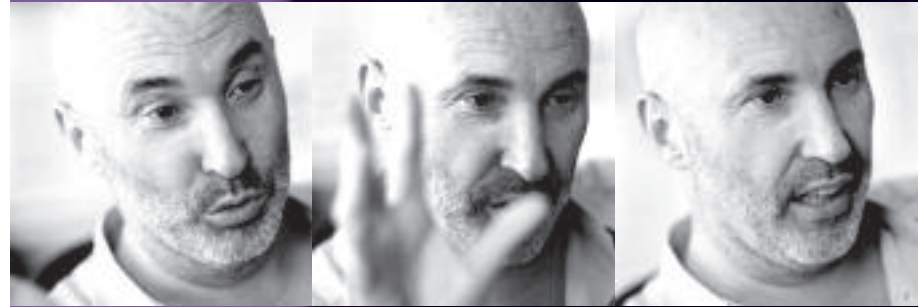


**Using the 'R' word**  
Alex Graham



# Using the 'R' word

## The evolution of reality television with real people has created situations where they find themselves manipulated in ways they could never have imagined.

**Alex Graham** | Chief Executive,  
Wall to Wall

I remember where I was when I first heard the 'R' word. It was the autumn of 1999 and I was chairing a seminar in a small conference room in the basement of an Edinburgh museum. I had no great expectations of the event. 'Sharing Stories' was at the less glamorous end of the conference circuit; an important clearing house for independent producers from the smaller European markets but not somewhere you would expect to stumble over the future of television.

I had been thrown by the fact that one of the participants - a polite and well-dressed Dutchman - had asked at the last minute if he could show an unscheduled videotape. It was a new programme, he explained, and he thought the audience would be interested in seeing it. I was sceptical. I disliked people using these seminars to plug their latest show. But since there was no time to preview the tape, I was forced to watch it along with the rest of the audience. And that's how I came to experience, with them, the shock of the new.

It was only later when I picked up the *Evening Standard* and saw our brand-new Channel 4 series *The 1900 House* described as 'the acceptable face of *Big Brother*' that I realised that the promotional tape for the Dutch game show that I had seen a few weeks before in Edinburgh was the harbinger of something revolutionary.

Just six months later, the revolution had been well and truly televised. *Big Brother* had launched in both the US and the UK. Our *1900 House* had transferred across the Atlantic to become a huge hit for PBS. And CBS - the 'twinset and pearls' network - had confounded its conservative audience by launching a brand-new game show called *Survivor*. That June, I made my one (and almost certainly only) appearance on the front cover of *Time* magazine as they ran a feature on 'Voyeur TV', linking our *1900 House* to *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and MTV's *The Real World* - asking 'what's behind the big turn-on?'

And thus, at the very high point of this new wave of television, the seeds of confusion were sewn. *The Real World* had in fact been around for almost two decades. In Scandinavia, *Survivor* had been running successfully if not exactly happily (one contestant had infamously committed suicide after being booted off the show) for several years. And even our *1900 House* had been 'influenced' by a classic piece of BBC television from the seventies called *Living in the Past*. Something was happening here but the truth was no one quite knew what it was.

We didn't know, but to be honest we didn't care either. We were too busy responding to the hunger of audiences for something new to worry much about dictionary definitions. At Wall to Wall we followed up *The 1900 House* with a string of 'reality history' hits on both sides of the Atlantic. *The 1940s House* brought home the reality of life in

wartime Britain and in *The Edwardian Country House* real people took on the world of *Upstairs Downstairs*. With New York's WNET/Thirteen we took the format to the Americans and *Frontier House*, which aired in the spring of 2002, was the highest-rated show on PBS for five years. So far, we've made nearly 40 hours of the *House* franchise and this autumn we start pre-production on our seventh series - *Texas Ranch* - for PBS.

At the same time, we've taken our skills into other areas. *Spy* - where volunteer punters are trained as intelligence agents - is currently a critical and rating success for BBC Three and will shortly transfer to BBC TWO. We've produced *Things I Hate About You* - a reality show about relationships - for the BBC in the UK and for Bravo in the US. Other production companies have also successfully colonised the reality genre: RDF with *Wife Swap*; Twenty Twenty with *That'll Teach 'Em* and of course Endemol, who have followed up the original *Big Brother* with a whole raft of programmes from *Shattered* to *The Games*.

