Reality TV

Remaking Television Culture

EDITED BY

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“I Think We Need a New Name for It”
The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV
Susan Murray

Shooting with handheld cameras, a film crew follows the everyday happenings and interpersonal relationships of an upper-middle-class Californian family for seven months. Television viewers have a “fly-on-the-wall” perspective as the family engages in heated political debates at the dinner table, frequents neighborhood dinner parties, struggles with internal and external conflicts, takes vacations, works, and attends high school. Viewers are also privy to the breakdown of the parents’ marriage and the details of one son’s openly gay lifestyle in New York City. All of this is tied together through interweaving multiple plotlines, presented without voice-over narration or interviews and edited in serial form.

Based on this brief description of the premise and style, are we able to identify whether this nonfictional series was a documentary or reality TV program? Would it help us to know that it was funded by and shown on public television or that it was made by two well-respected, independent filmmakers and produced by someone whose past works had focused on the fine arts? What if we also discovered that it was simultaneously criticized for exploitation and sensationalism? Or that it was marketed in newspaper ads as a “starkly intimate portrait of one family struggling to survive a private civil war”?1

Producer Craig Gilbert called the above nonfictional program, An American Family, a “real-life soap opera” in regard to its narrative structure, but crafted it using many of the stylistic techniques of the direct cinema movement.2 By the time it aired in 1972, the program’s resulting generic hybridity and instability so befuddled critics that they ended up comparing it to everything from home movies to situation comedies.3 Such confusion over how to place the series led anthropologist Margaret Mead to remark to TV Guide, “I do not think that American Family should be called a documentary. I think we need a new name for it, a name that would contrast it not only with fiction, but with what we have been exposed to up until now on TV.”4 Thirty years later, the program’s generic status remains liminal as it is now alternately discussed as an observational documentary and an early form of reality TV. The struggle to define exactly what An American Family was bespeaks much of what is at stake in our current generic placement of texts into the categories of documentary and reality TV.

While some nonfictional television texts fit squarely within the generally agreed-on borders of either documentary or reality TV, many others seem to defy easy classification. In a recent essay on Big Brother and tele-reality, John Corner argues that the “extensive borrowing of the ‘documentary look’ by other kinds of programs, and extensive borrowing of nondocumentary kinds of looks by documentary, have complicated the rules for recognizing a documentary.”5 For this and other reasons, Corner wonders whether we are entering a postdocumentary cultural moment. In this chapter, I am not interested in redefining, reclaiming, or reasserting the documentary genre—or in predicting its demise. Instead, I want to explore how a network’s brand image and its marketing and positioning of particular programs work in conjunction with our critical judgments, expectations, and knowledge of previous documentary and reality forms, to help us as viewers and/or critics decide what is “reality TV” and what is a “proper” documentary. In this way, I’m engaging in the type of analysis that Jason Mittell calls for, which at its base, conceives of television genres as discursive practices. As Mittell argues, “[The] goal in analyzing generic discourses is not to arrive at the ‘proper’ definition, interpretation, or evaluation of a genre, but to explore the material ways in which genres are culturally defined, interpreted, and evaluated.”6 Traditional analyses of the documentary form have focused on the textual elements that distinguish it from other forms of nonfictional film and video. While there is no doubt that such elements do work to define the genre, the goal here is to examine the ways in which certain extratextual factors can impel the viewer to see a nonfictional television text as either documentary or reality TV—sometimes even despite its textual characteristics. This type of discursive generic analysis helps us understand what reality TV is, since it reveals many of the assumptions that surround the generic category as well.
as the cultural role assigned to it, particularly in relation to that of documentary.

Genre, "Social Weight," and the Observational Mode

In order to begin a discussion of the reality TV genre, it's important to first recognize that there are many different formats—most of which are generic hybrids themselves—that fall within this category. Some of these formats are more readily differentiated from documentary than others. Gamedocs (such as Survivor), for example, embody only a few aesthetic or textual characteristics of the documentary and instead seem more closely aligned with game shows. The types of reality programs that share the most textual and aesthetic characteristics with documentaries tend to focus on the everyday lives of their subjects in somewhat "natural" settings without a game setup, use cinema verité techniques, and do not contain flagrantly commercial elements such as product placement or the promise of prizes. One such type is the docusoap, which Stella Bruzzi has identified as a legacy of direct cinema (also called observational or cinema verité).

