

## **New genres in commercial television and their effect on public opinion.**

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The Big Brother genre of TV programs suggest critical questions for the labor of the Council of Europe in favor of quality and dignity of contents. These programs have been successful in all the audiovisual markets across Europe. Different versions of the Big Brother format have been broadcast in United Kingdom (by Channel 4, known as being one of the highest quality European broadcasters) and in France (where the French version “Loft Story” received the strictest regulation from the audiovisual authorities). Similar programs garnered mass audiences and sparked heated controversies in Southern and Eastern Europe. The same happened across cultural borders when these programs reached Turkish television.

In all cases, the format of the programs have been adapted in order to gain as much audience as possible. The two Spanish editions achieved an audience of 69% of the population in 2000 and of 60% in 2001.<sup>1</sup> A European poll shows that around 61% of Spaniards admitted to having watched the program at least one time. Only Italians (70%) and Germans (65%) showed higher audience rates. In Sweden, Denmark and the USA, the rates were around 55%, while the lowest figures can be found in Holland (44%) and Great Britain (39%).<sup>2</sup>

These programs have been labeled as reality TV, reality shows, docudramas or socio-games. These tags all highlight commonalities among the new genres of commercial TV. They portray in a documentary fashion the daily “reality” of common people, who are forced to remain isolated inside a house, a bus or on an island. They include more and more spectacular contests, emotional dramatizations and physical or psychological competitions among participants. These elements have proved to be a good recipe for the most successful programs on open-air TV, not only in Europe but also in most commercialized TV systems of the world.

Some critics consider the Big Brother type of programs as symptoms of the hegemony of “trash TV”. From this point of view, these “socio-games” would be just another step further in the rampant course of degradation of popular and commercial televisions. As mentioned previously, the process overrides national audiovisual systems and cultural backgrounds. My contribution tries to clarify *how real TV type of programs take the industrial and the cultural attributes of the so called “trash TV” to its most extreme forms and how this might affect public opinion and the public sphere.*

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<sup>1</sup> *El País*, June 29, 2001, p.77.

<sup>2</sup> *Diario 16*, June 7, 2001, p.16.

The new media formats of commercial TV respond to the requirements of generalist TV when competing against new thematic channels. Broadcasters must guarantee the maximum economic profit. In order to do so, they need to establish a tight and continuous link with widespread popular audiences who can not afford to pay for cable or satellite TV channels. Like any other media content, the Big Brother-type programs are both economic and social products. I begin presenting the economic figures and the processes of production of these programs. Hopefully, this will help to clarify the limitations faced by most commercialized TV in addressing low income audiences. Economic restrictions also impose shortcomes in terms of public opinion effects and in terms of popular participation in the public sphere.

My main argument is that moral and esthetical critiques against the so-called real TV programs, although legitimate, are of no use. The effects of the new genres of commercial TV upon public opinion have not been determined empirically. Thus the attacks on these kinds of programs usually take for granted prejudices about the homogenization and alienation of TV audiences. In fact, such debates are usually biased by ethical or cultural standards that are representative of elite sectors of society. Not surprisingly, these sectors have tended to denigrate not only “trash TV”, but TV in general. From my point of view, such a critical perspective tends to be elitist and paternalistic, both in the negative image of popular audiences (systematically manipulated for ideological or consumerist purposes) and the solutions advanced (close to censorship in some cases).

I’ll end my presentation advancing some regulatory measures to be taken in economic and social terms. I argue that audiovisual authorities should try to regulate the economic position and the TV status of popular audiences who have access only to generalist open-air TV. More specifically, authorities should sanction the contracts of the participants in order to avoid excesses of private images commercialization from TV companies. Also public service broadcasters should foster the possibilities for the lower segments of the population to address the general public with their own discourses, in egalitarian terms, with media professionals and the elite. On one hand, the new commercial genres demand more *regulation of the “commercialization” of intimacy and private life in which the participants of these programs engage*. Contractual arrangements must be ruled to protect the weakest part of the business, namely the ordinary people that compete by selling out their private lives.

On the other hand, public broadcasters face the challenge of learning from the success of the new genres of commercial TV. “Real TV” programs pretend to enhance the status of the popular classes, but in fact they favor economic exploitation and discriminatory practices. *Public service television should ensure that the participation of the lower sectors of the audience in these programs increases popular access to public sphere and social deliberation*. Instead, the current contracts signed by TV producers and participants tend to favor only the economic benefits for the media. They usually leave the audience without enough guarantees over the control and economic exploitation of their public images. Hopefully, some of the data and the comments of this paper would help the “reinvention of public service broadcasting,” such as the Council of Europe has proposed<sup>3</sup>.

