

# Are reality TV shows true reality?

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Mark Pattison/CNS

WASHINGTON — What is “reality TV,” exactly?

Is it reality because you’re not looking at a fictional drama or comedy, with actors playing certain characters? If so, then you have a broad definition of reality.

In truth, the genre isn’t nearly as broad as it seems.

The first so-called reality series in this current wave of programs was ABC’s “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” It was real in the sense that actual people were put in cliffhanger-type positions on whether they’d be able to win a pile of money. But the format has been done already. It’s called a game show. It was unusual in that a game show appeared — and succeeded — in prime time.

If, as Dorothy Parker said, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then “Millionaire” was a flattering show, as rival networks tried their own concoctions.

Does “Survivor” qualify as a reality show? In my judgment, no. It’s too contrived to be authentic reality. After all, how real is it to plop 15 or so contestants in some remote corner of the world to give them a



CBS/CNS

Brook Geraghty, John Kenney, Rory Freeman, Chris Daugherty, Brady Finta, Lea “Sarge” Masters, Travis “Bubba” Sampson, Chad Crittenden and John Palyok are pictured during the first tribal council on the reality show “Survivor: Vanuatu-Islands of Fire” on CBS-TV.

chance to win a million bucks. The only reason folks volunteer to go on the show is to win the cash.

Does “American Idol” and its kin count as reality? People are singing and hoping to win a recording contract and a shot at real fame. But, if you’re old enough, you’ve seen it be-

fore on shows like “Ted Mack’s Amateur Hour” and “Talent Scouts.” Shorn of the big payoff, you might have been able to see a more recent vintage of this genre on late-night TV in the form of “Showtime at the Apollo.” It’s a talent show, pure and simple.

## TVReview


What about makeover shows like cable’s “Trading Spaces” and “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” and the imitations they have spawned? Close, I’d say, but no cigar. It comes closer because the programs start with people in the circumstances in which they find themselves. What spoils it is the help people get from outside — the show’s producers and their battalion of experts — to complete the makeover.

Let’s consider the relationship shows from the glitzy “The Bachelor” to the decidedly more low-rent syndicated series “Eliminate.” Again, these qualify as game shows.

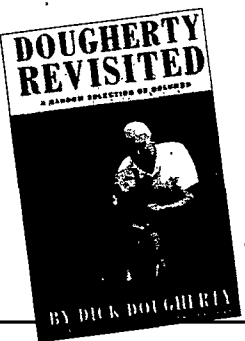
One central element selling the whole reality-TV craze is that the shows are unscripted. Yet there are always writers putting words into a host or narrator’s mouth.

In truth, the only reality TV is news and documentaries. Maybe more people would watch them if they got hung with the “reality” tag.

Pattison is media editor for Catholic News Service.



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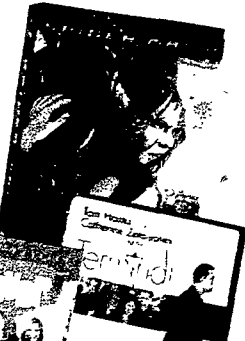



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