

## **Re)contextualising Audience Receptions of Reality TV**

Carolyn Michelle, University of Waikato, New Zealand

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### **Abstract**

This paper seeks to recontextualise key findings from recent studies of reality TV audiences in light of insights drawn from across the wider field. It suggests that modes of engagement and response adopted by different reality TV audiences appear broadly consistent with those identified in relation to a wide variety of genres viewed in diverse national contexts, as charted in the Composite Multi-dimensional Model of audience reception (Michelle 2007). To further illustrate these parallels, this paper analyses online audience responses to a specific event that occurred during the 2006 reality game show, *Rock Star: Supernova*, applying the Composite Multi-dimensional Model as its conceptual schema. In so doing, this paper seeks to demonstrate how we might move beyond the traditional focus on specificities of genre and format to recognise and begin to theorise broader *continuities* in the nature of audience engagement that may persist beyond the transition to new, hybrid, and increasingly interactive media formats.

**Keywords:** Audiences; viewers; modes of reception; reality TV.

### **Introduction**

Increasingly, questions are being raised about the viability of traditional approaches to audiences given the growing predominance of hybrid interactive genres and their convergence with new media forms such as online streaming video, discussion forums, and MSN messaging. A case in point is reality TV, where innovations associated with the hugely successful *Big Brother* franchise are being widely adopted. As Livingstone (2004: 76) notes, 'The activity of viewing...is converging with reading, shopping, voting, playing, researching, writing, chatting. Media are now used anyhow, anyplace, anytime'. For some, this implies that the nature of audience engagement is being altered irrevocably. The increasing ubiquity of media and our capacity to be both consumers and producers of it raises the question of whether theoretical and analytical concepts derived from 'traditional' television and film

studies are still relevant in a rapidly evolving mediascape. But has the nature of audience engagement really been dramatically altered by these new genres, formats, and opportunities for interactivity, such that entirely new theoretical and methodological tools are required? Must we reinvent the wheel, or can existing analytical paradigms be applied and, where necessary, extended to glean insight into how different segments of the audience make sense of hybrid genres and their growing convergence with new media forms?

I argue for the latter, and suggest that much recent work on reality TV's reception tends to overlook significant historical and current continuities in forms of audience engagement across genres (and, speculatively, media formats), and in the process risks resurrecting troubling notions of textual determinism. Further, in the rush to examine and theorise the seemingly 'new', many very useful insights derived from 'older' studies of audience reception are in danger of being discarded. Indeed, recent studies have devised typologies of reality TV's reception (see Andacht 2004; Jost 2004; Mikos 2004) with little or no reference to earlier models of reception *per se*, let alone the now considerable body of research suggesting possible parallels between audience receptions of reality TV and those of soap opera, sitcom and documentary. Additional problems emerge from the tendency to overplay the significance of new media formats and related opportunities for audience interactivity, particularly where those new technologies deliver essentially similar content. While we should not discount the significance of recent and emerging innovations, I share Livingstone's (2004: 77) view that 'the hybrid forms on the Internet (voting for *Big Brother*, for example, or online chat about the soaps) are fascinating *but do not necessarily undermine well-established distinctions in the field of communication*' (emphasis added).

With these points in mind, this paper introduces the four modes of audience reception charted in the Composite Multi-dimensional Model (Michelle 2007), and indicates how and where these modes are reflected within the body of international research on audience responses to reality TV. The paper then presents a case study of online receptions of a key dramatic event during the 2006 reality gameshow, *Rock Star: Supernova*, in order to further illustrate how the Composite Model enables a (re)contextualisation of forms of audience engagement with emerging hybrid interactive genres. By so doing, I hope to demonstrate that although reality TV has many characteristic generic features, audiences continue to adopt the same broad interpretive frames that scholars have identified among viewers of various other genres. Furthermore, these continuities in modes of response seem to persist despite the use of new media formats in content delivery and increased opportunities for audience interactivity.

Hence, I argue that there are grounds for moving beyond the traditional focus on specificities of textual genre and media format to recognise and theorise continuities in the form of audience engagement *per se*. This paper should thus be read as part of a broader attempt to reaffirm the *audience* - in all its diversity, possessing varying interpretive resources and

cultural competencies, and with the potential to draw on intra- *as well as* extra-textual knowledges – as properly at the *centre* of reception analysis.

### **Reality TV Audiences: How Much is Really New?**

To date, much of the research on viewers of reality TV has been framed in response to popular press and academic critiques of the genre, which too often reflect elitist disdain for popular factual entertainment and its (presumed) passive, uncritical audience (Dovey 2000; Hill 2000; Hight 2001). As Hight (2001: 390) notes, viewers of reality TV are frequently characterised as 'lower in intelligence, lacking in judgement and/or taste, unthinking voyeurs, unwitting dupes of commercialist broadcasters, [and] in danger of mistaking reality-TV programmes for 'reality'.'

Since the early 2000s, a diverse body of research offering an alternate and less condemnatory view of reality TV audiences has emerged [1]. Using methodologies ranging from focus groups and in-depth interviews to surveys, viewing diaries, online questionnaires, and the analysis of online forum postings, much of this research claims to chart the seemingly 'unique' modes of audience engagement and response that reality TV engenders. Yet in fact, when considered in light of key insights drawn from across the wider field, much of this 'new' research appears to confirm what audience reception researchers have long known: In study after study and across a wide range of genres, viewers have been shown to be active, creative, and (at times) 'critical' (Roscoe, Marshall & Glesson, 1995). Further, different audiences have been shown to adopt quite distinct modes of perceiving and talking about media texts, and in some cases these differences can be mapped to distinctions on the basis of age, socioeconomic class, gender, ethnicity, religious belief, and so forth.

This fundamental variability in the mode of audience response is delineated in the Composite Multi-dimensional Model of audience reception (see Figure 1), which draws together and extends upon commonalities within various schemas developed by audience researchers over the past few decades. The model charts four broad modes of audience engagement and response that have been identified in relation to a variety of genres and across various national contexts. It recognises that differently-positioned viewers approach the process of meaning construction in different ways, depending on their level of subjective engagement and attunement to the text's generic form and/or ideological/discursive content, and is intended to provide a common conceptual framework or shared 'language' for the (meta)analysis of existing and new reception data, in order that the field as a whole might become more unified and our collective knowledge synthesized (see Michelle 2007 for a full discussion). Briefly, since more detail of each category will be offered below, the Composite Multi-dimensional Model differentiates between *transparent*, *referential*, *mediated*, and

*discursive* modes of reception, and identifies various subcategories within each mode. While some modes express the creative and 'critical' capacity of audience members at particular moments, along with their ability to draw on various extra-textual resources in making sense of cultural texts, other modes reflect greater reliance on information supplied within the text itself, and thus imply greater likelihood of capitulation to preferred textual meanings. Thus, whereas in a *transparent* mode the viewer might relate to a reality TV show on a subjective level as though it 'were' life - in the sense of being an accurate rendering of the individuals featured and as depicting authentic, unmediated human responses (or in other words, as presenting a believable 'slice of life' and 'truthful' human reactions) - a viewer in a *mediated* mode might relate to the same show from a more distanced perspective as a *media construction*, and hence problematise any notion of authenticity due to, for example, their explicit awareness that the producers have edited the available footage to create a particular narrative arc or generate drama, with a view to increasing audience ratings. Differently again, a viewer in a *referential* mode might evaluate reality TV depictions according to their fit, or lack of fit, with their prior extra-textual knowledge of the kinds of people, issues or events depicted; whereas a viewer in a *discursive* mode might primarily relate to the same depictions as intended to convey a particular set of messages about the social world, with which they may or may not agree. While some (or even many) viewers will no doubt vacillate or 'commute' (Schrøder 1986) between these modes, the modes themselves remain quite distinct registers of meaning that require and utilise unique sets of cultural and discursive competencies at different moments. Much of the variability of audience response, this model suggests, is due to the propensity for different segments of the audience to adopt or commute between distinct viewing modes which (working in tandem with the parameters imposed by textual encoding) define and delimit the kinds of readings that are likely to be generated by differently-positioned audience members.

