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Show Your Real Face

A Fan Study of the UK *Big Brother* transmissions (2000, 2001, 2002). Investigating the boundaries between notions of consumers and producers of factual television

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Abstract

This audience research was designed to interrogate the UK fans of *Big Brother* so as to present evidence that might shed light on the audience's understanding of the 'reality' in this form of reality television. Using quantitative and qualitative data obtained from a web-based questionnaire linked to *Big Brother's* UK web site over three years, I investigate how the fan audiences negotiate what I have called 'personalised reality contracts' with the contributors, and how this affects their understanding of what they are seeing as 'real' or 'constructed'. I argue that it is *Big Brother's* constructedness that serves to liberate its content, allowing the viewer freedom to navigate past the performative elements typical of the docu-soap genre. I outline how this form of multi-platform TV creatively involves viewers on a number of levels, allowing them to develop strategies for watching that satisfy the desire to witness 'the real' through the lens of the camera. This is set within the context of the larger debate surrounding the change in status of factual programming.

Key words

Big Brother audiences • democratization • documentary • docu-soap • factual entertainment • interactivity • performative • reality contract • reality television • youth teleology
‘Big Brother is television that gets close to the bone, the more honest, the more real, the better.’ UK producer, Peter Bazalgette (RTS Huw Wheldon Lecture, 2001)

INTRODUCTION
The creators of Big Brother, by luck or good judgement, developed a format that seems to satisfy the predominantly younger audience’s search for a ‘new reality’ on their television screens. Initial marketing billed Big Brother UK as a social documentary offering the audience a chance to get ‘pore close’ to the experimental subjects, promising (through 26 live hidden cameras) a front seat from which the viewer could vicariously experience the housemates’ pain, their joy and their fear 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Derivations of this blueprint have proved popular internationally, making this form of constructed reality an integral part of broadcasting schedules around the world. Altogether, the two billion viewers worldwide of the Big Brother multi-media franchise are creating a unique challenge for conventional documentary and problematizing the notion of clean boundaries between producers and consumers of television. I argue that the success of these new-style media products is predicated on their ability to recreate the illusion of a democratic media product, one where reality is presented through a synthetic constructed environment, and, in the case of Big Brother, with the added attraction of access to around the clock live feeds from the house with multi-platform viewing choices. This democratic control over the actuality may be partially mythical (Andrejevic: 2002), but the illusion that the audience is an integral part of the experience and involved in meaningful interaction adds a significant dimension to the viewing experience (Jones, forthcoming, 2004).

Television factual programming has taken on a markedly non-traditional feel in many western cultures over the last decade, with the rise in popularity of first person formats such as the docu-soap and the multiple variations of reality TV. These programmes are in the business of filming real life in an attempt to engage audiences with issues of identity, pleasure and ‘pore close’ encounters. Cumulatively, it has been suggested, they can be credited with reconfiguring the personal in our media culture (Corner, 2002).

The relationship between documentary television formats and ‘the real’ has been the subject of a long debate that has taken many forms. These have primarily been concerned with the documentary aesthetic, the codes and conventions associated with documentary, and the subversion of its privileged status as a form that purports to reflect reality (see: Corner, 1996, Fiske, 1990, Kilborn and Izod, 1998, Nichols, 1991, Paget, 1998, Roscoe and Hight, 2001 and Winston, 2000).
Documentary's claim on reality is highly dependent on an historical construction, a long term relationship with the genre that instils a prior faith in its ability to reproduce reality. Kilborn and Izod (1998: 11) argue that postmodern thinking progressively invites us to abandon the belief that there can be any such thing as referential truth through the eye of the camera lens. Nichols (1991: 107) concludes that documentaries are simply fictions with plots grounded in reality. They do this by referencing 'a reality out there, no more or less'. Iser (1980: 106) discusses an active process of negotiation where audiences find their own place on a continuum between what they believe to be reality and the constructed reality that is the nature of documentary film. Winston (1995: 104) agrees that documentary’s truth is a function of the viewer interaction with the text, rather than of any formal quality of the text itself.

Underlying all these approaches, and in common with old or emerging documentary formats, is the requirement for an implicit ‘reality contract’ to be negotiated between programme and viewer. The nature of this contract depends on many things, but always requires a degree of suspension of disbelief. This ‘reality contract’ might best be defined as the relatively stable understanding that the audience achieves after sufficient encounter with a genre, enabling it to predict with a degree of security the extent to which it can credit the programme with ‘reproducing reality’. I argue here that this secure viewing, based on a lifetime of absorbing the unwritten grammar of television documentary forms, is being placed under strain as new cross-genre formats emerge to monopolize our television screens. I argue that a recent erosion of trust in traditional factual formats in the UK may have been triggered, in part, by the phenomenal success of the docu-soap.

