

HOW THE OTHER HALF VOTES

Big Brother Viewers
and the 2005 General Election

Stephen Coleman

Why is it that the experience of taking part in *Big Brother* is so much more compelling for some people than the routines and rituals of electoral politics? *How the Other Half Votes* raises radical questions about the condition of contemporary democracy, the borders between the political and the popular and the case for thinking creatively about what it means to be politically engaged.

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FOREWORD

By Peter Bazalgette

During George Galloway's notorious appearance in *Celebrity Big Brother* this year the anchor of a well known news programme bounded up to me at a party: 'You've finally done it! You've got George Galloway. We've been trying to get him for 20 years but *Big Brother's* done it!' A month later I was chided by a prominent government minister who thought otherwise: 'Honestly, how could you? You've made Galloway far more popular in his constituency than he ever was before.' Whichever view is true, the British public had certainly never seen a politician so intimately before. This was the best opportunity ever afforded to judge the personality of someone entrusted to represent us in Parliament.

Galloway's adventure coincides nicely with a second study from Professor Stephen Coleman as to why fewer and fewer young people are voting. As before, Coleman has used *YouGov's* online survey to isolate 200 *Big Brother* fans and investigate their attitudes to organised politics. They all followed the 2004 series closely, half of them voting at some point. In the European elections, held at the same time, far fewer *Big Brother* fans took part than the national average. Coleman then polled the same people during the 2005 general election. Their level of participation was not as low as some might think, but their disaffection for parliamentary politics was palpable. This malaise affects more than the fans of reality shows – 2005 and 2001 both saw historically low turnouts. The blame for this, argues Coleman, lies far more with politicians and their media coverage than with the voters themselves.

In fact, the new generation of voters is not as feckless as it is sometimes portrayed. It emerges that they cared more about global warming than the general election. Even then, they thought voting for a new government was much more important than voting in *Big Brother* (by 69% to 28%). Indeed, two thirds thought it their 'duty' to vote and one third believed it should be made compulsory. Given their sentiments, why aren't more of the younger generation voting? What would persuade them to do so? The Galloway episode – fantastic though it may seem – may help point towards an answer.

It's widely accepted that, in terms of policy, very little divides our parties. There is nothing to rival the Clause 4 debates of the 1940's and 1950's, tariff reform in 1900, Ireland in the late 19th century, political reform in the 1830's or slavery before that. Coleman's survey reveals that the main factor preventing his respondents voting is not being able to make up their minds



between candidates (twice as important as their vote ‘making no difference’ or being ‘too busy’ on election day). We are left – more than ever – with judging the personalities of the candidates. While paying lip service to ‘issues’, politicians well understand this. Blair’s disingenuously regular-guy mode of speech and Cameron’s ordinary-man-on-a-bicycle routine are both carefully calculated to reveal that they’re really one of us. But we’re not entirely convinced.

The study challenged those polled to compare Tony Blair with Jamie Oliver. Approaching 70% thought Oliver ‘has values’ and is ‘real’ compared, respectively, to 30% and 22% for Blair. Devotees of *Big Brother* will know that the programme’s fans reward personal characteristics in just the same way. Both are popularity polls in which those voting are seeking authenticity. It’s entirely legitimate to regard politics as a popularity contest – after all, what you think of the person you are going to entrust power to for five years is pretty crucial. And in the close-up age of *Big Brother* and *Heat* magazine, our expectations are raised. But with politics, by contrast, Coleman says that we find it difficult to discover what the candidates are really like.

Worse, the intensifying arms race between aggressive interviewers and spin sultans leaves us confused and disenchanted. Respondents were asked what kind of politician they were most likely to vote for. More than half said a good listener, only 10% said a good talker. This is profound and challenges the conventional wisdom that says politicians should present, as a *fait accompli*, the policies they believe in. Indeed, we sneer at parties that appear to poll and consult over much. But for young people, involvement in, say, the media is now all about a conversation. It’s a two-way process where they generate much of the material. Just look at *MySpace* or *Facebook* to see what I mean. The result is that young political activists of the future will need to be involved in a dialogue. I don’t think our politicians have a clue about this wholly novel development. The BBC does – it has just announced a total overhaul of its website so it can become a beacon of user-generation.



Coleman believes that to restore voter turnouts to their historic levels and involve far more younger voters in the process, general elections need to be re-invented. Good idea. Here are a few suggestions of my own. First, introduce online voting as an alternative to the intimidating polling booths. Yes, this is an exercise to make the prospect of voting more attractive so curb your inclination to condemn the new generation of voters as lazy. Let’s do politics in a manner they’re comfortable with.

Second, we should enforce the introduction of television debates between the party leaders. America has led the way and, more recently, Italy too. This is a simple way to enable us to get closer to their personalities, unmediated by spin. Thirdly, in place of the ghastly party political broadcasts, the BBC should host online party fora in which voters shape a virtual campaign according to their own desires. Lastly, we need to find more imaginative ways to scrutinise candidates so we can judge them more easily for what they are. Michael Portillo living with a working class family, Matthew Parris on the dole and George Galloway in *Big Brother* should be just the beginning.

We have a tradition of having strong personal opinions about our politicians. Look at the cartoons of Gillray, the poems of Pope, the inflammatory tracts of Wilkes and the novels of Dickens. The tragedy of today is that in place of this passion we don’t much care either way. One of my favourite cartoons, by Hector Breeze, has two people staring disconsolately out of a window. One says to the other: ‘There goes a member of the general public. I can’t think how they get anyone to join.’ Now we have to get more people to join.

Peter Bazalgette

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Stephen Coleman

People from diverse backgrounds and varying political perspectives are worried about the condition of contemporary democracy. A growing sense that the political elite is talking to itself, abandoned by ordinary citizens who have turned their attention to other conversations, has come to be regarded as something close to a 'crisis of democracy'. As one British Government Minister has put it, sounding rather like a 1960s headmaster lamenting the inexplicable popularity of the Beatles,

Sadly enough, I can tell you that in the UK, the televised Big Brother produced higher voting rates than the election to the European Parliament. We must face the fact that traditional democratic channels have lost much of their ability to engage people. Politics has become an issue of interest for fewer and fewer people.

The general consensus that the 2005 general election was 'one of the duller campaigns on record' did little to diminish this anxiety.¹ ITN's then-political editor, Nick Robinson observed at the outset of the campaign that, 'Journalists who could barely contain their excitement about the US elections now look ahead with almost universal gloom to the long British campaign ahead.' Comparing the campaign to a theatrical performance, Andrew Marr, the then-BBC's political editor, remarked that, 'No-one laughs. Nobody claps. There's scarcely the energy for a boo... If the audience is out there, and still watching, their arms are folded, and many are yawning.'² Marr's predecessor, Robin Oakley, reporting for CNN, pleaded for 'some human event to enliven [the campaign], as when Labour's deputy leader John Prescott woke up the 2001 campaign by lashing out instinctively at a protester who had thrown an egg.'³ Writing in *The Sunday Times*, after the election, AA Gill once again summoning the image of *Big Brother*, argued that 'the general election format looks dreary and undemocratic by comparison':

*Where's the excitement? What they should have been doing is voting people off the election every day for the past month. Where is the phone-in vote? Where is the red button to press for interactive coverage of candidates brushing their teeth? Where were the text messages from fans? We all know what democracy looks like. It's the bloke in tears... being interviewed by Davina – not some grinning git with 37% of the ballot telling us his victory is historic.'*⁴

The recurring references to *Big Brother* in speeches by politicians and commentators seem incongruous. What possible relationship can there be between the health of political democracy and the popularity of a TV game show? Three explanations come to mind.

Firstly, there is the much-quoted, but actually false, claim that more people vote in *Big Brother* than in political elections. The thought that people cannot be persuaded to vote in politically consequential real-world elections, but are willing to pay to cast votes in ephemeral reality TV polls seems like clear evidence that there is a deep flaw in our civic culture. In fact, the claim that more people participate in the weekly *Big Brother* eviction votes than in political elections

is a myth. In the 2004 final of *Big Brother* 6.3 million votes were cast – including, of course, numerous individuals casting multiple votes. In June of the same year 17 million individual votes were cast in the European election. While it is simply false to claim that more (or as many) people vote in *Big Brother* as in political elections, it is valid to recognise that precisely those demographic groups which are most attracted to voting in reality TV shows are least likely to vote in political elections. With four out of 10 eligible first-time voters not bothering to cast a vote in the 2005 election, and around 16% of that age group not even registered to vote, exploring ways of wooing *Big Brother* voters who remain resolute political abstainers could be seen to make sense.

