

KNOW YOUR NEIGHBOUR:
Reality Television and Performances of the Self

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Bachelor of Arts Honours, Halifax, 2015

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Abstract

Know Your Neighbour is a proposal for a half hour reality television show in which residents of an apartment building get to know their neighbours in a light-hearted way that breaks down barriers and reveals compelling stories. The residents uncover each of their neighbour's backstories through challenges: tricky trivia questions and a special snooping test. If they earn enough points as a group they win a break on their rent. Even if the neighbours fall short of their goal, the show helps create the beginnings of a community inside their previously disconnected building. The show's bible demonstrates the structure of the new format.

Research supports the idea that people are motivated to appear on reality television in order for a chance to define or try-out their identities within a media-obsessed culture. This is accomplished by encouraging people to share their personal stories and by assigning them a type or role that they feel comfortable performing. My format explores and applies this idea to apartment buildings in order to help people define the roles they can play within their communities.

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Introduction

Reality television genres have evolved to meet the tastes and interests of viewers. New reality formats are developed all the time with 750 reality television (RTV) shows airing in 2016, out of which 350 were new (VanDerWerff). These shows include infotainment, docusoap, and lifestyle-based formats, including subgenres that focus on topics such as dating, fitness, and fashion. Game or competition-based reality television formats continue to attract many viewers because of the excitement these prizes generate (Francis). However in some formats participants do not receive significant monetary rewards or public exposure in exchange for their appearances on the show. For example, *Hello/Goodbye*, a CBC show based on a Dutch format, focuses on personal stories rather than a prize. On the show, a host wanders around Toronto Pearson International Airport asking people who they are waiting for or where they are going. Participants tell him what brought them to the airport, answering life-affirming questions about their personal journeys posed by the host, Dale Curd, a psychotherapist by training. After the travelers or their friends and family tell their tale they are filmed leaving on their flight or greeting the person they were waiting for. There is no voting by a panel of judges or audience, and no prize. There is also very little chance for the participants to make money from their appearance since they are usually only on the show for a few minutes.

Without the drama of competition for a prize, *Hello/Goodbye* and shows with similarly simple formats such as *Say Yes to the Dress* derive their entertainment value primarily through the characters that emerge and the personal stories they tell. These confessions or tales are posited as authentic. Without the chance for money or fame,

something else must be motivating these participants to appear on these shows and sign the releases for the producers.

In this essay I argue the participants' motivator is to better understand one's personal identity and the 'role' they feel they should play within society. In an age where one's personal identity is increasingly defined by representations of the self through media, RTV has emerged as a space within which participants can validate or test personal performances. This in turn can help participants to understand the role they can or should play within their communities. To explore this question, I have created a reality television format, *Know Your Neighbour*. I will discuss the process of its development in light of my research, including my personal experiences pitching the format and through interviews I conducted with media professionals working in the industry.

Background

We can better understand how RTV affects people's self-conception when the quest for fame and/or money is temporarily removed from the equation. It is difficult to find documented information about how RTV participants are paid. Briean Kenward, a producer on *The Real Housewives of Toronto*, stated that payment practices in RTV are often confidential (Kenward). According to one executive producer interviewed for the paper who wished to be unnamed, one hidden camera show filmed in Toronto paid participants \$2,500 plus the equivalent of three days temp work. However, it is important to note that participants are not paid as performers. June Deery notes in her book, *Reality TV*, that "In a typical release form, participants must attest that: "My participation does not

constitute a performance and will not entitle me to wages, salary or other compensation” (32).

I interviewed several more producers of RTV and online reality-based content to find out, including Maria Pimentel (*Handyman Challenge*, *Popstars*), Christopher Chan (*WatchCut Video*), Gerry McKean (*Kitchen Nightmares*, *Nanny 911*), and Rachel Horvath (*Wipeout Canada*). All four stated that in the majority of cases participants were compensated for their travel expenses and usually received an honorarium for their time. McKean was blunt, saying: “productions try to get away with not paying... anything except their expenses.” He noted, “it’s not supposed to be a job for them, it’s supposed to be them taking part in an event that will live with them for the rest of their lives” (McKean). Pimentel mentioned that additional forms of payment are generally avoided in order to help the show stay “as real as possible” (Pimentel). She said, “the moment you start paying your amateurs they forget how to” be themselves, and will interrupt a shoot to ask if they should do another take or say something differently. Producers want participants to be motivated by their desire to appear on television, instead of being distracted by a paycheck. In other words, producers rely on the labour of ‘ordinary people’ that want to appear on camera to fuel their shows.

The show *First Dates* is upfront about its compensation practices, offering participants money for their travel expenses and £25 towards their meal, a modest amount when the total time commitment required of participants is considered (Hawkes). Former participants note that the process requires an application, phone interview, a confessional test shoot, an official confessional shoot, and finally the filmed date with another participant they have been matched with based on their professed dating preferences

(Hawkes). While the chance to find lasting love is a possibility within the show, the tens of thousands of people that apply to casting calls demonstrate that it is the chance to be on camera that makes a recorded blind date, an otherwise unappealing or anxiety-inducing situation, so desirable. What motivates people to appear on RTV shows must now be examined.

Video cameras have exerted effects on human behaviour since their invention. Cameras are capable of playing back past events to countless viewers. This raises the stakes for the subject that appears before a camera. People know that by offering up their image for capture they are simultaneously offering it up for judgment. Kenward notes that even confident people who want to be on television sometimes freeze up in front of a camera. She says, “We’ve had the experience where we’ve talked to people on the phone, they’ve been really great, we talk to them on Skype they’ve been awesome, but then you put the camera on them and they shut down” (Kenward). Some subjects understandably fall apart under the pressure that the presence of a camera imparts.

