

FINDING THE INTERACTIVE TELEVISION AUDIENCE

Big Brother

An audience study of the UK transmission, 2000 and 2001

Janet Jones

“ Interactive TV is a bit like making a meal – so far all we’ve done is the shopping, now we’ve got to find out what we’re going to cook. ” Michael Jackson – ex head of Ch 4 TV UK

Abstract

The term 'convergence' increasingly dominates discussions of our media environment, yet due to the embryonic nature of the newer interactive media platforms it remains hard to predict patterns of use and meaning making among consumers. As the UK moves into the world of digital plenty leaving behind the comfortable world of analogue scarcity, television executives are increasingly looking to interactivity to woo the promiscuous audience¹. Reality media events stripped across nine discreet platforms, such as *Big Brother*, are on vanguard of these new initiatives. This article explores some of the implications for user control over content. It uses quantitative and qualitative data from a web-based questionnaire linked to *Big Brother's* UK Web site (August 2000, July 2001) in order to map expectations associated with different viewing platforms. It examines how these predominantly youth, fan viewers negotiate what I have called a 'reality contract'² with the series while 'surfing' between platforms. This mobility I argue, (particularly appealing for 'reality TV' formats) allows the audience to customise their viewing, developing strategies for watching that cater to a sense of authorship and control over the content

Key words: Interactivity, viewer positioned as editor, reality tolerances across media platforms; democratisation of media, boxing reality - shelf-life considerations for multi-media reality, redundancy of conventional production practices.

Short Biography

Janet Jones (MPhil) is a lecturer at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth in media and communication studies. Her current doctoral work examines the relationship between viewer and multi-platform reality TV. She teaches in the areas of Journalism, Documentary Analysis and Documentary Production. Before taking up her present post Janet worked for the BBC from 1986 to 1998. During that time she produced and

¹ Peter Bazalgette, Executive Producer, Endemol UK, Royal Television Society Lecture November, 2001

² By 'reality contract' I mean the relatively stable understanding that an audience achieves after sufficient encounter with a new genre enabling them to predict with a degree of security the extent to which they can credit the programme with 'reproducing reality'. For some, the rhetoric of the 1990's exposing 'fakery' and 'deceit' and heavy handed mediation in the production of factual programmes (see *The Connection*, *Driving School*, *Rogue Males* et al) may have shaken the foundations of this learned behaviour as the artificiality of the medium was conspicuously exposed.

directed documentaries and current affairs programmes most recently for BBC News and Current Affairs in London

Introduction

“Interactive is a mechanism for allowing viewers to influence and control programmes or content in a natural or intuitive way making them feel they are part of the TV experience.”³

This audience research was designed to probe into how important the interactivity created through converging media was to the success of *Big Brother* UK. It acknowledges the importance of media convergence on an industry preparing to reshape its relationship with its viewers through the development of integrated, interactive content. *Big Brother* UK is on the vanguard of these initiatives combining telephony, webcasting and broadcasting to create a distinctive interactive media product.

Finding the interactive audience in the UK is not only a commercial proposition but a political one too. Digital penetration in British households is still quite small (35%) but rising at a steady pace. With the increased choice this brings, audiences are becoming increasingly peripatetic. The challenge for both government and industry is to create a broadband digital audience in just a little under ten years. The impending analogue switch-off will force UK residents to divest themselves of the coat hangers and soggy bits of string commonly used to receive analogue signals from local transmitters and invest in digital sets. UK digital viewers pay twice for their television consumption. They pay a subscription to the digital supplier and also over £100 a year to subsidise the public broadcasting system via the licence fee. Eight million digital subscriptions have already been sold – that only leaves 50 million conversions – a tall order.

Those who study audiences readily acknowledge that they are often made or constructed to accommodate the commercial forces that control the media. The requirement in the UK now is to deliver an audience as a commodity. Viewers are being invited to play a role created for them to facilitate the move to analogue switch off and so far they have largely failed to be convinced.⁴ *Big Brother* is a notable exception to this having been responsible for almost doubling the viewing figures for E4 interactive TV in just 3 weeks. (July 2001) The 2001 UK transmission of *Big Brother* was disseminated over nine discreet platforms⁵ of these four can be considered interactive – terrestrial broadcast coupled with the telephone, E4 digital interactive television, web and mobile phone. There is ample evidence to suggest how successful this media event was in commercial terms.

❖ 69% of the population watched *Big Brother* at least once during its first round

³ RTS speaker

⁴ The collapse of ITV digital in March 2002 is a clear indication that despite a few success stories, digital TV still remains an unpredictable business to be in due to lack of take-up.

⁵ Terrestrial broadcast, E4 digital interactive television, the internet, mobile phone, audio, video, book and magazine retail and the tabloid press.

