

Part One

Producing Reality

Industry, Labor, and Marketing

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Mapping Commercialization in Reality Television

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It hardly seems necessary to point out that commercial media are commercially driven, but reality television provides particularly strong examples of contemporary forms of commercialization: commercialization referring to the process of turning something into a commodity in order to generate a profit and, attitudinally, to a prioritization of this process. The reality producer's often aggressive strategies make conspicuous the fact that most media are, at base, cultural devices for selling things and that, though multiple agents as well as agendas are involved, it is the commercial nature of their activities that is the most inescapable aspect of what they do.¹ Not surprisingly, both the production and content of reality television reflect broad socioeconomic trends related to accelerated commercialization: most notably, neo-liberal privatization (the prioritization of profit over public service goals); personal-image management (the need for individuals to market themselves as brands); nonunionized outsourcing and other budget-cutting strategies; and an interlocking expansion in the areas of celebrity production, public relations, and various forms of oblique or indirect advertising. The purpose of this overview is to examine as many as possible of the commercial strategies found in reality programming, some of which I and others cover in more detail elsewhere (Deery, 2012).² Commercialization is also itself a topic in several reality formats (e.g., those involving businesses and trade) and, indeed, one of reality television's strongest claims to realism may actually be its acknowledgment that, today, commercialization is a growing presence in an increasingly branded and mediated life, to the point where it is becoming difficult to distinguish the commercial from the noncommercial or to conceive of meaningful experiences that don't have elements of both.

This chapter will at times generalize about all of reality television and at other times pinpoint features of specific formats. In both cases, I am interested in the

commercialization of content and of the viewing experience, whether it be a revival of techniques, as in product placement, or the emergence of something new, as in dynamic relations between viewers and television texts. For any media scholar, reality programming is worth monitoring because it has in many instances spear-headed advertainment (the merging of advertising and entertainment programming) in a convergent, postadvertising era and therefore provides a useful vantage point from which to gauge television's present and future role in a new media economy (Deery, 2004a). Reality television can be seen as emblematic of a wider cultural conflation of commercial and noncommercial agendas in an era of viral marketing, brand pushing,³ astroturfing, and numerous other forms of advertising disguised as something else. A fairly predictable effect of emphatic and endemic commercialization is a dampening of the overtly political and investigative approaches of the documentary. As Graeme Turner has underlined, reality television, like other media forms, must be understood as single-mindedly commercial and as ideologically casual, meaning that the primary aim of its producers is not to make an ideological point but to generate popular and profitable programming (2010, p. 63). Indeed, it can be argued that the one (being casually ideological) follows from the other (commercial pressure). The ideological import is there – perhaps inevitably, even when not intentional – and it ought to be identified. But the commercial foundation precedes everything else. For example, while there is much talk of amateur participation in contemporary media, *corporate* participation needs our attention too. On reality television (as in national politics), ordinary participation is showcased and capitalized upon, but circumscribed. Employing nonprofessional actors is a commercial rather than a deliberately political strategy, the aim being to attract viewers and cut production costs, not give voice to the powerless. Of course, not all media production is strictly for profit, yet a global trend in the past few decades has been a weakening of noncommercial, public service systems and pressure on those that remain to imitate many of the practices of commercial competitors in order to attract viewers and justify the expenditure of public funds in a deregulated and often transnational market. Heightened television commercialization is therefore also a result of national policies of deregulation and privatization.

Paid Programming: The Branding of Broadcast Content

Media producers have always assumed that the audience's attitude to advertising is, at best, one of tolerance and, when possible, avoidance. So, rather than relying only on the interruptive commercial break, reality programming has experimented with more integrative models in which advertising becomes vital and necessary, *enabling* on-screen experiences rather than distracting from them. One major form of commercial integration is product placement, the practice of embedding brands or products in media content for a fee or in some form of barter, as when producers defray costs by receiving free props or services. Examples of television placement

can be found as early as the 1940s (and before that in film since the 1920s), but it was not a significant practice until the end of the 1990s; it then more than doubled at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Thussu, 2007, p. 55).⁴ In recent years, placement has really taken off, appearing not only in an increasing number of programs but also more frequently within those programs (Magder, 2009), and most especially in reality programs: for example, in 2011, nine of the 10 prime-time shows with the most product placements in America were reality television formats (in descending order, *American Idol*, *The Biggest Loser*, *Celebrity Apprentice*, *Dancing with the Stars*, *The X Factor*, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, *America's Got Talent*, *America's Next Top Model*, and *The Amazing Race*) (Nielsen 2011). Product placement suits the current technological environment because it counters the evasive viewer actions of channel hopping or watching DVR recordings, and it bypasses the increased clutter within traditional commercial breaks, producing a better recall rate than television commercials (Jacobson and Mazur, 1995, p. 69). Hence, placements are now tracked by Nielsen and by companies such as iTVX, which attempt to measure the effectiveness of brand integration.

