

An Analysis of Agency Directors' Strategies in Casting Applicants for Reality-Based Television

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Abstract

Reality-based television has developed as an entertaining and dynamic viewing platform with the power to catapult non-actors into the status of iconic television characters. This qualitative study investigated how agency directors execute the general casting process, identify what qualities make for a memorable reality cast member, and interpret the concept of production editing for a reality series. Based on four in-depth interviews conducted with casting agents, the study identified three success factors: "layered" individuals, fluid character storylines, and effective production and editing within reality television.

I. Introduction

To meet the changing demands of viewing audiences, television programming utilizes the ability to quickly alter programming choices to appeal to current viewing tastes. The popularity of reality television filled this need for swift programming choices and created a niche form of television programming and entertainment. One of the most compelling concepts of reality television is the its use of real people or non-actors to contribute to the "diversification of the television culture" (Murray & Oulette, 2004, p. 11). The driving force that constructs popular reality television series is the cast of characters within them.

The casting process serves as the most crucial ingredient when developing a series storyline that will appeal to the public. Casting focuses on finding the right mixture of "personalities, looks and chemistry to fit each show's theme" (Lee, 2009). The foremost precept that casting executives adhere to is simply making the reality show interesting (Lee, 2009). In doing so, casting executives look for qualities in people that will fit the key cliché characters who will create the conflict, controversy, and pure amusement (Lee, 2009). Cast members are the key components to enthralling reality-based television watching.

The majority of reality shows are based on one central aspect: a cluster of "real people with different personalities interacting with one another" (Lee, 2009). Series like MTV's *The Real World* showcase dramatic scenarios between seven strangers selected to live in a house together. The show has served as one of MTV's longest standing and most popular series ever created. In order for a show like this to accumulate its notable ratings, the casting team sieves through an enormous number of applicants during casting calls, narrowing down potential candidates based on whether the team can envision a candidate for a particular role. Once eligible applicants are found to fit the mold of a certain role, they are cast in the hopes of becoming the next big realty TV icon.

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The key to a casting agent's job is discovering charismatic, captivating, and exaggerated subjects who make for enticing television watching. This paper examined the executive casting choices and patterns since the arrival of reality-based television through analyzing personal interviews with four unsung heroes of the pioneer of reality-based television production.

II. Background

Reality television has dominated entertainment TV programming since its inception. However, reality programming is not as recent a phenomenon as many researchers assert (Baker, 2003, p. 57). Shows such as *Candid Camera* and *Real People* are commonly cited as the initiators of reality television, and even earlier shows from the 1950s, such as *Dragnet* and *The Big Story*, display noteworthy characteristics of reality-based television (Baker, 2003, p. 57). In 2003, Fox's *Temptation Island*, which featured four couples testing their relationship by dating other singles on a remote island, helped precipitate an array of "singles"-oriented reality formats (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 7). By the conclusion of 2003, the successes of hit shows like *American Idol*, *The Bachelorette*, and *Joe Millionaire* convinced networks to formulate long-term plans for reality TV (Murray & Ouellette, 2004, p. 6). Suddenly, all major networks worked to develop reality formats within their programming agenda, and more than 30 reality-based shows were aired during the 2004 television season (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 7). The genre surfaced as the "preeminent programming format" of the modern age (Essany, 2013, p. 17).

III. Literature Review

A widely held principal in the reality television casting industry suggests that it is not the general premise of a reality show that impacts the prosperity of the series, but instead the cast members themselves who generate its overall success. Casting agents often employ this dictum when assessing talent and making casting choices. An individual with anything "extra" that resonates with a viewing audience makes for a qualified cast member on a reality show. The more "overly emotional" or "mentally unstable" a cast member, the higher the potential for buzz-creating conflict (Pozner, 2010, p. 27). Casting directors keep this key cliché in mind when scouting talent for their shows. And yet, the qualities the casting professionals look for in people can be difficult to describe (Pozner, 2010, p. 27). Jonathan Murray, head of Bunim/Murray Productions, states that the secret to casting is to "look for people who are not looking for us" (Tomashoff, 2011). Often credibility and authenticity are crucial characteristics an individual must possess to be cast for a reality show, but defining these vague traits is not always an easy task (Tomashoff, 2011). Balancing personality assessment for interesting, authentic, and unique is an instinct that casting director's must rely on to cast shows. These intangible qualities are the key components to casting decisions where often millions of dollars are budgeted for production costs.

