

# Look at me, I'm on TV: the political dimensions of reality television participation

Media, Culture &amp; Society

1–17

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/01634437211036979

[journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs)

**Bethany Klein**  and **Stephen Coleman**  
University of Leeds, UK

## Abstract

It has been over 20 years since the reality television genre attracted the attention of fans, critics and scholars. Reality programmes produced high viewing figures, suggesting a strong appetite for the form; critics dismissed the programmes as mindless and the participants as desperate for fame; and scholars assessed the formats, audiences and meanings of reality television, offering a complex, if rarely celebratory, account. While some commentators and scholars made connections between vote-based formats and electoral systems, or between opportunities afforded audiences for the deliberation of social issues and the idealized public sphere, the civic dimension of participation itself has not been explored. In this article, we take a closer look at reality television participants, drawing on press interviews and coverage in order to highlight how participants enact representative performances that might supplement more formal modes of democratic representation.

## Keywords

participation, politics, reality TV, representation, representative performances, visibility

## Introduction

Factual-entertainment television, more commonly referred to as ‘reality TV’, encompasses a range of formats that typically feature members of the public appearing as themselves in natural or constructed settings, including reality competitions, docusoaps, popular documentaries and social experiments. Reality TV programming has been

---

### Corresponding author:

Bethany Klein, School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds, Clothworkers' Building North, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK.

Email: [b.klein@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:b.klein@leeds.ac.uk)

regularly dismissed by some media commentators, politicians and scholars as, at best, a frivolous waste of time and, at worst, built on the exploitation of its participants. In the United Kingdom, recent press coverage of the deaths of reality TV and talk show participants, and the resulting inquiry by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport select committee, continue to focus on the potential negative consequences of participating in such programming (see Waterson, 2019). Yet, as more considered analyses have documented, reality TV has also offered space for the representation of populations with a limited public voice, challenging viewer prejudices by bringing types of people into living rooms whom viewers might not otherwise encounter. When the long history of television participation by members of the public is taken into account, lessons can be learned not only from tragedies that may have been prevented by more sensitive regulation but also from the broadened representational canvas that has been made available by reality TV programming. We argue in this article that media commentators, politicians, producers and regulators should take seriously the voices and reflections of people who have appeared on television, listening to their expectations and experiences, particularly in light of the increasing centrality of media participation in everyday life.

Amidst widespread anxieties about the extent to which actually existing democracies realize the norms of participatory inclusion, epistemic recognition and cross-cutting public deliberation, media participation is used by many people as a mode of self-representation for communicating beliefs and values. As political opinions have become polarized and fixed to the extent that we do not expect political programming to result in opinion change for participants or viewers, the power of reality TV to prompt meaningful discussions and influence attitudes is all the more significant. Further, what would have made reality TV television participants different to ‘us’ 20 years ago – their willingness to expose themselves on television – is what makes them similar to us now. Many of us live some of our lives on screen, whether television, YouTube or social media. Mediated visibility has afforded more people in more spaces opportunities for public self-disclosure. So why does reality television continue to concern us? What do people get out of television participation? And how does television participation relate to civic participation?

While some scholarship has linked reality television to the politics of representation and recognition (see, e.g. Kraidy, 2009; Skeggs and Wood, 2011), in this article we attempt to push the connection further by thinking about media participation as a form of civic participation that can shed light on deficiencies in formal political processes. By interrogating some of the explicit and implicit claims about the significance of reality television made by earlier researchers and by unpacking some of the representative performances of participants, we explore the breadth of the term ‘political’ and enhance understanding of how media get used as an alternative platform, particularly for people who may not feel that formal processes offer them sufficient voice or visibility.

## **Democratic participation**

Despite their normative claim to give voice to everyone regardless of status, democratic societies are characterized by marked and predictable inequalities of participation. It is not that disengaged citizens are too lazy or apathetic to bother to engage, but that they do not expect their voices to be heard (Coleman, 2020; Couldry, 2010; Flinders, 2015;

Pateman, 2012). This may be because they do not express themselves in accordance with standard political forms, because they fear being caricatured or ridiculed, or because they have come to believe that holders of social power are simply unable to understand or relate to their experiences. In recent decades critics of liberal democracy have begun to argue that political injustice stems not only from unequal resource distribution, but disparities of status recognition (Fraser, 1995; Honneth, 1996; Taylor, 1997). It is in the spirit of Nancy Fraser's call for a reframing of democratic practice whereby 'parity-impeding cultural norms' are replaced by 'parity-fostering alternatives' that we wish to explore spaces of public expression and visibility in which people have discovered opportunities to represent themselves and others through their own voices and actions.

We take a duly critical approach to the history of mediated visibility, acknowledging from the outset that opportunities for mediated visibility offered to culturally excluded and marginalized groups are never on their own terms. But even though they are framed and filtered through production norms over which they have little control, people utilize spaces of mediated visibility wherever they can find them. How people perform within such spaces, and how audiences interpret these performances, raises important questions about power, interpersonal dynamics and democratic agency.

The representation of popular voice in the media has traditionally depended upon the abstract quantitative aggregations of opinion polls, and vox pops in which reporters accost members of the public to give soundbite responses to their questions. Both of these forms are problematic. Opinion polls tend to tell us more about what the people who commission them want to ask than what people want to say (Bourdieu, 1979; Herbst, 1998). Vox pops are random, compressed bursts of symbolic public expression and, as Ekström and Tolson (2017: 225) suggest, 'What people actually have to say is not treated as particularly newsworthy. Vox pops are primarily used to illustrate categories of opinions and identities'. A much better way to explore people's identities is to allow them time and space to perform them, thereby highlighting the nuanced and variable ways in which identities are created and constrained (Goffman, 1959). In allowing audiences to get to know, and possibly change their minds about, people, capacities for judgement are encouraged which can have broader consequences for democratic agency.

