

# The Story of Reality TV

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Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

You could argue that reality TV has been around since TV. The nightly news features video of events happening in real time as well as off-the-cuff interviews with bystanders. Game shows are unscripted television.

So what makes reality TV different from the news? Or traditional game shows? Why isn't a

documentary considered reality TV? How about those “America’s home videos,” a weekly hour of guys taking shots to the nuts...that’s reality. That’s harsh reality...reality-check tv. Nut-check television.

I had some extra time lately due to fiancé’s quarantine—she’s vaccinated but caught a breakthrough case because of unvaccinated idiots—and I read a super informative book by Pete Tartaglia called “Creating reality: an insiders guide to working in reality TV.”

Tartaglia is a successful reality TV producer, and he breaks down the difference between reality TV and documentaries super succinctly.

Documentaries are supposed to be about observing and reporting.

You're not trying to create a situation and record the reaction to it, you're trying to capture the reactions and interactions that took place in response to a situation that you *didn't* create. On the other hand, "Reality TV is about control...Reality TV is real people in set-up or predetermined circumstances that often generate real reactions and real emotions....reality TV lies somewhere between documentary and scripted TV. It's neither one nor the other. It's the weird-looking cousin of both."

And what's really interesting about the book is how honest the author is about the fact that reality TV is completely contrived, and yet even HE finds himself frequently surprised at the results.

Creating a circumstance doesn't always work out the way you want it to. Or at least, there's still an element of reality TV that is real, because you can't account for the human element.

"After years in the reality TV business, no matter how many shows I work on and how many subjects I deal with, just when I'm 100 percent confident that I know exactly what someone's reaction is going to be in a situation, they take a left turn and surprise me. People are incredibly unpredictable, and no matter how much you "script" the situation around them, you can never truly be sure of their response. That's the beauty of the genre and why it can be so addictive to watch—you don't know what's going to happen

next." For instance he says, "We can't make someone cry. All we can do is put them in a situation that might elicit that response." He seems really put out by the challenge of making people sad. Human resilience: super inconvenient for the reality tv agenda. "You wouldn't believe how hard it is to get people to break down in the name of entertainment...we slap their babies, we kidnap their grandmas, some people just won't crack. It's like, come on. We're trying to sell soda pop here."

So how did reality tv take over the world? Why does every network seem to be scrambling to create the next survivor or big brother? One word:

avocados. No. Money. It would be great if somehow avocados were at the center of a reality tv conspiracy.

"Writers for reality television do not receive union pay-scale compensation and union representation, which significantly decreases expenditures for producers and broadcasters."

He explains that a scripted tv show can cost \$3 million dollars for an hour. Reality tv can be as low as 300k. If a scripted show is successful, the actors are going to negotiate for higher wages each year. However, on most reality shows, you just jettison the previous cast and start fresh. Other than maybe a host, reality tv participants aren't unionized. If you've

spent any time living in LA you've heard of SAG-AFTRA, created in 2012 when the The Screen Actors Guild merged with the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. It's an incredibly powerful union that represents around 160,000 entertainers, from actors to singers to models to radio personalities and these days even influencers. But notice the numbers we're talking about here. 160,000 total members might sound like a lot, but LA is a city of 4 million people, and I'd say conservatively the percentage of Los Angelinos trying to join that union is *approximately* all of them. That's a ballpark figure, I'm not great at math, but i stand by my calculations. The

number of people who are in the union and actually getting regular work and making money...seven. Maybe eight. I stand by these numbers. And you have to pay yearly dues to be in the union, which means it doesn't make sense to join the union if you're not actually going to make money as an actor or entertainer, because then it's a net loss. So if you're a network hiring actors you need to pay them enough to cover the union dues, plus healthcare costs, retirement, etc.

And then there are the residuals. Actors on popular TV shows get a cut of the revenue every time one of their shows airs, even in reruns. On the other hand, if you're a contestant or participant

on a reality TV show, and that TV show airs 1000 times a year, you don't see a penny more than you made for the first episode, if you were ever paid at all.