- ❖ 200 million page impressions were received by the *Big Brother* Website
- ❖ 34 million calls were made to The *Big Brother* eviction line (both series)
- ❖ 5 million votes were received via BSkyB remote controls linked through E4 (helped to double audiences for this fledgling interactive station)
- ❖ It gave Channel 4 its highest ever share of the weekly television audience in its 18 year history.
- ❖ Press coverage generated by the series in the main national and regional print and broadcast media was equivalent to more than 10.5 million in advertising space.

The aim of packaging and cataloguing an audience for interactive television is not just to deliver advertising revenue. (That may be on the decline due to technological innovations such as TiVo.⁶) The key to making money in the multi-platform media age is to encourage us all to participate in what is now called the ‘return path’ economy. Revenue is collected by convincing audiences (or more appropriately: *interactive consumers*) to respond to a variety of stimuli. Every phone call made, text message sent and TV remote control vote cast, nets the producer a small income. Media events that harness the power of all media such as *Big Brother* and more recently *Pop Idol* have shown that they can attract up to 8 million return path interactions (votes) in one evening.⁷

Research Methodology

This research interrogated audiences during two stages, one during the first series and one during the second series. Central to both stages of this research was the use of a self-reporting questionnaire designed to help 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, mobile phone etc. The questionnaire was released in two stages:

1. Open questions encouraging one sentence or short paragraph answers.
2. Closed (tick box) questions

The open questionnaire was used to help frame the questions and answers postulated in the second closed survey. The initial data was collated manually with the most frequent answers to questions used to construct the closed questionnaire. The closed questionnaire solicited approximately 9000 responses in 2000 and 9000 in 2001. The data was cleaned and computer encoded. This had the advantage of a large data pool that could then be easily interrogated using *Microsoft Works* giving us a statistically meaningful quantitative data pool. We also had 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.

Although self-reporting questionnaires alone are a blunt tool and perhaps not an entirely satisfactory method of detailed audience interrogation (only those who had

⁶ TiVo is a computer linked to the television that allows for the recording and editing of broadcast programmes that can be stored digitally for later retrieval.

⁷ It is also interesting to note that more viewers voted during the combined *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol* ballots than voted in the last UK general election prompting a review of balloting procedures for the 2005 general election.

access to the web could complete this questionnaire), the demographic information we obtained turned out to be significant and useful. For one, it contradicted the general assumption that the web is a male dominated medium with a 70:30 split between female and male respondents. As a point of comparison, Channel 4's demographic data showed a gender split of 60% female, 40% 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 young viewers. We might infer that the main viewing group of 16-24 year olds use the web more than the older demographic groups and this partially reduced the skew that a web-based questionnaire would normally generate.

Big Brother Comparative Audience Profile 2000 Transmission*

| <u>Demographic</u> | <u>Broadcast Audience Profile</u> | <u>Demographic</u> | <u>Web survey Profile</u> |
|---------------------------|--|---------------------------|----------------------------------|
| ABC1 | 48.2% | Broadsheet Readers | 33% |
| C2DE | 51.8% | Tabloid Readers | 45% |
| <16 | 11.5% | <18 | 27% |
| 16-34 | 29.3% | 18-25 | 36% |
| 35-54 | 9.2% | 26-35 | 27% |
| 55+ | 10% | 36-45 | 8% |
| | | | (55+....2%) |
| Male | 42.3% | Male | 27.4% |
| Female | 57.7% | Female | 71.5% |

**Source Channel 4 UK*

Finally, the fact that this audience questionnaire reached only the most dedicated fans, those interested enough in the programme to surf the Channel 4 web site and spend 20 minutes answering a questionnaire, allowed us to study specific fan attitudes towards the multi-platform viewing experience. At the very least it enabled a clear focus on *regular* and *repeated* viewing attitudes, thus making it possible to get data on how viewers actually *dealt with* (rather than *glanced at*) the show.

Seeking Authenticity

In the search for authenticity or personalised narratives, viewers have been drawn to 'reality TV'. *Big Brother* will most likely be remembered as the defining moment and for the genre. Its creators developed, by luck or good judgement, a format that seems to satisfy youth audiences searching for a 'new reality'⁸ on their TV screens. It is not easy to define or categorise *Big Brother*. This is a programme that relies heavily on a game show construct mixed with audience interaction and observational, episodic documentary in a constructed, artificial environment. It is unquestionably the most popular international reality television programme to date and one of the most successful television franchises in media history. The 2002 season of *Big Brother* UK has attracted 150,000 applications for wannabe housemates and only ten will be chosen. These 'social actors' are placed in an environment that the viewer believes or

⁸ Much has been written about the illusion of creating reality through the medium of television. I would echo Nichol's belief in suggesting that, "the fact that there is any reality 'out there', beyond us that can be captured on camera should be seen purely as an ideological effect." (Nichols, 107)

hopes will bring the real person to the fore.⁹ In 2001 the franchise reached a television audience of 2 billion mostly young adults heralding the start of the digital TV era. It was a media product of its time, or, as creator Jon De Mol claimed – “the spirit of an age”.

