



Reality TV and Queer Identities

Sexuality, Authenticity, Celebrity

Michael Lovelock

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In Episode Ten of the 2009 series of *The Real World*, the MTV reality show in which a group of young strangers from across the USA lived together in an unfamiliar city (this time Brooklyn, New York), the cast were tasked to organise a film screening to raise awareness about ‘safe sex’ practices among young people. Whilst these kinds of tasks had, by 2009, become an unremarkable feature of *The Real World*’s format, functioning to incite stress and generate conflict amongst the roommates, and bolster the show’s claims to some kind of pedagogical address to youth viewers, what was notable about this episode of *The Real World: Brooklyn* was how it broke the show’s usual refusal to acknowledge its own status as a TV show. Obviously, the whole premise of the programme was that the cast had been brought together for the express purpose of creating a television programme. Yet, within the broadcast texts, the means of production—camera operators, sound technicians, producers, runners, lights, boom microphones and so on—usually remained scrupulously outside the frame. Cast-members were explicitly instructed to ignore the camera, to act like they were not on TV (Winick 2000). Episode Ten of the 2009 season inverted this logic as the film the roommates were asked to screen was *Pedro*, a biopic about Pedro Zamora, the openly gay, Cuban-American AIDS activist and star of *The Real World: San Francisco* in 1994. Zamora’s presence in the 1994 season has been widely celebrated for advancing public awareness of AIDS, and worked to cement *The Real World*’s popular reputation for dealing with difficult social issues through progressive

representations (Pullen 2007). In *The Real World: Brooklyn*, MTV executive Maggie Malina appeared in front of the camera with the roommates, telling them:

It's a story and a moment in MTV's history that we've always held very dear because having the first HIV positive gay man on television on our show, it was pretty remarkable, and he had an amazing impact upon all the people who saw the show.

Later, one of the 2009 roommates, a gay man named JD, was shown reflecting upon his own childhood experiences of watching Zamora, saying, 'I remember being nine years old and watching Pedro on *The Real World* in San Francisco. I always thought he was a hero.' The sound of these lines bridged a textual juxtaposition of past and present, as shots of JD speaking to the camera/audience were intercut with footage of Pedro from the 1994 series, rendered in an exaggeratedly grainy quality, signifying its status as a historical or archival document from time-gone-by.

In a not dissimilar turn of events, in 2013 the UK reality show *Celebrity Big Brother* was won by a television personality named Rylan Clarke, an openly gay 24-year-old, who was known to audiences at that time for having competed on another British reality show, *The X Factor*. As he exited the metallic compound of the *Celebrity Big Brother* 'house' after being announced as the series' winner, Rylan was greeted by the show's presenter, Brian Dowling, another gay man who had risen to televisual fame as the winner of *Big Brother* UK in 2001. 'How does it feel for me to actually tell you that you are the winner of *Celebrity Big Brother*?' Brian asked, to which Rylan responded:

Coming from you, this is a dream come true [...] I have been the biggest fan of *Big Brother* [...] I remember when Brian was in the house, and it [the *Big Brother* compound] was five minutes from my house, and I got on the train, I went down there [...] and I screamed at the top of my voice, 'Brian!'

Both of these moments, *The Real World: Brooklyn* in 2009 and *Celebrity Big Brother* 2013, brought into proximity, through mediated or embodied connections, two generations of queer people. In each show, a pioneer of millennial queer visibility was encountered by a younger queer person, one who had come of age in an era of comparative tolerance and (in some quarters) acceptance for sexual minority identities across the global West.

In particular, the years between Pedro and JD's appearances on *The Real World*, and Brian and Rylan's respective participation in *Big Brother*, were characterised by unprecedented expansions in the visibility of LGBT people in popular culture. As JD watched the filmic incarnation of Pedro Zamora, and as Rylan poured out his own teenage fandom for Brian live on prime-time TV, audiences were presented with two iconic reality formats self-reflexively looking back upon their own roles in making queer identities visible to mainstream audiences throughout the first, and into the second, decades of the twenty-first century.

