

Written evidence submitted by Dr Jacob Johanssen

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This submission mainly focuses on the following questions:

- Do the design formats for reality shows put unfair psychological pressure on participants and encourage more extreme behaviour? If so, how?
- Who should be responsible for monitoring whether duty of care policies are being applied effectively in the production of reality TV shows?

Executive summary

- Reality shows are often problematic and unethical because they humiliate participants.
- Participants are deliberately put under intense pressure and in situations they have never been in before in order to produce emotional behaviour.
- Reality shows place a strong emphasis on the individual person while sidelining communities and groups.
- Academic research has critiqued the stereotypical and unethical portrayal of individuals in reality shows.
- The wider links between appearing on a reality show and mental health are under researched.
- While audiences watch reality shows for entertainment purposes, they also engage with the content in order to reflect on their own lives in more complex ways.

My background and expertise

I am Senior Lecturer in the Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI), University of Westminster (London). In my work, I use psychoanalysis to research how individuals are (un)consciously shaped by and in turn shape digital media. I have written on reality television, social media, psychoanalysis, and other themes. I am a Founder Scholar of the British Psychoanalytic Council (BPC) - the professional registration body for the UK's leading psychoanalytical practitioners - and member of the Executive Committee of the Association for Psychosocial Studies (APS). I am the author of the monograph *Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture: Audiences, Social Media, and Big Data* (Routledge, 2019).

The dynamics of reality shows

1.) A key feature of reality television is that it shows supposedly 'real' people in everyday or extraordinary situations as opposed to professional actors. Audiences have become the 'actors' they used to watch.¹ From an economic standpoint, this is very convenient for television production companies. Ordinary people are paid far less than professional actors. They do not need acting skills; all that counts are their 'real' problems or experiences that can be shown in much detail. While there are many different types of reality shows, one unifying theme is that producers are keen to show raw human emotions that audiences can relate to, such as anger, sadness, or joy. Reality shows are often based on extreme behaviour of participants such as screaming, fighting, arguing, competing with each other, undressing, confessing secrets or engaging in actions that may be shameful and humiliating.

¹ Andrejevic, M. (2004). *Reality TV. The Work of Being Watched*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.
Hill, A. (2005). *Reality TV. Audiences and Popular Television*. London: Routledge.

Such behaviour is desired and actively encouraged by producers by putting contestants in intense situations. For example, participants of the Jeremy Kyle Show reported that they were being put under intense pressure by producers and the host to not only talk, but to conduct themselves in particular ways. Reality shows often show individuals being interrogated by hosts. They may have never been in such situations before and consequently do what is asked of them out of sheer pressure. Many reality shows also involve the coming together of a group of strangers. Particular group dynamics emerge and are strongly encouraged by producers, such as competition, fighting, paranoia, distrust, illusion of imminent harm, the building up and destruction of hope.² 'Examples of long days, little food, and endless alcohol seem commonplace among reality shows, and producers may sometimes cross the line from psychological tactics into genuine mental cruelty', as Jennifer Blair notes.³ Additionally, filming can often take many days if not months and participants are isolated from the outside world. They are under complete control of producers and often have no or limited access to telephones or the Internet.

2.) Reality television works through either commenting on a participant (via an off-screen narrator or on-screen host for example) or by showing the participant's actions and words. Participants are often encouraged and probed by production staff to disclose more about themselves. Such narratives are often mobilised by evoking emotions such as shame or anger in the participant.

3.) Whether competition-based reality shows (such as X-Factor, ITV, 2004- or The Apprentice, BBC One, 2005-) or reality shows that portray the 'real' lives of ordinary citizens (such as Benefits Street, Channel 4, 2014), another unifying theme is a strong emphasis on the individual person. This comes as no surprise given the economic developments of the past decades towards a different kind of welfare state. Reality television encourages self-reliance, self-help, self-confidence and willpower in order to reach a desired goal. Reality shows often feature individuals who appear to be experts who guide contestants towards that goal (e.g. winning a competition or transforming an aspect of someone's life). Participants are told what to do by experts. It is suggested to audiences and participants alike that if an individual wants to achieve something all that is needed are practical measures and everything is possible. It may seem that reality shows have thereby turned contestants and audiences into caring for and about themselves *on their own*. They work on their own self-esteem, beauty, parenting skills, etc. after receiving instructions from experts. More communal ways of being and addressing problems are seldom explored in such content.