The density of product placement on reality television may be attributed to a variety of factors. For one thing, the lack of detailed scripting means that products can be inserted with little need for motivation or advance notice. Reality television's peculiar status as a *staged actuality* combining the planned and the spontaneous offers considerable flexibility, as do the attitudes of participants and producers. In many instances, placements are welcomed as positive additions rather than being merely tolerated; for example, products can appear as prizes (gamedocs), rewards (talent competitions), romantic gifts (dating/mating shows), or aid (makeovers). Products can also create a dramatic affect when participants are otherwise commodity-starved, as in the Spartan environment of *Survivor* (Deery, 2004a). Indeed, some featured placements rise to the status of essential element since without their presence there would simply be no show (e.g., some makeovers). In other instances, the location can constitute a product placement, as when *Top Chef* producers command fees of several hundred thousand dollars to locate the next season in a particular city or state. Makeovers are a particularly fertile ground for placements since their constructive contexts offer advertisers an integral and positive role and the programs' dramatic arc imitates the "Before-and-After" binary of much advertising. Other placements borrow the aura of an intense or ritualistic event, such as a wedding. Or programs may borrow the aura of a professional celebrity, which is essentially the use of one media product (the star) to boost another (the television show), and vice versa. While reality television does not usually hire professional performers, these can appear as "mentors" (in talent shows) or volunteers (in home makeovers) and be compensated with positive publicity.

Competition formats allow some placements to become a central thematic element, as in the products or services that contestants are charged to use or promote. For example, on *Top Chef*, contestants are required to use a placed product in the concoction of their next meal; those vying to be "The Apprentice" are asked to come up with a marketing campaign (sometimes subsequently adopted by the

sponsoring company) to promote another placed product or service; and Tyra Banks's protégés typically compete to pitch a beauty product in a television commercial (*America's Next Top Model*). These "performative placements" elevate a product's status from object to event, making its integration more critical and therefore more memorable (the ultimate goal). Some products may even become a character of sorts, either during the regular program or in designer advertisements created for interstitial commercial breaks (e.g., Ford cars on *American Idol* spots). Corporations appreciate having their products appear in a program with which viewers have a relationship rather than in an interruptive commercial break. An hour-long episode provides enough time for the empathetic identification that shorter advertising forms simply cannot manage. Indeed, some makeover formats resemble the longer form of the infomercial (Deery, 2004a, 2012; Palmer, 2011), employing the same formula of identification of the problem, offer of a solution, and empirical proof of the desired transformation. As in infomercials, the results are guaranteed for real or ordinary people who resemble those on camera who testify to the product's worth.

When polled, some viewers report that spotting placed products on reality television is just part of "the game" and that they have a higher tolerance for placement here than in other television genres (Hill, 2005; Jenkins, 2006, p. 88); this may in part be because they have lower expectations about the integrity and craft of these kinds of productions. It may be that reality producers are less inclined to wring their hands over art versus commerce than, say, serious film directors; indeed, identifying product placement opportunities can be a selling point in a show's pitch (Caudle, 2011, pp. 195–204). However, other media professionals are more concerned about the shaping of events to suit advertisers' needs; for example, in 2005 the Writers Guild of America (West) launched a "Product Invasion" campaign to protest this manipulation of content in all programming. One problem specific to reality television is a potential conflict between the genre's selling point (being real or authentic) and its promotion of other brands. For example, on style makeovers, viewers cannot be certain whether presenters really do like featured products and have to wonder whether they are cultural or *corporate* intermediaries. Paid-for recommendations can potentially, or maybe even necessarily, weaken the whole premise of a show and therefore its ability to attract audiences for advertising of any kind; in other words, commercial forces may be in danger of undermining themselves. In many European countries there are regulations or outright bans, though these have become more relaxed since 2010. In 2006, the European Union decided that its member states could authorize product placement but with genre restrictions: placements could not appear in news, current affairs, or children's programming (Thussu, 2007, p. 40). Each country is also able to add its own restrictions: hence, in France, placement is allowed on fictional but not on reality programming and fines have been imposed for unlawful placement (Dauncey, 2010, p. 314). In Britain, product placement was banned outright (2008–2011) and then reinstated with significant restrictions: unhealthy products are still banned, placements must be editorially justified and not unduly prominent,

and when placements do occur the broadcaster must display the letter “P” for three seconds at the start and end of the program.

