Reality Television Goes Interactive: The Big Brother Television Audience

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Abstract

Reality television was taken to a new realm in the summer of 2000. Television audiences and Internet audiences were married through a voyeuristic, interactive experience. This study attempted to better understand the audience attracted to these interactive, realistic television shows. Utilizing previous studies on audience interactivity, a random telephone survey of *Big Brother* viewers was administered. *Big Brother* viewers that browsed the show's website before and after the show were demographically more likely to be younger, more educated, and own computers. *Big Brother* website visitors were significantly more likely to plan to watch the television show, eliminate distractions to that viewing and be more involved during the television show than non-Internet website users.

Introduction

This project attempted to learn more about the viewers and levels of audience interactivity of the new, voyeuristic CBS television show *Big Brother*. The show, which ran five nights a week during the summer and early Fall of 2000, featured ten people housed in a specially designed 1,800 square foot house for three months. The house had no privacy for its guests and was outfitted with an array of 28 cameras, 14 robotic cameras, 5 stationary, 5 handheld, 4 infrared night-vision cameras, along with 60 microphones and an amazing 26,400 feet of cable (www.cbs.com, 2000).

The key to *Big Brother*'s appeal and popularity was hoped to be

its level of interactivity. The show featured "banishment" sessions, in which the at-home audience could vote for one of the houseguests to be removed from the show. The votes to decide who was banished followed a regular schedule and required viewers to place a 99-cent phone call to CBS. In addition to the control that viewers exerted over the show, they also enjoyed extensive voyeuristic opportunities.

The CBS *Big Brother* website offered 24 hour live video streams of the house and its houseguests (www.cbs.com, 2000). The site allowed on-line users to see and watch the houseguests at any point during the three-month period they were in the house. Three cameras in the house's bathroom that were even accessible through the website. The *Big Brother* website also offered MPEG format clips for downloading. These clips were selected from the streamed video for their unique qualities. Visitors to *Big Brother*'s website could download such video wonders as "Josh and Jamie in the Yard" and "Curtis, George and Cassandra Eating." (www.cbs.com, 2000)

This show was a prime example of the surge of reality television that also used the Internet as a link to the television show. Reality television is based on claims to be based on the truth of life, either in situations or in all aspects. Reality television shows while based on truth are also edited and molded by producers to emphasize the more exciting elements of the content. Critics claim, "these reality-based programs are simply concerned with ratings, using reality where it sees fit." (Donaghy, 2000)

The show's website had chat capabilities that allowed for opinion exchange on many different topics, including gossip on the characters and who the audience was wanting out of the house. To further prove that CBS had struck a chord with its viewers, a large number of other websites devoted to individual houseguests have popped up on the internet, such as www.jamie.kern.org and www.eddiesangels.fanspace.com. Several sites were also created with the purpose of trying to sway the public's opinion and have a particular guest voted off the show.

CBS's *Big Brother* debuted with an audience of 22 million when it aired directly after *Survivor* on Wednesday nights. The program won key adults, the 18-49 year olds, who are the most important demographics to advertisers (Beck, 2000). Many reports have shown *Big Brother* to be in ratings trouble, but this is not the case. CBS has steadily won the vital 18-49 demographic, and increasing its own ratings within the

same timeslot. However, with the conclusion of *Survivor* came a serious decline in *Big Brother* viewers (Bianco, 2000). The show's ratings fell from 22 million, capturing only 6.6 million of the 100 million potential television households (www.broadcastingcable.com, 2000).

CBS's *Big Brother* offered a new experience for American television audiences - the opportunity to observe and interact with a television show. Interaction was dependent upon three variables: PC ownership, Internet access and telephone calls. Following the success of *Big Brother* in Europe, CBS created a *Big Brother* show it hoped would capture the American market.

This study attempted to learn more about the viewing habits and Internet use levels of a typical *Big Brother* viewer. In addition to this, we also tried to understand what type of audience member is more likely to find *Big Brother* enjoyable and make it a part of their daily television and web-browsing schedule.

