

A Review

Reality Television or Television Reality Shows: Forms, Genres and Modes.

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This study explores reality television as almost an infinite range of subject matters and reality television as a direct television programming genre which is an evolving phenomenon that cannot be given any conclusive analysis. The focus of this paper is to examine the concept of reality television programmes/shows, vis-à-vis its various sub-genres, forms and modes. In doing this, various Literature on similar topics were used to drive home the discussion. We answered the question of What is Reality Television?. A synoptic historical view was also given to enhance the understanding of the subject matter. The various Reality Television genres and its sub-genres are also discussed. A further explanation of the various impacts of Reality Television was done to make the discussion a holistic one.

Keywords: Reality Television, genres, forms and modes

INTRODUCTION

The concept of reality television presents a sort of definitional difficulty in media discourse due to the wide range and sometimes conflicting scholarly and professional perspectives on the topic. Michelle (2009:1) says: "*increasing questions are being raised about the viability of various traditional approaches to reality T.V*". The conceptual divergences often bother on content focus of reality television programmes/shows.

Reality television explores almost an infinite range of subject matters—sports, music, dance, education, adventure, romance, etc, it has also lent itself to a plethora of variegated generic classifications. But irrespective of this divergence in opinions regarding the exact one-size-fits-all definition for reality television, there is a generally, albeit, unwritten agreement on the essence and reality of reality television based on a dispassionate appraisal of its manifest form and content. Reality television is generally configured as a broad category of TV programme genre that subsumes an even wider range of programmes that claim to be both factual and entertaining.

As old as television programming itself the reality television genre did not become popular until the dawn

of the 21st century. It has since continued to grow in popularity across all borders whether in Africa, Asia, Australia or in Europe and America, and is on local, national and international television stations.

As the genre has continued to grow in popularity, so has its forms and sub-genres been expanded to explore new markets and cater to various audience demographics, tastes and demands. The focus of this paper is to explore the concept of reality television programmes/shows, vis-à-vis its various sub-genres, forms and modes.

WHAT IS REALITY TELEVISION?

Reality television attracts such a wide-range of often differing definitions by various authorities that it is almost impossible to exhaust every definition in any single discourse of this limited scope however, to establish a clear and concise basis for our mutual understanding of the concept in the context of this paper, the following definitions are reproduced for analysis:

Reality television shows are those shows that contain producer related 'producer created environments that control contestants' behaviour'. (Charlie Parson, creator of survivor series, 2005).

Parson's definition is rather simplistic in that it recognizes only one form or sub-genre of television reality shows—the one referred to by Christin cherry (2008) as competition-oriented.

A more comprehensive definition of reality television is advanced by Hill (2005:1), and it states that:

Reality television is a genre of television programming that presents purportedly unscripted dramatic and sometimes humourous situations and with individuals who are often persuaded to act in specific scripted ways by off-screen "story editors" or "segment television producers", with the portrayal of events manipulated and contrived to create an illusion of reality through direction and post-editing techniques.

One key element to note in this definition is reality television's claim to the portrayal of non pre-orchestrated situations; that is, portrayal of reality as opposed to fictional situations. Another point to be noted is the entertainment objective (dramatic and humourous) of all reality TV programmes.

Reality TV's claim to 'reality' has often been questioned. Murphy (2006), for example, examined the issue of "reality" and argues that the title is defective. She questions how any television programme could be said to be "real" if the contestants/casts are continually placed in unreal situations surrounded by a camera crew. She pushes her argument further by demonstrating how programmes such as 'Big Brother' employ writers to determine the way in which the collected footage will be used to create a narrative. In fact, debates on the realness of reality television programmes are still ongoing and not likely to be exhausted anytime soon. Annette Hill's (2005) exposition on the extent of reality of TV reality shows is however instructive. According to her, reality television often portrays a modified and highly informed form of reality, sometimes utilizing sensationalism to attract audience/viewers and attract advertising revenue profits. In her view, therefore, reality television is an influenced and not a natural reality. Irrespective of the doubts surrounding its 'realness', the point remains that reality television has come to stay as a dominant television programme genre of immense global popularity.

The popularity of reality television is attested by Orlando Jaquez (2004) when he states that:

For the past five years, world television audiences have been deluged by these... so-called reality shows, each equipped with its own drama, challenge, and reward. In the United States, it takes serious effort to avoid a reality programme during primetime hours. The same is true in other nations with well-developed television industries.

Even in Nigeria, the popularity of reality television shows is not contestable. They abound on both free-to-air and cable/satellite stations. Examples of such shows include: ***Dance with Paul, the Nigerian Idol, project fame, Gulder Ultimate Search, who wants to be a Millionaire***, among several others.

