

Den svenska dokusåpan: Journalism, Criticism, and the Ethical Legacy of (Swedish) Reality TV

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What can a retrospective of Swedish reality television history – and its critical reception – tell us about ethics? In this essay, we explore the relationship between (cultural) journalism, documentary film, and reality television, with particular attention to how ethical dimensions are negotiated within journalistic discourse. Focusing on the critical reception of Den svenska dokusåpan, a documentary produced by the Swedish public service broadcaster SVT that reflects on the history of reality TV, we argue that ethical debates surrounding reality television are as enduring as the genre itself. Revisiting this history highlights persistent concerns and underscores the need for continued scrutiny. Documentaries such as the one discussed here help keep discussions about responsible media practices alive, although their ethical arguments are often articulated in rather broad or vague terms. Ultimately, ethical issues surrounding reality television are collectively negotiated across both old and new media formats.

The recent release of two Netflix documentaries, *Jerry Springer: Fights, Camera, Action* (2025) and *Fit for TV: The Reality of The Biggest Loser* (2025), scrutinizing the industrial underpinnings of notorious talk-show and reality formats *The Jerry Springer Show* (1991-2018) and *The Biggest Loser* (2004-2016; 2020), is indicative of a larger body of audiovisual reflective accounts that has emerged recently in the streaming landscape. Despite an overrepresentation of US productions, this wave of reflective documentaries, looking back at cultural phenomena with distance, interpreting their development, and evaluating their (social/cultural/individual) consequences, is not exclusive neither to American TV culture nor to SVoDs. In fact, Swedish public broadcaster SVT has since the early 2000s made a substantial effort to foreground cultural debate and critique (Reigert et al. 2022, 14, 305).

Den svenska dokusåpan (2022; translated as *The Swedish docusoap*) is a six-part documentary series that critically examines and reconstructs the historical development and cultural impact of reality television (henceforth RTV) in Sweden. The series traces the genre's evolution into a dominant form of popular entertainment, while foregrounding the ethical, representational, and industrial controversies that have accompanied this transformation. Through archival footage, interviews with key media professionals and former participants, as well as close examination of moments of heightened ethical significance, the documentary series creates a coherent narrative of how the genre evolved, diversified, and became institutionalized, i.e. recognized, standardized, and embedded within the norms and practices of TV production and consumption, while at the same time interrogating how RTV has both reflected and shaped broader societal norms and debates within the Swedish media landscape.

What can a retrospective of Swedish RTV history – and its critical reception – tell us about ethics? The documentary series begins in 1997, when SVT, the Swedish national public television broadcaster, launches *Expedition Robinson*, the format that later became well-known as *Survivor*, generating significant debate and headlines. The second episode follows how *Robinson* went from early tragedy and threats of cancellation to a massive hit that set off the global reality trend and celebrity culture. In the third episode, the series shows a turning point in audience preferences, as they start to show more interest for RTV that portrays social issues more grounded in reality. The fourth episode focuses on *Big Brother*, described as the most extreme format and centers on questions around authenticity and performance. Episode five jumps to 2021 and one of the darkest moments in Swedish RTV history: *Paradise Hotel* and a case of sexual assault during

filming. Finally, the sixth episode looks at the present, where RTV is normalized and mainstream. As such, these episodes have a lot to say about the historical evolution of ethical (and cultural) anxieties tied to RTV.

Den svenska dokusåpan appeared 25 years after the first broadcast of *Expedition Robinson*. Just as RTV usually does, this retrospective documentary about the history of RTV, ignited some critical reflections in Swedish press (including elite and tabloid, as well national, regional, and local newspapers), especially in the ‘cultural pages’. In this short essay, we explore the critical reception of the documentary in Swedish (cultural) journalism, a particularly strong and impactful sub-genre of journalism in the Nordic countries (Kristensen & Riegert 2017) that pays more and more attention to popular culture (Riegert, Roosvall, & Widholm 2022). Cultural journalism in Sweden is characterized by a distinctive focus on opinion and socially-engaged journalism (*samhällsjournalistik*), often addressing broader societal issues (Reigert et al. 2022, 9). This political orientation is also tied to an explicit ambition to influence public debate (Reigert et al. 2022, 53-54). It is further shaped by ‘criticism’ grounded in cultural expertise and personal experience, which reviewers/critics use to convey subjective evaluative judgments (Reigert et al. 2022, 52). As a result, Swedish cultural journalism frequently operates in the boundaries between meta-critique and traditional reviews, engaging in what Reigert et al. (2022, 53) mention as “critique of critique.”