The timing of *Big Brother* could hardly be more apt. The 1990’s saw a preponderance of personalised narratives on the television as UK audiences became obsessed with watching the daily lives of their countrymen on television in a dizzying array of docu-soaps. This form of populist documentary established many of the conventions later integrated into *Big Brother*¹⁰. These were typified by foregrounding the personal, emphasising performance with a reliance on a soap style narrative. This format reached its zenith of popularity in the UK in 1999¹¹, just as *Big Brother* was gaining its first foothold in Europe.¹² Towards the end of the docu-soap boom commentators were using words like ‘synthetic plot’ and ‘synthetic stardom’ to describe what they saw as a ratings driven documentary aberration. Fakery scandals surrounding programmes such as *Driving School* and *Clampers* helped to reclassify the format as more fiction than fact relying on many sly incursions into the realm of drama.¹³ The narratives of the docu-soap were exposed as synthetic and when viewers believed that this format only presented the illusion of intimacy between contributor and viewer, its popularity waned. The genre became tired, self-conscious, a victim of its own success with the output becoming more and more hyped and sensationalised.

Docu-soaps partially maintained their link to the traditional documentary construct, relying on conventional single camera directing techniques out in the field. *Big Brother*, however, pushed the factual envelope into the domain of constructedness. In the wake of false claims on reality, what better antidote than a programme that makes the set up so transparent that it features the cameras as icons in the introductory credits. The message to the viewer is that, yes, this is artificial, there is no pretence, it’s transparent for all to see. Its very constructedness was part of the attraction.¹⁴ The introduction of a sporting element combined with the intimacy of vicarious living and highly sophisticated casting in the *Big Brother* house provided an appealing combination of documentary, game show and soap opera. Much has been made of the sheer banality of the programme’s output; however, it is that very banality, watching strangers’ lives close-up, which provides the appeal. In the words of Peter Bazalgette,

⁹ See: **Show You’re Real Face – holographic reality constructs in prime time** (Jones 2002) for a detailed analysis of the relationship between the viewer and the search for ‘authenticity’.

¹⁰ See Dovey 2000 for an analysis of Docu-soap audiences and narratives.

¹¹ A word search using the Guardian/Observer CDROM reveals that the term docu-soap only significantly entered our lexicon in 1998 with 110 references by headline writers and columnists to this form of broadcast television. In 1999 there were 121 references. A survey conducted by Collins English Dictionary polled the UK population to find the top buzz words of 1998 and Docu-soap made it to the top ten surrounded by ‘Girl Power’ and ‘Furby’

¹² Estimated 2 billion audience worldwide (2001).

¹³ See Winston (2000)

¹⁴ The intervention or mediation in the *Big Brother* format is explicit and highly artificial - forced incarceration for up to ten weeks in a house with no contact with the outside world and 26 cameras watching your every move in close-up. The social actors in *Big Brother* are encouraged to ‘play up’ to the camera. The camera, as well as the production team (in the shape of the *Big Brother* voice), become characters in a play. For more detail on constructedness and reality see *Show Your Real Face*, Jones, 2002

(UK Producer) viewers today need to be “pore close” to real people on their televisions.¹⁵

Despite the obvious artificiality of the environment, the staging served well as a set up for interactivity between housemates and viewers. The attempt to put viewers in the driving seat by allowing them unprecedented access to the broadcast rushes through the web and interactive television and giving them a say as to how the saga might end proved important features of this format. The game was enhanced with the expectation of ownership over the narrative. These lab rats are allowed the free run of the cage, but the cage was (ostensibly) under the audience’s control.

Formulating the Rules of the Game

Although unattainable and elusive, experiencing ‘the real’ through the lens remains a popular pursuit and *Big Brother* appears to satisfy a demand for authenticity, using a variety of techniques that this research attempts to codify. Arguably, this format is far removed from ‘reality TV’. Boasting the highest shooting ratio in UK television history,¹⁶ with conspicuously artificial use of staging, set, props, characters, and behavioural rules enforced in a draconian fashion, is there anything of a claim on the real left to satisfy the audience’s longing for truth? The conventions established by this series seemed to be closely tied to the need to regulate the goings-on in the house that are in turn linked to the notion of the ‘game’ and how it *should* be played.

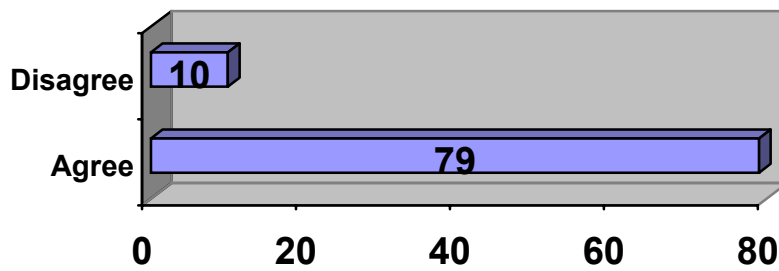
Within the game/documentary framing the game board was consciously set up with the viewer at the centre of the activity. There were many opportunities built into the format that allowed viewers to engage in some way in the narrative. For example, they could vote to exclude housemates, suggest tasks for them to do and control the web cams through their PC’s. Access to the house was possible 24 hours a day, seven days a week and this allowed the audience to experience a sense of control over their viewing. The gaming conditions were not explicitly set up by the producers but there appeared to be prevailing patterns in understanding or meaning making on behalf of the audience.

