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# **Live Reality Television: care structures within the production and reception of talent shows**

## **Abstract**

This article focuses on production and reception practices for live reality television, using critical theory and empirical research to question how producers and audiences co-create and limit live experiences. The concept of care structures is used to make visible hidden labour in the creation of mood, in particular audiences as participants in the management of live experiences. In the case of *Got to Dance* there was a play off between the value and meaning of the live events as a temporary experience captured by ratings and social media, and the more enduring collective-social experience of this reality series over time.

Keywords: reality television, production studies, audience studies, live experiences.

## **Live Reality Television: care structures within the production and production and reception of talent shows**

*Got to Dance* (2010-2014, Sky One, Princess and Endemol Shine) is a reality talent format showcasing adult and child dancers, integrating live television and a range of dedicated online content. The format's flagship series ran for five seasons in the UK, with other versions in America, Germany, France, Finland, Poland, Romania and Vietnam. The format uses a familiar narrative of talent competitions where participants first perform in regional auditions filmed in mobile domes, and, if selected by the judges, go on to perform at semi-finals and finals, with interactive voting by the public during the live events. *Got to Dance* is a rich site of analysis for critical examination of live entertainment television and the shaping of audience experiences.

This research focuses on the production practices for the creation of live reality entertainment, and situates this research within the audience experience of being at live events, as contestants and live audiences and watching at home in everyday

settings. We use a pragmatic, multidimensional approach, combining production interviews with executive and creative producers, and participants as contestants in auditions and live events, with participant observations of the filming of auditions and live events; we also combine individual and group interviews with audiences, and participant observations at auditions and live shows. A key question for the research is how do producers and audiences co-create, shape and limit a live reality television experience? The qualitative research is used to think through the tensions surrounding live reality television as about the here and now of an immediate experience, and a recurring reality entertainment series that reproduces a live experience year on year for audiences in their everyday lives.

The article's primary contribution is in the area of live television and audience experience. In particular, Paddy Scannell's (2014) research on *Television and the Meaning of Live* offers a useful framework for analysing the management of a live television experience by television producers and the experience of live events by reality TV participants and audiences. We draw upon his idea of care structures, which refers to the taken for granted expectations of live experiences, including the attention to mood and time in audio-visual recordings. Scannell argues that live television has 'hidden production care-structures that work to produce them as to-be-heard-and-seen'; the study of live television can illuminate both how live events are produced with audiences and listeners in mind and how this 'casts light on the human situation' (2014: 97). Our analysis suggests the significance of visible care-structures in the management of live reality television where audiences are participants in the talent show itself as performers and are the crowds at the live event.

With regard to reality talent shows Deery notes how live broadcasting is the 'ultimate fulfilment of reality TV's aesthetic of immediacy' (2015: 40). She argues that although audiences are aware of the shaping of an event by producers prior to filming, there is a strong expectation of experiencing something together, either in the live event itself, or an at home experience. This research critically examines how live reality events are shaped by producers and audiences, suggesting tensions within the commercial shaping of events and audience expectations. Holmes (2004) noted early on in the development of talent shows the marketing of live entertainment and the feeling of being there in a performance space; it is the sense of participation in the

process of identifying talent, the stage shows, voting and interactive elements that signal audiences can make a difference to the outcome of who wins. In the case of *Got to Dance* the empirical data suggests the series becomes a critical marker, as Dana Heller notes (2012:39-41), for the inherent contradictions in a dance format where there is the performance of the format as a commercial event and the experience of live television for participants and audiences.

The research signals a contestation between the strategic emphasis by the broadcaster on the live event and the embedding of reality entertainment in the everyday lives of audiences. This contestation is apparent in the fifth and final season when the broadcaster cut the budget and number of audition programmes and changed the transmission window, focusing attention on a condensed period of live events. These strategic decisions created tensions within the local production company and audiences for the series; there was a disruption to the normal flow of this live reality event, moving the series to a summer slot, creating a traffic jam in scheduling around other competitive reality shows, resulting in negative engagement with viewers and a ratings decline during the fifth season that led to its cancellation. The tensions highlight the economic value of the show for the broadcaster and the socio-cultural value of the show for the participants who performed in the series, and for at home viewers. It supports research by Corner and Roscoe (2016: 158) on the value chain in the television industry: the value chain is 'where different kinds of value interconnect but also sometimes conflict.' Industry focus on performance metrics as a value indicator for live reality television can occlude the socio-cultural values of live reality entertainment for participants in the talent show, and for audiences who make cultural artefacts meaningful through embedding experiences in everyday life.

