The kinder, gentler gaze of Big Brother: Reality TV in the era of digital capitalism

Mark Andrejevic

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/4/2/251

Published by:

§SAGE

http://www.sagepublications.com

Additional services and information for *New Media & Society* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://nms.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

ARTICLE

The kinder, gentler gaze of Big Brother

Reality TV in the era of digital capitalism

MARK ANDREJEVIC
Fairfield University, CT

Abstract

Surveillance-based reality television has emerged as a
resurgent programming genre in the US and Western
Europe during a time when the online economy is
becoming increasingly reliant upon surveillance as a form
of economic exploitation. The portrayal of surveillance
through 'reality TV' as a form of entertainment and self-
expression can thus be understood as playing an important
role in training viewers and consumers for their role in an
'interactive' economy. This article relies on interviews with
cast members and producers of MTV's popular reality
show 'Road Rules', to explore the form of subjectivity
that corresponds to its implicit definition of 'reality'. This
form of subjectivity reinforces the promise of the
interactive economy to democratize production by
relinquishing control to consumers and viewers.
Surveillance is portrayed not as a form of social control,
but as the democratization of celebrity – a fact that has
disturbing implications for the democratic potential of the
internet's interactive capability.

Key words

'Big Brother' • digital capitalism • e-commerce • MTV
• reality TV • 'Road Rules' • surveillance • 'The Real
World'

251

Big Brother may have been portrayed as hostile and forbidding

during the Cold War era, but he is currently receiving a glossy Hollywood makeover as a poster boy for the benefits of high-tech surveillance. His rehabilitation is a crucial component of the developing online economy, which is increasingly reliant on the economic value of information gathered through sophisticated interactive communication technologies. However, before he can be openly embraced by online commerce, he has to win public acceptance as a non-threatening – even entertaining and benevolent – pop-culture icon. This article argues that the most recent incarnation of reality TV, which includes, among others, an internationally successful program called 'Big Brother', is playing an important role in his rehabilitation. The moment that defined the co-optation and commercial domestication of 'Big Brother' occurred for me just before the 'summer of reality' in the US, during an interview with Holly, one of the cast members of the 1997 'Road Rules'. ('Road Rules' is a spin-off of MTV's 'The Real World', the latter of which features seven 20-somethings living together in a house for several months while their daily lives are videotaped for broadcast in edited, half-hour instalments.) On 'Road Rules', now in its ninth season, cast members live in a winnebago caravan and are asked to complete several challenges as they drive from one town to another (often in a foreign country). The group's adventures, failures, conflicts and love lives are duly videotaped and edited into half-hour segments for broadcast. According to Holly, every season the cast comes up with a nickname for the members of the camera crew who document their waking hours. Her cast nicknamed its crew 'Big Brother'; as Holly put it, this meant in practical terms

> . . . if we needed something we'd be like into the radio, 'uh big brother, we're just wondering if we're going to leave in the next hour or if we're going to be here for three' . . . and then someone would walk up and say 'just to let you know we're going to leave in 45 minutes'. (Personal interview, 16 November 1999)

The nickname may have come from recollections left over from a junior high school English class, but the historical reality of Big Brother had changed for this post-Cold War generation. The totalitarian specter was gone, replaced by the increasingly routine, annoying but necessary intrusions of commerce in the form of the entertainment industry.

Significantly, the commercial, capitalist version of Big Brother does not seem to get as bad a press as his totalitarian predecessor. For Holly and her media-savvy companions, the nickname was a bit of flip irony – perhaps one more indication that they are neither fooled nor particularly troubled by the commodification of their private lives for mass consumption. In light of the recent explosion of reality formats, this lack of concern – or this apparent fascination with self-exposure and celebrity – has recently become

the object of media speculation and criticism. The shows are seen as testimony to an inordinate fascination with voyeurism on the one hand and fame on the other – pathologies of a society in which the public sphere has been eclipsed by the private one.

This article takes the argument in a slightly different direction, one which does not bemoan celebrity obsession or the erosion of personal privacy (although it certainly does not laud either), but which attempts to explore the significance of reality programming by situating it within the socioeconomic context of the so-called information revolution. Drawing upon interviews with cast members of MTV's 'Road Rules', and on press coverage of both 'Road Rules' and 'The Real World', the article argues that such programs help to define a particular form of subjectivity consonant with an emerging online economy: one which equates submission to comprehensive surveillance with self-expression and self-knowledge. This equation is crucial to the rationalization of consumer labor anticipated by the architects of an online economy that relies upon surveillance, not only as a means for anticipating and customizing consumer demand, but for adding value to products and creating new ones. By democratizing celebrity, such programs help reinforce the notion that a surveillance-based society can overcome the hierarchies of mass society. It should perhaps be noted that since this research was conducted, the burgeoning success of 'reality TV' in the US and Europe has offered many further examples of the arguments outlined here. Since my goal is primarily to develop a suggestive theoretical approach, I will focus upon MTV's reality programs and leave the relevance of the analysis for other reality-based programs to speak for itself.

In order to provide some context for its discussion of MTV's reality programming, the article begins with a brief discussion of the emerging economic paradigm of mass customization. It follows with a theoretical discussion of the role of cultural trends in the formation of a 'whole way of life' appropriate to particular forms of production. The argument of this second section is that reality programming has a role to play in repositioning our conception of Big Brother and our consequent attitudes toward the threat of surveillance during an era when both government and corporate surveillance, are growing in leaps and bounds. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the equation of self-disclosure with self-expression, for those who see in the internet the potential for a revitalization of a democratic public sphere.