A second explanation for the curious interest in *Big Brother* by people grappling with the problem of political disengagement relates to its innovative use of multimedia communication technologies. The speed and convenience of participation in reality TV contrast starkly with the traditional act of voting which entails visiting a designated polling station and making a mark on a ballot paper with a blunt pencil. As the former Leader of the House of Commons wryly observed, 'There is no law of democracy which insists that voting must be inconvenient or that votes are any more worthwhile if they require a trip to the local primary school rather than a vote from the comfort of your home or the convenience of your local supermarket.'⁵ *Big Brother's* use of the web, live digital streaming, mobile telephony and sms accords with the interactive, multimedia environment in which young people in particular feel at home, while political communication seems to be trapped in a pre-digital world of unilinear transmission. A technocratic drive to borrow from the toolkit of reality TV has led the Government to consider introducing sms and online voting in future elections, a move which was no sooner announced than it was condemned in the House of Lords as 'reducing democracy to the level of *Strictly Come Dancing* or *Big Brother*'.⁶

A third explanation for interest in *Big Brother* has less to do with numbers of voters or methods of voting than the light which it casts upon the quality of competing forms of participation. Traditional political participation has been criticised for being remote from daily experience, over-complicated, demographically exclusive, excessively solemn and earnest and unlikely to result in tangible consequences. These are damaging charges, considering that public participation is supposed to constitute the substantive evidence that political democracy amounts to more than a procedural formality. In contrast, *Big Brother* is easy to understand and speak about; manages to attract young people who are most likely to feel excluded from political participation; appeals unashamedly to pleasure rather than obligation or self-interest; and entails a direct relationship between viewing, voting and visible consequences. In short, *Big Brother*, though substantially incomparable to a general election, is characterised by the very qualities which *political* participation lacks. *Big Brother*, in this sense, represents another side

'Precisely those demographic groups which are most attracted to voting in reality TV shows are least likely to vote in political elections'



of democracy; a counterfactual democratic process in which conspicuous absences within contemporary political culture are played out.

The success of *Big Brother's* interactive relationship with its mass audience raises stimulating questions about the scope for mediating political relationships along similar lines. If politicians really want to reconnect (or, most likely, connect for the first time) with broad sections of the public that have come to regard them as irrelevant, malevolent or worse, they may need to come to terms with approaches to representation which capture the symbolic, dramatic and banal aspects of human experience. The idea of broadening the scope of the political to incorporate themes and emphases more commonly associated with popular culture resonates with a growing sense within political-communication studies that the border between serious, rational, high politics and frivolous, distracting, low culture is less robust and significant than it once seemed to be.⁷ Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams have observed that:

*Politics is built upon deep-seated cultural values and beliefs that are imbedded in the seemingly non-political aspects of public and private life. Entertainment media often provide factual information, stimulate social and political debate, and critique government, while public affairs media are all too often diversionary, contextless, and politically irrelevant.*⁸

In a similar vein, John Corner and Dick Pels argue that “official” politics has been catching up, blurring the boundaries and levelling the hierarchy between “high” political representation and “low” popular entertainment.⁹ The success of *Big Brother* in generating the kind of participatory enthusiasm amongst its interactive audience that most politicians would love to engender amongst the people they claim to represent ought not to be read as evidence of a terminal political malaise. On the contrary, the convergence of popular and political communicative styles could have an invigorating effect upon democracy, releasing civic energies which have atrophied over the long years of separation.

On the face of it, comparing ways in which politicians seek popular mandates to represent the public with ways in which *Big Brother* ‘housemates’ act out their claims to be ‘good guys’ before voting audiences might seem to be absurd. Beyond the surface, however, both strategies entail performative appeals which are remarkably similar. Both rely upon similar claims to be authentic, sincere and consistent – and both, implicitly or explicitly, challenge onlookers to discover chinks in their moral armour; both are dependent upon voluntary, mass participation;

‘The convergence of popular and political communicative styles could have an invigorating effect upon democracy, releasing civic energies which have atrophied over the long years of separation’



both are compelled to adopt opportunistic stances intended to promote chances of winning and avoid losing. Both, indeed, are locked into a game, *Big Brother* explicitly so; politics popularly derided as such. The differences between these two approaches to representing the public are significant, not in demonstrating their distinct and incomparable nature, but in exploring how one succeeds in stimulating participatory energies which the other seems unable to reach.

The aim of the research reported here is to explore these contrasting approaches to participation and to ask why it is that the experience of taking part in *Big Brother* is so much more compelling for some people than the routines and rituals of electoral politics. This study is not intended to support crass notions, such as that political elections should be replaced by televised game shows, or that voting in a reality TV poll is just as important as participating in a general election. But it is intended to raise radical questions about the condition of contemporary democracy, the borders between the political and the popular, and the case for thinking creatively about what it means to be politically engaged. These questions are elaborated in the concluding section.

Research design and methodology

A 2003 research study (*A Tale of Two Houses*, published by the Hansard Society) reported findings from a series of six online opinion polls conducted by the online opinion research company, *YouGov* between August 2002 and April 2003, designed to explore the profiles and political attitudes of two groups: political junkies (PJs), who are very interested in politics (as identified by regular viewing of political coverage on TV and/or regular political discussion with friends or family) but do not watch *Big Brother*, and *Big Brother* viewers (BBs), who regularly watch the show and participate in its weekly ‘eviction’ votes, but have little or no interest in politics. The study aimed to profile the contrasting socio-demographic characteristics of these two groups and to explore their attitudes to politics and to one another. Intriguingly, the research suggested that, far from expressing indifference towards political representation, BBs expected more from representative democracy than did more typical and frequent political participators. While PJs had become accustomed to the remote and indirect culture of representative democracy, BBs felt uninspired, and even discomforted, by the rhetoric, routines and rituals that characterise the political sphere. Sensitive to the empathetic deficits and inequalities of acknowledgement which seem to permeate the representative relationship, BBs felt underserved by impersonal political mouthpieces and yearned for a more humanised, multi-dimensional form of representation. As one BB put it, ‘MPs... are generally un-knowns in suits. We see them talk about uninteresting issues frequently, but we rarely get to “know” them properly. Hence, not knowing how they react in real life, we don’t know whether to believe them or not.’

The research reported here was designed to explore how, if at all, *Big Brother* viewers pursued their search for a different kind of representation in the course of the 2005 UK general election. It was clear from the outset that simply conducting a post-election survey asking BBs what they had done during the election campaign and what they had made of it would have been methodologically inadequate. Asking people to recall a month-long event, which might not have meant very much to them even as they were experiencing it, would be less useful than establishing a panel which could be monitored every few days with a view to collecting experiential and attitudinal data in a dynamic fashion. It was decided, therefore, to recruit a panel of BBs (both viewers of the show and voters in the weekly polls) who would be paid a

small sum to complete regular surveys from the beginning of the campaign until shortly after polling day. The panel, comprising 200 BBs, was recruited by *YouGov* from a representative sample poll of people aged over 18. 93% of panel members responded to eight or more of the 10 surveys.

The profile of panel members replicated the main socio-demographic trends derived from other, larger-sample surveys of *Big Brother* viewers.¹⁰ 75% of selected panel members were female and 25% male. 32% were aged between 18 and 25 and 37% were aged between 25 and 31. Fewer than 2% of panel members were aged over 39. All panel members described themselves as ‘regular’ viewers of *Big Brother* and 58% of them stated that they had watched ‘several hours’ of the show each week during the 2004 series. This figure increased to 71% for 25-39 year-old females, but fell to only 49% for males in the same age group. 47% reported that they had voted in the 2004 series. Again, young women were much more likely to be BB voters, with over half (56%) of 25-39 year-old females having voted, compared with only 40% of males of the same age. Most panel members who had voted in 2004 had cast their votes from home via land-line telephones, but, interestingly, the majority of under-25 year-old voters had cast their votes via sms. Although multiple voting is allowed (indeed strongly encouraged) in *Big Brother*, three out of four voters stated that they cast just one vote in each eviction, while one in four reported casting the same vote up to five times. 56% of all panel members and 82% of panel members who had voted in the 2004 series reported that they had visited the official *Big Brother* website. 45% of voters had visited the online discussion forum (females were twice as likely to have done so as males) and 7% had posted messages in the forum. Three out of four (75%) voters said that they had talked with other people about how they would vote before their votes were cast.

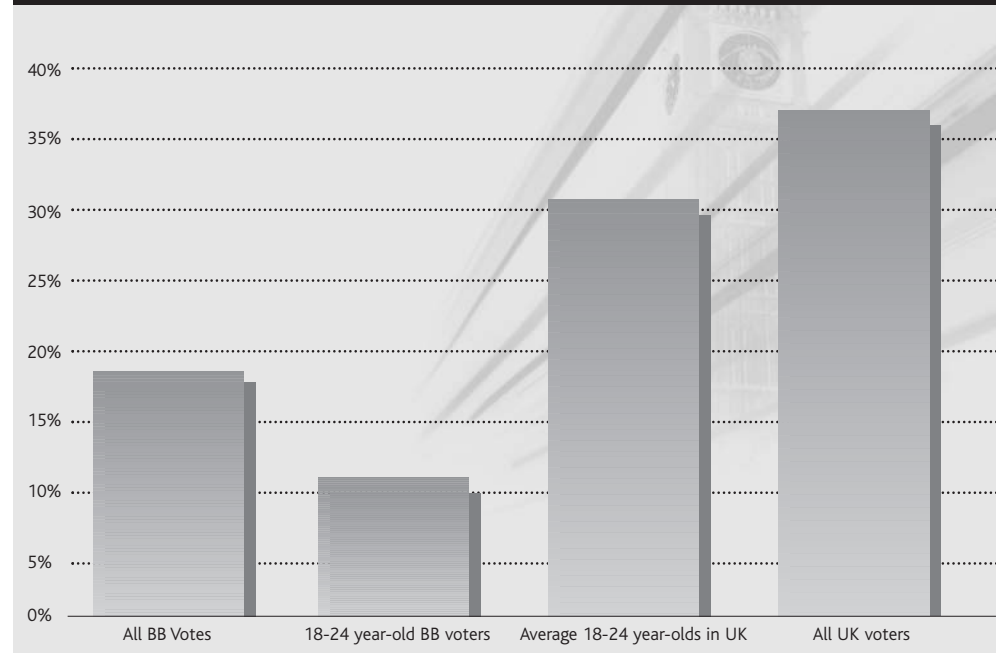
The close proximity of the European parliamentary election (in June 2004) and the 2004 series of *Big Brother* provided an interesting opportunity to explore whether BB voters were more or less likely than others to cast a political vote. Asked whether they had voted in the European election (for which the national turnout was 38.2%), only one in five BBs reported that they had, falling to 12% amongst 18-24 year-old females. As the graph opposite shows, panel members who had voted in the 2004 series of *Big Brother* were significantly less likely to have voted in the European election than the average British citizen, even when age comparisons are taken into account.