According to Paul Hillier, a communications scholar, the use of overt recording equipment in precursors to RTV such as in *An American Family* was seen “as a tool, a necessary technique towards documenting and studying of human behavior and roles” (642). The observation effect refers to the idea that the act of observing can alter the studied phenomena or behavior (Deery 33). Therefore people’s awareness of cameras can deeply alter their behaviours (Deery 33). In line with this effect, some participants internalize expectations to perform, since cameras are often seen as tools that capture remarkable or important sights, and some people play up their personalities or enliven their tales for this reason. Christopher Chan, a cultural anthropologist working for *WatchCut*, a

YouTube channel with nearly half a billion views, noted that most people get nervous in front of the studio cameras (Chan). Psychologist Anna Rowley, explained it this way: “From an early age we're taught to seek out our imperfections... [therefore] the larger the gap between who we think we are and who we think we should be, the more likely it is that we'll feel badly in front of a camera” (Rowley, Hurley). Nervousness is common since people are wary that their image and action can be replayed to possibly embarrassing effect. If the subject is not shy Chan notes that they often “ham it up for the cameras” out of nervousness, as an attempt to over-compensate (Chan).

If cameras exhibit such an effect, why is it that so many people want to be on television? Producer of *The Real World*, Mary-Ellis Bunim noted that at first, in the early nineties, very few people even considered appearing on the show (Ouellette 48). She said: “People thought we were nuts” (Andrejevic 115). However, soon her partner “Murray was fond of saying that more people were applying for *The Real World* than for Harvard” (Andrejevic 115). Horvath notes that *Wipe-Out Canada* received an incredible 40,000 submissions to be on the show, a huge number especially when the country’s relatively small population is taken into account. Sabine Trepte, a professor of media psychology, notes that now people who typically would have been relegated to the sole role of viewers are more and more “tak[ing] the opportunity to present themselves in front of cameras and microphones” (166). The question is why.

To understand why people are willing to perform for cameras, and by extension the audience, we must examine the performative nature of identity as such. Mark Andrejevic writes “the recognition that all of our social interactions are performances is the hallmark of the realist” (Andrejevic 46). This is a destabilizing claim that Judith Butler addressees

through the lens of sex in her groundbreaking book, *Bodies That Matter* (1993). Butler writes that no one organically embodies an identity category such as “woman” without engaging in a performance that artificially indicates their “womanly-ness” (x). Having long hair, wearing makeup, having pink accessories: these are all traits many people come to expect from women but which actually are superficial traits that some women choose to embody in order to enforce their own sense of self. Indeed, if “sex is constructed through a ritualized repetition of norms,” Butler writes that the same is true of all identity categories such as race and class (x).

Butler is careful to note that the constructed nature of our identities does not take away from their importance or their authenticity. She writes, without these constructions “we would not be able to think, to live, to make sense at all... without them there would be no ‘I,’ no ‘we’” (Butler xi). “Certain constructions appear constitutive,” demonstrating that people “only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain... regulatory schemas” that define their bodies and personalities (xi). In other words, constructions make it possible for some people to easily find their place or role in the world, at the expense of those subjects who do not fit neatly into the accepted categories as defined by the ruling power (xi). However, even if a body were to perfectly comply with social pressures and expectations, no one is ever fully realized as such because the subject must constantly reiterate the norms that defined their identity in order for it to be maintained. In other words, the performance must constantly be kept up through repeated actions, such as a woman putting makeup on every morning, if anyone is to be convinced of the supposed legitimacy of the performance (Butler 2). This means that “bodies never

quite comply with the norms by which their materialization is impelled” (Butler 2). This means that the subject’s quest for self-actualization and self-understanding is never-ending.

Today, as always, people seek out new sources of validation that will legitimize their personal performances in order to define their place within their community. This desire was addressed on television with the rise of the talk show format in the 1980s that highlighted “intimacy, humiliation, confession, and focus on ordinary people’s emotional display” (Deery 14). This led to “the beginning of personal narratives like *A Wedding Story* and *A Baby Story* in the 1990s (Deery 14-5). Formats centering on ordinary people and their stories take up large portions of television schedules. This impact can also be seen outside of traditional television broadcasting models, with the explosion of the popularity of reaction videos and mini-RTV-style tests featured on video sharing websites like YouTube. These videos also feature unpaid people that line up for the chance to negotiate or bear witness to their identities on camera. In fact, YouTube channels such as *WatchCut* reach huge audiences while featuring subjects often represented as ‘stock types’ of people with which viewers can easily relate. The channel’s popular videos include the series “Truth or Drink,” where people in relationships, ex’s, family members, or other interesting pairs engage in a spirited game of truth or dare. In one episode, sets of identical twins are asked to answer questions such as “Who is the better looking one?” to comedic effect (“Twins Play Truth or Drink”). Another popular series made by *WatchCut* features parents explaining taboo topics to their children such as sex and suicide, and recording their kids’ reactions. The entertainment value from these videos emerges from the apparent authenticity of the responses from the channel’s diverse subjects.

These subjects are cast from pools of volunteers it finds within its filming location of Seattle (Chan). However, as Chan noted, Seattle is not like a major media center filled with willing actors such as Los Angeles. Nevertheless, volunteers keep endlessly contacting the channel. Arguably, appearing on this channel and other reality-based shows legitimizes or helps define a person's sense of self.

Finding One's Role

Reality television has the power to enforce the participant's sense of identity. The genre is often built on people 'correctly' acting out certain roles or personality types within the shows. In fact, books, workshops and even a few schools have emerged in recent years that promise to help people become RTV stars (Hillier 643). These services encourage participants "to find and refine an 'identity,' to play a particular role suited for one of the shows in the genre" (Hillier 643). Even without training, "it is clear participants bring their learned knowledge of character types and roles into their 'performance'" (643). As the philosopher Slavoj Žižek notes, on RTV, "what we see there are fictional characters, even if they play themselves for real" (quoted in Hillier 644).

Usually, character types portrayed seen on RTV are drawn from traditional dramatic narratives. Those that become most popular reveal a lot about the social culture from which they emerge (Hillier 644). The presence of the camera extracts these very character types or roles (Hillier 642), roles that embody "the norms by which the 'one' becomes viable... within the domain of cultural intelligibility" (Butler 3). These "tokenized persona" can include characters such as "the entertainer, the leader, the flirt, the underdog, the professor, the zealot, the mom, the athlete, the wild and crazy guy/girl,

the quiet one, everybody's friend, the feral child, the introvert, the redneck, the slacker and the snake” (Hearn 133). These are all actual types television producer Mark Burnett, creator of *Survivor*, looks for during castings because they reflect types that people embody and respond to in daily life (Hearn 137). Hillier writes, “the move from studying general human traits to specific ‘types’ of roles or people” occurred because society started to interrogate and challenge the nature of our roles, “as feminist critiques and the Stonewall riots, as major examples, made the issue of social roles a real public concern” (Hillier 642). It therefore “makes sense that practices of studying human behavior moved from shared human traits to specific kinds of roles and kinds of people” (Hillier 642), a shift adopted by and reflected in RTV.

