

Reality TV's Low-Wage and No-Wage Work

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ABSTRACT: In keeping with this issue of *Alternate Routes'* focus on forms of low-waged and no-waged work, this article focuses on low-waged and non-waged work in the reality TV production sector. How do reality-TV studios try to maximize profits by keeping the costs of making their commodities to a minimum, and how does the push for profit disorganize and devalue labour? This article contextualizes and critiques how reality TV studios try to maximize profits by minimizing production costs in three sections. "Reality TV Producers: Work Behind the Scenes" shows how reality TV's classification as "non-scripted" programming enables production companies to exploit a non-unionized workforce. "Reality TV Celebrities: Work in the Scenes" highlights how reality TV production companies exploit the no-waged labour of "contestant-participants." "Reality TV Interns: Work Behind the Scenes, and In Them" shows how studios use internship programs to get workers to make reality TV programs without pay and how some of these programs glorify no-waged work. The article concludes on a more optimistic note with an overview of reality-TV worker challenges to reality-TV's owners with unionization, strikes, litigation, publicity and discourse.

KEYWORDS: Cultural Industries; Reality TV; Cultural Work; Political Economy of Communication

INTRODUCTION: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF REALITY TV

Since the turn of the millennium, the North American reality-TV production sector has grown immensely, and it is a boon to TV networks as they compete for viewer attention, ratings and ad revenue in a period of TV industry transformation (Kraidy and Sender, 2011; Murray and Ouellete, 2009). In the 2001-2002 TV season, reality TV accounted for about a quarter of the prime time network TV audience watching the top ten programs. In the 2007 and 2008 TV season, reality-TV captured about

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three quarters of the audience for the top prime time TV shows; in 2010-2011 season, it took in more than half (Nielsen, 2011). Despite a recent downturn in reality TV ratings (Collins 2014), North American TV networks still load their schedules with reality TV shows like *Big Brother*, *America's Got Talent*, *Duck Dynasty* and *Dance Moms* to collect viewer attention and cash in on advertising revenue (Kraidy and Sender, 2011; Mirrlees, 2013; Murray and Ouellete, 2009).

Reality TV shows are pervasive not simply because viewers demand that TV networks schedule them, but because these shows cost TV networks so much less to acquire from TV production companies than scripted TV shows do (Slocum 2005). And reality-TV shows cost less to buy because they cost less to make. On average, an hour long reality TV show costs a studio between \$350,000 and \$500,000 to make, while one episode of a fictional TV show costs anywhere from \$1 to \$2.5 million (Adalian, 2015; Eidelson, 2013; Gornstein, 2008). That reality-TV is “cheap” to buy and make relative to more expensive scripted TV shows is not surprising, but newsy descriptions of reality-TV’s low exchange-value obscures the asymmetrical power relations between the owners of reality-TV studios and the workers whose labour they employ to make these commodities. At the base of abstract and impersonal market exchanges between TV networks and TV studios and the scheduled flow and happy consumption of the latest *American Idol* or *Dancing With the Stars* knockoff, is the exploitation of human labour. In the capitalist system, especially in this epoch’s post-Fordist neoliberal one, corporations competitively strive to maximize profit on behalf of shareholders and they regularly do this by selling commodities for more than what they pay their workers in wages to produce them. Following this capitalist logic, high profits correlate with low wages (Norris, 2014).

The capitalist profit motive is full blown in the reality TV sector, where big TV networks demand cheap-to-acquire content from reality TV studios, and these studios compete against each other by slashing prices and labour costs. How specifically do reality-TV studios try to maximize profits by keeping the costs of making their commodities to a minimum, and how does this disorganize and devalue labour? This article contextualizes and critiques how reality TV studios do this in three sections. “Reality TV Producers: Work Behind the Scenes” shows how reality TV’s classification as “non-scripted” programming enables production companies to exploit a non-unionized workforce. “Reality TV Celebrities: Work in the Scenes” highlights how reality TV production companies exploit the no-waged labour of “contestant-participants.” “Reality TV Interns: Work Behind the Scenes, and In Them” shows how

studios use internship programs to get workers to make reality TV programs without pay and how some of these programs glorify no-waged work. The article concludes on a more optimistic note with an overview of how reality-TV workers are challenging the power of reality-TV's owners with unionization, strikes, litigation, publicity and discourse.