We are interested in exploring the ways in which mediated visibility offers opportunities for people to broadcast beliefs and values that structure everyday politics. These may take the form of brief moments which feature ordinary people speaking truth to power. Recently celebrated moments in the UK include when Brenda from Bristol seemed to speak for an entire segment of society when she expressed her exasperation at the prospect of a 2017 election; or student Harriet Ellis's display of incredulous eye-rolling as Nigel Farage spoke in a 2018 Channel 4 debate; or Omar Salem's insistent demand that Boris Johnson justify the state of the NHS as he stood in a London hospital in 2019. The popularity of these moments of intervention are a response to the disruption of staged and mediated situations by the presence of people whose unrehearsed expression contrasts with what seems to be an over-determined narrative (Wollaston, 2019). By enabling people to broadcast beliefs, values, stories and interactions that have a potential to structure everyday politics, reality TV programming raises questions about the productive intersections between popular and civic culture.

## Reality television participation

Members of the public have been appearing regularly on television since the 1940s, when hidden camera shows, talent shows and game shows were added to the US television schedule. Enabled by technological changes, including less expensive and lighter equipment, reality TV formats surged in popularity around the turn of the 21st century, followed by an increasing focus in media and communication scholarship. Research has focused on features of 'postdocumentary' television (Corner, 2002), reality television texts (Deery, 2015), audiences (Hill, 2005; Sender, 2012) and connections between audiences and texts (Skeggs and Wood, 2012), with few studies exploring production and lay people's participation in production, despite a significant growth in media production studies over the same period (see Mayer et al., 2009; Paterson et al., 2016). Notable exceptions include Grindstaff's (2008) excellent ethnographic account of television talk show productions; Andrejevic's (2003) insightful analysis, drawing on interviews with reality TV cast members, linking the rise of surveillance culture with the popularity of the television formats; and Hill's (2018) extensive work on media engagement, which draws on interviews with reality television participants as well as audiences. The view of reality TV programming across most scholarly work is not optimistic: important critical work has examined its exploitative models of labour (Hearn, 2010), the commercial imperatives that shape it (Deery, 2015) and its promotion of consumerism (Sender, 2012). Positive appraisals have been largely limited to assessments of how viewers might, in the best case scenarios, benefit from following the emotional journeys of participants (Hill, 2005), or how the formats relate to the public sphere, as when viewers use programme content as a springboard for debate (Klein and Wardle, 2008), or enhance their understanding of democratic engagement through viewership (Coleman, 2006).

The limited amount of research into reality TV participation has not stopped some commentators and scholars from speculating about the production process, as well as the motivations of and consequences for participants who appear on programmes. Such speculation often takes on the question of what it is about baring their souls before a mass television audience that attracts people. The lazy answer is that participants are all fame-hungry narcissists, worryingly typical products of a culture dominated by vacuous celebrity. On the contrary, from self-made YouTube films to appearances on constructed reality sets, willingness to appear before others and have the authenticity of one's identity and depth of one's feelings judged by others is a way of participating in the world. It contrasts starkly with the dullness of conventional forms of civic participation, the best known of which is the anonymous act of expressing one's beliefs in the privacy of a polling booth. It is an irony of contemporary politics that democracy has come to be associated with the invisibility of citizens, many of whom believe that nothing they do or say in or out of the polling booth can impact public affairs.

The popularity of mediated self-disclosure is a move in the direction of visibility. It is a way of saying 'I am here'. Hannah Arendt's definition of the public domain as a space 'where I appear to others as others appear to me, where [people] exist not merely like other living or inanimate things, but to make their appearance explicitly' points to a conception of public participation that is conspicuously absent in contemporary politics, while increasingly prevalent in popular culture. People want to see other people who are

faced with the kind of challenges and dilemmas that they face themselves. While many scholars have lamented what they regard as the rise of ‘audience democracy’, whereby voters are transformed into passive spectators while political leaders exert their dominance through their occupation of television studios (De Beus, 2011; Manin, 1997), we argue that there has been a simultaneous blurring of roles in contemporary democracies between citizens and media actors. Across concept, structure and setting, reality TV programmes are fundamentally about individuals trying to relate to one another – and it is tracking how that happens that fascinates viewers and makes participants feel that they are engaging in something meaningful. While the authors have published research exploring the potential of reality TV programming, including its relationship to democratic engagement (Coleman, 2003, 2006, 2010) and its role for the deliberation of complex social issues (Klein, 2011, 2013; Klein and Wardle, 2008), knowing more about the experiences of participants helps to clarify the realization of such potential.

What do people expect from and how do people experience being participants in television productions? What are the consequences for people’s lives of being participants in television productions? How does media participation relate to ideals and experiences of civic participation? This article seeks to understand the cultural and political potential of what has proven to be an enduring television category and a harbinger for modes of self-disclosure on social media. The role of reality TV programming as a precursor to social media activities, and the capacity of popular programmes to attract large, real-time and often ‘second screen’ audiences, highlights the continuing relevance of the formats even as mediated spaces for public expression have proliferated. While the focus of our research is reality TV programming, social media activities are now embedded across the different phases of television production: for example, the post-broadcast experiences of participants will involve a shift from production-based activities to social media and press attention (the latter often making liberal use of tweets).

