

REALITY TELEVISION

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REALITY TELEVISION

The Television Phenomenon
That Changed the World

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*In memory of Diane Kershaw (1970–2016), who introduced
me to Strictly Come Dancing and always wanted my first
book dedicating to her.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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PREFACE

Reality television is arguably the defining television format of the twenty-first century. It fills television schedules around the globe, as well as thriving on streaming and video sharing platforms which host new programmes and provide access to vast archives of content. Its stories and personalities are not only found on television screens but also in online forums, social media, celebrity magazines and newspaper gossip columns.

Reality's techniques and tropes can be seen everywhere from 'mockumentary' comedies to found footage horror films; from sci-fi to soap opera. It has made new stars, revitalised the careers of failing celebrities and even seen one of its biggest characters ascend to the US Presidency.

Reality television has been praised for giving a platform to ordinary people, raising awareness of social issues and revitalising factual programming. Yet, it has been criticised by parents, politicians and pundits for sensationalism, manipulation and its potential to cause harm to its participants. So, what is it about it that makes it so fascinating? Why do we love it, hate it and, indeed, love to hate it?

In this book, I am going to get 'under the skin' of the phenomenon and to consider the current state of the genre as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER STRUCTURE

Chapter 1 provides an overview of reality television, exploring what it is and where it comes from. It brings together key ideas from academics, participants, producers and journalists about the history and nature of reality television, outlines key programme formats and explores the various ways shows are, or are not, considered ‘reality’ by the TV industry, participants, audiences and commentators.

Chapter 2 moves on to consider the impact reality television has had on culture and the media, and explores the relationship the genre has with its audience. It looks at key debates in the study and analysis of reality TV, the impact of reality television on other forms of media, and the relationship between reality TV and its audiences.

Chapter 3 explores reality television as an industry. It looks at issues of ethics and duty of care, processes of regulation, production and distribution, the role of advertising and product placement, issues of labour, and supplementary industries and products.

Chapter 4 focuses more closely on what happens in reality television, exploring its characters, formats, messages and stories in more depth. The chapter considers the casting mix of different reality shows and looks at the reasons people take part in reality shows.

Chapter 5 discusses Reality TV (RTV)’s relationship to fame. It explores the way it has made stars of ‘ordinary’ people and considers why some of its key performers have managed to sustain long careers in the spotlight whilst others have disappeared. The chapter also explores the appeal of reality for ‘traditional’ celebrities and what it can do for their image.

Finally, Chapter 6 looks at the role of reality television in an age of social media. It discusses the different ways the genre has capitalised on the internet, discusses social media

strategies for TV shows, considers what the role of reality television is in an age of YouTube and influencers, and, finally, offers some thoughts as to where the genre might be headed.

MY APPROACH

This book is intended as a quick guide to reality television as a phenomenon, taking in a range of factors affecting its production and content – from different viewpoints, including participants, regulators, producers and critics.

Throughout the book, there will be extracts from interviews I have conducted with participants and professionals from the UK and Ireland. In line with my university's ethics board recommendations, most have chosen to remain anonymous, including the name of the shows they participated in – some of these shows ran for a single episode or series; thus, naming them would expose the interviewees' identities. Others have been happy to name the programmes they have been involved in, and some have asked to be named specifically. Commentary taken from audience members in forums, blogs and social media has been anonymised to give some privacy towards the authors.

Given the number of reality shows now runs into the thousands, if not tens of thousands, I could use the entirety of this book just trying to list them all – and the same is, of course, true of the many books and articles written about the phenomenon. So, if I have missed out your favourite, please forgive me!

I have tried to use a range of international examples, but as an author based in the UK, there are inevitably more from the UK. Likewise, I have attempted to reference a range of international perspectives on the phenomenon, but I am aware that a lot of the scholarship on reality television has been

concentrated in the UK, the USA and Australia; therefore, whilst there are certainly some global trends we can identify, I acknowledge that authors from elsewhere in the world might have a very different take on some key issues.