## **Researching Live Reality Television**

The empirical research of television producers and audiences involves the case study of *Got to Dance* which was part of a larger project on media experiences, conducted in collaboration with the production company Endemol Shine and funded by the Wallenberg Foundation (2013-2016). This broader project examined how producers

create experiences for audiences of drama and reality entertainment, and how audiences actually engage with these experiences. A range of qualitative methods place listening and respect for producer and audience practices at the heart of the research, using cultural sociology to examine how culture is made and remade by producers and audiences (see Sennett 2002, and Calhoun and Sennett 2007). The work connects with Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011: 165) in that the theoretical and normative underpinning to the research is provided by Raymond Williams' notion of the communication of experience as both objective and subjective (see 1974, 1981), where creative producers craft experiences, and audiences in turn 'formulate, describe and communicate' their engagement with this creative work. As Stuart Hall (1980: 63) notes, William's contribution to cultural studies was precisely in the interweaving of social practices in an understanding of culture: this sense of human praxis underlies the interconnections and conflicts around the meanings and values of popular culture in production and reception contexts.

A pragmatic approach was adopted for the project, including participant-orientated and context dependent methodological routines for the research design and analysis. In particular, the pragmatic sensibilities of looking at cultural practices within situated contexts meant that attention was given to how parts and linkages connect with the whole (Seale et al 2007: 6). Different types of original qualitative research and existing data was used in the fieldwork, including data collected by marketing teams which is used to consider the performance metrics, alongside interviews with executive producers and creatives working on the series. The pragmatic approach of the fieldwork is connected with the analytic strategy of subtle realism adopted throughout the research (Hammersley 1992); subtle realism enabled the building of reflexive knowledge about how reality television is constructed within certain values and assumptions around live events and audiences. All interviews were transcribed and analysed using qualitative data analysis, where descriptive and analytical coding was combined with critical reflection of interviews in the context of fieldnotes and participant observations. This multilayered analysis enabled an interpretation of the data across the sites of production, event and audiences (see Rose 2016).

For the production research, there were interviews and observations of the auditions, semi-finals and finals for *Got to Dance*, from May to August 2014. A team of four

persons, including creative content consultant Julie Donovan, Annette Hill, Tina Askanius, and Koko Kondo conducted the research, sharing the work across the different sites of data collection; 10 production interviews took place with executive and creative producers; 30 interviews were conducted with performers at the auditions, and 10 interviews at the semi-finals and finals, including family and friends there to support dancers. Observations took place front and back stage at The Roundhouse, London, and Earls Court, London during a two-week period, resulting in audio recordings, visual and aural data, and fieldnotes. All of the team took part in participant observations, taking notes, keeping diaries, and taking photographs and short videos as visual aids for the analysis of the data; the team discussed the participant observations at several moments of reflection during and after each production day was over. This continual reflection and analysis of the ongoing fieldwork allowed for flexibility in the data design, as each day the participant observations would be attuned to the production environment and the different kinds of participants at the venues. For example, in relation to the live shows, participant observations involved shifting attention to the backstage rehearsal space for the dance groups alongside the spaces for friends and family which were semi-backstage, and the main venue for audiences. Production practices for the participants, family supporters, and crowd management worked across these production and reception zones. Such observations supported the theory building and analysis of the care structures within the production of a live reality event.

For the audience research, 50 individual and group interviews (1 to 5 persons) were conducted with live crowds at the semi-finals and finals, in the queues, coffee shops, and on the street, outside and inside the venue. Each interview lasted between 5-20 minutes. Recruitment was focused on a range of participants and audiences, including professional dancers, individuals and dance troupes, dance teachers, family groups, people at the live show who received tickets as Sky subscribers, and people who were there to experience the filming of a reality talent show. Interviews were conducted individually and in groups in order to ensure both one to one and group interactions. The interviews were designed with a topic guide, including social contexts related to routines surrounding attending the live show, or watching the series at home, and theoretically informed themes such as emotional and critical engagement with the series. Further follow up interviews were conducted with dance schools and at home

audience, in order to explore issues raised by the fieldwork in August surrounding the final outcome of the series and its cancellation by the broadcaster. Participant observations of the live shows where the venue was filled with crowds of 4-6000 each day of filming followed the same pattern of flexible and pragmatic design, with notes, diaries, visual and aural recordings building a nuanced picture of the experience of live reality television. The interviews and observations served as valuable sources of knowledge construction for live experiences.

