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Playing the Reality Card: Factual TV Programming for a New Broadcasting Age

Abstract: This article provides some reflections on developments in factual TV programming in the UK in the last couple of decades. In principle, the term ‘factual programming’ covers an extremely wide range of material and could include news and current affairs as well as a number of other genres that one could regard as ‘non-fiction’ in their general orientation (see Hill 2007, 3-5). For the purposes of this article, however, I will confine my remarks to types of work which producers claim has a certain affinity with documentary and to which broadcasters themselves will generally attach the label ‘factual’ in their schedule information and in other promotional material. Even so, the amount of programming that is paraded under the factual banner still remains relatively extensive. It ranges from the cheap and cheerful docu-soap to the more challenging multi-part documentaries on topics of more serious concern.

There is one feature that all the formats that have attracted the label ‘factual’ have in common. It is the claim (not always realised in the event) that the material they introduce is directly rooted in the real, historical world. Events, persons and situations are presented to us as we would expect to encounter them in our real-life-experience. They are not, in other words, identified as emanating from the creative imagination of some authoring agent, even though one has to concede that, in today’s broadcasting world, the boundaries between what is imaginatively conceived and what is allegedly factually based are becoming progressively more blurred (see also remarks below under *Generic Hybridisation*). The deliberate blurring of these generic boundaries has also led to some major controversies over the status of material present as ‘factual’ but which, on closer inspection, has proved to be of largely fictional origin (Kilborn 2003, 122-51). Nevertheless, even though the status of what is presented as ‘factual’ can be the subject of legitimate concern, there can be no doubt that factuality, in all its many guises, continues to be of considerable appeal to TV audiences. This is one of the reasons why commissioning editors for the major TV networks have been willing to commit so many resources to the development and acquisition of factual entertainment and also why factual entertainment has itself become a major growth area in the sphere of independent TV production.

What seems to lie at the heart of factual programmes’ appeal is their real-life connectedness, even though – as documentary practitioners and scholars have recognised – a good deal of artifice is needed to create this real-seemingness (Nichols 1991, 107-33). The crucial factor from the viewers’ perspective is that the world

opened up by this work should bear the marks of the self-same socio-historical world that they themselves inhabit. The very fact that this world is identifiably *non-fictional* is arguably an important element of the appeal of this form of programming, in that it provides what some would regard as a much-needed antidote to the glossy, polished world of so much Hollywood-style made-for-TV fiction. In making the claim that audiences are drawn to facticity because they are seeking relief from Hollywood's melodramatic excesses, it would be wrong to conclude, however, that the core of factual programmes' attraction lay in their ability to evoke real-life ordinariness. Far from it. If anything, programmes will frequently attempt to win over audiences with the promise of encountering some heightened reality. In other words, one of the expectations with which audiences approach these works is that they will be provided with a mildly diverting rather than sternly educative experience.

In referring to factual programming in such broad terms one does, of course, run the risk of over-generalisation. It is important to remember, however, that programmes bearing the factual label come in so many different shapes and sizes. Indeed, the very category 'factual' now includes products which previous generations of viewers would probably have thought of simply as 'light entertainment.' One also needs to be aware that the term 'factual' has become part of the promotional rhetoric of broadcasters as they seek to persuade viewers of the educational benefits of consuming this type of material.

Operating in the New Broadcasting Age

The proliferation of these entertainment-oriented factual formats is also closely connected with wider developments in contemporary broadcasting. Programme makers are nowadays required, more so than at any other time in broadcasting history, to deliver audience-friendly material that can be strategically employed at chosen points in the TV schedule. Broadcasting has become an increasingly commercialised environment and, as a consequence, factual and documentary programmes now have to earn their place in the schedule in contrast to the quasi-protected status that they once enjoyed. The production of factual entertainment has also become extremely big business and the television marketplace is now dominated by a number of powerful international players, most notably *Discovery*, *Animal Planet* and *National Geographic*. The last decade or so has also seen the arrival of production companies specialising in the production of reality shows. Some of these organisations, especially the highly successful *Endemol* company, are nowadays almost as well known as other global traders such as Mercedes or Sony.

