

# Reel Politics



Reel Politics:  
Reality Television as a Platform  
for Political Discourse

Edited by

Lemi Baruh and Ji Hoon Park

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Reel Politics: Reality Television as a Platform for Political Discourse,  
Edited by Lemi Baruh and Ji Hoon Park

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## PREFACE

# THREE REASONS FOR TAKING REALITY TV SERIOUSLY

STEPHEN COLEMAN<sup>1</sup>

It is through mediation that the world becomes public and through exposure to media that the public becomes worldly. Neither of these processes are straightforward or inevitable. Mediation can be narrowly parochial or expansively global; liberal or censorial; self-centered or porous. And publics, as they are imagined and self-formed, can be open or closed to the world; citizens of the Arendtian kind, emerging within spaces of appearance, or subjects, spectators and saps. As media scholars, it is our task to describe and explain how these processes are generated and inhibited; how, through a diverse range of creative genres and formats, approaches to worldliness are opened up and closed down. In these first years of a new century, reality TV is one such genre, encompassing a range of formats that are frequently lumped together, all too often under the stigma of cultural decadence.

The culturally high-minded speak of reality TV in the way that critics first dismissed novels (mere feminine froth) and soap operas (frothier still). *Guardian* feature writer, Marina Hyde, who has made a career out of being supercilious towards popular culture, addresses herself to politicians who imagine that they can learn anything from watching reality TV: “they ought to note that, time and again, these formats produce nothing of lasting value whatsoever, be it someone who can shift more than two singles, or a celebrity worthy of admiration as opposed to ridicule.” Her article, entitled “There is simply nothing to be learned from reality TV at all” tells a bleak story of a society in which “young people will neither comprehend nor be interested in anything at all unless it has been refracted through the familiar prism of a talent show with celebrity judges” (Hyde 2006). Behind all of this pompous bluster is an argument that deserves to be aired. Far from providing “a platform for political discourse,” as this volume suggests, Hyde and others are uneasy about what they perceive to

be a populist attempt by the producers of reality TV to represent quasi-democratic mass voting, promoted in the name of “audience interactivity,” with the serious business of making consequential political decisions. As I have encountered it, this argument tends to comprise three strands.

Firstly, it is argued that reality TV has little to do with reality. The participants are performers and the performances are engineered by an industry that cares little for authentic representation. And it is certainly right to recognize that realist claims are nearly always over-stated, whether in theatre, literature or art. As Raymond Williams (1958, 22) observed, realism “creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons.” Resting upon a sensitive balance between structural constraint and autonomous agency, realists seek to show how people are what they are within situations that they cannot wholly control. Television complicates this balancing act, for, firstly, its “real” characters are from the start shaped by social structure, and then both structure and agency are reconfigured by media logic, which is dominated by a thirst for ratings and a tendency to rely upon ready-made, often clichéd representations. Of course, reality TV is not unadulterated reality any more than TV news is raw news. Reality TV is TV-treated reality, and yet at times it transcends the producers’ priorities and exposes something of human relations that is touching in its unscripted veracity.

Secondly, reality TV is seen as trivializing and distracting. But trivializing what? Distracting from what? To be sure, a reality-TV-simulated university or parliament or scientific laboratory would be a distraction from the real thing—but who has ever proposed this? A reality-TV-based kitchen or house full of young people or summer camp can hardly be accused of undermining the integrity of non-televised kitchens, houses or camps. These are, quite simply, windows into worlds that might not otherwise be observed; not completely real worlds, for that would constitute voyeuristic surveillance, but worlds created to be performed within and witnessed. The common accusation that reality TV is trivializing relates to the mundane nature of the scenes that tend to be witnessed. “Who would possibly want to watch a group of kids sitting around in a house?” it is asked by critics who are sure that that is not what they would choose to watch. Clearly, some people do. The question is actually a normative one: “Why *should* anyone possibly want to watch a group of kids sitting around in a house?” And the answer to that is best explained through cultural reflection rather than moral stricture. Some people want to watch other people who are either very like or very unlike themselves because they feel that they know more about life as a result of doing so.