Review of Related Literature

The show and the website for *Big Brother* were part of a technological phenomenon that allowed people the opportunity to interact with the television program. In the first six weeks of the show, the *Big Brother* website had more than eight million hits. That number meant that one out of every eight people using the Internet was visiting the *Big Brother* website (*Big Brother* episode, 9/6/00). More than 14,000 fan websites and more than 400,000 message board postings were created. The postings increased to 4,000,000 after results of the voting were read on the air at the close of the show. These statistics found that the *Big Brother* website hosted the largest webcast in history (*Big Brother* episode, 9/6/00).

Audience activity has garnered renewed interest by researchers. Researchers have turned their attention toward the World Wide Web becoming an alternative medium to television and also to trying to understand who are the people using the Internet and why. The Internet is a fast-growing medium that is already in competition with television, newspapers, radio, and even motion pictures.

Ferguson and Perse (2000) argue that television broadcasters becoming more concerned with what the Internet has to offer in the way of competition. With more and more people having access to the World Wide Web, the Internet is thought to be television's greatest threat to viewership and consequently advertising revenue.

The Internet has also been found to involve more audience selection than television. Because of this ability to select, the Internet is more attractive to some viewers who desire this level of control. The Internet also holds a level of interactivity that television cannot because the viewer has the opportunity to navigate through a limitless amount of information and entertainment.

Ferguson and Perse (2000) try to understand what motivates people to use one form of media over another. "Knowing why people use media helps to explain not only the choices among functional alternatives, but also the content of specific media" (p. 176).

The computer and Internet allow access to information and communication to and with the world around us. "Computer-mediated communication" is thought to be a greater advantage to the public because of this access to knowledge and information (Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000).

Papacharissi and Rubin (2000) believe "contextual age, unwillingness to communicate, and media perceptions" are just a few reasons why people turn to the Internet. Other people who use the World Wide Web include those who want to fill a void in their lives through interaction with others through a mediated device and those who are in control of their lives and simply use the Internet as an information seeking device. These ideas comprise a theoretical foundation for what lies behind people's use of the Internet, and also explain gratifications, or what motivates people to use the Internet.

Interactive television that became so popular with *Big Brother* is something that has been evolving over recent years. Web-based television is the one of the latest forms of media to involve viewers with the material they are watching on television. Yang (2000) states that America Online and its competitors are some of the companies struggling with the difficult combination of television and Internet use. "About 2.2 million American homes are projected to have WebTV by the end of the year, a three fold increase from 1999. The number is expected to grow to 24.8 million households by 2003." (p. 90)

Combining the Internet and television is thought to eventually lead to one interactive entertainment and information system in the next decade. This eventual combination of TV and the Internet will give the consumer more opportunity for interactivity. As seen from the growing increase of use on the *Big Brother* website, television programming will have more active viewers. The viewers will have more knowledge about

what they are watching and be more likely to participate in post-show activities. Internet viewers of the show have the potential for more in-depth understanding of the show's participants, what the show is about, and what is going to happen next. These viewers have 24-hour a day access to what is going on with the show, where as the television viewers only have an allotted time per week.

One of the theoretical foundations of uses and gratifications research is that the audience members are active players in their media experience (Pamgreen, 1985). Audience activity is interpreted by Blumler (1979) to include utility, intentionality and selectivity.

Σ Utility includes the idea that people use the mass media for a purpose.

Σ Intentionality indicates media consumption is directed by prior motivation.

Σ Selectivity is based on the audience's prior interests and preferences.

Blumler (1979) suggested that the level of activity might be examined over time. A person might be a more active view if he consults information what to view, plans the media experience or has prior expectation of the experience. During the media experience, activity can be measured by degree of attention and recall. After the media experience, activity can be examined by reflection of media materials, discussion of material and application of material.

Following Blumler's lead, Levy and Windahl (1985) proposed a two-dimensional typology of audience activity. The first dimension, a qualitative orientation of audience members toward the communication process, describes the types of activity. This dimension includes selectivity, involvement and utility. The second dimension of the definition is temporal and asks whether audience activity occurs before, during or after exposure. Levy (1987) used these dimensions of audience activity to examine the audience of VCR users. He used measures of selectivity, involvement and utility, before during and after VCR use, to determine the level of activity of the audience.

