

**Rethinking Politics and Reality TV –
Big Brother UK and the Rhetoric of Citizenship**

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1. Introduction

This paper challenges the traditional political science approach to the study of the relationship between politics and the mass media. It argues that popular culture should be taken seriously by political scientists interested in investigating how political ideas and values are communicated to the public.

I suggest that there are four reasons for questioning the traditional line of investigation of the links between politics and the mass media. First, politicians are increasingly turning to popular culture to gain visibility with young disengaged citizens. In the UK, examples include, but are not limited to, Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson (respectively former and current mayor of London) appearing on BBC 2 *Have I Got News For You* (2002), Edwina Curry (former Conservative MP) going on ITV *Hell's Kitchen* (2004), Tony Blair's appearance on T4 (2005) and *Blue Peter* (2006), George Galloway (Respect Party London MP) on Channel 4 *Celebrity Big Brother 2006*. Both Blair and Galloway specifically aimed at addressing the perceived crisis of democracy and the idea that 'young people' (18 – 35 year-old) engage with popular culture, but not with politics.

Second, several programmes have been recently produced, which deliberately blurred the distinction between politics and entertainment. For instance, *The Thick of It* (2005 – 2007), *The Amazing Mrs. Pritchard* (2006) and *Party Animals* (2007) are only a few of the most recent British examples of television entertainment that attempt to 'popularise' (that is, made popular with the audience, Street, 2001: 3) politics. This attempt is based on the widespread assumption that democracy is in crisis, that young people are disengaged with politics and that political communication is being 'dumbed down'. For instance, the website for *The Amazing Mrs. Pritchard* declares: 'so angry at the state of politics, so distrustful of the politicians on offer, local supermarket manager Mrs Rose Pritchard stands on an independent ticket at the General Election, determined to make a point'.

Thirdly, the Ofcom *Review of Public Service Broadcasting* (2004) shows that viewers are switching off the news and switching on to television entertainment and especially reality TV. It shows that, in 2002/2003, due to a multi-channel environment and audience fragmentation, the news programme *Correspondent* lost 51% audience share and BBC's *NewsNight* lost 59%. The Review notes that young people (16 – 34) in particular tend to watch more entertainment-

oriented programmes. This and the following Ofcom Review (2006) put forward the view that the switch from news to entertainment should not be viewed as a sign of the ‘dumbing down’ of television. Instead, Ofcom claims that there is evidence to suggest that ‘entertainment’, as well as ‘information’ and ‘education’, should be valued from a Public Service Broadcasting perspective as enhancing citizenship.

The forth and final reason to suggest alternative ways of investigating the relationship between politics and the mass media is that the changing expectations in the Public Service Broadcasting ethos provide television entertainment producers with a context to justify their programmes from a Public Service Broadcasting perspective. For instance, *Vote for Me*, a reality TV programme broadcast in 2005 on ITV ‘was intended to “enrich” democracy’ (Wells, 16 April 2004). The *Celebrity Big Brother* 2007 series ‘generated more than 400 million hits on the *Big Brother* websites, 2.5 million video downloads, a record 50,000 complaints to the television regulator, a private audience for the winner with the current Prime Minister, a plea to vote for the winner from the next Prime Minister, a national debate on racism and a rolling story across the world’ (Bazalgette, 25 February 2007).

But why would these examples be relevant to political scientists? To what extent does reality TV ‘count’ in the investigation of the role that the mass media play in a democracy? In order to answer this question we need to turn to the traditional ways that political science has adopted to investigate the relationship between politics and the mass media. The large majority of scholars, who are concerned with this relationship, claim that television entertainment should be ignored or criticised *because* it has nothing to do with *politics*. Within the liberal tradition I identify three approaches that deal with the role that the mass media play in a democracy: a political theory approach, a political communication approach and a political behaviour approach.

The political theory approach (Bloom, 1987; Sartori, 2000) expresses the thought that entertainment distracts citizens from the activities of the State. I have three problems with this approach. First, the critique of entertainment, in this perspective, is based on a definition of politics as civics and political engagement as a rational activity. Entertainment and popular culture disengage citizens, by distracting them from the ‘important’ affairs of politics. What these scholars do is to attribute to popular culture the power to influence ‘the people’. In other words, according to this approach

popular culture has political value, which can be criticised, but it is not 'worth' investigating. Second, political theory scholars claim that entertainment is incompatible with politics because the former is trivial, while the latter is a *serious* activity. They measure one against the other to *prove* the fact that one is *superior* to the other. This is a value judgement that is more telling of the way these scholars understand politics (as rational) and entertainment (as emotion/passion), rather than proving that the two are incompatible. There is a third, methodological problem with this approach. These scholars seem to assume that citizens/viewers are passive voyeurs that absorb trivia more than reflecting about the serious business of politics. This understanding of what audiences 'do' with media messages has been widely investigated and criticised, traditionally in the media and communication field.