Reality television casting seems to possess a formulaic process in determining appropriate cast members. The book *Reality Bites Back: The Troubling Truth About Guilty Pleasure TV*, puts forth the idea that cast members are molded into "predetermined stock characters," such as "The Weeper," "The Bitch" and "The Angry Black Woman" (Pozner, 2010, p. 28). David O'Connor, casting director of Chicago's O'Connor Casting Co., expounds on this theory and states that certain personalities are key to making good reality series. There are the "devil" characters that create conflict, "drama kings and queens" who flourish on controversy, "the pushovers" who are vulnerable to meltdowns, and the "oddballs" (Lee, 2009). According to O'Connor, casting staffs are especially eager to find three types of characters: "the oddballs, the best, and the disastrous" (Lee, 2009). Although "the best" make it through based on innate talent, the others "make for great TV" (Lee, 2009). Arguably, it is the combination of these characters and their interplay that drives the show and sets the direction for continuing viewer interest.

This approach in selecting certain characters for a reality series has raised questions regarding the industry's authenticity. In the book *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, the authors examine the reception of reality television programming, stimulation of questions, concerns that critics judge as artificially skewing the "reality" of scenes, and the impact that "editing, reconstruction, producer mediation, and prefab settings have on the audience's access to 'the real'" (Murray & Ouellette, 2004, p.7). The authors contend

that viewers, participants, and producers are less invested in “absolute truth” and instead, more interested in “the space that exists between reality and fiction” (Murray & Ouellette, 2004, p. 7). Many industry insiders feel that the overall goal of reality programming is to examine “the promise of a format that offers not an escape from reality, but an escape into reality” (Andrejevic, 2004, p.8). This theory presents the idea that reality TV demands a “new level of cultural participation on the part of TV viewers,” and in turn, innate instincts of casting directors to fulfill the demands of reality-based television and push the boundaries of the genre (Murray & Ouellette, 2004, p.7). The innate instincts of casting directors may be pushed even further with the evolving forms of reality TV.

Recently, a *Fox News* article elaborated on the programming synthesis of the real and the scripted to create a new sense of drama for viewer. “There is a sense that people want to see more unique forms of drama and comedy that feature complex characters and unique plots that sometimes have controversial subjects,” says Applebaum, host and producer of the online radio show *Tomorrow Will Be Televised* (Johnson, 2016). The success of scripted on demand networks, such as Netflix and Hulu, has drawn reality-based networks into the field with both scripted and reality entertainment (Johnson, 2016). Reality-based television programmers state that this is a natural way to expand and appeal to reality audiences who demand interesting storylines and characters (Johnson, 2016). Programming directors may feel that a combination of these forms allows for a more creative platform and an ability to quickly seize upon the changes in audience tastes. It remains to be seen if traditional reality-based networks will offer both scripted programming and reality programming or combine the two genres into one form of expression. This potential synthesis will present new challenges to casting directors who will be responsible for casting characters in a format that blends acting and genuine reactions.

Review of the previous studies established a foundation to learn more about the casting trends and choices for reality television for this study, which interviews four current casting executives. This paper addressed the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the specific qualities that casting executives look for in potential cast members when casting a reality show?

RQ 2: How are editing and post-production processes altering the final image of cast members?

IV. Research Method

To analyze the casting trends and choices that agents employ for reality television programming, this research relied on in-depth interviews. One-on-one interviews continue to stand as one of the most conventional data gathering techniques for qualitative research and also offer unique probative elements that casual conversation may reveal with offhanded comments and gestures. Pre-arranged interviews made through contacts who have working relationships with interviewees “enable interviewer/researchers to obtain information that cannot be gathered through content and observation alone” (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009, 57). This type of qualitative in-depth interview that pivots off established relationships allows an interviewer to assess an interviewee’s opinions and experiences more comprehensively.

