REALITY TELEVISION – MERGING THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL

AMIR HETSRONI
EDITOR

Chapter 6

TALKING ABOUT BIG BROTHER: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION ABOUT A CONTROVERSIAL TELEVISION FORMAT

Helena Bilandzic and Matthias R. Hastall
Zeppelin University Friedrichshafen, Germany

At the beginning of the 21st century, episodes of the reality television show *Big Brother* were watched by millions of viewers worldwide and became the subject of countless media and interpersonal debates (Bignell, 2005). *Big Brother* was "in many ways a watershed for our understanding of media audiences" (Ross and Nightingale, 2003, p. 3), as it provoked unprecedented levels of audience ratings and audience involvement. This chapter explores the relationship between a media spectacle like *Big Brother* and interpersonal communications about such events by viewers and non-viewers. We follow Hartley's (1999) understanding of interpersonal communication as a face-to-face communication from one individual to another, in which personal characteristics, social roles and social relationships of the communicating individuals are reflected by form and content of the communication. Our perspective is not restricted to family communication (e.g., Larson, 1993), but encompasses all situations and locations in which interpersonal communication about television programs occurs.

The significance of interpersonal communication for the selection and effects of mass media offerings has been acknowledged decades ago (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet, 1944). Several scientific attempts to combine mass and interpersonal communication have been made since then, and it has been argued that "many of the richest approaches to inquiry about mass communication effects acknowledge a role for interpersonal communication in some way" (Southwell and Torres, 2006, p. 335). Interpersonal communication processes play a role in theoretical approaches like Agenda Setting (Yang and Stone, 2003), the Two-Step Flow hypothesis (Lazarsfeld, et al., 1944), and Diffusion research (Rogers, 1962). Provoking interpersonal talks is also a frequently employed strategy to boost the effectiveness of communication campaigns (e.g., Hafstad and Aaro, 1997). In the majority of communication research, however, interpersonal communication remained a rather neglected topic. In the case of *Big Brother*, interpersonal communication processes deserve a particularly thorough scientific consideration: "Viewers watch [Big Brother] for many

reasons—it's something new, you can vote people you don't like off the show—but perhaps the most striking reasons for watching [Big Brother] are that everybody else is watching and talking about it" (Hill, 2002, p. 324). After briefly exploring media consumption motives related to interpersonal communication, we will examine motives for conversations about media content in greater detail.

MEDIA CHOICES FOR INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Functional media choice approaches assume that media content differs in its ability to satisfy the needs of media users. The hypothesis that mass media offerings are sought and used as a means for subsequent interpersonal communication has been expressed repeatedly (e.g., Chaffee, 1986; Lull, 1980) and can also be directly derived from the Uses and Gratifications Approach (Blumler and Katz, 1974) and from the original Informational Utility Model (Atkin, 1973, 1985). Uses and Gratifications research acknowledges media use as a convenient way to overcome feelings of loneliness, as an activity that may involve interpersonal communication with other people during media use, and as a means for information acquisition for anticipated interpersonal communication (e.g., Wenner, 1985). The Informational Utility Model considers *communicatory uncertainty*, defined as "a cognitive state of incomplete familiarity with a potential conversation topic" (Atkin, 1973, p. 217), as a determinant of media choices. Both approaches share the assumption that interpersonal communication purposes constitute an important motive for media choices, among others. Although the functional logic of these theoretical approach received severe criticisms (McQuail, 1984; Carey and Kreiling, 1974), this interpersonal communication motive appears regularly among the most important self-reported reasons for media choices (Hastall, 2009).

MOTIVES FOR INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Interpersonal communication can occur before (pre-communicative phase), during (communicative phase), or after (post-communicative phase) exposure to media (Levy and Windahl, 1984). Conversation topics are likely to vary greatly depending on the point of time that the conversations occur: Interpretative and evaluative elements are likely to constitute the biggest share of audience comments in the communicative and post-communicative phase, while expectations about upcoming developments appear more likely in the pre-communicative phase. The diversity of potential topics reflects the range of possible motives to start or sustain conversations.

Although it is widely accepted that interpersonal communication can serve different needs at the same time, little has been done to theoretically elaborate the question why people start interpersonal communication (see Rubin, Perse, and Barbato, 1988, for an overview). Schutz's (1966) Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation theory suggests the existence of three central interpersonal needs: Inclusion (need to belong to others), control (need to exert power), and affection (need to love or be loved). Burgoon and Hale (1984) distinguish seven dimensions of relational communication: Control, intimacy, emotional

arousal, composure (self-control), similarity, formality, and task-social orientation. Based on a thorough literature review, Rubin et al. (1988) identify 18 possible motives for initiating interpersonal communication. One third of these dimensions (pleasure, affection, inclusion, escape, relaxation, and control) is empirically validated and included in the Interpersonal Communication Motives (ISM) scale (Rubin, et al., 1988).