The second group of political scientists to deal with the links between politics and the mass media can be grouped within the political communication approach (Postman, 1986; Zolo, 1992; Franklin, 1994, 2004; Meyer, 2002). This group views entertainment as trivialising political communication. What are the issues with this approach? First, scholars within this tradition use a definition of politics as civics. This leads to a definition of political information as being about the structures and processes of government and parties. In this sense, according to these scholars, political content becomes trivialised whenever politics intermingles with popular culture. To define politics as civics, as these scholars do, has two major consequences. First, it assumes that politics has to be communicated through the conventional channels (news and current affairs programmes) in order to enable citizens to make a rational choice at the ballot box. Second, that trivialised political information necessarily entails citizens' inability to make political decisions that are rational. But these are normative arguments that aim at defining what politics *should* be, rather than *proving* the validity of the dichotomy between politics and popular culture that these scholars are keen to establish. In fact, by creating this separation between what counts as politics and what does not, these scholars grant political value to popular culture. Namely, they argue that popular culture is more 'powerful' than politics, because it has the power to contaminate it. However, just as in the case of political theorists, political communication scholars criticise popular culture, but do not engage with its political value. They argue that when political information is trivialised, viewers do

not engage with it in politically meaningful ways. As a consequence of insufficient political information, citizens are uninterested in and disengaged with politics.

Finally, the third group of scholars to investigate the role that the mass media plays in a democracy, is what I call the political behaviour approach (Putnam, 2000; US literature). This approach focuses on the ways in which models of political behaviour are negatively affected by entertainment. The problem raised in this approach has partly to do with its exclusivity and partly with its methodology. These scholars investigate the role that entertainment plays in relation to politics from a media malaise perspective. They claim that, in choosing entertainment, viewers/citizens reject politics. They assume that *all* television entertainment programmes promote individualism and that *all* viewers will decode this message thus. By associating entertainment with models of political behaviour, these scholars understand entertainment, not just as a purely aesthetic experience. They also read it as a politically significant ideological forum (Street, 2002b: 2, 8, 12; 2004: 439).

There is however a small minority of political scientists, who are generally critical of the traditional dichotomy between news and current affairs programmes and popular culture. They argue that, instead of being indifferent or hostile towards television entertainment, political science should ask questions about the ways in which popular culture expresses political ideas and values. For instance, some (Phelps, 1985; Neve, 2000; King, 2003) argue that film's representation of politics has consequences for the ways in which viewers think about themselves as citizens. Delli Carpini and Williams (2001) claim that providing factual information, stimulating social and political debate and critiquing government, entertainment programming enables viewers to 'play a more active role in constructing social and political meaning' (2001: 167) and marginalised groups to set and frame the public agenda. Merelman (1991) is interested in how popular culture can be 'an effective cultural vehicle of liberal democracy' (1991: 58) by acting as a Public Service. Cantor (1999) shows how popular culture contributes to make people feel more in touch with the institutions of liberal democracy (the government, the police, educational bureaucracy and the media) and restore people's faith in them. Street (1997) show that by offering particular images of identity popular culture becomes 'engaged with

politics, in particular with the politics of citizenship, the right to belong and being recognised' (1997: 11 – 12). Finally, Coleman (2003; 2006) explains how viewers engage with *Big Brother* in terms of political representation and what lessons can be learned for political engagement.

With a few exceptions, all these examples engage with popular culture that is *about* politics. In other words, political scientists, who are sympathetic to the ways in which popular culture plays a role in politics and democracy, tend to begin their investigation with a particular definition of what counts as political and then measure popular culture against it. This raises questions about how we think about popular culture as a site for stories about and examples of political thought and action. How do we 'read', rather than 'attribute' politics to popular culture? I argue that we need to analyse the content of a television entertainment programme in order to establish its politics.

In this paper I claim that a critical analysis of the content of *Big Brother* UK reveals how the programme articulates (Hall, 1986) political ideas, beliefs and values. I investigate this articulation in three ways. By reflecting upon how a reality TV programme, typically understood as not 'belonging' to (or as far apart from) the realm of politics, becomes connected to it; by considering how this link shapes ideas of politics and citizenship; finally, by thinking about how these ideas acquire different meanings that make sense in both realms, but do not necessarily need each other to exist. I argue that to understand *Big Brother* as political complicates the traditional distinction between what counts as 'politics' and what is 'mere entertainment', as it is spelt out in the UK Public Service Broadcasting rationale. Let's see how.

2. *Big Brother* and the Discourse of Community

In the British context, *Big Brother* is justified by its producers, commissioners and broadcasters as the product of the documentary tradition, because of its claims to represent 'reality', to give 'ordinary' people a voice and to engage viewers. Documentary is thought of as a Public Service Broadcasting genre, precisely because it articulates these ideas. Whether these claims are rhetorical, artificial, true or else is not the issue here. Instead, I assess the extent to which the claim of 'reality' is realised in the content and format of *Big Brother*. To understand this means to understand how

Endemol UK and Channel 4 have been able to use the similarities between *Big Brother* and documentary to justify the programme from a Public Service Broadcasting perspective.

In order to evaluate how the ‘reality’ claim is successfully realised, I ask whether *Big Brother* succeeds in building expectations about ‘real’ life in its content. I ask: what expectations about ‘real’ life are built in the content of *Big Brother*? How are viewers¹ invited to use the programme to make sense of the ‘real’ world? How are they invited to identify with the characters on the screen and their daily concerns? To what extent is the ‘reality’ that *Big Brother* claims to represent political? Does this representation of ‘reality’ encourage the audience to reflect upon various political dilemmas?

To understand how *Big Brother* enacts community, we need to address the institutional questions (Weale, 1999: 87)² and the ‘conceptual system’ (Connolly, 1993: 39)³ that describe the ‘reality’ that *Big Brother* claims to reflect. ‘Community’ in this paper conceptually qualifies one of the components of citizenship and aims at grouping instances of specific group behaviour, individual’s roles and responsibilities, rights and freedom and relationships of power. To analyse the discourse of ‘community’ here means to understand how what happens on the screen can be read as an attempt to recreate a ‘reality’, which aims at informing viewers’ understanding of how a ‘real’ community works.