And here's the real kicker... networks get to own the shows, and keep most of the revenue. See, a scripted television show is usually created by a production company, and those companies incur most of the cost of creating the show, and then they shop it around to networks. If a network picks it up, the production company still retains the rights, and they can negotiate deals to adapt the show to other countries, they can make a ton of money off of syndicated reruns, etc. Of course, that's assuming the show is popular. Most

shows bomb, and the production company eats the cost. But that's OK, because The television production game is basically like investing in start up companies. Most of the time you're throwing your money into a pets.com but every once in a while you invest in a Grindr. My idea, BTW calling grinder for pets. There are a lot of gay hamsters out there. So when it comes to scripted television, the networks have a problem: They're not taking the risk, most of the risk is shouldered by the production companies —but if the show is a hit, The book of profit is also going to those production companies. But with reality TV, it's a different equation. Networks buy reality TV shows outright, and after the season has

concluded they can air those episodes over and over again without incurring more costs. They don't have to pay residuals to actors, they don't have to pay a production company. The reality tv model is a massive upgrade for the networks. They're basically cutting out the production-company middleman.

Also, because reality TV doesn't officially have writers, it's a great option for keeping the money rolling in during the occasional writers strike. The Writers guild strike of 1988 prompted Fox to create the long running reality-esque series *Cops*, and the strike in the fall of 2007 would similarly boost network appetite for so-called unscripted shows.

# The history of reality TV

The show that is typically cited as the direct precursor to modern reality television was 1974's *American family*, which chronicled the mostly unremarkable lives of members of the Loud family. That should be the honorary name of every reality tv family. There was the loud family, the Kardashians were louder. then The Osbornes were the loudest. Remember them? Mansion full of dogs hit and dysfunction. Made me feel so much better about not being rich. So The first episode of *American family* began by showcasing the last day of filming, it started at the end, providing a tantalizing

taste of what was to come. The first scene features members of the Loud family celebrating New Year's Eve 1971, and viewers quickly realized that there was trouble in paradise. Because there were two New Year's celebrations: Mrs. Loud was celebrating at home with the children, and Mr. Loud was celebrating with another woman. Duh-duh-duh. Dramatic chipmunk. Giving viewers a tiny taste of the drama to come is now standard operating procedure for modern unscripted television, and it provided an irresistible hook to the audience. The show would at points score upwards of 10 million viewers for a single episode. To put that in perspective, many of the most popular shows today are lucky if 1 million people

tune in when they are aired. Obviously, many modern shows are streamed at a later date, but also there's just so much content to choose from now. Back when they were four networks it was a lot easier to get everyone watching the same show at once. So the eldest son of the Loud family, Lance, was the first openly gay person on television. I just realize his name was "Lance loud."

" That's amazing. The show was filmed in 1971 over the course of seven months, and aired in 1973. to provide some context, 1973 was the year that homosexuality was finally removed from the American psychiatric association's DSM list of mental illnesses. So we're talking about a time when being gay was literally only

months removed from being considered a symptom of insanity, and was still considered deviant behavior and completely unacceptable to most of America. Now it's tough to definitively shoehorn American family into a genre, because it straddles the line between documentary and reality TV. Compared to modern reality TV, most of it was straight-up boring. The series aired on PBS, and it's exactly what you would expect from the public broadcasting version of reality TV. 90% of it was pedestrian and uninspiring. For this episode I listened to a really great podcast called "spectacle: an unscripted history of reality TV" and the host describes scenes of Mr. Loud literally reading the mail. Can you imagine

watching Kim Kardashian sitting down and reading the mail? Or any Kardashian reading at all? Unlike modern reality TV, the plot lines weren't contrived, there were no producers actively steering the action. Which is why it's pretty amazing that the film crew was able to capture watershed moments like Mrs. Loud asking for a divorce, or visiting her gay son in New York for the first time. But of course it's hard to say whether the camera crew was lucky, or whether the constant scrutiny, the ever present cameras and production crew contributed to all the drama that unfolded. And that's why even though it often gets billed as a docuseries, the show absolutely paved the way for reality TV as we know it