How are these motives linked to reality TV programs like *Big Brother*? Given the highly entertaining nature of this show, motives like *entertainment* (pleasure) and *arousal-seeking* appear fairly obvious. The same holds true for *escapism*, the desire to avoid unpleasant thoughts and feelings by seeking interpersonal communication (see also Katz and Foulkes, 1962), as well as for the motives *relaxation, convenience*, and *pastime*. Considering the numerous violations of behavioral norms featured in *Big Brother* (e.g., Pawlowski, 2005), interpersonal communication can be initiated to relieve anger or frustrations about the program (*emotional expression*). Furthermore, individuals are likely to be aware of friends and family members watching the program as well; thus, *information-sharing* and *information-receiving* motives may initiate interpersonal conversations. The *Big Brother* motto "You decide!", reflecting the participatory character of this program (Holmes, 2004), can be linked to the *control* motive in the classification cited above. Feelings of *self-esteem* may play an important role too, either to the extent that the own voting decision is in line with the final voting decision, or through social comparison processes that will be discussed later.

MORAL CONSIDERATIONS AND INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The classification of interpersonal communication motives by Rubin et al. (1988) contains *social norms* for situations in which conversations are required by societal rules. In the case of *Big Brother*, we find it crucial to consider these norms for another reason as well: The main themes of reality television is "to portray subjects engaging in behaviors that tend to violate social norms" (Pawlowski, 2005, p. 1245). Social norms refer to relationships of group members to each other and can be distinguished from procedural and task norms, and also from formally established group rules (e.g., Adler and Rodman, 2006). Deviations from formal rules and informal group norms are likely to instigate emotional discussions, as these conventions constitute the grounds for social relationships. Such discussions about show elements in the mass media and in interpersonal conversations have been repeatedly reported for *Big Brother* (Bignell, 2005). A major ethical concern was that the contestants had to live under a constant surveillance of dozens of TV cameras and microphones, without any contact to the outside world. The shows' title *Big Brother* explicitly refers to the Orwellian nightmare of a society under constant surveillance, and the norm deviation was made obvious with further visual elements like depicting the CBS logo with an open eye (Kellner, 2003).

A SOCIAL COMPARISON PERSPECTIVE ON BIG BROTHER CONVERSATIONS

Selective exposure research suggests that people choose media to acquire valuable information about themselves (Knobloch-Westerwick and Hastall, 2009). Individuals have a

desire to evaluate their abilities and opinions, and people depicted in the media are likely to be a useful source for such *social comparisons* (Festinger, 1954). Two main directions of comparison processes can be distinguished, which both may lead to viewers' intensified feelings of self-enhancement or self-esteem (Wood, 1989; Wills, 1981): First, individuals can compare themselves with media personae who are in a less fortunate situation (social downward comparison) to feel better about themselves and their current situation. Second, a social upward comparison can be performed with media personae in a superior situation, in order to learn from them. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) suggests that both positive information about the own group (in-group) and negative information about out-groups can bolster feelings of self-esteem. Consequently, watching *Big Brother* and talking about the show, the contestants and its voyeuristic audience can have a self-esteem bolstering function for members of the same social group — and likely a similar effect for members of higher social groups.

MEDIA EVENTS AND GOSSIP

The *Big Brother* producers employed an extremely successful cross-media strategy that included television, print media, and internet coverage, as well as music spin-offs. *Big Brother* information belongs to the few examples of online media content, apart from pornography and financial information, for which consumers were willing to pay (Freedman, 2006). This cross-media strategy worked well in terms of public attention, which is a precondition of interpersonal communication. Another important function of the show was the potential for *gossip*, which has been labeled "an intrinsic feature of *Big Brother*" (Scannell, 2002, p. 271). Gossip, "a kind of small talk that concerns people who are not present" (From, 2006, p. 231), constitutes an important element of human communication (Thornborrow and Morris, 2004). Instead of perceiving it as a low-status or worthless form of communication, sociolinguists nowadays consider gossip as an important activity for social relationships, identification of group membership, social status, reassurance of social norms, and entertainment (Thornborrow and Morris, 2004). *Big Brother* offered countless possibilities to watch the tenants' gossip, and also allowed viewers to gossip about the contestants. The simplicity of the show and the high levels of media coverage made this possible for non-viewers as well. The *voyeuristic* nature of the program offered viewers many private insights in the contestants' lives, which further fuelled interpersonal discussions as well as passionate criticism (Rayner, Wall, and Kruger, 2004).