THE LEGACY OF THE DOCU-SOAP

The timing of the launch of Big Brother in the UK could hardly have been more apt. UK audiences were exposed to a heated debate through the latter part of the 1990s that made explicit notions of ‘fakery’, ‘deceit’ and heavy-handed mediation in the production of a range of factual programming. Fakery scandals surrounding two of the most popular series, Driving School and Clamper, helped to reclassify this format as more fiction than fact. One example of this was a well-documented press and public outcry when it was discovered that a key scene featuring Maureen from Driving School (a popular UK docu-soap spanning four seasons) had been set up. She was filmed in bed, ostensibly in the early hours of the morning, studying for a driving test that she was to take the next day. It was subsequently reported that this scene had been filmed during the day with the windows blacked out. Although this form of re-enactment is not uncommon in the production of factual films, especially docu-soaps, it appeared that audiences and commentators were irritated by this explicit reminder, and began using
words like ‘synthetic plot’ and ‘synthetic stardom’ to describe what they saw as a ratings-driven documentary aberration. It is unclear whether this particular event contributed to the tarnished image of the docu-soap as a ‘real’ format or whether the viewing public had already taught itself to view this style of factual programming with a proverbial ‘pinch of salt’. The intergeneric nature of these programmes, with their unashamed mixing of grammatical conventions (see Jones, 2000), meant that the docu-soaps were ever more transparently reliant on sly incursions into the realm of drama. The irony, of course, is that documentaries have done this from their inception. These factual films rarely stray from Grierson’s seminal creative treatment of actuality. What has changed over time is how much reality audiences read into these visual texts. An Independent Television Commission audience research survey from 2000 asked, ‘How important do you think it is that the following formats are completely accurate?’ Only 18 percent of respondents considered it important for docu-soaps to be ‘completely accurate’. This might suggest that by the end of the 1990s, this format had become severely diminished in the comparative veracity scale in the minds of its audience.

The narratives of the docu-soap were popular, but exposed as synthetic, as audiences learnt to identify the ‘sleight of hand’, thereby conspicuously exposing the artificiality of the medium. When viewers believed that this format only presented the illusion of intimacy between contributor and viewer its popularity waned. The format had tired, become self-conscious, a victim of its own success, with the output becoming increasingly hyped and sensationalized to the point where ‘characters’ within different programmes would refer to each other by name. In an episode of the BBC docu-soap Soldiers To Be, one soldier, while ironing his civvies and wearing only his underpants, commented on his physical torso, comparing it favourably to another docu-soap character from Paddington Green who had become well known for his sexual appeal. This type of inter-series banter, glorifying the ‘performative’, was not uncommon as the format proliferated and reached its peak of popularity. Corner addresses this directly in a discussion of the elements in a post-documentary context. He argues that, ‘this self display is no longer viewable as an attempt to feign natural behaviour but is taken as a performative opportunity in its own right’ (2002: 263). This created an environment where viewers were watching docu-soap with an almost ‘semiotic awareness of the artificiality of the medium itself’ (Eshun: 1999). But, in their day, series such as Driving School redefined a genre, showing that close-up and constant filming of a clever choice of subject could make compelling television.

In summary, the need to see glimpses of ‘the real’ and ‘the personal’ through the lens of a camera were cleverly exploited within the docu-soap tradition, although the audience learned to distrust this, effectively fracturing
the ‘reality contract’ and leaving the door open for a new popular frame for experiencing the real world through the lens of a camera. Thus, audiences were ready for a new style of reality on their screens and *Big Brother* was well placed to deliver this.

**RESEARCH OBJECTIVES – PROBLEMATIZING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN NOTIONS OF CONSUMERS AND PRODUCERS OF FACTUAL TELEVISION**

It is not easy to define or categorize *Big Brother*. Undoubtedly, this new constructed reality format stole many of the conventions typical of the docu-soap, specifically foregrounding the personal and a reliance on a soap-style narrative (Dovey, 2000). This is also a programme that relies heavily on a game show construct mixed with audience interaction and observational episodic documentary. Hill (2002: 251) describes it as a “‘gamedoc’ – a hybrid combination of genres designed to maximise audiences.” Corner aptly describes the *Big Brother* format as one that ‘comprehensively and openly gives up on the kind of “field naturalism” that has driven the documentary tradition into so many contradictions and conundrums for near on 80 years.’ He suggests that *Big Brother* ‘operates its claims to the real within a fully managed artificiality’ (2002: 256).

I am investigating this new environment of ‘fully managed artificiality’ by analysing how the format’s very constructedness might serve to liberate its content while allowing the viewer freedom to navigate past the performative elements, typical of the docu-soap genre. I am examining how audiences engage with the multiple delivery platforms to create their own meaning, and argue that the empowerment that comes through live viewing 24 hours, seven days a week with the added draw of interactivity, allows the viewer to own the process of viewing. 

In order to understand how these fan viewers of *Big Brother* learned to ‘trust’ the format and develop what I have called ‘personalized reality contracts’ with the contributors of this series, it was important to analyse the way in which they negotiated this new interactive surveillance space. I wanted to discover to what extent viewers believe that they are an equal party in a conversation, and how this might help to solidify a relationship with the onscreen personas.

The hypothesis on which this research is based is that the predominantly young viewers are attracted to formats that extend the ‘reality buzz’ and provide a heightened sense of the real. This suggests an implicit direction in their viewing, evidence of purposiveness, goal directedness, or teleology. The attraction of the surveillance space that *Big Brother* introduces, with 26 cameras focused on the housemates, is that they might act cumulatively as a mirror, reflecting back what is ‘real’ and giving the reflection a type of authority. This research deliberately targeted *Big Brother* fans. Many of these
were young viewers bringing with them the baggage of exposure to a saturated docu-soap market, familiarity with the internet and its uses, and an exposure to a society where webcams and security surveillance cameras dominate. These youngsters have been brought up in a world where everything is committed to the camera and seem comfortable with the concept of the universal lens.