today. It may not have captured 100% of daily reality for non-celebrities, but it was the first time a camera crew actually tried, The first time a documentary didn't focus on rich people or momentous events but rather on simple, daily lives. Some listeners may wonder why I'm leaving out the 7-Up series, which is amazing, but in my mind is firmly a true docuseries. It doesn't follow the day-to-day life of a single family, it's not focused on the dramas of an individual, it is an interview series which checks in with the participants every seven years. It's a fascinating documentary series, and one that should not be lumped in with reality TV IMO.

So the crew of American

family shot over 300 hours of footage. And just like reality TV editors of today, the crew was tasked with creating narratives out of the jumbled meanderings of unstructured family life. They chose which plot elements to focus on, and which family members to cast as villains or protagonists in each plot. And just as often happens with the popular reality shows of today, The louds became celebrities. They were household names, like Dustin Hoffman or Olivia Newton-John. They wrote books, granted interviews, waded through throngs of fans. Lance would eventually die of aids, though thankfully not on camera. his dying wish was for his parents to reconcile, and they did, after the whirlwind died down they would go on to

live together for over a decade as an apparently platonic couple, but hey. kind of a sweet story. At the time, however, the show was divisive. Many critics painted it as exploitive and sensationalist. PBS never re-aired it, and to this day you can't stream it anywhere. I like to think that PBS realized what they had unleashed, and tried to put the genie back in the bottle.

You could argue that there were other milestones in the March to today's reality tv, like candid camera and queen for a day, but the next true precursor of what we think of as modern reality television began when **seven strangers were picked to live in a house where they would work**

together and have their lives taped — and pretty soon they would stop being polite and start getting real.

I'm speaking of course of nummer 28.

In 1991, A year before the Real World premiered on MTV, a show called Nummer 28 debuted in Holland. N-u-m-m-e-r.

Which just means number in Dutch. I love how so many Dutch words are the same as English with like one letter removed. True story: Dutch is the language most linguistically similar to English. I used to annoy my Dutch ex gf by reading letters she was sending home to her family and correcting her spelling with the English spelling of Dutch words. Like "Boss" in Dutch is "Baas," you just

kind of stretch the a bit. "I'd be like, "you spelled that wrong. And that. And that." She didn't think it was funny. I'm easily amused.

So the title, nummer 28, referred to the house number or address of the house where 7 Dutch strangers agreed to live while having their lives filmed 24 seven. Sound familiar? The creator of the show has always been salty because MTV never gave him credit, and yeah. it's pretty obvious where the idea came from. But while nummer 28 started it all, it wasn't until MTV took the reins that reality television infiltrated the zeitgeist of the American teenager, and from there spread like covid across the globe. "Today the teenagers, tomorrow bored housewives, and

eventually we'll all be watching people eat cockroaches on tv." The Real World New York was pitched to the participants as a documentary about artists living in New York City. Which is a stretch. First off, the producers immediately focused on one white girl from Alabama, 19-year-old Julie Gentry, who became the show's protagonist. you know how the real world always includes bios of each participant before they get to the house? Well for season one they only did that with Julie. Just The 19-year-old corn fed white girl. Shocker. "A story of six random strangers, and the one you're supposed to care about." And it quickly became clear how much control the editors were going to have. One of the

participants, Eric, was a male model, and one day the cast woke up to find a modeling book in the living room, that contained nude photos of Eric. It was like the producers dropped a tiny little bomb in the middle of the apartment. Good morning, here's a penis. Not just any penis... HIS penis. Enjoy your day. The cast would get increasingly fed up with the contrived situations and pressure from the producers. Eventually, a couple of the cast members, Norman and Julie, broke into the control at night to try to turn down the lights, which were extremely hot, and they found a storyboard listing all of the upcoming drama that the producers planned to create. The cast started to passive aggressively rebel, and it

became a behind-the-scenes drama in addition to the drama playing out on the actual show. One of the cast members was a black guy named Kevin, and of course the producers managed to do what they called, "throwing a pebble in the pond to create some ripples." They framed him as the "angry black man" and sparked racial arguments between him and Julie. This manipulation of participants laid the groundwork for reality shows to come: cast people of different ethnic, religious, socioeconomic backgrounds, put them in situations that emphasize their differences, and let the sparks fly. Sometimes this can be a good thing... Get people out of their comfort zones and put

them in contact with diverse individuals they might otherwise not meet. But often it just reinforces stereotypes.