To reflect on the research, this is an ethnographic approach to the study of audiences, where agency is given to people and their interpretation and reflection on their experiences (Hammersley 1992). The aim is not to be critical of the people who took part in our study but to ask critical questions of the subject of the research and the context to their experiences. Our research addresses the production context of television experiences as a means to understand the values of live television production within the larger framework of socio-cultural values within everyday life (Corner and Roscoe 2016: 162). And our research addresses the reception context as an equally valuable data set to analyse the shaping of live television experiences and what audiences do with television in their everyday lives. In this case qualitative research offered an in-depth analysis of the tensions within cultural production and audience experiences of live reality television. As we shall see, the demise of the series can be partly connected to an industry perspective of live event television as fleeting communication at the expense of audiences of live reality television and the value of this talent show in their everyday lives. The research suggests that the live experience of *Got to Dance* is not easily measured with ratings; statistics offer a valuable picture of the attention of audiences to the series, and their interaction via social media, but the more sustained kinds of engagement from audiences who become participants in the talent show, or who have travelled to the live shows for a cultural experience, will inevitably be hidden within a quantitative measurement of audiences.

## **Care-Structures for Live Reality Television**

Research on live television is a broad area and there have been various approaches within phenomenology, performance and theatre studies and television studies. Rather than draw on communication as a speech act, or the recording of audio-visual live speech acts and events, we take inspiration from Paddy Scannell's (2014) discussion of the meaning of live experiences in the context of television and radio. He emphasises the significance of time and space/place to a study of live television. This is a sense of live television as immediate, in comparison with the instantaneous transmission of a programme to a live at home audience, such as a pre recorded talent show like *MasterChef* (Endemol Shine, 1990-). Marriot explains the value of immediacy, when a live broadcast and its reception are simultaneous: 'to be in the presence of the live event is thus to be swept away into a moment which is transpiring simultaneously with the now of one's engagement with it: it is to be in the event even as the event endures' (2007: 72).

Scannell adopts a phenomenological approach, drawing on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger to explore the dialectical nature of live experiences. He argues that electronic media organises the living moment for us and reduces the existential strain of existence (2014: xi). This way of organising the living moment is called care structures and Scannell urges researchers to consider the taken for granted expectations of live experiences, including the attention to mood and time in the visible and invisible structures of live moments. 'Care structures are concealed in the world of appearances' (2014: 77); there is the creative labour that helps to co-create our expectations of a live event, including the management of liveness as spaces of interaction, and the affirmation of a shared experience. Scannell draws our attention to the experience of live television as a dialectical play off between the mood of live events, the management of care-structures that support this, and our individual and collective-social experiences.

Two issues come to the fore in an analysis of live reality television. The first is the mood of a live experience; and the second is the organisation of time. In a discussion of event television, Scannell (2014: 178) notes how Heidegger's insight on the phenomenology of mood underpins a definition of an event: 'whatever it was, or wasn't any event is defined by its mood. Mood is not some value added to occasions... it is the sake for which they were made to happen.' Care structures are

the invisible management of the mood of an event so that it is produced to be ‘that which it was meant and intended and so found in the end to be’ (2014: 182-3). As this is the management of a live experience, time is crucial to care structures for event television:

Collective attention is monopolised by and focused on the event which is covered by television *en direct*, live and in real time, as it really happens. The time of the event, the time of television and the my-times of countless viewers all converge in the experiential, living enunciatory now of the event as it unfolds in a shared, common public time. (ibid)

Care structures, then, can be characterised as the hidden labour in the production of a live television event, both the labour of professionals in the industry, the labour of people participating in media production, and the labour of audiences in the co-creation of the mood for a live experience. The affective structures of a live event are interconnected with our experience of time as a multidimensional experience, so that the time of an event, the time of media, and the time of everyday life are interwoven in the overall care structure for a televised event.

