Introduction

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BIG BROTHER INTERNATIONAL

Think Globally, Program Locally
– David Landler, *Business Week*, 1994

What is Big Brother?

Everyone knows *Big Brother.* No longer only the all-seeing figurehead of George Orwell's dystopia, it is now an international multimedia phenomenon. The brainchild of John De Mol, it premiered on Dutch commercial channel Veronica (now Yorin) on 16 September 1999, and went on to conquer the world. *Big Brother* is now franchised to over thirty countries.

The show's inspiration was the Arizona Biosphere project of the 1990s, in which participants were confined within a dome, effectively becoming their own isolated society for two years. This coincided with the media fashion for emotive first-person television formats. *Big Brother* built on this cultural zeitgeist, and combines games, soap and documentary into one hybrid performance genre. In the *Big Brother* concept, ten ordinary people are locked up in one house for a hundred days, their everyday life is recorded around the clock by cameras and microphones. Every week the housemates

must nominate two in their midst to go, leaving the public to decide the final fate of the nominees. Millions of telephone, text and Internet votes are cast, and one loser is evicted with grand ceremony each week. The winner is the last remaining resident. During their stay, all housemates are subject to strict rules governed by two principles: back to basics and no privacy. They need to complete specific tasks; often live under dire circumstances and on a strict weekly budget. They are never free from the camera's gaze or the microphone's ear. They are required to make regular 'confession interviews' with an anonymous *Big Brother* voice in a diary room.

Within weeks, *Big Brother* caused huge controversy, being accused of inhumane experimentation on people's psychological health. But it also attracted an avid following, with millions of viewers glued to their television sets, phoning in to vote and catching up with what happened in the house on the Internet. Curiously, the show became both a scandal and hit in practically every country where it aired.

Big Brother in academia

In the few years since its inception *Big Brother* has received a remarkable amount of attention from academics. Starting with Henri Beunders' small book on the meaning of the show in a late twentieth-century public sphere, and still continuing today, it has become an exemplar of the changing face of media theory and practice, paradigmatic for some, despicable for others (Beunders 2000). The first wave of publications foregrounded its prescience. They used *Big Brother* to exemplify the future and warn against the celebration of constructed representations of everyday life on prime-time television (Meijer & Reesink 2000; Mikos *et al*. 2000; Biltereyst *et al*. 2000). Soon after, however, the show was analysed in relation to its cultural contexts. It became representative of certain evolutions in media culture (van Zoonen 2001) and media practice (Roscoe 2001), indicating that its impact was well beyond that of 'just a television show'. *Big Brother* became an academic media phenomenon, a status reinforced by the variety of ways in which it was seen as challenging media theory (see the issue of *Television and New Media* devoted to the phenonemon, 2002). As a particular point of interest, almost all studies of *Big Brother* seem to feel the need to acknowledge the importance of the ways in which the show connects to different (notions of) audiences, ranging from general conceptualisations of the public sphere, over statistic and representative audience samples, to individual audience reactions and attitudes (Tincknell & Raghuram 2002). One recurrent thread in all this audience-related research is the interest in the ways in which *Big Brother* links to theories and concepts about everyday life. As Ib Bondebjerg (2002) rightfully observes, everyday life has always been related to studying television, but never before have academics been offered the chance to see specific, concrete examples of, say, role playing, ritual behaviour, scandals, moral outrage, cultural values, and so forth at work within the scope of one format, as in the differences and similarities between life in the house and life outside it (whether it concerned participants or viewers, foes or fans).

The emphasis on audiences and the everyday life of *Big Brother* is important, because it allows the show to be put into respective cultural contexts. When one talks about audiences, one needs to be able to identify and contextualise them. And in naming the contexts of *Big Brother*, an international perspective is necessary. *Big Brother* is, first and foremost, a global phenomenon in different/similar local contexts, and needs to be approached as such.

Big Brother International

This book tells the story of the international career of *Big Brother*. It is not only a chronicle of the many significant events that distinguished almost all national versions, but it also links them to their respective cultural contexts and audiences. A few exceptions notwithstanding, the first seasons of *Big Brother* in each territory were massive ratings successes, which then had to struggle to maintain a bond with their audiences in subsequent editions. Remarkable drops and bumps in ratings made this 'special bond' between text and context very visible. Moreover, the moral outrage around the show in many countries, from calling it an 'audiovisual Auschwitz' (Mikos 2000: 185), to the several small-scale controversies (from the sexual exploits in Italy, over near bans in Germany and Africa, and the cheating of Nasty Nick, to American attempts to sabotage) make such an approach not only desirable, but necessary. This book offers that approach.