Also, one of the cast members, Norman, was gay, and it's unclear as to whether or not the producers of the show knew it when they cast him. But what we know now is that when they found out, they cut out any utterances of the word "gay." The only reference they allowed was another cast member mentioning that Norman was "bisexual." Which he wasn't. He was gay. He no like vagina.

Reality tv was becoming an MTV staple in the late 90s with the real world and its spinoff series road rules, but the genre exploded in the year 2000

when Survivor debuted on CBS. Survivor was based on yet another Dutch show, this one called Expedition Robinson, a reference to the Swiss Family Robinson, the novel about a shipwrecked family that learns to survive and flourish on a remote island. So let's just take a moment to stop and thank the Dutch for the hellish scourge that is reality tv. And for misspelling all of our words.

Survivor was a massive hit. Like, off the charts. It was appointment television. I watched none of it. I don't think I've ever seen a full episode of survivor. I don't know what's so appealing about watching people starve, but Americans love that shit. "Yeah, look at those ribs starting to show. Spear that rat!

Spear it!" Hey family, let's all gather around the television and observe some suffering. It's the weekly stress and desperation hour.

For whatever reason, Survivor was a smash, and it busted open the genre.

The show had been cheap to produce, the concept was simple, and it raked in cash. Every network began scrambling to create their own version, and 20 years later a bloated orange reality tv star ended up in the White House. So Thanks, survivor!

## **Types of reality tv**

There are multiple types of reality tv. Pete Tartaglia's book includes a solid

breakdown of what he considers to be the different flavors of the genre, and I'm going to list a slightly modified version that seems more accurate to the current landscape.

## **Competition/ Elimination Shows Formatted Shows Docu-Style Shows**

### **Competition/ Elimination Shows**

Survivor

The voice

The circle

Hell's Kitchen

1. Usually a host
2. Prizes
3. Eliminations

These are like the dystopian version of game shows. If the running man were real, it would be an

elimination show. Literally. In numerous ways. If I were on the Running Man, I would piss myself and die, all of the possible eliminations.

## **Formatted Shows**

Unlike survivor or the voice, in which you follow the same contestants week to week, a formatted show has a full narrative arc for each episode.

There's a beginning and an end, and then it all starts over next week.

So:

1. Fixer Upper
2. Flip or Flop
3. Dirty Jobs
4. Naked and Afraid

They have a certain structure that doesn't change, but each episode involves a change of

participants and location.

## **Docu-Style Shows**

The real world

Keeping up with the

kardashians

Jersey shore

Real housewives of

wherever

These are Truman show style, except it's more like the end of the Truman show where Truman knows he's on a show.

See, THAT would be true reality tv. A hidden

camera. Candid camera except for like a month.

Like those creepers...A

Spy cam in a bathroom,

that's true reality tv. If you

get caught planting a

camera in a locker room

just say it's a new show.

Candid pee-camera.

So these shows have

multiple ongoing story narratives. There's a primary "A" narrative, and then b and c subplots. Kim and Kylie are feuding, Snookie cheated on her BF, Kanye is charging 500 dollars for shoes that look like a coral reef. Wanna wear the bay of pigs on your feet? made out of rubber. I will never get past the Yeezies. Fuck Kanye west in his ignorant anti vaxer face. He's a piece of shit.

Many docu-style shows are soft scripted.

"A soft-scripted show is one that has a storyline mapped out already, complete with conflict, and a beginning, middle, and end. It's important to know that some of these soft-scripted shows don't want you to know they are

soft-scripted, so they are produced and shot in a way to keep the illusion alive that it is, in fact, real."