Figure 1: Composite Multi-dimensional Model of Audience Reception

DENOTATIVE LEVEL OF MEANING					
<p><b>Transparent Mode:</b> <b>Text as life</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Non-fictional programming</i>: perceived as a 'mirror' of reality</li> <li>▪ <i>Fictional programming</i>: 'suspension of disbelief'</li> <li>▪ Ideological/ discursive content is <i>implicitly</i> read 'straight' → dominant/preferred decoding</li> </ul>	<p><b>Referential Mode:</b> <b>Text as <i>like</i> life</b></p> <p><i>Comparative sources potentially drawn on:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Personal experience/ individual biography</li> <li>ii) Immediate life world experience</li> <li>iii) Experience and knowledge of the wider social/ political/ economic/ cultural/ national/ international context of production or reception</li> </ul>	<p><b>Mediated Mode:</b> <b>Text as a <i>production</i></b></p> <p><i>Heightened attunement to:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) Textual aesthetics</li> <li>ii) Generic form</li> <li>iii) Intentionality               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Textual</li> <li>• Generic</li> <li>• Professional/ Industry-based</li> </ul> </li> </ul>			
CONNOTATIVE LEVEL OF MEANING					
<p><b>Discursive Mode: Text as a <i>message</i></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) <b>Analytical</b> (Comprehension of message)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification</li> <li>• Motivation</li> <li>• Implication</li> </ul> </li> <li>ii) <b>Positional</b> (Response to that message)               <table style="margin-left: 40px; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 0 10px;"><i>Dominant/Preferred</i></td> <td style="padding: 0 10px;"><i>Negotiated</i></td> <td style="padding: 0 10px;"><i>Oppositional</i></td> </tr> </table> </li> </ul>			<i>Dominant/Preferred</i>	<i>Negotiated</i>	<i>Oppositional</i>
<i>Dominant/Preferred</i>	<i>Negotiated</i>	<i>Oppositional</i>			
EVALUATION					
<i>Hegemonic Reading</i>	<i>Contesting Reading</i>	<i>Counter-Hegemonic Reading</i>			

Close/ Subjective ←-----→ Distant / Objective  
(Relationship between text and viewer)

While the body of research on which this Composite Multi-dimensional Model is based largely

pre-dates the contemporary fascination with reality TV, essentially similar patterns in interpretation and response are clearly evident in much of the emerging research on reality TV audiences. However, such continuities remain largely unrecognised. With a few exceptions (see Götz 2004; Hobson, 2004; Lee 2004; Von Feilitzen 2004), research on reality TV audiences often seems to reflect a presumption that this genre provokes such divergent responses that it is unhelpful, even futile, to seek precedents or parallels across the wider field. In the rush to meet the call for 'new theoretical tools' of analysis (Hight 2001: 390), many scholars have neglected to examine whether existing understandings and theoretical/analytical concepts might be applied to shed light on the nature of audience engagements with reality TV. As a result, recent research is often frustratingly self-referential, and rarely acknowledges landmark studies of audience reception within the broader field.

Most notably Hill (2005), in her detailed study of British viewers' assessments of the realism or authenticity of programmes such as *Big Brother*, *Ibiza Uncovered*, and *House of Horrors*, cites none of the canonical studies that are widely recognised within the broader field of audience research, including (but not limited to) Morley and Brunsdon's *Nationwide* study (Morley 1980), the expansive studies of soap opera reception by Liebes and Katz (1986, 1989, 1990), Press's (1989, 1991) work on women's receptions of television drama, and Livingstone and Lunt's (1994) extensive psychological study of responses to TV talk shows. Yet reality TV is often characterised as *combining* elements of these different genres. Thus, it seems feasible that audience responses to reality TV might also reflect the modes of engagement that these and other researchers have identified in relation to news/current affairs, soap opera, drama, and talk shows, rather than being entirely unique.

In fact, as this paper endeavours to illustrate and as Lewis (2004) has also noted, modes of audience response to reality TV are quite consistent with those identified within the corpus of existing reception research. Debates over 'fact' versus 'fiction' and slippage between a realist mode versus a media-savvy position are common in relation to several television genres. At one moment programmes may be analysed as though they were a realistic 'slice of life' or a transparent reflection of reality; at other moments they may be related to as a constructed media production (i.e. in a *mediated* mode). As Lewis (2004: 294) points out, 'Reality TV, with its mix of vox pop authenticity, fakery, and contrivance, expresses these contradictions more overtly, but in doing so, *it merely triggers an epistemological paradox that precedes it*' (emphasis added). More specifically, the 'critical' assessments of 'reality' in television programming that Hill (2005) and others extensively document are by no means unique to viewers of reality TV, and are evident in the responses of certain viewers of soap opera (Liebes & Katz 1986, 1989, 1990) drama (Press 1989, 1991), and sitcom (Jhally & Lewis 1992; Michelle 1998). Researchers who point to viewers' sceptical, 'critical' approach to reality TV are thus saying nothing particularly new. As Lewis (2004: 292-3) notes,

...our language is full of references to TV's triviality: "it's only television", "it's nothing more than entertainment", and the ultimate dismissal, "it's not real"..... The majority of respondents in Hill's study who expressed doubts about the veracity of factual entertainment like *Big Brother* are therefore making a well-rehearsed gesture. It's TV; of course it's not real.

The same general point is true of those participants in Mathijus and Hessel's (2004) study of *Big Brother* who complained that 'everything [revolves] around money and profit.... Everything is over-the-top. Sensationalised. They only show the images they [the television makers] want to broadcast' (73). Such viewers are making comments similar in content and tone to those identified in studies of other culturally-derived genres, most notably soap opera and sitcom (Liebes & Katz 1986, 1989, 1990; Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner & Warth 1989; Michelle 1998, 2007), as well as documentary (Richardson & Corner 1986), in that they reflect primary engagement with the constructed nature of the text, codes and conventions of its production, and the generic and economic imperatives at stake, rather than the 'reality' depicted – again reflecting what I term a *mediated* mode of reception.

A further problem in some of the research on reality TV (and this again stems from a certain myopia which has led some researchers to overlook a number of well-established principles in the wider field), is the failure to give sufficient weighting to differences in modes of engagement *among* the reality TV 'audience'. For example, while offering many important insights, Hill (2005) draws a number of conclusions that tend to represent the reality TV audience as uniformly 'critical' and reflective, 'aware of the ways television "puts reality together"' and cognisant of 'how various formats, or editing techniques, can create different degrees of "reality" in popular factual television' (57; see also pages 187-8). While Hill's study certainly highlights many examples that seem to support these conclusions, the notion that such modes of response are widely evident across 'the' British reality TV audience evokes notions of a homogeneously self-reflexive collective, all responding in similar ways. Such findings seem rather at odds with a wealth of research conducted over the past three decades suggesting marked variations in audience response; variations that appear to be correlated with socio-demographic group memberships such as gender, class, and age, and factors such as education (see for example Press 1989, 1991; Seiter et al. 1989; Livingstone 1990, 1994; Livingstone & Lunt 1994). [2]

Indeed, other recent studies of reality TV audiences point to a possible connection between socio-demographic group membership(s) and modes of engagement in which viewers appear to have rather less detailed understanding of the text's status as a constructed media production. For example, Götz (2004: 76) conducted individual interviews with 401 six to nineteen year old Germans who were regular viewers of either soap operas or *Big Brother*, and also conducted twenty-three focus group discussions with 273 primary school children

who were not regular viewers. She found, differently to Hill, that

All those who took part in the study displayed a naïve reception attitude, i.e. the children and adolescents...assume that reality is actually being shown.... None of the respondents in the sample (except for one adolescent) seemed to understand that what they are viewing has been consciously produced and edited. (Götz 2004: 76)

Rather, it appears these young German viewers perceived *Big Brother* as documentary realism, as a source of information about the skills needed for everyday life, and as providing ideas, strategies and role models in terms of how to get along with others, including family members.

