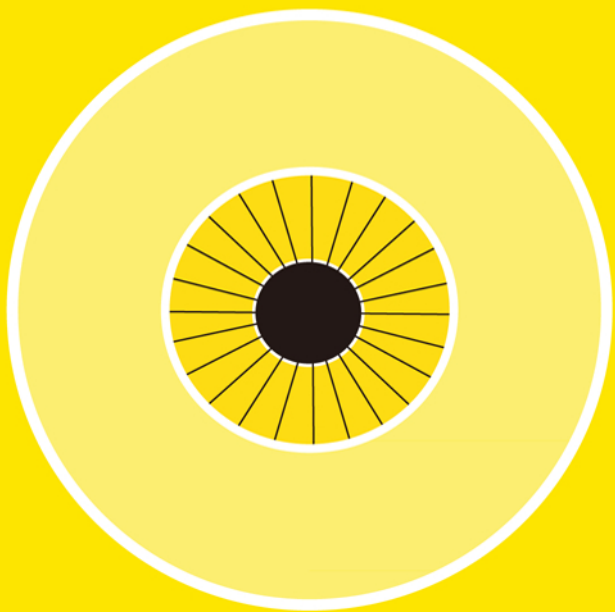


# reality tv

**Annette Hill**



Key ideas in Media & Cultural studies

**ROUTLEDGE**  


# REALITY TV

Reality TV is popular entertainment. And yet a common way to start a conversation about it is 'I wouldn't want anyone to know this but ...'. Why do people love, and love to hate, reality TV?

This book explores reality TV in all its forms – from competitive talent shows to reality soaps – examining a range of programmes from the mundane to those that revel in the spectacle of excess. Annette Hill's research draws on interviews with television producers on the market of reality TV and audience research involving over 15,000 participants during a 15-year period.

Key themes in the book include: the phenomenon of reality TV as a new kind of inter-generic space; the rise of reality entertainment formats and producer intervention; audiences, fans and anti-fans; the spectacle of reality and sports entertainment; and the ways real people and celebrities perform themselves in cross-media content.

*Reality TV* explores how this form of popular entertainment invites audiences to riff on reality, to debate and reject reality claims, making it ideal for students of media and cultural studies seeking a broader understanding of how media connects with trends in society and culture.

**Annette Hill** is a Professor of Media at Lund University, Sweden. Her research focuses on audiences, with interests in media experiences, everyday life, genres and cultures of viewing. Her most recent book is *Paranormal Media* (2011). Her next book is *Media Experiences* (2016).

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# REALITY TV

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Annette Hill

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**To Peter, who has a big heart, and to my family and friends for their warm embrace.**

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# 1

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## INTRODUCTION

### REALITY TV

You take it with a pinch of salt.

(19-year-old female student)

'It's a phenomenon' (BBC 2011). When people say reality TV is a phenomenon they are referring to the sheer scale and sweep of shows and formats that are a big part of everyday life. Reality TV is often more talked about than watched. A global format like *Got Talent* (Syco and FremantleMedia) attracts millions of viewers to live shows in countries around the world, many more millions download and share YouTube clips, and even more people chat about the show. A small-scale reality soap like *The Only Way is Essex* (ITV2, UK) can attract more Twitter followers than viewers. A studio-based show like *Dancing on Ice* with an average audience of eight million (ITV1, UK) is considered a failure if it doesn't make tabloid headlines. Reality TV is caught up in what is happening now. Individual shows, news headlines, social media trends and even big events date very quickly. Try watching last season's finale of *American Idol* (Fox, USA); it just lacks presence. But as live phenomena, reality TV makes a mark.



Figure 1.1 Reality TV embedded in everyday life. Photograph: Annette Hill.

It is no mean feat to make a mark in today's media landscape. The world is littered with failed films, television shows, music, magazines, mobile apps and websites. And reality TV is no exception. For every successful format like *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC Worldwide) there are many failures. Producers say content is king. But with reality TV, this is not always the case. As this viewer said '*The X-Factor, I'm a Celebrity* ... just rubbish really, but I think I've watched all of them' (23-year-old female shop assistant).

For example, *Splash!* (Eyeworks) is a reality show about diving. *Time's* TV critic named it one of the top ten worst TV shows of 2013: 'some reality shows achieve brilliance by embracing ridiculousness. This awkward, unpleasant diving competition just bellyflopped straight into it' (Poniewozik 2013). Despite dire reviews, *Splash!* still had 4.4 million American viewers on ABC for its finale, four million more than expected for a show about celebrities jumping into water (Hibberd 2013a). In the UK, the first episode attracted five million viewers on ITV1. This TV critic wrote: 'It's almost certainly going to be awful, and you almost certainly won't be able to stop watching it' (Heritage 2013c). It became a source of gossip for people, tabloid headlines, celebrity magazines and social media – '*Splash!* becomes our TV guilty pleasure' (*Daily Mail* 2013).

Reality TV is often shorthand for what people think is wrong with modern culture – time wasting, low grade, rubbish. Writer Seth Kaufman (2013) explains: ‘[R]eality TV is the most commercially successful format in the most dominant marketing medium in history ... this mutating, low-cost, high-ratings, often low brow, train wreck of a genre is everywhere.’ Everyone has something to say about it. Take this comment: ‘[T]o each one’s own, but take reality TV as far away from me as possible. I have much more enlightening ways of wasting my time’ (Brache 2013). Or this viewer: reality TV ‘is like putting two insects together in a jar and seeing what happens ... You know it is very primitive’ (56-year-old male freelance researcher).

Not all reality TV is seen as bad. There are shows that garner critical acclaim. Choir master Gareth Malone is ‘Michael Palin’s only serious rival for the title of the nicest man on TV’ (Lawson 2012). In *Military Wives* (BBC2 2011), Malone coached untrained singers into the first military wives’ choir in Britain; the choir’s first song became the UK’s Christmas number one (2011). *MasterChef* (Shine Group) is an international format with a winning combination of critically acclaimed chefs as judges and passionate cooks as competitors. One viewer said of *MasterChef*, the amateur version: ‘[I]t’s a chance to see real people shine on TV’ (60-year-old female teacher). But most of the time reality television has come to mean popular entertainment. When a character in the novel *Moonlight Mile* (Lehane 2010: 7) comments on ‘some soul-crushing reality show about stupid people’ we know what they mean.

Some people love reality shows. Other people love to hate reality TV. In a poll for *The Hollywood Reporter* (2012) *American Idol*’s Ryan Seacrest was voted ‘both the most beloved, and loathed, reality TV host’. Gary Carter (2014), Chairman of Northern Europe, Chairman of 360° Shine Group, comments:

[T]his ambiguity is reflected in the industry too. The relatively low/ambiguous status of the reality series is evidenced by the fact that there is only one Primetime Emmy given to reality as a genre, in a prize run-down dominated by drama.

When reality events like *I'm a Celebrity ...* (ITV1, UK) are running every night during an intense few weeks you can eavesdrop on conversations everywhere, from gossip at the shops, to radio and second screen chatter. Even reality refuseniks have plenty to say on the subject. For example this viewer noted 'thousands of so-called reality programmes. These are devastating television programmes to the detriment of viewing. It is a descent into the pit' (65-year-old retired male). You don't have to watch reality TV to have an opinion about it.

If we visualize the value of reality TV as a cultural phenomenon we would see shows overshadowed by talk about them. In a representative sample of 4,516 people (aged 16–65+) in Britain in 2003 only 15 per cent thought it important reality programmes were shown on TV (Hill 2007). Still, nearly 60 per cent admitted to watching the genre. As this person explained: there is 'crap I would never watch, crap I might watch, and then crap I would definitely watch' (33-year-old male student). Clearly, reality TV has entertainment value for audiences otherwise it wouldn't dominate the primetime schedules in the way it does. But people don't watch or talk about shows in the same way as drama, for example. Favourite drama series inspire devotion from dedicated fans. When a reality soap beat dramas such as *Downton Abbey* (ITV1, UK) and *Sherlock* (BBC1, UK) to a BAFTA YouTube Audience Award (2011) critics worried about the future of entertainment television. The look of shock on actor Martin Freeman's face (*Sherlock*) as the award was announced became a YouTube hit in itself, with many people watching that moment rather than the award ceremony or the reality soap. One person commented after the announcement of the award: 'I'm not going to say the people on *The Only Way is Essex* are representative of everything that's wrong with modern culture, but I'm sure going to think it loudly' (*Guardian* 2011). A similar turning point occurred in America with *Duck Dynasty* (A&E 2014, USA), when it beat *American Idol* and *Survivor* in the ratings for the key demographic of 18–59 year olds (O'Connell 2014).

Göran Bolin notes the value of media can be found not so much in content but in how value is produced from that content (2011). The value of reality television often lies beyond the

content on offer. For example, the value of mega format *Idols* is about its economic value as an international entertainment format, its aesthetic value as live entertainment for cross-media content, and its cultural, or social, value. The connections across these different types of value are constantly shifting positions. When Simon Fuller had the idea for *Pop Idol* in the early 2000s, his idea became a format that was rolled out globally as a reality talent show. According to the official FremantleMedia (2014) website, *Idols* has been ‘watched by over 460 million viewers worldwide since it first launched in 2001’ and ‘the *Idols* format has aired 207 series across 47 territories to date’. According to the *New York Times* (Stelter 2012), the 2012 season of *American Idol* saw the format ‘grappling with its own competition’. This season had an average of 19.2 million viewers, with 7.9 million viewers aged 18–49; the ratings were down on previous years with an average of over 20 million viewers, and 10 million in the coveted 18–49 age group. Rival talent shows challenged the juggernaut, although *American Idol* still remained number one after eleven seasons on Fox. TV critics and social media chatter suggested the series had lost its cultural value, suffering from format fatigue. A commentator for the (now defunct) website Television Without Pity noted how contestants ‘probably can’t remember a world without *American Idol*’, training for the competition from a young age – ‘it’s like watching somebody who was grown in a vat for this purpose’ (Stelter 2012). For 2013, the season dropped its pole position by 40 per cent compared to 2012, with 14.3 million viewers, in particular losing younger viewers. The average audience age is around 50: ‘it’s become your grandparents’ *American Idol*’ (Halperin 2013). For 2014, the ratings dropped further, with 8.4 million for a mid-March show. The ratings decline marks ‘the fall of the house of “Idol”’ (Carter 2014).

What makes people say reality TV is a phenomenon is something hard to qualify. It is ‘the moment’ that everyone talks about. This moment is priceless. It is what makes viewers tune in, vote, share, gossip, buy and return to a show. Some commentators call this moment a cultural zeitgeist. Reality TV had this moment around the turn of the millennium with the start of *Big*



*Brother* (Endemol) and the rise of competitive reality. Lawson (2014) argues:

Series such as *The X Factor*, *Big Brother* and (in America) *Survivor* have exposed a brutality and cruelty that was not previously part of television and was not as explicitly present in human nature. So the rise of these violently divisive entertainments is a genuine cultural phenomenon.

For example Chuck Palahniuk's *Haunted* (2005) is a satire of reality television about writers in residence who lock themselves in an abandoned theatre for three months, turning their lives into a 'true life horror story with a happy ending'. He writes: 'The difference between how you look and how you see yourself is enough to kill most people' (Palahniuk 2005: 144).

According to Jane Roscoe, Head of SBS international sales:

Reality TV has led the way, but dramas are the formats of the now. Reality TV has done so much to change how the industry works, and that is always fascinating. But, where are the shows that still make us say 'oh that is great'?

A show that makes us say 'great!' is drama series *The Walking Dead* (AMC 2010–), based on graphic novels. The series averaged 19.9 million viewers per episode in 2013, with many in the 18–49 age range, beating most other series and sports events on American television. According to *Entertainment Weekly*: '*The Walking Dead*'s ratings are big. Like really, really big' (Hibberd 2013b). The *New York Times* noted: '*The Walking Dead* is officially devouring the rest of television ... before Sunday night, every top-rated show this season had been an N.F.L. game. Now zombies are apparently more appealing than quarterbacks' (Carter 2013). Perhaps, the cultural zeitgeist of the moment is being 'post alive'. As Chuck Palahniuk notes in his latest novel: 'when you die, trust me, the most difficult person to leave behind is yourself' (Palahniuk 2013: 33).

In short, we can say reality TV is a phenomenon in the sense that it is part of a social and media matrix. 'It is not possible to

understand reality TV unless it can be connected to something else' (Bignell 2005: 177). We can understand reality television as a broad generic phenomenon that makes a mark as popular entertainment. And we can understand it as individual series that have phenomenal moments that grab audience/user attention. At this moment in time reality television is also a fading phenomenon. The elements that have made it part of a cultural zeitgeist are now a little tired and repetitive. It is a challenge for reality television to refresh itself with new formats and series that make people say 'that is great!'

What this means for a book about reality TV is a focus on its role in broader debates within popular culture, in social, political and cultural contexts. Specifically this book explores how reality television is a situated phenomenon. A central argument is that it is not possible to understand reality TV unless it is connected to audiences. People are crucial actors in the multi-stage drama of a cultural phenomenon. This is not to deny the power of producers, participants, celebrities, advertisers and distributors, just some of the professionals behind the making of reality TV (see Ouellette 2014), or to ignore the significance of aesthetics, narrative, characterization, sound and editing, to list some of the ways reality is represented (see Lury 2005). Nor can we disregard wider themes of consumerism or class, the politics of surveillance and the state, or the morals and ethics of fairness and respect, to mention a few of the salient political and social issues running through reality television shows (see Kraidy and Sender 2011). What can be said is that the production, aesthetics and politics of reality TV are connected to audiences and publics, consumers and producers, participants and users, fans and anti-fans, readers, listeners, viewers – all these people and their practices.

This book argues that reality TV producers, participants and audiences co-create cultural experiences, events and trends. For Gary Carter (2014) 'reality television is a genre of non-scripted entertainment: genres are also co-created'. The idea of a co-creation of producer, participant and audience practices is a term that is situated within political economics and production studies, where structural factors are a basis for producer–market–consumer

relations. And it is a term that is situated within audience studies, where media content can be used as cultural resources for understanding agency, identity and power. We should be wary of using a term like co-creation without qualifying both the structural factors that can lead to political interpretations of the media production–consumer relations, and the resource factors that can lead to cultural interpretations of production–audience relations. Rather than see co-creation as a cooperative endeavour, it is often a tense relationship between different groups of people who are engaged in multiple practices. To that end, the term ‘reality’ relations is used to signal the connections between producer, participant and audience practices.

Viviana Zelizer in her book *The Purchase of Intimacy* (2005) calls the mingling of economic activity and social relations ‘connected lives’. ‘People are continually involved in maintaining, reinforcing, testing, and sometimes challenging their relations to each other’ (2005: 306). For Zelizer: ‘there is not one strategic actor moving against another. Instead, we find people locating themselves within webs of social relations’ (ibid.). This idea of connected lives is suggestive of the ways producer–audience practices can be located within economic and social or cultural contexts. This is not one power player moving against another, but people maintaining, reinforcing, testing and challenging the ‘reality’ relations between each other in a push–pull dynamic.

The ‘reality’ relations between producers and audiences are complex practices. For every successful format that becomes a talking point there are many failures. For all the preparation by producers in the staging of a reality event there are still a dozen ways audiences can react in unforeseen circumstances. According to one viewer: ‘these programmes are created by us. We create demand for them, we create the justification for them, we create their success and we create therefore their continuity. So, we can’t blame them for what we want them to do’ (34-year-old male mobile phone seller). The success and continuity of reality television as a phenomenon is situated in these ‘reality’ relations between producers, participants and audiences.

## DEFINITIONS

The act of defining reality TV is not easy. It is a moving target and there are different definitions of it as fact and entertainment by the industry and critics, scholars and audiences. 'Reality TV is a nodal point at which different discourses within and outside television culture have temporarily come together in an unstable conjunction' (Bignell 2005: 171). Unstable conjunctions, different discourses, all signal something tricky about reality TV. It resists a single identity, occupying multiple positions for different groups of people, in various regions and cultures.

Reality television is a container for a range of diverse programmes, series, formats and events in which elements of documentary, talent shows, gameshows, talkshows, soap operas, melodramas and sports mix together to produce sub-genres. According to John Corner (2014), 'reality television is a new kind of inter-generic space rather than a genre'. We can broadly define reality television into two distinct spaces that draw on various sub-variants of other genres across fact, drama and entertainment. There is the 'world' space of television programmes set in hospitals, airports or hotels. Many examples of the 'world' space of reality television can be found in early forms of factual entertainment in the 1990s, such as docusoaps, or crime and emergency programming. Today, series such as *A Very British Airline* (BBC 2014) or *Duck Dynasty* tend to be set in real-world spaces, and are often described as 'fly on the wall', 'docussoap' or 'reality soap' to signal the mix of observational-style documentary and soap opera elements within this style of reality television. The inter-generic space of these series and formats set in real-world locations usually contain participants who are performing as themselves in recognizable social roles, such as parent or airline worker. Sometimes these series are based around a celebrity, like that of the series built around the actress Lindsay Lohan. This kind of reality television is often deeply banal, although that does not mean to say it is any less engaging to viewers. Reality television as 'world' space was dominant in the 1990s, and in the last few years has seen a resurgence as a primetime ratings hit with younger audiences.