### **Economic results and production of trash-TV**

[1] Whether the goal of maximum benefits of commercial TV in a highly competitive market leads to innovation or degradation of contents

[2] And if so, in what is the role of the audience and the participants? of the Big Brother type of

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<sup>3</sup> Group of specialists on media pluralism. “Pluralism in the multi-channel market: suggestions for regulatory scrutiny”. Study by Mr Chris Marsden. Strasbourg, 11 October 1999. p.13

programs.

First, I examine the fabulous economic results of these programs. Second, I trace the generation of the new TV formats like Big Brother. Far from being real innovations, the Big Brother is a mixture of older types of programs with tested success in commercial TV. The difference lies in the full incorporation of the public through the new technologies into a process of commercialization of audience participation. The audience either plays as TV guests or as spectators who perform as families, friends, fans or voters of the participants. But this participation is very limited (compared to the technological potentialities), and it is funneled almost exclusively to the benefit of the media. This relationship among commercial TV and its audiences raises important questions about the rights and duties of broadcasters and their publics. The truth of the images and discourses of TV reality has been put into question. And the audience has entered into a celebrity business in which there is plenty of uncertainty and severe risks of manipulation. TV guests and spectators now occupy a weak position from which to negotiate with media business the economic and symbolic returns of their TV appearances.

The Spanish version of the Big Brother gained about 10.000 million pesetas (\$) from advertisement revenues in its second season, 2001. This is the result of broadcasting around 6.000 advertisements during three months of program. Advertisements' prices doubled from the first and second seasons of the program as the audience rates increased. The TV station also earned patronage revenues (21 million per banner) and charged the firms for inserting some of their products in the images from inside the house, where participants were isolated. Tele 5, the company that bought the rights for open-air broadcasting, increased its operative benefits in 70%, compared with previous years. It also managed to take the place of its competitor (Antena 3), achieving the second highest audience in the country.

“Our goal is not to fight for the first place of audience, but to be the leaders of economic profit rentability”, stated Mikel Lejarza, General Director of Tele 5.<sup>4</sup> Big audiences are not the only thing to consider in TV economics, and one must also look at the system which extracts the highest benefits from the public. The production company (Zeppelin) gained 15% of the industrial benefits plus a merchandizing monopoly. It also hold (hired?) an agency (Telegenia) to manage the “artistic representation” of the participants and sold rights of emission for a digital TV platform (Via Digital, that gained 50.000 new customers).<sup>5</sup> Instead Tele 5 kept control over the following earnings:

- Rights of emission for the codified broadcast of a TV company operating through telephone infrastructures (Quiero TV). Via Digital and Quiero TV aired images from inside the house in “real time” 24 hours a day.
- Telephone calls from the audience. The company established 2.300 new phone-lines so the public could vote for the winner of the program. Each call was charged 136 ptas per minute. The official Web site enables tele-conferences between the participants and the public, and it charged 61 ptas per minute to each cyber-visitor.
- Tele 5 also published the official magazine of the Big Brother with an average edition of 150.000 issues (more than most political weekly magazines and three times the copies of the German version). The TV company also edited the official CD of the program (60.000 copies), it sold the most insignificant personal objects of the participants in an Internet public auction, and it monopolized the exploitation of their “rights of image” during a whole year.
- Finally, Tele 5 broadcast three short daily summaries of the life inside the house (Channel 4 and CBS broadcast only one summary), plus two longer, weekly programs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *El Mundo*, June 6, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> *Interview*, June 11, pp.16-21.

It seems hard to imagine a better system to extract more earnings from the competing companies, from the participation of the public, from the participation of the guests and by recycling the same audiovisual contents again and again. Actually, the Big Brother formula fulfills all requirements to triumph in the highly competitive market of commercial TV. Producers only generate programs when rights of emission are already sold. That is why the producers of “real TV” split the rights of emission into open-air stations and thematic channels. This way the program reaches targeted audiences, both extensive and segmented, that are respectively valuable for advertisement revenues and fees. This way competition between traditional and modern TV companies turns into symbiosis. This also helps to fight back the competition introduced by the increased number of TV channels. The resulting shortage of available audience is countered by segmenting the public into differentiated TV systems.

Average investment per program decreased from 1985 to 1990 in 40%<sup>7</sup>, this unveils the economic methods of “trash TV”: minimum investment and maximum return. Given the market conditions, the solution for open-air TV companies is the repetition of the cheapest formats with little variations, trying to seduce large audiences and gain their “loyalty.” As said above, Tele 5 broadcast three daily brief emissions of Big Brother (at 11:00, 16:15 and 21:30<sup>8</sup>), a weekly summary of one hour on prime time on Sundays and a two hours mixture of talk-show and contest-poll on Wednesdays. This was a very useful way to gain a significant audience that remained “loyal” through vertical (along the day) and horizontal (throughout the week) programming. The participants of Big Brother also appeared in many other programs of Tele 5 and produced a contagious effect with noted audience increases across the programming timetable.

