

RUNNING HEAD: REALITY TV IN BULGARIA

You'll See, You'll Watch: The Success of *Big Brother* in Postcommunist Bulgaria

by

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Abstract

This paper explores the development and growth of the reality television genre in a postcommunist setting. It uses the first reality TV show in Bulgaria, *Big Brother*, as a case study to show how the reality television format has far reaching social, technological and economic ramifications for the media industry of that postcommunist country. The paper places special emphasis on examining reality television as a global hybrid format, which provides assurance of unprecedented success when introduced locally.

Keywords: Reality television, Big Brother, Bulgaria

*All the world's a stage,
 And all the men and women merely players;
 They have their exits and their entrances;
 And one man in his time plays many parts*
 Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII

You'll See, You'll Watch: The Success of Big Brother in Postcommunist Bulgaria

Up until recently, audiences in Bulgaria thought of Big Brother as the embodiment of a totalitarian government capable of subjecting everybody to an uninterrupted surveillance apparatus. Having survived 500 years of Ottoman domination and 45 years of communist control, Bulgarians were all too aware of George Orwell's gripping description of the totalitarian state in his *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* novel. Not a lot of people would have heard of the reality show by the same name. The introduction of *Big Brother* as the first reality show in the fall of 2004 marked a sharp transition to a new media reality. Almost overnight, *Big Brother* became the biggest media event, attracting not only unparalleled attention from audiences, but dramatically changing the television landscape of the country.

Big Brother's success story in Bulgaria is not unusual or unique. The show, created by Dutch-based Endemol in 1999, has since then been aired in more than 70 different countries and watched by over two billion people worldwide (Reality Television, 2005; Johnson-Woods, 2002). And while there have been numerous publications on the show's popularity in Great Britain (Hill, 2002, Hill, 2005; Kilborn, 2003), the United States (Andrejevic, 2004; Murray & Oullette, 2004) and Australia

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(Johnson-Woods, 2002; Creed, 2003), conspicuously lacking from the existing literature on the subject is any discussion about the show's popularity in postcommunist states. The literature on reality television is narrowly restricted to Western countries in spite of the fact that Russia and Poland created their own versions of *Big Brother* as early as 2001 (Johnson-Woods, 2002). Four years later, *Big Brother* has been introduced to audiences in Romania, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary and Serbia, and has spurred similar formats in Albania, Bosnia, Latvia, Slovakia and the Ukraine (Reality Television, 2005). It seems that in spite of the fact that the reality television format has fared well in postcommunist countries, it has failed to generate scholarly research.

This paper uses a case-study approach to explore the development and growth of the reality television genre in a postcommunist setting. The paper examines how this reality television format created far-reaching social, technological and economic ripples in the media industry of that postcommunist country. The paper places special emphasis on examining reality television as a global format, which provides assurance of unprecedented success when introduced locally.

The first part of the paper presents a short overview of the origins of reality television with the aim of offering a definition of that genre. The second part delves into the history of *Big Brother* and its mythical status across different cultures. The third part of the paper describes the show's reception in Bulgaria and explores the formula for its unprecedented success on a local soil. The last part discusses the implications of the show's popularity in a postcommunist setting.

Origins of Reality Television

Reality television has become more than just a passing fad. In spite of numerous attempts to foreshadow its imminent demise, at this point it is clear to both audiences and pundits that reality programming is here to stay (Campbell, 2004). In fact, to dismiss reality television as a passing fad is equal to dismissing the fact that “reality” has been part of television history from the very start. Although reality shows like *Survivor* and *Big Brother* gave prominence to a new type of reality programming formats in recent years, an examination of the history of reality television reveals that there is nothing essentially new to the format (Kilborn, 2003; Creed, 2003; Murray & Oullette, 2004; Balkin, 2004; Sinclair, 2004; Andrejevic, 2004). Andrejevic (2004) contends that reality-based entertainment is as old as the Roman circus, while Creed (2003) and Kilborn (2003) trace the origins of reality television to the very first newsfilms produced by Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers, which capitalized on people’s fascination with “moving images of people in real-life situations” (Creed, p. 36).