The first stage of community building happens on two levels. The first level takes place before the programme begins, when Housemates are selected and the House is built. This is telling of how *Big Brother* ‘reality’ claim is realised in the content of the programme.

¹ Of course this paper cannot and does not aim at answering questions about audience reception. The questions asked here have to do with the ways in which *Big Brother* invites certain judgements.

² Weale (1999: 87) defines ‘institutional questions’ as those questions ‘concerned with the structure of rules, roles, norms and conventions that govern the allocation of decision-making power within a political constitution, including the rights and duties that citizens have under that constitution’.

³ Connolly (1993: 39) argues that ‘to understand the political life of a community one must understand the conceptual system within which that life moves’.

2.1 Selecting Ordinary People

The process of casting is presented in *Big Brother* as a reproduction of 'reality'. For example, in the opening night of *Big Brother 2005*, presenter Davina McCall takes the audience through selected parts of the process. The clip suggests that *Big Brother* is about 'ordinary' people that 'we' can 'all' identify with. It suggests that, even if some of those interviewed are entertaining, *Big Brother* is not seeking entertainment for the sake of profit. Instead it suggests that *Big Brother* seeks to represent 'reality' (as well as to provide entertainment to its audience). The extract suggests that *Big Brother's* selection procedures are fair, even democratic: they are open to everybody, but the group of people, who will have the 'pleasure' to be part of the programme, are not necessarily those who 'stand out', but the 'top thirteen', who made it through a very strict selection: long queues, endless interviews, role plays. The suggestion is that, since the future 'Housemates' are different from the rest of the 'crowd', because they are 'ordinary', they must be 'like us'. This extract suggests that *Big Brother* producers do not seek to recreate a specific 'reality' that speaks for particular social, economic or political groups⁴. Instead the suggestion is that producers are interested in providing viewers with examples of communal living situations. The community that they artificially create, producers suggest, is 'real' because of the ways in which the 'ordinary' people selected to be Housemates behave in it.

2.2 Constructing spaces of Communal Living

The second process of community building, which is presented to the audience as a reproduction of 'reality', is that of creating communal spaces. Once they have been selected to be part of *Big Brother*, Housemates enter a purpose-built House that resembles a self-contained, self-sufficient environment, which functions both as a living space and a stage. The implications for using such space seem to be twofold: on the one hand, a House recreates a well-known environment that viewers are familiar with. On the other hand, the different spaces in the House serve multiple purposes,

⁴ An exception to this is *Big Brother Celebrity Hijack* (E4, January 2008), where contestants are successful individuals with special skills in their discipline.

which allow for different interactions, social activities and division of labour according to abilities, skills and expertise. So, for instance, smaller living spaces will inevitably create tension and may indicate the desire to exemplify what are the causes and consequences of social tension. By constructing a House in which mundane quotidian activities will take place alongside other activities, such as tasks and nominations, *Big Brother* producers aim at portraying a ‘credible world [...] that resonate[s] with people’s experience’ (Street, 1997: 60). Such reproduction suggests that, by grouping together a number of contestants, viewers will be able to observe examples of collective experience. The discourse of community suggests that this type of communal living builds certain expectations that viewers can use to make sense of ‘reality’. As Sandy Fone, Production Executive for *Big Brother 2000*, puts it: ‘they could do anything they liked in there and we had to react to it. Unlike other television programmes, we had no part in creating it’ (as quoted in Ritchie, 2000: 13). This quote suggests that the House serves the needs of those who live in it and reflects the ‘reality’ of *free* individuals who were able to do ‘do anything they liked’. The discourse of community suggests that, in choosing Housemates ‘like us’ and creating spaces of communal living, the programme attempts to recreate examples of collective behaviour that we can all identify with.

2.3 Reproducing Modes of Behaviour

The second level of community building happens on the screen and is telling of *Big Brother*’s ‘reality’ claim. This stage seems to exemplify the need ‘to make the *actions, projects* and *practices* of [community] members intelligible’, which is necessary ‘to explain the politics of a society’ (Connolly, 1993: 36). The *Big Brother* discourse of community suggests that contestants’ modes of behaviour are made intelligible and revealed to the audience in two ways. The first is through 24-hour coverage of the events that take place in the House. Such coverage captures Housemates’ actions and interactions and allows for a ‘realistic’ representation of them. This suggestion is strengthened by a statement reported in one of the Official Guides. Helen Hawken and Chris Short, content Managers for the website *Big*

*Brother Online*⁵, state that, apart from what was thought of as ‘inappropriate’, all the events that took place during *Big Brother 2000* were broadcasts live. They add: ‘we didn’t compromise the honesty of what was going out. It was still an accurate record of what was happening in the House. Any censorship we did was simply to protect ourselves from legal action and the family-age-group viewers from nudity and obscenity’ (as quoted in Ritchie, 2000: 17). The suggestion here is that 24-hour coverage reports what ‘really’ happens in the House, because it is delivered in an unbiased and unconstrained way.