Chris Weedon takes up the idea of performative ‘types’ when he writes, “one of the key ideological roles of identity is to curtail the plural possibilities of subjectivity inherent in the wider discursive field and to give individuals a singular sense of who they are and where they belong” (Weedon 19). To do this, subjects are encouraged to identify with certain meanings, values and performances in order to better understand what role they are meant to embody in their everyday performance (Weedon 19). “A wide range of social practices, for example, education, the media, sport and state rituals” encourage or pressure people to identify with a specific type or role (Weedon 19). Importantly, “like the structure of meaning in language, identity is relational. It is defined in a relation of difference to what it is not” (Weedon 19). This means that identities are defined not only by positive qualities such as what one is, but also by what one is not. This necessitates the exclusion of some people who do not conform to these types, which posits these less-defined people as somehow less ‘real’ or as ‘abject’ types.

Alison Hearn takes up this thinking in her writing about the “spectacularization of the self” (133). Hearn writes that reality television content is built on the emotional work of people who desire to form themselves into brands, exerting strategic images to form a marketable “public persona based on templates of the ‘self’ supplied by corporate media culture” (Hearn 131). These “pre-set, freeze-dried presentations of self [are] moulded by prior knowledge of the dictates of the reality television genre and deployed strategically to garner attention” (Hearn 134). Hearn notes that these “types of ‘modern individuals [are] generated inside the structural limits set by reality television show producers and editors” (Hearn 137). Some subjects who appear on prize-based RTV shows or programs wherein significant exposure is possible are finding that “promotional versions of the self constitute a distinct form of labour, have market value, and, as such, constitute the only ‘reality’ that matters,” encouraging an inauthentic performance because it is motivated by profit (Hearn 144). Even with shows such as *Hello/Goodbye* and *First Dates*, do not offer money or significant promotional exposure, subjects are still willing to embody character types subconsciously or consciously.

The source of this willingness to be ‘typed’ is scrutinized through a study conducted by Sabine Trepte that examines why some audiences want to appear on daily talk shows as speaking guests even without compensation (165). She situates daily talk shows as a form of television that allowed ordinary people “to present themselves as real (Trepte 166), a mantle taken up by RTV. Interestingly, ‘playing oneself’ on a talk or reality show “might be a means of self-realization and an opportunity to enhance self esteem, among other ways to do so” (Trepte 167). Participants can draft new identities on the show, or simply bear witness to themselves and their own traumas and triumphs, allowing

them to form a coherent story-of-the-self and how they came into being as uniquely constituted subjects (Trepte 170). This allows participants to “become more self-assured” (Trepte 171). She unpacks this effect through the psychological “theory of symbolic self-completion,” a desire that acts as the main motivator for people to appear on RTV shows that do not offer exposure or money (Trepte 171).

Importantly, “a crucial aspect of the theory of symbolic self-completion is that people want to achieve self-defining goals,” such as being a good mother or chef (Trepte 171). The issue is that these self-defining goals are usually broad and not easily achievable, meaning that experiencing a state of self-completion takes a great deal of time if it is to be achieved at all (Trepte 171). One way around this impediment to a strong sense of self is to “self-symbolize,” that is “when people experience a shortcoming in a self-definition to which they feel committed, they are expected to engage in self-symbolizing” practices (Trepte 172). Trepte defines symbols as “modules of self-definition” such as material objects or labels such as those used by RTV producers like ‘jock,’ ‘ditz,’ or ‘geek’ (Trepte 172). However, these symbols only have power if others notice them. For example, a person struggling to define their place in the world may try to self-define himself as ‘nerd’ based on a symbolic achievement that others recognize, such as winning several robotics competitions (Trepte 173). So how do these ‘types’ emerge when someone agrees to be on an RTV show?

First, a participant may self-symbolize by telling others they were on a show since “being on television has positive connotations” (Trepte 173). Each show carries a slightly different opportunity for participants to define themselves. In terms of talk shows, which make similar use of ‘ordinary people’ as RTV, Trepte also notes that audiences are able to

self-symbolize during their interviews, and “without any immediate feedback by the audience in front of the television screens, they can report their own success and describe relevant aspects of their self-concept” (Trepte 173). Her conclusion is that “entering a talk show offers various ways to self-symbolize and that people might choose to go there to regain completeness with regard to a relevant self-definition,” especially those without prizes and significant exposure (Trepte 174). “While doing so, they are being watched by millions of people and, thereby, [their performances] have a strong social reality” (Trepte 174) that have the power to bring virtual communities into being.

The importance of the sociality of these performances and their relationship to community must now be interrogated. Trepte writes that participation in television shows “might even be similar to other everyday social settings” since “the shows seem to provide a community that can be compared to other groups, such as peers or family” (Trepte 185). Viewers are invited into the fold of these communities when they watch or appear on their favorite RTV shows” (Trepte 185). Still, appearing on television seems like an inconvenient way to self-actualize if the same effects could be achieved by engaging with one’s local community in a meaningful way. However, traditional communities are in flux, meaning that finding one’s community could be difficult for say, an apartment dweller who lives a city with less significant face-to-face contact with friends or family than in their original hometown. For a person who craves community, RTV can occupy the gap created by the dissolution of traditional family and community arrangements, an effect brought about by forces such as urbanization and the rise of individualism, by creating a community of RTV viewers. This kind of “mediated sociality” encourages viewers to talk with others about the show, and “this interchange could be regarded as compensating for

the anonymity of contemporary society and as answering a nostalgic desire for community life” (Deery 57, 63).