The Prime Minister called the 2005 general election on 5 April and Parliament was dissolved on 11 April. Polling day was on 5 May. Ten surveys were conducted between 12 April and 10

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Voting in the 2004 European Election



May. Over 100 survey questions were asked, intended to probe how panel members experienced the general election campaign. This was achieved by asking respondents detailed questions about their behaviour within the previous 24 hours, their recollection of political messages and their attitudes towards a range of issues, politicians and institutions.

Binary responses to survey questions are inherently limiting. In order to enable panel members to articulate in their own terms what it felt like for them to be citizens of a democracy during an election campaign, each of the 10 surveys was concluded with an unfinished sentence which respondents were asked to complete in their own words. These sentences were designed to stimulate candid and unrehearsed comments from panel members. These qualitative responses, which amounted to 18,771 words, were then analysed with a view to deriving qualitative interpretations. The 10 unfinished sentences are listed in the Appendix on page 30.

The survey findings are set out in the next two sections, organised around two themes which are intended to provide theoretical context. The first section considers *Big Brother* viewers and voters as a new kind of hybrid citizen: a combination of active audience and political public. Equipped with channel zappers, mobile phones and internet access, they are characterised as remote-control citizens. The second section explores how both *Big Brother* candidates and political campaigners adopt performative techniques to convey their appeal as ‘real’ people who are entitled to speak for the public and how remote-control citizens are becoming skilled in reading and decoding such performances.


The rise of the remote-control citizen

Who do they think they're talking to, these candidates for our attention, admiration and votes? Who do they think *we* are, when politicians address the voting public as citizens, with obligations to think and act in certain ways, while *Big Brother* appeals to its voters as members of an audience: an ephemeral assemblage of onlookers, bound by no civic identity or collective duties? These contrasting ways of addressing the public have huge implications.

Although liberal political theorists have tended to idealise political citizens as autonomous moral agents who are in possession of specific rights and collective political sovereignty, empirical research into the actual behaviour of the public has led to a waning of belief in the democratically influential citizen. 'Political realists' now argue that the public has become an almost superfluous presence within the political system, invariably ill-informed, inconsistent in its opinions, uninfluential when it participates and unable to overcome the mysteries of rational choice calculations when it votes. Citizens are expected to participate, but to do so responsibly, within recognised structures and in accordance with constitutionally-sanctioned procedures. Barbara Cruickshank has astutely observed how normative ideals of citizenship 'tend to foreclose the ways in which it is possible to be a citizen rather than seeking to place the question of citizenship within the reach of ordinary citizens'.¹¹ Official strictures about what constitutes respectable (and respect-worthy) political participation have the effect of narrowing the repertoire of political citizenship. The caricature of the dumbed-down *Big Brother* viewer, distracted by the trivia of televised reality from any engagement with the real world, in contradistinction to the 'good citizen' who votes on every issue and never misses *Newsnight*, is one example of such civic shrinkage.

There is a striking and illuminating contrast between the enervated condition of the political public and the empowered status of media audiences. In the past, researchers imagined audiences to be passive receivers of messages encoded in media content. That assumption is now in disrepute and contemporary reception theorists argue that, far from being inert dupes, media audiences tend to be active and, to some extent, critical. They view selectively, driven by a diverse range of motivations and anticipated gratifications, and they decode the messages they receive, often ignoring or rejecting the preferred ideological meanings embedded within media content. The assumption that audiences have a capacity to take, leave or add to media content implies that meaning does not inhere within media texts, but is formed as active and potentially critical viewers selectively and discriminately make their own sense out of media output.

The relaxed and obligation-free relationships that the audience has with *Big Brother*, as entertained viewers, discriminating judges, interactive participants and empowered voters, signals a new kind of citizenship which combines the autonomy and flexibility of the audience with the collective decision-making of the traditional political public. One might characterise this hybrid as remote-control citizenship. Although democratic theorists have tended to be understandably uneasy about what Bernard Manin has called 'audience democracy',¹² regarding it as a slippery slope to populism, there are grounds for thinking more positively about the convergence between contemporary audiences and publics.¹³ As social reality has become increasingly a matter of mediated experience, one might reasonably argue that publics and audiences are essentially the same people going through the same process of trying to make sense of a world which can only ever be apprehended indirectly. Indeed, as we have suggested, active, critical audiences may well be more discriminating in their sense-making than publics



'There is a striking and illuminating contrast between the enervated condition of the political public and the empowered status of media audiences'

driven by blind duty or deaf indifference. If, as most democratic theorists now accept, the will of the public is best formed and expressed within the context of a public sphere where 'private people come together as a public',¹⁴ then the mass media and their increasingly interactive audiences are the closest we have at the moment to such a space for public reflection. The kind of debates about public tastes in architecture which surrounded the BBC's *Restoration* series or about sexual identity which resulted from the appearance of a transsexual on *Big Brother* simply could not have taken place on the same scale in any other contemporary national space. It is in the mediated public sphere that publics and audiences converge to become remote-control citizens, free to switch off, switch channels, interact with media content and determine for themselves what matters to them and what doesn't.

The image of *Big Brother* viewers and voters as apathetic couch potatoes is not supported by the survey findings. Most of the panel members (51%) described themselves as good citizens and more than one in three (38%) claimed to be active citizens. But what did they mean by such self-descriptions – and by which criteria should we measure the validity of their claims? For this research, we selected three criteria which are sufficiently conventional to be recognised by political scientists who study participation, but sufficiently broad to capture wider elements of cultural citizenship. During the course of the 2005 election campaign, three aspects of BB behaviour were examined: gathering information about the election; talking to other people about the election and voting on election day.

Information-gathering

Panel members were most inclined to trust television as their source of election information, with 58% trusting television coverage of the election, compared to 12% who trusted websites, 8% who trusted newspapers and 3% who trusted information received by word of mouth. Panel members placed twice as much trust in television correspondents (58%) as in the parties' own manifestos and leaflets (24%) to tell them what the parties stood for. Asked which sources they *least* trusted to tell them what the parties stood for, 47% cited politicians' speeches and 46% cited newspaper journalists.

Given that television was the most trusted medium, how much of the election campaign were panel members watching? Over one in five (22%) said that they switched off the TV whenever the election was mentioned. This is actually lower than the national average during the 2005 campaign, in which, according to Ofcom research, 27% of the population switched channels or switched off whenever election coverage came on, rising to 37% amongst 18-24 year-olds.¹⁵

By the mid-way point of the campaign two thirds (64%) of panel members had seen a politician on TV, 48% could specifically recall seeing the Liberal Democrat leader, Charles Kennedy on

'Panel members seemed to regard the internet as either an escape from the election or as a resource for gaining access to information in ways not available from the old media'

their TV screens and 42% recalled seeing some reference to the launch of the Conservative party manifesto. At the same mid-way point in the campaign fewer than one in four (23%) stated that they had read an election leaflet, 9% had watched Jeremy Paxman's interview with Tony Blair and not a single respondent had personally met a candidate. (The latter increased to a mere 2% by the end of the campaign.) By the final week of the campaign, 71% of panel members reported having seen Tony Blair on TV.

In the 10th survey, conducted shortly after polling day, 40% of panel members reported that at some point during the campaign they had watched a party election broadcast (PEB) and 38% had looked up information about the election online. These figures compare with 70% of the UK population who claim to have watched a PEB¹⁶ and 15% of the UK population who claimed to have used the internet as a source of information about the election.¹⁷ 13% of panel members reported meeting a party canvasser during the course of the campaign, while UK citizens as a whole were twice as likely to have done so.¹⁸ 0.5% of panel members had attended an election meeting, a quarter of those who reported doing so in a nationally-representative sample.¹⁹

It was in their use of new media that panel members seem to have been more active than the UK population as a whole. Even allowing for the fact that panel members all had internet access (whereas only 60% of the UK population did at this time), their use of the internet in relation to the election campaign was significantly higher than internet users as a whole. In Ward's survey of election-related internet use during the 2005 election campaign, 28% of UK internet users stated that they had gone online to seek information about the election and 5% reported that they sent emails to others about the election.²⁰ At the end of the first week of the campaign, 10% of panel members said that they had sent or received an email relating to the election within the past 48 hours and 40% claimed to have visited a news website. Asked in the second week of the campaign about subjects raised in emails they had received over the past 48 hours, 34% had received emails about romantic relationships, 26% about money worries, 24% about football, 10% about TV soaps, 14% about their local communities and 17% about the election. In the final week of the campaign, 10% of panel members stated that they had visited a party website and 25% had visited the BBC news website to find out more about the election.