THE ROLE OF SURVEILLANCE IN THE EMERGING ONLINE ECONOMY

The development of the online economy has been portrayed in some quarters as the (all but inevitable) result of an information revolution that is, as Michael Dertouzos of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology puts it,

253

sweeping down upon an unsuspecting populous like a 'tidal wave' (as quoted
in Robertson, 1998: 95). More critical scholars such as Dan Schiller (1999)
make it clear that the pressures driving this so-called revolution are not the
result of natural inevitability, but of significant and directed infusions capital
in information technology. For example, Schiller notes that between 1970
and 1996, the percentage of all US corporate investment devoted to
information technology climbed from 7 percent to 45 percent, and that by
1997, 'domestic information technology hardware expenditures alone totaled
US$282 billion – 17 percent more than US purchases of new motor
vehicles and parts, 49 percent more than outlays for new homes . . .'
(p. 17). The tidal wave to which Dertouzos refers is a man-made one.

All of this suggests that, instead of blaming the shape of the emergent
information 'revolution' on nature, we can attempt to discern the priorities
of specific decision-makers in it. A new sector of the economy is under
construction, and one way of anticipating this construction is to attempt to
discern its outlines in its architects' imagination. The actual economic
structure that emerges will be the result not only of intentional decisions,
but of the interaction of various decisions, of resistance to them on the part
of particular groups, and finally, of the unforeseen consequences of all these
interactions. Nevertheless, this article argues that a certain set of priorities
on the part of the architects of e-commerce can be discerned from the
deployment of new information and communication technologies in the
emerging online economy. Specifically, the article will attempt to identify
and explicate some of the priorities that relate to the role of surveillance in
the rationalization of consumption.

Robins and Webster (1999) have made a compelling case for the notion
that the information 'revolution' ought to be construed, not as a rupture
with preceding forms of capitalist production, but as a continuation of their
logic. As they state: 'We would recognize that there are new technologies.
But we would see no signs of new social relations, values, goals, or
whatever. Technologies change, but society stands still' (p. 234). Their own
arguments tend to press against this thesis, suggesting that it may not be so
much the case that society stands still, as that certain tendencies and
inequalities are developed even further through the deployment of new
technologies. Specifically, they identify the tendencies toward the
rationalization of both production and consumption that characterized the
emergence and development of mass production. Fordism and Taylorism
culminated in a form of production wherein control over workers and
control over information about production went hand-in-hand. On the
demand side of the equation, the management of consumption through
marketing – what Robins and Webster term 'Sloanism' – corresponded to
the rationalization of production made possible by Taylorism. The
importance of information to both these processes justifies Robins and

Webster's claim that the development of the mass production economic paradigm constituted 'the original information revolution' (p. 97). The current so-called revolution represents nothing more than an extension of the logic of this revolution.

The proliferating logic of surveillance reaches in many directions, a few of which this article will attempt to explore before discussing how they are reflected in programs such as 'Road Rules' and 'The Real World'. Typically, the development of ever more comprehensive forms of workplace and consumer surveillance has been associated with the rise of what is sometimes called post-Fordist or 'flexible' capitalism. For example, Harvey (1990) sees the emergence of more flexible forms of niche production as one of the ways in which producers have come to terms with the destabilization of Fordist regimes of accumulation. He describes a scenario in which the stability of rigid forms of production and the predictable patterns of demand that they relied upon are disrupted by changing economic conditions, whose turbulence began to be felt in the US during the mid-1960s and was exacerbated by the socioeconomic developments of the early 1970s. Subsequent decades represented a period of adjustment to heightened instability and volatility of markets that resulted in the development of flexible forms of production that increasingly relied upon detailed information about inventory, production conditions and consumption patterns. As Harvey says:

> Flexible accumulation has been accompanied on the consumption side, therefore, by a much greater attention to quick-changing fashions and the mobilization of all the artifices of need inducement and cultural transformation that this implies. (p. 157)

On this point, Harvey's argument neatly parallels Jameson's (1991) description of the cultural logic of late capitalism, in which

> . . . the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods . . . at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation. (p. 5)

The result is an increasing reliance upon the rapid accumulation, management and commodification of information. Harvey notes the growing reliance upon information resources in a regime of flexible accumulation:

> . . . accurate and up-to-date information is now a very highly valued commodity. Access to and control over information, coupled with a strong capacity for instant data analysis, have become essential to the centralized co-ordination of far-flung corporate interests. (p. 159)

255

On this point, Harvey's analysis overlaps with much of the business and marketing literature which stresses the importance of information gathering and management to the emerging marketing paradigm of 'mass customization' (see for example, Pine, 1993). Mass customization promises to carry the 'flexible' logic of niche marketing to its logical culmination by tailoring products to the preferences and attributes of individual consumers. Experiments in mass customization range from Levi-Strauss' marketing of custom-tailored jeans to customized online news services. The internet has emerged as the cutting edge of customization technology, marketing everything from customized greeting cards to custom-made music compilations.

This emerging paradigm of customization serves both a symbolic and practical role. It advertises itself as a means of overcoming the stultifying uniformity of mass culture while simultaneously allowing for intensified forms of consumer surveillance and exploitation. In this respect it corresponds to the shift in economic logic outlined by Harvey, while confirming Robins and Webster's assertion that the information revolution represents an extension of the logic of rationalization that accompanied the rise of mass production.

