https://doi.org/10.53656/phil2024-03S-12

INVISIBLE PROFESSIONAL TV WATCHERS UNDER SURVEILLANCE

Assoc. Prof. Zhana Popova
Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski"

Abstract. This paper presents the results from a study of the attitudes of TV workers in entertainment shows in two main category oppositions: "visible"/"invisible" and "interesting"/"insignificant". The conducted interviews show that despite the stress of the workroom, nobody quits their workplace. Loggers and copilots keep their jobs, despite the pressure, because they want to "overcome the challenge" and to "leave their comfort zone". These lines strongly resemble the lines used by producers to describe contestants in the shows. The lowest hierarchal level job in reality TV shows (such as *Big Brother* or *The Farm*) is for workers to compete among themselves in describing the most "interesting" scenes which should not be overlooked. Our research shows, that these reality TV workrooms overflow with competition between ready-made stereotypical expectations of "interesting" interactions between contestants and unexpected "more interesting" occurrences. I attempt to answer the question: What messages in TV entertainment come from the relationships between video surveillance workers? One of the research results points, that people's desire to have symbolic power over others, to establish the ideas of what is "interesting", is the reason why this descriptive job has not yet been delegated to software solutions but instead people's senses are used as mechanical appliances.

Keywords: media; television; popular culture; entertainment; invisible workers

Introduction

Media owners and newsrooms in Bulgaria are often subjected to analyses aiming to uncover their mode of work in a society, troubled by ownership concentration, grey capital and censorship (Angelova, Popova & Neikova 2017; Popova 2020). The current study focuses on another segment of media content – who works in the so-called reality game shows and how they work. This main research question of this paper is: What happens when you are constantly being watched at your workplace, while you yourself should be watching the players? What relationships do the watchers in the workrooms form, whilst their main goal is to never miss to record a detail of what has been seen? How do the relationships among these media workers influence the messages produced by reality game shows?

The main postulate upon which this study is based is that reality TV control room workers are doomed to watch – to stare at contestants while being simultaneously stared at and watched themselves. At the same time, the audience never even register their existence. In order to understand what these relationships evoke, we conducted 20 interviews with people who had worked as "copilots" or "loggers" in TV game shows such as *The Farm*, *Big Brother* and culinary shows such as *Hell's Kitchen*. The control room for copilots and loggers is like a house within the house – a never ending process of watching, where everybody is subjected to someone's gaze. Copilots and loggers are professional watchers who have never found their place in the entertainment industry's professional registry. Some of them are appalled away from the job after only a season's work. Others return in search of the next production, regardless of who the producer is. Sometimes entire crews are rented out to the next production company. People whose job consists of watching other people on parallel screens and noting each dialogue, scene, more often than not work without permanent employment, at low insurance rates and with no job security whatsoever.

The study focuses solely on the workers' disappointment and does not account for the interest of people to whom working for a TV shows is considered a success. This would be an important research topic, but here we only focus on the people who voice their concerns for the gaze pointed at them and their workplace.

The recruitment process for reality TV control room workers is unusual. A 34-year old respondent conveys that she answered a casting call for contestants. She almost reached the final round but when she failed to secure a spot in the competition, she received an offer to join the TV crew. "I wanted to get out of my comfort zone" she notes as her motivation to join the other side of the game.

In 2012, Daniel Dayan identifies one of the main problems in media news coverage focusing on particular subjects and neglecting or failing to notice others (Dayan 2012, pp.13 – 66). Almost 10 years later, one of the main circumstances has changed – the more involved you are in the problem, the harder it is to notice what is actually occurring. Let us follow whether what unfolds inside of the control rooms in these so-called reality shows matches the process which Dayan called "a confiscation of democracy" (Dayan 2012, p. 52). Let us first dive into the control room, home to the screens which show contestant activity.

The loggers

A logger's job is to watch on the two screens in front of them for (any?) character activity, without being seen or heard. Could your job be to see everything? This, in fact, is the only real time – a person transforming a visual perception into a written description with a timestamp, and an encoded contestant and type of intrigue hinting towards what could become of this description.

The unseen has not happened – and this could lead to a series of events in the news. It could be censorship or a malicious editing decision. But in reality show scripts, the unseen equals an unrecorded event which leads to editors speaking of things that have not been shown. The missing gaze of a logger or copilot has interrupted the process of the occurrence becoming an event. Contestants discuss a kiss, a gifted flower, a slap on the face, but none of this should come to light. Not only is "valuable" material foregone, but problems occur in the watching of dialogues – nothing should be heard of the unseen. This is one of the main criticisms expressed by contestants upon leaving – how they did good things but were only shown in a negative light. Do they suspect that occasionally someone failed to see or record something?