This paper's critical focus on reality-TV's low and no-waged work builds upon important political economy of communication studies of labour in the cultural industries (Mosco 2009). In general, political economists of communication analyze the "power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources" (Mosco, 2009, 24). Over the past decade, scholars have illuminated the "blindspot" of labour in communication studies with significant research on work in the cultural industries, as well as the experiences of cultural workers (Cohen, 2012; Deuze, 2007; de Peuter, 2014; Hesmondalgh, 2010; Huws, 2010; Mayer, Banks and Caldwell, 2009; Mosco and McKercher, 2008; Ross, 2004; 2009). The cultural industries – all of the companies involved in the production, distribution and exhibition of cultural and informational commodities that convey meaning about the world –are surrounded by promises of "good work" and some jobs in these industries do enable cultural workers to express themselves, flexibly meet their needs by "doing what they love" and control the fruits of their labour (Hesmondalgh, 2010). Yet, research shows that the dream of good work in the cultural industries is often dashed by material conditions marked by class division between a few CEOs and a "reserve army" of workers (Miller et al., 2005), exploitation (Cohen, 2012; Ross, 2009), the corporate control of intellectual property (IP) rights to worker-produced content (Miller et al., 2005), hard Tayloristic managerial strategies that standardize, intensify and speed up the labour process (Huws, 2010), softer techniques that build "humane workplaces" as a way to get workers to actively coordinate their own exploitation (Ross, 2004), creativity automation systems, and the outsourcing of tasks to the new international division of cultural labour (NIDCL) (Miller et al., 2005). Furthermore, political economists of communication have documented how life and labour in the cultural industries tend to be marred by precarity and existential insecurity, as many cultural workers routinely move from short-term contract to contract, never knowing what's coming next or whether or not their labour will be sellable (Cohen and de Peuter, 2013; de Peuter, 2014).

The political-economy of communication method is useful to this article's study of reality TV's low-wage and no-wage work in the following ways. First, it enables a contextualization of the reality TV industry is

part of capitalism, an economic system in which privately owned media companies produce cultural commodities for sale in the market (with the intention of making a profit) instead of for human need using privately owned capital goods (technology) and human labour power (the manual and mental capabilities required to complete tasks). Second, it centers on the asymmetrical power relations between reality TV industry owners and workers and the class conflicts that emerge as result of them. Third, it avoids textual fetishism, or, the tendency to analyze texts sans production contexts, by relating reality TV show texts to the conditions of their production as well as to the lives and labour struggles of the workers who produce them. Fourth, its commitment to a good, equitable and just society enables a moral critique of the reality TV industry's bad, inequitable and exploitative conditions, while also pointing beyond them. In the following three sections, reality TV's real capitalist conditions are critiqued. This article does not break radically "new ground" in the field. But it hopefully offers readers, especially those unfamiliar with the political-economy communications' labour turn, a succinct and pedagogically helpful synthesis of some research about, news reports on and union coverage of reality TV's low wage and no wage work.

REALITY TV PRODUCERS: WORK BEHIND THE SCENES

The first way that reality TV studios keep production costs to a minimum is by exploiting non-unionized cultural workers in labour markets defined by post-Fordist flex work and precarity. Due to the efficacy of its exploitation of labour, the reality TV sector has been conceptualized as "paradigmatic" of post-Fordism's flex production model (Hearn, 2014). Over the course of the 20th century, workers fought and won battles against Fordist-era corporations to establish standard employment regimes and pocket a larger piece of the surplus they generated (i.e. in the form of high wages, benefits and pensions). This Fordist worker-capital "class compromise," however, was rocked to the core in the 1970s and with the onset of political neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007). In response to a profit-squeeze stemming from union militancy and strikes, some of which were motivated by worker efforts to escape the factory's cage of a routinized and standardized "job for life," corporations pushed a shift from a Fordist to post-Fordist flex regime of accumulation (Harvey, 1989).

To consolidate this post-Fordist flex work regime, many corporations pushed against standard employment relations and unions, replacing full-time and secure jobs with regular hours on a relatively fixed schedule with non-standard jobs that were part-time, contingent, insecure and

temporary (Harvey 1989). Post-Fordism's lean and mean flex work regime enables corporations to hire workers on contract and fire them as they like while spatially and temporally dis-aggregating work from one place and time into many spaces and time zones, often diminishing the collective power of workers and outflanking union initiatives to organize and bargain. Across the many sectors of the post-Fordist media and service industries, workers now commonly experience "intermittent employment and radical uncertainty about the future" (Ross, 2009, 4) as well as "financial and existential insecurity" (Brophy and de Peuter, 2007, 180). This post-Fordist work regime is typified by the rise of "freelancing, short-term contracts, internships, solo self-employment, and other unstable work arrangements" (de Peuter, 2014, 266). In this context, corporations strive to keep profits high and labour costs low by flexibly exploiting low to no paid workers who precariously move from contract to contract, task to task, without union protection and zero job security.

For most of TV's history, the production of "scripted programming" (i.e. dramas, sitcoms and soap operas) fell under union contracts, meaning that TV studios had to hire unionized workers if they wanted make TV shows. At present, the Director's Guild of America (DGA), The Writers Guild of America (WGA), the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), the Casting Society of America (CSA) cover "above-the-line" TV workers while The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) represents "below-the-line" workers and give them a means of negotiating wages, benefits and work conditions with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP), a lobby for media owners. These unions are intermediaries between the interest of TV owners to maximize profits by reducing labour costs and the interests of TV workers to get equitable wages for their labour, residual payments for the reproduction of the TV content they create and benefits. The relationship between TV unions and TV owners is at times collaborative and at others conflicted. But overall, through collective organizing and strike actions, TV unions have clashed with TV owners and established a barrier to their push for maximal profits. The WGA, for example, has organized three major strikes against TV owners. In 1960 (January 16 to June 10), the WGA went on strike to increase the minimum wage paid to writers for their labour and to ensure that they would receive a fair share of studio revenue accumulated through the lease or sale of movie distribution/exhibition rights to TV networks. In 1988 (March 7 to August 7), the WGA struck to try to get writers fair residual payments for hour-long syndicated TV shows, expand the creative power of writers to shape what actors and directors get hired

and to challenge TV studio strategies for lowering production costs. In the 2007-2008 WGA strike (November 5, 2007 to February 12, 2008), the WGA struck for pay raises relative to TV profits and a cut of what studios accumulated through DVD sales and deals with digital giants (i.e. iTunes, Amazon Video on Demand, Netflix and Hulu.com) (Schechner, 2007).