Most scholars, however, trace the origins of reality programming to two shows in particular – *Candid Camera* and *An American Family* (Andrejevic, 2004; Balkin, 2004; McCarthy, 2004; Murray, 2004). First produced for radio in 1948 (Hill, 2005), *Candid Camera* (1953-1967) captured television audiences with its unscripted and unpredictable situations catering to viewers’ demand for “pleasant, uncomplicated, and not at all controversial” humorous entertainment (Balkin 2004, p. 9). Although *Candid Camera* featured people in embarrassing situations, the show was not considered intrusive. As its creator L. Fund pointed out “[it] caught people in the act of being themselves” (cited in

Balkin 2004). *Candid Camera* achieved notoriety with social psychologists who praised it for its humanness and therapeutic effect (McCarthy, 2004).

By the 1970s, though, viewers who were used to watching footage from the Vietnam War on the evening news were ready for more invasive content (Balkin, 2004). *An American Family* (1973) was a PBS documentary that chronicled the life of the Loud family of Santa Barbara, California, in thirteen series. The family was followed for seven months as the parents discussed problems with their marriage, which ultimately led to their divorce, or learned that their son was homosexual. The show, often described as the first docu-soap featuring “TV’s first real family, ” attracted millions of viewers and turned the Louds into celebrities overnight (Kompare, 2004). In this sense, *An American Family* could be heralded as ‘the mother of all reality TV shows’ mainly because of its attempt to break down the “fixed distinction between reality and spectacle, public and private, narrative and nonfiction, film and television” (Ruoff, 1998).

Examining reality television as a hybrid form, Annette Hill (2005) traced its origins not only to the documentary tradition, but also to tabloid journalism and popular entertainment formats. The tabloid format became prominent during the 1980s and since then has included such staples as *America’s Most Wanted*, *Cops* and *Unsolved Mysteries*. The popular entertainment format, which gained prominence in the 1990s, includes a wide variety of talk, game, sports and leisure shows, which work well when exported to reality television (Hill, 2005). As Murray and Oullette (2004) argued, these formats “anticipated the confessional ethos and cultivation of everyday drama that permeate contemporary reality TV” (p. 3).

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It was MTV's *The Real World*, however, that gave rise to the current wave of reality shows, with its "surveillance of the rhythm of day-to-day life" (Andrejevic, 2004). Promising to deliver "the true story of seven strangers who are picked to live in a house, to find out what happens when people stop being polite and start being real." Pointing the camera at the daily desires, actions, relationships and lifestyles of the participants, the half-hour segments provide plenty of conflict and dramatic editing. The show is currently in its sixteenth season with a popular spin-off, *Road Rules*, currently in its twelfth season. How real *The Real World* is could be the subject of another examination, yet the realistic effect of the show is greatly augmented by the use of the "fly on the wall" documentary technique. The show deliberately eschews voice-overs or any indication of the filmmakers, to create a "real world" experience for the viewers (Andrejevic, 2004).

The start of the new millennium brought an explosion of reality television formats combining elements of *The Real World* and the game show (Kilborn, 2003). Created by a company that also produces game shows, *Big Brother* became the embodiment of this hybrid reality game-show format. Today, there are close to fifty reality shows on American television alone (Andrejevic, 2004). There are reality television programs about everything and anything. While the cable channels were the innovators in the genre, the networks quickly managed to catch up. An estimated 51 million viewers tuned in to watch *Survivor*'s final episode in 2000 (Nielsen, 2000). The finale of *American Idol* in 2003 attracted 38 million viewers (Tatham, 2005).

So what exactly is reality television? The answer to this question is far from simple since it depends on who provides the definition. Those critical of reality television dismiss its importance by emphasizing its artificiality (reality TV is an oxymoron) and

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commercialism (Andrejevic, 2004; Holmes & Jermyn, 2004), while other scholars (Creed, 2003) see it as a “postmodern form of ethnographic television which is different rather than ‘debased’” (p. 39). Emphasizing the need for “new theoretical tools,” Holmes & Jermyn (2004) note that “it seems important to foreground Reality TV as opening up a space for experimentation and exploration in this respect which we perhaps shouldn’t be too eager to resolve or close down” (p. 18).