Duck dynasty was an example. The Hills was another. I was mortified to learn that catfish is fake af. The producers typically correspond with the catfish first, so from the get-go there's no mystery as to whether the catfish will be unmasked. It's an absolute farce.

## **Criticism and controversy**

It has been claimed that reality shows can be viewed as anthropology experiments, for instance

big brother had been described as "a mass media experiment in watching people deprived of the mass media." You'll hear these claims less from scientists and more from low-key reality tv stans trying to justify their shitty taste. "I watch people eat bugs for science." You know what? Just own it. I loved the circle. It's ok. Of course the real problem with trying to pretend that reality tv is some noble science experiment is that it's easy to debunk.

Because when you watch a reality show you're not actually seeing how people would react to those scenarios in real life, you're seeing how they react to a situation when they know they're being filmed. They're performing to the camera. And to be

fair, this is a major problem in many psychology experiments. The act of being observed changes the equation. Reality TV only illustrates how people react to being on reality TV. Which is still interesting. Put People under stress, mash together incompatible personalities and see how they interact, create drama and push people to a breaking point with contrived scenarios. Good times. There's a certain Schadenfreude and hey, maybe Reality TV will someday prove useful in a scientific context. If you can survive being locked in a house with a bunch of drama queens for weeks at a time like on big brother, maybe you'd be particularly adapted to a voyage to Mars. I'd like to send you there regardless.

The other problem with reality shows is that they exert an incredible amount of power over the participants. There are iron-clad confidentiality agreements, and you basically sign your life away when you sign up for a reality show. If you want to sue the producers for making you look like a villain or an idiot, good luck. And make you look like an idiot they will. The practice of “Frankenediting” is ubiquitous. Editors have freedom to do whatever they want in order to craft a compelling storyline. “the first season of MTV’s “The Real World” was shot over a three-month period, ostensibly 24 hours a day — this would add up to about 2,160 hours of footage. But only 13 half-

hour episodes aired (technically, each episode was 22 minutes plus commercials), or approximately six and a half hours." So the editors are picking and choosing only the moments that fit their narrative. If producers and editors want to make you look like a psycho, they're going to make you look like a psycho. They'll use your reactions or expressions from days before and splice them into an unrelated conversation. They can even completely distort the significance of the scene. Famously in Joe Millionaire, when a contestant named Sarah Kozer snuck off with Evan Marriot (the fake rich guy) into the woods, evading the cameras, the entire production crew had a meltdown. Evan himself

described the situation on a podcast. as a result of their disobedience, some pissed-off editors made it seem as though the couple were hooking up in the woods and that they had forgotten to remove their microphones. The production crew filmed footage of the empty woods and spliced in audio from Sarah receiving a back massage and then used captions to deceive the audience regarding the source of the noises they were hearing. At one point across the bottom of the screen appears the word "mmm" and then "slurp." and regarding facial expressions, Evan Marriott, who by the way comes across as a pretty decent guy while being interviewed by an absolute douchenozzle, and does seem to have some

interesting things to say, he explains how the whole point of the reality TV show was that he was pretending to be a millionaire, and when he finally confessed to one of the girls that he wasn't rich, she just smiled and shrugged it off. But that wasn't good enough for the producers, and they had a backup plan. what they had done was they'd asked her to show up for the scene three hours early and filmed her the entire time as she was getting progressively more annoyed, and after he confessed, they used her expression from the previous three hours of pointless waiting rather than her actual response.

