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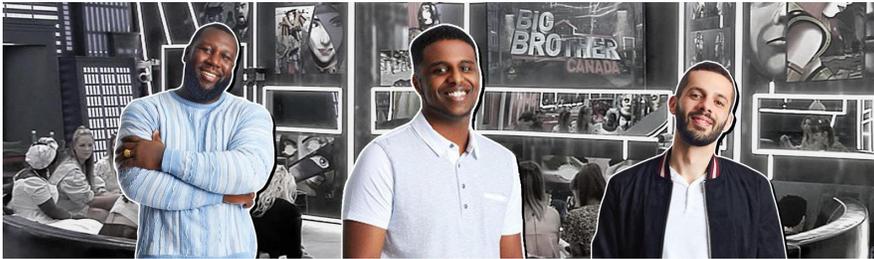
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FEATURE

Reality TV is failing Black people

Racial tensions were high before CeeJai Jenkins socked Jenna Thomason repeatedly in the mouth. It was 2016 and “The Real World: Go Big or Go Home” cast members were constantly at odds. Thomason, a young white girl from South Carolina, spent most of her time making racist statements. Jenkins, who is Black, spent the majority of her time trying to educate Thomason on why her comments were racist and disrespectful. Thomason insisted that when she made comments like “I’m not used to Black people that act like y’all” or “you are the right kind of colored people,” she wasn’t being racist. Throughout the season, Thomason continued this rhetoric but explained she is Southern and that is how people from the South talk. The last straw came when Thomason called Jenkins “ratchet.” A fuming Jenkins charged at Thomason and unleashed a flurry of frustration on her face, leaving Thomason with a black eye.

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Reality TV is widely criticized for being a sham. Viewers say the genre glorifies bad behavior, manufactures storylines and encourages drama. And while that may be a fair assessment, one of the most dangerous aspects of reality TV is how it treats its Black talent and portrays Black people. As each recent story of racial injustice and accounts of murderous police brutality involving African Americans has unfolded, network executives are realizing how their programming participates in systemic racism and are taking baby steps to make changes.

During the early days of June, networks ended relationships with white reality stars, many of whom have publicly made racist remarks or social posts about Black people. On June 5, Lifetime Network reportedly cut ties with "Dance Moms" star Abby Lee Miller amid allegations of racism. A few days later, Bravo announced Stassi Schroeder, Kristen Doute, Brett Caprioni and Max Boyens of "Vanderpump Rules" were getting the boot due to past racist acts involving racial slurs. Then, MTV announced Taylor Selfridge of "Teen Mom OG" would be receiving her pink slip after myriad old racist tweets by her resurfaced.

Racist aggressions don't have an expiration date. While many examples of blatant racism occurred two or three years ago, the current climate of protests against racial injustices have prompted networks to stand on the right side of history and finally reprimand its bad apples. Ideally, networks should terminate racist talent when incidents initially surface. It would be admirable if networks were capable of independently evaluating its own participation in perpetuating white supremacy without a global uprising. Instead, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd and countless other Black people had to die for networks to take an internal look. These firings appear as a knee-jerk reaction of networks scrambling to right wrongs and proclaim solidarity with the Black community.

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support of the #BlackLivesMatter protests, ViacomCBS channels ceased programming for eight minutes and 46 seconds, the amount of time police officer Derek Chauvin held his knee on Floyd's neck before ultimately killing him.

Releasing statements, firing racists, and ceasing programming are acceptable first steps toward equality and eradicating racism for the reality TV world, but that is all they are, first steps. They don't address the elephant in the room: Many reality TV shows perpetuate stereotypes and treat their Black talent poorly. TV writers and executives act as if these attitudes don't translate through the screen and contribute to a certain societal disdain for Black Americans.

CBS hosts one of the most problematic reality TV shows of all time. The "Big Brother" franchises are infamous for casting talent or houseguests, as the show calls them, who have made blatantly racist remarks. Even the shows' producers have been under fire for attempting to manipulate Black houseguests. The reality series follows a group of mostly white strangers who live in a house together and compete for a grand monetary prize. The show has been on air since 2000; and at this point, it feels as if racism is baked into the show's strategy for ratings.