Drawing on press coverage of and interviews with participants, we explore the expectations and experiences of programme participants, and consider reality TV formats as supporting instances of mediated representation as civic participation. We conducted a theoretically framed analysis, drawing upon three different representative roles that reality television participants appear to be performing: speaking *as*, speaking *about* and speaking *for*. In order to explore the nature of these roles and their implications for our argument, we first need to define the term representation.

## **Reality TV participants and representative performances**

To represent is to mediate between the absent and the present. Representatives seek to ventriloquize, re-presenting the absent as if it were present. They perform an aesthetic act (Ankersmit, 1996, 2002), creative, in the sense that representation cannot avoid contributing to the conception and constitution of the object, idea or public that is being represented. To represent someone or something, whether politically or aesthetically, is not therefore to reproduce it objectively, but to make a claim to be able to speak on its behalf. The efficacy of any representative performance depends upon the strength of the claim and its reception (Saward, 2006).

Participants in reality TV formats are most obviously engaged in the work of self-performance (Goffman, 1959). They seek to represent themselves as characters who possess a credible integrity. But in displaying themselves for public appreciation/consumption, they are also inviting viewers to think and care about the things that matter to them, be that support for a football team, membership of a group or community, or advocacy of a social cause. This involves three forms of representative activity, which are by no means mutually exclusive. Some representatives speak *as* objects of representation. For example, a black woman or member of a traveller community might want their self-performance to be interpreted as an enactment of the qualities and challenges of their identity. This does not mean that they would claim to be speaking for all black women or travellers. Neither does it mean that black women or travellers have asked them to represent them. But their association with such identities allows them to say, 'Look at me. I am this type of person and by watching me you may learn something about how this identity enables and constrains my agency within particular contingent situations'. A second kind of representative act is to speak *about* an object of representation, thereby drawing attention to something or someone that might otherwise be invisible or discounted. For example, someone might want to introduce into everyday discussion a concern about the dangers posed by climate change or the moral imperative of saving babies from death through painful hunger. Like NGOs and charities that represent a cause, such participants in reality TV formats are effectively saying, 'If you want to understand me and my world, you will need to sensitize yourself to this pressing concern that I am bringing to your attention'. A third kind of representative performance entails speaking *for* an object of representation. This might involve speaking for those who are voiceless, such as animals or nature. It could involve speaking for a group or a region. This is the closest form of representation to the role of the conventional political representative who claims to speak for the interests of a community. Such a representative might say, 'These people cannot speak for themselves, but if I am performing my role well they will not miss out because they will be satisfied that I am speaking for them as they would want to be spoken for'.

These theoretical reflections about representation should be considered against a contemporary backdrop of dysfunctional representation. In recent decades political democracies have seen a decline in trust for traditional representative institutions and procedures. Most people are normatively committed to the idea of democracy, but empirically disappointed by the efficiency of representative mechanisms. With diminishing confidence in parties, parliaments and elected politicians, many citizens turn to gestures of symbolic self-representation ranging from theatrical street demonstrations to parodic memes to digital storytelling. Some (but certainly not all) participants in reality TV formats see this public situation as an opportunity to engage in acts of representation, speaking *as*, *about* or *for* particular groups or causes.

We have chosen to focus on participants who used their reality TV exposure to engage in this novel form of representation. Our sample comprises participants who received prominent press attention following their appearances, which allowed us to reconstruct their experiences and views through press interviews and coverage. Although the use of existing interviews rather than interviews conducted by the authors meant relying on extracts that had been edited and framed (in a way not dissimilar to the process



participants would have experienced with reality television), we prioritized powerful emblematic cases over ease of access (especially important given that a couple of the influential participants in this analysis are no longer with us). Examples of participants include those who featured in early or more recent programmes, in order to reflect on changes and continuities of representative performances over time, and in US- or UK-based reality programmes, since both countries are leading producers of the formats and of reality celebrities who cross over into media spaces beyond the programmes in which they initially participated. In this section, we draw on sources featuring participants to explore the political roles they inhabited through representative performances during and following their reality television appearances.

### *Speaking as*

In part because producers of reality TV shows have sought to appeal to a broad range of the viewing public, many participants have been selected because they belong to an under-represented demographic. Participants from groups that have not had much visibility in mainstream media may find themselves under pressure to speak as a member of the community to which they are linked. They become, quite literally, representatives of a larger category and, for many audience members, a rare glimpse of somebody like themselves or somebody they've never encountered in 'real life'.

An early and notable example of the 'speaking as' representative performance is Richard Hatch, the openly gay 'villain' and winner of the first season of *Survivor* in the US in 2000. This was the programme which, alongside *Big Brother*, was credited with launching the reality craze stateside. Upon the conclusion of *Survivor*, media commentators immediately drew comparisons with the political sphere. On MSNBC's political talk show *Hardball*, for example, guests debated, 'What can Bush and Gore learn from the wildly popular television show *Survivor*?' (Hardball, 2000). But it was Hatch's role as an openly gay man on a mainstream, primetime programme that suggested the possibility of reality television as offering representation for under-represented communities.

