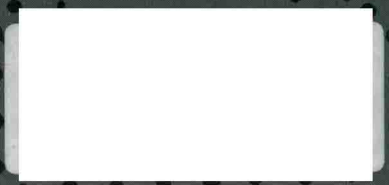
June Deery

Reality TV



Key Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies

Reality TV

June Deery

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For Alanna, John, and Doug

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Introduction: Definitions, History, Critiques

I'm not here to make friends. The tribe has spoken. You're fired! I believe in being honest. She has no class. He's not being real. She just threw me under the bus. Move that bus! I can't believe it's me/my living room/my car. I've learned a lot about myself. She is not here for the right reasons. Will you accept this rose? I did it for the experience. I have a friend who's an expert. Make it work. It's my day! Is this your dress? Watch out bitches! This isn't the last you'll hear from me . . .

These catchphrases are heard day after day on screens around the world. Many would recognize them as the voices of reality TV, a type of programming that whether enjoyed or criticized or both has affected television in each of the areas of production, distribution and consumption. So how did this happen and why is it important?

Reality TV is important in the most basic terms because it pervades TV schedules around the world and has, as a consequence, entered all kinds of popular and elite discourse, from personal blogs to presidential politics.[1] To dismiss reality TV because of its often trivial content would be to miss its significance. Some individual programs are of high quality, are well-conceived, or are provocative in important ways; most, on the other hand, are not. Nevertheless, it is impact, tenacity, and cultural resonance, not profundity of content, that make reality television worth analyzing. Even if it were to disappear tomorrow, it would be worth knowing why it arose and was so popular. But for so prominent a cultural form, reality TV is not often or easily defined. *What* is

it, and just as interestingly *why* is it, are questions worth asking. In this study, I offer an overview for those who are looking for a broad assessment of where we are with this attention-grabbing phenomenon. Based on current critical scholarship, I have selected what I believe are the main topics and questions reality TV (RTV) poses for students of the media and of contemporary culture.

Among academics, reality TV is becoming one of the most thoroughly analyzed areas of media production. It brings to the fore issues such as: What is real or fictional, how can we recognize either, and is it disturbing if we can't? What does it mean to represent the self and what self are we encouraged to represent? How does watching ordinary people on TV relate to surveillance and governance? Is everything in contemporary culture commodifiable? Is the private still a meaningful designation? Is celebrity ordinary? And what is the role of television in a digital, mobile environment? This programming allows us to think about a cluster of contemporary concerns, including the requirement that we all perform – because of surveillance, because of the marketization of everyday life, because of the demand for individual impression management. Reality TV has become emblematic of a contemporary monitoring and commercialization of performed and mediated identities. It grew in a time of transparency, with people posting intimate information about themselves on social media and conducting loud phone conversations in public. But this is also a time when many are spooked at the discovery of governmental and commercial surveillance. People are giving away privacy but are disturbed when it is not their choice. RTV works through some of these tensions and betrayals.

The nature and novelty of reality TV content also invites fundamental questions about genre, production methods, and motive. Few professional commentators make claims about reality shows being "quality TV," but their popularity and durability have earned them attention and even grudging respect as something deserving analysis. Some reality formats such as the *Big Brother* and *Idol* franchises are the most successful in television history and are significant both for their national and global reach. In many instances, reality TV producers have changed the nature of

television and a generation of viewers is growing up that regards unscripted TV as the norm. There are so many reality shows on American and British schedules alone that they are difficult to count: whole channels are devoted to reality programming or are dominated by it.[2] Then, too, a show's impact often extends beyond those who view it and is widely referenced even by people who would bristle at the suggestion that they ever watched it. It is likely that people underreport or underestimate how much reality TV they watch because they don't recognize that what they watch is considered reality TV or, also likely, they underreport because of social stigma – for nothing is easier to criticize in polite society than reality TV. This consensus, too, is noteworthy.