Famously, producers also use liquor to lower

inhibitions and raise tensions. If you want people to fuck or fight... shots, shots, shots, shots. There have been multiple allegations of sexual assault related to reality shows, including a 2011 out-of-court settlement paid by the producers of the world/road rules challenge; similarly there were allegations during the real world San Diego, with charges also leveled against camera crews and production teams for allowing the assaults to take place and even continuing to film. Most recently in 2017 the bachelor in paradise production was shut down when members of the crew acted as whistleblowers. One crew member described the situation: Corinne and Demario found out when

they arrived in Mexico that the story line would involve the two of them hooking up so they decided to hang out and get better acquainted over drinks," the source said. "Soon they decided to go swimming and when they climbed into the Jacuzzi, they were both loaded. Corinne proceeded to remove her bathing suit and things got increasingly sexual. There was hugging and kissing and touching, but before long, she seemed to go limp and was sliding under water. DeMario kept trying to hold her up and at the same time he appeared to be having intercourse with her. After he finished — which only lasted a few seconds — he lifted her out of the water and laid her on the cement, where he proceeded to have oral

sex with her. She appeared to be unconscious. At that point some of the crew came out and carried her off to her room. She was limp and seemed unable to walk on her own."

It should be pointed out that none of these cases resulted in convictions.

Product placement on reality tv is out of control. And that's because the audience is receptive, or at least tolerant. If you're watching a show that is already shamelessly exploitive, if people are spearing rats and swallowing donkey semen, you're not going to turn it off because they're conspicuously drinking Fanta or whatever. My favorites are the random shoehorned promos. My fiancé watches Hell's

Kitchen and it takes place in Las Vegas so they try to cram random ass Vegas acts into the show. In the middle of this dining room there will be jugglers and magic acts for absolutely no reason. A 2011 study determined that nine out of ten tv shows with the most product placement were reality tv.

Yet another issue is the stigma that can follow contestants who implode in front of a national audience. The humiliation factor...reality tv is sometimes derisively referred to as shame tv. The lure of a national audience can bring out the weirdos like moths to a flame. Sometimes the results are amusing and mostly harmless. William

Hung parlayed his fifteen minutes of "she bangs" infamy into a surprisingly durable career as a national punchline, but it's also a bit sad...I listened to a podcast interview with him and he's definitely not mentally impaired, but he's so painfully socially inept that it isn't clear whether he's in on the joke. He seems to believe that he's famous because America admired his courage. He refuses to acknowledge—to the interviewer and maybe to himself—that the laughter wasn't with him, it was AT him. And some of these situations are really sketchy. You take people who may be disturbed or on the edge, get them liquored up and put them on display in front of the world. and when they do something stupid, when they play into the narrative

that has been created for them, that footage lasts forever. There have been at least 38 notable suicides among reality show contestants, including Competitors from The Bachelor, Real Housewives of Beverly Hills, The Voice, Gordon Ramsey's Kitchen Nightmares, the list goes on. At one point, three of love islands roughly 100 contestants had died. As of 2020, "the UK media regulator Ofcom announced a new set of rules to protect those who appear on TV, guaranteeing care and support to all contestants and limiting the extent to which their distress and anxiety can be engineered by producers and directors."

Part of the problem is that we often have trouble

viewing contestants as victims. After all, they signed up for this. No one drags you off to a remote island and forces you to spitroast a rat. There's no gun to your head when you're swallowing donkey cum. But we create the culture that drives people to seek celebrity at all costs. Notoriety is preferable to obscurity.

Jodi and I watched *Love at First Sight*, a trashy reality show on Netflix, and there was one woman who we—and America—loved to hate. Her name was Jessica and she was horrid. The screechiest voice, as I recently said on the discord, she had a punchable voice, she was a conniving b-word. And at one point during filming she casually dipped her glass of wine down so that her dog could lap from her

wine glass and by way of explanation quipped, "she loves wine." And then drank out of the glass. So much wrong. Like don't give dogs wine, and also, wtf. I love dogs but they're fucking gross. That glass is now 70% golden retriever juice.

And speaking of alcohol, she was always drunk.

"It's tough, watching it back. It was obvious I was working through some things. I didn't like the person I saw. "I was really uncomfortable and I was drinking too much," she mentioned the toll taken by social media, people telling her to kill herself, it was taxing and she sought therapy. I didn't have to like dog-drunk Jessica, but this was clearly a nuanced person who was cast as a villain and portrayed as one-

dimensional.

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