

## **A companion to reality television**

DELLER, Ruth A. <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4935-980X>>

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Laurie Ouellette (eds), *A Companion to Reality Television* (Oxford, Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 529 pages, ISBN: 978-0-470-65927-4 (hbk) £129.00

Ruth A. Deller, Sheffield Hallam University

Reality television is now a firmly established part of both the television schedules and academic research in media. This collection aims to explore how 'reality television has transformed television culture' (Ouellette 2014: 3), both reflecting the existing work in the field and signposting new directions:

Today there are many books, articles and special issues of journals devoted to the critical analysis of reality television. It is time to take stock, reflect, synthesize what we have accomplished, anticipate emergent issues and chart what needs to be done. (ibid)

In the introduction, Ouellette provides a clear and interesting overview of how the genre has developed and changed over the past 20 or so years-noting the proliferation of formats and themes that have emerged in different markets. Shows from several different countries and from several different subgenres are represented throughout the 29-chapter collection, including talent shows, docusoaps, scripted reality shows, makeover shows and more.

The first two chapters of the collection are really refreshing for the reader in terms of offering new perspectives on the genre. June Deery's 'Mapping Commercialisation in Reality Television' offers an account of the different commercial and economic pressures in the production process and the way reality television formats reflect wider cultural economic concerns. Discussing product placement, she notes how 'in 2011, nine of the 10 prime-time shows with the most product placements in America were reality television formats' (p13). She also discusses that viewers actually 'have a higher tolerance for placement here than in other television genres' (p14), recognising product placement is 'part of the game', thus challenging the 'real'ness of the format.

This chapter is one of many in the collection that interrogate the different economies at play when we consider reality television as a phenomenon and, on the whole, this focus on economy is one of the most interesting contributions this edited collection makes to the study of reality television.

The second chapter, Andrew Ross's 'Reality Television and the Political Economy of Amateurism' considers different forms of labour involved in production, interaction and viewing of reality television, building on existing literature in this area through his discussion of the way that reality participants are treated:

They are not considered actors and so did not enjoy the rights and protections that an action is union would afford... The vast majority received trifling stipends, if anything, and the price for their shot at exposure is to endure conditions-deprived of sleep and plied with hard alcohol-that are designed to spark tension, conflict and confrontation on screen (p33).

As with Deery's chapter, this sets the scene for several further chapters exploring different forms of labour, another strength of the book. I wonder if it might even have been better for the book to solely focus on the range of economies and forms of labour involved in reality television, given these are clearly the strongest and most innovative themes in the collection.

There has been a welcome attempt to broaden the focus of this collection to incorporate authors from several different countries – particularly from Asia. However, it is still dominated largely by studies of American (and to a lesser extent, British) television. Even within these more familiar territories, the selection of programmes studied is curiously restrictive and slightly old-fashioned.

Some of the biggest hits of recent years, including *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *The Only Way Is Essex*, *Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo* and *Strictly Come Dancing* merit only fleeting mentions whilst others, such as the *Great British Bake Off* and its many spin-offs and global versions, are absent altogether.

Likewise, many chapters make mention of the different ways reality shows have tried to encourage audience interaction, whether through more traditional means such as voting, or through social media and other new(ish) technologies-but these mentions are often just that. There is very little discussion of the role of social media in reality television production and consumption, beyond acknowledging its existence. This is a shame, as it is one of the areas where the format has developed most significantly in recent years and some extensive discussion of this would also make the collection feel more contemporary.

Each chapter, in and of itself, offers well considered and interesting perspectives on reality television. However, as a whole, it begins to feel somewhat repetitive after a while. The majority of chapters focus on the shows themselves, offering levels of textual analysis or analyses of the personae involved, and as a result, the collection overall feels somewhat lacking in variety. Only two chapters (Annette Hill's Chapter 'Reality TV Experiences: Audiences, Fact, and Fiction' and Catherine R. Squire's 'the Conundrum of Race and Reality Television') draw upon significant amounts of original audience research, whilst Marwan M Kraidy's chapter, 'Reality Television from *Big Brother* to the Arab Uprisings', is the only one with significant interview material from people working in the industry. Laura Grindstaff's chapter 'DI(t)Y, Reality Style' draws upon interview material with participants, but sadly the direct voices of the participants themselves are largely absent from the chapter.

Indeed, it is somewhat disappointing that there is such minimal material across the collection that includes the voices of reality television stars/performers. Given the number of blogs, memoirs and interviews produced by former reality participants, there is no shortage of people who seem to be willing to tell their story-and arguments about the use of their labour, or the ways they are represented, would be stronger with the inclusion of their perspectives.

Likewise, it would have been interesting to hear more voices from producers and other industry figures, particularly given the emphasis of many chapters in the collection on different economies and modes of labour involved in producing and watching reality television. More could also have been made of the accounts of reality television fans and audiences (including anti-fans and online communities).

The lack of breadth in this collection is not necessarily a fault of any of the individual contributors or even the editor-it may be that this simply indicates a lack of active research into these aspects of reality television at present.

Overall, then, this Companion provides a strong overview of existing research in the field and offers some welcome and interesting discussion about the different economies and forms of labour involved in reality television - as well as some chapters exploring more familiar themes from reality television studies, such as notions of celebrity and reality representations of gender, race, class and sexuality. Its shortcomings and omissions highlight that, although there has been a significant body of research in the field of reality television in the past twenty or so years, there is still a long way to go and much more to learn and explore.