The international focus on *Big Brother* has consequences on a textual level as well. Because of the nature of the franchise there are numerous threads that appear in many national versions. As Gary Carter (once an Endemol executive selling *Big Brother* accross the world) testifies, it is a 'genre hybrid', both adhering to and breaking boundaries of television genres (see his epilogue to this book). A Belgian producer of Endemol stressed cultural differences:

> Does the format fit every country? Yes, it does, as long as you allow a few local changes. Compare the Belgian *Big Brother* for instance with the Dutch or Spanish one. In Spain they have a swimming pool. Here, a swimming pool is considered a luxury. In Spain, with the climate they have, it isn't. But every version of *Big Brother* has chickens, because chickens are everywhere in the world. (Plas 2001: 119)

It is tempting to see the chicken reference as a metaphor for audiences. After all, they did flock to screens all over the world to witness the events in the house. But assuming a blanket format and reception is probably the biggest mistake anyone could make about *Big Brother*. To begin with, there is no uniform text; it changed from region to region (swimming pool or not). Receptions varied from country to country as well. Even within countries opinions were heavily divided. And finally, numerous changes were made between and within countries throughout the hundred days of each season, and between seasons.

Another important element that informs the content and reception of *Big Brother* is the awareness of its international public presence throughout the world. When, in the first season of *Big Brother* USA, housemates planned a walk out, they based their view on what impact it would have on their own perception of *Big Brother* in other countries. When the American producers called in a Dutch veteran producer to suppress the 'uprising', they relied on international awareness to rescue their season. When, in the fourth season of *Big Brother* UK, one houseguest was nominated to leave the house, but then subsequently sent to another *Big Brother* house (in Africa), and vice versa, the format even plays to that awareness.

Talking about 'The *Big Brother* Text' therefore becomes next to meaningless. There are so many *Big Brother* texts, made under so many specific conditions, that only through a flexible approach to each version, requiring specific tools for analysis, can the phenomenon be fully understood (if, to echo van Zoonen, ever at all).

Multimedial interactivity and ludic representation

Big Brother's international presence, and its relevance to the global-local discussion (or the discourse of glocalisation as new academic lingo has it) is the most important thread throughout the book. But there are several others, that inform the approaches, methods and conclusions of the contributions.

A crucial aspect of studying *Big Brother* is coming to grips with the ways in which the text, changing over time and space is also filtered out across multiple media. Continuing a fast-developing trend in television practice, *Big Brother* does not just rely on the television set to communicate its message to its audiences. It also relies on other 'platforms', like the Internet, live events and telephone votings. By extension, it also informs (and feeds off) tabloid narratives, public debate and spin-offs (video spoofs, music videos, pop albums, celebrity cults, and so forth). The Internet allows viewers a 24-hour peek into the participants' lives (often revealing information regular viewers have no access to); the '*Big Brother* Magazine', accompanying almost every regional version, adds to the understanding of the show by offering background information (biographies, stories of fans and relatives, explaining changes in rules, and so forth); and live events, especially around the evictions, or charity events linked to specifc 'week tasks' have, in many versions, become public events in their own rights. The link between these multiple uses of media and technological innovations is another vital element to be taken into consideration when studying *Big Brother*, especially when the grammar of its reception is in its infancy. All this calls into question the singular status of the *Big Brother* television text.

As a result, *Big Brother* also challenges ideas around television genres and categories. Spread accross the schedule, both 'prime timed' and 'niched', its genre has become so variable that it defies classic genre theory. Therefore, attempts to understand *Big Brother* also need to be aware of its status as a class of text(s), even to the point of suggesting new generic labels for this kind of multimedial reality game shows. Notions of sociology like Johan Huizinga's concept of the *Homo Ludens*, or gaming human (Huizinga 1949) and Erving Goffman's analyses of everyday experiences (Goffman 1986) are important considerations informing such suggestions.

Ludic TV or reality game show, high-tech multimedia platform or plain boring television, studying *Big Brother* requires paying attention to a multitude of perspectives. We are confident all contributions in this book offer insightful and vivid discussions of these perspectives.

The first essay is internationalist and self-reflexive in scope. Daniël Biltereyst analyses the international presence of *Big Brother* in terms of its moral (and political) reception. Starting with a discussion of the controversy surrounding *Big Brother* Africa, Biltereyst questions the use of the concept of moral panics in dealing with the ways in which *Big Brother* seems to strike sensitive chords wherever it airs. Are 'moral panics' still a tool for analysis if producers use it as a marketing auxiliary? For Biltereyst, public intellectuals need to be aware of how they can be recruited by the exact same apparatus they criticise.