This brief and selective review of theoretical approaches for interpersonal communication about reality television programs illustrates the diversity of the field. Although it appears obvious that interpersonal communication can serve a variety of needs at the same time, little is known about motives that instigate conversations about a controversial reality TV show like *Big Brother*. We know *that* people talk about it a lot, but why they do so is less clear. To what extent are reality television shows sought and watched with the intention to talk about them, either during or after exposure? What types of communication about the show can be distinguished? The current investigation explores these questions in more detail and provides an empirical description of the type and the content of *Big Brother* conversations, as well as

charts connections to judgments about and exposure to the show, motives for exposure and conversation.

METHOD

Sample

A representative telephone survey with German adults and adolescents was conducted in winter 2000/2001 when the second season of Big Brother was broadcast on the German television stations RTL and RTL 2. Two thousand three hundred and fifty two valid telephone numbers were randomly drawn from electronic telephone directories. Each number was contacted up to five times. Nine hundred and fifty seven interviews were completed (response rate: 41%). Of these, 12 had to be eliminated due to missing data. This left 945 respondents for the analysis. The structure of the sample roughly corresponds to the general population (over 14 years) regarding sex (with a slight overrepresentation of women; 59% female in the sample vs. 51% in the population) and age (15 to 24 years: 18% (population: 11%); 25 to 44 years: 41% (30%), 45 to 64 years: 26% (25%) and 65+ years: 15% (17%); see Statistisches Bundesamt, 2009). However, a bias occurred with regards to the appropriate representation of different education levels: elementary/secondary school: 40% in the sample vs. 68% in the population; high school/college: 55% in the sample vs. 22% in the population. Thus, we check for differences in educational groups across all analyses and report differences whenever they occurred. The interviews were conducted by 50 trained student interviewers, who completed course requirements.

Measures

Spontaneous judgments about the show. The first seasons of *Big Brother* were accompanied by heated public controversy about the new format. Controversial topics, especially those which are morally disputable, lend themselves readily for interpersonal conversation. To capture a spontaneous evaluation of the show and have an indicator for the tendency as well as extremity of judgments, we asked respondents for their spontaneous reaction when they hear "Big Brother". This question was open-ended, and responses to it were noted verbatim by the interviewers. Later, the responses were coded into categories by two coders. The coders discussed cases of disagreement and agreed on one coding option.

Exposure to Big Brother was measured with the question "How often do you watch the daily one-hour summary show about *Big Brother*?" Respondents answered in an open-ended fashion, and interviewers coded the answer from 1 (never) to 6 (almost every day, 4-7 times a week). The mean was 2.77 with a standard deviation of 1.75.

Motives for exposure to Big Brother were measured with six items. Respondents could agree (1) or disagree (0). This dichotomous scale was chosen to keep the questionnaire as simple as possible in the telephone situation and to avoid that respondents refuse to continue the survey. As the survey duration was limited to 15 minutes for the same reason, each of the items on this list of motives represents a different dimension and will not be collapsed into a

scale or index. The items were: I watch *Big Brother*, because… "I like the fact that I can influence the course of the game as a viewer" (agree: 11%); "it's a good topic for gossip" (55%), "it represents an interesting social experiment" (44%), "my curiosity was evoked by media reports" (46%), "the show is unconventional and controversial" (34%), "I can sort of see into the living room of other people" (28%).

Channels for information about Big Brother. Respondents indicated which media they use as source of information about *Big Brother* (scale: 1=do not use at all; 4= use it very often): newspapers ($M = 2.45$; $SD = 1.09$), magazines ($M = 2.12$; $SD = 1.10$), television ($M = 2.99$; $SD = 1.10$), radio ($M = 1.80$; $SD = .95$), and internet ($M = 1.46$; $SD = .91$).

Last conversation about Big Brother. Three questions concerned the last conversation about the show that took place within the previous two days. If respondents indicated that they had talked about the show within the last two days, they were asked how many people participated in the conversation and were given an open-ended question about the content of this conversation. The open-ended question was again coded by two coders; differences in coding were negotiated until one solution was agreed upon.