Alongside the first reality TV show on *Nova TV – Big Brother* in 2004, a call for the position of logger was published. One of the loggers for this show describes her work as follows: "*A logger is a person who watches and describes situations, listens and records conversation. A logger's place of work is the control room, which is situated above the big bedroom inside the house. No daylight comes into it and it is soundproof.*" (Interview 14)

What do loggers watch? Usually, there is a wall in a room with a lot of displays screening footage from the cameras situated in different spots around the house, the farm, the kitchen, or the studios. In some reality formats this room is described as amphitheatrical. The control room with its displays is divided into two rows for two distinctly separate teams. The first row is occupied by the operators. The second row is occupied by two loggers, and a copilot sitting next to an editor. Everybody watches 24/7 divided into shifts of 6 or 8 hours. Seeing and hearing the occurrences among the contestants happens in real time. Two of the displays show the main characters. Secondary characters are only being watched. The decision of what record reaches the viewers is an editor's prerogative.

First and foremost, loggers get trained on how to detail occurrences into a shared language with editors. More accurately, a shared code, but it is this very language that remains unshared, divisive for some of the loggers, as is evidenced by their work tales:

Quotes are selected, whoever spoke them is enlisted followed by a literal description, a timestamp, and a video mark of the beginning and end of each interaction. The professional role bears the name "logger" which comes from the word 'log'. Logs are consecutive descriptions of a situation edited according to the editor's decision. As the room is dark and the air is stale, "each working hour is followed by a half-hour break. After the end of their control room shift, editors retreat into a separate room to look over their co-worker's logs. They select the most intriguing moments for editing into an episode.

The copilots

Copilots watch all displays, apart from the four main cameras. They have to inform an editor in case there is something "more interesting" than the occurrences among the characters and the expected four main monitors. Their gaze has to register "the most interesting" of the main activities for the day. Who determines then what is "the more interesting"?

One copilot says: "*Well, that's very difficult, especially at the beginning. You think - what's the big deal! But actually a copilot's job resembles listening to a broken radio - you catch about half of the sound and you need to figure out who is speaking and where you need to record*." (Interview 2). In 2008, a night shift had some unattractive traits - a logger became a copilot at night. All room doors in the *Big Brother* house were controlled by a switchboard situated in the control room. Opening the control room door at night (if required by the organising team) is a logger's responsibility. So they were not allowed to leave the room. "*So it is as if we are within some sort of a cube from which another cube emerges, and so on – some people confined within a room watch other people confined within a house*" (Interview 17).

Only two of our interviewees wondered what the game show contestants thought of them. They saw their "strategy and tactics" to be liked as they created conflict and helped become a main character. But according to them "*...none of the contestants ever think about the crew, probably neither do the viewers, who only see the final production on their TV screens. They especially show no consideration for the night shift, because that is when they talk the most. They sleep during the day and at night they are more active. Perhaps the only upside to a long night shift is that it is better paid, although it is an offensively small difference"*. (Interview 8)

The social profile of the people working in these hierarchically low positions of reality TV is: young people between the ages of 22 and 35, all interviewees hold a tertiary education diploma or are students; they speak at least two foreign languages; they live alone. What makes young people, who can travel, who could be anywhere, voluntarily self-isolate in the control room of a production company with no provision of fresh air or natural light, just equipped with air conditioners? What makes these young people see the job through and remain until the end of the show while working on temporary contracts with low insurance rates and a pay which they themselves describe as "low"? The answers to these trivial questions could provide clarity on why people stand by when they see the threat of dictatorship and from mere observers they turn into witnesses or watchers. There are no limits to the interpretations in entertainment shows. But this is exactly the space which insists upon convincing us (as viewers) through impressive video material that *who said what to whom with what tone of voice* could serve as a legitimate interpretation of the world. This legitimacy is a necessity which serves to compensate for the fiction of edited reality. But whenever different interpretations clash, the information

watchers on the filming set establish the prevalent interpretation. "Whenever the interpretation of facts replaces the facts themselves, hegemony can rule unhindered. If democracy means expression of diverse interpretative points of view, a variety of opinions, the establishment of a particular interpretation as fact is confiscation of democracy" (Dayan 2012, p. 35). In many cases, loggers are the ones who should identify rule breakers. Their job of descriptive watchers transforms them into accomplices in the making of some pseudo-laws of a quasi-society in a quasi-social experiment.