Certainly category identification is not an insignificant problem. "Reality TV" has emerged as a catchall phrase used to describe a wide range of programming but it is to some extent a floating signifier possessing different meanings for different people in different historical moments. One somewhat glib definition of reality TV that I enjoy is "non-fiction television of which I personally disapprove" (Poniewozik 2012: ix). However, I will be using as a basis for discussion the following more specific parameters: *pre-planned but mostly unscripted programming with non-professional actors in non-fictional scenarios*. This is very close to Misha Kavka's initial description of "unscripted shows with non-professional actors being observed by cameras in preconfigured environments" (2012: 5). But as she, too, recognizes, one can soon think of exceptions; for example, the environments aren't always preconfigured, there are different degrees of scripting, and there is even some use of professional actors or certainly aspiring actors. These factors will be examined in more detail later when I propose that reality programming is best defined not according to topic but according to the *relations between the camera, the participants, and the viewers*. For now, I consider the label reality TV useful even when it does not entail precise or agreed on borders. What is included within this category will depend upon which shows are selected as core examples: other programs will have varying strengths of membership. The most reasonable approach is to acknowledge that "reality television" overlaps with

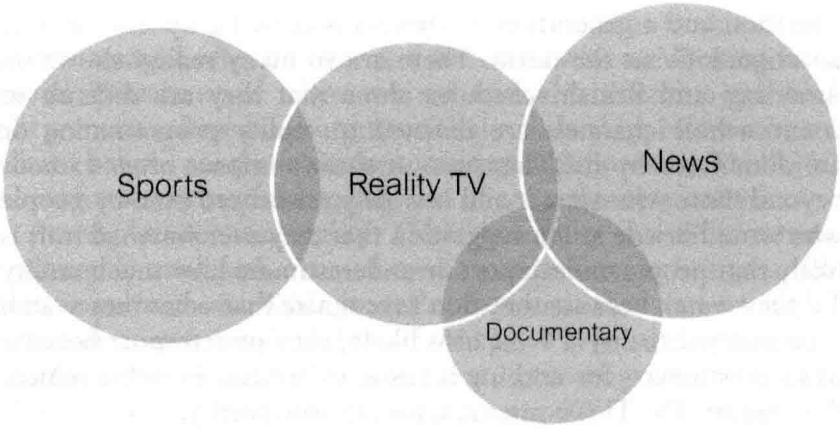

Figure 1 Overlap between reality TV and prior genres

other categories of programming and itself contains distinct but overlapping sub-categories that nevertheless share some common characteristics.

Without engaging in extended comparisons, we can see that reality TV bears some resemblances to prior genres (Fig. 1.1). A large and commercially vital block on most TV schedules is sports programming and this is similar to RTV in that it films actual events ("scripted" only by rules and rituals) and, like some RTV, entertains through the drama of suspenseful competition. Like reality TV also, sports events often happen at all or become important because they will be televised and this mediation shapes content. However, sports broadcasts are typically live (with some limited pre-planned content such as statistical information) and they focus on skills and action more than personalities and interpersonal drama. There is little attention to the emotions or opinions of players who are cast not for their telegenic appearance or acting ambitions but for their athletic performance. The focus is on the extraordinary, but in the sense of being excellent rather than freakish or shameful.

Reality TV also shares with documentary programming certain filmic techniques, but it appears to have different goals: most notably, RTV aims to entertain more than inform and happily

embraces the sensationalism that many documentarians avoid. There is on RTV no authoritative, objective exposition backed up by extensive research and rarely any advocacy or push for political reform. So if both types of programming portray intimate lives or everyday circumstances, it is generally for different ends. Their borders, however, are not clear and sometimes documentary is preserved as an evaluative rather than a logical distinction, whereby higher quality or more serious programming is accorded this status.

Finally, news programming might fairly be said to bear many resemblances to both RTV (on its infotainment and sensationalized end) and to documentary (when it comes to informing and addressing politics). The main contrast with reality TV would have to be that professional and reputable journalism eschews manipulation of material: whether it be staging, paying for contributions, or distortive editing – though it may be that the rise of reality TV problematizes and weakens the claims to objectivity of both documentary and news programming.

Is reality TV a genre?

Reality TV can be regarded as a recognizable category for purposes of discussion, marketing, and scheduling without it being a definite or universally agreed upon genre. The genre question has continued from RTV's inception right up through present day: from an impressive early discussion by Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (2004), to John Corner's concise overview (2010), to an excellent book-length study by Misha Kavka (2012). But while earlier commentators have been keen to identify reality TV as a genre or to underscore the difficulties in doing so, I won't spend time deliberating on this except to say that genres are discursive categories and matters of judgment. Today, the most common observation regarding genre in Literary or Media Studies is how fluid a concept it is and how difficult it is to pin down. Meanwhile, genre is often a pragmatic industry concern that determines both audience expectation and corporate investment as well as scheduling and