As moments like these attest, reality television has been one of the most prolific spaces of queer representation in Anglo-American popular media since the beginning of the twenty-first century. Wikipedia has a page entitled 'List of reality television programs with LGBT cast members'¹ which, despite detailing hundreds of participants from over 140 shows, remains far from complete. The GLAAD Media Awards, which seek to 'recognize and honour media for their fair, accurate and inclusive representations of the LGBTQ community and the issues that affect their lives,'² have an award for Outstanding Reality Program, and run-downs of fondly (or not-so-fondly) remembered LGBT reality stars have become commonplace online, under headings like '13 LGBT Reality Series that Changed Queer Life,' 'The 50 Most Memorable LGBT Reality TV Stars of All Time,' '25 Reality Shows that Made LGBT History' and '42 LGBTQ People Who Made Reality TV History.'³

Moreover, reflecting upon my own formative experiences as a lonely teenager with a burgeoning queer sexuality, growing up in a small town in West Midlands of England in the early years of the twenty-first century, it was through my encounters with reality television that I began to perceive life outside the heterosexual norm as viable, liveable, something that *real people did* (this was, after all, *reality TV*). Yet, just as I watched the loveable Brian Dowling triumph in *Big Brother* or *The Salon's* flamboyant Ricardo weave his creative magic in a custom-built hair studio, thinking 'maybe that could be me,' reality TV was also the place where I learned how *not* to be queer. From the much-derided militant lesbian feminist Kitten in *Big Brother 2004*, to the gay 'bunny boiler' Craig the following year, whose romantic obsession with a heterosexual housemate was ridiculed across the tabloid press, my early interactions with reality television were contradictory and complex; laying out for my young self a future at once rich with queer possibility, yet strictly delimited within elusive parameters of mainstream acceptability.

Reality TV is thus an intricate and productive cultural form, one which has offered up a diverse range of potential subject positions from which to live out differences to the heterosexual and cisgender norms. At the same time, the formations of queer identity made legible in reality programming are shot through with judgements about their social, ethical and commercial value, their legitimacy and acceptability. This book interrogates the cultural work of these representations, exploring what reality TV has enabled socially, culturally and politically as one of the most consistent and profuse sites for the production and circulation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and otherwise queer subject positions in twenty-first-century British and American popular culture. I argue that reality television's representations of queer people matter; that, taken together, they have been instrumental to the ways in which non-heterosexual and gender non-conforming identities have come to be understood within contemporary cultural life. This book asserts that these representations cannot be ignored if we are to understand how and why certain kinds of non-normative sexualities and gender identities have become relatively normalised, accepted or legitimised, whilst others remain abnormal, deviant and unknowable, within the popular cultural imaginary.

Centrally, this book is concerned with how queer visibility in reality programming is shaped by the generic conventions, commercial imperatives and audience pleasures of reality TV itself. It interrogates how this representational process has made intelligible a series of scripts, narratives and archetypes of queer identity and queer life that have become highly recognisable in twenty-first-century Anglo-American media. In particular, I explore how reality TV's insistent valorisation of what I term *compulsory authenticity*—the notion that each individual has an innate and essential 'true' self which it is their duty to discover, manifest and be faithful to, and that failing to 'be yourself' constitutes nothing short of an existential crisis—has functioned as a profoundly generative force in relation to cultural perceptions of queer people. This generic trope, which unites all incarnations and sub-forms of reality programming, has brought into being a discursive field in which particular ways of being queer, of living and persisting in the world as a non-heterosexual and/or gender non-conforming subject, have been able to not only take shape, but become (relatively) normalised, even common-sense, within twenty-first-century cultural life. These include the idea that people are 'born gay,' that transgender identities constitute an authentic gender 'trapped' within the 'wrong body,' and

that a ‘successful’ queer life involves branding and selling one’s queerness in particular, normative ways.