The need to differentiate what is true from what is false underpins much of the commentary surrounding this series, and resonates in line with the mood of the last decade. In the UK over the last five years, a meta-narrative has played out centring on the erosion of trust. This has taken many forms, from the rise of the political ‘spin-doctor’ to the popularity of the cult series, The X Files, where the ideological statements ‘I want to believe’ and ‘The Truth Is Out There’ dominate the hero’s quest for self-realization against an untrustworthy state. The film, The Truman Show (June 1998) also captures the zeitgeist with its portrayal of a young man who was caught up, unaware, in a long-running reality-soap where he was the only ‘real’ person, ending with the dialogue,

‘Was anything real?’

‘You were real. That’s what made you so good to watch.’

Research methodology

This research represents an ongoing tracking study following the fan audiences of Big Brother, UK for three consecutive years. Key to these investigations was the use of a self-reporting questionnaire designed to shed light on how the audience creates meaning in its engagement with the Big Brother output over the multiple platforms of broadcast, interactive television, web and mobile phone. Because this research was designed to capture both qualitative and quantitative data in a field where most data is collated through qualitative means, I needed to formalize a strategy for development and interpretation. In each year I ran a prelude or ‘framing test’ that collected information from 1000 responses to a series of open questions. I looked for phrases that occurred frequently to seek some pattern that would be useful for developing the final questionnaire. This established what Barker and Brookes (1998) refer to as available discourse repertoires. There were a number of reactions repeated with sufficient frequency to be able to create a meaningful digest allowing for the creation of closed (tick box) questions.

The final four questionnaires were linked to the Big Brother web site in the years 2000, 2001, 2002 for 24 hours using open and closed questions to generate quantitative and qualitative data. These questions looked for responses that might provide an insight into the respondents’ behaviour, beliefs and attitudes as well as collecting key background variables to assist in subgroup research.
To ensure security, the dataset was cleaned and computer encoded, and a number of internal checks were carried out ensuring that joke or repeated forms were eliminated. This had the advantage of securing a large data pool that could then be easily interrogated, giving us a statistically meaningful quantitative data source. Over the three years, we have received approximately 30,000 useful questionnaires. Consequently we have a large pool of qualitative data that can be relied upon to represent the ‘fan’ audiences for this programme. We also received thousands of short written statements from the respondents, varying in length from 20 words to 300 words, that provided the core of our quantitative data. The open questions encouraged short paragraph answers allowing for open coding of the data, noting key themes and concepts. This enabled me to manually look for patterns, similarities and differences. I was also able to use keyword(s) frequency checks to highlight repetition.

Although self-reporting questionnaires alone are a blunt tool, and perhaps not an entirely satisfactory method of detailed audience interrogation (only those who had access to the web could complete the questionnaire, which arguably eliminated the computer-phobic respondents), the demographic information I obtained did reveal some significant and useful data. It contradicted the now outdated assumption that the web is a male-dominated medium with a 70:30 split between female and male respondents in 2000, a 35:65 split in 2001 and a 76:23 split in 2002. As a point of comparison, Channel 4’s demographic data showed a gender split of 60 percent female, 40 percent male. More importantly however, in support of our data we found that the web-based demographic profile was largely consistent with Channel 4’s broadcast audience profile although the skew that a web-based questionnaire would normally generate was quite evident with fewer older respondents and a greater concentration of younger viewers. See Table 1.

• Table 1  Big Brother comparative audience profile 2000 transmission*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Broadcast Audience Profile (percent)</th>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Web survey profile 2000 n = 8000 (percent)</th>
<th>Web survey profile 2002 n = 12,000 (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABC1</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>Broadsheet Readers</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2DE</td>
<td>51.8</td>
<td>Tabloid Readers</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>unavailable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;16</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>&lt;18</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–34</td>
<td>49.3</td>
<td>18–25</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–54</td>
<td>29.2</td>
<td>26–35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55+</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36–45</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>42.3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>57.7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>71.5</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Channel 4 UK
The fact that this audience questionnaire reached only the most dedicated fans – those with enough interest in the programme to surf the Channel 4 website and spend 20 minutes answering a questionnaire – enabled me to focus on regular and repeated viewing attitudes, thus making it possible to get results on how viewers actually dealt with the show on an involved level.

**Basic motivations for viewing**

There exists an ongoing debate about changes in the nature of the public and private sphere over the last two decades, and the ways in which both the contours of social knowledge and emotional experience have been reconfigured (Corner, 2002; Dovey, 2000). Van Zoonen talks of the need to satisfy audiences’ ‘nostalgic yearning for authenticity’ (2001: 672). Such yearnings for authenticity, for ties with others, for social legitimization of one’s own private experiences, she claims, are not to be healed by regular culture, which still deals more with the exceptional and not the everyday. Part of the attraction of *Big Brother* is that it deals with the ordinary. It is a habitat that viewers have said they can relate to. Regular viewers soon become fluent in the minutiae of the housemates’ lives and this appears to encourage them to question their own lives. When the respondents were asked, ‘Why do you watch?’ and given 20 possible answers, the most popular response was ‘It gives me insight into people’s behaviour,’ and the second choice was ‘I enjoy being nosy’, closely followed by ‘because it’s real’ (see Table 2). This nosiness and insight, I argue later, relies heavily on a secure ‘reality contract’. The viewer must be confident in the strong modality represented.

The following representative quotes show how the fans are using the vicarious experience of viewing to help them make sense of their own lives. They are latching on to a very human need to discuss and assess the worthiness of others.

