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# Media Audiences and the Game of Controversy: On Reality TV, Moral Panic and Controversial Media Stories

## Introduction

Since the early 1990s there has been a wide public and academic interest in the explosion and success of new factual television formats associated with reality TV (hereafter: RT). RT has become a widely popular term, referring to various programme types such as docusoaps, reality crime shows, home video programmes, wider human-interest programmes, or even more hybrid programmes such as *Big Brother*, with a mix of real life soap and game show elements. Although RT has become a tendency, a loose meta-genre or a container concept, most viewers and critics share the feeling that it refers to various factual television formats with a high reality claim, stressing the actions and emotions of real people (non-actors), often using a combination of ‘authentic’ (e.g. police, security or surveillance images) and staged images (e.g. fictionalised reconstructions, post-factum interviews). In this chapter we will not be engaged again in trying to define this hybrid programme category,<sup>1</sup> but rather concentrate on another specific shared feeling among viewers and critics. It deals with the *atmosphere of controversy*, or as French sociologist Dominique Mehl (1994a, p. 104) put it, the ‘perfume of scandal’ around those programmes.<sup>2</sup>

This atmosphere is not only related to the often-explicit exploration (or from a

critical stance, exploitation) of those social and moral issues which touch the spheres of controversy and deviancy, but RT also touches on at least the ideas of a wider moral and media panic. In this chapter we will use these critical sociological concepts in order to understand better why these recent media products have been met by such intense moral outcry and public criticism. The wider debates about 'new' factuality have had, in some cases, many of the characteristics of a media panic (Drotner, 1992) as if a new, scary medium had arrived which threatens middle-class norms and attracts children and young people with vulgarity and a new barbarism. Some RT programmes even became the plaything of a spiralling debate among serious media journalists, fluent intellectuals, worried politicians, all sorts of moral guardians and wider public opinion, ultimately even leading to official action and concrete regulation.

In his monograph on the concept of moral panics, Thompson (1998, p. 139) claims that we have seen an 'increasingly rapid succession of scares in the mass media.' According to Thompson (p. 141) 'certain parts of the mass media have responded to market pressures by competing with each other to present dramatic narratives and spectacles with a strong moral content.' Although he does not explicitly refer to RT as such, it is clear that these programmes fit into the description of similar media strategies in a highly competitive environment. This connection between RT, the exploitation of moral issues in the media and the idea of moral panic has recently been signalled more explicitly by other authors (see for instance Richardson and Meinhof, 1999, p. 126). In this chapter we consider whether the perfume of scandal and controversy around RT is a basic constitutive characteristic of the genre. In order to analyse the phenomenon, we introduce the issue first through the use of concepts such as controversy and deviancy, and secondly through the concepts of moral and media panic. Finally we bring in results from a qualitative audience study on how young people talk about and perceive various types of factual and reality television, including controversial material.

## Exploring or Exploiting Controversial Social and Moral Issues?

### Issues of Identity Politics, Interpersonal Relations and Society

In its most negative version, criticism of RT tends to portray it as a format with a special interest in harsh, controversial social issues, giving voice to deviant views, creating a platform for eccentric freaks. This extreme argument, which comes close to Dovey's 'Trash TV position' (2000, p. 83), claims that contemporary media operate in a highly competitive, market-led economy and therefore only offer culturally suspect products. This *trash position* is often sustained on the basis of some spectacular, highly publicized shows such as *Rescue 911* or *Big Brother*, or programmes which have been attacked on the basis of fraud in terms of professional deontology or their reality claims. These programmes strongly

influenced the public debate about the broader RT genre, operating as media templates in their own turn (Kitzinger, 2000) and limiting a more sensitive discussion on the reality tendency.

In recent years however it has become clear that this position cannot grasp the potential of the wide variety of reality programmes, both as an instrument for social representation and as a forum for new forms of information, participation and debate. There seems to be a growing awareness, even among critics, that 'television's explicit and flexible generic organisation allows it to move in many directions, and to provide many emotional points of contact with the ideas and lifestyles, problems and opportunities, that it is working through' (Ellis, 2000, p. 126). It means that RT in its earlier form has gone through a process of transformation and exerted wider influence on other genres. The stress on everyday life, on strong reality claims, authenticity, intimacy and first person speech has made it possible for RT to shed new light onto various kinds of social and moral issues. We acknowledge three main directions here, namely issues in terms of *identity politics* ('I, manifestation of the self), of *interpersonal relations* ('I and the other'), and of the *relationship between the individual and the wider societal environment* ('I, the other and society') (Biltreyst, 2000).