Much has been written about reality television over the years, and this is a small book! So, my approach is primarily to think about reality television as it stands as the twenty-first century enters its third decade – how has it developed, who its stars are, how it sits within a world of streaming and social media, and where might it be going in the future.

Finally, just a note about me – I am a media and communications scholar, and an entertainment critic. I have been watching reality TV shows since before we even called them that! The genre has educated, entertained and enraged me in fairly equal measures over the years, and I come to this as a critical friend, rather than someone who wants to tear the whole thing down. And to pre-empt the inevitable question, I doubt I would ever choose to go on one (although, obviously, I have chosen the songs I would use if I were ever on *Strictly Come Dancing*, and have thought long and hard about my *Big Brother* gameplay strategy) – but I salute all those brave souls who have!

UNDERSTANDING REALITY TV

Reality shows can be deeply serious or deliriously silly. They deal with the ‘ordinary’ and the ‘extraordinary’. They have covered everything from colonialism to colonic irrigation and featured everyone from porn stars to priests. Interested in farming, tattoo artistry, pottery, Islamic dress, cocktail making or conducting an orchestra? Reality TV has got it covered. Do you want to get an insight into birth, death, marriage, divorce, friendship, work and community? The same applies.

Graeme Turner (2010) argues that it ‘may well be the most exorbitantly “noticed” form of programming in television’s history’ (p. 33), and Jon Dovey (2000) calls it the ‘perfect televisual form for the contemporary cultural moment ... [it has become] a crucial component of the fabric of popular culture’ (p. 78).

Reality brings together techniques from documentary, game show, soap opera, melodrama and sitcom, yet is not readily classifiable as any of these things. So, what binds a diverse set of programmes and themes together and makes them ‘reality’? And, where did these shows come from in the first place?

Unfortunately, these questions are not easy to answer! There is no clear consensus on either what reality television is, or where it comes from. Multiple programmes have been cited as ‘the first’ reality show, including *Candid Camera* (1947–2004) and its radio predecessor, *Candid Microphone* (1947), ... *Up* (1964–), *An American Family* (1973), *The Family* (1974), *Unsolved Mysteries* (1987–2010), *Cops* (1989–), *The Real World* (1992–), *Survivor* (1999–) and *Big Brother* (1999–) (for longer discussions on the history of the genre, see Bignell, 2005; Bonner, 2003; Dovey, 2000; Hill, 2005; Kavka, 2012).

In a way, it is not a surprise that all of these (and more) have been considered originators of the reality genre. They are all considered landmark television programmes that marked a watershed moment in TV production by offering something ‘different’. All have served as pioneers in factual TV production, with many imitators coming in their wake. Whilst they used different filming, editing and narrative techniques – each was concerned in different ways with the ‘ordinary’, and aimed to unearth social and personal ‘truths’ in new ways.

Part of the reason that it is hard to establish a single text as the key point at which a phenomenon was born lies in the fact that it is hard to pin down exactly what we mean by ‘reality television’. All of the shows listed above could be seen as reality television, as, in topic and format, they clearly resemble the kinds of programmes we identify today as belonging to the genre, including: a focus on the personal; ‘ordinary’ people and their experiences; highly constructed and formatted presentation; a blend of factual reportage with entertainment values such as humour and emotion (Dovey, 2000; Kavka, 2012). However, we could also argue that none, or at least very few, of these are technically reality TV – because when they were broadcast, the term had not been invented yet, and

television schedules had yet to be saturated by this kind of programming.

Academic and journalistic accounts have included almost the full range of factual programming under the banner 'reality television', including genres we may not always see as 'obviously' fitting its remit, such as quiz shows, antiques programming, chat shows and nature programming. Indeed, news coverage is possibly the only factual genre to escape the term, and even that has been discussed in terms of its relationship with reality (Bennett, 2005; Hill, 2007).

WHERE DID 'REALITY TV' COME FROM ANYWAY?