In relation to a reality talent show there are several ways in which the care structures for a live entertainment experience are situated within the genre and the time of its transmission on digital television. The sense of care structures as hidden needs to be re thought with this genre. The meaning of liveness in a reality talent show is the definition of the genre, and the live experience encapsulates the aesthetics of immediacy and intimacy that the genre offers to audiences. This means that the care structures are not entirely invisible; a talent show makes visible some of the hidden labour in the creation of mood, and the value of audiences as participants in the management of mood. The show invites audiences to be at a live venue, or to perform as contestants, and to interact and vote for winners, all of which brings into the spotlight the care structures of a live talent show. Talent shows are thus not only vehicles for the aesthetics of immediacy and intimacy in the production of a live spectacular, but also they invite audiences to participate, in myriad ways, within the very management of the live experience. This is not to say that there are no invisible care structures; a live event involves management that is hidden from audiences, but talent shows play with what can be invisible and visible in the structuring of mood

and affective relations around the experience itself. Indeed, some talent shows have become so adept at the appearance of making visible the care structures to a show that they have been criticised for deceiving audiences and participants into thinking that they are participating in the live event when there is evidence of tradecraft by reality producers in controlling the outcome (see Deery 2015, or Hill 2015).

As for the time of television, this is a complicated construction of the time of the production of the talent show, from its original idea, production preparation, the filming of the auditions, rehearsals and the filming of the live competition. Then there is the scheduling of the series in the annual transmission windows for reality talent shows, with certain brands scheduled for their own broadcast time, and others going head to head in direct competition with rival talent shows on commercial and public service television. And finally there is also the annual time of the series as it returns, year on year, so that the time of the talent show in the form of its first or fifth season becomes part of its performance metrics, including the re-commissioning process. The time of television is set alongside the experiential now of the live event in relation to shared, public time. Here, the temporal relations of media in everyday life are significant to a live experience; audiences make time for a talent show, including watching at home, or going to a live event, taking the time to vote, and share pictures, videos and comments on social media. The value of a talent show for audiences is situated within their temporal relations with the brand and its ability to create a meaningful live experience.

The crafting of care structures can be analysed in more detail in relation to managing live dance performances. Sky and Princess hired a full time on site psychologist to work with participants in auditions and the performers in the live events, including their family and friends. Cynthia McVey (2014) specialised in ethical treatment of children on television; she was an advisor to the Office of Communications (a national regulatory body) and also worked on other talent shows, such as *Got Talent* (Syco, 2005-). In interview she spoke of how care ‘cascades down’ in the management of live events, coming from decisions at the top level of broadcaster and executive producers and flowing down to the local crew. In our fieldnotes, the treatment of the participants, in particular children, auditioning at the live shows took centre stage in the production:

From the moment the contestants, supporters, and audiences enter the Roundhouse venue for auditioning, the production staff provide an all-around 'care' trying to create positive experiences and make the day special for the contestants, supporters, and the audiences at the venue. The winners from the previous year entertain the people waiting in the hall while queuing. On stage, a warm up act is entertaining the children among the audience, handing out prizes, making jokes during the many intervals when they have to wait for the next contestants to perform or for the stage to be cleaned. The runners are keeping time and cheering on the tense contestants before going on the stage.

It was a core production value of this talent show to treat participants with respect, articulated by the producers through to the below the line workers, and followed through by regular workshops with production staff run by McVey on fair treatment of children in entertainment television.

In our research we found that care structures flowed from the bottom up as well, through the free labour of friends and family of participants. This aspect of the 'care and concern' (Scannell 2014: 22) of supporters for reality TV participants is vital to the mood and experience of live talent shows. In one example, a father and his son and nephew reflected on the preparation involved in getting to the live moment of the auditions. The teenage boys (aged fifteen) explained how they became a double act after being inspired by popular dance films, such as Step Up. They started by performing at home, for family parties, their Dad's birthdays, before progressing to charity events: 'then we took a step further and started dancing at competitions and shows. Our mother has done our costumes today, she has done a really good job.' On the day of the audition they set off at 6am, the father driving to the audition, planning parking at a supermarket five stops away on the tube line, all to ensure these participants could perform for the talent show.

In another example of care structures from below dance mums supported their children in the long run up to the auditions and final live shows. One mother from Wales spoke to us in the semi-finals, explaining how she and two other mums helped ten girl dancers (aged between ten and twelve) to audition and perform for the talent show: 'the girls have been practicing for this for months and months and months! Dancing together as a team and they go to the same dance school. We mums have our own dance team for fundraising for the girls.' This organised labour is part of the care

structure, culminating in the live performance. ‘We have to be ready early in the morning; you have ten girls, do their hairs, do their make up, do their eyes, God knows what else! It’s very stressful.’ It is a labour of love that is hidden from the audience at home watching the performance on stage.