Most emphatically, this book does not seek to make judgements about how ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ these representations might be, nor how ‘accurately’ they have reflected any kind of pre-defined LGBTQ community. Rather, adopting the perspective, well established in queer and post-structuralist theory, that sex and gender categories (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or indeed cisgender and heterosexual) are culturally determined and constructed, this book interrogates critically *how* reality television, as one of the most prolific sites of queer pop-cultural visibility, has brought certain queer subjectivities into being. I explore *why* this visibility has taken the forms it has, and what these representations have *done* in terms of the increasing naturalisation *and* continuing marginalisation of queers and queerness in a heteronormative world.

WHAT IS REALITY TV AND WHERE DID IT COME FROM

As a genre of television, reality TV (if indeed it can be considered a genre at all—see below) is one of the newest. Reality programming emerged in the 1990s in the form of shows like *Cops*, *Airport*, *Driving School* and *The Cruise*, and was a response to changing contexts of production, distribution and reception in the television industry at the close of the twentieth century. TV had traditionally operated as a ‘broadcasting’ medium, that is, a small number of networks (the American ‘Big Three’: ABC, CBS and NCS, and the historical duopoly between the BBC and ITV in the UK) offering programming targeted towards a large-scale ‘mass’ or ‘mainstream’ audience (often imagined as taking the form of heterosexual families—see Chap. 2). The arrival of cable and satellite television in the 1980s and into the 1990s, however, created a multi-channel landscape in which an ever-growing number of channels had to compete for a swiftly diminishing share of the TV audience. As audience attention was now split between a multitude of different channels (many offering niche programming aimed at very specific demographics), costs of TV advertising fell and, as such, so did programme budgets. Reality television emerged as a solution to this problem, making use of (relatively) inexpensive, lightweight filming, sound recording and editing equipment to craft soap opera-like narratives out of the unscripted interactions of unpaid, amateur

performers out in the ‘real’ worlds of workplaces, roads, airports rather than in costly studio environments.⁴

Following its emergence in the 1990s, the years 2000–2001 marked the consolidation of reality TV as a major presence on Anglo-American television. Several of the most iconic and high-profile reality formats were first broadcast in these years, including *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, *The Amazing Race* and *Popstars* (which would later spawn *American Idol* and *The X Factor*). Rather than mediating participants in their ‘real life’ social worlds (workplaces, homes, motorways, city streets), these ‘second generation’ reality shows (Kavka 2012), inserted so-called ordinary people in explicitly contrived or manufactured settings (the *Big Brother* house, the *Survivor* island, the *Popstars* studio) and brought them into some form of competition with one another. The purportedly ‘real’ interactions, emotions and relationships produced through this melding of televisual contrivance and emotional and interpersonal ‘reality’ were then sold as a televisual spectacle. It is with these post-millennium shows that this book’s analysis of queer visibility in reality TV begins.

Indeed, just as reality television was cemented as a cultural phenomenon in the early 2000s, it became something of an academic phenomenon too. Early scholarship on reality TV was centrally concerned with questions of generic definition: what exactly were the characteristics that defined the parameters of reality TV and united the shows collated under this generic label? Answering this question proved by no means straightforward, as many of the programmes clustered under the heading of reality TV, in both academic and popular discourses, had little in common in terms of aesthetics, narrative structure, production values and so on: the usual markers of generic coherence. For John Corner (cited in Hill 2015), reality television is less a distinct genre of its own than an ‘inter-generic space’ in which elements of documentary, game show, soap opera, melodrama, talk show, talent show and sporting broadcast interweave. Approaching the genre question from a different angle, June Deery (2015) has suggested that what reality TV shows share are particular conditions of production rather than textual features. She states:

[Reality TV] is best understood not so much as [content with certain textual or aesthetic characteristics, but as a relationship between texts, agents, and technical devices. It is, in other words *a way of making television*. While particular topics or formats may trend only for a time, the basic production relations remain much the same – ordinary people, actual events, participation and interactivity. [emphasis in original]

In this book, I follow Deery by adopting a broad definition of reality television as ‘pre-planned but mostly unscripted programming with non-professional actors in non-fictional scenarios’ (ibid.: 3), as such an expansive definition is able to capture all of the reality shows I analyse. Clearly, however, the levels of pre-planning, (un)scriptedness and non-professionalism of participants vary considerably between different reality formats, and I outline the distinctions between the different reality sub-forms I engage with in this book—intimate strangers, talent shows, make-over shows and docusoaps—shortly.

Where my approach to reality TV diverges from Deery, however, is that I would maintain that all reality shows, and certainly all of the many I interrogate in this book, do share one, overriding textual feature. This is a discursive investment in the issue of the ‘real,’ particularly in relation to selfhood and identity. By this, I do not mean that reality TV shows make (be it fraudulent or truthful) claims to representing ‘real life’ in an unexpurgated fashion, but that reality TV is deeply attuned to the ambivalences that the concepts of ‘reality’ and the ‘real’ have taken on in contemporary popular thought. Reality TV takes as central preoccupations questions like: Where is the real located? What does it mean to *be* real? How can individuals discover and be true to their real selves? How can we tell if others are being real?

In this way, reality TV is emblematic of what we might call a broader *crisis of the real* in the twenty-first century, one that Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) has described as ‘the loss of a kind of authenticity [...] the 21st century is an age that hungers for anything that *feels* authentic, just as we lament more and more that it is a world of inauthenticity and superficiality.’ As cultural theorists from Walter Benjamin to Jean Baudrillard and beyond have argued for some time, in the contexts of mass media, post-modern and ironic popular culture, proliferating global capitalism and the digitisation of everyday life, precisely what it means for something or someone to *be real* is increasingly uncertain. The search for ‘something outside of mere consumer culture, something above the reductiveness of profit margins, the crassness of capital exchange’ (Banet-Weiser 2012) has thus become a dominant theme of contemporary popular culture. This hunger for the real, for *authenticity*, is also a product of what sociologists have conceptualised as the ‘fragmentation’ or ‘individualisation’ of social life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Here, traditional anchors of selfhood and identity; the collective structures which have historically defined a worthwhile or meaningful life, like occupation, family ties, religion and local community, are perceived as increasingly unreliable

and insecure (Giddens 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001). In response, popular culture now encourages individuals to look inwards, to the very fabric of the self, in order to find something ‘real,’ something which will enable us to carve out a happy and successful life. As the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991: 74) has claimed, ‘The idea that each person has a unique character and special potentialities that may or may not be fulfilled,’ has come to define popular perceptions of meaningful and non-meaningful existences.

Reality TV, I would argue, is perhaps *the* central proponent of this authenticity imperative. Through a discursive repertoire of ‘being yourself,’ ‘being real’ and ‘living your truth’ (and not being ‘fake,’ ‘phony’ or ‘shady’), reality programming has produced and circulated the idea that the ‘truth’ of *who we are* is to be found in an innate and immutable set of desires, dispositions, talents, values and ambitions located *inside* each person. According to reality TV, to find the real we must discover, make, manifest and live in a way that is faithful to our *authentic self*. This investment in authentic selves, the affects and emotions which emanate from them, and the relationships in which they become entangled, is the core *claim to the real* made by reality TV. Reality shows do acknowledge that they are structured, edited and manufactured media spectacles, but at the same time claim that their constructed televisual settings enable the mediation of participants’ ‘real,’ authentic selves, emotions and relationships. To be clear, I am definitely not suggesting that reality programmes actually do offer access points to cast-members’ innate, pre-cultural, ‘real’ selves. Rather, reality TV’s most potent and pervasive cultural work has been to bring the authentic self into being as a ‘symbolic construct’ (Banet-Weiser 2012), a culturally specific way of thinking about and valuing selfhood and identity which has become highly normalised, even common-sense, in twenty-first-century Britain and America. The central argument of this book is that reality television’s recurrent naturalisation of the authentic self has been instrumental to the genre’s impact upon how queer sexualities and gender identities have come to be made sense of in contemporary Anglo-American popular thought.