As already said, 70% of the Spaniards had seen the first edition of Big Brother at least one time. The program would have achieved that goal with its first two programs of two hours. The effectiveness of the formula can be assessed by comparison against the ratings of a high valued football match (Real Madrid vs. Valencia attracted an audience rate of 62%). A film premier would need to last eight or nine hours in order to reach the 70% audience rate of Big Brother type of programs.<sup>9</sup> The capacity to gather large audiences is related to the Big Brother format that satisfies two main features that guarantee audience success. Open-air TV programs should be “familiar” and at the same time “innovative”. Presented as a “program of risk and innovation,” the Big Brother was in fact a mixture of popular genres that had lost the capacity to captivate the public. The Spanish version, *Gran Hermano*, integrated the most successful genres of commercial TV, already tested and exhausted by the broadcasters since the early 90’s when private companies entered the market.

- 1.- The South American telenovelas (soap operas) were programmed by almost all TV companies when private companies appeared. Their price was substantially lower than the North American serials, and they related to the emotional life and daily experiences of popular classes.
- 2.- The reality shows concentrated most of the domestic production during the mid-90’s. They turned commercial TV in a “para-institution” that pretended to perform the functions of some true institutions such as the police or the Church by helping common people to find lost relatives or a couple to marry. Previously unseen dimensions of the private life of popular classes filled the screens until excessive morbidity created a backlash effect.
- 3.- Domestic sitcoms and series were produced and broadcast in the late 90’s to substitute for the

<sup>6</sup> These data have been taken, from Charo Lacalle. 2001. *El espectador televisivo. Los programas de entretenimiento*. Barcelona: Gedisa, pp.153-170.

<sup>7</sup> See Giuseppe Richeri. *La transición de la televisión. Análisis del audiovisual como empresa de comunicación*. Barcelona: Bosch, p.81. Original version: *La TV che conta*, 1993. Bolonia: Baskerville.

<sup>8</sup> The night summary was just a repetition of the morning one.

<sup>9</sup> Lacalle, *Ibid.* p. 159.

telenovelas and to surpass their limited female audiences.

4.- Different versions of TV games and contests were tested during the 90's, with increased doses of public participation (appearances of the relatives of the participants, different ways of voting for the winner) and ever increasing dramatics (ever harder trials). The higher the prizes, the less sophisticated abilities required to become a winner, and the more stimuli for the public to identify with the contestants.

5.- The sensational information shows about delinquency and marginal worlds, or the pink programs of celebrities scandals searched for strong emotions in daily lives of the lowest and highest classes.

6.- Finally, the former forms of popular TV journalism integrated talk-shows, where the words and debates of the public replaced the crude images of former reality shows.

Each of these genres tended to homogenize the programs of all broadcasters but only during two or three years.<sup>10</sup> This provides evidence of the continuous search for audience by TV stations. But the changing program offerings also point to the fast audience saturation—and quick boredom-- with such programs. Big Brother is the first TV product planned to be broadcast just for two or three months. As I argued in a rather polemic article, this program recognizes its short lifespan, knowing that the audience would abandon it if lasted longer.<sup>11</sup> No surprise. Far from being innovative, Big Brother is a cheaper and mixed version of previous genres presented with new packaging. The wrapping paper is new but contents are old, investments are smaller and audience commodization is higher than ever before.

We can consider the economic and production benefits of the Big Brother type of programs compared to daily fiction (telenovelas and domestic serials), TV contests and popular journalism (reality shows, talk-shows and sensational news programs about marginal or celebrities' lives). *Gran Hermano* included elements of all these genres but designed in a more profitable formula.

Compared to telenovelas and the domestic serials, the Big Brother format saves investment in salaries of actors, actresses and their managers. Each Spanish participant of the first version would have gained between 7.000 and 10.000 pesetas per day for being filmed 24 hours. With such cheap audiovisual material, Tele 5 broadcast around 128 hours of recycled images during three months.<sup>12</sup> No sit-com or serial can be exploited in such a manner. Expenditures on different stage sets and open air locations were also avoided. Furthermore, no script was needed in advance, since it was the result of combining images and scenes in “meaningful” stories of love, friendship, competition or hate among the participants.

Tele 5 hired several Venezuelan writers specialized in telenovelas to invent the script. One of them, Gilda Santana, revealed some advantages of the new formula: “What you see is real and true. It overcomes the imagination of any scriptwriter. What we do choose is the way in which we tell the story to the spectator.” She implicitly recognizes that the new genre takes from the participants an enormous quantity of images which will be taken as “real and true” by the audience. The “documentary” quality of the images enhances their alleged value. Two actors kissing each other means no novelty, as opposed to two “common persons” kept isolated inside a house and subjected to public scrutiny. After images are collected, continues Santana, “they are dramatized in love or conflict scripts” centered on one of the characters, while the others play secondary roles”.<sup>13</sup> The fact that the participants of *Gran Hermano* must vote the person who has to abandon the house every week triggers the main script of the telenovelas: the falsehood and

<sup>10</sup> See the *Informes de la Comunicación* of those years, published by Fundesco: Madrid.