Thirdly, at the academic end of this argument, are those who contend that reality TV is a means of conditioning people to govern themselves in certain ways. It is about “the conduct of conduct.” And so it is. One of the most appealing aspects of the discussions that surround reality TV shows is the democratization of ethical criticism. Or, to put this in terms that will be familiar to media scholars, the balance between textual coding and audience decoding is radically retilted in the direction of the latter. That is precisely why reality TV, at its best, gives rise to significant social backlashes, often at odds with the original intentions of the producers. (The UK’s *Big Brother* racism row was dramatic in its uncontrollable conflict between the participants, who were not performing as the producers might have expected, and the audience, whose receptive sensitivity exceeded the grasp of media PR.)

None of this is to say that some reality TV shows—or even perhaps the entire genre—cannot be accused of manufacturing some realities, trivializing certain social relationships and possessing a moral agenda. But that case cannot be made by allusions and sneers. If the wholly negative critique of reality TV is to be sustained, it must be on the basis of empirical analysis rather than angst-filled polemics. Just as the “news” may not be the news that it claims to be, it is there; it is widely watched; and it is generally believed. For those reasons, it should be critiqued as social text rather than on the unprovable basis of its pernicious editorial motives. And, for the same reasons, so should reality TV. But that does not answer the question posed by the title of this volume: Why should reality TV be regarded as a potential platform for political discourse? Here is where my three arguments become relevant.

## **1. An expanded conception of the political**

If politics is only about governments, laws, ideologies and rational-choice actors, some reality TV might still be marginally relevant to it, but too little to write a whole volume about. However, notions of what constitutes “the political” are changing (Corner and Pels 2003; Thrift 2007; van Zoonen 2004). Attention to micropolitical acts and flows of mundane power, within families, workplaces, schools, streets and dance clubs, for example, have emerged as we have started to take more seriously the feminist motto, “the personal is political.” Indeed, the political is becoming more personal at every level, not as a distraction from the exercise of power, but as a way of recognizing the multidimensional forms and strategies through which people “act powerfully,” i.e. interfere in the lives of others with impunity (Coleman, 2010).

These semi-visible interferences and casual injuries of power are best seen through the microscope of critical observation rather than the telescope of quantitative generalization. Power, in its many crude, subtle and ingenious forms, justifies interference through schemes, techniques and technologies that enable some to tamper with social reality so that the subjective performances of others conform to an imposed and inauthentic order. By ensuring that social spaces are “colonized” (Gregory 1994) “smothered” (Allen 2003) and “crowded out” (Scott 1989), modes of political interference are naturalized and opposition to them defined as disruptive or resistant. Traditional political analysis is poor at spotting these strategies of interference. Political scientists tend to ignore power acts that cannot be described or explained within the narrow terms of state-market-citizen relations. This is where some reality TV, in its focus upon the micro-social, is peculiarly effective in illuminating neglected aspects of power, whether they are performed by “judges” trying to shape future celebrities, makeover show producers telling people how to look good or *Big Brother* house inhabitants learning to submit to the disembodied commands of the show’s producers, while also trying to “be themselves.”

## 2. Self-representing performances

The history of broadcasting has been characterized by the exclusion of “ordinary people” from the center stage. Even when invited to participate in phone-ins, studio debates and vox pop interviews, the presence of the public has been subjected to neurotic control by media “insiders” (Coleman and Ross 2010). While reality TV is no exception to this desire by broadcasters to produce the public, the scope for loss of control within this genre is unprecedented. Reality TV entails risk—and it is this riskiness, I would argue, that makes it so appealing. The struggle between mediated and self-representation—the script and agency—makes reality TV always potentially political—always in danger of exposing media intentions which producers would prefer to remain invisible. If, as many scholars argue, the media perform a political role, not only in their coverage of official politics, but in the ways that they represent everyday social reality, it would be strange not to look towards moments when those representations are at risk of being countered by live, unscripted, untutored performances from people who are media outsiders.

Insofar as democracy is characterized by the transparent accountability of representations to the represented, there is at least some potential for subjecting democratic politicians to modes of scrutiny commonly applied to reality TV characters. Questions such as “Is this person who she claims

to be?”, “Does she express one view before some people and another before others?”, “Can she laugh at herself?” or “Is she malicious towards her detractors?” are regularly asked of participants in shows such as *Big Brother*, but there are far fewer opportunities to test the self-representations of elected representatives in the same way. In part, this reflects a deep-seated antipathy towards questions of personality within rationalist discourse. But, unless the more dogmatic followers of Foucault are right and individual agency doesn’t really matter very much, questions of personal integrity can’t be separated from political discourse. Any media genre that focuses attention upon judgments about the authenticity of representative performances is inescapably involved in political discourse.

