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Discussing the Life of the Others: Doing Ethnography in the Brazilian *Big Brother* Fan Community

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present some of the initial results of ethnographic research conducted in early 2008 with the online fan community of the Brazilian *Big Brother* (BBB). After a brief introduction to some of the challenges faced by ethnographic work on television audiences in the last couple of decades, the current piece will explore some of the main characteristics constituting this new social space. Beyond the gossiping, and the more immediate talks about behaviors and game strategies of the *Big Brother* housemates, these forums sometimes trigger exchanges about Brazilian society at large, and the role of television broadcasting in general. Nonetheless, a closer inspection reveals how the debates found in the community are themselves permeated by the participants' struggle for status.

Keywords

Brazilian *Big Brother*, fan community, ethnography, dispute

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Resum

L'objectiu d'aquest article és presentar alguns dels resultats inicials de la recerca etnogràfica duta a terme al principi de 2008 amb la comunitat de fans en línia del programa *Big Brother* del Brasil (BBB). Després d'introduir breument alguns dels reptes a què s'ha hagut d'enfrontar el treball etnogràfic sobre el públic de televisió en les dues últimes dècades, aquest document estudiarà algunes de les característiques principals que constitueixen aquest nou espai social. Més enllà de les xafarderies i les converses més immediates sobre comportaments i estratègies de joc dels companys de la casa de *Big Brother*, aquests fòrums a vegades susciten converses sobre la societat brasilera i el paper de les emissions de televisió en general. Tanmateix, un examen minuciós revela com l'esforç dels participants d'aconseguir un estatus s'evidencia en els mateixos debats que podem trobar en la comunitat.

Paraules clau

Big Brother brasiler, comunitat de fans, etnografia, disputa

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Introduction

Since its first broadcast in 1999 Endemol's *Big Brother* has drawn significant attention from both television audiences and academics around the world. The program, which still generates controversy and high viewing rates in many countries, has been host to a series of scandals, each one of them embedded in the values and morals of the local culture where it was being produced (Bazalguette, 2005). In spite of holding to its main idea of confining a group of people who, under permanent surveillance, are gradually evicted one by one through popular voting until a winner is left; the format has experienced several changes from country to country, and from series to series. Its capacity to adapt to different cultures coupled with a process of continuous innovation and adjustment has proven crucial to *Big Brother*'s longevity and even revival in some places.

In Brazil, for instance, the reality show seems to preserve much of the allure of the initial seasons. Its local adaptation borrows several structural elements from the national soap-opera tradition. After the first series, Rede Globo, its broadcaster, started to change how the routine of the housemates was being portrayed in the daily program. Instead of presenting a straightforward summary of daily events in the house, as it is done at least in theory by *Big Brother* productions elsewhere, the Brazilian producers started to develop a hybrid language that mixes reality television with soap opera.[1]

The Brazilian adaptation of *Big Brother* provoked an impact that exceeds the impressive financial result it generated for Rede Globo. The reality show also inspired a huge on-line fan community, the subject of investigation in this paper, consisting of various forums debating this multi-platform production. In the 2008 edition, five years after the creation of the first Brazilian *Big Brother* (BBB) fan blog, this online community has already created twenty-five blogs and one major forum. Just as an example, Tevescópio[2] – one of its most influential blogs –, received an average of six thousand comments a day during that same edition.

Beyond the gossiping and the more immediate talks about behaviors and game strategies of the *Big Brother* housemates, these forums sometimes trigger exchanges about Brazilian society at large, raising issues concerning transformations in gender roles, national identity, ethical dilemmas, and the role of television broadcasting in general. Nevertheless, an even closer inspection reveals how these debates are themselves permeated by the participants' struggle for status inside the community.

Issues on Audience Research

The research was based on an ethnographic study, which was designed to focus not only on the text reception, and all the different symbolic meanings that could be drawn from *Big Brother*, but also on the study of the "culture of everyday" of this virtual environment, in an attempt to capture how this was being lived by fans.

Nevertheless, the resource constraints of this research represented a considerable limitation in that respect. In any case, the impossibility of doing participant observation in the domestic environment of *Big Brother* fans made it unfeasible to pay closer attention to their private consumption of television content. Sonia Livingstone justly regarded this issue as the source of "moral anxieties" for the observer (Livingstone, 2004).

She reminds us that these anxieties have their origin in the early 20th century, period when the division between media-as-goods and the reception of media-as-texts became more pronounced. The invisibility of the moment of consumption, a consequence of a process of media privatization, made it more difficult for observers to "read" the reactions of the audience to cultural products. In previous times, on the other hand, it was much easier to follow people's reaction to theatre plays, music concerts or carnival festivities, as these events took place under the open gaze in public spaces (Livingstone, 2004, p. 84).

It was, however, the period after the Second World War that witnessed an acceleration of what Raymond Williams calls *mobile privatization*. This was the displacement of the individual to the most distant places of the planet without actually leaving the home; which was possible by the popularization of television (Williams, 1990, p. 26-27). Nevertheless, this trend began to undergo a transformation in the late 20th century when new digital platforms were developed, especially the more mobile ones, which allow further privatization of spaces different from the domestic environment. Hence, devices such as mobile phones, iPods, etc. are referred by David Morley as *privatizing technologies* (2003, p. 451).