Just as in other forms of commercial trading, success in the sphere of television production for a global audience is determined by the ability to drive down costs and maximise market penetration. With the likes of *Endemol*, for instance, the principal aim has been to develop a range of products that, with some slight adjustments to take account of the tastes and expectations of different cultures, can be profitably inserted into multiple markets. From the point of view of national broadcasters

such as *Channel 4* in the UK, it also goes without saying that they are attracted to forms of programming that are relatively cheap to acquire and which have often, as has been the case with *Big Brother* (Channel 4, 2000), been able to generate extremely healthy ratings.

The apparently irresistible rise of factual entertainment programmes has also led, in some quarters, to the expression of a good deal of concern (see also below under *Concluding Remarks*). This concern is frequently linked to the wider debates about the 'Dumbing Down' of culture. The increasing number of bland homogenised forms of factual programming that make few demands on an audience's intelligence is thought to herald the arrival of the philistines at the gate. Whilst some of these fears are undoubtedly exaggerated and do not take sufficient account of the media savviness of contemporary audiences, there is one respect in which we may have more legitimate cause for concern. This relates to the more general impact that these 'softer' factual forms may be having on other types of documentary work that have traditionally been part of most broadcasters' schedules.¹ The contention is that the popularity of these lightweight forms has made it more difficult for broadcasters to continue to include in their schedule examples that support the commissioning of the more serious and challenging type of documentary with which they may have been previously associated.

Support for documentary within the domain of television has mainly come from public service broadcasters. Latterly, however, public service broadcasting itself has been increasingly exposed to the chill winds of commercialisation. In the new digital world where audiences are fragmenting and where ever more service providers are appearing on the scene, public service broadcasters have been forced to adapt to survive (Kilborn 2006, 47-50). One of the preferred survival strategies has involved broadcasters in a 'squaring the circle' operation. On the one hand they seek to cling on to their reputation for providing the kind of quality programming that informs, educates and entertains; but at the same time they now place greater emphasis on 'programme accessibility.'

By the early 1990s, for instance, the BBC had begun to recognise that, in the face of stiff competition from its commercial rivals, it would need to popularise at least part of its programme provision in order to be in a better bargaining position with the British government over the setting of the TV license fee. It was, arguably, this popularising imperative that led in part to the mini-explosion of docu-soaps that graced UK screens in the mid to late 1990s. Perhaps somewhat contrary to expectations, it was the BBC who produced the vast majority of these hybrid forms. Whether it was *Airport* (BBC 1, 1996) or *Driving School* (BBC 1, 1997), docu-soap series all conformed to one basic requirement. They were essentially lightweight entertainment vehicles that retained some vestigial signs of documentariness. For the most part, however, docu-soaps owed their existence to the fact that they could be so effortlessly integrated into that period of the early evening TV

¹ In my book *Staging the Real* (2003) I suggest that the various forms of factual/documentary programming that appear in today's TV schedules can be conveniently located on a sliding scale according to whether they belong to 'softer' or 'harder' categories.

schedule that was slowly being colonised by the softer factual formats (make-over programmes, life-style and cookery programmes and the like).² The consequence of this shift in broadcasters' priorities was that, by the mid-1990s, factual entertainment – in all its many wondrous guises – had become one of the major weapons in the armoury of TV schedulers.³

Generic Hybridisation

The one feature that is common to most of the new factual formats is their employment of generic hybridisation. Elements are drawn from a number of what were once discrete genres and are combined into new hybridised forms. The best example of this type of generic blurring is provided by the docu-soap, a form that – as the term suggests – integrates documentary-style elements with features borrowed from TV soaps. Docu-soaps' claim to be thought of as 'documentary' is made on the basis that they purport to be giving viewers an insider view of a particular working environment from the perspective of those who work there (reps in holiday resorts, workers in airports, receptionists and porters in hotels etc.). As far as their narrative structure is concerned, however, docu-soaps bear a strong resemblance to soap opera, especially in the way they constantly switch attention between a number of different character-centred storylines. Their dependence on a cast of preferably larger-than-life characters is another feature that reveals docu-soaps' indebtedness to the world of TV soap.