SUB-FORMS OF REALITY TV

This core claim to the real, that the constructed environments of reality texts enable the revelation and consumption of real, authentic selves, plays out differently in different forms of reality TV. In this way, one of the aims

of this book is to interrogate how the sub-generic specificities of different types of reality TV shows have shaped queer representation in different ways. In this book I engage with four broad types of reality TV. There are intimate strangers formats (a term I borrow from Misha Kavka's 2012 monograph on reality television), reality talent shows, makeover shows and docusoaps.

During its first decade, from 2000 to the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, intimate strangers formats practically defined reality TV. Within this sub-form we can place iconic, globally syndicated formats like *Big Brother*, *Survivor* and *The Real World*, little-remembered, early formats like *The Salon* and *Back to Reality*, and more recent programmes like *Jersey Shore*, *Geordie Shore*, *The Bad Girls Club* and *Love Island*. In intimate strangers formats, groups of participants who have (usually) never met prior to the show live (and/or sometimes work) together in an environment explicitly constructed for the purpose of making the show. This location has not necessarily been built from scratch for television, but does function as a space saturated in mediation (usually 24-hour surveillance) and cut off from the 'outside' world. Some more recent shows, *Jersey Shore* for example, have muddled the mediated versus non-mediated/ordinary binary which traditionally structured intimate strangers shows, as casts move between their custom-created living space and 'real world' settings like nightclubs and bars. What remains, however, is the discursive claim that these shows' constructed, mediated environments work to bring out and make manifest the authentic selves of participants, an authenticity which is usually coded through outbreaks and articulations of affect and emotion by and between cast-members.

Talent shows, as the name suggests, are structured as competitions based on some form of talent (as this term is normatively construed). The earliest and most famous reality talent formats, *Pop Idol*, *American Idol*, *The X Factor* and *The Voice*, focused upon singing and performing pop music, but the sub-genre encompasses talents from baking (*The Great British Bake Off*) to fashion design (*Project Runway*, *The Fashion Fund*), modelling (*America's Next Top Model*, *The Face*, *Make Me a Supermodel*) to cooking (*Masterchef*), dancing (*Strictly Come Dancing*, *Dancing With the Stars*) and broad field of 'talent' as in *Britain's Got Talent* and *America's Got Talent*. In these shows, the claim to the real lies in two primary areas. Firstly, the participants are represented to be actualising and affirming an innate (and thus authentic) talent for singing, baking, modelling or whatever the show concerns through their involvement in the show. Secondly,

the emotional turbulence resulting from the pressurised context of the mediated competition is mined as spectacles of apparent affective authenticity.

In makeover shows, a participant with an apparently deficient corporeality undergoes a physical transformation, aided and enabled by a team of experts. As Brenda Weber (2009) has discussed in detail in her monograph on makeover television, the claims to the real of the makeover sub-genre are located in the apparent existential dynamics of the participant's transformation. As Weber states, 'makeovers depict stories of failed or imperilled selfhood, the locus of identity stalled or stagnated. In these mediated makeover texts, the body stands as the gateway to the self,' so that, 'to communicate an "authentic" self, one must overwrite and replace the "false" signifiers enunciated by the natural body.' Makeover texts mount a discursive collapsing of body and self, where a body that is altered to emit signifiers of corporeal ideals is construed as one which has achieved a state of authenticity. Clearly, the notion that one's apparently individual, innate authenticity is brought out through one's closeness to homogenous, culturally constructed perceptions of physical beauty is deeply contradictory. Yet, makeover TV has sought to smooth over such discursive 'illogics' (Weber 2009), in part, through the mobilisation of particular understandings of queer life. Most obviously this has been in the form of gay male fashion and beauty 'experts' whose expertise has been discursively grounded in their own apparent struggles to actualise their authentic selves in contexts of heteronormativity and homophobia. I engage with these representations in more detail in Chap. 6.