The meaning of these changes, particularly for media ethnography, should not be underestimated though. In any case, more than the simple incorporation of newer technologies, this trend led to the creation of multi-platform contents, which significantly expanded the possibilities for consumption. As a consequence, the study of media use had to go beyond the domestic environment to reach new sites where these texts are being signified and discussed. The potential anxiety of the media researcher described above by Livingstone takes on new dimensions in this new landscape. In theory, a more complex

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1. Annette Hill argues that this kind of fictionalization of factual programming is a contemporary trend. For her, this leads to a paradox where "the more entertaining a factual programme is, the less real it appears to viewers" (Hill, 2005, p. 57).
2. Visit: <http://tevescopio.blogger.com.br/>.

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multi-sited ethnography would now be necessary to cope with the new challenges.

Likewise, this digital transformation also offers a different kind of promise: the promise of interactivity. Different from traditional mass media, where the audience is limited to reading the text, even if in varied ways, the modern modes allow them to create their own content. From a one-to-many model, we have now access to a many-to-many one. It is important to reinforce, though, as David Morley does (2003, p. 439), that this assertion does not mean that new media users are by definition more active than mass media ones, often depicted as *couch potatoes*. Many times, internet users are limited to a few trifling interactions, while reception researches have shown that television audiences can often articulate unexpected interpretations of media texts. More importantly, returning to the matter at hand, new media offer the possibility of a two-way interaction, where the user's views on a particular subject can be instantly shared with other people in locations far beyond their domestic environment.

Doing the Ethnography

This exchange provides material for our study. According to Manga,[3] a pioneer of the Brazilian *Big Brother* online community, the first discussion blogs were created in 2003 out of the controversy around Rede Globo's production conduct, and to comment on the housemates' actions inside the *Big Brother* house. The idea was to develop a channel where people could discuss different aspects of what was then considered a fascinating new television format. Over the years, an ever increasing number of fans joined this initiative either by creating their own blogs or just expressing their views on the reality show, forming, thus, the community now known as Net.BBB. Despite the lack of face-to-face interactions, these forums offer the observer the possibility of following the reactions and interpretations of a part of *Big Brother*'s audience; hence, giving some contours to the "invisible" moment of its consumption. Furthermore, the fact that these exchanges occur in a virtual environment has several implications not only for the observer, but, most importantly, on how these articulations are shaped inside the fan community.

In fact, this ethnographic research, conducted during the 2008 edition of the show, faced several initial challenges resulting from the intangibility of an internet based fan community, as opposed to a physically based environment.

As a recruiting method, I wrote a text containing my identification as a researcher and a brief summary of the study being carried out.

This was sent via email to the most important bloggers and also posted on a regular basis in the "BBB.Lua"[4] discussion forum as well as in some blogs. However, most of the few people that took the initiative of answering the message were suspicious about my intentions and real identity. Consequently, cultivating confidence among potential subjects through solely virtual means presented a challenge. Most of people interacting there use nicknames and avatars that deliberately sever any link to their real identities, citing the perceived stigmatization of *Big Brother* in Brazilian society. Like any other country where it is produced, this reality show is constantly portrayed by television critics and the media in general as trivial entertainment aimed at a mass audience. The fact that the research volunteers were, to my surprise, high-profile professionals including a post-graduate professor, a psychologist, an advertising executive, a TV actress, a bank manager and even a diplomat, just to offer few examples, was the general excuse for not wanting any of their personal details disclosed.

A link[5] to a government promotion agency for education containing my profile and academic history was then included in the recruiting message in an effort to overcome the initial lack of confidence regarding the legitimacy of the study. But even this measure was insufficient to shake the initial resistance of many BBB fans. It took a few weeks of daily interactions in the "BBB. Lua" forum to convince them I was trustworthy. Perhaps, more than that, this commitment was also necessary to demonstrate my own opinions on the issues discussed there. It was important for me to be seen as an individual with my own perceptions and ideas about *Big Brother*. I consciously chose the discussion forum with this intention in mind. *Big Brother* fans generally consider "BBB.Lua" as the on-line environment where the best debates on the reality show take place. Furthermore, contrary to the fan blogs, where a blogger, or group of bloggers, is responsible for publishing posts expressing points of view about varied topics related to the show, which other fans will then comment on, the forum is uniquely comprised of its visitors' comments. It does not have any kind of "editorial line" to be contested or defended.

The varied ways the reality show is interpreted by bloggers is one of the most important characteristics of the community. In fact, their posts are seen as a reflection of their personality and a fundamental aspect of a blog's success. Fans tend to comment on blogs where they feel more connected to the owners' points of view. Usually, the most regular commentators in a blog develop an affective bond with the blogger, sometimes lasting for many years (even if they never meet in person, which is frequently the case). During the interviews, bloggers very often referred to these fans as "their commentators". Indeed, the amount of regular

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3. **Visit:** <http://manga-teleblog.blogspot.com/>.
4. **Visit:** <http://bbb.lua.com/>.
5. Visit: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/5749037979153144>.

commentators in a blog is an important measure of its success inside the community, and often a source of disputes. Susan and Dona Lupa, the two bloggers with the largest number of visitors, have been repeatedly accused by other bloggers of relinquishing to "mainstream" perspectives on the show, thus not expressing their true views about what happens inside the *Big Brother* house. These critics argue that this is a strategy designed to attract more visitors. Nevertheless, their concept of mainstream and independency is a subjective and often contradictory one, but frequently linked to the role of Rede Globo in regard to the show.

