

## THE HARSH REALITY OF “REALITY” TV

*If you're like us, you probably tell people that you never watch reality TV shows...well, except for that one (or two or three) that you never miss.*

*After you read this, you won't watch them the same way again.*

### **A** S SEEN ON TELEVISION

The proliferation of reality TV started in the United States with MTV's *The Real World* in 1992, and spread globally with *Survivor* and *Big Brother* a few years later. The success of these programs proved that nonscripted shows full of nonactors could deliver huge ratings at a fraction of the cost it took to produce scripted shows. Production companies and TV networks took notice, and by the early 2000s, the prime-time schedule was being taken over by so-called reality.

Today, reality programming consists of two broad categories: the “fly on the wall” show in which cameras document the lives of ordinary people, and reality game shows in which groups of people compete for cash and prizes. In both cases, viewers expect drama, conflict, humor, and a satisfying conclusion, just like scripted television. How do producers accomplish that with an “unscripted” show? By leaving very little to chance. The extent to which many of these shows are rigged might surprise you.

**SHOW:** *House Hunters*, HGTV

**“REALITY”:** Cameras follow home buyers as they choose between three properties shown to them by a real-estate agent.

**REALITY:** In 2012, after the Jensen family appeared on the show, wife Bobi told the real-estate website *Hooked On Houses* that just about everything they did on the show was faked:

The producers said they found our (true) story—that we were getting a bigger house and turning our other one into a rental—boring and overdone. They didn't even accept us for the show until we closed on the house we were buying. Then when they decided to film our episode, we had to scramble to find houses to tour and pretend we were considering. The ones we looked at weren't even for sale...they

were just our two friends' houses who were nice enough to madly clean for days in preparation for the cameras!

Only a few months earlier, *Slate* magazine had quoted HGTV general manager Kathleen Finch as insisting that “we are a network of journalistic storytelling, not dramatic storytelling. We’re very conscious of not allowing any kind of fake drama.”

**SHOW:** *Duck Dynasty*, A&E

**“REALITY”:** Cameras follow the Robertson family of Louisiana, headed by patriarch Phil, who owns a successful business selling duck calls. The show portrays the Robertson men as bearded hillbillies in full camo gear.

**REALITY:** Hillbillies? More like yuppies. In 2013 several photos emerged of Phil’s adult sons and their families that were taken before the show started. Not only were the men not bearded, they were dressed in khakis and pressed shirts. And in one photo, the clean-cut sons are armed with...golf clubs. In a *Washington Monthly* exposé about *Duck Dynasty*, Daniel Luzer wrote, “A&E appears to have taken a large clan of affluent, college-educated, mildly conservative, country-club Republicans, common across the nicer suburbs of the old South, and repackaged them as the Beverly Hillbillies.”

**SHOW:** *Call of the Wildman*, Animal Planet

**“REALITY”:** Cameras follow Ernie “Turtleman” Brown as he helps fellow Kentuckians whose properties have been invaded by nuisance wildlife. He catches the critters with his bare hands and then lets them go in the woods.

**REALITY:** *Call of the Wildman* now airs with a disclaimer: “The preceding program contains some dramatizations.” They’re not kidding. A 2014 article in *Mother Jones* magazine accused the show of not only faking some of the rescues but also treating animals inhumanely. The article focused on a July 2012 episode in which Brown captures a raccoon (possibly rabid) living in a family’s house. “Fluffy doesn’t have rabies,” he yells after catching the animal, “she’s got babies!” Then Brown uses the mom to help him find her offspring in the crawl space. The *Mother Jones* investigation discovered that “Fluffy” (Turtleman names all the critters he catches) couldn’t have had babies...because Fluffy is male. The baby raccoons, it turned out, were delivered to the house by a trapper. As always, Brown

The bite of a Russell’s viper instantly causes blood to clot, giving it the consistency of jelly.

promised to release them into the wild. But when the raccoons were delivered to a wildlife sanctuary a week after filming, they were reportedly “emaciated” and clinging to life. One didn’t survive. Other allegations: the show “used an animal that had been drugged with sedatives in violation of federal rules”; and in one scene where Brown identifies an animal by its droppings, the “droppings” were made from “Nutella, Snickers bars, and rice.”

A spokesperson for Sharp Entertainment, which produces *Call of the Wildman*, insisted that “the humane treatment of our animals is a top priority.” But the spokesperson also explained that Sharp is in the business of “guided reality.” And even though Brown really does catch the critters with his bare hands, an anonymous source from the show said that “99 percent of Turtleman’s lines are scripted.”