This is all possible because of the inherently social nature of culture. As communications professor Terri Patkin notes, “Culture, as an intersubjectively produced and publically held phenomenon, relies on the media to create a false sense of community through vicarious experiences” (13). Sharing a culture is a way to form a community. Yet increasingly culture is mediated more and more by the media instead of being directly experienced in the real, or unmediated world. In response, people seek out “‘virtual’ communities” wherein they “construct a feeling of community... while continuing to enjoy the anonymity of urban society” (Patkin 13). Patkin is critical of this arrangement. She maintains that while these arrangements may appear meaningful, the roots of these communities “do not go as deep” (Patkin 13). If “identity is mediated first by community, then reconstructed via the media” (Patkin 14), it makes sense that people desire to appear on RTV in order to understand the place of their identity. Even if it is a simplified version that ignores personal nuance in favour of broad ‘types’ of people, being assigned a role is affirming for RTV participants. This is affirming in the same way that identifying with a broad social construction such as gender is ultimately constitutive of our ability to think of “I” as such (Butler xi).

This desire is in line with “audience studies indicate that... there is a growing recognition of the extent to which we all perform in real-life social interactions— a tendency that is only exacerbated by social media” (Deery 43). As Andrejevic notes, we live in a paradoxical age in which “a premium is placed upon the ability to portray oneself to a growing and largely unseen audience while retaining the authenticity of the non-

performance” (Andrejevic 46). For example, Kenward noted that increasingly people pitch themselves as potential stars of long-form RTV series by sending a link to their Instagram feed and nothing else, confident that their account represents them in full (Kenward). Social media content that enforces a person’s sense of self allows subjects to brand themselves according to the identity labels Butler says must constantly be performed. However what one sees on social media might not reflect reality, but instead how people want their lives to appear (Stafford). Nevertheless, social media does not represent the first time humans have attempted to self-actualize in a satisfying way at the expense of complete accuracy.

Storytelling, which I will define as the art of communicating a series of events in a way that privileges entertainment value over accuracy, is one of the oldest and most commonly used arts across all cultures. It is a form of communication that is easily expressed through television. John Ellis writes, “television is ‘a vast mechanism for processing the material of the witnessed world into more narrativised, explained forms’ (quoted in Hill, 61). That is, TV is good for telling stories—stylized half-truths that impart entertaining incidents or useful life lessons. Yet before the advent of mainstream television culture Walter Benjamin witnessed the beginning of the fall of traditional storytelling in the wake of the First World War. This is when communities were shattered in the wake of shell-shocked soldiers returning home unable to explain what their trauma to others through language. He believes that this ability to translate one’s own experiences into stories allows humans to process their own emotions in constructive ways that allow humans to connect (Benjamin 84). However, he finds storytelling ability, what he calls the “securest among our possessions,” to be lacking in the post-modern world (Benjamin 83).

For Benjamin, the inability to process one's traumas or triumphs into the form of stories harms the subject because they will be unable to turn their experiences into a productive moment of self-realization. This is in contrast to communicable experiences told with the conventions of storytelling. Conventions such as a three-act structure, slight exaggerations, or leaving out unnecessary details all help to provide useful information or lessons to the listener (Benjamin 86). Being able to relate a tale to others also offers a healthy way of processing the events for the speaker, helping them to better organize or understand their lives by making them intelligible or entertaining to others (Benjamin 86).

If "the gift for listening is lost," then "the community of listeners disappears" (Benjamin 91). One's ability to understand the place of their personal performance in society becomes impossible unless a new way of telling the story of the self emerges. In today's world, one new way is through RTV, where the opportunity for people to tell their personal stories and demonstrate their performances of the self to a community of viewers is made possible.

Know Your Neighbour

In line with this research, I have created a reality television show that aims to mitigate and capitalize upon the problem of dissolving communities within urban centers. As producer Kenward notes, people want to "get out there and tell [their] story" (Kenward). The goal of the show is to allow people to do just that, enriching the lives of the participants and viewers. I was inspired to create the show because I noticed a lack of community in my own building. Because I am originally from a town of less than 2,000 people, I am used to knowing everyone, sometimes to the point of madness. However, this

familiarity with the people from my town and my neighbours led to lovely social gatherings and generous helping hands during times of need. Since moving from the East coast to Toronto, I was struck by how little people in my building spoke to each other. Eye contact was avoided in the hallways, people neglected to hold the elevator for each other, and the few social events my building organized were abysmally attended. I also noticed the wide variety of people I lived so close to, and became curious about each of their lives. This is in line with multiple studies conducted around the world including a survey that stated that 30% of Canadians “feel disconnected from their neighbours” (Bethune) and that a third of Britons would be unable to identify their neighbours in a lineup (Bethune). This led me to the concept of *Know Your Neighbour*, a show that aims to break down barriers between residents of large apartment buildings in order to reveal their amazing life stories. In the process, communities will be enriched as neighbours open themselves up to hearing each other’s stories in the way that Benjamin admired. The following is a critical analysis of how reality television can make it both possible and difficult for people to better understand their roles within their own lives and communities. It is this research that has shaped and informed my show’s development since I began working on the concept.

Choosing Types Over Truth

Regardless of the medium a story is told through, all stories must be mediated. Mark Andrejevic writes at length about the “contrived character of representation” in his essay, “When Everyone Has Their Own Reality Show” (Andrejevic 46). However, arguably, all forms of representation are contrived to some degree. To represent something is to divest it from the original in order for it to be intelligible and compelling to others. In

this way, it seems difficult to even look at stories we recount to each other as being representative of a definitively 'true' reality.

This view is taken up by Stuart Hall in his essay, "Encoding/Decoding." Within the rules of language "sign-vehicles of a specific kind," i.e. words, are "organized, like any form of communication or language... [as] symbolic vehicles constituted within the rules of 'language'" (128). These symbols are then produced by "material instruments - its 'means'" such as cameras, which are then organized by "media apparatuses" (Hall 130). In effect, stories simplify and organize our existences in a way that makes them intelligible to others. Hall writes, "Events can only be signified within the aural-visual forms of the televisual discourse," meaning that a historical event "is subject to all the complex formal 'rules' by which language signifies. To put it paradoxically, the event must become a 'story' before it can become a communicative event" (135). This is not to say that stories are simply lies, but that they are tools for understanding events that give the listener and the teller a sense of identity and personal understanding through their telling.