<sup>11</sup> Víctor Sampedro. 2000. “Vampiros, mercaderes y grandes hermanos”. *El Viejo Topo*, núm. 144, oct. pp. 37-43.

<sup>12</sup> This time does not include the many images of *Gran Hermano* and the participants appearances in other programs of Tele 5.

fragility of personal relations. Trials that maintained the participants “active” avoided boredom, but some were of dubious taste.

Another advantage of Big Brother, compared to daily life fictional genres (classic telenovelas, sit-coms and TV serials) is that it overrides audience clusters based on gender, generational or age criteria. The program replicates the main theme of fictional TV based on the complications of emotional life and daily experiences in both subjective and collective terms. Everything they show is “so usual” and “common” that audience identification can be easily prompted, with the only shortcoming being that it can not be broadcast for very long periods. The unique goal of the relation with the audience here is to take as much images and advertising revenues as possible. Afterwards, the public will be ready for stronger sensations of recycled programs of the Big Brother type.

Compared to traditional quiz shows and TV contests, the Big Brother uses a much higher number of potential participants in the selection processes (1.700 candidates in the first Spanish version). Tele 5 asked to those chosen an almost unlimited devotion: 29 cameras and 60 microphones registered all their acts and conversations, all the while they were kept inside a small house with unlocked doors. But freedom of movement was clearly curtailed. The rules of the Spanish version stated that abandoning the house could be done only with the permission of the TV station and after the farewell scenes were taped. More importantly, the participants might have thought that they only offered to the broadcasters a few days or weeks in the present, but they also risked public scrutiny of their pasts. Two female participants were blamed by sensationalist media for having practiced prostitution. Both women abandoned the house, one “expelled” by the audience and the other after the director of the program contacted her with this news “from outside” and filmed all her reactions.

The participants sold their present privacy and also that of their families. The selling included the most intimate parts of their pasts and their next future as well. The producers allowed them no public appearance or contact with other media without previous permission. This period of monopoly upon private and intimate information and public image rights began with the selection process and lasted during a whole year.

Life conditions inside the Gran Hermano house have been criticized in Spain for the lack of hygiene and the extreme temperature (heated on purpose so participants would wear few clothes). Surprisingly enough, most public controversies addressed the unfair treatment of the “guests” towards the pets (a few hens and a dog). Animal rights associations voiced complaints over this issue but said nothing about human rights. The latter were hardly invoked related to the “voluntary” human participants. The conductor of the program stated that she did not feel “the slightest moral conflict, because the participants enjoy total freedom.”<sup>14</sup>

Commercial TV makes business not only with the participants inside the house, but also with their families and friends (who supposedly are also subjected to contracts) and with a larger audience whose participation is always charged through phone calls and Internet access. None of them enjoy enough guarantees in their relations with the media: Participants can not control (they do not even know) the image that the TV station is projecting of them nor the information that other media can make public. Some private information (i.e. the results of the psychological tests) was made available over the Internet. The families usually perform inside a talk-show format, and all of them suddenly enter into the fame business under uncertain conditions and

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<sup>13</sup> Declaraciones recogidas por Fabra Mata, J. 2000. “Gran hermano. ¿Qué encierra la jaula?”. Course paper of the subject: *Medios de Comunicación y Manipulación*. UNED, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p.9.

little defense. The spectators must pay for voting, and there is no external agency controlling the fairness of the outcome. Moreover, phone calls and Internet chats are important venues of information about audiences for the broadcasting station. This way Tele 5 adjusted advertisement placement, the “script” and the profile of the “loser” of each week. After this, there is little doubt that the so called public participation in these kinds of contests is subjected to contractual excesses and dubious fairness.

When compared to popular TV journalism, the Big Brother formula escapes from the marginal worlds of reality-shows and talk-shows. Therefore wider audiences are addressed, from kids and adolescents to aged population. Compared to information about established celebrities, the new commercial TV also deals in a more advantageous way. To begin with, these new celebrities are their own manufactures. Therefore TV stations need neither “paparazzi” nor to pay for the public use of private images. In this way, TV continues to act as the celebrity maker it has always been, but now it also performs as the artistic manager of their invented celebrities. The new type of celebrities becomes much more manageable and profitable. Their public image is in hands of the TV stations which also use them as “guests” in another programs, especially in talk shows and late night shows. Broadcasters also earn the money from each public appearance by the participants in public relations and promotional activities. As already said, TV companies become multi-media firms that distribute their newly-coined celebrities in CD ROMs, Web pages, fan magazines and films.<sup>15</sup> Broadcasters even owned the personal properties that the participants used inside the house to offer them on the Web for public sale.