The majority of scholars writing on the subject, however, (Andrejevic, 2004; Holmes & Jermyn, 2004; Hill, 2005; Murray & Oullette, 2004; Kilborn, 2003) agree that reality television in its current form is an umbrella term that encompasses “various factual television formats with a high reality claim, stressing the actions and emotions of real people (non-actors), often using a combination of ‘authentic’ (e.g. police, security or surveillance images), and staged images (e.g. fictionalized reconstructions, post-factum interviews)” (Biltereyst, 2004, p. 117). The emphasis on “authentic” personalities and situations is considered the signature characteristic of this genre (Murray & Oullette, 2004). The main selling point of reality TV is that it provides viewers with access to “real” people rather than actors playing the roles of real people. As Andrejevic (2004) points out: “One of the promises of the genre is that you don’t have to be a professional actor or entertainer—being on a reality show is work that anyone can do...” (p. 6). Such portrayals, Murray and Oullette (2004) argue, have largely served to socialize the younger viewers, being their main audience, into “the language of reality TV” (p. 3).

Big Brother

Of all reality television shows, none has achieved the mythical status and proportions of *Big Brother*. The first show aired in the Netherlands in the fall of 1999 attracting more than 15 million viewers for the final episode (Johnson-Woods, 2002). The official description of the show on Endemol's web site, the production company responsible for it, states that the format is "centered around 4 elements: 1) The environment in which the contestants live - it's stripped - back to basics; 2) The knock-out system by which the contestants are voted out of the house by the audience at home; (the banishment process continues until only three houseguests are left, and the audience decided who gets first, second and third place); 3) The tasks, set by the editorial team, which the contestants must complete on a weekly basis; 4) The diary room, in which the contestants are required to record their feelings, frustrations, thoughts and their nominations" (web site). For 100 days, the houseguests live in completely media-free environment -- they cannot use television, radio, watches, or telephones; even paper, pens, or anything else you can write with, are forbidden. As in a totalitarian regime, the houseguests are subordinate to one unseen individual, called "Big Brother," who assigns the tasks or sets the rules. *Big Brother*, for example, can evict contestant or change the rules whenever he chooses. The show's similarity to a game – the last three left in the house wins cash prizes -- contributes to its characterization as "part social experiment, part real-life soap, part competition" (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 72).

Big Brother's claim to authenticity is augmented by the use of surveillance cameras and microphones that follow the actions of the houseguests 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Night-vision cameras film the houseguests during the night or in the

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bathroom. Although the houseguests are warned that anything they say or do could be broadcast, some of them seem to (deliberately) ignore that fact. Unlike other reality shows, where content is first shot and then edited and packaged into weekly half-hour segments, *Big Brother* is aired at least five days a week as well as features nonstop real-time feed on the Internet (with slight delays to allow editing for inappropriate content).

The show became so successful that Endemol has managed to sell the format to more than 30 countries (Endemol.com) and produce various spin-offs since then. The Netherlands has *Celebrity Big Brother*, the British produced *Teen Big Brother*, while the Germans created an entire Big Brother community (Johnson-Woods, 2002; Hill, 2002). The year 2000 brought the *Big Brother* format to Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Italy, the United Kingdom, Portugal, Spain and Belgium (Hill, 2002; Johnson-Woods, 2002). Denmark, France, Greece, Norway, Turkey, Argentina created their versions in 2001 (Hill, 2002; Johnson-Woods, 2002). The German version became so successful that the second season was commissioned immediately and in Italy 69 percent of the population said they have watched it (Hill, 2002; Johnson-Woods, 2002). Globally, *Big Brother* has been produced in Mexico, South Africa, Thailand, Philippines, Brazil and Iceland.

In 2000, CBS bought the rights to *Big Brother* for \$ 20 million outbidding FOX and ABC (Johnson-Woods, 2002). The show run July through December of 2000 and featured 10 contestants in a small house in the San Fernando Valley in California. The first US version of the show, however, was so boring that the producers offered \$50,000 to any houseguest who would voluntarily leave the house so that they could replace him/her with a more dynamic participant (Andrejevic, 2004; Hill, 2005). The offer was turned down and, amidst low ratings, the show's creator admitted that the second version

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of *Big Brother* would require some rethinking in view of the fact that the “cultural difference between American and Europeans are much, much bigger than we thought” (Johnson-Woods, 2002, p. 24). The show’s lack of success on American soil was also attributed to the fact that it run alongside *Survivor*, which seemed much more appealing to American audiences (Hill, 2005). Accordingly, the second *Big Brother* featured upgraded living conditions and changed rules (the winner was selected by the evicted contestants in *Survivor*-like fashion and the nominations were done by the Head of House), and the show was aired three days a week (Johnson-Woods, 2002). Only a month after the end of the sixth season of the American *Big Brother*, CBS announced that the show is renewed it for its seventh season (Adalian, 2005).