The 24-hour coverage is then condensed in the edited daily episodes available to all viewers. This represents the second and most accessible way in which, according to the discourse of community, contestants’ behaviour is revealed to the audience. Hawken and Short point out that ‘the team did not want to impose their own perspective on the show – they wanted it to be as truthful as possible. For this reason, the voice-over commentary was kept to a minimum and only reported facts without editorial comment’ (as quoted in Ritchie, 2000: 10). In the daily slots, situations are presented as naturally occurring, with the voice over signalling the transition between events and verbally filling in gaps that are not accounted for visually. The discourse of community suggests that the ‘reality’ reproduced in *Big Brother* provides an even clearer ‘window to the world’ (Corner, 1996b), if we observe how its members behave in it.

a. Responsibilities

The *Big Brother* discourse of community suggests that the *Big Brother* community thrives and is maintained thanks to the fact that, upon entering the House, contestants assume responsibilities that both facilitate cooperation between contestants and that ensure accountability. The suggestion is that this is a naturally occurring phenomenon. Responsibilities are taken up because contestants feel a sense of duty and social responsibility towards the community.

⁵ *Big Brother Online* is one of the programme’s official websites. The others are Channel 4 based websites. These offer another source of daily ‘news’ and ‘highlights’ from the programme. A similar function is served by spin-off programmes, such as *Big Brother Little Bother* and *Big Brother Big Mouth*.

Moreover, in the *Big Brother* community, duty and social responsibility function in relation to the roles that Housemates assume upon entering the House. Some of these roles are constructed as detrimental to the community and, the discourse of community suggests, the group will deal with them accordingly. For instance, Kitten, a *Big Brother 2004* contestant, appoints herself as the House rule-breaker and is asked to leave by other contestants on Day 8 because of her seditiousness

More socially positive roles and the responsibilities attached to them are constructed in the discourse of community as valued by the other Housemates, because they ensure the well-functioning of the community and the welfare of the other members. For instance, in *Big Brother 2003*, ‘moral guardian’ Cameron, who tries to resolve conflict between Housemates and takes care of their emotional needs when they need him to, wins the series. The *Big Brother* discourse of community articulates the importance of these self-appointed roles which are constructed to allow community members to fulfil their responsibilities. Responsibilities are constructed in this discourse as spontaneously adopted by Housemates for two reasons: they are invested in the welfare of the community and they seek the public vote.

Cooperation

The first way in which the members of the *Big Brother* community take responsibility is by cooperating with each other in order to ensure the common good. The discourse of community suggests that contestants are willing to assume roles that will ensure the survival and well-functioning of the community. Cooperation in the *Big Brother* community is structured in two ways. The first is a day-to-day type of cooperation that takes place in response to daily ‘mundane’ matters. For example, the use of the showers is negotiated daily amongst contestants, because hot water is often limited to set times of the day. In *Big Brother 2004* hot water was only provided for thirty minutes a day. Compiling a shopping list also needs to be an exercise in cooperation, since Housemates have a budget and a set amount of time to agree on what the community needs for the forthcoming week. Gigi Eligoloff, *Big Brother 2002* executive producer, notes: ‘we wanted the food tasks to have a communal feel, so everyone had to pull together. [...] *Big Brother* is, in some ways a team game – but

in other ways, like avoiding nominations, it's very much an individual game. We wanted to make sure viewers saw the team elements' (as quoted in Ritchie, 2003: 10). Negotiating shower routines and compiling the shopping list are examples of how ideas of cooperation play a role in constructing a sense of community.

The second way in which *Big Brother* suggests that cooperation is important in the House is during group tasks. Group tasks are important elements of the *Big Brother* discourse of community, because they require that Housemates take some level of social responsibility toward the other members of the community. There are two types of tasks: individual and group tasks. Both types of tasks are compulsory and result in communal remuneration or punishment. The discourse of community suggests that Housemates will do their best to ensure success in tasks for the benefit of the community. For instance, in *Celebrity Big Brother 2006*, George (Galloway) is chosen by the other Housemates to take part in a *Richard and Judy* quiz⁶ as the 'most articulate' contestant. He wins a luxury shopping budget to be used by the whole group for the next House shopping. Cooperation pays off in this example, because choosing the 'smartest' Housemate to perform a task, means that the whole community will benefit from it.

The *Big Brother* discourse of community suggests that cooperation is taken very seriously by the members of the community. This is because the logic of this discourse prescribes that Housemates, who are seen not to cooperate, will be chastised and negatively judged by the group. The mechanism built into the programme that ensures cooperation between group members is nominations. So for instance, in *Big Brother 2001* after the 'fire task', during which Housemates had to ensure that a fire was lit continuously for three days, Helen was nominated for not 'trying hard enough'. Narinder said: 'Helen didn't put one-hundred percent into the task' and Bubble said: 'in the long run she could lose a task'

⁶ Daily show broadcast on Channel 4. George Galloway played the *You Say, We Pay* quiz, where he was shown seven pictures which he described to the presenters and they had to guess what he was describing. He won £140 to be spent on shopping.

Accountability

The second key aspect of the discourse of community is accountability. Being accountable in the *Big Brother* community means that Housemates are answerable to and held responsible for their actions by the other members of the community. The *Big Brother* discourse of community suggests that being unaccountable is not a punishable offence, in that accountability is not prescribed by in the written rules of the *Big Brother* community. However, it also suggests that being accountable is a choice made by Housemates, who care about the welfare of the community. It suggests that being nominated by other Housemates reveals a lack of accountability, which will be chastised.