In the context of ongoing (class) struggles between TV owners and unionized TV workers, reality-TV tipped the balance of power in the favour of TV owners at the expense of workers. Here's how. Reality-TV covers many different TV formats (i.e. game shows, talent competitions, mock documentaries, unscripted dramas, lifestyle episodes and home improvement shows) that mix different tele-visual genre codes and conventions. But what unites all reality-TV shows is their classification as "non-scripted programming." To free themselves from collective agreements and bargaining, TV studios used "non-scripted programming" as part of a "wider industry move toward using non-union, freelance production crews" (Raphael 2004, 129) and consequently, established a "non-union business model with a work force that is underpaid, overworked and made to feel fungible" (Verrone ,2007). The distinction between scripted and non-scripted TV basically split the TV labour market in two. In the first, unionized workers create "scripted" programming; in the second, non-unionized workers make "non-scripted" programming, or "real-TV" (Raphael, 2004; Yglesias, 2006). In the non-scripted sector, TV owners replace unionized directors with precarious production managers and displace unionized scriptwriters with casualized story editors. Workers in this sector get paid less than those in the scripted TV sector, work overtime without pay, lack health insurance and pensions, do not receive residual pay, are denied credits and flexibly move from one reality TV project contract to the next, some lasting weeks, others, many years (Eidelson, 2013; Rendon, 2004; Waxman, 2005).

The non-scripted label, however, obscures how reality TV is quite similar to scripted TV in terms of its labour process (Delgado, 2007; Richmond, 2004; Rupel, 2014; Stradal, 2014). Like many scripted TV shows, reality TV shows entail formats that enable producers to standardize and routinize the labour process. Akin to the procedural scripts of IKEA furniture assembly manuals, reality-TV formats convey the "one best way" to assemble the given TV show. These Taylorize the labour process, breaking it down into steps to be efficiently followed by workers, and they shape the action behind the scenes and the interactions of on-screen hosts and contestants alike. Like the sequences in fictional TV, reality-TV scenes are contrived, shot by a production crew on sets that are built or found (Mohan 2014). If the initially recorded material does not

provide the content from which a compelling story can later be fashioned, sequences are often re-staged and re-shot (Delgado, 2007). Reality TV is supposedly non-scripted, yet, writers, though not recognized as writers, shape what viewers see or don't see. These "story producers," "story editors" and "segment producers" turn hundreds sometimes thousands of hours of source material into compelling twenty-two to forty-four minute narratives with a beginning, middle and end, protagonists (heroes) and antagonists (villains) and conflict-driven action—all typical of scripted TV (Rupel, 2014; Stradal, 2014). They also use franken-biting techniques to splice together select pieces of footage or sound-bites to create sequential clips of contestants doing or saying things that better fit with the producer's overall vision of the narrative or the story effect they wish to achieve (Waxman, 2005).

Though non-scripted TV is a misnomer, it has helped TV studios and major TV networks outflank and outlast TV union strikes. During the 2007-2008 WGA strike, for example, TV workers refused to write new TV episodes, anticipating that this would shut down TV production, compromise network profits, and compel TV owners to meet their demands. Though the scripted TV sector stopped churning out TV shows, the non-scripted sector kept assembling TV shows and selling them to TV networks, which filled their schedules with reality-TV shows like *American Gladiators*, *Farmer Wants a Wife*, and *My Dad is Better Than Your Dad*. With reality-TV in cue, TV networks drew mass audiences, upped ratings and collected ad revenue (Strachan, 2008). "The strong performance of non-scripted series has network executives brimming with confidence about their anti-strike strategy" wrote a *New York Times* journalist in an article appropriately entitled "Reality TV Is No Lightweight in the Battle to Outlast Strikers" (Carter, 2008). Furthermore, as reality-TV studios competitively raced to the bottom to sate TV network demand for a glut of cheap TV shows, the WGA strike arguably helped major TV networks save money they would have otherwise spent on scripted TV programming. Leslie Moonves, CBS's CEO, commented: "We have added a number of reality programs" and "costs will be down considerably" (Wyatt, 2007). Peter Chernin, president of Fox, announced: "My guess is that during fiscal 2008, a strike is a positive for us" because "We save more money in term deals and story costs and probably the lack of making pilots than we lose in potential advertising." Chernin continued: "Our animated shows are a year ahead in terms of scripts, and we have *American Idol* and other reality shows coming" (TV Guide, 2007).