One must remember that some of the above excess is surpassed by more recent programs of the Big Brother type. The French program “Les enchainés” presents four men who are chained day and night. “Boot camp” groups participants into military commandos that must stay awake for three days. The NBC “Fear Factor” in U.S.A. offers \$50.000 for laying down into a coffin full of snakes or for eating rat soup. Open-air TV stations in North America have fostered competition of these productions and curtailed investments in more highly regarded sit-coms and serials. The companies usually fall into illegal practices such as “counter-programming.”<sup>16</sup>

We face a new relation between audiences and television in which both parts seem to assume as legitimate the trading of intimacy, privacy and public images in exchange for TV fame. But resources of control are very unequally distributed among media professionals and their “guests.” It seems sensible to ask for some measures to protect the reputation of the participants and the sensitivity of the audience. But the moral standards to be applied are very difficult to establish because both participants and spectators are voluntary. From another point of view, some of the excesses pointed out above express that open-air commercial TV has already turned its audience into its labor force. First defined as consumers of advertisements, now they become fragile stars that the media can easily construct and destroy.

In my opinion the core problems here do not involve traditional disputes between freedom of expression and privacy rights. In the Spanish public debate only Tele 5 employees invoked the freedom of expression to actually defend freedom of media business.<sup>17</sup> And as predicted, not a single participant invoked his or her privacy rights while on TV. On the other hand, the “moral panic” that the Big Brother has provoked in some countries could be countered by applying to these programs the same general limits already established for open-air TV content: no obscenity

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<sup>15</sup> The audience failure of the film *El gran marciano*, based on *Gran Hermano* might be proving some or all of these thesis: the caducity of this audiovisual material made for being consumed and abandoned, the saturation of the public, its resistance to pay for viewing such low products or the impossibility of the film industry to emulate the TV stations with this type of content.

<sup>16</sup> *El País*, 6 September, 2001, p.53.

<sup>17</sup> See declarations in Sampedro Ibid.

images in prime time; no racist, homophobic or xenophobic expressions; or no incitement to consume alcohol and tobacco. Many of us might not share the values promoted by these programs but censorship could be not only unconstitutional but also would incite viewers to tune into cable and satellite stations offering these programs.

The commercialization of intimacy and privacy depicted here is not an illegitimate intrusion of the media but a business, both for the stations and for the participants. When they later assume to perform a media role, they risk losing control over their private lives. When they accept being recorded 24 hours a day, they give up to the establishment of limits between their public and intimate exposure. But it would be unfair to consider them as other celebrities or public figures and conclude that they deserve no more protection. The suicide of a Swedish participant after having been taken out of the contest is a dramatic example of evident risks. They derive from illegitimate or frivolous use/construction/exploitation of TV images of ordinary people. Many of them were never exposed to the media attention before, and they lacked the expertise and the resources to protect themselves effectively.

Considered simply as a contract, the relation between TV producers and participants is one of labor. It deserves to be subjected to the same conditions that apply to other media professionals and actors. This points to some of the restrictions imposed to the program by some audiovisual authorities, such as the obligation to concede pauses from media exposure taken in France and Germany. The contracts could also implement a more detailed description of the specific information that can be aired and impose secrecy on potentially damaging data. For example, the psychological tests of the Spanish participants were made available in the Web. Self-regulation of TV companies seems no remedy. The former provisions were not taken in order to enhance the alleged status of the viewers as inquisitors of the participants. And increased competition seems to generate more morbid and extreme versions of the program.

### **Effects on public opinion and public sphere**

[1] Whether the Big Brother type of programs alienate and homogenize the public  
[2] and what is the status of common people in the highly commercialized public sphere that this type of programs create.

“These broadcasts, being in fact a glorification of confession/disclosure under “coercion,” stupidity, boredom and primitivism, show and, even worse, promote attitudes and behaviors that may have a significant, in the NBC’s opinion, decidedly unfavorable effect on molding the views, attitudes and standards of behavior of some viewers.

People with minimum intellectual needs, lose family and social ties, become embedded in the minds of the masses and heroes of the general public. Showing such behaviors is in contradiction with the cultural and positive role which television can have.”<sup>18</sup>

This is an official statement of the National Broadcasting Council of Poland in response to a questionnaire of the Council of Europe. It is a clear example of some critiques that blame programs like Big Brother for being socially damaging. Nevertheless, there is still no empirical evidence of such an effect on public opinion. A more sophisticated analysis has to distinguish between the effects upon the participants and upon the general public. We can review empirical studies made about some TV genres tightly related to the Big Brother format (quiz shows, TV contests and talk shows) searching for indications of the most feasible effects of “real TV” programs.

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<sup>18</sup> “Compilation of responses to the questionnaire on “Big Brother” type programmes”. Secretariat memorandum prepared by the Directorate General of Human Rights. Council of Europe, p.3.



