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Big Brother on-line discussion communities: watching the emergence of a new public space

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Big Brother on-line discussion communities: watching the emergence of a new public space

Introduction

Since its first broadcast in 1999 Endemol's Big Brother has drawn significant attention from both television audiences and academics around the world. The latter have produced works that, for example, associate this format with the creation of neoliberal subjectivities (Andrejevic 2002, 2004; Couldry 2008), with the increasing blurring of the modern 'bourgeois public-private division' (van Zoonen 2001, p.675), or even with the search of authenticity in factual television (Hill 2002, 2005). The interest in Big Brother is such that it is possible to find a large number of articles and chapters published about this reality show including an edition of the journal *Television and New Media* fully dedicated to the program (2002), and the collection of essays organized by Ernest Mathijs and Janet Jones in the book *Big Brother International* (2004). In addition to the extensive coverage, Big Brother is also heavily cited by a considerable amount of books and readers analyzing the genre of reality television.

Along with these reflections that provide some insightful readings on its role in contemporary society, Big Brother has also managed to generate a long list of controversies almost everywhere it has been broadcasted. Since the initial negative responses to the idea of 24 hours surveillance of 'locked' individuals, this reality show has been host to a series of scandals, each one of them embedded in the values and morals of the local culture where it was being produced. Interracial relationships, class disputes, family reunions, unsafe sex on TV, homosexual proposals, religious conflicts, fairytale love affairs, and race rows are just some examples of events that have contributed to the Big Brother popularity worldwide, for good or for bad (Bazalguette 2005).

The successful export of the Big Brother model to over sixty countries can be partly credited to a process of "situated acculturation", whereby populations are offered a composite matrix that affects their national culture and allows for discursive practices about values, not just tastes' (Frau-Meigs 2006, p.52).

In Brazil, where Big Brother has maintained high viewing rates since its premiere in 2002¹, the production borrows several structural elements of the local soap-opera tradition. After the first series, Rede Globo – its local broadcaster – started to change how the routine of the housemates was being portrayed in the daily program. Instead of presenting a straight forward summary of daily events in the house, as it is done – at least in theory – by Big Brother productions elsewhere, the Brazilian producers started to develop a hybrid language that mixed reality television with soap opera. In the head of production's own words, 'Here it [Big Brother] works because of the type of editing we do, which is different from anywhere else. In other countries, they simply show what happens. My team creates videos, animated cartoons, clips with jokes, vignettes... We make a mixture of our culture of [soap opera] dramaturgy, which we apply to the production.' (interview of J.B. Boninho de Oliveira to O Globo newspaper in 08/01/2007)²

The Brazilian adaptation of Big Brother provoked an impact that goes far beyond the impressive financial result it generated for Rede Globo³. The reality show also inspired a huge on-line fan community consisting of various fora debating this multi-platform production. In the 2008 edition, five years after the creation of the first Big Brother Brazil (BBB) fan blog, this online community already comprised twenty five blogs and one major forum. Tevescópio⁴, one of the most influential blogs within this fan base, received an average of six thousands comments a day, while De Cara pra Lua⁵ blog recorded twelve thousands comments in a single day in the same edition. This online phenomenon composed the subject of my qualitative research. The aim of this paper is, therefore, to present some of its findings, whilst examining a number of issues

¹ During the 2008 edition of the Brazilian reality show, an average of 40% of television-equipped homes in the city of São Paulo was tuned to Rede Globo, its local broadcaster.

² Annette Hill argues that this kind of fictionalization of factual programming is a contemporary trend. For her, this leads to a paradox where 'the more entertaining a factual programme is, the less real it appears to viewers' (Hill 2005, p.57). She quotes Kilborn when stating that the original Big Brother format already involves the 'use of structuring devices inherited from fictional serial drama' (Kilborn 2003, p.114). Although, perhaps not as 'heavy handed' as Boninho seems to make the case for the Brazilian adaptation of the reality show.

³ Although there are no official figures available, it is estimated that the latest series of Big Brother generated over R\$350 million (approximately £100 million) of revenue from advertisement and merchandising sales alone (Veja magazine, 12/03/2008). This sum does not take into account revenues from a number of alternative sources such as pay-per-view package sales (over 160.000 packages sold in 2008), and income from the eviction voting (this same edition registered an all time record of over 410 million votes [SMS + phone + internet]. The final alone was responsible for more than 75 million votes).