This suggestion is exemplified in the case of Nick (Bateman), a *Big Brother 2000* contestant eventually expelled from the House. Although Nick was disqualified for breaking the Rules, the discourse of community suggests that this was in fact a decision taken by the other members of the community. The Official Video for this series structures Nick's story as one of betrayal. The sequence of images shows how Nick was never nominated by other Housemates because of the role that he played in the House. He is shown in the film playing the 'father figure'. The exchanges between Housemates shown in the Video emphasise how Nick's seemingly supportive and encouraging side is perceived as 'genuine' by other Housemates. After having provided this information, the clip turns to the 'other' side of Nick. The Video climaxes in this part of the clip by showing Nick approaching Tom and saying: 'he is a treacherous one, Craig'. Time and date are superimposed on the screen as a reminder to the viewers of the exact time when the 'crime' is taking place. This is an important detail, since the narrative has been fragmented in the clip so far. On Day 35, at 12 pm Tom told Craig: 'I'm saying this as a friend to you. I was influenced to vote a certain way this week. [...] Nick... has a habit of writing things down⁷'. Tom's loyalty to Craig and the rest of the group is put in stark contrast to Nick's in the video. His reaction to the event and choice of words are presented as a genuine concern that group rules have been broken. The images cut to an event that had taken place previously and not been shown previously: Nick writing on a board and then quickly

⁷ Upon entering the House, contestants are asked to leave behind all writing material. Rule Five states that 'the Housemates are not permitted to discuss their nominations, or try to influence anyone else's nominations'.

rubbing it off. While Craig's reaction at this point in the Video is impulsive it shows how the community took up roles that benefitted all: Mel and Anna provided moral support and offered to talk to Big Brother; Darren and Tom prevented Craig from overreacting. The events that follow suggest that the Housemates' reactions were responsible and beneficial to the community, because only by having a public consultation could Nick be held to account for his actions. Craig calls a House meeting and confronts Nick. The discourse of community employed in the clip suggests that, despite feeling personally attacked, Craig is willing to take responsibility for Nick's 'trial', because this will benefit the community as a whole.

The discourse of community suggests that the verdict is final and that the *Big Brother* community, not producers or viewers, have reached it through the careful negotiation of their responsibilities, for the benefit of the group and in the name of their own personal accountability. This is why Nick is being pushed out. Because he has to be held responsible for his actions that have not just gone against the Rules, but that have also betrayed the trust of the community. Nick's behaviour is constructed as selfish and individualistic, while Craig, Anna, Darren and Mel are portrayed as having at heart the welfare of the community. As a consequence, Nick was expelled from the community for cheating and was labelled 'Nasty Nick' by the popular press⁸. The other Housemates, who took up social responsibility and held Nick to account, were the four finalists in the series.

These examples show how housemates are constructed as taking their roles and responsibilities very seriously. In the discourse of community, they do so, because the group that they are part of is a community that needs them to function

b. Rights

The *Big Brother* discourse of community suggests that the programme provides examples of how a 'real' community works not just because Housemates take up roles and responsibilities as soon as they enter the House. It is also because they enjoy certain non-formally constituted rights. In the *Big Brother* community all Housemates enjoy social rights. Firstly, the programme caters for their welfare by

⁸ See for instance, Mohan (2 August 2000); '*Big Brother* Throws Out "Nasty Nick"' (17 August 2000); Lawson (18 August 2000); Brown (19 August 2000).

providing food and accommodation, as well as medical and psychological support, should they need it. 'Experts' provide contestants with 'professional' support. That is often used to prevent or contain antisocial behaviour. In the *Big Brother* community, as well as social rights, Housemates also enjoy political rights in that all Housemates are eligible to nominate every week. The discourse of community suggests that Housemates have the right to participate in the exercise of power. When, during *Celebrity Big Brother 2006*, George Galloway is barred from nominating, for having discussed nominations with another contestant, he complains: 'they are taking my rights away'. Finally, the *Big Brother* 'constitution' establishes that Housemates enjoy a set of civic rights. Their equality before the law, spelt out by the *Big Brother* Rules, ensures contestants' freedom and autonomy

Freedom

Freedom of speech is encouraged both in the House (with the exceptions determined in the Rules) and in the Diary Room. In the latter, the members of the community are free to both air their anxieties and to comment on other contestants' behaviour. The Diary Room is constructed as a space where the exercise of individual freedom does not impinge upon the freedom of others. In the House, discussion is free to develop, but the discourse of community suggests that open discussion may lead to conflict. Freedom of speech is constructed as a possible locus of tension between the contestants' rights and responsibilities, because it can potentially impinge on cooperation. For instance, outspoken Housemates are often portrayed as 'bitching' and 'backstabbing'. Housemates who are perceived in this way are punished with nomination by the other contestants for upsetting the equilibrium of the community. Bitching and backstabbing are punished in the *Big Brother* community because they are framed in the programme as vices that clash with one of the key values that allow the community to work: cooperation⁹.

⁹ Interestingly, in the Official Video for *Big Brother 2002*, psychologist Geoffrey Beattie argues: 'It is of course against the Rules of *Big Brother* to discuss the nominations, but it is not against the Rules to bitch'. The point made in this section shows, however, that bitching is constructed as detrimental to the community and is therefore punished almost as severely.