The main effects upon participants are symbolic and practical. The first effect is called “status conferral” of a public identity to common people. The founders of Media Sociology, Lazarsfeld and Merton, had argued that media appearances “testify that one has arrived, that one is important enough to have been singled out from the large anonymous masses, that one’s behavior and opinions are significant enough to require public notice”.<sup>19</sup> Empirical research done on participants of talk shows and quiz shows support this thesis.<sup>20</sup> Some authors even talk of a sense of empowerment of the public who feels “chosen” and “worthy” after appearing in TV. They might even become leaders of their social circle.

In their encounters with other people, TV participants tend to feel special and a sense of mastery over the medium. As much as their TV participation follow, a second practical effect can take place. Changes in self-esteem and TV appearances lead to other TV offerings. This way they might join the elite community of those who appear on screen. As a matter of fact, some participants of the Big Brother type of programs have pursued media careers as TV conductors, singers or fashion models. They might not be the rule, but they can not be taken as exceptions. Another important characteristic is that these effects are extended to families, peer groups or social circles of the participants since they play secondary roles in the program.

The effects upon the general public can not be assessed, since no empirical study is available yet. But theory and research done on fictional TV point to audience projection or identification. Imitative behavior might be limited just to language expressions or fashion trends lasting as long as the program is on air. One could talk of audience alienation (which is a quite strong criticism to be made) only if the identity of the participants and of the public is assumed as proper or if the job of media professionals is considered as a moral or civic action. A good counter example comes from the first edition of *Gran Hermano*, which was announced as a “sociological experiment”. Hundreds of e-mails sent to Tele 5 denounced such a strategy. The director of the program was teased and asked to direct a good and emotional telenovela, instead of a scientific experiment.

There were fan clubs in support of some of the participants, but they should be considered as games of imagination and desire of transitory nature, many times fostered or even financed by TV industry.<sup>21</sup> Tele 5 sent three daily messages to around 20.000 people through their mobile phones. There were almost 120.000 daily visits to the official Web page.<sup>22</sup> The commercial TV formats and their use of new technologies make possible for ordinary people to exchange information, value judgments and moral tenets concerning themselves, their life circumstances and their preferences. These programs usually arouse gossip and rumor as forms of social conversation.

“Real TV” can be taken as a symptom and not as the cause of already existing social pathologies. Moreover, there are many indications that popular TV derives its popularity from two basic fears and anxieties of postmodern societies: The repulsion of a homogeneous, standardized mass society and the distrust for excessive individualism and anomie<sup>23</sup>. *Gran Hermano* might have allowed many Spaniards to enjoy an “elective community” while following groups or sub-groups

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<sup>19</sup> P.F. Lazarsfeld & R. Merton. 1948. “Mass Communication, popular taste and organized social action”. In L. Bryson (Ed.) *The communication of ideas*. Pp. 95-118. New York: Harper, p.101.

<sup>20</sup> See Patricia J. Priest. 1996. “Gilt by association: Talk show participants’ televisually enhanced status and self-esteem”. In D. Grodin and T.R. Lindloff (Eds.) *Constructing the self in a mediated world*. London: Sage, pp.68-83. Eric Macé. 1997. “La televisión del pobre. Sociología del público participante: una relación encantada con la televisión”. In D. Dayan (Ed.) *En busca del público*. Barcelona: Gedisa, pp. 185-206.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Ien Ang. 1996. *Living room wars. Rethinking media audiences for a postmodern world*. London: Routledge.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. Lacalle, p.200.

<sup>23</sup> See Dominique Wolton. 1990. *Elogio del gran público*. Barcelona: Gedisa, p.114.

of participants, their families and other fans together with the program makers. Not surprisingly the female director of the Spanish version changed her initial role as “sociologist” for the most conventional one of “mother” of the whole family.

Public participation in the new genres of commercial TV has been considered by some authors as a sort of social activism.<sup>24</sup> But these conclusions are derived from empirical studies of call-in or live talk-shows dealing with political and social issues. Even in these cases, it is not clear at all if the popular discourses interact with elite disputes or provoke any institutional response. The main point I would like to make now is that the real problem is not commercial TV in and of itself (a legitimate business while limited by basic human rights) or the alleged effects of the most extreme contents. Once basic human rights are granted in the contracts among participants and TV professionals, the main regulatory concern is that the public broadcasting systems link the popular sectors of the population to the social, political and cultural realms. Because there are many indications that the “definition of the public made by commercial televisions is redundant with the lack of social participation of the public.”<sup>25</sup>

Media participation is ambiguous, potentially empowering and transgressing, while the risks of containment and trivialization are great. Popular TV presents a double face. It performs simultaneously as a medium of social control and as a potential tool for the social empowerment of the audience. Considering the Big Brother type of programs, they could be analyzed as symbolic prisons or convents where punishment and confession serve to exonerate, punish or normalize the participants behaviors (and their followers’). From a different perspective, TV functions as a potential vehicle of empowerment of popular tastes and experiences through self-expression and dialogue with elites and institutions. The social control function highlights the risk that the most commercialized televisions become “cultural ghettos” for those who can not afford to pay for supplementary channels. The empowerment function, instead, points to the participatory and interactive features of the new commercial TV, which should be activated by public broadcasters without the restrictions imposed by the maximum economic return.