⁴ <http://tevescopio.blogger.com.br/>

⁵ <http://decarapralua.zip.net/>

raised by them. It also introduces some reflections on the new possibilities opened by these discussion fora.

Issues on Audience Research

The investigation was based on an ethnographic study, which was designed to focus not only on the text reception, and all the different symbolic meanings that could be drawn from Big Brother, but also on the study of the ‘culture of everyday’ of this virtual environment in an attempt to capture how this was being lived by the fans. The latter objective was naturally constrained by the limitations posed by my sole participation as a researcher, making it impossible to follow Radway’s ambitious proposition of fully pursuing

the habits and practices of everyday life as they are actively, discontinuously, even contradictorily pieced together by historical subjects themselves as they move nomadically via disparate associations and relations through day-to-day existence. (1988, p.366)

Radway herself recognizes that this could only be accomplished through a collaborative project; perhaps, like the one conducted a couple years later by Silverstone, Hirsh and Morley (1991). These researchers wanted to go beyond traditional audience studies that focused solely on the reception of television in the domestic environment. They also wanted to understand the implications of the growing number of information and communication technologies within ‘the social and cultural context of the household’ (Silverstone et. al 1991, p.207). After some initial adjustments, they decided to spread out the research over several months. This ‘long conversation’, based on interviews, participant observation and a diary, was conducted with a group of British nuclear families as a way of investigating some of the concerns associated to this group in its relation to technology.

Indeed, the resource constraints of my fan community ethnography represented a considerable limitation compared to the above example. After all, the impossibility of making a participant observation in the domestic environment of Big Brother fans meant an unfeasibility of paying a closer attention to their private consumption of television content. Sonia Livingstone justly regarded the issue as the source of ‘moral anxieties’ for the observer, which raise questions like:

Is the person sitting quietly on the sofa watching television part of a respectable audience, paying careful attention and concentrating on understanding and benefiting from the entertainment offered, or are they passive couch potatoes, dependent on media for their pleasures, uncritical in their acceptance of messages, vulnerable to influence? And, if they do not sit quietly, as increasingly they do not, are they active audiences participating in their social world or disruptive audiences, unable to concentrate? (Livingstone 2004, p.85)

She reminds us that these anxieties have their origin in the early twenty century, period when the division between media-as-goods and the reception of media-as-texts became more pronounced. The invisibility of the moment of consumption, a consequence of a process of media privatization, made it more difficult for observers to 'read' the reactions of the audience to cultural products. In previous times, on the other hand, it was much easier to follow people's reaction to theatre plays, music concerts or carnival festivities, as these events took place under the open gaze in public spaces (Butsch, 2000 *in* Livingstone, 2004, p.84).

It was, however, the period after the Second World War that witnessed an acceleration of what Raymond Williams calls 'mobile privatization'. This phenomenon was characterized by two seemingly paradoxical yet connected trends of modern urban life: an increasing mobility of the individual (and his desire to see and be in different places), and a greater self-sufficiency of the home (partly due to some improvements in the workers income and a change in his working time). The television resolved this apparent paradox by allowing the displacement of the individual to the most distant places of the planet without her or him actually leaving the home⁶ (Williams, 1990, p.26-27).

Nevertheless, this mobile privatization starts to be transformed when new digital platforms are developed, especially the more mobile ones, which allow further privatization of spaces different from the domestic environment. Du Gay *et al.* (1997) offer us an example of these new possibilities in their account of the social use of Sony's walkman. They describe it as a technology that permits its users to privatize public spaces by producing a kind of isolated audio environment created by the music played. The increasing ubiquity of devices such as mobile phones, iPods, etc., is an indication that the success experienced by the walkman was just the beginning of the

⁶ In his definition of mobile privatization Williams mentions other media like cinema and radio. However, he recognizes that none of those carry as many important features as television (Williams, 1990, p.28-29).

enormous popularization of what David Morley calls ‘privatizing technologies’ (Morley, 2003, p.451).