“Made possible by”

One of the earliest models for monetizing television programming was sponsorship, a technique television inherited from early radio. The practice diminished after the quiz show scandals of the 1950s and in subsequent decades became mostly a backdoor strategy for companies banned from direct advertising on television (e.g., tobacco), which could sponsor, for example, a broadcast sports event and in this way get their brand on air. Today, there has been a revival of sponsorship in certain types of reality television, not for reasons of legal regulation but because of changing technology and viewer agency, most notably the viewer’s ability to zap through advertisements when viewing a DVR recording. As in the past, sponsors usually pay up front to help finance a show and have varying degrees of influence, sometimes shaping content from the show’s inception (e.g., *The Restaurant*) or even producing it themselves from scratch (Ford’s *Escape Routes*). Examples of deep and long-term sponsorship include Coke and Ford on *American Idol* and Sears and Ford on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. Naturally enough, sponsors intend their association with a show to strengthen their own brand and so Sears’s sponsorship of home makeovers makes sense since the company has for generations been selling people the means to build, repair, and furnish homes. Similarly, Coke, as always, seeks a youthful demographic. Detailed figures are not disclosed to viewers, but the sponsors’ financial support is overt because they want their magnanimity to be recognized. Today’s packages usually involve special announcements before or during shows, regular spots in commercial breaks (some being designer advertisements that link to a particular series), and product placement. Some companies pay for naming rights in order to become part of the *mise-en-scène*, as in “the Kenmore Pro kitchen” (*Top Chef*) or the “L’Oréal Paris Makeup Room” (*Project Runway*). Because reality formats often have distinct segments, they can also attract partial sponsorships: for example, contestants might use the sponsor’s product during a particular challenge (e.g., Bertolli oil on *Top Chef*) and then win an associated prize (trip to Italy). Products can be designated as “official brands” (*Top Chef*) or even official “partners” (*Top Chef: Just Desserts*). Broadcasters can also sell packages of advertising across diverse media in what Michael Curtin terms a “matrix-media” strategy (2009, p. 15), and so sponsorship can be extended onto an associated web site or part thereof (e.g., the *Top Chef* site at Bravotv.com).

Contemporary makeover formats have made a distinct contribution to monetizing television by elevating sponsorship into donorship, a practice that may enhance the status of commercial support in general (see also Ouellette and Hay, 2008 on Charity TV). The difference between a donor and a sponsor is not entirely straightforward (donors may or may not also be sponsors), but, while sponsors offset production costs, donors offer goods to individuals on screen that are kept by these

recipients rather than functioning as background props. While not unprecedented (e.g., *Queen for a Day*, *Strike it Rich*), soliciting donations has not been a common practice on popular television programming and is still comparatively rare. One prominent example, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, relied on pre-established capital networks but asked businesses to perform aberrantly within a middle realm of ambiguous discourse that is neither strictly commercial nor noncommercial. By amalgamating gift and market economies, a donation can produce appropriately targeted product placement (items people really need) as well as generate good publicity for the donor. Both of these can be expected to lower audience resistance to the advertising involved and it may appear almost a matter of politeness for viewers to give the donor due recognition. No one is so gauche as to express excitement over how much anything costs, but, of course, as Marcel Mauss (1990) underlined in 1950, even in gift economies the recipient is obligated to reciprocate: in this instance, by allowing producers to generate profit from publicizing the exchange. Television donation creates a form of volunteerism-for-profit in which subjects trade their privacy for goods and services and donors trade goods and services for the opposite, for publicity: either way, the currency is media exposure. This model therefore represents not so much a transcendence of commerce as a recirculation through less direct channels that ends up benefiting several constituencies. But what it demonstrates most emphatically is the unmistakable power of mass mediation, when for just one second of the camera's attention companies are eager to hand over valuable items without expecting direct payment.

Social television

When it comes to the commercialization of associated content beyond the television program, reality producers have been intent on improving web-enabled brand extension, the commodification of viewer input, and merchandising. Reality television has provided a strong example of multiplatformicity as an economic strategy ever since John de Mol launched *Big Brother* specifically in order to “articulate” (Hall, 1980) or conjoin television and Internet activity and thereby generate additional revenue streams from coveted youth audiences: at first rolled out for free, these online videos were subsequently only available for a fee. Reality broadcasters have also experimented with extending their brand in other professionally produced programs such as spin-off television shows, web shows, and even radio shows (Deery, 2012). Today, devices such as computers and smart phones have allowed an increasing “overflow” (Brooker, 2001) from the television text. Second-screen viewing (e.g., of a laptop while watching television) can foster greater engagement with a program while also broadening audience reach and so, increasingly, reality broadcasters encourage a coactive (simultaneous) or asynchronous use of multiple devices.⁵ Much effort has gone into professional web development, presumably because it is hoped that associated sites will encourage people to watch a show

so they can be part of the conversation. And, because these conversations are public, they are commodifiable: for example, online space can be sold to advertisers as well as used to build brand loyalty for a show. Even negative reactions can add value to the media product, since all viewers – whether they are watching as fans or anti-fans – are included in the ratings. In the current phase of “social television,” networks increasingly include second-screen streaming and other supplemental numbers such as Twitter mentions when pitching to advertisers. However, when professionally produced, the labor status of some of this paratextual material is currently up for debate: for example, there are discussions about whether broadcaster web sites are forms of promotion or are editorial material and how this work should be compensated.