Other studies similarly point to what I term a *transparent* mode of engagement among younger viewers. Comments made by participants in Hobson's (2004) study of girls' receptions of soap opera and reality TV suggest that many older girls perceived the reality show *Wife Swap* as documentary – as unrehearsed, as depicting what people would 'normally do', and as a relatively unmediated reflection of real people and their real lives. Aside from highlighting the role of producers in selecting families, they did not seem overtly aware of the role played by selection and editing processes in constructing a particular and potentially partial representation of 'reality' (2004: 142). This tendency for some viewers to perceive reality TV as a reasonably reliable representation of reality and real people is also reflected in the findings of Lumby and Probyn (2004), whose focus group data suggests that many Australian girls used *Big Brother* to

observe and analyse the behaviour of others, to check out what worked and what did not, and to try to ascertain what sorts of behaviours brought the rewards they were seeking. The program offers viewers a sort of "relationship laboratory" where friendships, passions and feuds can be observed and contemplated, judged and criticised without any threat to the self. (Quin 2004: 95)

The potentially 'instructive' value of reality TV is also noted by Chilean 'Tweens' (Souza 2004), who identified various positive (and negative) aspects of the genre. Many of their comments regarding the former again reflect a perception of reality TV as documentary realism. For instance, 'they teach us how to live together in harmony'; 'they show positive role models for how to deal with conflict'; and 'they show you an ethical and ideal self' (175). Despite her conclusions, Hill's research in fact offers support for this pattern of response, as many of her younger viewers likewise talked about learning about life from their observations of people and their behaviour in reality TV (2005: 102; see also Lee 2004).

What is of interest here is that these younger viewers appear to be engaging with reality TV



programmes as relatively unmediated depictions of life as it *really is* – a defining key feature of the transparent mode of reception - and thus as offering reliable models of how to live and behave in the real world. They are not primarily engaged in a critique of realism or consideration of the authenticity of ‘performance’. Nor do they seem consciously aware of the use of selective editing to create drama, for instance, or to emphasise a particular narrative arc. Now, one might of course argue that some, or even many, such viewers are merely suspending disbelief to engage ‘playfully’ with the text, in full cognisance of its status as a constructed media product. But is this necessarily true in the case of reality TV? After all, this genre sits somewhere between factual and fictional programming: reality TV is both ‘real’ *and* constructed/fabricated. So, where do viewers draw the line? Some, the accumulated evidence seems to suggest, largely accept the implicit textual premise that, *despite* the machinations of reality TV production (of which they may have only limited knowledge), it still offers a ‘window’ on authentic human interactions and responses. Such an approach to sense-making is not at all surprising, since as Lewis (2004: 288) points out, ‘the idea that we are watching real people in all their unscripted vulnerability is central to the premise of reality TV’. Viewers who adopt a transparent mode are thus reading ‘with’ the grain of the text in terms of its preferred meanings, and typically draw on intra-textual sources of information as clues to its interpretation.

But this is not to say that *all* younger viewers are disinclined to make more ‘objective’ assessments when prompted, or in another context, or in relation to other genres. Indeed, other studies point to examples where some young viewers in certain contexts *do* draw attention to the text’s status as a constructed, and potentially manipulative, media text. Biltereyst (2004), for example, found that in Belgium, many viewers aged fourteen to twenty-eight years linked reality TV programmes to ‘sensationalism, voyeurism and commercialism’, and

used a more critical, metalinguistic frame [in talking] about factual programmes as constructs of a reality, which have to obey to technological procedures and restrictive economic laws. [R]eality TV was seen as...an invitation to manipulation and the construction of a faked reality. (Biltereyst 2004: 17)

Similarly, German students in research by Mikos (2004: 101) were often ‘critical towards the [ability] of the television station to edit and cut out certain parts. A lot of their speculations cumulated around the question as to what they were missing out on and what happened in reality’. Further, a few of the young Chilean viewers in Souza’s (2004: 175) study were mindful of the way some reality shows ‘induce conflicts among young participants so as to highlight drama, and show emotionality to its limit...they resent the television industry, which, in their view, uses emotion and drama as instruments for getting higher ratings’.

Significantly, but not surprisingly, there is evidence linking the adoption of this mediated viewing mode to formal media studies education – or in other words, to a particular form of *acquired cultural competency*. More than half of the undergraduate media studies students in Hyde-Clarke's (2004) South African study identified the constructed nature of the genre, and highlighted factors such as the commercial nature of television programming, the false or 'staged' setting of the show, and the intervention of the host as determining or shaping the 'reality' depicted, potentially manipulating the behaviour and responses of contestants. Such comments are of a similar ilk to those made by a group of seventeen to nineteen year old media studies students at a British girls' school interviewed by Hobson (2004), who said of the 2004 season of *Big Brother* UK that 'they purposely got like different people into it...and they made the house smaller...so they could be exploited more', 'the producers have only chosen to show the bad parts', and 'they go out looking for these kind of people who will make scenes and dramas...that way they get more viewers' (142).

A small body of research into online fan responses to reality TV is also emerging, and largely confirms these variations in the form of interpretation and response among different groups of viewers. LeBescoe's (2004) study of two online fan communities found that members of *Mighty Big TV* were 'well equipped to reflect on how manipulation by editors produces certain impressions about characters that may or may not be accurate' (272). However, in *Survivor Fire*, contributors were 'far more earnest and considerably less sophisticated in their abilities to produce oppositional [*sic*] readings' (LeBescoe 2004: 273). Finally, research conducted by Jones (2001) suggests the clear majority of fans active on the *Big Brother UK1* website 'valued the truthfulness and honesty of the games' contestants, which implies that the programme was read at least partly as a revelation of underlying character, not simply as a game to be won' (as cited in Couldry 2002: 290; see also Frau-Meigs, 2006; Foster 2004).

Evidently then, different groups among the reality TV audience may adopt quite *different* modes of engagement, but these modes are *themselves* entirely consistent with those previously identified within the body of accumulated cross-cultural research pertaining to audience receptions of a wide variety of television genres. In some (but not all) cases, the same viewer may commute between those modes, such that those who primarily adopt a transparent mode (and thus exhibit a high degree of subjective identification and involvement) may have moments where their attention shifts to certain representational, aesthetic, generic, or discursive features of a text, and at such moments they can be said to commute to a referential, mediated or discursive mode. By the same token, some or even many whose basic viewing experience is marked by attunement to the generic form of a text, or opposition to its discursive orientation, may have moments of intense engagement in the fictional or real-life drama (Schröder 1986: 68–9). Andacht (2004) identifies this commuting process in relation to young people's receptions of *Big Brother* in Latin America, where

the most noticeable tendency...is a fair split, even an *oscillation* between a firm belief in the genuineness of the format's index appeal, and the strong suspicion that its most memorable moments are carefully staged by the participants of *Big Brother* in complicity with the producers. (124-5)

Similarly, Hill herself notes that (some) viewers may commute between at least two different modes in the same response: 'audiences are able to switch from appreciation of these ordinary people and their experiences, to awareness of the staged nature of their experiences created for television' (Hill 2005: 177).

To recap; what all this suggests, I contend, is the existence of distinct modes of audience engagement and response that are evident across national contexts, and (based on the research to date) appear to be correlated in some way with age, fandom, and media literacy, and perhaps also gender. Further, the modes of response being identified in the current proliferation of studies of reality TV reception are not unique to this genre. Thus, it seems prudent to evaluate audience responses to reality TV programming in terms that reflect what is known about forms of audience engagement and response more generally; or in other words, to evaluate and (re)contextualise findings pertaining to receptions of this genre in light of now well-documented (if less clearly articulated) principles within the wider field regarding the nature of audience engagement and response *per se*. In order to illustrate how such a recontextualisation might be achieved, I offer a case study analysis of online fan responses to the interactive reality gameshow, *Rock Star: Supernova*, applying the Composite Multi-dimensional Model of audience reception as my analytical framework. In the following analysis, I draw on archetypal examples from online forum contributions to the official *Rock Star: Supernova* website in order to illustrate the specific nature and tenor of the four primary modes of response – *transparent*, *referential*, *mediated*, and *discursive*.