The experience of participants prior to a performance was enhanced by the design of the backstage area as a protective zone where there was a temporary dance floor to practice on, and where make-up and costume departments became social places to share thoughts and feelings. Such backstage design encouraged performers to prepare in peace and quiet, no cameras followed them around at the Earl’s Court venue, no hosts badgered them for emotional quotes, something common to other talent shows. When contestants went on stage this was the biggest moment of their dancer careers and groups of very young children, or adult solo dancers, gave powerful, professional and kinetically charged performances. The emphasis was on their art, not their lack of talent.

Of the 6000 strong crowd at Earl’s Court for the live events, many members were from local communities, dance schools, and general supporters of the dancers on stage. Another large group were people who regularly went to live filming of reality talent shows, getting tickets through the company Applause Store for an annual round of all the main television entertainment events. These participants at the live events compared their experience at this talent show with others, noting how the local production crew had established a reputation for a positive experience. The mood for an event started in the queues, where members mingled together, waiting hours before the doors opened. Some families picnicked at the side of the road, like a day out at the beach, bringing chairs, flasks of tea and home made sandwiches. Once inside crowds wandered around the venue, taking pictures in front of cardboard cut-outs of the judges, popping into the *Got to Dance* photo booth.

At the live event for season five, buses arrived with schoolchildren, teachers taking their classes to learn the *Got to Dance* values of positive role models. One teacher explained how they replicated the style of this talent show in school performances, using gold stars and constructive criticism, something seen as different than the more negative market in emotions within other talent shows such as *Got Talent*. This

visible care structure to the talent show made the brand attractive to parents and children who spoke of an authentic feel to this commercial event. In an interview with a mother of a child dancer, they explained:

My daughter (year 6) has been having auditions for 4 years...They were supposed to have an exam on numeracy and literacy test this week. But the head of the school really supported it (coming to the audition). At the end of the day, it is really good for the school, and they like to see their pupils doing well and it was really enjoyable process.

An owner of a dance school brought her young pupils to the live event to learn about the auditioning process: 'In the dance industry, it is very hard to be seen...when I was younger, there were no shows like this. We came here to support Unity and they have rehearsed so many times to get to this stage... It is not about winning - you see yourself in public which is amazing.' As Scannell notes, the foregrounding of a positive mood to the event enhanced the brand as about dance skill over the spectacle of amateur talent (Scannell 2014: 24).

One family we interviewed in the queue for a semi-final commented:

Mum: we share our views, what we like and what we don't like, the more we watch the series, the more we become dance critics, we give our own opinions before the judges do (laughs)... so we are judges in our living room.

Interviewer: So, when you are watching the show, do you dance together?

Mum: I do notice that you try to copy some of the moves.

Interviewer: So what is your style of dance?

Boy: more street style. I take street dancing because I am pretty young.

Interviewer: How old are you?

Boy: Six

This young fan illustrates how watching the live event at home transforms into a more intensive engagement with the live event at the production venue, and participating in dance classes, all to potentially audition for the show in the future. The care structure encourages young audiences to become performers in the next iteration of the format, ensuring a flow of free labour to the commercial live experience.

In these examples, the local production company, performers and audiences were working together to create a positive mood for the live experience. The mood was not hidden from the participants and audiences by the invisible care structures of the local

production company; indeed the format made visible to participants at auditions and the live events that it was part of its production values to offer a positive live experience. It is part of the overall value of this live talent show that the producers could draw audiences year on year to the event, privileging what Elizabeth Evans (2011: 156) calls the ‘hyper-ephemeral’, where a mediated experience prioritises ‘engagement with a particular moment that can never be replicated’. In the next section we consider how the care-structures in the management of live experiences were broken by the broadcaster through changes to time, scheduling, and budget cuts for the series, leading to the performative failure of the format and negative reactions from audiences.

