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10 THINGS

10 Things Reality TV Won't Tell You

 By [Kedon Willis](#) | [Kedon Willis Archive](#) | Published: January 18, 2008

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1. "Step aside, crime dramas. There's a new sheriff in town."

In case you haven't noticed, reality shows are staking out more and more space in network lineups. In 2001, according to Ted Magder, chair of NYU's Department of Media, Culture and Communications, major networks devoted three hours a week of their prime-time schedule to reality TV and "challenge" game shows. The number increased to eight in 2002 and jumped to more than 20 in 2007. Today reality TV accounts for 20% of prime-time programming on network television. Fueling the trend is the format's comparatively low production costs: typically less than a third of what it takes to produce hour-long dramas. But the bottom line behind the reality boom is ratings. In a Nielsen report for the 2006-07 season, reality shows accounted for six of the top 10 most-watched programs, including all of the top five.

What's behind our fascination with reality TV? Robert Thompson, a Syracuse University communications professor, says an "evolutionary quirk" compels our curiosity about how others live and function. "It's why we peer into other people's medicine cabinets," he says. "We can't help it; we're naturally voyeuristic."

2. "The reality is, it's fake."

Seasoned viewers know that what gets called reality on these shows is often fairly contrived. But few fans know the extent to which the producers mold both people and situations to fit their scripts. It's common, for example, to feature actors in the role of supposedly real people, says Jeff Bartsch, a freelance editor who has worked on reality shows: "Producers have to do this sometimes because they're looking for a specific type of person to fit a role."

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But it's in filming and editing where the magic truly unfolds. Using endless hours of footage, editors often craft whole sequences using a technique called "Franken-biting" to weave together disparate clips, or they'll dub in contestants' words out of context — something Patrick Vaughn knows all too well. A former contestant on CBS's *The Amazing Race*, Vaughn says he was surprised to hear his own voice encouraging the group to find cabs to finish a leg of the race, and recalls that producers were the ones who instructed them to take taxis. A spokesperson for CBS says the change in transportation was "a safety precaution" and that the dubbing of Vaughn's voice "was done to better describe the scene to the viewer."

3. "Once you sign our release, we own you."



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It's no joke, according to Jameka Cameron, a recent contestant on the CBS reality show "Big Brother": "When you sign that document, you're basically signing away all of your rights — everything." (Cameron refused to be more specific, due to legal concerns.) So what exactly does she mean by "everything"?

A look at the participant agreement form from CBS's controversial "Kid Nation," in which unaccompanied minors struggle to create a society in a desert town, sheds some light on the extent of control the makers of these shows wield over contestants. For example, producers have sole discretion in determining what, if any, medical procedures should be sought in cases of injury, even though they don't guarantee the credentials of their medical staff.

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Furthermore, producers are not liable in cases of death or injury of a contestant during the course of filming on location, and they can't be held responsible if a child contracts an STD or becomes pregnant. Says CBS: "The series was filmed responsibly and within all applicable law in the state of New Mexico at the time of production."

4. "Our background check's a joke."

The way reality shows examine the backgrounds of their participants is an area of concern among legal experts. And for good reason — producers love characters who are great at creating conflict, and they'll overlook important personal information to get them. In 2001's "Big Brother," contestant Krista Stegall had a knife held to her throat by another cast member who, it turned out, had previously been arrested for theft and assault charges. (Stegall sued; the case was settled out of court.)

Larry Waks, an entertainment lawyer in Texas, says background checks are "still an evolving area" in reality TV and that the big networks are getting stricter. But the problem is far from fixed. In October, after one of VH1's "America's Most Smartest Model" contestants was arrested for allegedly groping a woman at a party, it was revealed he'd served time for assault, harassment, criminal contempt and trespassing. ("We do thorough background checks," says a spokesperson for the show. "We're continuing to investigate the matter.") Los Angeles entertainment lawyer Neville Johnson doesn't like what he sees. "I'm concerned about the characters they recruit for the sake of drama," he says.

5. "Even our crew members don't know what they're in for."