*Table 2*  Top 8 reasons for watching from 20 possible options (1st, 2nd, 3rd choices, 2001)  
\[ n = 12,000 \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>1ST CHOICE (PERCENT)</th>
<th>2ND CHOICE (PERCENT)</th>
<th>3RD CHOICE (PERCENT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gives me insight into people's behaviour</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoy being nosy</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it's real</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I want to be entertained</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I like some of them as people</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it's live</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because it gives me something to talk about</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because I like to predict who is going to win</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Big Brother really helps me by showing how other people deal with their anger and personal disputes. Also it is good to see behind people’s conversations. It really does help in the acquisition of social skills.

I feel that watching and commenting on Big Brother tells us a lot about ourselves: how we judge people, what our values are in relationships. How we interact with others and how we would handle relationship dilemmas if put in a similar position.

I enjoy watching because I am learning to deal with intense relationships in an environment where everyone must make an effort to get on to make the situation as bearable as possible.

If I was chosen to be in the house I would learn a lot about my own character and also develop how I deal with complete strangers in such a pressurised and contained environment.

Thus, the value appears to come from using Big Brother as a compass, to provide the reassurance that comes from observing the intimate and ‘real’ detail of others’ lives. The series encourages viewers to lift back the net curtains to their neighbours’ living rooms, where paradoxically, the neighbour wants to be viewed.

It is clear from the discourse analysis of the thousands of short paragraph answers to questions posed that there is a strong connection between the way soap operas are consumed by audiences in UK society (Geraghty, 1991) and the way viewers respond to Big Brother. Soap offers a homology between soap life and viewer life, just as Big Brother offers viewers a way of sizing up their own lives. Eighty-one percent of the respondents said they preferred Big Brother to their favourite soap opera during the 2000 transmission and 75 percent said they preferred Big Brother during the 2001 transmission. (This sample is of fan viewers and not the general population.) One viewer summed up her feelings: ‘soaps seem so two-dimensional now I have Big Brother to watch’.

Letting oneself be held in suspense, discussing psychological motivations and the conduct of the cast or contributors, deciding who is right and wrong, these are all characteristics that link reality soaps with their drama counterparts. Viewers are essentially living life by proxy. Although we cannot generalize to the larger population from a fan study, I can conclude that these respondents felt that the move from cast to contributor was singularly important.

Table 3 shows how these predominantly young viewers, with their saturation exposure to docu-soaps during their teenage years, compare in a generational attitudinal study. The younger they are, the more likely they are to abandon their favourite soap in favour of Big Brother.

It has been said that we live in a world where nothing seems real unless it is seen on television. The following quote from a young viewer
demonstrated his utter confidence in *Big Brother*’s ability to present a crystal clear reflection of the housemates:

I would love to see how *I actually am as a person*. I have opinions about myself but have never seen the real me. It (being in the house) brings out the real personality of the person that’s there. (My italics)

Thus, the persistent gaze of the camera becomes a guarantor of realness and paradoxically confirms our individuality (see Adrejevic, 2002). Given that soap operas have traditionally fulfilled this function, one can’t help asking whether we can reconcile the shift from living vicariously through fictional characters to living vicariously through real people depicted in an artificial way within a heavily constructed environment.

**REALITY SOAPS – A WINDOW INTO THE WORLD**

The discussions around this new form of factual entertainment inevitably centre on its codes of realism and immediacy. The *Big Brother* broadcast programmes are heavily mediated, with perhaps the highest shooting ratio in television history. But, this mediation appears to be in a palatable form for the audience when presented in the media mix. The wall-to-wall commentary with a high degree of editorializing combines with an unprecedented shooting ratio designed to highlight dramatic moments within the house, often accentuating personality traits to the point of caricature. One *Big Brother* producer aptly described the reproduction of the housemates’ characters by saying ‘It’s all you, albeit a refracted image of you’.

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Table 3  ‘I prefer *Big Brother* to my favourite soap opera’ (n = 8000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Agree/Strongly</th>
<th>Disagree/Strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>under 16</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–25</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26–35</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36–45</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45+</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---
This format thus appears to owe more to the synthetic nature of the
docu-soap, which I argued earlier, had lost some of its claim on the real,
and been exposed as synthetic, with declining audiences. One might expect
that Big Brother would also be perceived as ‘performative’, with the degree of
explicit and highly artificial intervention where the social actors in Big
Brother are encouraged to ‘act up’ to the camera as if they were characters in
a play. However, there does appear to be a degree of viewer buy-in and
acceptance of the artificial premise; that of forced incarceration for up to 10
weeks in a house with no contact with the outside world and 26 cameras
watching your every move in close-up.

To account for this we must examine how Big Brother frames its actuality.
In contrast to the docu-soap, the synthetic nature of the format is heavily
signposted. The cameras are foregrounded, used as icons in the introductory
credits, a type of post-modern reaction to the fact-fiction polarity. Although
the initial set-up is constructed, the manufactured nature of the environment
appears to liberate the content by calling attention to itself and allowing the
internal dynamics to work themselves out in a more natural fashion like lab
rats allowed the free run of a cage. Ironically it is the very constructedness
of the Big Brother game show that appears to liberate its content. These fans
appeared to be able to suspend their disbelief and look for the reality created
within the artifice.

Thus, the audience expresses itself as a liberated consumer or having what
Hodge and Tripp refer to as a ‘strong modality . . . an unimpaired view of
the “window on the world”’ (1986: 130).