REALITY TV CELEBRITIES: WORK IN THE SCENES

The second way that reality TV companies keep production costs to a minimum is by exploiting the no-waged labour of anybody who wants to and consents to try to become a reality TV celebrity. For most of TV's history, TV studios hired and paid for the labor of professional actors, many which were unionized. But reality-TV studios channel the labour of presumably "ordinary people" – as opposed to professionally trained and unionized actors – into the production of "on-screen" TV content. In effect, they bypass AFTRA and SAG-supplied actors, decrease the number of paid jobs for TV actors and increase the number of unpaid jobs for amateur "scab" actors, all for the sake of maintaining low labour costs (Utley, 2000). In fact, TV production companies have harnessed the unwaged labour of ordinary people to make TV since network TV's emergence in the late 1940s. Allen Funt's *Candid Camera* (1948-) filmed ordinary people being tricked and surprised, *The Art Baker Show* (1950-58) invited viewers to interactively submit postcards to producers describing what they wanted to see on TV and Ralph Edwards' *This is Your Life* (1948-52) profiled the biography of ordinary people before a live studio audience (Slocum 2005). *Game* shows that integrate people as unpaid contestant-workers in competitions for money prizes – such as *What's My Line*, *I've Got A Secret* and *To Tell the Truth* (the 1950s), *Jeopardy!* (1960s), *The Price is Right* (1970s), *Wheel of Fortune* (1980s) – have aired for decades. PBS's *An American Family* (1973) turned the daily life of a middle-class Santa Barbara family (the Louds) into a TV show that was a precursor to MTV reality-docu-soaps like *The Real World*, *The Osbournes* and *Nick & Jessica*. Late in the 1970s, the airwaves carried TV shows based on the lives of people with unique talents such as *Real People* and *That's Incredible*. In the 1980s, talent contest shows like *Star Search* showcased people singing, dancing and joking in spectacular competitions for \$100,000.

In the 1990s, *Rescue 911* and *Cops* used police-generated video content to show the security state cracking down on petty criminals in racialized and poor communities. *America's Funniest Home Videos* repackaged video content submitted to its producers by people who used low-cost cam-corders to record and watch people just like themselves doing silly things. Millennial reality-TV hits like *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *American Idol* integrated the labour of people to make the on-screen reality content that fills each TV episode's commodity's form. The reality-TV production industry's incorporation of the labour of amateurs as cast members, life-tellers, contestants, participants into the content it generates, sells and screens significantly reduces, if not eliminates, the

cost of unionized “actors.” Reality-TV’s “field for ordinary people vying for potential fame is virtually inexhaustible” and all of their performances are unwaged, but value-adding (Collins 2008, 97).

Every year, people compete to be cast on reality-TV shows. Some of these are trained actors searching for paid work in scripted TV (Peterson, 2012) but can’t get it, so settle for unpaid unscripted gigs. TV studios mobilize their workforce by placing ads for casting calls and auditions in newspapers, on TV and on websites (Kelley, 2006). At the same time, on websites like Reality Wanted (www.realitywanted.com), workers promote their talents and headshots in hopes that reality producers will take notice and give them an audition. Each year, reality-TV studios audition thousands of people for roles that they’ve pre-designed to be filled by someone who by playing themselves, will fit the part. In preparation for the auditioning process, reality-TV hopefuls self-exploit, committing many hours of unpaid labour and spending a lot of their own money. Tom Sullivan, for example, worked hundreds of hours without pay and spent thousands of dollars to shoot, edit and mail videotapes of himself to Survivor’s casting agents; he was auditioned five times but was never cast (Ellin, 2007). Sergio Alain Barrios, an aspiring fashion designer, worked over a thousand unpaid hours and spent \$7500 to produce fifteen sample clothing designs in preparation for his Project Runway audition (Ellin, 2007). While reality-TV hopefuls like Sullivan and Barrios may have believed that self-exploitation would give them an advantage over competitors in the reality-TV labour market, they were not cast by reality-TV production firms and neither are most others. The people that do get cast for unwaged work on reality TV must forego waged work if they have it by taking leaves of absence, extended vacations or quitting (Gornstein, 2009).

How do TV studios get the people they cast to consent to the exploitation of their labour? Prior to the audition, prospective reality-TV performers must sign a “participation agreement” with the TV studio (Cianci, 2009). The contract for Sirens Media’s *Real Housewives of New Jersey*, a Bravo reality-TV show, sheds light on the asymmetrical, unequal and exploitative terms of the agreement. The contract asserts Sirens Media’s right to: 1) exert proprietary control over the contestant’s recorded image, voice, information, videos (Footage and Materials) and exploit this content in any way it likes; 2) “edit, delete, dub and fictionalize the Footage and Materials, the Program and the Advertisements as Producer sees fit in Producer’s sole discretion”; and, 3) not be held accountable for injuries or damages to the contestant for having “personal, private, surprising, disparaging and embarrassing” details of

their life (even if not true) represented. Furthermore, the contract stipulates that the relationship between the production company and the contestant is not one of employer and employee, but voluntary. As such, the “volunteer” will not receive payment for their appearance on the TV show (“I hereby waive any and all rights I may have to any compensation whatsoever”).

