

HOW REALITY TV FAKES IT

Phony quotes, bogus crushes, enhanced villains: the makers of "unscripted" TV spill its secrets

By JAMES PONIEWOZIK

THE HEART, WOODY ALLEN SAID, WANTS WHAT IT WANTS. FOR THE producers of the ABC network reality show *The Dating Experiment*, that was a problem. The heart of one of their female participants did not want what they needed it to want. She disliked one of her suitors, but it would make a better story if she liked him. So they sat her down for an interview. Who's your favorite celebrity? they asked. She replied that she really loved Adam Sandler. Later, in the editing room, they spliced out Sandler's name and dropped in audio of her saying the male contestant's name.

That's love, reality-style. This trick, says Todd Sharp, who was a program consultant on the series, is called Frankenbiting. And it happens more often than you may suspect. Frankenbites, he says, are the work of "desperate people who had to deliver a story in a few days"—producers under pressure to deliver a tidy story that's zippier than real reality.

Granted, in the pantheon of shocking headlines, REALITY SHOWS MANIPULATED ranks with PORK RINDS FATTENING, RESEARCHERS SUSPECT. But even savvy viewers who realize that their favorite reality shows are cast, contrived and edited to be dramatic may have no idea how brazen the fudging can be. Quotes are manufactured, crushes and feuds constructed out of whole cloth, episodes planned in multiact "storyboards" before taping, scenes stitched together out of footage shot days apart.

And while we may have long suspected that a cast of camera-smitten future trivia answers can't really be that interesting without professional help, details of how these shows manipulate reality have begun leaking out—because of a dispute with the employees hired to do the jiggerying. Those staff members—who create story lines, coach interview answers and cobble together video—say their work amounts to writing, and they are suing their

networks and production companies, arguing that they deserve to be covered by the Writers Guild of America.

Their employers call them story editors, segment producers and so forth and don't recognize them as union employees. Those designations save money—Guild members have better pay, benefits and protections. But they also preserve an illusion: that the shows are authentic and true to life, free of anything close to "writing."

It's not that the shows have line-for-line scripts (although reality writers have charged that Paris Hilton was fed lines on *The Simple Life*). But Jeff Bartsch, a freelance reality-show editor, says there are many ways of using footage to shape a story. Bartsch worked on *Blind Date*, a syndicated dating show that features hook-ups gone right—and comically wrong. If a date was dull or lukewarm, the editors would juice the footage by running scenes out of order or out of context. To make it seem like a man was bored, they would cut from his date talking to a shot of him looking

around and unresponsive—even though it was taken while she was in the restroom and he was alone. "You can really take something black and make it white," Bartsch says. (NBC Universal Television, the studio that makes *Blind Date*, had no comment.)

Those devices, producers emphasize, can be used not just to deceive but also to tell a story clearly, entertainingly and quickly. News producers, documentarians—and, yes, magazine writers—selectively edit raw material and get accused of cherry-picking facts and quotes. But on an entertainment show the pressure to deliver drama is high, and the standards of acceptable fudging are shadier. The first season of *Laguna Beach*, MTV's reality series about rich teens in Orange County, California, centered on a love triangle among two girls (LC and Kristin) and a boy (Stephen). The problem, says a story editor who asked not to be named, was that the triangle didn't exist. LC and Stephen, he says, were platonic

friends, so the producers played Cupid through montage. LC "would say things about [Stephen] as a friend," says the editor. "[LC] said, 'I just love this guy.' All you have to do is cut to a shot of the girl, and suddenly she's jealous and grimacing."

Tony DiSanto, executive producer of *Laguna Beach*, says the show's story was "enhanced" but genuine. "Stephen and LC were friends, but in the raw footage, you could see an attraction," he says. "Anytime you take anything into the editing room, you are enhancing it and editorializing. But we never make up something that hasn't happened."

If reality participants think the enhancement amounts to a lie, they have little recourse, since they usually sign a thick stack of waivers. On *The Amazing Race* last year, Jonathan Baker savagely berated his wife Victoria Fuller and alienated fellow contestants and service workers around the globe. But Baker says his villainy was trumped up in the editing room. One episode showed him appearing to be kicked out of a cab after browbeating the driver. Really, Baker says, the driver had an accident and couldn't continue. "I got the worst rap of anyone in reality television ever," Baker says. CBS network spokesman Chris Ender replies that the fender bender was not bad enough to disable the cab. "Although Jonathan may have had softer moments," he says, "what was captured on film during the broadcasts accurately represents his behavior."

