The Future of Reality and Unscripted Television: A Genre Not Here to Make Friends

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Abstract

The Future of Reality and Unscripted Television:

A Genre Not Here to Make Friends

Benjamin Kessler

Reality television has advanced from a niche, scattered mix of oft looked at “lower class” genre to a dominant form of media in the business and culture of entertainment. With the industry changes formed by the rise of social media, streaming models and genre dismantlement, reality television is at the center of change rooted in audience habits and large-scale business shifts. This thesis intends to examine how the unscripted genre has developed, why, and measure the potential success for the future of reality-based media. The main subtopics will question the impact of fluxes in the television industry and their long-term future, the attributes that make the genre both what it is and what makes it successful, and if genre is affected by the medium in which it is consumed. The research will quantitatively and qualitatively analyze viewer preference within the genre and compare it to the most popular programming outside of the genre. Through wide-ranging looks at the people working in the space, the data driving the decisionmakers and projections to the adaptability of the genre within a medium upheaval, this thesis will determine the viability for the future of reality television as a whole.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Since rising to a household name genre in the 2000's and 2010's, reality and, with it, unscripted television has introduced a new fourth-wall breaking dimension to the medium. Due to its cost-effective models and majority non-unionized crewing practices, reality television was able to thrive at a time of peak chaos in the entertainment industry. In the years since, however, the genre has plateaued. With a revisit of major strikes in the 2020's, unscripted programs were unable to once again find their footing. Instead, development and production on the unscripted programs of the past twenty years has taken major hits, resulting in lost work, revenue, and a stagnation of the genre as a whole. The shows that have continued to thrive are franchises of major traditional and non-linear broadcasts, including *Survivor*, *The Real Housewives* franchises, *Top Chef*, *The Voice* and *Love Island* to name a few. All of these programs have become cornerstones of their subgenre, injecting consistent viewership while implementing adaptability to their programming. Are these programs outliers, the norm, or something else altogether? On the heels of sudden changes towards streaming and YouTube based landscapes, does the unscripted genre fit into the new mold?

From its inception, unscripted, and specifically reality programming on television, has consistently been split into "subgenres" that more uniquely identify the audience most interested in specific shows. While not new, this practice has stuck with reality television due to the nature of growing algorithmic advertising alongside reality television's need for quick understanding. In traditional television and film this had been fairly simple: are you a drama or a comedy? Are you serious or funny? With streamers focusing on garnering the largest potential audience, the answer has more recently turned to a gray area of both. In reality television, the feel is less important than the subject. Do you focus on lifestyle or game design? Are you a competition? Are you then a competition based on fan voting or contestant voting? The lines are drawn extremely quickly to display to audiences what they will enjoy. Without one clear aligning factor, reality television has become a stew of niches, each becoming somewhat a copy of what came before while introducing new factors to modern audiences. Reality television has suffered in general popularity and culture due to this. In similar fashion to some audiences being a fan of a specific athlete (ex: LeBron James) rather than a fan of the team they play for (ex: Los Angeles Lakers), many hit shows have been able to sustain their popularity but have not inspired greater copycat success, diminishing returns on the genre as a whole when it comes to the business of entertainment.

With the genre in disarray, the business decisions driving new programming has not matched what initially made reality television such a draw to decisionmakers. YouTube has become one of the most dominant platforms on the back of user generated content, costing the main platform nearly nothing to create. There are more and more videos being created on social media daily for younger audiences with quicker attention spans and a preference for vertical video in short packaging. Reality television, while generally inexpensive to a traditional network program,

cannot match the speed and monetary value of this content. “In interviews, executives attributed the steep drop-off in total series to three issues: the rapid decline of cable, the continued momentum of YouTube and other digital outlets, and the industry’s nearly endless consolidation” (Koblin 2026). Many of those who built careers off of the original boom of reality television have found themselves in an entire career pivot, completely out of their control. The drop-off in reality programming is also affecting viewers, with streamers set on releasing as much bankable material as possible there has been much consternation over the churn for limited series’ containing the most advertise-friendly stars. Combined, audiences are in a constant, seemingly limitless era of scrolling without the true ability of choice.

This research explores the ways in which the reality television genre has rose and fallen. By examining trends in the business in conjunction with perceived changes in audience habits, this thesis dives into three main areas of interest:

- Major fluxes in the TV industry and their impacts on reality television
- The changing attributes of what makes a program fall under the reality genre
- The form and distribution of media as a means of change for what it means to be unscripted

Consistent and quick changes within the industry has demanded adaptability to this thesis, ensuring it is current with its analysis of the future landscape in accordance with the measures driving today’s decisions.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Reality television has been identified over time by four unique elements. While not every program may necessarily include all, these factors have become synonymous with the genre. They are:

1. The nature of the program must be unscripted
2. There must be a clear format (game design, structure, social experiment)
3. Confessionals/Interviews are employed
4. It must be conveyed that the situations are posed as “real” with real people, even if they are not, through the stylization and editing of the program

As the genre grew, parts of these four elements were also used by scripted media and made for social media programming. For instance, one main difference between a reality program and a documentary is the presentation and purpose. Documentaries generally hold a main thesis and are structured in ways in which the audience expects the aim for education and information. Reality programs, on the other hand, have developed a less polished, prompted style that mark easier to identifier cues to the viewer. Reality television’s aim is not necessarily to inform, it is to entertain. In doing so, the dramatic use of background music and sound effects, “frankenbiting”, and selective storylines allow the audience to compartmentalize the differences into separate boxes. Some programming, such as NBC’s *The Office*, used confessional interviews in a documentary style and employed similarly less polished camera movement. The main difference

between these two is elements one and two: *The Office* is still a scripted show masquerading as everyday drama, combined with no clear format due to the scripted storylines.

The precise issue this thesis will address is if these four elements are conducive to an entire genre, or if they are monikers of a past era. Does medium inform genre? Does reality television still exist as a broader genre in the age of streaming? Media leaders worldwide are determining this now, deciding what programs to put money towards. The pivot to streaming and social has contained new strategies of cultivating all genres to attract the most amount of people. In this case, why isn't reality TV thriving then? The issues that face this genre are multitude. Viewing habits have skewed towards programs that are more definitely front facing. Audiences do not enjoy the façade of realness anymore and would much rather support even less polished influencers and filmmakers. Reality television's relevancy in popular culture can help determine the creation of new genres. This thesis will explore the facets of reality Television that enable it to thrive and its collapse in multiple angles, finding out if the genre itself changed or if the industry around it developed beyond its reach.

Major fluxes in the television industry, mainly the industry-wide pivot towards streaming, represented significant problems for traditional standards. As revenue was initially determined by subscriptions for streamers, not advertisements and sponsorships, streamers such as Netflix began segmenting their programming towards a mix of beloved licensed content and limited series. These limited series were aimed at accumulating the greatest number of users to a service, as if one service were only known for one genre or type of content they would be isolated from wide audience bases. The rise of user generated content from platforms such as YouTube and TikTok contributed heavily to the programming decisions from leaders at these streaming services. Streamers began greenlighting programs that closely resembled what young audiences were watching on social media, included a marketable icon, or were a large budgeted piece with spectacle. Reality television does not fit into any of these pockets. While some shows, like *Survivor*, thrived on its streamer Paramount+ during the COVID pandemic, it is rare for any content in the same vein to match its power. NBC's most recent attempt, *Deal or No Deal Island*, was recently cancelled due to poor performance after including former reality contestants and celebrities.

After the examination of the genre and its rise from oft considered "trashy" to easily identifiable and well known, reality television became a copycat game. Take for instance the subgenre of cooking: NBC's *Yes, Chef!*, Bravo's *Top Chef*, Food Network's *Chopped*, *Alex vs America* & *House of Knives*, Fox's *Next Level Baker*, *MasterChef* & *Gordon Ramsay's Secret Service*, plus CBS' *America's Culinary Cup*. It would take an entirely different thesis paper to determine the intricacy of difference that makes up all of these cooking-based programs. Some are competitions, some are lifestyle based, and others are in different categories entirely. The issue persists within this: what is the uniqueness for the audience? What is the difference between cooking show A and cooking show B if they are both competitions hosted by Gordon Ramsay? With near unlimited choice of what to watch and algorithms determining our carousels unless you are a super fan of Gordon it is difficult to argue why all of these shows would be directed to you in marketing. How much room does one person hold in their viewing habits for cooking

competitions? Streamers, just like traditional broadcasters, only need one of these variety to hold over their selected audience.

The development of streaming services and social media content altered both the way in which programming was algorithmically ordered as well as what it truly means to be classified under one specific genre. In recent years, there has been heavy debate on this topic from traditional award shows, most specifically FX's *The Bear* finding itself in the comedy categories, even though its intent may not have been to make audiences laugh. Above all else, content is defined by what it does, which puts the four unique elements of a reality program in question. If your program includes all these elements, but is filmed vertically via a livestream on Instagram, are you still creating a reality program? How would Netflix's *Star Search*, a five-week live talent competition, be classified in comparison to an *American Idol*? There are simply no definitive answers. Medium informs genre and vice-versa. Casey Neistat, a popular "YouTuber", created daily video blogs of his life, with structure and confessionals, seemingly unscripted in nature. And yet his content library is foremost labeled as YouTube-centric, not bound to genres of linear television. Our consensus wants out of reality television have morphed and with it the genre itself.

Through examining all factors related to reality television, many of the findings are broad conclusions of decisions made by industry leaders. This thesis constructs examinations from research questions based around the idea of what genre truly is and what factors impact a specific genre.

1.3 Background and Need

Reality television's explosion into our shared culture came with stark criticism of the genre, often for the less than polished style, perceived treatment of talent, and ethical boundaries of the product. These criticisms also marked its wide appeal, as reality programs matched the moral and ethical lines of the times (and still does). This is, however, not the problem explored in this study. The problem explored can mainly be compared to the disappearance of other genres: variety, multi-camera sitcoms and daytime soap operas. All of these genres are relics of their era and seemingly suddenly stopped being produced for a multitude of reasons attributed to evolution of their medium. Variety shows have been replaced by the modern-day reality competition series in many ways, as well as sketch comedy series' and late-night formats (which themselves seem to be fading away as podcasts and social media interviewers grow in popularity). Multi-camera sitcoms have been almost entirely abandoned for the single camera structure, which in part grew to the rise of higher budgeted "dramedy" programs along with preferences veering from theatrical setups. Daytime soap operas, with a few remaining, have been outpaced by daytime talk formats, game shows, and shopping based social video.

The dissolution of genre is not new. There are forms of all three genres listed above that are still popular within their niche, but these programs are outliers. CBS even ordered *Beyond the Gates*, a new soap opera made for traditional daytime television. But this problem has consistently evolved for genres as a whole during times of upheaval, whether it be due to the industry, worldwide change, or new generational habits. Every era has tackled this problem differently.

Some adapt; late night formats have been adjusting their content to match a YouTube first audience, often relying on those views and live streams as the sole true measuring stick of popularity.

Developmental changes in the television industry make reality a prime genre of importance for research. With influences from media decades older than itself, reality is the first of its kind to come face to face with the streaming era in this way. While many may believe reality was primed for success under the new models, time has shown this to be the opposite. Less programs are being greenlit overall, which has led to a mass exodus from the production of reality content. Changes in the entertainment industry inform viewers while viewership informs the industry. It is striking to see a show such as *Love Island* or *The Voice* perform so well in this landscape, seemingly isolated from the issues of the rest of the genre. What makes these shows different? Is there a formula for success? Adaptability to new environments informs industry leaders of the true metrics that matter for future growth.

Without true lines of genre, a marketer's job becomes significantly complicated. Television shows now classified in the "dramedy" category are a catch-all, yet made for no one group in particular. Genre, and the way we define it, is an important factor in the progression of a medium. Similar to podcast's callings to radio, reality as a genre harkens back to variety formats and the evolving nature of the documentary and mockumentary. Marketing is based around these formations, signaling groups of people into groups of content. If reality television does not fit into the future of the medium, it is important to identify what made it fail, why, and what comes next.

Marketing can also be based around the medium itself. Sponsorships have already completely altered the methodology of many businesses, pivoting to paying influencers for social posts instead of traditional over the air advertisements. Streamers themselves have pivoted from subscription only businesses to the integration of advertisements depending on the tier you subscribe to. These diverging paths in revenue building lead to a change in what advertisers look for and how algorithms push content forward to subscribers. In doing so, reality has become mixed in with the "influencer" era, marked by livestreams, product spots, and social first. This era posts a greater dependence on audience integration rather than the poking of the fourth wall first marked by reality's unscripted nature. It is imperative that leaders in the television industry understand what they are marketing and why. If reality is fading into the influencer machine, the differences may exist in genre but the underlying business is the same.

As the television industry further dissects the slowdown of cable and linear channels, an overarching trend of analyzing individuality has developed. This means there is great exaggeration placed on individual movements, purchases, and licensing from specific companies (especially traditional media that has taken on their own streaming service), pointing to an overall slowdown of the former traditional methods of television creation. Consolidation has become a buzzword for the growth of a few scaling companies. Within this, it is rare to find research on the more methodical evolution of how viewing habits & business decisions influence the actual content. Yes, it is easy to point to the total numbers of programs being produced when compared to previous years. These numbers do not accurately paint today's watching landscape.

Does one genre or "type" of content dominate social media and YouTube's growth? Which copycats thrive and why?

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to analyze reality television's meaning and place in today's viewing landscape through the lens of current changes in the television industry. This study was conducted to showcase the ability of genre to morph through business decisions and viewing habits with a focus on reality television's development. The research involved is aimed at fans of the genre, decisionmakers in the television industry and the crew members involved in creating reality television.

The need for focusing on this problem arises from reality television's unique position in modern culture. Both within business settings and popular culture, reality television has represented an upheaval of norms that would have otherwise never made their way to the screen. Reality television's ascent marked a new angle for the unscripted format and its immediate popularity posed a challenge to all other scripted formats. The copycat nature of the genre, in which many networks began creating similar formats to those of immediate success, also capitalizes on a trend that has become relevant in the streaming and social media era. A need for understanding of why trends develop and how they are cemented into our general culture is important for truly understanding the future of both the reality genre and the medium of television.

This study uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to supply readers with the knowledge of many views, data, and analytical understanding of the people and situations involved. Interviews were conducted with crew members from the genre (including producers, casting directors and executives), fans of reality television, executives from social media-based companies, those covering the genre as a reporter and those in business facing roles at unscripted based production companies. Surveys were also conducted, aimed at general audiences as well as reality fans and those affected by the shift in the reality genre, in order to assess the overall viewer sentiment on the current state of reality and unscripted programming. In addition, surveys, statistics, and raw data was gathered from verified sources to better understand the state of the television industry as a whole.

Expected outcomes of this study include an overall comprehension of reality television's current place in the media landscape and the perceived future of the genre. The research will highlight the streaming era's changes in the reality genre and the current outlook at where the genre ends up within the consolidation of the industry. The perceptions of those interviewed and the analysis of the quantitative methodology will result in an understanding of the genre's place in the minds of leaders, viewers and crew members.

1.5 Research Questions

1. How have major fluxes in the television industry changed reality and unscripted television productions and what impact does this have on its immediate and long-term future?

2. How do the attributes of "reality" and "unscripted" television and media determine the future of the genre, both in its success and its ability to provide substantial content to viewers?

3. Is the form of unscripted television distribution impacting its function as a fully realized genre?

4. What actually makes a program fall under the umbrella of reality television?

1.6 Significance to the Field

This study greatly benefits the participants involved through its analysis and findings, expanding upon general understanding of television genres. The study contributes to the field of television by first identifying the current state of the industry, defining reality television, and placing reality within the modern and future landscape. The long-term benefits of the study are based on creating an understanding of genre, if genre morphs or dissolves, and developing how the medium of television forcibly changes genre.

1.7 Definition of Terms

Frankenbiting: The process "in which producers formulate sentences from multiple clips into something reality stars didn't actually say or mean" (Brara 2021).

Producer: A crew member whose job "usually focuses on assembling a coherent narrative from the messiness of real life and a reality TV production" (Dehnart 2015) and can include a multitude of story, field, and technical expertise.

Casting Director: A crew member whose role is to source the possible participants in a reality television program. This role may have final decision-making on which participants actually make it onto the program or not.

Streamers: "Content providers or platforms that deliver video programming over the internet" (Wurl).

1.8 Limitations

Limitations in this study include the ability and timing of interviews. Interviews were sourced from multiple online sources and it should be noted that many of those in executive roles were unable to be interviewed. In addition, survey results can be skewed based on the limited ability to survey more respondents, as the survey was shared by the researcher through Drexel University

and many forms of social media such as LinkedIn. This can create a bias as the survey was only available to people within the sphere of the researcher.

1.9 Ethical Considerations

An ethical framework was created for this study which included verbal consent for recording all conducted interviews, the option for all interviewees to not be included in the study or to be included as an anonymous source. Subjects interviewed were made aware of where the study will be published and the researcher's goals for the study. All interviewed subjects were able to opt out of answering any questions and any information which was requested to be removed from the record has been. Survey respondents are to be kept anonymous for privacy. One interview was conducted via email and all formatted & edited interview transcripts can be found in the appendix.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Reality Television first made waves within American culture in the early 2000's, with programs such as *The Real World*, *American Idol*, and *Survivor* proving that the genre had mass appeal and was therefore valuable to the Television landscape. With diversified offerings, the genre grew beyond its "reality" moniker as lifestyle, cooking, competition, dating, true crime, and other subgenres formulated the umbrella of "unscripted" programs. Reality TV became a staple for networks, with legacy shows highlighting the slate. As a side effect of the 2007 Writers Guild of America strike, more reality style programming was ordered than ever before. With no ability to confirm scripted timeslots, networks resorted to more cost effective and often faster produced unscripted series, which did not require union writers. The genre hit a new level of popularity and cultural awareness in the years to follow, cementing reality as a must-have for viewers and networks alike.

With another Writers Guild of America strike coinciding with a Screen Actors Guild strike in 2023, many industry insiders expected the same to occur. However, since the early 2010's boom, the landscape had changed. Streaming services took massive market share away from traditional network television. YouTube, social media, and many similar Free Ad-Supported Streaming Television businesses now command greater attention from both viewers, buyers, and advertisers. These services do not need to fill specific timeslots and have more flexibility within the production and distribution process, allowing for quicker consumption.

Competing against YouTube & social media's "homemade" content and the rise of the event driven style surrounding streaming service unpredictability has left the genre of Reality TV in flux. While there are still many legacy shows alongside up and coming talent, the genre has been dispersed amongst generations in formats & style, production, and the methodology of watching. The future of the genre will be forged by what industry leaders believe is the catalyst to attract widespread viewership and garner active monetization opportunities.

2.2 The Next Level of Production

Since the fall of physical television production during the COVID pandemic and the immediate WGA & SAG-AFTRA strikes in 2023, "the result is that reality TV shoot days are now trailing pre-pandemic numbers. [Q3 of 2024's] 946 shoot days is just a 2.4% decrease from Q3 2019 but a 16% drop from Q3 2018 and a 43% decrease from its considerably pre-pandemic peak (1,646 days in Q2 2014)" (Steiner 2024). Streaming services do not need to adhere to more traditional schedules for both production and release, resulting in the accumulation of more programming to gain the widest potential audience possible. More programs lead to budgets being spread thin across a greater number of shows. "A show like *American Idol* used to run pre-production from September and then air the show from January to May. That's basically a full year's worth of work with a built-in summer vacation" (Dehnart 2024). Network television's inherent limitation

to time has forced stagnation. Five out of the top ten programs on the "Most-Watched TV Series of 2024-25 Across Streaming, Broadcast and Cable" list are distributed on Netflix.

Incentives and opportunities for creating prestige Reality programming have also subsided. Under the newly proposed California tax incentive program for Film and TV, "other productions that could get credits under the revisions to the bill include sitcoms, animated films, series or shorts and 'large-scale competition' shows, excluding reality, documentary programming and game or talk shows. They must have budgets of at least $1 million" (Cho 2025). To compete with the smaller budgets within the rise of short-form and influencer/creator-based ecosystem, many Reality productions move internationally or order popular international formats with a new American cast. One example is *The Floor*, a literal floor-based quiz show that expanded to twenty countries in 2024 but records multiple versions in Talpa Studios' Netherlands production hub and Ardmore Studios in Bray, Ireland. A separate example of an international format turned into a USA based production is *The Traitors*, based on an original Dutch version then popularized in the UK. The USA version is produced by Studio Lambert, a British based production company, filmed in Scotland, and released on the streaming service Peacock. With easier access to international resources, talent, and distribution, overseas influence has been a strong metric for the current foreseeable future of Reality TV production.

2.3 Genre Dismantlement

Coinciding with changes in production has been an increase in viewer habits re-shaping what is and is not considered "Reality" or even "Unscripted". *Survivor* (twice), *The Voice* (also twice), *American Idol*, *Dancing with the Stars*, and *The Amazing Race* all premiered before or during 2011 and all cracked the "100 Most-Watched TV Series of 2024-25 Across Streaming, Broadcast and Cable" list, while *The Floor* was the only modern (premiering within the past two years) non-streaming program to make the list. No matter how it is viewed, legacy programs still dominate the reality genre. Streaming programs mimic the plan of this legacy format success, with Netflix's *Is It Cake? Holiday Edition*, *Love on the Spectrum U.S.*, and *Love is Blind* all making the top 100, taking competitive and dating formats to the streaming era. No one show falls within the same subgenre. Even *Love on the Spectrum U.S.* falls closer in line to a documentary categorically when compared to the more traditional "house" format of *Love is Blind*. All of these programs fall within the "Unscripted" umbrella, but none of them have requirements beyond the hiring of writer positions, and the characteristic markers of the genre are fading away with the rise of user generated content. The style that once made Reality TV unique is now commonplace, with TikTok and Instagram influencers referencing confessionals, stereotyped casting choices, and the moniker of "realness" in short-form skits and long-form podcasts. Vlogging (video blogging) is now a second visual language on YouTube, resulting in copycats for every specific detail of true authenticity in video content.

Beast Games, created and hosted by YouTube sensation Mr. Beast, ranked 74th on the aforementioned list with seven million viewers, yet this pales in comparison to his YouTube channel's public analytics which show at least sixty million views per video over multiple years. Both forms of Mr. Beast's programming revolve around competition formats. But is his YouTube channel "Reality TV"? What needs to be included to fit both Mr. Beast, Vlogs, dating

based formats, and so many others amongst the same umbrella terminology. Where is the line drawn? Genre is determined by specified stylistic choices, theming, and structure. With the absence of exact parameters, genre morphs into individual statistics, failing to converge multiple forms of programming into a distinguishable output. Identifying the attributes of "Reality" and "Unscripted" will determine the future of the genre in both its success and ability to convey substance material to viewers. These features are being rewritten by industry leaders, creators, and viewers and are imperative to understanding distinctions that separate a defined genre from the methodology of watching.

2.4 Form and Function

With the form of production affecting the genre itself, Unscripted TV has reflected the battle between streaming and traditional (cable and broadcast) television networks. Unscripted television can break convention in a way scripted programs cannot, as the story being told is less dependent on strict shooting schedules and higher budgets. There are no "re-shoots" for unscripted programs. They can bend and morph to the medium as it adapts to perceived viewer desires. Does genre dismantlement lead to a change in the fundamental way Unscripted content is created and watched? Is the form (way people watch) informing the function (content itself) or vice versa?

Changes to this form and function are also seen in the metrics deemed important to the industry at large. The seventh season of *Love Island*, streaming exclusively on Peacock, "racked up 1.2B minutes viewed across nine available episodes, per Luminate's streaming data" (Campione 2025) from June 6-12. The seventh season aired thirty-six edited episodes from June 3 – July 13, 2025, coinciding with fan votes for favorite cast members. This would be practically impossible on a traditional network. Rarely are statistics measured in total minutes viewed on specified air dates for traditional programming, yet total minute count, not viewership itself, has become a normalized and imperative statistic when reporting on streaming services. Reality and all Unscripted content are following this trend by matching the functionality, changing total episodes and diversifying episode lengths to appeal to a new generation that does not adhere to appointment viewing. This has been furthered with live reunion specials, immediate spin-offs, and international versions becoming more accessible to American audiences. All of this transcends the genre to match how viewers are watching.

2.5 Conclusion

Unscripted television has become an important indicator of the health of the entire entertainment industry and has positioned itself as a major reflection of culture in a given time. Ushering in a new era of entertainment, the genre has spent twenty-five years continuously reinventing what "unscripted" can mean. Its future is on life support, both as physical productions and as a legitimized genre.

Television as a medium may be unsteady, fluctuating with new and older generations, but one point is certain: in whatever form, unscripted content is not going anywhere. No matter how it is

identified, created, or distributed, or viewed, unscripted works are omnipresent in nearly every forum. If a new form exists, the unscripted content will follow in some variation. For the well-being of television, it is imperative that unscripted as a genre is not lost in the shuffle and broken down, instead being championed to survive and thrive.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Qualitative methodology was employed via one-on-one interviews for this study. Wide ranging interviews enabled the research to be more open to further development. Questions were set beforehand, but within each interview the researcher delved into the specificity of relation between the position and viewpoint of the interviewee with the overarching theme of this thesis. This method allowed the interviews to be more expansive, free flowing and gave a personalized quality towards understanding how the subject can be analyzed from a multitude of perspectives.

3.2 Setting

Interviews were conducted in one of two places: via phone call or zoom conference call.

3.3 Participants

The interviewed participants are labeled below based on job title:

Producers: Multiple producers were interviewed for this thesis, each of whose roles vary slightly. Some worked for a production company specializing in unscripted projects, others were freelance producers, working on multiple television shows as part of the producing network or third-party company. In all cases, these producers offer valuable first-hand knowledge of the ways in which productions are developed, created and edited. Many of these producers have worked on the development side of television, helping to ideate new formats.

Casting Director: Casts play an integral role in the formation of a reality program, and this participant has over a decade of experience on one of the most formative reality shows in addition to continued work for digitally based shows. Casting departments help determine how the format of a series will match its participants and their roles can often be broad, including sourcing potential cast members to interviewing, hiring, and pitching their perspective on behalf of potential cast members.

Event Organizer: This participant is both a fan of reality television and runs event-based programming that matches the rhythm of many competition-based formats. This perspective is invaluable because it provides insight to the fan side, complimenting this with true boots to the ground knowledge of how the formats run in real time.

Entertainment Writer: This participant is a writer and blogger with over twenty-five years of continued reporting on reality television. With a blog focused on reality tv news, updates and opinions, this participant is able to synthesize years' worth of cultural and business momentum to fully establish a picture of reality television in its past and current states.

Executives: Multiple executives were interviews for this study. Each executive works on the business end of the industry, spanning social media managers, financial based roles, and as leaders of production companies. Executives in all facets are more business aligned, focusing on how viewing habits change their day-to-day operations while looking towards the long-term health of the industry.

Participants were also surveyed for the quantitative measurements, spanning ordinary viewers to crew members, students, and those simply fascinated by television.

3.4 Measurement Instruments

Interviews were recorded on either Zoom or native iOS and transcribed using online transcription tools via Adobe. Survey results were created using Qualtrics.

3.5 Data Analysis

Survey responses were analyzed for commonality and discrepancies. Statistics and visuals were then created in Qualtrics and selectively used as part of visual reporting and analysis for this study.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for overarching threads, similar answers, differences in viewpoints and opinions and weighted against the research found in this thesis. Interviewed transcripts were intentionally viewed upon as a collective of opinions, basing all thoughts in this study on facts first and supplementing subjective nature of any statistics with the consensus opinion of interviewees. Transcripts can be found in the Appendix.

Chapter 4: Results

4.1 Results

The results below are organized within three sections: each a unique subtopic of the study. Within each, findings will be provided from a combination of synthesized understanding of research, interviews, and subjectively based on the opinions presented in the surveys conducted and overall sentiment found within the industry (from reporters, real time updates, and understanding of business decisions). For each subtopic, there will be multiple perspectives: those interviewed, the viewers, and the industry at large. While none of these perspectives may be uniquely objective, each will include any bias and limitations found when conducting this study.

TV Industry Fluxes

During the interview process of this study and through further research, changes in the entertainment industry have been rampant, most noticeably a continued trend of consolidation. Most recently, Fox Corporation is set to acquire Roku, another combination of large-scale streamers. As was evident at the beginning of this study, reality programming has continued to decline; “The annual number of unscripted and reality series with season premieres in the United States has plummeted by a third since 2022, according to Luminate, a research group. It fell 15 percent just last year, to 794” (Koblin 2026). This study’s overall sentiment matched a significant portion of the research involved; “executives attributed the steep drop-off in total series to three issues: the rapid decline of cable, the continued momentum of YouTube and other digital outlets, and the industry’s nearly endless consolidation” (Koblin 2026). In this study’s interviews, opinion varied on all sides regarding optimism with the genre’s future in the face of industry wide change. Exclamations ranged from as far as Jo Sharon, Co-CEO of Magical Elves sharing that the “industry has become overly safe and hesitant. So much of what’s greenlit feels like a slight variation on something that already worked years ago. If we want to reinvigorate the space, we need more risk-taking—not just in concepts, but in casting, tone, and format” to journalist and television critic Andy Dehnart saying that “I'm not sure those things are all that different than they were 25 years ago. The risk taking has always been a Hollywood problem, and for as long as I've been talking to executives, producers, people who produce reality television, the sort of undercurrent always is.” Creatives tended to be more pessimistic, as many have seen their work shrink over the past half-decade, while those more aligned on the development and practical business end compared the current landscape to constant change, not uncommon just one everyone goes through.

Many of those interviewed pointed towards the rise of less polished work as the future, specifically in relation to true crime and “self-shot” social media campaigns (projects filmed with a small or limited crew and setup). While not necessarily negative, almost all interviewed participants agreed that in terms of traditional linear television the problem stems from the lack of risk-taking, as one failure with a large enough budget can be catastrophic, a turn from what was once a cheap investment. This topic came up repeatedly, with Phillip Barbb, producer on shows ranging from *Love Island USA* to *Dancing with the Stars* saying “nobody wants to be on

the chopping block. So sometimes rather than, you know, if people are fearful of their jobs and they don't want to rough, you know, ruffle or they don't want to like, you know, rock the boat, they stay safe. They make easy calls, they make easy hires, they make they do stuff that makes so much sense that no one could ever call them out on it being their choice." This does not mean that reality production has become so expensive it must be the biggest hit on any platform to be successful, but with the hyper scaling of "self-shot" and viewers trending to TikTok, this points to the reason many networks now try capitalizing on current success stories; this explains shows like *Love Island Games*, *Love Island: All Stars*, *Love Island: Beyond the Villa*, and the similarity in shows such as *Too Hot to Handle*, *Perfect Match* and *Love is Blind*. While scripted series contain spin-offs and copycats, reality seems to have cultivated a "must have" list for streamers and networks alike, furthering consolidation: the less total places willing to spend money, the less need for multiple dating shows or programs from around the reality space.

From a viewer perspective, this consolidation may be as catastrophic in the long-term. There is "a recognition that we are living through the end of a distinct era in American popular culture, where television, even at its most manufactured and manipulative, still operated as a mass medium capable of producing shared reference points. What comes next is not the disappearance of unscripted entertainment" (Brotman 2026). What comes next may just be the same ideas repackaged: Barstool Sports continuously creates long-form competition series, Mr. Beast has just reached five hundred million YouTube subscribers with his survival and unscripted based series, and niche media such as "Fishtank", an all-encompassing 24/7 live challenge-based Twitch adjacent program, similar to CBS' *Big Brother*, continue to grow. Traditional powerhouses, such as *Top Chef*, have even branched out to formal digital short form series with *Last Chance Kitchen* (created in 2011). All of these are examples of the evolution of genre. For viewers, the only difference may be where they can find their favorites. Reality will need to continue to get creative in pushing out short form and digitally aimed series in order to win over new fans as the YouTube landscape reaches a point of legitimacy with traditional Hollywood.

What Makes Genre

The idea of pivoting leads directly into what creates genre. For savvy viewers, it is extremely easy to assess a channel like Mr. Beast under the reality umbrella, as it holds all the pre-designated markers of what makes reality television. As discussed earlier, for many this has come down to taking less risk with format changes and more risk with the dollars put into marketing; Matthew Fernicola, creator and executive producer of *Last Foes Standing*, the first-ever reality competition music festival said "it's important to keep the accessibility thing really, really high I think. You don't want it to just be a rotating wheel of the same players. I go back to sports. It's good that people have to retire. So now instead of having Babe Ruth and Derek Jeter, the Yankees have Aaron Judge." Every network, channel or service dreams of this consistent marketing power. Now more than ever genre is tied to reoccurrence, which resonated throughout multiple interviews, with Carey Mandelker, producer and supervising producer on programs including *Catfish: The TV Show* saying "I think that's the problem with a lot of the shows, is that everything sort of has a sameness to it, where it doesn't really stand out. So, when you have like a character that punches through, which is, you know, the Mormon wives or men, Alan

Cumming on the *Traitors*, like, he was so great, like he, he I mean, look, the characters on the show made the thing, but I think he, he made the show like it". There is no definitive answer on what genre a daily livestream on Twitch or series of Instagram lives is. Nor is there true quantitative data to show if these newer forms of media resemble the same space as an unscripted series. What they all have in common, though, is engagement and participation. Beyond its genre markers, reality television has been synonymous with polarization. As a viewer, you are either watching a hero or a villain. This phenomenon is still capitalized on today. If the program is unscripted and includes the hallmarks of reality, can we call it reality?

"TikTok typically thrives on a balance between polish and spontaneity—otherwise known as the 'plandid' approach: planned and posed but meant to appear spontaneous and natural. Reality TV has always lived in this space. Contestants may have glam squads, but the moments that really go viral are unscripted due to the "oopsies" and awkward moments that definitely weren't intentional" (Benabid 2025). Unscripted is more about perspective than anything else. What makes something feel spontaneous and authentic is not necessarily unscripted, or reality based, but it has been the main classification of reality television for over twenty years. There is no reason why social media, or any other new form of media, cannot function as reality television. Multiple interviews also pointed in the direction of the nature of definition, with one supervising segment producer of *Below Deck* and challenge producer of *Project Runway* Chris King saying "it's a voyeurism, right? It's the idea that you can drop in on these people in some of their most intimate and embarrassing. You know, you're there almost, to watch someone get rejected. You know, there's something really sinister about it, you know? But it really draws you in and, you know, it's in the it's definitely in the format" and producer Phillip Barbb saying "I'm a reality TV producer, but I did a show about aliens, and then I did a show about sharks. Like an adventure show about sharks. And then, you know, then I have a show that [is] dancing with celebrities. It's like there's that cookbook so many ways, right?... I think it's, it's such a catch all term that I think it's kind of hard to know where it's going."

Genre is determined by culture. In many ways, viewers have shaped what it means to be a reality show by classifying aspects of "reality" and applying it towards linear, scripted series. In the future, it seems likely that the moniker of a "reality" show will morph, just as the standard for a variety show changed over generations. Chasing the greatest number of viewers and advertisers, though, will always stick. The reality genre's broad appeal and definition allow it to adapt, as Michael Vito Valentino, Editor-in-Chief at *NowThis* said "it's not about just making a polished show. It's about making one that actually fits in the algorithm." Algorithms, trends and viewer habits are ever evolving. Reality, in any form, does not seem to be disappearing any time soon.

Form and Distribution

After establishing reality's possibility for aptitude in the streaming and digital landscape, it is also important to contend with what this feasibly looks like. As the genre morphs, acknowledging its changes and why those changes occur are imperative for industry leaders to form around trends, matching what viewer's require for modern day watching. In many conversations as part of this study, the key term that was developed was the idea of authenticity. Michael Vito Valentino also noted that "at the end of the day, what happens on set is pretty

organic. And we're working with comedians etc., because we want it to feel authentic but really want on big personalities. I think…the biggest thing the people are looking for is authenticity, right?" The element of perceived authenticity has always shaped reality's ability to permeate culture in a way many star-studded scripted programming cannot. With it has come the rise of the reality star as an influencer and legitimate celebrity. "The audience knows if you're authentic or not" (Coates 2026), notes talent manager and executive producer Ryan Revel. But how? What may have once been considered inauthentic on television can very well be considered authentic to one's character on a different stage. Unscripted no longer means no game plan, as has been drilled into the minds of many passive viewers, with Valentino also saying "I bet they're (Bravo's *Real Housewives* and other lifestyle based dramatized reality) more scripted than some of the, TV shows that we watch, you know, on the CW and whatnot. But at the end of the day, it's about these larger than life individuals. And, you know, people do perceive them as authentic and they're messy."