The current author interviewed four female casting agents residing in the greater New York City area. The participants, ranging from 24-34 years of age, currently work as casting associates, directors or managers for leading companies, such as Viacom or major freelance production companies. Past internship experiences allowed the author to contact two of her former supervisors at MTV casting within the network’s talent and series development department. These executives agreed to a telephone interview and, in turn, arranged for introductions to a freelance casting associate and the casting director at 3PX Productions. Each participant responded to previously crafted and forwarded interview questions. The interviews lasted between 35-45 minutes. Some of the more off-handed comments revealed nuggets of honesty that helped project the future of reality-based television. The interview questions forwarded to each participant prior to the discussions were:

1. Could you describe your path to the casting aspect of reality-based television programming?
 2. How has casting changed during your career?
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3. How are casting candidates sourced?
4. What are the factors that are important to you when casting for a reality-based project?
5. Many reality-based projects hire individuals without acting experience. What are the particular challenges that this poses?
6. In what direction do you feel reality-based programming is headed?
7. Given your understanding of reality television, how close to real life should the final version be? How much should consumers understand that there might be edits and modifications?
8. Are there any lessons you have learned that you would like to share regarding your casting experiences?

Each participant served as a unit of analysis and their responses were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The results below showcase themes derived from the responses of each interviewee.

V. Findings

The Evolution of the Reality-Based Casting Process

Each interview began with a broad opening question targeted to invite interviewees to discuss their individual path which led to casting for reality-based television programming. All participants expressed that reality television casting has changed dramatically within the last 5-10 years and attributed much of that change to the emergence of new technology. One participant, the casting director of MTV Series Development, explained that the casting process is much easier today than when she began casting for reality television in 2007.

“The timeline was pretty excruciating. Things that nowadays take less than 24 hours for a turnaround were taking up to two weeks. It progressively got better and better – when I was working on 16 & Pregnant, we would go to Duane Reade or Walgreens and buy disposable video cameras that we would send to the potential cast mates, they would then videotape themselves with very explicit directions and send them back to us. We would then take the footage, wipe the video camera clean, and send that same camera out to another potential cast member.” (personal communication, March 15, 2016)

This casting director went on to explain that real-time Skype interviews have allowed the casting process to compress the amount of time needed to not only interview and assess candidates, but to make definitive casting choices. This advance has presented its own challenge: establishing a realistic application cut-off period that will produce a fruitful draw of candidates in a short period of time without limiting the pool of candidates that may be perfect for the role, but too late in applying.

The manager of MTV Series Development recalled a burdensome casting routine when she began in 2009. She described the current casting process now utilized throughout her department as follows:

“When I was first starting out, I did a lot of research online, but it was mostly cold calling. There wasn’t a social media platform to find talent beyond MySpace and LiveJournal. Now, we conduct interviews over Skype or FaceTime. From there, we can edit within an hour and send it up the flagpole. The casting process has become much more efficient – video recording capabilities have a lot to do with that.” (personal communication, March 17, 2016)

In doing so, social media has saved production costs and allowed entire casting departments to streamline their efforts. An unforeseen consequence of social media’s impact is the need for fewer casting employees. Now the job can be accomplished with half the staff that was originally needed for casting a show.

Expounding on the importance of the role of social media in casting and research, the casting director at 3PX Productions noted that today there are websites specifically devoted to collecting information from individuals who wish to be considered for roles on reality television projects. This new avenue is merely an augmentation to other social media platforms for casting considerations.

“Social media has become super huge. There are standard reality casting websites, which have become slightly obsolete. People still cast that way, but it’s not as common nowadays. It is much more valuable and constructive when the casting executive searches for and finds individuals who they believe could fit the mold of a character. This is done through searching Instagram, Facebook, Vine, Blogs, etc.” (personal communication, March 30, 2016)

Social media has allowed casting directors to view potential candidates for genuine authenticity of character and review a history of their behavior. The potential for “just acting” the part of a character to gain a casted role is much less of a concern since casting agents can examine a candidate’s long-term history of posted behavior on social media.