4.) What is fundamental about reality shows is that they are superficial. They stress the visual and emphasize processes of transformation that are exclusively tied to appearance and visibly observable behaviour. Viewers are made to believe that naughty children are turned into obedient and good children (Supernanny, Channel 4, 2004–2012), an aspiring entrepreneur is transformed into a successful businessperson (The Apprentice), young people are transformed into superstars (casting show formats), and so on. The individuals with complex life histories whose transformations audiences witness are of lesser importance than their displayed and observable utterances, mannerisms, bodily features, actions and styles.

Academic research on reality television

5.) In academic research, the content of reality television shows is almost exclusively discussed critically. Academic researchers critique such programmes because of the problematic and often humiliating ways in which the contestants who appear on them are

² Blair, J. L. (2010). Surviving Reality TV: The Ultimate Challenge for Reality Show Contestants. *Loyola. Los Angeles Entertainment Law Review*, 31, 1: 1-25.

³ Blair (2010, p. 7).

portrayed. Reality shows are often built on a particular understanding of cruel entertainment which is based on portraying other people's misery and suffering in ways that are supposedly funny for viewers. Reality shows appeal to the taboo and voyeuristic and often feature scenes one would normally not see (e.g. couples arguing about infidelity in front of a studio audience). A sub-genre of reality shows – makeover television – has been particularly critiqued for its sexist and ideological portrayal of females. Many makeover programmes feature bodies that are to be transformed from 'ugly' into 'beautiful'. Reality television is often specifically interested in finding people from disadvantaged backgrounds with complex life histories and needs. It is presumed by producers that such individuals make for particularly engaging material. This is problematic because particular social groups are singled out and exploited.⁴

Mental Health and the legal status of participants

6.) Research on reality television tends to focus on (qualitative or quantitative) content analyses and audience studies. Few scholars have directly dealt with the question of mental health implications for individuals who appear on reality shows.⁵ While participants have voluntarily agreed to be on reality shows, it is questionable if they were fully aware of what might happen to their private and professional lives following the filming. Reality television participants are often asked to sign non-disclosure agreements, confidentiality agreements, or other measures that make it difficult for them to challenge recorded material afterwards.⁶ Some legal experts have noted that the actions by reality shows, talk shows in particular, towards participants are not only unethical but also reckless.⁷ However, it remains contested to what extent participants are able to take production companies to court. To my knowledge, no academic research exists on how the participation in a particular programme has affected a participant's mental health.

While reality television may have been subject to criticism, it looks like it will continue as long as audiences will watch the shows.

How do reality television audiences respond?

7.) Much academic research suggests that audiences watch reality shows for reasons of voyeurism⁸, escapism⁹, or entertainment¹⁰. Reality shows may seem like an easily digestible form of emotional entertainment for audiences. It is particularly the emotionality and apparent authenticity of formats that is appealing to viewers. They can relate to the feelings and emotional states displayed on screen, because they may have been in similar situations.

8.) However, my research and that of other scholars¹¹ has shown that there are more complex motives at play for many viewers. While reality shows are often unethical and

⁴ Ouellette, L. (2004). "Take responsibility for yourself". Judge Judy and the Neoliberal Citizen', In: Murray, S. & Ouellette, L. (Eds). *Reality TV. Remaking Television Culture*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 243-259.

⁵ Hsiou, M. (2013). Harsh Reality: When Producers and Networks Should Be Liable for Negligence and Intentional Infliction of Emotional Distress. *Seton Hall Journal of Sports and Entertainment Law*, 23, 187: 187-220.

⁶ See Blair (2010).

⁷ See Hsiou (2013).