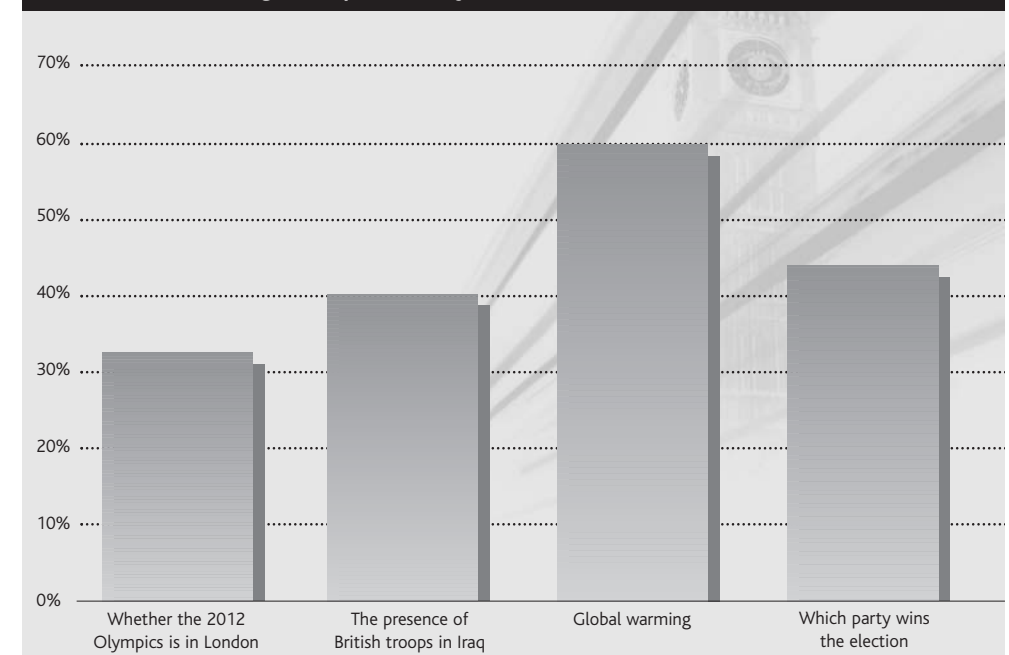
Three days after the election, panel members were asked whether they had engaged in a number of different activities during the course of the campaign. 17% had received an email from a friend about the election, 13% had sent an email to a friend about the election and 38% had looked up information about the election online. These findings suggest that BBs were more likely to express themselves as active citizens in an interactive, online environment than in more traditional spaces of civic engagement. When this hypothesis was probed further, however,

panel members seemed to regard the internet as either an escape from the election or as a resource for gaining access to information in ways not available from the old media. Asked to complete the sentence, 'I have used the internet during election campaign to...' approximately half of the respondents suggested that they went online in order to retreat from the election, stating that they used the internet to 'access my internet account and browse the web as normal – not to look at political campaign manifestos' or 'avoid the election which is dominating the other media' or 'get some news other than elections' or 'shop, surf and ignore the election'. Others used the internet to 'make sure I'm making the right decision' or 'do one of those quizzes to see which party I'm most aligned to' or 'try to work out where parties stand on certain issues, as it is not always clear from the sniping and evasion seen on TV'. In responses to several of the qualitative questions, enthusiasm was expressed for the opportunities presented by interactive media. Repeatedly, when asked how the general election could be made more accessible to them, panel members spoke of the need for 'more interaction between parties and the public on policy creation' and 'more interactive interviews with politicians'. It was not always clear how respondents imagined such an interactive relationship, but there was a clear sense that its absence somehow limited the effectiveness of contemporary political communication.

Talking about the election

There is a strong relationship between talking about politics and engaging in the democratic process. As McKuen argues, 'the act of public expression itself transforms subconscious sentiments into conscious cognition and provides the basis for an active rather than a passive political involvement'.²¹ Some scholars argue that talking about civic issues constitutes political

Which of the following are important to you?



action in itself²² and most accept that interpersonal communication is a strong predictor of participatory behaviour.²³

Asked in the first week of the campaign, 60% of panel members said that they had talked about the election with members of their family, 36% with workmates, 29% with a close friend and 4% with a stranger. One in five (21%) had not talked about the election with anyone.

By the final week of the campaign, 64% reported that they had had a conversation with someone else about how they would be voting, and almost a third (32%) said that they had discussed the question of Tony Blair's honesty with someone else. 17% had discussed the election with someone else via email.

Asking people whether they were 'talking about the election' reveals only part of the story, for some panel members were more interested in discussing other political issues which they considered more important than which party would form the next government of the UK. In the second week of the campaign, panel members were asked what issues most concerned them. Just under half (44%) said that they cared about who won the election, while 60% expressed concern about global warming, 40% about the presence of British troops in Iraq and 32% about the success of London's bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games. In short, for some panel members other political issues were more important than the election campaign which was dominating news coverage.

Non-election preoccupations were conspicuous when panel members were asked, in the second week of the campaign, which topics they had discussed with anyone else within the previous 48 hours. 56% had talked about recent events in a soap opera, 53% about personal money worries, 52% about football, 46% about the election, 25% about their local community and 17% about the state of the environment. The election competed for conversational attention amongst a range of issues, and the distinction between political and non-political topics of conversation was not always obvious.

Voting

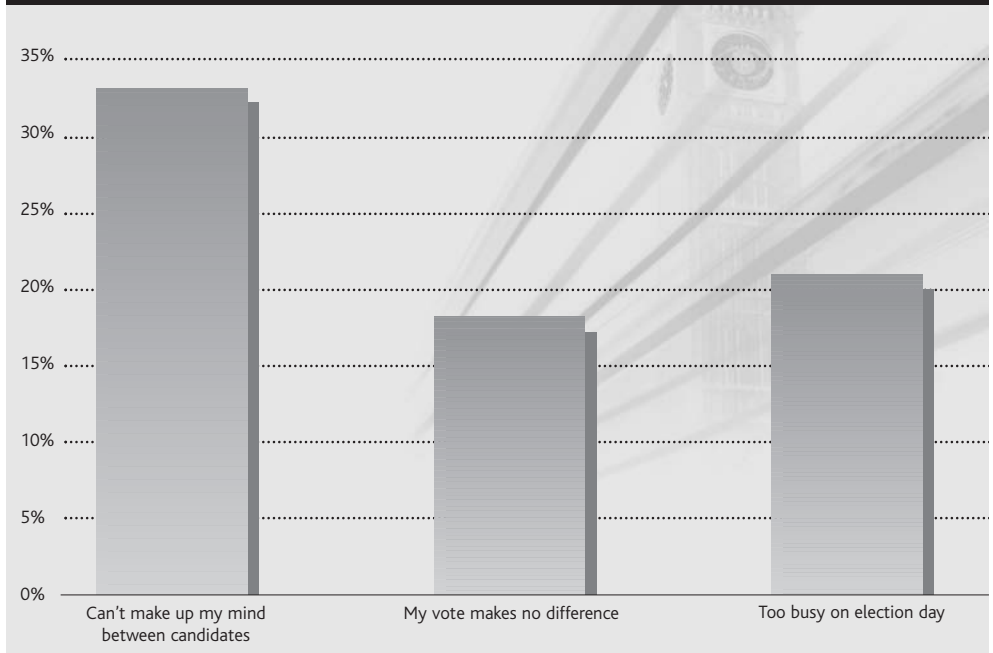
Voting is a key measure of active citizenship – the crucial one for political scientists who equate turnout with participation. A week before the election, most panel members expressed an intention to vote, although almost a third (31%) were still unsure who they would vote for. 12% believed that they knew too little to cast a vote.

Almost two-thirds (64%) of panel members regarded voting as a duty and a third (34%) were in favour of compulsory voting. But when asked a few days before the election about factors

'Voting is a key measure of active citizenship – the crucial one for political scientists who equate turnout with participation'



Which of the following would prevent you from voting?



which might prevent them from voting, 34% stated that they were unable to decide who to vote for, 22% expected to be too busy on election day and 19% believed that their vote would make no difference.