The meaning of these changes, particularly for media ethnography, should not be underestimated, though. After all, more than the simple incorporation of newer technologies, this trend led to the creation of multi-platform contents that can be consumed in different media (Roscoe, 2004). Large media groups can’t afford to depend on a single distribution channel for their products anymore (Jenkins, 2006). The Harry Potter franchise, for example, was developed to exist in platforms as diverse as book, film, computer game, and Internet portal (Borelli, 2007). In a similar fashion, the Big Brother reality show was especially important to Endemol for its adaptive capacity to the new media convergence scenario (Bazalgette, 2005; Campanella, 2007). In Brazil this production is available in a variety of packages including both free and pay television, pay-per-view, internet, and telephone (mobile and fixed).

These new multi-platform products significantly expanded the possibilities for consumption. As a consequence, the study of media use has to go beyond the domestic environment to reach new sites where these texts are being signified and discussed. The potential anxiety of the media researcher described above by Livingstone gains fresh colors in this new landscape. In theory, a more complex multi-sited ethnography would now be necessary to answer those questions presented by her.

However, this digital transformation also offers a different kind of promise: the promise of interactivity. Different from traditional mass media, where the audience is limited to reading the text – even if in varied ways – the modern modes allow them to create their own content. From a one-to-many model, we have now access to a many-to-many one. It is important to reinforce, though, as David Morley does (2003, p.439), that this assertion does not mean that new media users are by definition more active than mass media ones, often depicted as ‘couch potatoes’ by technology enthusiasts. Many times, internet users are limited to a few trifling interactions, while reception researches have shown that television audiences can often articulate unexpected interpretations of media texts. More importantly, returning to the matter at hand, new media offer the possibility of a two-way interaction, where the user’s views on a particular subject can be instantly shared with other people in locations far beyond her or his domestic environment.

Doing the Ethnography

This exchange provides material for our study. According to *Manga*⁷, a pioneer of the Brazilian Big Brother online community, the first discussion blogs were created in 2003 out of the controversy around Rede Globo's production conduct, and to comment on the housemates' actions inside the Big Brother house⁸. The idea was to develop a channel where people could discuss different aspects of what was then considered a fascinating new television format. Over the years, an ever increasing number of fans joined this initiative either by creating their own blogs or just expressing their views on the reality show, forming, thus, the community now known as Net.BBB. Despite the lack of face-to-face interactions, these fora offer the observer the possibility of following the reactions and interpretations of a part of Big Brother's audience; hence, giving some contours to the 'invisible' moment of consumption. Furthermore, the fact that these exchanges occur in a virtual environment has several implications not only to the observer, but, most importantly, to how these articulations are shaped inside the fan community.

In fact, this ethnographic research faced several initial challenges resulting from the intangibility of an Internet based fan community, as opposed to a physically based environment. The study was conducted during the 2008 edition of the Brazilian Big Brother, between the months of January and March. Three different techniques were used: on-line interaction, face-to-face interviews (in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo) and questionnaires. By the end of this edition, I had conducted fifteen interviews with bloggers and commentators, compiled ten questionnaires⁹, and done hundreds of hours of participative observation. Even though the final result was quite satisfactory, the initial process of recruiting volunteers turned out to be more complicated than one would anticipate.

As a recruiting method, I wrote a text containing my identification as a researcher and a brief summary of the study being conducted. This was sent via email to the most important bloggers and also posted on a regular basis in the BBB.Lua¹⁰ discussion forum as well as in some blogs. Nonetheless, most of the few people that

⁷ The names of the Big Brother fans mentioned in this article are either non-real ones, or just nicknames used by them on the net. *Manga* in the owner of the blog Teleblog: <http://manga-teleblog.blogspot.com/>

⁸ Most of the information presented in this article was collected for the PhD. research being currently conducted by its author on the Brazilian Big Brother on-line fan community.

⁹ The questionnaire was used only when the informant couldn't meet in person for a face-to-face interview.