She points out that British nonfictional programs such as Vets in Practice and Driving School (U.S. equivalents include The Real World (MTV) and American High [Fox/PBS]) combine many of the textual and aesthetic elements of direct cinema (handheld camerawork, synch sound, and a focus on everyday activities) with the overt structuring devices of soap operas (short narrative sequences, intercuts of multiple plotlines, mini cliff-hangers, the use of a musical sound track, and a focus on character personality).

Yet there are programs that have been classified rather definitively by critics as documentaries that look— in terms of their aesthetics and narrative structure— quite similar to the docusoaps mentioned above. In the United States, the public television series An American Love Story (which chronicled a year in the life of an interracial family in Queens, New York) and A Farmer's Wife (which centered on a Midwest farming family's economic and domestic struggles), for instance, followed the American Family model quite closely, yet they were never considered to be reality TV. Therefore, there must be characteristics beyond narrative form and aesthetic qualities that help critics and viewers define such programs. Indeed, much of our evaluative process is based on the belief that documentaries should be educational or informative, authentic, ethical, socially engaged, independently produced, and serve the public interest, while reality TV programs are commercial, sensational, popular, entertaining, and potentially exploitative and/or manipulative. These somewhat subjective assumptions work to construct a dialectical relationship between documentary and reality TV, even as they share many similar features. Documentary is seen as a valid and productive social as well as artistic endeavor, while reality TV is often vilified or dismissed. Consequently, generic placement becomes a way in which to gauge a program's cultural value and import through discursive means.

Documentary has traditionally been assumed to be rather high-minded, and if not fully educational, then at least informative. Mobilizing a "discourse of sobriety," documentaries reference established traditions of ethical and political mandates for their own form. Although observational documentaries tend to concentrate on the mundane, everyday, and personal—and as a result, can appear just as obsessed with the intimate as reality TV—they are seen by many viewers and critics as doing this for the greater good of the subject, viewer, and society at large. Bruzzi contends that the most important distinction between observational projects and docusoaps is the "social weight" of their content—specifically, the latter's focus on entertainment rather than the exploration of cultural/political issues. This is familiar logic, and it has been borne out throughout the history of TV as documentaries have often been produced and aired in order to compensate for the "sins" of commercial television. For instance, in response to the quiz show scandals in the late 1950s and growing criticism of the networks for their failure to serve the public, networks commissioned more documentaries as a way to recoup their public image, appease critics, and win back the trust of the viewing audience. Largely because of this rhetorical/social positioning, documentary producers are often the recipients of governmental and private funding, and their resulting work is commonly shown on PBS—which maintains a mandate to provide its viewers "programs that the present system, by its incompleteness, denies [them]." Documentaries are thus believed to play a central cultural role in representing minority viewpoints and having serious historical or social significance (although this has been troubled during different historical moments, such as the "culture wars" of the 1980s).

Yet "social weight" is an interesting and potentially contentious distinction here, since claims of social relevance are frequently made by the creators of docusoaps as well. As Jon Kraszewski's research has shown, The Real World, for example, often highlights the ways in which it consistently
deals with issues of race and sexuality. Social weight is not something that can be empirically measured, nor is it necessarily an inherent textual characteristic. Rather, it is a rhetorical stance that can be mobilized in an effort to endorse or authenticate a particular television text and attract an audience who cherishes liberal notions of social responsibility or public service. Even if it is possible to measure social import/impact in some way, it is still crucial to ask whether or not “entertainment” and “social weight” really exist as mutually exclusive terms, since as I will detail later in this chapter, programs such as American High and America Undercover are presented as both sensational and educational.