### 3. Testing the rhetoric of interactivity

Much has been written, often in quite hyperbolic terms, about the dialogical potential of interactive media. Reality TV has skillfully employed this rhetoric as a means of promoting the notion of the empowered audience, capable of intervening in media production in decisive ways. The cynical hollowness of some of these claims have been exposed in what the British press liked to refer to as “the phone-vote scandal”: moments of embarrassing exposure for producers who had imagined that offering the public a say (at premium rates) was sufficient, without having to go so far as to act upon the plebiscitary mandate. The public backlash was powerful. Broadcasters were forced to change their ways. New controlling phone votes have not only limited fraud, but opened up a space for viewers to assume interactive rights. These new forms of voting are democratizing, not simply because they offer opportunities for viewers to contribute to what had once been privately-determined media outcomes, but because they raise public expectations about the possibility of influencing media content. Hartley (2008) is right to see this development as having relevance for the health of the public sphere. As Arendt understood, the political emerges when people gather together and have a capacity to reach one another. The extended interactivity, that starts with phone votes and migrates to much more autonomous and flexible community-building through online fora and virtual social networks, is an example of that civic gathering. As Graham has shown in his study of the *Wife Swap* forum and van Zoonen in her work on online fan communities, democratic citizenship takes form in unexpected places and ways.

Were the reality TV genre capable of generating mass interactivity, while stifling political discourse, that in itself would be worthy of study. For, depoliticization is always a deeply political strategy. If, on the other

hand, issues raised in reality TV give rise to politically-inflected many-to-many communication, how that happens, where it leads and how it might evolve should most certainly be subjects for exploration by media scholars. This volume takes up that exploration in a systematic and penetrating way.

## Notes

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION: REALITY OF EVERYDAY POLITICS

JI HOON PARK AND LEMI BARUH

In the mid-1980s, Neil Postman claimed that television made entertainment the natural format for the representation of all experience. While Postman's argument still applies to contemporary television, it also seems increasingly more accurate to argue that “reality-based” entertainment is quickly becoming the referential format for televisual representations of our experience in the 21st century. For instance, in recent years the United States has witnessed an explosion in reality programming on network and cable television. Some reality subgenres include reality game shows (*The Apprentice*, *Survivor*), dating shows (*Next*, *The Bachelor*), makeover shows (*Wife Swap*, *The Biggest Loser*), reality talent contests (*American Idol*, *America's Best Dance Crew*), popular court programs (*Judge Mathis*, *Judge Judy*), “celebreality” shows (*The Surreal Life*, *Flavor of Love*), docusoaps (*The Real World*), and reality sitcoms (*The Osbournes*, *Newlyweds*).

Many media scholars and critics agree that reality TV is not only here to stay, but that it has also become a pervasive form of representation that significantly influences the media landscape as well as people's sense of reality. It is not uncommon to employ “reality” components in a wide range of programs dealing not just with ordinary people, but also with celebrities, animals, and even animated cartoon characters. In 2004, Comedy Central aired *Drawn Together*, the first animated reality series featuring eight cartoon characters representing different personality types typically seen on docusoaps such as MTV's *The Real World* or *Road Rules*. For the first quarter of 2008, broadcasting networks in the US planned 27 hours of weekly reality programming. We now have an all-reality channel, Fox Reality, devoted entirely to reality TV shows 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

More often than not, reality television has been regarded as “network crack” (Conlin 2003) or as a “fast food” (Javors 2004) genre that is more

suitable for “numbing ourselves to very real life challenges” (35) than for providing a venue within which issues with “social weight” can be discussed. However, Murray (2009, 69) reminds us that debates about the “social weight” of the content of factual entertainment are largely a “rhetorical stance that can be mobilized in an effort to endorse or authenticate a particular television text.” And, while cognizant of the often debated high vs. low culture dichotomy regarding the social, political or informative value of reality programming (Meers and van Bauwel 2004), we, as editors of this book, were particularly intrigued by both how quickly political issues and controversies may permeate reality programming content and reality television’s “potential” as a springboard for political debate. For example, when *Survivor: Cook Islands* in the United States premiered as a contest between races, discussions regarding racial inequality and how *Survivor* would reinforce or challenge racial stereotypes inevitably followed. The examples concerning how reality television may trigger political discussions are not limited to *Survivor: Cook Islands*. The place of reality television in contemporary political discussions has been highlighted by a variety of reality shows such as *Big Brother* (surveillance and privacy), *Beauty and the Geek* (gender inequality and stereotypes), *The Real World* (religion, gender and homosexuality), *American Idol* (voting patterns), and *The Apprentice* (the American dream).