¹⁰ <http://bbb.lua.com/>

took the initiative of answer the message were suspicious about my intentions and real identity. Differing from traditional ethnographies that occur within the physical experience of the field, virtual ones are mediated by Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Consequently, cultivating confidence among potential subjects through solely virtual means presents a challenge. Past works analyzing on-line interactions have shown the adoption of fake identities in these environments to be a common practice (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995). The Brazilian Big Brother fan community doesn't escape this common trap. Most of people interacting there use nicknames and avatars that deliberately sever any link to their real identities, citing the perceived stigmatization of Big Brother in Brazilian society. Like any other country where it is produced, this reality show is constantly portrayed by television critics and the media in general as trivial entertainment aimed at a mass audience. The fact that the research volunteers were, to my surprise, high profile professionals including a post-graduate professor, a psychologist, an advertisement executive, a TV actress, an IT manager, a local newspaper owner, a bank manager and even a diplomat, just to offer few examples, was the general excuse for not wanting any of their personal details disclosed.

A link to a government foment agency for education¹¹ containing my profile and academic history was then included in the recruiting message in an effort to overcome the initial lack of confidence regarding the legitimacy of the study. But even this measure was insufficient to shake the initial resistance of many BBB fans. It took a few weeks of daily interactions in the BBB.Lua forum to convince them I was trustworthy. Perhaps, more than that, this commitment was also necessary to demonstrate my own opinions on the issues discussed there. It was important for me to be seen as a subject with my own perceptions and ideas about Big Brother. I consciously chose the discussion forum with this intention in mind. Big Brother fans generally consider BBB.Lua as the on-line environment where the best debates on the reality show take place. Furthermore, contrary to the fan blogs, where a blogger – or group of bloggers – is responsible for publishing posts expressing points of view about varied topics related to the show, which will then be commented by other fans, the forum is uniquely comprised of its visitors' comments. It does not have any kind of 'editorial line' to be

¹¹ The foment agency is CNPQ: (<http://lattes.cnpq.br/5749037979153144>)

contested or defended. This doesn't mean that *ADM*¹², how its owner is known, does not express his opinions once in a while. But when he does, it is usually done in a very economical fashion and frequently through an alternative alias not recognizable by most people, relegating his opinion to the same status as that of any other blogging fan.

The varied ways the reality show is interpreted by bloggers is one of the most important characteristics of the community. In fact, their posts are seen as a reflection of their personality and a fundamental aspect of a blog's success. Fans tend to comment on blogs where they feel more connected to the owners' points of view. Usually, the most regular commentators in a blog develop an affective bond with the blogger, sometimes lasting for many years (even if they never meet in person, which is frequently the case). During the interviews, bloggers very often referred to these fans as 'their commentators'. Indeed, the amount of regular commentators in a blog is an important measure of its success inside the community, and often a source of disputes¹³. *Susan* and *Dona Lupa*, the two bloggers with the largest number of visitors, have been repeatedly accused by other bloggers of relinquishing to 'mainstream' perspectives on the show, thus not expressing their true views about what happens inside the Big Brother house. These critics, *Manga* and *Thors* among them, argue that this is a strategy designed to attract more visitors. For them, *Susan*, *Dona Lupa* and other bloggers have compromised an 'independent' point of view on the reality show in order to please a larger portion of Big Brother commentators. In fact, their concept of mainstream and independency is a subjective and often contradictory one, but frequently linked to the role of Rede Globo in regard to the show.

The 'hybrid' language adopted by Globo commonly becomes a source of tension inside the community. The 'fictionalization' of the daily summary described early in this piece by the head of production implies a development of plots and a characterization of the housemates in ways that are sometimes controversial. For instance, a contestant can be portrayed through editing to appear conspiratorial, of questionable character, or, on the contrary, as an innocent victim of his companions' envy, without actually fitting in any of these categories in a clear-cut way. The advent of the pay-per-view (and internet) 24 hours direct feed gave fans the possibility of

¹² *ADM* is a mythical person in the fan community who makes a point in completely hiding any trace of his/ her real identity.

¹³ In her interview, *Susan* revealed that several of 'her commentators' use different nicknames when they leave comments in other blogs. According to her, they do that to avoid jealousy from the other bloggers or even from her. Despite stressing that she didn't mind 'sharing' her commentators, she reckons that other bloggers don't think the same way.

accessing the rough material used by Globo to produce the daily summary. Although on the one hand this alternative platform provided Rede Globo a new source of income while cutting the distance between the fan and the media product, on the other it also opened the gates for contention. Most of the arguments related to claims of independency, or the lack of it, have to do with the way Globo is judged by fans. Those more critical of the broadcaster's economical interests, and how these may result in a hybridization of BBB's daily summary's genre, tend to see themselves as holding a special place within the community. They condemn any attempt to transform Big Brother in a reality based soap opera, regardless if that actually happens, or only in the bloggers' readings¹⁴.

