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Panel Response: New Formations of Stardom in Contemporary Media Culture

Previous paradigms explaining television stardom have argued that television rejects the cinematic aura created by distance in favor of familiarity. The television industry's recent use of amateur performers in order to mitigate the financial risks associated with its business models can be seen as a kind of hyper-realization of this difference. This is not to suggest that commercial television's use of participants instead of actors represents an entirely new kind of stardom. But it does indicate a possible shift in the way television constructs stardom. Specifically, it appears that television's recent fascination with 'the real' intensifies its long held affinity for the familiar. This in turn further collapses the space separating viewers from television's mechanisms of production. Consequently, the assertion that television produces 'personalities' instead of 'stars' seems at once prophetic and in need of reexamination.

The abundance of scholarship examining reality TV's economic and cultural impact has to varying degrees touched on this issue. One of the principle observations that can be taken away from these discussions is that reality TV's construction of stardom differs greatly across its formats and platforms. On its face, then, any analysis of reality-celebrity encounters the same epistemological constraint found when trying to sketch the parameters of the genre: is the stardom that reality TV constructs coherent enough to outline in the first place? As a way to grapple with this, I want to suggest that we approach reality-celebrity from the standpoint of the participant's status within the industry as talent.

One way to do this is to examine instances in which participants have been repurposed into a durable form of talent and then think about the role their fame plays in that repurposing. For example, participants are regularly recast on spinoffs and asked to work publicity junkets and make public appearances. Shows like *I Love New York* and *That's Amore!* are two recent examples. Both were hatched from highly successful programs in order to profit from the popularity that a particular participant had cultivated with viewers. Although it is often the case that a popular character or actor anchors a spinoff, reality TV's use of its participants in this capacity is limited by the behind-the-scenes quality of the participant's fame. Thus, unlike other television personalities, famous participants must continually maintain personas that in some way reflect the actuality of their identities as private individuals.

In this capacity, the participant serves both as the textual element necessary for enabling the process by which reality TV stages its presentation of the real and as a mode of on-camera talent that must

enact their individual realities in order to fulfill the representational promise made by their amateur image. As a consequence, the logic underpinning reality TV's performances has with time compelled the television industry to design programming that further capitalizes on the uniquely 'unexceptional' quality of the participant's fame. This is seen in long-running reality franchises like *The Real World* that increasingly make their participants' ongoing interaction with celebrity the narrative basis for new shows. Recently within this franchise, the programs *Fresh Meat* and *Road Rules: Viewer's Revenge* placed first-time participants against veteran participants in a competition for the shows' prizes. In so doing, MTV manufactured programming that purposefully called attention to the way much of today's reality-participants function as talent.

Traditionally, reality TV has not relied on the kind of labor that is often associated with being 'talent' but, instead, eschewed these performers in favor of ones that are presumed to be anything but talent(ed). At its most basic, then, reality TV is television that reconstitutes the viewer into a form of labor. This is why shows like *Fresh Meat* and *Road Rules: Viewer's Revenge* are worthy of note. They highlight the progress the television industry has made in this reconstitution. As participants are starting to be recognized as a durable form of talent, the parameters outlining their fame are beginning to solidify, revealing a situation in which reality-celebrity is both part of the larger cultural field of star production and a localized variation. Put another way, because reality-celebrity does exist as a modified form of television's long held affection for depicting the familiar, it trades in a genre-specific form of capital. But in order for this currency to hold its value, it must also attend to the routines and standards found in the larger field of media production of which reality TV is a part.