Autonomy

The second suggestion that *Big Brother* makes about the civic rights of the Housemates is that they possess the right to be autonomous agents. It is suggested in the discourse of community that contestants are rational individuals that have the right to make informed, un-coerced decisions to preserve their own autonomy. The expression of this autonomy is exemplified by Rule 12, which guarantees Housemates the freedom 'to leave the House at any time'¹⁰. Housemates gain the right to autonomy in *Big Brother* also when they succeed in the weekly tasks. When Housemates win the tasks they earn money that can be spent on 'luxury' items, such as alcohol and chocolate and which can be collected at a set time from the Store Room. Their autonomy to spend this money is totally dependent on their success. Success at group tasks is always obtained through cooperation with other members of the community. So, in this case, while Housemates can exercise autonomy, this is dependent upon cooperation.

The *Big Brother* discourse of community suggests that Housemates have a choice to pursue incentives and benefits, because they have the right to self-govern. But it also suggests that they need to take moral responsibility for their actions. In the case of prizes and rewards, Housemates are allowed to have a game plan in order to achieve this aim. However, Housemates who have pursued victory through a particular strategy have never succeeded. *Big Brother 2000* Nick repeating that 'it's only a game show' is a good example. *Big Brother 2003* contestant PJ is also voted out for repeatedly saying that he has 'very high chances of winning'. So, although the ultimate aim of *Big Brother* contestants may be to win the *Big Brother* game, individuals, who put their rights in front of their responsibilities, have so far failed to win the show. Cooperation in other words is constructed as necessary for the members of the *Big Brother* community not only to preserve their own autonomy (and win the

¹⁰ Housemates also have autonomy in the decision to pursue a number of benefits and incentives that they are promised when entering the House. The final prize, a contract with Channel 4, deals with tabloids and magazines, music records and media visibility are amongst the benefits that *Big Brother* the game show promises its contestants. Winning the programme often means a change of career and instant celebrity. Although producers highlight that the 'claim to fame' factor was one that was frowned upon during the selection process, when asked what they wanted to achieve by participating in *Big Brother*, most 2000 applicants replied that they wanted a career in television or to become popular or a pop star (more on this in Ritchie, 2000: 20-28). So, while the applicants to the first series could only base their hopes on the visibility that they were inevitably going to obtain through television, subsequent participants had clear examples of previous years' Housemates, most of whom had indeed achieved more or less successful careers in the media.

tasks as well as the final prize), but also for the survival of the community itself. The discourse of community suggests that seeking freedom and autonomy over cooperation and accountability is problematic, because it puts the individual above the community. According to this logic then, winning *Big Brother* can be achieved only by contributing to the welfare of the community. This is because, in order for the *Big Brother* community to function, the behaviour of the contestants must conform to its communitarian rules.

The discourse of community suggests that the reality that *Big Brother* constructs is a political reality, where Housemates are citizens, whom enjoy rights and have responsibilities. Their behaviour is constructed as political behaviour, in that Housemates establish rules of coexistence and live by them. To suggest, as the discourse of community does, that *Big Brother* Housemates have rights and responsibilities indicates that the *Big Brother* community should not be thought about as an experiment in governance (e.g. Andrejevic, 2002a; Palmer, 2002; Pecora, 2002). On the contrary. The fact that Housemates possess rights, the discourse of community suggests, means that they enjoy the freedom and autonomy that democracy provides to all citizens. Furthermore, the discourse of community suggests that the type of citizenship that the *Big Brother* Housemates enjoys is based on liberal ideas of how civic, political and social rights ensure equality amongst citizens (Marshall, 1950). The suggestion is that rational citizens face constant tensions between the right to autonomy (embodied in the freedom to pursue their own goals), the respect for other citizens' autonomy and freedom and a sense of duty and social responsibility (see for instance Johnston et al., 1993). Finally, the discourse of community suggests that being a citizen in the *Big Brother* community is not just about possessing a set of rights; it is also concerned with sharing responsibilities. This is a communitarian approach to citizenship, which emphasises the importance of civic culture (Etzioni, 1993).

2.4 Articulating Relationships of Power

The third way in which *Big Brother* articulates lessons of communal living is by framing examples of how power is enacted. Power in the *Big Brother* community

is articulated in three ways. The first is the power of Big Brother, enforced through the Rules¹¹. The second has to do with the ways in which Housemates negotiate power amongst themselves and the third is concerned with the role that resistance plays in the negotiations involved in maintaining political order.

Power in the *Big Brother* community manifests itself through the disembodied voice of Big Brother. This is usually a male voice, which personifies the main source of power. Big Brother impersonates the authority that establishes the rules, ensures that these are followed and is responsible for the welfare of the Housemates. Although Big Brother, as the authority, is responsible for the implementation of all three functions of power (legislative, executive and judicial), previous sections have stressed how the discourse of community suggests that Housemates possess rights and responsibilities that allow them to make decisions for the community. Big Brother is always referred to and refers to itself in the third person. So, after the eviction night, the voice-over states: 'Big Brother has spoken'. And in response to Housemates' requests made in the Diary Room, Big Brother replies: 'Big Brother will get back to you' (also see Ritchie: 2000: 21). The *Big Brother's* voice gives the impression that Big Brother is a constant presence in the life of the community, by intervening in the events of the House.

The Diary Room, where Big Brother addresses Housemates, represents in the discourse of community the space for direct access to power. Here contestants are allowed to petition, challenge and sometimes influence power. The discourse of community suggests that the Diary Room provides Housemates with a sense of connection with and access to power. The Diary Room also represents the place for acknowledgment, judgement of and punishment for Rule's infringement.