But these contentions are only one aspect of what differentiates one blog from the other. There are in effect a wide range of takes on the reality show. Some blogs make a point of constantly demonstrating humor and cynicism towards the production, others are devoted to an analysis of the 'strategy' of each housemate in the game show, there are also those who tend to display a more passionate view of what goes inside the house – overtly supporting a particular participant or, on the contrary, making loud campaigns against their chosen disaffection –, and finally there are bloggers, like the ones exemplified above, that try to position themselves as watchdogs of the audience by displaying a critical perspective towards Rede Globo and its way of conducting the production¹⁵. For all of them, Big Brother means different things: a simple entertainment show, a strategy game, a popularity contest, or even an excuse for starting critically engaged discussions.

These discrepancies make Net.BBB an environment marked by disputes. Therefore, concentrating my interactions in the BBB.Lua forum, a territory considered 'neutral' by other bloggers, could also save me from being pigeonholed as someone's commentator. For example, *Dona Lupa* cancelled our scheduled interview after she learned that I had previously encountered *Manga*, one of her detractors in the community. She only changed her mind after *Xuxu*, her long time on-line friend and fellow blog commentator, whom I had interviewed previously, vouched for my support.

¹⁴ Of course, it is always difficult to define to which degree there is a real manipulation of how interactions between housemates – or traits of their personality - are being reproduced by Globo. There are often intense arguments within the fan community to decide whether there is interference by Globo in particular moments or not.

¹⁵ However, there are blogs that don't fit neatly in just one of these categories. They can, for example, be ironic, critical, and passionate, all at the same time. Others are the result of the contribution not of one, but of a group of bloggers, each with her/ his own personality.

Opinions on the Big Brother's housemates also reflected a great diversity. Fans choose their favorite participant based on a variety of factors. Charisma, determination, authenticity, appearance, social skills and ethical behavior were some of the attributes considered when electing their pet housemates. These different preferences prompted a subtle division inside the community, though. The ones more interested in discussing housemate strategies and actions would often have disdainful opinions about fans engaged in a cult of personalities. They went so far as to pejoratively dub them 'cattle people'. According to *Xexéu*, one of the most respected BBB fans in the community, 'cattle people' refers to those who base their decisions related to Big Brother on emotion, instead of reason¹⁶. They would support a housemate because of her charisma, appearance, or even class position (in order to, for instance, perform a sort of 'social justice' through voting) rather than the content of her conversations or her articulation in the game dynamic. Moreover, the origin of their label stems from the belief that their alleged lack of rationale makes them more susceptible to external influence, as well as acting like extreme fanatics. When interacting in the fora, however, it was simply impossible to find a fan that would admit to fitting in this category¹⁷. Even those who showed a more passionate support for a particular housemate would always attempt to rationalize their choice with justifications based in logic.

Peter Bazalgette, former chief creative officer of Endemol UK, suggests that the American audience of reality shows such as Big Brother and Survivor is probably 'the most sophisticated of all' because 'they rewarded those who played most effectively', regardless if they were villains or not (Bazalgette 2005, p.242). For him, the reality show is about rewarding those with greater surviving skills and not necessarily greater charisma, ethics or financial needs. One could say that these distinct opinions reflect the varied worldviews of the audience. These are translated in the factors that, according to them, should be taken into account when choosing a winner of the show. The examples above appear to indicate that meritocracy, even if in different shapes and forms, is a fundamental element of division within this audience. Those who give greater

¹⁶ Cattle people (povo gado in Portuguese) is also used by some to designate those that don't have access to pay-per-view, thus being incapable of making fair judgments on what goes inside the house.