It is not difficult to relate these issues (treated in RT) to recent important sociological work on contemporary social problems. In his book *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracy* for instance, Robert Lane (2000) indicates how Western society struggles with a fundamental paradox: despite high material prosperity people more than ever experience personal unhappiness and unease. In his analysis Lane warns of a tragic erosion of solidarity in society, starting with the level of interpersonal and family relations. This lack of warm *interpersonal relationships* and of solidarity in family life is reinforced (especially in the US) by the erosion of basic structures of societal solidarity since the 1980s, as well as by the growing work pressures in contemporary liberal market economies. For Lane it is clear that in a network society people need 'intimacy' and strong relationships based on trust. If this analysis is correct, it is no surprise that contemporary television - from dating programmes, confessional chat shows or *Big Brother* - stress intimacy, the personal voice and interpersonal relations or the cohabiting of various people.

This tendency of explicitly showing intimate (love) relations has often been criticized as voyeurism and exhibitionism, but Mehl (1996) argues that this type of *télévision de l'intimité, télé lacrymale* or *télé charité* may be disturbing for the elites because of the irrational discourse being thrown into the public sphere. Those on the defence of intimacy television claim that this type of programme crucially questions the borders between the public and private sphere and the status of expertise and experience. These weaker and shifting boundaries between the

public and private ultimately create a more complex public sphere, including a decline of traditional institutions and discourses.

This type of intimacy television can also be easily related to theories on *identity politics*. Manuel Castells (1996, p. 22) defines identity as a complex process whereby an individual defines him/herself and constructs identity meaning on the basis of a 'set of cultural attributes'. In a network society, where media are so prominent, identity construction is more than ever an individual task with many opportunities and possible avenues. Some will experience this as an ultimate proof of liberation. But for others this may be a damaging task, given the absence of the safe haven of family, tradition, neighbourhood and social class. Given the imminent role of media in identity politics, it is only a small step to see various forms of RT as performing forceful, concrete scenarios of identity construction in action, reinforced by its intimacy and everyday life setting (see also Bondebjerg, 2002, pp. 160-1).

Another set of issues deals with how RT explores problems in the relationship between the *individual, societal institutions* and *society in a broader sense*. A striking paradox here is the success of some reality programmes in promoting vox pop and audience participation on the one hand and the crisis of the citizen participation in official politics on the other hand. This explains the intense research on audience discussion programmes (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994), which thematize several concepts of political participation, democracy and civil responsibility. These talk shows seem to perform an open forum where civilized people discuss and try to come to a consensus over important ethical and social issues. According to Mehl (1996, p. 235) this type of vox pop programme formulates an answer to the lack of political participation and direct democracy. Participation is not only present in this type of talk show, but also in the use of voting systems, or the audience power to change the narrative and the course of the game (e.g. in *Big Brother*).

Other aspects are related to how RT actualizes sociological theories on risk and fear in capitalist society (e.g. Beck, 1986). We can draw the connection between the success of reality crime shows on the one hand and the representation of crime and the ecology of fear in neo-liberal society on the other. The latter is illustrated by a long chain of activities and institutions, which operate on the sense of fear, crime and risk - from shopping malls at the outskirts of the city with their own security services, the success of alarm systems and the mobile phone for security, to the abundance of crime and violence on television and film. For Boomkens (1996), reality crime shows are perfect examples of how television operates as a 'fear machine'. Dovey (2000, p. 99) claims that watching reality crime shows combines 'shared expressions of fear and disgust (...) with fearful and protective feelings, making for a TV "family bonding experience". We are able to confirm our own

security by looking at those less fortunate. Bill Nichols (1994, p. 55) in his analysis points to fear of social inequality, flexibility and instability as a background for the rise of RT. Nichols (p. 58) claims that RT mainly targets the big middle class, which in a flexible capitalist society continuously feels threatened by a possible social decline.<sup>3</sup>

### **Trash, Pluralist, Critical and Consumer Culture Positions**

All these examples indicate that RT is, in some sense, more than entertainment. Both defenders and critics agree that it openly constructs as well as explores significant issues which go to the heart of how people (can) live with each other in society. Most of these issues are fully part of the sphere of legitimate controversy and rarely actually treat deviancy. However, the controversial nature of RT may be less in *what* than in *how* issues are treated. And here again various positions can be taken up.<sup>4</sup> From a *pluralist position*, RT bears a potential for empowerment, sometimes translated as the forum for new forms of information, participation and debate. In its ideal form this position underlines the potential of RT for opening up an additional independent space where issues can be treated from a bottom-up perspective.

At the other end of the spectrum we can observe various *critical positions*, which claim that RT does not explore, but rather exploits important contemporary social and moral issues. The critical position often stresses the ideological dimension behind how these issues are treated. Nichols (1994, p. 51), for instance argues that, compared to the documentary tradition, RT does not intend to mobilize people or to sharpen their civic sense. The ideas of the liberal pluralist position are seen as mere illusions and as commercial strategies for obtaining wider audiences. The exploitation of the private sphere corresponds with people's tendency to voyeurism, along with the perverse use of symbols of participatory democracy. Television only plays with these ideals of representation, while minority groups are further stigmatized. These programmes pay lip service to democratic ideals, while they use a specific discourse to simulate participation and an authentic voice. Television's forum is highly orchestrated, while real debate is impossible. Patrick Charaudeau and Rodolphe Ghiglione (1997) talk about *une représentation fallacieuse* and a *leurre séduisant*.