To support the notion that the fan base for Big Brother derives satisfaction
from its search for ‘the real’ in this television format we need to understand
how the audience engages with the reality on screen. Viewers’ open
responses to the research questions centred on their engagement with the
truth or genuineness of participants, and the need to be free to determine
for themselves the answers to questions such as ‘who is real?’, ‘when are they
real?’, ‘how real are they?’, and, ‘how often are they real?’

The data collected over this tracking study suggests that their engagement
with ‘reality’ (at least for this fan audience) is closely linked with the more
complex mix of media offered as part of this series. Sixty-nine percent of
the respondents to our June 2002 survey (Big Brother 3) said it was
important or very important that they could see live events in the house.
Only eight percent of our respondents reported that they had no access to
the live coverage and only 10 percent said that the live coverage was of little
or no interest.14 Within this sample, those who were frequent viewers of the
live coverage were more likely to believe that they had access to the ‘real’
persona. Typical comments from this group centred on the housemates
being ‘exposed’ or ‘laid bare’ with ‘nowhere to hide’. Yet, those who only
rarely viewed the web or E4 transmissions tended to be more distrustful of the image. For example:

We only see what Channel 4 wants us to see. We only see extraordinary events rather than what people are usually like.

It’s an unreal situation. I don’t follow the live action, I only look at the highlights on the web and Channel 4 which are edited so (I) don’t get a true reflection. You only get what makes good television.

These viewers’ ‘reality contract’ was primarily based on finding times when they were able to view glimpses of the ‘real’ within the producer’s cut.

Another common reaction involved second-guessing and reading between the lines:

Over the ten weeks emotions may show for a short period although it is more about the game situation. Characters such as Jade are mentally unable to sustain such a game plan causing friction as she attempts to ally herself too obviously.

Here we see a fairly complex set of reactions. The viewer is working out a reality contract with Jade (Goody, a contestant on Big Brother 3) and with the series as a whole. She acknowledges the ‘game frame’ and then rates each character grading how much ‘reality’ is likely to come through depending on her reading of the personalities. This viewer evidently believes that she is being given the tools by which she can judge the characters of the housemates sufficiently to draw these types of conclusions. This is part of the fun and the challenge of viewing. Each viewer is empowered to construct his or her own picture from what is transmitted. This also concurs with Hills’ findings (2002: 334) that viewers expect contestants to act up for the cameras, but they also expect this improvisation to break down. This is then a popular subject of ‘water cooler’ conversations at the office or school the following day. Overall, when I asked the viewers of the 2002 series if they felt that they could ‘really get to know the housemates in ten weeks’, there was a clear split between the sceptics and the believers. Forty-eight percent of male viewers and 41 percent of female viewers felt that they could (agreeing or strongly agreeing), whereas 34 percent of men and 37 percent of women disagreed or strongly disagreed with this suggestion. Overall, the more access fans had to live coverage of the events, the more they were willing to suspend their disbelief and trust their ability to ‘really get to know’ the housemates.

SEPARATING THE ‘PERSONAL’ FROM THE ‘PERFORMATIVE’

Since the fun is discovering those magic moments when people reveal their true selves to the cameras, for the game to work, the audience must believe that the environment is right for ‘fake-spotting’ as Table 4 shows.
With 65 percent of males and a significantly lower 43 percent of females believing that the housemates cannot fake it all the time, the stage is set for breaking through the ‘performative’ barrier. This understanding is rooted in the knowledge that there is nowhere to hide and that access to the rushes, 24 hours a day, is guaranteed. This is what underpins the reality contract with the programme. Once the game rules are established then the question remains, on what behaviour should the winner be judged? This appreciation is based on the audience’s perception of genuineness. Table 5 shows how important it is to be perceived as honest in the gaming strategy.

• Table 4 ‘I think it’s impossible for the housemates to fake it all the time for the cameras’ (2000) (n = 12,000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree strongly</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• Table 5 ‘I think the winner should be the person who is true to themselves’ (2000) n = 8000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Downloaded from nms.sagepub.com at Institute of Education University of London on February 27, 2011
It is clear from this that the only way to win the Big Brother game is to appear as real as possible by matching the audiences’ expectations.

I like Dean the best because he appears to be the housemate who I presume is most like what he is in the real world.

I liked Brian because he is genuine and doesn’t put on any airs or graces and doesn’t falsely play up to the cameras.

I liked Brian because he’s Brian.

I like Helen because she hasn’t got a conniving bone in her body, she is not putting on an act, she is genuine and her naivety makes her more appealing.

The 2001 series finalists Brian (who eventually won the contest) and Helen (the runner-up) were most likely to be described as childlike, naive, honest, genuine and being themselves. Conversely, the losers are the ones who come across as two-faced, conniving, not giving away enough to the viewer, not wearing their heart on their sleeve, keeping themselves to themselves. The other deadly sin is to be seen to be playing the game in a manipulative fashion. It doesn’t take much for a housemate to fall out of favour. Just one memorable incident edited into the primetime version of the programme can affect a housemate’s reputation irreversibly.

I dislike Elizabeth I think that she is managing to hide what she’s really like. That slip when she shouted at Paul showed her real side. So far she has managed to get people on her side by being understanding and nice but then has given them a good slagging off behind their backs. Like when all the girls were wearing bikinis and she made a sly comment about them to Stewart.