In the *Big Brother* discourse of community power is enacted in three ways. It works in the public interest, it deals with political pressure and it ensures that political order is maintained.

¹¹ These can be viewed in *Rules* (2008). The Rules were changed in 2008 and seemed to reflect the need to protect all minority groups. This was done in the wake of the racist incident between *Celebrity Big Brother 2007* contestants Shilpa Shetti and Jade Goody.

a. Public Interest

The discourse of community suggests that public interest in the *Big Brother* community is maintained through the Rules that Housemates have agreed to abide upon entering the House. The Rules structure relationships of power, to ensure that public interest is maintained, in three ways. By setting out the terms on which contestants structure their relationship with the outside world, between themselves and in relation to Big Brother. Rules structuring the relationship between Housemates and the outside world spell out that ‘there is no contact with the outside world’ and that ‘Housemates are free to leave the House at any time’. These Rules strengthen the idea of the *Big Brother* community as an independent and self-sufficient entity. The emphasis on ‘outside’ suggests that Housemates’ needs are catered for ‘inside’. However, ‘inside’ is not a prison, since ‘Housemates are free to leave’ whenever they decide to. The tension between the terms inside/outside reinforces the idea that *Big Brother* is a community, which Housemates contribute to forming and maintaining. It suggests that they are not ‘forced’ to be there, but that they take seriously their roles and responsibilities towards the community. The discourse of community suggests that Housemates do not leave, despite having the right to do so, because they share a sense of belonging and loyalty for the community that they have built together. The separation between inside and outside world contributes to the construction of the *Big Brother* community as ‘real’¹².

The *Big Brother* Rules also set out some of the terms of interactions between contestants. They spell out that ‘it is not permitted to discuss nominations, or try to influence anyone else’s nominations’, ‘the Diary Room is the only place in the House where Big Brother will acknowledge Housemates individually’, ‘all tasks and challenges are compulsory’, ‘Housemates must not act violently towards any other Housemate’ and ‘if any Housemate breaks the Rules they may be asked to leave the House’. These Rules underpin the rights and responsibilities that the citizens of the *Big Brother* community enjoy and hold. They reflect the ways in which modes of

¹² There is a second type of Rules that structures the relationship between Housemates and the outside world, which are concerned with how the *Big Brother* community relates to the viewing public. They are: ‘Housemates are filmed 24 hours a day and must wear personal microphones at all times’, ‘visits to the Diary Room are compulsory’, ‘nominations are compulsory’, ‘Housemates must give frank and honest reasons for nominations’, ‘it is not permitted to discuss details of how they’d spend the prize money (if they were to win)’ and ‘eviction is decided by public vote’. These Rules spell out the responsibilities that *Big Brother* contestants have towards the viewing public.

behaviour are structured within the House. The discourse of community suggests that they guarantee that such rights and responsibilities will be upheld by all. For instance, *Big Brother 2007* Emily Parr was ejected from the House for using racially offensive language against another contestant. In an interview to *Heat Magazine* she is asked whether she was surprised by her expulsion. She replies: 'No. I broke a rule. I was told about these Rules. It's completely fair that I was taken out, and I understand why it's happened' ('Emily's ONLY Interview', 18 June 2007). Channel 4 senior executives for *Big Brother* are reported to have said: 'Emily [has] broken the Rules governing contestant behaviour' (Conlan, 07 June 2008). These examples show the role that the Rules play in the discourse of community. They are not devised to curb individual freedom, but to guarantee the public interest.

The final way in which the Rules structure relationships of power in the *Big Brother* community is through setting out how Housemates and Big Brother relate to each other. The Rule that structures this relationship is what is called 'the most important rule of all' (Rules, 2008) and states that 'Big Brother reserves the right to change the Rules at any time'. The adoption of this Rule is usually referred to as a 'twist'. Although 'twists' appear arbitrary and unjust, they in fact neither contravene the Rules, nor do they infringe the rights of the contestants. Even when Housemates are not given political rights and are not allowed to nominate this is usually justified in the discourse of community as a way to safeguard the public interest. For instance, previous series had proven that a new Housemate provides an 'easy target' for the other contestants to nominate. In *Big Brother 2006* new housemate Susie is spared this treatment by being allowed to be the only person to nominate. Such decision was constructed in the discourse of community as an attempt to protect her own rights. The fact that 'Big Brother reserves the right to change the rules at any time' seems to suggest that Big Brother is an authoritarian dictator and that Housemates are powerless against this authority. However the examples above show that the discourse of community tells a different story.

b. Political Pressure

Big Brother not only articulates relationships of power by safeguarding public interest. It also frames the ways in which Housemates negotiate power amongst themselves. The show structures relationships between contestants through the idea that coexistence within the community is possible only when contestants strike a balance between self-interest, cooperation and social responsibility. The discourse of community suggests that when Housemates openly display an interest in controlling the dynamics of the community, they are penalised by the rest of the group. A good example of this is provided, for instance, in *Big Brother 2002* Official Video. One of the clips shows two Housemates ‘bitching’ about the fact that ‘Penny wants to be in control’. Penny is the first Housemate to be evicted from the House. In this sense, *Big Brother* adopts a communitarian interpretation of citizenship by constructing a type of community that rejects hierarchy. In all the series there is a suggestion that the attempt to establish some form of control over the group is punished. Rejecting hierarchy, in the *Big Brother* discourse of community, suggests an interest in eradicating pressure in order to preserve the welfare of the community. *Big Brother 2004* offers an example of how the absence of hierarchy helps maintaining the equilibrium in the community. Prof. Geoffrey Beattie, appearing on the daily programme (Day 24), says that ‘from day one Daniel was able to communicate across the divides in the group and that put him in a position of considerable power. [...] Daniel has become the ultimate bridge builder [...] his role facilitates the peace negotiations and ultimately contributed to the psychological wellbeing of the whole group’. The *Big Brother* discourse of community suggests that absence of formal hierarchy allows Daniel to act freely and attempt to maintain the peace. It suggests that the *Big Brother* community does not need tight restrictions (typical of a totalitarian state) to control political pressure. Instead, coexistence is negotiated amongst Housemates.