¹⁷ It must be said that *Susan* once declared in her blog being herself part of the 'cattle people'. In her own words: 'How can we diminish the contribution of 'cattle people' in the discussions? Just like my friend Lana [another BBB blogger] once said, I am 'cattle people' too, and with proud'. However, one must put her declaration in perspective. This could be interpreted as an attempt to show her 'popular side' to BBB fans.

importance to this principle seem to believe that the ones who don't are less sophisticated or less rational.

There was, however, one desired characteristic repeatedly mentioned by almost all of the fans: the participant's capacity to create controversial situations inside the house. They even developed a kind of mantra that was constantly uttered in all fora when approaching eviction day: 'Ferns should leave first!' Fern¹⁸, an ironic label usually given in Brazil to individuals seen as passive, was the nickname given to all Big Brother participants who avoided taking stances inside the house or expressing opinions that could be viewed as controversial were called. A group of housemates lacking personality is the worst nightmare for a BBB fan. On the other hand, those participants that like to stir the humors in the house, even if in contentious ways, always score some points with bloggers and commentators. The justification for that lies at the core of Big Brother's on-line fan community *raison d'être*. After all, these fora are mainly used to debate the actions and points of view of those inside the house. If they don't create material to be debated upon, the community loses its fuel.

The 2008 edition of BBB brought a contender, Gyselle, who was rejected by most fans in the community for her apparently passive attitude inside Big Brother's house. Despite being dismissed as a fern by most of them, she made it to the final day, disputing the main prize head to head with her opponent, a young Emo rock band leader from São Paulo, in an all time record of over seventy five million votes. Most of her supporters, however, justified their choices arguing that her humble origin in northeast Brazil, the poorest region in the country, the other houseguests were prejudiced to her. For Gyselle's fans, her lack of interaction with other participants was the result of a conscious refusal to mix with her supposedly biased (and mostly southeast middle-class) competitors. Although she was indeed ostracized at certain moments, it is hard to say if this was a consequence of Gyselle's own apparent apathy in relation to the game show, or the other way round¹⁹.

Fans' opinions about Gyselle were further influenced by an on-line movement in her support. Since the selection process of Big Brother candidates, months before the programme actually started, Gyselle managed to launch an on-line viral campaign drawing attention to her candidacy with the help of some bloggers who were not related

¹⁸ *Sambaia* in Portuguese.

¹⁹ She did mention a few times that she was being ignored by her housemates. But so did other participants. Putting oneself in a position of victim is a known strategy used by many Big Brother contestants.

to the Big Brother fan community²⁰. When those NET.BBB fans who didn't initially sympathize with Gyselle learned about her pre-BBB moves²¹, they became even more upset with her apparent disinterest in the other housemates, which started to be seen as a sign of arrogance instead of shyness. Her defenders, on the other hand, saw in her narrative a story of a formidable individual who came from a difficult background and was struggling hard to succeed in life. For them, her sparse, but always sharp, interventions in the group were a sign of personality and resistance.

Regardless of the real motivations behind Giselle's attitudes inside the house, her actions turned out to be the source of contradictory interpretations among Big Brother fans. She became a symbol for both groups. Her detractors would argue that her disinterest in interacting with other housemates was an example of how a Big Brother participant should never behave; an arrogant fern. To make things worse, several Internet cafés located in Timon, the city where Gyselle was born, offered free access for all fans who wanted to vote for her in the final. Washington Souza, the owner of one of those Internet cafés declared that he took this initiative because 'she is humble, lives in Timon and is from northeast Brazil'²². In addition to that, Mão Santa, a senator who represents Piauí in Brazil's upper house, made a public speech in the senate that same week urging Brazilians to make her the winner of the show, so 'those humiliated would be exalted, and Piauí should be exalted through the victory of this fabulous woman over this young man from São Paulo [her opponent in the final], who doesn't even play or understand anything about football'²³.

These external interferences, seen by many as out of place and unfair, further divided the fan community. They were perceived as a bending of unspoken ethical rules of the reality show and, as a consequence, associated with everything wrong with 'old Brazilian practices'. The importance of Gyselle's image being so strongly linked with northeast Brazil cannot be overestimated in this whole episode. The region, the poorest in the country, is usually portrayed by media in negative angles, such as: its appalling

²⁰ Big Brother 2008 inaugurated Globo's initiative to use internet based profiles for helping the selection of BBB housemates. A voting system was created, and the profiles with more votes would draw the attention of Globo's selection team. Xpock was the blogger who actually initiated a campaign in her favor (<http://xpock.com.br/nossa-candidata-entrou-no-bbb8>).

