

# Producers and Participants in Reality TV Production

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This paper explores the matrix of work practices in reality TV production to show how asymmetrical power relations affect on-screen representation. In the reality TV economy, the production of unscripted storylines depends on collaborations between network executives, producers, editors, and casts, to name a few. In this environment, tensions abound over representation among workers with distinct yet interconnected goals (i.e. producers aim to maximize drama, while participants seek to mold on-screen personas). The production of Bravo TV's unique brand of glossy, melodramatic docu-soaps underscores the complex dynamics between reality TV producers and participants.

The job of reality docu-soap producers is to create compelling drama that drives viewership and ratings. To do so, reality producers develop multifaceted relationships with cast members to evoke emotional performances that can be edited into coherent and engaging narratives. Bravo executive producer and television host, Andy Cohen (2011, p. 202), describes his role working with the casts of *The Real Housewives* series as a “shrink,” “cheerleader,” “peacemaker, and referee.” Similarly, field producers, who oversee shooting, work to get cast members to disclose their deepest feelings. But, as one *Housewives* producer explains, this job can be challenging because “you're dealing with real people with their own minds that have their own images that they want to control or they want to be seen” (Nededog, 2016).

Reality stars often have two intersecting goals—to be portrayed flatteringly (or at least accurately) and to have a television platform (to become famous and to sell branded merchandise). The cast of *The Real Housewives* regularly uses the show to advertise branded commodities, including clothing, beauty products, liquor, and sex toys. During early seasons, casts' efforts to market their products on air were not successful as promotional scenes were cut in postproduction. However, stars quickly adapted their technique by integrating dramatic emotional outbursts into branding events, a strategy I have termed ‘affective enterprising’ (Arcy, 2015). By creating melodramatic storylines around branded merchandise, reality stars leverage their representational power to ensure maximum exposure. In doing so, however, they often forgo control over how their persona is depicted throughout the series.

Reality stars on-screen personas are often translated into character archetypes, like the drama queen, the party girl, the villain, and the best friend. To craft intelligible personas, tape loggers sift through thousands of hours of footage to find on-brand and over-the-top interactions and bits of dialogue. The enormity of

this task is evidenced by the over 85 hours of footage that is edited down to a 45-minute episode (Cohen, 2011, p. 195). Story producers then stitch these moments together, often out of order and out of context, to create melodramatic narrative arcs.

When reality participants are unhappy with their portrayal, they often take to social media to contextualize their on-screen portrayal. For instance, when New York Housewife Bethenny Frankel is depicted as a rude friend pretending to fall asleep when her co-star confronted her about not being invited to a party, she explains the event on her blog: 'I find that on the Housewives shows, being invited or not invited to something tends to be blown out of proportion... It felt manufactured to stir up drama' (Frankel, 2015). Though Frankel attempts to expose the logics of reality TV representation, her online platform cannot effectively counter the reach of the television series. Instead, stars find that they are more successful promoting their own branded products when they lean into their reality TV persona on social media. For Atlanta Housewife Kandi Burruss, she sells her line of sex toys through her persona as an outgoing best friend.

There is a stark imbalance of power in the production of commercial reality TV that favors the vision of producers over reality participants. As stars attempt to gain control over their on-screen personas, producers come up with new ways to manage and incentivize their cooperation. These tensions affect the final product, visible in the immutability of stars on-screen personas, the increasing amount of product promotion integrated into storylines, and the ease at which stars are cut from the series.

### **Works Cited**

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