Hatch's role as representative was twofold: he offered a potential role model to gay viewers and an opportunity to 'get to know' a gay person for viewers who believed they didn't already know any. Although Hatch was hesitant to claim the position of role model, he recognized that seeing a happy, out gay man could help others: 'I'm just me. And I'm not out there trying to be a role model. I like myself. I like the way I live my life. And if that helps somebody be more comfortable with who they are or live more honestly, then great, I'm happy to fill that bill. But my goal isn't to be a role model. I'm just being myself. I just hope it helps' (Today, 2000). A spokesman for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation was excited by the potential of Hatch's win, and how it showed 'the diversity of our community. What most viewers learned here is that gay men can be smart' (Weiner, 2000: A20). Hatch's win opened the doors to other representations of gay people across media offerings, from marketing to the growing genre of reality television. The head of a major advertising agency noted Hatch as the 'first openly gay spokesman to appear on a "got milk" ad' and wondered if 'gays are going to have more impact in terms of trends' (Hardball, 2000). Certainly, Hatch's success seemed to be influential to reality television casting and auditioning and, by 2002, the discourse was

more sophisticated, with one booted-off survivor asked, 'How has "Survivor" been as a platform for people who may not be familiar with gay people in their lives to see gay people as just people?' (Early Show, 2002). While documentaries, cable programmes and the occasional scripted series had featured gay participants before, as a producer for MTV's *The Real World* noted, 'it took reality television and Survivor to have the first sort of gay Machiavellian winner of a major, you know, television show with Richard Hatch, you know. You wouldn't have gotten a scripted character like that. So, sometimes reality can take you places that scripted can't' (Talk of the Nation, 2006).

There are of course pressures associated with such a representative role. The same producer considered, 'You know, it's always difficult when you're putting a show together, because whoever you put on it, often you sort of feel like, gee, do they have to represent a whole race or do they have to represent the sexual orientation' (Talk of the Nation, 2006). But such a representative performance also confers privileges, including the ability to contribute to national debates, as Hatch did in 2004 when he appeared in the media with his partner to support the then hotly-contested issue of gay marriage (Big Story Weekend Edition, 2004).

Programmes like *Survivor* rely on the personal qualities and openness of participants to produce drama and entertainment. However, even when personal lives and values take a backseat to the primary action of a programme, participants may emerge from their appearances with expectations to act as representatives. Nadiya Hussain, winner of 2015's *Great British Bake Off*, found herself 'speaking as' a British Muslim as much as a skilled baker following her appearance. Unlike participants in early reality television programmes, more recent participants should have a better idea of what to expect, though the intensity of the spotlight and reduction of identity can still shock.

Like Hatch, Hussain hadn't planned to be a representative: 'I'm a part of the Bangladeshi community, I'm a part of the Muslim community, I'm British. But my aim isn't to represent any of those communities, my aim is to represent me' (Kelly, 2016). Even so, she was aware that she would stand out on *Bake Off*: 'Originally, I was a bit nervous that people would look at me, a Muslim in a headscarf, and wonder if I could bake' (Walker-Arnott, 2015).

But the reality of appearing on reality television from an under-represented background often means that the choice to be a representative or not does not lie with participants, but media and viewers. While Hussain 'certainly didn't enter a baking show in the hope of representing anyone', the attention on her hijab and religion was immediate (Kelly, 2017). 'Being a Muslim for me was incidental, but from the day the show was launched, I was "the 30-year-old Muslim," and that became my identity', explained Hussain, who questioned, 'Am I the token Muslim?' (Kelly, 2017). Hussain was particularly treated as a token by right-wing columnists who decried her success as part of a 'PC agenda': a *Daily Mail* columnist wrote of the elimination of a white, middle-class contestant, 'Perhaps if she'd made a chocolate mosque, she'd have stood a better chance' (Platell, 2015).

On the other hand, Hussain's visibility as a Muslim woman was celebrated as part of a growing number of positive representations across media: 'Muslim women in hijabs are becoming increasingly visible in the public domain, whether appearing in EastEnders,



Android ads or The Great British Bake Off' (Aly, 2015a). For many viewers, Hussain was speaking as a representative not simply for the communities to which she belongs, but of a more inclusive Britishness: 'That an Asian Muslim woman in a headscarf can win a thoroughly British competition proves that 'Britishness' is a broader and more open concept than some would like us to think' (Aly, 2015b). And, in this sense, Hussain came to embrace the representative performance for the opportunities that it afforded. As she put it, 'Just because I'm not a stereotypical British person, it doesn't mean I am not into bunting, cake and tea. I'm just as British as anyone else, and I hope I have proved that' (Walker-Arnott, 2015). Ultimately, the goal for such representatives is to challenge stereotypes, reinforcing the normality and diversity of their communities on behalf of those members who do not have the same level of voice or visibility.

The sense in which Hatch and Hussain were speaking as representatives of hitherto marginalized identities was separate from any overt intention to speak for others. On the contrary, it was the nonstrategic ways by which they realized their representative role that made them more convincing. Because reality TV participants are protractedly exposed to an audience over time, the complex multi-dimensionality of their identities becomes clearer (much like a friend who might at first glance be thought of in terms of a disability or skin colour, but is eventually recognized as possessing a compound identity). Paradoxically, it is precisely this sense in which reality TV participants are unwitting, inadvertent representatives that makes them relatable and credible, in contrast to strategic representatives whose characters often seem to be reduced to just one, albeit significant, aspect of their identity.

### *Speaking about*

Some reality television participants join programmes with the focused goal of highlighting a cause as an activist. In speaking about a campaign or specific issues, they seek to expand the public agenda by drawing attention to a social injustice or call for collective action.

MTV's *The Real World*, a precursor to the 'reality' tag, offered a model for how participation may act as a platform for 'speaking about' activist causes through the experience of housemate Pedro Zamora. Zamora appeared on *The Real World* in 1995: a gay, HIV positive 21-year-old, he viewed the opportunity as a chance to expand his reach as an AIDS educator. 'He was one of the first people to use a reality show for a greater purpose', noted a producer (Rothaus, 2009).