Conversations about Big Brother in general. A set of questions concerned informal conversations that respondents had about the show. First, they were asked in which social group they talk about the show (family, friends, people from a school or work context, casual acquaintances). Second, they indicated whether they talked about *Big Brother* during watching the show or independently of the show. Third, they were asked to estimate whether their frequency of talking about *Big Brother* had increased, decreased or remained the same compared to the first season. Then, a set of items assessed the content of these conversations (scale: agree: 1; disagree: 0). Three items measured *involved communication*, where respondents talk about the candidates, their conduct and the events in the *Big Brother* house from an involved perspective. These items ("I like to discuss possible nominations and evictions from the *Big Brother* house", "I like to talk about the conflicts and intrigues inside the *Big Brother* house.", "I enjoy talking about the relationships and kiss-and-tell stories inside the *Big Brother* house.") were combined into a mean score (Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$; $M = .29$; $SD = .37$).

The other items measured *reflective communication*, a type of conversation in which participants take on a distanced perspective or even assume the role of a media critic and talk about the show concept and the effects that the show may have. These items were too heterogeneous to be combined; thus, we used the single items for analysis (moral considerations: "I often discuss whether it is morally correct to keep individuals under surveillance 24/7", $M = .40$, $SD = .49$; psychological damage: "I like to discuss the effects that *Big Brother* may have on the life of the candidates, $M = .43$, $SD = .49$; success: "I often talk about the success of *Big Brother* and its reasons", $M = .53$, $SD = .50$).

Finally, we asked the respondents for their motives to talk about the show. Seven single-item measures were used to tap different aspects of the specific conversational motivation (items: I talk to other people about *Big Brother*…: "to get information about the show", $M = .22$, $SD = .41$; "because it is an easy way to start a conversation", $M = .25$, $SD = .43$; "because it is an good topic for small talk", $M = .40$, $SD = .49$; "to gossip about the candidates"; $M = .39$, $SD = .49$; "to show that I am up-to-date", $M = .14$, $SD = .34$; "because people impose conversations on me", $M = .41$, $SD = .49$; "because I am a true *Big Brother* fan" $M = .07$, $SD = .26$; scale: agree: 1; disagree: 0).

RESULTS

Talking about Big Brother

In our sample, 80% of the respondents (n= 738) had at least one conversation with other people about *Big Brother*. Talking about *Big Brother* was also a widespread phenomenon among respondents who never watch this show on television: 57% of those who never watch it have talked about it at least once (see Figure 1). Thus, *Big Brother* provided conversational topics for viewers and non-viewers alike – and, in a sense, started a conversation within society as a whole. Of course, an increase in exposure frequency also brings about more conversations: If people watch *Big Brother* several times a week, more than 90% talked about the show at least once. Even those who rarely watch it (less than once a month or just once) have talked about it in more than 80% of the cases.

Demographics. No differences in the frequency of conversations can be found between men and women (see Table 1; χ^2 = .11, df = 1, n.s.), or between people with different education attainment (see Table 1; χ^2 = 3.40, df = 1, n.s.). However, there is a pronounced tendency for younger people to talk about *Big Brother*: Those who had at least one conversation were on average 40 years old, while those who never had a conversation about *Big Brother* averaged at 55 years. This difference is significant (T = 10.21; p < .001).

Parameters of conversations about Big Brother. Most respondents stated that they talk about *Big Brother* outside of the viewing situation (64%); only 16% indicated that talking happened during viewing (multiple responses were possible). Thus, conversations about the show did not merely accompany viewing, but kept people busy even after they watch the show. The conversations most often went on among friends (50%), among family (32%), and work or school colleagues (39%); conversations among strangers rarely happened (6%).
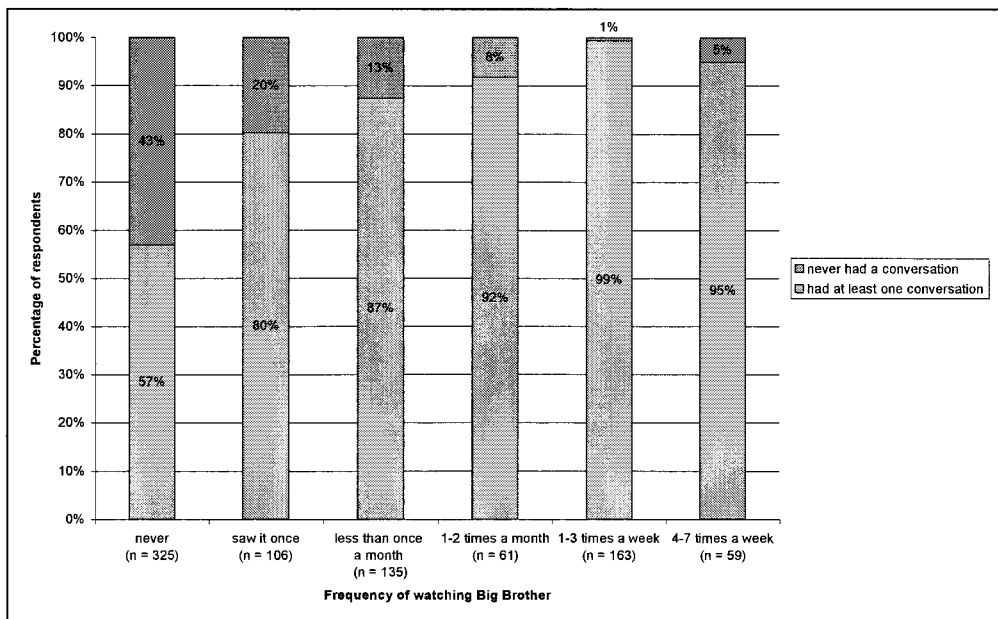