## **The Constraints of Live Reality Television**

Live reality television can offer an infrastructure for the moment to moment of the event itself, and also the hourly, daily, monthly preparations and routines that come before, during and after an event. For Paddy Scannell this is an example of how technology is ‘constitutive of the world we live in’ (2014: xi). This is especially relevant if reality television is a returning feature of a broadcaster’s seasonal schedule, similar to football seasons for example. Live events matter in the moment of a unique experience; that particular performer, the crowd’s reactions at that particular venue, the way the voting worked for that specific winner. But reality entertainment events are usually replicated, due to the format market and the economic model of broadcast television that recoups start up costs for an original production by re-producing the same show with less risk and more return on the investment. A returning talent show brings with it the power of the live, and the expectation of this experience being constitutive of the everyday lives of audiences and performers year on year.

Elizabeth Evans’ research in online drama highlights how ephemeral media can be ‘durable and temporary’ (2011: 169). For her case, what is durable about online content is the ability to be archived, collected, re-watched, and what is temporary is the emphasis on liveness. Online drama creates an experience similar to live theatre through a broadcast event, and at the same time ‘builds viewer agency and community’ through an explicit strategy of encouraging audiences to engage with

each other and the text (2011: 169). Live reality television mimics this dual function of a temporary live event and a durable experience in everyday life. However, the production of a live event across a multidimensional experience of time can be fraught with difficulties. These tensions can be seen in the way *Got to Dance* was produced in earlier seasons, and the broadcaster's changes to the budget, production and scheduling of the final season.

Up until season five, *Got to Dance* was scheduled in the winter months of January, February, and March. There were domes, temporary sites that travelled across the United Kingdom for the auditions. To audition for *Got to Dance* meant a lot of preparation – dance school teachers spoke of planning routines once children were back at school in the autumn. Schools gave permission for children to go to the auditions; teachers and friends supported their participation by voting, and organising parties back home during the live events. During the interviews parents and friends of participants explained how they booked time off work, helping with logistics, and coming to the auditions and live shows. As the series gathered momentum season on season, it established a routine where the broadcast schedule worked with the individual rhythms of people's lives and the shared public time of performers and audiences in the winter months. Interviews with parents highlighted how families organised their everyday lives around the twin interests of their children in dance and this television show. There were the practice sessions to organise and get to, the voluntary work for local dance groups running on limited budgets, sharing skills in sewing, makeup and hair for competition, and weekend events in far flung places across the country. And then there was the routine of a reality talent series. One mum explained how she made a ritual of the show, dinner and a bath before watching the auditions and live events: 'it is one we can all sit around and watch as a family. My husband doesn't care about *The X Factor* whereas he will sit and watch this. It's family time.'

Thus, we can see *Got to Dance* balanced the temporary live event with the durable experience of a talent show year on year. However, live shows are highly risky: 'there is a danger in everything we say and do: a possibility, every time, of performative failure and unanticipated and unwelcome consequences' (Scannell 2014: 97). *Got to Dance* experienced just this performative failure in its fifth season. The first season

started with over a million viewers, but by seasons three and four the numbers were declining. Sky's strategy was to extend the live shows, whilst at the same time reducing total screen time. The budget was cut in half, from around 13 million to 7 million, the number of programmes were cut, in particular auditions, and all the weight was placed on the live events, squeezing the show into a few weeks during a new scheduling slot of August 9<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> 2014. This slot was supposed to attract family audiences during the summer holidays, and to have a short transmission window just before the autumn broadcast schedule for the two rival talent shows on BBC and ITV. Another strategy was to give more attention to social media, hiring a young YouTube celebrity, integrating social media reactions, digital hosts and Facebook live studio interviews with the main programme. Overall, the broadcaster's strategic decisions led to a major overhaul in the series, including a change in the annual schedule, a significant cut in budget and transmission time, and a digital marketing campaign mainly aimed at social media users rather than broadcast audiences. For local producers these changes signalled an uncertain future; one producer described the broadcaster as sabotaging the brand through the summer scheduling slot; another crew member working on casting felt that the reduction in the audition shows was negative to audience's emotional engagement with the participants for the live events – how would viewers know who to vote for if they didn't have a chance to follow the performers from auditions, through rehearsals to the live finale? There was an underlying worry amongst the producers that whilst the events at Earl's Court were delivering a positive experience to crowds at the venue, what was the mood of audiences watching at home?