Scouting Talent for Reality-Based Programming

The process of discovering talent to form complete characters for a reality series is done meticulously by casting agents who acknowledge that one-note characters do not add to the depth and interest of the series. The casting director of MTV Series Development describes the current target audience of the MTV network and how the casting department strives to meet its programming needs.

“The demographic of casting sources we go after is really savvy. We work hard to make sure we’re not going after the stereotypes anymore – and we work even harder to make sure we are finding people who will help round out a cast.” (personal communication, March 15, 2016)

She went on to explain the process she employs when searching for talent.

“Usually the casting begins with the idea and the concept. If I’m casting for a show like 16 & Pregnant or Teen Mom, I’m browsing organizations that support teens that are pregnant or schools that serve to pregnant teens – I start with the idea or concept and I work backwards. There’s a million ways to source people for casting because there’s a million ideas. You have to get super specific to get the best characters.” (personal communication, March 15, 2016)

At the same time, an interesting individual who may not fit within the idea for a character will not be eliminated, but instead spin the programming idea into a new direction. Casting directors must remain open-minded during casting research and often unique candidates may be “saved” for other potential projects or casting opportunities.

The manager of MTV Series Development explained that the type of show drives the direction of what casting producers seek in an individual during casting.

“If we are casting a one-off, for example, we are casting three brides for a bridal story; it won’t necessarily matter what may be happening in the bride’s future, but the most important aspect will be her personality and her story the day of her wedding. Alternatively, if we are casting a docuseries, we want to cast people that have a very clear, forward-moving story.” (personal communication, March 17, 2016)

Casting for characters with a well-defined element, such as pregnant, transgender, or a person of a certain ethnic group, is merely the baseline for casting choices, which will then focus on an individual candidate and what he or she can bring to the series’ appeal.

One casting agent further expressed that the hidden gem candidates are the ones who simply do not want to be on the casting couch.

“I want to find the person that doesn’t want to be on TV – that’s how you produce the best characters. I don’t want the person who is applying to every show. I want the family whose lives are so interesting, compelling, and unique, and I want to showcase that what is normal to them is completely outrageous to us.” (personal communication, March 30, 2016)

These type of characters are generally the ones found through social media. They have not applied for consideration for a casting role and are instead simply living their lives aloud through social media posts. Often, they are completely unaware that their lives or lifestyle makes for interesting TV.

Who Can Make It Big in Reality Television

Trending themes were apparent in interviews with participants regarding the key factors considered when evaluating candidates for reality-based projects. The attributes most mentioned by casting agents when assessing potential candidates were “personality” and “depth.” There is a constant tug-of-war that occurs when agents evaluate an individual’s suitability for casting in a reality series. The casting associate producer at Leftfield Pictures shared her opinion on the traits that most resonate with her when assessing candidates.

“Personality is extremely important. Cast members usually need to be loud, but more importantly, must have a great storyline and way of expressing themselves. Do their eccentricities make us want to see how they will react or what they will do next? Do they have something that we can follow throughout seasons? That is vital to look for when evaluating each candidate while casting.” (personal communication, March 16, 2016)

The casting director at 3PX Productions agreed that personality is essential when evaluating a candidate, as well as other attributes.

“I like to find characters that are unfiltered and individuals who are unique and have a very distinctive voice. They must have a depth to their point of view that makes their storyline more interesting.” (personal communication, March 30, 2016)

The casting director of MTV Series Development further expressed that a layered individual makes for a marketable reality cast member, one of which viewers will want to follow.

“We want to make sure we are finding layered individuals who have a lot of different things that make up their inner being and that they are outspoken about it. It is this depth and big voice that makes them suitable for casting. We used to just turn a blind eye and be like ‘she’s pretty, she’s entertaining enough, she’ll bring drama,’ but now our viewers aren’t interested in drama for drama’s sake.” (personal communication, March 15, 2016)

The manager of MTV Series Development articulated that a candidate does not need to be the loudest or most dramatic person in the room, but someone who can bring out some range of emotion either in cast mates or the audience.