Big Brother in Postcommunist Countries

Poland became the first postcommunist country to create its own version of *Big Brother* in March of 2001. Although Polish audiences had been previously exposed to lifestyle reality shows, *Big Brother*’s resemblance to a game managed to captivate the audiences (Johnson-Woods, 2002; The Warsaw Voice, 2001a). In line with the country’s grim communist past, the Polish version of *Big Brother* took militaristic underpinnings. The contestants were subjected to a lie-detector test prior to entering the house and then had to participate in a military training task where they were required to wear gas masks (Johnson-Woods, 2002). In spite of lukewarm media coverage and poignant comments from scholars about the show’s low cultural value (The Warsaw Voice, 2001b), *Wielki Brat* (*Big Brother*) attracted four million regular viewers, and six million viewers for the final episode (Johnson-Woods, 2002). In its aftermath, *Big Brother* inspired a wave of

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reality programs on Polish television one of which, called *Amazons*, was planning on bringing together six couples to flirt and swap partners (Reality TV Under Fire, 2001). In response to the increasingly bold content, several Polish directors – including internationally known Andrzej Wajda – wrote an open letter to the National Council for Radio and Television condemning the negative influence of reality television on viewers and asking for a government regulation (Reality TV Under Fire, 2001). As a particular point of concern was the influence of this genre on the “young, morally defenseless viewers.”

In October of that same year, *Big Brother* came to Russia in a slightly changed format, but with matching appeal. The show, called *Za Steklom* (Behind the Glass), became Russia’s first reality show. Endemol threatened to initiate legal actions against the Russian company producing it on grounds that the show was not licensed through them, yet the show continues to run (O’Flynn, 2001). In *Za Steklom*, the typical *Big Brother* house was exchanged for a one-room apartment in a hotel facing the Red Square where three men and three women had to live for 34 days (Johnson-Woods, 2002). The big prize was a Moscow flat (Russian Big Brother, 2001). The show’s producer, Ivan Usachev, said that “The purpose of the experiment is to take people back to the times when there was no television. We will see whether today's youth has retained a love of talking” (Russian Big Brother, 2001). Still, the show quickly became the center of public discussion because of participants’ explicitly sexual behavior, not deep conversations (Russian Big Brother, 2001). A memorable episode in the show was an overnight marathon session of sexual intercourse displayed live on the Internet until 4 a.m. (Russian Big Brother, 2001). Sixty-seven percent of the Russian population claimed to have

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watched the show at least once and the television station broadcasting it was inundated with calls from Russian immigrants requesting it (Johnson-Woods, 2002; Russian Big Brother, 2001). The show, as well as its web site, continue to enjoy phenomenal popularity among the younger audiences. During the show's first season, its web site, zasteklom.tv6.ru, managed to receive a record number of visitors – 3.1 million for the first four weeks (Korkina, 2001).

For the past four years, *Big Brother* has continued its expansion to other parts of Eastern Europe. The Croatian channel, RTL Televizija, launched its version in September of 2004, while the Czech Republic, Hungary, Serbia and Slovakia are in their first or second seasons. The show's success is never quite guaranteed though. *Big Brother* Romania failed after its second season because the viewers found the houseguests boring (Auret, 2004).

Endemol's reach in the region has been significantly extended with its game show formats. Nova TV in Bulgaria and TV Klan in Albanian purchased the license for the quiz show *Deal or No Deal* in 2004, the Czech TV Nova purchased the *1 vs 1000* game show in 2004 and the Slovak TV owns the license for *Love Letters*, a dating game show (Waller, 2004). Endemol's expanding interest in the region is indicated by the fact that the company has also set up two local production units – Endemol-Neovision in Poland and Endemol Russia.