The attempt to both manage and anticipate increasingly volatile patterns of consumption (patterns that correspond to a need to sell the goods made available by enhanced productive capacity) leads to an intensive reliance on marketing research. The development of information and communications technologies (ICTs) has allowed for the proliferation of strategies for rationalizing such research, and, perhaps more significantly, for shifting much of the burden to the consumer. One of the cannier strategies of mass customization is its claim that surveillance works to the advantage of consumers by allowing producers to more closely meet their wants and needs. As Mougayar (1998) states, in the win–win rhetoric of the marketing world: 'While offering customers new choices, added convenience, and control, companies are saving costs by offloading some duties of customer interactions to the customers themselves . . .' (p. 170). Of course, the claim of enhanced consumer control depends on a very narrow notion of control: consumer control boils down to the ability to have preferences monitored in detail.

However, the gain on the part of companies is palpable: consumers take on the additional labor of market research. Gandy (1995) builds on the work of both Smythe (1981) and Jhally and Livant (1986), and has argued that audience labor can be understood as the work that consumers do in sorting through the plethora of commercial messages made available to them. He argues that the effort to enhance audience productivity focuses primarily on making the labor more targeted and thus more efficient. This

article suggests that the notion of audience labor can be further extended to a consideration of the labor involved in designing a customized product.

Thus, for example, a Nike website that allows consumers to 'design' their own footwear by choosing from a variety of possible options, adds value to a product by enhancing its uniqueness in ways that correspond to the tastes of a particular consumer. Rather than being compensated for the labor that goes into the customization process, the consumer buys back the added value generated by the additional labor. The goal, as Pine (1993) puts it, is to create a differentiated product that can be sold for more than its mass-produced equivalent: 'Customers do not purchase customization per se . . . if customization does not add value, customers will not pay for it. If it does add value, they will generally pay a premium' (p. 179).

Flexible, customized production does not operate solely on the basis of direct interaction with consumers. Rather, it creates secondary markets for demographic information that has been collected, sorted and packaged by middle men. Thus, consumer labor is a source of profit, both directly as a means of adding value to a particular customized product, and indirectly when information generated by consumers is aggregated and sold as a commodity in its own right. Companies such as Axciom, DoubleClick and EquiFax (also ZapMe! – a company that offered to donate computers to schools in exchange for being able to monitor children's surfing habits) profit from the collection and commodification of demographic information. According to *The Nation*, EquiFax alone makes US$2bn a year by trafficking in so-called 'personal' information (Garfinkel, 2000a: 11). In some cases, consumers are directly compensated for their role in generating databases, as in the case of companies such as AllAdvantage, that provide free internet access to people who agree to keep an advertising bar on their screen while surfing the internet.

The commodification of personal information has generated extensive coverage in the US media, as well as several books documenting the potential threat to privacy posed by the burgeoning database industry (see for example, Garfinkel, 2000b; Lessig, 1999). However, this article avoids locating the threat posed by new forms of surveillance in the problematic realm of privacy. For the purposes of its consideration of reality TV, this article follows Robins and Webster (1999) in arguing that the information revolution is best understood 'as a matter of differential (and unequal) access to, and control over, information resources' (p. 91). Gandy (1993), quoting Klaus Lenk, cuts to the heart of the matter:

> The real issue at stake is not personal privacy, which is an ill-defined concept, greatly varying according to the cultural context. It is power gains of bureaucracies, both private and public, at the expense of individuals and the non-organized sectors of society . . . (p. 52)

257

It is probably not possible to extract considerations of privacy entirely from any discussion of personal surveillance, but this article argues that a critique of surveillance can also be offered on the grounds of power and exploitation. As currently constructed, the regime of privacy in the US promotes a glaring differential in the ability to access and control information. Corporations are in a good position to extract information from consumers, who often have little choice but to surrender information in order to complete a transaction, but consumers have very little access to information about the corporations or what is done with their information. Moreover, the ability to profit from personal information is predicated on access to extensive databases and sophisticated computer hardware, far beyond the means of individual consumers. Corporations can exploit information precisely because they can aggregate it – because the information gains in value when it is placed within a larger information environment that individuals cannot access. Allowing consumers to retain some say over what happens to data about them can only address this fundamental inequality weakly and indirectly. Consumer labor, then, retains an important commonality with producer labor: it can be exploited precisely because the majority of laborers do not own the resources that allow the full value of each kind of labor to be realized.

The argument so far can be summarized as follows: the speculative value of the online economy is dependent, at least in part, on the anticipated economic benefits of customized forms of marketing and production that rely upon increasingly pervasive and comprehensive forms of consumer surveillance. These forms of customization represent an extension of the tendency toward more 'flexible' forms of production noted by Harvey, among others. But building an online economy requires more than the expenditure of capital on the technological infrastructure of production. It requires the transformation of a whole way of life in accordance with the forms of consumption and production that characterize such an economy. Producers will not reap the benefits of the online economy, if, for example, prevailing mistrust prevents consumers from submitting to the forms of surveillance on which it is based. Historically, the development of Fordist techniques of mass production required more than the technical innovations of standardized parts and assembly-line production. Fordism also required changes in the way people lived their lives outside of the factories. Those changes included a differentiation of work, consumption and leisure time, as well as an increasing reliance on goods produced outside the home. At the same time, workers had to accommodate themselves to the fixed schedule of factory production, and to patterns of saving and credit that allowed them to purchase newly available consumer goods like automobiles and washing machines. Harvey (1990) notes that Henry Ford was not unaware of the fact

that mass production required changes in the entire way of life of his factory workers:

> . . . in 1916, Ford sent an army of social workers into the homes of his 'privileged' (and largely immigrant) workers to ensure that the 'new man' of mass production had the right kind of moral probity, family life, and capacity for prudent (i.e. non-alcoholic) and 'rational' consumption to live up to corporate needs and expectations. (p. 126)

The development of e-commerce is also predicated on the development of a 'new person' who has the right kind of attitude toward the benefits of online surveillance. The goal of the remainder of the article is to explore how a television program such as 'Road Rules' exemplifies the right attitude for the online economy. Such an economy depends on the de-differentiation of the spheres of consumption, production and leisure that coincided with the rise of mass production. Significantly, for the purposes of this article, the online economy achieves this de-differentiation, at least in part, through techniques of surveillance that allow leisure time and consumption time to participate in the creation of surplus value through the generation of information commodities. Finally, such an economy relies on the assumption that individuality can be recovered from mass society through the process of individuation through customization – that consumers can express their uniqueness by participating in forms of customized production. Crucially, this participation comes about largely through the process, once more, of surveillance – hence the equation of surveillance with creativity and self-expression. Consumers are no more the passive recipients of mass-produced products at mass-produced prices. Rather they have the newfound freedom to participate in producing their own custom products. This ostensible democratization and liberation carries over into the realm of reality programming, which will be the focus of the following section.

SURVEYING THE REAL

If, as the producers of 'The Real World' and 'Road Rules' admit, the scenarios they portray are contrived, what then constitutes the claim to 'reality' put forth by such shows? The answer appears to be twofold. First, the fact that the characters are not professional actors and, second, that the show's action is unscripted. However, these two criteria do little to separate out the genre of 'The Real World' from a broad spectrum of programming, ranging from game shows and talk shows, to programs such as 'Cops' (based on videotapes of real car chases and arrests, set mostly in Southern California), and 'America's Funniest Home Videos'. A further qualification needs to be added to shows such as 'The Real World' to distinguish them as a discrete genre: the fact that they are not based on the documentation of

259

exceptional moments, but on the surveillance of the rhythm of day-to-day life. This rhythm may take place in a contrived context, but the distinguishing element of 'The Real World' and 'Road Rules' is that the surveillance of the characters is, for the period they are on the show, comprehensive. The only time that cast members were not taped was when they were sleeping, showering or going to the toilet (personal interview, 17 November 1999). In the end, the show airs only a tiny fraction of the total footage it gathers – typically distilling 18 half-hour programs from more than 18,000 hours of videotape (Rowell, 1999). Nonetheless, the premise of the show is that the cast members live in a kind of panopticon – not everything they are doing is taped and watched, but they have to live with the knowledge that at any moment, their words and actions could be taped for broadcast.

The goal of this article is not to question the definition of 'reality' implicit in 'The Real World' or to measure it against what reality really is, but rather to explore the way in which this definition functions to reinforce the logic of a surveillance-based interactive economy outlined above. Cultural forms such as 'The Real World' ought not to be considered in isolation from the socioeconomic contexts within which they emerge and gain a certain degree of acceptance. Placing such forms within a broader social context helps to illuminate their significance and perhaps to defamiliarize them in a theoretically productive manner.

For example, consider the first component of the reality format outlined above: the fact that cast members are drawn from the viewing public, and not from the specialized ranks of professional actors. This fact has its practical appeal to producers, in so far as it helps to make reality programming cheaper than conventional dramas and sitcoms. Furthermore, it adds to the fantasy appeal of such shows by democratizing it. As the show's co-producer, Jon Murray puts it, 'I think the audience that watches the show think that they have an opportunity to be on it' (personal interview, 12 November 1999). The appeal apparently works and, as in the case of the lottery, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that the fantasy can indeed come true. Dan Detzler, a former cast member of 'Road Rules', said that being a fan of the show was what inspired him to apply: 'there's a bunch of kids in front of the camera . . . and you're sitting on the couch, thinking, "that could be me" ' (Justin, 1998: 1E). In this sense, reality TV replicates the promise of interactive commerce: that viewers/consumers will have a greater ability to participate actively in the production process.

Part of the 'reality' claim of a show such as 'The Real World' relies on the assertion that the control of specialists over the program has given way to that of the 'real' people it documents – non-specialists, just like the audience. As co-producer Mary-Ellis Bunim suggested in a newspaper interview, the roles of producer and audience have been reversed: the

producers just sit back and watch, while those members of the public who are selected to be on the show do the acting: 'All we have to do is stand back and let it happen . . . We're flies on the wall' (Farhi, 1999: C1). Murray is a bit more candid about the control that the producers have in the editing process, but still stresses the element of added control on the part of the cast: 'We don't have a lot of control during the production process, what we have is the control to make choices during the editing' (personal interview, 12 November 1999). This model parallels that of interactive commerce outlined above: viewers/producers provide the content which adds value to the program/product which is then repackaged and sold back to them. Of course, not all audience members have a chance to participate in providing content. But their ability to contribute is being further expanded by the producers' use of video footage sent by cast rejects to liven up some of the behind-the-scenes episodes of 'The Real World'. The production staff has plenty of material to choose from, considering the fact that each year some 14,000 would-be cast members send in videotapes demonstrating their prime-time potential (Heft, 1998). This phenomenon is echoed by the increasing trend, at least in the US, of people creating their own versions of 'The Real World' online. For example, the *New York Times* reports that one of the hottest selling computer accessories are the cheap self-surveillance devices called webcams. More than a million were sold last year, and some 250,000 are 'exposing their lives part-time' (Sella, 2000: 54).