⁸ For example: Baruh, L. (2010). Mediated Voyeurism and the Guilty Pleasure of Consuming Reality Television. *Media Psychology*, 13, 3: 201-221.

Nabi, R., Biely, E. N., Morgan, S. J. & Stitt, C. R. (2003). Reality-based Television Programming and the Psychology of Its Appeal. *Media Psychology*, 5: 303-330.

⁹ Hall, A. (2006). Viewers' perceptions of reality programs, *Communication Quarterly*, 54, 2: 191-211.

¹⁰ Lundy, L. K., Ruth, A. M. & Park, T. D. (2008). Simply irresistible. Reality TV Consumption Patterns, *Communication Quarterly*, 56, 2: 208-225.

¹¹ Hill, A. (2005). *Reality TV. Audiences and popular television*. London Routledge.

Skeggs, B. & Wood, H. (2012). *Reacting to Reality Television. Performance, Audience and Value*. London: Routledge.

Johanssen, J. (2019). *Psychoanalysis and Digital Culture: Audiences, Social Media, and Big Data*. London:

problematic, viewers engage in complex ways with them. Seeing particular problems discussed on a talk show for instance can enable viewers to engage with their own problems which may be of a similar nature. Many viewers are well aware that reality shows are not completely real and that material is often rehearsed multiple times or scripted altogether. In my work on reality show audiences, I have argued that there are complex and contradictory motives why individuals consume such programmes. There are more light-hearted motives such as entertainment, or voyeuristic curiosity. Programmes that feature revelations about citizens' private lives can be particularly attractive for viewers because they allow a glimpse into spheres one would not normally see. Reality shows are also consumed to make viewers feel better about themselves (their own bodies, relationships, socio-economic status, etc.). Being entertained by watching another person's suffering thus functions as a way for audiences to momentarily forget about their own problems. At the same time, more reflexive and meaningful forms of engagement are also present. Viewers may use a reality show to (un)consciously work through their own problems or conflicts and may follow the advice given by hosts. Reality shows often end on a happy note and solutions are found. This is very important for audiences. Reality TV often suggests that there is a solution for everything, no matter how severe the problem is. This can be a very comforting idea for viewers. If things really turn out so well once filming has ended is questionable.

Policy recommendations

9.) Reality television contestants sign contracts and consent forms and consciously agree to participate in shows. However, recently many have reported to journalists that they were rushed into participating without adequate knowledge and time for reflection on what they might get involved with.¹²

- Reality show participants need to be adequately briefed and given time to reflect before signing any contracts

10.) While television channel and production company executives have stressed that there are effective screening procedures and after-care treatments for participants in place, it is unclear if that has always been the case and how such procedures precisely operate. It is therefore essential that industry-wide standards are set by government and scrutinised and monitored by a professional mental health body, such as the British Psychoanalytic Council (BPC), the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), or a unit within the NHS. If a participant discloses that they have a severe mental health condition it needs to be determined if appearing on a programme may be detrimental to their wellbeing. If a mental health professional has come to such a conclusion, the participant should be informed that they are participating at their own risk.

- The government should set up an industry-wide regulatory body responsible for standardised pre-, during and post-screening mental health checks for reality television participants and production staff.

11.) As discussed, reality shows are often very problematic and unethical. They portray people in certain ways for entertainment purposes which are often invasive, humiliating, and stereotypical. Some shows have intentionally inflicted emotional distress on participants.

- Reality television shows should stop the exploitation and humiliation of participants for the purposes of entertainment. This needs to be enforced by Ofcom.

12.) The legal status of reality show participants is unclear at times and if they are considered actors or employees for example. If participants challenge some of the practices of the production companies in court, judges should not automatically refer to the legal binding nature of signed contracts. Instead, the circumstances that led to the signing of the contract and what occurred before and during filming should be examined. This includes examining if participants were told what would really happen to them during filming.¹³

- The legal system needs to take into account all aspects of participating in a reality show.

June 2019

¹³ See Blair (2010, p. 24).