Big Brother in Bulgaria

The third *Big Brother* season – *VIP Brother* – ended on April 10, 2006, and by the success of it, it is clear it won't be the last one. Unlike other countries, where the show

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loses momentum after its first season (i.e. Romania), *Big Brother* is enjoying unprecedented popularity in Bulgaria. According to ratings data, *VIP Brother* turned to be the most successful season yet, with an average rating of 19.1 percent (close to 1.4 mil. viewers) in a country of only 8 million (VIP Rating, 2006). The season's finale attracted 2 million viewers who sent 500,000 SMS votes to determine the folk singer Konstantin as the winner.

The first *Big Brother* aired on Nova TV on October 18, 2004, although speculations about the show started circulating a year earlier (Popova, 2003). With hopes that the show will be "a revolution for TV in Bulgaria," George Zois, executive director of Nova TV, said that "Never before have we had a reality show on Bulgarian television and it's definitely the correct choice to start with Big Brother" (Waller, 2004).

As a novelty format on the Bulgarian airwaves, *Big Brother* generated unprecedented media coverage. Newspapers immediately started defining the term 'reality television' for their readers as well as speculating about the show's success on local soil (Dimitrova, Sept. 23, 2004; Auret, 2005; Leviev-Sawyer, 2004; Daskalov, Aug. 8, 2005). The house itself became the object of tremendous interest. It was built in the lobby of a popular movie theater in the capital city Sofia. It was a 130 square-foot, bright, luxury compartment with 70 mirrors and 27 cameras (Peteva, 2004). A day before the start of the show, 12 reporters spend one night locked up in the house following the orders of Big Brother (Peteva, 2004).

The participants basked in the light of national attention as well. By the time the casting call ended, close to 15,000 candidates tried to secure a position on the first ever Bulgarian reality show. The 12 finalists proved to be a diverse group of six men and six

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women, selected to represent not only different regions and social classes, but also, as the show's producers admitted, clashing personalities (Nova TV Thinks, 2004).

The Bulgarian version did not deviate substantially from the familiar *Big Brother* format. Unlike the Polish or Russian versions, the show kept its original logo – white letters on a blue background—and even its original name. The show's name was spelled and pronounced in English in spite of the fact that English is not one of the official languages of the country. Again in accordance with the traditional *Big Brother* format, the houseguests were locked up in a specially build house for 13 weeks. Viewers could evict the houseguest by calling or sending SMS messages that cost 1 BGN. The finalist was entitled to a prize of 200,000 BGN (equal to 100,000 EUR or 700 average salaries) while the second- and third-place winners won a trip to Tunisia (Peteva, 2005). The best moments of each day in the house were broadcast primetime every night, with an uncensored version aired daily after 11 p.m. Nova TV selected one of the cable TV providers, CableTEL, to create a dedicated channel, called Big Brother Channel, to air live footage from the house 24 hours a day for the duration of the show (SEM Tell Nova TV, 2004).

In a dramatic finale of the show in January 17, 2005, the winner became the flirtatious 27-year-old hotel owner from the Black Sea, Zdravko Vassilev. A few hours before the end of the show, Zdravko was raking second, with 19-year-old fashion model, Zara Trendafilova, ahead of the SMS vote. With a 1-2 percent difference though, Zdravko's supporters managed to overturn the vote in the final hour. According to official data, 2.1 million viewers (62.5 percent of all viewers) were glued to the screen for the show's finale casting a total of 855,825 SMS votes (Antonova & Kandov, 2005).

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In light of *Big Brother*'s phenomenal success, the plans for the second season were announced two weeks before the end of the first (Peteva, 2005). This time the casting call attracted more than 30,000 people, including enthusiasts from the UK, Italy, Russia, Ukraine, Lybia and even an Orthodox monk who passed the casting but was not allowed to participate by the church (Leviev-Sawer, 2005). Among numerous speculations about the success of the second season (Bondokova, 2005; Antonova, 2005), the show's producers announced that they'll change the rules to make it more interesting. Of the 25 people allowed to the final casting, only 15 will enter the house, which this time would be stripped of any amenities. The houseguests have to live in a rural setting, grow their own vegetables and take care of a goat, several hens and a cow. During the first week, the houseguest did not have beds or hot running water. Furthermore, to reinforce the Spartan atmosphere of the second season, the show's producers gave the logo a Stone Age look.