All other essays in the collection concentrate on one specific territory. Liesbet van Zoonen examines the debate surrounding *Big Brother*'s very first encounter with its publics and critics, in 1999. It was in the Netherlands that the format originated, villified as an abomination, a low point in Dutch Television history. Van Zoonen looks beyond this

debate and discusses how *Big Brother* captured the 'zeitgeist' of a generation, analysing what she terms as the 'subconscious collective yearning' that propelled this series into television history's record books.

Annette Hill sets the agenda for a discussion of *Big Brother* audiences. She lays out the conclusions to a significant ESRC- and BARB-funded audience research project on television audiences of factual entertainment, in which *Big Brother* was a prominent feature. She analyses how viewers engage in a critical viewing of the attitudes and behaviours of ordinary people in the house, introducing us a theme running throughout this book: that of the debate on differences between 'the real' and 'the constructed'. Focusing on authenticity, performance and an understanding of viewers' engagements with 'the real' in reality TV, Hill discusses how specific roles and functions are picked up as clues by audiences seeking for a glimpse of the unconstructed. Daniel Chandler and Merris Griffiths build on the discussion of audiences, in providing us with an empirical piece of specialised audience research investigating some of the ways in which opinions are formed about onscreen individuals. Their research makes a distinction between a 'mirror hypothesis', suggesting that viewers will tend to relate favourably to those onscreen who are *like themselves* (the mirror) and a 'magic mirror hypothesis', representing what the viewer *would like to be like*. Their findings support the notion that differences in modes of parasocial interaction show a very strong connection to gender and sexual orientation.

Ernest Mathijs and Wouter Hessels introduce us to a reception study of *Big Brother* Belgium highlighting how different notions of 'the audience' are used by producers, commentators and in the public sphere. For them, an examination of the role of ancillary discourses provides a way for explaining attitudes (from all kinds of angles) towards the show. It shows the transition of the initial cultural concern and outrage towards more text-related concerns, dragging audiences away from the context into the text. Also dealing with *Big Brother* Belgium, Philippe Meers and Sophie Van Bauwel offer a framework for understanding the critical responses to the series. With a qualitative discourse analysis of the different voices in the press debate, the authors discuss three main theoretical frames (critical, pluralist and culturalist) and use them to stimulate the theoretical debate on perceptions of popular culture. They propose that more attention be paid to a culturalist frame which provides a clearer view on the cultural dynamics surrounding *Big Brother*.

After debating notions of the public and specific audience attitudes, the book also problematises the text. Lothar Mikos' chapter on the German *Big Brother* moves from a focus on audiences to considerations of the textual features of the series. Emphasising their mutual dependance, and drawing on theories of literary reception, Mikos agrees that the very notion of the text depends on frameworks in which reception and audiences are dominant, while also maintaining that there is no audience without the textual stimulus. Through the introduction of the notion of 'migration of genres' François Jost proposes a similar point in his article on the French version of *Big Brother*. Pushing the examination of the text into a semiotic-based investigation of genre theory, Jost argues that *Loft Story* (the French title) promises several generic interpretations for its audiences. But these promises are by no means static; they migrate dynamically between combinations of fictitious, ludic and reality modes of representation. Jost theorises how the 'fluctuating generic reception' influences the contract between the programme and the public. Also building on the question of the connection between text and audience, but linking it to an empirical reception study of *Big Brother* in two regions in Latin America, Fernando Andacht's essay combines empirical data from qualitative

research and a realist semiotic theory. In doing so, he argues that, although elusive in its portrayal of signs of the real, the *Big Brother* format nevertheless seems to offer audiences enough indexical signs to set it up as linked to reality.

