

Amid a media firestorm, a new 'Jon & Kate' season

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(05-22) 04:02 PDT NEW YORK, (AP) --

Has Kate Gosselin been cheating on her husband, Jon? Has Jon been cheating on Kate? And have they been pulling the wool over their viewers' eyes?

What manner of reality have they and their eight conscripted co-stars (that is, their children) been dispensing to the multitudes who follow "Jon & Kate Plus 8"?

Questions have raged in recent weeks amid reports of marital strife and off-screen mischief. Splashed across Web sites and magazine covers are accounts of infidelity by both spouses — Jon with a 23-year-old schoolteacher and Kate with her bodyguard (accusations both of them deny).

Can this marriage be saved? How about the series? "Saturday Night Live" weighed in last week by joking about two replacement shows: "Jon Plus 4" and "Kate Plus 4."

But as the Gosselin homestead seems increasingly at odds with the happy, wholesome version of reality approved by TLC, one thing is sure: Viewers are stoked to watch "Jon & Kate Plus 8" when it returns on TLC for a new season Monday at 9 p.m. EDT.

Two months ago, more than 4.6 million viewers flocked to the fourth-season finale. But now, for better or worse, "Jon & Kate" has raised its must-see stakes. There's significantly more suspense than was ever in the show's original concept: rearing a house-full of twins and sextuplets.

The suspense is surely felt at TLC. It must strike a balance between the racy new reality of its monster hit series, and holding firm to what the network stands for: family friendly fare.

"Attention and big audience are desirable," said Robert Passikoff, president of the market research firm Brand Keys, "but not at the expense of the network's brand — or the audience and advertisers who like the show the way it is.

"I can't imagine this does anything to reinforce the core values of TLC or the show itself."

TLC has withheld any comment on the "Jon & Kate" media firestorm, apart from declaring support for the family and "respecting their needs as they work through this challenging time."

Meanwhile, the network has been scrambling to finish the season kickoff, promising it will properly address the negative publicity bombarding the Gosselins.



A challenging time, indeed.

"This is certainly not the way the network would have preferred things to go," Larry Gerbrandt, a principal of Media Valuation Partners, noted.

Since "Jon & Kate" premiered two years ago, TLC has been the proud custodian not only of a show with broadcast-network-size viewership, but also of a merchandising golden goose. (Latest samples from the product line include Kate's third book, due this fall, with nearly a million copies of her first two books in print, according to their publisher, Zondervan. And another batch of series DVDs will be hitting stores in July.)

Can TLC navigate the stormy, uncharted waters and keep the franchise intact?

"They've got some tough choices to make," Gerbrandt said. "They must handle it with great sensitivity."

Like maybe: Add marriage counseling to the narrative mix.

"They could bring in a Dr. Phil," suggested Gerbrandt.

Of course, it isn't just up to the network and producers. The stars of the show will obviously have some say. After a decade of marriage, do Jon (age 32) and Kate (34) mean to stay together — or at least recommit to a convincing simulation of togetherness for the cameras?

"Kate and I obviously have been going through a lot of stuff, and discussing what's best for our kids," Jon says in his roundabout way during a "sneak peek" clip from Monday's episode, posted online by TLC a few days ago.

"My kids are the reason I have always done everything," says Kate.

If the Gosselins are discussing anything, it would seem to be by e-mail. In the two-minute excerpt, each addresses the camera seated solo on a sofa. And in scenes at their sextuplets' fifth birthday party, each gives the other a wide berth.

A recent People magazine story quoted Kate Gosselin saying she and Jon had struggled with their marriage for months.

"I don't know that we're in the same place anymore, that we want the same thing," she said.

It's the sort of sentiment that clashes with the feel-good tone of past shows that has Kate declaring in the title sequence, "We're a family," as Jon chimes in, "We're in this together."

Granted, a certain stress level was always part of the show's recipe. Kate came off as snippy, Jon as taciturn. Their less-than-perfect relationship was just another way that made them seem relatable to viewers.

"She's so emasculating, it's just a matter of how much is he going to take? There's tension every episode

between them," said Jessica Remo.

Remo, a contributing writer for Philadelphia magazine, was a big fan of the show, which she found "cute and adorable," when a few months ago she began reporting an article on the Gosselin phenomenon.

"Jon + Kate + 8 \$\$\$" appeared in the magazine's March issue. While sidestepping any mention of marriage vows broken, the article charted a vivid distinction between being a family and performing as a TV-friendly family-for-hire.

Now Remo wonders how her story, and the recent avalanche of tabloid coverage, could have caught the Gosselins off-guard.

"You're selling your privacy and going on television," Remo said. "You guys are celebrities, your show is a hit, and everybody wants to know about you."

And that sums up the plight of "Jon & Kate" as it begins its planned 40-episode new season. It must bridge the gap between the Gosselins its viewers used to think they knew, and an alternate, less sanitized family the media are racing to expose.

"Viewers aren't stupid. You've got to explain it away somehow," said Remo, laying out the challenge facing TLC. "But I think even if the network doesn't do it well, people will still watch. It's human nature: They want to see what happens next."

TLC is owned by Discovery Communications, LLC.

On the Net:

tlc.discovery.com/tv/jon-and-kate/jon-and-kate.html

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2009/05/22/entertainment/e040256D08.DTL>

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