In order to court a particular type of audience identification and set of expectations, television networks can take a program that has somewhat liminal textual generic identifiers and sell it as either a documentary or reality program by packaging it in such a way as to appear either more educational/informative or more entertaining/sensational, or in some cases both. In this way, the networks are working with the audience’s prior experience and expectations of each form, and then highlighting certain aspects of the text to ensure that it is read (and therefore classified) in a particular way. As Bill Nichols points out, “The distinguishing mark of documentary may be less intrinsic to the text than a function of the assumptions and expectations brought to the process of viewing the text.” Although Nichols is talking primarily about the ways in which an audience’s experience with prior documentaries informs its encounters with future examples of the genre, I would also add that the site of exhibition (and the discourses that construct it) plays a vital role in the audience’s process of generic classification and its assignment of social weight to a particular text.

In the following section, I will focus on two programs, American High (Fox/PBS) and America Undercover (HBO), that serve as productive examples of the ways in which the context of reception of a program can be manipulated so as to encourage a viewer to understand the meaning of the text through a specific generic lens. If a viewer reads the text through the lens of documentary, for instance, that viewer will be more likely to read it as socially engaged, informative, authentic, and artistic. In the examples below, I will explore the ways that Fox, the U.S. public television channel PBS, and the premier cable channel HBO mobilized their different brand images along with publicity and marketing tools to push viewers to see programs carrying signifiers of both documentary and reality TV as simply one or the other. In these cases, genre turns on the industrial management of extratextual discourses. Through these examples, however, we’ll see that these strategies do not always work out as planned, since the tensions that exist in the bifurcation of the two generic categories can, at times, be difficult to contain.

American High and America Undercover: Packaging Documentary/Reality TV

American High was sold as a reality program on Fox and, a year later, a documentary series on PBS. Obviously, these two networks have disparate brand images, financing structures, and target audiences, and therefore had different interests to serve. Yet executives at both networks believed that they could alter the reception context of American High to suit their particular needs.

The production context of the series reveals direct links to documentary practice. Director R. J. Cutler, a renowned documentarian who received an Academy Award nomination for The War Room (1993), shot two thousand hours of film tracking the lives of fourteen seniors in a suburban, Chicago-area high school. He also arranged for the students involved in the show to take a video diary class, the results of which were edited together with the vérité-style footage to create the final product. Cutler claimed to use An American Family as his model, yet he also told reporters at the time of the program’s premiere that he was influenced as well by the fictional teen drama My So-Called Life, thereby underscoring the hybrid nature of his series. He appeared to avoid using the term documentary to describe the project in interviews and press conferences, but also refused to overtly align it with reality TV. In a chat room interview, Cutler told fans that shows like Big Brother and Taxicab Confessions “are not real the way our show is . . . Our show is a drama series with real characters and real stories that continue over the course of a year.”

On the other hand, Fox was eager to label American High as a reality program as executives were hoping that it would be Fox’s answer to CBS’s recent success with Survivor and Big Brother. Aired on the network late in summer 2000, the show was scheduled against Big Brother, and it was expected to win over the youth demographic with its combination of reality and teen drama. At a press conference before the show’s premiere, a cast member played up the program’s competition with other reality series: “This is our real life. We’re living in our real houses, and we get cameras
where we get to talk about what we’re really feeling. Compared with *Real World* and *Survivor*, I think we are the closest you can get to reality.”

Gail Berman, Fox entertainment president, used the documentary heritage of the series to make a similar assertion: “This is the real *Real World*. No false settings, no contrived situations. This is a type of reality programming that can be enlightening as well as entertaining.”

Despite such allusions to enlightenment, Fox hyped *American High* with its usual anti-establishment style, creating bumpers that declared (over a hard rock sound track), “What you’re about to see will get you hooked! Real kids! Real families! Real life! . . . Find out what it’s like to be young in America. The bold new summer series—*American High!*” Such promotions played up the series’ sensational aspects and reality TV conventions in order to better suit the network’s brand identity.