With the status of both the audience and the text challenged, yet at the same time also set up as essential for understanding *Big Brother*, discussing specific cultural concerns becomes a problematic endeavour. Baris Kiliçbay and Mutlu Binark examine this problem by focusing on the relationships between fandom and contestants' cultural backgrounds in the Turkish *Big Brother*. In doing so, they pick up on the theme of personal performance, examining televisual identities adopted by contributors playing out a variety of roles that conform or challenge the precepts of a changing society. They also discuss how the one central text spawned others, observing how this quickly led to a market saturation of *Big Brother*-related products on Turkish television. Just as cultural background (even class) was a defining element in the relationship between the Turkish text and context, Marco Centorrino's discussion of *Big Brother* Italy employs textual analysis to highlight the centrality of the programme's pornographic appeal while adapting Goffman's model of interaction to critique the sexual relations in the house. Centorrino researches how this adaptation of the *Big Brother* format successfully encapsulates, in a single brush stroke, many of the defining elements of Italian television entertainment. Magriet Pitout's chapter on *Big Brother* South Africa continues the theme of a local examination of the relationship between context and text. She focuses on the particular South African reception, reflecting on the politicisation of the format with its strict adherence to a true representation of the country's diversity and newfound racial sensitivities. She analyses the role race played in the eviction of candidates, suggesting that being black in the house equated to invisibility, which ensured a degree of survival. Pitout also problematises the ongoing debate on the presumed interactivity between text and audiences, questioning the extent to which this new format actually changes the audiences' relationship with the text.

The following chapters take the element of multimedial interactivity as their main focus. This concern is not just about which black box will deliver our media in the future, it is also forcing us to re-examine the role of the audience in a contemporary television environment. As the distinction between text and audience begins to blur the viewer is promoted as an 'equal party' reworking and transforming the text at the point of consumption. Certainly *Big Brother* usefully sets the stage for a closer examination of the impact of new technology and the boundaries between notions of media consumers and media producers.

Jane Roscoe describes how central multi-platform interactivity was to the Australian version and how the new technologies that enabled media convergence were integral to its success as 'event' television. Her production study demonstrates how the function of audiences, in the role of participants transforming texts, is not just confined to areas of reception but informs the construction of the text as well, especially when 'indigenising' the format for Australian audiences (with particular emphasis on location and 'mateship'). Pamela Wilson shows how on-line narrative activism played a central role in the first season of *Big Brother* USA. This new form of media activism reflected the intersection of a counter-cultural social movement ('culture jammers') with the shifting technology of the show's dual webcasting/broadcasting premise. The convergence of technology, text and audience, at least in the short-term, noticeably upset the apple cart and jolted the corporate producers, while also having a profound effect on the behaviours and beliefs of the *Big Brother* participants, thus influencing the text itself.

Janet Jones provides empirical audience data of *Big Brother* UK and uses these to argue how the convergence of text and audience has impacted on *Big Brother* fandom over a three-year period. Jones' attempt to predict patterns of use and meaning making among interactive reality TV consumers is set amidst a view of multi-media culture as an internationally developing interplay between interactivity, media convergence and hybridity. For Jones, such developments are critical to debates of how new media theory relates to media practices.

Finally, Jon Dovey pushes media theory to a new and challenging level with an investigation of the reality TV game as an aspect of the cultural logic of an 'order of simulation'. He highlights the erosion of traditional factual television practices where empirical observation has been largely abandoned and replaced with the observation of simulated situations that *only* exist because of the intervention of the television production. Building on theories of Jean Baudrillard (on simulation) and Roger Caillois (on play), he then takes this observation to its logical implication suggesting simulation takes over from empiricism as reflected in the ludic world of Sims and gaming. He uses a finely-honed understanding of documentary history to examine how this trend may be a revival and triumph of Jean Rouch's original notion of 'cinéma vérité' in which the camera is only ever seen as a catalyst that provokes performative events, but can also be seen as evoking a 'ludic and liminoid zone of culture'.

We thought it relevant to conclude the book with a voice from media practice. In his epilogue, Gary Carter allows the reader an inside view on how the *Big Brother* format was thought up, how it was sold and how it inspired new ideas in reality TV. Building on Huizinga's concept of the *Homo Ludens*, and expanding it into a prototheory of genre hybridisation, Carter argues that *Big Brother* is symptomatic for the kind of television that fits a generation of viewers who grew up on television, who started making television about television, and who know how to negotiate performances of media identities.

There are many strands in this book, and we admit that, to some extent, its final order is arbitrary, as are all classifications. Yet we maintain that the identified threads of glocalisation, audience and receptions linked to specific textual cues, genre and the public, multimedia platforming and convergence, and ludic representations of everyday life are crucial elements for those wishing to understand *Big Brother*.

We claim nothing less than that this book offers, at the time of writing, the most complete view on the international phenomenon that is *Big Brother*. But we would be foolish to think that this is all there can be said. Much terrain remains uncharted, and we welcome all attempts to further the analysis of *Big Brother*, and the larger issues around it. We only hope this book can be of some help to those efforts.

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