Authenticity can be built from both genre and distribution, with producer Phillip Barbb exclaiming "it's like maybe the recipe is that you have to, that you can't create any you can't create something just to be a show that if you're going to create it, you've got to already have an idea of what the symbiotic relationship would be with social…like, could you get conversation about the show?". Better than ever, the digital age has brought on easier methods of conversation and communication. On nearly every service exists a chat feature. While still produced media, content on social and cleverly designed streaming services can feel as home-y as possible or as tantalizing. This is the reason for the trending tab, Netflix's top ten and the endless stream of scrolling. Reality breeds on the idea of authenticity for the audience. Much of *Love Island*'s success can be attributed to its simplistic distribution. Episodes are edited quickly, aired immediately, and conversation continues for several months. The entire concept of the series is based around perception: not just the contestants' perceptions of each other, but the viewer's idea of what competitors actually think about each other, whether true or not. *Love Island* is a microcosm for what thrives in reality: people to root for, root against, and the knowledge that what you are watching is true to in the moment. Whether or not the contestants are playing themselves or characters does not matter. All that matters is if they are believable as one or the other.

"I don't know if I think the shift will come from reality itself. I think reality shifts to whatever happens around it. Does that make sense? Like, yeah, I, I don't think it's the genre that's going to and frankly, I don't know if I think it's the genre in any of entertainment. I think it's really based on what users are flocking to", noted unscripted producer Carey Mandelker. Genres cannot simply shift to the next distribution form. They are continuously developed and re-developed into puzzle pieces of what they once were. For reality, this has also significantly shifted to the live aspect of media, with several competition and judging based programs thriving on sustained live viewership. In the same vein, going "live" on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and specifically Twitch has led to new terminology and a whole new off-shoot under the reality genre. Being a live streamer is incredibly reminiscent of the idea of authenticity; in being live, everything that happens on the other end of the screen must be as real as possible, no matter how scripted. The next evolution of what it means to be a reality show is not based around the

definitions established earlier. It is based around the form in which content is produced, distributed and watched. The reality genre is already so broad that the gray area of what is and is not reality is subjective. Producer Chris King noted that "I think live when it comes to reality is the most interesting. But it hasn't been done. It hasn't been done great in a new way. Obviously. Every week on *American Idol* in its 25th season, people sing live and people vote and all that good stuff. But there hasn't been as sort of a, you know, a new way to make live reality pop". Maybe reality has not "popped" in the traditional network or streaming sense over the past decade, but the concept of the genre has most definitely found a new home within YouTube and the authenticity of being live and connected to your peers online.

4.2 Survey Results

Findings and results of the study included a survey that, while limited in scope, found the unique opinion of thirty-five different participants on their watching habits with a focus on the reality genre. The following figures were all created in Qualtrics, a survey formation website, and all survey respondents willingly filled out the questionnaire without any input or interference from those involved in the writing of this thesis.

Figure 4.1: Watch Habits

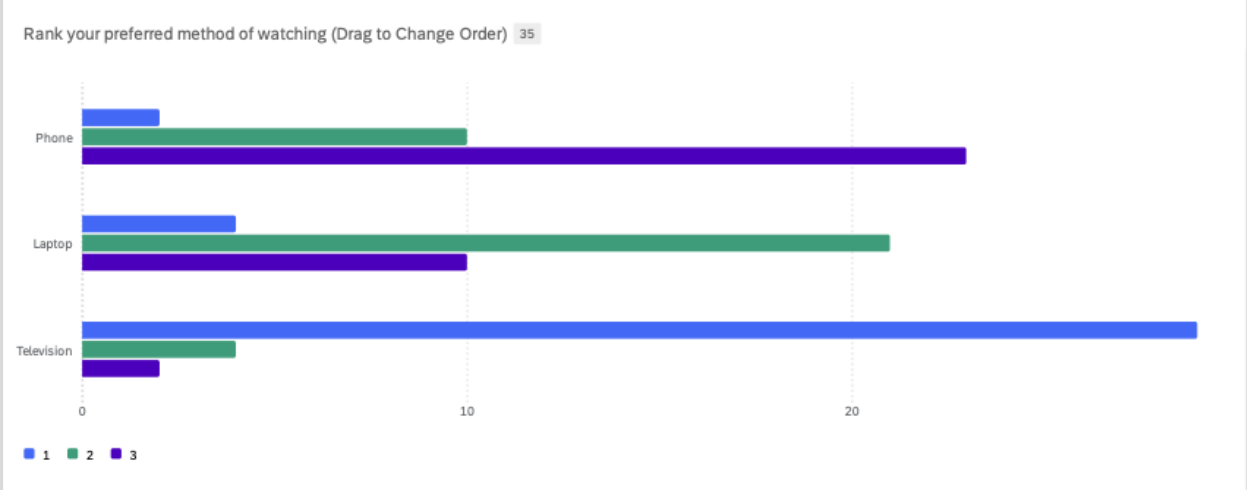


Figure 4.1 created a base for habits, with a significant portion of respondents placing television as their most preferred method, followed by a laptop and then finally phone. This question was an important baseline, as it establishes the idea of television for the survey. While most answered they would prefer to watch on television, it is still high likely all survey respondents spend most of the time on their phone out of the three options available.

Figure 4.2, outlined below, dives further into which specific service or method respondents would most likely hear about a new reality show, with multiple answers allowed. Twenty-four users answered friends/colleagues, demonstrating the power of word of mouth, especially for those who may not usually find out about entertainment news. However, only a few less

respondents additionally answered “within a streaming service”. This survey does not immediately make it clear on the power of either method of spreading the word of a new program, but it does prove that even in small sample sizes the general public values the suggestion of a friend, whether it be on person or on social media.

Figure 4.2: Sourcing Information

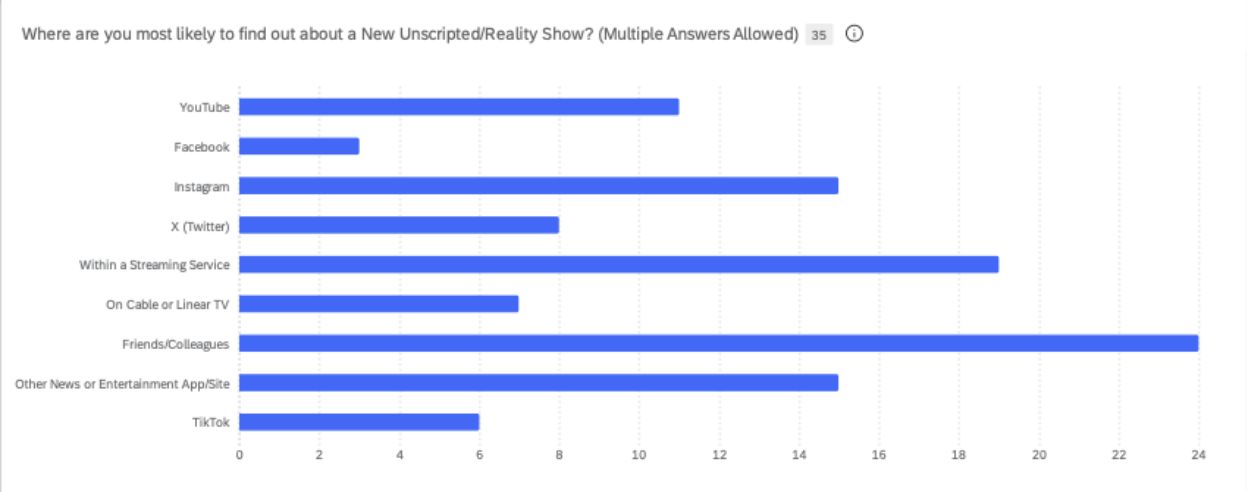
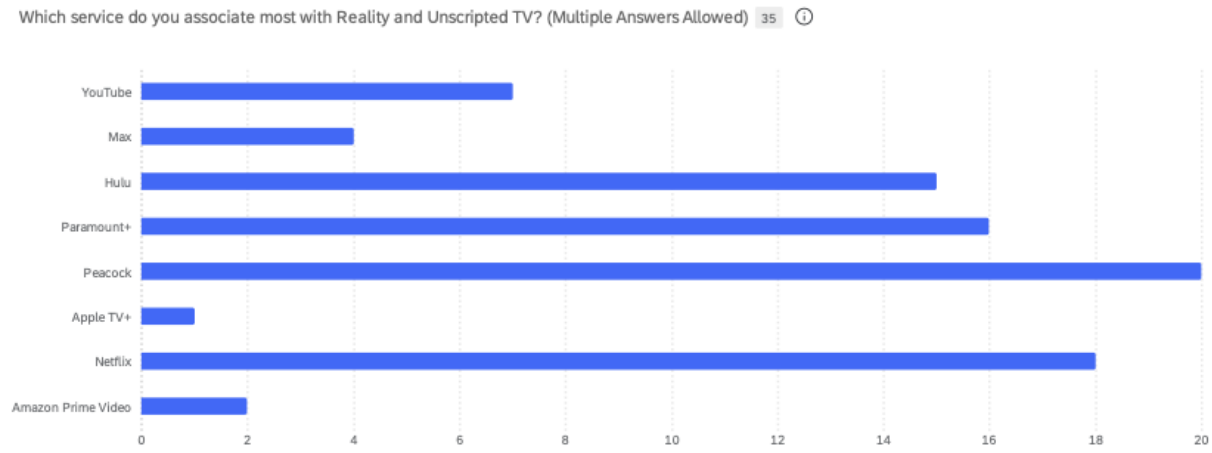


Figure 4.3: Reality Association



In conjunction with the method of finding out about a new show, the association of reality television with a specific streaming service was similarly jumbled. As seen in Figure 4.3, Peacock was the leading vote getter (most likely due to its association with the Bravo network and its hit show *The Traitors*), but every streaming service did receive at least one vote. YouTube, which has by far the most unscripted and reality-based content, only received seven total votes (even with multiple answers allowed from respondents). Without one runaway leader,

the small sample size indicates a hypothesis discussed throughout the duration of the study; each streaming service is operating under the same general baseline of acquiring the most viewers possible. In enacting this strategy, every streamer will require at least one reality show to satisfy the genre as long as the genre remains popular.

Figure 4.4: Subgenre Popularity

How likely are you to watch the following genres? 34

How likely are you to watch the following genres?	Average	Minimum	Maximum	Count
Dating/Romance	2.87	0.00	5.00	30
Competition	3.25	0.00	5.00	32
Game Show	2.57	0.00	5.00	30
True Crime/Court/Law Based	2.35	0.00	5.00	31
Documentary/Mockumentary	4.12	1.00	5.00	33
Lifestyle Programming (Home, Medical, "Real-Life Stories")	2.41	0.00	5.00	29

Figure 4.4 queried respondents on their likelihood of watching a specific subgenre from within the reality umbrella. This was asked to assess whether one subgenre was dominating viewer attention, and respondents were able to rank the likelihood from least likely (0) to most likely (5). With comparable respondent results, documentary/mockumentary ranked highest with an average score of 4.12. The second-highest, competition (3.25), was the only other subgenre to rank over a total of three. These results indicate two distinct patterns: while a broad genre, reality is still hyper specific and yet some subgenres can hit all markets. Documentary and mockumentary have broad appeal as the topic of conversation within a program of this nature can vary wildly. Within true crime, lifestyle, game shows and dating programs, one needs to be significantly interested in the stylized nature of the subgenre in order to watch. While one piece of content may stick out as an outlier under each, documentary/mockumentary is the only subgenre that does not have an immediate obvious “go to” example as well. This subgenre can be a drama, comedy, mixture, or go wildly off board. It can fluctuate in episode order, length and prior knowledge. Documentaries are culturally significant, having formulated a visual style that appeals to all tastes.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Introduction

A significant portion of this study was based upon the premise that reality television can be as specific or broad as a viewer imagines and the nature of a cultural want for definition, both for audiences and marketing. This chapter will discuss the limitations when attempting to define an entire genre, weaknesses of subjective materials of the study and recommendations for future monitoring of many of the claims in the thesis. In order to best conclude the study, elements of greatest potential quantitative data will be recommended as well in order to further define both what the reality genre is in the future and its feasibility against competing content and medium. Through covering these elements, this chapter will enable the reader with the best methodology for further diagnosing gaps in creative overhauls, allowing for a critical analysis of what was once popular, why, why it changed, and what it changed into.

5.2 Limitations

Many of the limitations of this study are rooted in the inaccessibility to raw data from television and digital programs. Without the tangible figures of unique viewers, minutes watched and total reach, the study lacks some consistency in exact precision. In addition to the lack of statistical comparatives, a survey of a greater number of American and international viewers, from all walks of life, is required for a true understanding of watch habits in the modern landscape. It is highly possible that the current survey respondents are too "in the know" to achieve partial answers that may help determine reality television's future feasibility. Additionally, with the significant constant change in the television industry, conducting many of the interviews within the span of a few months limits the long-term scope of the varied opinions. Interview questions and the focus of many subsequent interviews may have shifted to broadly new topic in the wake of even greater industry consolidation.

5.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research on the reality genre can more greatly stem from available quantitative data. As many streaming services are privately owned, raw data is not often published. However, overviews of total viewership numbers are becoming more common, and should be acknowledged at face value to compare against both total subscription numbers and competitors. With the transfer of "views" changing its definition completely, and the new standard of minutes watched for both streaming content and social media viewership, a holistic view of data is important to understanding what is truly thriving in the industry.

To further increase optimization of study, there must be a greater emphasis on the delineation between mediums and content as they become more defined. In some cases, social media programming is formatted conceptually as a "show". In others, however, social media is simply not comparable. For the sake of current research, the differences between what truly is a "show" and isn't were not discussed, but it is a significant aspect of seeing content force genre changes. One example would be *Love Island's* ascent, as discussed. If *Love Island* were to suddenly have

five competitors as show formats on different networks/streamers, all with the same distribution and concept, and those were to thrive, it is only a matter of time before the reality genre becomes more synonymous with the show's winning format. In the same vein, if producing and livestreaming content on Instagram Live were to become the dominant medium, what the reality genre is known for would change completely.

Studies in years to come on the downfall of cable and network television must include sections on the "double dipping" of many traditional companies, with shows like *The Traitors* originally becoming available for streaming on Peacock, then airing on NBC linear, then going back to Peacock, then creating spin-offs for NBC linear once again. This can substantially reconsider many of the changing attributes in the industry discussed in this study and should be tackled separately in many cases.

In order to gain a full picture of the health of reality television as we know it defined now in the near and long-term future, statistics and raw data must also be separated out by unique viewers and sub-genre. This will make it substantially easier to indicate if one sub-genre is plummeting or lifting the entire reality umbrella. Unique viewers, in contrast to total minutes watched, add a much more even playing field to data collection. Minutes watched heavily favors programs that are repeat watches and longer in total timespan. This is specifically important for the reality genre as lengths and repeatability can differ greatly for live programs compared to pre-recorded. To help narrow down the scope of future studies, it should be noted that while there is not one true definition of a genre, researchers must decide where the proverbial cutoff is. Without this, the limits of what is and isn't become too broad, leading to miscalculations in qualitative data.

5.4 Conclusions

The main lesson gained throughout this study is the gray area of media at specific moments in time. While virtually impossible to predict, the interviews, data, and researched opinions of the business point to continued upheaval of traditional methods of working, distributing, and watching all forms of television. The one true consensus was that change is inevitable, and the opinions of one, no matter how influential, matter significantly less than the tidal wave of an audience. If anything, it can be concluded that the true predictor of reality television's future is the present. Even though this can seem obvious, much of the sentiment of articles, blogs, those interviewed and business leaders pointed towards "seeing the forest for the trees". Every decision may seem rash, every hit may seem triumphant and every loss may seem beyond sinking. But the forest of the genre is not buoyed by one tree and never has been. The collection of uniqueness from a genre so broad has unleashed its signature style in all work of those influenced by it, both on television and not.

The level of influential behavior from within the reality genre became undeniable during this study, especially upon reflection of the most popular forms of television and social media today, as well as the trends that have emerged from streamers. As of writing this section, Netflix released its first trailer for a ginormous *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* based competition series, with hopes of it spawning the service's next hit in a post *Squid Games* competition show world. This is yet another reminder that while one program does not make a genre, it only takes

one success story to catapult the entire genre to the next level. Hopefully, both traditional and new-age reality programming continue to find paths that raise the creative and viewership bar on all mediums.

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Appendix A: Preliminary Interview Questions

1. In a recent Deadline article interviewing 50 producers within reality tv, they identified 3 major changes as catalysts that would help the business in 2025: more live programming, more tax incentives (specifically in California), and networks taking more risks on less tested formats. Do you agree with these and do you foresee these still being major challenges in 5+ years? Which is most and least important? Did they miss anything major that you feel is needed for the industry?

2. During the recent strikes in the entertainment industry reality tv was shelved in a way it had not been during the 2008 strikes, one reason that has led to the 2020s being a downturn for reality tv production. Why do you think this happened and do you see this as a bubble or a continued trend?

3. Even with production numbers down overall, reality tv remains a pop culture staple. Why do you think this is? Do you think it's on the back of a few niche, legacy shows or the genre is still capable of creating standardized hits?

4. Do you foresee reality tv being a go to genre as user generated content becomes more popular? Would newer models fall under the unscripted category better?

5. What do you believe is the most recent successful reality tv model and why?

Appendix B: Interview with Michael Vito Valentino – Editor-in-Chief at *NowThis*

Benjamin Kessler

There's a recent deadline article that interviewed 50 producers, and you've been I've seen your LinkedIn, you've been alive talks where you're talking about the how to appeal to Gen Z and stuff. And this was about appealing to the future of the genre and these high-end producers. They identified three challenges as catalysts. They were like, this would help the business in 2025, which was more live programing, more tax incentives and networks taking more risks on less tested formats. And I don't think this has anything to do with you, actually. But I'm curious to know in your world, with your vertical based semi scripted formats that you guys are doing, what do you think are the most, challenging things right now and maybe things that need to be catalysts for the future? as legitimizes that you're seeing and you talk about for kind of the, the halfway world you guys are in for, appealing to everyone and the other half that's more niche heading to Gen Z.

Michael Vito Valentino

Well, I'm actually before I answer that question, I'm curious what you mean by half. Are you talking like, it's like a talk show model where, like, half of it scripted, meaning the questions are scripted? Yeah.

Benjamin Kessler

That's so. And how would you identify like the genre that you guys are doing?

Michael Vito Valentino

I definitely think we play in the unscripted world. I think we're the next step of unscripted in certain aspects, but also, it depends on the show. I think it's, you know, we're half and talk and half and unscripted, right? We have a show called judging. that is, you know, our take on, Gen Z take on a quarter, on court T.V.. And like that one, for example, is like, of course we're doing pre-interviews and same way that court T.V. exists figuring out okay what, what is it that they're, they're either suing the person over or they're guilty over. Right. And then from there we're kind of, we're helping shape the story. But at the end of the day, what happens on set is pretty organic. And we're working with comedians etc., because we want it to feel authentic but really want on big personalities. I think in a day, you know, the biggest thing the people are looking for is authenticity, right? So and reality TV or in, or even, you know, in the talk genre, people want authenticity. Gen Z in particular wants authenticity. And they have a really good voice meter. So when you don't give that to them, I think that they kind of, bulk, continuing continue watching. And they, they'll just, you know, especially in the vertical space, they're going to continue scrolling. Right. And scrolling is the equivalent of changing the channel for us. So I think in terms of large challenges, it's audiences, consuming habits continue to change rapidly. So we're always trying to kind of work with them and change. But at the end of the day, we're trying to create fandom. So, once you create that fandom, you build that loyalty, particularly with the host and then with the format. And then the, audience itself is a little bit more forgiving. From a production standpoint, though, you know, we're doing this on a shoestring budget. So how can

we make, you know, the highest quality, the most premium, show possible with maybe not that many people. And, you know, sometimes having too many people also kind of, hurts the creative in a way, because then it's, you know, with too many cooks, the, the creative vision isn't kind of being, realized. So I think it's very much a balancing act on that side of things. And then also with social media, it's different than traditional, where it's like you have to have an always on presence. So we're not really having, we're not having seasons in order to keep up with the demand from the audience and stay relevant, we have to be always on. And on these short form platforms, we have to have an always on mentality. So, like, we don't have seasons. We're continuing creating shows week over week, month over month, you know, season over season, not in the way of TV, but like actual physical seasons where, you know, if we're filming a man on the street, the show in winter, it's going to be drastically different of an experience because in the gorgeous, weather of the summer. So those are just things that we kind of, you know, they're, obstacles that come with the nature of playing in the space. But with that being said, there's also no rulebook for what this is. I always say, like, what's revolutionary about what we're creating isn't so much the formats themselves, because all these formats have been around, you know, or these tropes have been around for the past 150 years of TV has existed. What makes them revolutionary is how we're taking them and, reformatting them to fit a Gen Z audience. And how do we make them work on vertical?

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. I'm curious to, something that has been pinpointed on everyone I've been talking to. And it was the first thing you said was authenticity. And one of the places I work at is Amazon Live, which is Amazon's home shopping channel, and we do a bunch of shows live. We're live streaming all the time out of the, Amazon Studios. And the number one note we get from higher ups is it looks too well-produced, it looks too much like TV. And so one of the questions I've been asking everyone I've been talking to is that reality TV and unscripted has kind of been a pop culture staple where even if you don't know anything about The Real Housewives or anything on Bravo, you've seen a clip from them talking on social media. You see how large they do on an Instagram Live that they're really gathering these numbers. And you guys, more than anyone, are competing with this user generated content upheaval where it's like, yep, everything. You know, any reality TV star, the first place they're going to is they're creating, like you said, a trusted area, as if they're the host of their own show on social media. So when you think about the genre going forward, do you think it's on the back of these like few trusted formats? Like, you know, I know you watch Big Brother and like, you know, I just talked to someone who works on Top Chef, who he was saying, even if they don't get, you know, millions of viewers, there's still a trusted format. So they still keep getting renewed. Or do you think the genre is capable of creating standardized hits, authenticity or not? Whether it's perceived authenticity, real or fake, do you think what matters more is the authenticity behind it? Or the fact that it that the genre breeds authenticity by feeling spontaneous?

Michael Vito Valentino

I think it depends on, you know, unscripted is, an umbrella term I think of. There's so many genres underneath unscripted, because I think that that's true when you're talking about Big

Brother, survivor, etc. but also, you know, as lifelong fans of the show, we also know that a lot of the stuff that happens in the Diary Room, etcetera, is, created by the producers. You know, it's a it's a lie. Not everyone on Big Brothers is going to be coming on. And they're having these amazing puns like, yeah, although they have a lot of time to be thinking about, you know, a great deal of that is also being produced. same thing, though, with what you know, all these women are watching are predominantly women. On Bravo, these, Andy Cohen shows, they're, you know, I bet they're more scripted than some of the, TV shows that we watch, you know, on the CW and whatnot. But at the end of the day, it's about these, larger than life, individuals. And, you know, people do perceive them as authentic and they're messy. And I think authenticity can show up in different ways. So I think it truly, depends on what, authenticity depends on what the genre is and how it shows up, because you can manufacture authenticity through, you know, the unscripted, chaos of a reality competition show, but also authenticity can be created in the larger than life, you know, messy individuals, the raw emotions that come with a show like, you know, a Real Housewives of New York or whatever you have, you.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And kind of like you're saying with that, you know, that's a show that still can get a pretty large budget. And like you were saying, you're in a tough position because all your budgets are shoestring, where you're competing with these, with everyone, literally anyone can make a video on the internet and you're competing with them for attention. And as YouTube becomes much larger and larger and more people are watching YouTube on their TVs, now more than ever, do you think how do you think the evolution of the budgeting matters for the stuff you're working on? Would you rather have, like what would a larger budget you think do for you guys within your productions going forward? If it gets to that level, like, would you do more horizontal videos or do you think you stick with vertical? Because that's what's working and what people are watching on their phones. What would money change in the future as more money gets piled in and people see the you know, there's only one Mr. Beast of the world. But as people see that becoming more legitimizes and more money gets pushed into it, what do you think is going to change?

Michael Vito Valentino

So oh, so we'll say is right now the best place to, read and grow is still on the short form, platforms because, you know, unless you have the legitimacy of, you know, a time slot on a TV channel, like to gain an audience, the best marketing tool possible is still through the algorithms of Instagram Reels. And, on TikTok. But it's what you do when you when you foster that fandom fans or fans or fans or fans. But what do you do with the fans as you continue to grow and continue creating legitimacy in the space? What do you do when that happens? And then that could go into either yes, longform video. You could, you know, bring your audience from short form to long form and you have more time with them then you're able to, reap the benefits of the AVOD. Then you could also do, you know, live events, depending on what the show concept is. How do you get people to open up, you know, their hearts and minds and their purses to come out and support. And last but not least, merch. Merch is also a very big option.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, this is true. My second last question for you is, you know, like I said at the beginning, the TV producers identified three major changes they want to see in the industry, as you know, catalyst going forward for reality and then scripted TV because you guys like you were saying, you can revolutionize and you can really do anything and test the market. What do you what do you foresee is the biggest challenge as it becomes more and more, I don't want to say oversaturated, but more and more saturated and more and more people copycat each other and copycat, you know, I'm sure if your core TV show does well for Gen Z, you're going to see another one pop up and another one and.

Michael Vito Valentino

I'll start off with the positives. We're not competing over our time slot. You know, there's 24 hours in a day, eight hours for sleeping, eight hours for working, eight hours for everything else. Theoretically. Right now, everything else is where you end up living your life. So that's where you're hanging out with your friends. You're playing video games and you're consuming content. So in that time, you know, there's more than enough to go around for all of us. And as you're scrolling, people spend on average, I don't know, 2 to 3 hours a day on TikTok is I think that the recent number that I saw, you know, if I'm getting two minutes of your time, three minutes of your time, that's actually unbelievable. But also someone else, you get that time for you, too. So I don't think, you know, we're not competing over times that we're not even competing over the same ad dollars is enough money to go around for everyone. So I think for us it's more so like, okay, let's continue legitimizing the space. There's no such thing as competitors. If we're all legitimizing the space, you know? And of course, there's friendly, you know, everyone wants to outdo the other person. Of course, that's like it's a spirit of competition, you know, and like sports, etc. but they were legitimizing a space. And we're all chasing these media, the media ad buys. We're not in the influencer space anymore. We want, you know, the major media advice. Now, the challenges that come up are there's not a lot of people that understand the storytelling. You know, you could go to some people that work in, traditional television, but unless they understand how to make, content that is native to the social platforms that they're servicing, it's going to feel very inauthentic. So I think a challenge for us is there's only a certain amount of people that, have, you know, really understands what it takes to do the type of storytelling in this 60 to 90 second. format. So with that is a resource thing. You know, hiring right now is a bitch. Yeah. But it's so difficult to hire, and find people that understand this type of storytelling that have the taste. But on top of the know how to do this type of, storytelling on top of it, you know, how do you you can make a polished product? That's the thing about all this, it's not about just making a polished show. It's about making one that actually fits in the algorithm. So that's the hardest thing is like finding individuals that get it, understand it, and then also continue to replicate it and teach, folks how to do, this type of, this type of storytelling on a larger scale because like, scalability is paramount to the success. And luckily, you know, I've done this now, this type of, vertical video, you know, at three different companies successful and scaled it that way. So, like, I, I've been very fortunate to figure out, okay, what are the types of people that we need to bring in to help scale, help grow. And then from there, create successful formats. We

launched Are You okay, for example, which is, you know, one of our quote unquote Z talk shows. And, in the past four months, we've been over 540,000 followers. And they're getting, you know, unbelievable viewership across videos. And it's been really exciting seeing that type of growth. And we attracted the likes of, Pink Panthers, Lizzo, Anderson, PAC, and then plaid, etc. so it's been really exciting seeing that come to fruition on that side of things. With that being said, scaling is so important to the continued growth of a company, but also, you know, humans being a resource. How do we get that into play and ensure that these people are set up for success?

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, and scaling is unique for you guys too. Whereas like the guy I was talking to the other day who works on Top Chef says, like, you know, I could do three Top Chef seasons and spread them out over the course of a year and a half. And one be have digital exclusive and they're all just Top Chef. You need that authenticity where like Top Chef fans are going to watch it no matter what. But with you guys it has to hit a certain note with the audience you're aiming for. Like you were saying, native to the platform. Because if you just keep churning out a million, are you okay? Is eventually it won't feel as authentic to as the people that are first finding it. So you need those different formats to keep that authentic feeling to the channel and that you guys are really, you know, experimental and showing your audience like, look, we're not just a one trick pony here.

Michael Vito Valentino

So that that changes things to, so and that's the whole thing. Yeah. Just a one trick pony. And we have to have offerings for all different types of things, but particularly want to have different offerings, different verticals for different advertisers. We want to make sure that we're attracting, you know, we have an offering for whatever an advertiser's needs are. And I think that's the biggest thing for us, because at the end of the day, TV exists for commercials. So, you know, how are we, how and, we're no different. We're all here, unfortunately, to make money. So with that, it's like, how can we, ensure that we have enough TV shows to, partner with any type of advertisers that want something so that we can continue developing these relationships, etc.?

Benjamin Kessler

My last question for you is, what do you believe is the most recent in the last five years or so? What's the most recent unscripted model? And it could be something that you guys have done. And now this or something that you've seen on social or, or a method of casting or finding talent or any type of model that you've seen that you've been like, wow, this is like really blown my socks off and been really successful. And it could be a show. It could be a social trend. You've seen anything that you can think of off the top of your head that you're like, this thing really like is the next up and coming thing or blew me away. What comes to your mind first that is like, wow, this unscripted model is really killing.

Michael Vito Valentino

I think, like these pseudo unscripted, like jury duty, I think was the most revolutionary. Like, it was like, you know, how do you take something like The Truman Show making in real life? That was something that I just thought was truly, truly exceptional. I think also looking at Borat coming back, you know, this is America, all these all those types of properties. I thought that was really cool where it's like, you know, it's kind of a fish out of water-esque, where the fish out of water is, is the, the scripted side of things. Then you have someone else kind of, you know, it's it's half scripted, half unscripted, but like, you're it's more of a social experiment than anything else.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. No, that makes sense. And yeah, that's my last question for you. Do you have any other thoughts on what you guys are doing or, things that you feel should be mentioned? When I talk about unscripted in the world of social media.

Michael Vito Valentino

And you'll see, like what we do is we take is really exciting formats and we attach them with, over the top creators and from there build an audience. And like, we've gotten to do that in so many different ways. You had a show like that was our version of Ferris Bueller's Day Off, where like, we brought people, we had people have skipped work to go and do really fun activities like skydiving, indoor skydiving rather, or to, like, go to Margaritaville, like stupid stuff like that. So that was a fun one. We have like, you know, just so many different types of things. Crosswalk crashes, like I was finding out of individuals are actually dateable or not. And that one's doing pretty well right now. So it's like, how do we, you know, further create that authenticity, but really, create fandom in the space and everything I do. You know, I love to add a flare, a celebrity. So for all of my shows, I always create them in a way that like, how do you, have as a celebrity could come on and help promote, you know, their album, their movie, whatever it may be, but also in the same way that celebrities are their own personal brands. It's how do we promote actual physical brands, you know, so that advertisers come in and they could really, see how their products could show up in this quote unquote, authentic commercial, I think we're going back to the world of, like, presented by Revlon and things like that. because that feels more, more authentic and less intrusive. I always tell people brands it's not about integration anymore. That was a big thing, you know, ten years ago. Now it's about how does your brand elevate the actual content itself? Because people are exhausted. So, you know, Gen Z doesn't hate ads. They hate shitty ads. So at the end of the day, if you're showing up authentically and you're helping elevate the content they know and love day in and day out, then you're going to come out on top.

Appendix C: Interview with Jenny Gnirke – Development Producer, former Story Producer

Benjamin Kessler

There's a recent deadline article that interviewed 50 producers within the reality TV world, and they really identified three major changes as catalysts that they said would help the business in 2025 and beyond. And those were more live programing, more tax incentives, specifically in California and networks taking more risks on less tested formats. And I want to know if you agree with these and if you foresee these still being major challenges in five plus years.

Jenny Gnirke

I agree that production companies would want those things. I think right now, especially with the big contraction that's happening just industry wise and scripted and unscripted production companies are really struggling to make a bottom line and keep the lights on. So I, you know, I primarily work in small documentary type television, you know, true crime, started out as MTV doing a maid and teen Mom, which was made for very cheap, more running gun, smaller documentary shows and I have worked on bigger docusoaps like Basketball Wives and Love and Hip Hop, which are more expensive to make, but ideally a live programing or a big concept show like Love Island is going to come with a big budget. So I think that answer feels to me more reflective of what the business, the production companies need in order to survive, rather than what actually audiences want or what network wants. And there is a big, I would say, gap right now between all three of what those things people need. I think audiences want good stories, and stories that they can talk about in the watercooler with their friends or something that, you know, interest them. And I think a show like Love Island that comes out once a day, once you know, every day and is a big event show, is that, but I also think, quiet on the set. Is that and the budget between those two shows is a vast difference. So I think it's more about the storytelling than it is. The concept. and I think the networks just want, you know, to make shows that people watch and that they can make money off of and they can get streamers, you know, people sign up for streaming. So, you know, yeah, I mean, I think that's one way. But I also think there's a lot of ways that you can, you know, invest a lot of money into something like that. And it doesn't work, you know, a Squid Games, you know, format. Squid games, like the unscripted show, is a huge success for someone like Netflix. But you could do something big like that, and nobody watches it, too. so it's not like the particular part of the business I work in, like these bigger kind of game show or live events. So I do know, you know, great development producers would come up with the concepts all the time and they really struggle to sell them. So, it really has to be the right situation of the right concepts, the right branding and the right talent. And those are three hard things to bring together. but I think Netflix is tapping into live events in a different way. I struggle to know how much that's going to be unscripted TV and more, like concerts, sports, that kind of thing. I think that there's a lot of different directions unscripted is going to go in. And I think the the difference between scripted and unscripted and sports and live events are all going to be very blurred in the next, like ten years.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, definitely. And just within that, you know, because you were saying you have worked on a variety of shows with different budgets and kind of that appeal some to the reality space and some more to the unscripted overall space. Do you think that within those three, the more live programing, the more tax incentives and the networks taking risks? Do you think that the executives and producers missed anything major that you can think of, that you feel maybe is needed, like you're saying for the audience or for the industry? That would help, shows that you're saying maybe couldn't find that budget, find it in the future.

Jenny Gnirke

Yeah. I mean, I think in general, audiences are more savvy. they understand reality TV in a different way than ten, 15 or 20 years ago, you know, like, you know, anyone who watches housewives is aware that producers are involved, that they ask questions and they set things up. Like, all of that is a little bit more open now. And like audiences are interested in that, especially in the like. Bravo versus, you know, fan accounts spend all day trying to figure out, you know, what did this person really mean? Or where are they coming from? Or what was production driven versus talent driven. And, you know, there's a whole behind the scenes market of trying to parse those things. And I think people want authentic storytelling about real people's lives, whether that's a docusoap like Housewives or a true crime program or another kind of documentary like not quite in the SAT, which, you know, it's sort of true crime. It was on IG. and I think, you know, audiences are driven towards that just as much as audiences are driven towards a high end, like Love Island type show. I think we're almost going back to, you know, early, like, early MTV, you know, docureality shows like Real World or even made or, true Life, like, people loved those shows. And I think it was because it was really raw and real. And I think, why everyone's trying to chase the next thing. It's like, well, those other shows were made for like no money. People loved them. And you got a glimpse into like, people's lives. And I think that's just as relevant today as it is. You know, we just see a lot of that on Instagram. We see a lot of that on TikTok. We see a lot of that on YouTube. But people will watch that. They watch YouTube on their TV, you know, for, and so I think, you know, everyone's trying to tap into what, why are these YouTubers so successful and how do we bring them into, you know, mainstream media? And it's like, I think in ten years there's not going to be a mainstream media versus YouTube. YouTube is just going to be like the same as Netflix or the same as Hulu. the production quality might not be as good, and content creators are going to own their own content, but, I mean, I, I see that that's a huge, a huge marketplace that, you know, might not sustain a huge production company, but will be a huge part of the audience viewership.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, I totally agree. And you kind of gave me a great segue to my next, couple follow ups. So I just want to first go back to what you were saying with, you know, show like The Real World, which, you know, the challenge still continues. Don't have the real world anymore. But that show, you know, really started the genre in a lot of ways and propelled it. And, you know, we've seen with the recent strikes, one of the outputs was there was actually less reality TV being Greenland and produced compared to like the oh eight strikes. And reality TV is still a pop culture staple. And you really talked about that with the behind the scenes now being just as

large on social media in a lot of ways. But I was curious to know if you think that reality TV and unscripted remains this staple on the back of these few kind of niche legacy shows like the Housewives genre that, you were talking about? Or do you think that these shows that are still being created are still new? Do you think they're still capable of creating hits and kind of holding up to that standard that it was 10 or 15 years ago, or do you think that it's a new leaf now? And like you're saying with the YouTube, sphere, it's just a whole new ballgame?