While Zamora had already received national attention as an AIDS educator and activist (he was profiled in the *Wall Street Journal* in 1991), *The Real World* offered an opportunity to reach younger audiences with a window into living with AIDS, very different than the dry, health information they would have encountered in school. As Zamora described,

It's a great way to educate people (about AIDS), because when I go into a presentation, I'm only there for an hour. I talk about the times that I'm happy and have a lot of energy, or I can talk about the times that I'm sick and that I'm scared, but they can't see it. They're just seeing me speak about it.

This was the perfect way to have people see it all. I had cameras following me when I was at the park playing soccer with Judd, and I had cameras with me when I was talking to the doctor and not feeling well. (Rodriguez, 1994: Z2)

*The Real World* was a suitable environment for activism since the housemates themselves were the focus of the action – as opposed to competition-based formats where viewers may learn little about the private lives of participants. *Big Brother*, variants of which have been successful around the globe, has been a destination for activists for similar reasons. Carole Vincent, who appeared on the 8th series of *Big Brother* in the UK, was described by one paper as having ‘been a protester at everything from Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camps to recent anti-war rallies. She is a member of the Socialist Workers’ Party, Respect, Unison, Action For South Africa and the Stop The War coalition, among many others’ (Hughes, 2007: 7). With activism playing such a central role in her life, it’s no surprise that Vincent entered the *Big Brother* house with the specific goal of bringing ‘important issues to the public’ (Brown, 2007). In the end, much of Vincent’s efforts were unlikely to make the edit, with the interpersonal dynamics of other housemates (in other words, kissing and fighting) bound to get more attention. But she was also able to wield her time on *Big Brother* into press access that she likely wouldn’t have gained otherwise: subsequent appearances in the press to speak about activist causes presented Vincent as a ‘Former *Big Brother* contestant’ as well as activist (Pears, 2008).

Even reality programming that has been dismissed as particularly shallow has at times offered space for ‘speaking about’ representative performances. Consider series 2 of *Love Island*, the dating programme best known for its barely dressed beach bodies and night camera sex scenes. One of the controversies of the 2016 series involved participant Zara Holland being stripped of her Miss Great Britain title after having sex on the programme. Fellow Islander Sophie Gradon drew cheers from contestants and audiences when she used a talent contest on the programme to give a feminist speech in defence of Holland and women’s right to exercise their sexuality:

Life shouldn’t be about judging one another. Say, for example, judging a young woman for enjoying herself. A young woman who hasn’t harmed anyone but a woman who has faced a torrent of judgemental and close minded opinions since leaving Love Island. As an ex Miss Newcastle and Miss GB I can say that it’s time people moved forward from their old fashioned thinking and accepted the simple fact that women like to have sex. (Love Island, 2016)

Gradon’s openness about her bisexuality and feminist views brought a new dimension to the programme and highlighted the potential for speaking about activist causes even in less obvious media spaces. In the following series, Islander Camilla Thurlow was even more explicit about her feminist identity, defining terms for her fellow contestants and ending a coupling over his lack of support for feminism. In true activist style, Thurlow reflected on the disagreement, ‘My main concern after that was whether I’d done the cause justice’ (Cope, 2017).

Gradon was one of two contestants who sadly took their own lives following their appearances on *Love Island*, a reminder that the representative performances enabled by

reality programming also come with unwanted attention and pressure which can produce or exacerbate mental health issues. The television industry, press and social media platforms have a responsibility to minimize such risks without shutting down opportunities for ordinary people to appear on reality programmes.

In terms of representative theory, reality TV offers a potential platform for those who wish to raise issues within the public sphere. By enabling participants to reach viewers who might not ever watch political programmes, and by providing a context in which representative work can be subtly interweaved within the unfolding of the lifeworld, there is scope for expanding the space of political sensibility. Rather than be harangued by a didactic advocate, viewers are attracted to values which they can learn to share as they see them lived out.

### *Speaking for*

Some participants enter reality TV with practiced experience of representing. They have already acquired the techniques and tricks of speaking for others, sometimes formally as professional politicians, and other times informally as community leaders. Reality television gives them an opportunity to develop and use diplomatic skills; meet people they wouldn't have otherwise; see things from another perspective. They can be seen as ordinary enough to be representative but extraordinary enough to be representatives. They can disarmingly present themselves as members of a lifeworld rather than didactic invaders, pressing their ideologies upon natives of the land of everyday life.

Politicians and community leaders who volunteer for this genre are likely to regard themselves as possessing special cultural skills – folk diplomacy, so to speak – that can entice their fellow participants, and especially the viewing audience, to translate political into personal values – and vice versa.

Participants who have demonstrated and honed their skills in speaking for others have sometimes used their exposure and experience as a springboard to enter formal politics: for example, former member of the US House of Representatives Sean Duffy began his public life as a housemate on MTV's *The Real World* and UK *Apprentice* winner Michelle Dewberry (Parsons, 2019) joined a number of US reality participants (France, 2016) in standing for but failing to win political office (and this is to say nothing of the former US President, whose popularity was due in large part to his reality television career (Keefe, 2018)).

Deirdre Kelly, or 'White Dee' as she was known on *Benefits Street*, offers an illustrative example of a 'speaking for' representative performance. Kelly was the break-out star of *Benefits Street*, a series that documented the lives of residents in an area of Birmingham with high dependency on welfare benefits. Although the programme was widely criticized as 'poverty porn', it also provoked media and political debate on issues relating to poverty and welfare, and introduced viewers to Kelly, who offered advice to fellow residents and presented herself to camera as speaking for a marginalized constituency, whose voice is often distorted through stereotypes.