The myth offered up by programs such as The Real World is that audience members gain meaningful control over the content of television programming when that programming becomes 'real'. They are no longer force-fed the rehashed formulas pounded out by hack Hollywood scriptwriters. Instead, they are feeding on the fresh, vital fare of reality — their own reality. Content becomes liberated from the inbred coterie of scriptwriters and directors, to be replaced by the spontaneous rhythms of real conflict and real romance — the twin foci of every season of 'Road Rules' and 'The Real World'. The reality of the programs becomes dependent on perpetual surveillance, which is presented as the antidote to artificial interactions — to 'acting'. As Bunim says: 'You can't sustain a character that isn't true to yourself, day and night, for 13 weeks. It's just not possible. It would drive you mad' (Farhi, 1999: C1).

The contribution of cast members to the show is decidedly not their acting ability — indeed, when one cast member began to play to the camera on 'The Road Rules', other cast members derisively started to call her 'the actress' (Farhi, 1999: C1). Rather, their contribution is their ability to 'be real' — to reveal their authentic reactions and to just be themselves. This emphasis on authenticity epitomizes the goal of 'The Real World' format, according to its developers. As Murray, a former documentary filmmaker, says:

> We're very strict about not influencing the action. If you only bring cameras in when something exciting is happening, then you affect the cast. We don't want them to know what we think is important and not important. We don't want to turn these people into actors. (Sharkey, 1997: 17)

The result of this ostensible striving for authenticity is not only the purported producers' 'loss of control', but also the portrayal of the program as a kind of social experiment, whose outcomes always remain uncertain. As Murray says:

> We try to cast really interesting people who, when they come together, something interesting is gonna happen . . . It's like a chemical experiment – you wait to see what kind of compounds are going to be created, and then apply all of the principles of drama to it. (Weingarten, 1999: F2)

In keeping with this experimental mentality, the producers are not above tweaking the cast members' environment in order to generate interesting results. Sarah, a cast member of the 1997 'Road Rules' season, said that if the action seemed to be slackening aboard the winnebago, the producers would cut back on the cast members' cash allowance: 'They purposely put us in a situation where we didn't have any money or any food to watch us argue about it' (personal interview, 18 November 1999). In recalling the ways in which the producers attempted to create tension and conflict, Josh, also a member of the 1997 season of 'Road Rules', echoed Murray's description of the show:

> I knew going into it [that] it's kind of a human experiment, kind of to see how people react under certain situations . . . I knew that going in and it doesn't really bother me. (personal interview, 6 December 1999)

This knowing attitude characterizes several of the cast members interviewed for this article. Despite the producers' assertion that 'Road Rules' represents a willful relinquishing of producer control, cast members knew that the way they were portrayed and the way they lived, down to details of money, food and shelter, were out of their control. Their contract stipulated that they permit the comprehensive documentation of the rhythm of their day-to-day lives in return for compensation that included scale TV wages and the gift of a VW Beetle at the end of the season. As in the case of online services such as AllAdvantage, cast members were directly compensated for access to the rhythm of their daily lives. In the context of reality TV – as in the case of the online economy – this rhythm can be reconstituted as a form of value-generating labor.

One of the major obstacles to realising the potential value of such labor is the socially negative connotations attached to the notion of surveillance. The watchful electronic eye of George Orwell's Big Brother served to epitomize

the negative image of surveillance as totalitarian and intrusive. The rhetoric of the Cold War and a certain libertarian strain in the US psyche have contributed to a mistrust of centralized forms of surveillance that, in some circles, is viewed as one of the major impediments to expansion of the interactive, online economy. For example, in the wake of a recent Federal Trade Commission survey that suggested that internet companies 'have not properly protected the privacy of consumers' (Labaton, 2000: A1), the US Senate proposed a series of regulations designed to allow consumers greater control over what happens to information which is gathered online. In enumerating the advantages of such legislation, Senator Ernest Hollings (South Carolina) emphasized its economic significance as follows: 'For many, privacy concerns represent the only remaining obstacle impeding consumers' full embrace of the internet's ample commercial opportunities' (Labaton, 2000: A1). The problem with such legislation is that it threatens to dry up the flow of surveillance-generated information that is the lifeblood of the economy it seeks to promote.

From the corporate perspective, a much more desirable solution would be one in which consumers do not have to worry so much about what is being done with their personal information. Or even better, one in which consumers see the provision of this information as a potential benefit. The e-commerce campaign has already started in this direction by touting the benefits of customized goods and advertising. Indeed, customized advertising is offered as a technological solution to the problem that advertising itself created. Consumers are being blackmailed with the question: 'Wouldn't you rather be targeted by ads for products you're actually interested in than barraged by advertising for products that are completely irrelevant to your needs and wants?' Corporations hoping to avoid the stigma of Big Brother are further assisted by the legal culture in the US, which has designated them as members of the 'private' sector. If Big Brother famously represented the threat of totalitarian government intrusion, corporations can distance themselves by making an appeal to the fact that they are merely interested in providing goods and services, and that they do not have the coercive power available to the government. Further, they can argue that the information they gather remains, in the legal sense, private. Otherwise, of course, they could not exploit its economic value.