**SHOW:** *Real Housewives*, Bravo

**“REALITY”:** Cameras follow the exploits of cliques of well-to-do women from various American cities. Episodes feature fights, betrayal, drinking, and sexual situations.

**REALITY:** The gossip website RadarOnline posted photos of the cast and crew of *Real Housewives of New York City* filming a “spontaneous” street scene: “Carole Radziwill and Heather Thompson were taking instructions from producers, shooting multiple takes, and waiting for breaks in dialogue to ensure cameras were set up.” The gossip site also reported that *Real Housewives of Atlanta* cast member Walter Jackson confessed that—at the behest of producers—he pretended to be Kenya Moore’s boyfriend “to give Kenya a story line.” Contrary to what viewers saw, the two were not a couple.

**SHOW:** *American Idol*, Fox

**“REALITY”:** At the beginning of each season, thousands of aspiring singers line up in various cities for a chance to audition in front of the celebrity judges. If the judges deem a singer good enough, he or she gets a “golden ticket” to compete on the show in Hollywood. Singers not good enough are often ridiculed (on national TV) before being sent home.

**REALITY:** By the time most singers get in front of the celebrity judges, their fate has already been determined. In 2011 a former contestant who identified herself by the fake name “Maria Saint” revealed that several of the top singers didn’t even have to audition.

They'd been "recruited" for the show by talent scouts. And those huge lines full of hopefuls we see on TV were actually filmed weeks or months before the celebrity judges showed up. The hopefuls sing for the show's producers, after which, according to Saint, each singer is given a piece of paper with the producer's name along with a code: "Y" means the singer is good enough to move on; "K" means the singer isn't great but has potential; and "N" means the singer's not good enough for the show...but still might still get in front of the judges. "Take my advice," wrote Saint, "if you're an 'N' and you want to see the process and you're okay with the fact that you may be humiliated and that's all right with you, then by all means, take the chance-of-a-lifetime experience." Saint kept her identity secret, fearing she could be sued for up to \$5 million for breaching a confidentiality agreement that all hopefuls must sign.

**SHOW:** *Kourtney and Kim Take New York, E!*

**"REALITY":** Cameras follow the exploits of the Kardashian sisters as they navigate the perils of life, love, and family. In one episode in 2011, Kim flew to Dubai to have a heart-to-heart talk with her mom, Kris Jenner, to tell her that she was going to divorce her husband, Kris Humphries.

**REALITY:** After the show aired, a photograph of Kim and her mother leaving a soundstage in Los Angeles wearing the exact same outfits, hairstyles, and makeup they had in "Dubai" showed up on the Internet. And the photo was taken on December 6, 2011—a full week *after* news broke that Kim was divorcing Humphries. Not only was the location faked, so was the entire conversation between mother and daughter.

**SHOW:** *Toddlers & Tiaras*, TLC

**"REALITY":** Cameras follow the highly competitive world of child beauty pageants.

**REALITY:** When RadarOnline broke the story about the scripted scenes in *Real Housewives of New York City*, one of the online commenters was former *Toddlers & Tiaras* pageant mom Darci McHenry, who wrote: "We had to 're-shoot' things that started out spontaneously. We were re-fed lines to re-create a 'missed' moment. Plus, you're mic'd the whole time. You can be addressing one person, and editors can come in and splice it to make it look like you're

addressing someone else because it makes for better television.” She added that one scene of a little girl “spontaneously” singing a song was shot six times.

In 2012 Maxine Tinnel, who was hired to stage pageants for the show, told the *New York Post* that everything on *Toddlers & Tiaras* is preplanned to ensure that the competitive kids and squabbling parents are always at each other’s throats. Capturing this is difficult, says Tinnel, because the pageants aren’t nearly as combative as the show makes them out to be: “When we have downtime, the kids are sitting on the floor coloring or playing together.” The real trick to creating a tense atmosphere, she says, is in the casting: “They find the crazy families first, then find a pageant near them.”

**SHOW:** *Hell’s Kitchen*, Fox

**“REALITY”:** Twenty contestants compete for a chance to become head chef at one of Gordon Ramsay’s restaurants. Each episode features a dinner service where the British celebrity chef yells bleeped-out profanities at the contestants, smashes poorly cooked meat with his bare hand, and often shuts down the service early. One chef is eliminated each week, at the sole discretion of Ramsay.

