‘Glocal’ *Big Brother* Phenomenon in Thailand

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The entertainment industry is lucrative and flourishing owing to advancements in modern technology. Television, in particular, penetrates homes in almost every corner of the world. The current trend of reality-based TV shows in the West has proven to be a phenomenal success and prompted Asian TV in 2005 to adapt and create its own version of the popular international series *Big Brother – Big Brother Thailand*. The show drew large audiences and was such a hit that its producers, the Kantana Group, immediately produced a second series in the following year.

This paper explores the phenomenon of a ‘glocal’ television program in Thailand - the first and second *Big Brother Thailand* series - examining the ways in which audiences view and interpret the shows, both in terms of passive and active reception, via positive (identification) and negative (indignation). Responses from local and expatriate viewers vary, with some approving of the behaviour of housemates, including gestures, and others finding these inappropriate and insulting. Leading Thai commentators, however, have unanimously condemned the shows, questioning their propensity to promote ‘unThai’ behaviours that have the potential to corrupt the Thai social fabric. The influence of these critics caused the show’s producers to be called before the House Committee on Religion, Arts and Culture in 2005 – publicity about which caused the program’s ratings to peak. This paper examines the range of responses to *Big Brother Thailand* and raises the question of whether glocal television programs benefit local communities by increasing global understanding and communication or contribute to the watering down of local cultures in favour of global hegemony.

Introduction

TV and Internet globalisation, emerging in the latter part of 20th century, has had a great influence on almost all nations, in terms of economics, politics and culture. Culturally, the media has provided people with a popular way to relax, socialize, gain knowledge and even improve family ties. The adoption and use of new and advanced media communication technologies by contemporary societies has contributed to the constitution of a globally political and economic system, where each individual and each nation state complexly depends on and connects with another (Alasuutari, 1999). Television contributes directly to this transformation of the world into a global phenomenon. Giddens (1999) sees globalism as comprising a place where no single entity is capable of domination or imperialism. Some commentators see the global world as a place where diverse groups of people from different nations can connect and exchange both cultures and ideas (Morley & Robins, 1995). McLuhan (1964) argued that understanding and empathy are brought to citizens of the global village.

However, globalisation also has its critics. Ritzer (1993) views the world under globalisation as marred by hegemony, where citizens of the global state are passively moulded into one dominant culture and misled to losing individual identity. On the one hand, Internet users can search for information online, trade products and services, and use electronic mails and instant messages to communicate with others
across the globe. On the other hand, at anytime and in any place, television audiences are drawn into watching programs produced for global distribution because local producers may have limited budgets to make their own products (Wilson, 2004). Additionally, in many cases the costs of purchasing programs from the USA and Western Europe are much lower than having to locally produce them (Berger, 1992).

Yet, viewers, not only in different cultures and societies but also in the same society, interpret the programs in dissimilar ways. When audiences view programs, they give their own meanings to them by culturally interpreting the product communication through active participation - “the bottom-up flow of interpretations of people living in a geographical setting” (Lie, 2003: 109). Höijer (1999) refers to them as active audiences who use the cultural interpretation flow to strengthen their social, cultural and political engagements, whereas Fisk (1987, 1991) and Curran (2006) see such flows as audience power that protects people from undesired ideology.

In consequence, the term ‘glocalisation’ - or ‘localisation’ of the globe – has been coined to reflect the merging of the concepts - ‘global’ and ‘local’. For Barker (1999), global products can become local as whatever is considered local “is produced within and by a globalising discourse which includes capitalist marketing and its increasing orientation to differentiated local markets” (p. 42). Chang (2003) defines media glocalisation as “a language-block-by-language-block approach or country-by-country approach to deal with differences within a region” (p. 4) that involves three phases of programming strategies. The first one refers to re-broadcasting Western programming; the second involves the customising of language; the third recognises the cooperation of international producers with local sectors for local programming.

It is evident that glocal products or commodities are more likely to originate from Western countries, specifically the United States, the so-called locus of modernity. The products are usually wrapped up in glossy packages, attracting consumers elsewhere who either integrate or disintegrate themselves with the packages, such integration and disintegration depending on the forms of consumers’ familiarity or unfamiliarity with the cultural identity of the product. Referred to by Wang and Servaes (2002) as involving paired aspects, this process depends on one’s inward feelings of identification with a particular culture or subculture and an outward tendency towards or away from another culture in order to come to a realisation of a sense of cultural differences from and similarities to others. The sense of viewer identity is also associated with a process of “learning about and accepting the traditions, heritage, language, religion, ancestry, aesthetics, thinking patterns, and social structures of a culture” (Lusting & Koester, 2006: 137). Among these cultural values, as described by Samovar and Porter (2003), are powerful guides of one’s own perceptions and behaviours of “what is worth dying for, what is worth protecting, what frightens people, what are proper subjects for study and for ridicule, and what types of events lead individuals to group solidarity” (p.12). This sense of identity is likewise related to consumption as:

[it] defines identities or even that identity is consumption...a global identity and a local identity are ideal forms, not existing in real life. All identities are a mixture of global and local aspects. People in local settings constantly reshape their own individual and collective identities by consuming cultural elements originating from a variety of levels (Lie, 2003: 102).
What may be seen as appropriate cultural values in some cultures may not be viewed the same way in others. For instance, in Thai culture, it is not considered rude to ask a person’s age, although it can be in Western cultures. Thais have the Pi-Nong (siblings) relationship system. Although not biologically related, Thais are culturally required to address one another as either Pi (the older) or Nong (the younger). Thais also prefer to practice indirectness in communication, which is considered more appropriate than being straightforward mainly because directness may cause confrontation and conflict causing others to lose face. North Americans, on the other hand, value directness as a sign of being honest. Thai culture fits most closely with what Hall (1976) conceptualises as high-context culture and Hofstede (1980) as collectivistic culture. It is a culture where people place great importance, not so much on the individual, as on their groups and societies, communicating their thoughts not only via verbal messages but also through context and nonverbal codes which are crucial to the construction of meaning. This is generally opposed to practices in the West where low-context culture and individualism are practiced.

Recently, according to Thai intellectual Nithi Aewsriwong (cited in Siriyuvasak 2000: 101) Thais - especially the emerging middle classes influenced by the West through the use of new media, travel and education abroad - have adopted new cultural values of individualism and consumerism. They tend to be concerned with their own class interests, ignore the traditional Thai values of freedom, equality and democracy and are moving to Western-style competitiveness in business dealings with an emphasis on accumulation of knowledge and resources, income and profits. Pennycook (1994) has argued against the value of study abroad as overseas students are not only obliged to possess a high level of English proficiency in order to be admitted to degree courses in the host countries, but also become dependant upon “forms of Western knowledge that are of limited value and of extreme inappropriateness to the local [cultural and social] context” (p. 20). In many cases, students studying abroad place themselves in culturally conflicting situations with their own people. Pennycook’s example demonstrates the complexity of cultural differences – that they abound not only between the East and the West but also within the West and the East themselves, creating barriers to understanding.

**Research Methodology**

In order to explore the phenomenon of the first and second *Big Brother Thailand* series, this paper will examine the ways in which audiences view and interpret the programs using data from the following websites collected between April and August 2006, and August and September 2007:

http://tvfanforums.net/lofiversion/index.php?t1214.html  
http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=24441  
http://www.mythailanddiary.com/392/big-brother-thailand  
http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=24509  
http://www.brandage.com/issue/cs_detail.asp?id=1581  
http://www.blog.sanook.com

Wilson (2004) asserts that when local audiences watch a glocal show, they actively or playfully interpret its contents, the characters presenting or hosting it, its screen
format and its narrative. From there, audiences either identify themselves with or feel antipathetic toward their interpretations. The ability to identify oneself with the contents of a program and its media actors, involves a culturally aware process. Inevitably, glocal television programs are then very much involved with cross-cultural perspectives. Meaningful or positive interpretations by audiences usually occur via their recognition and familiarity with the culture of the program, which in turn depends on cultural sharing and integration across the globe. This reveals the web of relations between ‘us’ and ‘absent others’ (Giddens, 1990).

Glocal television programs such as Survivor and Big Brother are widely viewed and copied. The latter program is representative of many ‘copy-cat’ television formats (Woods, 2002) adopted by countries around the world whereby the local program makers are instructed to follow the original program format, for example, to use the original logo, backdrops, computer graphics, showing time and so on. Big Brother Thailand is no exception.

**Criticism of the Big Brother Show**

Kantana Group, a Thai media corporation, produces Big Brother Thailand on an annual contract and sets its program objective in accordance with the product’s original theme (developed in the Netherlands where the program was first shown in 1999) of portraying real people in real interactions while living together in a confined environment over an extended period of time. Although Sasikorn Chansate, who is the managing director of Kantana Group, has claimed that the focus of the program is not romance but real life showing how people live together and interact with one another (Assavanonda, 2005), both of the Thai versions’ themes have been clearly based on conflicts within and around difficult personalities and/or romantic situations.