The contract implies that the volunteer exchanges their Footage and Materials – and the labour it requires – for exposure (“I acknowledge and agree that a significant element of the consideration I am receiving [. . .] is the opportunity for publicity”). By signing the contract, the participant exempts themselves from being covered by unions and governmental labour laws and regulations and agree to take full responsibility if they are injured, fall sick and or are even killed while making the TV show. Also, the contract says the volunteer may be exposed to “public ridicule, humiliation or condemnation” but cannot sue if they don’t like the way that Sirens Media “took or used the Footage and Materials or used the Footage and Materials in the Program.” Furthermore, the contract says volunteers are not free to talk about their experience of making the TV show and must keep “in strictest confidence” “prior to, during, or after the taping” all “information or materials.” The agreement basically censors what each voluntary can and can’t publicly say about their experience. The agreement says the participant understands they are “giving up certain legal rights under this agreement, including without limitation, my right to file a lawsuit” and additionally, that if the volunteer breaches the terms and conditions of the deal, they could be sued (Tereszczuk, 2013).

The above “agreement” between Sirens Media and the “housewives” is comparable to many others in terms of its power to accumulate Footage and Material by exploiting the people who make it. By signing such agreements, participants voluntarily exculpate their legal rights to the audio-visual content of their labour, privacy, experience, free speech compensation for work, union and an attorney (Blair, 2010; Cianci, 2009; Helppie, 2013; Kelley, 2006). “Reality TV cast members are subject to totally unequal terms of negotiations” says Andrejevic (2009). “They are essentially a disposable commodity, and if they don’t sign the contract there are hundreds of other people lining up for their spot” (cited in Wyatt, 2009a). Participants do invaluable work for TV companies, but participant agreements obscure this fact (Blair, 2010) and are designed by studios to maximize owner power and minimize the power of the workers that appear in their shows. Liberal cultural studies scholars make much of reality-TV’s “democratization” of entertainment, citing its inclusion of “oddballs” (Steinberg, 2014) and empowering “semiotic self-

determination” (Hartley, 2004), but the terms of reality-TV participation agreements undermine workplace democracy and creative autonomy on reality-TV. Participation agreements give TV owners a “significant legal advantage over participants because reality show participants waive certain rights” and then fall into a “grey area of the law somewhere between the classification of an employee of the studios and an independent contractor” (Kelley, 2006, 15). By freely signing the participation agreement, people consent to unfreedom on the job and producer control over their labour and lives. Under contract and on sets – beaches, kitchens and stages – reality-TV celebrities are really serfs. Survivor’s cast gets stranded on islands; Big Brother housemates cannot exit the house; Bachelorette contestants can’t skip the late-night rose-giving ritual. “They locked me in a hotel room for three or four days” before production started, said Jen Yemola, a pastry chef who appeared on Hell’s Kitchen 2007. “They took all my books, my CDs, my phone, any newspapers. I was allowed to leave the room only with an escort. It was like I was in prison” (cited in Wyatt, 2009a).

The labour of reality TV’s contestant-participants is objectively exploited, but what might motivate so many people to consent to this exploitation? Political-economists have shown how workers will sometimes consent to work without wages in the cultural industries in exchange for the prospect of accumulating non-monetary rewards like peer recognition, self-actualization, or exposure that may be parlayed into a future oriented employment opportunity (Hesmondhalgh, 2010; Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013; Ross, 2004; 2009). What seems to unite many reality-TV contestants is the pursuit of an experience that may yield symbolic and monetary rewards in the near or distant future. Some people jump into reality-TV for a shot at the money prize. Others give their labour to reality-TV companies in exchange for a chance to build a celebrity profile (Couldry, 2002). Some may sing, dance, cook or manage on reality-TV in exchange for a coaching lesson from Paula Abdul, Gordon Ramsay or Donald Trump on how to hone their skills as artists, chefs or budding capitalists. Others may exchange their labour for a fleeting feeling of being part of TV’s power networks, to rub shoulders and schmooze with industry gatekeepers and tastemakers like Simon Cowell or Ryan Seacrest. Others exchange their labour for access to privatized services and lifestyle experts – psychologists, dieticians and coaches – that the post-Keynesian state fails to provision while internalizing neoliberalism’s ethos of individual self-responsibility for social problems (Ouellette and Hay, 2008).

Significantly, people may work without wages in the reality-TV factory in exchange for the opportunity to generate publicity for themselves that may translate into future monetary returns. As Hearn (2008) says: “reality programming provides the means for individuals to produce their own image personae, or ‘branded selves,’ which, potentially, can be traded for cash down the line.” On *Chopped*, chefs compete to make three course meals for a panel of culinary experts in hopes of winning \$10,000, advertising their skills and generating publicity for their current restaurants. The Hills’ Lauren Conrad says she used reality-TV to “help start a business” (Fahner, 2008). *Dragon’s Den* and *Shark Tank*’s motley innovators consent to appear on TV in exchange for a chance to win the financing they need to start a company. Sometimes, the unwaged work of reality TV pays off. Keeping up with the Kardashians gave the Kardashian family members publicity that landed them franchising opportunities with advertising companies. Survivor Marquesas’s contestant Hunter Ellis did not win the competition, but still leveraged her appearance to get a job as host of History Channel’s reality-TV show, *Tactical to Practical and Man, Moment Machine*. Idol winners like Kelly Clarkson and Carrie Underwood were shuttled into careers in the music business. In sum, reality-TV studios invite entrepreneurial cultural workers to gift their labour power to them as a way to publicize themselves and gain access to more lucrative cultural industry labour markets.

