

Breaking out of the 'reality' straight-jacket

In North America, the definition of 'reality television', apart from being misleading and restrictive, is having an explicit negative impact on the genre's development. David Jenkinson reports.

At the Banff Television Festival last week, concerns were raised about the funding of producers and programming in the non-scripted genre as a number of executives called on the Canadian government to update its funding policy and support growth.



Michael Geddes (left), president of Lone Eagle Entertainment, and a pioneer of non-scripted programming in Canada, said during a panel to discuss The Future of Reality Television: "The Canadian Television Fund, which is government-supported to sponsor development across television, is generally designed for documentary and drama. Reality has always been the poor cousin of television, particularly in this country. And even though many of the reality shows that are produced meet all the criteria necessary to access funding, they are not eligible because of the 'reality' tag that is put on them."

Geddes, who is just rolling out Office Temps, a show that puts unsuspecting members of the public into a fake office environment and lures them into a variety of scenarios using actors, added: "A lot of the funding mechanisms are for scripted TV in this country. Whether that is right or wrong, when you are putting a show on the air, and you are employing Canadians, and you are 10 out of 10 with regards to meeting the demands of the points system - everybody's money is the same colour."

"At the end of the day, good TV is good TV, and I don't think we should marginalise a genre that is speaking in volumes in the ratings. That is wrong. As long as you understand television is here to entertain and the audience is left to decide what they like and what they don't like, I think there should be a very even playing field." Geddes called on the Canadian government to review its funding policy with regard to 'reality', a call that drew full support from delegates at the Banff session.

David Lyle (right), coo and general manager of Fox's Reality Channel, added his voice to the call to arms: "Where I think your government is missing the point is they are not helping support one genre which can be a huge export earner. An old-fashioned government that just wants to see 16mm reels



of documentaries being exported, which make a few dollars on the international market, is turning its back on a billion dollar industry. Last year the value of the formats business in Britain alone was half a billion euros, all of which returned into Britain from foreign productions. To have an outdated mindset that is sending documentaries about the lifecycle of the woodworm around the world, when there is a modern international business, is ridiculous."



Mark Rowland (left), former Television Corp International MD and long-time non-scripted exec producer, currently overseeing the roll-out of Supernanny and Brat Camp for ABC in the US, said: "'Reality' was helpful as a label to put on the genre in the early stages, but now it is completely pointless to describe the range of programmes that fall within it. It is amazing how quickly the genre has evolved. For instance Supernanny is effectively a form of popular documentary, not reality,"

he said. "It is also interesting that family-based reality has sprung out of countries with strong documentary traditions. At the moment trying to describe Supernanny as reality alongside Paradise Hotel and reality gameshows is just not very helpful."

Rowland went on to say: "The other thing that is a problem is the way different countries have adopted reality at different points in time. The US got it at a point in reality where they had missed out several stages. In Europe there had been a period of fly-on-the wall docs which had turned into docusoaps. The lead-in for that was the desire for more stripped scheduling in Europe, and non-linear technology had made it possible to do, which a lot of people forget. So there had been a lot of observational programming without a formatable shape going on for some time. What America did was leap in at the point where Survivor and Big Brother had created a format structure on top of that - and after Millionaire, which again they thought was reality and so they thought all reality shows should have a strong gameshow thread.

"In the US, to some extent, we are now working back towards the middle. Therefore, although Supernanny is very much a show of now, its antecedent it is much more akin to shows that came out of that docusoap generation in the mid to late nineties in the UK and Europe. I think that is very interesting because stylistically it means in the US, and across North America, the look and feel of primetime network television has changed radically," Rowland adds.

"Only about a year or so ago, people were saying you could never get away with something that didn't look glossy on US primetime television. With Supernanny in ABC primetime I think the floodgates will open and people will realise that all we are talking about when we use the word 'reality' is shows about 'us'. About real people."

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21 Jun 2005
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