One important rule was evidenced by the viewer’s response to the question, “I think the winner should be the person that is ‘true to themselves’”.

¹⁵ VLV conference speech June 1999

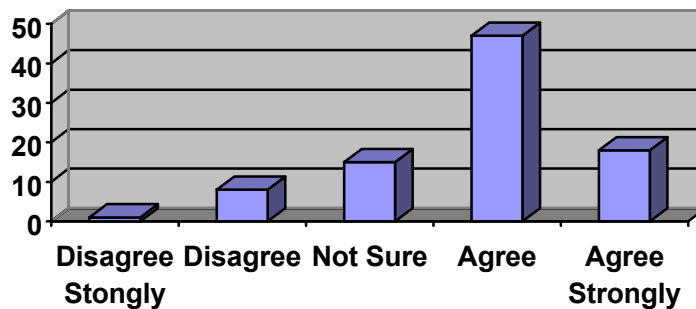
¹⁶ When all cameras are factored into the equation 26 cameras x 24 hours x 70 days = 43,680 hours, shooting ratio 874:1

I think the winner should be the person who is true to themselves



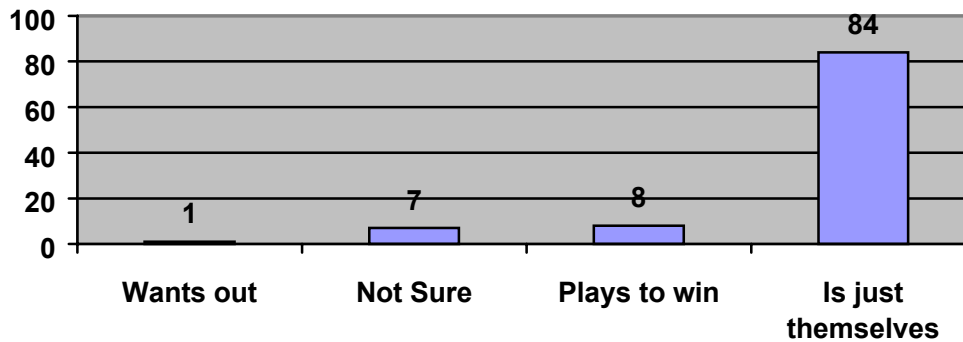
In order to gain a degree of pleasure or satisfaction from the viewing, these fans needed the confidence to be able to gauge the apparent authenticity of each contributor and the high number of people who believed this statement to be true suggests that this audience believes it has the power to effectively police the ‘genuineness’ of the housemates. Positioned as editor, judge and jury, the audience perceived itself to be in a strong position from which to referee the activities in the house. The following chart supports as viewers indicated that they were confident in their ability to spot any ‘false’ behaviour suggesting that it would be impossible for the contributors to elude the reality net created through the convergence of media.

I think it is impossible for the housemates to fake it all the time for the cameras



Despite the obvious ‘game setting’, it is also interesting to note that the viewers were not happy with the idea of the housemates ‘playing the game’.

I think the winner should be the person who



It appears that in order for the viewers to get 'pore close' to these subjects then they must believe, despite the artificial environment, that they are witnessing the 'real' person. They are thus largely intolerant of any sign of 'game-playing' on behalf of the housemates as this would make it more of a charade and less of a reality television experience. Certainly, the UK winners so far have been those characters who scored the highest on the personality indexes 'honest' and 'sincere'.¹⁷ The following chart indicates which descriptive characteristics came up most frequently in relation to housemates' personalities.

¹⁷ Personality Scale: **Honest, genuine, not two faced**

The male winner, (2000) Craig scored **52%** on this scale compared to the least popular character, Nicholas, who scored **0.7%**

| <u>8 most common reasons For Liking a character</u> | <u>8 most common reasons for disliking a character</u> |
|--|---|
| Level headed | Has ulterior motives/two faced |
| Straight forward | Manipulative / Scheming |
| Normal seeming | Dull and boring |
| Observer rather than a player | Fake personality |
| Honest and down to earth | Unattractive |
| Genuine | Fawning |
| Seems Real | Plays game too well |

In summary it appears that viewers are developing viewing strategies that allow them to sit in judgement of the actuality. And despite the format's obvious constructedness the viewer endows the actuality with a strong 'claim on the real'. The next question I attempted to answer was how important the multi-platform viewing options were to this perception of witnessing reality.

