

# Another unreality rap on reality TV



Hester has lawsuit regarding nearly every aspect of Storage Wars is

Storage Wars allegations revisit issue of faked shows

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TELEVISION REPORTER

Reality TV isn't real. For some folks that won't be a revelation.

Most viewers are aware that fitting a neat dramatic arc into a half-hour show requires a little manipulation, now and then. Happy endings take work. Or perhaps a little editing.

But what if the show is a competition and the outcome has been staged? The latest reality series to take a credibility hit has been A&E's *Storage Wars*,

where contestants compete to auction off items from abandoned storage lockers.

Last week, star Dave Hester sued the producers of the series, saying that "nearly every aspect of the show is faked."

REALITY TV continued on E4

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# Shows accused of bending truth

REALITY TV from E1

The allegations have yet to be proven in court.

"The truth is that defendants regularly salt or plant the storage lockers that are the subject of auctions portrayed on the series with valuable or unusual items to create drama and suspense for the show," Hester says in his lawsuit.

Hester claims he was fired from the series after he told producers that their staging was "possibly illegal." He is asking for \$3.75 million in damages.

*Storage Wars* is not the only show accused of rigging the game, of course. TLC's *Breaking Amish* and the popular *House Hunters* real-estate show have also been under fire for their authenticity — or lack of it. *Breaking Amish* follows five supposedly naive young Amish and Mennonite men and women as they move to New York.

While the premise of the show is that the subjects have grown up in strict communities and have not experienced a wider life, allegations have surfaced that this may not exactly be the case.

One cast member, Rebecca, has already revealed that she is a divorcee and a mother, and that she is a mother husband Abe before, not during, the show.

There have been so many allegations against the show that a Facebook page was set up by people devoted to exposing misleading aspects of the show.

"If you ask viewers whether reality shows bend the truth I don't think you'll get too many people who are surprised that this happens," says Charlie Keil, a professor of cinema studies at the University of Toronto. "What is acceptable as the threshold of reality is fairly elastic by the audience. But where they may draw the line are in competitive situations. If people thought



Cast member Jarrod Schultz with a unit full of stuff in Season 2 of *Storage Wars*. Former cast member Dave Hester claims many items were planted. STUART PETTICAW/ABC

*American Idol* was rigged they wouldn't watch."

"After all, reality is messy, says Keil. "Reality does not conform to a time slot. And there isn't always a villain and a good guy."

Even the way a show is edited — putting quotes out of context or juxtaposing certain scenes — can be misleading, something that is frequently done in reality TV according to an anonymous reality TV editor on the website Buzzfeed.

"As editors we walk a fine line, though in some shows we jump over it," says the purported editor. Another popular "reality" fran-

chise, *House Hunters* and *House Hunters International*, has also come under fire from former subjects who say they had already made their purchase decisions before being filmed.

One woman who was on *House Hunters Texas* claimed that producers thought her story of wanting a larger home was "boring" and gave her a more interesting backstory. She had already closed on her home and used two houses belonging to friends as the other choices in the show, even though the properties weren't on the market at the time.

HGTV responded by saying, "Often everything moves much more quickly than we can anticipate, so we go back and revisit some of the homes that the family has already seen and we capture their authentic reactions."

It's questionable how "authentic" those reactions are going to be given that it's likely weeks or months after they've already seen the properties, but good on HGTV for at least admitting the process.

However, what's disturbing — if it is true — is that by potentially putting valuations on homes that may not be accurate, HGTV does a dis-

service to viewers, who watch because they want to know what you can get for your buck. If you're picking a number out of a hat, then you're distorting the process.

As for *Storage Wars*, Keil says most viewers are pretty forgiving, although if the allegations are proven true, producers would have stepped out of bounds.

"It would certainly be unethical if they did this. But most people may accept a certain amount of manipulation. After all, you don't want them to go into that locker and find nothing. That would really be boring."

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