Season after season, Black cast members complain about the cesspool of microaggressions in which they are forced to operate, all the while playing a game with a predominantly white cast who casually make tone-deaf statements. In 2013, fans were outraged when houseguest Amanda Zuckerman consistently went on racist rants. Zuckerman called her Black castmate "the Black mamba" and "the dark knight." She said Puerto Ricans smell and referred to herself as a "f** hag." In 2018, two white contestants, Angela Rumans and Rachel Swindler

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Black housemate had been to prison and categorized him as aggressive—all because he was Black. This show has cast so many Amandas, Angelas, Rachels and Jacksons that at this point, keeping track is a burden, albeit a necessary one.

These incidents do not end with the housemates. In 2019, a producer was reprimanded after asking a Black houseguest, Kemi Fakunle, to act more stereotypical while interviewing her. CBS issued repeated statements—and signed the offending producer up for unconscious bias training—but has never publicly announced an actual strategy to ensure that every cast member is being treated equally and racist remarks will become punishable. The Tylt reached out to representatives of “Big Brother” for comment, but there was no response.

Three former “Big Brother” houseguests of color became so frustrated with the way Black people are treated on the popular show that they came together to create a safe platform where people of color can speak candidly about their experiences on reality TV. Merron Haile, Hamza Hatoum and Andrew Miller of “Big Brother Canada” have real and raw discussions about the microaggressions and discrimination they have faced on “Big Brother” simply due to the color of their skin.

Miller says they felt compelled to come together after they saw the way Jamar Lee of the latest season of “Big Brother Canada” was treated. Lee, who is Black, was kicked off the show after two white houseguests complained about feeling “unsafe” with Lee in the house.

“The show stemmed from seeing how Jamar was treated,” said Miller to The Tylt over a Zoom call. “Having been on the show and seeing how certain narratives play out, I felt like we needed to join forces to amplify the voices of minorities on reality television.”

Miller says the lack of diversity in the “Big Brother” house leaves room for misinterpretations and is the main contributing factor to the show’s issue with race. “We saw what people were saying and what outlets were reporting, and they completely got the story wrong,” says Miller. “To see folks bashing him because they don’t understand his vocabulary, slang and energy—that was a big reason why we started this show.” He goes on to add that racism in Canada

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all around, it's bad. I've been a victim of racial profiling and microaggressions."

The guys say building relationships with their white counterparts in the game felt forced; and as men of color, they didn't even feel comfortable talking to each other openly because they feared the other housemates would view them as "threatening."

"The problem in the house is you have to force these conversations in order for you to advance; if you don't have the relationships you won't go far," says Haile. Relationship building is a key part of winning the game. And this game is disproportionately white, which could explain why typically only white people win. There has never been a Black winner in the 20-year history of "Big Brother America" or in the history of "Big Brother Canada."

While being in the "Big Brother" house, minorities have reported feeling isolated and lonely. To combat those feelings, they created a "Black Code"—a set of rules Black folks adhere to hoping to make their time in the house more palatable. "I couldn't imagine my time in the house without them," says Hatoum about Miller and Haile.

Toward the end of the game, Haile was the only Black person left and describes the environment as being so cold and toxic he was more than ready to hit the road when the game was over. "When it was my time to go, I was happy to leave," says Haile.

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The Tylt published a debate asking the following: "[Big Brother](#)" has a [history with racism: Should it be canceled?](#)" Almost 60 percent of voters responded with #WatchBigBrother despite its problems. Andy Dehnart is the founder of "Reality Blurred," a platform that covers reality TV. Dehnart has covered "Big Brother" over the years and has written about the show's issue with race. We asked Dehnart why he believes the majority of voters still support the show despite its obvious blind spots. He says it's hard for viewers to disconnect from something they love even if it's troublesome.

"Not to overgeneralize and smash together fan bases from different shows," says Dehnart, "but I suspect it is similar to what we saw with 'Cops.' People connect their identities to the shows they watch."

"Cops" was on the air for 31 years before it recently disappeared from TV listings. A spokesperson for [Paramount Network](#) released a statement saying "Cops" is no longer a part of its lineup and it has no intention of bringing the show back. Many speculate the show was quietly canceled due to the current protests against police brutality. Critics have been calling for the show to be canceled for years, saying it glorifies police and promotes stereotypes.

The landscape beneath reality TV doesn't give easily. "Big Brother" has been on the air for more than 20 years even though die-hard fans know the show has a problem and needs to make changes. Still, vanquishing the franchise is unfathomable for many fans.