Multi-platform reality – the effects of the webcam and E4 transmission on this audience's relationship with the 'actuality'

There is never any question of an unproblematic relationship between the visual text and the reality it purports to reflect. One question I attempted to answer was how each platform might have opened up a new window on the actuality presented to the viewer and how important this was to the enjoyment of the programme.

I argued earlier that the docu-soap format had lost some of its claim on the real after the audience lost faith in its essential truth claims and began viewing it as largely artificial.¹⁸ In relation to *Big Brother*, docu soaps are arguably one-dimensional with only one broadcast window available and no opportunity for interaction with the characters or control over the narrative. Given that the *Big Brother* format offers a choice of viewing platform, it is interesting to see how important this was to the programme's success. The series producers told me that they estimated that less than 20% of the overall audience were regular viewers of the web however the following data shows that this fan audience depended much more heavily on the alternative platforms than the general broadcast viewer. The following chart shows the first choice responses to the 2001 survey asking, "*How do you stay up to date with what's happening in the Big Brother House?*"

¹⁸ See also Annette Hill's research on Factual Entertainment. (2001)

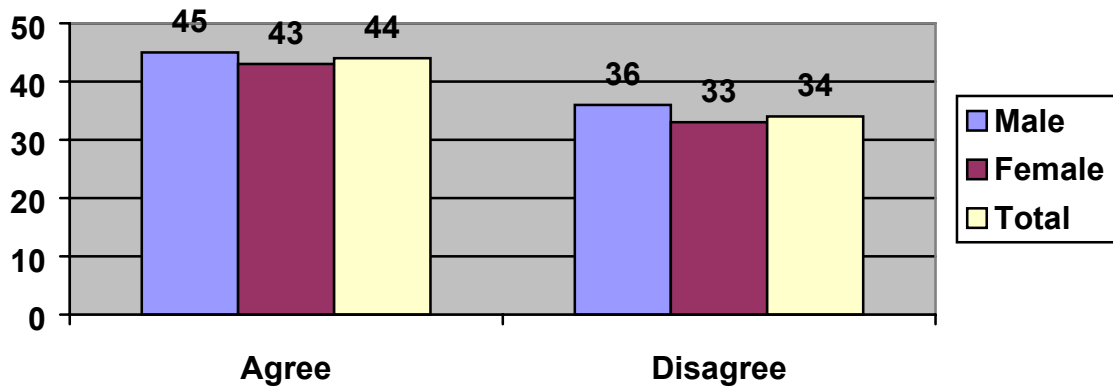
| Platform | Percentage response first choice platform |
|-----------------------|---|
| Channel 4 terrestrial | 41% |
| The web | 37% (this figure was approximately 10% as measured by Channel 4 from the programme's total audience) |
| E4 digital | 19% (63 per cent of respondents said that they had watched E4 at some point.) |
| Mobile phones | 3% |
| Friends and family | 1% |
| Press | 0.5% |

Because this was a web-based survey one might expect a higher proportion than average would choose the internet option. It is interesting, however, to see such relatively high percentage for E4 digital. (Remembering that there is only 35% digital television penetration in the UK) Once E4 came on stream in 2001 the lure of a broadcast-quality signal pulled many away from the internet in favour of a cleaner picture with 12 per cent claiming to have abandoned watching *Big Brother* on the web in favour of E4, although 24 per cent told us that they continued watching both. The number of video streams on the web went down in 2002 as the E4 Interactive option gained popular exposure. Quality and the ease of use were the two primary reasons given for the switch from web to digital television.

It would be reasonable to anticipate that the option of viewing the rushes would be an important condition in satisfying the audience's need to 'judge' the authenticity of the contestants on *Big Brother*, however, it may also be an important factor in policing the veracity of the broadcast version – or the 'producer's cut'. (The anecdotal comments (see page 13) suggested that this was indeed the case) In the first season where the web was the only live medium for viewing the activities in the house, I

asked the viewers, "Do You think *Big Brother* would have seemed real without access to the house on the web?"

Question: Do you think Big Brother would have seemed real without access to the house on the web?



Here 44% of this fan base said they depended on the web to verify the television version's claim on reality. The fact that they could watch the rushes, albeit on a small and low grade screen, gave them confidence in their own ability to negotiate their relationship with the housemates and cross check their own assumptions and theories about their interpretation of the action. However, a significant number (34%) did not feel that access to the live webcast was required to give the actuality a degree of authenticity. The need to audit the producer's cut is a majority desire but certainly not universal.