Participants on reality shows aren't the only ones who don't know what to expect from the experience — crew members are often subjected to highly unpredictable situations as well. Osvaldo Silvera Jr., a director of photography who's worked on shows including "Top Chef" and "Miami Ink," says the first rule he learned on a reality set was "always keep your camera rolling no matter what." That included the time he followed a subject into a room only to have the door slammed in his face, hitting his camera and knocking him to the ground. Cinematographer Aaron Schnobrich recalls filming a reality pilot in Red Square during a demonstration. "One of the camera operators was hauled off by officers in front of me, and I barely escaped from being caught," he says.

How do shows prepare crew members for such crazy working conditions? Mostly, they don't. "Not in the sense of confrontation management or anything like that," Schnobrich says. And since the cameras are usually manned by freelancers rather than union labor, producers face little if any resistance. "Especially in reality TV, everyone works freelance," Schnobrich says. "It's the trick of the industry."

6. "Ad execs are the new producers."

product placement is the big thing in TV advertising, and reality shows are the main vehicle. Leading the way is American Idol, whose sponsors spend millions to sew their products into the show — which is why, for instance, the Coca-Cola brand on the cups at the judges' table faces the camera. "Reality TV is rife with it," says Mark Andrejevic, author of "Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched." It's "selling you something without trying, and it works." Advertisers spent \$1.5 billion on product placement in 2006, according to PQ Media, a 58% increase from 2005. And double-digit growth is projected over the next five years.

Some advertisers even want to design whole shows around their products. Last fall, for example, MTV premiered "The Gamekillers," whose concept was developed by Bartle Bogle

Hagarty, the agency that pushes Axe deodorant for Unilever PLC. The basis of the show was to see if male contestants could "keep their cool" under pressure — while wearing Axe. Don't be surprised if you start seeing more of these ad-minded concepts, says Andrejevic. "This may be the direction marketing starts going."

7. "Go ahead and sue us — you'll have a hard time winning."

Reality-based shows are famous for subjecting participants to intriguingly dangerous situations. But creators hardly ever have to pay up in the event that someone gets injured or even killed. It's not that people haven't tried to sue — they have — it's just that they virtually never win, according to Eric Robinson, staff attorney for the Media Law Resource Center. Robinson has tracked 14 such cases. Half were dismissed outright, and only one resulted in an arbitration award for the plaintiff.

Just ask Jill Mouser, who in 2003 filed suit in Los Angeles for battery and gross negligence after being held in a harness for 40 minutes for CBS's reality show "Culture Shock." She claimed the producers failed to warn her just how physically taxing the show would be. The release form she signed said differently; she lost. According to Larry Waks, release forms have gotten increasingly broad to ensure that networks and producers are indemnified from any claims of liability. So if you're intent on participating in a reality show, the most you can do is be aware of the risks and read all the waivers very carefully. Because, says Waks, "they've all stood up. The releases I see have all been found to prevent suits."

8. "Reality TV? You mean celebrity TV."

The landscape for reality TV has changed rapidly over the past few years. Competition shows and unscripted dramas once dominated the landscape, but it wasn't long before celebrities began infiltrating the reality format. "When reality TV started, its whole appeal was that 'these are not stars — it's unscripted!'" says Robert Thompson. "Then all of a sudden, we have 'The Osbournes' and 'Surreal Life.'" And it wasn't long before network stalwarts like CBS and NBC began catching on to the trend, with celebrity versions of shows like "The Apprentice" and "The Mole."

Elayne Rapping, professor of American studies at SUNY Buffalo, says that the influx of celebrities into the genre makes sense, because "it became something they could do to keep their careers going." As for viewers, "we want to see [celebrities] being real," Rapping says. "This is a country that's addicted to celebrity." Case in point: ABC's "Dancing With the Stars" drew an impressive 22 million viewers for its first season's finale, in 2005, and it was the No. 1 show in all of television during the fall 2007 season.

9. "We steal a lot of our best ideas from Europe."