Conventions of storytelling also define how people interpret their own lives and experiences. Carolyn Steedman "points to the significance of the tradition of the 'great European novel' to show that what we tell and how we tell our stories has been influenced through the technique of literary production" (Skeggs 55). As Doris Baltruschat, notes, like a novel, "the typical plot in reality programs involves a 'story of change,' a fact that copies the traditional three-act structure of stories, which often include the setup of an issue, and the introduction of the problem and its effects, ending with its eventual resolution wherein new lessons are learned or old morals enforced (44). This 'transformational' plotline is satisfying because the goals of the subject are clearly laid out in the first act and then

achieved in the third after surmounting difficulties in the second act. This ‘story-of-change’ forms the basis of most reality television shows (Horvath). Because we live in a media-saturated world, many people are drawn to the classic, neat story trajectories seen on RTV more often than the messy outcomes of ‘real’ life. These narratives are thematically satisfying, attracting audiences to watch the show because it suggests that appearing on the show is a way to live out a neat, three-act, happily-ever-after, or at least a memorable story. It is this chance for the self to be reduced to the types found on RTV that will help the subject make sense of their own lives and the role they play within their communities.

As Deery notes, “if RTV demonstrates anything it is that all mediation has the potential to commodify experience” (87). This mediation encompasses the roles and types that people willingly play when appearing on talk shows and RTV formats that do not come with large incentives other than the chance to appear before a camera. Some forms of mediation simply allow basic experiences to be understood by others through the telling of personal stories that can reveal one’s past triumphs or traumas, one’s identity and beliefs. However, mediation is a matter of degree, and can sometimes overwhelm a person’s story to the point that it no longer is representative of what they wish to self-actualize in themselves. For example, editing techniques, commonly used to make stories more entertaining, can either misrepresent a person’s identity entirely or they can help a subject solidify a stronger sense of their identity. For example, Joel, a participant on *First Dates*, complained that his words were taken out of context on the show (Hawkes). He said producers asked, “‘Do you have any doppelgangers?’ and I said ‘Not really.’ And they said

‘What about Prince William?’ and I said “I don’t think I have a Prince William look.’ And they used ‘I have a Prince William look’” (Hawkes).

This tension between truth and representation can also be found in confessional interviews, a convention of reality television where off-camera producers interview subjects individually. The subject directly address the camera, and by extension the audience. These interviews are filmed before and/or after a reality show’s ‘main event,’ and show subjects speaking on camera about their personal opinions about relevant people or events on the show (McKean). Their responses are intended to reveal a look at the person’s inner life as the events of the show unfold, and capture their unique viewpoint or interpretation of events i.e. their story. This convention can allow people to ‘bear witness to the self’ i.e. tell their stories when appearing on a show because they are often asked to say how they ‘really feel,’ instead of adjusting their responses in order to be polite to other contestants or to be strategic. Confessionals can also be used to compress the narrative within a show, helping to move the story ahead.

These interviews can also be manipulated to misrepresent a person’s character. The interview questions can be formed in such a way as to influence the subject’s responses through the use of ‘leading questions’ that aim to elicit certain answers that will create drama (Nadler). McKean explains the process of collecting confessionals: “We know what sort of answers we want, and we might ask the same question a few different ways to get what we want because that’s what goes to the narrative... it’s better for us to get the characters to explain what’s going on in the show rather than a voice over.” Beyond that, some subjects actually ask for direction on set, asking what the producer would like them to do rather than being able to simply perform themselves ‘authentically’ (Nadler). Being

on a set can feel intimidating and the presence of cameras can make the subject feel as though they must earn the attention being paid to them, a thought that can alter their behaviour.

The possibility of being misrepresented through media is increasingly understood as more and more ‘regular people’ define their identities through social media. Popular articles entitled “A Brief History of People Getting Fired for Social Media Stupidity” in the Rolling Stone Magazine, and the high-profile nature of the Anthony Weiner ‘sexting’ and Twitter scandal have demonstrated to pop-culture that one misstep on social media can result in the loss of a job or social life. However, this does not seem to affect the number of volunteers to be on these shows because the trade-off is seen as worth the risk.

As Andrejevic notes, some people see appearing on a show as an opportunity for “self-expression via self-disclosure,” since RTV promotes “self-knowledge through seeing oneself through the eyes of others” (Andrejevic 49). Josh, a cast member of MTV’s *Road Rules* noted, “I came away from the show being even more confident in who I am” (Andrejevic 49). Another participant noted that appearing on RTV legitimized her experience: “I could never describe the things I saw, the things I did, and the feelings I felt to everyone. And then you think, oh, wait, they’re going to see it on TV... And that’s the whole point about validation. It [being on *Road Rules*] validates what you did and why you were there” (Andrejevic 51). Briean Kenward agreed, stating that on the artist-based show, *Crash Gallery* subjects “came away from the show saying ‘Wow, I’ve never seen myself practice [art] before, I’ve never seen how a crowd responds to the art that I’m making” (Kenward). They expressed how the experience enforced their personal identities. Because people appearing on camera are offering themselves up to surveillance that “provides a

degree of authenticity,” “this authenticity becomes a process of self-expression, self-realization, and self-validation” (Andrejevic 51). This in turn encourages more and more people to apply to appear on these shows as Chan from *WatchCut* noted that the number of volunteers that applied to appear on the show rose exponentially as the channel grew in popularity.

Trepte also notes that appearing on RTV allows one “to self-symbolize and that people might choose to” appear on TV in order “to regain completeness with regard to a relevant self-definition” (Trepte 174). As Deery mentions, “RTV subjects report that being on TV helps them ‘discover who they are,’” since it is possible for a sense of one’s true self to emerge from a performance (Deery 44). Deery goes on to note, “if RTV highlights the performances of everyday life, the fact that mediation can so transform and validate ordinary people is a testament, finally, to the medium’s power” (56).