Kelly was then able to apply those skills in various settings through the opportunities made available to her. She appeared on morning shows, chat shows and news programmes, including the BBC's flagship *Newsnight*. Interviews with Kelly appeared in

tabloid and broadsheet papers, including ‘serious’ papers like the *Guardian* and the *Telegraph*. Here, her natural politician qualities were praised. A *Guardian* interviewer explained that, despite the narrow representation on *Benefits Street*, ‘In fact, Dee is enormously likable. Unaffected yet knowing, she is very direct and can be extremely funny, with a natural gift for comic timing. She is also one of the most tolerant, least judgmental people I’ve ever met, and remarkably pragmatic about the hand she has been dealt’ (Aitkenhead, 2014). A *Telegraph* interviewer admitted,

In reality, I find her relatively well-informed and politically aware. Plus she is engaged, having voted in every election apart from one.

Snobbery and judgement aside - she is exactly the kind of floating voter politicians should be targeting. (Ridge, 2014)

Kelly’s ability to make connections with people from a wide range of backgrounds helped her navigate the sometimes rocky social waters of *Celebrity Big Brother*, where she appeared alongside professional sportspeople, actors and fellow reality television participants in 2014. As befits an able politician, Kelly remained in the Big Brother house until the final night. While her appearance allowed her to stop receiving benefits, she continued to express her commitment to the working-class residents of her street in interviews.

Kelly followed up her reality programming run with an appearance at the 2014 Conservative party conference, where she listened to the then Chancellor of the Exchequer discuss plans to freeze working-age benefits for 2 years. She shared her evolving thoughts, just as she had done in considering the social politics of reality settings:

When I was listening to the speech, I thought yeah, that’s a good idea that because I do think you’ve got to get a balance between people that do work and have nothing in their pocket at the end of the week and then you get people who don’t work who are on benefits who have got a minimum of £200 in their pocket.

But by the end, after I had time to think about it, I thought it wasn’t a good idea because I think it’s just going to make genuine, genuine benefit claimants worse off because the cost of living is going to carry on rising, fuel’s going to carry on going up and at the end of the day, if you’re getting £50 a week now, that £50 is not going to be worth £50 in two years, it’s probably going to be worth half of that and I just think the country will actually get into a worse state. (Datham, 2014)

Given her ability to navigate complex issues, to communicate them clearly and to speak for others, it is no surprise that Kelly has been encouraged to stand for office, a suggestion which she has playfully entertained but not formally pursued (‘I’ve got more passion in my little finger than most politicians have in their whole body’ (Culliford, 2014)). It certainly says a lot about contemporary formal politics that the idea of an ‘ordinary’ person standing for office is seen as a novelty.

Indeed, much of what is going on in reality TV constitutes a form of boundary-shifting between what is entertaining and what is serious; what is private and what is public;

what is individual and what is civic. Without seeking to be pedagogical, reality TV invites its audience to think about the different kinds of meaning they are capable of making within particular sites of interaction. Without being high-minded about its remit, the genre extends the relational field of citizenship, providing it with a form of expression that political journalists may well sneer at, but the politically disengaged perceive as having something to do with the allocation of values.

## Representing in public

We have argued that reality TV has opened up a space for the representation of populations with a limited public voice, exposing audiences to groups, issues and values that they might not otherwise have an opportunity to encounter on television. We have made no claims in this article about the effects of such exposure upon audiences, although we note that several media scholars have suggested that civic and political agenda items are often primed and framed within genres that do not purport to be ‘serious’, ‘political’ or ‘discursive’ (Graham and Harju, 2011; Hoffman, 2013; LaMarre, 2013; Long et al., 2021; Moy et al., 2005). Our claim in this article is that some participants in some reality TV programmes are engaged for some of the time in what we call representative performances. That is to say, they speak as, about or for groups, issues or values with a view to bringing them to public attention.

Just as reality TV formats allow viewers to witness a range of mundane human activities, interactions and dilemmas (the so-called reality of reality TV), they also put on public display not only the representative performances that participants attempt to enact, but the process of working at such enactment. Audiences are invited to observe how a person whose behaviour is being made public by the technology of television works at turning that representation to their own advantage, or the advantage of others with whom they identify. When audiences see politicians giving speeches or political parties running conventions or conferences, they are exposed to the outcome of a representative performance: the final display. In reality TV we are witnesses to the performative devising process and rehearsal. We see representation in process, unfolding from intention to articulation.

We have not only shown in this article how reality TV shows people ‘doing representation’ in situ, but how some participants continue this work of representing after they have appeared on television. Bolstered by their public persona as reality TV celebrities, they are able to use their fame to act as representatives of people and causes that might otherwise receive little or no media representation. In short, reality TV allows some citizens to rise within the mediated public sphere as quasi-representatives, just as within the social media sphere, some voices that would not meet conventional thresholds of legitimacy are able to make themselves heard (Lovelock, 2019; Stromer-Galley, 2002).

Of course, representative performances on reality TV are no more guaranteed to succeed than they are in the conventional political sphere. Participants in reality TV shows do not control editorial output. Celebrities emerging from such shows cannot determine how the media will report or frame them. As always, representation is a risky business and there are clearly differences between performative intentions and mediated reception.