Since its inception, Fox has crafted itself as an anti-establishment provider of innovative and often controversial, youth-directed programming. As such, it was one of the first networks to experiment with prime-time reality formats in the mid-1990s. Under the leadership of Mike Darnell, Fox’s alternative programming unit succeeded in attracting large numbers of young male viewers with reality specials such as *When Good Pets Go Bad*, *World’s Scariest Police Chases*, and *Alien Autopsy*, which were derided by critics as “glossy shockumentaries and socially unredeem- ing freak shows.” In February 2000, however, the network was forced to rein in Darnell’s programming style as a result of the backlash from the airing of *Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?* Although highly rated, the special—a bridal/beauty pageant culminating in an on-air wedding—was lambasted by the press, and it also scared off advertisers after the bridegroom’s background and financial standing was put into question. Coming in the wake of that scandal, *American High* allowed Fox to retain its reputation for groundbreaking and risky programming while providing an opportunity to clean up its public image. It was a balancing act meant to redefine reality TV for Fox, while not straying too far from viewer expectations. Even though it did receive much critical acclaim at the time of its premiere, Fox dropped *American High* from its lineup after only four episodes. Although network heads simply cited low ratings as the reason for their rather hasty decision, it appears that this series’ particular blend of formats and aesthetics did not ultimately square with the average Fox viewer’s vision of what reality TV was supposed to provide.

By engaging in a two-pronged campaign, utilizing both conventional PBS marketing methods as well as overtly commercial strategies, it would seem that Mitchell hoped to appeal to new and old viewers alike. She convinced Coca-Cola to sponsor the series, and entered into promotional deals with MTV (which cosponsored a contest in which the winners would appear on *Total Request Live* with the *American High* cast) and Teen People to cohost dances at high schools wherein clips of the program would be shown on dance floor Jumbotrons. In addition, ads for the series (shots of individual cast members in their bedrooms or school hallways accompanied by copy such as “No actors. No scripts. Just life”) were placed on the teen websites alloy.com, launch.com, and bolt.com. In an attempt to balance the PBS mandate with her aggressive marketing, though, Mitchell also used the PBS.org *American High* website to situate
the program as an educational and therapeutic documentary tool for families and teachers.

Besides the message boards, chat rooms, production stills, cast biographies, and streaming videos that make up most television program websites, the American High one contained a Teachers' Lounge and Parents' Guide. The Teachers' Lounge utilized the tools of media literacy to instruct teachers how to teach students to make their own videos of their high school experience as well as to explore the legal and ethical aspects of reality TV. (It's interesting to note that the only time the term reality genre is discussed in this campaign is when it's directed toward the teens, and then only in regard to its ethical ramifications.) The downloadable twenty-five-page Parents' Guide, which consistently describes the series as a documentary, begins with a letter from Mitchell:

[American High] is not just a remarkable window into the lives of teens, but also a frank, gripping, and often poignant depiction of the teens' parents and the daunting challenges they're facing in raising teens. As a mother of a teenager now, and having raised another, I immediately felt a sense of gratitude for what I learned from watching American High. The father of one of the teens in the series told the press, "watching the series is like the anthropology of our family. It made us look at issues in a completely new light— one that probably saved our relationship with our son." We at PBS believe this series can be meaningful for you, as well. And, to deepen your viewing experience, we have created this American High Parents' Guide. With insights from parenting experts and psychologists, the Guide uses the real-life stories from American High as catalysts to help you better understand the world through your teenager's eyes. Plus, the Guide provides a wealth of ideas to support you in what is arguably the most difficult relationship on earth: parent and teen.24

For parents and teachers, the series was constructed as what Mitchell calls "an observational documentary in the tradition of PBS."25 Or as the parent in the above quote describes it, it was formulated as an anthropological project to be viewed and processed within an institutional context—either school or family—so that the more sensational or explicit aspects of the program could be "properly" narrativized as socially relevant issues. The idea was to attract teens to PBS by making the series appear entertaining, while simultaneously appeasing PBS's core audience—mostly parents or grandparents—by wrapping it in the discourse of education.

