

Reality TV: Deja Vu All Over Again

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In the early 1990s, reality television was a fledgling type of voyeuristic television programming beginning to catch the attention of American viewers. About 20 years later, reality television is a mainstay on television airwaves and seemingly the format of choice for many networks, such as MTV, E!, TLC and HGTV. Reality television has solidifying itself as true television programming genre.

It is important to understand the structures of mass media that allow stereotypes to exist and how framing is used to portray African Americans in a particular manner. In the United States, media representations of African Americans have virtually always offered problematic and distorted depictions of African Americans. Primarily, the media system is owned and operated by white males, and they, consciously or unconsciously, have historically produced scripted and news programs with stereotypical content. Yet, what happens when they begin to produce “real” or “reality” television shows.

There is a significantly large gap within scholarly research concerning the role and presence of African Americans in reality television programming, and there is a need to produce research designed to uncover the possibilities of typecasting in reality television programs to determine if television producers enable stereotypes to exist by casting African Americans who embody characteristics supportive of historic as well as new stereotypical characters. Ultimately, the question becomes is reality television perpetuating the same stereotypical representations of African Americans present in scripted television shows?

African Americans have traditionally been seen as a “token” on many mainstream reality television shows, with usually one female or one male being the guest, participant or roommate. Yet, today, there are more shows produced with full African American casts, hosts and produces. Therefore, it’s important to really understand what is happening with this media phenomenon and provide context and guidance for those producing these shows or analyzing them in the future. An initial analysis of ten reality shows featuring African Americans uncovered all ten shows included at least one African American participant who exhibited the characteristics of a historic or new stereotype, and in some instances, a participant was exhibiting the characteristics of two stereotypes.

It is important to note that cast members do not easily appear on reality television shows, and it is probably more than fair to surmise there are no mistakes made in casting the participants, and in fact, the decisions are more than likely overly scrutinized, rather than haphazardly made. The framing of participants is deliberate and the casting ensures that individuals chosen can fall within roles needed to help advance plotlines. Reality television producers often engage in very long, complicated and tedious selection processes and sometimes weed through hundreds of thousands of contestants before choosing the small casts eventually accepted onto the programs.

The “science” of casting stereotypes can easily been seen. It appears producers use stereotypical African American characters like a catalyst in a science experiment to help trigger a reaction, which is often drama. African American stereotypical characters have been and continue to be written into dramas, situation comedies and soap operas. However, producers of reality television programming continue to hide behind the marquee of a genre that is simply catching “real people” doing real things. Producers

deny their involvement in the storylines and actions of participants, which negates their initial heavy involvement in the screening and choosing of participants and the subsequent development of challenges or events that juxtaposition certain types of people in certain situations to garner specific results.

Reality television is really not real. It is a crafted television genre that is continuing the tradition of typecasting African Americans and framing them in accordance with historic and new stereotypes.