²¹ During 2008 Big Brother, fans also discovered that Gyselle had been the winner of the French version of the reality show Temptation Island in the previous season.

²² http://babado.ig.com.br/bbb8/noticias/2008/03/24/bbb8_lan_houses_no_maranhao_oferecem_acesso_gratuito_a_internet_para_quem_votar_em_gyselle_1241050.html

²³ http://babado.ig.com.br/bbb8/noticias/2008/03/25/bbb8_mao_santa_pede_votos_para_gyselle_no_senado_1242169.html

human development figures, its large flows of mass migrants to the southern capitals of the country, which eventually leads to urban poverty and violence, and its corrupt oligarchic local families. In other words, northeast is sometimes presented as a drain to the projection of a modern Brazil due to their dire living conditions and old habits, while others, as deserving compensation for being historically neglected by the elite of the country.

The fact that Gyselle was completely unaware of all these events and didn't have any kind of control over the appropriation of her image outside the house was not taken into account by those who were campaigning against her²⁴. For BBB fans, the dispute transcended the realm of simple entertainment. *Susan*, the owner of De Cara Pra Lua Blog, posted a text commenting on the new symbolism Gyselle had acquired for her fans:

It became of little importance if Gyselle has a bad temper or if she was really pour and endured suffering, [but] she brought with her the desire for respect and recognition of a whole population, which indeed carries a history of fight and exclusion in the Brazilian economic and political scenery. (Susan, 24/03/2008)

Hours before the end of the final voting, BBB.Forum and all fan blogs were engulfed in a tense atmosphere of dispute and accusation. Several fans declared voting in an almost non-stop rhythm. After having their computer servers disrupted a few times during that day due to massive voting, Rede Globo decided to extend the deadline by fifteen minutes, on the grounds that the result was too close to call. At the end, it announced the winner: Rafinha had defeated Gyselle by an insignificant margin of 0.15%.

After this announcement a huge celebration took place in BBB.Lua forum, and in all the blogs that supported Rafinha. *Xexéu*, for example, posted a text in the forum reproducing the Brazilian national anthem. *Dona Lupa*, posted in her blog a trembling Brazilian flag with the following (and charged) message on the foreground: 'Come clean Brazil'. These were responses to the defeat of what they perceived to be a contestant who not only lacked any kind of personal merit while in the house, but also profited from dubious artifices used by her supporters.

²⁴ It is understood in the BBB community that the attitudes of a supporter can indeed damage the image of a Big Brother participant. Fans were reprimanded on several occasions for inappropriate behavior in the BBB.Lua forum by colleges supporting the same housemate. They fear that attitudes seen as fanatical can tint the image of their pet housemate. It is interesting to notice a clear existence of a link between Big Brother's participants' attitudes inside the house, and their fans inside the community.

On the other hand, *Simone*, a commentator of the blog Sociedade Brasilis and fan of Gyselle, raised suspicions of a possible manipulation of the final result by Rede Globo, arguing that Gyselle was the victim ‘of prejudice against northeastern women, [who are] typical representatives of Brazil, of mixed race and “kinky” hair’ ().

The repercussions, controversy, and implications of the Gyselle affair, which could be linked to discussions of national identity, serve as example of the unexpected possibilities raised by the Brazilian Big Brother dynamic. Indeed, the 2008 edition of the reality show also brought other polemic housemates. Among others, these included a psychiatrist who, apart from surprisingly coming out of the closet on live television, was accused of unethically using his professional skills for influencing other participants, and a former beauty pageant contestant that repeatedly embarrassed her male housemates with insistent queries about details on their sexual habits and unreserved divulgation of her own.