Jenny Gnirke

No, I think I think, the strikes were not reflective of unscripted at all. I think oh, eight really, broke through, to for, you know, a lot of people to order more reality. But I think it was going in that way anyways. I remember still like having worked in this industry for what seems like not that long, but now I feel like an old timer or something. I remember everyone being like, streaming is going to kill reality TV because no one's going to choose to, like, click on reality TV on Netflix. Like if their choice is like a high and, you know, like filmmaker driven series versus, you know, something like Housewives, they'll never choose that. And it was like, you're so naive because, look, then Netflix got into the game. Selling sunset was huge. and you know, like every, you know, there's been so many predictions of the death of reality TV and they've all been wrong. And reality TV just keeps getting back stronger. And I think a big reason for that is, you know, when, you know, if you go back to storytelling, even from like the beginning of time, you know, big reason that people wanted to hear stories is because they wanted catharsis. At the end of the day, you know, they're working hard job, they're dealing with their families. Like whatever struggles you're going through in life, you want to sit down and hear a story and like, you know, process whatever you're going through that story. and a lot of times, sometimes it's also just like I had a hard day and I want to laugh. Right. That's where comedies come from. So, you know, I've had a lot of people let us know in L.A. But when I lived in New York, you know, who would give me the critical, you know, look, whenever I said I work in reality TV, and to me, I was like, listen, they would say Shakespeare was for groundlings, like, was for poor people. And they during that time, he was not well respected, you know. And now we study Shakespeare in every high school in the world, right. So like, I think that people want to think that it's a lower brow form of entertainment, but it's actually a much more real form of entertainment than like a scripted series where someone's taking, you know, I just did a great panel, for this, for which I'm on the board of the Associates wing. About scripted versus unscripted and how, you know, they take true crime stories and make it, you know, first a podcast, then it becomes a true crime docu series, then it becomes a scripted series. And it's like, essentially you're just taking someone's stories and like, you know, manipulating it to fit like a better form of narrative in the scripted sense. But like the reality TV version is like you're just seeing Kyle Richards get divorced from her husband and she's processing that on TV the best she can. You know? And you can make a much more fascinating scripted series on that, but like, you're seeing the real thing play out. So I think going back to your initial point of, you know, your question was about the, you know, future as far as, asking your question again.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, it's kind of if you think that the genre is being held up by these legacy shows or if it's still capable of creating these new hits that will be.

Jenny Gnirke

You know, yet.

Benjamin Kessler

Just as fruitful.

Jenny Gnirke

Okay, so this is what I wanted to bring up, like, you know, Secret Lives of Mormon Wives, which is really just these girls on TikTok. Yes. That, you know, just have these kind of scandals. And then it became a huge freaking hit, that nobody really expected. So, yeah, I don't I don't think that, you know, it's his legacy shows being held up because, you know, like, there's huge hits all the time that keep popping up. And if anything, it's like these content creators are fueling, then that's hits. Like, if anything, there's a new pipeline, like, okay, like there's a new pipeline for reality TV because like, content creators make these TikToks or they make these crazy stories. I think there was another one, like Dancing With the Devil that was like a Netflix doc. and then they become an unscripted series and then they can get brand deals. So it's like there's a whole ‘nother pipeline of like celebrity and reality that's all intermingled. so yeah, I think if anything, it's like all the lines or everything is just going to become more and more blurred over time. because, you know, a lot of people say to me, oh God, I don't want to make reality TV, I want to make a documentary. And I'm like, okay, but these production companies that make secret lives of more wives, they also make Netflix documentary. They also make like they don't make a film festival movie because they want to have that cachet. And they want to have the hit and they want to make money. So the creators and the people who are behind a lot of these shows, like and these documentaries, they're not like different, like the same producers that are making, you know, a high end, like quite on the spot to also turn around and make a return to a true crime series that you like. So it's like everyone has their own know, and then they'll go on YouTube and make their own YouTube series. So I think, you know, it's about being flexible as a producer, but also it's like all these genres are the same, you know, like you know how to pick up a camera, you know how to interact with people, you know how to construct something in the form of like a TV show, a documentary, a podcast. Like it's all the same. It's just storytelling, you know?

Benjamin Kessler

And, one aspect just going to what you were talking about with the, you know, there's always in your head it's interesting because when you read about unscripted and reality TV, you always read like you were saying about the death of reality TV and the death of this. And you never really, you know, there's new drama shows every year. A lot of shows get canceled after one season. Some don't even make it that. There's new comedy shows every year, but you never read like it's the death of the comedy show. That's just not in the strategies fear. And so when you look at it, you know, it's like people are always preying on these shows that pop up. And, you

know, my weird metaphor is like, everyone knows LeBron James. He's been an NBA player for 20 years. The average time of an NBA player is probably is like 3 to 4 years on average. So, you know, you have the survivors of the worlds that are on 20 years, but most of these shows in general only lasts a couple of years, if that, if you're lucky too. And then on top of that, it's like just such a hurdle to get made that there's even less TV on TV now, like you were saying with YouTube. So my question going back to YouTube is that, you know, we've seen a huge rise in user generated content, and YouTube is like fighting for the top spot with Nielsen on Nielsen's charts, with streaming every month now. And majority of that is user generated content. Other than, you know, there's a small percentage of YouTubers, I'll call them that. Like are the Mr. Beast types that have millions and millions and those are kind of the outliers. Whereas most of the material on YouTube is homemade, let's call it. So with that becoming such a rise you were talking about earlier and becoming more and more popular, and a lot of it's unscripted in nature. Do you foresee the reality and the unscripted nature, the genre just kind of morphing into here's the new place to do it, and maybe the new style or do you think newer models will find a way to succeed? Maybe on in different ways of programing, just on different platforms?

Jenny Gnirke

Yeah. You know, it's tough because I think every, every channel has a little bit of a different brand. And I think that is kind of important to differentiate in a way. so, you know, okay, I'm watching a Bravo show versus a Hulu show like Bravo and Hulu right now have kind of these sort of similar styles where it's like, you know, they have secret lives of Mormon wives, they have Kardashians and they have, they have Vanderpump Villa, which Lisa Vanderpump was a big star from Bravo. I've watched a little bit less of the Hulu stuff versus Bravo, but like you can tell because Hulu shows have a bit of a chaotic way of editing. well, not so much Kardashians, because that's a little bit more chic in the way that they want it to be presented. But like, you know, I know more and wives, it's like, don't throw in a bunch of TikTok videos or throw in some crazy interview bites, like, they'll have interview bites at the end. They really go for like, more of the messy content. It's almost like I want to say Bravo meets like a VH1, MTV style. Yeah.

Benjamin Kessler

Do you think that's a product of the fact that it's on Hulu and made by similar, you know, editors and production companies? Or do you think a show, you know, Secret Lives of Mormon Wives could be like its own YouTube channel that makes you know, in the future that makes full episodes like that and has do you think you would have a different style if it were on YouTube? But basically, my question is, do you think that style is lent to the companies making it or to the genre itself?

Jenny Gnirke

Well, I mean, I'd like to think and I think I've worked on a lot of different network and companies. TLC particular has a very strict style of editing. and I've worked for different companies that make TLC shows, and they communicate that differently to you as a producer.

But when you work on multiple, you realize it's really coming from the network's branding perspective.

Jenny Gnirke

And so I think if you work for really good network, like a Bravo or TLC or I think Hulu is starting to really break into that. Like no matter what company you work for, no matter who you work for, there's not network notes coming down. There's network directives that are are directing you towards a bigger vision for their their network. So, you know, you know, TLC has very in the moment feeling like they like to have a theme that they almost see everybody walk into the room, they see everyone leave the room, they don't have chaotic cuts, and you really feel like you're sitting in a full scene. So their scenes are just like longer and but you know, when you're watching a TLC show. So when we start talking about YouTube, you know, we have these different creators, right? And there's really no overarching style for YouTube. Like maybe you could say like a mr. beast or whatever, just because he's so huge. I do not profess to be a YouTube expert in any way, but I would say like the challenge going forward with YouTube is like these individual creators and kind of start to make their brands, and maybe that successful one channel. But I think, you know, someone like Mr. Beast is really the only one who's, you know, really starting to do this. But like creating multiple channels, multiple shows, multiple like different, content streams, but all feel like this is branded my thing. And I think for audiences that will be easier for them to know. Okay, well, I like this guy's stuff. It's the same as like, you like Netflix or you like TLC or you like you'll try any of their shows because you're a fan of five of their shows. And that's really what came down to the death of cable as well. It's like you have this full cable package, and maybe you have 1 or 2 streamers, but like if you have a cable, right? And they've done studies on this that, you know, I'm probably not quoting accurately, but like there's really when you have a cable package, you're watching five channels like oh yeah. And because it's just too much overload and you're like, well, I like three Bravo shows. So I'm gonna watch all the shows. I watch all the shows because I like them. So I'll give almost any Bravo show a chance. that doesn't mean I watch all of them. But like, you know, sometimes, like Real Housewives in Atlanta, I'll fall off on them. Be like, I have five on you to watch, you know? But like, essentially, I think for YouTube, it's just the diversity of content. How are you going to get through all that? And I think, you know, that that's also what production companies and people are trying to figure out right now, because there are some people who came very early in YouTube who are making tons of money. But if I set up a YouTube channel tomorrow, with all my experience and all these things, and I have a great concept and a great but it's really hard to make money on YouTube. YouTube as a job, as a as an entity is really coming for networks right now. But if you're an individual creator and you're putting all that money in upfront, you're not really getting that much back. You know, everyone's trying to figure out this goldmine of YouTube. And I have seen a lot of people, you know, they're struggling and they're really not making their money. Right? Yeah. So that's going to be the challenge, I think, too, is like, you know, I, I talked to a YouTube creator, you know, someone who does consulting. He came from the network. And and you know, he's like you, you know, I have people who are making really high end content and they're not making any money back. And so now they're having to dial back their production, you know, the level of production they're putting into it because they're

really, you know, they're not getting anything back for it. And so they should have started out smaller, grown a following, and then amped up their production budget because, you know, then they would have money to play with. Right. And I think Mr. Beast has talked about this too. I think his first, you know, how over many years he didn't make any money, he just kept funneling it back into the business.

Benjamin Kessler

That's it.

Jenny Gnirke

It's like a challenge, you know?

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, it's a there's definitely. It feels like two schools of thought, when it comes to that, too, where, you know, you had cable, which is, you know, programmers and developers are deciding, like, here are your options. And then streaming and YouTube are kind of two peas in the same pot where, you know, anyone can make a YouTube video, not anyone can make, you know, a show that ends up on Hulu. But they do have the same kind of feel because like you were saying that there was that overload where there's just so much, there's so much on each platform that it feels like you have an endless variety of choice where actually, you know, both of them are using algorithms to push things to us. And a lot of the, a lot of cases. And so, you know, I think what's interesting, what you were saying is, you know, the there's a lot of YouTube creators who are making things that maybe have a different style to like those Hulu shows you were talking about, but they would both fall under unscripted. So a lot of people watch these vlogs, that are inherently unscripted because it's just a creator making a video. And, you know, I'm really interested in tracking the genre to see if, like, you know, kind of it's interesting what you're saying with the production notes being, oh, we, you know, we don't like some intense cuts. We like watching people enter a door or leave a door so we know where they are. And a lot of YouTube's fears, it's the exact opposite. And so seeing that these two opposite ways of creating things fall under the same genre is, it's just really intriguing to me to see where that's going to go. And really, my last big question for you is, what do you believe is the most recent really successful unscripted model and why? And it could be an actual show. It could be just an idea. It could be a way of making something that you've seen, that you're like, this was actually a genius way of making this. Anything that you've found recently that you're like, this was something that was really successful out there in your work and that you've seen, that you think is like, you know, being at the top of the, the unscripted genre right now.

Jenny Gnirke

Oh, gosh, that's really, really tough question, actually. because I think I've seen a lot of success, but there's nothing that's been like, this is going to, for me. I don't know, I'm really thinking about it. I don't know if there's anything that I've seen that I'm like, wow, like it. If anything, it's like going back. I keep telling everyone that if it goes back to ten years ago when I was kind of, you know, I've been in this industry like 17, 18 years now, like going back to sort of where we

were ten years ago. I think that might be just better for the business. but like and the reason I say that is a lot of the questions and the conversation we're having now while we're focused on unscripted, I think there's just such a larger conversation about the industry that really like if in some ways and I was talking to a writer last night at this event I was at, and I was like, and the scripted is a bit weathered from this, like, as much as I know so many producers out of work, so many editors, so many talented people not working right now, we are faring better than scripted. But ultimately the industry, and as much as, you know, you can, hate on any of these studio owners, like, you know, salaries or whatever, every business is really, really struggling to, figure out the future of this business. and, you know, attending Real Screen this year, there was a lot of crazy predictions, like medical companies sponsoring shows. I was like, I don't know about that. Like, I generated a show. It was like, okay, maybe, like, I don't know, I think everyone is pulling at straws to figure out where are we going to be. And not even ten years, like five years, because it's almost like an a, like a nuclear bomb hit the entertainment industry. And that's like the only way I can explain it, because, you know, cable has for a long time been very antiquated. I think not enough blame is placed on the cable companies because no millennial wants to sign a two year contract to pay an exorbitant amount of money to watch TV. That's been that way for a while. And then you have streamers coming in to fill the place of like, what would be cable. And, you know, all these companies really underestimated the amount of streaming. You know, people committed to their streaming service like they thought 100,000, you know, subscribers would get, at least to, you know, equal out. But now we're seeing you really need you know, 100, I'm sorry, 100 million, 100 million subscribers. You're really seeing now that you need double that. And then when you're talking about double that, you're talking about global. You can't just get that from America. So there's really only a couple of streamers that are even global. So you know, when you see the bigger picture of the industry, you kind of realize that, like, so much needs to change because the business models need to be profitable or else it's not going to make sense. but essentially we're reinventing cable because all these streamers and bundling, in order to get to the amount of subscribers that they need in order to be profitable, which was just cable in the first place. And then they're adding ads because they need ads, too. So in five years, I feel like we're just going to have a re-engineered version of cable via the internet, which is something they could have done many years ago. So I blame the business lines for a lot of what's happening more than the creative end of things. and that goes on a way higher scale. I'm talking like heads of, like cable companies, heads of like, you know, networks, like, now we're seeing such all these conglomerates come together, you know. But I think at the end of the day, a unscripted hour is going to be significantly cheaper than a scripted hour, no matter what you're talking about, you know?

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, it's really it's extremely surprising me to hear you say that. You think that reality, the unscripted genre, is faring better than basically anything. Right now when it comes to scripted? Because everything you look at, you know, from these media outlets, from looking at the numbers, it's saying that there's less and less. But maybe like you're saying, there's just less and less of everything because everything is becoming so commodified in that sense, where it's like everything's available everywhere at any time except when it isn't, and sometimes it is, and

sometimes it's gone. Yeah, I'm so surprised hearing you say that you were talking to someone recently who? And you guys were basically saying that, you know, you think that from your experience, I don't know if it's anecdotally or not that it's very better right now. Do you think that's, a bubble or do you think that's a trend?

Jenny Gnirke

I think so. You know, I just came out, you know, and I don't know all the statistics on that. Some of this is just my, you know, assessment. Yeah. but, you know, just came out this week, 42% of their writers are out of work, you know, and WGA East is making a huge movement towards unionizing reality and unscripted TV because they need the members to pay off the pensions of their older members. Yes. Essentially. So I think, yeah, you can look at unscripted, scripted, whatever. Everyone's out of work right now. Everyone struggling to tax incentives are horrible, and we're experiencing that just as much as anyone else. You know, like most of home rental shows or a lot of shows right now are getting shipped to Canada. which is something that we never thought would happen to unscripted, you know, I was coming in and they're, you know, they're trying to make the industry better, and I get that. But they're also, you know, you know, the network will shut down the show and moved to Canada if a union comes in. So, you know, we have even less like we have no bargaining power. We have no real union. We have no one really defending us, no one speaking out for us. And so when I think of it in that scheme of things, we are doing better. Because, you know, they have SAG, they have WGA, they have, you know, the Producers Guild, they have like they have a lot more power than we have, and they're doing worse than us. I think. but again, like, yes, we are getting less reality. But if you look at Netflix's top ten, I mean, I do it every couple weeks where I count the top ten and how many of it is on documentary or unscripted versus scripted, and it's what I see consistently. Half of it is unscripted. And so to me, I'm like, that would never have been the case ten years ago. That's the other thing I think people don't realize, like we are still a new genre. Like, I mean, when I started out in this field, you know, we had just come off of the like, flavor flavors and those kind of like early VH one shows. Yeah, Real World was maybe like ten years before that. But like scripted TV has been around, you know, for decades at this point. And we're really only talking about 20, 30 years of reality TV, right? Like, yeah, not even.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah.

Jenny Gnirke

That's if you exclude like documentaries from that. And you're just talking about no reality TV. Right. So to me I'm like, I think, you know, considering you would never have seen even five years ago, I don't think you would have seen Netflix's top ten have that many unscripted, you know, they only made their first unscripted shows like not too long ago. And everyone said they'll never do unscripted, Amazon will never do unscripted like these shows are going to. These streamers are all about like the high-end film, our tours or whatever. Like now they their biggest hits are like Selling Sunset, you know, so, I don't know, but, going back to your original question of things that shocked me or whatever, I think things that shocked me, things shocked

me all the time. For me as a development producer, I try to think about what's happening in the zeitgeist. and I think that in some ways that's the future, not just like pop culture, but like also what's hitting what are people interested in? Because the like, the culture and span of people are is so low. but there's a lot of stories that hit on social media or will it will hit in articles and people will be interested and then it kind of goes away and I'm like, you know, there's like TikToks about it. I've worked on the, Gypsy Rose docuseries last year. You know, she really became this big like social media, you know, icon, you know, for lack of a better word. and people were just interested in watching her life. And that's how her show got greenlit, you know, and seeing what I was going to be like when she got on here, she never really been an adult ever in her life. That was a lot of TikToks about what was happening these early, you know, 2000 kid shows and people were interested. And to have a real documentary that explored that in that was really interesting. And so I don't know if there's things that I see that shocks me. It's just very hard because when you're in that creative field, too, you'll see something with a hit and you get too wrapped up in that. It can be very like, why didn't I have that hit or whatever? Not that I ever really think that way. So I just kind of stay blinders and the things that interest me and excite me and I want to see more of. And then I try to feed off of that and bring that, you know, with anyone that I collaborate with. I mean, there is a big especially in true crime, there's a lot of, you know, older people who watch true crime and as a millennial, I'm a very different style of how I like to watch documentaries. And blending those two ideas are hard to, so there's a lot of there's a lot of subtle things happening. But yeah, I think anything that's really popped off as something, like I said, for months, whatever happened to those freaking TikTok girls with the swings scandal? That was fascinating. And then all of a sudden the the trailer dropped for yeah, oh, like killing Mormon wives. And I was like, oh my God. Yeah. Like, duh, this. And they made it. And they and they made it so fast and furious, I think, I think they filmed a pilot and then had a big gap of time and then filmed the other like 5 or 6 whatever, episodes they ordered, like very quickly within, like maybe a two month span. and those girls just had so much going on that, like, you know, that that's a huge difference to, you know, like, we used to shoot Teen Mom over the span of a year and make it one series now. And they're filming the real lives. But, you know, they set up events, they set up.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, they condense it all down and, in a more palatable way. Yeah.

Jenny Gnirke

So, yeah, I mean, I think production schedules and budgets are going to keep getting smaller. but that doesn't mean they can't make good programing. Whereas I think with scripted, you know, my husband works in scripted. He's a visual. he does visual effects. he worked on the Netflix, adaptation, live action adaptation of avatar and know and I remember talking to that showrunner and at the time, I was showrunning a show making true crime for like a budget of, like, under 250,000, an episode. He's making a Netflix show, and I can't even imagine the scale of his budget. But like, I'm talking millions and millions of dollars like an hour, right? And we're sitting there and he's like, yeah, there's no money, no money, there's no money. And I'm like, I cannot. I literally have one person doing like ten people's jobs right now.

Benjamin Kessler

And it's funny how we're all in a bubble like that. You know? Money's such a bubble where it's like, if you're part of $1 billion thing, you know, $1 million might be nothing to you. But in another bubble, that's everything.

Jenny Gnirke

Yeah. I mean, I can't even imagine having that budget for anything unscripted, like, even close. But I mean, you know, at the same time, he's not wrong, like, I don't you can't make a show like that for not millions of millions of dollars, you know. Yeah. and I think you're seeing in the film and now too, with Netflix, like, they, they're their most they keep making their most expensive action movies and their the stories are not as they're stories. Right. And if the story is not good, it doesn't matter how much you spent on the visuals or the star or anything really. And I and I think you're seeing that in the film world too, like A24 is making amazing content. even though they're making more expensive films now, neon, it's really like all their movies are amazing, like, because people just want to watch good content and they don't care how much money was spent on it.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. Nobody watching is like, oh, like you only saw that with like, severance where it was reported it was like $20 million. And people were like, how how is that, you know, an episode like, how does that happen?

Jenny Gnirke

But I started watching that too. And so, I don't know, in some ways that doesn't shocked me, but in other ways I'm like, yeah, they film in a cubicle, like, what are we talking about?

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And you read that like Apple is losing money on it, but then you're like, well, Apple's worth $1 trillion. So really, what is that?

Jenny Gnirke

Going back to the business thing, how do you as a little, you know, even indie channel or, you know, these legacy channels, you're making small things, you're going to compete with Apple, who will spend endless money on a show about people in cubicles. And they don't even care. They don't even care about how many people watch it. They don't even care. Like, Amazon's the same way. Like I remember my boss. And this has got to be like over ten years ago, he had this weird, like sit down and ask me questions session. And we were asking something about streamers. And he's like, Amazon does not care if two people watch it. Well this was early on and then things have changed since then. So this is like early on when Prime was just launched and they weren't even doing reality at this point. And he was like, they do not care how many viewers they watch, if they get two viewers, but they get ten subscribers to Amazon Prime, they've calculated the number between someone who doesn't have Amazon Prime, versus

someone who is Amazon Prime, like how much they spend on Amazon, which is like a vast number, right? Like thousands of dollars a year. So they just want to get people to sign up for Prime, because regardless of the $100 you pay a year, you're gonna spend way more money, because the convenience of having it is just going to be like, you know, I'm the worst that, you know, I mean, like, just.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And that dives into a different topic altogether, but it's more about creating that sphere where, like you were saying, you know, I saw a statistic about podcast two where it's like people only have like up to five podcasts or like you're saying with the cable channels, you're really only watching five channels. It's going to be the same way with streaming if it's not already. And if you don't have that infrastructure there, it's all fighting to be one of those 3 to 5 slots in someone's brain. rather than fighting to get them to watch a show.

Jenny Gnirke

And scripted or unscripted, you need to have a show everyone's talking about. Everyone's talking about severance. I had no interest in severance the first season it came out, I don't think I even heard about it. Came back. Everyone's talking about everyone's, you know, and I'm like, well.

Benjamin Kessler

I guess I have to watch it. Yeah.

Jenny Gnirke

And it's the same thing with unscripted. Everybody was talking about quiet on the set when it launched. Like everybody I had text from like 5 or 6 people before I watched it being like, have you seen that? Have you seen it was like it came out yesterday. How have you seen this? So I think that that is just across the board with content. Everyone's fighting for eyeballs. But yeah, for me, I think the momentum in that or the model in that is, you know, tapping into the zeitgeist. but I think for unscripted, it's also like you got to push out that content kind of fast, and that's hard. a YouTuber, you know, like there's this, pure crime case I've been following and working on in development. And, you know, I'm trying to pitch and it's like there's endless amounts of YouTube creators talking about this case every single day. And like, some of them are making a lot of money doing that, you know, like they're making all of their, you know, years salary talking about this case. So they talk about it every single day.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And it's all it's all symbiotic, like you're saying where the social media and the YouTube and supports the big budget and of these documentaries and vice versa, because it gives both sides things to talk about and keep. That's like I stop for as long as possible.

Jenny Gnirke

Yeah. But you know, it's also like I think, the Johnny Depp Amber heard, documentary for Netflix, which, you know, it reflected the, the conversation. I would say, but it did really well. I

think it was in the top ten. You know, Netflix just started releasing their streaming numbers pretty sporadically, but they had released streaming numbers. And I remember that doc being like in the top ten, and I hadn't seen it yet. And I was like, dang, that was really that, you know, streams, you know, we're talking about competing with Shonda Land and, you know, some big stuff. Yeah. And so of course, I wanted to watch it. And a lot of it is, content from content creators that they just, you know, they made deals with them and they use their stuff, which was really interesting. But like, you know, it is like that's now feeding unscripted. And so I think that's an interesting model that I, I'm interested in working with more, because especially in the true crime genre, it's tricky because some of these cases, like they need to get the word out to get law enforcement to do more or to get the media's attention, or for various, like, really good reasons on the on the side of, you know, the victim or the victims loves a loved ones. But in order to do that, it's not just Nancy Grace anymore. It's also YouTube. It's also TikTok. It's also Instagram. And then by the time that, you know, it's a fully formed idea or concept, which it does need to be for a real documentary. You know, a lot happened and you've missed a lot of that. And it's hard when you're making something high end to pick up a camera and just fly out anywhere and just start following it, you know, like a journalist can do that. I think Karen Reed trial was, they just made a doc on ID channel about the Karen Retrials, and they partnered with a great journalist who was there from the beginning filming with her. And, and by the time they ordered it, they probably just had to shoot some interviews to tie everything together. They had the court footage, you know, like that. That's the kind of thing that I think is, is where we're heading, where, you know, networks really want to see a full package of like, you almost have everything before they even greenlight, which is really challenging for a development producer, but also an opportunity. and partnering these content creators could be a great opportunity for that, too. it's just, you know, they are a wild West, you know, they don't have standards the way we have.

Appendix D: Interview with Chris King - Emmy-nominated Executive Producer

Benjamin Kessler

I just want to ask because I was reading, you know, I finding a little bit about you, but I wanted to ask you kind of what your, career has been like in reality and scripted so far and kind of what you've seen and worked on. And just to hear a little bit about you first before I get into the nitty gritty of it.

Chris King

Yeah. Sure thing. Well, I would say that my, experience in reality is unique because I was just speaking to somebody about this. I, you know, the old phrase Jack of all trades, master of none, which sometimes sounds insulting, but I think especially today in the world of reality, the ability to say you've done a number of different things actually comes in very handy, because with the way the world is going, you're asked to kind of do a myriad of things on any job. So, I've done everything from competition and, you know, like shiny floor project runway, top shelf type stuff, big, big stuff and some live stuff down to the really small, you know, two cameras, you know, five-person crew, docusoap type stuff. And so and then I've been branching out into the more unscripted branded lifestyle content. So I do a little bit of everything.

Benjamin Kessler

I'm really interested in looking at both from a production standpoint, like you were just talking about with the rise of social media and user generated content, but also the genre itself. And, you know, there was a huge, upheaval kind of after the 2008 strikes. And then with the most recent strikes, people thought there'd be more reality TV, but there really wasn't. And so, yeah, it's interesting to see where the genre itself, aside from the production aspect, is going. And one thing I've come upon in my research is there was a fairly recent deadline article. They interviewed 50 major producers within the genre, and they really identified three changes as big catalysts that they think would help the business this year and beyond. One was more live programing. One was more tax incentives, specifically in California. And obviously we saw with this Trump news at tariffs on, you know, outside film of the country that who knows what that'll be. And the third was networks taking more risks. less tested formats. So with those three do you find those. Would you agree with those first of all, and do you foresee any of those still being major challenges in five plus years? Or do you see that maybe being bias on these major producers for what they want? What are your thoughts on those three as being big catalysts?

Chris King

Yes, I believe I read that same article and it featured several company owners of companies that I have worked for who I thought were quoted as saying these amazing things. And then I thought, man, I wish they would really do that, you know, because the first number one thing I think is the third one, and that's the ability to take a risk and take a big swing. And whilst it does happen, it doesn't, you know, it's with risk comes the cost and comes the risk that it won't hit and it won't do well and you will have wasted all this time and energy. But the only way for the genre to grow is opera is really stagnant, right? You have your old school hits, your survivors, your American

idols, your, you know, different stalwarts of the genre. And then you have sort of the newer variety, you know, your 90-day fiancé days and really your dating formats that have been really in the zeitgeist in the last couple of years. But if you look back over the last five or so years, and especially post-strike, when you would have thought, you know, these ideas would have ballooned, you really don't have anything that sort of shaking up the space that much. Maybe you could say the traders, because it sort of put the put the competition format on its head a little bit. And, it's an international brand, but, you know, there hasn't been that big, bold idea that has really broken through. The reason for that being, maybe the market is saturated and the audience isn't actually as interested in it as we think. Or people, even people's biggest swings aren't big enough to sort of make people take notice and sort of breakthrough. the second thing is, I've always thought that live programing, first of all, it's got the fun and the sense of like, who knows what could happen. But there have been so many stumbling blocks in the lot in the in the movement of reality going to live, especially on streaming, that I think it's really hit a snag. So I work a lot for Sharp Entertainment. They do 90 Day Fiancé and shows like that, and they just did a live Netflix version of a YouTube show called Pop the Balloon, which is like a do you know it? Yes. And I, I believe it was. And don't quote me on this. It's just not well done and like slapped together and not promoted and really not watch. So really felt like a missed opportunity, you know, but I think live when it comes to reality is the most interesting. But it hasn't been done. It hasn't been done great in a new way. Obviously. Every week on American Idol in its 25th season, people sing live and people vote and all that good stuff. But there hasn't been as sort of a, you know, a new way to make live reality pop, you know what I mean?

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And you've given me a couple of great segue ways. You touched on a couple things that I'm, I'm curious about. And one thing I want to mention, too, with the traders is the traders just based on, you know, I think one of the big reasons they got greenlit here was because it was done by a UK, production company, because it was so successful in the UK, first of all, so that while it was a, you know, a new tested format here, maybe in terms of bringing reality stars together in a different way, which they did for that second season. So you could argue that, you know, it. It was a less tested format. It was already tested in a different market that was just brought over here, which is another way to look at it. But I also want to ask, like you were saying with pop, the balloon is, you know, like you were saying, reality TV has the big saw words. I'm a huge survivor fan. You have The Amazing Race, you have a CBS lineup, you have your you call the shiny floor shows that are kind of there and will be there for however long they want to be and their pop culture staples. And then there's, you know, every once in a while, you get a new show that maybe pops up for a season and then disappears. Or maybe it has a little bit of leverage and comes in. But like you were saying, there's it's hard to find that big bang. So I'm curious that do you foresee reality TV being a go to genre as user generated content becomes more popular and we kind of see social media become a higher, higher form? Do you think newer models that are on social media like that pop the balloon that come to Netflix? Would they fall under the same category, or do you think there's something different?

Chris King

Well, I think both things can be true. I think, you know, broadcast and cable, whilst they might be hanging on by a thread, they're still hanging on and they're always going to be a place where the sort of old school, you know, broadcast and cable will always be places where those tried and true formats, like you said, like a prime time CBS, you know, wide audience type of a show is welcome. But for streaming and even for like, where do most young people get their content now? YouTube, you know, and it's and it is independent creators creating their own content and selling it independently. But that I don't think that type of stuff has not been proven to be able to break through. It's very niche, you know, and people do have success with it on a smaller scale. But there's very few, Mr. Beast, you know, as compared to the small time creators who have 10 to 20, up to 100,000 followers who have created a new model. It's really interesting to see how like, you know, the way the audience, digests and seeks out entertainment content, reads unscripted and scripted, is so fragmented now that you wonder if there will ever be another survivor. You know, a show that I again, I think The traders is the closest thing because it actually gets people talking. Or maybe love is blind, or even like Vanderpump in its late iterations, where it's crossing generations and it's crossing genders and it's crossing interests. For whatever reason, it's so hard to break through now that these smaller, more niche, independent, user generated things are considered a success, when ten years ago they would have been considered a flop. But because you can sort of produce for niche audiences now, you know, it's a whole different business model. So you don't have to reach 10 million viewers week after week, as long as you reach the right viewers for the advertisers or the brands that you're working with specifically.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And so based on that, you think, like the genre as a whole right now is being upheld still on the back of those legacy shows, or do you think because you were just saying there might not be another survivor, do you believe that there could be a hit like Mr. Beast on YouTube that is such a pop culture staple? Social media, whatever it comes to, that could be equal to that? Or do you think it's just going to be different? It's hard to say. Communities.

Chris King

I think that by virtue of the way we consume media now, though, multiple smaller successful niche programs is way, way, way more likely than, you know, an overarching big smash. You know, in the traditional sense, 20 million viewers a week. You know, when American Idol was in its first few seasons, it was it was getting 30 to 40 million viewers at 8 p.m. on a Wednesday night or whatever, every single week. It's just we don't consume and unmasked like that anymore. So I think smaller successes and a lot, I think it's more likely to have a lot of smaller successes than any more like behemoth, you know, ratings juggernaut type of a thing. It's just not the way things work anymore. Even the biggest hits, it's even the biggest hit. It's getting, you know, maybe 10 million viewers in real time a week and then maybe doubling it through DVR and streaming. But that is different than everybody consuming the same media at the same time, and going to work the next day and talking about what happened on survivor the night before. You know, that sort of consumption of media is sort of at, you know, antiquated, you know.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, yeah, I definitely agree with some of that. And from just anecdotally and from the research, I'm finding, you know, it's just maybe that is the way of all TV and we I it's hard to see if it's genre dependent or not. And just like I mentioned earlier, you know, when that oh eight strike happened, there was this huge swing to unscripted TV, but this time with the past couple strikes, they were actually shelved. And they're it's a weird way to look at what people value in production. So I'm curious, with those most recent strikes and production not fully recovering, do you think this was a bubble? Do you think things are recovering for reality TV production, or do you see this as a continued trend that will constantly have a back and forth?

Chris King

Well, a couple of things. So in 2008, I was an intern at, Late Night with Conan O'Brien when he was still in New York. and the strike happened, and I thought for sure I was going to go into late night, I was going to work at SNL, and I was going to, you know, go into scripted. And then the strike happened. And just like you said, the floodgates opened out of necessity, and really forced a new genre to be born. And while it's still a viable genre, mostly because it all comes down to the almighty dollar and you, a less successful reality show is still a smaller risk, budget wise, than an unsuccessful scripted series. You know, it's just so much less expensive to produce all this content. So I think that alone will keep the genre alive for longer than it. Maybe I don't want to say longer than it should, but like it, it's a it goes back to the risk reward formula. It's less risky to produce a show like extract that came out this year on Fox, which is like a big high concept show, and it's doing nominally well, but it probably costs 90% less than rescue High Surf, which was their big show that was supposed to premiere after the Super Bowl that is doing the same numbers, but costs exponentially more money and will be canceled, whereas extracted will probably get multiple more seasons because of the just bottom line of it all. But I will say that it seems to me that the appetite for unscripted in general has certainly subsided. If you look from look at its path from 2008 through now, even though reality existed before 2008. Because I've been watching the real world since I was, you know, a kid. Yeah. So it's not like the genre was created in 2008, but there's Unwra was able to really explode there out of necessity. And I just think host this strike, maybe the necessity wasn't there or maybe it was, but like, there's so many different places to find content that you just didn't feel it as much, you know, because people just don't watch NBC, CBS, at ABC on Mondays at eight. They just watch whatever love is flying whenever they want to binge it or, you know, so maybe it's certainly didn't blow up the world the way it did 2008. But that's also a product of the fact that the media landscape is quite different than it was. It's just not so concentrated. It's so spread out.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And even like you were saying with YouTube, you know, there are literally billions of hours of content on YouTube made by random people for very little money that similar to those shows, some could be considered small successes. Some, like everyone, points to Mr. Beast, but there's hundreds of shows, hundreds of channels that are real shows that have a million plus, you know, subscribers, which is a different metric than a viewer. That is really interesting that I'm

trying to explore, and I'm going to be working on this thesis for another couple months. And my last, written question for you is I'm asking everyone I'm talking to you. What do you believe is the most recent successful reality or unscripted model? And it could be an actual show. It could be an idea. It could be a way of, casting. It could be a way of doing production or just something you've seen that you think is the most successful over the last five years or so. And why?

