

Who is watching Big Brother and why?

Julie Hyland
19 August 2000

The TV programme *Big Brother* first aired in Britain on July 14. It involves 10 strangers sharing a house for 10 weeks, their every action monitored by closed circuit cameras and relayed 24 hours a day to millions of viewers via a dedicated web site. Edited highlights can be followed daily on Channel 4 television. Each week one of the participants is evicted by phone vote, following secret nominations by their housemates. The last one remaining wins £70,000.

The self-proclaimed “television experiment” was piloted in Holland last year, becoming the second most watched programme in the Netherlands in 1999. Versions have been run in Germany and Spain. On July 5, the US variant got under way.

The programme is considered so successful that spin-offs are already in production. One, *Chains of Love*, follows a young woman shackled to four men she has selected from a pool of 100. Each week she releases one until she is left chained to the one deemed the most desirable. At the end of *Big Brother's* run in the UK, *Jailbreak* is to commence. Selected participants will be incarcerated in a “prison” as viewers watch their ordeal and there will be a £250,000 reward for the first person that manages to escape.

The title *Big Brother* draws directly on George Orwell's classic novel 1984, but there are several vital differences. In the novel, *Big Brother* symbolises a monolithic state apparatus snooping on every aspect of its unwilling citizens' lives in order to control them. In the TV programme the viewers at home are *Big Brother* and the watched-over are volunteers.

The programme has been compared to Peter Weir's *The Truman Show*, but more closely resembles Ron Howard's *Ed TV*. Truman does not know that he is being watched, whilst Ed consents in order to become popular, although soon horrified by the consequences of his “fame”. *Ed TV* was meant to warn of the dangers of blurring reality and fiction and the cult of celebrity. *Big Brother* celebrates both. The idea is an extension of self-debasement programs such as the *Jerry Springer* show and the infamous one-off US production, *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?*.

Big Brother viewers tune in to see the participants manipulate their housemates, or to find out if any are having sex and with whom. Interest in such prurient details is fuelled by the tabloid press, which devote page after page to the previous evening's highlights and run campaigns to ditch certain individuals.

More than 45,000 people in Britain volunteered to take part in their own public humiliation on the programme. Those who won a place are open enough about their motives: besides the prize money, there is the possibility of fame and lucrative employment in the media or entertainment business. In a world where most celebrities are famous for doing nothing more than exhibiting themselves, *Big Brother* appeals to a certain social type that is desperate for “success”—however that is defined and at whatever cost. Newspaper articles talk excitedly of how the winner of the Dutch programme became a talk show star, whilst another who had left the show voluntarily “even” became a Playboy model.

Big Brother is big money. It has made its creator, Dutchman John de Mol, a multimillionaire, with his company Endemol Entertainment netting £100 million worldwide from selling the show in 20 countries. Endemol has now been brought for £3.3 billion by Spain's Telefonica, with de Mol set to be made chief executive for media and the Internet. As for the TV stations, the programme is cheap to produce and has proven popular, particularly amongst younger viewers. As this is the audience most highly prized by the advertising industry due to its “purchasing power”, the TV channels involved hope to land some big contracts.

Each version of *Big Brother* contains an even mix of male and female participants, ranging from “high fliers”, such as the recently deposed private school-educated stock broker Nick in Britain, to the obligatory former stripper/porn model. This supposed cross-section of people is meant to account for the programme's success. Not only is this supposedly “cutting-edge” experimental broadcasting, but also it offers, we are told, a “slice of real life”.

Far from providing a break from run of the mill TV, *Big Brother* follows the same pat formulas. The participants are all pleasant looking twenty and thirty something's. No one too fat or too old is allowed to spoil the picture. There is a feel of respectable suburbia about the whole thing—hardly surprising given that those participating are in the main middle class boys and girls, and are financially and/or personally independent enough to be able to take three months out of the daily grind.