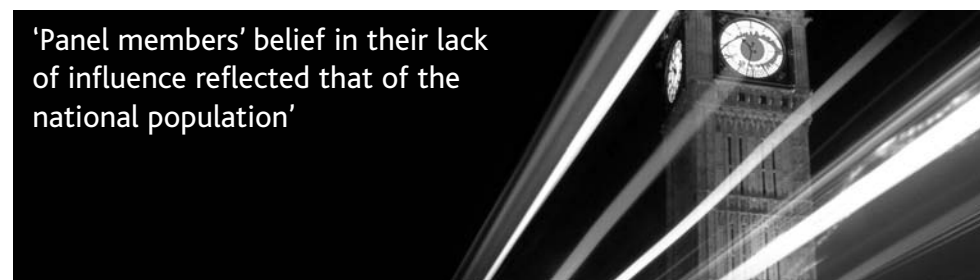
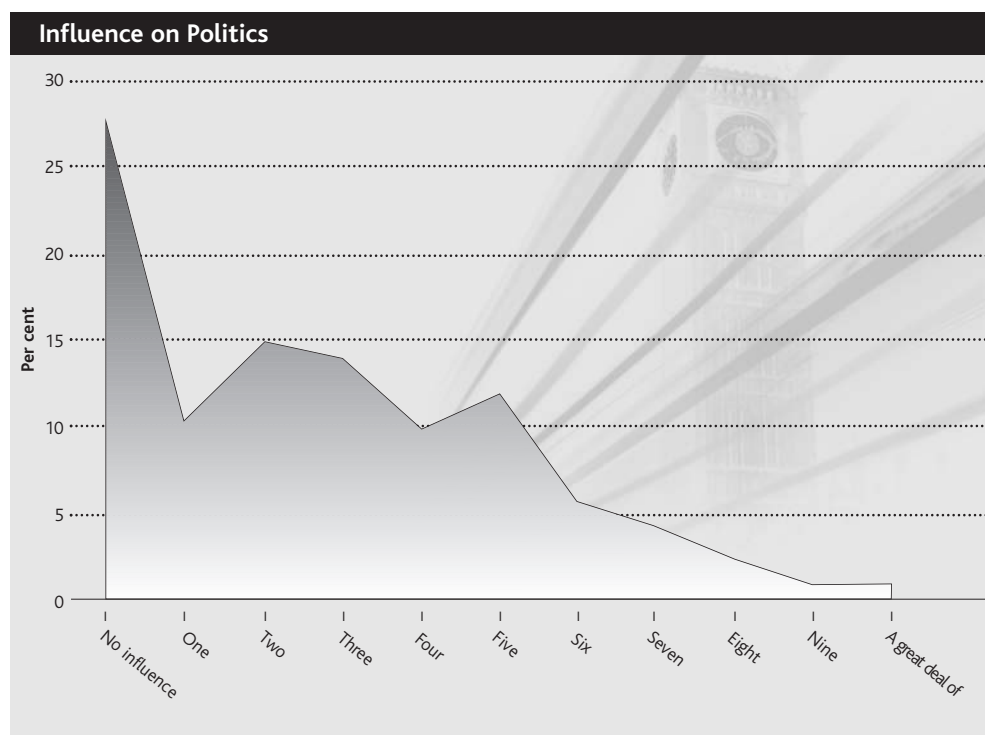
In the post-election survey, 60% of panel members claimed to have voted, 50% at polling stations and 10% by post. This was almost precisely the percentage of citizens who did vote in the 2005 general election and higher than the average for the demographic group most represented on the panel. (Only 39% of 18-25 year-olds voted nationally, but almost half (49%) of panel members within the same age group claimed to have voted.)

BB viewers and voters were neither inattentive nor inactive citizens during the 2005 campaign. They did not sleep through the election, but their experience of the campaign was far from enthusiastic. 50% of panel members stated that they found the campaign boring and 69% said that they heard nothing during the course of the campaign that changed their minds about anything. Like most British citizens, BBs were reluctant participants in the election. The main reason for the sceptical and grudging nature of their participation was that they did not believe that their involvement in the election could have much impact on political consequences. In the language of political science, panel members had a very low level of political efficacy. (This concept refers to people's beliefs in their ability to understand and participate effectively in politics, as well as to their perception of the responsiveness of political institutions to their comments and demands.) 27% believed that voting in the election would make no difference to the way the country is run. 37% believed that politics was too confusing to follow. 41%

believed that nobody in government ever listens to them. 55% said that anything they said or did would have no influence on how the country is run. Panel members' belief in their lack of influence reflected that of the national population; according to the British Election Study, 67% of the UK population rated their influence on public affairs as between 0 and 3 out of 10, with 0 meaning no influence and 10 meaning much influence.

Low efficacy levels were linked to low expectations about the consequences of voting. Over half (53%) of the panel members did not know the name of their elected MP three days after the election. 93% did not expect to have any contact with their MP after the election, although one in four (25%) expressed a wish to do so.

Another perspective upon low efficacy was cast by the qualitative research. Asked in the first week of the campaign to complete the sentence, 'I'll only vote in the general election if...', over two thirds (69%) of all responses expressed a lack of trust in the outcome of voting. Most panel members were only prepared to vote for a party or candidate if they felt confident that what was promised during the campaign would be delivered after the election. Typical completions of the sentence were 'if the parties involved show that they actually do what they state' and 'if I could be certain that the party I vote for would be true to themselves'. A second condition for voting, raised by approximately one in four of respondents, reflected anxieties about access to adequate information. For example, one respondent stated that they would only vote if



'Panel members' belief in their lack of influence reflected that of the national population'

'I receive manifestos from each group in leaflet form, so at my own leisure I can read them and make an informed choice. (to date I have only received one leaflet!')

As remote-control citizens, most panel members were more conscious of their remoteness from the political process than their control over it. They were faced with uncertainties about who or what could be trusted; access to balanced information; and whether their votes would lead to predictable outcomes. It was as if they had been repeatedly pressing the buttons on their remote controls, but there was nobody at the other end to receive their cries for assistance.

In search of the really real representative

Both politicians and *Big Brother* candidates must appear before the cameras and perform. Performances require stages and staging. Symbolic settings matter.²⁴ There is widespread contemporary distrust of staged appeals to the public: the mock-sincerity of the eye-to-camera politician; the scripted eloquence of political speech-making; the chatty blog which was clearly written by an enthusiastic research assistant; the posed portraits of politicians and their stage-extra families. From Major's humble soapbox to Blair and Cameron's abandonment of their once obligatory neckties, cultural democratisation requires would-be representatives to manifest ordinariness by appearing on the public stage as if they were offstage and being themselves. It is precisely this offstage lifeworld that the *Big Brother* format illuminates, providing its viewers with new ways to see and judge those who claim to speak *for* or *as* the public. The drama of *Big Brother* is set within the private sphere of everyday intimacy. Although the show is but a mediated simulation of intimate life, its emphasis upon domestic interaction and shared experience conveys an impression of unrehearsed authenticity. Strategies usually associated with the traditional world of public politics, such as affected mannerisms, insincere claim-making and opportunist alliances, are precisely the forms of behaviour most likely to be punished by the onlooking public as they scrutinise the exposed domestic relationships of the *Big Brother* house.

Big Brother claims to depict real people dealing with everyday experiences: cooking and eating; gossiping and posing; sleeping and waking up; falling in love and having sex; getting drunk and suffering from hangovers; shopping and earning money; watching others and being seen; laughing and crying; winning and losing; arriving and leaving. It appeals to viewers' experience of the micro-political world of everyday relationships and mundane encounters with power. Viewers recognise such dramas from their own lives and are able to compare their own responses to those of the on-screen protagonists. *Big Brother* serves as a laboratory for the public observation of private conduct. In this sense, the political electorate and *Big Brother*

voters are both engaged in the same game of judging the credibility of a group of distant others, only accessible to them via mediation. Hill argues that

Reality game shows have capitalised on [the] tension between appearance and reality by ensuring that viewers have to judge for themselves which of the contestants are being genuine. In fact, audiences enjoy debating the appearance and reality of ordinary people... The potential for gossip, opinion and conjecture is far greater when watching reality game shows because this hybrid format openly invites viewers to decide not just who wins or loses, but who is true or false...²⁵

Viewers of *Big Brother* are encouraged to adopt a paradoxical perspective towards the on-screen protagonists. On the one hand, they are outsiders looking in at an artificially-constructed private, domestic space in which ‘ordinary people’ are forced into intimate contact with one another. On the other hand, the house is manifestly a public space, constructed to be consumed by a mass audience, and the public’s surveillant gaze is less an intrusion upon intimacy than a feature of participatory theatre. The project’s success depends upon a constant and subtle tension between these private and public illusions. If the inmates of the house really believed that they were private and unobserved, their motivation to remain incarcerated would evaporate, but if they believed that they were constantly on show it would become impossible for them to maintain personal relationships. So, they live with ambiguity, experiencing both intimacy and exposure in much the way that one might when walking towards a CCTV camera in a shopping mall or posting to a chatroom from one’s bedroom or having a conversation on a mobile phone on a crowded bus. *Big Brother* inmates deal with this ambiguous staging by imagining themselves to be in moments of either intimacy or exposure: the former in whispered conversations from one bed to another; the latter when dressing up and showing off for the Friday-night eviction show, as if suddenly they have consented to be seen by the outside world. Viewers also accept this ambiguity, sometimes seeing themselves as voyeuristic outsiders, and at others feeling like active participants in a public game.

In contrast, traditional political communication valorises the public over the private sphere, regarding the former as a space of shared rationality, accountable visibility and collective solidarity.²⁶ In contrast; the private sphere is seen as atomised, feminised, emotive and inaccessible: a space of retreat from the civic and political world. Politicians have always had an uneasy relationship with personal intimacy and feel a need to patrol and control the border between private and public. Whereas talk for most people tends to be spontaneous and conversational, political speech (which often takes the form of speeches) is scripted and well-rehearsed, with off-the-cuff utterances regarded as risky paths to self-exposure. Whereas the subject of most people’s talk is personal and experiential, politicians tend to speak impersonally and abstractly, steering the focus away from their own private lives.