In accordance with larger positions in terms of media and society (Curran, 1996), the critical position assumes that the media are not only serving commercial purposes, but ultimately function as instruments for social control and ideological reproduction. RT goes along with tendencies of infotainment and tabloidization, leading to more stereotypes and a narrowed knowledge of wider societal issues. Abstract analyses and background information are replaced by a fragmented image with subjective, individual voices. These techniques of subjectivation,

fragmentation and personalization ultimately can lead to the implosion of the modern public sphere. These frames hide various other, more intermediate positions, which accept the validity of the fundamental critical approach, while also opening spaces for alternative material. One position, which is closely linked to cultural studies perspectives, can be seen as a *critical consumer culture position*. This position accepts that commercialism often leads to trash, exploitative or socially conservative material. But it at least opens up the possibility that contemporary commercial culture may have the potential for empowerment at some occasion. The arrival of new factual television is mainly a result of commercial strategies and may use the symbols of democracy, but this does not exclude the potential for new forms of public debate, broader representation, or a better access to wider information.

From this perspective there is no need to consider RT as the end of ideals in terms of media and society. According to Bondebjerg (1996), we see the 'creation of a new mixed public sphere, where common knowledge and everyday experience play a much larger role.' The consumer culture in which we live becomes a more nuanced frame of interpretation where democratic potentials are not excluded, notwithstanding the original political-economic motives. In a recent critical overview of RT formats and positions in the debate, Bondebjerg (2002) illustrates how some RT programmes are still informed by, or have clear references to, documentary traditions. Arguing that we have to acknowledge the variety of formats and traditions covered by reality TV genres, Bondebjerg claims that 'from an audience point of view, reality TV covers very different formats and tendencies and cannot just be dismissed as commercial trash-TV' (p. 188). Referring to a Danish and British context, it is interesting how he makes a distinction between the use of RT formats by commercial and public service channels, where the latter more often try to link up with documentary and journalistic traditions. Bondebjerg (1996) argues that 'in spite of this, there is a need for critical perspectives: dramatizing crime, personal problems and social issues in fascinating forms does not necessarily create the basis for public knowledge. There still is a question of balance, relevance and the question of putting things into appropriate perspectives and contexts.'

## **Provocation, Simulation or Real Moral Panic?**

### **The Intentional Production of Scandals and a Public Discourse of Denouncement**

The above discussion claimed that the perfume of scandal and controversy around RT may be linked less to the kind of important social and moral issues treated than to the ways these are (re)presented. As with most news and information programmes, RT operates in the sphere of legitimate controversy, although it uses different means. Dependent on the various (schematic) positions in the debate, there is a different evaluation of reality programmes (in) direct treatment of those

controversial issues, their strong reality claims, or their stress on everyday life experiences and on subjectivity. While some see RT as a potential for discussing social issues, others see it as a lure and ideological fraud. We also claimed that the public debate on RT is strongly driven by some eccentric or highly publicized programmes, which tend to become staged media events and even a media template, obscuring the debate.

This leads us to a second step in our analysis, to the *discourses around RT* leading to protest and eventually to scandal and moral panic. An important feeling here is that some reality programmes are engaged in the *intentional* production of a perfume of scandal and controversy. Critics (e.g. Nichols, 1994) claim that reality programmes are highly aware of their exploration of morality and transgressions of norms and values. According to the critics, reality TV and other 'new' factual programmes are not so noble in their discussion of important issues in the public arena, but they should rather be seen as a metaphor for the critical observation that media are driven into commercial goals where crime, scandals and hysteria can create enormous profits (Lull & Hinerman, 1997). Defenders of RT however, claim that this type of programming can only be successful when it appeals to an audience's need to see wider social and moral issues treated in the media. Mehl (1994a, p. 104), for instance, claims that the wave of moralist protest against 'reality shows' in France indicates that these programmes appeal to deeper social phenomena and changes in society, related to changing patterns in power structures of knowledge (Who may speak? What about private, intimate knowledge?). Mehl (1994b) also points to the furious wave of moral protest and indignation, mainly by journalists and intellectuals. This debate reached its peak in France in 2001, when the *Big Brother* derivative *Loft Story* was promoted and broadcast by the commercial channel M6, and caused an unprecedented moral outcry and intellectual hysteria in the national quality press (Kerviel & Psenny, 2001). But there was more. Besides this debate and the faint-hearted public protests by the leading commercial broadcaster TF1 against *Loft Story*, it was amazing that France's regulatory body CSA intervened directly and forced a number of modifications to the programme.<sup>5</sup>