The programme has been described as “water-cooler television—programs that seep so deeply into the public consciousness that they become essential topics of workplace conversation”. This stands reality on its head. To the extent that

Big Brother can be considered successful on these terms, it is precisely because it doesn't penetrate, let alone disturb or challenge consciousness.

That *Big Brother* has found an audience is the result of a generally conformist climate, which routinely chloroforms people with the minutiae of celebrities' lives. Inadvertently the show points to the emptiness that lies at the heart of this phenomena—the voyeuristic fascination with the antics of a bunch of wannabe celebrities resulting from people trying to escape their own largely unfulfilling lives.

More fundamentally, the show reinforces ideological nostrums that have become a staple diet over the last two decades. In every country there has been a significant redistribution of wealth in favour of the rich. The numbers of millionaires and billionaires has grown in direct proportion to the numbers condemned to lives of misery and hardship. Social provisions have been cut back in order to provide tax breaks for the rich and major corporations. A necessary accompaniment to this has been the revival of theories of the “survival of the fittest”, whereby poverty, ill health and other disadvantages are deemed the outcome of individual failings or weaknesses rather than existing social relations.

Big Brother's producers glorify this dog-eat-dog mentality, offering a type of Social Darwinism combined with a popularity contest.

The participants in *Big Brother* are completely cut off from the outside world, allowed neither access to television, newspapers, computers, telephones or radio, nor contact with relatives or friends. They do not work or leave the house and its grounds. In this completely artificial environment, they are set meaningless tasks for completion and topics for discussion—such as “your first romance”—before being asked to vote secretly for one of their number to get the axe. One German newspaper accurately described the “group relations” this produces: “like rats in a cage, the five women and five men are thrown together and must battle for survival.”

Psychologists have attacked the programme creators' claims that they are providing a sociological insight into the “interaction of human beings within the process of the group”. The British Psychological Society is investigating complaints that the two university professors who appear on the show to “interpret” the actions of individual participants are guilty of professional misconduct. Dr. David Miller, research director at the media research institute at Stirling University, said: “What we are seeing night after night is a game show, not a serious attempt to explore human nature.... These two professors are lending credibility to a crass and exploitative gimmick.”

Big Brother's producers can only be said to have portrayed a “real world” in miniature from the standpoint that it reflects their own social values and prejudices. De Mol insists that there is no line a person would not cross in order to ensure his/her own personal advancement. He smugly informed the *Daily Mirror* that he was “100 percent sure that if we announce a

show where we say we'll take 10 people and put them in an airplane and there are nine parachutes and one person is probably going to die and the nine who live will all get \$1 million, we will get enough contestants for a daily show.” According to such reactionary social theories, selfishness, greed and petty egoism are simply the inevitable expression of “human nature”, which can never be changed, except that each individual becomes more ruthless than the next.

This is former Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's dictum that “there is no such thing as society” brought to life as entertainment. There is more than an element of self-serving justification in this by de Mol and his wealthy backers. How can you criticise me for exploiting people, the multimillionaire asks? Wouldn't you do the same in my position—doesn't my programme prove it?

Even the smallest display of opposition to this reactionary philosophy is expunged. To the dismay of the programme's makers, the Spanish version of *Big Brother* began with a meeting between the participants where they agreed not to vote for anyone's removal and that whoever finally won would donate the prize money to the handicapped daughter of one of the contestants. This did not prevent them from being individually “purged”.

Big Brother is not as popular with the public as the programme's self-generating media hype would have us believe. The majority of people find de Mol's mercenary perceptions of human relations revolting. The viewing audience in Germany and Spain fell as the show went on. Despite the huge amount of publicity for the show in the UK, Channel 4's viewing audience has never passed five million. Many people recognise that the show's very set-up denies expression to different, even noble, human emotions—such as solidarity, friendship, cooperation—and that there is something very distasteful about the whole exercise. And that is an entirely healthy reaction.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact