

Reality ▶CHECK



**A TV SHOW ABOUT
THE REALITY BEHIND REALITY TV.**



© ATOM 2014

A STUDY GUIDE BY ANNE CHESHER



<http://www.metromagazine.com.au>

ISBN: 978-1-74295-512-4

<http://www.theeducationshop.com.au>

Reality ▶CHECK

INTRODUCTION

Reality CHECK delves into our fascination with Reality TV and analyses how this relatively new genre has become an integral part of our daily lives. Looking at national and international Reality TV programs and trends, Reality CHECK exposes the tips and tricks that make this form of entertainment the most watched television around the globe.

Reality CHECK is a documentary series of eight 30-minute episodes produced by Cordell Jigsaw Zapruder (CJZ), broadcast by ABC TV and hosted by Tom Ballard. Each week, a panel of reality TV insiders including television producers, judges and contestants join Tom to dissect, discuss and explain the successes and failures of the Reality TV format. This sometimes hilarious, sometimes tragic and sometimes very moving exposé, makes sense of our weird and wonderful Reality TV obsession.

Host Tom Ballard explains.

'Reality CHECK dissects Reality TV with different panellists who work in Reality TV including producers, former judges and former contestants act as experts for the night. The show includes a review of the "big moments" (a finale, a blown fuse or a Susan Boyle), a real or fake segment when the plethora of ridiculous overseas shows allows experts to be forced to choose the real thing from three silly scenarios, and a dissection of tricks of the trade showing viewers how the genre works'.



CURRICULUM

Reality CHECK has Australian Curriculum application as a learning resource in English, The Arts (Arts Media and Drama) and Media Studies. The program's subject matter and pitch is appropriate for Secondary School Years 9-10 and Senior Secondary Years 11-12.

As a classroom resource or as a reference for individual learning assignments Reality CHECK offers a variety of contemporary topics affecting our society that deal with ethics, morality, values and culture.



SERIES SYNOPSIS

Reality TV is TV right now. Everything else is just making up the numbers. And yet for all its cultural force, we barely discuss it. That's now changed. Hosted by comedian Tom Ballard, Reality CHECK is a weekly half-hour of sharp, cracking panel discussion in which no-one gets voted off at the end, no-one plays the pantomime villain and there's nothing to be gained by crying for the camera.

Drawing on the wisdom and wit of both the professionals who make these shows and the people who appear on them, Reality CHECK dissects the week in Reality TV, both home and abroad, share war stories, and give us the lowdown on what really goes into making Reality TV. After a decade-plus of worldwide Reality shows there is a mountain of fun to mine and a million ideas and issues to discuss: just how important is a back story? What is 'Frankenbite' editing? When does a 'journey' begin? How do you cast a bachelor? And what happens when things go horribly wrong?

Australians might think we invented *MasterChef*, but we're only one of 41 global copies. There are 56 different versions of *Got Talent* out there, 49 international *Big Brother* houses and 48 versions of *Survivor*. And with 42 countries pumping out *X-Factor*... that's a lot of singers murdering 'I Will Always Love You'.

Why is Reality TV the most-watched and most popular form of entertainment on the planet, how has it changed the television landscape, and what can we learn about ourselves from these shows? This is Reality CHECK.

HOST

Tom Ballard

Most recognisable as an award-winning stand-up comedian and former host of *triple j's Breakfast with Tom and Alex*, Tom Ballard began his comedic career while still at high school performing in the *Melbourne International Comedy Festival's Class Clowns*. He was a national finalist in *RAW Comedy 2006* and performed in the 2008 *MICF's Comedy Zone*, a showcase of up-and-coming comedic talent. Since then he has performed at the invite-only *Montreal Just For Laughs Comedy Festival*, at the *Edinburgh Festival Fringe* and at comedy festivals, fringe festivals, theatres and comedy clubs all over Australia. *triple j* offered Tom some airtime in 2008, and in 2009 he took over the *triple j Weekend Breakfast* shift with his friend Alex Dyson. 2009 also saw him perform his debut solo stand-up show *Tom Ballard Is What He Is*. His show was nominated for a *Golden Gibbo Award* and he became the youngest person ever to win the prestigious *Melbourne Airport Best Newcomer Award* at the *Melbourne International Comedy Festival*.

In 2010, Tom and Alex took over the weekday *triple j Breakfast Show*, however after four years of *Breakfast with Tom and Alex* (and winning an ARIA), Tom decided to hand in his headphones to focus on his first love, stand up. Tom has also graced our television screens as a guest on *The Project*; ABC TV's *Spicks and Specks*, *Adam Hills In Gordon Street Tonight*, *Tractor Monkeys*, *The Drum*, the 2011 broadcast of *RAW Comedy Final* and *Comedy Up Late*; *This Week Live*, *Can of Worms*, *Good News Week*, and *The Circle*. Throughout 2011 and 2012, Tom was *The Project's* fortnightly 'Resident Expert'.

In addition, he has released a DVD of his *Is What He Is* show and a half-hour special from ABC2's *The Warehouse Comedy Festival*, and has written for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *JMAG*, *Good Weekend* and the *Warrnambool Standard*.



REALITY TV FEATURES

Reality TV shows use a combination of the following characteristics.

- Unscripted
- Narration
- Observation
- Surveillance
- Voyeurism
- Real-life participants
- Audience contribution
- Cross-platform
- Scripted Reality (Jersey Shore / The Shire)

WHAT IS REALITY TV?

The Oxford Dictionary defines Reality TV as a style of TV in which ordinary people are continuously filmed, designed to be entertaining rather than informative. The format relies on the spontaneous actions and reactions of its participants to maintain audience interest. The success of Reality TV is largely attributed audience fascination with 'expecting the unexpected'. Unscripted, yet guided by the show's producers, Reality TV evokes empathy from audiences who recognise the real-life situation and feel for participants or contestants.

Many Reality TV shows include a voice-over narration to guide the audience through the things that happen in the show. Like a commentator, the narration is delivered in present tense to enhance the 'watching' or observational style. Reality TV encapsulates a sense of voyeurism – a human behavioural trait that dates back to early civilisations – for example when ancient Greeks and Romans applauded ordinary people trapped in arenas with wild animals. Today, digital innovation provides the technology for surveillance cameras to capture participant reactions in 'real-life' situations. True to their genre, Reality TV shows remain unscripted and focused on everyday people.

REALITY TV HISTORY

Reality TV is genre of television production that emerged over the last decades beginning with the televising of *Candid Camera* in 1948. Using hidden cameras, unsuspecting 'ordinary' people were recorded in set up embarrassing situations. Each episode contained several situations that were compiled into a half hour comedy show compared by a host. Since then the blending factual entertainment with real-life people has proven to be a crowd-pleaser format.





During the past decades scores of Reality TV shows have been produced. In the early 1980s *That's Incredible*, *Real People* and *Ripley's Believe It Or Not* attracted high ratings and confirmed the popularity of Reality TV. The first situational Reality TV show *Airport* (UK), was produced in 1996 and continues to be broadcast today. Set in an airport environment the show takes audiences into the intriguing lives of others embarking on travel. The 1990s also saw the emergence of 'inside' Reality TV programs set in hospitals, emergency services, police stations and prisons.

Early versions of Reality TV introduced viewers to the thoughts and behaviour of every day people faced with

confronting situations. More recent Reality TV formats have evolved into shows where the participants were confined to an artificial situation or place. *Big Brother* is widely recognised as the first to contrive a situation where contestants are confined to a set or artificial location with a group of strangers. Subsequent popular productions such as *Survivor* and *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here* use a different location but the same format.

Reality TV shows continue to evolve new formats. These days, Reality TV is produced in a variety of subgenre formats. Examples of formats and productions are shown in the table below.

REALITY TV FORMAT	EXAMPLE	PRODUCTION (date & origin)
Observational Docusoap	<i>Big Brother</i>	Netherlands 1999
Formulated Docusoap	<i>Brynne: My Bedazzled Life</i>	Australia 2012
Historical immersion	<i>Turn Back Time –The Family</i>	UK 2005
Lifestyle change	<i>The Biggest Loser</i>	USA 2004
Play-off	<i>Masterchef</i>	UK 2005
Makeover	<i>The Block</i>	Australia 2003
Talent search	<i>X Factor</i>	Australia 2010



REALITY TV Subgenre Definitions

Observational Docusoaps

Reality TV Observational Docusoaps take viewers inside stressful agencies which otherwise might not be accessible such as 'behind the scenes' of medical emergency centres or law enforcement departments. Cameras observe and reveal the action as it normally unfolds. Hence, the show 'feels' like a televised 'soap' production.

Formulated Docusoaps

Reality TV Formulated Docusoaps record the action in the same way as Observational Docusoaps. However, the show records the participants experiencing and reacting to a constructed setting such as an historical context or within the confines of a house.

Lifestyle Reality Shows

In Lifestyle Reality TV Shows experts assist real-life people to transform their homes, lives, physical appearance – for the better. The audience watches as the transformation is put into action. The 'hook' in these shows is the ending where the 'reveal' occurs.

Reality Elimination Shows

The threat of eviction is the driving narrative of Reality TV Elimination Shows. Competition between participants is central to this subgenre. Participants are put into a stressful or demanding situation that will ultimately produce one 'winner'.

Reality Talent Shows

Reality TV Talent Shows are centred on ordinary people competing in challenging situations. Fearing elimination the contestants strive to win. Typically audiences empathise with an individual contestant in the hope that they win. Audience participation through telephone and SMS voting is common in this subgenre.



TRICKS OF THE TRADE

In this segment of Reality CHECK host Tom Ballard explains an aspect of reality television, and ask our panel insiders to explain how it's done.



Episode 1

The verdict moment: Increasingly the final episode or episodes is kind of the series encapsulated. Shows now have big viewing at the beginning, then traditionally there's a little lull. When you come back to the final, there's a lot of material that many of the audience have not seen. You know the audience is captive and will not leave that set until the tinsel rains. Live finales attract advertising and high ratings.



Episode 2

Planning for the big moment: Every producer wants to capture that unique moment that overloads twitter, crashes YouTube and has everyone talking about it the next day.



Episode 3

Recruiting participants: For every show to you do enormous research to understand the person's motivation and aspirations. Every person has his or her own headlines. When recruiting participants ask people what they're passionate about.



Episode 4

Ethnic diversity: Reality shows showcase multiculturalism. Cooking shows like *MasterChef* have put people like Poh Ling Yeow, Amina Al Shefai, Tom Moseby, and our Adam Leow on Australian screens.



Episode 5

Challenges: Challenges have a narrative purpose. Games within a show force contestants to play, win rewards, impress judges or just fill air time.



Episode 6

Judging: Every reality show is an absolute licence to judge. How do you make good TV when your main job is basically saying yes or no? Finding new and interesting ways to affirm or eliminate someone can be challenging.



Episode 7

Product placement: If a brand is involved, most people that watch Reality TV get it. They know that stuff happens on *The Block* and *MasterChef* is commercial. But if you change the story, you'll alienate the crowd.



Episode 8

Scandals: Those moments when someone bends the rules and spices things up. Sometimes they can give you a huge rating spike. Other times they can get you cancelled.



PANEL

Marion Farrelly

Director at The Media Tribe

Since July 2013 Marion has been the Director of Australian company Media Tribe. From May 2011 to April 2013 Marion worked at Fremantle Australia, where she shared a title of Director of Television Content with Cathie Scott, overseeing shows like *Australia's Got Talent*, *The X Factor*, *The Farmer Wants A Wife*, *Celebrity Apprentice* and *Project Runway*. From 2009 – 2011 Marion worked in the UK. She was the Entertainment Executive of Format Entertainment at Princess Television, Shine's UK production company. She also worked extensively with the BBC in the UK and was Executive Producer of *It Takes Two* and *Step Up To The Plate*. Before heading to the UK she had previously worked with Southern Star Endemol on seasons 4, 5 and 6 of Australia's *Big Brother* plus other projects.

Andrew Shaw

General Manager. Commissioning, Production & Acquisitions, TVNZ

Andrew Shaw began his television career in the late 70s, as a children's television host. After making his debut on *TV2 presents Andy*, Shaw was soon working six days a week, hosting each afternoon's programming under the title *Hey Hey It's Andy*. In 1996 Shaw became Head of Programming for both TVNZ channels. In 2001 he left TVNZ to become Chief Operating Officer at production company South Pacific Pictures. Keen to broaden SPP's range of programming, Shaw helped ink a deal with multi-national FremantleMedia, enabling SPP to produce a local version of the hit show *American Idol*. Shaw was Executive Producer of the show. In 2007 Shaw came back on board with Television New Zealand, where he works as General Manager of Commissioning, Production and Acquisitions. He has commissioned shows like *Changing Rooms*, *Treasure Island*, *NZ Got Talent* and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

Ian Dickson

TV Host, Judge and Contestant

Dicko started his career in the record industry and spent 20 years working for iconic labels like Creation Records, Sony, A&M and BMG. He was cast as the 'bastard judge' on *Australian Idol* on Network Ten in 2003. After leaving Ten he set up a talent management and television development firm with his business partner, David Wilson - Watercooler Talent & Media – which represents some of Australia's most popular personalities from TV, radio and stage. Dicko's television career continued to flourish with Channel 7 as he went on to host *Celebrity Survivor Vanuatu* and *My Restaurant Rules*. During this time he was also a contestant on *Dancing With The Stars*. In 2007 Dicko returned to *Idol* as a judge. He says his role as the harsh but honest judge which endeared him to many was the one he was most comfortable with. In 2012 he was a contestant on *The Celebrity Apprentice*, which he won.

Julie Goodwin

Winner, *Masterchef Series 1*, Placed 5th in *Masterchef All-Stars*

With a background in youth work, 3 young boys and an IT consulting company she ran with her husband, in 2008 Julie took a chance and applied for the first series of *MasterChef Australia*. On 19th July 2009 Julie, watched by over 4 million Australians, took out the title as the first ever *MasterChef*. In a whirlwind of activity since her win, Julie's first book *Our family table* published by Random House in April of 2010, went immediately to No 1 where it stayed for over 10 weeks. Having sold around 200,000 copies it is one of Australia's largest selling cook books ever, and saw Julie named as Australia's biggest selling author across all categories in 2010. Julie's second cookbook was published on October 1st 2011. In 2012 Julie appeared on *Masterchef All-Stars* and placed 5th. Julie has also become a regular columnist for the *Australian's Women's Weekly*, and resi-



dent cook on Channel Nine's *Today Show*. She also fronted her own cooking show *Home Cooked!* - also on Nine.

Julie also runs *Julie's Place* from Gosford, NSW. Julie's Place hosts cooking lessons with Julie and other chefs, as well as holding and catering private events.

Amity Dry Contestant, *The Block* 2003 (Placed 4th) winner of *All Stars* 2013

Prior to appearing on the first series of *The Block*, Amity was an aspiring singer/ songwriter. While filming the first series of *The Block* Amity secured a record deal, and during the show released her first album, *The Lighthouse*. *The Lighthouse* debuted at #8 on the ARIA chart, going gold and peaking at #6. In 2005 her second album, *True To Me*, was released, with the single *Rollercoaster* achieving national airplay. After the birth of their first child Amity and husband Phil returned to their hometown of Adelaide. Shortly after Amity decided to put her experiences of new motherhood into music, writing and starring in the show *Mother, Wife & the Complicated Life*. The show had a sell out season at the '09 Adelaide Fringe Festival and was unanimously applauded by critics. Following *The Block All Stars* Amity has taken the musical on a 30 show tour, with seasons in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. She is currently working on a new musical, scheduled to debut in 2016.

Amity also writes a regular column for *Essential Baby*.

Ryan "Fitzy" Fitzgerald Host of *The Recruit* / Placed 4th in *Big Brother* S4

Former AFL Sydney Swan star Ryan 'Fitzy' Fitzgerald began his media career as a contestant on Series 4 of *Big Brother* Australia 2004, where he placed 4th. In 2005 Fitzy co-hosted Friday night *Big Brother* Australia show *Friday Night Live* with fellow 2004 contestant Bree Amer. In 2006

he and Bree hosted *Big Brother* spin off, *Night Games*, a weekly challenge based game show. Fitzy has regularly appeared on Network Ten's *Before The Game* and *The Project*. He is currently host of Fox 8 series *The Recruit*. Fitzy is also a popular radio personality and has been heard on-air ever since he was voted out of the *Big Brother* house. He is one half of the successful radio duo *Fitzy and Wippa*, who are currently on air weekdays from 6-9am on Nova 96.9. Fitzy remains one of the most popular media personalities to emerge from *Big Brother*.

Sheridan Wright Biggest Loser Series 3 (Eliminated week 4)

Sheridan appeared on Series 3 of the *Biggest Loser Australia*. She was eliminated in week 4, but returned for comeback week later in the series. However she was not chosen to continue in the competition. Although she was only in 5 episodes of the show she was in the *Biggest Loser* house for a total of 10 weeks. When she weighed in at *The Biggest Loser* finale Sheridan had lost nearly half her body weight, dropping from 136kg at her heaviest to 75kg. These days she manages her freelance writing work alongside a full time gig with *Hardie Grant Media*, working for organizations like *James Halliday's Wine Companion*. She also finds the time to moonlight as a Melbourne Hostess for *Secret Foodies*.

Julian Cress Co-Creator and Executive Producer, *The Block*

Julian Cress was a Senior Producer on *60 Minutes* for more than a decade. He has since developed key ideas for television networks in Australia (Channel Nine) and overseas (Granada) including *Celebrity Overhaul* & *The Block*. Julian has executive produced shows like *Celebrity Circus*, *The Chopping Block* and *Homemade*. Julian currently runs Cavalier Television with David Barbour, who he has worked closely with since they created *The Block* together.



Rob Mills

Placed 5th Season 1 of Australian Idol / Host of Young Talent Time

Rob first came to the nation's attention in 2003 as a finalist in the first series of *Australian Idol*. Following this success and a national *Idol Tour*, he was signed to BMG. His first single *Ms Vanity* debuted at #6 on the Australian charts, reaching Gold status. Since then Rob has been regularly seen on Australian screens and stages. Rob has starred in stage musicals *Hair*, *Wicked* and *Legally Blond*. He also regularly appears on television, most recently as host of Network Ten's *Young Talent Time* and a contestant on Channel Nine's *Celebrity Apprentice*, where he raised \$40,000 for *The Reach Foundation*. Rob is continuing his passion for musical theatre, currently playing Danny in the stage musical *Grease*.

Peter Abbott

Executive Producer, Co- Founder of Freehand

Peter Abbott is a founding partner and executive producer at Freehand Productions.

Prior to founding Freehand Peter worked as an EP at Beyond, Southern Star and the Seven Network. He has developed a number of highly successful formats and has delivered literally thousands of hours of programming across a range of genres.

Freehand is an Australian production company, founded in 2004 by John Gregory, Peter Abbott and Chris O'Mara. Since its inception, Freehand has delivered content including light and factual entertainment, observational documentary, specials and children's television. Key shows include *Top Gear Australia*, *Dancing With The Stars*, *Queer Eye For The Straight Guy*, *My Restaurant Rules* and *Missing Person's Unit*.

Poh Ling Yeow

Runner Up, Masterchef S1 (2009), TV Host

Poh Ling Yeow's food career began in the first season of *MasterChef Australia*, 2009.

After coming runner up in the finale Poh was offered her own cooking show *Poh's Kitchen*, on ABC1. The first series went to air in 2010. Also that year she published a cookbook, "*Poh's Kitchen - My Cooking Adventures*", which stayed in the top 10 Australian bestsellers list for six weeks. In 2011 she presented the second series of '*Poh's Kitchen on the road*', as she travelled around Australia meeting and cooking with a wide range of food producers and chefs. In 2012 Poh wrote her second cookbook and presented Season 3 of '*Poh's Kitchen*'. Poh was a fulltime artist before she became a cook, she has over 20 exhibitions under her belt, 10 of which have been solos.