distribution. While I will at times use "genre" as a useful shorthand for encapsulating a wide range of programming, I suggest that reality TV is defined more *ontologically* than *stylistically* and is best understood not so much as content with certain textual or aesthetic characteristics but as a relationship between texts, agents, and technical devices. It is, in other words, *a way of making television*. While particular topics or formats may trend only for a time, the basic production relations remain much the same – ordinary people, actual events, participation and interactivity.[3] Many see RTV as a good example of a hybrid genre or mega-genre that amalgamates other genres such as the game show, the talk show, the soap opera, the talent show, and the documentary. However, it may be wiser to discuss specific RTV *formats* – format being a subset of genre – as these are often distinct legal entities and commodities (unlike genres). Formats are defined by specific show elements: the shape and type of events (e.g., the form of competition or interpersonal interaction), the role of participants and hosts, the type of narrative, the subject matter. Yet as Jonathan Bignell (2005) points out, even formats are not always easily identified (hence legal disputes) and it depends if it is producers, participants, or viewers who are assessing these matters (p. 174).

Reality TV has proven to be highly resilient and has more than once been likened to a mutating virus (e.g., Gailey 2007: 108). Annette Hill describes RTV as a feral genre (2007) for being deterritorial, wildly opportunistic, and "resistant to containment" (p. 215). It has indisputably transformed television culture, mostly by leading the way in adapting to oncoming industry trends, among them: deregulation, privatization, increased commercial pressure (even on public broadcasting), proliferating niche channels, audience fragmentation, online interactivity, and global trade. RTV has spearheaded changes in production practices, subject participation, and the relation of text to audience. Its programming provokes strong reactions from viewers and has generated an extensive discursive field, both in mainstream media and viewer-generated content. People don't just watch reality TV: they blog about it, they read magazines and tabloids about it, they tweet about it. RTV is also striking for its demonstration of

glocalization (locally adapted global phenomena) as its formats are often designed to be readily exportable and indigenized with local casts and content. This process often underscores the uneasy and continuing interplay between nationalism and globalism. Typically producers sell format details and provide creative consultants to go with them.[4] However, success is never predictable: for example, *Big Brother* and *Survivor* each fared differently in the relatively similar markets of the US and the UK. When formats travel further, they often challenge societal conventions, upsetting governments or religious authorities or different viewer demographics (more later). Even in original settings, RTV programming provokes more social controversies and debates than most other forms of television, due in some measure to its claims to represent reality and its use of real people. Programs make visible various areas of concern, from obesity to mental illness to criminality; but whether they deal with these in any prosocial or responsible manner is another matter.

Ethical concerns

Around the world, reality TV is both popular and held in low esteem. Even those who claim (with some pride) that they've never watched it tend to have strong as well as negative opinions about it. Some regard RTV as a debasement of television programming. It is framed as a distortion of documentary and a public service remit. In European contexts, evaluations of RTV are part of a larger discussion about whether the quality of TV programming has deteriorated since public service broadcasting lost some support and funding. The "crab grass" of television, RTV can be regarded as a cheap filler providing material for expanding commercial channels (Fishman 1998: 69). However, on both commercial and public channels there is, today, high-quality scripted programming as good as or maybe even better than in any previous era. So evidently RTV hasn't smothered this creativity, although its popularity has undoubtedly eliminated some opportunities for professional writers and performers.

But what about reality TV's moral influence on its audience? Journalistic and para-journalistic commentary[5] often becomes quite exercised about this matter and assumes RTV is indeed influencing individuals or society. It is also interesting to ask what it tells us about a society that it produces or watches so much RTV. In both instances I suggest speculation is legitimate but is just that: speculation. Even when parallels are found, it is important not to confuse *concurrence* (e.g., similar behavior occurring on screen and in real life) with *causality*. What we *can* demonstrate are the social debates and scandals this programming ignites in a wider cultural setting. Measuring specific viewers' responses (which is not quite the same as assessing broad cultural impact) is an important area of media research, but it is often limited by methodical and resource constraints: sample sizes, short durations, reliance on self-reporting, assumptions of immediate influence, and so on. Those who do it best acknowledge these restrictions. Also limited, but for different reasons, is the other approach which is for a single author to present an interpretation of media content based on textual analysis, with reference to others who have done likewise. This is essentially what I do here. It is what virtually all media scholars do, and their work is accorded worth if the interpretations appear to the reader to capture the local and wider significance of the content under analysis: that is, how this content may reflect, amplify, refract, model, or shape other cultural beliefs, techniques, or practices. Indeed, media analysis is valued as a means for elucidating or thinking through cultural trends as well as vice versa. It would seem reasonable to assume – based on the tenets of this broadly Cultural Studies approach – that an author's sociopolitical position and affiliations will inform their interpretation of content; however, some acknowledge this subjectivity more readily than others. The position I occupy is that of a White, mid-Atlantic, middle-class, liberal, professional female with more cultural than financial capital: a profile that is not particularly unusual in Media Studies.[6] When it comes to assessing the responses of other viewers, I do not attempt to offer anything prolonged or systematic. However, there is no question that viewers' online contributions (posts, blogs, tweets, recaps) are a valuable

