

ALUM PROFILE

Bravo, Andy!

Happily ensconced at pop culture's epicenter, Andy Cohen produces some of television's most-watched programs

ANDY COHEN IS unapologetic about addicting large numbers of his fellow Americans to dishy television shows about wealthy housewives, junior fashion designers competing for the icy approval of a supermodel, and an obsessive, stylish gay man who makes big drama and big money flipping real estate.

Cohen (COM'90) is the senior vice president of original programming and development at Bravo, overseeing production on about thirty unscripted series, including some of the most popular shows on TV. In addition to developing new projects, he supervises casting, character motivation, episode structuring, and getting the "tonal" elements right, he says — "eliminating things that don't fit in with our voice and finding things that strike me as funny that we should blow out and make funnier." His sensibility — campy, sincere, voyeuristic, hip — infuses Bravo's programming and shapes shows like *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Project Runway*, and *Flipping Out*, all of which have become pop-cultural touchstones, cultish spectacles that seem at once lowbrow and chic.

On some nights, Bravo is the top-rated cable channel, outperforming the networks in the advertising-critical eighteen-to-forty-nine demographic. A megahit like *Project Runway* routinely draws between two million and four million viewers.

Bravo's audience, according to Cohen, is the envy of the industry: affluent and educated, passionate, and a little fanatical. "They like watching the creative process," he says. "On shows like *Top Chef* and *Top Design*, they like knowing why people made something the way they did, and they want to know *how* they made it. So we need to satisfy that. But they also love the drama. And they have a certain sense of humor that we speak to."

The programming — competition shows like *Top Chef* or docudramas like *The Real Housewives* series — has other key reality-TV ingredients: great storytelling, outsize characters, talent, and something aspirational, Cohen says. "People will start out watching a show like *The Real Housewives* and think, oh, this is going to be a train wreck. But then they start realizing that they identify with some of these women. They get satisfaction and humor out of it, and it's exciting and fun and highly addictive."

So is Cohen's blog on bravotv.com; like the shows, it's an ode to fabulousness and big-city style without any sense of elitism. He writes it on his BlackBerry in the cab he takes from his West Village apartment to his office in Rockefeller Plaza every morning, often sharing his assessment of the ride, the fare, and the driver — a Twitter-sized reality show of his own.

The blog's popularity led to gigs in front of the camera,



ADAM KRAUSE

Bravo's Andy Cohen is a force behind the cameras — and, increasingly, in front of them, too.

both online and on the air, where Cohen's infectious, telegenic enthusiasm makes him an ideal host for cast reunion shows and episode recaps. "It was a great, fortuitous thing," he says of his trajectory at Bravo. "At BU I always wanted to be on air, but I got a great job out of school producing at CBS News. It was too good for me to leave New York and go to some small town to try to be on air."

As a kid, Cohen watched tons of TV, he says, and he was one of the first students at BU to own a VCR. Ask him for his all-time favorite show and he lists five: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Donny and Marie*, *All My Children* ("but it has to be in the eighties"), *Oprah*, and the Australian version of *Kath and Kim*. (According to a recent Cohen blog post, that comedy is currently "getting mauled" by Bravo's parent, NBC, which is airing an American version.)

And when he hears people complain that reality TV represents the end of good taste or the fall of civilization? "I get offended," Cohen says. "The first reality show was *An American Family* on PBS. It was a fascinating look at how this family lived their lives at a certain time in history. *Real World* on MTV picked that up — it really changed the way the people in my generation viewed gay people, social issues, AIDS, alcoholism. I respect reality TV. I think when it's done right — and I think we do it right, *Survivor* does it right, *The Amazing Race* — it reflects the culture around us.

"Truth is stranger than fiction," he says "And it's so much fun to watch." BARI WALSH