The second season of *Big Brother* started on September 19, 2005, among unprecedented media hype and aggressive television and billboard advertising. The show ended in mid-December. The second season's colorful combination of participants, offering a double doze of shocking tasks, tears, intrigues, and love triangles proved to be even more successful than the first (Antonova & Kandov, 2005). The ratings for the second season were 5 percent higher and so were the show's audience shares. In its first two weeks, *Big Brother 2* achieved 13.5 percent higher share than the first season proving that the reality format has a place on Bulgarian soil. As one prominent Bulgarian newspaper commented: "the [Big Brother] show is the most commented television show"

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(Antonova, 2005). No wonder then that the third season of *Big Brother* started only three months after the end of the second.

Big Brother's Formula for Success

The cult status of *Big Brother* in Bulgaria is indicative of the format's resilience. Amidst heated debates about the show's runaway success, however, lie several reasons for its popularity in a postcommunist setting. Each will be examined accordingly.

First and foremost, in the face of *Big Brother* the reality television format offered the Bulgarian audiences a dramatically different television experience. For more than forty decades, the Bulgarian National Television was the sole source of news and entertainment for the Bulgarian people. As one of two available TV channels during communist times, Channel One functioned as the official carrier of informational programming in the form of communist propaganda. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the government continued to hold a firm grip on national broadcasting. The first private broadcaster, bTV, an affiliate of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., started infusing a doze of Western programming in 2000. Since then Bulgarians have been living with such shows as *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Friends*, *Dharma and Greg*, *Married with Children*, *Ally McBeal*, *CSI* and *Sex and the City*. bTV's leading position with audiences and advertisers had been attributed to its commercial formula. The channel introduced a popular talk show with a local celebrity that for years has been dominating the national primetime.

Yet *Big Brother* changed everything. Just like Western Europe and the United States four years earlier, reality television became the burgeoning genre that re-energized

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the television market. In spite of accusations for encouraging a pathologic voyeurism (Boychev, 2005), *Big Brother* became the symbol of a format that provided a television experience that was refreshingly different from all that Bulgarian television had to offer. In the wake of the new millennium, fictional entertainment has been described as formulaic, predictable and boring, while television personalities were perceived as annoying (Kilborn, 2003; Andrejevic, 2004; Antonova, 2004). That was the case with Bulgarian television; as a remnant of a communist past, programming was often trite and boring – same faces, same stories. With *Big Brother*, for the first time in television history, viewers could see ordinary people in the ordinary rhythm of their daily lives. As Andrejevic (2004) pointed out, reality television has a democratizing character offering a “lottery-like ability to make a star out of ‘nobody’” (p. 4). Instead of watching celebrities on the screen people were given the chance to become celebrities (even if it is for a day) or sometimes act as such.

Nonetheless, the *Big Brother* show proved to be egalitarian in another aspect – it sent Bulgarian viewers the message that it is work anybody could do (Andrejevic, 2004). No special skill or talent was needed to be selected as a participant; after all, “anyone could perform the work of being watched” on *Big Brother* (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 6). In this sense, the 12 houseguests represent the thousands of people who showed up for the casting call thinking that they could, too, be on TV. In fact, any voyeuristic accusations are downplayed by the official ratings, which indicate that the second season had the largest audience not during the erotic scenes, but during a live show that determined the fate of two houseguests (Antonova, 2004).

In the backdrop of rigid cultural traditions, *Big Brother* exerted a democratizing effect in yet another way. It gave unprecedented visibility to taboo topics Bulgarian television would be cautious to handle. As one article commented, “because of inertia, narrow mindedness or unwillingness to take risks, phenomena as homosexuality and bisexuality in a Bulgaria context were lacking from the screen” (Lazarov & Tavanie, 2004). During the first season, one of the favorites, Zara, openly flaunted her bisexuality while another participant divulged that he is gay and then went ahead to demonstrate his unbridled sexuality by masturbating in the toilet. The end result was that,

...by a skillful blurring of the public and private spheres, *Big Brother* made people talk not only about politics and soccer, but brought important topics to the public discussion. Topics like aggression, sexuality, human relations, and even mental health. In this sense, we can say the *Big Brother* became the catalyst of a long overdue social transformation (Lazarov & Tavanie, 2004).