‘Politicians have always had an uneasy relationship with personal intimacy and feel a need to patrol and control the border between private and public’



‘In an age of mediated politics, the role of being a representative entails appearing to be someone who is extraordinary enough to represent others, but ordinary enough to be representative of others’

But contemporary politicians are being dragged, sometimes kicking and screaming, into the sphere of mediated intimacy, undermining their well-crafted performances by exposing them to ever-expanding public surveillance. Media-savvy politicians have responded by incorporating approved aspects of their private lives within their public performances, be it Tony Blair at the kitchen table with his kids, George Bush taking a jog or Michael Portillo subjecting himself to the televised ordeal of pretending to be a single mother of four. In an age of mediated politics, the role of being a representative entails appearing to be someone who is extraordinary enough to represent others, but ordinary enough to be representative of others.

Whether they like it or not, political candidates are now judged in much the same way as *Big Brother* contestants. This means that they must accept the increased visibility of what was once strictly private and the need to invest emotionally in messages that could in the past have taken the form of impersonal publicity. As John Corner has astutely observed, politicians ‘serve to condense “the political”’ by embodying political values and ideas in ways that often exceed ‘rationalistic commitments’.²⁷ Just as *Big Brother* reflects a recognition that the personal is often political, contemporary obsessions with politicians’ personas reflect an acknowledgement that the political is always bound to be personal, at least to the extent that one cannot credibly represent values without being seen to live them.

As the credibility of politicians is decreasingly determined by their ideological stances or partisan loyalties, and the judgement of volatile voters tends to revolve around questions of character integrity and witnessed reputation, the public stage of well-managed performance has a diminishing value. Politics is moving inside: spatially, to the observed private sphere in which duplicity cannot be sustained for long, and psychologically, towards an unprecedented public interest in the inner strengths, struggles and frailties of their leaders. Sennett regards this as a ‘confusion’ which ‘has arisen between public and intimate life’ and laments the fact that ‘people are working out in terms of personal feelings public matters which properly can be dealt with only through codes of impersonal meaning’.²⁸ But for many disengaged citizens, it is precisely the impersonal abstraction of most political talk that they find disingenuous and alienating. Clearly, there are aspects of discussion about complex social issues which are best conducted in the clinical terms of instrumental rationality, but need these be at the expense of subjective and affective perspectives which serve to connect grand policy-making to the democratic sensibilities of public experience?

Despite the tendency of political scientists to ignore the dramatic and affective aspects of political behaviour, preferring to see politics as an instrumentally-driven competition between

rational interests, there is much evidence to suggest that citizens' support for policies and politicians depends as much upon how they feel about them as what they know about them. Politicians have always been judged on the basis of performative qualities, such as how convincingly they speak, whether they look like a leader, whether they appear calm under stress and whether they could be relied upon if they were a personal friend. Contrary to the rather condescending assumption that only the least educated and politically indifferent make judgements on such an affective basis, the opposite is in fact true: it is better-educated, politically-active citizens who are most likely to evaluate politicians on the basis of their personal qualities.²⁹ Because personality traits, ethical values and observable behaviour matter to citizens in making judgements about who is fit to represent them, the way in which these qualities are depicted is central to effective (and also affective) democracy.

When panel members were asked to complete the sentence, 'I would only support an election candidate if he or she...' the vast majority of respondents referred to notions of integrity and authenticity. The term 'genuine' was the most common epithet of approval. Typically, they stated that they would only support a candidate who '*was down to earth and more real*' or '*shows humanity and admits weaknesses*' or '*was approachable and naturally human*'. It seemed from the qualitative research as if BBs wanted to judge political representatives in much the same way as they choose their own friends. They found politicians' claims to represent them too rhetorical, remote and non-transparent to be convincing. They wanted something else from representation: qualities and characteristics more universally human than the abstract promise-making of electioneering.

In the second week of the campaign, panel members were asked to state which two characteristics they would most want the candidate of their choice to possess. Most wanted their chosen candidate to be 'an ordinary person' (53%) and 'a good listener' (52%). The opposite characteristics were less popular: only 10% wanted candidates to be extraordinary people and 23% preferred them to be good talkers.

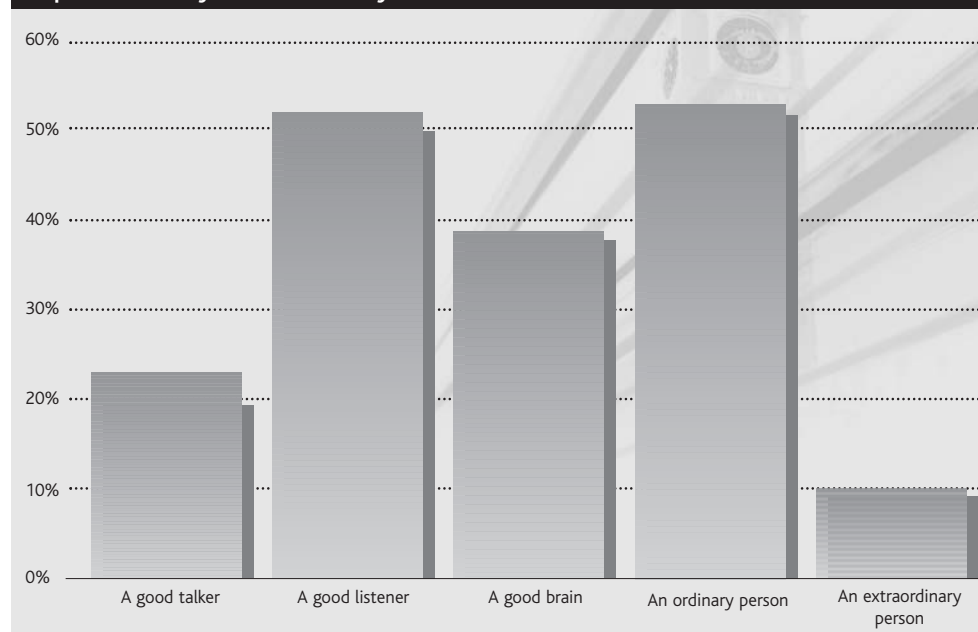
That was the ideal. When asked how, in reality, they would characterise the candidates standing in their constituency, only 17% of panel members selected 'ordinary' and 9% 'straight-talking', while 29% chose 'slimy', 35% 'arrogant' and 53% 'false'.

Three days before polling day, panel members were asked to select a number of qualities which would make a candidate appealing to them. Qualities rated least important included looking good on TV (1%), knowing more than the voter (12%) and having business experience (14%). The most popular qualities were an ability to speak convincingly (49%), having strong political values (40%) and looking like an ordinary person (37%).

'Asked with who they would most like to have a discussion about the state of the world, 39% of panel members chose Tony Blair and 36% selected Jamie Oliver'



Which TWO of the following best describe the kind of politician that you would be likely to vote for:

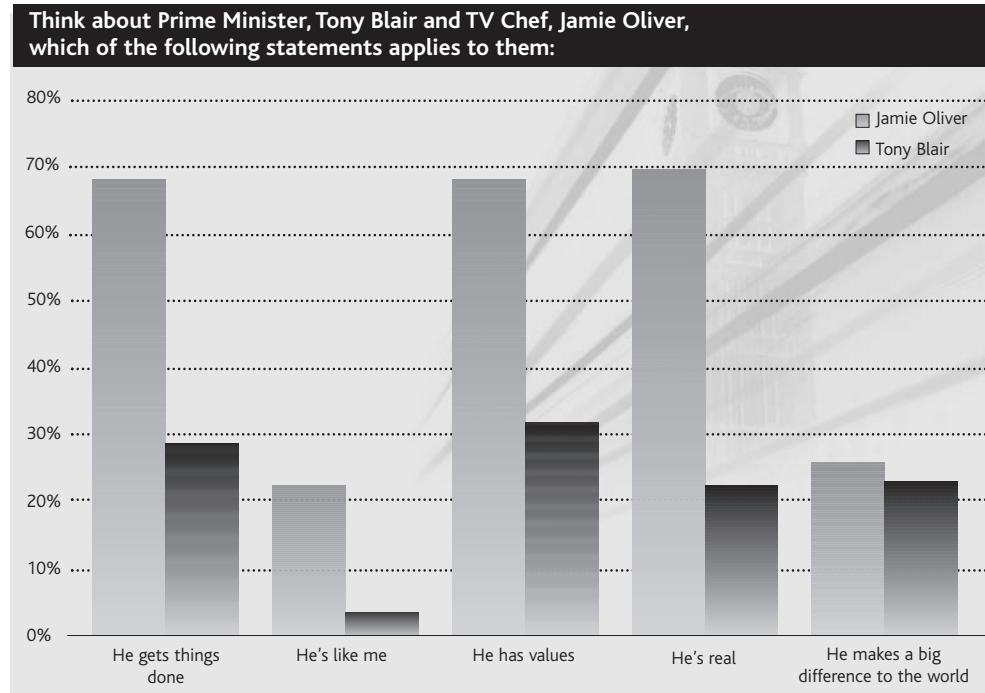


When asked after the election to describe the characteristics of the MP elected in their constituency, most panel members were unable to state whether their elected representative was trustworthy (56%), ordinary (58%), clever (59%) or friendly (61%). In short, a majority of panel members were unable to make informed judgements about the very characteristics which they considered to be most important in judging candidates.