### **Rock Star: Supernova**

The brainchild of the reigning King of reality TV, Mark Burnett, *Rock Star: Supernova* (CBS) is the sequel to *Rock Star: INXS* and follows the same premise: aspiring musicians compete to front a 'prestigious' rock band, in this case the newly-formed *Supernova*, [3] which brought together three well-known rock veterans: Tommy Lee of *Mötley Crüe* (also an executive producer), Jason Newsted of *Metallica*, and Gilby Clarke of *Guns N' Roses*. Throughout the competition the fifteen finalists of diverse nationalities lived together in a large Hollywood Hills mansion, and engaged in various tasks (including songwriting, media interviews, photo shoots, and industry parties) to test their reactions and judge their suitability for rock stardom, whilst also rehearsing and performing chosen songs before a live studio audience and the band member judges. *Rock Star: Supernova* is thus one of 'a whole range of programs that

have deployed various combinations of the same syntactical elements of forced confinement, competitive individualism and emotional conflict as entertainment' (Tincknell & Raghuram 2002: 202).

The latter aspect was especially evident in the twelve weekly 'reality' webisodes that first aired online on 3rd July 2006. Essentially a heavily-edited version of life at the *Rock Star* mansion, these webisodes were accessible via the official *Rock Star* website ([www.rockstar.com](http://www.rockstar.com)), to subscribers of Verizon and some pay TV channels in a few countries, [4] and through Windows Live Messenger. The website also provided various opportunities for viewers to extend their engagement with the primary media text by hosting contestants' video diaries and interviews, an associated online game, and discussion boards. *Rock Star: Supernova* was thus potentially highly interactive, and offers an interesting example of media convergence (Jenkins 2006), or expanded media delivery using various formats. It also illustrates Brooker's (2002) notion of media overflow, as the webisodes and online resources offered fans 'an immersive, participatory experience which extends the "text" of the show beyond the time and space in which it is broadcast' (Foster 2004: 273). Indeed, the television broadcast was actually relegated to a less prominent position in the *Rock Star: Supernova* schedule: the show premiered on television in the US on 6th July 2006, three days after the first webisode appeared online, and in the hours that followed screened in sixteen countries. [5] This pattern, in which the weekly webisode became available for viewing as part of the lead up to the weekly performance show, continued throughout the season. Following each performance show, local and international viewers were invited to cast their votes for their favorite contestant, either via MSN on the *Rock Star: Supernova* website, or by text message through their local telecommunications provider. Results were revealed the following night, and influenced (but did not dictate) the decisions of *Supernova* regarding weekly eliminations. The eventual winner, Canadian Lukas Rossi, went on to record a CD with the subsequently renamed band *Rock Star Supernova*, and joined them on their world tour in the first half of 2007.

Given that hard rock is not mainstream, it is unsurprising that *Rock Star: Supernova* fell short of being a ratings success among the general audience. That said, the show consistently rated well in the coveted eighteen to forty-nine age bracket, and the 13th September finale ranked third in its timeslot in the US (Russ 2006). Outside the US, the show appears to have had a considerable following. It was the top rated show amongst eighteen to forty-nine year olds in Canada (Zerbisias 2006), while in Iceland, a nationwide campaign was instigated to vote for Magni Ágeirsson. To encourage support for their local hero, both telecommunications companies reduced their rates for SMS votes from ISK .99 to ISK .19 ([Icelandreview.com](http://Icelandreview.com) 2006). A large number of local and international fans were sufficiently motivated to contribute to discussion forums hosted on the official *Rock Star: Supernova*

website, with some threads attracting over 1,100 different posters. These forum contributions are the subject of this research.

### **Methodology**

In order to place some boundaries around data collection, this study focused on contributions to seventeen discussion threads from the official *Rock Star: Supernova* website over a forty-eight hour period from 23-24th of August 2006, and a further 24-hour period on 5th of September 2006. Access to all *Rock Star* forums was public, allowing casual visitors to read posts. However, it was necessary to sign in as a member to add new comments. 'Lurkers' such as myself could view biographical details revealed in the profiles of members and access all posts by the same member, but the vast majority of members offered no information other than geographical location. While 'live blogging' occurred regularly during the US television broadcasts throughout the season, none of the threads included in this study were of this nature. Given that members were geographically dispersed across various time zones, discussions in most threads continued around the clock. The majority of posts were thus read and analysed in transcript form some time after the period surveyed. 165 members contributed to the seventeen forum discussions that are the focus of this research; their posts ranged in length from a few lines to several detailed paragraphs. Contributors to these forums were self-selecting and from a range of nationalities, although all the analysed postings were in English.

As a growing number of researchers are coming to appreciate, online discussion forums offer a potentially fertile source of insight into audience receptions. As Van Zoonen (2007: 535) suggests, forum postings provide access to more naturalistic responses than traditional research methods such as interviews or focus groups, since there is often a gap between what people say they do in the context of academic research and what they do in routine practice. Examining people's unsolicited, spontaneous, unprompted responses potentially offers a clearer picture of how they *actually* make sense of reality TV's depictions, rather than how they believe a researcher or others present think they should. Online contributions also offer insight into the nature of fan-initiated negotiations around the meaning and significance of what is seen. Fans effectively 'set the agenda' in terms of what is most important and relevant to them, rather than the researcher determining the parameters and topics for discussion. From a practical perspective, online forum discussions make it possible to easily access and record responses from a large and potentially diverse group of respondents, without the usual cost and time involved in studies of audience reception.

However, the use of online forum contributions also raises a number of methodological problems, the first of which is that it is generally not possible to know very much, if anything,

about the identities, socio-demographic backgrounds, and discursive affiliations of respondents, nor why they feel motivated to contribute (Van Zoonen 2007) – as was the case in this study. Thus, it is not possible to draw a link between social positioning and modes of reception, which remains a key concern within the field (Hall 1980; Morley 1980). Secondly, online fan responses should not be assumed to be representative of ‘the audience’ more generally. As Brooker (2001: 468) notes, ‘we should be careful not to take “fans” – those who produce the artefacts we see online...as equivalent to the less active but far larger group of “viewers”.’ Conversely, fans should not be viewed as necessarily a unique, niche audience or some kind of special case, as the intertextual networks created by media overflow are increasingly part of the mainstream viewing experience, and not just the preserve of ‘hardcore’ fans (Brooker 2001). Indeed, from my reading of the forum discussion postings, many contributors claimed not to be ‘fans’ of reality TV or the show *per se*, prior to stumbling across one of the early performance shows. Thirdly, it should be noted that the audiences for the *Rock Star: Supernova* broadcasts and online materials were not necessarily one and the same, since many television viewers may have lacked access to the video streaming technology required to view the webisodes or even visit the website, while those with internet access could potentially view just the webisodes and performances available online. The levels of participation online also varied enormously: many visiting the website regularly may have read but not contributed to forum discussions. These problems in mind, for the purposes of this research, I make no claims as to the wider representativeness of my findings to the *Rockstar: Supernova* audience in general, but do assert that the patterns of engagement and response identified among this group of online forum contributors are consistent with patterns identified across the body of existing reception research and charted in the Consolidated Multi-dimensional Model. On this basis, I suggest this case study lends empirical support to claims by Lewis (2004) and Foster (2004) that there are significant continuities between receptions of reality TV and a variety of other genres.