**REALITY:** Regular viewers often ask, “How did some of these clueless chefs even get on the show?” In a 2013 interview with *Emmy* magazine, Ramsay answered that question during a rant about “the muppets I have to work with.” He said, “There’s fifty percent cast for character, and there’s fifty percent cast for talent.” That explains why obviously inferior chefs remain on the show after better chefs have been eliminated—it makes for better drama. But regardless of how they’re selected, if being lambasted by Ramsay looks tough on the screen, it’s even tougher in real life. For five weeks, the chefs are completely isolated from the outside world—no TV, no Internet, no calls home. There are cameras everywhere, even in the bathrooms. Most of their work days last from dawn until 2:00 a.m., and the contestants must do all of their cooking and cleaning themselves. It’s so stressful, in fact, that after a contestant is eliminated, he or she is immediately sent to a psychiatrist to be evaluated. Why? According to a show insider who spoke to the *New York Post*, the producers “want to make sure you don’t want to kill yourself—or someone else.”

So is it worth it? Out of the dozen or so winners in the show’s

history, only half received the promised job of head chef—some were given lesser positions, and a few didn't get any job at all. (They got a cash prize instead.)

**SHOW:** *Mystery Diners*, Food Network

**“REALITY”:** Cameras follow restaurant “fixer” Charles Stiles as he assists restaurant owners who are losing money and can't figure out why. Stiles's company comes in at night and secretly installs hidden cameras. Then company operatives pose as employees and customers while Stiles and the restaurant owner sit in a control room and watch what transpires. In every episode, restaurant employees are caught engaging in some kind of shady activity, which leads to a heated confrontation, dramatic firings, and a grateful owner.

**REALITY:** If it seems as if some of the “problem employees” that Stiles's company exposes are paid actors (because who would act like that and then allow themselves to be on TV?), it's because they are. In 2013 a former employee of Big Earl's Greasy Eats in Cave Creek, Arizona, told the *Sonoran News* that when the *Mystery Diners* production crew filmed an episode there, they brought in paid actors. The confrontations were staged, and some required several retakes.

**SHOW:** *Breaking Amish*, TLC

**“REALITY”:** Cameras follow five young adults—four Amish and one Mennonite—who decide to leave their rural, technology-free, religious upbringings in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and go to New York City. They live the “English” life for a while before deciding whether or not to go back to their traditional homes.

**REALITY:** Almost immediately after TLC aired the first episode in 2012, accusations arose that *Breaking Amish* is fake. According to London's *Daily Mail*: “While each cast member claims to have grown up in the strict communities, evidence has surfaced suggesting they have decidedly dark pasts—involving divorce, children, and time away from the faith.” In fact, two cast members supposedly met each other for the first time on the show, but a Facebook photo taken a year earlier shows the two of them together. TLC execs say they never implied that cast members lived a completely Amish lifestyle before the show, but Hot Snakes Media, which produces the show for TLC, says on its website that *Breaking Amish* “follows

the lives of courageous young Amish men and women as they experience life, for the first time, outside of the Amish community.”

As the allegations of fakery kept coming in, TLC revised the storylines throughout the first season to reflect the fact the young men and women weren't as “pure” as the show had made them out to be. The show was renewed for a second season.

**SHOW:** *Bug Juice*, Disney Channel

**“REALITY”:** Cameras follow boys and girls at a summer camp.

**REALITY:** In an article posted on the Writers' Guild of America's website, veteran script writer David Rupel explains how reality TV really works: “The first thing is that the term ‘unscripted’ is a fallacy. No, we don't write pages of dialogue, but we do create formats, cast people based on character traits, and edit scenes to tell a powerful, intriguing tale.” He cited an example from *Bug Juice*:

We faced a major problem with our boy-girl love story. After weaving this story line through nine episodes, we were caught flat-footed when our boy, Connor, had the nerve to dump his girl, Stephanie, off camera! We had enough interview bites to explain what happened, but we needed a good visual to make it work. If you catch a rerun of the show, you will see a happy Stephanie obliviously bounce up to Connor, who solemnly takes her hand and leads her off, as his interview bite explains he needs to end things. With the help of a tender music cue, it turned out to be a touching and bittersweet end to our summer romance. The reality: Steph walked up to Connor, gushed about his Adidas T-shirt, and they headed off to have lunch. We used the interview bites and music cue to shape the otherwise innocuous scene to approximate the reality that we failed to shoot.