The strategy failed on both fronts, however. Although the program did attract a significant number of young viewers, it was not as popular as PBS executives had initially hoped. And perhaps even more important, America High so offended and alienated the sensibilities of the network's older viewers with its frank themes and explicit language, Mitchell was forced to admit that by choosing to air the series, PBS had "built an audience and then let them down."26 It would seem that a specific set of expectations for and understanding of the form and function of documentary was so developed in the minds of the core PBS audience, that Mitchell's attempt to refashion it through extratextual means did not take. It's also possible that PBS viewers may not only be sensitive to sensational and sexual content but may also reject programs that could be seen as too commercial in regard to content or marketing.

While PBS viewers may have a difficult time accepting strategies that work to redefine social relevance and public service outside the conventional liberal model, HBO viewers seem to be more willing to ascribe social weight to programs that are both sensational and commercial. This may have to do with the history of HBO's nonfictional programming division, which grew largely in response to PBS's content limitations. The early and mid-1990s saw a significant shift in the market for television documentaries since the culture wars over arts funding and increasing competition from cable outlets left PBS (the primary venue for television docs up until that point) in a state of crisis. Due to the close scrutiny the network was receiving, it became increasingly difficult for PBS to not only fund documentaries but also air work that was explicit and/or controversial. And it is exactly this type of content that HBO excelled at. The very nature of HBO's premium channel payment structure allows the network to escape the cultural vilification and calls for censorship that plague broadcast and some basic cable stations. Coupled with an audience who wishes to see itself as more capable, responsible, and mature than the average television viewer, this creates an ideal setting for the presentation of "tasteful," but possibly lurid nonfictional programming. Over the past decade, HBO has aggressively marketed itself as a quality network for the (paying) television connoisseur. Through its original programming, such as The Sopranos, Six Feet Under, and Sex in the City, the cable network has refashioned liberal notions of "quality" television to include "adult" content. Consequently, viewers come to programs such as the nonfictional anthology series America Undercover with the expectation that what they are about to see is above and beyond the usual network fare.
Shelia Nevins admits that early in her career as HBO's head of adult documentary and family programming, she saw documentaries primarily as cheap time-fillers, but now considers them an essential marker of prestige for the company. Certainly Nevins has deliberately cultivated this prestige, as she has spent years showcasing the work of renowned established talent, such as Albert Maysles, Jon Alpert, Barbara Kopple, Lee Grant, and Alan and Susan Raymond (An American Family), as well as supporting up-and-coming independent filmmakers. And the resulting critical praise and industry accolades that her programs have acquired over the years have helped HBO in its effort to brand itself as the quality cable network. Yet Nevins is also responsible for such series as Real Sex, G-String Divas, Autopsy, Cathouse, and Taxicab Confessions, which have all come under some scrutiny from critics for their sensational subject matter. These programs share a number of aesthetic characteristics with the networks' more serious fare, are often shot or directed by independent documentarians, and are packaged alongside more traditional documentaries as part of HBO's “investigative” America Undercover series. Although Nevins packaged many of her documentary programs under the America Undercover heading for nineteen years, in 2002 the program was moved into one of HBO's prime program slots. Showing at 10:00 p.m. eastern standard time on Sundays in the spring and summer of that year, the program followed Six Feet Under and The Sopranos, which gave the show not only increased visibility but also a higher level of prestige. The network has invested more in its promotion of the show, even taking out two-page, full-color ads in highbrow venues such as the New Yorker.