Indeed, the appearance on an RTV show is a form of auto-ethnography, a research method that allows people to understand their lives through such practices as visual representation. Within this practice is the desire of people to tell a story of their lives that best explains and accounts for their faults, traumas, and successes. This desire results in the ‘writing’ of a personal story that places triumphs and losses within a three-act story of redemption or change, helping to make sense of their lives. The story that emerges allows people to put the randomness of everyday life into context, allowing them to feel more secure embodying their inherently unstable identities. As Randall Rose and Stacy Wood note, when “driven to authenticate the self and important social spaces, consumers engage in authenticating acts and authoritative performances,” such as “those self-referential behaviors actors feel reveal or produce the ‘true’ self” (287). This story-of-the-self can be

expressed through rituals that have developed over time, such as weddings, graduations, toasts or confessions at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Indeed, when people are unsure of their place in their changing communities, appearing on a reality television show can have the same effect on a person's sense of self as a formal ritual. In other words, appearing on RTV can be considered a similarly powerful rite of passage considering "the increasing organization of social life around media centers" (Couldry 62).

Still, we must not idealize RTV's power to reinforce people's self-conception since the methods of RTV production privilege ratings over accurate portrayals of ordinary subjects. It is obvious that not all people have an equal chance to appear on a reality show since the subjects in question must be "the right [kind of] amateurs, who can be exploited for dramatic situations, comedy, and talent" (Baltruschat 52). A regional casting director for *Canadian Idol* notes, "People are either very good or good for TV, those in the middle don't make it" (Baltruschat 52). Casting agents are careful to pick people who will fit into particular types or roles that generate the most drama, and prefer subjects that have satisfying, three-act personal stories to tell or those that are willing to undergo a personal journey of transformation and improvement. For example, when selecting the family for the show, *An American Family*, a series many consider to be a precursor to reality television, the casting director specifically chose a family that contained conflicting personality types (Hillier 640). The father figure fit "the bill as a 'rugged entrepreneur,'" while his wife represented "'a suburban stay-at-home mom,'" while their children were all on the cusp of important developmental milestones such as one becoming a teenager, or a fully-fledged adult (Hillier 640). This family was chosen to tell their story not because they most deserved to understand themselves through the self-actualizing possibilities of

appearing before a camera, but because they would provide the most dramatic storyline for the viewer. This demonstrates that while appearing on an RTV show can allow some people to better understand themselves, this is a possibility open only to those picked by casting directors.

While these shows create potential troubling tensions between fact and fiction, the producers are ultimately motivated by the desire to win viewers. Therefore many take what steps they can to ensure an entertaining outcome, and that starts with casting. As McKean puts it “Casting is a huge part of every reality show. You’ve got to have characters, they’ve got to have good stories to tell, they have to be likeable and relatable,” qualities that can take time and money to find (Gerry). Horvath agrees, stating that for *Wipe-Out Canada* “everyone had to have a character and a type, and it wasn’t really enough to be like ‘I’m athletic, I’m a fun guy.’ We needed to know what that’s person’s role was” (Horvath). Horvath states, “the cast in a show is the proxy for the audience.” Casting or creating broad types on RTV helps gives “the audience a way for them to experience [the show] in a personal way” (Horvath).

Unfortunately, this means that being cast on an RTV show comes with the risk that a person’s sense of self will not be accurately presented, at least from the perspective of the participant. It is not difficult to find a RTV participant who is unhappy with how they are represented on a show. The opportunity to tell a story in one’s own words on RTV can be corrupted by editing. McKean explained that producers are under pressure to tell a story in a limited amount of time, so people “get a sense that we’ve embellished certain things, and sometimes we have although we don’t put words into their mouths” (McKean). For example, Joel and Amelia appeared on the show *First Dates*, and “while they were aware

that their dates would be edited, they didn't initially think about quite how this would work” (Hawkes). "Ultimately, everything that they showed, I did say,” Joel says, “but a lot of the context was taken out of it (Hawkes). Interestingly, Joel and Amelia were shown copies of their appearances on the show in advance of the episode airing, during which the producers “have to explain the narrative they’ve created” (Hawkes). However, most producers say that showing tape to subjects in advance is not common. Producer Gerry McKean noted that many broadcasters would forbid showing participants their parts before the show is aired because of contractual obligations (McKean). Furthermore, most producers do not want their subjects to see their appearance in advance because they will not have the time or resources to adjust the edit (McKean). There are some exceptions to the rule for famous reality stars, however for most people the way they are represented is not within their control.

Indeed, it is rare that the show would ever alter a subject’s depiction at their request (Hawkes). For example, Amelia did not like the box the show placed her in saying, ““It does kind of feel that they have decided what character they’re going to make you beforehand, or during the process... They make you into a character, and it’s two-dimensional”” (Hawkes). She was especially angry because the show depicted her as a needy and tragic figure because they used a statement she made out of context (Hawkes). Famous participants on docusoaps like Tori Spelling may be able to exert control over the content of the episodes as the series is sold on their name (Nadler). This example shows that while thousands might be lining up to self-actualize through RTV, what makes the cutting room floor might actually serve as an impediment to understanding one’s self.

This is further complicated by RTV's history of class exploitation on shows such as *Cops* (Skeggs, Wood 50). As Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood note, a person's ability to behave correctly while self-witnessing on an RTV show is tightly linked to the subject's class and therefore their ability to manage their performance 'correctly' (55). This demonstrates that while self-actualization through RTV is possible, it is only available to the types of people who are deemed acceptable by producers and whose personal tales are easy to convert into satisfying three-act stories. Since appearing before a camera can define a person's sense of self, as Chris Weedon notes, "power" exerted by producers for the sake of entertainment value "limits the possibilities of identity" that people are able to adopt on camera and beyond (15). However, to those that are cast on the shows, the opportunity for increased self-understanding using RTV as a mirror remains. Perhaps if more diversity is incorporated into RTV more viewpoints can be expressed, and more and more people can better understand the roles they feel comfortable playing.