Figure 1. Frequency of Watching Big Brother and Conversations about Big Brother.

Table 1. Demographics and Conversations about Big Brother

| | Conversations about *Big Brother* | | |
	had at least one conversation (%)	never had a conversation (%)	Total n
Sex			
Male	80	20	390
Female	81	19	552
Education			
Elementary/secondary school	78	22	374
High school/college	83	17	523
Total	80	20	945

Note. Values represent percentages.

Compared to the frequency of conversations during the first *Big Brother* season, 38% of the respondents said they talked less about the show during the second season, only 9% talked more during the second season, and 14% thought that the level remained about the same. Apparently, the novelty effect wore off to some extent after the first season; however, this did not eliminate conversations completely.

Last conversation about Big Brother. To obtain a clearer picture of the nature of the conversations, we asked respondents to recall the last conversation they had about the show within the past two days. 17% (n=161) of the respondents had such a conversation. Most respondents (93%) indicated that they had talked with five people or less; a two-person constellation was the most common group size (42%). Then, we asked respondents to sketch the content of the conversation for us. Of those who reported their last conversation, 67% indicated some form of involved communication (e.g., about the behavior of candidates, guesses who may win, evaluations of who is a good or a bad candidate, about events), 20% reported reflective communication (e.g., how the channel is making money with the show, moral evaluations of show, other media coverage of the show) and 13% detailed other topics (e.g., discussion about allowing a minor to watch the show, about *Big Brother* merchandise, about being relieved not to be in the *Big Brother* house).

Conversations and spontaneous judgments about the show. To capture spontaneous evaluations we prompted respondents to indicate what comes to their minds when they hear "Big Brother". It is remarkable that negative evaluations prevailed in this very first comment (see Table 2): 19% of the 920 respondents with valid responses gave a definition that contained a negative evaluation (e.g., boring, not interesting, impossible, waste of my time, don't like it); another 25% used very strong negative evaluations or even swearwords (e.g., absolute nonsense, imbecility, pathetic, primitive, human zoo, garbage, dumbing down of society, exhibitionism, or voyeurism). Approximately a third of respondents used neutral definitions or named candidates, 5% spontaneously gave a positive evaluation and only 4% gave a reflective comment such as "psychologically interesting", "social phenomenon", "receives a lot of media attention", or "brilliant marketing idea" as their first thought about the show.

Table 2. Types of Communication about Big Brother and Spontaneous Reactions (open-ended)

	Conversations about *Big Brother*		
	had at least one conversation (%)	never had a conversation (%)	Total
Definition and neutral evaluation, names candidates	31	19	29
Definition and positive evaluation	6	1	5
Definition and negative evaluation	18	24	19
Definition and strongly negative evaluation, swearword	22	36	25
Reflection	4	4	4
No spontaneous thoughts	15	13	14
Other	4	4	4
Total %	100	100	100
Total n	n = 738	n = 182	n = 920

Note. Values represent percentages.

Talking about the show with other people increased positive and neutral evaluations, and decreased negative and extremely negative judgments (see Table 2): While 31% of those who had a conversation about the show at least once reacted in a neutral way, it was only 19% of those who never had a conversation. In a similar vein, only 22% of respondents who talk about the show express an extremely negative evaluation, whereas it is 36% of those who do not talk about it. Thus, conversations may serve as outlets for positive opinions that have been formed during watching the show; or, talking with other people may also actually improve evaluations of *Big Brother*.