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF REALITY TELEVISION

It is a truism that reality television gained global popularity as a dominant television programme genre at the dawn of the 21st century. This veracious saying, however, does not detract from the fact that reality television is by no means a recent phenomenon. Precedents of television programmes that portrayed people in unscripted situations began in the 1940s and became popular in the United States in the 1950s, according to Christian Cherry (2008), debuting in 1948, Allen Hunt's hidden camera- Candid Camera – show in the United States of America, (based on his previous 1947 radio programme – **Candid Microphone** – where unsuspecting ordinary people reacting to pranks were shown, is the first ever known reality television show. For this reason, as Robert Gawford (2014) contends, Hunt is regarded as "the granddaddy of the reality TV genre".

Other reality TV efforts that followed Hunt's initial effort include:

- **Seven Up** – Produced in Britain by Granada Television and directed by Michael Apted in 1974;
- **An American Family** – Produced and directed by Robert Graig in the U.S.A in 1974;
- **The Family** – Produced in Britain by Paul Watson; among others.

Between the 1980s and 2000, several other reality TV shows were produced and notable among these was the first local Australian unscripted docu-soap called **Sylvania Waters**, Produced by Paul Watson and the

The ABC/BBC. But it wasn't until the 21st Century that reality TV berthed as a global television programme genre.

The new millennium saw an explosion of global popularity of reality TV shows, starting with the successes of **Survivor** and **Big Brother**, both in the United States of America. In particular, **Survivor** and **American Idol** have topped the U.S season-average television ratings on several occasions. Survivor, a game show reality TV programme led the ratings in 2001-2002, while American Idol topped the ratings for six consecutive years (2004-5 through to 2009-10). The shows **Who Dares Wins, Survivor, Idol series, The Amazing Race, the America's Next Top Model series, the America's Got Talent series, the Dancing with the stars series, The Mole, Big Brother, The Apprentice,**

Fear Factor, among others, have all had a global effect, having been each syndicated in dozens of countries worldwide. For example, **Big Brother Africa** is Africa's variant of the Big Brother series in the US and Britain. Likewise **The Nigerian Idol** is Nigeria's variant of the **American Idol** series.

Christin Cherry (2008) states that several factors account for the growth and development of reality TV. The first factor is television's struggle with alternative media outlets. Pay TV, DVDs, and the Internet have all eroded free-to-air television's status as the premier media outlet. Reality TV thus offered free-to-air stations a unique and more importantly, cheap form of programming.

Additionally, Hiebert and Gibbons (2000) as cited by cherry (2008) posit that the increase in reality programming is undoubtedly related to the increase in the number of cable channels, which allows advertisers to reach niche markets. That is to target and reach particular audience demographics. This is because most reality shows target specific audience demographics. MTV's real world, for instance, targets younger demographic, cherry (2008) contends.

REALITY TELEVISION FORMS GENRES AND SUB-CATEGORIES

Reality TV shows are presented in various formats. That is there is no one-size-fits-all format for reality TV production. The format in most cases is dictated by a number of factors which include **theme, subject and genre**. In general, reality TV is characterized by the presentation of participants either in an artificial environment or a real environment, participating either consciously or unconsciously in an event. Understanding the various genres and subcategories of reality TV is therefore crucial to understanding its form.

Cherry (2008) argue that classifying reality TV into genres and subcategories is not easy, if not impossible, due to the overlap among genres and subcategories. She however aligns with Bailey and Barbato's (2003) categorization on the one hand, and Nabi's (2007) classification which recognize the following; categories: **romantic, talent, quiz and game**, which are subsumed in the broad genres of **romance and competitiveness**.

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (2015) in its treatment of the topic, provides a more detailed and comprehensive picture of the genres and subcategories of reality TV. The genres include: *competitiveness, self-improvement, hoaxes, social experiment, hidden cameras, documentary style, and legal programming*. These genres have subcategories that share peculiar features that characterize the genres.

1. Competitiveness: The subcategories under this genre include talent, game shows, quiz-competitions and

tournament elimination. Under this genre, participants are filmed competing to win a prize. Most times competition outcome is decided by audience voting, panel of judges or a combination of both. Examples of programmes under these genre and subcategories are: **Who Wants to Be a Millionaire** (game show/quiz competition), **Gulder Ultimate Search** (tournament elimination), **Nigerian Idol (talent hunt)**. One major characteristic of the completion-oriented reality TV shows is the confession room, where participants reveal their fears, challenges and inspirations before and during the competition. Other programmes that fall under this genre include: **Big Brother series, Mtn Project Fame, Dance with Peter, Celebrity Takes Two**, among others. There are also sports-based shows; e.g: **The Club**, which is built around boxing.

2. Documentary: Reality TV documentary is different from normal television documentary in that in reality TV, emphasis is not primarily on information and education, but rather on drama, conflict and entertainment. Under this genre, viewers are given a private look into the lives of subjects. Its subcategories include:

- Special Living Environment; which places cast members in artificial environments – e.g. **Big Brother Africa**.
- Soap opera style; in which focus is on a close-knit group of people and their shifting friendships and romantic relationships. E.g. **Laguna Beach** series (Bindig and Bergstrom, 2013).
- Celebrities; which often shows a celebrity going about his/her normal everyday life. E.g; **The Osbournes** and **Keeping up with the Kardashians**.
- Professional Activities; which portrays professionals such as fishermen, cops, botanists, etc going about their day to day businesses. E.g; **The Deadliest Catch**, shown on **NatGeo wild**, and which focuses on fishing expeditions of professional fishermen.

3. Hoaxes: This genre presents a false premise to some of the series participants. The rest of the cast may contain actors who are in on the joke. A good example is the programme **You Just Got Punked** on **MTV**.

4. Law Enforcement Shows: This genre follows law enforcement agents – police, fire-fighters, traffic wardens, etc, during their patrols and operations and presents the highpoints of their activities. Examples include **cops**, which is shown Fox TV. This genre tends to be shocking as it presents real individuals caught in real criminal acts or situations. One subcategory of this genre is **investigation-oriented programming**.

5. Legal Programming: Under the legal programming genre, litigation procedures and shown with casts who are sometimes and sometimes actors playing litigants

and lawyers. The judges are pseudo-judges who have had real life experience in justice administration. Good examples include *The Assizes* shown on NTA in the and *Judge Judy*, shown on E.TV.

6. Social Experiments: Under this genre, emphasis is one drama, conflict and sometimes transformation in people's lives. Experiments are carried out with real people on specific social practices and concepts like marital love and fidelity. A good example is *Wife Swap* in which couples eventually agree to swap spouses after living together for a period of time.

Another example of this genre are shows which test human patience and endurance by pushing them to the brink. *Solitary* was a controversy product of this genre, which was shown between 200-2010--- fox TV. It isolated participants for weeks and put them under extreme conditions in an elimination contest. The contestant that lasted the longest won. Participant could exist the contest by pressing the quit button.

7. Hidden Camera: This genre presents hidden cameras rolling when random passersby encounter a staged situation and react. It is essentially meant to create humour. Examples include: *Just for Laughs and What Would You Do?*

Some hidden cameras also claim to show upstaged events. E.g, the investigative programme *Cheaters*, which investigates and proves allegations of cheating in relationships. Though, as Nowell (2002) states, these claims have often been questioned.

8. Some Improvement/Makeover: This is an interventionist programme genre which entails renovations. In some cases, it involves experts intervening positively in people's lives to help them solve problems like obesity, excessive weight loss, poor dentition etc. At other times it entails repairs and complete turn-around renovations on the beneficiaries' houses, cars, offices, etc. Examples include: *Extreme Makeover* and *Pimp My Ride*.

As I have stressed earlier, it is a thin line between some of these genres and subcategories, as one show could easily fit into two or more groups. *The Big Brother* series, for instance, has the attributes of both the Hidden camera, Documentary Style and competition genres. Similarly, *You Just Got Punked* is a cross between the Hoaxes and the Hidden camera genres.

REALITY TELEVISION MODES

From the discussion of the genres above, the modes have been explained but for the sake of brevity and clarity, we have decided to list and discuss the modes all over again. We shall realized, at the end, in no time as we consider each mode how television text corresponds

to the historical world, how it appears to represents those genres already discussed, and that they are not limited to one single mode, but instead draw on each as needed.

The modes of reality television simply denote the ways reality television depicts reality and address itself to viewer about that vision of reality (Nichols 1991:105).

It should be noted, however, that there are no hard and fast rule to how to determine firmly the modes of reality television. But for the purpose of this study, we shall limit ourselves to the strategy devised by Nichols and elaborated on by Julianne Burton (1990/1991). Which are:

- 1.Expository (or rhetorical) mode
- 2.Interactive mode
- 3.Observatory mode and
- 4.Reflexive mode

1.EXPOSITORY MODE

The important component of an expository television text is that it shows cases and presents an argument about the historical world. That is, it veraciously or aggressively takes and organizes the "facts" of the world and presents them to the viewer in a direct address.

The expository mode does not rely on the narrative form to guide its audience or on its manipulation but it uses rhetoric rather than narrative.

News casting is a good example. News uses direct address. The anchors face the cameras and directly present their facts to us.