Analysis of online forum responses also raises practical problems due to the ‘overwhelming volume of material, temporary existence of material and its “virtuality”’ (Livingstone 2004: 83) Contributions may be unmanageably high in volume and frequency, and may be subject to censorship by moderators – as was often the case on the *Rock Star: Supernova* message boards. Whole discussions may be eventually relocated, archived, or simply deleted, and again this was true in this case: the *Rock Star: Supernova* threads were closed and removed from the official website several months after the season finale. To contain data collection to manageable and coherent levels, all threads included in this study addressed the key drama of the 2006 *Rock Star: Supernova* season – the fallout from South African contestant Dilana Robichaux’s apparent criticisms of her peers in a series of staged media interviews in Week Eight. In the weekly webisode and again in excerpts featured in the TV broadcasts, Dilana is depicted making comments such as ‘There’s definitely a guy that I want to strangle at one

point every day and that's Lukas'; 'I kind of know who is really serious about this and who is just along for the ride for as long as they can.... Magni is really set on being with his family'; and 'Storm really hated [Supernova's] lyrics'. According to spoilers from those who attended the live taping of the performance show, Dilana's statements resulted in a lengthy barrage of verbal condemnation from producer/host Dave Navarro (who in the broadcast remarks, 'What the *hell* were you thinking? You *never* bag on your peers like that!'), angry responses from other contestants, and extensive, frequently heated, online debate which continued well after the series itself had concluded.

Many of those who contributed to the discussion forums analysed in this study appeared to have access to multiple texts and information sources, including online content, the webisodes, weekly broadcasts, and in some cases, direct or secondhand access to 'spoiler' information. Others professed 'insider' knowledge of either the show's production or the television or recording industries in general. In a few cases, contributors claimed to be existing fans or personal friends of Dilana prior to *Rock Star: Supernova*. For the purposes of this analysis, only statements directly relevant to the Week Eight controversy were included in the sample; unrelated remarks about competitors were excluded, as were 'hidden' messages and statements deemed too brief to determine modality of response. Statements were categorised in accordance with the four modes of response identified in the Composite Multi-dimensional Model. Comments were coded as one discrete statement, regardless of length, if consistent in modality. Where contributors 'commuted' between modalities within the same response this was noted, but each discrete 'modal' statement was recorded separately. In total, 290 discrete statements were identified: 142 of these were coded as in a transparent mode, thirteen as referential, seventy-five as mediated, and sixty as discursive.

In the analysis that follows, I discuss archetypal examples of each of these four modes drawn from fans' online contributions. By applying the Composite Multi-dimensional Model to online receptions of *Rock Star: Supernova*, I hope to demonstrate that responses to reality TV are largely consistent in *form* or *modality* with those identified in response to various other genres. By so doing, I seek to illustrate the value of acknowledging patterns in the nature of audience engagement and response above and beyond specificities of genre and (potentially also) format, and to affirm the general principle that the various interpretive capacities and activities of differently-positioned audience members should properly remain at the centre of reception studies, rather than the text *per se*.

### **Debating Dilana's Fall from Grace on *Rock Star: Supernova***

Much of the online discussion pertaining to the events of Week Eight can be understood as a discursive struggle to affirm the meaning or 'truth' of what was represented, and/or to

determine *why* events were represented as they were. In their postings, different contributors draw on various textual and extra-textual resources to construct a particular (and inevitably partial) interpretation of the events that unfolded. The very different responses discussed below, I suggest, reflect contributors' adoption of distinct modes of reception, and it is this that prompts them to conceive textual events in radically different ways: in some cases, as a transparent reflection of reality 'as it really happened'; in others, as a particular version of real events constructed via the selective editing of media producers; and in still others, as a biased representation of reality designed to sway audience opinion and voter response. *Modality of response*, I suggest, is key to understanding the capacity of different viewers to make divergent readings of the same media text, and takes four primary forms.

*i) 'Superstar', or 'Superbitch'? Readings in a transparent mode*

My understanding of a *transparent* mode of reception draws on concepts developed by other researchers, including Worth and Gross's (1974) notion of an *inferential reading*, Richardson and Corner's (1986) concept of a *transparency reading*, and Schrøder's (1986) notion of *strong involvement*. Consolidating these existing understandings, a transparent mode is one where viewers assess and comment on persons and events depicted in media texts as though encountering them directly, or firsthand. Interpretations in this mode draw on cues, frames and other information provided by or inferred from the text itself to establish meaning or 'truth'. In effect, then, the text provides the primary resources for its interpretation. In the case of non-fiction programming, what is seen is assumed to be a transparent reflection of an external 'real' world and real people and events within it – as life *as it is*. Hence, viewers draw on intra-textual evidence to make sense of depicted events and the actions and motivations of individuals involved. This reading mode relies on an implicit belief in the accuracy and truthfulness of depictions which are, for the most part, still presented by their producers and accepted by the majority of audience members as relatively undistorted reflections of reality – a 'window on the world'.

That this was the most common mode adopted by contributors to these online forums is not surprising, since as Hill notes, 'viewing expectations for popular factual television are framed by audience understanding of factual programming as "true to life", recording events that "just happen"' (2005: 55). She suggests that viewers tend to place considerable trust in what appears to be genuine 'on-the-scene' footage. Corner similarly notes that a large part of the pleasure and interest in observational reality TV is founded in a belief that programmes depict 'the real characteristics of real people, even if the material and temporal conditions for that behavior has been entirely constructed by television itself' (2002: 256). Hence, many forum contributions reflected an implicit assumption that the online webisodes, TV episodes, and other materials offered reasonably accurate reflections of life at the Rock Star mansion 'as it



really happened', and of the contestants 'as they really are'. Participants adopting this mode often engaged in heated debates about Dilana's personal contribution to her own undoing; her motivations, character traits, personality and so on. For these contributors, at such moments, 'seeing was believing'. What they were able to see and hear provided the ultimate confirmation of 'truth', and while reading in this mode they did not question the 'realness' or authenticity of the statements made by Dilana. Rather, they asserted different views on what her statements *meant* (in terms of her intentions in saying them), and in terms of what saying these things reflected about her personality.

For example, one contributor drew on earlier textual depictions to suggest that Dilana

would have her band mates' backs in the real world during interviews.... I have watched the show from week one and it was Dilana who was sad when someone was voted off and in sound bites it was obvious she was a team player practicing, helping and advising others on how to do their best. (3.20pm, 24/08/06, participant #40). [6]

Many others similarly drew on intra-textual resources and recalled that other competitors had been seen saying negative things about their peers in previous weeks: 'The only difference is she said it to the media.... lesson learned.... Dilana gave her opinion, she didn't deliberately backstab anyone that I can tell'. (3.33pm, 24/08/06, participant #81). Others were rather less forgiving, but still adopted the same transparent mode of response. Here, one poster refers to broadcast footage of the Week Eight media interviews to support a less positive evaluation: 'The media...asked everyone the same questions and the others (mostly) handled themselves well and did not bag on the others. However Dilana had what I can only call verbal diarrhoea. Very distasteful!' (10.25pm, 23/08/06, participant #71). Many participants offered theories as to why Dilana may have made such statements, pointing to a variety of (positive and negative) character traits and psychological motivations, including her brutal honesty, big-headedness, stress, and overconfidence. As one commentator remarked, 'There is a difference between being eager and aggressive for the job and being an over-confident raging diva...she is pushing the diva side!.... We all saw the wicked witch come out in her weeks ago. I wonder when *Supernova* saw it?' (2.03pm, 23/08/06 participant #100).

Such comments, I suggest, are indicative of a transparent mode of reception. These contributors are at this moment relating to Dilana as though the *Rock Star: Supernova* webisodes and/or broadcasts held up a mirror to life at the mansion and they were observing her directly or firsthand, as she 'really' is. Their (different) assessments of Dilana's behaviour, character and psychological motivations are based solely on textual information – on what they have seen and heard Dilana do and say in this and previous weeks, and on traits they've attributed to her based on those depictions. As Corner notes, reality TV viewers often engage in 'thick judgemental and speculative discourse around participants' motives, actions and

likely future behaviour' (2002: 264), and this is certainly true of many of these online fans.