Compared with around a million viewers for the first three seasons, the ratings performance for the final season signalled a sharp decline. According to the BARB (Broadcaster Audience Research Board) figures, viewers disengaged with the series, dropping from 646,000 at the start of the auditions to 486,000 for the live finale, losing a percentage point in the share of audiences watching television at that time (from 3.4 to 2.2). The share drop was especially felt amongst children (from 9.5 to 4.6), and the share halved for women, adults aged 16-55, and housewives (for example housewives 2.5 to 1.6 share). If we analyse the ratings for children, there is a stark picture of younger audiences disengaging with the show. In season one, 230,000 children watched *Got to Dance*, but by season five at the auditions 160,000 were

watching, and only 80,000 stayed to the live finale. In terms of mums, recorded in BARB as housewives, the ratings dropped from around half a million viewers for season one to 200,000 for the live finale of season five. The ratings show that the strategic decision to focus on the hyper-ephemeral in the form of live shows backfired with core audiences (children and parents) for the series.

Indeed, the switch in seasons was devastating for the series. Gone was the school and weekend routine and families now had make special time for the compressed live shows during the school summer holiday. In the queues for the live events audiences expressed their frustration with the broadcaster and changes made to the show. A brand based on passion for dance seemed oddly lacking in dance content due to the compression in the programme time:

Interviewer: So what do you think of this new format?

Mother: I just don't like it. We don't see much dance.

Interviewer: Do you dance?

Mother: Yes, I used to do line dancing and Latin samba.

Daughter: Yes, it's a family thing (laughs).

In another encounter, two sisters and their children were waiting to enter the venue for the semi-finals. They had no idea about the acts as they had been on holiday during its transmission: 'I must admit that I haven't watched this one, I never missed any series but we have been away on holiday. We love dance... the previous series were shown in January and they changed it' (30-40 year old female viewer). If viewers missed the auditions 'then when it comes to the semi-finals they won't know what the acts are. "Who are these people?"' (40-50 year old male viewer).

One female fan explained how she felt the broadcaster cut her 'TV time': 'I was looking forward to ten weeks of the show and feeling like you get to know the acts, whereas with the time and space I feel like I don't know them as well.' An embedded live experience, so hard to create and something to nurture and value in a seasonal event such as this, slipped away with the broadcaster's decision to change the timeslot and cut the running time. In such a way the broadcaster dismantled the care structures of the live experience of *Got to Dance* for at home audiences. As this fan noted, their sense of time - the season, time to watch and share with others - was changed for the

worse: 'I like the fact that it used to be week in, week out. It has been compressed. I feel like my enjoyment is going to be a lot shorter.'

## **Conclusion**

Paddy Scannell's research on the experience of live television highlights the mood of a live experience and the organisation of time within the shaping of this experience. The care structures of a live experience are, for Scannell, hidden labour in the production of a television event, helping to generate an affective investment in the overall individual and collective feeling of being there. However, in the case of reality talent shows, the genre makes visible some of the care structures that help to shape a live event, such as the relationship between producers and performers, the back stage auditions, or the mood of the live crowds. Indeed, reality talent shows need to reassure audiences of care structures in performance spaces where audience interaction and voting can make a difference to the outcome of the live event. This is partly why some of the hidden care structures in the making of a live event become more visible in a talent show, in an attempt to address audience concerns about how much shaping has gone into the management of a live experience. In a similar way, the organisation of time becomes visible to performers and audiences for a talent show, where there is an understanding of how the time of media intersects with the time of audiences and their everyday lives.

In the case of *Got to Dance* the live experience shaped by producers, performers and audiences became fraught with difficulties. There was a play off between the value and meaning of the live events as a temporary experience, and the more enduring collective-social experience of the series. The strategic privileging of the temporary over the durable experience of live reality events led to a breakdown in the temporal and emotional relations with audiences for the brand. The performance metrics for live television signal the primacy of the now; this flow of power to the live shows and the constitution of television obscures the sense of community and viewer agency that is built up over time through the embedding of cultural values in everyday routines. This woman spoke of her disaffection with *Got to Dance*: 'I'm missing my TV time. I want to watch them for longer, not sit down and 'oh, it's over already' (20-30 year old

female viewer). This meaning of a live experience as durable, and built on the care structures between television producers and audiences, is lost when a broadcaster treats audiences as disposable, only of value in the moment of the live shows. In the short term, viewers lose their relationship with a favourite show, but in the longer-term television broadcasters break trust with audiences at a time when power is slipping from the constitution of television to disparate sites of media content across multi-platform environments.

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