

Race, Gender & Sexuality in Production Studies

“Producing Digital Stories: Emotional Labor in Transmedia Reality TV”

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With the proliferation of media platforms associated with media convergence, TV networks are coordinating transmedia paratexts across television and digital spaces.

While media convergence is often viewed as empowering for users, it causes anxiety for media producers responsible for creating interactive ‘empowering’ media (Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell, 2009). Production Studies adds a critical lens to understanding the labor of media convergence as it shifts focus from new media participants to producers. In the context of reality TV, stars (and their assistants) are responsible for creating interactive storyworlds that span TV and web series, social media, online live-streaming events, and mobile applications. Unlike fictional TV series where mid-level industry workers create transmedia content, reality transmedia platforms depend on its personalities to produce extra-textual material across digital sites like YouTube, Snapchat, Twitter, and Facebook. In order to push viewers online, reality stars’ must perform their feelings in such a way that generates conflict and intrigue. This industry strategy not only cuts down on labor costs (there is no need for transmedia content developers), it relies upon and monetizes the often-unpaid emotional labor of reality TV participants.

In this response, I explore the production of transmedia worlds for reality TV docu-soaps—a popular genre of female-centered reality TV chronicling the melodramatic lives of women. Taking Bravo’s *The Real Housewives* franchise as a case study, I situate reality stars’ social media production as a form of emotional labor, and ultimately argue that TV networks capitalize on women’s unpaid emotional labor to create transmedia content. Emotional labor is defined as the management of emotions in accordance with

workplace guidelines, and has long been associated with women's domestic care work and extended into feminized career fields (Hochschild, 1983). Female-driven docu-soaps like *The Real Housewives* have clear guidelines for emotional labor as stars are required to perform extreme emotions such as fighting, crying, and screaming to maximize drama and drive ratings. As reality programs expand across media platforms, networks increasingly depend upon its female stars to display heightened emotions on TV as well as online. This gendered approach to transmedia production extends the conventions of women's emotional labor into the digital realm.

One significant example of how emotional labor is carried out on reality TV transmedia platforms is the Twitter war. A Twitter war takes place when one reality star attacks another star on the micro-blogging platform. Cast members regularly post confrontational tweets about their co-stars to correspond with episode broadcasts, and the respondent fires back, sparking a real time Twitter feud. As a part of the Twitter war exchange, feelings such as rage, shock, and distress, are produced through carefully crafted tweets. For instance, when *Real Housewives* star LuAnn de Lesseps finds out that her fifty-year-old co-star, Carole Radziwill was dating her 20-year-old chef, she condemns Carole on social media: "You're a disgrace and embarssing to women our age @CaroleRadziwill @BravoWWHL @Andy" [sic] (de Lesseps, 2015b). That night, LuAnn posted over two-dozen accusatory tweets corresponding with the pre-taped *Real Housewives* broadcast and Carole's live interview with Bravo executive Andy Cohen on the after show *Watch What Happens Live*. LuAnn's Twitter war galvanizes audience attention across media platforms, creating a feedback loop between Bravo series and social media, encouraging fans to traverse platforms to uncover more details about the

conflicts that play out on the show. Through the Twitter war, we can see how Bravo commodifies reality stars' emotional labor by putting pressure on the cast to display feelings on social media to produce transmedia content.

The Twitter war underscores the type of emotional labor female reality stars are expected to perform—carefully crafting emotional responses to create melodramatic spectacles and distributing them across converged TV and new media sites. Since reality television trades in extreme vacillating emotions, the emotional labor involved in the production of the reality TV further entrenches the stereotype of women as the primary managers of emotions on one hand, and as weepy, unpredictable, and emotionally imbalanced on the other. By placing women's stereotypical emotions at the center of the network brand, Bravo capitalizes on women's emotional labor to produce transmedia content that will attract viewers and ensure digital engagement.

References

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