Significantly, however, these participants draw on *different* visual and verbal evidence to support their interpretations and evaluations, in the process demonstrating the full extent of textual polyvalence (Condit 1989). They are able to arrive at different interpretations because the text is complex in its signification; hence, they can mobilise different bits of textual evidence from across eight weeks' worth of broadcasts and reality webisodes to support their interpretations of Dilana's actions. And, because there is so much material to draw from, and because human behaviour is generally complex and contradictory rather than consistent (the same individual may be overbearingly competitive at one moment, but kind and supportive the next), they are able to piece together different bits of information to construct a particular (and partial reading) of the same text. Further, as Corner (2002: 261) notes, the 'self' in reality TV 'can be put on display in various modes of affection, solidarity, insincerity, confrontation, and downright aggression'. Depending on *which* 'performances of self' and which *other* pieces of textual information are mobilised, Dilana can be understood as a brutally honest Superstar who let success go to her head but has now learned her lesson, or as a jealous, hyper-competitive Superbitch finally exposed. In either case, however, the text provides the primary resources for its interpretation since viewers base their assessments on what has been *depicted*, which is assumed to be a reasonably transparent reflection of events 'as they really happened' and of Dilana as she 'really' is, warts and all. While this mode is essentially one step removed from the referential mode discussed next, it is *qualitatively different* from either a mediated or discursive mode of reception.

*ii) 'Rockers say stupid stuff all the time': Readings in a referential mode*

My understanding of this second mode of reception draws on the categories of *inferential* reading (Worth & Gross 1974), *indicative involvement* (Schröder 1986), *trivial/random personal association* (Dahlgren 1988), and *referential* reading (Liebes & Katz 1986, 1989, 1990). Whereas a *transparent* mode is one where viewers relate to media texts on their own terms, a *referential* mode is one step removed, in the sense that viewers perceive and relate to the text as standing *alongside* the real world, and make linkages, comparisons and analogies between that depicted reality and their own knowledge and experience of the extra-textual world 'out there'—experience that may be first hand, or itself mediated through encounters with other cultural texts (Lewis 2004). In adopting this mode, viewers are able to draw from three 'pools' or sources of information, and may use this information to make sense of and affirm, contest, or question the accuracy of textual depictions of people and events and the version of 'reality' presented. Such assessments are typically made according to a perceived fit, or lack of fit, between textual depictions and the viewer's own cultural milieu, their existing *extra-textual* knowledge and experience and their observations of the wider

social world.

According to Höijer (1992), one source of referential information is each viewer's *personal history or individual biography*, including experiences of childhood, adulthood, parenthood, and personal and familial relationships. Another referential source is their *immediate life world experience*, including experiences and observations of other people and involvement in activities and concerns related to the public sphere. A third source of referential information is *viewers' experience and knowledge of the wider macro sphere in which they live, and/or in which a given media text was produced*. Such information may pertain to local, national, and international events, economic and political systems and controversies, social policy, contemporary social issues, mainstream public opinion, and social and cultural norms.

Immediate lifeworld experience was drawn on by only a few forum contributors, one of whom noted that 'it is when someone is at their top that they have the most pressure on them to perform and she cracked under that pressure! When you're at the top there is only one way to go, and that's down'. (10.25pm, 24/08/06, participant #71). Another pointed out that 'at some point in our lives every one of us will say something that will either offend or anger someone else. Nobody is perfect' (3.33pm, 23/08/06, participant #81). Somewhat differently, a few contributors drew on knowledge of South African cultural traits gleaned from their personal associations to make sense of Dilana's behaviour: 'I hear from South Africans that such honesty is very much a trait of their country. If they're asked an opinion they will give it' (9.17am, 24/08/06, participant #38), and 'I have worked with several South Africans and Dilana is being true to her own culture. They can be rather blunt and they do not suffer fools gladly - they have zero tolerance for BS' (4.23am, 23/08/06, participant #140).

Others drew on their knowledge and experience of the wider macro context of production, noting that rock stars quite often say and do stupid things that end up being reported in the media:

She's no different than any other person that has a chance to front that band; a band might I add that has a drummer that has a sex tape floating all over the world; did it hurt him? (6.46am, 23/08/06, participant #45)

If Tommy Lee got the boot for publicly complaining about Vince Neil's race car driving, they would have split long before they did. For that matter insert ANY other of the members of *Mötley Crüe*. People say stupid things sometimes. (7.18pm, 24/08/06, participant #94)

It should be noted also that in adopting this referential mode of reading, participants relate to the text primarily at a denotative level. Their various pools of referential knowledge may be used to affirm, question, or reject the accuracy of textual depictions in terms of how closely

they mirror 'real life', or may simply be used as a pool of information which can be drawn on in making sense of the version of reality or 'slice of life' presented. In this case, Dilana's representation is assumed to be accurate or true to life – this is Dilana as she really is, and she really said those things – and viewers are primarily engaged with trying to make sense of and assess her actions in relation to their experience of the extra-textual world; one in which South Africans are blunt, opinionated, and honest, and most people, including rock stars, occasionally say and do stupid things.

*iii) Dilana and the 'evil edit': Readings in a mediated mode*

Rather more frequent were interpretations in a mediated mode which typically referred to the processes involved in producing a text of this genre and the various constraints and imperatives involved in reality TV production; any of which may have resulted in the selective presentation of a particular *version* of events surrounding the Week Eight media interviews. My understanding of this mode is derived from analytical categories developed by other reception researchers, including those of *attributional reading* (Worth & Gross 1974), *analytic decoding* (Neuman 1982), *mediation reading* (Corner & Richardson 1986), *media awareness/demystification discourse* (Dahlgren 1988), *syntactic criticism* (Liebes & Katz 1986, 1989, 1990), and *discrimination* (Schröder 2000). Consolidating and refining these existing schemas, I suggest that what distinguishes a *mediated* mode of reading is explicit recognition of the constructed nature of the text as a media *production*—as an elaboration of established codes and conventions. *Mediated* readings are thus generally characterized by a more distant or 'objective' relationship between text and viewer (although the reverse may be true of 'hardcore' fans [Jenkins 1992]). In adopting a *mediated* mode of reception, viewers characteristically draw on (often quite considerable) knowledge of aspects of media production, aesthetic ideals, generic conventions, and the functions and motivations of the film and television industries.

Within the broader perspective of a *mediated* mode of reading, three subcategories can be identified. A mediated mode of reception with an *aesthetic* focus is one where the viewer draws attention to any of various features of technical production, such as narrative construction, plot, pace, timing, camera work, use of visuals or captions, editing, scriptwriting, performance, and characterization, and the constraints placed on production and scheduling. Mediated-aesthetic receptions often take the form of a positive or negative evaluation of the *quality* of such features. In comparison, a mediated mode of reception with a focus on *generic form* is one where viewers draw on their knowledge of generic conventions—such as narrative formula and characterization particular to genre—or use as interpretive frames of reference texts of the same genre, other episodes of the same series, or even texts of other

genres. The third subcategory reflects viewers' perceptions of the *intentions* and motivations of cultural producers in terms of meeting various textual, generic, and professional or industry-based imperatives. Viewers may, for example, perceive that the producers have constructed certain textual features in particular ways for reasons such as the need to generate humour, interest, or drama within the text itself. Alternatively, viewers may draw on their understanding of certain generic imperatives, such as the need for texts *of a particular genre* to inform, entertain, amuse, or educate. Differently again, viewers may express an awareness of the text as reflecting the *industry-based motivations* of its producers, and hence as having a specific purpose such as informing or entertaining the public, or attracting a lucrative viewing audience in order to generate profit for the television network or film studio. Obviously, such receptions require specific knowledges and acquired cultural competencies, and some viewers clearly have greater media literacy as well as stronger allegiance to these interpretive repertoires than others.

Generic form and intentionality were key considerations in many of the statements analysed. Many contributors posited Dilana as the victim of an 'evil edit' initiated by Executive Producer Mark Burnett, that 'master of editing' (7.33pm, 24/08/06, participant #86) whose 'speciality is creating drama and fights between people' (5.38pm, 24/08/06, participant #136). As one forum participant notes,

...this crazy ride is a total set up. This show will play out however MB wants (save for the final decision). We will see only what he wants us to see...and 1,000's and 1,000's of hours of footage, with all sorts of mudslinging and slugging by all the rawkers, will likely never be seen'. (10.01pm, 23/08/06, participant #142)

Such readings highlight aspects of generic form and intentionality – they reflect intertextual awareness that certain things are likely to happen in reality TV shows made by Mark Burnett, as well as technical knowledge that processes of selective editing are used to create certain narrative arcs that produce the controversy and drama that are essential to this genre.