In theory the web viewer or interactive television viewer was watching genuinely unedited events unfolding.¹⁹ A significant test of the importance of these alternative platforms came in the 2000 series when the housemate Nicholas Bateman was found to be cheating, playing one member of the house off against another, and was asked to leave in disgrace through the back door. This was well timed to the midway point of the run and generated the highest audience figures for *Channel 4* to date. Interest was galvanised through the web and mobile phone network and for the first time viewers were treated to the drama unfolding live, watching it wherever they can find the nearest computer screen. Viewer's mobile phones had alerted them to events taking place in house. Mark Lawson, writing in the *Guardian*, reflected on the drama of Nick's eviction, "*People were huddled excitedly together around a tiny unreliable image. In a quite unexpected way, the future of television has turned out be a mirror of its distant past.*" The live, low-grade images watched like a news event signified

authenticity to the viewer despite the fact that the quality offered was equivalent to the first experimental television sets. Surveillance imagery and low-grade images characteristic of the web transmissions can denote a direct relationship between what is in front of the camera lens and its transmitted representation. This new popular

¹⁹ Line producers, of which there were four, were charged with editing and mixing the output of all 26 cameras down to four final streams of video. There was also a slight delay built in to edit anything that would contravene copyright, indecency or defamation law.

visual demotic might be part of what has come to signify the essential truthfulness of this format.

In support of this, the following chart shows how our fan base responded to a question about how they differentiate between the benefits of the web compared to the broadcast cut.

| <u>Top 5 Reasons for Watching on the Web (in ascending order)</u> | <u>Top 5 Reasons For Watching on terrestrial television (in ascending order)</u> |
|--|---|
| ➤ Keeps me up-to-date | ➤ Addictive |
| ➤ Because it's live | ➤ Entertaining |
| ➤ Sneak preview | ➤ Diary Room |
| ➤ Because it's uncut/unedited | ➤ More real than soaps |
| ➤ Seems more real | ➤ I'm nosey |

The viewers are assigning qualities to the platforms that allow us to begin the process of mapping expectations associated with different viewing platforms. The web's attraction was its timeliness, the absence of mediation and its stronger association with reality as opposed to the producer's cut being associated with added value through commentary (eg Diary Room), entertainment and also the preference for reality over fictional formats such as soaps.

Reality tolerances across platforms

Because viewers can choose how they consume a programme, this naturally invites them to make comparisons between platforms. This section investigates how viewers' expectations of the real are reconstructed to accommodate discreet platforms.

The act of making platform comparisons encourages the audience to analyse its own viewing behaviour and motivations. The reality factor, as we have noted previously, is crucial to the success of this media product. Yet many viewers were quick to point out that the broadcast programmes were far from real when compared to the live feeds. In fact a reality hierarchy developed as the relative veracity of different platforms was compared.

Responding to open questions, viewers typically stated that their attraction to the web (and also E4 in season 2) was based on its indexical quality. They indicated that

access to the raw footage gave them a feeling of control over the programme that was unique to *Big Brother*. They took pleasure in policing not only the activities of the housemates but also the way the producers edited the material.

Typical responses to open questions about the attractiveness of the web//E-4 transmission.

“To get information about how the show is being handled, interest in the public’s reading of character and their reaction to the participants. (keeping in mind how the footage is being edited.)”

“I’m interested in Big Brother production team’s presentation of participants.”

“Nothing is edited. You can see related conversations and hear what everyone has to say.”

“Watching unedited sources i.e. without any production bias.”

“See what’s going on during the day/night, as in to catch whole conversations rather than being shown which ones they want me to see. It’s a real-life soap opera, it has all the intensity of say ‘friends’, but these are real people and real relationships.

“We watch everything live. Nothing is cut, you get to see the bad things about people and know it’s not scripted.”

“It’s real fly on the wall stuff”

“I am fascinated by how the producer’s edit the footage to manipulate the audience into thinking certain characters are nasty”

“ I like to see the bits that would be censored/ taken off the TV by producers for certain reasons.”

“I like comparing the net with the Broadcast programme to see what the personalities of the individuals are like normally, and not what’s just suited to TV. E.g.: the quieter moments.”

“Less censorship – unedited, what you see is what is happening.”

Reality tolerances for E4 – the, live, streamed broadcast output

The multiple video streams and interactivity offered by the broadcast channel E4, (2001) offer the promise of live access to the rushes and good quality sound and

vision. The obvious 'flaw' in the output comes from the broadcaster's obligation to mute the sound fairly frequently to prevent profanity and problems with taste and decency and also to edit footage to prevent any breach of copyright. The audience seemed far less tolerant of the obvious and frequent sound interruptions that were a feature of this viewing platform and many respondents chose to criticise the explicit and heavy-handed censorship. They saw it as an unjustified interference and a breach of an implicit promise. It was clear from these responses that the viewer believed that the producer's were breaking one of the new grammatical rules established for this platform. One audience member chose the web as the favoured format because, "although the pictures are clearer on E4 the sound interruptions on E4 are too annoying, they are always censoring something, I feel they must be keeping the best bits for the evening programme."