Using these concepts of audience activity, we sought to find out the levels of audience activity among viewers of *Big Brother*. A telephone survey was conducted with 395 households. Questions administered to subjects were designed to gather information about selectivity, utility and involvement. These measures were then used to test the fol-

lowing hypotheses:

H1: The audiences of *Big Brother* Internet are more actively involved during the use of the Internet than those watching the television show.

H2: The audiences of *Big Brother* television are more active with competing activities during the show than those using the Internet.

H3: The audience of the *Big Brother* TV show will more actively prepare to watch the show than those planning to use the Internet. By "actively prepare" we mean schedule other activities around the show time so they will not be disturbed while watching the show.

H4: The *Big Brother* Internet audiences are more knowledgeable about the program and its characters than the Big Brother TV audience.

Methodology

A random telephone survey was conducted in a county with a population of 42,000. Using the most recent telephone bank, every twentieth number was pulled for potential inclusion in the survey. The calls commenced the week of October 22nd and were completed two weeks later when the sample size reached 395. With 395 surveys, one can assume a margin of error of ±5 points. Potential random numbers were each called back three times at different times of day before being discarded from the pool.

The survey is composed of 28 questions broken into four sections (1) how the respondent received television signals; (2) the respondents Internet/computer availability and use; (3) the respondents of *Big Brother* and visiting the *Big Brother* website; (4) and demographic information about the respondent. A survey instrument marked-up with the results is available in Appendix A.

Findings and Discussions

Before launching into a summary of our findings, the reader would benefit from an understanding of the demographics of the respondents. Of the respondents, 38% were male and 62% were female. Studies have shown that females are more apt to answer a phone survey (O'Hare, 1986).

6

When asked about the ownership of homes, 75% of the respondents reported owning their homes and 25% rented. Forty-eight percent (48%) of respondents were single and 52% were married. The average age of the respondent was 42.

The education level of the respondents were as follows: some high school or GED 22%, some college 26.8%, college graduate 28.2%, graduate work 2.2%, masters degrees 2.2% and terminal degree 1.6%.

Annual reported household income of respondents was as follows:

> Less than $25,000 (25.9%)
> Between $25,000 and $75,000 (6.2%)
> Over $75,000 (12.3%)
> Refused to answer the question (23.7%)

The ethnicity of the survey respondents were as follows: 20.3% African American, 78.3% Caucasian, 3% Hispanic, 8% Asian American and 3% Other.

When considering computers and media, 47% of respondents indicated that they owned a personal computer. This is about 8% behind the national average in computer ownership, which is reported to be at 55% (USA Today, December 10, 2000, A1). Of those that had computers, 90% reported having an Internet connection. Of those respondents that had Internet availability (39%), 80% accessed from their home, 15.3% from work, 3.3% from school and 7% was other (library, friend's house). The average time spent on-line among Internet users was almost 2 hours a day, and half that time was described as recreational web-surfing.

Most (73%) receive their television signals by cable and 20% reported having a satellite dish. Almost 80% reported having more than one television set per household and watched on average 3.5 hours of television a day. News and sports programming were most often identified as popular programs. When asked about simultaneously web browsing and television viewing, 9% always browsed the web and watched television at the same time, 14% frequently did both at the same time, 24% rarely did both at the same time and 51% never did both at the same time.

Viewership of *Big Brother* in the county selected for study mirrored national viewing measures with 22.4% watching the show and almost 8% having visited the website.

Findings show that while there were no significantly differences

among the demographics of the *Big Brother* viewers they did tend to be younger, more educated respondents and reported owning a personal computer.

Ninety percent (90%) of those respondents who visited the website, reported that they visited "before the show" and 10% reported visiting the website "after the show." No one reported visiting the website "during the show."

H1: The *Big Brother* Internet audience was more actively involved during the Internet than those watching the television show. ACCEPTED.

Internet users did not report any instances of engaging in other activities while visiting the *Big Brother* web site. This may be due to the level of attention needed to surf the web, it is apparently difficult for some people to be involved in other activities while web browsing.

