

THE BIG BROTHER OF CHANGES ON THE BULGARIAN TV MARKET

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The Bulgarian media market is in progress. While the interest of consumers continues to fall and fewer and fewer real events attract the audience, advertising revenues are regularly increasing. One of the reasons for this is the start of the Big Brother show in the autumn of 2004. In only three months, this TV format turned upside down everyone's ideas on how contemporary television is made, the concept of attracting more advertisers, and theories on the potential of the TV viewer. In fact, nothing unusual happened – the process of import of western TV formats went further and proven formulas for trash entertainment were applied on the Bulgarian viewer. Did he like it? It seems he did.

Big Brother is probably the most popular product of the trash TV program wave that swept over European air at the end of the last century. Produced by then Dutch company Endemol (presently owned by the Spanish telecom Telefonica), the Big Brother shook European countries to their social fundamentals after provoking absolutely everywhere one and the same discussion – are those, who watch it, really enjoying observing, for a whole day or for a couple of hours in the evening, how a group of people eat, relieve themselves, probably scratch their heads and after some time start looking for sexual contact? Does the viewer really want to be entertained by the smallest, sometimes provocative and not exactly pleasant details from the life of the participants in the show? Is voyeurism indeed not a disease, but a mass sport? Is it really?

In Bulgaria, The Big Brother Show succeeded in winning 12 million leva (appr. 6 million euros) in advertising revenues for Nova TV, the third national television, owned by the Greek Antena Group, which took the risk of broadcasting this format. The quoted amount is relatively reliable, because it is a practice in Bulgaria not to comment on the real numbers after commissions and gross rebates, but to name the raw number. Even then the success of the Big Brother is remarkable. It is also a fact that the start of this concept succeeded in provoking the long anticipated and desired competition on the TV market, which until the present moment had been practically divided between the state owned national television BNT and the first private national television BTV, which is claimed to be owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. Nova TV staked on provocation, implemented the reality format and redesigned their whole programming schedule by turning into The Television of the reality TV. Every show had some connection to the Big Brother, even the Evening News. Nova started cooperation with one of the biggest cable operators for the launch of a 24/7 broadcast of a Big Brother channel. Participants in the house of Big Brother were voted for per SMS and producers report receiving nearly 860,000 short messages, priced 1 leva each (appr. 50 euro cents). This has made the show one of the most successful projects in Bulgaria for making profit through alternative marketing channels, which SMS voting itself is. The Big Brother project was first declared risky; however it succeeded in raising the television's revenues. Analysts started talking about the birth of new media celebrities.

Aside from the marketing and advertising effects stands the discussion about the audience watching the broadcast. Supporters of the game describe it as pure entertainment and a unique social experiment. Opponents call it pathological voyeurism and a demonstration of primitivism. Despite this, many people watched Big Brother out of curiosity or for fun. Peoplemetric results show that more women than men have watched the game. The most active viewers were among the age groups of 45-54 – 21,6% and 15-24 – 17,4%. Statistics on social status shows that Big Brother has more fans among common workers (27,9%) and students (24,4%).

The start of Big Brother was in some way a cultural shock for many. Suddenly, the elite audience in the big cities and in the capital Sofia (to which media analysts also belong) saw implemented in practice their wildest nightmares for the real social conditions in the country. This audience rather assumed that such terrible expectations should be just a

product of phobia or probably a marginal entertainment only for the lowest social groups. Suddenly (but probably expected) it turned out that:

- the mass Bulgarian TV viewer tolerates sexual discrimination and does not respect women;
- the viewer, armed with a mobile phone, realized his power to “punish” those who look weird to him and do not fit in the stereotype; he did not miss the chance to take advantage of that power;
- the Bulgarian TV viewer can be easily manipulated, is naïve and persuadable by advertising campaigns which provoke an illusion of easy winnings;
- the Bulgarian TV viewer really likes melodrama, supports narrow-mindedness and respects dodgers

Big Brother provoked similar emotions in Western Europe and is now coming to the Balkans in its full “brilliance”. This is, some might say, inevitable. The contemporary viewer gets euphoric by watching simple social provocations. He likes gossip, intrigues. Dirt does pay. Check out the weekly rating lists, and there is bound to be at least one seamy exploration of life's sleazy underside floating near the top. All mass media are now part of this indistinguishable tabloid ooze that has driven our collective reputation into the gutter. Critics are worried trash TV is threatening the very moral fabric of society. Wired magazine describes the essence of daytime talkshows as a masturbatory encounter of the outraged audience. It seems trash TV plays on our voyeuristic desires, as well as our newest basic instinct: wanting to appear on television. Whether cop, criminal, or suburban housewife, the possibility of being on camera is considered seductive because self-exhibition is a validation of existence. Some observers link the popularity of reality-based television to a spreading sense of powerlessness among the general public rather than voyeurism or exhibitionism. People do not want the old-fashioned kind of news because they know there is nothing they can do about it. But these new shows offer them the chance to get involved. They can call a number. They can make a difference. In other words, unlike more traditional news and public affairs programs, trash TV invites viewers themselves to actively intervene in limited ways.

Faith favors the bold. Success gives wings. Profits – too. In the coming autumn the second season of the Big Brother is set to be made. If we believe in regularities, this second attempt should not be as successful as the first. The Pandora Box is already

open. The trash continues with another successful format – “The Star Academy”, where a group of young people struggle to become a super star. Who says reality television does not evolve?

The author works for the Capital Weekly Newspaper, a business oriented publication considered one of the most important and influential Bulgarian papers. © Media Online 2005. All right reserved.