Chris King

I mean, my I know we've talked about traitors. To me, The traitors is the first thing that pops to mind. And I would say it's because it's not exactly a brand-new model. It's sort of a new take on a classic sort of voting each other out strategy-based competition series. but it's the it's what is unique about it, which is, like you said, it's based off an international format. It's featuring I think that's something that's hot right now that likely will not last very long. Is this like integration of a variety of well known reality? Call them personalities, call them stars, call them whatever you will. You know, like different worlds colliding and people are fascinated to see like, okay, well, what will the guy from survivor having in common with the Real Housewife and what will she have in common with the young girl from Love Island? And so those kind of cross mold, cross cultures, for lack of a better term, seems to be working right now. There is, there and they're trying to replicate it and they're going to do what they do with every mildly successful new take, and they're just going to, you know, wring it dry. I've already seen, got to get out on Hulu, which is like an escape room show with, reality stars from various shows converging in one place. House of villains on E took all of your favorite villains from the challenge. And I love Flavor Flav or whatever, and put them all under the same house. I think there's a finite amount of time that people are going to be that interested in that, but it certainly is of the moment and something that when you look at the mandates from the networks, they all will say like, what is our version of the traitors? You know? So that to me says that's a concept or it on the existing genre that is hot right now. And then I would also say that people just cannot seem to get enough of dating concepts in every which way possible. I mean, Love is Blind and Love Island and mILF manor and I'm I'm dating your grandma and you know, all these like seem it's a golden bachelorette. You know there seems to be. And again, none of these are changing the world the way that the the actual bachelor did when it came on and broke through. But, you know, Love Is Blind is in the top five regularly for all streaming shows across all streamers, you know, and that's that's a clearly identifiable, identifiable genre that still grabs people's attention and it gets young people to watch. And that is when you think about the traditional shows, you don't get youth, the youth audience. They're all watching to truly watching TikTok and YouTube. So when you can capture them with a show like Love Is Blind, it definitely feels like sort of a breakthrough moment, you know?

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And the dichotomy there is really, I think, powerful, like you were saying, because my, my sports analogy is like in football, you know, we all know people love their football team. If you're a, Cowboys fan, you don't care who plays for your team. You're a Cowboys fan. But in basketball, people watching, if LeBron James leaves their team, they don't like their team anymore. And so one is driven by the character and one is driven by the format. The game. And

like you were saying with the traders and with these this new in the moment of colliding, these, you know, celebrity, social media reality personalities is, you know, when that next person comes along, is that next person enough of a character and star driven enough to hold up that format. And that's where you really see is it the format that succeeding or the characters that are succeeding? And with those dating shows, it's clearly right now the format, because they've been doing so well with new people on and on.

Chris King

Again, it's true. It's true because the idea of it's a voyeurism, right? It's the idea that you can drop in on these people in some of their most intimate and embarrassing. You know, you're there almost, to watch someone get rejected. You know, there's something really sinister about it, you know? But it really draws you in and, you know, it's in the it's definitely in the format, but it's also definitely in the casting. You know, there's plenty of people to root for and there's plenty of people to root against. So like Love Is Blind is a great format. And I Love Island is a great concept, but I would argue that without the casting, it's, you know, if you put 15 boring people and have them date each other, it wouldn't matter what format you have because you're not going to keep tuning in unless you love somebody or hate somebody. You know what I mean? Yeah. So I do think it's a little bit of the best of both worlds. And I think I think that's why traders is successful. But as of yet I haven't seen any of the other sort of copycats shows break through to the zeitgeisty because you can't sorry. You can cast eight reality stars from a variety of places and like we said, it's only the show. And the concept also has to make the format has to make sense and that's traders really nails it on both ends. And it's and it feels original. It doesn't feel like a copy. You know, even though like you said, it's a format from another, country that's universal. But so too was The Masked Singer, you know, which is maybe the only other thing I can think of in the last decade. It's sort of fall. It didn't have a lot of staying power. I don't know that it's something yet now, but The Masked Singer was so unique and weird to kind of try and watch and figure out what it was about, but that was like a Japanese or a Korean.

Benjamin Kessler

Yes. Yeah. And there's a show right now that aired in Korea called The Genius Game. And and now they're doing a UK version that's airing. And I am betting money that in the next year and a half there will be some type of US version by the same production company because it's doing so well.

Chris King

Oh, 100%. There are all these, when you're in development and when you're trying to sell shows, there's all these kind of like real screen, I don't know what to call them, like consortiums of production people. And, if you look at like, what kind of gets greenlit over the last few years, there's definitely a, there is an absolute leaning towards existing IP, as they like to say, you know, there's a monopoly based reality show. It's going to be on Netflix coming up. You know why? Because people understand what monopoly is. You know, you don't need to take any time to explain to people what they'll be watching. So your format box is checked off. It's an existing property that people know. And now what's the other half that you cast it with, people or families

or whatever? I don't know what the what the creative is for the monopoly. So I'm assuming it's family, maybe families. And now what you do is you cast people that, people will want to watch in a format that they're, like, so comfortable with. And I guess the other thing that's everybody says is a really, hot right now. But it seems like that's just a talking point, is nostalgia, you know, like the reboot has been king in scripted and unscripted for the past several years. Although I think when you look at the numbers, the successes are outnumbered by the sort of like semi successes or just outright failures, but definitely nostalgia and like comfort and existing IP is something that people tend to go towards now. Yeah. You know, I've been lucky because, you do hear it all the time. Oh, there's just no work. There's no work. But there actually is. If you you have to be able to diversify a little bit and be able to go from one genre to another. I want to say one other thing that I think gets lost in the shuffle that you may want to want to consider as you look towards the future of unscripted. And that is that for a while, especially in the beginning, you didn't we didn't give the audience of reality any credit. And we thought like, oh, this is less smart kind of television. And like it's just comfort food and that kind of stuff. But the audience of reality now is a really savvy, and they're really eager for things that feel authentic. So I think you might see in the coming years a turn even on the big networks, they've always, you know, thought big, thought big. But sometimes the biggest swing is to go really, really small. So sort of like the way true crime has blown up. It's not really unscripted, but it's sort of reality adjacent, I think small scale, intimate, real, real, raw, authentic documentary type reality shows, could see a boon number one there. So see if you can do it for almost nothing. and number two, the audience craves this. Like, again, voyeuristic, unproduced, unvarnished, unlit. Look at people's lives. It's why, 90 Day Fiancé, they did so well. I work on a prison-based show called Love After Lockup.

Benjamin Kessler

Oh, yeah. I've heard.

Chris King

And they want it because they're like, this show is real. It's just like, fly on the wall, throw a camera up and still cast insane, crazy people, but unvarnished. So I would look for small. They're big swings, but small productions.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And I spoke to a woman the other week who's a producer on a couple of true crime. Very small things that, like, have it are still, you know, either being produced or like small things, they end up on YouTube or something like that, or random streamers. And she was saying that they do a lot of, they don't even license a lot of courtroom footage or things like that, that they're just getting reactions from creators and creating spaces with that. And she was like, yeah, people love it because it feels more real. It feels like you're watching something, someone real reacting to it or something that's like happening in real time as opposed to archival footage.

Chris King

Because it's like totally in the moment. I mean, for Pete's sake, people sit on YouTube all day and watch videos of other people reacting to other videos. It's like this insane, mad, thing, but it's

like one of the top. Like they get some top views on YouTube. It's literally watching someone watch something else to see their reaction to it. But I think that speaks to the fact that people want people crave an honest and clearly unedited version of reality.

Benjamin Kessler

I work at Amazon Live, which is the home, their home shopping channel, and we do a lot of like reviewing, you know, going over products. And we have a bunch of, reality people come on. And it's cool to see. But it's so funny because the number one note we get from, you know, the higher ups is this looks too well-produced, this looks overproduced. We need this to look like it's just someone flipping on a camera. And it's so funny because there's like, you know, 12 to 15 of us in the control room making it happen, but they're like, nope, looks too good.

Chris King

Now that we talk, I'm not in this world. It's one of the few worlds that I'm really having dip my toe in. But look at the video podcasting world. It's just two people and a microphone. And like the these, I'm sure you're a New York guy, so, you know, New York Post and Page six, and they're, they're, podcasts or video podcasts or what? I'm not sure exactly what you call it. It's literally just the stars of the reality show coming on and talking shit about, their own show. It's so meta and talk about easy to produce. You don't even have to make the show. You just have to get a studio and have somebody who was on the show come on and talk about the show.

Benjamin Kessler

So this is my exact pitch to Amazon. The other week I went to them. I said, we have all these reality stars. Why aren't we having them? Come on to a podcast that, you know, they can talk about the show. We're not showing footage from it as long as they don't cross any, you know, lines of their end.

Chris King

Yeah, there's no reason not to. And the audience eats it up because you get when you are a niche fan. Like, look at Reddit, right? I work, I'm working. I just finished a couple of seasons of Top Chef and some, digital shows that go along with it. We don't get millions and millions and millions of viewers anymore. It's just like it's in season 22. The people that watch it are the people that watch it, but the people that watch it are voracious with the amount of content they will consume. So there's top shelf and then there's Last Chance Kitchen, and then there's the dish with cash, and then there's the Bravo podcast. And the audience is what there's smaller audiences, but they want more and more and more. And you can target like our two, digital series are sponsored by BMW and sponsored by Saratoga Spring Water. And like you don't need to please 80 different advertisers. You just have to work with the one brand sponsor that you have. And that's why a lot of these smaller podcasts do well, too. Small budget that can be fronted by 1 or 2 single sponsors and then you throw it up on YouTube, which costs nothing, and you got a show and you get a couple million views and it's like, insane. It's authentic, low like purposefully low lift programing. It's like it's they're two people in a chair talking about talking about a show that somebody else made, which is kind of frustrating.

Appendix E: Interview with Matthew Fernicola - Creator and Executive Producer of Last Foes Standing, the first-ever Reality Competition Music Festival

Benjamin Kessler

I was interested in talking to you because I saw your project Last Foe Standing that you've definitely grown to be, you know, based on what I've seeing, like a real legitimate reality project here. And it's really cool to see and I'm, I'm really interested first, just in how you came up with that project, how it's worked and kind of what, what brought you to being like, this has to be a thing. And then making it into a real, actual, you know, finalized, program.

Matthew Fernicola

Awesome. Well, hey, thanks for the question. And thanks for the time. super cool to hear what you're doing in that. I think the thesis you're working on it is super six. So, the project. okay, so I have a background in events organizing. I've been organizing events for the last ten years. mainly in New Jersey. The community that I work in is the Asbury Park, arts community. So, Yeah, I was just putting on events for so long, and I fell in love with reality TV during the pandemic. And, you know, I'm always trying to figure out how to get more people to buy tickets to come to the shows and, you know, showcase art. And I just, I just thought, why is there no reality TV where someone can, like, purchase a ticket and have a beer and eat a hamburger and, you know, party all day and watch a reality TV show instead of watching just on your couch. Because, like, currently the only way you can watch survivor, Big Brother, The Amazing Race is basically on the couch. And what's happening now in the community is there's a lot of watch parties. So you can like, go to New York City to watch every episode. And there's, you know, there's podcasts on these episodes as well. Like, Rob has a podcast is a huge resource when it comes to podcasting on reality TV. It to me, it just felt like the next layer in sports history because like, if you think of what, what sport radio is, you can drive around all day listening to grown men complain about the New York Jets all day in new Jersey. And like, it's kind of the same thing that's just happening, what these podcasters are doing and these, like, live shows. And I just kind of realized, like, if someone's going to beat me to it, and I'm just trying to be the first one to to make it happen, where you instead of watching a baseball game, you're watching a reality TV show. And then since I come from an arts community, the festivals and arts festival, they, the contestants, are all musicians and poets and comedians and bartenders and the, the barbers and the tattoo artists, the venue owners that make up our little arts community and then the music happens in between the sets. So it's just I just thought it was the the best event I could build. And I've been doing it for four years now and I'm just like, really pumped on the project. And I'm hoping it can really take off because the goal is to, you know, sell camping tickets to this and make it like a six day, you know, kind of like festival thing. That's that's the big goal with the whole thing.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. I think it's really unique. And especially because what I've been asking, mostly producers in the spaces they there was a recent article from deadline where they interviewed 50 high powered TV producers, basically asking, what does what do reality TV producers and executive

heads need to do to help the genre and help production? And they identify things. One was networks taking more risks on less tested formats. One was more tax incentives. And the third biggest thing mentioned in that article was more live programing. What they meant was like, you know, you see, like these a lot of dating shows where they'll have live reunions or they'll have, you know, kind of, oh, you can tune in live like Big Brother as the live feeds. But I think you've kind of combines, the idea of live programing being with live in person and can also exist on a platform. It can be a show and it can be an experience. And I'm just curious, what do you think lends itself to reality TV specifically, and both things being unscripted, that you think worked with what you were trying to do in terms of selling tickets and it being live like, why did you land on that?

Matthew Fernicola

It's just like I was saying before, it's just the next like sporting event. And like, people love football, baseball, basketball, hockey here. And what happens is they go to the games and they it's an experience and it's unscripted. You don't know who's going to win. You don't know who's going to win. And when we're watching survivor Big Brother, Drag Race, Amazing Race, The traders, the goat, all these things, we're watching an edited format of it where we all know who the winner is, as in, like we don't know who the winner is, but the editor knows who the winner is. So you're getting the edit, you're getting the editor's viewpoint on what happened. And I just love the idea of watching it live. And maybe we could partner with FanDuel one day and we're, you know, doing our own survivor brackets with it and the whole thing. I just it was really that like live aspect of it of like being in it now and not being beholden to an edit. You understand what I'm saying? Not being like, this is what's happening. If you're at the event, you see with your own eyes and then you know why. Whatever, whoever the person wins, you know their story. You understand why they won. Sometimes you watch survivor and it's like, well, I thought Charlie should have won that season. But, you know, maybe if Mackenzie did really play a really good or sorry, Kenzie Mackenzie played a really good season. And if we were there, if we were Island, we would have been able to to like, see that without having the editors really ruin our experience. Erica from season 41, everyone keeps on saying that she was a great winner, but the editor didn't really show us that. So it's like it's just putting you there in person and making it feel like a circus. We've, like us as a society, have been going to the circus since the Roman times, like look at the Colosseum and everything, like it's just what we're attracted to. Big, fun, energetic events, which is way more fun than just going to work all day.

Benjamin Kessler

Yes, I definitely agree. And one thing I've been seeing a lot in my research too, is that, you know, there's those shows that you're talking about, like survivor and as user generated content, social media becomes larger. You see a lot of reality stars pivoting to creating kind of their own brands as themselves on social media. And I'm curious both as a fan and as someone that who's creating reality TV, through a live portion. How do you foresee reality TV and unscripted in general? Do you see it being a go to genre as things projects like yours and even smaller, short form vertical things as they become more popular? How do you think unscripted fits into that? Do you think it's this what we're seeing is a new genre?

Matthew Fernicola

More accessible and like, you could see it by like every year there's a new reality TV show that's on and like there's there's also genres inside of reality TV. There's like the competition. I don't know, it's just the reality. Like Below Deck is different than the traders because there's like The traders is a game that you can win. And Below Deck is just getting to know people like and those happen to be people on a yacht, like whatever. But like it's accessibility that I think is really like driving that because like, I am part of a community that's called LA. Geez. Have you like stumbled upon the LD community?

Benjamin Kessler

Yes, I've heard of it.

Matthew Fernicola

Yeah. So there are hundreds, hundreds of these spinoff games that are being played right now. And it's a thing where it's like, if I want to play baseball for the New York Yankees, I have no shot. I'm five eight and I'm fat. But like, if I want to play in my like, softball league that my buddy runs, I can play in that softball league. So it's just about accessibility with reality TV and like people have 4K cameras now. So like a lot of people are making their own little versions of these games and people are having an experience playing them. I am trying to break my way through, you know, I'm proud of being an RG, but I do want to be in the same sentence as survivor and top chefs and, all those other game, because I do believe that if I can get the right funding, then I can throw a six day festival, which is now it's even more accessible for people. You can go and just be there live, instead of having to sit on your couch and watch reruns and like, we'll have a live stream, just like the Super Bowl is live stream baseball games or live stream like, the idea is to really make it feel like, kind of like a sporting event and anyone can compete. That's the fun thing. You don't have to be a mega athlete to be Boston Rob or to be Cirie or some of these other, like, fantastic characters that have made their whole life off of being on reality TV. So I'm just going to keep on going back to that phrase. It's like accessibility. It's just way more accessible.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, no, I definitely see that. And a big thing I've been talking about with people too is that in order to be successful as an unscripted model, there has to be a sense of authenticity. And you just talked about it with sports too, where it's like, you go to a Yankee game, you have no idea if they're going to win or lose. You have no idea what's going to happen. There is a built in authenticity to the sport because of the rules and restrictions. And here's what's going to happen. And like you were saying, with your live events, there is a built in authenticity to your at the live event and you're watching things unfold in front of you. So I'm curious from your perspective, what do you think lends itself well to the genre of unscripted, that what do you need to make unscripted feel authentic, and why do you think authenticity is so important to the genre?

Matthew Fernicola

I mean, it's the buy in, like when you watch these shows, like most of the time people have completely bought in, like as in the competitors, the people aren't just phoning it in, they're playing with their heart. It's the only thing that matters. When we do our game, we take our phone, the phones away from the competitors. And now for this, for a period, the only thing that matters is winning this game. And they go so hard. It's just it's just the buy in that it makes it so real. And then the audience is like, yo, okay, this matters. Maybe it doesn't matter who gets voted out in a reality TV show game in the grand scheme of life. But when you're there in the moment, people are. They really like fighting for their lives inside the game. It's really cool to see people like compete so hard. I would say the hardest part about it is the aftercare you really got to provide. Like the contestants, the right way to leave the game or else they're mentally just going to be like fried because it is the most important thing to them. And then you're asking them to go back to work the next day after they have to decompress from this, like, whole experience.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And it seems like I'm curious also to get your production mind going with this, because you set up this event when you're creating, you know, you're you're having that buy in from both the people buying tickets to watch and the people the contestants going in. And so when you're building something like this, because it's kind of a combination of live, of unscripted, of a, of a TV format, but also a live concert style format. What do you think was most important to you production wise, putting this together? Was it having that final product on the internet? Was it the in-person event? Was it the clips? What were you aiming towards and what do you think now, how that has evolved into.

Matthew Fernicola

What are both equally as important to life, the event, what it's happening. You want it to be as fun for the audience as possible. Everything that we're doing is, at the end of the day, for the audience and putting on a show. A big inspiration of what I'm doing is the Savannah bananas. Have you heard of this? This is definitely oh my God, do they have just cracked the code? They just fricking got it, man. And they've turned baseball into their own product. Like, that's what all these reality TV shows have competition shows have done. They've turned survivor into their own product, Big Brother, into some versions of, amazing races. I'm version survivor. Trader is a version. It's about it. So it's like you got to find your DNA inside of it. And for me, that DNA is just the audience experience. So when you're watching the episodes, there's an audience experience of being home and watching it. But we're really trying to create that feeling of like, yeah, I'm watching a season of Last Standing, but I shouldn't be watching it. I should have been there like last year when they were filming it. Let me go get my ticket for the next season now, because it's really just creating the best, most fun experience for the audience as possible. So you want the audience to batter the audience. In our game, they can play along. They have their survivor brackets where they're rooting for the players, they're getting their own points and giving their points to the players that they want to win. It's like it's important for everyone to feel like ownership inside the. And that'll like answers your question.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. No it definitely does. And you know speaking about you're definitely a fan of the competition shows. And there's a whole subgenres within the genre. And I'm very I'm asking everyone I talk to what they believe is the most successful unscripted model of the past five or so years, and this could be anything. It could be a way you saw someone did casting. It could be a way you've done something with your event. It could just be a show you watched and you were like, wow, they really blew it. I, you know, blew my socks off with this one. Is there anything that comes to your mind that you're thinking, wow, this show that I watched recently or this type of thing, this challenge that someone did, this format that someone made really, like blew me away.

Matthew Fernicola

There's three things that pop into my head right off the bat. So, one thing that blew me away, just not that it's the most amazing thing ever, but it just worked way better than I thought it would. Was Deal or no Deal Island, DONDI. Have you seen DONDI?

Benjamin Kessler

Yes. Yeah. It's crazy.

Matthew Fernicola

Honestly, pretty great. And it's like it does the thing that like traitors does where it's like it brings in other reality TV show players, which is something I want to do down the line. The goal for me is, you know, I can cast someone from all these other reality TV shows and then I can sell a ticket to my event. Come see, you know, you saw Boston Rob on traitors, you saw Boston Rob on survivor, you saw him on Amazing Race. You know, you saw him and dandy. Now go see him live at last. So standings like, that's, that's the goal that we're getting to. So dandy was a huge one. obviously traders has done great as well because they have like the traders like UK, the traders New Zealand, the traders America. They've done a good job of like spinning off of like for three different hosts. But like each season's the same. It's in the same freaking castle and it's the same type of challenges. So like I thought that was super cool as a way to get multiple seasons out a year like survivor gets two seasons out of year, but trader, you get multiple seasons because you literally get just a different like country playing the game. Yeah. and then I think, I mean, you have to say the Beast games, beast games was incredible. And it's like that was basically just a version of Squid Games. But all ideas come from somewhere else. So like whatever inspired these games, I thought that was very engaging, very fun. And to me, the thing that inspires me the most right now, like it used to be survivor, but it's jet lag. The game.

Benjamin Kessler

I've heard of this. Yes.

Matthew Fernicola

Oh my God, jet lag. The game is just like everything. And I'm also like my genre. I'm like a parody guy, right now because I'm a parody survivor player. So I'm almost like, I'm kind of like the Weird Al of reality TV, where I'm just kind of like throwing like my own spin on things. So

I'm doing my own jet lag game as well in this summer, where they play hide and seek on all of Japan. I'm playing hide and seek in all of new Jersey. Like, not the same energy, but my brand is new Jersey, so we're going to be running a hide and seek game in new Jersey that's based off of jet lag rules, and they just really hide and seek New York City. So I'm hoping to catch some good energy from that as well. But yeah, if you're looking at someone that's really just like nailed it on that, like just right on the head, it's definitely jet lag. Those, those guys made such a cool, cool, engaging game. And it's like it's just their personality that shines through as well. Yeah.

Benjamin Kessler

And my last question for you, based off your answer to that, is I actually just spoke to someone yesterday who was saying that this trend that we've seen of having other reality stars from, you know, like you're saying with traders and dealer, No Island and there's that new show on Hulu, got to get Out where they're everyone's copycatting a format that works. When traitors is like, oh, let's take all these reality stars, let's see it works. Other networks try doing the same. It's a copycat genre. And like you're saying, where you're putting your own spin on it. And a couple people I've spoken to have said that they see this more as a fad and less as something that will be long lasting, because you still need to create those stars. And so I'm curious from a fan perspective and from someone who's running live events that are maybe less so creating social media stars, but more so creating in the moment stars, do you see that as something that will excel in the future? Having reality stars combined and unscripted models that are just based on other unscripted stars? Or do you see that? Just something of the time and in five years it'll be a new fad.

Matthew Fernicola

I mean, it might be a fad. I mean, it's active right now for sure. I think you're like, you kind of said something that I very much agree with. You're going to have to be making your new stars as well. And it's like inside of each show, they have their own stars. They literally have all star seasons for like Survivor and Big Brother and Drag Race like they had. They already do that. They're already creating their stars. But it's important to keep the accessibility thing really, really high I think. So like you don't want it to just be a rotating wheel of the same players. Like it's I go back to sports. It's good that people have to retire. So now instead of having Babe Ruth and Derek Jeter, the Yankees have Aaron Judge.

Matthew Fernicola

Like you need to be curating new stars constantly. But, I don't know if it's just a fad. I honestly think that, like, people like whatever sell sells and like, I don't think Boston Rob has played his last game. That's all I'm saying. I don't think Siri has played her last game. I think Tony is probably going to play another game and two, like, I don't think it's a fad. I hope it's not a fad because I like seeing these players return. But I also do enjoy learning about new players as well. So it's like you kind of have to find that like balance.

Appendix F: Interview with Phillip Barbb – 2x Emmy-nominated TV Producer & Performance Coach

Benjamin Kessler

So first, I just wanted to ask you if you could tell me a little, I did some research on you, but if you could, in your own words, tell me a little bit about yourself and your career and how you ended up in the unscripted reality world.

Phillip Barbb

I went to Michigan State University to study TV and film, and I'd never been west of Wisconsin, didn't really know what I was going to get into. And, but when I moved out to LA, like, I really, I really didn't have, like a huge desire to work in reality or to work in, or movies or tell you I want to write. I wanted into entertainment. And when I got out to LA, it was one of those instances where I ended up, you know, meeting some people. I'll save you the whole long story, but meeting some people started my job at, at a company called Studio Lambert. And. And started working on Undercover Boss, which was kind of my first project. First credits were kind of an undercover boss. I started out as an assistant, and then, kind of just worked my way through reality TV. You know, I found a little niche for myself early on as kind of a producer shooter. So I was actually as a AP shooter, and then that opened up the door for me to be able to kind of, like, dive in and start doing some more producer shooters stuff. I, you know, I worked in casting on a lot of projects. I've kind of, you know, been in development, and, you know, most recently, I'm getting ready to start, you know, Monday I go back and I'm a senior producer on Dancing With the stars. Earlier this year, I was, you know, co-ep on all the sharks for Netflix. alien encounters for discovery. or I should say, alien encounters, fabrications, the full title of the show, and, Yeah, I mean, I think I one of the reasons that I, you know, I got to Los Angeles in 2009 right at the tail end of kind of the writers strike. So I think reality was kind of really having a resurgence. There was a lot of work in Los Angeles. It was and I what I really liked was it was very still creative. excuse me, in a lot of ways where if you're not a writer, it didn't feel like there was as much creativity for me in, in scripted if I wanted to go that route. But being able to get on set, as you know, a producer and reality TV and you're crafting, you're helping craft story, you're thinking on your feet. Everything is in flux and that type of excitement and that type of ability to be creative with other people is what I enjoyed. I've never been a like, oh man, I've got these stories inside of me that I need to get out. It was always like, I enjoy the process of making entertainment. I enjoy being around other creative people. I like the fact that I wear a t shirt, not a suit to work. and so that was kind of a little bit of the, you know, where I've kind of found myself now, obviously, you know, we're in we're very interesting times with the industry. And I think, you know, for all the, you know, I read the article that you kind of sent over and I'd seen that article before on deadline and, and for as much, you know, as much as I appreciate, you know, the AMA, you know, tax incentives and, you know, taking bigger swings and some of these things, I appreciate it. I also just, you know, some of my concern just comes from the, you know, the viewing practices of people where they're not sitting and watching television, where they are sitting in their on their cell phones and they're, you know, it's very short form content. It's. You know, I don't know if I don't know how long is that the new normal? We're in a stage where

everyone has very short attention spans, and we're going to. It's going to struggle to do anything over, you know, three minutes or, you know, like, I it's interesting. also, when you have a lot of you, you have a system where a lot of people are creating for, especially in like the social media realm. Like so many people are creating for free and under the hopes of being able to eventually one day make a living at it. Whereas, you know, 20 years ago, like we were, you were being paid to show up and produce, you were being paid to show up and to write and to script and do these things. And, and you're being, you know, it was part of the business. And like now because of social media, we have so many people that are creating and writing and doing so much on the hope that one day maybe it'll work out and I just don't know if that is a I don't know how sustainable that model is for people that are trying to professionally, professional stay in the industry.

Benjamin Kessler

I want to boil it down and kind of point by point. So I want to start first with you got into the industry at a time when reality was booming, like you said, because of those strikes and something I've been asking everyone I've been interviewing is that during those strikes, you know, reality booms and becomes a much more legitimate player in terms of the amount of productions. And then that changes viewer habits as well. And recently, during the recent two strikes, reality TV, if you look at the actual production numbers, was shelved in a much different way, where people kind of expected a similar thing to happen, where you would get a lot more unscripted media and it actually didn't happen, and it really hasn't recovered since Covid. When you look at the overall downturn numbers, and I'm curious, as someone who has now been through both of those time periods, why do you think that reality was shelved during these strikes compared to those 081? And do you see this as a bubble or more of that continued trend? Because a viewer habits like you were talking about.

Phillip Barbb

Yeah, and I just I also want to say like I am by no means an expert in the workings of reality. Right. Like how things work, like there are so many people that are on that are on the executive side, that are in the networks, in the streamers that are, you know, the agents that are following the business end to such a stronger sense that I am. So I don't want to come off as somebody that protests and knows everything. So a lot of my, you know, like I've been around the industry for 16 years, you know, I've worked, you know, but I've always been kind of on the creation side, the production side and little bit of the selling side. But so I wanted to at least say that. Yeah, I don't want to portray myself as the expert guru of reality TV. But, you know, the one thing about in oh eight, right, is. Like, in a lot of ways, in a simplistic term, like America doesn't care about the strikes. Like they don't know that the strikes are happening. They just want content. So reality had a boom because it was still new. It was still fresh. It was brand new thing. Right? Like, sure you would had the real worlds and the survivors and a lot of stuff for a long time. But like, wow, the strikes for scripted opened up the door for reality. It also only works at that time because reality was still newer, and the concepts that were coming out with fresh to the viewer, right? If like they only like the networks only started spending the money on the on that stuff because it was like, oh, the viewers were open to it. The viewers were willing to watch. the

difference now is when we're hitting strikes recently, like reality isn't new. It's not the new kid on the block. YouTube is the new kid on the block. Instagram, TikTok. You know, user generated content is the new is the new thing that feels new and fresh and way cheaper. Ratings. Insanely cheap. Like Tick Tock pays nothing, Instagram pays nothing, YouTube pays nothing. They get your stuff for free. And so I think that that is one reason why you see such a difference between what was experienced in, you know, 070809 versus these recent strikes is it is it isn't just, oh, the strike should have opened the door for this, you know it. Like I said, that the average person at home watching content, like, they don't care who's making it. They don't care if you edited on edit or premiere. They don't care what what programing you use to color the show. They just want the entertainment. They don't care about any of the business behind it. And I think sometimes maybe we think they should, right? We think that people should care, you know, like about, you know, the workers. You know, obviously I'm a guy who's originally from Detroit, and there's a lot of times where, you know, guys that are from Michigan and, you know, we talk about the industry and there are times where you're like that. It's like, I feel what the and I'm this is a bad analogy and I don't want to make it seem insensitive or whatever, because it's not a clean analogy, but it's like, you know what a lot of workers went through back in like, you know, 60s and 70s days in Detroit of watching jobs go elsewhere because labor was cheaper or costs were cheaper. It's like it's what we're seeing happening to, you know, to to workers in L.A., you know, these jobs are being sent, not only to other states, but they're being sent completely out of the country. and, you know, I think the one thing that's tough now is like, look, I left Detroit under the note, like I left Detroit because there was like the type of work I wanted to do wasn't there, right? So, like, I had to go where the work was and, and so a lot of us come to Cal or we came to California because that was where the work was, the tough thing. Now it's like, all right, so an easy analogy or easy thing to say is like all right, well, look, the work isn't here anymore. So like you got you might just have to move somewhere else. And I appreciate that. The difference now is it's so fragmented. Right. Like it's not it's not oh all of the work is in California. So if you want to do that work you go to California. The work is now being spread out so thin all over the place that it's it's hard to, you know, you can't just say, oh, I guess I'll just go to Nashville or I guess I'm going to go to Atlanta, or I guess I'm going to go to Ireland. I don't know if, you know, all of those places are getting work, but I don't know how big the job, you know, the job pools are for those places, you know? Yeah. so so there you go. I, I ramble a little, my brain goes, no, you're all, I hope you'll be great. I hope it all makes sense.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, yeah, it makes sense because also we're all in a bubble. So it's when I talk to people, it's very interesting to hear based on what they've done, because you could talk to one person who is like, the industry's dying, and then you talk to another person in a different position in their in their niche. Might be booming and you know what they're in. But, specifically, I want to ask about that deadline article because you touched on it a little and I think it has a little to what you were talking about there, too, where, you know, you I've spoken to a few people in more business and executive and who, you know, they talk a lot about, you know, it all comes down to money, obviously. But within that deadline article, they were kind of talking on three kind of changes or catalysts that could help the business, you know, tax incentives, networks taking

risks. And more live programing. And I'm curious from your perspective of someone that works in the creative end without money in mind, do you see these things as still being major changes that are needed, or what? Do you see the audience based on what you're working on gravitating towards? When things when habits are changing?

Phillip Barbb

Yeah, I mean, I think the one thing that feels like it's a little difficult at this point is it's hard. Like it takes things sometimes it takes a little bit of time to find the right audience. And especially now when you have so many, you know, like, like perfect example, like dancing With the stars is a show that in the last couple of years has really gained a lot of popularity with like a much younger, like younger female audience that is kind of like, you know, for lack we kind of, you know, at times you'll hear it referred to not my words, not any one of the show's words. But like, kind of like the sorority audience, right? The sorority girl audience, like this idea that like a group of girls who grew up with TikTok and, like, dancing and they follow the, you know, the Charli D'Amelio and, you know, they saw Ilhan Omar on the Olympics and like they it becomes this thing where like they want to watch it with their friends and be it feels like it's this active thing. Right? It's a live show. The voting is live. It's feels topical, it's in the moment. But like sometimes things shift and they needed to find an audience. That's a newer segment of the audience. Right. And, you know, and that shows been around for, you know, 30 plus seasons. I think there is so much there are just like it takes like if you build a if you start a piece of business, it's going to take time for people in the neighborhood to learn the new pieces. And so it's going to take them time to test it, to actually go and say, all right, I'll get a new piece of shot, place a shot. Because I used to. I love my pizza place, but there's a new spot. All right. It's going to take some time before they decide I'll give it a shot and then it's going to take time. Say they love the pizza. It's going to take them time to start letting other friends know in the area that this pizza is actually really good. If you've been there, have you been to Freddie's Pizza? Whatever. Right. And it feels like the runways on some of these shows, like they're, you know, they're, they're not buying as many episodes. They're pretty quick to cancel stuff after, you know, if it's if it's not working right, if it's not a slam dunk a game, if it's not Squid Games out the gate, if it's not Love Island out the gate. And it's like even that like some of those are, you know, Love Island, you know, those are projects that come out of other regions, you know, and it feels like there in a lot of ways. And look, it is a business thing, right? Like you don't want to just it's much easier to sell something to people when they're already in the market for wanting to buy that thing. And when you already know that that product is profitable or that people want it, right. And so they're trying to get they're trying to have as small of runway needed for something that becomes successful. But I think in that there are times where they're maybe, you know, they're not allowing they're not allowing some of the bigger swings to play. And if they do take a big swing, there's people get so nervous about, you know, losing their jobs that they don't really always want to maybe fight for a project. They don't want to be the scapegoat of a project. There is that site, super hyper competitiveness inside of corporate anything, but definitely inside of, you know, in entertainment where it's like, if you don't if you champion a project and that champion goes out and sort of hit off the gate like it puts you on the chopping block and nobody there's so fewer jobs running around in the executive market. Nobody wants to be on the

chopping block. So sometimes rather than, you know, if people are fearful of their jobs and they don't want to rough, you know, ruffle or they don't want to like, you know, rock the boat, they stay safe. They make easy calls, they make easy hires, they make they do stuff that makes so much sense that no one could ever call them out on it being their choice. And this isn't the whole industry, but it just feels like that's where some of that lack of risk taking. And look, there's also projects that you take big swings and they don't pan out because maybe they were too different or the audience wasn't given enough time to fall in love with it. So I think there's, you know, there it's just the options are so vast, like I think of, you know, my father, a guy who, you know, his name is, you know, in his late 60s and, you know, used to watch a lot of, you know, would bounce around from the a and he's in the C's and the, you know, would watch outdoor programing and, you know, like, would you know, automotive and watch a lot of that stuff. I go and spend time with him now and you know, he's on his phone and he's watching. He's watching some guy that lives in Iowa talk about, you know, talk about changing oil on his, you know, 70, you know, 72 Camaro. and it's like, how do you I don't know how you make a I mean, you think about it, right? When we first started this whole TV thing, you started with, what, for 3 or 4 or five networks. Yeah, or back in the day. And then it expands. You get cable and then you get premium, and now you it's just everything has getting it went from complete broad to super niche. And I just don't know how you still get the niche. Like how do you break people out of the niche. Oh, I could get this piece of content that feels like it's directly aimed at me. And it doesn't, you know, versus these, you know, the network shows that need millions of people to watch for, for them to be profitable. So once again, I had long, long sentences. I probably do well now.

Benjamin Kessler

It's great because I think, I think you hit on this great dichotomy I'm seeing when I talk to people and I just, you know, look at the landscape where if you're a streamer, you're really building, these companies that are getting into the streaming game later or than even the original Netflix, they're not building, platform. They're building an economy where people can be you what you need to be everything for everyone. Netflix needs to have a show for that sorority type environment. They also need to have a show for people like your dad. They need to be something for everyone in order for people to buy in. And when you it's this dichotomy because it's both hyper niche and everything forever and the most general thing in existence. So when you have those, you know, your TikTok and your YouTube and your Instagram live, your dad is watching these videos. But really, YouTube is also everything for everyone. It's just their getting there, their content in different places. And so I think something you've also hit is that as I'm curious to know what you think that content that your dad is watching where it's, you know, unscripted and it's someone talking about changing their oil or some cards, maybe it's a YouTube show, it's a 20 minute, you know, live stream of someone talking about their classic car collection. You know, not even the Mr. Beasts of the world, but there's all these YouTube content. As content shifts to that environment, do you foresee unscripted and reality still being a popular genre, like what would you call an Instagram Live? Well, what umbrella just that fall under? Is it its own thing or do you think it falls also under in unscripted genre in a sense?

Phillip Barbb

It is interesting right. Like I got one of my what am I best one of my closest buddies growing up or not growing up, I liked her college and through, you know, media. We did a lot of TV work together and he's still back in metro Detroit. He's an on air personality at a radio show. Right. And, you know, radio is felt like it's had its downfall for many years. Right? Like that. People just aren't listening to that satellite radio that came in, blah, blah, blah. And then the podcast comes out and you're like the podcast. It's just a talk show. It's an alien talk show in a way, right? Yes. And then and then, you know, you look at, okay, TV is starting to fade away and then you're like, wait, wait, what? I don't want to say TV's fading away, but it's just there's a lot of different, you know, things that it's funny, but then you look at, then you look at all. I read a thing that said the top 100 podcasts. They all have a video component. So you're like, okay, hold on. So we went from radios, radios failing and I, I'm making some generalized leaps here. But you're like, radio is falling apart. Elon wants radio two. Whole man hears this podcast thing. So wait a minute. It's podcast with video. They're basically talk shows man. Like that's it. Your talk shows. They talk shows and it's amazing. But then you think of like, are they actually getting all these views on the entire like I guess this is the difference, right? Like you watch you know, you watch a talk show in the morning and like, you know, most of it's not super clipped out. Right. Like somebody watches it. They might watch the whole thing. Maybe not. If it's the moment you tune in is an interesting maybe you leave where like with these podcasts. I mean, I can think of how many like I've seen so many podcast clips, not the whole podcast. I can't tell you if I've ever seen a whole thing of Joe Rogan, ever. I've definitely never watched the Joe Rogan interview for over 25 30 minutes, and that was it. Somebody's really sensitive, but I've seen hundreds, hundreds of Joe Rogan clips. Right. So it's like those were just in such a short form. You know, place. And I mean, look, I think people do enjoy it. People do enjoy feeling like they're actually spending time with these individuals, that they actually have access to them. I think people want to feel like they're living in the same world as some of these people that they idolize. I think there's a lot of I think there's a lot of neat content that, for better or for worse, allows people that maybe never felt like they have voice before, can connect with somebody. And, you know, I think it is a dangerous thing at times where you've got, you know, you got 18, 19, 22, 24 year old people that are like the experts of something, you know, that are just, you know, sharing knowledge and creating communities around something. And maybe they're not the best the best role models. I mean, I guess now we're getting into a little bit less about the industry and more about like the, the social impact of everyone having a voice. And some people may not have a developed voice or a well thought out voice, which I think that that kind of can create some problems in with everyone having the ability to communicate. But I guess back to your original thing, I don't know. I don't know where you start creating these segmentations of like, right. Like even to say reality TV, right? Like last year, you know, I'm a reality TV producer, but I did a show about aliens, and then I did a show about sharks. Like an adventure show about sharks. And then, you know, then I have a show that dancing with stuck with celebrities. It's like there's that cookbook so many ways, right? Like for a lot of times, and even when I used to go when I would speak to college kids and I'd be like, you know, hey, man, when you hear reality TV, you think you immediately think the Kardashians or, you know, you think, you know, Housewives or some of those shows, but like, there's so many things that follow me. The Naked and Afraid, the, you know, survival shows, you know, shark shows, the adventure shows. So I think it's, it's such

a catch all term that I think it's kind of hard to know where it's going. I just think that's a big thing. That's tough, man, is. And look, I'm the. I'm no expert on this, but you figure right back in the day when you would, you know, I don't know who was your who was your cable provider growing up. Did you have the Comcast stuff?

Benjamin Kessler

I was I was a Comcast household.

Phillip Barbb

There you go. Right. Yeah. So same with me I you know from Detroit. You know we had Comcast right. So you know and I don't know the breakdown all this. But like my understanding of how it all worked. Right. You would say you had your family had $100 bill. Like you know every month you guys paid $100 for your cable bill. And with that $100 you got, you know, 50 channels, right? You got the A&E, you got the Fox News, you got everything. And there were probably like a lot of a lot of pieces that you did not a lot of places that you were never going to watch. Right. Your family never watched, but a piece of your hundred dollars of your cable bill went to each of those places in some sort of crazy split. That is way beyond my knowledge. Right? But so there were networks that could get money that maybe they were they were getting a little bit of help from some of the more popular places. Maybe ESPN wasn't getting its full share of that $100 in your viewing house, but they you know, it. It helped some of the other networks. It helped some of the other channels, the bio channels, the A&E, the some of these things that were able to create their own shows. Well then, now when that money is no longer doing that right, not money is not being distributed across multiple channels. It's only going to a Netflix and maybe a Hulu. You just have less money that's coming into the into the entire thing getting spread around, allowing more networks to take more shots and to have more niche content. And so do I know what the future is? I wish I did, man, I, I would feel, you know, I'll tell you what the hardest thing, the hardest thing about all of this. And I give you a little bit of like, I guess the human humanity other and less of the business, but. Nothing against, nothing against being an accountant. But I don't know a whole lot of people that pick up and move find, you know, 1500 and 2005, you know, that move, across an ocean to go be an accountant somewhere. People have come to LA or the New York of a dream that is deeper than just, oh, I need a major. Oh, man. I gotta figure out something to do. Like, you know, so many of us. And maybe I'm overly. I'm overly romanticizing it because I'm in it, and I can appreciate that I may be doing it, but, like, you know, I work in, you know, I'm a I'm a coach as well. And I work with people that are in a lot of different industries and, you know, like I started making stupid little videos and stuff when I was in middle school. And then you move out, then you leave everything you've ever known, you leave your family behind. You missed holidays, you missed birthdays. You missed weddings. You move out here because you want to chase this dream, this very American dream of working in Hollywood and moving out here and doing the thing. And then you meet other people that are doing that, too. And they want to be producers and they want to be directors and actors. Maybe they're coming from everywhere to come and live this dream. And the hardest thing right now is watching so many people have to give up the dream. Yeah.

Benjamin Kessler

Dancing with the stars is an interesting one, like you were talking about because you're telling all these different stories, but you're also I think sometimes it's like, are you creating the show for clips, for segments? Are you creating segments for the show? And there's that weird middle range where you're doing both at the same time. You're creating segments that create an overall arc of a skill, and you're also creating a show that can be broken down into many different segments. And I, I think you hit on something like that. But my last question for you is, is there a recent successful reality TV unscripted social media model? It could be a show you watched. It could be a way someone did casting or something you seen that you believe is really blue your way and why. And in the past you had 3 to 5 years.

Phillip Barbb

I mean, yeah, I guess there is a couple of things in there. So, so real quick. And this is a lot this is a very, very selfish answer. Right. it's a very selfish answer. But when I look at when I look at what, what we were able to do with all the sharks and having it be such a like an educational and adventure way of taking a of taking a like taking sharks. Right. Which have always been very like sensationalized and fear based and overly dramatized talk of danger, danger, danger, danger, danger in the water. Right. And we were able to take it and like, show all these beautiful locations in the world. Look at sharks from not a danger standpoint, but from these beautiful creatures and really and then also provide a lot of like little tidbits of information and info cause of learning that it actually ended up doing. It was like a lot of I had so many friends that would send it and they're like, do my kids love the show? Like to be able to like, feel like you're somehow kind of changing the understanding of these animals? Like it was amazing project to be a part of. And it was something that like, I love, you know, like, I love that show and it was a season one. So obviously you're going to have difficulties and things, but it just, you know, like you just wish that more shows like that, we're going to get rewarded versus, you know, maybe shows that are a little bit more, you know, exploitive of human, of human difficulties or lack of maturity. I guess I'll say it that way. Right? Like there is a lot of shows that do well that that live in, that live and die on the on the immaturity and bad behavior of the cast. And I mean, I guess, you know, like, sure, we want to watch people, you know, you want to watch people have hardship or struggle because it makes us feel connected more to our own hardship and struggle. And then you want to hope that people will win. But it's like we've also gotten to a place where we have a lot of content, where we really enjoy watching people lose. And I don't love that. I think like as me, as in not as Phil representing an industry or like just me at my core. I don't love I don't love the celebration of people getting put in their place. I don't love culture, culture, I don't love I don't love the let's pop up balloon when the second you say something I don't like and and let's make fun of you because you oh haha, you're a nerd or hahaha you're oh, you're a single mom. Like oh, you're out of here. No one likes single moms. It's like, I don't like the whatever, the podcasts. And let's be combative and let's just get people in a room and let me just punch down and beat people up. And I don't love it. And but in a lot of ways, we've gotten to a place where so much of our, so much of our we have a lot of content that is very much in, in attention. It's all about attention. But people are failing to make the distinction between positive

attention and negative attention. that's all I have for the, for the for the, for the your second half of the question. So the first half look from a dancing with the stars standpoint. And where I'm at, I'm not a big picture person on that show like I am a I am a producer that works with the cast and I work with everyone on I help build, I work with the team that helps build the packages for the show. Yeah. And those are very fun. But like, you know, in a lot of ways, like our main focus is, is this mini show within the show, right. Like these packages, these like, hey, we're going to show you what happened during the last week for Wayne Brady or the you know, for that, you know Danny Amendola is there for a lot more is even better. I was like let's show them what happened in the last week. So even those little packages you could joke are a show within the show. And then the dance is its own thing. and then there's all of this social media that does drive it, like there's so much social media from the actor or from, like, our dancers and what they're doing to, you know, even just like the little fun stuff that some of the, you know, that the couples do from, you know, TikTok to like the little the love interests and things that you get from the show that really I don't think that it's as easy. It's definitely not like, oh, the show now feeds the social media and it's the social media now feeds the show. I think it's a, you know. Sense is that that was the word I was afraid to use because I didn't know if I was using it. Right. No thank you. Yeah. It's like it is that. But, like, would I be lying if I didn't say, like, 100% social? Has, like, helps feed the fuel for that show. And I would argue like shows like Love Island same thing. Like, you know, I worked on Love Island for one season and then you look at like the popularity of it and like, yeah, like people like that's, you know, you have shows that you work on. And I only did one season of that. But like, that's always a show that when people find out I work on Love Island, like they're like, oh my God, girls love it. Girls love like, you know, it's like, you know, and I think that there is I don't know if it's like it's it'll look like love and dating is always done well because it's such a, you know, it's a human. It's such a human core human emotion of what we're chasing so much of this life about every everything we I think is about love. Right? Yeah. and but so, I don't know, I just, I do think that for a in maybe, you know. And look, I'm thinking this through right. As we say it maybe that is, you know, we're talking about what is the recipe. What do you need. Right. It's like maybe the recipe is that you have to, that you can't create any you can't create something just to be a show that if you're going to create it, you've got to already have an idea of what the what that symbiotic relationship would be with social and appreciating that if you're not going to if you're not creating it, you know, it's like it used to be like, could you get conversation about the show? Like, could you get enough buzz from writers and could you get enough? You know, I mean, back in the day, reviews meant everything. Newspaper reviews that determine whether or not your Broadway show was going to be a hit. So, like, needing to understand, like, can we get people to, you know, like, maybe that's just what it is. That's the that is the deepest form of social word of mouth for a show. Success is like, you not only need to have a very good successful show, but you have to you have to focus on the social aspect of it as well and the sheer ability of it. And because maybe we're just getting to a place where if you want to have a successful show on TV, you got to have a successful marketing plan for social. And like I said, that is a, two second theory that came to my head now is definitely not a fleshed out. Phil thinks this is the wave of the future, but. It's part of the, it's part of the cog that makes the machine run. And that's a big part of it. Yeah.

Appendix G: Interview with Tammy Zohar – Production Executive

Benjamin Kessler

And first, I know a little bit about you, but I'd love for just to hear again how you started in unscripted and kind of what led you now to how I know you and in your capacity.

Tammy Zohar

Oh, great. I love talking about it. Try to keep it brief, even though I've been working in television for over 30 years. I consider myself lucky because I always knew I wanted to be an entertainment. And, And I know I dabble in the Po a lot, so please stop me if I said any of this to you that, But, you know, I was. I got an internship, when I had, had original programing that a live show in the morning, and the receptionist was rude to the executive producer wife and got fired on the spot, and I got hired, and, I always thought I wanted to be a producer. I thought that I wanted to be the creative exact, that I wanted to be in charge of shows and stuff. But as what was great about working at a startup, you sort of got to do everything. And because I was the receptionist, people would literally call me and pitch ideas for a morning show and I would pitch. The idea is in our morning pitch meeting, and I got to produce segments and I realized I was terrible at it. And then the slime producer took mercy on me, and she's like, why don't you come help me with these budgets and schedules? And my career was born, and, I was a production coordinator and effects and Fox News Channel. And then I got my dream job at one where I got to be a coordinator on, like, stupid things like the top ten countdowns. And where are they now? Before they were rock stars. I mean, I don't even know if you've even heard of those shows. but I've always I've never worked in scripted television. And then I felt that my trajectory turned out to be on every terrible dating show that was produced, mad at or like I worked on a show called Shift Mates, where our motto was three days, two nights, one day. That was scape, where we set up a couple on a blind date on a cruise ship. I worked on another show called Deep Patrol, where we took people who were trying to be others and had like a committee and a sprinter van giving them tips on like, what to wear and how to act and, and sexual communication. So I, I was always I was very lucky because I was at networks the very beginning, and then I got the opportunity to line produce that show. And I dove into the freelance world where I worked on shows like Growing Up, Gotti, show called Ultimate Holiday Town USA, just, a plethora of mediocre cable television. And then, my big break for me was I finally got to work at a place that people had heard of called MTV, and I worked on the pilot of The Hills, and, I helped create, like, logistically, not creatively 16 and pregnant. It's like, how do you figure out a budget and a green light to air when you don't know when someone's giving birth? You know, just things like that. So I, you know, I got to see a lot of very famous shows from the ground up, which, you know, how was that oxygen when they launched Fox News Channel, when they launched. So that's dabbled in a lot of different. And that's why I love being in development, because you're always going to have different projects to work on.

Benjamin Kessler

And one reason I want to speak to you, even in this beyond your experience, is because I think you've done, just from watching you work and, you know, talking to people at APL is you've

done a, a great job at like, you see both ends of it, you see the creative end and you see the business end with the money and the planning, the scheduling, where you're kind of, in a weird way, kind of in the middle of both, where you're at these meetings that maybe the creative develops into. Then the planning and the scheduling. And like you're saying just now at the Teen Mom shows. So my first formal question, I'm starting this off with everyone because at the end of last year, deadline came out with a great article interviewing 50 plus producers. And those executives identified three major changes. I kind of synthesized down their points that they saw as catalysts that would, quote unquote, help the business of reality TV in 2025. And their points were one more live programing to more tax incentives, specifically in California, which has become more hot button and three networks taking more risks on less tested formats. And so I just wanted to get your thoughts from your vantage point, if you agree with these as being like three major kind of points that are still ongoing and you see, is could help the industry. And if you think there are ones that maybe there were myths that are challenges that people really aren't talking about, or do you talk about budgets just a little under the radar?

Tammy Zohar

One thing that I will say, I feel like one huge catalyst in sort of a negative way, to reality television was the strikes, right, the WGA strike. And I feel that one of the reasons why reality television took off in the past 20 years is that it's so much cheaper to produce because you don't have to because, you know, and this is this is the kind of thing where it's like, I probably shouldn't be on the record, but do I care? It's like when a show is unionized, it costs more money. And unions were created for very good reason. Their job is to protect the employees. So we I know specifically in all the shows that I've worked on is that we try to protect our employees and pay them a fair wage so they don't feel they have to unionize. So, you know, and I feel because I am in charge of the budgets and not as much of the creative part, I feel that one of the things that people like about live is like, you don't have to spend a lot of time editing. It all comes down to the dollars and cents. And now this is very recently. I don't think anybody wants to take chances anymore because they don't want to spend the money.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, it always comes down to money, frankly, just from my perspective to seeing how things kind of end up, you know, flowing down the pipeline of what ends up on air. It's when you talk to people, it all, it ends up coming down to almighty dollar. And you give me a great segue, because I've been talking to people about the recent strikes, because while it's difficult to get numbers when you look at the numbers of shows being produced and shows actually making it to streaming or to network or things like that, reality TV was shelved in a weird way that it had, even though it's cheaper, you know, after eight strikes, there was a huge boom. But after these post Covid strikes, there wasn't really that boom. There was more of a downturn overall. And I'm curious if you think there's a reason this happened. And do you think this is more of a bubble or a continued trend moving forward?

Tammy Zohar

I wish it was a bubble, but sadly, I think it's a trend. And this is, a little political. It's more about like, the money at the top, right? It's America in general. You know, it's Democratic versus Republican. It's like this. You know, you look at Amazon right. Our parent parents coming company and they have so much money at the top. But that in general like the budgets are going to get more constricted because they refuse to spread the wealth. Like what? Sorry. Repeat your question again. Just so I understand. So make sure I'm summarizing it.

Benjamin Kessler

Do you think there's a reason why reality TV did not boom again during those strikes like it did in 2008, even though it's cheaper still? And is that a bubble or a continued trend moving forward with the.

Tammy Zohar

I think it's a continued trend because people and I think, I don't know, because we've actually talked about it recently, like with the recent split between discovery and, Warner Brothers, again, we're sort of hoping that, hey, guess what? Now that the television and the streamers are separating, the actual cable networks are going to need content, right? Let us be the ones to produce the content for you. But like I also feel in the past you would have like three of the same different cooking shows in three different networks, right? You'd have something on Bravo, you'd have something on Food Network, you'd have something, you know, on another network. And now it's like, oh, if someone's done it, we're not going to touch it with a ten-foot pole. I feel that, I don't I don't think it's a bubble because I feel like even though they're cheaper, they still don't want to spend the money until they know that's an absolute hit. And how do you know that without putting money into development?

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And there's this weird dichotomy when I talk to people where it's like, if you're my mom and you're looking at Hulu, there's more shows than you've ever seen in your life. But then when you talk to people that work in it, there's less things being made than ever before in this weird way. So it's there. Depending on who you talk to, it's either all gram and there's nothing but even a show like, I don't know if you watched The Traders on NBC, it was like their biggest reality show.

Tammy Zohar

That was that was different. That was very different.

Benjamin Kessler

That even had their budget. It was just reported two months ago. Their budget was decreased for their upcoming season. So.

Tammy Zohar

And a successful show. Yeah.

Benjamin Kessler

So it's very strange. And you know, even with these numbers down overall the genre that you're working in remains like this pop culture staple. You have some staple shows like your, The Voice, your American Ninja Warrior just got renewed literally yesterday for the 18th season. Again, you have Real Housewives. You have these shows that you can pick and say, this show's been on for 20 years now, and they're still a staple. And other shows pop up in unscripted and even things that go live on Netflix and stuff, they become this kind of cultural staple. I'm curious if you think there's anything within the genre now working in it for so long that has made it more kind of pop culture proof in a way that has made it always active in culture.

Tammy Zohar

Very wise. My old boss at MTV, said to me, the reason why a lot of the shows like and this was again, a long time ago, it's a lot of times it's so popular because it's something that you can relate to, even though it's nothing like you. Like he gave me. He was giving me the like. I was working on a lot of earnest shows about like, what do you want to do before you die? And, you know, making people feel good. Nobody wanted to watch them because it made them feel lazy. But you look at 16 and pregnant like the gum. I'm dating myself. But you looked at Real Housewives. It's like, hey, I have a group of friends. There's always a lot of drama, whatever's relatable, you know, a home improvement show. I want to watch that because I want to fix up my bathroom. A cooking show I like to eat. I think's what the success of reality television is that it's all relatable. It's not like the scripted, you know, I don't know why The voice is relatable, but I guess it's because a lot of times it's regular people who become famous, right? We all want to be famous. And this is reality. Television's always going to have that niche because it's always going to be relatable.

Benjamin Kessler

And something I've been focused on to within that is authenticity. What makes something authentic. And I the point I go to is, you know, I'm a huge survivor fan survivor really how staple the you know, the confessional. And then you have a show like The Office which then does the confessional. And now the office grows huge, and now it's in both unscripted and scripted shows. And it is no longer authentic feeling, in a sense. And so now when you see confessional on reality shows, they can either feel corny or they can feel more realistic. And there's a there's a weird sense of authenticity. So, when you're talking about that relate ability factor, do you do you think a show like a home renovation show, do you think it needs to be authentic? You know, if they're faking, maybe a home or two, or if they the person isn't necessarily the most, authentic in their actual motives? Do you think that matters or it's more of the format and the development behind it?

Tammy Zohar

I do not think it matters if it's authentic. I don't I think that like, you know, and I think about the shows where I have reality shows where every created a scene. It doesn't matter. It's still entertaining, but the type of people, the personalities, whether you're faking it or real because

you're going to know right away, like the audience isn't that dumb. You're going to know when someone's trying to get something over on you. I think, I hope, and I think that people producers really try hard to make sure that it is something that people still will want to relate to, that even if it isn't authentic, that it appears authentic. Like I look at Lucilla and I think that is a priority to her for sure.

Benjamin Kessler

No, and I think I agree because I think authentic can mean different things. when you're on a Real Housewives show, you want the drama to feel authentic, whereas you want you need the characters to, even if they don't hate someone, you need them for the moment to explain themselves in a way that feels real. Just switching gears a little bit because you've been at several networks and you've seen kind of have several trends have shifted. I'm curious to know how you feel about more things shifting to streaming and to YouTube and to social media. And do you foresee unscripted and reality TV being the same staple? It is as user generated content? Instagram lives, tiktok. As that becomes more and more popular, do you think reality lends itself into that, or do you think these newer models would they fall under a different umbrella entirely?

Tammy Zohar

I think that our quality is going to deteriorate because anyone can get an could, get their own channel and do it themselves. You know, we've actually talked about that at work. It's like, On Patrol live has just launched a YouTube channel. All we're doing is taking programing that already exists and putting it back out there for everyone to see. Any schmo now can say, hey, I have a channel, I'm interesting. Look at me, and they're going to do it for cheaper. And it's money driving it down. So I absolutely think that social media and user, user generated content is going to have a huge impact on us. However, I always go back to Lucilla. She will never put her name on something that doesn't look great. And a lot of networks like Netflix will never allow that. Prime will never allow that. There will definitely be the difference between a major streamer and a user. And, you know, content generated by user, you know? So I feel like there's going to be the opportunity for a lot of crap. But I still think with the Netflix and the primes and the Hulu's, you know, that there will also always be like, there's no there's no such thing as a network anymore. Nobody tunes into ABC or CBS. There's no more, you know, I have twin 15-year old's. They don't watch television. The only thing that the boy watches is sports. That's his only appointment television. But, you know, ever since, you know, when growing up in my generation, you know, my CTV Thursday night that was the place to be now. Now, like a new series comes out and I want to watch one episode a day so I can enjoy it, where my daughter will watch all ten episodes the minute it comes out.

Benjamin Kessler

So from the business end, within that, you know, when you air something on the network versus putting it straight to a YouTube or to a streamer, there's a big difference on how you can monetize it. Yes, as these shows become more niche in production because like we said before, there's just the budgets are less because the company's overall make less. And a lot of money goes to different facets. As you know, Amazon or Netflix buys more properties. It's just there's

an overall budget and it gets divvied out. So when there's less overall numbers, do you think that will determine where the next generation watches like even do you think it matters if you know, let's say a little it's like, I'm not putting my stamp of approval on something I don't personally love and think it's great. Do you think that will influence where the next things come from, and will that change how people are watching?

Tammy Zohar

Yes, I do, I don't know how. I don't know who will watch what, but it has to have an impact.

Benjamin Kessler

How have you seen your role change within that to on some of the shows you've worked on within both production companies and networks, have you seen a shift in sort of where the aim is or who the audience famous, or more so in just a copycat style of oh, streaming's popular, now we have to be on a streamer.

Tammy Zohar

No, I've seen more the direct impact is the financial impacts. Like how is the cheapest way to do it? You know, not necessarily like I know that for us, we're going to put together a budget for discovery that's going to be different than the budget we do for Hulu or Netflix. Right. but we are going to get a lot more creative, on how to create something for less money but still have it look good. It's like, do I want, you know, five cameras and a producer for each team and the production management team for each team? Absolutely. Am I going to get the money for that? No. Is it still going to get produced? Yes.

Benjamin Kessler

Do you think that'll influence stylistically, like when one when everyone has less money, do you think that'll change the style of what unscripted looks like?

Tammy Zohar

Yes, but it will be survival of the fittest. who? Whoever can figure out the way to do it. The prettiest for the least amount of money wins.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, and it's something I'm starting to look into more is the numbers of, like, where things are and what that matters. And if there's an overall sense. And there was a great article the other day about how Netflix is trying to create this almost like melting pot of their own shows, but they're like, oh, we had a dating show, we had this other show. Let's put them together and do it. And another one with these people were already on because the goal is almost to create an ecosystem left to create one hit show.

Tammy Zohar

Right. And what they're doing with their live programing and their sports, like they are not cheating out on that, that's for sure. But on the same token, I talked to a producer. He's like, oh

yeah, I'm doing the show for Netflix. You know, it's just, I can I think it was unscripted. But he's like, yeah, they just cut our budget in half. I'm like, really? Netflix is like, oh yeah.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. I mean it feels like the path with everyone is as streamers become more and more popular, they also didn't know directly how to monetize it without the ad revenue. Yeah. And so that changed a lot of you know streamers are huge. But they're also not as huge business wise because of that.

Tammy Zohar

Right. Yeah. I feel like you know more than I do. If you've researched this more, I'm like, I just make my television shows.

Benjamin Kessler

No, it's good to just talk to people. My, my last written down question for you is I'm asking everyone, what do you believe? Is there a is there a recent successful model you've seen? It could be a show you watched unscripted show. It could be something you saw on your phone, on social media. Could be a way you saw someone do casting or a way you saw someone deal with a budget issue. Is there something you've seen in the past 3 to 5 years that you said, oh wow, that's a great way someone's doing that? Or wow, that's a really cool thing. Or, you know, something that stuck out that you see as kind of a trend for the future.

Tammy Zohar

I will say that, you know, I'm very biased on this. And I was there at the beginning and this was a little bit more than five years ago. But us creating live PD created a genre that didn't exist before, like there's live television, but no, like when we hired everybody to do live PD John Gonzalez came from sports, right? Let's do this live. Like, how are we going to be live in eight places at the same time? How does golf do it? And it was great to like go to my first Christmas party, you know, in, in the industry and someone's like, wow, you work on that show. How do they do that? And you know, we at Big Fish have tried several different models, which are the dating show. We did a court show and none of them succeeded. And it's like, but, you know, when it comes to just, you know, when you look at Big Brother, when you look at which again, there's been a long time. But like, people just want to be voyeuristic. They want to see what people are doing, you know, survivor like, let's watch all these people survive. Let's watch all this thing, you know? But live PD showed you away, which then, you know, morphed into on patrol to really be live and also put a focus on an industry that's under a lot of scrutiny. Right. Like a lot of people are like, oh, police departments are never going to let you do that. Do you know how many cops are like, please let me have a camera and show you that we are not the problem, you know? It's not too old because it's been around, but it's like, you know, I'm ancient in this industry, and it is definitely one of my proudest accomplishments because I help hire every single person. And when the show launched, you know.

Benjamin Kessler

It's you have to capture a niche. I think the more I've done, more I've looked at what succeeds. And it's weird how in capturing in a show like creating one, you know, where cops was so successful live PD and on patrol. I've looked nothing like cops. They don't appeal to the same people. They don't appeal the same people working on it stylistically or watching it. And that is so, so odd to me because you'd think just looking at it, oh, that's the same group. The Venn diagram makes sense here. But really, when you get down to what makes each one successful, it's entirely different. And that's been cool to see.

Tammy Zohar

Yeah, I hope you've enjoyed it. I mean, I know you're like a little niche of it as well, you know.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, it's weird for me because I've when you jump around genres like freelancing I've been doing, you kind of see you get to see how different people work. And the one thing I love most about working there is like, everyone's bought in. Everyone, like, wants the show to be as entertaining and exciting and well-polished as possible, which is just not the case at other places because they get bogged down by the corporatization of it all. And that is like, that is the most fun. Whatever. You know, you could be working in sports, you could be working in cooking shows. Whatever the team around it is the most important part. And what makes it fun to me.

Tammy Zohar

It's so true. It's such a unique thing. Like everyone's like, oh, you got to work over the weekend. It's like, yeah, but it's not that bad. Time goes by really quickly. And to watch the evolution of the show, like in the beginning, we didn't have the edit, like we didn't know how to use it. Like that show that you saw the first month it produced was not the show that we see today, and to watch that evolution and be part of it was just very exciting.

Appendix H: Interview with Charlie Jenkins – Post Production Management, Supervisor & Coordinator

Benjamin Kessler

I took a brief look at your bio and everything about you, but I, I'm interested just to hear you talk about, kind of how you came upon the unscripted space and kind of what you do now.

Charlie Jenkins

Sure. Well, I started way, way back in 1992. I was one of the first, avid assistant editors in Los Angeles. the guy that I worked for, was doing commercial work, like, Budweiser frogs and that sort of stuff, which I worked on. so he needed I was in I was an assistant director. The economy crashed. We're talking to late 80s, early 90s. and there was just no work. Kind of like. No. And so he asked me if I wanted to help him out. I was like, sure. He's like, I have an app. And I'm like, what the hell's that? And one thing led to another. And, we did a bunch of work for quite a few years. One thing from that, led me to work over, a place that I don't think exists anymore. Used to be called pop. Pacific Ocean Post in Santa Monica, and I believe it's completely gone at this point. I worked over in the sound side because I had been a sound designer eventually, and, ended up in operations over there for 5 or 6 years. And then, was reached out to by a guy named Jeff Rice, who was the VP at, a company that was called elemento. and they did a whole ton of reality stuff, a bunch of discovery stuff. and I had worked when I was, an assistant editor I'd worked on what was the very first shark week. Which, oddly enough, they sent us a massive box of shark related footage that they had in there, like, make a show or, like, okay. And literally just for hours and hours and hours.

Benjamin Kessler

You just staring at sharks?

Charlie Jenkins

Yeah. And I was like, this is back when average had a removable hard drive in a chassis, and they were only eight gigs. That was it. That was the Max. so you had this rack of these drives that you had to spin down and spin up in order to pull them out, spin them down. And then once they spun down, you could pull them out if you pulled them out before they spun down the disk inside would shatter. And anything on and of course is gone at that point. So it's crazy times of we were just talking about this today. It's kind of funny. Anyhow, so Jeff was like, you know, we've got this show was one of the it was one of the first big reality shows. It was called Bachelorettes in Alaska. And it was, a bunch of, girls that, wanted to be bachelorettes. And they went to Alaska because there are more men than women in Alaska at the time. And, then, you know, long story short, you can imagine the drama and whatnot. So I was like, yeah, sure, I'll be a post supervisor. I'm not sure what that means, but I will. And so went over there and Jeff kind of trained me some, and just one thing led to another. And I was with elemento until 2007. And then I went freelance and had been freelance as a post-super post producer ever since. and 99% of the stuff I've done could be called, I guess you could call it unscripted or, some of it was reality, like the, you know, housewives and that kind of stuff. that to me would be more reality

then you have more unscripted stuff, which is like docufollow, which I've done a ton of, which I prefer better than the game show type reality stuff. The docufollow stuff can be really fascinating and some of the stuff can be Award-Winning. we did a show. I did a show with a group called two Roosters that, unfortunately, the production company is not around anymore, but, we did what had been their largest show to date until, Blue Planet or Planet Blue, whatever. Blue planet nature shows. Yeah. Blue planet. So we had the highest rated show on discovery for two seasons until that came out, of course, blew everything out of the water. and that's pretty much how I got there and what I've been doing until of late. the last thing I worked on was with A&E, and it was remote, but it seems like even the remote stuff's going away now, so I'm back in LA.

Benjamin Kessler

Yes, I definitely want to get into that. And really cool just to hear about your career. And, I'll start off with that, just like you were talking about, you know, kind of lack of work right now. And one thing I've been seeing in my research is, you know, during the recent, the recent strikes were very different from the oh eight strikes, which the oh, strikes kind of led to this upheaval of reality TV because it was cheaper, because it was nonunion and because they could make a quick and.

Charlie Jenkins

Basically, those strikes made reality explode. They existed before that. The very first reality show. And people don't realize this was cops. And I worked on cops as an assistant director way back in the God, that must have been the it must have been in the mid 80s when that, took off. And that was really the first reality show. So it did exist beforehand. it just, you know, what the, the always strikes it crippled la financially, the whole city. It just really did a number and there was just no I was lucky enough that I was already working with Jeff over at element, so I it didn't hit me so much. They had a bunch of discovery stuff they were doing, which wasn't reality. It was more documentary type stuff. but yeah, these strikes, this is a whole different can of worms.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. So I just want to, prompt you before you get into it. Is that these strikes? You know, at first there was a lot of reports that like, oh, it's going to if it lasts too long, it's going to be similar where networks are going to fill their spots with unscripted reality stuff or things they have in the can. And then what we saw from that so far is no, no reality. A small amount, but not on the same level, not near the level even of what was being produced 2 or 3 years ago, just after Covid and I'm curious to know, why do you think this happened, and do you see it more as a bubble right now, or a continued trend with the way production and on your end post-production works?

Charlie Jenkins

Well, it's kind of kind of both. I got lucky. I, I moved out of L.A. because you didn't have to be here, though, like, we're working from home. I got a gig through A&E through their one of their production companies. They produce for other networks, oddly enough. and so a lot of stuff I was doing was for the history Channel, even though I don't know why they call it the History

Channel anymore. There's no history on it. But, it's bizarre. I've even done history shows for the History Channel where they wanted us to take all the history out.

Benjamin Kessler

That's. Oh, this is bizarre.

Charlie Jenkins

Yeah. So at any rate. So I was living up near San Luis Obispo, which is central California, and I. And then we were just I was doing one show. They'd roll me from one show to the next show. They had a bunch of stuff. I'm like, you guys are producing an awful lot of content. I mean, you can't air all this, and I mean, other networks can't air all this. And then one executive goes, this is what we're doing because of the strikes that are happening. And we know there are more strikes coming. We're loading up. I'm like, you're doing what they're like. We want to produce 500 hours of TV this year, which is a ton. I mean, that's a it's just a break that down. You know, how many hours in a week are there? You know, all the content that could possibly be. Plus they're going to rerun a bunch of stuff. So what happened was, they kept me busy for almost two and a half years, and then nothing. They were like, okay, we're good. And we went through all the different strikes. We're all going through Covid. Covid was the thing that made them start doing this, you know, over producing. And they knew strikes were coming. So that just cemented the whole we're going to may have to make a bunch of TV or we're going to be doing nothing, but, you know, reruns of the last 20 years of content. So it was just asses and elbows. They couldn't hire enough people to complete everything they wanted to do. They had stuff greenlit, they had the money, but they didn't want to get caught, you know, with their pants down. So they wanted to over produce, which is great for them, not for us or people in production, for that matter, obviously. So. And I think a lot of networks did that. They just produced the crap out of everything, did as much stuff as they could. And quite honestly, some of the shows that worked on, I wouldn't watch. They were just garbage, but they fill the air airspace. So there you go. Then you end up in the situation we're in now. So Covid, was not good for production. It shut everything down, which was fine for post because we're, you know, obviously a few a few months to maybe a year behind production, you know, finishing up. They've already shot. And eventually that crept up to us. Of course. then Covid was over and they had strikes which didn't really affect, quote unquote reality unscripted because we're not union. so if you have decent enough reputation and you knew enough people, you were brand new to the industry where you just didn't have anybody to call, you could keep you could keep pretty busy because, you know, not union. For editors, it was a bit different because a lot of editors that were union were taking nonunion jobs. A lot of guys do, and the editors union cares, but they ignore it because, you know, they know people have to pay deals and whatnot. Yeah. So do anything. So, keep kind of rolling along. Then you had more strikes and then, you know, these networks started running out of content. but I've had big patches. The last thing I worked on ended in November of last year, and I have not been able to find anything. I was I just moved back to LA because I was trying to find more remote work. I was living in Asheville, North Carolina, where that big flood happened last year. Yeah. it's going to be 20 years from that place is normal again. Maybe ten but most likely 20. I think you're right. Yeah, I was lucky I, we were trapped in our complex because of all

the trees that came down, but we didn't have any issues with flooding or needed stuff. Thank God we were up on a hill. That's good. But anyway, yeah, so I was able to work through a lot of that except when we were, you know, the power outage and whatnot that we had for four days or whatever. It was five days. and then I just went right back to work. but eventually that came to an end and I started looking and most everything now all these companies are like, oh, we're never going to bring you guys back in-house. We don't need to do this. You can work from home, you know? Plus, you know, it doesn't cost them, so much money. The biggest thing for a lot of these production companies is parking. Parking in L.A. is ridiculous. It's more than it's more than their rent. So having post-production at home is great. You know, they can have a machine room with all the different, evidence, you know, the hardware for the Amazon there and just use jumper whatever software.

Benjamin Kessler

You just remote.

Charlie Jenkins

You remote in and they're not paying for parking. They have maybe they have a room that has like a viewing station in it where if they want to review something, they can, or they can do a mix in there or whatever, but for the most part, you know, but all these companies, for whatever reason, have decided to bring everything back in, at least to a hybrid degree. Well, you know, I've got to be within driving distance of a hybrid kind of shift. So if I've got to be in office, a day or two out of every week, then that's not going to work from North Carolina. So I moved back and I just had lunch today with one of the owners of a company called, Lot Size Media. And they have they should be there machine room, which was incredible. they, they, they're now down to the point where they're doing mostly scripted with a handful of non-scripted stuff. And I was asking them, I was like, so what do you think they're like? It just there's no call for it. No one no one wants it. And the companies that are doing unscripted don't need a finishing voice. They're, they purchase all their own AV and they have all the finishing stuff they have. They need in-house. They're never they're not going back here unless they need, like, rental space, like office space. And then they'll come back. But for the most part, a lot of the companies that do that stuff, all the smaller companies that were doing reality stuff, folded.

Benjamin Kessler

This is a great segue point too, because we see with total production numbers down overall, you know, obviously unscripted being part of that. But one thing that I've been noticing is trend wise is unscripted. And specifically, reality has still be is still remaining as like a pop culture social media staple. And so one place I work Amazon's home shopping channel, they were completely remote, like, you guys were. And then I only got in when they brought everything back. And still, the number one note that we're getting is this looks too polished. We want everything to look less produce. Wow. And so there's this there's this kind of, idea out there right now that they want everything to look social media. So there's this rise of user generated content. One of the biggest shows, you know, is Beast Games with Mr. Beast on Amazon Primes. YouTuber, everyone thinks you know, YouTube is the most viewed platform in the world right now, just

because of the sheer amount of content. And I'm curious, as this user generated content becomes larger and maybe what you're seeing with things that you've seen adapt to streaming or adapt to just shorter overall, do you foresee unscripted reality stuff that you've worked on in the past, or even that you see coming up in the future? Do you think it will still be a go to genre, even if it doesn't exist in that same form? Or do you think it's morphing into something different?

Charlie Jenkins

That's a great question that I really, honestly, a bunch of us have been racking our brains about it, and it's just like, what's with YouTube today? I just I just closed my laptop. I was I've been using, LinkedIn, of course, to try to find work and whatnot. and I saw a story on there where this guy is trying to relate that, he got what you call him self profiled at the airport, and I'm like, oh, so I decided to read it and was like, not because of my skin, but because of what I do for a living. Apparently some woman was sitting next to him and she's traditional Hollywood and he's, what do you call it? Creator, I guess is the term people are using now. And so he decides when she asks him what he does for a living, not to go through the whole creator thing, but to tell her, you know, he turned to her and said, I own a studio. And she looks at him. She's like, you're 24, how do you own a studio? And he went on this rant about how he owns a studio and this and that and the other thing and I actors and I have, you know, sound and I have post and I have all this other stuff I like. All right. Cool. So I read the whole thing and trying, you know, trying to learn even though I'm the old guy. I was like, roll. Let's look at his stuff. It was crap. It was so bad. I mean, it was just garbage. I didn't know that. The camera's all handheld and you can't really tell what's going on because a guy's shaking or something. I'm not quite sure what it was, but it's, you know, actors. You've never heard of kids out of high school. It's like you and me making a movie in their backyard. And we were 14. You know, I guess that's content. And, you know, it airs at. Maybe he's making a good living doing it. I don't know, but the quality is low. like you're talking about. I'm shocked to hear that they want something like, because I've worked on some Amazon stuff and they're not looking for low quality. I mean, I get what the person is saying. They want it to be more gritty, more YouTube.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, it's a it's a different sphere. It's not it's, you know, it's for the home shopping channel. So it's it falls under a different grid. But yeah.

Charlie Jenkins

Of course, of course. But still, you know, I mean, wouldn't, wouldn't you think Home Shopping Network would take a step up and not have people be so dismissive of it? You know, to have the watching something that has quality. I can't watch something that I mean, I watch this one thing that you did. Well, I watch one of the things and yeah, there's a ton of stuff he had. He's produced a ton, a lot. And so I watch this one kung fu kid thing, and I get your ten minutes. I'm like, this is there's another 15 minutes. I can't watch it. Just can't.

Benjamin Kessler

So do you think a lot of this is a numbers game? Just the fact that they're producing that much content and the algorithms on these platforms are, you know, they reward sheer amount and then eyeballs, whether eyeballs are good or bad or and do you think that lends itself to the genre of unscripted more or like what do you think the combination there is just because, you know, this guy stuff may have been scripted, but there's definitely a heavy amount of vlog material that became very large on YouTube, and the sense of great things feeling more, like affable and things feeling more realistic, which when reality TV first became a big thing, that was the whole thing is these are real people. Do you think that I'm kind of seeing a bridge between those two types? And I'm curious from someone who has worked on more unscripted, less reality, but more like you're saying docufollow and docuseries-based things. Do you think those still fit, or do you think they're just like a split? Completely different subgenres, completely now, different depending on the generation watching it's budgets?

Charlie Jenkins

The networks won't. According to the guys I have lunch with today, they're like, because of Covid and the strikes, people had to start producing things. This is what happened in 2008. All of a sudden they squeezed that, production companies, instead of you having traditional positions, you had to take, 2 or 3 different positions in production and squeeze that into one position, one person instead of three people. And of course, that, you know, stresses everybody out. You're working and it happened again. Apparently now they've squeezed the budgets yet again. And you're we're probably not going to see. I hadn't thought about the quality thing. I guess if you chop the quality, in half, like it's a YouTube thing, you can kill a lot of budget that way. And if that's what we're gonna start seeing on regular TV, or maybe regular TV just isn't the platform anymore. And some of these studios, I mean, Sony and Paramount and all the rest of these guys, I mean, they're looking to, you know, make as much money as a can, of course. And so that's why production has fled the country. That's why we need a national tax incentive, not a state by state tax incentive. Because what happened, this past week, Gavin Newsom, the governor of California, announced, he's going to try to get the tax incentive in California up to 750 million like the state of New York. Well, two days later, the governor of New York came out and said that she's raising theirs to 850 million. So really, it this tit for tat thing for every state that wants to have production in it. And it's just an unending disaster. We need a national like Ireland or the UK or Belgium or, you know, there's a lot of stuff. A friend of mine is a dialog coach and has done all the Knives Out movies as an example with Daniel Craig. And so Daniel Craig has a southern accent, and that's what my friend works on to help him get that done. Danny just did the movie career with him. Oh, cool. But all of those movies, the Knives Out, of course. the first two were supposed to be in the U.S.. They weren't shot in the U.S or shot in the UK. It takes place supposedly in Mexico and South America. The whole thing was shot in Italy because it was cheaper. last year she did three films. Not all of them were supposed to. In the movie, you're in the US and none of them were shot in the US. They were shot in Italy, Bulgaria and Prague and Czechoslovakia in the Czech Republic. And none of those should have been shot there. He did a, sorry. He did another one that was shot in the UK. The UK was supposed to look like New England. They found a place. It looked like New England. They shot it there for half the price. Oh, weird. This is what it's. That's why. That's why they say Hollywood is dying. Stuff isn't

being shot here anymore. It used to be for, for reality unscripted. They would go and shoot wherever they were going to go and shoot. They always brought post back to LA or New York, and they're not even doing that now. They're actually shoot as an example. The game show, game shows are doing this, which blows my mind. The game show The Floor with Rob Lowe.

Benjamin Kessler

Yes. Just got a renewed right.

Charlie Jenkins

You know, where they shoot it? They take Rob Lowe and all the contestants to Bulgaria, and they shoot the whole fucking thing and post it over there.

Benjamin Kessler

That's insane. I had no clue that they fly out there. Yeah, that's because I just saw that they got renewed, and actually one of my friends sent it to me and he was like, look at this show many months ago. He was like, you won't believe what the show is. And I was just watching that. I was like, this show is crazy.

Charlie Jenkins

Yeah, Fox is doing that. the guys that I had lunch with were saying, oh, yeah, that's like five different game shows or shooting and posting outside the country. We have all this lot space here where they used to shoot these things. It's just dark.

Benjamin Kessler

And you're giving me another great segue. I have two questions left. One is the spying on the tax incentives that there was a fairly recent deadline article. It was at the end of last year, and they interviewed 50 major producers within reality TV. And I, I identified three major changes that these head executives and producers viewed as catalysts that would help the unscripted reality business in 2025. And they were one being more live programing, one being more tax incentives, specifically in California, right. And the third being networks allowing themselves to take more risks on less tested formats. And I'm curious for just before you talk about it, I'm curious on your end, seeing how things get finished and seeing the kind of the last step of the work. Do you agree with these, and do you foresee these in five plus years, ten years to even two years still being these major challenges that prevent the work from happening and from moving to more of that YouTube style that we're talking about?

Charlie Jenkins

Right. So as far as the tax incentives go, I hadn't thought about this, but there's a discussion on LinkedIn that I'll try to find and send to you. But, people talking about, you know, for reality unscripted, they need a carve out inside the tax incentives for those things because they're kind of not they're dismissed and overlooked. Most of the tax incentives are for feature and for scripted TV. And I'm not sure if these tax incentives single out reality slash like docu-following all the rest of that stuff. Unscripted stuff. Maybe there's something in because I've, you know, not being

an accountant in in the business. I don't really pay attention to that stuff. Maybe there's something that says that they don't qualify for it because of what they are. I don't know, but people are starting to say, hey, we need a carve out for this stuff. Meaning a section of that chunk of money is solely for this type of TV because, at the moment, it's dead. I mean, I've called some of the bigger producers I've worked with who are I mean, we're all getting up there in age. I'm in my 60s. and some of these guys are like, I think I might be retired. I'm like, what do you mean? It's like, I've worked in six months. I know a guy that lost his house, lost his cars, lost their vacation home, and is now going through a divorce, all because of lack of work. Well, it's destroying families and lives or whatnot. The lack. I mean, there's just, you know, they've run through their retirement fund, they run through any other kind of savings they had. They went and sold their vacation home. Then he went and sold their regular home. Now they've got kids that are, you know, approaching college and whatnot, but still, you know, it's destroying people. The lack of employment.

Benjamin Kessler

And the, the freelance nature of it to changes the way that people, you know, just earn money. And, you know, I don't want to end on a downer note. So I wanted to ask you too. I'm asking everyone I talked to what they believe is needed for the future in this space, or what they believe is the most recent successful model they've seen in unscripted reality TV. And it could be a show. It could be a way of doing post, a way of casting something you've seen that you're like, this would work great in the future. From what I've seen from both executives and the audience, is there anything that you've seen that you're like, this has either been great or could be great in the near future?

Charlie Jenkins

I think people are tired of the housewife type stuff, all the stress and whatnot because of how stressful everything else is right now. So I think this is happening kind of in a way. And one of the reasons why more docu following reality blew up and people were looking for more hopeful stuff, you know, more, what would be the word for more encouraging type of television, I think could catch on and do better? It's the biggest problem right now is money. you may have a great idea. And unless you can inspire someone that has money that can help you produce it, whatnot, I just it that they're looking for hits right off the bat, just like they're not taking a chance. You know, some of these companies need to be able to go, hey, let's, you know, roll the dice on this. We like it. We can sell it. I've worked on a few shows where we did the pilot and then the episode, shopped it around and eventually sold them. And, you know, then other companies are just like, damn, we should have taken that. So I you know what? I don't know, because I don't really watch the type of stuff that I work on unless it's, more of a docu follow. I don't really I never really like to watch because by the time you've worked on a show in post, I've seen every episode 600 times. So watching the finished product, which I've already seen a bunch, not really looking to go home and watch it again. Yeah, so I might watch some, somebody else's show, but I wouldn't watch my own. Some of the competition stuff is good. I like the way, American Idol. when Fox canceled it, NBC picked it right up. I was surprised at Fox killed it, and it's still going strong. the chair that's sort of, you know, it's anything that other people think they could do also

is going to be a hit. So everyone thinks they can sing. So the thing with the chairs and American Idol and all that stuff, I did a show. I'm surprised it never took off. It was called Opening Act, and it was Simon Lithgow, the guy that was the main producer of American Idol. it's one of his. And what it was, was they were going around trying to find talent that could be the opening act for Lady Gaga or Sting or whoever, and I'm not sure if you can find it out there, but there were some really talented people, and I'm really shocked. And these are people that were, you know, trying really hard to it was kind of their break to get the opportunity to open it for someone. And one of the people that they ended up casting in the show, one of the episodes she opened for Lady Gaga at a massive stadium tour. What happened to her after that? I have no idea of any of these people ever were able to turn it into something, but stuff like that, that's, you know, more of what we need, in the reality space, if that's what we're going to do. I would love to do. I worked for Doctors Without Borders for a couple of years. I left, this lovely industry and went and worked for them for a bit. I would love to do something sort a docu follow thing on that vein, so people get an even bigger appreciation of what those people do, and how they go about doing it and the politics involved in it and all that stuff. I think that could do. Well. That would be a hard sell to the Doctors at Borders. But there are other companies out there, save the Children and whatnot.

Benjamin Kessler

And yeah, in a really weird way, that stuff does really well. On the flip side, it's true. I've spoken to a couple of people who do true crime and things like that, and it's so funny how those are like, you know, you're describing something that in my head it's like, well, that's just as intriguing, if not more than a lot of the true crime stuff I see. And, you know, it's almost like we're in a copycat industry where one thing takes off and everyone wants to make the next big hit of it. But what you're saying is definitely true where there is an appetite for just intriguing characters, intriguing jobs, and intriguing anything that can make people sit down and go, oh, that's something cool. Oh, that's something different. People do enjoy watching that stuff. And sure, I agree with you. I think it could be successful, but I also agree that it needs to be in the right case by case. And if you ever work at a place where they say, oh, we have all the money we need, I your, you know, your boss might be selling drugs or something, that I don't think I've been at a single place where they've said, oh yeah, we're good on money. Even, you know, large corporations to small production companies. They're all saying we don't have enough money. And so it's hard to tell sometimes if that's just part of the game or if that's real or what's going on. And. Yeah.

Charlie Jenkins

Yeah, it's how it goes. A lot of, a lot of reality companies quote unquote, cook the books, if you will. This is something this you cannot repeat and I'd rather you didn't use. Yeah, I guess, but as an example, let's just say you're a poor supervisor and you're getting two grand a month or, sorry, two grand a week for your job, on the show that you're on, then the production company, the budget that they send to, network X instead of you being two grand a week, they charge the production company three grand a week, and they're skimming a thousand bucks, and they do with every position. Yeah. They don't have money. Yeah. Please. I mean, sometimes. Sure,

they'll do, they'll do, they'll say the big problem with production companies, they don't know the word no. and networks are constantly asking for things that are next to impossible, without, you know, the huge human effort, like seven days a week, 24 hours a day, all the overnights and all the rest of the stuff you have done, you know, they use, budgeted time for post in production instead. So you're six months to get your stuff done. It's down, down to four months, and it's all that kind of stuff. getting into the side of the business, I would be very has if my son wanted to get into, reality and unscripted and stuff. I tell him that was probably not a great idea. and I don't think it's going away completely, but from what I can see right now, and we don't know what the impact of AI is going to be, I think a lot of posts could end up going, I honestly, I've been doing coordinator work, post coordinator work, lately because that's really the only stuff I've been able to find it, which is fine, but it's a lot of paperwork, and I think a lot of that position could go away. You just feed that information into an AI that knows what document it's filling out and it's done.

Appendix I: Interview with Andy Dehnart – Writer, TV Critic, Creator of *Reality Blurred*

Benjamin Kessler

Okay, so first off, I've read up on your site about how you got started with reality blurred, but I'm just curious from your perspective, less so how it started out and more so how you've seen it develop with the genre changing. Can you tell me a little bit about how you've been able to keep up with reality TV this over 25 plus years, and how you've kind of seen your site change and how you've kind of maybe approached it differently.

Andy Dehnart

Yeah, it is a great question because it's certainly has changed a lot. And I think, you know, some of that change has been, you know, just incremental over time. And then even things I'm doing differently, I don't notice until suddenly I'm like, oh, that has changed. I think the, you know, when I started reality and it was really about just me trying to find all of the information and tidbits that I could get online and share those with people and just kind of scour the internet for anything. And of course, today we're in a media ecosystem where, you know, just the lives of reality TV stars are covered, and mostly like celebrities. And because they're celebrities and there's more reality TV people and people magazine and Us Weekly than there are celebrities now. So certainly there's no shortage of content. but it's almost like what I do kind of hasn't changed. And then now I'm searching through a landscape of overload of like too many shows, too much information and trying to make sense of that answer the questions that I have. I reviewed the shows that I think are worthy of attention for review, even like whether that's because they're great or they're not so great, or just something about that makes them that way. So I've definitely found myself having to filter or like, I don't know, like, I guess I've found myself really having to curate more, both in terms of my own diet. I like I can't watch every reality TV show now. Not that I even could back in the year 2000, although I did, because there was like seven shows on the air that, you know, kind of changed, like weren't on constantly, but now it's completely impossible and it's certainly impossible to cover every show all the time. And even what we're seeing in media, and I'm sure you've seen this is like some networks don't even announce formally new seasons of shows. They just kind of come and go like guys. Grocery Games on Food Network is just on all the time. There's not a new season. It just takes, you know, it's like 50 episodes a year or whatever they're doing. And same with some history and TLC shows. They're just like, we don't even need to publicize that. So it's hard for me to keep up in that way. And then, of course, everything on streaming, has opened up a lot of possibilities and doors to including the fact that now in the US, we're getting a lot more international shows and able to watch those weekly, which, is really nice and awesome, but also, again, even more content to try to cover. So I don't know if this is the answer to your question, but I guess the only other thing about the way I've changed, I think, is I hope I've gotten to be more informed, a better critic and a better journalist. Just over those years of practice and learning and talking to people and making connections and trying to cover this industry as if not thoroughly as I can, as in-depth as I can with the places that I decide to go.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, no, that makes total sense. And, just to say, like reality blurred is very impressive in the sense that, you know, I know it's you and a couple other people maybe, and you're covering, like, everything in a, in a broad sense, and you're getting information that even large amounts of like your Entertainment Weekly's and your Hollywood reporter's like you're writing more in depth about this stuff than they are with their large amount of teams online, which is just impressive off the bat. And so I want it. I have five questions I kind of use as a base for these interviews so far, and it's funny that you were talking about watching, that you can't watch everything and you never really could in theory, because depending on who you talk to, whether it's a production person or an executive, you know, some people are saying, oh, there's more work in TV than ever before. And some people are like, it's gone, it's extinct. There's none. And I've heard both of ends of it. So one article that has really intrigued me as I've been, researching this was from deadline at the end of last year, where they interviewed about 50 producers and executives within unscripted reality TV, and they basically asked these producers, what does reality TV need to be stronger in the future? And they synthesize it down with these executives to three main catalysts, and they were one being more live programing to being more tax incentives, specifically in Hollywood, in California overall, and then three generically, networks taking more risks, less tested formats. And I can repeat those. But as someone who is covering the entire industry, I'm curious if you from your perspective, if you agree with these executives and if you see these being changes that you also believe are necessary or could still be major challenges, or if there's something you think they're missing because they're executives and maybe their opinions a little skewed.

Andy Dehnart

Yeah, it's interesting because just hearing you say those three and I feel like I remember reading that that's back then, is that I'm not sure those things are all that different than they were 25 years ago. For sure. The risk taking has always been a Hollywood problem, and for as long as I've been talking to executives, producers, people who produce reality television, the sort of undercurrent always is. The fear of not just losing their job is because something failed or creating something that doesn't work. but also, just the fear of taking chances. And, I mean, you can look back to survivor and such an excellent example of that where every major network rejected Mark Burnett's pitch for this show that had succeeded in Europe, at least in a very small way, like not relative to other shows, but it was not a brand new from nothing format, although he certainly put his own spin on it and evolved quite a bit. But anyway, so everyone rejected it. And finally, CBS decides to take a risk. But their risk was completely mitigated by the fact that Mark essentially funded the show through product placement and integration that he got on his own. So CBS essentially didn't have to take a risk at all. Yet they were seen as taking this big risk on survivor. And of course, survivor was a massive hit. The finale is still like the second most watched show of the 20 or the 2000 era that that decade, just only after the friends finale. And of course, that's entertainment, not sports. but it was a live event, and it was something that people watched together. And I think if you look at Love Island this summer, which, granted, has not reached as many people, but still sort of airing in real time, capturing attention of media, social media, fans, viewers, it's I think, that sort of live component of watching together that hasn't changed either. And maybe we've forgotten it over the years. Maybe there's been, you know, less

marketing, less attention on the fact that this is really communal, ultimately. And people like to talk about what they're seeing and discuss it with each other. so, yeah, I think, you know, the piece about, tax incentives bringing back production to California. Absolutely. But I think that the bigger problem is that Hollywood is now run by the whims of Wall Street and private equity, and this idea that we have to be incredibly profitable and yet spend no money. And so you see things like what's happening at discovery, where they're decimating the cable networks that are actually doing pretty well, like it's GTV and just canceling a bunch of shows just because they think they can make even more profits on the back end. So, you know, does it would it be great to bring more production back to Southern California for the people who work there? Absolutely. Is that the financial problem that we're really having? I don't think so.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And reading it, you get different perspective perspectives too, based on kind of what each network is doing. But overall there's just less TV shows now on these networks, on these cable channels, even on streaming, compared to a couple of years ago. There're just less things in total being produced. You know, really strange way when you look at the numbers, which sometimes are hard to find because, you know, not every company needs to report their numbers. But when you look at the Nielsen numbers, too, there's just overall less shows. But then maybe the staple hit shows, you know, are doing so much better in proportion to everything else. And so I saw you did some coverage about, the recent strikes and of course, Covid of five years ago now. And during those recent strikes, from two different unions in the total entertainment industry, reality TV was shelved in a way that was almost entirely opposite from the 2008 boom that kind of caused this huge upheaval in reality TV coming to the mainstream. And that some people have pointed to as one reason that maybe reality TV has had a downturn in production and hasn't really recovered. Both Covid and those strikes being two things that just kind of decimated reality TV, in a weird way. And I'm curious if you think, why do you think this happened? And it wasn't like 2008, where executives said, okay, we can make reality TV for cheaper, let's do it. And do you see this as more of a bubble and that there's still a way back, or do you see this as more of a continued trend now that it's kind of established?

Andy Dehnart

Yeah. You know, I think what was definitely interesting that the strikes left both scripted and unscripted, damaged in the same way, I wouldn't I think that there's probably like it sort of like looks out. So we're looking at like the actual quantity and total and where things are being produced. Like is it is this affecting Southern California only like in terms of production numbers and shows? For sure. Like the networks didn't rush in to fill gaps. But also I think that like they had already decided to produce a lot less content that they had before, and so they didn't need stuff to fill those gaps. And they had sort of been planning for strikes for a little bit, or at least knew that this was a possibility, especially places like Netflix, which work in advance. So I think they you were you end up seeing as like reality TV is mature at this point and it's just part of the TV landscape. And so it's kind of treated as an equal is not exactly fair, especially with so many reality TV shows not being under unions. And therefore like, you know, they are cheaper in many ways. And of course, it's much cheaper to film in PG for survivor where they get, you

know, almost 50% of their budget back in incentives and also don't have to have a unionized crew. I just like I'm not entirely like I'm not entirely sure what happened, but I don't think that like, I don't think that it was about reality TV. I think it's about just the industry in general. And there's this tendency to like, you know, what do we actually need to make money? And granted, it's always been about making money and it's always been a business. But, you know, I think that there was definitely different creative leadership 25 years ago than there is today. And maybe the leadership today is much more focused on, you know, money, like David Zaslav is not a creative person. And yet everything is flowing from him in that massive company. And so does that hurt the creative? And I would argue that that it does.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And even with that, sometimes you see a lot of copy paste. And one thing I like to talk about too is like you see a show like the traders do really well. And then all of a sudden three other streaming platforms have a show that are taking other reality, all these reality stars and putting them together. And do those shows work? Not really, because they're not the traitors, they're just trying to copy what they're doing. And within that, there's production numbers down overall, like we were talking about a bit where it's not even a reality or unscripted thing. It's just there's less things being produced because of the rise of YouTube and streaming when it comes to that. And like you were saying, spend as little as you can to make as much profit, potentially. But even with that, reality TV remains this like huge pop culture staple where any time you log into social media, you're going to see news about Love Island, you're going to see news about someone from Real Housewives. You're going to be seeing something about some type of reality or unscripted show. Whether it's true crime or a docu series, every streamer has one and there's still pop culture staple. So I'm curious, even with numbers down, why do you think reality-TV is still such a pop culture phenomenon, even if there's less shows overall, do you think that it's still on the back of those Survivors and Real Housewives franchise, or its. Is the genre still capable of creating these huge hits, even today and moving forward?

Andy Dehnart

Yeah, I think it absolutely is. And to your previous point, like The Traders proves that and like it is a very successful format and copies don't work and the same thing was true 25 years ago when survivor was a hit. And then suddenly we had all these like, survivor shows that went nowhere and can't even remember their names other than, I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here! Some version. but so, yeah, so, like, I think that they're always kind of like, they're making that, the fear and sort of reticence to be out there and be bold. So like someone like the traders finally does something and then it's like, oh, we should just do that because it was successful. But they're missing the fact that what people are responding to is something new, something different, something creative. And I think the universal underlying factor here is that we watch reality TV to connect with and relate to the people who are in these circumstances, whether the circumstances are their lives, you know, such as the Osbornes or the Real Housewives, however, produce their lives might be or whether we're seeing people in these competition formats and in these kind of big and surreal and wild games, all of that. It's still like something that we can find both interesting and find a point of connection with the people who are playing them, you know,

certainly people respond to and connect with characters on scripted TV shows, but with reality TV, you remove the layer of knowing that the person that you're seeing is acting. And sure, like, obviously we can have a discussion about reality TV stars performing for cameras or how cameras change their behavior. But at the end of the day, it's still someone who is just themselves in this weird environment responding to that. And I think that creates closer bonds and closer connections, with viewers. And that's why this has been an enduring format, you know, since basically the beginning of television with shows like Queen for a day, and all the way up through an American family and into the real world and, and where we are today. So it's certainly evolved and changed over time. But people never get tired of seeing other people and like, basically appearing in their windows, just in a very regal legal way.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, there's definitely like, at the best, a mildly voyeuristic aspect to reality TV, but something I've been looking at, too, with the genres since you've had shows like scripted shows like The Office, take markers of reality TV with confessionals and with, you know, kind of seeing behind the scenes with the crew and things like that. There's been this kind of blurred lines of authenticity, and you were just talking about, you know, people like watching reality TV because it is inherently authentic. And you see a show like The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives, which is on the top of Hulu's list. Like every week now and was nominated for an Emmy. Do you do you think that these type of shows that are maybe overly produced or are just now so inherently self-referential because they use confessionals and the maybe older now markers of reality TV? Do you think those shows are still viewed as authentic to what do you think a show, a reality show, needs to be viewed as authentic, whether it's a competitive show or a cooking show or a docu series, do you think there's something that there's a level of sincerity that needs to be hit with these in order for them to succeed?

Andy Dehnart

Yeah, I think I think so, and I think it's probably a combination of things like sincerity, vulnerability, and just how all of that translates like, I think there can be people who are being really authentic and whether they're in a game format or in a docu follow format, and the show itself through its editing, its cinematography, can fail them and make it seem really produced and fake, even when it's not. So I think there's every single layer for me from casting to on the ground producing cinematography than story producing editing. All of that contributes to how we see, the characters on screen and how we relate to them and whether we think they're being real or not. So I think that the, what is the word like that, you know, confessional. Certainly. Like, I think there's a lot of times when confessionals feel just like someone really just riffing, like, I think on Drag Race where you're seeing people obviously are performers. They're used to, they know what they're doing, both in terms of producing the TV show and their art, and they can just seem like really raw and honest and reacting to what has happened. Even though those confessionals are filmed a day or 2 or 3 later. So they're responding in, you know, in the past to what to what has happened in the past. but yeah, I think and I do think there's also an interesting evolution of how producers and shows are, like, you are able to, like, play with a medium to give us a different sense of people. Like, I just noticed Bravo shows from, next gen NYC to Below

Deck this spring and summer have been doing a thing where they're basically dropping in audio from other interviews. Parts of the show over footage to make it seem like that's what the cast members are thinking and like. It's just for me, that feels really weird and artificial, and I'm like, there's no, you know, how do we know what they were thinking in that exact moment? Like, you're just making this up here, but the fact that they're playing with it and trying something new is also, I think, at least interesting. And perhaps something that people will respond to positively.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. No, I think that's an interesting one too, because there's a, there's such a, a thin line to authenticity and then people being like, well, that's fake. That doesn't feel real that. But if you get it in someone's voice, it could be argued that maybe that that's how it's applied. So it's there's this weird line where to some people who are maybe casual viewers, it feels normal and people who watch more reality TV, it feels weird. But then there's a mix there. And within that too, you have a lot of YouTube style, vlog style shows where I'd argue that there's now a whole self-genre of sorts on YouTube that are self-produced, or maybe things that are becoming larger. Like we see everyone points to the Mr. Beast show where it's like his. You have what is basically a, network TV show on his YouTube channel, and then he just takes that and puts it on Amazon. And there's kind of two levels to this. So I'm curious, as you've seen, the rise of YouTube and online platforms like that, do you still foresee the reality genre being a go to genre with user generated content becoming more popular, or do you think that maybe the Mr. Beast and the smaller people of that world, are they a newer model that would be in their own bubble? Like what's the what's the Venn diagram there, or is it all? Would you say it all just falls under the one umbrella?

Andy Dehnart

I think I don't think it's I mean, I think ultimately it's all kind of serving the same mission or attraction. And from viewers like we're all responding to the same thing. but I do think that there's like, there's a lot of viewer attention. And also in terms of thinking about creators, like people are just realizing they don't need Hollywood, that they can start, they can sidestep them and just go directly to filming their own stuff for TikTok. And in terms of being able to relate, to connect with an audience and, and just be, you know, in that space that maybe previously they would have had to be cast in a reality show and then, you know, filtered through all these years in order to actually be able to have to have that platform or to have that kind of communication. And like the Mr. Beast example is interesting because personally, like, I find him to be just like as interesting as a piece of like, stale toast. He's not like a really engaging personality, but he knew how to make really engaging content that worked for the YouTube algorithm. The fact that his show worked is interesting. I didn't expect it to. And I guess it's one of these worked in terms of it did well enough for Amazon to order a second season of it, and I don't know if creatively it worked, but I guess enough of his fans or other people watched it to justify that because like you said, it wasn't much of a different thing at all. And it was like a lot of him and his bro's shouting at us, and it's just like, there's so much better competition reality TV around that I don't know why didn't you know, like why that show would get money when others wouldn't. But again, maybe that's the power of his celebrity for whatever it is. And maybe I'm just too old to get it with him. But I think that's true of all reality TV stars. And, like, there's certainly people who

don't understand the appeal of the housewives. But also the housewives are, you know, middle aged or, older women and people who generally don't get platforms on television shows. And so I think some of the objection to them, I guess, for lack of a better term, is just like, yeah, we don't give platforms to people who are like the sort of like them. Yeah, I just do the YouTubes too, like this little tangent. But I've been hearing from more producers who are now just producing directly for YouTube and skipping over in the network and studio apparatus, because why try to sell something and go through all that time and money and like, be dragged, you know, like even if you're getting a greenlight, it's going to take months and years and you're going to have to fight things all the way. Like, why to do that if you can just do it yourself. So I think that's the problem that Hollywood has right now. And that, you know, if we're thinking of reality TV as a Hollywood genre, that's the problem reality TV has. But I just see this as reality TV, like finding itself, a new space in a new, new model for new mediums.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And I think I've talked to a couple producers who have told me that the barrier for entry, like you were saying, just to get a show to that level where it might be airing somewhere is so high now because there's really only a handful of companies that are have the relationships in place to make these shows actually happen within that time span that is foreseeable, whereas everyone else, it's like, even if you have the most tremendous idea, if you don't have that cachet already, it's difficult. And even with the Mr. Beast of the world, it's I'm sure Amazon could leverage the existing numbers already to say, well, we're going to sell, you know, our three ads for such a high amount. It's worth it either way. Even whatever the viewership numbers, in the same way it would work with a Real Housewives person where you could say they have this many Instagram followers, they have this many TikTok followers, they have this many. You know, viewers on whatever. They could leverage that against whatever ads, whether it's on YouTube or on a network. And I think that works to some degree as well, where it's I work in, Amazon Live, which is Amazon's home shopping channel. It's a place I freelance at. And our best performers, from what I've heard, are multiple Real Housewives people like Kyle Richards and Paige Desorbo.

Andy Dehnart

So interesting.

Benjamin Kessler

And I also want to ask you, I'm just asking everyone basically blanket what they believe is the most recent success for the last 3 to 5 years. Unscripted, a reality TV model. And it could be multiple things, whether it's an actual show or a way you've seen casting done or something like that. Bravo you pointed out about how they're inserting audio. Is there something that you've seen that you've been like, wow, that's the future, or wow, that worked really well. that you think is important to highlight in a piece like this.

Andy Dehnart

I mean, I think if you're we're talking last five years especially, I think it's worth noting what Netflix and the production company Kinetic Content did with Love Is Blind of just not just kind of like heading into the Bachelor territory, but, basically creating their own ecosystem of reality TV stars that are now being said throughout other shows like Perfect Match and the ultimate and I don't know if I would have like, I, I if you ask me this question five years ago, I don't know if I would have said like, yeah, that's definitely going to happen or that's going to be possible given this show in this, this audience. But that's, it's a remarkable success story and also shows that, you know, I think that platform maybe matters less than the fact that, like, Love Is Blind kind of give us a spin on The Bachelor. You know, it's still just as archaic and conservative in terms of its ideas about marriage and sex and relationships and all these other things. But it does have people an opportunity to relate or not relate, I guess, just as much as they had for The Bachelor. So that's one I would point out. I mean, The Traitors is undeniably a success. And I think shows that like, you can have really strong production values and a lot of attention given to the stuff that sometimes falls by the wayside, like between the music, the cinematography, the editing, the amount of money they spend on costumes not just for Ellen, but all the players and set design, like all that stuff really does work. And of course, it's an interesting model in that they basically filmed that exact same season twice with two different sets of people, one American cast and one, you can cast. And so they're saving a ton of money that way by partnering. but they're also able to bring a level of quality to the screen that I think viewers notice. You know, it's not to say that the traders might not have worked if it was much lower budget, but I think there have been shows that had potential. But just like for not given the time, money, resources necessary to really build themselves into something that could succeed and so they went away where the traitors was able to succeed.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And I, I was very surprised watching the traitors U.S season one that they were able to correctly identify this half of the cast that is not reality TV stars does not work. And I thought that was a right. That's a strong pivot, but that's a strong creative decision where I'm sure there was there must have been two sides in those arguments where it's like, well, it's going to cost more money to get more reality TV stars. But also, you know, it's identifying that change and making it for the second season, I think really vaulted it to the next level, where you have people who are watching for maybe the gamesmanship and the your survivor, your challenge fans, your big brother fans, but then you also get the Drag Race Real Housewives group who are maybe in it for the storylines and more of the, the drama within the genre and that really, they really hit the nail on the head there. And I've had a couple people mention the traders.

Andy Dehnart

I think what is just the fact that they realized they could take advantage of existing fandoms and use that. And that's something that other networks and shows long avoided, like both in terms of like a show like CDA or like survivor, or like they would mock their contestants down into contracts that didn't allow them to do other projects on other networks. And then like, Food Network, for example, you would see people from top chefs, but they would never mention that they were on Top Chef, because I think Food Network saw that as like, we're not going to give

Provo any, you know, free advertising here, essentially. But I think everybody now realizes that you win when, you bring the fandoms in from all these other shows into your show. Then you also win because, like, your show is now being advertised on this other show. So people are watching the trailers and maybe they're like, oh, like this. You know, these people from Drag Race are really funny. Like, let me check that show out. if they hadn't before.

Benjamin Kessler

And it would make more sense to me about the contract locked down if it were something like a host, but because these reality stars are also just people, I, I never understood the lockdown in that sense because it's like, well, if these stars become bigger stars, they just do better for you. And you're because they're known from survivor, from Drag Race, then now people are going to check it out, like you're saying in that that never made sense to me, where it's like, oh, we only want this person from the challenge. On the challenge, it's like, well, then they're only ever going to be as big as the challenges.

