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A year later, questions still loom over Octomom

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Writer © 2010 The Associated Press

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In this magazine cover image released by Star magazine, the cover of the Feb. 1, 2010 issue, currently on news stands, featuring Nadya Suleman, is shown. (AP Photo/Star Magazine)

LOS ANGELES — As her eight youngest children celebrate their first birthday, "Octomom" Nadya Suleman has gone from a veiny-bellied expectant mom to a scantily clad model on the

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cover of a supermarket tabloid.

"My new bikini body! How I did it!" exclaims the headline in this week's issue of Star Magazine. In the photo, the 34-year-old smiles and poses with a thumb crooked into her red bathing suit bottoms.

A year after giving birth, the single, unemployed woman seems to have learned that one way to raise her 14 children is to exploit the celebrity media for attention and money that can be used to bring up her brood.

"Her narrative, her epic seems to be being told almost exclusively by the medium of tabloid print," said Syracuse University pop culture professor Robert Thompson. "The little slices we see have not added up to much."

Photo spreads, online videos and interviews in gossip sheets lean more toward promoting Suleman's image. The reports provide little insight into how she manages to raise her huge family and still find time to get buff and stay in the limelight.

She breezes past the details, telling Star she only sleeps two hours a day, has three live-in nannies to help and has friends who sometimes take a child for several days to ease her load.

While she insists she's a good mother, gone are the days when the births of the world's longest-living octuplets were hailed as something akin to

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a miracle.

Curiosity quickly turned to criticism when details of her life surfaced: She was divorced and had six other children living in her mother's house, which was in foreclosure. She was living off college loans, her children's disability payments and workers' compensation from on-the-job injuries at a state mental hospital.

Scrutiny intensified when it was revealed that all her children were conceived through in-vitro fertilization. The doctor who performed the procedures now faces censure from the state medical board.

She once claimed she would support her family by returning to school to become a counselor, but those plans wilted. Suleman now says media deals will pay for her children's upbringing. The Associated Press estimates it will cost \$1.3 million to \$2.7 million to support her children through age 17 — not including medical costs, based on U.S. Department of Agriculture figures.

A magazine cover story could earn between \$50,000 and \$75,000 for non-celebrities. Smaller items could give Suleman between \$5,000 and \$10,000 a pop, said media consultant Richard Laermer.

A transition to television could prove more lucrative, but even an American audience obsessed with revolting behavior — from "Jersey Shore" to "Jerry Springer" — seems to lack the sort of appetite that could propel Suleman to C-list stardom.

The most likely networks to air a Suleman clan reality show, TLC (home to "Jon & Kate Plus 8") and A&E (tagline: "Real Life. Drama."), have said they have no plans to do so.



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"What I suspect is that they don't want to take a chance on her because she's almost a little too crazy for reality television," said Elayne Rapping, professor of American studies and media studies at State University of New York at Buffalo.

Internet video clips have often portrayed a blustery side of Suleman, airing a feud with her mother over whether she should have had the octuplets and sniping at "Jon & Kate Plus 8" star Kate Gosselin before tearing up a photo of the other famous multi-mom.

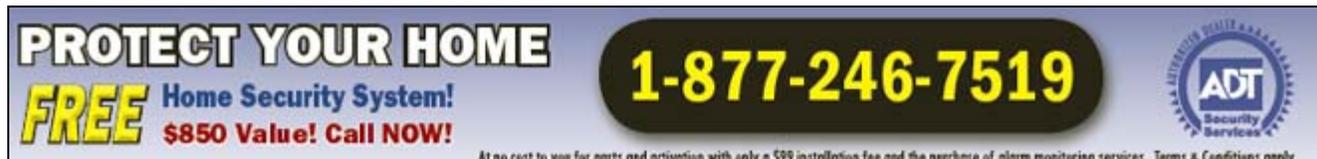
She also fought with a team of volunteer nurses on "Dr. Phil" before firing them.

Suleman's former publicist Joann Killeen said Suleman's story had the potential to be different. "But when you have a client who will not listen to outside counsel, will not partner with you and will not pay you," you can't help them, she said.

After giving the "Today Show" the first interview a couple weeks after the births, Suleman has rarely given access to mainstream media. A New York Times Magazine story in November largely took a fly-on-the-wall approach, observing Suleman at home with filmmakers from European production company Eyeworks.

Despite repeated requests for interview, Suleman has never spoken to The Associated Press. Her lawyer, Jeffrey Czech, did not respond to calls for this article.

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Paparazzi have tailed her shopping at expensive stores, getting manicures and working out. But most of her media exposure is closely guarded, particularly footage of the kids.

Among the hurdles for television networks are strict labor laws related to filming children.

The octuplets can be filmed for a total of one hour per day, and the older kids can be filmed for three to six hours, depending on their ages and whether school is in session, according to state regulators.

Four citations were brought against RadarOnline.com by the state labor commissioner as a result of the Web site's secret deal to chronicle Suleman's brood over seven weeks. Regulators said Radar did not get the required permits to videotape the babies, filmed too many hours a day and ran too late at night.

In the last year, Radar has posted more than 100 items about Suleman and rarely showed the babies. In some videos, Suleman's older children call her names, yell at her and bite her on camera.

Eyeworks made a deal in which Suleman's children would earn nearly \$250,000 over a three-year period, deposited into a safe account, though it's unclear what channel would air the show in the United States.

It's also unclear how much Suleman herself would be paid and how lucrative it would be for broadcasters.

When Fox aired a well-promoted, two-hour special composed of video clips from RadarOnline.com in August, the program

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averaged 4.2 million viewers, earning fourth place. The night's winner, NBC's "America's Got Talent" had 10.3 million viewers.

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