Many echoed this view:

" I find E4 rather pointless especially since they edit it in certain parts and it isn't due to bad language. It usually happens when things are starting to get interesting. I think they should just carry a warning. "

" I liked E4 the best because it's live but it's boring sometimes and the gaps in the sound can be irritating. "

E4 fans commonly chose this format over the edited broadcast version because of its superior indexical quality, yet, many were turned off by what they saw was inappropriate editing. The grammar of normal television allows for the editing and condensing of material, it's what the viewer expects and has become used to over a lifetime of viewing. The terrestrial broadcast offers an officially doctored version that is spun like a political story and the word " official " was quite often used as viewers tried to clarify their impressions of the broadcast platform

" I liked E4 because you can watch *Big Brother* when it is not officially on and I can move from screen to screen at the touch of a button to see what is most interesting but I hate the gaps in the sound, it makes me want to hurl my remote control at the screen."

" It acts like a slap in the in the face " said one. The audience is effectively saying that the rushes are their domain and they have a right to an undisturbed version.

"We felt that the editing of the programme was excessively manipulative when compared with what we have seen on the way up the characters were squashed into stereotypical moulds the easy consumption by the man on the street. "

" Fraudulent editing detracted from the show. Certain contestants, particularly Melanie were betrayed as negative characters purely due to the agendas of the producers. Unlike Craig, ' The Saint' whose arse wiping was never shown and any mention suppressed. "

Yet despite the audience's often-hostile reading of the producers' motives there was an acceptance among many that the multi-platform approach to this form of reality TV works best. Viewers could also purchase a special mobile phone card that linked them

with the programme's producers. Not only do their mobile phones ring with the *Big Brother* theme tune they can also receive text messages about their favourite characters at any time of the day and night. Two fans commented:

" The mobile-phone is my favourite format because it keeps me up to date with whatever's going on where ever I am, especially when you miss highlights you can still find out what's happening. "

" The mobile-phone and E4 are my favourite formats because by the time Channel 4 transmits the show it is already out of date. "

That *Big Brother* could be considered stale if not viewed as is happening is more in keeping with the transmission of a live sports fixture and reinforces the importance of the 'event' in the minds of the audience and as this form of reality TV becomes more interlinked with live media then its shelf life will be more of a factor in managing its success.

Summary Chart

When I interviewed the producers it was clear that they were conscious of the need to fine tune the media mix allowing audiences to gravitate to the console of their choice depending on what information they required. Ideally each platform was to be programmed with a unique selling proposition. In summary, the following chart indicates how I believe the producer's and audience see the unique identities of each platform.

| <u>Platform</u> | <u>Console</u> | <u>Identity</u> |
|--------------------------------|----------------|--|
| Terrestrial analogue broadcast | Television | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Open access to all ❖ Expectation of heavy mediation and a package of entertainment. ❖ Expectation of the producer's cut or the official version. |
| E4 interactive | Television | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Privileged access to rushes – 3 time zones ❖ High quality image and sound in the comfort of your living room. ❖ Instant remote control access to voting, quizzes and polls. ❖ Bootleg copy – unofficial version (anger when 'heavy handed editing' techniques are used) |
| Web | Computer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ People go to the web to interact with text elements/magazine summaries like a print source or almanac. ❖ Web used as a type of archive news resource allowing viewers to search for information about certain characters in long form format with more detail. Answering the question – “I know the story so far but how did we get here?” ❖ Video enhancements needed to distinguish the video streaming over E4 and keep viewers from only sourcing E4. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The fancam - follow your favourite housemate around for the day. 2) The pancam - control the camera with your keyboard to place your gaze in the direction of your choice. ❖ “You can't say – oh, we'll do the telly on the web, it simply won't work.”²⁰ |
| Mobile Phone | Mobile phone | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ The viewer is never out of touch and can receive information anywhere, any time via text messaging. ❖ Also designed to engage viewer in conspicuous consumption. E.g.) Fans can buy the <i>Big Brother</i> theme tune, ring tone ❖ Fan identity and promotion in public places. |

Our readings of conventional single platform television have been built up over the last fifty years. Today producers and audiences are just starting to develop assumptions about the choices multiple platform, interactive television offers. One

²⁰ Morgan Holt, Web Manager, *Big Brother* UK. Interview conducted summer 2001

small example of this learning curve came when the *Big Brother* interactive production team introduced E4 interactive television in the second season. (2001) This cable/satellite delivered platform streamed four channels of video live from the *Big Brother* house into the viewers' living room. (Broadcast quality picture and sound) The audience was able to watch events unfolding live or alternatively select a video stream from 2 hours previous or 4 hours previous.²¹ They also had a choice of camera angle and 'producer's mix'. Linked to this site were interactive options that posed questions to the viewer. After some experimenting it became clearer which questions earned the biggest income. For example when the following two questions were posed:

- 1) Who is your favourite housemate?
- 2) Should booze be banned from the BB house?

The second was the most popular option for the viewer. This is because the audience understood that they could shape the outcome of the programme and felt that the 20p tariff was justified.²²

Do we still need the producer's cut?