I won’t say Elizabeth is two-faced but she has more sides than a Rubik’s Cube.

Once the viewer is positioned as owning the actuality, then the game is to have fun with that assumed power and separate the ‘performative’ from the ‘person’. There are two types of deception that the housemates must avoid if they are to take away the £70,000 jackpot. First, there is the deception the audience witnesses between housemates, as exemplified by the following:

I dislike Elizabeth because she is so two-faced it is almost unreal. She nominates and bitches about people and almost immediately afterwards she goes back to that person and hugs them.

This might be called the ‘I got you’ reaction. Viewers enjoy catching housemates out as they witness these unforgivable indiscretions. The second type of deception speaks to housemates’ ability to fake it in front of the camera. The audience does not believe that a contributor can fake his or her personality 24 hours a day, seven days a week, although it is a mortal sin to be caught trying – ‘He is so calm and self-assured it is almost repugnant’.
The audience is thus empowered to create individual ‘reality contracts’ with the participants because, from time to time, this format allows viewers to sneak glimpses of what they understand to be a true indexical image. Questions such as, ‘is he real?’; ‘was she real?’; ‘they can never be real, don’t you agree?’ can be viably discussed or hotly debated. The viewer is actively negotiating the mediated reality. The contributors to this series are required to live in one of the most artificial environments one could imagine. Despite this, viewers expect a display of naturalism, and any display of artificiality or inconsistency between the audience’s perceptions of a housemate and the actions taken, is generally seen in a pejorative light. The viewers refused to believe that it is possible for the housemates not to reveal their true selves. There was general agreement that fakery could not be maintained and it was the job of the audience to spot the fakers. This appeared to be the most important reward associated with the act of viewing.

VANESSA’S TEARS – FALLING FOUL OF THE ‘REALITY CONTRACT’

When the 10 participants enter the house they are unknown to the audience. They have no identity other than the ones constructed for them in brief video vignettes by the producers. It is left to the audience to create an internal picture of the housemates, based primarily on their viewing experiences across the many platforms available to them. They take an active ownership of the reality-game. They enjoy picking favourites and supporting underdogs, and actively engage in the process of eliminating those they like least. This creates a strong bond between viewer and contributor, and provides an agency, a sense of control over the outcome. The fact that these people were unknown before their *Big Brother* debut meant that the canvas used to create the personality was first encountered as a blank page. The act of creation is then entirely one between viewer and screen. Past research into relationships between on-screen fictional characters and audiences have noted the importance of maintaining the illusion of the actor as a ‘real’ person despite the fact that the image presented on screen was undeniably a construct or a façade, bearing little or no resemblance to the actor playing the role. As long as there are few discrepancies between the public image of the actor and his private life then the illusion can be successfully maintained. (Horton and Wohl, 1956: 226)

If the audience will only properly identify with those characters who they can trust to be ‘true to themselves’, then the production of a *Celebrity Big Brother* (January 2001) was a good test of what would happen if the audience was familiar with the housemates prior to their arrival in the house. In the case of *Celebrity Big Brother*, the canvas was already partially
drawn because, in this case, viewers did know the housemates before transmission.

The extra textual debate surrounding the transmission was dominated by a discussion of ‘Vanessa’s tears’. UK talk show hostess, Vanessa Feltz, cried upon hearing the news that she was next in line for eviction, yet this contradicted her public persona in which she is often seen to be in control, hard-headed and polite as host of her own daytime talk show. What follows is a transcript from an access radio programme airing in the same week as Celebrity Big Brother, highlighting contradictions between Vanessa’s house persona and public persona:

**Hostess**: Cheryl from Cardiff, do you think Vanessa’s tears were real?

**Cheryl**: I hated it. Vanessa Feltz was just a big fake. She behaved like a spoilt child. She’s just a fake.

**Hostess**: But, doesn’t that make it more compelling, Cheryl?

**Cheryl**: She’s spent years on the TV pretending to be somebody she really wasn’t. She was nasty and swearing and it made me feel sick. The real person came out.

**Hostess**: Chris Eubank, he came over as normal didn’t he?

**Cheryl**: He was normal. He was the same in the house as he was outside. He’s the same inside and outside. Vanessa comes over as a strong lady but she wasn’t. I don’t think they were putting on an act. I would have preferred it if they would have put on an act.

In this instance Cheryl felt let down because she did not see Vanessa’s public persona. She was happy when Chris Eubank’s two identities (inside and outside the house) matched. There is obvious confusion when it comes to Cheryl’s understanding of how she would like to see Vanessa act. At one point she asserts that she would prefer that Vanessa ‘put on an act’ to reaffirm her public persona. And at the same time she criticises Vanessa for being ‘a fake’. Either way, Cheryl was unable to enter into the performance. She saw only the performative and the ‘reality contract’, at least for this one viewer, was broken. This made her react with hostility to the person and programme. Another guest commented during the same radio show, ‘Isn’t it nice to see them being themselves. But, they haven’t been quite honest with us. Anthea Turner is being too nice. She thinks everyone is brilliant. She’s a bit creepy’. Thus, Anthea too fell down on the ‘genuine’ scale for not being what the audience expected. I would argue that this might be symptomatic of how this new sub-genre of factual programming has developed explicit rules of conduct for its protagonists. The viewer puts a high value on the purity of an untarnished mirror image reflection of those incarcerated inside the house. It lends more weight to the argument that the ‘reality contract’ established through Big Brother is inextricably tied to the concept of genuineness of expression. These housemates are not allowed to be actors.
IT’S ONLY A GAME SHOW! IT’S ONLY A GAME SHOW!