Conclusion

The great significance given by BBB fans to these controversies appears to indicate a general desire, even if sometimes unconscious, for reappraising values and social conventions. Lull and Hinerman (1997) analyses of media scandal offer us an interesting perspective on this subject. For them

A media scandal occurs when private acts that disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant morality of a social community are made public and narrativized by the media, producing a range of effects from ideological and cultural retrenchment to disrupt and change. The transgressions assume additional impact when markers of human difference such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation are involved. (Lull & Hinerman, 1997, p.3)

Debates found at the BBB fan community reveal a wide spectrum of reactions. They could range in topic, for instance, from trivial exchanges of information about a newly minted celebrity, to fierce discussions on socially related issues, ethical decisions, or even sexual preferences. It is important to notice, nevertheless, that the way these debates are transformed into media scandals – resonating in different spheres of society – cannot be dissociated from economic objectives and, as the example above shows, even opportunist political interests. Lull & Hinerman affirm that scandals are

entertaining, therefore, marketable for large consumption. There is no doubt that it is in Rede Globo's high interest to create a stir around their product as a way of attracting a wider audience. The broadcaster developed several strategies for creating dissent among housemates in the 2008 edition in an attempt to augment internal fights and, consequently, attention to the reality show. A Youtube video showing a heated discussion between two participants in that edition received almost one million views in a period of just few weeks. Access figures of the same video hosted in Big Brother's official website were not available, but one can imagine they probably were even greater.

Frau-Meigs argues that even critical views on Big Brother manipulation found in discussion fora – like the ones investigated here – are ineffective. Despite having informed perceptions of the economical interests behind the reality show, these fans still take part in the game. For her, 'to see the confidence trick, does not necessarily lead to escaping it' (Frau-Meigs, 2006, p. 50).

Andrejevic draws a yet more critical view by arguing that reality based programs such as Big Brother

anticipate a world in which we will create value for advertisers and marketers by allowing ourselves to be watched as we go about our daily routines, in which the promise of interactivity participation serves as a ruse of the rationalization of consumption, and in which the imperative to "get real" reproduces the abstracted relations of mass society. (Andrejevic, 2005, p.8)

The arguments above remind us that the dialogue between the audience and the Big Brother format is always connected to marketing strategies and new forms of revenue. Nonetheless, the importance of the emerging fan communities, like Net.BBB, shouldn't be ignored either. If on one hand fans can't avoid consuming Big Brother, whether it be critically or otherwise, on the other it would be too limiting to interpret their articulation of the reality show only in terms of resistance/acceptance of market forces. In fact, several fans declared both in the interviews and during the participant observation that they enjoyed more engaging in online discussions than actually watching the show²⁵. For them, polemics involving Big Brother houseguests were seen

²⁵ It is also important to remark that none of the bloggers have financial benefits with their blogs, not even the forum. On the contrary, some put their own money on their platforms. *Dona Lupa*, for example, has a team of three full time assistants during the months of Big Brother production to help her managing all

as a means to expose, and ultimately confront, their own prejudices and views. More than that, BBB fans gave great importance to the way they were perceived by other fans. Gaining respect inside the community was crucial for their experience as such.

Factors like the type of perspective used to comment on Big Brother (ironic, emotive, game/strategy, etc.), the moral and ethical values used to evaluate the housemates, the perception of how Rede Globo plays its role as Big Brother's producer, the prestige gained in terms of external media exposure (articles in newspapers, gossip magazines, etc.), and the total number of active commentators in the blog (the last two factors applying basically to bloggers) are determinants for the status held by the fan inside the community. This is a space where, for three months once a year, thousands of people meet to discuss the reality show, and issues around it. During this process they exchange ideas, build reputations, make friendships, form alliances and develop rivalries. Although trivial gossiping constitutes a relevant share of discussions there, debates sometimes go beyond immediate Big Brother narratives, touching themes relevant to the formation of Brazilian society. Net.BBB is a very complex community with different agendas driving its interactions.

If we can call it a new type of public sphere, *i.e.* a space where the exchange of views on issues of public relevance can take place so a public opinion can be constituted, remains to be debated. It is true that these exchanges are sometimes limited in scope, not mentioning their lack of face-to-face interaction, a feature considered crucial by Peter Dahlgren in the formation of a public sphere (2000, p.20). But it is impossible to deny that this is a new type of media phenomenon that presents new opportunities and challenges for the audience researcher, and as such deserves to be further explored.

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the posts and comments in the blog. ADM once declared spending over R\$ 6000 per year (almost £2000) just to pay for hardware maintenance and software license of the BBB.Lua forum.

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