Andy Dehnart

Exactly. And I think that's just connection. There's so much of that fear. And like, just for years, like networks would not let reality TV stars go under social media to discuss things while the show was airing or even after the fact. And I interviewed a survivor player recently who said CBS literally made her physically delete her Twitter account completely. And it's like to be so shortsighted to not recognize, like what? How much attention that would bring and like, how having that conversation being led by the people who are on screen and like now, of course, they've completely light up and it's a free for all, which in many ways I think is better. and just doesn't like wild that they for so long that that would be a negative, like, oh my gosh, we can't have the people on TV talking about the show that they're on.

Benjamin Kessler

And now it's become so self-referential that whether it's on social media or on the show, it's almost the same thing. in that regard, I, I just want to know, before I let you go, is there anything you have coming up with the site or something you're looking forward to or something you see is, you know, oh, I, I could see this is a really big thing that I'm looking forward to covering in the future.

Andy Dehnart

Just the one thing I have to do is, I don't know if you came across the piece that I did where I talked to a bunch of reality TV, people who are people who produce reality TV from executives down to like, you know, like below the line. Yes, people. And just, wrote about that. So I'm going to check in with them and hopefully more people this fall. So within the next month or two, and I'm just really interested to see what has changed for them and what their sense of the industry is like, because I think, like you said earlier, I think there's multiple like some people are very much, like, oh yeah, like things are kind of coming back to normal and then others are just like, you know, I completely quit the business and, it's over for me and for whatever.

Appendix J: Interview with Lynne Spillman – Casting Director

Benjamin Kessler

You've done a couple of interviews. I listened to some you did a couple years ago where people are asking you, you know, how you got your start and how you know what casting something like survivor or casting post-Covid is like? I kind of want to ask a few different questions. rather than kind of about how you got your start and about what the world was like. I'm more interested in what the world is like now. Where it's going. So I started off every interview so far I've done with there was a deadline article about a year ago now, and I synthesize it down to three major changes that they interviewed about 50 producers and executives in the reality space. And those producers and executives said that three big catalysts that need to change are one. There needs to be more live programing, and two, there needs to be more tax incentives, specifically in California. Yeah, and three networks need to take more risks on less tested formats. And I'm curious just off the top, if you agree with any of these and based on what you've seen in the reality space and from your position as a casting director, I know I've known at times you've produced things. What do you see as current major challenges in the industry? Just off the top of your head?

Lynne Spillman

Well, I mean, I think that it used to be that they could take more risks and buy more and test things more like we never did pilots before. And that's a big that's all I'm working on right now is I get hired to do sizzle reels and pilots and things to see if it's going to sell in the marketplace, and it just might be. The position I have is different, but it used to be based on a concept. They'd be like, yeah, let's go, you know, and you would do it. And at least that's how I was hired in the past. there's no scare. They want to do test markets and, you know, Amazon like they all do these tests and beta tests and you know, they are testing with audiences and they you know, they're going off that data to see if the show should be bought or if it's you get a second season and they don't give the room for the shows. I think scripted probably to breathe. And, you know, there's history of shows that don't even catch on till season four, but then they become humongous hits. So I think the one thing I've noticed is that there's not a lot of chances given, where it used to where they used to do that kind of. That makes a lot of sense.

Benjamin Kessler

But no, like, yeah, that makes perfect sense. Especially because I'm reading about this stuff too. There seems to be this dichotomy where it's like, there seems like there's less money than ever, but yet there's more TV shows ever out there in the ecosystem.

Lynne Spillman

Yes, but the truth is out there. I mean, they can get them from other countries, they can air different, you know, they can revive things that have once gone away and come back. But it's in a different package or a different network. They feel that there's so much already made that they can test around that. I think they're still counting on that. And as far as like incentives to go in California, I think that really helps scripted TV a lot to me. The thing and maybe I live here, the

thing that I think works with reality is almost fantasy. Like fantasy or, you know, people behaving badly, maybe. But I think it's still the fantasy is still going to be a deserted island. They're on a yacht or, you know, somewhere like, you know, more fantasy than California. So yeah, I'm not sure how much the tax incentives. I know it will help scripted. for sure. and maybe because post is in California, it would help in post-production. but I don't know enough about that to speak about it. But as far as filming, reality, it shows to me what works is the fantasy. So I think all the states need to have better tax incentives if they want to keep things in the United States.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, no, that definitely makes sense. And you hear about a lot of shows specifically, you know, unscripted going overseas just because it's cheaper. And, yeah, I'm curious when it's tough to get, you know, raw numbers. But it seems like the feeling from speaking to people is that production numbers are down overall. But reality. Yeah. Reality remains this like pop culture staple. If you go social media, there's always a show. There's always something popping up that is trending that people are talking about in this genre. And that's not necessarily true for scripted or for other genres that are out there. And I'm curious, as someone who's come from the background of casting, do you think that's on the back of legacy shows? Do you think it's on the back of the shows creating these big kind of niche superstars, or do you think it's on the formats? What do you think helps maintain reality in unscripted?

Lynne Spillman

I mean, there's legacy shows for sure. Anchoring the entire thing. I think you're seeing the legacy shows get the most publicity, they get the most everything. You get a show like traitors that kind of snuck in there and you're like, wow, that's great. You know, I mean, I can only think it is right now, but, you know, these network big shows that have the machine behind them to generate publicity to, and then, you know, I just think it's there's not that many probably the same amount like that get the publicity like White Lotus. Like, I feel like you're getting the same amount in reality as you're getting in the scripted. right now, there's just not a lot of big new hits every year for either. Jay not taking. They're not making as many you get. You're down 30% or more I think. So you know, there's a chance for it to hit.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah that's that is interesting too because do you do you think even with less shows out there, Reality Unscripted still has that same potential with the formats that exist? Like what do you think needs to happen, work?

Lynne Spillman

Well, I don't know what needs to happen. I think the, the, it's the legacy shows that are anchoring the whole thing. The legacy shows still work even when they tweak the formats a little bit or, you know, do something slightly different. They're still getting all the attention and that's people are just they want to be on their phones and doing 20 things at once. So to sit down and watch survivor, which is a show, you know, has tribes and challenges and, you know, when you go to

the bathroom, I mean, you don't have to be 100% engage. You can be doing other things because you know those. If a new show comes along and it's like, wait, where are they going now? What are they doing? You have to focus. I mean, I'm not saying it's not why they don't exist, but I think they have to. Everything needs to be simple, and you need to do four things at once for it to work, I think.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. I mean, within that simplicity. Two, there's a lot of copycat, you know, you see a show like you mentioned, The Traitors, which starts bringing these reality stars, and then you get a copycat show on Hulu that maybe didn't do as well, and then you get a copycat show somewhere else that is taking that kind of concept. So I'm curious, as someone who was involved in the production and in the pre-production with casting, do you think that copycat mentality helps the genre? Do you think it hurts the genre? What do you think it does every year to reality and the unscripted kind of atmosphere as it is now?

Lynne Spillman

Well, I think that seeing the any I go back to attention span, and I think seeing the characters you already know, playing a different show makes it a lot easier for the viewer. Like, you know, when Survivor Amazing Race first aired their episode, their season, you have to get to know 20 players. That's a lot of, you know, they do. People do it and they love it, but it's a lot, you know, that's why some people tune in in the middle, like it's a lot to absorb if you already know half the characters because they've been on other reality shows, you have the tolerance to finally figure out this new format and like, what are they doing? What are these people doing that I already know? I know what they're you know, I know who the villain is. I know who that this is. So I think you're not burdening the audience with a whole thing like you would on a totally new concept in a new cast. And I know, which is a shame, but I think that it still goes back to attention span.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And there's always a lot to talk to you about. Did the show make the star or did the star make the show where you have something like, you know, The Bachelor, which creates these kinds of micro celebrities that that they then put on the other Bachelor shows or something like survivor, where you could argue kind of both sides, that you're casting people who will be quote unquote stars. But the format also stands on its own. And so I'm curious your thoughts on that, that mix of, you know, Netflix is doing a new dating show with someone they've had it's Bachelor esque, but, you know, he's the show was built around this one guy. How do you feel about. Yeah. Just your thoughts on the future with format versus casting and star quality.

Lynne Spillman

I think when you've created a show and someone pops and they have the star quality to not use them again and again, it's crazy. You gave them the you know that. You gave them the platform and you help, you know, they're your PR team, your publicity team. You run their background checks. You know, you've helped, you know, make the machine kind of bigger. Why not invest

more in what you've already done? I think, you know, I understand what's going it with social media. It's changed so much to and I think I like, you know, for years I've always like, you know, Bravo. And these places that let their people make money on the side or, I mean, I guess they're making money from it, too. But I think when you put people on Dancing With the Stars and you up the celebrity again, you're giving the audience some money already. Like there's no risk. You already know they like this person on The Bachelor. Why not give them a platform on Dancing with the stars?

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, no, that that definitely makes sense. And you can tell what the like risk quality is almost at times with these shows, when they come out where it's you can tell if they kind of want the format, they'll get a celebrity host versus a celebrity contestant. And there's that balance there. And one of the places I work at actually is Amazon's home shopping channel, and we work with a lot of the Bravo and yeah, yeah.

Lynne Spillman

Good. I think it's good that they make money. They great. They they've risked a lot. They don't get paid much to do these shows. They've risked a lot. They their families have risked a lot. Let them make money. Other ways. I think it's great and it's for you.

Benjamin Kessler

It also shows that, you know, there was that show, Secret Lives of Mormon Wives, where they were all really popular on TikTok and social media. Yeah. And I kind of want to pivot to this new streaming slash social media landscape. And sorry if I'm going a little rapid fire on you, but like, okay, but you see, like that show Mr. Beast show on Amazon Prime how well it did. And you see that secret lives of Mormon wives. I'm curious, as everything comes more and more down to the phone, into the streaming, how you feel unscripted and reality fits into that user generated content world. Do you think a show that's like on YouTube, if it's still a reality show, is it still an unscripted reality show? Or is a YouTube show? Do you think it's an umbrella, or is it more of like a Venn diagram here that we're talking about?

Lynne Spillman

Well, me, it's funny because I'm casting something now that is going to be on a streamer, and it's so confusing when you are DM'ing people. Do you want to be on this show? What are you going to say to be on a streamer? To be on you like you don't want? I don't know where it's going to land. I mean, most likely a streamer, but I just call everything a TV show because people don't even know what they're watching it on anymore. So I just say TV show for all of it, because one, I don't know where it's going to land. And two, I think people, younger people these days, they don't, you know, YouTube to them is this any it's all the same.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And that Mr. Beast show on Amazon, like if you even watch five minutes of it, you're like, this is a classic competition show. Like it makes sense. And then if you watch his YouTube, you

know, the biggest YouTube channel in the world, obviously. So yeah, I'm kind of I'm kind of picking the biggest one here, but it's still a you watch it, you're like, this feels like a reality show just built for a different generation.

Lynne Spillman

So exactly.

Benjamin Kessler

Do you think a show can thrive without that backing of a, you know, it used to be the mainstay networks? Now it's the mainstay streamers as they pivot. Do you think a show can be just as successful on a YouTube type space? What do you think a show nowadays needs to thrive more than anything else? And to get that viral moment.

Lynne Spillman

I wish I knew. Oh, actually, I don't know. I think, it's funny. I mean, I might have old data, but I think that format, like I'm doing, like Mr. B felt like, I think that kind of works. I think we don't see a big tech when we put TikTok and YouTube stone on, I mean, I nothing yeah. You know, stars on these shows, I think you get a little jump, but I don't think you're seeing a humongous change in the ratings based on a TikTok star being on the show. at least over the years. I think when you do a show based on a video game or something, I think you have an audience that will tune in for the first episode and say, let me check this out. But if they don't like the show and they have no one on the cast, they relate to it. It doesn't make sense to them. they're still going to leave, but I do think that there's a nice push when you already have a concept like, what's when, Squid Games, you know, you've got this built in. You already have an audience for Squid Games. Now let's see real people do it. It's, you know, you already have a huge audience that's going to come over with you just to check it out, because they're fans of the editor.

Benjamin Kessler

Do you think there's something needed? There's a quality, whether it's format casting, you know, it's based on something like Squid Game. Do you do you think there's something that maybe a Netflix or a different streamer that does it well that they hit on and they can cultivate that is kind of, you know, in the secret sauce per se, because it seems like sometimes some of these hit and they stick and other times they don't, and it doesn't feel like there's rhyme or reason necessarily, other than, you know, something hits and everyone says, oh, it was so obvious.

Lynne Spillman

Well, I think it's I feel like one it's the format and it's the name recognition and the format. I think for game shows like that, you're not, you know, the casting is really hard. It's hundreds of people. But I don't think you're like, oh, this. I don't think we've seen a breakout star in any of those shows yet, because it's just the format. It works so well for the super fans of that. You know, the unscripted, I think. and then The Secret Life of Mormons was really fascinating. The timing was right, the scandal that broke out. But you don't I mean, and I don't know if other and I don't know if other seasons have aired since, but it's kind of like Vanderpump Rules, like you have that huge

scandal and now people just don't care. So once the scandal happens on some of these docu soaps, like how do you keep the people engaged when there's no scandal? you know, so I think sometimes they get lucky when they not lucky. Horrible for the people that, it, you know, it just happens to hit right at the same time of filming.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And I want to ask you casting specific. I'm sure you get a lot of people ask you, you know, what are you looking for? And you know, what do you what do you want from people who are sending in, you know, videos or applying or, you know, people DM'ing on Instagram and things like that? I'm really curious to know now that reality is so mainstream and, everyone knows you. How has casting in your mind changed in order to be authentic? Because something that I've hit on talking to a lot of people is reality needs to feel authentic, whether it's through the casting or the format something. So what? When in your role, what do you think makes something authentic when you're looking? And as that kind of the world has developed where everyone knows that you're looking for something authentic, so now they're in their head like, am I authentic? What does that even mean? What do you think that means now in this landscape?

Lynne Spillman

Well, I think it's I mean, I feel like it's really hard to find it because, I think people I mean, it's changed 100%. I think people are doing it now for followers. So you getting people that may not even want to be on a reality show, but they want to be influencers and they know by a few episodes of Bachelor, you're an influencer if you play it right. So for me, it's breaking through and maybe finding the people that don't even want to be on TV, like they don't want to do it and talking them into it, I think it's I, I've always even from day one, you know, with survivor, I never wanted people that wanted to be actors because that's not what the show is like. If they want to be an actor, they're not going to be authentic because they're going to be so worried about how they come off and what it might do. The acting career. Now it's 100 times worse because you've got these, you know, job as an influencer. So for me, I don't know if this was the question. The challenge is to find authentic people is recruiting and finding the role. Like I don't want to give away what I'm working on, but finding little like nuggets of communities that no one has seen before that you find interesting that, you know, oh, this is you know, it was interesting stories here. These people are interesting. I've heard of people like this and never seen it. You know, like so something like that. I mean, the people I want I don't want to be honest. I want to talk to them and that's what I like. I mean, it depends what you're doing. If you're doing like a fashion show where you need fashion designers, of course you want the ones that one of you on it, and then the fashion designer, it depends on what I'm casting. But I think to find authenticity. You look and you. Oh, we've always done that. Like the life patterns. You can't say I'm this way, but then there's no pattern in their life to show it. You know, I'm looking at one of their friends like, what are they? What did they post five years ago on Instagram? You know, maybe they've changed. But, you know, I kind of want to see how other people describe them. You know, they don't know why I'm asking, you know. Yeah, I think it's finding the way around to figure it out, as opposed to listening to what they say and what actions have they taken in the

last few years, as opposed to what they're telling you or what they put on this beautifully edited audition video with music and graphics and the whole thing? But who is this, you know? Yeah.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And what do you think? Do you think what makes someone come off as authentic now on the shows is different than it used to be? And does that impact the way you cast?

Lynne Spillman

No. I think authentic is authentic. And I think when we say the person pops, they pop their people that are very good on camera. Now, that could be trained to pop, but I don't know. I've been doing a long time. You can break through that pretty easily. Also.

Benjamin Kessler

Do you find that that feel of when you see someone in your you can't explain it, but you're like this person pops has that? Has that changed over time as you've been looking at people, or is the feeling still the same of, oh, I know this person will do well because they resonate on camera?

Lynne Spillman

I'm not sure because some people it's a slow burn. Some people, you know, they're going to be like camera shy or they're just not their world and you got to give them a chance. But when you met them, and when you're one on one with them, they're great. And it just you might say they're not going to pop in the first episode, but by three they're your star. I mean that that happens sometimes, but there's other people you just know. It's just I mean, there's more people that seem like they're natural stars, but, you know, you catch them on a dime or, I mean, I do it all the time. Like, can we just FaceTime right now? And when they say, no, I have to, you know, I may like you just know that they're not up for it. They're not really up for anything. They have this thing they want to, you know, I don't know. No, I think it's harder now than it was. If that was your question I know that.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. It makes sense.

Lynne Spillman

Yeah. You know, people still pop, you know, they still pop, but I think are they, you know, what do they want to get out of is the bigger question.

Benjamin Kessler

Just to shift again a little bit, I've been asking a lot of people about strikes and how strikes have changed, unscripted and reality and how that's changed modes of creating things and also how that's changed in some cases, casting, you know, you see it on a show like survivor, which you worked on for a long time. Every there's kind of the eras where you can tell kind of what they're going for, either putting more super fans or putting more of, you know, a different type of person on the show or going for a different feel on the show. But in the past couple of years, it seems

like, reality has been shelved in a way that it hadn't been maybe during the 2008 strikes. And I'm curious, as someone who's seen the business end of it, as well as the casting and the production end, why do you think there's kind of been bubbles of reality and maybe you in a different way than scripted and, and do you see this time that we're in more as a bubble with the streamers or a continued trend moving forward?

Lynne Spillman

No, I just think it's I mean, I don't know what any bubble seems like it grows. I don't think we've seen growth in years in reality TV. I think it's been really slow. I think it's still really slow. I think there was a time where, you know, there was a lot of casting directors and lots of shows, and everybody was working out 2 or 3 things at once, and I don't maybe other people are, but I am doing smaller projects. I'm doing pilots. I have a lot going on, but I don't have. It's just different. It's they're testing things with me at least. or what would this look like? And, you know, they hire me to see what something looks like, which, you know, it's just me. I don't know, there's other people probably working on big shows, but I just think it's super slow compared to what it used to be. It's harder to sell a show. I don't, you know, I can't say I'm not close to how buyers are buying, but, I just think we haven't seen the boom that we saw. The first strike. The very first strike. I don't know what you're. That was. That was crazy. There were so many shows, and it's probably because I was working for CBS at the time. They wanted to get enough going so they would have material. I haven't seen that that didn't happen with the last strike.

Benjamin Kessler

I guess what I mean by bubble is from talking to people, everything feels very situational right now in the industry where it's if you're on, like you were saying, a big show or in a role that you know you've had for a long time, it might feel like things are thriving. But then for other people who are freelance or maybe in a different type of role, I've spoken to a few editors who are like, there's nothing here, everything's drying up. And so it's almost like everyone's in their little bubbles in a way.

Lynne Spillman

Yeah, I think that's true. I think with me, the good thing with casting is a lot of the shows start with casting. So, you know, they're not going to call an editor or, you know, an art director or anything until they have a cast or, you know, with something looks like, you guys are casting kind of I feel like we got lucky here because that's where they start. Yeah. so yes, it's slowed down a lot, but. And it's different. but it's, you know, casting has to be first. So even if they pull the plug on something, it's after casting or after they shot, you know, shot something or whatever.

Benjamin Kessler

What do you see right now as working with streamers and working with, you know, these different types of you don't know necessarily where things will land? And like you were saying, testing. Do you do you see a trend of different types of pitches or different types of ideas of

things you know, without giving away maybe what you're working on or what you've worked on? Do you see different types of trends than you have in the past? And yeah, do you do you see that as something in the future? If you were kind of had a crystal ball and you were like, I see this, do you see it in phases of trends or do you see things that you think will do better moving forward than maybe they had in the past?

Lynne Spillman

Well, I think that's two questions. I what I've noticed now that's so different is in scripted. They used to have to have a script and then, you know, I mean writers would write scripts, specs, scripts for free. I mean, they would write scripts and say, here's my show, do you want but that that's hours and hours of work, you know, for free with, or with and like, I sold a show a few years ago and, you know, I at first I gave them ideas for free. I wasn't paid by anyone said, here's my three ideas, here's what it might look like. And on my own I was like, here's mini cast. Like, here's three people that could be on this cast for these three ideas. I did all that for free in the past, and we never like, you know, I guess I had a deal with CBS. I never had to do that. But you know, they buying stuff when they can see it. Now for reality TV, which is different than here's the concept, here's some money. Let's go. They want to see it. So people like editors and editors help me out. I'll like find it, you know. So find something and I'll call another actor. Hey, do you mind if this goes? We'll hire you. But. Or here, I'm paying out of my pocket. You just take this rate. You're going to sell a show based on what you can see. And that's definitely different than what it was before.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And then just to add on to that, is there, a trend in the format or in the way that you're casting that you're like, oh, this. Because now you have to kind of show it first and kind of already have a product out there for them to buy as opposed to just, you know, that concept in that, okay, let's do this thing. Do you, do you can you kind of foresee the trends as they're up and coming, like as we mentioned with the traders doing those, bringing out others, you know, reality shows, or is it still kind of whatever comes up as situational?

Lynne Spillman

Well, I mean, it's situational, but there's two things that are happening to for me. And I again, I can't speak for other. I'm getting a lot of calls for branded. I call it branded entertainment because it's an advertiser doing a wholesale. they're sponsored, they're paying for the whole production of the show because they want to show with their product or whatever it is. I don't I can't say it's coming out soon, but, you know, so it's just a different, you know, I still get paid, everybody still gets paid. It's just a different model. you know, that the actual brands are paying for the whole production, and then you have plenty of places to air. You can air it on Amazon, you can air it on YouTube. That has plenty of places that you say, here's a free show. You want it. I mean, I don't know what the deal is, but, you know, there's a lot of places things can air once they're produced.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, that is a very different model.

Lynne Spillman

It's a very different model.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. Then even something that, you know, relied on ads because of now the streamer landscape where it's more, yeah, you're looking at just things to build an ecosystem, is kind of how I see it, where every place is looking to build up this little ecosystem to take from the other place.

Lynne Spillman

Yeah. Well, one thing that hasn't changed is if you know what different production companies or networks are looking for, you know, they'll say, oh, we want to do a Western Westerner here. We want something like this. You know, that makes it a little bit easier because they, they, they know where they, they, they've got data on what might work for them. But it was funny when trader when survivor kind of stopped casting villains for a little bit, I had there was a you knew there was going to be some kind of way that someone was going to do something with, like, you know, after 2 or 3 seasons, it was apparent like, oh, you know, these are nice people. They're great. There's plenty of people for me to root for. You did feel like somebody better hurry up and do something with villains because that's what we're missing. Kind of.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And now that's like. That's a lot of what you get. Now on, you know, kind of more playing up the villains. Yeah.

Lynne Spillman

Well, people don't take events. They don't like these people. I don't know. But I think they appreciate savvy play or you know, people that are willing to play a game, you know, really willing to play. And again, how much of it is an act? I don't know, but you could for me, I can see the landscape a little bit in casting and, you know, not so much formats at work and okay, let's copy, but in casting of the biggies.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And it's funny because a show like House of villains, which is literally just let me, you know, let's take those and let's just do something with them. Yeah. It's funny,

Lynne Spillman

My last bachelor, Bachelor Island, whatever. Call it like. Yeah. Why not just keep it going? They've got the momentum. Everybody likes them. It's hot people and I, you know like why not. They already have. They're already household names you know.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. No, I mean it makes sense if they when they make it work, it's like why haven't we been doing this the whole time? Has that that feel my last like, formal question for you is I'm asking

everyone I talk to who is what do you believe is is there a recent successful unscripted model? You know, for you, it could be a way of casting or a show you've seen or an idea you've heard of, that you know, became something or just a way of doing something that you've been like, oh, that was brilliant in the past five years or something that blew you away, that you were like that. They really hit it out of the park with that.

Lynne Spillman

Yeah, yeah. I'm not you're not going to like I don't watch reality. I just don't. It's very different. I don't watch it. So I can't say one way or another. I will say, you know, I and I don't even watch I don't watch survivor anymore. But the fact that it's still on and keeps reinventing itself, whether you like it or not, it's kept it on. And, you know, there's always new viewers and there's people still talking about it because it didn't veer too much from the format. I mean, I think in that way, I think, you know, I, I'm proud of survivor that they, you know, managed to make it through all this and still be relevant and still be great and still get new viewers. even though they've made all these changes and I think, you know, to still on you have to do that. I thought Golden Bachelor and it could be because I'm golden, I guess I thought that was so smart and that they're not oversaturated. And I think we do that once a year, once every year years. I think that also was really brilliant. And of the time with where the baby boomers are right now. And I thought that was brilliant and perfect timing. I think that was good.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And Golden Bachelor, I, I don't know what the demos are on that, but I would be surprised if I, I think a lot of young people also watch it.

Lynne Spillman

Oh, my daughter, my daughter's 25. She watches it for that. They watch it. No, I mean I think for sure.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And on the, on the survivor front too, I mean, you can really look at survivor as a microcosm for a lot of reality, unscripted changes. And, you know, post-Covid survivor is you know, obviously very different. but it's you can tell that they trust the format more than anything else, and they trust that they trust in that. The casting in the format, if you have those two things right, the show will succeed no matter what, because I work on a lot of shows where you're like, are we making a show or are we making clips that are combined for social media? And that's a show where they're like, no, we know what we are, we know what we're about.

Lynne Spillman

Right? Right. But they also have had so many years of success before that that they can play around with it because people will come back and say, oh, what are they doing this year? You know, I think the history of it is, you know, Amazing Race two. I think they do a great, you know, it's they've in that you know the Covid really you know, hurt them with I don't even know

what they're doing now. But it feels like it's back. People are talking about it. And even though it's only once a year now, I think, you know, it's still there and it's still great. It's still escapism.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, frankly, I'm surprised that we haven't seen I don't know if you remember Big Brother, Once Upon a time did a season that was like specifically to the CBS streamer at the time, the online I, I'm, I'm surprised we haven't seen something like that from one of these shows from a big, you know, Dancing with the Stars. I think for a minute was like Hulu only. And now it's back to both ABC and Hulu. I'm surprised we haven't seen, I think, Top Chef to so many seasons. I'm surprised I haven't seen more of that, more of those many kinds of, oh, can we get, you know, a star we had and do it, you know, an eight-episode thing or a quick little thing.

Lynne Spillman

That I wonder why we don't have the answer. I mean, I followed it because I love part of why I couldn't even find Australian survivor or Survivor versus the world or whatever the one. It just they just finished last Sunday. Yeah. You know, why are they putting that not on CBS, but on something easier? I know where it was, but.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, I mean, you have to think that one person at Paramount has to be I mean, one person has to be like, how can we get these rights? I mean, it's like it was on Paramount Plus for a minute in maybe four years, maybe four years ago. And then they lost the rights. And there's a whole streaming rights issue. I mean, I, I used to work for Paramount at CBS sports and even just, you know, browsing slack channels there and stuff. I mean, it's like you have to think like someone, come on, it's worth the money if you just buy these streaming rights for a minute.

Lynne Spillman

Right. And it's not going to hurt American survivor. It's just not.

Benjamin Kessler

No, I think that's probably part of the fear is it dilutes it in a couple of ways.

Lynne Spillman

Yeah, that's I think so too.

Appendix K: Interview with Carey Mandelker – Reality TV Producer

Benjamin Kessler

Okay, so first I just kind of want to ask you to introduce yourself a little and just for me to get to know you as well, kind of, where you are now, what you're doing. And also how you kind of came into the unscripted reality genre, both as someone working in it and maybe watching it.

Carey Mandelker

I live in Los Angeles, although I am currently heading east, I think for a little bit. and I came into reality. I was, how did I come into reality? I accidentally became a reality producer. I, I had been out in Los Angeles trying to be an actor, and then I wasn't trying to be an actor, and I was kind of bumming around, and I didn't know what I wanted to do. I went back east, and I was at my parents' house, and I think on Craigslist, there was like some sort of a job listing. It was like TV show producing in New Jersey. And they wanted somebody to do office management, but who had experience on sets. And I had, you know, worked as an agency and done a bunch of stuff out here. And so I applied for the job and it was a show called Jersey licious. filmed in new Jersey, and it was about a beauty salon, in Union, new Jersey. And I went in and I, I had no idea about reality producing. and I went in, I was the office manager and, I was bored and I wasn't enjoying it. And I would go and, like, see everybody sort of going off to set. And I was like, well, how do I do that job? I was like, this, this job stinks. But that one looks more fun. and they were like, oh, are you interested in doing something on set? And I said, yes. And I had worked for them for a couple of weeks. And I guess, you know, they either trusted me or were desperate. Maybe a talent coordinator. and so basically every week on the show, they had it was like makeovers. So you had to have, like, a new person come in, right? And like, get their makeup or hair done or whatever. and so, I was responsible for, like, keeping track of everybody's schedules and like, the people that were coming in for, like, whatever beauty session they were going to get. And that was how it started. And I was on set, and I was with the people, and I worked for, I worked well, I don't want to say anything on the record. I worked for some people that taught me how I absolutely did not ever want to be in this industry. and then, it just went from there. I got a job after that, working for a really wonderful producer and, did a crappy little show in Brooklyn, and then just bounced around, made connections and sort of inadvertently worked my way up the chain. I didn't know what, like, field producing was. I remember talking to, like, some of the producers on Jersey licious and being like, how do I get your job? And nobody really knew. Nobody knew how they had gotten their jobs, like how they ended up there. It was everybody at that time sort of accidentally ended up in reality. It was kind of like a wild thing.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, it's crazy when I talk to people about it and just even people, you know, when I'm doing the graphics work or when I'm interviewing, and I've done around ten interviews now so far for this, and I'm going to be working on till the end of the year. And it's just so many diverse perspectives and that everyone falls into it in some way or another. And so the kind of overarching thing is, I read in a deadline article that was from late 2024, and it was interviewing 50 head producers and executives within reality TV. And I kind of synthesize that down to three

major changes that these 50 people decided were catalysts that would help reality and unscripted in 2025 and beyond. And they were more live programing, more tax incentives, specifically in California and networks taking more risks on less, less tested formats. And these were kind of the three key themes that every for the most part, each producer and executive was talking about is like, this is needed for the entire genre. Do you agree with any of these? And do you think one is more important? And do you foresee these still being major challenges and catalysts in 510 years? And do you think one of these might be more important than the others?

Carey Mandelker

I think the tax incentives one is a big deal. I think there's something, look, I don't 100% know if this is true. but it's what we've all sort of been talking about at, like, dinners or parties out here is that there's only 30 shows in production in Los Angeles right now. and that is a wildly low number, right? Like reality TV is dying right now, I would say, well, all content is sort of dying right now. but like most people that I know or I have come up with, like, everybody's leaving the industry, because there's no jobs. so, yeah, I think that the tax incentives need to happen. I think reality is so reality is determined by how cheaply you can make it right, because the networks don't want to pay for it, which is why it's actually kind of a, mixed bag of an industry to work in. So I think, yes, I think the, I think for sure the tax incentives are needed because you need people to, you know, start greenlighting shows, you need more production companies or you need production companies to be able to survive basically right now, I don't know if I would say, like, more live. I mean, yeah, I guess I can see that I, I don't work in, like, live production. So for me, I don't really think about it, but yes, I can I can see where that perspective comes from. And what was the third one?

Benjamin Kessler

The third one was networks taking more risks on less tested formats, which is like, yeah, you know, I mean, who's going to say that's wrong? But it was a point that they were saying maybe now more than previously during a boom time, networks are more risk averse than ever.

Carey Mandelker

Yeah, I think that that I think that's just, an industry, entertainment industry wide thing is like, everybody needs to take more risk. Everybody just wants to keep making branded IP shows that I made ten years ago that I thought were like, dead, dead are suddenly having resurgences on like, different formats. And I'm shocked that they're back. But basically, it's like if you have a brand, at all, people are willing to greenlight an old idea because they think it will build on an audience, whereas I think that it's probably not that those are bad ideas. Those cast in those characters were interesting then, and I'm sure they're still interesting now. But, you know, take a shot on something. It's not like it's not like they're losing that much money on reality TV anyway. You can like, take a shot and do something interesting. so yeah, I would definitely say that I think the tax incentives are like the number one thing right now that needs to happen. And then I would say, yes, you know, take risks. I think also taking risks on new, producers and production companies like that, it doesn't necessarily have to come through the old guard, you know, like, you know, Mr. Beast, for all of now. Not that Mr. Beast is not a known product, but

like, you know, he went and did it on his own. Now he has the budget to be able to do that. But he made a show successfully with some, you know, pitches here and there. that was a huge hit. Right. So it doesn't have to be a Mr. beast who's a billionaire. Like a company could fund somebody who has a good idea without it having to come from, like, you know, Pilgrim or, you know, E or Bunim Murray. It's hard to get in the door. I think independently, if you're not coming through one of those, you know, big guys.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And it's, it's definitely interesting too, that you said that, you know, it's not just a reality unscripted thing. It's all content is dying. Because when I've spoken to people about this, there are definitely different areas where some might do well in the short term versus long term. But everyone is saying there's just everything's migrating and to where people aren't necessarily sure where the necessarily where the money might be going, let's say. Right. And one, one thing that everyone points to is that there's the strike, right? There're the 2008 strikes, which kind of create this big boom of reality TV. And then there's this most recent strike, the few, the, that just kind of led people. I was reading at the time that people were saying, you know, this could lead to another boom for reality because WGA doesn't include a lot of reality, you know, writers. So it could. But what we saw was the numbers are just saying production was still down overall in every everything, but specifically within reality, there was still there was no other big boom. And I'm curious why you think that maybe this strikes didn't lead to that. And networks or even, smaller networks or streamers decided, no, we're not going to do this again. What we did in 2008, why do you think this happened? And do you see it as more of a bubble or continue trend?

Carey Mandelker

Why do I think this happened? I think you had all of the reality started to contract. You know, much like everything else, the pandemic, I don't think that it ever bounced back from the pandemic. So in 2025, you already had a smaller reality world, in terms of shows that were getting made. I was super lucky. I worked on a show through the pandemic. I think I was only unemployed for a couple of months while we figured out how to make the show during the pandemic. Wow. and so we were able to make that adjustment. I think we I also worked at a production company that, you know, they were very good to us. So I think we all what it was like March when we all went sort of down. and then I think by June, the company had us doing, like, remote specials, that we were filming about the pandemic, but we were up and filming again. I want to say by August. Right. So I and my coworkers, we worked right. And we never had a lull. Right. But everybody else I knew had left. So people left L.A. in droves, right? Like nobody had any money at all for their apartments. And so I think you had, like, a great loss of, like, of shows that just went away. Right? You're just done. Yeah. So you come back from the pandemic and everybody was trying to gear back up. And I think what especially with like streaming, what everybody learned was that they could pick up international content. Right. And, and an American audience would watch it. so I think all of a sudden you had an influx of international shows coming in and they didn't need to produce their own content in a sense. So I think when people came back, like, we I was in a bubble. Right. So and I've been in a bubble for like eight years on the show, which is also unheard of. Like nobody works on a show for eight years. but. It

seems to me that with the strike coming in, which I supported the strike, and I think the WGA made another mistake in that the strike probably would have been shorter if they had opened their arms to reality producers. Right. If it had become, you know, an acceptance of the fact. The reality is not a flash in the pan, which is what everybody sort of thought way back when, and people were so upset about reality existing as a genre back then. but reality was still able to work. I worked through the strike, or I wasn't the scab. Right. We would have like, you know, people show up on set while we were filming in LA would be like, you know, no BS. And back here, nobody's, you know, we're not we're not in the union. and I think if they had actually, you know, opened it up and been more willing to include everybody that was sort of working in television. And so the unions, you probably would have had a shorter strike because the networks would have been able to rely on reality to sort of fill those gaps. which I think they did. and then after the strike, all the studios were hurting and they didn't have any money. And, you know, they had to make concessions, which, you know, rightfully so, they should have had to make those, in my opinion. And they didn't want to greenlight anything. Right. So everybody is sort of being very hesitant right now. Nobody wants to put out money on anything. what's happening in reality is that, you know, they're trying to make those for even less. So they're trying to make them on lower budgets and with less staff. So, you know, a job that used to be one specific job, you're now also doing like somebody else's job. So it's, I, I think the, the lack of a boom is just that they didn't want they nobody wants to spend money. So I think that is they would rather pick up shows from overseas or go after already known entities. Right. Like there's a million Love Islands, there's a million bachelors. Although Bachelor right now was put on hiatus.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, parts of it.

