Reality Television

'In the future, everybody will be famous for 15 minutes.' Andy Warhol (1928-1987), pop artist and avant-garde filmmaker (statement made in 1968)

Reality television shows have proven to be incredibly popular with audiences. The final episode of The Block (2003) was Australia's most watched television broadcast since the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Before that, only one other television broadcast had had a bigger audience - the funeral of Princess Diana.

What is reality TV?

Reality television is a broad category that includes a wide range of programs aiming to be both factual and entertaining. There are various definitions.

The creator of the Survivor format, Charlie Parsons, defines reality TV as shows containing 'producer created environments that control contestant behaviour'. But this definition excludes, for example, emergency services and police force programs.

Television reviewer Kerrie Murphy has a broader definition. She says reality TV generally involves filming the actions and reactions of people in a set situation. This situation can be a natural one, as in Airport (UK, 1996-present), or it can be completely contrived, as in Big Brother. Jonathon Bignell defines reality TV as programs 'where the unscripted behaviour of ordinary people is the focus of interest'. An important aspect is the comprehensive monitoring of everyday behaviour.

The boundaries to the reality television genre are blurred. Some programs, such as Big Brother, are like sitcoms. Contestants are trapped together under one roof in the same way as characters in a flat-share sitcom. Others, such as Border Security (2006) or Airport, are more like soap operas or dramas. Some reality programs resemble documentaries while others have characteristics in common with talk shows or game shows. Programs such as Australian Idol are like talent quests.

An important factor that separates reality television from other genres based on real-life contestants is the focus on their private thoughts and reactions to the situations.

Types of reality television

Different types of reality television have developed as a result of the use of elements from other genres.

- Observational docuseries. 'Fly on the wall' docuseries reality television combines observational documentary (see page 205) with the dramatic conventions of soap opera. The camera observes people in their everyday lives. Docuseries are often based on
high-stress work situations such as border security, law enforcement or medical emergency. Docusoap reality television has its roots in cinema-verite documentary (see page 205).

• Formulated docusoap. These reality shows take people out of their own worlds and place them in a formulated or specially constructed environment to see how they behave, says Kerrie Murphy. The Big Brother format is an example of a formulated docusoap. So too are the shows that place modern people in specially reconstructed historical settings.

• Reality game shows. Some analysts call these types of programs 'gamedocs'. As in formulated docusoaps, contestants are placed in a demanding artificial situation. However, says Kerrie Murphy, an extra element of competition is introduced together with the threat of elimination. The Survivor format is an example of a reality game show. Big Brother also fits into this subgenre.

• Lifestyle reality. Ordinary people and their lifestyles are transformed by experts, who make them extraordinary in lifestyle reality shows. It's not the winning of a prize but the 'reveal' of the transformation that is the climax of the show. 'It's the reaction, not the action that matters,' says Annette Hill of the University of Westminster.

• Talent show reality. Reality shows based around talent quests differ from conventional talent quests in that they focus on the participants' lives during the quest. An example is Australian Idol.

• Clipshow reality. Clipshows are made up of amateur video clips sent in by audience members - often for prize money. An example is Australia's Funniest Home Videos. Clips of surveillance video or CCTV footage from crime scenes are another variation.

Context

Reality-based entertainment has a history as long as human civilisation's. It ranges from harmless 'people watching' to the depravity of Roman circuses. On the big screen, the first films of the Lumiere brothers in the 1890s could be called reality-based entertainment. They showed ordinary people going about their daily lives - clocking off at a factory or catching a train.

The first reality television show is generally agreed to be the American comedy program Candid Camera (1948). The show used hidden cameras to film unsuspecting ordinary people faced with odd or embarrassing situations - such as a coin glued to a footpath or a talking mailbox (that only they could hear). When the embarrassment reached its peak, the camera would be revealed with the line, 'Smile, you're on Candid Camera!'

The cold war period during the 1950s and 1960s increased public anxieties about spies, hidden bugging devices and secret surveillance. Candid Camera humorously tapped into this anxiety.
Smaller, lighter cameras made possible the cinema-verite style of documentary in the 1960s. This, in turn, created interest in other types of ‘fly on the wall' observational entertainment. An American Family (1973) was the first program to use cinema-verite techniques to record family life in a long-running series. As it turned out, the show recorded a painful and unplanned family break-up.

Cops (1989) and Crimewatch UK are credited with kickstarting the latest wave of reality television programming. Like Candid Camera, modern reality television is a product of a surveillance culture. Nowadays CCTV security cameras and mobile phone cameras mean we are constantly observed. In the form of the reality television program, surveillance has now become entertainment.