Content of the Conversations

Overall, reflective communication seems to be the more common content of *Big Brother* conversations: More respondents agreed to at least one of the reflective communication items (75% of 651 respondents who talk about the show) compared to the group that agreed to at least one of the involved communication items (44%).

Demographics and conversational content. We cannot find any significant differences between men and women except for the reflective communication item "Success" (see Table 3; $T = 2.01$; $p < .05$). There are, however, some differences regarding education: People with lower education tend to have involved communication more often ($T = 2.81$; $p < .01$), talk about morals less often ($T = -2.11$; $p < .05$), and talk about success less often compared to more highly educated people ($T = -2.11$; $p < .05$). This result suggests that conversations about *Big Brother* may serve as a vehicle for downward social comparison for the more highly educated and provide the grounds for starting a dialogue about ethics in television.

Table 3. Demographics and Content of conversations about Big Brother

| | Involved communication | Reflective communication | | |
		Moral considerations	Psychological damage	Success
Sex				
Male	.27	.37	.46	.57
Female	.31	.42	.40	.49
Education				
Elementary/secondary school	.35	.34	.45	.47
High school/college	.26	.43	.39	.56
Total	.29	.40	.42	.53

Note. Values are means. Range for involved communication: 0-3; reflective communication: 0-1.

Involved communications are not necessarily affirmative of the events in the *Big Brother* house; they too can involve moral issues centered on the candidates' behaviors and statements. But as far as people think about television's role in society and what commercial programs should be allowed to show, it is the more highly educated people who choose to talk about this.

Age was also related to the content of the conversations that people had about *Big Brother*. The older people are, the less they engage in involved conversations ($r = -.32$, $p < .001$) and the more they talk about moral considerations ($r = .15$, $p < .001$); talking about success is not related to age ($r = -.04$, *n.s.*), neither is talking about the possible psychological damage of candidates ($r = -.08$, $p < .05$).

Frequency of watching Big Brother. Next, we computed partial correlations between the frequency of watching *Big Brother* and types of communication, controlling for age, sex and education (see Table 4). The more people watch *Big Brother*, the more frequently they talk about it in an involved way ($r = .54$, $p < .001$). Similarly, the more they talk about possible psychological consequences for the candidates, the more often they watch ($r = .17$, $p < .001$). Conversely, if people indicate to talk about moral considerations regarding the show, they watch the show less often ($r = -.13$, $p < .01$). Talking about success is not at all related to watching the show.

Motives for exposure. As watching *Big Brother* is positively related to only two conversational contents (involved communication and psychological damage), *motives* for watching the show also tend to correlate with these two contents only (again, partial correlations were computed, controlling for age, sex and education; see Table 4): The strongest correlates with involved communication are gossip ($r = .35$, $p < .001$) and voyeurism ($r = .39$, $p < .001$), followed by considering the show as an interesting social experiment ($r = .33$, $p < .001$), appreciating the option to participate as an audience member ($r = .24$, $p < .001$), seeing the show as controversial ($r = .26$, $p < .001$) and curiosity evoked by the media ($r = .12$, $p < .05$). Talking about the psychological damage that candidates may suffer from participating is related to audience participation ($r = .11$, $p < .05$), considering the show as an interesting experiment ($r = .15$, $p < .01$), and to curiosity ($r = .12$, $p < .05$).

Table 4. Partial Correlations of Types of Communication about Big Brother, Exposure and Motives for Exposure

| | Involved communication | Reflective communication | | |
		Moral considerations	Psychological damage	Success
Watching *Big Brother* on TV	.54***	-.13**	.17***	.07
Motives for exposure :				
Audience participation	.24***	.07	.11*	.12*
Gossip	.35***	.02	.12*	.05
Interesting social experiment	.33***	-.01	.15**	.13*
Curiosity evoked by media	.12*	.10	.12*	.16**
Controversial show	.26***	-.00	.11*	.09
Voyeurism	.39***	-.10	.08	.02

Note. n = 428-449; partial correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) controlling for age, sex, and education.
*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Curiosity evoked by media reports also motivates people to watch the show when they have the tendency to talk about the success of the show ($r = .16, p < .01$). Talking about moral concerns is not related positively to any of the motives.