The case history of *Big Brother* shows that in other Western European countries too there have been instances of something like moral panic. The German case is well-known, where arguments about the programme preceded its airing and where public pressure drove regulators in several *Länder* to mandate legal experts to screen the programme content. This indirectly led to the modification of the programme, while the moral outcry from intellectuals, the Church and other 'moral guardians' continued (EBU, 2001; Mikos et al., 2000). What is interesting in the *Big Brother* case, in terms of theories on moral panic and controversy, is that the producers in various countries explicitly looked for and promoted disputes with moral guardians and with regulators in order to get media attention. In Belgium,

for instance, months before the launching of the programme, a wide advertising campaign in the press showed ads with quotes from first-rate politicians and well-known critical intellectuals claiming that *Big Brother* was the worst television programme ever to be shown. One advert even quoted the well-respected secretary of the (dominant) Christian-Democratic party, claiming that he will go to court if *Big Brother* violated, even to a small extent, principles of human dignity. This example shows that the programme makers were not only looking for controversy by exploiting social and moral issues (*Big Brother* was after all a very decent programme, as also critics acknowledged later on), but rather played with the idea of a possible moral panic. But the question is to what extent this concept is still useful.

### **Moral Panic**

In his book on moral panics, Kenneth Thompson (1998, p. 140) claims that '(it) is only recently, in the 1990s, that the continuing rapid succession of phenomena commonly described as "moral panics" has begun to force a reappraisal.' Following earlier work on the concept, Thompson (1998, p. 7) refers to the concept as a result or a 'spiral effect produced by the interaction of the media, public opinion, interest groups and the authorities.' In his pioneering work on the confrontations between mods and rockers, Stanley Cohen (1972, p. 9) wrote about how the media were crucial in (re)presenting 'a condition, episode, person or group of persons (...) as a threat to societal values and interests (...) in a stylised and stereotypical fashion.' The electronic and printed media provided the information that fuelled the panic, mainly through a process of stigmatising, thus defining social deviancy (Ben-Yehuda, 1990, p. 103). The mass media did not only exaggerate the scope of events (exaggeration), or defined events as worse than they really were (distortion), they also inferred emotional symbolism and moral values of fear and threat to specific groups ('folk devils'), which were then defined as separated from the majority.

The work of Cohen and of Young on drug takers (1971) demonstrated that the media drew attention to or reflected social problems, as well as actively constructed meaning, by amplifying fear around issues such as crime, sexuality, gender, youth or ethnicity. The ideological nature of the media's use of moral panics became apparent through Hall's et al. (1978) work on mugging. The researchers claimed that the media were whipping up a moral panic around the issue and thus legitimated more intensive policing and punitive measures. Moral panic (and the media's role in stirring it up) became intrinsically linked, not only with conservatism and social control, but also with faked consensus, hegemony and the transmission of a dominant ideology. In this manner, the media are more than mere moral entrepreneurs, but become vehicles for the transmission of ideology, primary definers of consensus, and forces in maintaining social cohesion.

The question however is whether this concept can still be maintained for analysing the public debate around RT. Along with Angela McRobbie (1994) it seems necessary to redefine the moral panic model in a post-modern society. A central idea in McRobbie's criticism of the old model is that moral panics still exist and even show a high rate of turnover, but that, at the same time, all constituents of it has changed radically since the 1980s. She argues that 'the rectangular relationship of positions and processes which held the old model together (the sociologists on behalf of the deviant; the agencies of social control; the media; the moral guardians and experts) has been replaced by a more diverse and more fluid set of institutions, agencies and practices which sometimes interlock' (p. 211).

Various ideas in McRobbie's forceful attempt to redefine the place of the moral panic concept for media and cultural studies may be interesting in understanding the fuss around RT's controversial image. First of all, and in relation to the media, she claims that in a highly competitive environment media often take up the role of moral guardians, becoming the moral voice of the new middle class, alerting them 'to new possibilities for concern and indignation.' McRobbie (p. 202) argues that 'moral panics thus become the norm of journalistic practice', where even quality papers use 'exaggerated, sensational and moralistic headlines.' Given the expansion and amplification of the media in social life, the world of the media can no longer be separated from social reality. Although McRobbie did not refer to RT, she argued that the media in the 1990s provide a forum upon which important social and political issues are 'presented, paraded and transformed, no longer into straightforward moral panics, but rather into a seamless web of narrativized news and media events.' This means that panics are simulated, only rarely taken up and activated, mainly because they are woven into a wider flow or web of news stories and media events.

Secondly, this idea is closely linked to the more complicated and fragmented balance between the media on the one hand and the traditional agents of social control, the 'folk devils' and the moral guardians on the other. As an example McRobbie refers to the impressive growth of various pressure and interest groups, which often succeed in responding to or even countering the stigmatization or demonization of the people they represent. They can produce their own media or try to influence the traditional media representation of (former) folk devils. A standard procedure in this process of de-stigmatization is to give a view upon the everyday life and problems by first hand witnesses. This proliferation of voices in the media, McRobbie argues, has introduced a strong contestation of the traditional moral guardians. And she continues that 'the old days of the clearly defined and highly visible moral panic have been replaced by a much more sophisticated way of representing social and political issues to the public' (pp. 217-8). Contrary to the old moral panic view on society and moral coherence, this also concludes that norms, morality and representation are less stable and belong to a

field of contestation and struggle (see also Horsefield, 1997).