Also common were postings alluding to aspects of professional and industry-based intentionality, specifically in terms of creating drama and controversy in order to increasing ratings (and thus advertising revenue) and help save a 'poorly-performing' show. The following remarks typify this kind of response:

The producers of this show are desperate. It is among the lowest rated of all the summer shows. They need drama. What better way than to take someone who is in the lead and edit/spin/splice to create the drama they feel they need to increase their show's ratings. (8.45pm, 05/09/06, participant #13)

We have to remember.....this is a TV SHOW!!!!!! .... I think A LOT of what we saw was creative editing.... I think everyone is a little concerned that Dilana has this wrapped up already and that viewers may think “What the heck?” and stop watching. A little controversy NEVER hurts!!!! (4.28pm, 24/08/06, participant #56)

You people that like to diss so and so would be surprised at how much does end up on the cutting room floor... you might be very appalled as well. Dilana got her spanking as deservedly so but it's also clear that she was the focus as of late to level the playing field and leave us all wondering what is up with what now... until something else happens to give the viewing audience something else to chew on..... Controversy sells and I imagine the ratings have gone up as well. (12pm, 23/08/06, participant #75)

Importantly, I do not consider readings of this nature to be ‘oppositional’, ‘critical’ nor ‘resistant’ as other scholars might suggest. While such comments clearly draw on formal media literacies and (in some cases considerable) knowledge of how the television industry operates, they are limited in their ability to challenge preferred textual meanings as they primarily engage with the text in terms of its denotative rather than connotative content. It is therefore necessary to make an analytical distinction between those viewers who adopt a mediated mode of reception and acknowledge the constructed nature of the text (in the sense that what is depicted is shaped by certain codes and conventions of reality TV production, and by industrial, professional and economic imperatives, such as the need to increase ratings) and those who, having identified particular textual *connotations*, perceive the text's producers as having a manipulative intent in terms of depicted events in a way that seeks to influence the beliefs and behaviours of viewers (including, in this case, their *voting* behaviours). Receptions framed in a mediated mode do not contest the text's implicit claim to be a reasonably accurate representation of reality (within certain generic and industrial constraints) despite the situation being inauthentic/contrived. In this case, such readings accept the preferred meaning of this reality game show – i.e., that *Rock Star: Supernova* was a genuine contest with a ‘fair’ outcome primarily based on how well each contestant performed throughout the whole series, how closely they would ‘fit’ with the band, and the votes of viewers/fans.

In contrast, the last set of readings I wish to discuss are analytical and also oppositional, since they reject this central claim that contestants and viewers were primarily determining the results of a genuine contest. Instead, these responses assert that the contest was effectively a sham, the outcome having been determined some weeks in advance by (most suggest) Tommy Lee in collusion with the other producers. Such readings also assert that both contestants and viewers were manipulated through biased representations that were deliberately intended to influence viewers' fan allegiances, with the explicit aim of changing

their collective voting behaviour. While allegations of television game show corruption are nothing new historically, the issue has particular significance in the current context, given that with some reality TV game shows, revenue derived from public telephone voting now exceeds that derived from the traditional source of advertising (Knight 2007). I should also note before continuing that these oppositional discursive readings are just one variant within the broader discursive mode. By focusing on them, I do not wish to imply that readings in a discursive mode are inherently oppositional or counter-hegemonic, since the discursive mode also encompasses readings that affirm preferred textual meanings – see Figure 1 above for further clarification.

*iv) Dirty dealings, sabotage and the Supernova 'conspiracy': Readings in a discursive mode*

My understanding of this fourth mode of reception draws variously from the categories of *dominant/preferred*, *negotiated* and *oppositional decoding* (Hall 1980), *interpretive decoding* (Neuman 1982), *manipulative intent* (Richardson & Corner 1986), *semantic criticism* (Liebes & Katz 1986, 1989, 1990), and Schrøder's (2000) dimensions of *comprehension* and *position*. Whereas viewers adopting a mediated mode typically highlight features related to the *form* of a given cultural text, receptions framed in a *discursive* mode specifically address the text's propositional or 'message' content—i.e., its ideological connotations. That is to say, accounts primarily framed in this mode perceive that the text is attempting to communicate a particular message, and represent the viewer's response to that message. This mode has two elements: *analytical* and *positional*. Of most relevance to the present research is the *analytical* discursive category, which may reflect viewers' consideration of the motivation behind the message, and may be framed in terms of the perceived political or discursive aims of the producers in promoting a certain message and in their representation of particular characters or events. In this view, textual producers are seen as biased in a particular direction, and as attempting to persuade viewers to adopt their favoured position. Viewers in this mode may thus comment negatively or positively on the ideas or feelings the producers hoped to instil in the audience. Some may express a negatively framed conception of the text as having a specific purpose in terms of exerting influence within the social or political sphere, or as Richardson and Corner (1986) term it, having a manipulative intent. According to these authors, viewers in this mode may suggest that in the process, the producers of the text have (perhaps deliberately) distorted reality in some way, and are attempting to deceive viewers in order to secure their own political or ideological intentions. The positional subcategory refers to Hall's (1980) well-canvassed delineation between dominant/preferred, negotiated, and oppositional decodings.

Analytical discursive readings were very much evident within the *Rock Star: Supernova* online fan community, with a surprisingly large number suggesting extensive manipulation,

sabotage, and even a conspiracy to 'bring Dilana down'. Until this point in the series, many argued, Dilana was the clear favourite and widely considered the one to beat. Unlike all other contestants, she had never appeared in the bottom three considered for elimination. Many fans thus considered the possibly manipulative motivations behind the representation of her following the Week Eight media interviews, as the following remarks illustrate:

Why don't they just say they are trying to get more people behind Lukas 'cause they are looking at him to front the band...and stop tearing Dilana down to try to get all the people who know she is the best choice to change their minds and support who they like already.... A lil dirty dealing going on if ya ask me... shame on ya!! (7.22am, 05/09/06, participant #22)

Obviously she had enough public support that Dave and the band had to go to extreme measures to get her into the bottom three where they obviously wanted her. They knew they had to tear her down. (11.24pm, 05/09/06, participant #55)

If they had not shown what they did about Dilana and then got to the end of the show with nothing negative said or shown about her - how do you think the fans would have reacted when they didn't pick her?? They had to do "something" to justify their decision.... And, WHY did they cut her sentences off and not show everything she said so that we would hear the whole story. They wanted the fans to be mad at her!!! (8.49pm, 05/09/06, participant #92)

Somewhat differently, several contributors inferred that the apparent attempt to undermine Dilana's popularity and manipulate the outcome was grounded in a Patriarchal worldview and the entrenched sexism of the existing *Supernova* band members. One described *Supernova* as a 'Patriarchal organizational system', and noted that

Any time a woman is talented and in the public eye, she is scrutinized, judged, and berated, positioned - culturally - as a bitch.... It was just a couple of weeks ago that it was the men who were 'gossiping' and saying derogatory things about Storm.... Yet when Dilana deigns, finally, to speak...she is cast as a \*\*\*\*, self-aggrandizing, even mean. This is a direct result of Zayra and Gil—who'd both been in that position before—being eliminated, which means, in a patriarchal organizational system, that some other woman is forced to occupy that role/type.... It is not, however, just that a patriarchal system demands—nay, requires—a woman command the role of '\*\*\*\*'.... If you are a frontrunner AND you are a woman, well, you will be crucified. (9.46pm, 23/08/06, participant #141)

A few others expressed the view that implicit in Dilana's 'crucifixion' was the message that women just aren't capable of fronting 'serious' rock bands. Some contributors suggested that the producers, and specifically Tommy Lee and Dave Navarro, may have deliberately pushed for selective editing to make Dilana look bad out of fear that a woman might actually win the



public vote, as in this example:

This has been a concerted effort to destroy her! ... My theory is until two weeks ago Dilana was the clear front runner and was on her way to winning this! Tommy, Gilby, Jason and Dave in true misogynist rocker fashion could not have a girl in the final two and kick her off. Knowing they will never pick a woman lead singer, they began to lean on the producers to make her look bad. A little of this out of context a little of that out of context and presto the fans begin to turn on her. Sort of like in the movie G.I. Jane, "it was never going to happen on their watch". (11.50pm, 05/09/06, participant #27)

Again, what characterises these readings as fitting within the discursive mode is that they primarily make sense of textual depictions in relation to discourses of the wider social world. They thus conceive the text as conveying a sexist message about gender roles, and as expressing and affirming patriarchal power within the band, as within society more generally.