Motives for conversation. Respondents who talk about *Big Brother* in an involved way seem to be active parts in the conversation and willing to talk about it – they do not feel that conversations are imposed on them ($r = -.17, p < .001$) – very much in contrast to people who talk about moral concerns and success who have the only positive correlations with this motive (all partial correlations: see Table 5). Similar to motives for exposure, gossip is the strongest motive for conversation for involved talkers ($r = .42, p < .001$). This is followed by conversational motives (small talk: $r = .33, p < .001$; and easy way to start a conversation: $r = .31, p < .001$). Finally, involved talkers also commit to being fans ($r = .32, p < .001$) and wanting to get information about the show ($r = .27, p < .001$). People who talk about psychological damage and success tend to agree to talk about the show because it's an easy way to start a conversation ($r = .17, p < .001$ and $r = .15, p < .01$, respectively), because it's a good topic for small talk ($r = .18, p < .001$ and $r = .09, p < .05$, respectively) and to show that they are up-to date ($r = .10, p < .05$ and $r = .12, p < .01$, respectively).

Channels to learn about Big Brother. Television seems to be the most important channel to learn about the show ($M = 2.99; SD = 1.10$), followed by newspapers ($M = 2.45; SD = 1.09$) and magazines ($M = 2.12; SD = 1.10$). Radio and internet are by far less important ($M = 1.80; SD = .95$ and $M = 1.46; SD = .91$, respectively). Internet use, of course, can be expected to be much more important today than it was during the first seasons eight years ago. Differences between the means are significant (overall ANOVA for repeated measures: $F(df=4) = 374.69; p < .001$; all contrasts between the adjacent means are also significant: internet vs. radio: $F(df=1) = 72.89; p < .001$; radio vs. magazines: $F(df=1) = 61.30; p < .001$; magazines vs. newspapers: $F(df=1) = 49,33; p < .001$; newspapers vs. television: $F(df=1) = 136.66; p < .001$; as contrasts were computed with adjacent means, significances mean that all means are different from each other).

Table 5. Partial correlations of Types of Communication about Big Brother and Motives for Conversations

Motives for conversations:	Involved communi-cation	Reflective communication		
		Moral considerations	Psychological damage	Success
I talk about *Big Brother*...				
to get information about the show	.27***	-.05	.07*	.07
because it's an easy way to start a conversation	.31***	-.04	.17***	.15**
because it's a good topic for small talk	.33***	-.06	.18***	.09*
to gossip about the candidates	.42***	-.08	.06	.00
to show that I'm up-to-date	.17***	.06	.10*	.12**
because people impose conversations on me	-.17***	.11*	.03	.14**
because I am a true *Big Brother* fan	.32***	-.01	.08	.01

Note. *n* = 619-644; partial correlation coefficients (Pearson's *r*) controlling for age, sex, and education. *p < .05 **p < .01; *** p < .001.

Table 6. Partial Correlations of Types of Communication about Big Brother and Sources of Information about the Show

	Involved communication	Reflective communication		
		Moral considerations	Psychological damage	Success
Newspaper	-.03	.03	.05	.03
Television	.25***	-.01	.16***	.13**
Radio	.10*	.05	.05	.08
Internet	.15***	-.05	.02	.03
Magazines	.07	.06	.06	.10*

Note. n = 630-651; partial correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) controlling for age, sex, and education. *p < .05 **p < .01; *** p < .001.

However, not all important channels also relate to conversations about the show. All types of conversation except moral concerns correlate positively with television use (see Table 6: significant partial *r*'s from .13 to .25. Internet use only correlates positively with involved talk (*r* = .15; *p* < .001) while newspaper use is not related to any type of conversation. Magazine use is only related to talking about success talk (*r* = .10; *p* < .05).

DISCUSSION

People love to talk about morally disputable issues – especially when issues are easily accessible through media and coupled with public attention and money. The first seasons of *Big Brother* provided ideal grounds for interpersonal dialogue among all parts of society, men and women, persons with high and low education, viewers and non-viewers alike. This chapter explored interpersonal communication that took place during the first seasons of the reality television show *Big Brother* in Germany – at a time when the format was new and highly controversial. Media content is known to permeate into interpersonal communication to a certain degree (e.g., Keppler, 1994). However, it is rare indeed that a large portion of the population chooses the same show to talk about. In our survey, we found that four fifths of the respondents had talked at least once about Big Brother. The show even reached people who did not watch it: Non-viewers were not only confronted with the show through the extensive media coverage; the show also haunted them outside the viewing situation, in their personal contexts – in conversations with their friends, relatives, along with work and school colleagues. In this way, the show expanded its reach considerably, even to those who refused to be exposed to it in the first place.