The negative aspect of a campaign to champion the advantages of surveillance might be understood as the attempt to stigmatize any unreasonable fear of self-disclosure as a tacit admission that there is something to hide. Seen from this perspective, a program such as 'Road Rules' goes a long way toward valorizing a subjective attitude of self-disclosure as a form of being honest to oneself and others. The version of reality that is valorized by such a program is one that can be achieved only through full disclosure. Significantly, the attitude that equates honestly with

openness to surveillance is a common attribute of the 'Road Rules' cast members. As Josh said:

> I think I got chosen because I kind of just wear my life on my sleeve, you know what I mean. I really don't have anything to hide from anybody, I don't have any skeletons and I'm a real honest kind. They don't want somebody to get on the show that's going to be hiding what they're feeling or what they're thinking or what not. (personal interview, 6 December 1999)

Gladys, who was kicked off the show after a conflict with another cast member escalated to physical violence, echoed Josh's sentiments:

> I'm very open with everything, whatever I've done in my life . . . and I've gotten over it . . . I told them, 'listen, I smoke weed all the time. I don't do any other drugs. I smoke weed, I drink, that's about it'. (personal interview, 7 December 1999)

The producers make no secret of what they are looking for in the show, and, consequently, what they valorize. As Bunim put it, 'We try to cast people who have a natural openness' (Weingarten, 1999: F2).

Holly, who has a similarly open style to that of Josh and Gladys, said that even though there were times when she felt more shy than other cast members, part of the program was becoming not only accustomed to constant surveillance, but almost reliant upon it:

> You honestly get used to it, it's just part of your everyday life . . . I went through withdrawals for the two weeks after I got home . . . I looked forward to that for so long, having my own time and my own space, and then when I got there, it was so lonely. (personal interview, 16 November 1999)

Holly's personal experience echoes the eventual acceptance of 'The Real World' format, the appeal of which was not immediately evident, according to its producers. In the beginning, cast members were not always so easy to come by as they are now; as Bunim said: 'Can you imagine approaching people on the subway and saying, "How would you like to live in front of cameras 18 hours a day, seven days a week?" People thought we were nuts' (Brownfield, 1998: F1). In past years, there has been no shortage of applicants – tens of thousands of people attend the program's open casting calls. It is worth considering this acclimatization process within an even broader context: if Holly can grow reliant upon – almost addicted to – being constantly under surveillance, if programs such as 'The Real World' can win popularity as accepted and legitimate formats, whereby self-disclosure via surveillance is valorized as authentically 'real', can the population as a whole become reliant upon perpetual monitoring?

In his survey of attitudes toward surveillance, Gandy (1993) noted that greater television exposure is associated with greater acceptance of the

statement that: 'the more businesses know about me, the better they can meet my individual needs' (p. 165). Furthermore, increased exposure to television also correlates with greater acceptance of the view that, 'The only people who are concerned about privacy are people with something to hide' (p. 165). Gandy concludes from these correlations that television exposure is associated with 'a hegemonic view of business as good, efficient, and fair' (p. 165). For the purposes of this article, it is perhaps significant to note that the attitude toward reality valorized by 'The Real World' and 'Road Rules' corresponds neatly to what Gandy defines as the corporate 'hegemonic' attitude toward the panoptic: the de-legitimation of privacy concerns and the presentation of corporate surveillance as beneficial to the consumer.

The positive benefits of the type of 'reality' made available through surveillance television are twofold. First, as noted above, control over reality is ostensibly ceded by proxy to the audience. The audience reclaims a modicum of participation in the production process via its representatives: the chosen few selected to join the cast. This participation parallels the participation of consumers in an interactive economy – they participate in the production process without controlling the means of production, which is just another way of describing the category of wage labor. Nevertheless, interactive production processes are marketed on the basis of the claim that they allow consumers to 'make' their own products for themselves – as in the days before their labor had to be sold in exchange for wages on the open market. Consumer labor is figured as the resuscitation of creative labor – of the possibility that, to paraphrase Marx, the product of the worker's activity could also become the object of that activity (McLellan, 1977: 250). The promise of interactivity within the sphere of e-commerce is that labor and life-activity are reunited – that the labor of customized consumption can offer the fulfillment of creative life-activity.

This promise is recapitulated by the promise of the real in reality TV: that surveillance provides a certain guarantee of authenticity, and that this authenticity becomes a process of self-expression, self-realization and self-validation. For example, Holly describes the television episodes in which she appears as a kind of journal that allows her to share her experience with her friends and family, as well as the general viewing public:

> I'd gone and had this experience, but I could never describe the things I saw, the things I did and the feelings I felt to everyone. And then you think, oh wait, they're going to see it on TV . . . And that's the whole point about validation. It [being on 'Road Rules'] validates what you did and why you were there. (personal interview, 16 November 1999)

One of the common themes that emerged from the interviews with cast members (and from their quotes in news accounts) was that being on the

265

show served as a learning experience, a means of getting in touch with themselves and others. Josh described the show as a means of testing his self-knowledge; knowledge cultivated during a winter retreat in a Colorado mountain cabin before joining the 'Road Rules' cast:

> What I got out of the show is that all of the characteristics that I figured out about myself were put to the test throughout the show during certain situations . . . And everything that I had come to the conclusion on while living in Colorado was held true by the tests that were presented to me . . . So I came away from the show being even more confident in who I am. (personal interview, 6 December 1999)

Similarly, Rebecca Lord, who was in the 1997 'Real World' cast in Atlanta, Georgia, described being on the show as an exercise in self-discovery: 'I'm so much more open-minded than I ever have been . . . Seeing that first show, it's amazing how much you have changed' (Klass, 1998: E6).