Motivation of workers: the enticement to discover whether they can handle the stress

A third of the interviewed loggers and copilots explained their remaining on the job as a way to prove to themselves that they could endure the tough work. The loggers described special fragmented watching which challenged them. They would not watch/see the big picture but would patch from separate displays details of the overall unfolding of the events around them. They commented on their fear that their descriptions could turn into "something absurd" after editing. "*Sometimes I felt like a snitch if I saw on the following day that my episode had been selected*", was a comment made by an interviewed logger. This "fear of misrepresenting reality" is present in their words. In fact, "looking beyond the concrete task to follow the participants' reactions as they saw the decor, to follow how the weekly mission in the game unfolded, to only follow male/female relationships" lead to loggers' inability to perform the task at hand which lead to frequent angry accusations by show editors. Other loggers and copilots found the sudden music and signals to contestants, especially in the morning or while the contestants were asleep, stressful. When the music startled the contestants, loggers had to note their reactions and not to miss a single grimace.

"*This is playing with people's psyche. To me this music was a signal for an hour-long watching of people who had just been hit by some sort of high voltage. You watch these stressed-out people on the screens, but you need to grasp their emotions very quickly, because there is no way of showing that [to the editors]. Then I, too, started to worry that I wouldn't be able to make it."* (Interview 19)

"*Music usually meant that somebody would be angry and that their anger would linger. Because all of the contestants were suddenly energized and I couldn't think about anything else, except how crappy that music was".* (Interview 12) "*From now on, I will always associate music with the memory of something bad that I could not stop watching."* (Interview 3).

It is a common theme in the conducted interviews that watching was not as big of an issue as listening. Hearing contestants conspire to act against the rules of the game was an unbearable knowledge for two of the loggers. The feeling of betraying other people whom you had heard conspiring to break the rules,

felt like snitching and this was "mentally exhausting", as experienced by one respondent.

The biggest "war" in the Big Brother show was between smokers and non-smokers. At this time, chaos usually ensued and the watchers behind the screens were mobilized to never skip a statement or a comment made by the contestants. In fact, "smoking" was sharing of the same *space* through differing choices on how this space should be shared. Such scenes in reality shows illustrated the most definitive shift initiated by them, which is reconsidering what is "private" and what is "public". What is "personal" or "social", "private" or "social". Smoking became a marker of "freedom", "feminism", "how your privacy can exist in a small voluntarily confined societal group", etc. Was it just chaos that bothered workers? They explained that cigarettes changed group dynamics just as well as any other need – hunger challenges, deprivation. However, cigarettes were thought of by contestants as "their character", "their personality". And, by the words of one of the loggers: "*Looking at people fighting to preserve their identity and to save it from being trampled by others is very unpleasant",* (Interview 2) *"After these types of wars, the return to the normal everyday dynamic was very difficult. I never expected that they could be so offensive and spiteful just because of the air around them"* (Interview 18). The category of "interesting" in this everyday situation aired on TV intertwines with the category of "taste". Therefore, it is by no accident that another topic of "importance" is food. Feeding, rewarding participants with more food or depriving them of food in the game is experienced as a battle for identity assertion (Petrova 2023, p. 83).

In fact, smoke is the only way to intrude on someone's private space in a place that is devoid of privacy. And vice versa – this is the only way to defend your personal space. A symbolic battle that becomes a war for individuality.

Can we share a view on reality if we understand the category an "interesting" TV show differently?

According to Kolyo Koev's analysis on Schutz and Simmel's concepts, "the same gaze" still does not entail "a shared gaze" (Koev 1996, p. 48). The category of *interesting* appears in media studies as a part of the elaboration of the term "public interest" – a key category of public life in democratic societies. Usually, scientists distinguish between the "public interest" and "interesting to the public". But this does not mean that TV has to recreate the two stereotypes of news - boring news of social value, and interesting news lacking social value. In actuality, can something be of social value if the viewers are not interested in what this something means? Of course. But we should ask the question in reverse: if TV operators can make an interesting show out of bored people, why would they not invest in creating interesting TV reports, news or documentaries about topics of public interest?

The editors' intuition that absurdity, chaos, dirty laundry and cigarette butts are *interesting to* people. Could that not be the case, if so many crew members claim so?