America Undercover is marketed in such a way as to intentionally blur the boundaries between reality and documentary. Alternating between works that engage in the “discourse of sobriety”—covering topics such as labor struggles, racial profiling, terrorism, and the death penalty—and the regular round of sex-based programming, America Undercover straddles traditional formats and viewing positions. As Nevins herself states, she and her staff “try to balance programs that nudge the world and programs...
that are more titillating and fanciful in order to temper or contain the reception of its risqué episodes and help sensationalize more staid subject matter. It's important to note, however, that the narration and editing of Real Sex works to position the program as an investigative and somewhat cerebral exploration of the sexual underground rather than straightforward pornography or erotica. In other words, it employs the discourse of traditional documentary to mitigate or justify its more voyeuristic tendencies. It also enables the viewer to feel better about engaging with the text as one can more easily read it as educational if one wishes. Outlining the way in which she negotiates the often conflicting desires of her audience, Nevins told the Los Angeles Times that "if you could see it on A&E, if an advertiser would sponsor it, then I don't want to put it on HBO, because people are paying to see something a little spicier. But if it's ugly like Playboy, if it's lowbrow sexuality, then it's not what I like to call 'erotic eros.' I don't want it." Nevins also has asserted that the unifying element of the nonfictional programs that air on America Undercover is their ability to fully represent "the real." As Nevins RealScreen in 1998,

The concept of our unexpurgated [programs] began to mean a certain kind of license to push reality to where it would naturally go without any censorship. There was no need to curtail what was happening. That's when reality began to be as interesting to me as theater, because it meant people could realize their stories to their full extent and where they could take them, whether the stories were happy or sad or violent or tragic or sexual.

Nevins is making a claim here for all her nonfictional programming that equates the lack of mediation or censorship from higher authorities with the ability of these programs not only to make truth claims but to move beyond realism and into the area of unfiltered reality. In doing so, she is touching on arguments that are made by both reality TV and documentary producers and marketers. Yet texts that are placed in the documentary genre tend to make an additional claim: that of social and historical relevance, or in the language of television, public service. In Nevins's statement above, we can see that she is trying to shift the discourse to incorporate her presentation of sexual and other such controversial content as a public service in itself. Or at least she's alleging that sensational/sexual and educational/informational content is not mutually exclusive. In Nevins's explication of her tactics and reasoning, it becomes clear why the documentary label is so important in this context. If her programming was classified as simply reality TV, it is possible that programs such as Real Sex would be evacuated of any sense of social weight. As it stands, America Undercover is able to mix content and form because it is wrapped in a redefined discourse of public service or education. Viewers of the program consequently exist in a context of reception that tells them that documentary, as defined by HBO, can both educate and titillate.

With America Undercover, HBO was able to do what Fox and PBS could not: successfully incorporate popular pleasure into a discourse of quality. Nevins and her team reworked the discourse around their program not only to suit their network's brand image but also to redefine the terms on which it was understood and classified. Certainly America Undercover's anthology format contributed to the success of their strategy, but it was also a result of an audience who, through its prior experience with HBO and conception of itself as a unique and select group, was willing to accept a dismantling of the bifurcations that separated traditional definitions of documentary and reality TV. Some of this willingness can be attributed to HBO's championing of the First Amendment, which Nevins says provided "[HBO] with a comfort zone. If you had a Richard Pryor special, you could do a show called Eros America; if you showed an [unedited] R-rated movie, you could push your exposure of a crack house to the full extent of what was going on inside. It was the mandate of the network, because that's what people were paying for."

With American High, both PBS and Fox had difficulty balancing their audiences' notions of quality with mainstream tastes and pleasures. Fox has cultivated a core constituency of viewers for its nonfictional programming who have little interest in texts that profess social significance, and instead find delight in the outrageous, lowbrow, and sensational. The meanings that accompany the documentary are contrary to what they hope to get out of Fox's reality lineup. American High, while sold as reality TV, still bears many of the marks of documentary conventions and therefore held little interest for Fox viewers. In contrast, PBS has constituted an audience for documentaries who imagines itself as above the machinations of commercial or mass entertainment. Their pleasure is contingent on a text's perceived social weight or historical relevance, and as a consequence, PBS viewers seem to prefer more conventional documentaries such as those produced by Ken Burns. They may resist nonfictional programming that is "tainted" by the popular or marked by a relationship to the commercial.
The generic instability of *American High* and *America Undercover* demonstrates just how difficult it is to define documentary and reality TV (or any television genre for that matter) outside of reception and industrial contexts. As I've shown, it is possible for networks to frame a generically unstable program as a documentary or reality program in order to activate the perceived values and implications that surround these categories. Yet the success of such rhetorical framing is contingent on an audience's preconceived ideas about the functions of that genre. A viewer may accept that a program is a documentary if a network proclaims it as such, yet that doesn't guarantee that the text will meet their needs and expectations, activate the perceived values and implications that surround these categories. If a program is ultimately unable to provide them with the knowledge and pleasures they have come to expect from documentaries, they may simply choose to stop watching it. To put it another way, textual signifiers commingle with present and past extratextual generic discourses to generate spectator positioning.