Another way in which the *Big Brother* discourse of community suggests that coexistence in the community is facilitated by an equal sharing of power between contestants. The suggestion in this exchange is that it is only by accepting negotiation and power sharing that members of the community can coexist. Moreover there is a suggestion that the *Big Brother* community seeks political order, rather than conflict.

c. Political Order

In the *Big Brother* community there is a clear tension between the pressure of coexistence and power sharing and intervention in the name of public interest. This tension is usually articulated in the programme through resistance. Resistance in the *Big Brother* community varies from deliberate rule-breaking to more radical acts of revolt. Deliberate rule-breaking is presented as a form of civil disobedience and is usually adopted by more 'law-abiding' contestants to make a point. It usually does not result in punishment, although verbal 'warnings' are sometimes issued and reprimands are made. Rule-breaking is treated as unthreatening to political order.

Organised resistance is more uncommon in the *Big Brother* community and is usually presented in the programme as a failure, due to disagreement between Housemates. For instance, in *Celebrity Big Brother 2005*, Germaine Greer urges the other Housemates to stage a naked revolt and 'overthrow Big Brother' (also quote in Burchill, 13 January 2005). Organised resistance is unpopular with Housemates, not because they fear Big Brother, but because it threatens political order (even when such order is perceived as unfair). Most forms of resistance in the *Big Brother* House are punished through public disapproval rather than coercion. The suggestion is that the community will find disciplinary mechanisms that do not need the intervention of other forms of power.

Resistance in all its forms is constructed in the *Big Brother* discourse of community as a tool that Housemates use to negotiate power and that Big Brother contains in order to maintain political order. Negotiation takes place amongst contestants and between them and Big Brother. What is suggested in the programme is that power is equally shared and that different modes of power all aim at preserving the community. Resistance is therefore punished either by public consensus or more official forms of disciplinary intervention. The reason for punishment, it is suggested in the discourse of community, is not because Big Brother is a dictator and the Housemates his obedient subjects. It has to do with the fact that political order needs to be sought in order to ensure the survival of the *Big Brother* community.

3. Conclusion

This paper was concerned with the investigation of how *Big Brother* articulates lessons of political behaviour in its content. It analysed the extent to which the programme enacts examples of community, reproducing modes of collective behaviour and framing relationships of power. This analysis reveals how the content of *Big Brother* articulates examples of how the *Big Brother* community functions as a political community. The discourse of community suggests that by observing how the members of the *Big Brother* community behave, it is possible to learn lessons of political behaviour. By providing examples of collective experience, *Big Brother* enacts a community in which its members take up different modes of political behaviour. This behaviour is political because upon entering the House, *Big Brother* contestants take responsibility for its functioning by assuming roles and responsibilities and by claiming their rights. By articulating the tensions between rights and responsibilities, autonomy and freedom and duty and social responsibility, *Big Brother* raises questions that are of concern of both liberal and communitarian approaches to citizenship. The *Big Brother* discourse of community suggests that Housemates and citizens face similar tensions (see for instance Johnston et al., 1993).

By recreating the dynamics of coexistence, intervention and resistance, the programme's narrative gives *Big Brother* its politics. This narrative suggests that the image of dictatorship and governance that *Big Brother* portrays of itself is a marketing technique, aimed at attracting viewing figures and advertising deals. These examples show that *Big Brother* creates a political reality that is concerned with how power is negotiated between citizens and authorities. *Big Brother* encourages viewers to reflect upon the political dilemmas that they would face if they were in the same situation. It structures an understanding of modes of political behaviour around questions of rights and responsibilities. In short, the *Big Brother* discourse of community articulates examples of what it means to be a good citizen. By constructing this model of politics in microcosm, *Big Brother* articulates examples of citizenship. Political behaviour and ideas of citizenship are also the concern of democratic theory.

Big Brother frames an understanding of citizenship by articulating politics in microcosm. By mimicking some of the practices of democratic politics, *Big Brother* encourages viewers to make judgements about the ways in which these practices, institutions and mechanisms work and affect their lives. In this sense, the expectations

that *Big Brother* builds in its rhetoric map into the political world. *Big Brother* makes available to the viewer a type of citizenship which is presented as an alternative to political citizenship. It presents itself as a solution to the ills of contemporary politics, apathy and the crisis of democracy, by articulating the populist argument that politics and politicians cannot resolve these problems. Programmes like *Big Brother*, by this account, represent and translate popular views into action and show how the relationship between entertainment and politics is constructed by the producers of that culture. In this sense, political scientists who are interested in the relationship between politics and the mass media should take television entertainment seriously as a space in which political ideas and values are effectively communicated to the public.