From its introduction, the basic premise of all commercial television has been that viewers constitute a labor force that can be commodified in the form of ratings. Today, reality television producers demonstrate that a mass medium can also generate income by selling back to audiences content created *by* audiences. For example, viewer voting in talent contests profits telecom companies and broadcasters, which sell back information the audience helped to create (e.g., who won the vote). Even when voting can be seen as a form of audience resistance, as in vote-for-the-worst campaigns, it still generates a profit: in fact, if it means some viewers become more engaged, all the better for associated business interests. Similarly, when viewers build their own fan/anti-fan web sites, these actions can generate interest in a television show with no cost to the broadcaster. The audience’s “texting” – that is, continuing to engage with a television text beyond the broadcast (Deery, 2012, pp. 34–35) – creates a valuable buzz. But, again, this is an overflow, not a confluence. The broadcaster still owns and controls the television content; it is just that now there is a potential (not yet a necessity) for more forms of interaction, many of which are ripe for commercialization.

In other instances, exo-broadcast (outside and beyond the broadcast) interactivity can become another form of commodifiable participation.⁶ Viewers are ushered over the broadcast threshold and given the chance to participate when their emails, texts, or tweets are read on air, usually on reunion and associated talk shows rather than the regular series. This material then legally belongs to the broadcaster. Another trend is treating viewers as focus groups (in talent competitions) or as market research when they are invited to vote in online polls or via text messages. The viewer’s desire to participate can also be commodified when their telephone calls fund the program (e.g., *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*). But, in what became known as the British “phone-in quiz scandals,” it emerged that on several series viewers were being duped into calling into a prerecorded show, so their chances of participating were nil. Even when viewer input is legitimately managed, the odds of anyone winning when calling in to a quiz show are low, and this caused one parliamentary committee to consider reclassifying vote-in reality shows as a form of gambling that should come under government control (see House of Commons, 2007).

Merchandising

A more traditional way to convert viewers into consumers is through their totemistic purchase of merchandise associated with the show, or “entertainment property,” and this, too, has been enhanced by the Internet. Broadcasters can sell physical items (coffee mugs) or media content (associated games, music downloads, ringtones). All items extend the brand, but some promise to capture a replicable element of the show. For example, television spots advertise recipes for meals prepared on *Top Chef*, enabling viewers to mimic the activity they witnessed on television and doubly commodify it, first as television content that viewers consume by watching the show and then as associated books or DVDs that they subsequently buy. Banner advertisements sometimes appear on television screens inviting viewers to purchase music being played on a current episode (e.g., *Jersey Shore*, *Mob Wives*). Another twist involves inviting viewers to extend the show experience by “winning” participants, as when advertisements offer the chance to have the *Top Chef* winner cook for you or to meet cast members in person (e.g., *Ice Loves Coco*, *Real Housewives*). Such television advertisements are uncommon, however, and most merchandising is conducted online. Broadcasters often frame this activity as answering a demand from viewers to enrich their television experience,⁷ but it also clearly works for “shop-enabling” a range of shows.⁸ The shift from show to “showcase” can be presented as pedagogical (online “universities” offered by Donald Trump or *Top Chef*), or as a form of mentoring (“shopping guides” and “tips” about how to achieve the same results seen on television). But, again, what purports to inform consumers also provides information *about* consumers, information that can itself be sold or at least used to better target potential advertisers (Andrejevic, 2004; Philips, 2008).

Commercialization of and by participants

In addition to being filmed for the regular series, reality television participants are often obliged to appear in subsequent reunion and “sit in” shows, or, with the producer’s permission, they may appear on other television programming, usually on the same network and in order to promote their own series. Some cast members are encouraged, or even obliged, to blog on broadcaster sites as “participant-viewers” – as cast members who are now witnessing the television episodes for the first time. They are expected to comment on episodes as they are aired (they may see a DVD just a few days before each broadcast) with a view to addressing both audience and other cast members. This opens up new veins of drama and conflict due to different levels of insight and viewing access: that is, they now see what others said behind their back while being filmed and can react and retaliate. Many viewers take the opportunity to respond to the participants’ blogs with their own posts, and so the drama and the engagement continue. On other occasions, producers encourage a more integrated use of other platforms, as when participants tweet during or

between their shows, hoping to build fan excitement (e.g., on Bravo, VH1). Kim Kardashian is often seen texting while being filmed; she may be engaged in commercial activity on behalf of the show or she may be fulfilling contracts to plug other products (for which she currently commands high fees). With multiple devices come multiple layers of commercialization.