A third and final criticism deals with the necessity to bring in and to reconceptualize the audience. Here McRobbie (1994, p. 215) rightly argues that the audience ‘in the old moral panic theory played a minor role’ and was seen as ‘the space of consensus, the space of media manipulation’. The moral panic concept has often been used as a key concept for understanding processes of social control and manipulation, often leading to a quick view upon an easily convinced audience. In this context Horsefield (1997) refers to the whole field of audience reception studies, which ‘suggest that the interaction between audiences and mediated messages is much more complex than the media influence theory which underlies the moral panic hypothesis.’

This all seems to make the moral panic concept outdated and inadequate for analysing the role of the media in (re)presenting and discussing moral and social issues in a post-modern society, leading some authors to replace ‘the vocabulary of the moral panic with that of representation, discourse and “the other”’ (McRobbie, 1994, p. 210). As a summary of this excursion through the moral panic concept, we think that McRobbie’s critical reconfiguration of the concept fairly helps to understand RT’s controversial nature in various directions. RT as a tendency has been crucial, as authors from a pluralist and ‘empowerment’ position may argue, in the proliferation of voices from below during the 1990s. It has also been important that using/exploiting stories with a moral panic *angle* as a working practice to attract audiences has led to public criticism of sensationalism and commercialism. The intentional production, or the simulation of, a (possible) moral panic only rarely leads to real moral panics – at least as defined as a spiral effect produced by the interaction of the media, public opinion, interest groups, moral guardians and the authorities. In a post-modern environment, these (potential) moral panic stories are woven into a massive flow of other media stories, events and voices from various horizons. In this context, the chance that they really lead to a momentum of moral outcry is fairly small, at least as a result of specific issues whipped up by the media.

### **Media Panic**

How then are we to explain the moral outcry against specific programmes or against the RT genre as a whole? Here it is necessary to distinguish between moral panic and *media panic*. While in moral panic the media play a role of stirring up a wider debate over a specific social or moral issue, in media panic they become the object, source and (sometimes even) the medium of public consternation (Drotner, 1992). Media panic mainly refers to the historical introduction of a new mass medium and the resulting strong public reactions, sometimes leading to a spiral of fear, threat and (in some cases) regulation or censorship.

Drotner refers to various forms of popular media, such as popular fiction, film, comics, but it may also include a panic over specific genres or cycles of films, books, comics or programmes (see Springhall, 1998). Drotner indicates that the phenomenon is mostly seen as a potential threat to children and the young, and (as an extension) as a possible conflict with enlightenment ideals of human and cultural development. The historical analysis of such panics underlines the strong coherence and repetitiveness of the arguments in the debates. What is interesting in all this and mainly in relation to RT, is, as Drotner (pp. 60-1) rightly claims, that 'media panics do not tell us much about actual media', although they 'tackle central questions about cultural quality, personal development and social change under the rubric of enlightenment.'

It is not so difficult to extend Drotner's analysis to the debate about panic and regulation of RT in some countries. We already indicated how some highly publicized programmes drove this debate, operating as media templates. Again, as in the French case, arguments of quality and civilization were raised, while the young were seen as principal victims of vulgarity. In her 1992 essay, Drotner already indicated that there has been a change in the media panic discourse over the years, where pessimist elitism, paternalist measures and (in some cases) straight censorship (e.g. film in most Western democracies after the First World War) gave space to liberalism, tolerance and 'more optimistic pluralism' (p. 52).

### **Audiences, Factual Television and Controversial Stories**

In this section we will briefly discuss some conclusions of a case study on how young people look at (and learn from) new factual television, including various forms of RT and controversial stories.<sup>6</sup> With this qualitative audience study we primarily wanted to test or confront some crucial issues in the public debate on RT in relation to other factual television, including hard news. Using both interviews and diaries with open questions and specific statements, we wanted to understand how adolescents thought about these 'new' factual programmes. What about their understanding of the different formats and their reality claims? What do they think about the 'new fluidity' across genres (Corner, 1999)? What kind of issues treated by factual television do people talk about? And how do they appreciate the potential information delivered by RT formats with its stress on lay experts, everyday life experiences and the new light that these programmes can bring onto specific issues? What about controversial stories? What about the ethical and deontological questions?