In the same vein, the wide mix of *VIP* participants reinforces the growing acceptance of the Bulgarian audience. The 12 *VIP Brother* participants includes an opera singer, a couple of pop and folk singers, a beauty queen, a fashion model, a writer, a gay stylist, and a businessman with a Master’s Degree in Management.

As the success of the Bulgarian *Big Brother* indicated, the audiences welcomed the opportunity to experience a different type of television. Indeed, the country was divided in two – those who watched *Big Brother*, and those who hated the ones who watched. Supporters of the game called it a unique social experiment and pure

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entertainment, while opponents called it primitive and voyeuristic (Boychev, 2005). In spite of this, audience measures unequivocally show that *Big Brother* was watched by people from the entire country, coming from all social groups and ages (see Table 1). Ironically, the first season was advertised with the catchy phrase “you’ll see, you’ll watch” and the Bulgarian audiences were ready to watch. Audience research shows that more women than men watched the show; an average 22 percent of the viewers were in the 45-55 age group, with 17 percent of the viewers in the 15-25 age group (Antonova & Kandov, 2004). Close to 27 percent of the viewers were in the service sector while another 24 percent were students (Antonova & Kandov, 2004). While audience ratings and shares do not necessarily guarantee viewing, it is clear that that show was something people would tune to, even if it was just a background. Additional research is needed to understand the viewing habits of the *Big Brother* audiences.

Table 1 about here

Second, the success of *Big Brother* is directly linked to its producers' ability to orchestrate the show as a big media event. For a start, Nova TV run an aggressive ad campaign, making the casting call, the selection of the participants, the bios of the final 12, and the house itself the center on national attention. Even politicians could not resist commenting on *Big Brother*. A month before the start of the show, General Boiko Borisov, chief secretary of the Interior Ministry, visited the house and called it a luxury prison, but praised *Big Brother*'s high-tech equipment (Novkov, 2005). Indeed, there was no detail too minor to be spared -- the Bulgarian viewers knew how much beer, meat,

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veggies, cheese and condoms were used by the houseguests (Peteva, 2005). As one journalist observed, everything on Nova TV, even the evening news, was somehow related to *Big Brother* (Boychev, 2005).

Pavel Stanchev, the executive director of Nova TV, called the novel approach of promoting *Big Brother* “total communications” thus describing the arrival of converging media (Antonova, 2005). *Big Brother* was broadcast 24 hours on a specially designated cable channel; the houseguests were featured in a special edition of the popular magazine *Bliask* (Sparkle), which sold a record 70,000 copies; the biggest national newspaper *24 Chassa* (24 Hours) and the popular radio *Express*, which broadcasts updates four times a day, became the show’s media partners (Antonova & Kandov, 2004). In addition, the show’s finale was celebrated in Sofia with “unique fireworks” and a music concert, while the towns of the three finalists erected live stages where “beer was in abundance” (Peteva, 2005). Accordingly, Nova TV made sure that the second season would start with nothing short of a genuine media spectacle. Big billboards announced the start of *Big Brother 2* amidst incessant speculations about its success. Not by coincidence, Nova TV decided to introduce its new logo, new music clips and new programming format on the premiere night of *Big Brother 2* (Antonova, 2005). Just before Christmas, two popular general interest magazines, *Koi* (Who) and *Hai Klub* (High Club) issued special *Big Brother 2* editions (Antonova, 2005).

Also within the context of “total communications,” the show’s producers turned the participants into celebrities, even though most of them were short-lived. Apart from learning everything about the personal lives of the favorites, it became fashionable to