In the case of the docu-soap, the disparate generic elements have been literally fused together in a new hybrid form. The hybridisation has been, if you will, fully realised. In other types of factual programming, however, the various generic components on which the programme makers have drawn still retain something of their original identity. In several of the 'Accident and Emergency' formats (programmes such as *Cops* (Fox TV, 1989), *999* (BBC, 1992) and *Police, Camera, Action...* (ITV, 1994)), for instance, each programme consists of a number of discrete sections. Wherever possible, actuality footage will be included, but where this is not available programme makers often resort to various types of dramatic reconstruction (usually involving actors but sometimes inviting individuals who have been victims of crime or who maybe have had miraculous escapes to re-enact their experiences for the camera). These sequences, which supply the necessary action ingredient, will normally be complemented by interviews with the individual who has lived to tell the tale and by some form of reflective commentary on lessons to be learned from the events depicted.

² This provides evidence of how schedule-driven the whole business of programme production had become. Whereas in former times programmes could be made 'on spec' and a slot in the schedule be found in which they could be accommodated, nowadays the making of a programme is predicated on the need to fill a particular schedule slot.

³ The popularity of many of the factual formats also resulted in frenetic attempts by broadcasters to develop new products that would enable them to steal a march on their competitors. It also led to widespread cloning of factual material.

Staging the Real

The other feature that has distinguished the new factual formats is the number of programmes that have involved some form of ‘reality staging.’ This is especially true of the reality game-docs such as *Big Brother* (Channel 4, 2000) and *Survivor* (CBS, 2000), but from the mid-1990s there were an increasing number of programmes based on scenarios that had been dreamed up for the specific purpose of televisual entertainment. What one confronts as a viewer is a kind of ‘reality construct’ in which, typically, a group of carefully selected participants are brought together in situations carefully set up by the show’s producers. The interactions of these real-life performers are recorded and a highly edited version of the proceedings transmitted. What needs to be underlined here is the calculated nature of the producers’ intervention. It is true that many traditional forms of documentary have involved a degree of interventionist or constructive activity and that documentary subjects have always, to some extent, been cast according to what contributions the documentarist expects them to make. In the case of the new factual formats, however, producers make a far more calculating assessment of the potential performative ability of the participants (Bruzzi 2006, 185–218). By the same token – and mindful of the entertainment value that these shows are expected to deliver – programme makers spend a great deal of time devising scenarios and creating storylines that can be guaranteed to generate dramatic interaction and lively exchanges between subjects.

A good example of a ‘created-for-TV’ factual format is the garden makeover show. A team of telegenic horticultural experts descend upon the garden of an owner who has not been giving it due care and attention. Within a short time a plan is devised to transform this ugly duckling of a garden into a beautiful swan. Scenes of frantic makeover activity then ensue until, in a climactic ‘lo and behold’ sequence, the frequently bemused garden owner (who has been required to vacate the premises for the duration of the transformative work) is summoned to admire the experts’ handiwork. Garden make-overs share the same structural features as many other make-over shows such as those that involve the transformation of subjects’ homes or those often-painful-to-watch personal make-overs where fitness experts or cosmetic surgeons get to work on a volunteer willing to allow a large audience of TV viewers witness their attempts at self-improvement. All these programmes adhere to the same narrative pattern, in so far as an initial problem (e.g. garden left to go to wrack and ruin) is neatly and entertainingly resolved by the timely intervention of the TV make-over team. Just as with many of the other new factual formats, make-over shows are as dependent for their effect on story-telling devices borrowed from dramatic fiction as they are on techniques of documentary observation (Kilborn 2003 156–7).