Judgments about the show are not as favorable as one would expect, considering its popularity on television and as a conversational topic shared by a wide portion of the population. The very first spontaneous reaction to the show was negative in almost half of the cases in our sample. What is more, the majority of the negative reactions consisted of extreme judgments, even swearwords. This may be a reflection of moral panic on an individual level: When *Big Brother* was first broadcast, a flood of media reports and commentaries severely criticized the new format for its numerous transgressions of social norms. This "public anxiety about key social and moral issues, characterized by spiraling debate" (Biltereyst, 2004, p. 91) is often referred to as "moral panic" – or "media panic", if the event is media-generated (Drotner, 1992). Finding negative reactions in private conversations is an expression and a catalyst of this public discourse and shows that the moral indignation was not reserved to persons with a public voice (journalists, politicians, etc.), but also occupied the minds of regular people. Biltereyst (2004) claims that the staging of moral panic has become an integral part of the format of reality TV; indeed, we may conclude from our findings that the audience similarly considers controversy as an integral part of the viewing experience: Negative views on the show do not preclude the audience from watching it; exposure feeds into conversations and conversations in turn fuel more exposure. One of the main motives for exposure is being able to gossip about the show. To some extent, a satisfactory use of *Big Brother* may be only present when audience members complete their understanding of the show through interpersonal conversations. The portion of negative and extremely negative evaluations decreased when people had at least once talked about *Big Brother*. The causality of this relationship, however, is not clear – people may talk about the show because they like it, or they may like the show because they (can) talk about it.

One of the reasons of the show's popularity as a conversational topic may be that it offers material for conversations on several levels: *Involved communication* deals with the world within *Big Brother*, the actions and events, and the candidates' emotions, while *reflective communication* considers *Big Brother* as a cultural and commercial artifact and deliberates moral issues. As the concept of the show is as simple as it was scandalous at its first

introduction, people do not need much information about the show to form an opinion and discuss it. This may be an explanation why we found that more conversations deal with reflective rather than involved aspects – for involved communication, detailed information is necessary and actual exposure to the show indispensable, while people are able to carry a reflective conversation with no more than just the concept in mind.

The two kinds of conversations, involved and reflective, are associated with different groups of people and contexts. People who enjoy involved communication are young and less educated, and tend to watch *Big Brother* on a regular basis. The most prominent motives for them to watch the show are gossip, voyeurism and considering the show as an interesting social experiment. Gossip is also the strongest motivator for involved talkers to engage in interpersonal communication. This group appreciates *Big Brother* as a convenient topic for small talk and wants to get more information about the show by talking to others. Involved talkers constitute the group that makes most use of the internet to get information about the show.

People who engage in reflective conversation have quite a different profile: The more they communicate about moral issues, the better educated and the older they are, and the less they watch the show. Reflective talkers tend to watch Big Brother out of curiosity evoked by the media, and because they perceive the show as an interesting social experiment.

Overall, *Big Brother* represents an interesting example of media content that engaged very different kinds of people in a common dialogue. Certainly, people did not agree in their evaluations of the show, but its provocations started a societal conversation (or argument) that many parts of the population shared. In this sense, there is a discrepancy between the conscious, often harsh judgments about the show, and the way in which this show may be functional for society. Providing a common topic for social discourse serves an integrative function: People may disagree about evaluations and enter heated discussions about *Big Brother*. However, in order to talk about it, they still need to agree that *Big Brother* is something that needs discussion, something that is relevant to society even though in the sense of being a threat. Characteristics of people who engage in reflective communication (they are older, have higher education, and watch less of the show) suggest that social comparison may be one the functions that the show readily serves – to increase the viewer's (and talker's) self-esteem. It is not just a discrimination that happens in this type of social comparison. Cultural Studies scholar Robert Pfaller, in a recent newspaper article, analyzed how sexuality is banned from public life, removed from normality, and quarantined into in television talk shows and reality formats as a repulsive caricature. These formats serve as entertainment for viewers, but also as "a dangerous threat: If you don't pull yourselves together, it will be you in the container tomorrow" (Pfaller, 2009). Indeed, such processes surfaced in our survey as well – one of the respondents said that his last *Big Brother* conversation was about him being relieved *not* to be in the container himself. This goes beyond social comparison. In this sense, *Big Brother* may serve to shape one's attitudes about social conduct and moral understanding (see Krijnen and Tan, 2009). Beyond direct exposure to the show, interpersonal communication may be a central vehicle and catalyst for this process – and may multiply the show's effect by reaching non-viewers as well.

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