Adam Liaw

Winner, Masterchef (Series 2)

Adam was a young prodigy, completing year 11 at just 14 years old, enrolling in university at 16 and becoming a lawyer at 21. Adam is a cook, TV presenter and writer based in Sydney, Australia. The winner of *MasterChef Australia's* hugely popular second season, Adam's triumph on the show still remains the #1 most watched non-sporting event in Australian television history. Adam currently hosts the primetime food and travel program *Destination Flavour* on Australia's SBS network, and he is the author of the two cookbooks – *Asian After Work* and *Two Asian Kitchens*. He writes a regular column for *The Wall Street Journal's* *Scene Asia* and contributes regularly to Australian newspapers and magazines. Adam is a qualified lawyer and is currently UNICEF Australia's National Ambassador for Nutrition. Prior to *Masterchef* Adam was a practicing lawyer.





STUDENT TASKS

Task 1

Candid Camera is regarded as the first ever Reality TV show. Create a table of at ten reality tv shows (minimum of one show per decade) showing the date and location of the production.

Task 2

Reality TV shows should not be confused with documentaries. Explain how they are different.

Task 3

In Episode 1 Tom tells us ‘there are 46 international versions of *MasterChef*, 48 *Survivor*’s and 50 *Big Brother* houses. Why is this possible for some Reality TV shows to be re-produced in different countries around the world and not others? Use examples in your answer.

Task 4

Marion Farrelly describes the type of personalities she looks for when selecting Reality TV participants. ‘You want

people who are sincere. You want funny people, some loud people and you want to have some argumentative people’. Why does Marion want people with these characteristics in her Reality TV shows?

Task 5

Susan Boyle was responsible for one of the biggest moments in reality television history with her 2009 audition on *Britain’s Got Talent*. Dicko describes the event as a ‘modern day Cinderella story – they dusted off a story all of us had from childhood and transposed it into the most beautifully crafted piece of reality TV’.

Describe how Susan Boyle became an overnight international sensation.





Task 6

In Episode 4 Adam Liaw says *'Big Brother was one of the first reality shows that showed people being people could be interesting television. That's why millions of people around the world watch it. Big Brother is the truest reality show, because it's all personality'*.

Explain the *Big Brother* show format.

Task 7

In Episode 4 Tom and the panel talk about the some people having the 'X Factor'. What do they mean by the term 'X factor'? Write a list of five Reality TV participants who have the 'X factor'.

Task 8

Journalist Damien Murphy defines an element inherent in Reality TV productions. *'A frankenbite edit allows editors to manufacture "story" by extracting blunt grabs from long, nuanced confessions or arguments. It may be reality TV's most powerful weapon in manipulating viewers' perceptions of contestants'*.

In your own words, explain how *frankenbite edits* can influence how an audience feels about a character.

Task 9

In Episode 2 Tom states that *'every producer wants to capture that unique moment that overloads twitter, crashes YouTube and has everyone talking about it the next day - in this case five years later'*.

Describe how social media has opened up the opportunity for audience participation.

Task 10

Suggest a new concept for a new and original Reality TV format. Explain your idea in a paragraph of 100-150 words.





REFERENCES

Reality CHECK on ABC

<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/programs/reality-check/>

Reality CHECK Sydney Morning Herald article 14/08/2014

Journalist Damien Murphy

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/tv-and-radio/tom-ballard-says-abcs-reality-check-is-for-people-who-hate-reality-tv-or-love-it-20140811-101xn1.html>

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA)

<http://www.acara.edu.au/curriculum/curriculum.html>



This study guide was produced by **ATOM**. (© ATOM 2014)
ISBN: 978-1-74295-512-4 editor@atom.org.au

For information on **SCREEN EDUCATION** magazine,
or to download other study guides for assessment,
visit <http://www.screeneducation.com.au>.

Join ATOM's email broadcast list for invitations to
free screenings, conferences, seminars, etc.

Sign up now at http://www.metromagazine.com.au/email_list/.

For hundreds of articles on Film as Text,
Screen Literacy, Multiliteracy and Media Studies,
visit <http://www.theeducationshop.com.au>.