We argue that in an age of populism, when dangerous claims to speak for vast publics are made by demagogues who know how to exploit television (as well as social media), there is something democratically salutary about opportunities for people to appear on television speaking for themselves, the communities they know intimately and the frequently neglected values that they wish to espouse. At their best, these representative performances remind us that the public is not homogeneous, and that cultural experience is rich precisely because it is diverse. Reality TV projects an image of citizenship as people living together amidst their differences which might just help to nurture a sense that diversity and solidarity are compatible.

In conclusion, returning to the questions that we raised at the beginning of this article, we argue that scholars interested in mediated forms of representation should pay attention to reality TV as a potential site in which distinct and hybrid forms of representing can be observed in motion. Some – but by no means all – participants in reality TV have used the experience to enhance their political voices. This tendency is nullified neither by the fact that television production is institutionally geared towards the control of lay participants nor by the many examples of reality TV participants being exploited, shamed and effectively de-voiced. In some cases participation in reality TV constitutes a form of civic agency by affording opportunities for representation from below.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Bethany Klein  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0638-5549>

## References

- Aitkenhead D (2014) Deirdre Kelly, AKA White Dee: ‘I would never watch a show called Benefits Street’. *Guardian*, 7 March. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2014/mar/07/deirdre-kelly-white-dee-never-watch-benefits-street> (accessed 21 June 2021).
- Aly R (2015a) How the hijab – and H&M – are reshaping mainstream British culture. *Guardian*, 28 September. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/sep/28/hijab-h-and-m-mainstream-culture-great-british-bake-off-diversity> (accessed 21 June 2021).
- Aly R (2015b) Nadiya Hussain has won so much more than the Great British Bake Off. *Guardian*, 8 October. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/oct/08/nadiya-hussain-has-won-so-much-more-than-the-great-british-bake-off> (accessed 21 June 2021).
- Andrejevic M (2003) *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Ankersmit FR (1996) *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy Beyond Fact and Value*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ankersmit FR (2002) *Political Representation*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Big Story Weekend Edition (2004) Interview with Richard Hatch, Emiliano Cabral. *Fox News*, 6 March, 21: 32.
- Brown C (2007) Activist BB housemate had been arrested. *This is Local London*, 31 May.
- Bourdieu P (1979) Public opinion does not exist. In: Mattelart A and Siegelau S (eds.) *Communication and Class Struggle 1*. New York, NY: International General, pp.124–130.



- Coleman S (2003) A tale of two houses: The House of Commons, the *Big Brother* house and the people at home. *Parliamentary Affairs* 56(4): 733–758.
- Coleman S (2006) How the other half votes: *Big Brother* viewers and the 2005 general election. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9(4): 457–479.
- Coleman S (2010) Acting powerfully: Performances of power in *Big Brother*. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 13(2): 127–146.
- Coleman S (2020) *How People Talk About Politics: Brexit and Beyond*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Cope R (2017) Exclusive: Camilla Thurlow on why she really entered ‘Love Island’. *Grazia*, 1 August. Available at: <https://graziadaily.co.uk/celebrity/news/exclusive-camilla-thurlow-really-entered-love-island/> (accessed 21 June 2021).
- Corner J (2002) Performing the real: Documentary diversions. *Television & New Media* 3(3): 255–269.
- Couldry N (2010) *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism*. London: Sage.
- Culliford G (2014) Yes I’m earning AND claiming Benefits. . . if you have a problem with that talk to David Cameron. *Sun*, 18 May.
- Datham M (2014) Benefits Street’s White Dee turns to Ukip. *Times*, 29 September.
- De Beus J (2011) Audience democracy: An emerging pattern in postmodern political communication. In: Brants K and Voltmer K (eds.) *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.19–38.
- Deery J (2015) *Reality TV*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Early Show (2002) Former ‘Survivor’ contestant John Carroll talks about his experiences as a contestant. *CBS*, 19 April.
- Ekström M and Tolson A (2017) Political interviews: Pushing the boundaries of ‘neutralism’. In: Ekström M and Firmstone J (eds.) *The Mediated Politics of Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.123–149.
- Flinders M (2015) The general rejection? Political disengagement, disaffected democrats and ‘doing politics’ differently. *Parliamentary Affairs* 68(suppl\_1): 241–254.
- France LR (2016) Trump isn’t the only reality star to try politics. *CNN.com*, 10 November. Available at: <https://money.cnn.com/2016/11/10/media/reality-stars-politics/index.html> (accessed 21 June 2021).
- Fraser N (1995) From redistribution to recognition? Dilemmas of justice in a ‘post-socialist’ age. *New Left Review* 212: 68–68.
- Goffman E (1959 [1990]) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Harmondsworth. (Reprinted, London: Penguin Books).
- Graham T and Harju A (2011) Reality TV as a trigger of everyday political talk in the net-based public sphere. *European Journal of Communication* 26(1): 18–32.
- Grindstaff L (2008) *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hardball (2000) ‘Survivor’ finale rakes in big bucks for CBS. *MSNBC*, 24 August.
- Hearn A (2010) Reality television, *the Hills* and the limits of the immaterial labour thesis. *TripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 8(1): 60–76.
- Herbst S (1998) *Reading Public Opinion: How Political Actors View the Democratic Process*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Hill A (2005) *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*. London: Routledge.
- Hill A (2018) *Media Experiences: Engaging with Drama and Reality Television*. London: Routledge.
- Hoffman L (2013) Breaking boundaries | Political interviews: Examining perceived media bias and effects across TV entertainment formats. *International Journal of Communication* 7: 471–488.