We will only discuss some major results of this study (Van Bauwel & Biltreyst, 2002), but it may be important first to acknowledge that in Flanders both the commercial and public service broadcasters are heavily involved in using reality formats. In recent years, the public television station invested strongly in

docusoaps in prime time and includes RT techniques in many of its talk shows, audience discussion and even in its information programmes. Similar trends can be observed on the commercial channels, although they are much more strongly involved in using vox pop in the news as well as in exploiting the more controversial, 'tabloid' genres within RT, such as dating programmes, reality crime shows and big real life soaps (e.g. *Big Brother* and *Temptation Island*). It was no surprise that the latter programmes were often used as the key references in discussions about RT. *Big Brother* in particular has been a major media event in 2000 and again in 2001, when it broke all domestic viewing records and, for months, led to a public debate among politicians, lawyers, intellectuals, programme makers and 'shocked' citizens.

### **RT as Denouncement and as a Metaphor for Television as Manipulation and Sensationalism**

One of the striking results from the diaries and our discussions with recipients was that most of them use RT in a rather negative manner, often as a concept to denounce some overall tendencies in television and society. This was clearly the case for *Big Brother*: this programme was continuously called trash, nonsense and (indeed in a pejorative sense) mere popular culture. Also other forms of RT associated with freak shows, eccentric experiences or openly controversial stories, were larded with words and images usually associated with the 'trash position'. This denouncement included some ambivalence among most receivers: these programmes were very often connected to sensationalism, voyeurism and commercialism on the one hand, but also included entertainment and amusement on the other hand.

This denouncement also included the idea of media manipulation and the deconstruction of RT's reality claims. A quite illustrative statement here comes from a male respondent (B., twenty-one-years-old) who called RT 'rather ridiculous.'

*Television makers can do with people what they want. 'Jambers' for instance is pure kitsch. He's looking for extreme figures, for instance a guy in a town who's paid for what he tells to the camera. But some people like this programme and find it informative enough while they get a skewed image of reality.*

This critical attitude towards RT, its sensationalism and fake reality claims was far from exceptional and it was often enlarged to a criticism towards television in general. Many recipients talked about manipulation of reality through television. The young people in our study mostly developed a complex, not to say nuanced and critical, attitude towards the reality claims, where they made a clear distinction between fictional and factual programmes. But the latter were also often observed

from a mixed perspective. On the one hand, they talked about news, information and reality programmes in a deferential manner, referring to television as a means to get a part of reality, with people of flesh and blood. But on the other hand, they also used a more critical, meta-linguistic frame about factual programmes as constructs of a reality, which have to obey technological procedures and restrictive economic laws. Within the factual category, RT was seen as the worst case scenario or as an invitation to manipulation and the construction of a faked reality:

*Reality television is not a window to the world. They invite people to have specific reactions. There is always something behind. It is only reality when you don't know that they are filming. (C., female, twenty-two-years-old)*

### **Generic Distinctions, the Usefulness of Emotion and the Need for Balance**

This type of statement clearly echoed critical positions in the public debate, making *Big Brother* the ultimate metaphor for manipulation. However, when discussing other, less openly controversial reality and 'new' factual programmes in more detail, it was clear that the recipients were naturally aware of distinctions between programmes and formats within the RT tendency. Viewers did occasionally refer to leaky genre boundaries.

The respondents talked in a nuanced sense about different reality shows where, for instance, some human-interest programmes were highly appreciated because they made them think about specific issues, which also came up in discussions with other people. A key factor here is emotion, which introduces personalization and the possibility of identification:

*Some programmes really make me think. I remember a programme with a cancer patient being filmed and interviewed by her sister. This made me think: ooh! This could happen to me! (T., female, twenty-one-years-old)*

It is tentative to see this trinity of emotion, personalization and identification from a critical perspective as a form of trivialization. However, as Elizabeth Bird claimed (1998, p. 39, in a quote from John Tomlinson), personalization can be useful 'in achieving greater imaginative proximity, while the personal can introduce a democratisation of news'. The recipients claimed that emotion may be a gateway for empathy and discussion, but here again, they were often fully aware of the danger of tipping into sensationalism and voyeurism. This nuanced view underlined the general idea that the young recipients *often picked up arguments from various positions in the debate on RT*, from a trash position (e.g. about *Big Brother*) to a critical (e.g. on sensationalism) or a pluralist view on empowerment (e.g. emotion can lead to a better understanding). This can also be illustrated by how they appreciated (but also criticized) other main characteristics of RT such as

the use of experiences of lay people, associated with emotion and everyday life experiences. Again people were quite critical in discussing the pro's and con's:

*Experts know more about it, they analyse things in a neutral manner. Lay testimonies will always be somewhat coloured. But, these testimonies are necessary, mainly because they represent honest emotions. (S., male, fifteen-years-old)*

Most respondents appreciated first person speech and emotions, although this may introduce some dangers of overexposure:

*I think that testimonies may be somewhat too subjective or personal, or that people are driven by their emotions and feelings... I like to see people talk about what they experienced, because you know that what they think and say is honest. (D., female, twenty-one-years-old)*

Some respondents clearly expressed their ideas about balance in information and in voices on a specific issue:

*Testimonies are emotional and may not be realistic. The emotional value may obscure the facts and at this moment we need experts who remind us about what really happens. (K., female, nineteen-years-old)*

*Testimonies are strong in showing what is happening inside people. Experts are more objective. (L., female, twenty-one-years-old)*

*People know the problems. Experts know also something, but it is often theory. (H., female, nineteen-years-old)*

### **The Importance of News, the Potential and Conditional Character of RT**

Another striking finding was that this fairly young group of television viewers continuously underlined the importance of traditional information programmes. One of the alarming results of many audience studies on news consumption deals with the diminishing attention and attraction of young people for it. We can only speculate about social bias, but most respondents indicated news as the most reliable source of information (although certainly not always free from manipulation):

*But television does not always provide correct information. It depends on the programme. Soaps for instance are fantasy. The news must be nothing more than reality. They will not invent things, though? (H., male, nineteen-years-old)*

In the diaries people had to indicate a list of stories, social and political issues, which were discussed with friends, colleagues or family members. These lists

indicated that most of these stories came from news, rather than from many forms of RT. It was also amazing that the deconstruction of the reality claims of many forms of RT often went hand in hand with a reference to the importance of traditional news and information. This comes close to Bird's analysis (1997) on audiences for tabloids and scandal news, where she indicates that public conversation does not revolve solely around issues of scandal and personality, and not all people avoid hard news. On the contrary, 'people still discuss political issues and complex economic questions', and Bird continues that 'the media do have a crucial role in setting the agenda for public discourse' (p. 119). Bird's analysis, which we would see as a critical version of the consumer culture position, is not so far away from how many respondents in our study think about the balance between traditional news and various RT formats. Although the recipients did not talk in these terms, they were often defending an argument for balance between various forms of factual programmes.

The image of various types of reality programmes was not straightforward, ranging from a trash position to a positive appreciation of the additional informative value of others. According to the recipients much depends upon the general atmosphere and the concrete issues treated. Audiences do not speak in terms of the democratic potentials of some RT, or in terms of an additional forum for information and discussion, for a plurality of views and voices. However, they did argue in more indirect ways for the potential and conditional nature of reality programming:

*It is true that testimonies of ordinary people must be supplemented by those of experts, in order to get a more objective view on what happens around us. (N., female, twenty-one-years-old)*

It is always easy, and it has become a nearly standard conclusion for qualitative audience studies, to say that viewers are critically involved with media products. However we must acknowledge several weaknesses in the use of diaries, interviews and other qualitative methodologies. It might well be that audiences tend to respond according to traditional taste hierarchies as they are circulated in the public debate. But there are many indications in our data that viewers are actively involved in what television offers as information for their lives, despite what the differences among respondents in terms of cultural capital indicate. The public debate and the media panic around RT did not seem to have influenced their definition, appreciation and use of various forms of reality programmes. However, it seems that they somehow picked up the negative connotation of the overall concept of RT, which they reserve for eccentric and highly publicized formats. But nevertheless people appreciate RT as a wider tendency in as much as the issues presented can touch them emotionally or bring in new practical knowledge. In these cases they search for other generic nouns than RT. An interesting docusoap is then called a 'documentary'.

In a similar manner, the audience was not picking up most claims about RT's potential for theories of the public sphere, not at least in an abstract manner. However, when specific issues are treated in an accessible manner, they very much seem to appreciate strategies such as the use of lay testimonies, new forms of bottom-up knowledge based on everyday life experiences, subjective speech and so on. On all these points, however, we hope to have shown that people also noted a darker side of cheap sensationalism and RT's potential of limiting wider information. They seemed to call into question the idea of balance in types of information (expert versus everyday life experience, top-down versus bottom-up), including the conditional value of RT.

## Discussion

This chapter started from the observation that few recent media genres have been more critically received than RT, defined here as a broad container concept, metagenre or a tendency in how television treats specific social and moral issues. In many (European) societies specific RT programmes were seen as troubling and controversial, leading in particular cases to a wide, spiralling debate with (for some authors) all the characteristics of a moral panic. The application of this critical concept to RT was reinforced by the fact that in some countries media regulators were driven to action. The application of the moral panic concept to RT was also somewhat magnified by publicity campaigns of some programmes, which seemingly tried to whip up the debate with intellectuals, politicians, regulators and various groups of moral guardians (e.g. the Church).

In this chapter we've argued that the concept of moral panic may be insufficient to understand the atmosphere of controversy or the 'perfume of scandal' around RT. According to various critics of the concept, it seems that in a post-modern society, with its abundance of voices in different types of media, a fairly narrow view of social coherence and moral stability can no longer be maintained. Media themselves have played a major role in contesting the authority of traditional agents of social control and in questioning values of traditional moral guardians, while other groups gained a clearer voice in the public debate around specific social issues (e.g. gay movement, ethnic movements).