Asked with whom they would most like to have a discussion about the state of the world, 39% of panel members chose Tony Blair and 36% selected Jamie Oliver. (These choices were well ahead of Jeremy Paxman and David Beckham, each at 10%, and Michael Howard at 5%.) Asked shortly after the election which politicians and non-politicians would make good legislators, Jamie Oliver received more support (34%) than Tony Blair (25%), Jeremy Paxman (22%) and George Galloway (2%), but less than Bob Geldof (47%).

Given the consistently strong support for Jamie Oliver as a credible political figure, panel members were asked to compare him with Tony Blair in terms of five characteristics. A significant majority of panel members felt that Oliver, more than Blair, has values, is 'real', gets things done and is like them. Jamie Oliver was even considered to make more difference to the world around him than Tony Blair!

The strong conclusion which emerges from these findings is that when BBs judge political leaders they reward similar characteristics to those which appeal to them as voters in *Big Brother*. They regard both contests as raising similar questions about the authenticity and

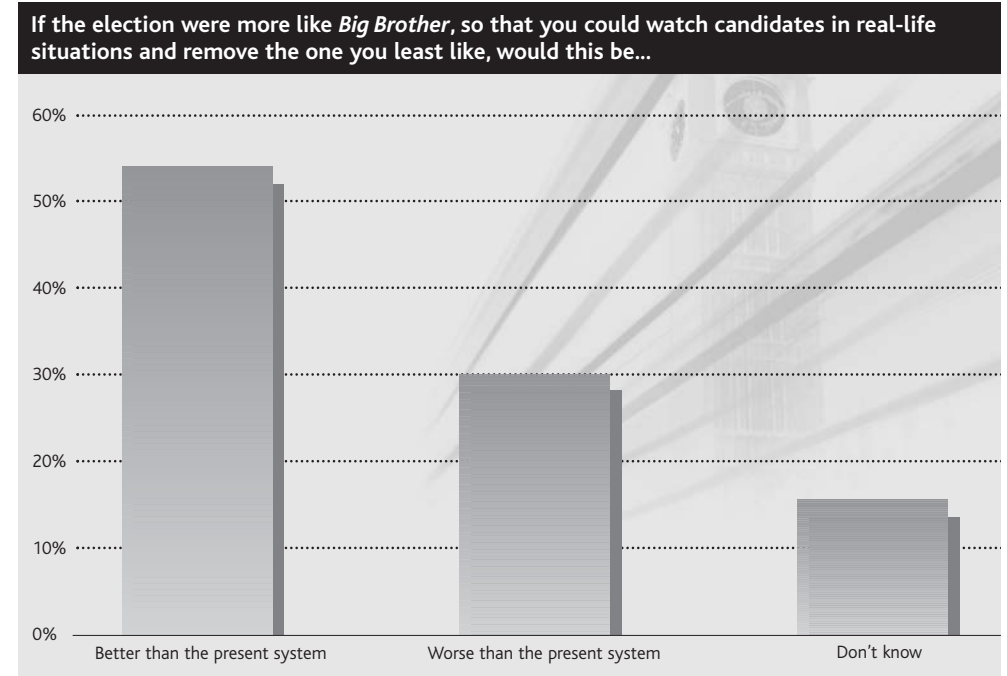
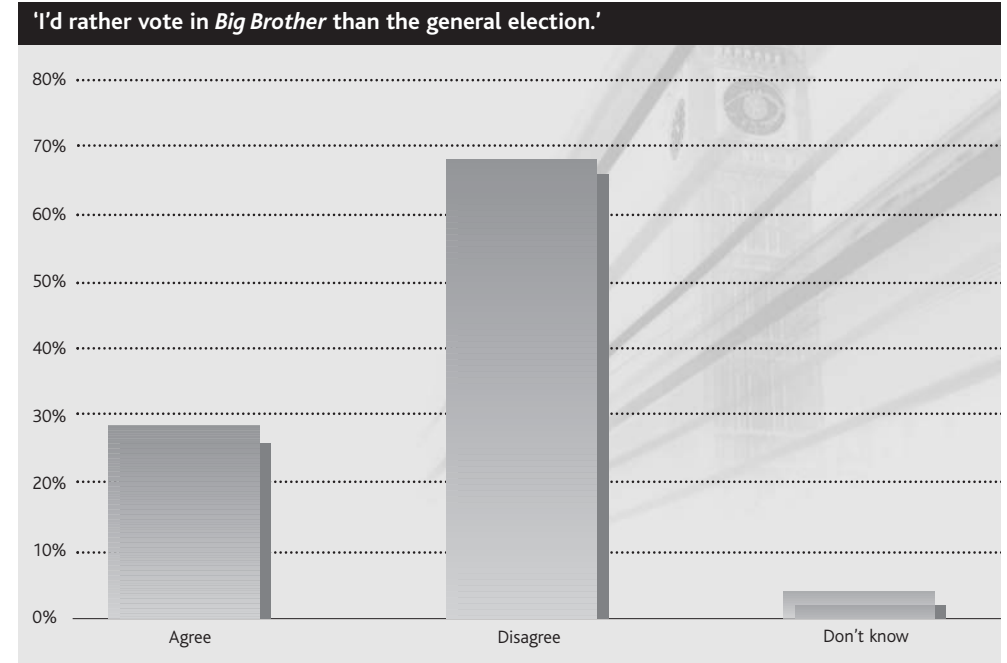


ordinariness of people claiming to speak for and as the public. But panel members experienced considerable difficulty identifying these characteristics in political candidates; most were unable to draw any conclusions about qualities which they regarded as paramount in reaching a judgement about politicians, whereas they had no difficulty in determining these qualities in *Big Brother* housemates. These conclusions beg the question of whether an electoral system that was more like *Big Brother* – more emotionally accessible, permanently visible and directly interactive – would appeal to and engage BB viewers and voters?

Asked whether they would rather vote in *Big Brother* or the general election, over one in four panel members chose the former, although a clear majority (69%) placed greater value upon their political votes.

The panel was then asked whether they thought that the *Big Brother* format, in which candidates are under constant surveillance, with the least popular voted out each week, would be a better way of electing representatives than the present electoral system. A majority (54%) did, although one in three (30%) did not.

In an attempt to understand why a majority of panel members felt such confidence in their capacity to judge political candidates, they were invited to complete the sentence, 'If *Big Brother* voters decided the result of the election, it would be better because...' Respondents emphasised two different aspects of representation which they thought the *Big Brother* approach might enhance. Firstly, they considered that representatives would be forced to



become more exposed and open to emotional surveillance. In an election determined by BBs, they argued, *'we'd get to see the real person and we'd get to see a lot more of them'* and *'the most genuine person would win'* and *'you may see the actual personality of the politician, not just the public person'*. The result, they suggested, would be that *'the false candidates would be weeded out'* and *'true character would be judged, rather than the facade'*. Secondly, panel members considered that *Big Brother* voters would constitute a more representative electorate: *'you would get an overall vote from the entire population rather than the middle-class voters' view* and *'the ordinary people would decide who represents them'*. A clear impression given by respondents was that BBs could bring a degree of emotional intelligence to the electoral process which is at present being squeezed out.

Letting The Other Half In

It's striking that not a single minute of Big Brother has shown a discussion of what we used to call public affairs: there is not a word about politics. It is all about relationships – with each other, past loves or themselves.³⁰

Well... it all depends what you mean by politics. If *Big Brother* is to be criticised because it fails to engage its audience in scintillating debates about the proposed European Constitution or proportional representation ('what we used to call public affairs'), rather than the debates about asylum seekers, inequality, cheating, bullying, anarchism, sexual identity, religious fundamentalism and war that have figured in the show over recent years, who can blame its viewers for sacrificing 'politics' for 'relationships'? Rigid distinctions between political and other democratic forms of participation do not well describe the way that most people lead their lives. In everyday reality, democratic practice occurs in many spaces beyond the formally political, from ways in which power is negotiated in the home to ways in which young people contest adult expectations; from acts of resistance against cultural snobbery to debates about what constitutes offensive humour; from the subversive lyrics of pop songs to the shared code of open-source software. People who do not think of themselves as acting politically frequently find themselves employing democratic discourses and principles.³¹ For example, writing about rave culture, Daniel Martin has argued that

If we accept that fun can be political, then raving can be a political practice which challenges our very notions about ourselves. It subverts dominant images of subjectivity and discipline, it states that politics does not have to be negative, nor does it have to be cooped up in committee rooms, and that protests don't have to be angry.³²

'Rigid distinctions between political and other democratic forms of participation do not well describe the way that most people lead their lives'



The belief that democratic participation must be one thing or the other – reasoned or emotive; dutiful or pleasurable; committed or ephemeral; sophisticated or dumbed-down – is at odds with the evidence from the research presented here which suggests that, far from possessing a finite store of energy which can be spent on only one form of participation or the other, *Big Brother* viewers and voters are capable of participating pluralistically and critically. They did follow the general election campaign, both via the mass media and online, but they often felt themselves to be outsiders in someone else's story. They did talk to their friends and families about the election, but they often chose to talk about other issues that they regarded as more important. They did arrive at political judgements, but their means of doing so rarely conformed to the calculating schemes of rational choice theorists. They did vote for an MP and a government, but they often wondered why voting failed to engage them in ways that remote-control TV voting clearly does. Their activism was not always enthusiastic and they often lacked a belief in their efficacy as political citizens, but they did play the game, even though its rules were opaque and its outcome uninspiring.

