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Reality shows: OTT platforms' next big content battle with TV

The article is about how OTT platforms are reshaping the non-fiction and reality show landscape by adopting shorter, more experimental formats targeted at younger, niche audiences. It also examines the growing popularity, economic dynamics, and creative flexibility that distinguish streaming platforms from traditional television.



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Article Content:

Streaming platforms are shaking up the non-fiction game. After years of tried-and-tested television formats, OTT players are betting big on shorter, sharper, and more experimental reality shows.

Amazon MX Player's *Hip Hop India* and *Rise and Fall*, and Netflix's *The Great Indian Kapil Show* prove that both viewership and brand adoption are strong for the category.

In the mid-year list of most-watched streaming originals by media consulting firm Ormax, although fiction has attracted higher viewership, several non-fiction shows have also made it to **the list this time**. *Hip Hop India Season 2* ranked 15th with 11.1 million viewers, followed by *The Great Indian Kapil Show Season 3* with 10.9 million. *Shark Tank*

India Season 4 came in at 18th (10.3 million), while *The Traitors* — a Prime Video reality show hosted by Karan Johar — attracted 9.3 million views to secure the 24th place.

Why OTT works

Industry experts said unscripted shows are uniquely suited for creating impactful brand integrations while offering customers entertainment that becomes part of everyday conversations. With daily or weekly drops, these shows often manage to create buzz, spark conversations, and enter the cultural zeitgeist.

“Unscripted programming is a critical pillar of our content strategy, and we are approaching it with the intent of creating formats that feel fresh, relevant, and designed for digital audiences,” Amogh Dusat, director and head of content, Amazon MX Player said.

Rise and Fall debuted as the number one unscripted show during its launch weekend, a sign of growing appetite for fresh, digital-first formats, Dusat said.

Charu Malhotra, managing director and co-founder, Primus Partners, a management consultancy firm, said non-fiction has started becoming a real area of focus for OTT platforms, because the audience profile on streaming is younger, urban and more experimental.

Unlike television, where the genre has been dominated by long-running shows like *Bigg Boss* or *Indian Idol*, OTTs are actively experimenting with newer sub-genres.

“OTT can do a few things television cannot. So, shows can be sharper, shorter and more experimental. You do not need a 100-episode season; a six-part reality series works just fine online,” Malhotra said.

Additionally, OTT enables hyper-targeting, allowing you to create a reality format around dating, stand-up comedy, or even niche hobbies, and still find an engaged audience. Whereas TV has stuck to safe formats that work across family audiences, but feel repetitive,” Malhotra added.

Economics of the format

Reality shows on streaming platforms tend to be more expensive per episode due to higher production values and more recognisable talent. But with fewer episodes per season, overall budgets can still be lower.

While TV still depends on advertising volume, OTT success is measured in subscriber retention, engagement time and sometimes brand partnerships.

TV shows can cost between ₹1 crore and ₹3 crore per episode, while OTT may be slightly higher due to production values.

Brijen Desai, associate vice-president at digital agency White Rivers Media said non-fiction and reality have become central to OTT growth. What started as spin-offs of TV

shows has evolved into digital-first formats across survival, dating, social experiments, comedy, and influencer-led programming.

Reality comes of age

Streaming also allows agility. "Formats can adapt quickly to cultural trends, explore niche and regional stories, and integrate social media directly into the experience. Interactive tools like live voting and gamification keep viewers actively involved, avoiding the predictability that plagues television," Desai added.

Sai Abishek, head of content, factual, lifestyle and kids entertainment – South Asia, Warner Bros. Discovery said OTT reality formats bring a real sense of freshness, not just because of interactivity and on-demand access, but because they let makers experiment in ways traditional TV can't always do.

"Many TV formats now have OTT versions, but streaming allows us to go a little edgier, play with sub-genres, and create more immersive, in-depth experiences that suit digital-first audiences," Abishek said.

Key Takeaways

OTT platforms are leveraging interactivity and niche storytelling to create engaging reality shows.

The shift towards shorter and more experimental formats is appealing to younger audiences.

Higher production values and recognizable talent are driving the costs and quality of OTT reality shows.

True crime remains one of the company's strongest genres, he added. Titles like Hunt for Indian Mujahideen, Cult of Fear: Asaram Bapu and Money Mafia have built passionate followings online.

History and mythology are another fast-growing space, occupying almost a third of the company's slate. After the success of Neeraj Pandey's Secrets of the Buddha Relics last year, and Legends of Shiva with Amish earlier this year, the firm has recently launched Ek Tha Raja with Akul Tripathi, which dives into the stories of India's kings and queens.

However, it is important for OTTs to bring something unique to the non-fiction genre that goes beyond linear television. Saugata Mukherjee, head of content, SonyLIV said the platform has seen success with Shark Tank, MasterChef India and Million Dollar Listing India but wants to go slow. "We're very keen on developing new formats but the idea is to find a USP that nobody else is doing," Mukherjee added.