Despite restrictive contracts, it is possible for television participants to make their appearance profit themselves. Some mimic corporate participation by simply plugging their own wares during filming in a form of unofficial product placement. Many create new businesses on the strength of their television fame. For example, on *Real Housewives*, if the participants don't have a business to publicize when a series starts, most do eventually. Hence the show in part creates the wealthy lifestyle it portrays, even if this wasn't the producer's original intention (though, given multiple foreclosures and bankruptcies, their cast needs the income). More specifically, some participants afford their lifestyle in part by selling its props (clothing, cosmetics, alcohol) to others. A particularly strong example of someone deliberately leveraging reality television fame to create a substantial commercial brand is former *Apprentice* and *Real Housewives* participant Bethenny Frankel, who went on to secure the spin-off series *Bethenny Ever After*. Throughout her many television appearances, Frankel has relentlessly promoted her Skinnygirl brand and in 2011 sold her cocktail line to a major drinks manufacturer for many millions (though the exact figure is under dispute).

Another self-serving use of reality television is the appearance of "media zombies" in the form of past celebrities who stumble around in a half-dead, half-alive state, many disfigured and unsettling because they no longer resemble their image in their prime. Whether they are paid directly or not (often "celebrities" must donate their winnings to charity), television face time is the hoped-for elixir. Meanwhile, new television faces are strongly motivated to launch their media careers, though producers expect them to hide this ambition in order to appear more "ordinary" and novel: these people are therefore not so much amateur as "proto-professional." Some dream of their own spin-off series. Others are delighted to secure a part in another reality series (e.g., Bravo's *Real Housewives* stars appear on the parent broadcaster's *Celebrity Apprentice*) or in an all-star/celebrity version of their original show. And of course it benefits the broadcaster to recycle its own pool of inexpensively produced and contractually bound celebrities. Reality celestoids (Rojek, 2001) are sometimes attractive to advertisers, also, because they are just sufficiently recognizable to attract attention but cannot command the high fees of higher-status celebrities and so some (but not many) endorse consumer products in straightforward advertisements (e.g., the *Jersey Shore* cast). As indicated, television participants may use their official blogs to plug their own businesses: some even pose as ordinary viewers in order to mount a stealth promotion of their image-as-brand or to defend it when under attack – although this of course backfires if they are caught doing so (e.g., Jill Zarin, ex-member of *Real Housewives*).⁹ For many viewers, the participants' plugging of their own businesses reduces a show's authenticity and the practice has attracted considerable criticism when judged to be too greedy or clumsy – although,

again, audience reaction of any kind may ultimately serve the show and producers likely count on characters whose inept ambitions viewers love to hate.

Reality television regularly provides material for other professional media largely outside the producer's or participant's control. Certainly, in America and the United Kingdom, reality casts have become a sizable component of the growing circulation of celebrity news on television (*E! News*), in magazines (*People*, *Hello!*), tabloids (*New York Post*, *The Sun*), middle-brow newspapers (*The Daily Mail*), and numerous web sites, some of which are well known (RadarOnline.com, TMZ.com, PerezHilton.com) and some of which are mounted by freelancers advertising for work. It is hardly surprising that reality stars feed this economy of gossip since all of reality television is essentially gossip in that it reveals otherwise private affairs, with an emphasis on sensational information. But, that even lowly reality television participants are in such demand attests to the insatiable hunger for celebrity material in contemporary media. Some – most frequently docusoaps stars (*Jersey Shore*, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *Real Housewives*) – earn substantial fees by selling their photos to magazines and granting interviews. Again, such coverage can badly damage their image, but producers may pick cast members whom they predict will attract free publicity, whether good or bad, in such venues.¹⁰

Cutting Costs

All of the commercialization mentioned so far is on top of cost-cutting in production, an area where reality television has also been aggressive. Without going into great detail about industry practices, it is worth observing that on reality television profits are made precisely because viewers enjoy the spontaneous and ordinary effect created by spending less on production than in other programming. Reality television is largely and properly regarded as a cash cow whose producers have come up with several ways to shrink budgets. First, broadcasters can buy internationally traded, prepackaged, and already successful franchises that require little further creative development beyond some local adaptation. This suits advertisers, who typically look for a level of predictability in their financial investment (Baruh and Park, 2010, p. 5). Producers further oblige by setting up controlled environments – both via the physical setup (often isolated and closely monitored) and through casting and editing – permitting just enough shock and novelty to keep the shows from getting too tired. Then, on-screen participants expect little or no pay and are generally underemployed aspiring actors or lower- and lower-middle-class employees whose casting could be considered a form of outsourcing to cheaper labor. Producers are able to draw from a wide pool of disposable talent; in fact, candidates don't even need to possess talent, for reality television proves one can commodify lack of ability (witness deluded docusoap characters or embarrassing talent-show auditions). Even the process of casting can become a commercial opportunity since speculation about who will be cast or renewed next season often generates free publicity for the show.

