Reality TV Helps Bring Diversity to Television

*Reality TV, 2013*

Greg Braxton is a veteran staff writer at the *Los Angeles Times*, covering arts and entertainment. He frequently writes about the role of African Americans in the entertainment industry and has appeared on National Public Radio to discuss the lack of opportunities for black actors in television and film.

Despite its reputation for exploitation, reality television's desire to offer compelling social experiments centered on interpersonal conflict and competing worldviews makes it one of the most diverse genres on TV. In comparison to scripted television, which rarely features actors of color in leading roles, reality television gives minorities a fair chance to express their views and to become viewer favorites.

The much-maligned world of reality television is winning praise these days for "keeping it real" in an unexpectedly relevant way—reflecting a more diverse America than its more highbrow cousins in scripted prime-time shows.

Despite decades of public pressure on the major networks to diversify, the lead characters in all but a few of prime-time scripted shows this season are still white—and usually young and affluent. In contrast, reality programs consistently feature a much broader range of people when it comes to race, age, class and sexual orientation.

For example, CBS' *The Amazing Race* includes an Asian American brother-and-sister team and two African American sisters in its 14th season, which premiered Sunday. Three African Americans are in the current cast of CBS' *Survivor*. Four African Americans and two Tongan Americans have been featured on the current season of NBC's *The Biggest Loser*.

By contrast, a report released last year by the National Assn. for the Advancement of Colored People, titled "Out of Focus—Out of Sync," accused the networks of perpetuating a view of the nation that recalls "America's segregated past." The 40-page report charged that non-whites are underrepresented in almost every aspect of the television industry—except for reality programming.

That's no accident, according to reality TV producers and creators.

"We're looking to create shows that everyday people can relate to, and for that you really need a true representation of the population," said Dave Broome, executive producer of NBC's *The Biggest Loser*.

"A couple of seasons ago, there was an over-the-top character who was white that we could have cast, but we sacrificed that for a Latino. That's how important that is."

**Business Decisions**
The culture mix is driven by more than just political correctness. Although reality shows aren’t directly in the business of bringing racial and ethnic enlightenment to America, they are in business. For shows that thrive on conflict and drama, a collection of cast members from varied backgrounds often serves that goal. Unresolved issues surrounding race, class and sexual orientation can either quietly fuel tension on programs or generate outright emotional explosions.

"I don’t believe the makers of unscripted programs are necessarily all pro-social," said Jonathan Murray of Bunim-Murray Productions, whose shows include MTV’s reality veteran The Real World. "A lot of times it comes down to the fact that diversity just makes those shows better."

Reality programming may be a ... transformational force in bringing greater diversity to television today.

Of course, being involved in reality TV is not always an uplifting experience. Participants are subject to humiliation on the air (and, occasionally, eternal infamy on YouTube). The more outrageous the show’s concept, the more likely contestants are to be ridiculed or even scorned. But at least unscripted television is an equal-opportunity offender.

Though the issue of race is often secondary to unscripted series’ story lines, it does at times directly fuel the drama. William “Mega” Collins, an outspoken African American houseguest on the first edition of CBS’ Big Brother, was the first evicted from the show after he angrily confronted his predominantly white fellow participants about race. CBS’ Survivor in 2006 sparked a furor when the series initially divided tribes along racial and ethnic lines.

Just as the military and professional sports—two arenas not heralded for their liberal thought—became the unlikely vessels for breaking racial barriers decades ago, reality programming may be a similarly transformational force in bringing greater diversity to television today.

Vic Bulluck, executive director of the NAACP’s [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] Hollywood office, noted: "The marketplace has changed, and the producers of reality shows are obviously more sensitive or conscious of that change than the producers of scripted shows. It really comes down to relevance."

Stealing the Spotlight

Minority contestants have often done well in competition shows, such as ABC’s Dancing With the Stars and Fox’s Hell’s Kitchen. By winning week after week, these contestants in effect become some of the programs’ leading characters.

Network executives say that comparing the two genres [of scripted and unscripted TV] is unfair and that scripted shows are governed by creative restrictions that don't apply to reality TV.

(Two notable exceptions in which a reality program has yet to spotlight a person of color are ABC’s dating franchise shows The Bachelor and The Bachelorette. In 17 total seasons, neither show’s main role has ever been filled with a person of color. ABC representatives say they are "exploring" the issue for
That's seldom the case with scripted comedies and dramas. Though the major networks—ABC, CBS, Fox and NBC—have in recent years made noticeable strides in assembling multicultural casts in ensemble shows such as Heroes, ER, Lost and Grey's Anatomy, there are still only five network shows with a minority actor playing a clear central character: NBC's Law & Order (Anthony Anderson), ABC’s Ugly Betty (America Ferrera), ABC’s Desperate Housewives (Eva Longoria Parker), CBS’ The Unit (Dennis Haysbert) and CBS’ CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (Laurence Fishburne). (In the 15 midseason network scripted series, including Fox's Dollhouse, ABC's In the Motherhood and NBC’s Kings, only a few have a person of color in a central role.)

Network executives say that comparing the two genres is unfair and that scripted shows are governed by creative restrictions that don't apply to reality TV.

"When you're casting for an unscripted show, it's a much bigger universe and a whole different talent base," said Nina Tassler, president of CBS Entertainment. "It's real people versus actors.

"The casting in unscripted shows informs the storytelling," she said. "That kind of show starts as an idea, but then the story is developed by the cast. A scripted show is the brainchild of a creator who has a very specific vision."

Still, critics like Kristal Brent Zook, author of I See Black People: Interviews With African American Owners of Radio and Television, argue that diversity behind the camera in scripted programming will increase it in front of it. "It all comes down to what goes on in the writing room," Zook said. "It's a reflection on their imagination, or lack thereof. It's going to remain this way until you bring in people with wider experience."

Further Readings

Books


**Periodicals and Internet Sources**


• Nicole B. Cox and Jennifer M. Proffitt "The Housewives’ Guide to Better Living: Promoting Consumption on Bravo’s *The Real Housewives*," *Communication, Culture & Critique*, June 2012.

• Kate Coyne "Kate Plus Eight: 'My Family Can't Be Canceled,'" *People*, September 19, 2011.


Source Citation

Document URL
http://electra.lmu.edu:2089/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&prodId=OVIC>windowstate=normal&contentModules=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&limiter=&currPage=&amp;disableHighlighting=false&displayGroups=&sortBy=&source=&search_within_results=&zid=&action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010307241&userGroupName=loym48904&jsid=21b1d4ca8c97f584fda494c902d93

Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ3010307241