But in the reality-TV biz, as in capitalism, inequality of outcome prevails, and there are always more losers than winners. A lucky few do profit from their reality-TV work experience while many others suffer great losses and hardships, subsisting “neither as employers nor traditional employees, in a limbo of uncertainty” (Ross, 2014, 34). The physical and emotional toll involved in being on camera 24/7, working to be watched, judged and assessed on a weekly basis, trying to act in accord with cultural industry-standard entertainment values, recounting traumatic personal details like breakups, marital discord, accidents, deaths and layoffs, bearing the pressure to competitively complete challenges and crunch producer-ordered tasks, enthusiastically contemplating what it would mean to win the grand prize and then repressing the disappointment of losing it, punishing work routines, sleep deprivation and induced intoxication—all of this leads reality-TV’s reserve army to anxiety, depression and burnout. After the reality TV shoot ends and the deal between TV studios and TV networks is complete, TV studios dump their contestant-workers back into other labour markets of precarity while retaining proprietary control and secure exploitation

rights to their Footage and Material. Much reality-TV focuses on the power of the makeover, but many former reality-TV volunteers cannot reinvent the image that TV made for them. Ridiculed by publics, frowned upon by scripted TV casting agents and desperate to make ends meet, reality-TV's "dispensable celebrities" chase low-paid appearance gigs at shopping malls, sporting events, conferences, nightclubs, resorts and colleges, often in violation of their "participation agreement" with TV studios (Cave, 2005; Collins, 2008). Unable to exchange their unpaid appearance on reality-TV for a compensated acting career and dispossessed of the sign-value studios made of them, reality-TV has-beens try to regain former waged jobs in the service economy. But some get fired from waged jobs because of being on TV (Princ, 2013). Ebony, the winner of *I Want To Work for Diddy: Season Two*, for example, did not receive her prize as one of Diddy's minions and was fired from her day job as a public school teacher because of her use of profane language. "I've been unemployed ever since" said Ebony. "This is the most broke I've ever been in my life" (Moore, 2010).

REALITY TV INTERNS: WORK BEHIND THE SCENES, AND IN THEM

A third way that reality TV studios keep production costs to a minimum is by exploiting the labour power of workers via internships, many of which do not pay in cash, but in experience (Mirrlees, 2015). The "internship" is often a synonym for an "experiential education, volunteer work, participant observation, training, or apprenticeship" (Perlin, 2012, 206), and the "intern" is often defined by companies as anything but an employee who does real work and is thus entitled to a minimum wage. Yet, the "internship" label frequently act as a "kind of smokescreen" (Perlin 2012, xi) for the real work that millions of people are doing for corporations in these programs and obscure the fact that many so-called interns are actually cultural workers whose labour power serves the firm's bottom line (Perlin, 2012).

Internships are pervasive in the contemporary TV industry (Cohen, de Peuter and Brophy, 2013; De Peuter, Cohen and Brophy, 2012) and at present, the US's big six media conglomerates hire interns for little to no pay and channel their labour toward the completion of tasks that contribute to their TV properties. NBC-Universal, for example, says it has "strengthened its commitment to developing young, high-potential talent through the creation of specialized internship and rotational programs" that establishes "a diverse pipeline of talent by building a team of graduates into future leaders." Walt Disney says it offers "an internship

unlike any other world” and an “internship opportunity that only happens once-in-a-lifetime” that enables interns to “contribute to a global company” and explore their “passion alongside some of the most inspiring talent around.” News Corp says its program “offers an exciting and fast-moving environment for aspiring media professionals to gain valuable learning experiences.” Time-Warner declares to prospective interns that an “internship with one of our divisions will not only provide you with valuable experience in media and entertainment, but an opportunity to develop key skills and build your network while learning and having fun within businesses at the top of their industries.” CBS Corporation says it is “proud to offer internship opportunities in virtually every field of media and entertainment” and strives to “provide students [...] with meaningful and practical work experience.” Viacom claims its internships “allows college students to work in an innovative, progressive, fast-paced and professional environment” that exposes them to “all levels of the company” and which is “an invaluable experience to individuals interested in pursuing a career in the entertainment industry.”

The big six media conglomerates offer some paid internships, but many of the sub-contractor reality-TV studios that source the TV network-exhibition subsidiaries of these conglomerates with cheap content do not. Skip Films, for example, is looking for unpaid reality-TV development interns for “2-3 days a week” to do “heavy research, drafting treatments/pitch materials, pursuing leads to determine if a show concept is feasible/interesting and misc office tasks.” Nan Fisher Entertainment seeks a “highly organized, responsible intern” who has an “enthusiasm for reality television” to “be involved in every aspect of the making of a reality show.” Departure Films wants to hire “development and casting interns” who have a PASSION for UNSCRIPTED TV and an eye for talent” to research “potential show concepts and talent” and conduct “preliminary interviews with talent.” Half Yard Productions says its “looking for an intern” who will work two days a week on “various projects related to television production, including various jobs in the office.” The Idea Factory posts for “interns to work in [reality] development and production” who are “amicable,” “highly creative,” and “able to think on their feet” and “ready to wear lots of different hats.” Clearly, reality-TV production studios are trying to mobilize the labour of young interns and channel it toward the completion all kinds of un-waged jobs “behind-the-scenes” that add value of reality TV shows. These examples suggest that interns are actually unwaged cultural workers that do a lot of real work. They conceptualize, research, cast, edit and produce reality TV shows. Reality-TV intern ads may attract people to labour without pay in

exchange for the prospect of career-relevant skills, mentorship and networking opportunities (Mirrlees, 2015).