The media professionals of the Big Brother type of program should keep in mind or recognize the falsity of four implicit arguments that they usually use to defend their “public service” function.

- 1.- Because of current segmentation of the TV market, popular expression does not equate interaction. Popular classes are flooded by Big Brother types of programs, while global elites follow CNN. Both audience sectors remain separate and increasingly distant concerning available information, their aesthetic and ideological tenets.
- 2.- Popular expression does not always bring deliberation, it depends on the type of discourse that media professionals promote among their TV guests and the audience. It could be that commercial TV promotes the social deliberation that public broadcasters should breed.
- 3.- Individual expression does not lead to collective action, simply because there is an enormous distance between speaking and acting, moreover if most audience projections remain restricted to subjective and emotional stimuli.
- 4.- Emotional expression by itself leads to politics of identity (usually turned into consumerist fashions) and not to public policies designed for collective purposes. The latter demand a deliberation with elites and politicians based on rationality and expertise.

Media professionals and TV owners usually forget these arguments or turn them upside down when responding to the critiques addressed to “real TV” programs. This way they can invoke

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt. 1994. *Talk on television: Audience participation and public discourse*. London: Routledge. Benjamin page. 1996. *Who deliberates? Mass media in modern democracies*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Zhongdang Pan and Gerald M. Kosicki. 1197. “Talk show exposuer as an opinion activity”. *Political Communication*, 14, 371-388.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* Macé, p. 191.

“freedom of expression” and “public service” goals when they actually aim to advance their professional careers and the profits of the media enterprises.

Mere economic strategies are being implemented at the cost of closing venues of public participation in the new genres of commercial TV. We can point to four processes that became clear in the two editions of Gran Hermano:

1.- Public debate was restricted to the limits of official consensus. In Gran Hermano 2000 a Basque activist managed to enter into the house where participants were kept to demand the reunion of terrorist prisoners in prisons closer to their relatives (an initiative promoted by the Basque Parliament). Tele 5 did not broadcast a single image of the incident and only a snapshot was aired by the 24 hours emissions of paid TV. This proved that censorship also existed in the so-called “direct” TV. Besides the script changes in open-air programs, there was a delay of a few seconds between the taping and the broadcasting of images of the later TV companies.

Another example of public debate limitations comes from Gran Hermano 2001. After the disappointing audience ratings of the first week, a case of “domestic violence” inside the house was “built” by Tele 5. A few images of a rather faked quarrel between two fiancés helped the program makers to blame the male for violent and racist behavior. All this was made against the public defense of his female counterpart. In fact, the issue of domestic violence had gained visibility in the institutional discourse since 1997, overflowing the media with news and political initiatives.<sup>26</sup> Then, despite declarations of the program director no innovative public issue emerged from Gran Hermano. On the contrary, the debate was kept restricted with manipulative audiovisual maneuvers as a personal dispute. However, higher rates of audiences followed this incident.

2.- Big Brother type of programs make an instrumental and one-way use of their alleged interactivity. New commercial TV searches for a constant relation with its the audience and promotes pragmatic communication hosting spectators in the programs or bringing their conversations and daily affairs in.<sup>27</sup> As we have seen open-air TV needs to constantly verify the audience ratings in order to establish advertising rates. It also needs to gather as much information as possible from the public audience to adjust both program schedules and advertising placement. Phone calls, messages to cellular terminals and Internet were used in Gran Hermano mainly for these purposes.

These new technological links became critical to developing the profiles of the characters of the telenovela. As mentioned before, producers and broadcasters gained enormous amounts of money because the interactive channels were costly for customers and served as platforms to multiply merchandise sales. In fact, this might be the first time in TV history when marketing research is perfectly adjusted to become a tool of legitimization of TV stations (they primed the message to the viewer: “you count, you are taken into account”) and a venue for immediate economic benefits. Despite the Gran Hermano promises, audiences were more intensively observed and monitored rather than being allowed to become omnipotent observers.

3.- The new commercial TV genres blur the public references of reality and replace it by self-references just in search of more TV consumption.

Popular audiences and the public in general has had TV as the almost unique point of reference

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<sup>26</sup> Víctor Sampedro. 2000. *Opinión pública y democracia deliberativa*. Madrid: Istmo, pp. 129-130.