“What is most important is a big personality and people who are very strong in their convictions. I want them to be able to pull comedy or frustration and cause some sort of reaction; otherwise it would be really boring.” (personal communication, March 17, 2016)

All casting agents agreed that the individual must naturally possess a personality that is not only “watchable,” but also distinctive and compelling. Part of the agent’s job is executing balance in assessing personality and suitability for role casting. These characteristics are sometimes at odds with each other—it is the casting agent’s responsibility to achieve a proper mix of both.

The Impact of Edits and Modifications in Reality Programming

The question of how close to real life the final version of a reality-based program is/should be arises from the common criticism that reality television is not “real” at all. Each interviewed casting agent related differing opinions and experiences with the editing process, which, at times, must be finessed to retain the reality aspect of the show. The casting director of MTV Series Development explained that there are different types of reality television: How loosely the plot is managed will determine the level of direction and editing that takes place for the televised segment.

“Certain shows are produced with a stronger hand in production and the viewer is probably aware that the entertainment is directed. For example, The Bachelor is a show that you watch and enjoy and assume that everything you are watching is just simply overproduced. That’s what the show is, that’s what you’re being given, it makes quality television, and people love it – but at the end of the day you have to know that these producers have a heavy hand in what’s going on; people are being edited to say things that weren’t said in that order. There are other shows out there where you should feel good knowing what you’re watching is extremely close to what’s happening in real life. Jersey Shore is a great example – you are

talking about eight strong individuals who are put in a house together – already that is an extenuating circumstance.” (personal communication, March 15, 2016)

The manager of MTV Series Development further described the concept of overproducing and its presence within reality television.

“The truth of the matter is yes, sure – we could edit a single episode, but if it’s not consistent with somebody’s personality, it won’t work for an entire season. Overproducing doesn’t really work well for anybody – it’s not great business and you won’t really get what you want from the talent. With that, the final version should be pretty close to real life. We always tell talent, ‘look, this will be you condensed into 22 minutes – so it is the sliced up version of yourself.’ We can’t put words in anyone’s mouth and we can’t do anything that they are not willing to do.” (personal communication, March 17, 2016)

The casting director at 3PX Productions concurred on the subject and explained the importance of casting the right type of person for a role allows for a fluid storyline throughout seasons and minimizes editing and production.

“There are some shows that are very much produced, but if you cast people with very authentic, compelling, and genuine stories, you don’t need to overproduce it – you let the story speak for itself. Editing can only do so much – it is not as magical as one may think.” (personal communication, March 30, 2016)

Each casting producer alluded to the assumption that viewers have an innate understanding of a show’s level of directed production. The casting associate producer at Leftfield Pictures discussed the function of editing and the consumer’s response to an unscripted show.

“Obviously we have to edit it – it can’t be a 24-hour unscripted show. I think people know that. I think people want to know as much as they want to know in order to be entertained.” (personal communication, March 16, 2016)

As reality TV has become a part of modern culture, audiences are savvier to aspects of the genre that are now part and parcel of series production. Editing will always be necessary to filter through the many hours of recording; the extent and modifications of those edits will depend upon the type of series and guided storyline. All casting agents credit the viewing audience with knowing the amount of guidance and alterations that are employed for certain types of “reality” television.

The Future of Reality-Based Programming

Each casting executive shared similar thoughts when speaking about the future of reality-based programming. Although all were uncertain of what exactly is to come next, they agreed that reality television would evolve into a new format. The casting director at 3PX Productions shared her viewpoint:

“I feel like it is back to the Wild, Wild West because people have seen so much and the question of ‘where do we go now?’ emerges. I think there will be a shift away from docuseries and a lot of fresh formats will develop. I think there might be a hybrid between docuseries and scripted series.” (personal communication, March 30, 2016)

The manager of MTV Series Development believes there is much in the television realm to compare with real time social media, and following real-time events appeals to a knowledgeable demographic.