Willing subjection to surveillance, then, comes to serve as a demonstration of the strength of one's self image – of one's comfort level with oneself. Being 'real' is a proof of honesty, and the persistent gaze of the camera provides one way of guaranteeing that 'realness'. Further, in a teeming society wherein one's actions often go unnoticed by others, the reality of those actions can be validated if they are recorded and broadcasted – they become more real to oneself to the extent they become real for others. Submission to comprehensive surveillance is a kind of institutionally ratified individuation: it provides the guarantee of the authenticity of one's individuality. Murray believes that people who want to be on the show are seeking this kind of validation:

> I think there is a feeling that this is a very complex global world, that people want to count, they want to feel like they're having some kind of impact . . . You know when you're at a college campus and you're waiting in those long lines to register for classes, and when as a freshman you're sitting in a lecture hall with 400 other kids, it's very easy to feel like you're sort of the smallest cog in the wheel, and I think this idea of being able to be on one of these shows and have your opinion heard by your peers in a large way is very exciting. (personal interview, 12 November 1999)

CONCLUSION

The paradox of a surveillance-based economy is that it pretends to individuals that they count, that they are worthy of individual attention – even though all it really wants to do is count them – to plug their vital statistics into a marketing algorithm. Even Winston Smith must have had the illusion that, as subdued and circumspect as he was, he was enough of a threat to warrant the mobilization of Big Brother's extensive resources against his petty subversions. Of course, Smith was not the threat in himself,

merely another ruse for the proliferation of power. Similarly, a television show such as 'The Real World' although it implicitly promises the democratization of creative control and productive power, serves as a form of acclimatization to an emerging economic regime predicated on increasingly unequal access to, and control over, information. It also validates the pervasive surveillance of the rhythm of day-to-day life as a contemporary commonplace – a form of convenience and entertainment. Furthermore, the celebrity status attained by participants on the show validates the claim that authentication-via-surveillance has its tangible economic rewards. More recently, the proliferation of television formats predicated on day-to-day surveillance, such as 'Survivor' and 'Big Brother' in the US, are continuing to rehabilitate the public image of the much-maligned Big Brother. His gaze no longer symbolizes the threat of mass homogeneity, but the promise of a paradoxical mass individuation.

This is a promise that needs to be handled very carefully. On the one hand, it invokes a familiar critique of a society in which authentic individuality has been subordinated to the dictates of mass production and the mass media. It further offers a critique of the passive spectatorship associated with the refeudalization of the public sphere. But on the other, the promise remains complicit with an emerging paradigm of mass customization that rehabilitates individuation only to commodify it. As with labor power before it, personal information can be extracted from consumers only to be sold back to them in a congealed commodity form. This ambivalence in the promise of mass customization recapitulates a frequently noted ambivalence in the political potential of new information technologies in general. Calabrese (1999) uses the notion of ambivalence to explore the potential 'link between human emancipation and the means of communication', arguing that new communication technologies create the potential for new forms of social mobilization against exploitation. At the same time, he argues, 'innovative uses of the means of communication by mobile capital can work against such struggles' (p. 266). Kellner (1999) is somewhat less ambivalent about the political potential of technological developments, arguing that

> . . . new communications technologies enable ordinary citizens and activists themselves to become political actors and communicators . . . to participate in debates and struggles, thus helping to realize Gramsci's dictum that anyone could be a public intellectual. (p. 109)

However, the previous discussion of mass customization suggests that our notion of ambivalence needs to be reconfigured. The binary distinction between a passive, refeudalized public sphere and an active (or interactive) revitalized politics needs to be revised. To date, this distinction has hinged heavily upon the transformation in the political function of publicity

267

outlined by Habermas (1991) and summarized by Peters (1993). Whereas the Enlightenment ideal of critical publicity once served to undercut 'the secrecy of the absolute state, subjecting state policies to the inspection of reason' (Peters, 1993: 544), today, publicity is synonymous with public relations. Peters argues that 'the semantic change of *publicity* thus mirrors Habermas' thesis about a structural transformation from critical participation to consumerist manipulation' (p. 543). Countering refeudalization, on this reading, would mean repoliticizing publicity. However, television shows such as 'The Real World' suggest that new media offer a third possibility between the passive evisceration of publicity as spectacle and the revitalization of democracy through the reclamation of publicity as public debate.