'Reality TV is format based and can be successfully franchised globally. A format is a tried and true program template that is proven to appeal to a large audience. This lessens the financial risk to the producers.'  
Sarah Malcolm, author of a PhD thesis on reality television narrative, Flinders University

'Reality television is suited to adaptation because once you've made the adjustments the show becomes local,' says Kerrie Murphy. She cites Southern Star Endemol producer Paul Romer: 'When you put twelve Aussies in a house it's a typical Australian format. When you put twelve Italians in the house it will be a typical Italian format. It works all over the world because the content is being decided by the people inside the house.'

Not only can global formats be repackaged using local content. Most reality television is much cheaper to produce. It is true that high-budget programs such as Big Brother or Survivor have expensive upfront costs. However, programs are often more than a third cheaper than equivalent prime-time drama.

The exportable formats and the cheap production costs suited the changed landscape of the television institutions of the late 1980s and 1990s. Many public service broadcasters had their funding cut back. At the same time television markets around the world –especially in Europe and New Zealand - were being deregulated, and commercial operators were in a rush to compete with one another.

Low-cost reality television suited small, newly deregulated markets such as New Zealand, the Netherlands and even Australia. As a result, a large number of the successful reality television formats have been devised outside of the United States. Americans came late to the genre, but brought high-budget productions when. they did.

**Features of reality television**

Reality television programs vary considerably; however, most display some if not all of the following features.
• Real-life-participants. Much of the appeal of reality television is that it is based around real people, not actors playing parts. But because this is television, there is an inevitable tendency to create characters out of these people, says Sarah Malcolm of Flinders University.

• Unscripted performance. People being themselves is the basis of the genre. The programs are largely unscripted, although that does not mean that producers can't deliberately set up situations. A narrative structure is usually imposed on the reallife events, but it is created during the editing and isn't necessarily there from the outset.

• Voice-over narration. The actions of the participants are explained to the audience through the use of voice-over narration. Mostly this narration is in the present tense and is about what is happening as we watch. The narrator adopts an informal style.

• Observation/surveillance. Like the documentary, reality television relies on observation. But in these shows it is taken one step further to become actual, sometimes intrusive surveillance - around the clock. For professor of media studies Mark Andrejevic, this is a natural outcome of the culture of CCTV we live in now. Reality television is suggesting that surveillance can be fun!

• Voyeurism. A voyeur is a peeping tom. Many commentators believe that reality television has moved beyond surveillance into voyeurism. Audiences are positioned as peeping toms who gain pleasure from the exhibitionism of the participants. There is also voyeuristic pleasure to be gained from knowing the emotions displayed are real. If someone is crying, for instance, it means they are really upset.

• Audience participation. What was unique about reality television when it took the world by storm in the 1990s was its use of audience participation. Fans were more than observers -they became participants in the narrative. Because they could influence the outcome of shows such as Big Brother, viewers to some extent became producers. Audience participation also proved to be an effective way of enticing viewers to become committed fans.

Some analysts suggest that reality shows offer the chance for a renewed interest in ordinary people. Just as new digital media have partly democratised communications, reality television has partly opened up the traditional media. However, says Mark Andrejevic, the power relations between the audience and the producers remain essentially unchanged. The television producers still have the real power in creating the format. The audience merely votes on who wins.

Convergent technologies. Reality formats are also designed to utilise convergent media technologies, such as the internet and the mobile phone, says Sarah Malcolm. In the early days of reality television, viewers were enthusiastic. For example, the first Big Brother website in the Netherlands recorded 52 million hits in its first three months online. (There are only 15 million people in the Netherlands.) Viewer voting by phone keeps audiences
involved, and the phone charges are another big revenue stream for the production company.

- Big event television. Many reality television programs become media events in themselves. They can generate major 'moral panics' in the community. They receive lots of newspaper coverage and sometimes even get mentioned in Parliament. For example, Big Brother scandals have been the subject of criticism from the prime ministers of both Australia and the UK.

**Plot**

'The significant thing we have done is try to emulate the pace and grammar of the soap opera. This means you can come into a scene two-thirds of the way through it as long as you know what the plot line is.' *Peter Abbott, Executive Producer, Big Brother*

Real life is not a narrative - although it can lend itself to being made into one. Reality television uses the narrative structures of soap operas to give shape to the events on camera.

The programs are often divided into segments in between the ads. Each segment may have two to three stories that run for a few minutes each. Although soap operas do not have as many stories in each segment, the use of multiple story lines is similar.

Reality shows also use rotating plot lines in the same way as soap operas. The plot lines are often based on developing relationships between the different characters - just like soap operas.

Parallel editing or simultaneous time is another way of imposing a narrative structure on reality. If events are happening in parallel, there is a tendency to see them as connected in some way. 'The narrative structure of soap opera reinforces the sense of immediacy and reality by appearing to unfold in real time,' says Sarah Malcolm.

