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Best of Cincinnati for September 11, 2008

30-Day Turnaround

Morgan Spurlock's series raises issues at FX

By CHRISTOPHER TOMLIN

Think of Morgan Spurlock as the anti-Michael Moore. The friendly, handlebar mustachioed documentarian from West Virginia made waves in 2004 with an Oscar-nominated *Super Size Me*, which chronicled his 30-day experiment of ingesting foods only from the McDonald's menu. The film not only proved to audiences what we already suspected -- doctors freaked out as Spurlock's bodily functions spun out of control -- but Spurlock emerged as a watchdog everyman, pointing out the drastic effects of fast food in a nation obsessed with efficiency and growing fatter by the spoonful.

Good-natured, likeable and inquisitive to the point of self-experimentation, Spurlock brought the war against obesity to us in a way we could understand and view for ourselves, a sharp contrast to the nightly news anchors who filibuster on the phenomenon over stock footage images of overweight citizens strolling down the street.

With his keen sense of social consciousness, Spurlock has found a home on cable's FX Network with a series of hour-long, mini-documentaries, *30 Days*. (For scheduling info, check local listings or visit www.fxnetworks.com.) Each episode features a *Super Size Me*-esque study of a different sociological phenomenon and places one person in an environment or situation previously unknown to him or her, capturing the response.

The premiere episode of *30 Days* focused on Spurlock himself, who dragged his reluctant fiancée to Columbus, Ohio, where they shed their wallets and attempted to live on minimum wage for a 30-day period. During that time frame, the two encountered medical problems for which they had no insurance coverage and took on Spurlock's niece and nephew for a weekend to simulate the struggles facing minimum-wage families. The evidence is clear-cut -- rather than beat his audiences over the head with a conclusion, the facts are there. And they're eye-opening.

The episodes that would follow detailed other 30-day trials, among them a West Virginia Christian living with a Muslim family, a soccer mom boozing to intoxicating levels each day to teach her college-aged daughter a lesson in binge drinking and a frumpy former athlete undergoing an anti-aging regime that includes the use of human growth hormone.

Along the way, Spurlock visits each subject not only to check in on his or her progress but to offer moral support as well. He's the scientist by way of a buddy, affably sprinkling statistics and facts that allow the audience to understand why the experiment is relevant.

The story arcs of the test subjects range from humorous to dramatic to heartwarming as Spurlock's human guinea pigs begin to re-assess their former preconceptions. The program's

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Photo By Samuel Goldwyn Films

Documentarian Morgan Spurlock has found a home on cable's FX Network.

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debut season was a critical darling, with FX recently ordering a new season of *30 Days* while continuing to air repeats of the first season regularly on the channel.

TIME!
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While the "fish out of water" storylines are what endear audiences to *30 Days*, Spurlock has also managed to master what other reality shows have sloughed off -- the repercussions of the exercise. While ABC's *Wife Swap* repeatedly features the country mouse versus the city mouse scenario, the drama is played for sardonic "can you believe how crazy that woman is?" effect.

Survivor has cornered the market in taking unsuspecting contestants and placing them in trying circumstances. But the reasons why the program keeps returning to the beach is simply to get their beautiful stars into skimpier swimsuits. As long as the entertainment is overplayed (or underdressed), the networks know the demographics will keep coming back. Sadly, they've been right.



Spurlock's *30 Days* represents how reality programming -- and this is gonna sound crazy -- can *actually* depict reality. Its subjects face real, topical issues of tolerance, prejudice and health.

As Spurlock learns during his fast-food binging of *Super Size Me*, sometimes the best way to understand something is to see it for yourself. And that's where *30 Days* makes its greatest difference. ©

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