Once cast, participants are typically controlled by tight contracts that few question, presumably because they generally start without professional representation and are desperate to sign on. Nondisclosure agreements (themselves undisclosed) appear to be common and not only serve to control the participant (as media property) and their ability to capitalize on their celebrity but also work to mystify the production of the show and the degree to which it is planned and managed, in order to preserve the selling point of realness and authenticity. A participant's other media appearances are also guarded to maintain suspense whenever this is profitable (e.g., on elimination formats), though new media leaks often challenge this. On a series with multiple seasons, participants can negotiate to have their income increased before resigning. On the one hand, this gives them leverage, but, on the other, it binds them more tightly, for dangling the possibility of a renewal presumably enhances the producer's control and encourages participants to fulfill expectations in their performances. There has been little investigation of the legal status of such performers and whether they ought to be extended the same rights, protections, and compensation as other workers (for some early considerations of legal matters, see Dauncey, 2010; Andrejevic, 2011; Jost, 2011). Some shows pay high salaries to professional talent (e.g., judges receive millions per season on *American Idol*) and some ordinary participants on very popular multiseason shows can command increasingly high salaries (in 2011, it was reported to be \$100 000 per episode for *Jersey Shore* or up to \$250 000 per season for *Real Housewives*). But these figures are not typical. Most people who appear on reality shows earn only a small per diem stipend that may not cover loss of wages or other expenses.

On the production side, once they have been sold an idea or an already established format, broadcasters typically outsource to small freelance production companies, which compete to deliver results as quickly and as economically as possible. So, as Alison Hearn (2010) points out, underneath the often immaterial labor of cast members who produce the cultural text are lowly paid and extremely hard-working production crews. With rare exceptions (Collins, 2008, pp. 87–88), reality producers both contain creative costs and avoid strike action by hiring nonunion workers, who enjoy few of the rights and little of the job protection won by organized labor: this means long hours, low pay, little job security, and few benefits (Raphael, 2009). Since this employment strategy has been used to fill schedules during writers' strikes, it could be regarded as a form of scab labor and it certainly weakens the bargaining position of others in the industry (Hearn, 2010, p. 244). Reality producers typically reduce salaries by recategorizing jobs: they employ lower-paid "story editors" or "segment producers/directors" instead of writers belonging to a guild, even if line-by-line scripting (e.g., for presenters) as well as story creation is required. Not having professional writers may also reduce liability if a cast member says or does something scurrilous. As for filming conditions, these are also generally inexpensive, although there is quite a range. For example, the long-running *Survivor* series requires hire and housing of a large crew in an exotic location, with heavy insurance and security costs. However, most formats require only small crews with inexpensive light equipment and little need for elaborate sets,

lights, or makeup, especially if filming on the fly. Most economize on the location, too (though it may appear to be luxurious): for instance, by renting an existing building or expecting participants to provide the location themselves (their own home). However, many long-running series eventually cover more expensive travel segments, presumably to keep viewers and participants interested (even *Jersey Shore* went to Italy).

Commercialization as Topic

Several reality series illustrate, as a topic, the playing out of commercialization in private life from the perspective of consumers or retailers. Many formats are predicated on the idea that consuming goods and services is a highly significant activity that produces positive results. Hence, if the overarching economic point of television is to commodify leisure time, this content encourages people to commodify other discretionary time, by shopping. Makeover narratives, in particular, promote an energetic but strategic participation in consumer culture, while other formats display a very high level of commercial activity as a spectacle for viewers to either admire or condemn. Here, as elsewhere on reality television, producers rely on the easy drama of extreme behavior and, even when some of these extravagant displays become cautionary tales, the programs still fulfill their commercial function by attracting viewers and advertising. The same applies to series that reveal the sometimes troubling commercialization of personal relationships, some as a direct result of being on television. A major theme in recent docusoaps (*Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *Real Housewives*) has been the corruption of personal relationships as a result of their being filmed for profit. Both cast members and their viewers speculate about the extent to which exposure and greed are turning personal relationships into business relationships, even among family members.

Strategic consumption

The mundane act of entering a retail store can in some formats be presented as revelatory and life changing. Since shopping is keyed to values as significant as self-esteem and identity, viewers are warned against neglecting what their own consumer choices might signal: in other words, the portrayal of consumption is meant to stimulate consumption. Style makeovers and consumerist docusoaps suggest that consumption is a form of mediation in that it mediates one's role in society and mediates between people. Shopping may even be elevated into an art form, as when hosts on decor and real estate shows promote what Mike Featherstone characterizes as a late twentieth-century "life of aesthetic consumption" (1991, p. 67). Whether the budgets are modest (*Changing Rooms*, *Trading Spaces*) or high-end (*Million Dollar Decorators*), these shows encourage everyone to see their home environment as a place that should be aesthetically pleasing.