H2: The audiences of *Big Brother* television are more active with competing activities during the show than those using the Internet. ACCEPTED

Big Brother TV audiences reported engaging in other activities more often than Internet users reported being during the show. While watching the TV show, 35% of viewers participated in other activities: 21% of people were cleaning, 11% were doing homework and 3% were eating.

H3: The audiences of the *Big Brother* TV show will actively prepare to watch the show than those planning to use the Internet. By 'actively preparing' *Big Brother* television viewers would schedule other activities around the show. They set aside time so they will not be disturbed while watching the show. REJECTED

TV viewers reported less preparation or scheduling of activities than the Internet users. In other words, viewers who also visited the *Big Brother* website were significantly more likely to report that they 'planned/scheduled' their viewing of *Big Brother*. 15% always were prepared to watch *Big Brother*, 11.3% were prepared frequently, 10% were rarely prepared, 63.8% were never prepared. These findings appear to demonstrate Internet users were more selective in choosing to watch *Big Brother*.

H4: The *Big Brother* Internet audiences are more knowledge-able about the program and its' characters than the *Big Brother* TV audience. ACCEPTED

The *Big Brother* Internet audience was significantly more likely to be have knowledge of the characters on the show. The Internet site was constantly active--allowing Internet users more time to learn about the shows characters. The 24-hour a day nature of the shows webcams, allowed audiences the ability to check up on their favorite characters even when the show wasn't airing. Almost thirteen percent (12.8%) were very familiar with the show's characters, 20.5% were somewhat familiar, 34.6% were only slightly familiar with the characters, 32.1% were not familiar at all.

Out of all respondents, 22.4% watched the *Big Brother* TV show. Of those, 24.7% of viewers always watched the show, 23.5% watched frequently. 52% rarely watched the show. The shows television viewers were significantly more likely to have visited the web site, most often after the show had aired. The *Big Brother* television show viewers were significantly more likely to have discussed *Big Brother* with a family member or friend and significantly more likely to have also watched Survivor. Demographically, significant differences were reported in education levels, household income, race, marital status and gender. *Big Brother* TV viewers were more likely to be high school graduates or had some college, earned less than 75K, were more likely black, single and female. Television viewers were more likely to have also watched Survivor.

Big Brother Internet viewers were demographically similar to *Big Brother* TV viewers. However, Internet viewers were more likely to be regular viewers of *Big Brother*, more likely to prepare in advance to watch the show, more likely to be familiar with the characters on the show, more likely to participate in call in voting, and more likely to have watched *Survivor* and *1900 House*.

Conclusion

Big Brother Internet website visitors were demographically similar to *Big Brother* television show viewers. However, viewers that visited the show's website were more likely to be regular viewers of *Big Brother*, more likely to prepare in advance to watch the show, more likely to be familiar with the characters on the show, more likely to par-

ticipate in call in voting and more likely to have watched interactive programs. While statistics show that there is an audience for interactivity, the mixture of web and television has not been refined for a broad audience.

Using measures based on Levy's definition of an active audience, this study found a more active audience in individuals who watched the show *Big Brother* and accessed the website. Viewers who only watched the television show were a less active audience. Those who accessed the *Big Brother* website were more actively involved in their *Big Brother* experience during their on-line use and during their television viewing of the program than those who did not access the website, but only viewed the program. Internet users rarely engaged in other on-line or off-line activities while accessing the *Big Brother* website, while television viewers did participate in other activities while viewing the show. Those who viewed the show and accessed the website were more involved in their television viewing experience than those who only viewed the show. Internet users were also less likely to participate in competing activities while viewing the television show *Big Brother*. Those who access the website were more likely to prepare for their viewing of the television show than those who only watched the show. Internet audiences were also more knowledgeable about the program and its characters than those who only viewed the show.

While this study focuses on a small portion of the overall questions related to new audiences for interactive television programs, it does raise interesting findings for broadcasters. Perhaps most importantly, the research offers new understanding regarding levels of activity and involvement in traditional television viewing. Knowing that Internet users become more involved television viewers, opens a window, so to speak, for innovative programming to capture the next generation of television viewers.

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