That's a nice way of saying Baker did plenty of obnoxious things that couldn't be made up—pushing his wife on camera, for instance, during a tense moment. Which raises the question, Is dramatic editing wrong if it captures the essence of the moment? Reality producers say they often have to shuffle footage to tell a story concisely or make a babbling interviewee coherent. "We're using things said at different times, put together to imply a statement or observation that may not have been succinctly demonstrated," says J. Ryan Stradal, who was a story editor on *The Bachelorette*. "That's where Frankenbiting may come in." Or producers may withhold information—such as downplaying a budding romance—to create suspense.

Cheating? Sure. But viewers want suspense. The problem is that makers of reality TV have the power to imply or outright fabricate things about real people who have to

FIVE TRICKS OF REALITY TV

carry their fake reputations into their real lives. Sarah Kozer, a contestant on the Fox network dating show *Joe Millionaire*, producers doctored a scene in which she went for a walk behind some trees with the show's bachelor, Evan Marriott, to make it

seem as if they had oral sex. The producers added sound effects and captions, she says, and dubbed in a line—"It's better if we're lying down"—that she had said earlier in the day in a different context. "It couldn't have been more misrepresented and fictional if it had been completely scripted," she says. (Fox declined to respond.)

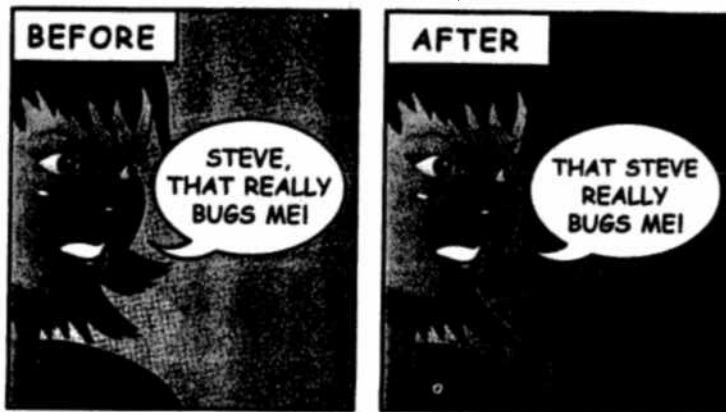
It's a harder case to make, though, that taking liberties is a crime against viewers, who widely accept that the shows

use the term reality loosely. True, the shows sell themselves as more authentic than scripted programming. But in a recent TIME poll, only 30% of respondents believed that the shows largely reflect what really happened, and 25% of them believed that the programs are almost totally fabricated. More than half said accuracy was not a factor in their enjoyment of reality TV. Fans watch *Laguna Beach*, for instance, not for a glimpse about LC, Kristin and Stephen's lives but for a gorgeously shot, engrossing story of the envy, entanglements and casual cruelties of rich, hot teenagers. That view of reality TV may veer close to controversial memoirist James Frey's "essential truth" defense, but, let's face it, *Blind Date* does not have quite the same literary aspirations.

And what about contestants? Once Frankenbitten, twice shy? Kozer feels badly used by Fox, but Baker says he would do *Amazing Race* again, albeit more self-consciously. Likewise, says perhaps the biggest reality villain ever, Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth of *The Apprentice*, who says the show demonized her. "When I was a good girl, there were no cameras on," she says. "The minute I started arguing, there was a camera shooting me from every angle." She was vilified by viewers across the

U.S. But she has since gone on to do *Fear Factor* and to play host to Oscar coverage on U.S. cable TV's Style Network. "I was on track to become the biggest bore in history," she says. "Being on the show changed my path."

Reality TV's Dr. Frankensteins have tremendous power indeed. And sometimes it pays to be the monster. —Report
Jeanne McDowell/Los Angeles



1. Frankenbiting

Sometimes used to clarify an incoherent interview, sometimes to flat-out put words in subjects' mouths, this technique stitches together clips from different scenes to make participants say what the makers of the show wish they had said.

2. Fake Settings

On *The Apprentice*, according to some insiders, Donald Trump's "boardroom" is actually a stage set, while the "apartment" the contestants stay in is a set built on extra space in Trump Tower. (The NBC network declined to respond.)

3. Misleading Montage

Looks can deceive, literally. Cutting to a contestant looking unhappy—for whatever reason—can make him or her seem jealous, angry or outraged if the cut is inserted after the right scene, even if the clips were shot days apart.

4. The Leading Interview

Reality-show makers rely on "confessional" Q&As to fill in when an actual event didn't provide enough drama. Questioned the right way, contestants can make a conflict sound more dramatic than it looked on camera.

5. The Overdub

On the Fox network's 2003 hit *Joe Millionaire*, lead hunk Evan Marriott, center, disappeared into the bushes with date Sarah Kozer, left. Kozer says the producers added lusty noises and captions to suggest they were doing more than kissing.