Subjects that appear on reality television "dramatize how we all project and perform in real life" (Deery 31). While it is true that RTV shows make it possible for subjects to understand the role of their performance within increasingly fragmented communities, the fact that some RTV shows privilege drama over truth makes this claim true only on a case by case basis. However, some RTV shows can still be excellent vehicles for subjects to communicate their experiences through the telling of personal stories that allow them to make sense of their lives or provide counsel to others in the way that Benjamin so admired. Since we humans "learn to recognize ourselves through others, potentially adopting the gaze of others... and how they judge and position us," RTV provides one, albeit imperfect, mirror from which to bear witness to the self (Rose, Wood

71). Although not without risk of misrepresentation, people on RTV shows can still use the mediated images of themselves as “providing an interface for [real] connection” through “the unremitting social connectivity of television” (Rose, Wood 71-3). Perhaps we will never come close to understanding what really underpins our unstable identities, but if the ratings for popular RTV shows are any indication it is at least very entertaining to try.

Research in Relation to Creative Work

Beginnings

In October of 2016 I began to develop a reality show format called *Know Your Neighbour*. I was inspired to create a factual show because the CBC put out an open call for factual television format submissions. Since authentic human-interest driven formats have occupied a portion of most television schedules for decades, I thought that my concept, *Know Your Neighbour*, was worth developing. After some research to see if the basic concept was unique, and I set about trying to write the beats of the format. The logline of the show is “Residents of an apartment building get to know their quirky neighbours for a chance to win a big break on their rent.”

Pitching and Development

I was shortlisted for CBC’s format incubator competition in early November and pitched the show later that month. This opportunity was very valuable because I received feedback from the development executives in the process. During the pitch the Executive in Charge of Development, Jessica Schmeidchen, a Ryerson Alumnus, asked if I would

shoot the show inside people's apartments. While I had considered this idea before pitching, I thought that neighbours would be unwilling to open their homes up to a camera crew. Upon reflection I realized that she was correct to think visually: showing the neighbour's homes would make good television, and finding people willing to let a crew into their home would be possible if that is clearly stated in the terms for participation. This idea also allows the neighbours to finally get to see beyond the hallway doors, feeding the curious impulses of both the neighbours and the viewers watching. I therefore took her suggestion and adjusted my format to include a segment in which the neighbours get to snoop through each other's apartments in order to determine which unit belongs to whom.

After my pitch, I was called by the producers and told that my show was not selected for the competition. The producers let me know that although they liked the basic idea of the show, the individual beats of the format felt a little too complicated. My format had originally involved several physical challenges that take place off-site of the apartment and would be expensive and time-consuming to coordinate. This did not appeal to the CBC, so I went back to the drawing board and got rid of the complicated challenges in favor of a *Newlywed Game*-style trivia round where the neighbours are asked a series of strange questions about each other for a chance to win points towards the prize. These adjustments made it possible for the shoot to take place over one day and within a smaller number of locations, while also making for more interesting television.

Later in the year, a CBC factual producer, Susan Taylor, indicated that the CBC was potentially interested in developing the show as part of their digital content. I was told to conceive of different ways the show could be miniaturized to better fit the shorter form usually required of digital content. This is how a mini-version of the show called *Know*

Your Neighbour Now emerged. This show consisted of randomly knocking on doors of a student residence and asking the two neighbours that answer a few questions about each other for a chance to win a small trinket. Besides acting as a test of the show concept as a whole, filming this version of the show taught me how best to approach possible subjects in order to ensure authentic performances, how to write compelling and humorous questions that will elicit the most entertaining responses, and how to direct the show's host as he interacted with the contestants. Filming in the residence also showed me how the show could be easily tailored to fit a younger, Vice-style demographic depending on the building chosen and the questions asked.

Protecting My Interests

During a development phone call, the producers at the CBC indicated that my show had been shopped around the world to clients of Warner Bros. International Television Production, and that I had received a lot of positive feedback from Scandinavia. I found this to be exciting, so I asked to whom the producers had shown my format to during a meeting in February. In response, I was asked why I was asking this question. I replied that my supervisor told me it was in my interest to know who had already been pitched my idea. This question was met with a terse response from Ms. Taylor, who reminded me that I had released the CBC from obligation to disclose that information when I entered the competition. This interaction marked an important wakeup call in my journey as an aspiring producer because it allowed me to realize that even though the producers had been extremely friendly and complimentary, I could be seen as a potential troublemaker. In response, I registered my idea with the Writers Guild of America. This is a protective step

that only offers a fairly weak first-line of defense for my format, but given its affordability is better than no protection at all and taught me about copyright law in the process.

While I have not been given any indication of further involvement with the CBC, their development coordinator, Mélanie Lê Phan, did tell me she would give me a list of potential producers for me to work with, and regretfully expressed to me that the CBC does not have the internal mechanisms required to develop my idea in the building since the corporation is no longer engaged in in-house production. Whether Lê Phan helps me in the future or not, the entire experience with the CBC competition was highly instructive. The opportunity taught me how to write and deliver a pitch under pressure, how to adjust my format based on feedback, and how to deal with the disappointment and rejection that comes with the industry. It also taught me how frustratingly slow the process of show development can be, and how attempting to enter the industry through untraditional channels, like the format incubator, can come with its downsides.

(Mis)adventures in Casting

I had originally hoped to film a small trailer of the show in my own apartment building. However I ran into too many difficulties casting the show in order to produce it in time. Nevertheless, the process was still a valuable learning lesson that further enforced what I was told about casting by the producers I interviewed. First, I secured permission to film from my building's manager and they agreed to help me contact the residents. A flyer was put under each tenant's door advertising the show, and let them know when I would be filming and for what purpose. The chance to win a small prize with lunch included for the participants, motivators that could help encourage people to play the game. I also plastered

my apartment with posters advertising the show in an eye-catching fashion. I gave people a deadline to respond to my casting call and waited, hoping for up to seven participants.

Sadly, most of my posters were torn down the following day. Despite reposting them with a sign saying that I was authorized by the building manager to advertise the show, most of the posters were still taken down. It seemed like someone really did not want to know their neighbour! I did receive two calls from possible participants and one lady who wanted to help but did not want to appear on camera. This response rate was a lot lower than I expected. Because I was offering lunch and a prize and would be filming within a location the cast would easily be able to get to, my building, I thought I could get at least four or five willing people out of the hundred in my building. However, my show's lack of a proven track record meant that I needed to do a lot more legwork and spend a lot of time pre-interviewing people. However, there are a few reasons besides time constraints why I not knock more aggressively, literally and figuratively, on my neighbour's doors.