Carey Mandelker

But yeah. So, like, they're not making new shows. And the thing is, if you work on The Bachelor, that's kind of great, because then you work on The Bachelor year-round, right? So, you know, you just never leave that job. which is like, you know, I work on the show catfish. We're on hiatus right now as well. And, you know, I worked that show for eight years, so I had no complaints. But, like, if you're normally working in reality, you work on a show for, like, 3 to 6 months, and then you go and you work on another show and you, you know, you know, you fill the gaps in between you just you, you know, you keep hustling and you just keep working. But when you start having tons of little shows and there aren't as many like, little networks anymore, right? First show I worked on was on the Style Network. You know, that doesn't exist anymore. you know, oxygen used to do a ton of shows. lifetime did a ton of reality shows, but then now they don't do them as much. So I think where you have people that don't want to spend money and then you have a fear of trying something new because you only want to rely on a brand's name. that. Yeah, it's a contraction. And so they're willing to pick up a show that does well overseas, which, you know, that's fine. I watch those shows, too. So I think it's just, sort of was like a perfect storm of events and like, timing was just not great for the industry as a whole. And I would say that the entire industry has not bounced back. I don't think its just reality specific.

Benjamin Kessler

And, you know, like you were saying, it's like the confluence of as things push to streaming, like a lot of these streamers are just still not as profitable as these companies want to be. So overall, they just, you know, I even saw with recently NBC was reporting that the traders they like, cut the budget of that show, which was like one of their biggest shows on both streaming and they even aired the whole season on NBC again after I was shocked to see that their budget got cut.

Carey Mandelker

Oh yeah. Oh, no, they're cutting everybody's budgets. I mean, a little inside baseball. you know, I, I know people who are on big, huge network shows and because everybody is aware, like, you know, industry wide, that there are few and the jobs are few and far between, they're biting people back, but they're literally cutting their salaries by like 500. So they'll be like, we're going to bring you back, but we don't have the budget. So, you know, you can have this job, but only if you come back at 500 or they're firing their entire, like, crew. Right. Because crews are still unionized. so they'll fire them all because they make too much money after being on the shows for so long. And then they start everybody out news. They can bring them in sort of at scale. day. Right. so, yeah, I mean, it's, it's tough times out here. It's pretty brutal.

Benjamin Kessler

And it's, I mean, you gave me a good Segway here because even with production numbers down overall unscripted reality, you mentioned Love Island. That's just one example I've seen recently. They're all pop culture staples. Like the Big Brother cast came out today. It's all I'm seeing on Twitter. And Love Island has a literally 1,000,000,000 minutes viewed. And I would say so much of that I don't have the exact statistics but has to be driven from social media. I mean, there was an entire, storyline recently on Love Island. Was a woman getting cut from the show because people found a video of her and post on social media of her from many years ago saying things that were inappropriate. And it it's results in this whole storyline for the show that's exists entirely on social media. So yeah, I mean, it's more than scripted, more than any other genre, more than film even. Why? Why do you think reality and unscripted just pairs so well with social media now? And do you think that, you know, that pop culture staple is do you think it can work like you were saying, with these new, smaller shows that used to exist still? Or do you think it's only on like these more legacy style shows that exist in one pocket that are still capable of creating these hits?

Carey Mandelker

No. I mean, I think that in reality it can come from anywhere. I mean, that's the beauty of the genre. Like you, you just get lightning in a bottle every once in a while. But I think, you know, with something like Love Island or whatever, you know, that is. I mean, the cynical person in me would say, and I don't know, I don't work on Love Island. I don't know anybody who works on Love Island. So I just always look at anything that something like that happens. I always assume the producers knew and that the producers could be part of it. So I, I don't know if I would say I believe that that's organic. it could just be very smart producers on your show because you, you

need that social media interaction. Right? a scandal very rarely hurts a show, right? It just gets people talking about it. So, you know, I, I haven't looked into it. I did see a very quick article talking about the girl and, you know, and I moved on, but in my sort of skeptical way, like, I just don't think that there's very little in reality that's organic, right? That just comes from nowhere because you have to vet these, people on the show so intensely, to get them on the show and approved to be on the shows that, the idea that this came out of nowhere, I mean, unless, I don't know, it could be something the she said on like, Twitter 15 years ago and nobody went back 15 years on Twitter. But I, I, you know, I'm just always skeptical of that.

Benjamin Kessler

Shifting more to curiosity about reality TV and social media as things push more to social and to YouTube and I mean, YouTube. Recently, stream streaming just recently overtook everything as the number one view. And then within streaming, if you look at the numbers, even just from Nielsen, YouTube is being watched on people's TVs more than ever before. And it's interesting when I talk to people because one thing like you that came to my mind, I've spoken to some people about with this Love Island thing is authenticity. It's like reality TV, when it had this huge boom, was known as like the authenticity genre, even though what you're saying is. And that, I think is also true, is that that none of it is organic, it's all in organic and fake in, in a sense. But do you do you foresee reality unscripted being a go to genre as you, the YouTubes of the world and the user generated content creators become more and more popular and and big streamers and big networks hitch their ride to them. Or do you think that these new models still fall under unscripted, or do you think it's its own genre entirely?

Carey Mandelker

I mean, I think the reality genre is so broad that you can easily slide everybody in there, but I think that, like streamers and content creators, I think are different. but I think from a network perspective it's all the same. Right? And, and network is going to look at somebody who is online and has cheaply been making their own content, and see dollar savings there. Right. So I think it's sort of very appealing to go to. I don't know if I'm saying this right. I think content creators and I don't want to say this is a bad thing is I think some of the stuff that's on there's brilliant.

Benjamin Kessler

No, I, I, I've here heard similar sentiments to what you're talking about.

Carey Mandelker

I think content creators are naive about how the entertainment industry works in terms of like contract. you know, you know, how to interact with a network and what the demands are of actually making a show. Right. it's a shoestring budget or no budget, right. It's like a ring camera on a person, and they're just doing their lives. So I think there's, you can come to them with a lower budget. Nobody's going to say boo. So I think that also makes them very appealing, from like a corporate standpoint. But I would say that, like, Mr. Beast didn't just want his show on YouTube, right? He could have just done it on YouTube. He wanted it on the streamer. Right.

And if it had been, you know, ten years ago, he would have wanted it on a network. so I still think it's a little too unsteady right there, because as much as people talk about there's so many streaming platforms like, you know, Netflix has been around a long time. Hulu's been around a long time. you know, Amazon Prime people don't even realize they have it, but they have it. So there's some like, steadiness there. But like, you know, I don't think anybody thinks of social media as like a permanent system. Right? You know something? YouTube may be the one, right? YouTube is pretty stable. It's legacy. but, you know, it was like when they tried to do Quibi, right? There was some great stuff on Quibi. But if you know, it just it couldn't hold people's attention. you know, Facebook has fallen, Instagram is falling. TikTok, whether or not it stays in the country. Right. Like I think it all just I think it's hard to say that like the shift is going to go to that when there's just not the infrastructure does that makes it like, I, I don't know how to explain it. Like there's social media is a little bit like the Wild West, right? Like something's really big today. And then something comes down and like, you know, calls it out, shoots it in the street, and it's a new king, right? Like it's just it doesn't have the permanence, I guess, of it feels like, you know, and I wouldn't say the network does. Right. Like, I think right now you're looking at, like Netflix is Netflix, right? And so everybody wants to be on there, and then you're looking underneath, for that stability. in terms of the streaming and the numbers, it's but there's so many things that are competing that like an audience size that was like would have been considered paltry on like a network is like huge for streaming. Right. or today, like you get a million people to watch. It's like, oh my God, that's great.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. Especially because Netflix in most regards cut out the middleman and now they're bringing it back. So that's in terms of where's the money coming from is it's like, you know, it's the same thing with like the graphics work I do. You know, a new company comes in and says, oh, we have this great graphics software and it's look so much cheaper. And they try to undercut the big guy in the game. And then five years later that it's now that they're all the same price eventually. And it's, you know, you see the same thing with Netflix. We're slowly they're starting to integrate their ad tiers. and someone like my mom who watches streamers now is like, why would I ever watch ads again? I never want to watch ads again. and I'm telling her, I'm like, you're going to very soon without realizing it, but where does that money follow? And so as someone who's in that reality bubble, where do you if these shows don't come back or if they do, where do you foresee. Something within this genre falling into place? Or what do you think it needs to pivot to move to, whether it be social or to YouTube or to a streamer? What do you think is going to be a big shift that needs to happen in order for these to pivot?

Carey Mandelker

I don't know if I think the shift will come from reality itself. I think reality shifts to whatever happens around it. Does that make sense? Like, yeah, I, I don't think it's the genre that's going to and frankly, I don't know if I think it's the genre in any of entertainment. I think it's really based on what users are flocking to. So I think we move where the audience goes. I mean, I think you know, this has nothing to do with reality but this big, you know, after the pandemic and you had all the people being like, go back to the movie theaters, right? And you have some, you know,

directors and actors that are like my movies will only go into the movie theater. But that's not where the audience is anymore. Right? So I, I think that's a very old fashioned idea. And so I think that is what will happen with all of entertainment is that it's going to land where the audience does. So I, I, I don't think there is a specific answer to that question. Yes. I think right now you're your hope is that you know, you make your show and it airs on whatever platform and then you want it in pop culture, right? So you want there to be chatter on online. So wherever that is and you want clips of your show to be spread around, you know, what was interesting is like, I work on catfish and so we would make these episodes right there on MTV. But, you know, the day before the episode came out, like MTV would put out on, you know, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, they put out, like the first ten minutes of the episode. So, like, you give this, like ten-minute trailer and we were always like, oh, right. You know, fine. Like, sometimes we'd have like, surprise guests or like things that were supposed to be big for the episode. and then all of a sudden it was already out before the episode aired. So it's sort of like take the air out of the balloon, and then the episode would air and almost immediately, like just about the entire episode, would go up online, on clips, on Instagram, YouTube, like, so. It was always interesting to me as like somebody who's not, you know, in the, in the, you know, marketing distribution side that like that was more important than, like getting eyeballs on the network, right?

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. It's almost like, are you building clips for the show or are you building the show for clips?

Carey Mandelker

Right. That that was always interesting to me. So I, I think that, you know, it. I don't think that the companies care. I don't know if I want to sound too cynical. I don't the companies really care. You know, they don't look at it as like nobody care. But whoever like, oh my God, you ruined the twist or whatever. You know, they don't care. They care about making money, right? So they're going to put it out in as many places as they possibly can to make money. So, you know, I think that that's what it is, is that the industry just follows money, and the money is where the audience goes. Is that does that answer the question?

Benjamin Kessler

No. Yeah. That makes perfect sense. I also think it's like the, that network streamers social care about what is work, what is perceived as working too. Yeah. And I just want to add where it's like, you know, I was talking about the trailers earlier, you know, the trailers pops up now all of a sudden there's ten shows taking other reality stars and putting them together. Or are any of them successful? No, but they're all trying to capture that lightning in the bottle you were talking about, because everyone's following each other in the same works with the money in that regard, where if one thing is successful in terms of making money, other people will copy that method as well because they think it means it will be successful for them. Will it be? I don't know, but they think it will be.

Carey Mandelker

I mean, it's because, like the traitors is not a new idea. No. You know, it's. Yeah, it's the mole. Right. And the mole is done like celebrity mole. you know, survivor isn't a new idea. Survivor was basically, an amazing race or basically. Oh, God. What was the name of the show? Oh, there was this amazing show that was on discovery that was like about. Oh, I gotta look it up. It was about people, like, on these international races. And so there were these teams and they dropped them in like, you know, the middle of the desert. And then they would just have to race to get.

Benjamin Kessler

A show called Eco Challenge.

Carey Mandelker

Yes, Eco challenge. But like, I still think the best reality show ever. and, you know, Amazon tried to bring it back like, a year ago. Yes. Not a year ago, like five years ago. But time is all a blip. and I thought it was great then, but it was too expensive to make up. Sure. Right. And then in streaming, you just never get to really see the numbers. So you don't know, like, yeah, they're, you know what? What if the investment was worth it? but, you know, so, you know, we it's always been a copycat industry and all of entertainment is like that. If one thing hits, everybody's trying to make their own version of it, because there's safety in that, you know, like, But yes, it gets oversaturated because now you have so many people trying to make the same show. Used to be like, you know, you had CBS it. I'm trying to think of like, and I guess like The Mole and stuff like that was supposed to be answers to that. but. Yeah. Sorry. yeah, it is. It is a copycat industry and everybody sort of tries to hit it. But if you do like sometimes the copycats are, you know, wildly successful or very successful and that, you know, nobody cares for, like, you know, the bachelor's copying itself with all of its different iterations. and, you know, catfish gets like, you know, help him in a secret relationship or, you know, I'm keeping a secret from this. Like, you know, they try to spin it off all the time. Ghosted, trolls, you know, and sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. But it's like the familiarity. Because I think it's also that, you know, when people are watching TV, they're scrolling on their phones or they're doing something else. So you, you like the familiarity because you can just sort of pick it up anywhere you're familiar with the format and you get it, and you don't have to worry that you've, like, really missed something, or that you are going to have to figure something out. You know, it's like white noise.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And I mean, the patterns there, sometimes I watch like I was watching Deal or No Deal Island and I had to stop watching it. I was like, this is cut horribly, but it was clearly cut for someone who was on their phone. Yeah, yeah. which bummed me out because I was like, so close. But, my last question for you that I've written down as I'm just kind of leaving, open to everyone I'm talking to, is there, successful unscripted reality TV model? It could be a way that you've seen someone cast something, or way you've seen someone come up with an idea or a show you've seen recently that you're like, oh, that was really good the way they did that, that

you've seen in the past five or so years that has just blown you away and been like, well, and it could just be an idea. You heard from someone or something, that first thing that comes to your mind that you're like, this was a really good thing I saw that is just made me go, wow, I can't believe this was so successful or this worked so well, or this was really cool.

Carey Mandelker

I always respond to shows where you can't see the strings sort of being pulled. Right. So I think cheer was fantastic. Right. On Netflix. I thought that was a really beautifully done show. it was the show that, like, you know, those of us that have worked on dance shows in the past, like it was a show we always wanted to make. But, you know, nobody was like, you know, take a deep dive. you know, lifetime wants it frothy. And, it was a shame that that we didn't get to do more because I thought those kids were really moving. And obviously they had the scandal where the one kid had, like, child porn or whatever, like on his computer. There was something that happened with one of the kids, and that sort of took the wind out of it, and it, it had to, break the fourth wall in a sense, like it had to incorporate that scandal into its second season. And I think that sort of hurt it a little bit. But I thought it was great. I think Last Chance University, same thing. although that's older than five years now. what do I think? I thought Netflix, did a reality show of Squid Games, which I thought was brilliantly produced, and was really smart and was very, you know, appropriate tie tired. Like, I was like, oh, what's this? And like, cynically, like I was looking at it like, look at this cash grab. But like they did a great job with it. and it was smart and it was engaging. I'm trying to think of what else I think the traders, you know, I thought the first season of it was really, wonderfully done. I'm trying to think of, like, in terms of, like a docu soap. I mean, I thought Golden Bachelor. I didn't watch it, but I don't I the secret is I don't really watch a lot of TV. but I, I thought it was a great idea. And, you know, it's going out of the box to reach to an audience that doesn't ever really get catered to. So I thought that was really smart, and it seemed to do very well for them. You know, the housewives are. I'm trying to think if there was a housewife show that I thought went really well. I, you know, the Utah oh, oh, Secret Lives of Mormon Wives. Fantastic. That's a social media integration show that works really, really well. and I think the first season of that show reminded me of, like, old school reality where, like, look at I think producers' hands are and everything on reality basically. But that was a show that felt like producers were scrambling to, like, keep up with the cast, and what they were doing. And so I thought it was great. Like, that was, you had great characters like who, you know. Yes. They had found themselves sort of. Right. They were on, on social media already. but they all worked really. The, the main characters of that. You had a clear hero and a clear villain, and it was messy and it was sloppy. And sometimes your allegiance as you were watching it, like, changed, which is always super fun to be able to do. I think Secret Lives of Mormon Wives is like the best docu soap that I've seen in the last five years. For sure. and that had just built in also integration, right? Because it was TikTok. It was a show. people were already talking about it. it was just really smart. and that was a show that capitalize off of, you know, Housewives. And then like all of the Mormon shows like Sister Wives, things like that, like that was like something that just came together on its own. Yeah, I think that's probably about it. Those are the ones that are like jumping out to me that I remember. and I think that's the toughest thing with reality is like having things that people remember. Right. Because so much

of it is similar. you know, I, you know, I'll watch. I know people who know all of the Housewives shows and can tell you who's on which one and, like, keep the plot separate, but, like, that's all just one big sort of blur to me, right? And I think that's the problem with a lot of the shows, is that everything sort of has a sameness to it, where it doesn't really stand out. So when you have like a character that punches through, which is, you know, the Mormon wives or men, Alan Cumming on the traitors, like, he was so great, like he, he I mean, look, the characters on the show made the thing, but I think he, he made the show like it. Rode on his personality that first season and him making it interesting. Everybody was wearing and all of that. and then Squid Game was also capitalizing off of, like, a cultural touchstone. but it was also really smartly done. So I think it's so hard to break through the, the, the general white noise of most entertainment that those are, those are the ones that I that stand out for me.

Benjamin Kessler

I just want to say to like the idiosyncrasies that you're talking about, where it's like everything feels the same. That's one thing like I'm starting to look into more now with the thesis is like on when you edit something for a streamer or a network, and especially with the more traditional like Secret Lives of Mormon Wives, which is, by the way, always at the top of Hulu. Whenever I click on Hulu, it's always like number 2 or 3, which is insane. Oh, but that show uses like TikTok and B-roll, like confessionals and a really like, traditional feeling way, which is strange because that's using social media in a way that, like you would watch a confessional 15 years ago, which is weird. Yeah. But yeah, the that is such totally different the way that show works than the things that I might watch on YouTube, which are also unscripted reality shows in a sense, but are edited in this like vlog style that just has no maybe no confessionals, maybe the whole thing is a confessional in that sense. And it's so, and I'm something I'm starting to write about is like, well, what does that make? Are these two things under the same umbrella? Then if they no longer have those, aspects that make, you know, the check off the thing up, it has this it's there for reality TV. So that's something that you mentioned that I'm really interested in looking into more. And I really appreciate your time. And I hope that, you find consistent work, especially I hope catfish comes back and it's it comes back from hiatus and MTV doesn't have that many shows, so hopefully they bring it back.

Appendix L: Interview with Chris Lehman – Reality TV Producer

Benjamin Kessler

And first, I just want to know if you could talk a little bit about your experience in reality TV and where that, led you now and kind of what, looking back on your time in the reality world, how you feel about your work that you have done. And I, you know, looking a little bit at the projects you've got, I love to hear it from you.

Chris Lehman

Sure. so, I actually started in scripted. I did, I worked my way up, in the scripted capacity to, script coordinator, for shows like Less Than Perfect on ABC and then a whole bunch of different pilots, and then my, introduction to the unscripted reality world was when my, former professor, mentor, actually called me up and said, I'm doing a show with Morgan Spurlock, who you might remember from doing the Supersize Me and a bunch of other projects, but he was doing his television series called 30 days, but the premise of that was basically, you would take two people with, very specific opinions. For instance, somebody that was a huge gun rights advocate and somebody that did not like gun rights, switch them, in their lifestyles for 30 days and see if that changes their perspective on whatever the issue is. And then in addition to those shows, Morgan would do 1 or 2, year, where he would just kind of embed himself into different, environments and figure out, like what that was like. So the first, reality, unscripted show I did was Morgan going to jail for 30 days. So I was spent, some time in a Virginia jail for 30 days as he, went through all the experiences, well, what a new prisoner was like. And then later we did one where, he went and was a coal miner for 30 days. So again, we were in that time, we were in West Virginia, and we went down to, a coal mine or down, at the you know, the, the face for, for 30 days, which was interesting experience. So then after that, I did a whole bunch of different kinds of, reality shows, everything from food shows to, like, yeah, more drama kind of stuff, like, bring it and that type of thing. I got to be known sort of as the empathetic kind of, producer. So, I would do intervention, I would do 600-pound life, anything or anything that had to do with kids. and that needed like a little, special handling, in regards to, what the process was. And that's, that was basically my, that was my career. I also did clip shows for a long time. but that's not super, interesting. It's basically, license the what? A clip of some dramatic event. like, the something exploding or some, incident that was caught on tape and then, we would, in various formats, either dissect what that clip was or just have fun with showing the side of America's Funniest Home Videos or ridiculousness. Kind of showing what, whatever goofiness happened. So, I've kind of done the whole breadth of what unscripted is. yeah, I guess that's me in a nutshell.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And that's the great segue for me, because that's one reason I, I really wanted to talk to you, looking at your experience and my first like formal question from doing research, there was a fairly recent deadline article that interviewed 50 producers within reality TV. And as someone who, you know, you just said you worked on kind of the gambit of different subgenres within the genre of unscripted. And these producers identified three major changes that they want to see as catalysts that would help the business moving forward. And one was more live programing. One

was more tax incentives. So specifically, in California, and one was networks taking more risks on less tested formats. And so I was curious from you, looking back on your work and looking at maybe if you watch anything now or the way that you see the world is now from who you know, would you agree with these? And do you think based on your time in the reality world and the unscripted world, did you see these as being major challenges then? And do you think these are would be considered major challenges now or even in the future? I.

Chris Lehman

Would have to disagree. Those sound. I did not read that deadline article, but those sound, those three that you laid out sound like, owners of production companies. Do I have that right?

Benjamin Kessler

It was like, smorgasbord of high-level producers, owners, like major players. It was a whole, whole, a whole around the board. And I'm kind of synthesizing it down to those three.

Chris Lehman

I mean, the main struggle that I think the in for reality right now is that they, for unscripted is that they don't pay their producers, the guys that are guys and gals that are actually boots on the ground or the crew, enough to deal with the, sort of the tribulations and craziness that happens from, from day to day. Oftentimes we're sort of the, forgotten, forgotten middle child of, of TV production, even though we, the, the unscripted itself. it's a huge part of like I just looked at Netflix this morning and the top trending shows were thousand-pound sisters and thousand-pound roomies for TV. So like we do have that. But like reality, it's there's nothing that comes from a producing standpoint. Until you get up to like maybe an older level that you have any sort of benefit from that, like there still intervention and a lot of shows that I work on rerun all the time, and there's no residual is there's nothing that happens. for that, it's basically work for hire. And then you're then you're done with the show. And the work for hire is difficult. I never noticed I did development, too. I should have probably mentioned that in my little, description. I did development for a long time. And while it's always a challenge to get networks to take a, crazy, leap on something, I don't think that that is the main hurdle. I think that they're always going to be cautious about what that means. But, I've done shows where we've gone into, like, little literal drug dens down the coal mines down, working with children, like, really tough subjects. I, I, I don't see that there is not enough, I don't I don't see that risk tolerance is a problem for reality. I would say the main thing is that they don't, compensate enough for what the actual work is and what the benefit is to the various networks and streamers.

Benjamin Kessler

I want to talk about during the recent strikes in the entire entertainment industry, reality TV was shelved. when you look at the overall production numbers in a way that people didn't expect. and I'm curious, based on what you're saying, which it was very different than the 2008 strikes where everyone was like, okay, we need to fill up these time slots. We need reality because they're nonunion. They cost less, and they can fill up the time slots. Why do you think, based on what you were saying, where maybe there's less pay or even there's just less shows being made now,

why do you think we didn't see maybe that shift in mentality with these most recent strikes to go back to reality, and the numbers are still down from that?

Chris Lehman

Because, I think that, there is a, that the studios and the networks are overweight in regards to what they have as network, staff and pricing. And then they, they're, they're also they got a, huge amount of content already, just like you said, like they could just air, live PD clip, or they could just rerun something like the Thousand Pound Sisters or, you know, I did 600 pound wife that trends every once in a while to why make new shows when you can just rerun the old shows? I thought it was interesting in that in the article that you're where they were talking about, that streaming actually, is now larger than terrestrial. Is that and Gunsmoke, because there's so many older people finding streaming and being having access to it. Gunsmoke, a show that was made, 50 plus years ago, at least it was consistently coming into the, the ratings because that's what that generation likes. So. So you have all this content. Why buy new content? Why do something. Why do something else? Because you have this huge library of stuff that you can just pull, and it's to get you the same numbers and without the same risk. Like, you know, that show is going to work. Does that make sense?

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, yeah. And, I can say firsthand my grandpa's favorite show was Gunsmoke, and he would still watch it every day, within that too, even with production numbers down over all, reality TV still remains like this pop culture staple. You'll see a new, you know, one week special, Jersey shore. You see headlines on Entertainment Weekly, PEOPLE.com. You see, it's all about the reality stars. It's all about there's always something new popping up within pop culture where reality is making these stars, and then they're kind of becoming more, more and more larger than life celebrities. I'm curious, what do you think, even with those production numbers down overall and reusing a lot of the same shows on these streaming libraries, why do you think reality TV is still staying a pop culture staple? Maybe when there's less overall new being made, but there's still so much out there on social media. Do you think it's on the back of like, these few niche legacy shows that were made ten, 15 years ago and are still pumping out? Or do you think the genre is still capable of making new standardized kits?

Chris Lehman

Oh, I think 100%. They can still make, new hits. but the landscape of the media landscape itself has changed dramatically. And the cast members of reality shows have also become way more sophisticated than, what you would what we would, well, at least what I grew up with, like, when Real World came out, nobody really knew what that was. Nobody. None of you, not even the cast members, knew what that was. And in today and in today's culture, they're able to, not only monetize their appearance, and just look at the Kardashians or any of the housewives, they can monetize that thing, but then they can also have these ancillary benefits where they do social media or they, you know, like Jenner runs a makeup company or whatever. So it is possible to, to still become a reality TV. So I just think that it's, like anything like the public always wants to see what someone's up to, especially if you can capture that in a candid way. I think that that is

the reason that you don't see as many, new shows. and then I also think that it could be just from, creative standpoint. I think that a lot of people in reality now, it's it feels like cast members know what the what the game is. And they it's hard to capture the authenticity, of what they were, which is what I think originally drew audiences to them. So without that authenticity, it is a little, it's a little difficult to, like, really latch on to a personality or a character if you want to call your cast member, if you want to, however you want to call them, in the same way, and you just have you have these huge mega stars that people just know and they grow up with. So it's like if the I'm sure if any of the, friends cast did a reality show, it would be a mega hit because everybody knows them. They know who they are, they would like. And it would be easy. Like I did the wall burgers. And even though it was a, you know, essentially a show about a family, it got the traction because, you know, Donnie Wahlberg and Mark Wahlberg, we're both participants. And that was a huge, draw for the audience. And I think that, like when you see the new shows like the Baldwins, do you see that kind of stuff in celebrities, much in the same way that they've switched from the used to be? no. Go for a film star, to be a TV star. That's changed. and I think that also now it's okay to be a reality star. So it just pushes it makes the the it makes the bar that you got to get over that much more difficult, if that makes sense.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. No, definitely. And I think within that too is it's also the rise of social media and YouTube. I mean, if you look at the Nielsen numbers, YouTube is destroying everyone else in total minutes. Watched it everything when it comes to that. And it's also kind of created this new weird landscape where it's like, who's really making the money here? One place where I work at currently is Amazon's home shopping channel, which nobody knows exists, but we collaborate with a lot of the Real Housewives, and they come on and they get views just because of their name, and they know exactly what they're doing to tease the upcoming season of whichever show they're working on. But it's also this new kind of subgenre of user generated content where it's like, they might go on Instagram Live and talk about it for an hour, and they wouldn't be that maybe major of a celebrity, but they'd become that over time in their niche world. So within that new social media atmosphere, do you think that this would also fall under unscripted reality TV? Do you think it's, a different genre in itself, the Mr. Beast of the worlds that are coming out? Where would you say these get classified now? Would you consider that unscripted or is that the whole thing?

Chris Lehman

I would consider that unscripted. I would consider anything that, or most things that are on YouTube that have like a Mr. beast kind of situation, that is unscripted, like Mr. Beast essentially with it, he created it, gave up that guy, his company created a game show. and you could do that. I mean, you look at Dave Portnoy, he essentially did a food review show, and I mean, apart from his other businesses. But like his pizza bite thing is one bite pizza things that him up in ways that you can't avoid not seeing it if you're, you know, once you're in the algorithm because he just does it. But essentially it's a food review show which have been around forever. same thing with, with Mr. Beast. It's a game show. It's the same thing, except on a different scale. yeah, I would, I would say that that the social media is definitely, unscripted for the for the most part, I mean,

unscripted. And then I guess we have we should define what that means because it can mean different things. Like, when I work on a show like intervention or 600-pound life, where, just because of the nature of what the subject matter is, that is that's real. Like, that's a, that's a real thing that we're not, doing it. But if I do a show where it's a food show or, like a drama kind of thing, we're manipulating how that's happening. just because of deadlines and, the, you know, the need to get stuff out live. PD obviously is a real show like that is like you're going to see what happens, but even that, you know, they know where the action is going to be. And that's where they put the cameras. Like they know where the situation is. So it's all it's all it's the same unscripted to different, different degrees is what I would say.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah. And it comes back to, to what you were saying about authenticity, like what is considered authentic at any given time. And something I'm looking into within the paper with, within the genre is things that were once staples of unscripted or reality, which is just simple. Confessionals is now like got used in The Office and now it's a staple of documentaries too. And now it's like, well, is that considered authentic or not? And what is real and what is not real? And is that considered unscripted if it's not technically real and there's a whole different way to look at that landscape now. And my last question for you is really just what, from your perspective, watching things now on social media, on TV, do you think there's a model you've seen in the last few years? It could be a show that you've seen or heard about. It could be a, friend that you've seen work on something, a way that you've seen someone cast something. What do you believe is, a recent, very successful, unscripted model? And why do you think it succeeded?

Chris Lehman

I think that the next generation is going to be more the next. And I haven't seen this actually done yet, but this is my suspicion, as we were talking about, like YouTube and the social medias and that I think that there are the ability and the technology wasn't there in the past. But what we have now is people who know how to shoot themselves. I look at shows like alone where it's, there is there's still a crew there, but a lot of the material they use is, self-shot. So I think that that's going to be the next, the next evolution of reality where people will shoot themselves. and then the audience can say, well, are they really authentic or are they, are they putting on a show for the camera? And I think that there's going to be debates. And I think that because of the technology, the landscape and, the just the ability for influencers to like kids to have, box something there if they've got a million followers or, or even more that that used to be a big number. That's not even that big number anymore, but it's going to be that self-shot stuff. And then I think that eventually the networks are going to click into the networks, and the studios are going to click into that and say, oh, well, do we even really need a crew? Maybe we just hire a crew to do a couple interviews or like a little patchwork, and they and then other than that, the, the they can just shoot this basically themselves, which is a whole different topic to say, because even editing with AI coming in, which is going to be a game changer with AI coming in, you can get a rough cut of a show. Even now, it's not going to be a great one. But even now, you can get a rough cut of a show through AI. So the technology and the ability of people to be a little bit more savvy in regards to how reality shows work and what works and what drives audiences is

going to lead, I think I believe it's going to lead to people just creating their own content, and that will be the unscripted reality show of the future.

Benjamin Kessler

Yeah, no, we've seen it with vlogs too, where YouTube, you know, one of the staples with these people doing video blogs and they've created this cinematic language almost where, you know, if you grew up at a certain point and you're watching YouTube at a certain point, you now understand that this style equals authentic, which is so weird because that style might have once been thought of as cheap or as, you know, just like, some people would say, this is not art, this is not TV, and other people are used to this feels real. This feels real to me.

Chris Lehman

Right? It used to be that that would be the public access, the UHF. Like it's like really like if you look at a vlog, like if you go back to the public access, kind of channels, that's what a vlog is. It's just but now it's because of the technology. It looks it looks cleaner. People know how to edit and all of the things that made it exactly what you said made it look gritty, give people like, they're like, oh, I like that because that I can relate to that. And that's where I think, I think that's where our stuff is going to go, which is going to change the industry dramatically. And I can't even predict on how that will eventually shake out.

Appendix M: Interview with Jo Sharon – Co-CEO, *Magical Elves*

Benjamin Kessler

In a recent Deadline article interviewing 50 producers within reality tv, 3 major changes were identified as catalysts that would help the overall Reality TV business in 2025: more live programming, more tax incentives (specifically in CA), and networks taking more risks on less tested formats. Do you agree with these and do you foresee these still being major, relevant catalysts in 5+ years? Which is most and least important? Did they miss anything major that you feel is needed for the industry for the short and long term?

Jo Sharon

Live programming is definitely a catalyst for drawing viewers to networks and platforms, helping boost exposure for other shows and increasing overall engagement in a very crowded landscape—especially at a time when marketing budgets are minimal to nonexistent. But I don't believe live programming can or should expand across the entire genre. What makes reality TV so satisfying is often the editing, structure, and pacing—things you lose in a live environment. Live only works when there's a clear, compelling reason to watch in the moment—when it feels like an event, not a gimmick. And that's a tough thing to scale.

Tax incentives in California would certainly help retain production and keep more people working locally, but they don't solve the core issue: there's simply less being greenlit right now. That said, retaining the creative talent and crews who built this industry should be a top priority. Losing them to other regions or industries weakens the entire ecosystem.

As for networks taking more risks—I couldn't agree more. Reality TV was born from bold moves, gut instincts, and unconventional thinking. But now, the industry has become overly safe and hesitant. So much of what's greenlit feels like a slight variation on something that already worked years ago. If we want to reinvigorate the space, we need more risk-taking—not just in concepts, but in casting, tone, and format.

There's also a lot of talk around brand-funded programming being a solution to the current downturn. But while there's energy behind the idea, we haven't seen it scale in any meaningful way. Right now, it still feels like a promise more than a pipeline. If it becomes a real, reliable path for funding shows, that could change the game.

Benjamin Kessler

During the multiple recent strikes in the entertainment industry, reality tv was shelved in production in a way it had not been during the 2008 strikes. Production output has yet to fully recover to pre-strike levels. Why do you think this happened and do you see this as a bubble or a continued trend?

Jo Sharon

I think the recent strikes did real damage to the tv business as a whole—ironically not because of what was made, but because of what wasn't. Networks and platforms relied on their libraries to

fill programming gaps and discovered that they worked. They were able to repurpose older titles across their streaming and broadcast portfolios and, in some cases, even get better ratings than they would have with new content that had no marketing or awareness. That realization shifted behavior.

Now, instead of prioritizing original development, many networks are leaning more heavily into internal content sharing across platforms. That means fewer slots for new shows and fewer opportunities for creatives. Until there's a business or audience incentive to change that, I think this trend could stick around longer than people expected.

Benjamin Kessler

Even with production numbers down overall (specifically in CA), reality tv remains a pop culture staple on social media and for individual programming on streamers. Why do you think this is? Do you think current success relies on the back of a few legacy shows and formats or the genre is still capable of creating fresh, standardized hits?

Jo Sharon

Legacy franchises absolutely still have power—they've built loyal audiences and online communities that amplify every moment. But that doesn't mean the genre can't deliver fresh hits. It absolutely can. Audiences are still hungry for new formats and breakout personalities; they just aren't being served enough of them.

We need to keep investing in those legacy formats to keep them evolving—but the real energy and cultural conversation comes when a new show hits and breaks through. The only way that happens is if networks take more swings, trust their creative partners, and support those projects with real marketing and smart release strategies.

Benjamin Kessler

Do you foresee reality tv being a "go to" genre as user generated content on social media becomes more popular? Would newer styles of content (Vlogs, long form YouTube documentaries) still fall under the unscripted category, or are we seeing a new sub-genre altogether? Why?

Jo Sharon

While they certainly share some DNA I'm not sure I see them as one or the other. And my hope is that while technically under the same umbrella one doesn't replace the other. Traditional unscripted reality shows offer something UGC often can't: narrative structure, character arcs, editorial polish, and that feeling of "must watch", watercooler content. I do however think that the popularity of UGC content has pushed unscripted TV and will continue to do so to be more authentic, more personal, more timely and more raw.

In the short term I think we're going to see more shows borrow from internet culture as a way to try and bridge the gap - from bringing Creators and Influencers into unscripted whether it's Mr.

Beast or Alex Cooper or we are even starting to see some non -traditional hires in terms of Directors of photography and editors who can bring POV's from other non-traditional areas into unscripted. So, it's about not resisting this shift, but embracing the tone, pace, and personality-driven energy of online content to shape the next wave of unscripted hits.

Benjamin Kessler

What do you believe is the most recent successful reality tv/unscripted model and why? This can be any aspect: a development methodology, an actual show, strategy of casting or production/post production are some examples.

Jo Sharon

One of the most successful recent trends in unscripted has been the strategic use of pre-existing equity—in the form of known talent. Shows like The Traitors have proven the power of casting familiar reality personalities from other franchises. It creates a built-in fan-base and can help market a show with their social media platforms and press in a world where finding an audience is often the barrier of entry to success in an overly crowded market.