Generic interpretations

‘It’s Only A Game Show! It’s Only A Game Show!’ was a mantra sung during each eviction ritual in the 2000 series. These housemates were actively trying to reassure themselves that it was all a bit of fun, nothing to take seriously. It wasn’t real. This mantra may have offered a degree of reassurance to the 10 people incarcerated in the house, as they waited nervously for Big Brother to decide their fate, but the viewers saw things differently. They were not happy to classify this programme as a game show. For the audience, it was more complicated.

Television formats are a principal factor in directing audience choice and influencing audience expectations. They frame viewers’ understanding of the text helping to answer basic questions such as, is this fact, is this fiction, real or fake? ‘Reality TV’ suggests by its labelling that it owes more to factual than fictional programming. Corner (2002: 259) argues that Big Brother belongs in a new category – documentary as diversion.16 This classification, he suggests, has evolved by a process of ‘longitudinal sub-generic developments and intensive cross fertilisation with other formats’.

The ambiguity relating to format is at the core of the audience’s understanding of reality within this series. ‘It’s only a game show’, the mantra sung at the beginning of every eviction ritual by the housemates in the UK’s first series was a helpful reminder of the more trivial side of the competition before eviction from the house in ritual humiliation.

In most game shows, the participants who ‘play the game to win’ by trying to outsmart their competitors usually gain the audience’s approval. Conversely, in the Big Brother game show, the reality contract demands that the power (or ‘democratic power’) to control the outcome of the game should rest with the audience alone. The need to appear ‘real’ demands that any evidence of ‘game-playing’ be masked. Viewers are not happy when they see evidence of housemates ‘playing the game to win’ as Table 6 reveals.

* Table 6 ‘I think the winner should be the person who plays the game the best’ (2000) n = 8000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>agree</th>
<th>disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is interesting to note how low down the scale ‘good strategic game player’ comes in the following comparative list created from the 2002 survey. This list was created in response to the question, ‘Which trait best describes the housemate you think should win?’ There is still a significant minority of viewers (mostly male) who reward the housemates for their game-playing skills, but since most of the voters are female, the housemates who covet the big prize would be best advised to avoid this behaviour, as Table 7 demonstrates.17

Wayne Garvey, BBC head of entertainment and features, calls Big Brother a ‘fantastic example of a factual programme with huge entertainment value. . . . We all understand it’s a game show. It uses the grammar of entertainment in a factual proposition.’ (Garvey, 2000: 4). When asked, ‘What kind of programme does Big Brother seem most like?’, the audience did not necessarily back up Garvey’s assumptions with the majority classifying it as a documentary or documentary hybrid (see Table 8).

A small percentage, 10 percent, was not comfortable placing Big Brother into any conventional category reflecting the ambiguity that comes with intergeneric formats.

One interesting effect arising from the ambivalence in the format was how housemates were often described as ‘characters’ rather than participants or contributors. Despite the strong attraction of realism, the artificial setting of the Big Brother house, with its constructed narrative and audience interaction, appears to encourage these lapses into fictional descriptors.

When asked what viewers would like to see in Big Brother 3, one viewer

### Table 7 Desirable personality attributes and behaviours by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample Attributes (in descending order)</th>
<th>Male response (percent)</th>
<th>Female response (percent)</th>
<th>Total population response (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Honest, open, themselves</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funny</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good, strategic game player</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First to have sex</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting to note how low down the scale ‘good strategic game player’ comes in the following comparative list created from the 2002 survey. This list was created in response to the question, ‘Which trait best describes the housemate you think should win?’ There is still a significant minority of viewers (mostly male) who reward the housemates for their game-playing skills, but since most of the voters are female, the housemates who covet the big prize would be best advised to avoid this behaviour, as Table 7 demonstrates.17

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When asked what viewers would like to see in Big Brother 3, one viewer

### Table 8 Audience’s response to the question – ‘What format does Big Brother seem most like?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Audience response (percent)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Docu-soap</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentary</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Game show</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap opera</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
suggested that he would, ‘like to see more interesting characters not faking it for the cameras’. The drama frame is inescapable and owing to its hybrid nature, as Garvey suggested earlier, the audience does appear to be comfortable using the grammar of entertainment within a factual proposition.

CONCLUSION

*Big Brother*’s popularity amongst its fans derives from its success in delivering an acceptable frame for the actuality mixed with the foregrounding of the personal and private. The evidence here supports the notion that younger audiences, with their exposure to 1990s style factual entertainment, are well-placed to relate to this novel constructed format.

It is too simplistic to assume that *Big Brother* audiences see this format as offering a window on the world and an untarnished view of reality. What it does do successfully is to involve viewers creatively on a number of different levels, allowing them to establish their own varied interpretative frames. This audience research suggests that, far from confusing viewers by presenting them with a format they do not recognize, part of the attraction for fans is the way in which this constructed reality game show allows audiences to perceive reality on many levels, and to develop strategies for watching that satisfy the desire to get ‘close to the bone’ and ‘pore close’ to the housemates. This is the essence of a ‘personalized reality contract’ and it fits with the teleology of youth audiences.