The "hybrid" language adopted by Globo commonly becomes a source of tension inside the community. The "fictionalization" of the daily summary implies development of plots and characterization of the housemates in ways that are sometimes controversial. For instance, a contestant can be portrayed through editing to appear conspirational, of questionable character, or, on the contrary, as an innocent victim of his companions' envy, without actually fitting in any of these categories in a clear-cut way. The advent of the 24-hour direct feed gave fans the possibility of accessing the rough material used by Globo to produce the daily summary. Most of the arguments related to claims of independence, or the lack of it, have to do with the way the broadcaster is judged by fans.

However, these contentions are only one aspect of what differentiates one blog from another. There are, in effect, a wide range of takes on the reality show. Some blogs make a point of constantly demonstrating humor and cynicism towards the production while others are devoted to an analysis of the "strategy" of each housemate in the game show. There are also those that tend to display a more passionate view of what goes on inside the house – overtly supporting a particular participant or, on the contrary, making loud campaigns against their chosen disaffection –, and finally there are bloggers, like the ones exemplified above, who try to position themselves as watchdogs of the audience by displaying a critical perspective towards Rede Globo and its way of conducting the production.[6] For all of them, *Big Brother* means different things: a simple entertainment show, a strategy game, a popularity contest, or even an excuse for starting critically engaged discussions.

These discrepancies make Net.BBB an environment marked by disputes. Therefore, concentrating my interactions in the "BBB.Lua" forum, a territory considered "neutral" by other bloggers, could also save me from being pigeonholed as someone's commentator. For example, Dona Lupa cancelled our scheduled interview after she learned about my previous encounter with Manga, one of her detractors in the community. She only changed her mind after Xuxu, her long time on-line friend and fellow blog commentator, whom I had interviewed previously, vouched for me.

Opinions on the *Big Brother*'s housemates also reflected a great diversity. Fans choose their favorite participant based on a variety of factors. Charisma, determination, authenticity, appearance, social skills and ethical behavior were some of the attributes considered when electing their pet housemates. These different preferences prompted a subtle division inside the community though. Those more interested in discussing housemate strategies and actions would often have disdainful opinions about fans engaged in a cult of personalities. They went so far as to pejoratively dub them *cattle people*. According to Xexéu, one of the most respected BBB fans in the community, *cattle people* refers to those who base their decisions related to *Big Brother* on emotion, instead of reason. They would support a housemate because of their charisma, appearance, or even class position (in order to, for instance, perform a sort of "social justice" through voting) rather than the content of their conversations or their articulation in the game dynamic. Moreover, the origin of their label stems from the belief that their alleged lack of rationale makes them more susceptible to external influence, as well as acting like extreme fanatics. When interacting in the forums, however, it was simply impossible to find a fan who would admit to fitting in this category. Even those who showed a more passionate support for a particular housemate would always attempt to rationalize their choice with justifications based in logic.

There was, however, one desired characteristic repeatedly mentioned by almost all of the fans: the participant's capacity to create controversial situations inside the house. They even developed a kind of mantra that was constantly uttered in all forums when approaching eviction day: "Ferns should leave first!" Fern[7] was the nickname given to all *Big Brother* participants who avoided taking stances inside the house or expressing opinions that could be viewed as controversial. A group of housemates lacking personality is the worst nightmare for a BBB fan. On the other hand, those participants that like to stir up the mood in the house, even if in contentious ways, always score some points with bloggers and commentators. The justification for that lies at the core of *Big Brother*'s on-line fan community *raison d'être*. After all, these forums are mainly used to debate the actions and points of view of those inside the house. If they don't create material to be debated upon, the community loses its fuel.

Conclusion

Although celebrity gossiping constitutes a notable share of discussions in Net.BBB, debates sometimes go beyond immediate *Big Brother* narratives, touching on themes relevant to the

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6. However, there are blogs that don't fit neatly in just one of these categories.
7. *Samambaia* in Portuguese.

formation of national society. In fact, several fans declared both in the interviews and during participant observation that they enjoyed more engaging in online discussions than actually watching the show. For them, polemics involving *Big Brother* houseguests were seen as a means to expose, and ultimately confront, their own prejudices and views. On a different level, BBB fans gave great importance to the way they were perceived by other fans. Gaining respect inside the community was crucial for their experience as such.

The complex relations encountered in the Net.BBB fan community serve as an example of how a media phenomenon such as the Brazilian *Big Brother* should not be analyzed only in terms of a media product designed to provide entertainment and pleasure for the audience. It should also be viewed as a valuable opportunity to understand how this audience articulates their values and social norms around narratives presented by the reality show.

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