<sup>27</sup> Omar Calabrese. 1987. *L'età neobarroca*. Bari: Laterza. Umberto Eco. 1983. “TV: la trasparenza perduta”. In *Sette anni di desiderio*. Milán: Bompiani.

for social realities. The new television talks more about itself and about its contacts with the public than about external reality. In fact, most programs tend to attract a rather disappointed and transitory attention from the audience. The attention span should be just enough to be captured by audience rating systems (called peplemeter) and to “sell” potential consumers to advertising companies. Therefore commercial TV broadcast a built in reality to keep the audience tentatively tuned to the whole program schedule. And that’s all, because activities other than TV watching would diminish audience rates.

I have presented several ways in which a fabricated TV reality was presented as actually happening and being directly observed by the audience. This also included the audience responses. During Gran Hermano 2001, Tele 5 paid common people to receive the first participant who came out the house. These images supposedly showed the “sociological phenomena” that the program generated. Imitative behavior made this investment unnecessary in the future. Another example comes from Germany where the Endemol producer was denounced for having signed with the TV stations the exclusive right to determine the winner of the program regardless the popular votes. These facts prove the validity of the next proposition, which in fact summarizes the three previous ones.

4.- Open-air TV has become the almost unique agency of the public visibility of the popular classes. As already argued, low income audiences have almost no access to paid TV channels, and they do not enjoy the resources and opportunities of higher social sectors to debate their issues in egalitarian terms.

Some dangers exposed here derive simply that commercial TV is an unregulated agency of public visibility with little care for the consequences of its activity upon individuals and societies. Increased media visibility heightens at the same time the vulnerability and the symbolic power of those who attract media attention.<sup>28</sup> Illegitimate or unforeseen media intrusion goes hand in hand with the TV status conferral effect already mentioned. In this context it seems evident that the popular audiences are more vulnerable than professional celebrities and dignitaries who also trade with TV their private lives. And it seems a democratic pre-requisite that public broadcasting systems should protect and promote fair media participation among the more vulnerable citizens.

In line with the trends of commercial TV, public broadcasting systems need to abandon paternal attitudes and leave space for the audience self-representation. But the goals and the normative standards of new participatory programs must differ. The pragmatic goal of public broadcasters should be to complement (and hopefully to gain terrain to) commercial TV, since the latter basically offers discriminatory and instrumental forms of public participation. Finally, the institutional goal of public broadcasters is not only economic efficiency but to foster the conversion of the personal matters of the citizens into sociopolitical issues.

Public service TV should expand its audience by opening new technologies of communication for public contact and participation. New versions of the most popular TV genres can be inserted in public service programming. The aim would be to socialize citizens’ problems expressed not only in terms of elites but also in the words of ordinary people. Some public and non-profit media enterprises already broadcast talk shows directed by friendly experts and respectful program hosts who help to establish horizontal communication with TV guests and the general public. It also would be interesting to see the presence of institutional authorities in these programs in order to promote public officials’ responsiveness to public opinion. This could be also achieved by deliberative programs with institutional figures where the public interviewed or

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<sup>28</sup> John B. Thompson. 1998. *Los medios y la modernidad*. Barcelona: Paidós.

addressed them with their comments. A more personal and human view of public authorities, not only based on financial or sex scandals, is required to be integrated into regular information. The aim would be to portray political conflicts not as power struggles by any means but pointing out the distance between official discourse and the reality in the streets. The public could be presented in those programs through representatives of the organized civil society and not exclusively by individual citizens. It would be a solution against the extremely individualistic, instrumental and subjective view of political participation that now prevails. Nothing impedes the above issues and characters from entering into new quiz shows and TV contests that would recognize the value of popular knowledge and anonymous heroes.

There also exist programs of the Big Brother type with educational and social values that can be taken as models to be implemented. In the U.K. participants are invited to live in past periods such as the Iron Age, the happy decade of the 30's or the Victorian Age. German TV has made a version of primitive life in the woods. The Austrian experience also seems interesting. The participants of "Taxi Orange" work as taxi drivers and maintain with the customers interesting debates about the nation's daily life.<sup>29</sup> Last but not least, public service broadcasting should serve as platform for the regulatory agencies and media consumers' associations that uncover and denounce the excesses of commercial TV. There is no reason for these kinds of programs to remain restricted to high quality paid channels or to the critical pedagogy of the media. As the Brazilian musician Gilberto Gil sings: "o povo sabe o que quer / mas o povo também quer o que não sabe" (Common people knows what they want / but common people also want what they do not know). If viewers would recognize the exploitative drive and the falsity of much "real TV" they would not watch so much trash TV. If general public would find in the public service broadcasters a closer reality depicted in participatory and egalitarian terms, they would demand these programs. We should not forget that Big Brother can be aired only over a three month, it would seem that afterwards this trash TV begins to stink.

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<sup>29</sup> "Programmes genre "Big Brother" et la dignité humaine", internal report of the Secretary of the Council of Europe based upon a questionnaire sent to 23 regulatory authorities of the audiovisual sector in 19 States members of the Permanent Committee.