Our results show that people who are in a low hierarchical position prefer to remain in the crew until the end as they pick up the buzzword that leads any player into a game, "*to overcome the challenge*". Therefore, lowly crew make no friends, they do not seek support from others but rely on something which they call their "survival instinct". Copilots need to compete with loggers for a "more interesting plot than the one already established". Who determines what can be more interesting? Our research shows that while being watched, watchers remain in their position until the end of the season, despite the outrage, insult, or sadness because they yearn for recognition but not from others, rather from themselves as individuals. This is a tool for some people to be managed by others who forget that they were not born to control anyone or to watch anyone's ego get diminished and deprived of the proper means to react. Copilots are usually people fleeing the "creative industry" of advertising, disappointed by the negativism of newsrooms. When it has all been said and done, they wish to return to a more mechanical non-creative type of occupation because they were left "deceived in their perceptions". The formation of "interesting" characters in media is left to people who will always resort to set clichés and will only multiply more of the same that has already appealed to viewers before. Divergent ideas about what is "interesting" are impossible and remain invisible. While suffering from hard working conditions, people are unable to tell about what appalls them at their job, because the job is structured in a way so as to impute guilt that one does not understand what one is expected to produce to aspire to the idea of an "interesting bit of TV". For example, one of our respondents could not understand what was so interesting about an untidy house, so initially she would not record such footage.

In "Cultural scenes of the political" Ivaylo Ditchev looks at how political life has been influenced by phenomena emerging from the desire to perform in front of an audience. Thus stages and internet platforms have become political projects (Ditchev 2019). Researchers Ventsislav Dimov and then Niya Neykova and Svetla Koleva describe the transformations of the ideas of "celebrity" and "performance" among Bulgarian musicians or influencers, who use political plots on a daily basis (Dimov, 2019; Neykova & Koleva, 2022).

The current study focuses on the people behind the stage. Our research shows that the invisible workers of media entertainment remain in employment until the very end of game shows despite the described challenges. Therefore, it would be difficult for them to join any sort of social mobilization or action.

As viewers, we cannot expect the appalled to change entertainment. Our negative attitudes towards TV compel us not to look away and prevent us from seeing that these types of shows could be created by people whose gaze could be diverted from the status quo of sensationalism, violence and sex talk. Could they change

the content, if empowered by our attention, should we turn our gaze to them and recognize the importance of their profession? But in such enthusiastic expectation of change, we would be wise to remember the words of Christopher Lasch that the encouragement of self-respect does not lead to self-growth/professionalism, rather to crippling narcissism, in need of admiring audience (Lasch 1997).

Working in a TV game show, as well as competing in one, is performance made for an invisible crowd, performance seemingly aimed at replacing religion and psychotherapy as a moral compass.

Reality shows recreate their viewers' matrix of attitudes, inspiring them to seek their inner potential, that each of us has a certain type of resource that they need to look into. It is not accidental that half of the respondents, who had quit their jobs as loggers or copilots, subsequently endeavored in sewing, decoupage, and other activities which seek to demonstrate the result of the development of their potential. The multiple repetition of the delusion about realizing one's inner potential allows it to enter the work process. This is why every year new people participate in such experiments with their feeling within the control room by working as loggers or copilots. AI will not replace this labour force any time soon, despite the advancing efforts. Because, in fact, copilots and loggers are contestants watched by editors as mirror images of their own demanded footage. Editors, in turn, are the object of somebody else's gaze.

Copilots and loggers work for the most viewed nightly programs but their problems remain invisible and untold. Do they then notice the troubles of other professional groups? At the backdrop of the rise of social media channels where all private information is publicly blabbed, here a strict isolation of the working experiences of people can be observed. Many of our interviewees explained that at the beginning of their employment, they thought they had a personality flaw - that something was wrong with them as persons. But most disturbing was their feeling, emerging even at home or during walks in the park with friends, that they were constantly being watched by someone behind (not above) them. All interviewed loggers and copilots explained that it had cost them a lot to realize that they were not being watched.

Conclusion

The current research study is founded on the thesis that watching either produces desire or refusal to form relationships among participants. More often than not, the research interest focuses on the stage and the people who dream of performing or enjoy their visibility in the era of imagery. This interest of this paper lies in the invisible workers of entertainment who are the professional "watchers" in entertainment shows. Their gaze is an intermediary between screen players and TV audiences. The analysis of interviews with loggers and copilots shows that none of the interviewees speaks of an internally structured group. They speak of no