Acquiring retail items is made compelling through techniques such as time compression, where subjects move at the speed of advertising, not everyday life. The swiftness of the makeover's commodity-enabled transformations adds to the power of consumption. But, in more industrial terms, the pace is rapid because mediation makes time into a commodity and these shows underline that time on a mass medium such as television still commands high fees. As for the sociological, television makeovers suggest one can amass instant cultural capital and a detachment from most social underpinnings (e.g., class or race); this produces something resembling the conservative conceit of the "sovereign consumer" who supposedly makes free choices without sociopolitical constraints. Makeover formats ratify the late-capitalist (particularly neoliberal) emphasis on self-promotion and impression management, an instrumental relation to the self occurring in the context of post-industrial employment, and even familial, insecurity. Hence the need for the "enterprising self" (Rose, 1996) or "belabored self" (McGee, 2005) who is encouraged to work on self-branding (Hearn, 2008; see also Ouellette and Hay, 2008; Redden, 2008; Weber, 2009; Palmer, 2011). This work may include a physical redesign in conformity to the ideal imagery of media advertising as depicted in surgical makeovers, in which the body comes to be regarded as a property that one owns and inhabits. Like other properties, it functions under capitalism as an investment and as a commercial prospect with an assessable market value (Deery, 2004b, 2006, 2012). As part of an expanding discourse of imperative television – a type of programming that includes talk shows, news magazines, and shopping channels – all makeover subjects are encouraged to regard themselves as commodities whose "image" (a PR term) must be promoted. They are exhorted to improve via consumption, not by governments, family members, or friends but by representatives of large commercial agencies that survey and discipline them in ways that would be regarded as highly objectionable, as well as illegal, if performed by noncommercial, governmental forces (surveillance, destruction of property, home invasion). Watching subjects bow to instructions on television makeovers hints at how consumerism disciplines and socializes elsewhere. These makeovers' recipes and regimes appear to support Baudrillard's assertion that "consumption is an active, collective behavior: it is something enforced, a morality, an institution. It is a whole system of values, with all that expression implies in terms of group integration and social control functions" (1998, p. 81).

Longer-form docusoaps give us a more leisurely insight into how subjects have come to embrace a market-based understanding of human relationships and the resultant refraction of the private into the commercial and the public into the publicized. One striking trend is the privatization of private life and professionalization of social relationships, both of which indicate a deepening of marketization. Reality docusoaps highlight services that previously would have been performed by oneself or by friends and family but are now professionalized and therefore commercialized. For example, few self-respecting "housewives" (*Real Housewives*) are without personal assistants, personal shoppers, or in-house stylists; in other shows, sometimes alarming job titles emerge, such as "maternity concierge" (*Pregnant in Heels*). We

witness some employees becoming an ersatz family (*Bethenny Ever After*) and family members becoming employees (*Real Housewives*). Currently, a controversial example of a deeply commercialized private life is that portrayed in *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. Many viewers express concern that a mother is exploiting her offspring (including sexually) for commercial gain in this series. Similar disgust is expressed at the portrayal of children in *Toddlers & Tiaras* and at the working conditions of the multiple Gosselin children (*Jon & Kate Plus 8*), where parents appear to treat offspring as commodities who are indeed more open to exploitation than child actors on more regulated, unionized programming.

Hyperconsumption as spectacle

Another type of reality programming, prominent in the past half decade, depicts high- or hyperconsumption and encourages viewers to enjoy its ritualistic, theatrical, or fantastic dimensions, a form of “wealth voyeurism” offered by a whole stable of shows featuring luxurious, hedonistic lifestyles (e.g., anything with “millionaire” in the title). Spending is lavish but socially sanctioned in an increasing number of programs featuring the largely feminine ritual of the big wedding. This prime example of “event spending,” the fruition of years of consumer training, provides an intense version of several consumer patterns: positional consumption to establish status; an infatuation with goods accorded a deep symbolic meaning; the substitution of goods (dress) for people (groom); and, of course, the pleasure of excess. Weddings are virtually guaranteed to provide drama, but the real payoff is how much business they generate – both on and off screen – especially as there is frequently an “affective override” of budgets and financial concerns. In other programming more often coded as masculine, buying beyond one’s immediate needs, as in “collecting,” is validated because subjects claim it is educational, has historical significance, or is a skillful sport (e.g., *American Pickers*, *Pawn Stars*). Sometimes these activities are also framed as patriotic, thus bringing nationalism into the commercial sphere either as a basic audience attractor or to stimulate more engagement – also evident in fervent nationalistic voting in transnational talent competitions (Kraidy, 2010; Punathambekar, 2011). In America, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* is striking for making national pride commercially productive in a post-9/11 recuperation that may be enjoyed as a substitute for government failure to deliver on promised makeovers (nation building) in the larger geopolitical context (Deery, 2012) (on commercial nationalism elsewhere see Volcic and Andrejevic, 2011).