Not surprisingly however, the notion that any such conspiracy may have occurred was met with considerable scepticism by other forum contributors. As found by Hill (2005), many viewers are unable to resolve the tension between fact and fiction in this genre; clearly a lot of what is seen is 'real', but much is constructed, and many viewers are well aware of this. However, the line between reality and artifice can be difficult to determine in the absence of proof either way. Hence, determining which events are accurately depicted and which behaviours are truly honest and authentic rather than contrived remains a site of discursive struggle. Many among this group of online forum contributors consequently vacillate or commute between seeing what is depicted as 'reality as it is', and expressing their awareness that what is seen may at times be highly selective, performative, and potentially misleading. Thus, at one moment they acknowledge features of textual construction such as the use of selective editing, but at other moments speak about the text as though it were documentary realism, and in several cases explicitly reject any suggestion that editing might be used in ways that *deliberately* misrepresent 'reality' in order to influence the outcome – thus rejecting any possibility of a *Supernova* 'conspiracy', however conceived. A considerable number make statements that reflect a high degree of acquired media literacy (in terms of understanding of the industry and reality TV as a genre) but ultimately reassert a realist view, claiming that audiences are seeing a *reasonably* accurate version of events as they really happened, as the following comments suggest:

Sure the episodes are being manipulated. Of course not all of the media interviews are being shown. It is a reality show, after all, and conflict makes for good ratings. But *Dilana put herself in the hot seat. She made herself a target.* The show doesn't need to crucify her, just turn the cameras on her for a while and *she'll do it to herself...* It's not just media or reality show manipulation. *Dilana did muck up. Can't escape that truth.* (4.08am, 24/08/06, participant #80;

emphasis added)

Juicy footage sells. *Dilana provided some really juicy stuff this week* - that is why the focus is on her. It's her turn. If there were JUICIER footage floating around *we would definitely be seeing it*. Burnett doesn't care about these contestants or *Supernova*, he wants ratings. So I think it's ridiculous to think he's holding back more drama from the viewers. If there was some, we'd be seeing it for sure. (5.44pm, 24/08/06, participant #60; emphasis added)

*The fact is...those insults came out of her mouth*. It doesn't matter how they edited it... I know how editing works, I am a film major... plus it is just common sense. *They didn't magically put those words into her mouth. She had the lack of respect and class to say those things*. So it is not a 'ploy'. (10.24pm, 24/08/06, participant #18; emphasis added)

Ultimately, for many among this group of *Rock Star: Supernova online viewers/fans*, including those professing a high degree of media literacy, 'seeing was believing' after all.

While I remain reluctant to make any general claims based on the responses of this particular group of respondents to a highly specific televisual moment, responses such as these seem to suggest that particular (and partial) understandings of the media's capacity for selective representation, coupled with broad, if not *unqualified*, acceptance of reality TV's claims regarding the authenticity of the real-life events depicted, may reinforce a tendency to perceive reality TV as a particular kind of documentary 'realism' created for our entertainment. Irrespective of many online contributors' familiarity with the codes and conventions of media production, and despite their evident awareness of the use of selective, even 'creative' editing, *Rock Star: Supernova* was ultimately perceived as offering a 'window' on authentic (i.e. unscripted) human interactions and responses, a reading which is entirely in keeping with the central premise and preferred meaning of reality TV (Lewis, 2004). Webisodes were thus generally perceived as representing reality *as it pretty much is*, or as offering an acceptably *accurate* version of real events - within certain generic, technical, and industrial constraints - rather than presenting a version of reality that might be intentionally misleading or manipulative. Yet as industry insiders have recently suggested, highly selective editing, scripting, and even 'frankenbiting' - whereby comments are presented out of context and are reordered to convey quite different meanings - are becoming increasingly commonplace in reality TV production (Gay 2005; Poniewozik 2006; Ytreberg 2006; see also Winston 2000). In the case of *Rock Star: Supernova*, allegations of overt manipulation via selective editing intended to help justify a predetermined outcome emerged in the wake of online 'revelations' that Lukas Rossi had been selected as the new band member, three weeks before the season finale (Charlton 2006). Reconsidered in this light, the kinds of audience responses presented above raise important questions regarding what many scholars continue to regard as 'critical' modes of media engagement, since these examples in fact read 'with' the

ideological grain of the text and mobilise 'critical literacies' to effectively dismiss what, in terms of the Consolidated Model, might be considered truly *oppositional* accounts.

### **Conclusion**

Just a few years ago there was barely any research into the reality TV audience, but much public and media debate characterising this audience as vulnerable, naïve, and voyeuristic. In the intervening period, and partly inspired by a desire to disprove such problematic characterisations, there has emerged what may soon become a veritable avalanche of audience studies focused on this genre. But rather than continuing to reinvent the wheel of communications research based on a presumption that understanding reality TV and its reception requires entirely new theoretical and methodological tools, I suggest it might be more fruitful to focus on how receptions of reality TV fit within the broader body of knowledge about the nature of audience engagement per se. This paper has sought to demonstrate that existing analytical concepts drawn from across the wider field of reception studies and charted in the Composite Multi-dimensional Model of audience reception (Michelle 2007) in fact offer a very useful means of understanding modes of audience response to reality TV, which do not constitute a radical divergence from those identified in relation to soap opera, sitcom, drama, and documentary. Bringing together key understandings generated over the past four decades, the Consolidated Model thus provides a means of (re)conceptualising the reception of hybrid genres in a way that places the audience - in all its diversity, with varying capacities and discursive competencies, and with the potential to draw on intra as well as extra textual knowledges - more firmly at the centre of analysis. It also offers, I propose, one possible route by which audience researchers might collectively move beyond specificities of genre and format to develop conceptual understandings better able to accommodate ongoing evolutions in media form and transformations in modes of media delivery.

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## Notes

[1] see for example Dovey 2000; Corner 2002; Friedman 2002; Hill, 2000, 2002 & 2005; Hill & Palmer 2002; Tincknell & Raghuram 2002; Kilborn 2003; Andacht 2004; Biltereyst 2004; Chandler & Griffiths 2004; Foster 2004; Götz 2004; Holmes 2004; Holmes & Jermyn 2004; Jones 2004; LeBescoe 2004; Mathijs & Hessels 2004; Mathijs & Jones 2004; Mikos 2004; Murray & Ouellette 2004; Von Felitzen 2004; Biressi & Nunn 2005, Hill, Weibull & Nilsson 2007.

[2] There is now a substantial body of work pointing to distinct 'clusterings' in audience reception based on factors such as socioeconomic class, gender, race and ethnicity, age, political interest, moral and/or political belief, religious culture, and individual psychological characteristics (see Michelle 2007 for details).

[3] Following legal action taken by an existing band with the same name, *Supernova* has since

been renamed *Rock Star Supernova*.

[4] The reality episodes did however air on television in Canada, Australia, Singapore, the Philippines, Malaysia and Hong Kong. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock\\_Star:\\_Supernova](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rock_Star:_Supernova).

[5] Weekly performance and elimination shows aired in the United States, Canada, Brazil, Ecuador, Columbia, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Australia, Singapore, Philippines, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Iceland and New Zealand. See <http://rockstar.msn.com/votefaq>.

[6] In order to preserve the anonymity of online respondents, chosen usernames have been replaced with participant numbers and titles of discussion threads have been omitted.

Email: [caro@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:caro@waikato.ac.nz)