And some reality TV shows promote the idea that unwaged internships are a stepping stone to waged work in the cultural industry. As Perlin (2012) says: “reality TV truly embraces the intern” (xii). Indeed, a number of reality TV shows represent people competitively doing jobs, not for pay, but for experiences that help them land paid careers at a later date. MTV's *The Hills - Season One* (2006) depicts Lauren Conrad and Whitney Port benefiting from an unpaid internship at the hip *Teen Vogue*. At this internship, they enhance their skills, meet peers and make connections, and then move from this experience onto paid creative careers. On CBS's *The Cut* (2005), fashionista interns square off to win an opportunity to design a clothing line for Tommy Hilfiger. *Project Runway's* (2004-present) designer interns slog away for training (“mentorships” at companies like Banana Republic and Inter-National Concepts), publicity (editorials in *Marie Claire* and *Elle*), sales platforms (on *Piperlime.com* and *Bluefly.com*) and cash prizes (\$100,000). On *America's Next Top Model* (2003-present), women work without pay as walking ads for beauty industry products with the goal of winning a shot at a modelling contract or endorsement deal with one of the TV show's sponsors. *I Want to Work for Diddy* (2008-2009) got its contestants to work toward a chance to be a paid assistant to the rapper multi-millionaire Sean “Diddy” Coombs, at Bad Boy Entertainment.

Reality TV shows like these give expression to and crystallize the fundamentally asymmetrical power relations between corporations and interns but elide social antagonism by showing interned workers worshipping the boss. They depict interned cultural workers as hyper-individualistic and entrepreneurial subjects who employ their cunning to outsmart, out-perform and undermine each other in competitions to win exposure and pay, displacing emerging forms of worker solidarity. They degrade the value of labour in the cultural industries by depicting interns completing numerous high-skilled tasks that contribute to the production of cultural goods and services as a game played for fun rather than as real work that deserves pay. They normalize unpaid work by framing it as something that interns enthusiastically consent to do as a “stepping stone” to a future opportunity of paid work, not as something they are increasingly expected or compelled to do by necessity. Moreover, these shows legitimize unpaid work with a meritocratic ideology that conveys the idea that the hardest working and most talented, not the already class privileged, will prosper.

CONCLUSION: REALITY TV WORKERS UNITE!

This article has shown how reality TV studios feed upon the labour-power of a low and no waged workforce behind the scenes and in the contrived scenes of the reality TV shows they own. Reality TV workers—precarious, flexible, self-branded, performative, entrepreneurial, risk-taking and self-exploiting—fit the job description of 21st century creative capitalism’s “role model worker” (de Peuter, 2014). But just as the one-sided rendering of “role model” precariats as hyper-exploited risk a “sense that there is no way out,” overlook the capacity of workers to collectively “contest” and “resist,” and gloss over “countervailing possibilities” (de Peuter, 2014, 365), stock descriptions of reality TV workers as dupes or pawns fail to address how these workers possess the collective capacities for understanding and changing their circumstances, possibly for the better. It is thus important – analytically and politically – to balance the critique of the capitalist structures that exploit labour with an account of the different ways that workers are uniting to contest them. By way of conclusion, I briefly review five emerging reality-TV worker challenges to studio owner power.

First, reality-TV workers are unionizing. From 2006 to date, the Writers Guild of America (WGA) has been attempting to unionize the editors/writers of reality TV shows. During the 2007-2008 strike, it tried to bring reality-TV writers into its fold and called for reality-TV writers to be credited as “Story Producers” and “Supervising Story Producers.” To elevate this issue in the public mind, the WGA protested outside of Fremantle North America, one of the largest reality TV firms. The WGA lost this battle to the studios, which walked away from the bargaining table and refused to return unless the WGA dropped its proposal to unionize reality-TV workers (*The Economist* 2008). Despite this setback, the WGA continues to try to unionize reality-TV workers and has won some small victories. In 2010, workers at Lion Television (*Money from Strangers*) and Optomen Productions (*Worst Cooks in America*) voted to join the WGA and did. In 2012, they won a three-year collective agreement that provides weekly compensation minimums, health benefits, a grievance and arbitration process and vacation time (Cunningham, 2012b). Following the lead of US unions, the Canadian Media Guild (CMG) (2015) is fighting to expand union coverage to reality-TV workers. In Britain, the Broadcasting Entertainment Cinematograph and Theatre Union is fighting a similar battle. So, there is an emerging international effort to unionize reality TV workers, and some small victories.

