Reality TV

Over the past 20 years, a genre (category or style) of TV called **reality TV** has taken over a large part of television network schedules. The success of shows like *Survivor*, *American Idol* and *Big Brother* have led to shows like *Duck Dynasty*, *The Voice* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*.

The reality TV genre presents shows where cast members (the term "actor" is not used) appear in unscripted situations and interactions. The shows often encourage tensions and conflicts, as the cast members compete in a contest (*Amazing Race*) or struggle with human relationships (*The Real Housewives of Orange County*).

Whether or not you enjoy reality TV, the genre is a window into aspects of the television medium. For example, it can provide insight into what we believe on TV and why. It can provide a new perspective on constructed reality. Reality TV can also help us question the **authenticity** (the honesty, accuracy and creativity) of television content.

*If the question of the origin of reality TV interests you,* [***click here***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reality_television#1940s.E2.80.931950s) *to visit Wikipedia's Reality television article. It does a nice job of addressing the questions of what reality TV includes and when the genre began.*

Consider the following statements. On the surface, they may reflect many people's thoughts about reality TV. Click each statement to read a short comment. What is your opinion about each statement?

* [**Reality TV is a new genre.**](https://nbvhs.nbed.nb.ca/content/English/MEDIA_STUDIES_120/MS120_PD_2014-15_S2/Module%204/MedStu120_04_16.html?d2lSessionVal=m8QZLZkBXlOIJljtwshzqE6xo&ou=33016&d2l_body_type=3)

The term "reality TV" appeared in 2002 following *Survivor*'s early popularity in the USA; however, the concept is not new. Shows that featured non-actors in unscripted situations have been on TV since at least the 1950s. Shows like *Candid Camera*, *The Gong Show* and *The People's Court* fit the definition of reality TV long before the term was invented. Game shows are often considered reality TV, and some people even argue that sports programming, like *Hockey Night in Canada*, fall into this genre.

* [**Reality TV isn't about constructing reality.**](https://nbvhs.nbed.nb.ca/content/English/MEDIA_STUDIES_120/MS120_PD_2014-15_S2/Module%204/MedStu120_04_16.html?d2lSessionVal=m8QZLZkBXlOIJljtwshzqE6xo&ou=33016&d2l_body_type=3)

As we saw earlier in this course, the media is always constructing reality. The very name "reality TV," though, suggests that this genre does not construct a reality, it presents true reality. Is that even possible when every reality TV show shows carefully edited footage of carefully selected performers in a carefully planned contest or setting?

Next time you watch a reality show, use your analysis skills to notice how production techniques like camera angles, camera motion, lighting and sound affect the reality that the show presents. If you are watching a show that claims to show people acting spontaneously in a contest, race or social setting, imagine that you are the camera person. Picture you, your equipment, and any other crew members you think must be nearby as part of the scene.

* [**The cast's performance is authentic because it is not scripted.**](https://nbvhs.nbed.nb.ca/content/English/MEDIA_STUDIES_120/MS120_PD_2014-15_S2/Module%204/MedStu120_04_16.html?d2lSessionVal=m8QZLZkBXlOIJljtwshzqE6xo&ou=33016&d2l_body_type=3)

Reality TV cast members may not be given an actual script to follow, but their performance can be shaped in various ways. Interviewers select cast members to meet the director's specific requirements, weeding out participants who are unlikely to fit the show's expectations. Cast members often follow the pattern set by popular cast members in previous shows. For example, *Survivor* cast members always form alliances, and contestants on *Family Feud* always jump up and down shouting "Good answer! Good answer!" Pre-recorded shows like *Amazing Race* edit huge amounts of recorded footage down to only those scenes that fit the show's needs. Some reality shows have even been caught reshooting scenes when the "first reality" wasn't what they wanted. The authenticity of a cast member's "reality" in these shows is filtered through a camera lens and then edited to decide exactly what we see. A more authentic performance is possible on shows broadcast live (as they happen), such as some episodes of *American Idol*.

* **[Reality TV shows use "real people," not professional actors.](https://nbvhs.nbed.nb.ca/content/English/MEDIA_STUDIES_120/MS120_PD_2014-15_S2/Module%204/MedStu120_04_16.html?d2lSessionVal=m8QZLZkBXlOIJljtwshzqE6xo&ou=33016&d2l_body_type=3)**

This statement suggests that an actor's work is not authentic—that it is fake—because it delivers someone else's words in an artificial setting and story. It also suggests that reality TV performers are saying what is in their hearts, in a real setting. But should we assume that any actor's performance is always less authentic than any performance on a reality TV show? Consider the following two examples. Which show do you think might give a more authentic (believable) picture of a career in a challenging job?

*A professional actor in a realistic police drama studies how actual police officers behave on the job. The show also hires five police officers to give advice on story lines and to coach actors on speaking and reacting correctly. They also ensure that the show gives a believable and fair picture of the lives of police officers, on the job and off the job.*

*A popular reality-TV star is in the fourth year of a show where he spends a month in one "dangerous and dirty" job after another. The series began when he was unemployed and so desperate for work that he tried out jobs that most people would avoid. Now, the network sells a line of "Dangerous and Dirty" products. The star has launched a successful line of hand tools with his name on the label.*