Incompetent consumption provides another kind of drama, especially when attributed to lower-class vulgarity or lack of discipline (*Bayou Billionaires*, *Bridezilla*, Jamie Oliver’s *Ministry of Food*). Some formats purport to offer training or rehab to increase consumer literacy (*Bank of Mum and Dad*, *SuperScrimpers*, *You’re Cut Off!*). Others dwell on various types of consumer dysfunction, some of which are regarded as a sign of laziness and incompetence (*Clean House*) and others as requiring full psychiatric intervention (*Hoarders*). These portray not the drama of

successfully harnessing the power of commodities but the morbidity of letting consumption get out of control. Launched during a recessionary cycle, hoarding shows can be seen as a testament, ultimately, to the power of consumption and the need to respect its impact and consequences. In actuality, hoarders may be men or women, but the majority of those featured on television are female. This conforms to a wider pattern when it comes to extremes, for across many television formats extreme spending is currently enacted mostly by women (docusoaps, weddings) and extreme (risky, difficult) earning by men (*Deadliest Catch*, *Gold Rush*) – another affirmation perhaps of the old trope of woman as consumer and man as provider.

Business reps

Finally, an increasing number of reality programs have recently centered on retail businesses and offer mostly positive images of the desire to make a profit. When there are incompetencies or problems, experts are there to offer the middle-class business owners moral support. Some teach management skills in order to improve the profits of a family business, as in Gordon Ramsay's many interventions into restaurants in Britain and America or *Tabitha's Salon Takeover*, both of which – after some heavy criticism of both management and employees – ultimately reassert the authority of the owner and the expendability of the employee. If large corporations are involved there is often a softening of commercial motives into showcases for “caring capitalism” (Deery, 2012), where philanthropy appears to take precedence over profit in allegories of corporate generosity (see also Ouellette and Hay, 2008). In some instances of social entrepreneurship, individual capitalists help strangers (*Secret Millionaire*) or employees (*Undercover Boss*) (see Hollows and Jones, 2010; Biressi, 2011). But these formats ultimately support the market logic of self-help over collective welfare. They focus on a single giver and individual recipient, someone who is usually rewarded for demonstrating great effort and initiative and whose reward, in turn, provides valuable publicity both for specific companies and for the often tarnished image of the rank of CEO. The fact that only a handful of people are being helped is not criticized; rather, inadequacies are inverted and the paucity of support is capitalized on because helping individuals generates drama and ratings. When, alternatively, drama stems from the brutality of hard-nosed competition (*The Apprentice*, *Dragons' Den*, *Shark Tank*), viewers are encouraged to admire effort, ambition, and the opportunities afforded by a less sentimental but still meritocratic capitalism. Or, at least, these are the attitudes often expressed by those on screen. For of course individual viewers will react individually to any given content at any given time. They may or may not be stimulated to consume or to think in a particular way about consumption practices based on what they see on screen.

My goal has been to simply underline the commercialization that exists in reality programming (the strategies used and cues provided) and to demonstrate that what script this “unscripted” programming more than anything else are the commercial

forces that are present before, during, and after production. On the one hand, commercial pressures shape and even distort program content so that it may seem less realistic and less genuine. On the other hand, I suggest that one of reality television's strongest claims to realism is its representation of the increasingly commercialized nature of everyday life in societies that produce this programming. When the commercialization is hidden or unacknowledged, this entertainment is performing at an even deeper level of realism in that it incorporates the similarly concealed commercial undercurrents of many contemporary cultures. These, too, may shape, or one might say distort, the content of everyday experience – whether we are aware of it or not.

Notes

- 1 For an extended analysis of the commercial nature of reality television see Deery (2012).
- 2 Unfortunately, space considerations mean that I cannot go into as much detail or cite as many specific works as I would like.
- 3 “Brand pushers” are paid to say positive things about a brand in online conversations.
- 4 The annual rate of growth of product placement between 1999 and 2004 was 16.3 percent (Lehu, 2007, p. 34).
- 5 Other discussions of reality television and the Internet include Andrejevic (2004), Holmes (2004), Jenkins (2006), Ross (2008), and Gillan (2011).
- 6 In my discussion, subjects participate *in* and interact *with* the television text.
- 7 This is the sentiment expressed by NBC's vice-president of “interactive development” (Futon Critic 2004).
- 8 In 2004, NBC-Universal hired a company called Delivery Agent to enable viewers to purchase products seen on television by visiting a show's web site and clicking on an online store or calling a toll-free number. See Deliveryagent.com.
- 9 Many fans were upset to discover that Zarin apparently posed as a viewer to defend her television actions and, under a pseudonym, posted glowing reviews of her book on Amazon.
- 10 One piece of advice for mounting a successful reality shows is: “Cast somebody the paparazzi are going to want to chase and exploit” (Caudle, 2011, p. 144).

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