"For the people who are watching the live feeds, they are spending almost 24/7 just watching what's happening in the house," says Dehnart. "That is a big commitment and connection to have for a show."

But fans aren't the only ones in a love-hate relationship with "Big Brother." The guys of "Minority Report" say if they could do it again, they would still go on the show. But they would like to see some changes. "Cast more of us," says Haile. He points out that Robyn Kass, of Kassting Inc., does the casting for "Big Brother Canada" and the American-based show, and he would like to see the company simply include more Black people. "They probably think it is a complex solution they need to find," says Haile, "but it's simple: They need more of us."

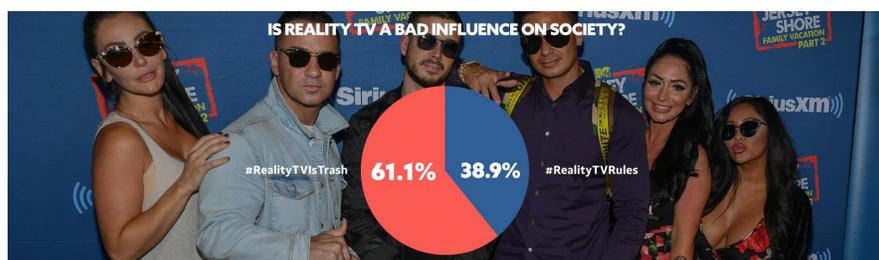
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As the Zoom call comes to an end, Hatoum drills the importance of representation on reality TV behind and in front of the camera. He says, "Just because there is one Black man on the show doesn't mean there can't be two; and just because there is only one Muslim on the show it doesn't mean there can't be two."

Studies over the years have shown that reality TV does have an impact on society. If shows like Big Brother continue to lack diversity, they could perpetuate a negative impact on the way the world views Black people. A lack of representation on reality TV leaves viewers with a monolithic perspective.

At The Tylt, we asked its audience, "[Is reality TV a bad influence on society?](#)" And almost 60 percent of voters said "yes." As a white man who grew up in a predominately white suburb, Dehnart says because the representation of Black people in his real life was limited, the images he saw of Black people on TV impacted his point of view.

"I think it is interesting for people, including myself, to figure out what that was and exactly how it plays out in life," says Dehnart. "I've made decisions in my life and wrote things as a writer that I wish I hadn't that are just examples of white privilege and my complete ignorance of my own privilege and how it affects other people."



When it comes to the future of reality TV, Dehnart says it will be a long time before we see real change.

"Number one: The entire system needs to change and that starts with hiring more people of color, more Black people and more LGBTQ people... this also includes putting people of color at the top as showrunners and network executives so they can be decision-makers also" added Dehnart

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The fate of representation and fair treatment for Black people in the reality TV space is still up in the air. But the country is making changes for the better in the fight for racial equality. American television—often a mirror of society—has a tedious road ahead and it includes revamping reality TV. Dehnart points out reality TV is for fun and entertainment but that doesn't negate the real impact it has in how society views and treats Black people.

Dehnart ends our conversation with saying, "Reality TV is real and there are a lot of fun moments to watch, but I think for people to see how those amusing moments can sit beside ones that are incredibly problematic in the way that they are portraying people and creating a pattern of how we see one another, like young Black men for example."

If only reality TV did a better job at representation. If only it would stop perpetuating and profiting off stereotypes. If only there were consequences for those who violated Black people on national television. If ... maybe the lives of Black men like Floyd and Arbery would have been valued, maybe they would still be with us.

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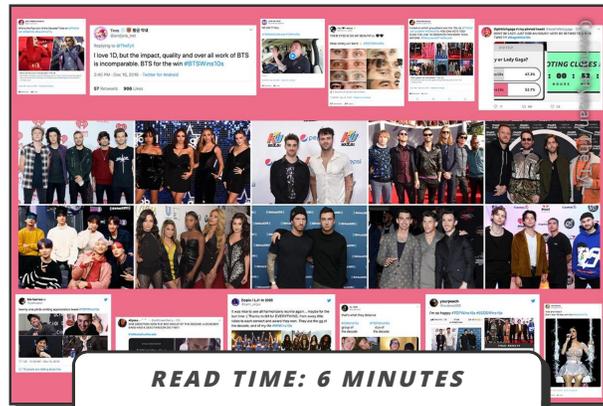
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