Docusoaps are the most historically recent sub-form of reality TV, emerging around 2007 but proliferating from around 2010 onwards. The earliest docusoaps were MTV's *Laguna Beach: The Real OC* and *The Hills* (and the short-lived attempt at a British version, *Living on the Edge*). At the same time, these shows find pre-cursors in some of the earliest reality texts, like *Airport Driving School* and *The Cruise*, which crafted soap opera-like storylines from the relationships of ordinary people, mostly in workplaces, thus melding the visual and thematic tropes of documentary with the narrative structure of a soap. These early formats profoundly impacted the TV industry by demonstrating audiences' appetites for consuming narratives based around the purportedly 'real' everyday lives of apparently 'ordinary' people. Contemporary docusoaps have developed this formula in three primary ways. Firstly, the focus on workplaces has shifted to a more directly soap opera influenced focus upon groups of

friends, enemies, acquaintances and neighbours, usually within a particular urban milieu, as seen in, for example, *The Real Housewives* or *Love and Hip—Hop* franchises in the USA, and shows like *The Only Way is Essex* and *Made in Chelsea* in the UK. Secondly, recent docusoaps have incorporated textual features from fictional TV drama, such as non-diegetic music, glossy title sequences, and more clearly constructive rather than reactive editing, so that the shows are openly signifying that they are *building* a narrative rather than reacting to unfolding, ‘real’ events (as in observational style of early reality shows, which was, of course, no less a textual construct). Relatedly, of all reality TV, docusoaps are the most self-reflexive about their statuses as constructed texts. These shows deliberately blur the boundaries between fiction and factual television, and audiences are addressed as literate in how constructed they are. For example, *The Only Way is Essex* begins with an onscreen caveat that ‘some of what you see has been constructed for your entertainment’ and in the large number of ghost-written cast-member autobiographies, participants have talked openly about how events that are framed within the text as, sometimes coincidental, meetings between friends are in fact determined, planned and semi-scripted by producers.⁵

At the same time, *The Only Way is Essex* maintains in its opening caveat that ‘these people are all real.’ This invokes a claim to the real in the selves, relationships and emotions of participants which are brought into public view by this very obviously and openly constructed and mediated context. Indeed, whilst, on the whole, the means of production (cameras, crew, etc.) are normally not visible in these shows, audiences are not called upon to suspend our disbelief in the constructed text in the manner of fictional media. Rather, many docusoaps offer audiences apparent access to the real in moments where the ‘real,’ signified through affect and emotion, appears to exceed the contrivance of the docusoap context, where artifice seemingly cannot contain the real. This happens most obviously in fight sequences, where smooth visual styles give way to jolting camerawork, and the cast-members move, seemingly unexpectedly, beyond the space of action which will keep the production crew concealed. Sparring participants barge into camera operators, as security guards and producers wearing microphones and headsets enter the frame to calm the participants down. The mediated and the real are thus represented to collapse upon one another in explosions of apparently authentic affect.

The differences between these four reality sub-genres are, of course, not always easy to delineate, and reality shows have always melded and

borrowed from different sub-forms. For example, it has been argued that *The X Factor* (which I would describe overall as a talent show) is also a makeover show because it narrativises the transformation of participants from so-called ordinary people into celebrities (Bratich 2007). Similarly, a show like *America's Next Top Model*, where a group of aspiring fashion models live together whilst competing in various challenges in order to win a modelling contract, is both a talent show through its judging of the participants' abilities at modelling, and an intimate strangers show because large portions of each episode centre upon the emotional dynamics (fights, friendships, relationships) of the would-be models' cohabiting, thus mobilising a joint claim to the real.