The interpretation of RT's role in this all depends very much on the position that one takes *vis-à-vis* the media and society in general. We've argued that RT as a whole does not herald the end of ideals in terms of media and society, and that in some cases it provides additional information on specific issues. As the audience study indicates, it is clear that people can gain knowledge or learn from how some RT formats (e.g. some human-interest programmes) work upon specific issues in terms of identity politics, interpersonal relations or on issues dealing with the relationship between the individual and society. They offer people concrete

scenarios, often applied in an everyday context, with people and their emotions. Although people appreciate concrete programmes and issues, they also make overall distinctions within RT formats, accepting the value of this type of information but still underlining the importance of traditional news for balance and relevance. People were overall fairly critical of specific formats and even applied the overall noun of RT in a rather derogatory manner. People appreciate the potential nature of 'useful' information, although this is often swept aside by sensationalism, game show elements and all that is troubling about this type of programme (e.g. the use of freaks). More abstract theories on the democratic potentials of RT, as often formulated within an empowerment frame (Dovey, 2000), are not useful or applicable for audiences. RT in its most pejorative form only uses the symbols of democracy and stigmatises and may limit a broader representation of some groups and issues.

It is obvious that we should make clear distinctions among genres and programmes, also RT-genres, although this might limit our understanding of generic hybridization in contemporary television (Corner, 1999; Ellis, 2000). RT is also a concrete sociological phenomenon in public debate. The exploitation of stories with a moral panic angle or potential, as well as the attempts to simulate a wider debate for commercial reasons, sometimes causes moral panic against certain types of RT programmes. However, we need more research on the kind of social and moral issues that reality programmes treat, how these themes are related to different national and cultural contexts and how audiences and public discourses react.

It is therefore important to link RT to the history of media panics (Drotner, 1992; Springhall, 1998) and, more broadly, to histories of media censorship, classification and regulation of media representations in Western democracies. Historical research on media panics may come to the conclusion that they are ultimately about central ethical questions, questions of power, and that they may be 'understood as tacit or explicit means of social regulation' (Drotner, 1992, p. 57). Research on the history of film censorship for instance, and by extension all types of research on the regulation of troublesome images, may indicate that censorship is a 'significant social response' (Staiger, 1995, p. 14) and is about the power 'in defining categories of taboos' (p. 15). Recent, more culturalist inspired studies on film censorship and classification, indicate that forms of extreme regulation (e.g. cutting, defining who can speak and what can be represented) must not be seen as just repressive, but also productive and meaningful because they are so explicit in indicating the limitations of representation and in showing pictures that are troubling in a given society.

This link between media panic/censorship and power throws up many questions in relation to who speaks and to the role of who is engaged in public debate on RT.

The case is more problematic for critical media researchers who know about media panics and their link to the role of power in society. This may easily paralyse any participant in contemporary debates on the media. The case is even more difficult with RT and its controversial promotional discourses. In the end, it may be that these public and moral ‘crusaders’, and not the average members of the audience, are the ones bamboozled by the industry. Their critical attention only supports the industry’s promotional search for attention and distinction in the market. The export of RT’s promotion to critical opinion pages of quality and other newspapers, may then be the ultimate perversion of reality shows.

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## Notes

- 1 For other definitions, see e.g. Dovey (2000, p. 1), who relates these programmes with the concept of ‘first person media’, and Kilborn (1994, p. 423).
- 2 We need to differentiate between scandal and the notion ‘perfume of scandal’. Scandals basically deal with actions or events with a clear transgression of certain norms and moral codes, often in relation to sex. Scandals thrive on morality, as well as on public disapproval or denouncement of specific events and actions, and the scandal arises when secrecy is revealed and things made public (see John B. Thompson, 2000). Programmes such as *Big Brother* thrive on transgression of morality and scandal-sensitive events (often sex), but also often lack secrecy and hypocrisy. On the contrary, they often exploit the idea of voluntary participation and openness.
- 3 See also Langer (1998, pp. 162-4).
- 4 Dovey (2000, p. 83) talks about three positions: ‘Trash TV’, ‘reality-TV as empowerment’ and ‘reality-TV as nightmare’ position. The second comes close to our pluralist position. For an interesting discussion of these positions, see Bondebjerg (2002).
- 5 Referring to human dignity and responding to the wide public debate on ‘Loft Story’, the French regulatory body, the *Conseil Supérieur de l’Audiovisuel*, formulated some general recommendations on the phenomenon of ‘*télé-réalité*’ (La Lettre du CSA nr. 153, July 2002). As a result of this, M6 agreed to diminish the use of alcohol and cigarettes, while the participants were accorded two hours of real intimacy (EBU, 2001).
- 6 The conclusions are based on data from a reception study where we used both diaries and interviews. In total seventy-nine people between fourteen and twenty-eight-years-old filled in a diary for one week (21 to 26 October 2001), while two waves of interviews (before and after)

were organized. A more detailed account of the study was published in Van Bauwel & Biltereyst (2002).

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