The term 'reality television' became commonplace in different academic studies during the 1990s, with early literature focussing on crime, consumer affairs and disaster formats (e.g. *999*, *Cops*, *Crimewatch*). The makeover, talk show and 'docusoap' formats of the 1990s (e.g. *Changing Rooms*, *Jerry Springer*, *Airport*) meant that the focus of the literature and the use of the term 'reality television' expanded to include these genres. 'Social experiments' (e.g. *The 1900 House*, *Survivor*, *Big Brother*), which emerged at the turn of the millennium, expanded the genre further, as did the early 00s' resurgence in talent shows heralded by the *Popstars* and *Pop Idol* franchises – to the point where reality has moved away from being a single genre, and, instead becomes more of what Nick Couldry (2009) terms a 'meta-genre' (p. 47) encompassing several subgenres.

It is hard to pinpoint the first use of the phrase within the TV industry, or in journalistic and academic accounts of the phenomenon. Academic studies have certainly been using the term since at least the 1990s (e.g. Dauncey, 1996; Kilborn & Izod, 1997); however, it is harder to trace its origins in industry

or popular discourse. For example, searching for the term in English language news database Nexis returns very few articles using the term ‘reality television’ before the late 1990s, and a modest number between 1997 and 1999 – and the returned results do not always use the term to indicate a genre, more to describe the ethos of an individual show. In contrast, when searching in 2000–2001, Nexis returns thousands of hits, as the arrival of popular global formats such as the *Idol* franchises, *Big Brother* and *Survivor* saw the term ‘reality television’ become a common component of media culture.

The way academics, audiences and the industry use the term ‘reality TV’ also fluctuates over time. Dovey (2000), for example, considers British crime show *Crimewatch* (a studio-based show involving crime reconstructions and public appeals) to be reality television; whereas now, it would be considered unusual by broadcasters and audiences to think of *Crimewatch* as a reality show when compared to an observational programme dealing with crime such as *24 hours in Police Custody*, which more closely fits the template of what we consider reality television in terms of its use of on-the-spot filming, strong characters, social commentary, voice-over narration and story-like narratives.

DEFINING REALITY TV

Most academic studies, rather than attempting to pin down a definition of reality TV, highlight that it is almost impossible to coming up with strict rules as to what it is and is not:

to narrow the definition [of RTV] is not necessarily helpful; it obscures the flexibility inherent to ‘reality TV’. (Couldry, 2003, p. 10)

However, even if it is difficult to completely pin down a definition, there are some features that seem to be common to reality programming. Dover and Hill (2007, p. 25) argue that it usually features a combination of information, education and entertainment; and Hill (2005) also points out that it ‘implicitly and explicitly addresses the viewers about good and bad ways to live their lives’ (p. 184) whilst Corner (2004) says it is about ‘ordinary people doing ordinary things’ (p. 295).

At the heart of all ‘reality’ TV, however, is some sort of claim to the ‘real’. However, the term ‘real’ can sometimes seem to be the antithesis of what is actually involved in reality TV – when I mention to people that I am researching the field, the most common response I get is along the lines of ‘well, they’re all fake, anyway’. I will look at issues of ‘real’ versus ‘fake’ in more detail in later chapters, but at the heart of this tension is that ‘real’ can be interpreted in many ways.

Naturally, the confines of a TV time slot mean that showing unvarnished reality ‘as it happens’ is impossible – there has to be a process of selection and editing (not least as unvarnished reality contains a lot of mundane activity that does not make for good television!). Reality shows vary in what they mean by the ‘real’ – there are observational and hidden camera formats that attempt to show people ‘naturally’ going about their daily lives, for example, but there are also shows that place people in contrived situations that may be very different from their ordinary life. In historical reality TV like *The 1900 Island* or *Back in Time For...*, the idea is for contemporary participants to experience something of the reality of their historical peers. In a format like *I’m a Celebrity: Get Me Out of Here!* however, the focus is on the ‘real’ people behind the celebrity façade – they do not ‘really’ live in the jungle and eat bugs, but the show uses these testing situations to reveal

their emotions, personalities, make-up free faces and other aspects of the 'real' person. As Turner (2010) explains:

The formats usually included under this label have a quite varied relation to 'the real': some are highly narrativized and mediated, some are actually just updated game shows for whom the 'reality' descriptor is more an indicator of format style than any claim to be capturing real life, and still others are essentially documentary in their format and in their ethical relation to the material they put before viewers. (p. 33)

According to Bignell (2005), one of the chief points of reality TV is:

For people to reveal themselves to each other and to the audience, to establish a 'structure of feeling' that the television audience can share and adduce to understand the foibles, embarrassments and triumphs of the participants, who are most often presented as familiar and ordinary. (p. 172–173)

June Deery (2015) argues that what many reality shows deal in is 'staged actuality' – by which she means they contain a mixture of contrived and spontaneous situations (p. 29).

If the term has many uses, then, and these not only shift according to time but also according to context and, even, to the individual using it, is the term reality television still fit for purpose? I would argue that it is, insofar as it still has resonance and meaning in different contexts. There are perceptions of what reality television is, even though they differ. It is seen as something that has value for audiences and participants as much as it is also seen as an object of derision and low culture elsewhere. And if we were to abandon the term altogether, how then would we categorise some of the shows that typically

come under its banner, and examine what we might learn from thinking about them in connection with one another?

I would argue that ‘reality television’ has about as much, and as little, usefulness as comparative genre terms like ‘documentary’ or ‘game show’. There are almost infinite permutations of what each term means, yet they still echo something that connects with audiences, in however limited capacity. For the purposes of this book, I am taking a broad approach to the term. Rather than trying to narrow down its definition to a select group of programmes, I would prefer we open up the definition and consider the breadth of content that it can encompass. Therefore, I am including any television programme that has, at its heart, an emphasis on the ‘real’ lived and or felt experiences of people – be they ordinary citizens, celebrities or even elites.

I have kept a deliberately broad definition to recognise the diversity of the format, and acknowledge how blurred the lines are between ‘reality’ and ‘documentary’, ‘game show’ or ‘entertainment’. For example, *The Only Way Is Essex*, which is a non-competitive show (unless we are talking about the competition for airtime and attention) has, perhaps, more in common with a so-called observational documentary such as *63Up* than it does with a skill-based competition such as *MasterChef*.

I am not arguing against using other terms like documentary or game show to describe programmes – on the contrary, I believe that in many cases, more than one genre classification is not only helpful but also necessary. I consider it perfectly possible that something could be a documentary and a reality show at the same time, for example. I am also concerned with challenging the discourse found particularly within the world of programme makers and broadcasters, that implies that documentary as a genre is more ‘serious’ than RTV, has something more ‘substantial’ to say, or has in any way a greater

claim to ‘truth’ – after all, documentaries involve the same processes of selecting, editing and framing their material.

That said, there are some programmes that I am excluding from my discussion – even though others may decide to include them in their own analyses. I will be focussing on programmes that deal with humans, rather than animals. There are certainly some nature programmes that take a similar approach to human-focussed reality shows (eg *Meerkat Manor*, *Orangutan Island*), and try to anthropomorphise them by attributing human emotions to them. However, as we cannot ever ‘know’ the inner thoughts and feelings of the animal kingdom in the same way we can with humans; they are perhaps too different to be considered alongside other reality shows.

I have also excluded documentaries where the principal objective is some form of investigation of a particular issue or theme; for example, documentaries investigating climate change or anti-terror legislation. Whilst there may be a human interest and reality component to them, this is not the core focus of the documentary. I am also excluding magazine-style shows because their format is comprised of several small segments rather than detailed stories. Likewise, chat shows are excluded as being a primarily promotional vehicle for the celebrities involved and centred on the personalities of the hosts. Game shows and quiz shows are, for the most part, also left out of this book – although there are some exceptions, for example, *Survivor* or *Big Brother* where there is a game element to the programme; but this is, perhaps, secondary to the experience and personalities of those involved.

WHAT DOES REALITY TV LOOK LIKE?

Not only is it difficult for writers to establish a consensus on what ‘reality’ television is, but also it is a term that remains