resource that I use as a base for gauging viewer reactions: unless otherwise stated, when I invoke viewer responses it is these sources I am drawing on. Indeed, I would argue that one of the things that makes reality TV worth investigating is the strong social response it generates, and so the relation between TV content and other platforms becomes the central focus of an upcoming chapter.

By the end of this book reality TV's cultural significance should come into focus but no definitive or causal linkages will be advanced. What media scholars *can* point to is how people on RTV behave, how they are portrayed and framed (textual cues), and how some viewers react (as reported on online posts, surveys, focus groups). But all of this information is circumscribed and a matter of interpretation. When it comes to ethics, it is also important to distinguish different possible areas of concern: the behavior of participants, the role of producers, the harm to viewers just by witnessing this behavior and, as a separate matter, concern that viewers will imitate unsavory behavior. Certainly, RTV is where social issues are represented and even tested, but what happens after that is difficult to determine. Commentators need to distinguish between content and impact, between RTV showing people behaving badly (in the opinion, say, of many viewers) and the influence this has on viewers (more difficult to demonstrate). For one thing, much depends on the social and psychological context out of which an individual viewer comes, and basic demographic data such as a viewer's age or gender barely touches on this. After studying audience responses to content, Katherine Sender (2012) concluded that journalists and media scholars may be overanxious about the influence of RTV (p. 77). Most of the time, if a series or type of series is popular, all we can say with certainty is that numerous people like to watch it – for reasons that they or others may not understand.

A common response is for people to report feeling shame or disappointment in themselves simply because they watch reality TV (e.g., Hill 2007: 201–2). Informal conversations begin somewhat defensively with "I don't watch reality TV" or "I hardly ever watch this stuff," after which the speaker often goes on to reveal some real familiarity with the programming or at least an awareness of

its wider social currency. RTV is described as addictive, as crack TV, a guilty pleasure. Many viewers use the "train wreck" metaphor and say they find the shows appalling but can't look away. Often we witness a third-person effect where people acknowledge RTV's influence on others but not on themselves – whereas most sports fans have no such qualms and many viewers feel downright superior for watching documentaries. Later chapters will explore why viewers have such opinions, but when it comes to ethical influence we can say that RTV performs a useful function if nothing else because it inspires ethical debate and provides an opportunity to publicly calibrate what is considered admirable or disreputable behavior.

Plenty of advice and makeover formats are at base about good and bad behavior, but rarely do RTV participants or hosts explicitly invoke ethical principles or do more than critique individual incidents. On several docusoaps we get ethical deflection and deadpan avoidance: take the moral nullity of characters who when asked to assess a situation merely shrug and use the all-purpose "It is what it is," thereby closing off discussion of their culpability. Since its first appearance there have been claims that RTV encourages voyeurism, schadenfreude, mockery, lack of sympathy, and expectation of salacious or mean behavior. For some, RTV increases fears about a cheapening of experience: the emotions and ideas are too easy, simplistic, primeval, appealing to the lowest common denominator. RTV is too centered on unthinking pleasure, on sex, on greed. It shocks and provokes because it displays the unvarnished behavior of undisciplined young people or life-long extroverts. It encourages status-oriented consumption, narcissistic self-promotion, and basically doing anything for money. RTV normalizes an obsession with appearance, dysfunctional relationships, and rude behavior. It elevates shallow personalities and sanctions their excessive ambition, deception, selfishness, aggression and so on, so long as these lead to fame and fortune – as they sometimes do. However much any of this is true, there is no economic incentive in media entertainment to display only morally admirable behavior, and no accountability if it does not. Whether this is a good thing or not is another matter.