“It is now more about the people. There is no wall between the eye and the talent anymore. Everything happens in real time now on social media. People want to know what they are seeing isn’t six months old – it makes it so much better when they feel like they are invested in the moment.” (personal communication, March 17, 2016)

The idea of live programming resurfaced when speaking to the casting director of MTV Series Development, who believes viewers will begin to watch television in real time.

“Cable networks in general are just so oversaturated. I think everyone is running out of ideas, everyone is frantic about how to make something new and something fresh. We are quickly moving towards a really tight turnaround . . . I think that reality television is moving in the direction of live programming.” (personal communication, March 15, 2016)

The casting associate producer at Lefffield Pictures concluded that employers within production are working in an experimental stage, attempting to discover what will work best for television. The field is ripe for new concepts and perhaps a composite of several types of television platforms.

“We’re all trying to figure it out – TV in general is at an interesting place and I guess in 4-5 years we’ll see.” (personal communication, March 16, 2016)

VI. Conclusions

Casting for reality television has evolved with the genre itself. Reality-based television began as the unproven idea that certain peoples’ lives and situations would draw a viewing audience. The appeal of popular new shows was their attention-grabbing themes coupled with the outrageous real-life characters that drove the energy of the series. Casting for this genre of television involved hiring a group of non-actors with strong, unique, and differing personalities. The interaction and conflict between the characters provided entertaining television viewing because it treated the audience to a type of uncensored voyeurism. As this type of television began to score success among audiences, casting for reality-based television became more formulaic. Eventually, casting directors began to look for certain types of people: the drama queens, the jocks, the bombshells, etc. However, as audiences and critics began to criticize “how real reality television was manufactured,” casting directors changed course and once again began to look for characters with eccentric personalities and interesting personal storylines. The arrival of extensively used social media has resulted in an entire generation of individuals who are comfortable with exposing themselves and their lives. Now casting directors have a vast pool of potential reality TV candidates.

Analysis of the current state of casting for reality-based television hinges on the following: the specific qualities that casting executives look for in potential cast members for a reality show; and the extent to which production and editing make reality television *unreal*. Interviews conducted with four casting executives of reality-based television revealed that casting candidates are assessed on their personalities, manners of expression, and authenticity as characters within a particular reality series realm. In assessing the extent to which editing and postproduction practices make reality television something other than the real, one must again consider the history of the production of the genre. Originally, reality-based television was minimally directed, edited, and produced. As the success of the series and competition for the viewing audiences became more fierce, casting directors began to use a heavier hand in the editing and production of a reality series in an effort to appeal to what they believed audiences desired. This manipulation had a negative effect as viewing audiences became savvier, aware of the overproduction, and demanded true reality in their reality television.

The ebb and flow of casting considerations reflect the ever-evolving genre of reality television. The casting executives spoke candidly of their early casting experiences and each referred to instinct as the prevailing factor in the final choices. As the genre evolved, casting considerations began to take on more formulaic designs that sought to cast stereotypical personalities to drive the storyline and character interaction. Over time, this formula became unworkable as reality television began to lose its originality to standard character roles that each reality series seemed to infuse into their project. Viewing audiences demanded more genuine reality in their reality television and unique non-actor characters began to push the envelope of acceptability. Casting executives met this demand by filling casting choices with interesting characters that possessed their own intriguing storylines, and once again the personality of the candidate became an important component of casting assessment. The current state of casting may take yet another turn as scripted television explodes with success on cable and on demand networks that now rival established networks for television audiences. Recent industry literature coupled with the personal interviews implies that a new form of reality is on the horizon, which combines real-time programming with scripted direction. Scriptwriter Wendy Whitman explains how viewers are now more “jaded and skeptical” than ever, resulting in a trend toward scripted programming that will fit viewers interests (Johnson, 2016). Casting executives may

face the additional challenge of casting trained talent *and* real-life personalities for series that will possess a scripted element. This synthesis will present new hurdles for casting agents who will be charged with the responsibility of finding a combination that is workable and successful. Whichever way the winds of reality-based casting blow, the one caveat that remains was plainly stated by a Discovery executive, who mused that “real people are just harder to control” (Johnson, 2016). This fact will continue to burden all casting choices and also offer the potential for phenomenal success.

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