The Performance Requirement

What has also become increasingly apparent with most forms of contemporary factual entertainment is the extent to which they rely on the performance ability of participants. In the case of make-over programmes, only limited performative ability may be required of the targeted individuals (e.g. garden owners) who are at the receiving end of what is sometimes akin to a sting operation. There is another tranche of factual programmes, however, in which the ability of real-life subjects to perform is accorded much greater significance. These are the shows in which carefully selected individuals agree to participate in one of those created-for-TV programmes previously alluded to. In each case these volunteers are selected according to strict dramaturgical criteria and are then inserted into specially contrived situations: the contained environment of the *Big Brother* house or the exotic jungle or island setting of *Survivor* in which subjects are allocated to separate tribes and expected to carry out a series of tasks devised by the show's producers.

From the producers' perspective the primary requirement is participants to be able to deliver the kind of performance that will make for entertaining viewing. Considerable importance is also attached to devising strategies that will encourage the audience's involvement in the on-screen events (nowadays aided by the interactive technologies and by the voting-off procedures through which viewers can determine participants' fates). From the audience's point of view the particular attraction of these programmes is the scope that they provide for voyeuristically tapping into the participants' verbal and other exchanges. An additional appeal (and one that is made much of in the accompanying promotional materials to these programmes) relates to the insights into human behaviour that viewers can hope to gain by observing how a group of previously unacquainted individuals cope with being narrowly penned up with each other in unfamiliar surroundings. In other words the profit-oriented intentions of the producers can be conveniently concealed behind the rather dubious claim that this is a social experiment from which we can all learn.

With reality game-docs such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor*, producers and programme promoters generally choose not to put too much emphasis on the 'social experiment' aspect, given the general air of playfulness that pervades the proceedings. On the other hand, with the sub-genre of factual programmes that includes successful shows such as *Wife Swap* (Channel 4, 2003) and *Living with the Enemy* (BBC 2, 1998), producers will generally make much more of the fact that the programme incorporates a form of social experiment. Such programmes all follow a standard pattern. For the purposes of the experiment, selected individuals agree to enter an unfamiliar situation in which they would normally have not found themselves, if it had not been for the calculating intervention of the programme making team. Since audience entertainment is the desired outcome of these media-initiated events, a series of measures are taken in order to ensure that these shows contain their fair share of dramatic tension, verbal conflict and rip-roaring rows. The principal way in which this is achieved is through careful subject selection.

In *Wife Swap*, for instance, in which two wives exchange homes for a limited period, and in *Living with the Enemy* where individuals with different ideologies and lifestyles agree to spend time in each other's company, producers will almost invariably choose people with diametrically opposed views or people who are otherwise 'worlds apart.' The case can, however, be made that programmes like *Wife Swap* and *Living with the Enemy*, besides making for very entertaining viewing, can also elicit a more reflective response from the audience. They provide, namely, a number of 'test cases' that show how some of the individuals faced with such challenges can learn to cope in an alien environment by making appropriate adjustments. In the act of reflecting on the coping strategies of those participating in the experiment, audiences are allegedly moved to contemplate how they themselves would have fared in a similar situation.

Concluding Remarks

One cannot hope to do justice in a relatively short article to the multiplicity of factual formats that have sprung up in recent years. With more space one would have been able to trace the impact that the ratings success of these formats has had on other forms of TV programming. There is evidence to suggest, for instance, that – in today's heavily commercialised broadcasting environment – a much wider range of programming than might have been anticipated is being impacted by the need to emulate or acquire features of the 'popular factual.' Certain types of wildlife programming, for instance, have been pushed so far in the entertainment direction that some producers are beginning to fear for the long-term survival of television natural history in the form we have known it hitherto (Kilborn 2005/6).

Those who have anxieties about the damage inflicted on the factual/documentary genre by the commercialising imperative may, however, derive a certain consolation from studying the historical contours of these developments. Just as with all other TV genres, so too within the domain of TV factual entertainment there are discernible shifts and fluctuations as producers strive to maintain the freshness and appeal of their product range. It is worth recording in this respect that a number of these factual formats have only enjoyed a relatively short life span. Yet, even as their popularity has begun to dwindle, new products have come on stream to replace them. Docu-soaps, for instance, after having been such high-profile performers in the second half of the 1990s, virtually disappeared from view to be replaced by the even more successful (in ratings terms) reality game-docs.