The broadcast programmes often scored low on the veracity, timeliness and reality scales (with the exception of the eviction shows) but they still scored highest on the entertainment scale. Although surprisingly, 14 per cent of respondents said they thought that *Big Brother* would work well without the conventional Channel 4 broadcast versions, but 67 per cent thought that the transmission highlights were essential. One viewer said, " It needs to be edited so people can just see the best bits. " Although there was great sensitivity on the part of the viewer to the power of the producer, this sensitivity was not enough put them off the producer's cut

" I enjoy listening to the psychologists' analysis but I wonder if they are reaching their conclusions from the edited highlights which I'm sure are very carefully edited for the viewer's entertainment. "

" Without the Channel 4 show I wouldn't have a clue what was going on. Web news flashes don't give you the full picture and while Channel 4 coverage is highly edited it gives you more body language. The whole point is that it's real. "

" It wouldn't work without the Channel 4 version because it wouldn't give you the *feeling* of it being at TV show. " (my italics)

The grammar or " feeling " of a TV show has many associations. By selecting and condensing events the viewer can relate much more easily to a programme. This is how we've all been trained to watch television and because of this, the packaging of housemates is not just acceptable but often desirable. The producer's cut is less real but, not unattractive in the media mix. The comments indicated that viewers were

²¹ These images contained a small delay so that they might be edited to comply with the UK regulator's guidelines on taste, decency and to avoid copyright and libel problems.

²² Peter Good head of interactive and enhanced television, Channel 4, 2001

reassured by the presence of the web cams and E4 live feeds. They needed the power to accept or question the dominant frame. The panoply of choice may indirectly contribute to the overall sophistication of viewers encouraging them to become more media-literate. By making comparisons between formats viewers begin to customise their viewing habits to maximise the entertainment potential of this series. Surfing between platforms allows the freedom to negotiate their individual reality contracts with the series' protagonists.

CONCLUSION

As the computer mutates into a television set, or conversely, our televisions become computers, then it becomes necessary for us to continue investigating the psychology of audience interaction (still in its infancy) and learn what 'grammar of navigation' might be emerging from these new interactive formats.²³

Big Brother appears to have appropriated what is attractive in the docu-soap genre and created a media event, exploiting the embryonic stage of convergence. The format, although derivative of the docu-soap, has evolved and mutated to keep up with the greediness of the audience for what Van Zoonen calls 'a nostalgic yearning for authenticity'.²⁴ With this indexical quality come the unfiltered and uncensored, codes of realism that our audience research indicates attracts people to the show. This illusion of complete embodied intimacy with the goings on in the house was an essential ingredient to the success of the programme.

Live, interactive video streaming, through whatever console it enters our homes may become a feature of future reality TV formats spreading like a virus through the television industry. We are moving into an era when the digital blending of computer, gaming console and television allows us to watch the lives of the real people 24 hours a day, seven days a week, as they sleep, eat, shower, cry and laugh. The evidence here suggests that the 'feels real' aspect of *Big Brother* is enhanced by offering a panoply of platform choices and allowing the viewer freedom to move between them. The next evolution of the reality programme will most likely involve enhanced interactivity between programme-maker and viewer.

Given that one definition of interactivity is a form of people consuming directly through their television sets, then it becomes a commercial imperative to exploit this new technology.²⁵ As the battle for console supremacy continues it becomes more

²³ The broadcast industry in the UK is working to standardise platform, technology and user controls to aid in the growth of this form of media.

²⁴ Van Zoonen, *Desire and Resistance*, *Big Brother* and the recognition of every day life

²⁵ One digital provider *NTL UK* released these statistics dated September 2001 showing the present rate of growth and usership of interactive TV. Source RTS interactive seminar.

Popularity of interactive media from NTL UK's customer research database 2001

- 1) Gaming (video games) 1.2 user sessions per month
- 2) Weather/news /sport headlines
- 3) Betting
- 4) Game shows like *Big Brother* and *Banzai*
- 5) Buying Pizza or impulse purchases for gifts that 'fit the media'
- 6) Pay per view – films
- 7) Programme reminder guide

evident that the technological apparatus in our homes and jacket pockets each represent a gateway to information for audiences that can be exploited by entrepreneurial media businesses.

There is not yet gold at the end of the interactive rainbow. For that to happen the services need to be ubiquitous to build up confidence and user momentum. Interactivity can only become a reality on a wide scale in the UK when most of us decide, or are coerced, into divesting ourselves of our analogue reception. Yet, there remain many millions of consoles in kitchens, bedrooms, student dorms and garden sheds that need to be converted.

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Frequency of interactive digital usage – Source NTL 2001

90% of all NTL's households use it every month

60% every week

21% every day

Average session length – 9 minutes = 50 minutes per household per week

Strong usage spikes between 4pm and 6pm when the kids return home

7 million e-mails sent every week via TV – text messaging. These are mostly young people talking to their friends about what they're watching simultaneously on TV.