Born of *Big Brother:* celebrity, interactivity and the thinnest of screens

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With the advent of reality TV phenomena like *Big Brother* (*BB*), a new form of celebrity was born: one raised hand-in-hand with interactive media technologies. From amongst the various platforms that *BB* spanned, audiences could weave together their own meanings and pleasures, as well as, for the first time perhaps, *directly* act upon the very creation of media personalities themselves. Interactivity not only allowed the public to claim active ownership in the co-creation of celebrity, but freed it to 'override' previously sacrosanct production editorial decisions. Constrained within admittedly 'locked in' parameters (Lanier 2010), the viewer could be said to have become the director.

At its simplest, *BB UK* only consisted of the main daily broadcast and Friday night eviction shows, yet it also incorporated sibling programmes *Big Brother's Little Brother*, *Big Brother's Big Mouth* and *Big Brother Live* (a time delayed stream that aired intermittently across Channel 4's broadcast and 'red button' services, as well as being available 24/7 on the *BB* website). Interactivity was available, most significantly, through eviction phone votes, as well as via the *BB* web offerings; and it is definitely worth noting that the ability to audition to become a housemate in the first place, could also be considered an interactive act. *BB*'s reign in the UK covered the years in which smart phone use was popularised, and computers were fully domesticated. With opportunities arising for two-screen, or multi-screen, utilisation of more than one platform simultaneously, this period marked a change in consumption habits as dramatic as anything since the introduction of television itself. There appear currently to be two distinct streams within cross-platform development: the 'platform led', like *Doctor Who* (1963-) for example, which was born to one platform, television in this case, but has since spread to the far reaches of the media universe; and a 'conceptual' form, which is shaped in the space *between* platforms, and finds utility in *appropriate* platforms. *BB* arguably sat within the latter, and existed as much amongst the porous diegesis of the cross-platform world, as it did within the bricked-in diegetic walls of the broadcast 'house'.

In Janet Jones' fan study of *BB*, she suggests that audiences use 'multiple delivery platforms to create[…] meaning', as well as to actually '*own* the process of viewing' (2003, p.404, author's italics). In accepting this standpoint, it is possible to see how interactive cross-platform phenomena can free an audience to move from a preferred 'consumption', through to a negotiated or even contested one, and allows for a parallel argument to be made that even

the creation of celebrity has become an opposable act. The selection of an inchoate proto-celebrity was 'attributed' *by* the producers of *BB*, but the actual 'creation' of celebrity existed as a ricocheting negotiation between the producers, the audience, the popular press and the participants themselves. It became part of a demotic circuitous process, in which the audience had the potential to overrule any normative editorial calls of the *BB* production edit suites.

Alongside the negative popular rhetoric that surrounds reality TV phenomena like *BB* (see Krijnen & Tan 2009), exists a more critical discourse centred on concepts of authenticity. This discourse has dwelt on aspects of broadcast veracity (e.g. Biressi & Nunn 2005), performative truth (e.g. Hill 2007), and the audience's actual perception of authenticity. It is this perception of authenticity, which Jones wraps up within a personalised 'reality contract' of suspended belief in the constructedness of *BB* (2003, p.402), that offers a basis for understanding the connection between viewer and housemate. An audience can now employ the diffuse multi-directional flows of cross-platform media technology environments to form complex parasocial bonds with 'their creations', in ways that have undermined the once fixed and top-down power narratives within celebrity/public relationships. For many, reality TV is populated by people 'just like them', and as Andy Duncan (one time chief executive of Channel 4) once suggested, audiences will connect with those *BB* housemates 'whose values they identify with and admire' (*The Guardian* 2005); viewers find fellowship with 'ordinary people', which serve as pixelated proxy 'versions of themselves' (Giles 2003, p.242). *BB* has set reality TV on a trajectory that differs remarkably however from its 'ordinary people, living ordinary lives' fly-on-the-wall roots. A position that Annette Hill (2002) acknowledges when she states that audiences take pleasure from what they consider to be a 'moment of authenticity', in which participants are *really* themselves, but in an *unreal* environment (p.324); a sentiment echoed by Peter Bazalgette (who whilst at Endemol introduced *BB* to the UK), when he suggests that audiences want to see 'real people in unreal circumstances' (2010).

As cross-platform interactivity tugs at the fraying curtain between 'reality' and 'unreality', it also brings in to question the borders between self and celebrity. Erving Goffman's (1971) conceptualisation of 'territories of the self' mapped out the physical and ideal spaces over which an individual has control. These spaces included: situational territories, like a public garden; fixed territories, like a house; and egocentric territories, like pockets or even letters. *BB*, through the multiple platforms it inhabited, bridged this taxonomy, and the act of permitting others, like *BB* housemates, into one's own multiple territories of the self, could therefore allow the viewer to 'become' the viewed; self becomes housemate - becomes celebrity - becomes self. This dissolving of the *psychic* distance between celebrity and self, and the many ways in which the near permeable screens of cross-platform media devices can reduce the *physical* distance between audience and celebrity, has maybe permanently skewed expectations of reality formats. Post *BB*, audiences are accustomed to the sense of agency that platform spanning interactivity affords. They can now anticipate intimately immersing themselves within the cross-platform practices that *BB*'s descendants offer up. Practices, which in the case of *BB*, have allowed an audience to redefine the creation of celebrity itself.

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