common problems or professional parameters. The descriptions of their workplace illustrate a group which is incapable of coming together, because everybody watches the others. Their work does not entail a "we" form of speaking and processing of events. If we follow Snezhana Popova's analysis of the stories with no storytellers (Popova 2019, p. 158), such a narrative could create the feeling of a collective identity, which is evident in the work process in television. But in the interviews of people disappointed by their work, only one collective identity emerges – they speak of themselves as the lowest level of the hierarchy of reality TV workers. As a big part of the interviewees hold tertiary education diplomas and have working experience in other segments of media or advertising, they find it hard to agree to play the role of anonymized workers on the labour market and tend to seek acknowledgement for their efforts. Respondents paint the picture of success in the watchers' business as follows: there are numerous examples of successful people – if someone liked the job and was able to withstand the pressure, they would move upwards. However, this hesitation between agreeing to a low-level job and the ability to withstand until the end of filming or the TV season is a rarely observed situation in media. This is why it is important for us to analyse what such relations entail, especially in a field which accentuates entertainment and display of various talents or capabilities. An external observer could expect disagreement or protest in this situation. But quite the opposite occurs – we see that the lack of acknowledgement gives rise to amicable acceptance of a stressful and low paid job for long periods of time and a passion for to prove one's abilities to oneself and others.

Respondents often noted that not everybody found the situation burdening and that a lot of people would continue their way higher up in the hierarchy of reality TV. It is not that the job was not suited for people like them, rather they found fault in their requirements to themselves. It is afterwards that they could look back to that period of their professional journey and see it differently. It is a peculiar form of invisibility of the human interaction – one that everybody sees but refuses to look at.

Our research shows that people's desire to obtain symbolic power over others, to guide viewers and workers with the clichés of what is "interesting" is the reason why such easy (at first glance) work has not yet been delegated to software solutions but still relies on using people's senses as mechanical appliances.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of the project "Pop culture, pop politics: the digital turn. Interdisciplinary analyses of the intersection between media, cultures and politics" (2021–2025), funded by the Bulgarian National Science Fund within National Program "Fundamental Studies", contract number H55/2, 15.11.2021.

REFERENCES

ANGELOVA, V., POPOVA, Z. & NEIKOVA, M., 2017. *News: Close-By*. Sofia: AEJ-Bulgaria. Available from: http://www. aej-bulgaria. org/en/ wp-content/uploads/2017/07/News… Close-By.

DIMOV, V., 2019. About some media metamorphoses. *Medialog,* no 5, pp. 8 – 31. [In Bulgarian]. ISSN 2535-0846.

DITCHEV, I., 2019. *Kulturni sceni na politicheskoto.* Sofia: Prosveta. [in Bulgarian] ISSN 1313-9932.

DAYAN, D., 2012. Dealing in Attitudes. The Media Dialectics of Information and Monstration Political Representation in Crisis. In: ZNEPOLSKI, I. *Is Democracy sick of its own Media?,* pp. 13 – 66. [in Bulgarian] ISBN 978-954-9567-31-1.

NEYKOVA, N.; KOLEVA, S., 2022. Long Live YouTube! On the Way to Pop Culture Politics. *Seminar_BG,* vol. 21. Available from: https://www. seminar-bg.eu/spisanie-seminar-bg/broy21/797-da-zhivee-youtube. html [in Bulgarian] ISSN 1313-9932.

KOEV, K., 1996. *Vidimostta: fenomenologichni konteksti*. Sofia: Critique and humanism. [in Bulgarian]. ISBN 9545870249.

LASCH, C., 1997. *Buntat na elitite i predatelstvoto kum demokratsiyata.* Sofia: Obsidian. [in Bulgarian] ISBN 954-8240-47-5.

PETROVA, S., 2023. Philosophy na hraneneto i identichnost. *Filosofiya-Philosophy*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 81 – 92 [in Bulgarian]. ISSN 0861-6302.

POPOVA, S., 2020. Samoprezhivyavane: profesiayata, kolegiyata, drugarstvoto. In: POPOVA, Z.; POPOVA, S. (Ed). *Vaprosat za spraveslivostta. Sadenite zhurnalisti v Bulgariya* pp. 43 – 50. Sofia: University press 'St. Kl. Ohridski' [in Bulgarian] ISBN 978-954-07-5399-7.

POPOVA, S., 2019. Beyond the collective imaginaries: stories without storytellers. *Medialog,* no. 6, pp. 151 – 161. [in Bulgarian] ISSN 2535-0846.

✉ **Dr. Zhana Popova, Assoc. Prof.**
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-8786-1625
Researcher ID: C-7703-2019
Sofia University
Bulgaria
E-mail: ztpopova@uni-sofia.bg