**SHOW:** *Storage Wars*, A&E

**“REALITY”:** Cameras follow professional buyers as they bid on the contents of abandoned or unpaid storage units.

**REALITY:** Former cast member Dave Hester sued *Storage Wars* for wrongful termination in 2012. He says the show fired him because he publicly claimed it was rigged: “The producers staged entire units, planted items in lockers after having them appraised weeks in advance, and funneled cash to weaker teams to buy lockers they could not have otherwise afforded.” A&E's defense: “The composition of the show is covered by the First Amendment.” A judge agreed and ordered Hester to pay the network's legal costs. But

Hester is sticking to his story. He knows the show is rigged because he helped rig it. According to RadarOnline, “Hester planted items that he owned in lockers he bought and was even paid by the production company for ‘renting’ those items.”

**SHOW:** *Snooki & JWoww*, MTV

**“REALITY”:** Cameras follow Nicole “Snooki” Polizzi and Jennifer “JWoww” Farley in this *Jersey Shore* spin-off as they—like *Kourtney and Kim* (and many other reality shows)—navigate life and love.

**REALITY:** In her book *Baby Bumps: From Party Girl to Proud Mama, and All the Messy Milestones Along the Way*, Polizzi confessed that the story lines on *Snooki & JWoww* are all planned out in advance. In 2012, when she informed the show’s producer that she was pregnant, the first thing he said was, “Get me a rewrite, ASAP!” Then the producers threw out their plans for filming in bars and quickly “concocted” scenes “in a pet store, in a baby-clothing store, at a psychic’s, and at the doctor’s office.” Critics and viewers complained that the ensuing season felt “painfully scripted.”

**SHOW:** *The Voice*, NBC

**“REALITY”:** Popular music artists mentor up-and-coming singers who are chosen via “blind” auditions. The mentors can only listen to the contestants’ voices before deciding whether to take them on as students. Winners are ultimately determined by a fan-voting system.

**REALITY:** NBC Universal is very adamant that its hit show is not rigged in any way. “We have never manipulated the outcome on this show—NBC and *The Voice* producers take the fairness and integrity of this competition far too seriously.” But you wouldn’t know that from the 32-page contract every contestant must sign. The *New York Daily News* broke the story in March 2014 after an anonymous Twitter user leaked the “dehumanizing” contract online. Some highlights:

- A contestant may be removed from the show at any time “for any reason whatsoever,” even if they are “winning” with the public.
- A contestant must agree that the show “may portray me in a false light” that “may be disparaging, defamatory, embarrassing (and) may expose me to public ridicule, humiliation, or condemnation.”
- The producers can “change the rules at any time,” “ignore the show’s voting system,” and force contestants to “undergo medical or

An estimated 60 million Americans are legally forbidden from hanging laundry out to dry.



psychological testing and, under certain circumstances, release the results on TV.”

- Failing to follow the rules or divulging inside information could result in the contestant being sued for \$100,000 to \$1 million.

A legal expert told the *Daily News* that this type of contract is now the norm in reality programming because several shows have been sued by bitter contestants and cast members. Result: the production companies can treat the reality stars pretty much however they want. Happy viewing.

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### THE GOLDEN FLEECE AWARDS

*Sen. William Proxmire of Wisconsin created this “award” in the 1970s to call attention to wasteful government spending. A few honorees:*

**The National Endowment for the Humanities**, “for making a \$2,500 grant to Arlington County, Virginia, to study why people are rude, ill-mannered, cheat and lie on the local tennis courts.”

**The Federal Highway Administration**, for spending \$222,000 to study ‘Motorist Attitudes Toward Large Trucks.’ ”

**The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism**, “for spending millions of dollars to find out if drunk fish are more aggressive than sober fish, and if rats can be turned into alcoholics.”

**The Agency for International Development**, for using part of a \$97,000 grant to study “behavior and social relationships in a Peruvian brothel.”

**The National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders**, for spending “\$160,000 to study in part whether someone can ‘hex’ an opponent during a strength test by drawing an ‘X’ in the air in front of his opponent’s chest.”

**The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration**, “for spending \$120,126 to build a low-slung, backward-steering motorcycle that no one could ride.”

**The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**, “for spending at least \$6,000 to determine if pot smoking has a bad effect on scuba divers.”

In 2007 Canada issued a \$1 million coin. It weighed 220 pounds and was made of solid gold.