invite the houseguests to make appearances in other television shows or social events.¹ The final three took a tour of the Parliament, and the first season finalist received an offer to get involved in politics, which he turned down (Mihalev, 2005). Zara, the runner-up, was the one who took full advantage of her celebrity status. She appeared in the Bulgarian version of *Playboy*, became the advertising face of a mobile phone company and a new wafer called *Big Brother*, plus started to host a new reality show (Mihalev, 2005). As a matter of fact, all participants capitalized on their fame, although it was clear that becoming a genuine media star required much more. As one editorial pointed out: “If *Big Brother* was an example of how unknown people managed to focus the interest of the entire society upon them for a short time, then the fame of the show’s participants is indicative of the fact that fame is a heavy burden, which not everybody could carry” (One-time Use, 2005). Yet it seems that in a culture where celebrity status was strictly reserved for the selected few for so long, audiences are eager to see ordinary people “making it” to the top. Audiences could identify with the people on the screen and their tears, fights and revelries, no matter how contrived they are (Mihalev, 2005). *Big Brother* provided the thousands of people who tuned in every night at 8 p.m. to vicariously experience what the houseguests were experiencing.

Third, the Internet became an integral part of the show’s success. The popularity of *Big Brother’s* web site in Bulgaria, however, only reinforced the belief that the show’s international success was largely due to its clever use of the Internet as an interactive technology (Andrejevic, 2004, Johnson-Woods, 2002; Kilborn, 2003). Discussing the influence of the Internet on the show’s popularity, Andrejevic (2004) quoted producer

¹ All participants had to sign a five-year contract, which obligated them to coordinate all their public appearances with the organizers (Mihalev, 2005)

Doug Ross who commented that “Big Brother was generally considered to be more of a success on the Internet than on television” (p. 160). Indeed, being able to participate in the experience and determine the fate of the houseguests is one the most attractive features of this format (Kilborn, 2003; Andrejevic, 2004). As Kilborn (2003) commented:

It is by exploiting the range of interactive possibilities....and by creating the illusion that the audience are calling all the shots that Big brother, and shows like it, have been able to attain such landmark status in the history of contemporary television (p. 81).

The success of the *Big Brother* web site in Bulgaria was not new. In Germany, the official website generated 90 million hits during the first several weeks; the Dutch web site attracted 52 million visitors during the course of the show, while in the United States the official web site, hosted by AOL, received 9.4 million hits (Andrejevic, 2004).

The official Bulgarian web site, www.bigbrother.bg, boasts that it provides access to the show even to those without a television set. In spite of lack of data on site traffic, an examination of the web site shows that it is not only technologically advanced, but also extremely popular, possibly because it is updated every 30 minutes during an active season. Users post messages on the chat forums daily and some discussion topics get more than 400 responses. Among the customary participant bios, gallery and news, the attractive web site offers games, wallpaper, screen saver and ring tone downloads, a live chat and a live forum, as well as opportunities for fans to create a fan web page and post their MMS pictures. The most advertised feature, however, is Big Brother Live that allows the fans, with the purchase of a special e-card, to “watch the life in the house 24

hours a day, seven days a week.” The ardent viewers could also listen to what’s happening in the house via a “spyline” or get news updates on their cell phones. In order to use most of the features, however, visitors are required to register. The show also has an equally attractive fan web site, www.bigbrotherfans.info, which offers fewer features, but has detailed site statistics. This is how one could gauge the show’s success among Bulgarian fans. Since its creation on October 2004, the site has registered 16.5 million hits. In fact, the site registered 32,869 visits on December 1, 2005, alone.

Conclusion

The success of *Big Brother* in Bulgaria foregrounds the adaptability of the reality television format to different cultures and settings. In its ascent, the spread of reality television programming is reminiscent of the “global resonance” of such supersoaps as *Dallas* several decades ago (Kilborn, 2003). The past six years have witnessed a phenomenal interest in reality television to the extent that no media pundit could afford to ignore the fact that reality television was not a passing fad. And whether liked or disliked by media critics, reality shows are tremendous hits with the audiences. The ratings of *Big Brother* across the world indicate that.

By examining the development and success of *Big Brother* in Bulgaria, this paper offered an overview of the dynamics of the reality television format in a postcommunist country. It suggested that *Big Brother’s* formula for success, with its emphasis on convergent media and unique opportunities for participation and interactivity, does work across cultures. The show not only revived the inert television market in Bulgaria by drawing unprecedented numbers of viewers, but also became responsible for generating a

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national discussion of taboo topics. Further research is needed to explicate the economic ramifications of such high ratings or the reasons behind audiences' attraction to this format. Yet the new reality after the introduction of the first reality television show in Bulgaria is that, for now, reality rules.

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