Malcolm believes the future of reality television may well lie in the merging of reality show narratives with the plots of immersive video games. 'Reality in this type of narrative may take on more of the characteristics of virtual reality. The television of the future may well be a screen window on a performative world of virtual reality.'

**Character**

'Most reality television is built entirely around character, not plot,' says Jonathan Bignell. For most fans the attraction of the programs is in following the characters and gradually getting to know the kind of people they are. The climaxes in the narrative are often built around moments of self-disclosure or revelations about identity.

Casting is often a long process that involves finding real people who have the
characteristics the producers are searching for. Often people are chosen because they fit into certain dramatic character types. For instance 'there may be characters who represent villains or heroes. Other people may be cast because they are likely to provoke conflict or perhaps even create headlines.

Celebrities are increasingly used in reality television. Part of the reason for this is that they are instantly recognisable. They come to the program with a personality that is already known to the public. But key moments in the program, says Jonathan Bignell, are when the celebrity's public personality is stripped away to reveal the real person underneath. 'If reality television offers to make stars out of ordinary people, it also offers to make real people out of stars,' says Mark Andrejevic.

The host or narrator plays an important role in reality shows. The narrator establishes the narrative by interpreting the events for the audience. While editing helps establish the narrative behind the scenes, the narrator has the public role of making sense of people's actions.

**Setting**

The settings used for reality television programs are most often closed systems. In this respect they are similar to soap operas or situation comedies.

Observational docusoaps are usually set in a 'small world' with a familiar set of characters. These characters interact with a constant flow of incoming strangers. Police docusoaps, customs and national security shows, and emergency services reality programs all work in this way. Often the professional community has a 'them against us' siege mentality that helps to unite the lead characters.

Formulated docusoaps and programs based on game shows tend to operate within closed systems. In the case of Big Brother, for example, the closed system is a specially built house that is scaled off from the rest of the community. These locations are specially designed to force contestants to live in certain ways. For example, the Big Brother house has mixedgender shared bedrooms that encourage housemates to form couple relationships. At the other extreme, the Survivor format uses locations that force contestants to undergo physical challenges.

**Audience**

The more you watched the program, the more you knew about all the inmates, their personal traits, the ways they interacted with each other. Just as in soap operas, the more you watched the more expert you became in evaluating character and behaviour.'

*Paddy Scannell, Professor of Communication Studies. University of Michigan*

Just as soap opera audiences are said to follow the characters in the manner of a 'spectator sport', so too do reality television fans. Sports fans enjoy the tactics of the
game play and know the rules in the sort of detail that outsiders struggle to understand. Soap opera fans know the idiosyncrasies of their favourite characters like sports fans know the rules of the game. Reality television viewers follow characters and come to know their tactics in much the same way.

Part of the pleasure of watching reality shows is in the interpretation of a moment as being 'real'. Viewers decide something is real through a combination of their knowledge about the characters and the understanding they have about themselves, says Jennifer Gillan, of Bentley College, Boston. They match up how the contestant is acting according to how they themselves would act in the same situation, says Annette Hill.

A survey of 8000 people conducted by Annette Hill found that people watched shows such as Big Brother for two reasons. First, because the programs were popular with others and everyone else seemed to be watching them, viewers felt they had to watch as well. The programs gave people something to talk about in social groups at school or at work.

Second, reality TV audiences valued the moment when someone revealed his or her true self on television. Hill called this 'the moment of authenticity when real people are really themselves in an unreal environment'.

**Representations and discourses**

At first audiences accepted the promise of reality television at face value. However, recent surveys show that nowadays as many as 70 per cent of people think the stories on the shows are too contrived or exaggerated.

**Representations**

'The overriding rule is that reality TV bears about as close a relationship to reality as one of those banana lollies does to an actual banana.' Kerrie Murphy, television reviewer

Several factors guarantee that reality television is in fact quite unreal - almost as unreal as many fictional programs. These include the following:

- Settings are specially built and scaled off from the real world in formulated docusoaps and reality game shows.
- People and personalities are not a randomly chosen representative sample but are purposely picked to create good drama.
- A narrative is imposed over real events, sometimes distorting reality significantly.

**Discourses**
While the discourses of reality television are as diverse as the formats on offer, there are some clusters around particular types of discourses, including:

- Personal identity. To be open and honest about your inner self is regarded as one of the foremost virtues of reality television. Participants often speak in terms of finding their 'real' identities on the shows. As part of this discourse, housemates on Big Brother, for example, even participate in 'confessionals' with Big Brother and the audience.

- Friendship and intimacy. A common discourse in formulated docusoaps is around the idea of sharing of identity through friendship and intimacy.

- Personal bests. Discourses around personal achievement and success are common in all reality television shows but especially in game show and talent show formats.