Chapters in this edited volume will present a selection of different perspectives focusing on this potential for reality programs to serve as a domain for politics and political discourse. Contributors will investigate a wide range of themes—including politics of the real in relation to authenticity and performance in reality TV; audience interaction with reality programming; neoliberal politics, ideology and subversion; identity, gendered and racial violence; and ethical norms—that situate reality TV in wider political, cultural and social contexts.

### **Cashing in on controversy**

While reality TV encompasses a host of subgenres and draws codes and conventions from already existing genres (e.g., documentaries, talk shows, game shows) (Hill 2005), the immense popularity and proliferation of reality programming transformed this niche into a separate genre now recognized in two categories for the Primetime Emmy Awards: *Outstanding Reality Program* and *Outstanding Reality-Competition Program*. British media scholar Richard Kilborn (1994, 423) offers three defining characteristics of reality TV as a genre:

Reality TV involves (a) the recording “on the wing,” and frequently with the help of lightweight video component, of events in the lives of individuals and groups, (b) the attempt to simulate such real-life events through various forms of dramatized reconstruction, (c) the incorporation of this material in suitably edited form into an attractively packaged television programme which can be promoted on the strength of its reality credentials.

We believe that it is important to recognize two additional characteristics common to all reality formats. First, it is for the most part the commercial objectives in the television industries that motivate the production of innovative and often-controversial reality shows. Reality TV has gained popularity among television producers and executives because the genre enables them to reduce production costs while achieving ratings success. Chad Raphael (2009) notes that reality TV emerged as a response to economic restructuring within the television industry and its need for cheaper programming. He argues that behind the spread of the reality genre are producers’ cost-cutting strategies such as bypassing union labor associated with the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), Screen Extras Guild (SEG) or the Writers Guild of America. William Booth (2004, c01) of Washington Post writes, “An hour of reality TV costs about half of what an hour of drama or sitcom does.” Despite the lower production cost, reality programs often enjoy the status of being among the highest-rated shows in network television or cable networks. The finale of a reality dating game show *Flavor of Love*, where women of different races compete for the love of Black rapper Flavor Flav, was the highest-rated show in the history of VH1. *America’s Next Top Model* was ranked the number one rated show on UPN in 2006. A number of reality shows, such as *Survivor*, *The Real World*, *Big Brother*, *American Idol*, *Wife Swap* and *America’s Next Top Model*, enjoy their longevity and continuing popularity. The reality genre has been proven successful not just in the television ratings, but also in other areas such as DVD sales, syndication, and foreign format sales.

Producers of reality programs, however, quickly realized that the reality format alone does not guarantee success as indicated by numerous reality shows that failed. As the television schedules are filled with cheap reality shows and their competition gets ever more intense, creative topics and story ideas have become ever more critical to the success of a reality show. As media scholar Sean Baker (2003) notes, in an increasingly competitive market where different communication media and channels compete for the attention of audiences, reality TV producers are pressured

to introduce innovative and often controversial formats and topics that can instantly grab the viewers' attention.

The second feature common to all reality program formats is the genre's claim for the authenticity of what is presented on the show. Reality TV producers have capitalized on the concept of "reality" as an effective promotional marketing tool. James Friedman (2002, 7) of the UCLA Film and Television Archive writes, "What separates the spate of contemporary reality-based television from its predecessors is not the form or content of these programs ... but the open and explicit sale of television programming as a representation of reality." Media scholars Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (2004, 5) have also observed that what unites the wide range of reality-based programming is "primarily its discursive, visual and technological *claim* to 'the real.'" Producers actively take advantage of the generic connotations of authenticity, naturalness, and frankness by using various documentary filmmaking techniques widely known as the "fly on the wall" or *cinéma vérité*. Even technical glitches including poor framing, frequent loss of camera focus, or audio problems help contribute to the illusion of unmediated reality. Not only does the reality genre boost and market its authenticity, but its alleged claim for authenticity and unmediated reality also grants the genre what Richard Kilborn (1994) calls "reality credentials," a unique privilege to blatantly deal with controversial subjects with fewer ethical constraints.

If we understand the industrial context underlying the production of reality TV (such as financial scarcity and the pressure to cut production costs in the television industry, the competitive market, the need for eye-catching subjects to achieve high ratings) and the genre's privilege to promote the discourse of the real, it is not difficult to understand why sensational or controversial topics continue to serve as popular subjects for reality shows. Not only are reality shows cheaper to produce, but the reality credentials also enable the producers to take advantage of socially stigmatized subjects associated with ideology, gender, race, sexuality, class, etc. While reality TV producers may manipulate footage and manufacture drama to tell an interesting story, the reality claims of the genre, such as unmediated reality or unscripted natural interaction among the cast, provide the producers with a shield from potential criticisms. In other words, because reality shows are "unscripted," they have a claim to the real that serves as a safety net and allows for the use of material too controversial for regular programming.

## Management of unpredictability in reality TV

A key characteristic that demarcates the reality genre from fictional programming is its unpredictability. In contrast with fictional shows where each actor's complete performance is scripted and carefully rehearsed, reality TV relies on the "unscripted" performance of non-professional actors. As Nabi and colleagues (2004) note, one of the main selling points of the genre is the element of shock and surprise involved in witnessing real-life drama.

From the television industry's perspective, however, it is important for the producers to have control over the unscripted interaction among participants and increase their predictability. If producers merely depicted the random and quotidian moments of everyday life, their shows would be boring, if not chaotic, and therefore fail to draw the audiences' attention. Reality TV is about creating something more interesting than real life. While working with unpredictable real-life performance and interaction, the producers must produce *predictably popular* shows, for the advertising-driven television industries must ensure a reliable supply of entertaining programming that can consistently achieve high ratings. Therefore, the industry's need for creating commercially viable reality-based shows in the highly competitive media environment necessitates the producers' active intervention that reduces unpredictability.

Reality TV producers employ a number of strategies to effectively transform unpredictable reality elements into structured narratives that are engaging and entertaining. Typical strategies include typecasting, the employment of artificial settings, and selective editing and narration (or the use of dramatic structure). Producers carefully choose a small number of individuals out of tens of thousands of applicants so that they can reduce the uncertainty associated with the use of ordinary people's unscripted performances. Typecasting also ensures that the cast members portray easily recognizable characters that are interesting enough to draw the audience's attention. The use of artificial and contrived settings/events, such as competitions and task assignments, is effective because they can structure the cast's behavior in predictable ways. Producers impose rules on the cast (for instance, the cast on *The Real World* or *Big Brother* cannot watch television or use cellular phones) so that they can confine the cast's interaction within the predictable framework. Not only does reality TV include a highly artificial environment, but also producers actively shape the reality by employing a variety of narrative strategies during post-production. Temporality and spatiality are ignored to enhance the dramatic effects of the narrative.

Matt Kunitz, former producer of *The Real World*, and Joan Meyerson of the Writers Guild of America, note that reality shows normally have dozens of writers and story editors who construct stories because “story after all is everything ... editing is absolutely a tool we have as producers to tell a story. You might call it manipulation. But it’s a tool” (quoted in Kunkel 2003). With these structuring devices, producers attempt to construct a series of entertaining, coherent episodes out of random and mundane real-life events, while simultaneously benefiting from the quintessential strengths of the reality genre: strong realism resulting from unscripted interaction among ordinary people and the privilege to use sensational and controversial material that fictional shows hesitate to include.

### **Debating reality television**

The rapid proliferation of reality formats has generated a wide range of debates about the negative impacts of reality TV. In Britain, where reality-based programming is understood within the context of or as an extension of traditional documentary, there has been great concern about reality TV’s contamination of serious documentary forms. Similarly, the major concern in the United States has been on the dominance of this light entertainment format on the television schedules and its “dumbing down” of American audiences. Other criticisms of reality TV include an impoverishment of public discourse, tabloidization, the promotion of sensational and voyeuristic pleasure, and increasing public acceptance of surveillance.

Generally, two main concerns about the genre underline scholars’ and media critics’ widespread skepticism regarding the social value of reality programming. First, the industrial practices of typecasting make it difficult to expect cast and content that can subvert dominant ideologies. Second, the negative views regarding reality TV are associated with the genre’s fictional reconstruction of documentary facts for the purpose of creating entertainment.

### **Typecasting in reality television and politics of subversion**

From a media industry perspective, typecasting responds to the need to quickly convey information about characters and to instill in the audience certain expectations about characters’ actions. While typecasting is a routine practice in the production of entertainment television in general, the reality genre’s need to reduce uncertainties (associated with the use of



ordinary people's unscripted performance) forces the producers to rely more heavily on typecasting. Ultimately, typecasting allows the producers to portray easily recognizable characters that viewers can instantly relate to. Johnson-Woods (2002, 66) notes the importance of casting for reality shows, stating that,

“[Reality shows'] success hinges on the right casting. In order to attract an audience, it is necessary, because of the soap opera elements for the producers to have the casting gene ... It helps if contestants can be molded into stereotypes: the hard-working mother, the sassy young female, the plotting villain. And if contestants can be roughly divided into 'goodies' and 'baddies,' then the show is sure to attract a following.”

It should come as no surprise that Arnold Shapiro, executive director of *Big Brother*, comments that “casting is the single most important ingredient in the success of any reality show” because the cast's performance ultimately determines the main story to tell (quoted in Kunkel 2003).

Not only do producers rely on casting, but they also depend heavily on selective editing to construct participants into characters. Ruthi Alcaide, a former cast member of *The Real World: Hawaii*, who became best known for binge drinking, is but one example of many former participants in reality programs who complain about the discrepancy between their “reality” portrayal and their “real” selves: “My storyline was alcoholic. The only time I saw myself on TV was when I had a beer on my hand.” Another cast member on the show, Amaya Brecher, similarly notes that MTV portrayed Alcaide as an alcoholic through editing. She states, “they [producers] focused so much on her drinking. They didn't focus on what a great person she was” (quoted in Kunkel 2003).

Media scholars argue that the industrial practice of typecasting for reality TV narrows the range of people on the show, resulting in a lack of ethnic diversity. For example, according to Edward Miller (2000, 15), reality TV ultimately distorts reality in that the genre tends to promote ideal types of people while excluding everyday people:

Are ethnic minorities included and to what degree? Are there people from various ages and regions and body types? Where representations of minorities on television are smaller than census percentages and often rely on stereotypes, any supposed inclusion of real Americans will become contested and reflect anxieties about how to define and portray a larger American identity. That is, given the construction and tendency of the media industries, any attempt at “realness” is all but doomed to fail being accurate.

Reality TV has received a great deal of ideological criticism for its stereotype-driven narratives and lack of diversity. Media scholars argue that reality TV functions to reinforce the dominant ideologies associated with social groups such as race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and class. Reality TV star William Hung's popularity demonstrates the effectiveness of racial stereotypes in the success of a reality series. Hung's appearance on the reality singing competition *American Idol* made him one of the most recognizable Asian American celebrities in American history. While a student at the University of California, Berkeley, Hung, auditioned for *American Idol* and instantly gained fame through his off-key audition performance of Ricky Martin's hit song "She Bangs" on its third season in 2004. Journalist Emil Guillermo (2004) comments that Hung may have not gained much popularity if he had been of another race, and that his popularity has a great deal to do with classic Asian American stereotypes, characterized by nerdiness, bad hair, bad teeth, bad moves, and a bad accent. Guillermo considers *American Idol* racist in that the series has exploited an infantilized, incompetent, and impotent Asian male image (William Hung was a self-declared virgin!).