AN EXCEPTION TO THE RULE? QUEER PEOPLE, REALITY TV AND TRANSFORMATIVE POSSIBILITIES

In January 2017, following his election on a platform of xenophobic, conservative populism, Donald Trump was inaugurated as President of the USA. Two months later, in March 2017, the cable TV channel Logo released a 90-second trailer for *Fire Island*, a new reality shows about a group of gay men sharing a summer house in the legendary queer party enclave of Fire Island Pines. The trailer offered a mash-up of cast-members arguing over dinner tables, engaging in bitchy confessionals, drinking, partying and hooking up—highly conventional scenarios for 2010s intimate strangers formats like *Jersey Shore* and *Bad Girls Club*, injected with the twist of an all-gay male cast. In response to the trailer's release, the gay magazine *The Advocate* published an opinion piece on its website denouncing the show for 'Giving this sort of behaviour a national platform where it becomes normal' (Wimberly 2017). The article thus, on one level, rearticulated what has become a highly recognisable criticism of reality TV, that it has degraded public culture by naturalising the mediated display of apparently extreme, and traditionally private, behaviours like sexual intimacy, emotional outbreaks, fights, alcohol consumption and so on. In the context of a gay cast, however, this well-worn critique took on added connotations, as *The Advocate's* piece went on to complain:

As a minority group, the actions of a few can unfortunately shape the view of the many [...] In a time with so many of our rights being challenged daily, LGBT people must choose to elevate public perception of us as best as we can. We are above this sort of mindless "It doesn't matter, it's just a show"

dialogue. It does matter. If it didn't matter, we wouldn't be in a position where a reality TV star is now running the United States of America. (Wimberly 2017)

This final sentence reproduced what had become a common discursive technique in liberal media reporting of Trump, drawing upon his status as a former star of the reality show *The Apprentice* as semantic shorthand for Trump's apparently crass populism, duplicitous campaign narratives, and appeals to base voter sentiments rooted in a conservative, xenophobic vision of traditional patriotic values (anti-immigration, anti-LGBTQ, anti-women's rights, anti-welfare, anti-gun control, etc.). As Weber (2014: 11), writing presciently before Trump's entry into formal politics, has stated, "'Reality TV' functions as a synonym for poor taste, questionable morals, shallow celebrity, and manipulative storytelling.' *The Advocate's* rebuke of *Fire Island* mobilised a common popular characterisation of reality TV as having ruptured the divide between 'elevated' political debate and apparently crude, private emotional and sexual expression. This discourse evoked an irreconcilability between reality television and social or political progress for LGBTQ people, particularly at a time when the ascent of Trump appeared to threaten the hard-won civil rights gains for LGBT people under the Obama administration. For the piece's author, 'bad' politics was proximate to reality TV, and reality TV meant bad politics for queer people.

The Advocate was not alone in its public critique of the *Fire Island* trailer. The writer H. Allan Scott, for example, published an 'open letter to gay kids' on his public Facebook page discussing the show's trailer and its cast, stating:

This isn't what it's like to be a gay man. You don't have to be like them, or look like them, or have the same interests as them. Gay media wants you to believe this is reality, but it's not. They're paid to fool you into thinking this is what it's like to be a gay man. Don't buy into it. [...] A real gay man is a man with a mind, an engaged mind, an enlightened mind. So watch this shit if you want to, but then go read some James Baldwin.

This post puts forward another two, common criticisms of reality TV. Firstly, that it degrades the minds of its audiences, rendering them media illiterate, incapable of distinguishing between manufactured, commercial media representations and so-called real life. Secondly, that it encourages audiences to value particular undesirable 'interests' (drinking,