

The commercial TV industry is in financial meltdown, so it's no wonder low-budget reality shows are reaping the benefit – but at what cost to the viewer? Channel M's **Steph Elmore** investigates

How low can we go?

WHEN the wedding of Jade Goody to Jack Tweed is screened by Living TV next month it will likely serve as a watershed in reality television. For reasons as tragic as they are remarkable, the former Big Brother contestant is the most famous cast member in the story of television, which, over the past decade, has been all about the reality genre.

While the stakes for those in the spotlight are high, budgets are low.

Low budget TV is enjoying its day in the sun at a time when cash-strapped commercial broadcasters can't really afford to show anything else.

ITV, once a televisual powerhouse, is desperate to cut costs and it is widely accepted that the business models of both Channel 4 and five are in need of a radical overhaul. Meanwhile the BBC is under increasing pressure to curb spending despite the fact that it can rely on us, the licence fee payers.



EXCITED Robin Ashbrook, of independent TV producer Shine

Robin Ashbrook worked in entertainment programming for both the BBC and Granada before accepting an offer to be creative director of Elisabeth Murdoch's Shine Limited.

Shine North in Whitworth Street, Manchester, produced more than 30 hours of television for the five terrestrial channels last year, the vast majority produced and filmed in our area. Key shows include two series of Battle of the Brains for BBC2 and Banged Up for five, which is nominated for an RTS award for best constructed documentary.

Ashbrook, who is based at Shine North, has responsibility for "returning" factual and entertainment reality TV formats – those shows which earn a regular seasonal slot on the telly – including Battle Of The Brains and Gladiators for Sky One.

He insists that viewers aren't being starved of quality with what critics regard as a relentless diet of reality TV shows and tried and tested formats.

He says: "It's exciting times. Getting lower budgets to make TV programmes doesn't mean you have to make low quality programmes, it just means you have to be more creative and find new ways of adapting."

"We aren't whingeing. What we have to do is look at what can come back, what's creative, what formats can be sold worldwide – we sold Sex with Mum and Dad on BBC3 to MTV in America."

Ashbrook rejects suggestions that he is in the business of dumbing down



SMALL SCREEN BATTLE Manchester-based television company Shine North is responsible for shows like Gladiators and produced more than 30 hours of programming for the five main channels last year alone

television. "I devised and created Honey We're Killing the Kids, originally shown on BBC3, which used computer technology to graphically illustrate to parents the long-term effects of feeding children junk food."

"To say programmes like that aren't informative and entertaining is just plain snobbery."

And in a week when the obesity timebomb has been highlighted again, it's hard to argue. The programme did target ill-informed parents, many of whom were overweight themselves, who were allowing their children to follow them blindly down the path of ill-health – and it appeared to work. The government is

spending millions on advertising campaigns and public health initiatives trying to achieve the same objective.

"People are interested in watching real people. Television will become less celebrity-led. But it's all about choice. If people don't want to watch, there are 50 other channels to choose from. There's a place for everything."

'It's all about choice. If people don't want to watch, there are 50 other channels to choose from'

He concedes that commissioners are likely to take fewer risks these days, but insists that much of what you see on the screen can still be traced back to a spark of creative genius – no matter how long the brainstorming session took.

"With more channels and lower budgets it's good for TV as standards are higher, you have to fight for your viewers but you can't risk doing one-off programmes that won't work."

"That's why shows like Strictly Come Dancing will still be running in five years, as will The X Factor. Commissioners would be crazy not to commission them when they pull in such huge figures."



INFORMATIVE Computer images on Honey We're Killing The Kids

But Ashbrook feels we are on the verge of a TV watershed and that Jade Goody's life and, tragically, her death, will come to be seen as landmarks.

And he leaps to the defence of Living TV's coverage of Jade undergoing chemotherapy treatment, her wedding vows and who knows what next?

"It was perfectly acceptable for John Diamond – a remarkable man and journalist – to be filmed by the BBC's Inside Story as he dealt with terminal cancer, but those broadsheet-reading hypocrites don't feel the same way about other subjects."

"Just because Jade isn't a highly educated academic and just because her story will most likely be covered by Living TV it doesn't mean her story is less relevant. If people don't like it, they switch off."

For now Shine Group is doing very well on our appetite for its programming with revenue this year expected to be in excess of £250m. But whether we watch cheaply-made programmes because we want to or because of that frequently heard lament "there's nothing on the telly" will remain a subject of fierce debate.

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