The attraction of the fly-on-the-wall documentary and the early docu-soaps was built on a relatively frail reality contract, relying on the assumption that the events filmed would have occurred (seemingly) without the presence of a film crew. This format left little room for manoeuvre should its tenuous hold of reality be shattered. Docu-soap may be remembered as a post-modern reaction to the documentary – self conscious in its deceit and its conceit. Like professional wrestling, the licence to make these kinds of programmes will come from an audience that has successfully negotiated its place on the fact–fiction continuum. Capitalizing on much of what docu-soaps did well, *Big Brother* moves viewers into new territory, mapping out its own space by creating a highly artificial format relying on the constructedness of a game show. Ironically, it is the very constructedness of the *Big Brother* game show that appears to liberate the content. Its artifice is so transparent that the message to the viewer is, yes, the cameras are present, no pretence, we can all see them, now let’s get on with capturing actuality. Whereas audiences often question the fidelity of truth claims in factual programmes, *Big Brother* audiences appeared to be able to suspend their disbelief and look for the reality created within the artifice.

The two billion viewers worldwide of this multi-media franchise seem to be creating a challenge for conventional documentary, by beginning to blur
the lines between the production and consumption of the genre. John Hartley (2002) has referred to ‘the DIY viewer’ one that actively engages in the content through interaction on many levels, and Big Brother might be seen as a good example of this in practise.

Love it or hate it, Big Brother can justifiably be labelled a seminal media event, a turning point in the construction of television-based media products and the beginnings of a redefinition of the way audiences respond to fact-based television. As the younger members develop as a generational audience it will be interesting to track future viewing habits to see if their fondness for Big Brother was merely an aberration or a beginning. Undoubtedly the role of technology will offer a window onto a totally new world of fact-based television, but, audiences may well continue to ask themselves the fundamental questions, ‘Is it fact?’, ‘is it fiction?’ ‘is it real?’ or ‘is it faked?’

Notes
1 Title of the German Big Brother theme tune from 2000.
2 Peter Bazalgette speaking at a VLV seminar in London, May 2000
3 The positioning of Big Brother as a ‘social experiment’ was abandoned in seasons two and three. Now Channel 4/Endemol go to great lengths to promote this series as ‘entertainment’ or ‘game show’ related. Some have argued that its billing as a socially based factual programme was an attempt to generate interest from the press to help advertise the first season.
4 Endemol’s own figures from year ending 2001.
5 Big Brother was disseminated over nine discreet platforms in the 2001 UK transmission – terrestrial broadcast, E4 digital interactive, the internet, mobile phone, land-line phones, audio, video and book retail and the tabloid press. The added dimension to this new-style media product is the interactivity it provides, turning a passive experience into an active one. In a separate article I explore in more detail the implications for this user control over content, context, and flow. In a multi-channel world, television executives believe this is an excellent way to woo an increasingly ‘promiscuous’ audience.
6 See Dovey (2000) for an overview of this trend pre-Big Brother.
7 ITC Research responding to the question, ‘How important do you think it is that the following television formats are completely accurate?’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORMAT</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE RESPONSE AGREE STRONGLY (PERCENT)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current affairs (e.g. Panorama)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentaries (e.g. Cutting Edge)</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Docu-soap</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8 For statistics relating to the decline in audiences for docu-soaps, see Wells (2001).
9 Annette Hill’s audience investigation into Big Brother UK largely confirms these findings. Hill analyses the tendency for viewers to look for ‘moments of truth’
within the performative space, (2002: 92) but does not concentrate on exactly how fan viewers specifically rework and transform this text.

10 The original four questionnaires used over the three years can be found online at http://www.aber.ac.uk/bigbrother/rationale.html

11 For research elaborating on these findings – see Liesbet van Zoonen’s work on gendered forms of communication through the web. Please also note that the first set of data collected in 2000 allowed informants not to specify gender if they so chose. This option was eliminated in the 2001 and 2002 questionnaires, hence the 1% discrepancy from 2000.

12 A more detailed account of the way in which viewers surfed between platforms can be found in Jones, forthcoming, 2004.


14 It could be argued that the informants from this web survey were already predisposed to engaging in the live and interactive elements that accompanied the series and are consequently unrepresentative of the population as a whole. For example, an analysis of a general audience study in 2000 showed that only 18 percent of 16–24 year olds accessed the sites, despite the fact that 50 percent had access to the internet in some form (Hill, 2002). I argue that the general audience is attracted to live and interactive coverage but initially audiences were put off from accessing the 2000 series due the technological limitations of their equipment (Jones, forthcoming, 2004). Since the first transmission in 2000, however, Channel 4/Endemol have created a live and interactive broadcast version of the programme on E4, that is easily accessible to over 40 percent of the audience. The addition of this new platform demonstrably improved ratings for E4 during transmission of the series but did not diminish the web audience that also grew in 2002.

15 There were a number of variations in responses to questions across gender lines. In this instance it appeared that women were more cynical and less inclined to believe that housemates ‘couldn’t fake it all the time’. As seen earlier, women were also less inclined to believe that they could get to know the housemates well in 10 weeks than men.

16 John Corner’s first three categories are Documentary as Democratic Civics, Documentary as Journalistic Inquiry and Exposition and Documentary as Radical Interrogation and Alternative Perspective.

17 Statistics from 2002 show that Big Brother is a woman! 76 percent of women voted for male housemates and 71 percent of men voted for male housemates in the 2002 series. I also discovered that women are 20 percent more likely to vote more than once a week than their male counterparts.

References


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