There remains the question as to what the future may bring. As with all popular cultural forms, so too with factual entertainment it is difficult to make any general prediction as to whether it will continue to exercise such a powerful hold over the TV schedules as it has done in the previous two decades. So rather than indulging in too much crystal-ball gazing, let me by way of conclusion simply offer one or two final reflections on 1) how these factual formats have been received by audiences and critics and 2) what the popularity of this type of programming tells us about the current state of broadcasting.

Regarding the critical reception of these formats, it would be foolish to deny that, in some quarters, there has been considerable anxiety about the proliferation of these softer factual forms. The fears relate principally to the implications for other types of programming. Public service broadcasters still continue to find space for more demanding types of documentary alongside the softer forms. There is concern, however, that the popularising imperative may become so strong that all forms of television non-fiction will find themselves having to aspire to the condition of factual entertainment. Coupled with this concern is a further anxiety that documentary film and programme makers will, to an increasing extent, find themselves having to fashion products for the international market, thereby significantly reducing the culturally specific element on their work, for fear of alienating global audiences (Hogarth 2006, 19-40).

There are some amongst the broadcasting community who – possibly taking their cue from the tale of the goose that laid the golden egg – are apprehensive lest the products in which they have so heavily invested begin to lose their attractiveness for members of the consuming audience. The fear is that viewers will one day tire of watching groups of lay participants producing performances in the context of specially contrived media events. A particular fear is that viewers will sooner or later take exception to the fact that the participants in these show are not always the ‘ordinary members of the public’ they are made out to be. One study conducted into how people are selected to take part in a range of public participation programmes discovered that a large number of them (53% of the sample) could be categorised as ‘semi-professional performers’ in the sense that they had all already appeared in one or more programmes of this type (Hibberd et. al 2000).

As well as concerns about the directions in which factual programming is moving, there is also recognition that some of the developments can be more positively regarded. The very fact, for instance, that the new modes of factual programming have been generally popular with viewers has proved to be of major economic benefit for the scores of independent companies specialising in factual/documentary production. The high profile of the new factual formats has also led to a lively debate in media studies circles concerning both the status of the material that claims to be factually based and the relationship of the newer factual formats to the wider documentary enterprise. Is it not possible, for instance, to view the diverse reality formats as fulfilling the Griersonian demand that documentary should be a “creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson 1966, 13)?

There remains, finally, the question of what these developments in factual entertainment tell us about the new broadcasting age. Certainly factual programme makers have not been slow to take advantage of the possibilities offered by the new technologies. *Big Brother* was one of the first shows which allowed viewers to engage with the programme at all hours of the day and night via web site, chat line, video and audio streaming. This created for viewers a strong sense of being totally involved in a made-for-TV event. This clearly shows how adept these purveyors of factual entertainment have been at capitalising on the opportunities provided by the interactive technologies.

The example of *Big Brother* alerts us to an important development in the way that broadcasters are linking up with other service providers in order to meet the challenges of the new broadcasting age. In the modern digital age there is increasing convergence and synergy between different media sectors. Organisations like the BBC that were at one time exclusively concerned with broadcasting activities are now in the process of converging their broadcasting and online operations. This has had special implications for the way in which factual and documentary material is put together, circulated and viewed. In almost every case the screening of a particular factual or documentary programme will be complemented by a series of supplementary online materials. As we move further into the digital age and as all of us become more accustomed to engaging with material downloaded from multiple delivery platforms, we may find ourselves having to reconsider what we have traditionally thought to be the function of documentary (Corner 2000). It may not be too fanciful to imagine, for instance, that – thanks to these new digital possibilities – users will be encouraged to interact with this material in far more active ways than hitherto. This may bring us one step nearer to being able to realise Brecht’s dream that, in a more enlightened media age, each member of the ‘mass audience’ could become an active producer rather than being just a passive recipient of media information (Brecht 1964, 51-3).

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