Through this mini-case study, the aim is to register the different critical reflections activated in cultural journalism around the past, present, and future of RTV, not least through the lens of ethics. Specifically, we are interested in how journalists and cultural critics engage with (un)ethical media content and how (if at all) they attempt to educate the public about such issues.



Image 1. *Den svenska dokusåpan* (2022), a six-part documentary series that offers a critical reconstruction of the history of Swedish reality television and its broader cultural impact (Image source: SVT).

A first remark that can be made through the close reading of the critical reception of *Den svenska dokusåpan* is that RTV is not considered a crowd-pleaser; rather it is an instigator, a provocator, thriving on pushing the envelope. At the same time, it is described as a complex, provocative, persistent, and flexible genre, as exemplified in the following excerpt:

[...] “*Den svenska dokusåpan*” paints a far from complete but interesting portrait of a genre that is incredibly complex. A genre that, like most of its notorious profiles, isn’t trying to be liked and make friends, but lives off provoking, stirring emotions, pushing boundaries, and thrives on reinforcing stereotypes. A genre that loves being hated and often goes too far. A genre that has been declared dead several times over the years – but always manages to reinvent itself and land on its feet (Fjellborg 2022).

The dark sides of RTV are often discussed in cultural journalism through the *potential* consequences they may have on audiences and the *real* consequences they have on participants, both on an individual and collective/societal level. In Sweden, *Expedition Robinson* became a point

of reference not only because of its exportation journey and global success, but also because the broadcast of its very first season was marked by a tragic incident; *Den svenska dokusåpan* dedicates a significant amount of airtime to unpacking this collective trauma. The accompanying cultural commentary reminds the readers that cultural criticism was quick to alert about the risks associated with the genre in terms of fostering a ‘bullying’ culture:

The show was initially met with harsh criticism. It was called fascist TV and adult bullying and many demanded that the program be shut down. The criticism intensified when one of the participants took his own life a couple of months before the show was set to air ([Waldeck 2022](#)).

Interestingly, a homicide connected to a story on *The Jerry Springer Show*, as well as an extensive discussion about the weight loss journey and health hazards experienced by contestants on *The Biggest Loser*, were important arguments in the Netflix documentaries’ reconstruction of the legacy of RTV. Previous literature has addressed, albeit not extensively, the blurry filming and working conditions, the power asymmetry that is part and parcel of RTV, as well as the low sensitization toward (after)care practices (Mast 2016; Thorbjørnsrud & Lånkan 2022), aspects that are also present in the previously mentioned Netflix documentaries.

Cultural journalism is an important site for “information, evaluation, and reflection in [...] the cultural public sphere” (Riegert, Roosvall & Widholm 2018) and RTV has historically triggered public debate and moral reflections. In the excerpt below, the author provides a short comment on the genre’s evolvment, transformation, and resilience, observing at the same time that some extent of normalization has been reached over the years:

In some incomprehensible way, the reality show has managed to find ways to reinvent itself even though it’s been declared dead several times. These days, you can almost miss the collective uproar over the bullying, or even the “fascism,” that *Robinson* had to endure ([Hildén 2022](#)).



Image 2. Expedition Robinson as an early site of ethical negotiation in Swedish reality TV (Image source: Filmpool Nord).