This third possibility is a hybrid combination: the democratization of publicity *as* celebrity. In a world where the public sphere has been debilitated to the extent that publicity is reconfigured as representative publicity, thereby reducing politics to celebrity, this third alternative ought not to come as a surprising one. The democratizing promise offered by the internet in the era of e-commerce is not that everyone will be able to participate in a revitalized public sphere, but that everyone will be able to participate in politics-as-celebrity. No longer will it just be the president whose private life is subjected to microscopic examination and 'public' debate. Now it will be the private life of the person on the street – of anyone who trains the webcam on him- or herself – or anyone who makes the final casting call for 'The Real World'. If politics has been reduced to public relations, its democratization results not in a repoliticized public sphere, but in equal access to celebrity as self-promotion. Consider, for example, the gushing enthusiasm of a 17-year-old girl who drove several hours to get a chance to be one of the audience members interviewed live on camera by the host of MTV's TRL show: 'It's like, 8 zillion people watch this show, and I get to advertise myself' (Myers, 2000: 1A). It is universal access to the means of publicity as self-promotion that characterizes the democratic promise of reality TV.

The lesson of reality TV for media critics is that a two-way, participatory medium is by no means an inherently progressive one. And this is not only because of imbalances in the flow of information, but also because of the economic value of consumer participation. The more consumers are willing to send information about themselves 'upstream', the better it is for those companies in a position to exploit such information. Thus, approaches to new media that celebrate the progressive aspect of interactivity run the danger of co-optation by marketing strategies that appeal to the democratic potential of the internet. Programs such as 'The Real World' reinforce that marketing strategy by equating self-disclosure with freedom and authenticity. 'The Real World' is a place, in other words, where people can individuate themselves – can differentiate themselves from the mass – by subjecting

themselves to pervasive surveillance. This real world, of course, is precisely that world imagined by the architects of mass customization. Reality becomes mass customized just as the online economy begins to become a reality.

References

Brownfield, P. (1998) 'Reality-Based TV Raises Questions About Privacy', *Buffalo News*, 28 June, p. 2.

Calabrese, A. (1999) 'The Welfare State, the Information Society, and the Ambivalence of Social Movements', in A. Calabrese and J.-C. Burgelman (eds) *Rethinking the Limits of the Welfare State*, pp. 259–77. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

Farhi, P. (1999) 'The Spin on "Real World", Cast Members Say the MTV Show Adds its Own Spice to a Duller Daily Life', *Washington Post*, 4 November, p. C1.

Gandy, O. (1993) *The Panoptic Sort: A Political Economy of Personal Information*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Garfinkel, S. (2000a) 'Privacy and the New Technology: What They do Know can Hurt You', *The Nation* 8(270): 11–23.

Gandy, O. (1995) 'Tracking the Audience: Personal Information and Privacy', in J. Downing, A. Mohammadi and A. Sreberny-Mohammadi (eds) *Questioning the Media*, pp. 221–37. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Garfinkel, S. (2000b) *Database Nation: The Death of Privacy in the 21st Century*. New York: O'Reilly.

Habermas, J. (1991) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. T. Burger. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Harvey, D. (1990) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Heft, R. (1998) 'Cues From the Real World', *Glasgow Herald*, 17 October, p. 14.

Jameson, F. (1991) *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Jhally, S. and B. Livant (1986) 'Watching as Working: The Valorization of Audience Consciousness', *Journal of Communication* 36(3): 124–43.

Justin, N. (1998) 'Reality Bits: the Most Compelling New TV Soaps are all about the Ordinary Days of Our Lives. Ready for Your Closeup?', *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 22 June, p. 1E.

Kellner, D. (1999) 'Globalisation From Below? Toward a Radical Democratic Technopolitics', *Angelaki* 4(2): 101–11.

Klass, T. (1998) '"Real" Spotlight Sometimes Glowed, Glared', *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 17 June, p. E-1.

Labaton, S. (2000) 'US is Said to Seek New Law to Bolster Privacy on Internet', *New York Times*, 20 May, p. A1.

Lessig, L. (1999) *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books.

McLellan, D. (1977) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford University Press.

Mougayar, W. (1998) *Opening Digital Markets*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Myers, G. (2000) 'As Seen on TV in Video Age, Everyone Wants to Get into the Act', *Columbus Dispatch*, 5 March, p. 1A.

Peters, J.D. (1993) 'Distrust of Representation: Habermas on the Public Sphere', *Media, Culture and Society* 15(4): 541–71.

Pine, J. (1993) *Mass Customization: the New Frontier in Business Competition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Robertson, D. (1998) *The New Renaissance: Computers and the Next Level of Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Robins, K. and F. Webster (1999) *Times of the Technoculture*. London: Routledge.

Rother, C. (1994) 'Chance to be a Star on MTV Show Lures Spectrum of Youth', *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 16 January, p. B-3.

Rowell, R. (1999) '"Real World" Really False', *Omaha World-Herald*, 15 October, p. 19.

Schiller, D. (1999) *Digital Capitalism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Sella, M. (2000) 'The Electronic Fishbowl', *New York Times Magazine*, 21 May, pp. 50–104.

Sharkey, B. (1997) 'Living in "The Real World"'; Entering its Sixth Season, MTV's Video-verité Series has Established its Own Brand of Show', *Mediaweek*, 21 July, p. 17.

Smythe, D. (1981) *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Weingarten, M. (1999) 'MTV Moves the "Real" Fishbowl to Honolulu', *Los Angeles Times*, 14 June, p. F2.

MARK ANDREJEVIC is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at Fairfield University. He is currently working on a book about reality TV and continues to research the role of surveillance in the online economy.

Address: Department of Communication, Fairfield University, N. Benson Rd., Fairfield, CT 06430–5195, USA. [email: mandrejevic@mail.fairfield.edu]