Second, reality TV workers are striking against TV studios. Some strikes result from union planning and others are spontaneous. In 2010,

the below-the-line crew members of *The Biggest Loser* who belong to the IATSE struck against Eyeworks-owned 3 Ball Productions and won health and pension benefits (Andreeva 2010). In August of 2012, IATSE's Local 700 won similar benefits for 11 story editors after organizing a strike against Blueprint post-production, which was editing the Syfy TV show *Hot Set* (Finke, 2012). Some of reality-TV's on-screen workers have staged wildcat strikes during the shooting of the TV show to demand better working conditions or more control over the creative process. In 2012, participants of *The Biggest Loser* walked off set, refused to work and threatened to quit when they learned the producers were planning to bring back former loser-victors to compete with them for the \$250,000 grand weight loss prize (Hater 2012). By collectively withdrawing their labour, they challenged the power of owners to rig the game.

Third, reality-TV workers are struggling against TV owners through the courts. While studio participation agreements define the relationship between the studio and the worker as voluntary and outside of existing labour laws, entertainment lawyers are struggling to redefine this relationship as one of employer and employee. The courts should categorize reality-TV studios as employers and reality-TV participants as employees due to the amount of control that studios exercise over contestant labour power. "[R]eality show participants provide 'services' to the producers of these reality shows in an environment most often significantly manipulated and controlled by the producers" (Kelley, 2006, 37). The fight to expand and enforce labour laws in reality TV is important given that the participation agreements workers sign violate existing labour laws and subvert minimum employment standards. Reality-workers are also enlisting the help of attorneys to demand pay for work. In 2009, Melody Murray, Aaron Silberman and Rosemarie DiSalvo, producers of reality-TV formats such as *The Osbournes: Reloaded*, *Thank God You're Here* and *American Idol*, sued Freemantle Media North, claiming the company compelled them to work in "sweatshop" conditions, seven days a week, up to twenty hours a day, and falsify payroll records (Wyatt, 2009b). Some reality-TV workers do not seek legal representation to confront wage theft because they fear employment deprivation. But some workers are gaining the confidence to challenge capital in the courts.

Fourth, reality-TV workers are using their precariously acquired celebrity power to demand payment for their labour from TV production firms. When a reality-TV series becomes a hit, reality-TV production studios find themselves in a relationship of relative dependence on the people they cast. For example, *The Thompson family* of TLC's smash hit, *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, received a stipend of about \$5000 per episode

in season one. The antics of the child amateur-star, Honey Boo Boo, turned the TV show into hit, bringing in ratings and revenue for TLC. Using Honey Boo Boo's fledgling star power as a bargaining chip, the Thompson family got the TV studio to pay it a higher stipend—between \$15,000 and \$20,000 per episode – in exchange for the work they put in to season two (TMZ, 2012). In 2014, the “cast” of Party Down South banded together to collectively demand a 1400% pay increase from 495 Productions. Each cast member hoped to increase their payment from \$500 per episode (as stipulated by the participation agreement) to \$7,500 per episode. After some bargaining, 495 Productions agreed to a 400% pay increase and now pays each cast member \$2000 per episode (Daily Mail, 2014). The pay increase is a pittance when compared to the \$250,000 to \$750,000 earned per episode by top-tier TV actors like Ashton Kutcher, Mariska Hargita and Claire Danes. But it does show how reality-TV participants and contestants are starting to perceive themselves as workers and their TV appearances as jobs deserving of pay.

Finally, reality-TV workers are challenging the discourse of owners by fighting over the definition of the commodity they produce and revealing the real labour that all reality-TV classifications hide. The power of TV studios to maintain a non-unionized, precarious and interned workforce relies in part on their power to define reality-TV as a type of TV that is categorically different from other types in terms of who makes it (non-professional or un-skilled amateur workers) and what it is made of (“the real”). This classification creates the illusion that reality-TV shows are made by workers who do not possess the same skills or do the same jobs as the workers who create un-reality TV shows (scripted programmes) and that reality-TV shows give viewers privileged access situations, events and happenings that are more true to life, original or authentic than conveyed by scripted TV shows (“reality”). This classification enables TV owners to build, control and exploit a low-waged and no-waged workforce (the workers who make reality TV are not unionized) and deflect claims that the people in reality TV are workers whose performances should be paid for (the people are contestants playing a game for fun, not workers in an employer-employee power relationship). In response, reality-TV workers argue that the classification of reality-TV as different from scripted-TV masks substantive similarities between them, namely, a division of labour and company efforts to control their labour as well as the property rights to the reality-effects they make. The struggle to define reality-TV as a product made of labour whose value is equivalent to the labour of making scripted entertainment is integral to the material struggle for expanding union membership, anti-wage theft

legislation and fair pay to the workers toiling behind and within TV scenes.

So, while reality TV studios degrade and disorganize the labour of cultural workers to profit-maximize, these workers are beginning to dignify their labour and organize. The reality TV workers toiling behind the scenes and in them – producers, contestants and interns – are quite different with regard to their professional roles and the distinct tasks they perform in the overall division of labour, but what they share in common is media capitalism's dispossession and exploitation of their labour. A challenge for reality-TV organizers is to shed light on how these workers' manifestly different orientations relate and link to a common social relation in capitalism as a class by and for itself.

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