- Honneth A (1996) *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Hughes R (2007) Loudmouth 'from hell'. *Daily Star*, 3 June.
- Keefe PR (2018) How Mark Burnett resurrected Donald Trump as an icon of American success. *New Yorker*, 27 December. Available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/01/07/how-mark-burnett-resurrected-donald-trump-as-an-icon-of-american-success> (accessed 21 June 2021).
- Kelly H (2016) 'I slaughtered animals aged 5': Nadiya Hussain opens up about her childhood in Bangladesh. *Express*, 16 August. Available at: <https://www.express.co.uk/showbiz/tv-radio/700401/Nadiya-Hussain-opens-up-childhood-Bangladesh-slaughtered-animals> (accessed 21 June 2021).
- Kelly H (2017) Nadiya Hussain confesses she felt like the 'token Muslim' on Bake Off. *Express*, 11 July. Available at: <https://www.express.co.uk/celebrity-news/826978/Nadiya-Hussain-token-Muslim-Great-British-Bake-Off-BBC-Mary-Berry> (accessed 21 June 2021).
- Klein B (2011) Entertaining ideas: Social issues in entertainment television. *Media, Culture & Society* 33(6): 905–921.
- Klein B (2013) Entertainment-education for the media-saturated: Audience perspectives on social issues in entertainment programming. *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 16(1): 43–57.
- Klein B and Wardle C (2008) 'These two are speaking Welsh on Channel 4!' Welsh representations and cultural tensions on *Big Brother 7*. *Television & New Media* 9(6): 514–530.
- Kraidy MM (2009) *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LaMarre H (2013) Breaking boundaries | When parody and reality collide: Examining the effects of Colbert's super pac satire on issue knowledge and policy engagement across media formats. *International Journal of Communication* 7: 394–414.
- Long JA, Jeong MS and Lavis SM (2021) Political comedy as a gateway to news use, internal efficacy, and participation: A longitudinal mediation analysis. *Human Communication Research* 47(2): 166–191.
- Love Island (2016) Episode 20. ITV, 21 June.
- Lovelock M (2019) 'My coming out story': Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth identities on YouTube. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22(1): 70–85.
- Manin B (1997) *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mayer V, Banks MJ and Caldwell JT (eds.) (2009) *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Moy P, Xenos MA and Hess VK (2005) Communication and citizenship: Mapping the political effects of infotainment. *Mass Communication & Society* 8(2): 111–131.
- Parsons R (2019) Ex-Apprentice star Michelle Dewberry says the North is treated as 'an afterthought' as she stands for Brexit Party in Hull West and Hessle. *Yorkshire Post*, 14 November. Available at: <https://www.yorkshirepost.co.uk/news/uk-news/ex-apprentice-star-michelle-dewberry-says-north-treated-afterthought-she-stands-brexit-party-hull-west-and-hessle-1747448> (accessed 21 June 2021).
- Pateman C (2012) Participatory democracy revisited. *Perspectives on Politics* 10(1): 7–19.
- Paterson C, Lee D, Saha A, et al. (eds.) (2016) *Advancing Media Production Research: Shifting Sites, Methods, and Politics*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pears E (2008) Anti-racism message lives on at Rise festival. *Haringey Independent*, 15 July.
- Platell A (2015) Why womb transplants make me shudder. *Daily Mail*, 3 October. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3258338/AMANDA-PLATELL-womb-transplants-make-shudder.html> (accessed 21 June 2021).

- Ridge S (2014) White Dee interview: 'What I really thought of Conservative Party conference and all those Tories'. *Telegraph*, 1 October.
- Rodriguez R (1994) 'Real World' cast enters season on friendly terms. *Salt Lake Tribune*, 29 June, p.22.
- Rothaus S (2009) Pedro's story finds a new voice. *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, 22 March, p.g3.
- Saward M (2006) The representative claim. *Contemporary Political Theory* 5(3): 297–318.
- Sender K (2012) *The Makeover: Reality Television and Reflexive Audiences*. New York, NY: NYU Press.
- Skeggs B and Wood H (eds.) (2011) *Reality Television and Class*. London: BFI.
- Skeggs B and Wood H (2012) *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value*. London: Routledge.
- Stromer-Galley J (2002) New voices in the public sphere: A comparative analysis of interpersonal and online political talk. *Javnost-The Public* 9(2): 23–41.
- Talk of the Nation (2006) Long live rock 'n' roll: MTV at 25. NPR, 1 August.
- Taylor C (1997) The politics of recognition. *New Contexts of Canadian Criticism* 98: 25–73.
- Today (2000) Richard Hatch discusses 'Survivor' and what's happened to him since the show ended. *NBC*, 30 August.
- Walker-Arnott E (2015) Bake Off's Nadiya: I was nervous people would see a Muslim in a headscarf and wonder if I could bake. *Radio Times*, 28 September. Available at: <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/entertainment/reality-tv/2015-09-28/bake-offs-nadiya-i-was-nervous-people-would-see-a-muslim-in-a-headscarf-and-wonder-if-i-could-bake/> (accessed 21 June 2021).
- Waterson J (2019) Plan for safeguards to protect 'dignity' of reality TV participants, *Guardian*, 29 July. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/jul/29/watchdog-unveils-new-rules-to-protect-reality-tv-participants-love-island> (accessed 21 June 2021).
- Weiner J (2000) Winning 'Survivor' defends his style as strategy in 'a game'. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 25 August, p.A20.
- Wollaston S (2019) 'It just snowballed': The viral stars of Brexit Britain on what happened next. *Guardian*, 19 September. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/19/viral-stars-brexit-britain-eyeroll-girl-ana-telma-rocha> (accessed 21 June 2021).