### **Real simple entertainment**

While scholars acknowledge that reality TV may include serious and controversial social issues, they express skepticism about the profit-driven reality genre's potential to challenge the status quo. Accordingly, reality TV is ideologically limited because the producers' imperative to create an entertaining show causes simplification of the complexity of the underlying social issues, and thus fails to offer a broader context within which such issues are properly understood. As such, unlike traditional documentary whose main emphasis lies in critical investigation of power relations embedded in our everyday lives, profit-driven reality TV pursues light entertainment that is easily accessible to a wide range of audiences. For example, Bondebjerg (1996) argues that BBC's crime reality show *Crimewatch UK* rarely offers a critical account of the social and historical contexts of inner city crimes. Similarly, Kilborn (1994) notes that while a British reality series *999* may increase viewers' awareness of how emergency services operate, it does not discuss health crises engendered by the underfunding of particular medical services. Pointing to the ideological limitations of the genre, Kilborn indicates:

The task of those involved in reality program making lies, therefore, not so much in seriously challenging viewers' received notions of the world as in producing highly personalized accounts of incidents and events [...] There

is rarely an attempt to place the events depicted in a wider sociopolitical context. All the emphasis is on producing a style of programming which is light, easily digestible and guaranteed to bring back viewers for further helpings in the weeks to come. (426)

It is almost an essential feature of reality shows to refrain from adopting an overly critical stance toward their subjects. With regard to docusoaps in particular, Richard Kilborn (2000) maintains that while they may incidentally shed light on socially important issues, they seldom offer analytical or critical engagement with the issues because they highlight character interactions and personality conflicts that divert the audience's critical attention. Likewise, Miller (2000, 9) argues that reality TV does not offer so-called "Brechtian moments of alienation," which give audiences the intellectual distance necessary to contemplate TV critically and gain an understanding of the reality of the larger world. For John Corner (1999), the use of narrative in non-fictional forms such as reality TV has ideological implications because the genre's convention of easily digestible storytelling trivializes or naturalizes power relations that require critical attention from the public, thereby limiting complex thoughts and feelings about the issues covered. Corner argues:

One of the ways in which television criticism has engaged narrative is precisely in respect of it as a potential distraction device as a way of engaging the viewer which privileges emotional over rational assessment and which naturalizes aspects of social life which may be the fit subject for questioning and indeed suspicion. (49)

### **Making the case for reality television?**

Despite receiving widespread criticism from scholars and media commentators alike, the reality-programming genre offers a number of instances underlining its progressive potential. For example, a variety of reality shows, such as *The Surreal Life*, *Road Rules*, *The Apprentice*, and *The Real World* have featured racial and sexual minority participants and have consistently portrayed trust, friendship and romance transcending the boundaries of race and sexuality.

As mentioned above, despite producer control of narrative and character construction, reality programming is substantially different from scripted drama in its propensity for the unexpected. In her discussion of *Big Brother*, Jane Roscoe (2001, 481) argues that no matter "how constructed the event, how closely it [real life event] conforms to the structure and narrative of the soap opera, there is always a potential element of

unpredictability in the show.” In other words, while producers rely on the practice of typecasting to construct easily identifiable character types, reality TV nevertheless includes *real* people whose characters are sometimes complex and not always one-dimensional.

Consequently, unlike fictional programs within which the cast’s performance is thoroughly scripted by writers or producers, reality shows can provide minority cast members with an unusual (and perhaps unanticipated) opportunity to speak for themselves and engage in non-traditional and counter-hegemonic discourses. In his analysis of gay images on reality TV, Christopher Pullen (2004) suggests that while producers cast characters for their stereotypical performance potential, the unpredictability inherent in the reality genre works to produce textual ambivalence that defies a straightforward definition of gay identity. As such, Pullen claims, reality-based shows offer a democratized televisual space that contradicts moral and political hegemonies.

### **Politics of the real: Authenticity and performance**

As the discussion above outlines, an important dimension of the debate regarding the extent to which reality programming may engender political discourse and ideologically disruptive moments centers around the balance (or the conflict) between the editorial choices of producers working in a highly commercial environment and the genre’s inherent “reality” and unpredictability. As Laurie Ouellette and Susan Murray (2009, 8) observe,

Far from being the mind-numbing, deceitful, and simplistic genre that some critics claim it to be, reality TV provides a multilayered viewing experience that hinges on culturally and politically complex notions of what is real and what is not. Moreover, reality TV enlists people in activities and practices ... that ... further complicate text-based notions of meaning and truth.