But there I go - using the 'R' word again. Before we address the future of 'reality' television, perhaps we had better try to establish whether it even has a present or a past.

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You could make a convincing case that the sheer range of programming that is labelled 'reality' is enough to make the label meaningless. Does *Wife Swap* really have anything in common with *The Apprentice*? Is there any common ground between *Colonial House* and *Shattered*? The spectrum is indeed very wide. At one end we have programming that looks and feels very much like documentary. Paul Watson - the *enfant terrible* of British documentaries - has been withering about shows like *Wife Swap*, but it seems to me that they are precisely in the tradition of his groundbreaking programmes such as *The Family* and *The Fishing Party*.

At the other end, much of so-called 'reality' television is simply the evolution - made possible in part by dramatic advances in television technology - of the game show. The show which is credited with heralding the 'reality' revolution in the US is *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*? But *Millionaire* is simply a good old-fashioned game show reinvented (brilliantly) for the era of glitzy graphics and interactive telephone lines.

The Americans are actually more coy about the use of the 'R' word, preferring the 'U' word (for unscripted) or the 'A' word (for alternative). In the US, these definitions came about in an effort to describe a phenomenon that had not been seen on US network television for around 40 years. Apart from news and current affairs, US primetime television had been for decades dominated by scripted material: sitcoms and dramas. Scripted material was safe. You could read scripts; you could pilot shows and that way reduce your upfront risk. But while these safety procedures may have helped reduce the number of out-and-out turkeys, they also squeezed much of the risk - and the life - out of primetime. Apart from some rare - and honourable - exceptions many of the US scripted shows were predictable and formulaic.

When *Millionaire* launched on primetime network television in the US it caused a sensation. Game shows did not play in primetime, or so the received wisdom went. *Millionaire* was disqualified from entry to the primetime Emmys because it was a game show and game shows were only eligible for the daytime Emmys because... well, because game shows only played in daytime. Didn't they?

And while game shows were storming the citadel of primetime television they were also bursting the traditional boundaries of the television studio. *Survivor* took the game show to exotic sub-tropical islands; *Big Brother* took it into the bedroom and even the bathroom, exploring the outer (or should that be inner?) limits of intimacy on television. *The Apprentice* and our own *Spy* format go even further, taking the artifice of the game show out into the real world.

It is of course possible to come up with a working definition of 'reality' television. On the one hand it is largely unscripted and the characters are real people, not actors. And on the other, the situations and the narratives in which these characters find themselves are constructed and manipulated in ways which documentaries never were.

Except of course, many of the big American reality shows are not just structured but heavily scripted too and about as spontaneous as an episode of *Blind Date*. And despite the protestations of old-school documentary-makers, documentaries have never been quite as spontaneous as documentarists would have us believe. Are we really saying that *Wife Swap* and *Jamie's Kitchen* have any less to say about contemporary Britain than *Man Alive* or *40 Minutes* did 20 years ago?

So can we apply the 'M' word (meaningful) to the 'R' word? Does the 'R' word represent a new genre? Well, something is going on. The past five years have seen an outpouring of programming which feels different from anything which has gone before. Shows that are part game

show, part drama, part documentary, and yet which don't feel like any of them. Whether you like it or not, the mould has been broken.

More importantly, the forces transforming television extend way beyond the boundaries of television itself. In part, they are technological. Digital technology is creating competition in broadcasting the like of which we have never seen before; the result is a monster with an insatiable appetite for new ideas and new formats. At the same time, technology is allowing new ways to shoot and edit television programmes and new ways for audiences to influence or interact with them.

In part these forces are generational. A new generation of viewers reared on the spectacle of Hollywood movies - seen in the cinemas and on DVD - and the all-embracing experience of playing computer games. The traditional forms of television are not enough for this new generation; they want experiences that are both more exotic and more immediate than traditional television forms can deliver. They want to see themselves on television. And to interact with their television selves in new and exciting ways.