If you happen to sally forth across the Pond and catch a show on British TV that's exactly like "Dancing With the Stars," it means you're watching "Strictly Come Dancing," the popular U.K. progenitor of the U.S. hit. In fact, of the nine reality shows listed in the top 50 of Nielsen's ranking report for the 2006-07 season, only three were developed by domestic production companies — and they were among the lowest rated. The reason? Foreign studios have been mining the reality-TV vein for a lot longer than American studios, and they soon started packaging and reselling concepts at a frenzied pace.

Netherlands-based Endemol, the force behind such reality hits as "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition," "Deal or No Deal" and "Big Brother," farms out formats to other countries, stripping away cultural nuances and tweaking shows so they better suit their new home. The company even throws in a coach with the deal to consult with local producers on how to successfully adapt the show's basic elements. The goal, says David Goldberg, chairman of Endemol in the U.S., is to "exploit our content across as many markets as we can." Indeed, "Big Brother" has variations in almost 40 countries. "It's as if there's nothing original about reality TV," author Andrejevic says.

10. "Get used to it — we're not going away anytime soon."

Since the 1990s, network television has been strained by the expense of original programming. According to NYU's Magder, producing an hour of original dramatic television averages a cool \$3 million and can run much higher (ratings darling "ER," for example, cost \$13 million an episode in its heyday). Compare that with the cost of producing reality shows, which generally run less than \$1 million per hour, and you'll understand why networks won't be abandoning the format anytime soon. "They can't do without them now," says Magder. "The writing overhead is

much less. They're easy to produce. It's a good economic model."

Another boon: As the writers strike aptly demonstrated, reality shows help hedge against union and labor demands related to producing scripted shows. Does that mean reality programming is destined to take over prime time completely? Not necessarily, says Magder. There may be a short-term increase at present, but don't expect the networks to abandon scripted dramas altogether. "The new model of scripted and unscripted shows is too good," he says. For networks to survive, "there must be a mix."

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vicciv

Posted: 12:21 PM On January 25, 2008

Well, there is one piece of the story that is a flat out lie.

I've been to two showings of Dancing With the Stars. The show is indeed broadcast live to the east coast, complete with the dancing couples who make mistakes that show up and stage workers scurrying out of the way, which you can see at the edges. The only part during the show that is taped is the rehearsal footage.

Before the show begins, during the warm up, they take three audience applause shots to be able to cut away in case something horrible happens on the dance floor (like someone's head cut open). They explain that at the beginning.

The article implies that the entire show is taped which is a lie. It is broadcast live, warts and all.



r377010

Posted: 10:01 AM On January 21, 2008

Couldn't agree more with the previous comments before me (nevola & genedewitt). It's sadly amazing how disconnected with reality our media has become. Hopefully the writer's strike is a wake-up call to all of Hollywood - GET WITH REALITY & come back when you're work's better!



nevola

Posted: 11:48 AM On January 18, 2008

It's obvious that a good portion of Reality TV is contrived for dramatic effect. What might not be so obvious is that much of scripted TV is contrived for political effect. Hardly a show goes by without some gratuitous negative comment re: The President, military, Patriot Act or The U.S. in general. They used to be deftly feathered into the scripts. Now they are so out-of-place they actually screw up a story line. It's almost as if there is a contest among the liberal writers to see who can get the most inane comments slamming our country into a script. This 'groupthink' has spread like an epidemic through the writers circles to where no show is immune to these negative ideas; even those that feature agencies like The Unit and NCIS. No show is immune to these cheap shots intended to plant subliminal messages in an unsuspecting audience seeking only entertainment. Next to this insidious practice, scripting reality TV is hardly noteworthy. One can only hope the writer's strike drags on.



genedewitt

Posted: 10:46 AM On January 18, 2008

I think we need a new label for what is called 'Reality TV' since it is so clearly not reality in any sense; rather, it's a new form of unreality and fantasy that is appealing in the same way that the celeb and gossip magazines are---very light entertainment. The one issue that really caught my attention in Kedon Willis superb article is the nature of the background checks that producers do on program participants. This is a very dangerous area for advertisers since legal liability may be covered via releases but negative public relations could be very damaging to sponsors. I'd suggest that advertisers pay more attention to this issue and insist that producers do so as well.

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