The chapters in Part I of this volume consider this question of reality, authenticity and politics from various perspectives. In Chapter 2, John Corner looks at definitions of “politicality” to offer a framework within which the link between political culture and modes of reality can be investigated. Corner questions the usefulness of contrasting *everyday politics* of television and conventional modes of *high politics* and goes on to suggest that deeming reality programming to be unsuitable for “serious” content ignores both its highly heterogeneous nature and its openness to viewer interpretation that may put the “public” into content that initially manifests itself as asocial and ahistorical. At the same time, Corner also

cautions against overplaying the potential of reality programming for subversive readings and points to the need to empirically engage with the question of what popular audiences can make of the “interpretative options” available to them.

In Chapter 3, Paul Kerr provides a compelling account of what he experienced while producing a television documentary titled *The Last Slave*<sup>1</sup> to argue that the current state of public television is moving away from the documentary form to what he calls the “experiential” mode. Kerr suggests that we should focus not only on the text of a program but also on the whole experience of production itself (including pre-production, production and post-production). According to him, particularly indicative of the move towards the experiential is public televisions’ accommodation of “reality” as constructed by reality television through such conventions as narrativization, first person testimonies and dramatic reconstructions.

In his essay in Chapter 4, Mark Andrejevic focuses on politics of authenticity as portrayed on reality television to consider the fate of participation and democracy in the age of interactivity. According to Andrejevic, at the same time that reality television promises to deliver to its audiences the ability to capture what is authentic, it also paradoxically leads to what he calls the “politics of the knave” or “post-deferential reality TV politics,” within which layers of authenticity can be peeled but “authenticity” can never be fully achieved. As such, reality television caters to the savvy consumer who—always skeptical of any claim to authenticity—is content with figures that just admit everything (including their own personas) is staged. Andrejevic argues that the politics of the knave may have dire consequences for participatory democracy by putting a premium on cynicism and discounting the value of reliance on information and deliberation.

## **Audiences and everyday politics**

The chapters that make up Part II of this volume provide different viewpoints and analyses pertaining to the questions that John Corner (Chapter 2) raised about audiences’ reception of everyday politics as depicted on reality television.

In Chapter 5, Andy Ruddock discusses reality TV in the larger context of political communication. A specific example analyzed is controversial British MP George Galloway who provocatively competed in UK Channel 4’s *Celebrity Big Brother*. While many consider his appearance as nothing more than an exercise in celebrity, Ruddock views *Celebrity Big Brother* as an opportunity for more direct communication between the public and

politicians. Despite the popular criticism, the shows provided Galloway with a platform for articulating an anti-war voice and displaying his personality. Ruddock has observed that reality TV can be a powerful tool for politicians to project their attractive personalities and establish direct and personal relationships with audiences. Ruddock proposes that scholars expand the domain of political communication to include entertainment. He claims that the political discourse in entertainment programs such as reality TV may re-ignite interests in politics, instead of promoting cynicism, by allowing the audiences to have a feeling of proximity to the operations of otherwise alien political processes. Galloway's appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother* must be seen as points of affective and effective entry to political life.

Katrin Döveling and Claudia Schwarz, in Chapter 6, offer an insightful discussion of the political implications associated with the audience's emotional involvement with reality programming. Using media psychology and cultural studies as two main theoretical frameworks, Döveling and Schwarz conducted two case studies of *Pop Idol* formats in Germany and Austria to explore what they call "socio-emotional reception" of reality shows. Their study suggests that media scholars must go beyond the examination of textual characteristics and interactive features and include audience research in evaluating the democratic potential of the reality genre. Accordingly, the "politics in the living room" is mediated significantly by the recipients' social background such as gender and education. For example, Döveling and Schwarz observe that whereas active televoting makes up an integral part of pleasure only in families of a lower education level, families with a higher educational background have negative attitudes toward televoting and may tend to engage in an oppositional reading of reality TV's construction of celebrities. Authors also suggest that mothers with a higher educational level may substantially mediate their children's interpretation of the ideological discourse in reality programs.

In Chapter 7, Ayana McNair brings attention to one of the longest running reality show *COPS* in relation to Black audience responses to the show. McNair claims that *COPS* reinforces the neoliberal ideology that overlooks the structural causes of poverty and crime while emphasizing individual responsibilities. She attempts to examine the Black audience's discourse about the show to identify the potential effects of the ideological text on the marginalized groups. She has found evidence of what Darnell Hunt calls "raced ways of seeing" that inform the viewers' decoding processes. Although the textual structures and conventions of *COPS* appear to privilege the dominant reading of the narrative (namely the law-