*American High* and *America Undercover* also remind us that the often tenacious assumptions that structure our prior knowledge of nonfictional television genres not only inform our ability to classify a new program but also subjectively assign it a particular level of social value and artistic validity. This is because, as Mittell argues, genres are malleable, historically situated, cultural categories, and as such, "evolve out of the specific cultural practices of industries and audiences." The distinctions we make between forms of nonfictional television are not based on empirical evidence but largely contained in the evaluative connotations that insist on separating information from entertainment, liberalism from sensationalism, and public service from commercialism. When it comes to reality-documentary hybrids, we may not, as Mead suggests, "need a new name for it." Instead, we might just need to look at why it's so important for us to label it at all.

**NOTES**

2. Ibid., 23.
3. Ibid., 108.
4. Ibid., xxv.
8. Programs such as *Cops* (syndicated) and *Maternity Ward* (TLC) are episodic in structure rather than serial, but they are otherwise stylistically related to the docuseries.
9. Some network executives fear the documentary label will turn off mainstream viewers because they don't tend to associate the genre with pleasure. When asked why networks shy away from the term documentary, ABC News Senior Vice President Phyllis McGrady answered: "When you think documentary, you think black-and-white, old, and boring. People are just afraid of the word. We did let it get a little fuddy-duddy" (cited in Gary Levin, "None Dare Call It a Documentary," *USA Today*, 18 June 2002, 3D).
11. Corner argues that the discourse of sobriety is no longer relevant in television's postdocumentary context as most documentaries are now infused with a "lightness of being" ("Performing the Real," 264).
15. See Kraszewski's chapter in this volume.


28. Ibid.


31. It's important to note that Brian Winston decries this sort of thinking since he considers this willingness to investigate sexuality and nudity—which he calls "docu-glitz"—cable's "un-public service" contribution to the documentary form (cited in Nichols, Representing Reality, 48).


33. The history of the public television audience and how it has been constructed by PBS is a long and complicated one. It is described in detail in Laurie Ouellette, Viewers like Us: How Public TV Failed the People (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).


Teaching Us to Fake It

The Ritualized Norms of Television's "Reality" Games

Nick Couldry

Whatever its contribution to the overblown claims of semiotics as a general "science" of language, Roland Barthes's analysis of "myth" and its connection to ideology remains useful as a specific tool to understand particular types of media language such as advertising and also that most striking of recent phenomena, reality TV. Myth itself, Ernesto Laclau has argued, is increasingly a requirement of contemporary societies whose divisions and dislocations multiply. If so, reality TV's mythical claim to represent an increasingly complex social space—for example, in the largely entertainment mode of the game doc or reality game show—may have significance far beyond the analysis of the television genre. I will make this assertion more precise by considering reality TV's ritual dimensions and their link to certain media-centric norms of social behavior.

The idea underlying reality TV is hardly new. Here is the television anchor who commentated on the 1969 Apollo moon touchdown speaking three decades ago: "[Television's] real value is to make people participants in ongoing experiences. Real life is vastly more exciting than synthetic life, and this is real-life drama with audience participation." This notion—and the associated claim of television to present real life—does not disappear in the era of television "plenty," but rather comes under increasing pressure to take new forms. The subgenre of gameds on which I will concentrate is a later adaptation to those pressures, succeeding an early wave of docusoaps and television verité in the mid-1990s, and a subsequent crisis of many docusoaps' documentary authority because of scandals about fake productions—for example, over Carlton TV's documentary...