In the corpus that was analyzed for this mini-case study, it is important to point out that cultural journalism also returns to questions revolving around what counts as RTV and what implications that has for how we understand and evaluate the cultural impact of the genre. It has been argued that while RTV can be understood as ‘mega-genre’ under the umbrella of which one can fit game shows, talks shows, talent shows etc., the specificities of each format are telling of the analytical potential of RTV (Deery 2015). Closer accounts of sub-genres have the potential to help us understand both the popularity and resilience of the RTV, as well their status in broader transformations in culture and society. In the excerpt below, the author emphasizes the special weight that certain RTV sub-genres may have and criticizes the fact that the documentary does not differentiate between and problematize sub-genres:

[...] Though with dating shows like *The Bachelor* and SVT’s own controversial *Married at First Sight* being almost a total blind spot. Which feels surprising considering that particular branch of reality TV has been one of the most written about, most creative, and most expansive in recent years ([Fjellborg 2022](#)).

As a final empirical observation, it is worth noting that this trend of meta-reflective documentaries does a good job of summarizing decades of media experiences with RTV and (re)activating an ethical lens, as well as offering a more balanced view of the phenomenon with some elements of transparency coming from the production side and the participants' experiences. However, as argued elsewhere (Aitaki 2025), while they fulfill an important function as keeping the questions of responsibility and accountability open, they abstain from taking a clear stance regarding the future of RTV. This is important when read at the backdrop of a contemporary cultural climate that is, arguably, more sensitized to responsible production cultures – including public service and commercial broadcasters, but also transnational streaming services. Indeed, this is something that is picked up by cultural critics whose prediction is that RTV will continue to endure and reinvent itself:

When the series then crosses the finish line after six episodes, the open question is where the docu-soap – or “reality TV” if you want to use the broader term – is heading next, with new platforms, shifting attitudes, and moved-forward boundaries. Only one thing is certain: the grave is not an option. No matter how many people hope it is. What we've seen so far were just the first 25 years ([Fjellborg 2022](#)).

To conclude, we are returning to the question: What can a retrospective of Swedish RTV history (and its critical reception) tell us about ethics? A small-scale study of the critical reception of *Den Svenska Dokusåpan* reveals the following:

Firstly, ethical debates surrounding RTV are as enduring as the genre itself. Revisiting its history highlights persistent concerns and reminds us of the need for continued scrutiny. RTV is now firmly embedded across public service and commercial broadcasters, as well as SVoDs, and ethical negotiations take place across podcasts, social media, documentaries, and cultural journalism. The latter remains central; as Gripsrud (2017, 182) notes, it can foster “sustained argumentation and critical reflection,” though it can also lapse into uncritical promotion. Our study shows that questions around asymmetrical power relations, albeit mentioned, are rarely explored in a deeper fashion – larger scale studies are needed in order to evaluate how strong of a critical lens cultural journalism actually applies when scrutinizing such phenomena.

Secondly, documentaries such as the ones discussed above keep discussions about responsible media alive, but their arguments are often quite vague. They revisit early ethical concerns surrounding participants' vulnerability – issues of dignity, consent, and emotional harm – by highlighting both the opportunities RTV created and the long-term negative consequences some participants faced, such as harassment, reputational damage, and mental health challenges. They also recirculate the most prominent early critiques of the genre (e.g., “fascist-TV,” adult bullying) and reflect on whether RTV has learned from past scandals and moral panics. In doing so, they convey both uncertainty about the genre's future and a cautious hope that stronger ethical standards are emerging. However, meaningful change requires clearer demands for transparency and policy. Despite increased participant agency, production practices in RTV remain opaque. More openness about production strategies is essential for assessing workplace ethics and enabling greater responsibility and accountability.

Thirdly, ethical issues are collectively negotiated across old and new formats. Long-form documentaries add to the debate, but established forms like cultural journalism continue to play a key role (Riegert, Roosvall & Widholm 2022). The role of PSB and SVT as an important “ethical observer” (historian of RTV), in that it reflects on ethical issues of the (evolution) of the genre is vital, as is showcased in our material too:

SVT makes a solid and commendable attempt to cover virtually the entire spectrum of reality shows, and it succeeds best in the episodes that highlight the thin line between journalism, entertainment, and outright public shaming ([Hildén 2022](#)).

However, cultural journalism, could adopt a more proactive stance in promoting a responsible media landscape and investigating the genre's darker sides – especially within a transnational, digital environment where both content and adjacent ethical concerns circulate widely.

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