The image of *Big Brother* as a refuge for a politically distracted generation, which squanders its precious votes on televised popularity polls while refusing to meet its civic obligations at the ballot box, reflects a hopelessly narrow conception of politics which assumes that the professionally-devised agendas of political elites must be of greater value than those emanating from common experience. New orientations, aesthetics and languages of democratic participation are eroding the boundaries of the political, leading some to conclude that even the most sacred centrepiece of democratic architecture, the election campaign, is in need of cultural re-invention.

The evidence from the research reported here suggests that letting *Big Brother* viewers and voters into the political arena entails giving them permission to experience democratic decision-making on their own terms. To speak of giving permission involves more than extending grudging toleration towards the bothersome *demos*; it entails letting the other half in on their own terms by opening up politics to a broader range of issues, ways of speaking about them and forms of participation.

Bridging the current democratic gap calls for a two-way flow of transparency which makes the drama of politics more easily accessible to the public and the public more vividly real to those who seek to represent them. It is in the first of these two directions that most visible progress is being made. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 'For Americans under 30... comedy shows are now mentioned almost as frequently as newspapers and evening network news programs as regular sources for election news.'³³ 'Soft news' formats, such as *The Daily Show*, have gone some way to making the political agenda less lofty and inaccessible.³⁴ *The West Wing* has been remarkably successful in conveying the complexities of the American political process within a compelling narrative.³⁵ The belief that political participation is too earnest and sombre to accommodate feelings of sociability and pleasure should be dismissed, as should the puritanical belief that it is precisely the self-sacrificing tedium of politics that makes participation a virtuous civic act. Political participation, including voting in elections, is not an obligatory act, but a free choice and, as with other decisions people make about how to spend their free time, they tend to be motivated by what they enjoy rather than what they find arduous or dull. People who offer their services as volunteers are more likely to sustain their commitment if they are motivated by

'The most conspicuous missing link in the contemporary political process is that which allows representatives to know and understand the public'



enjoyment than if they are driven by a sense of obligation.³⁶ The same is likely to apply to political participators.

BBs expressed a desire for an approach to political coverage that jettisons the relentless high-mindedness of Millbank journalism. Asked how they would have made coverage of the election results more interesting, panel members suggested *'maybe having a few bands playing whilst the votes were counted'* and *'if it had entertainment included in the programme'* and *'if it wasn't in the middle of the night'*. Even if the main channels continue to produce election coverage for an imagined audience of dutiful citizens, might not other broadcasters give creative thought to formats which combine entertainment with civic information?

But that is only half the story. Enabling the public to know and understand their representatives will make democracy more transparent and humane, but the most conspicuous missing link in the contemporary political process is that which allows representatives to know and understand the public. How are remote-control citizens to make their presence felt in a world where significance is indicated by media visibility? Like the residents of the *Big Brother* house, the public are strangers who are thrown together, within neighbourhoods, workplaces and public spaces, and compelled to get along. The basis of citizenship is promiscuous respect for unknown others. Because it never meets in one place or speaks with one voice, the public is unable to represent itself. Consequently, the public, as 'a ghostly figure, only ever made present through various proxies' is in constant search of itself.³⁷

The public is depicted in numerous works of fiction, from crowd scenes in films to soap operas which set out to give flesh and character to 'ordinary' people doing everyday things. Politicians claim to speak for the public and news media claim to scrutinise such claims and expose betrayals of what they decide are public values and interests. Charities and pressure groups seek to give voice to otherwise ignored publics. Opinion pollsters, adopting the language of scientific certainty, conjure up the public's opinion by determining questions that will enable the public to reveal itself. The public is spoken for in a great variety of ways, often with supreme confidence, but members of the public have great difficulty knowing quite what it is they belong to, let alone how to speak for themselves in ways that will be heard, acknowledged and respected.

The irony of contemporary democracy is the dependence of the *demos* upon ventriloquised forms of representation. As politics becomes more technocratic and instrumental, it has less to do with contested values and becomes more like an ongoing audition of competing management teams. The public find this uninspiring. They vote less, watch less and join in less. They are not just politically disengaged; they disengage as a political act.

Occasionally, however, the public sees flashes of itself: on phone-in shows; in home-made films; talking to one another in web fora; and in reality TV formats. The public are not so naïve as to imagine that these glimpses encapsulate the whole picture of who they are and how they live. But even limited self-recognition is appreciated. The cultural focal point of Melbourne's Federation Square is the vast overhead plasma screen on which casual passers-by are able to watch themselves and others; in Shoreditch, London, two housing estates have adopted state-of-the-art CCTV cameras which allow residents to watch what's going on in their communal areas. The immense popularity of reality TV formats of many kinds is linked to the public's desire to witness itself as a central actor in its own drama. Such witnessing, and being witnessed, is the key missing ingredient of contemporary democracy, and it is here that political communication could derive its most interesting lessons from *Big Brother's* relationship with its audience.

Rather than the top-down model of accountability, with its exclusive emphasis upon the images, activities and foibles of political representatives, there is scope for a two-way model which, as well as holding politicians to account, enables the public to provide their own accounts of how they want to be represented. For example, as well as the slick and tedious party election broadcasts in which the parties package their promises, it might be revealing to set up video boxes in supermarkets, workplaces and community centres in which members of the public, in the privacy of a *Big Brother*-style 'diary-room', can raise issues and concerns that might not otherwise be voiced within the national election debate. As well as inviting political leaders into television studios to be cross-examined by well-known presenters, it might be illuminating to invite the politicians into people's homes, perhaps over a period of a few days, to see what kind of impression they make upon the people they want to represent. As well as the increasingly popular online voter guides which enable electors to key in their preferences on specific policies and find out which party (or candidate) comes closest to their overall preferences, it could be enlightening to establish an online forum in which a panel of traditional non-voters challenge candidates to answer questions about who they really are and what they really believe in. The creative minds of media producers, who have managed seemingly impossible projects, such as making cricket a popular televised spectacle and turning *Opportunity Knocks* into *Pop Idol*, can no doubt come up with more imaginative and appealing formats for bringing the public to the very centre of the political stage. In doing so, it would be a mistake for them to dismiss or disdain formats, methods and strategies that have the potential to generate a connection between the political democracy and popular culture.

APPENDIX

The 10 incomplete sentences at the end of each survey were as follows:

1. The world would be a better place if...
2. When I see politicians on TV, I think...
3. If you were to send an email about the election to a friend or relative, what would you say?
4. Politics would be more fun if...
5. I would only support an election candidate if he or she...
6. If *Big Brother* voters decided the result of the election, it would be better because...
7. I'll only vote in the general election if...
8. The difference between deciding who to vote for and deciding where to go on holiday is...
9. I have used the internet during election campaign to...
10. Television coverage of the election would have been more interesting if...

FOOTNOTES

- 1 *Guardian*, 7 May, 2005
- 2 BBC News Online, 15 April, 2005
- 3 CNN, 12 April, 2005
- 4 *The Sunday Times*, 8 May, 2005
- 5 Robin Cook, 2002
- 6 Baroness Scott of Needham Market, quoted on BBC News website, 13 February, 2006
- 7 Brants, 1999
- 8 Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001
- 9 Corner and Pels, 2003
- 10 Hill, 2002; Jones, 2003
- 11 Cruickshank, 1999
- 12 Manin, 1997
- 13 Livingstone, 2005
- 14 Habermas, 1989
- 15 Ofcom, *Viewers and Voters: Attitudes to Television Coverage of the 2005 General Election*, p.23
- 16 MORI, 5-10 May, 2005
- 17 Ward, 2005
- 18 MORI, 5-10 May, 2005
- 19 *ibid*
- 20 Ward, 2005
- 21 McKuen, 1990
- 22 Gamson, 1988
- 23 Horan, 1971; Mutz, 1989; Weaver, Zhu and Willnat, 1992
- 24 Edelman, 1985; Kertzer, 1988; Hajer, 2005
- 25 Hill, 2002
- 26 Habermas, 1989; Sennett, 1978; Putnam, 2000
- 27 Corner, 2000
- 28 Sennett, 1978
- 29 Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk, 1986

- 30 Jonathan Freedland, *The Guardian*, 9 August, 2000
- 31 Eliasoph, 1998
- 32 Martin, 1999
- 33 Pew, 2004
- 34 Prior, 2003; Baum, 2005; Moy, Xenos and Hess, 2005; Hollander, 2005
- 35 Beavers, 2002; Holbert et al, 2005
- 36 Roberts, 2004
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