These forces suggest that this is much more than the mere invention of a new television genre. It is a revolution in the medium itself. And if it is indeed a revolution then we are still living through it. The Winter Palace has been stormed, the people are on the streets but the new leaders are not yet in control. If this is the birth of something new, then its pangs are not yet over. To engage in a bit of metaphor-busting, if these new forms were a planet, then for the time being they would still be swirling masses of gas and fragmentary rock. Time will tell whether they will become solid and capable of sustaining life.

For all these reasons, speculating about the future of reality television is probably even more foolish than speculating about the future of most things. The only honest answer to the question: 'how will things change in ten years' time?' is to resort to the 'F' word and say 'who the \*\*\*\* knows?' But my guess would be that the 'R' word will either fall into disuse or will become so widespread that it will lose its capacity to shock.

In the short term, I think we can detect a number of interesting trends. Television will continue to subject old formats to the makeover treatment. The *\$64,000 Question* is reborn as *Who Wants To Be Millionaire?*; *Come Dancing* takes to the floor again as *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Search for a Star* steps back into the limelight as *Pop Idol*. This seems to me to be an entirely healthy phenomenon and something Hollywood has been doing for decades. Do people complain when Clint Eastwood remakes the classic Western or Curtis Hanson reinvents the film noir? Arguably, television's problem is that it does not pay enough homage to its great tradition.

For good or ill, boundaries will continue to be pushed. Some of these boundaries will be technological. The computer-games generation is beginning to enter the 16-34 demographic and they will not be content to be couch potatoes. They will want to interact with and increasingly to impact upon the events unfolding on the screen. So far, levels of intervention have been fairly limited attempts - vote for your favourite Briton, book or building or your least favourite celebrity or housemate. But *Big Brother* has demonstrated that although the mechanism (voting) may be simple, the underlying psychology can be pleasurable complex.

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My guess is that while fiction will continue to satisfy those whose desire is simply to 'lean back' and think of television, reality will be driven to find new mechanisms to engage the audience and as a result we'll see further convergence between television and computer games. We've already seen the first attempts at this and while shows like *Fightbox* and *Time Commanders* may seem like the television equivalent of Pac-Man they are important first steps towards convergence.

The other boundary which is already being pushed is the boundary of taste. It is difficult to predict how far and how fast these frontiers will move but I'm not sure that we've reached the limits of people's capacity to be shocked. I think we can expect more in the way of *Miriam* and *Extreme Makeover*. Five is preparing to offer liposuction to brides-and-bridegrooms-to-be and even as I write this the trade press is having kittens (or should that be an orgasm?) at the thought of Brighter Pictures (the boys who brought you *Miriam*) staging the world's first televised sperm race in their new show *Make Me A Mum*. (Just as long as they don't get Jonathan Pearce to do the commentary!)

Occasionally, you have to wonder whether Caligula might not have made the perfect programme controller for the early 21st century. My own view is that in a digital world (with proper safeguards for parents who want to control their children's viewing) regulators should have nothing to do with taste and decency. Censorship has no place in a civilised society, even (perhaps especially) when it is clothed in well-meaning liberal clothes. But to be honest, it doesn't really matter what I think. Digital technology is making regulation irrelevant; it's transforming television from a public utility into a genuine electronic marketplace.

Fortunately, the future of quality television doesn't lie with the regulators or even with the programme-makers; it lies with the audience. And from that, I think we can take heart. Remember that the rise of cable television in the United States was a response to the tired predictable schedules of the networks. Cablenets like Discovery and HBO were a response to a demand from the US television audience for a wider range of more challenging programming. The explosion of reality television itself has made possible all kinds of new forms and approaches to television.

And there are signs that audiences are continuing to demand more from their reality programmes. In *The Apprentice*, NBC has done the unthinkable and made a primetime hit out of a business programme; our own *Spy* format sets out to be entertaining but along the way addresses the morality of espionage in a fresh and interesting way. *Wife Swap* regularly provides profound insights into issues of class and gender in the way that the best television has always done.

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And the digital audience is likely to be as demanding and discriminating as the analogue one. Indeed, with such a plethora of choice, they will need to become more so. My hunch is that they will gradually stop using the 'R' word - and the 'U' word and the 'A' word - and focus on the words which really matter - the 'G' word (good) and the 'B' word (bad).