First, Kenward told me several things about the casting process for her show that made me realize I did not have enough time or resources to cast the show. She stated that at Lark Productions "the main thing is, we don't convince people" to be on our shows. She explained that having to convince someone means that you are unlikely to get the kinds of personalities that work best on television i.e. people that are not intimidated by the presence of a camera. She noted that at least for longer-form series like *The Real Housewives of Toronto* "they talk to 1000 people to cast six," and have to be picky about who they choose to invest in in order to ensure an easier on-set experience. However, building a network takes time. Kenward said that she and her co-workers started out casting the show artistic competition show *Crash Gallery* by "knocking on a lot of doors"

and doing lots of research, building a cast from the resulting network. Each person was given a pre-interview test to see how they behaved on camera. Potential contestants were also filmed completing a mini art challenge to see if they would crack under pressure or “freeze up on set” (Kenward). These tests help ensure that time is not wasted pursuing people that end up being camera-shy, and helps give the potential participant a sense of the process and a chance to feel comfortable on set.

Appearing on an RTV show can be very positive or negative for people because it is a powerful experience with one’s own identity. McKean put it this way,

Some people love it, and never want it to end, they like the attention, they like their 15 minutes of fame, and they want to figure out how to get on again. And then there are other people that are traumatized by it, because although they thought it was a good idea, they are really people who don’t want that kind of attention. Often they’re very self-conscious people, and when they see themselves on television they hate it and the whole thing becomes too overwhelming. (McKean).

Therefore, while some people can use RTV to affirm their role within their communities, some cannot handle the gaze of the camera. Sadly, this will mean that their story will not be told through RTV. However that person is likely to find other avenues of self-expression that they have more control over, such as their social media accounts.

Therefore, a fear of looking like a fool on camera is one strong potential reason why people did not contact me, despite the incentives I put in place.

Other potential reasons for why I did not get the numbers I was hoping for are many, and help me to better understand what motivates people to appear on RTV. One reason is perhaps that people in apartment buildings really do not want to meet their neighbours because they like the anonymity of living in a large, impersonal building. The other reason is perhaps that since I was unable to offer compensation for their time or a

very valuable prize, people felt less motivated to contact me. I was also honest about what the filming of the trailer was for: I explained that it was for a university project and that it was not going to appear on television. Perhaps in order for people to be motivated to appear on reality shows the show has to be produced by a real production company, which would lend an air of legitimacy to the show and make the participants feel important. People also might be more motivated to appear on the show if they knew that it was going to be widely seen. Maybe people do not want to offer themselves up to the judgment of a camera without the potential for many viewers see their performance.

Kenward also advised that I take my time with casting and not jump into a filming situation without having done a lot of preparatory work. She said that it is important to take the time to get “your cast on board with what you’re doing and have them buy in. That is the number one thing, to make sure that you’re all on the same page and that they’re invested” (Kenward). Without that investment, people will not be enthusiastic about appearing on camera. She also said that it was important to create a welcoming on-set environment in order to facilitate authentic reactions. Perhaps the filming location being set in my building’s courtyard, an area lined by windows from which other residents could watch the filming, made my neighbours feel too nervous to put themselves out there.

Casting a diverse set of characters also takes more time if it is to be done properly, according to Horvath. She said that her company expended extra effort trying to find a cast for *Wipe-Out Canada* that “represented the whole country.” She noted that “there’s a big focus on diversity in casting in order to show a wide range of viewpoints, and its important for everyone to feel represented on screen.” Scheduling extra time to cast the show is something I will keep in mind when I work on future iterations of *KYN*.

If I had successfully cast the show, I would have been careful to follow up with participants. Kenward stressed the importance of forming a relationship with a show's cast, saying "you don't want to spend time making that relationship and then cut them out of communication, not email them or send a thank you, or let them know how it went, because you never know when you might need use them in the future." Since a show's cast offers themselves up for judgment to the camera, a thing many people are unwilling to do for little to no pay, it is in the best interest of the producers to make the subjects feel valuable because without them there is no one to film.

Future Areas of Research

While I was able to find some testimony from former-reality television contestants about how the experience of appearing on the show affected their identities, more interviews should be conducted to further access how they felt about the experience of being on RTV. Besides the difficulty of finding former RTV participants, it is also tricky to find participants that are able to talk about their experiences because many have signed non-disclosure agreements when they agreed to be on the show. Perhaps future researchers will find a way to tackle this problem.

Additional research should also be conducted on the feasibility of the format in its current form. Small test-runs of the challenges should be played with willing residents in order to see if the show 'works' on camera while still giving the neighbours a genuinely memorable experience. Interviews with participants conducted after filming could collect information on how subjects feel about themselves about the experience.

Finally, additional research from a psychological or sociological perspective could delve into how people use social media and other tools of self-image making in order to glean more concrete data on how it makes them feel and see themselves. Researchers in all disciplines should take note as people continue to change their relationships with their own images through RTV and social media and new way of self-image making in the future.

Conclusion

In light of my research, I will endeavor to sell the format. In order to strengthen future pitches also I plan to film my own prototypes of the concept. I will do so in keeping with the advice of the producers I interviewed and while remaining sensitive to the idea that appearing on an RTV show can have a major effect on a subject's self-conception. The choices producers and editors make have deep effects on how a participant is depicted, thus I will endeavor to make choices on KYN that will allow subjects to walk away with a greater understanding of themselves and their communities.

Through my pitch, I was able to get to know the development coordinator in the factual department at CBC, the aforementioned Mélanie Lê Phan. She offered to help provide me with a list of producers I could approach to develop my idea. I will pursue this contact. In addition, I plan on approaching producers myself through the connections I have made through my research and interviews. Lê Phan also recommended that I find a way to pitch the concept in an altered form to CBC's radio department since they are more able to invest in new ideas since radio content is cheaper to produce. In light of my work and experience writing a show bible, I feel prepared to tackle the challenge of adapting this format or other ideas I have in the future to different mediums.

As communities continue to shift and become more insular, perhaps the virtual community of RTV viewers and participants will provide a new space within which everyone can find a role they enjoy performing every day. People will continue to look for new ways to test or confirm their identities. The reality format *Know Your Neighbour* provides a new way to do just that.

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