2.INTERACTIVE MODE

This mode is often used. It is evidence in "**who want to be a millionaire**" "**60 minutes and Dateline**"

In interactive mode, interactive text represents the mixing of the historical world with the reality of the video/films master. The characters are live in the studio. This mode is common in "talk show", "game shows" e.t.c.

In interactive mode, the address of the interactive text unlike the expository, is not directed toward the viewer rather toward the television producers. That is to say, the characters or social actors at the moment, become our textual representative as seen in "**who wants to be a millionaire**". "**The Price is Right**", where participants are chosen from the audience. In this case, we presumably align with the participants, who are like us.

One unique feature of interactive mode is that we are not placed in the same viewer position as in the expository text where we are often addressed directly.

It is sometimes argued that as far as the character has appeared before the television, he or she has been

subjected to the rules, medium and convention of the television and as such, it is no more reality. “The Oprah Winfrey” show is another good example of reality television show that uses this mode.

3. OBSERVATORY MODES

Expository and interactive modes dominate non-narrative television (Reality Television) but there are times when the act of Television producers becomes almost invisible and their manipulation of the historical world is relatively minimal. In observatory mode as the word implies, the producer observes rather than argues about (exposition) or mixes with social actors as in (interactive mode).

A good example of the observatory mode is “**An American Family**” (1973). A series that observed the family of Pat and Bill Loud. Camera recorded over 300 hours of the day-to-day happenings of the family. “**The Cops**”, (1989), “**The Real World**” (1991) are all example of this mode. The observatory mode was influenced in the 1990s when the surveillance cameras and microphones technology advanced in their production.

4. REFLEXIVE MODE

This mode deals with certain reality television programmes in which viewers are invited to examine the techniques and the conventions of television production.

The text reflects back on their own experience. It does just depict that reality world but it draws our attention to the process of depicting itself, shifting the focus away from historical proper to the text reality relationship. E.g. “**The Thin Blue Line**” show by Errol Morris (1988) some facts are shown and presented about the murder conviction of Randall Adams. A social actor in the historical world. But the reason of the programme is to show the different possible narratives surrounding the murder, which Morris presents to us in ambiguous, stylized and re-creative form.

In “**The Late Show**” with David Letterman (1993) is also good example because the show reflects back on the conventions and devices of talk shows for much of its humorous effect which makes it look more like a talk show and a satirized parody.

THE IMPACT OF REALITY TELEVISION

That reality television has made a strong impact on the contemporary society is not contestable. What is of issue is the extent of impact. On the economic scene, reality television has come to rescue television from displacement by the rival media of Internet, DVDs, and film. With the proliferation of cable network stations, it

was feared that quality programme scarcity would ruin the TV industry. The enhanced production of reality programme has solved that problem. On the Nigerian scene, where unfortunately, no standard rating mechanism is in place, reality television shows like **Project Fame, Nigerian Idol** and **Gulder Ultimate Search** could be argued to be among the most popular media entertainment offerings. As the programmes increase in popularity, so do their capacity to generate revenue both for the television stations and the programmes owners. **Big Brother**, for instance, is a show in which a group of people live together in a large house, isolated from the outside world but continuously watched by television cameras. The participants known as **housemates**, try to win the grand prize by avoiding the periodic evictions and emerging as the last person standing. Since its inception in the Nether lands in 1999, the show has been syndicated and being a primetime hit in over 70 countries (Hill, 2005). The economic implication of this global viewership cannot be over-emphasized.

On the socio-cultural scale, reality TV shows have been lauded and criticized for various reasons, largely bordering on morality. Again, the examples of Big Brother (UK and Africa) are instructive. In the UK, the celebrity Big Brother series of 2007 was a series of events related to perceived racist behaviour by contestants. Contestants Jade Goody, Daniëlle Lloyd and Jo O’Meara directed a perceived racist comment at Indian actress Shilpa Shetty. The screening of these comments on UK television resulted in national and international media coverage, responses from the UK and Indian governments, and subsequently, the show’s suspension during the 2008 season.

Relatedly, **the Big Brother Africa** season 2005 was banned from screening on free to air stations in Nigeria on account of incident and absence content bordering on nudity and sexual immorality.

Despite these and other alleged shortcomings of reality TV genre, its prospect are huge, especially with its proven capacity to adapt and address any issue of human interest and concern. There is a strong possibility that based on this, will continue to revolutionize television viewing experience.

CONCLUSION

Reality television as a direct television programming genre is an evolving phenomenon which cannot be given any conclusive analysis. The continuous inroads it continues to make into territories wether to uncharted in TV programming are pointers that its final form and nature cannot be deductively and analytical captured in any exercise today. The key to understanding it’s true dynamics and extent lies the continuous appraisal of its evolution and development.

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