The format of the show involves fifteen strangers living in the same house for a total of 105 days. Each individual has to follow instructions and perform tasks directed by Big Brother. With 26 cameras located in every corner of the house, each and every movement of the inhabitants is monitored and watched around the clock by home and cyberspace audiences. As people live together, they behave and adjust to each other in order to survive in the group. Those who find it difficult to get along well with the others are voted out and evicted, one by one, until, in the final week, the last remaining individual wins the game. The prizes include a house, a car and cash.

The first Thai version of the series telecast in 2005 was a phenomenal success. Big Brother became a smash hit as Thai viewers went crazy and were glued to their screens in response to the controversial behaviour of two contestants, Pim and Toto, who became intimate in the house – holding hands and sharing a blanket. The two contestants were portrayed as lovers, and viewers were not pleased with what they saw. For members of the opposite sex to touch each other affectionately in public is taboo in Thailand. Critics of the show were alarmed and consequently questioned the values portrayed in Big Brother Thailand, raising concerns about a corrosion of ‘Thainess’ amongst viewers (Assavanonda, 2005).

According to Sattayanurak (n.d.), ‘Thainess’ was initially conceptualised under the absolute monarchy of King Rama V to prevent the nation from being seen as barbaric by Western powers and to strengthen the ability of Thailand to resist Western
domination. The King played a vital role in fostering artistic and cultural expressions of ‘Thainess’ which was exemplified by unique Thai traits. ‘Thainess’ was described as supporting a hierarchical social structure which was successful in shaping [a] “mentality [of] ‘Thailand is good’...convincing [Thais] that everything in Thai society and culture was already ‘good’; and all the ‘bad’ elements were the result of foreign influence” (p. 29). However, in the present context of the Big Brother series, ‘Thainess’ was used by mainstream intellectuals as a concept – partly influenced by Buddhism - emphasising “that everyone must ‘know thy place’ via Thai decorum, Thai language, Thai ethics” (p. 30).

Itthipol Pretiprasong, TV for Kids research and development team project head, questioned the show’s influence on young people (Assvanonda, 2005). He considered the behaviour of the contestants to be improper and inappropriate and feared young Thai people might find it acceptable. He recommended local cultural issues should be taken into consideration by the show’s producers and that the local format of programs such as this should be adjusted to suit local values and beliefs, rather than merely copying the values of the original version. In his comments, he emphasised the uniqueness of Thai culture:

In the show, 12 people are totally cut off from the outside world, which in reality is impossible. Despite its concept, the program is far from reality. If you say it's about how people would live together, there should be something else, apart from chatting, gossiping and boycotting someone in the group. There are other creative things they could do (Assvanonda, 2005).

Panpimol Lortrakul, a child psychiatrist, was also disturbed by the scenes shown on TV screens involving romantic relationships. Given that the show is reality based, rather than scripted, she raised the possibility that it could have more impact on viewers than a soap opera. She was also concerned it might lead to copy-cat behaviours amongst the show’s mass audience. Ladda Thongsupachai, the Director of the Cultural Surveillance Centre under the Culture Ministry, noted she had kept a close watch on the show from the start and thought there were risks in broadcasting it around the clock. All human behaviours, including sex, had the potential to take place in the house and be broadcast live. Though Toto, the man criticized for his intimate actions, was evicted from the house early on in the series, Thongsupachai believed there was a need for the government to be ever vigilant in monitoring the behaviour of the housemates.

The most serious concerns were voiced by Chairman of the House Committee on Religion, Arts and Culture, Kuthep Saikrachang, who said that Thai society couldn't accept this kind of reality program because it did more harm than good to the Thai social fabric. He questioned why Thai producers would import the concept of the program from a foreign country at all. He protested that he did not understand why the two contestants would express their feelings openly in front of the cameras in breach of social taboos and raised the suspicion that they may have been directed to do so by the producers in a chase for ratings. He called for the producer – the Kantana Group - to explain why such improper behaviour was allowed to be broadcast. The producer defended that the show just portrayed real life in a house. His comments forced the Culture Ministry to consider whether or not to screen reality
programs with the possibility of preventing them being aired (Assavanonda, 2005)

These critics - socially and politically recognised in Thai society – unanimously viewed their cultural identities as being different from those projected on screen (Loke, Supramaniam & Wilson, 2005). They actively interpreted the media product, *Big Brother Thailand*, and found themselves unable to relate to its narrative shape and screen format, leading them to question the ethics of the local series. At the same time, collectively they perceived that young audiences, whose moral virtue was untried and who watched the program for a long period of time, were more likely to be negatively influenced by what they viewed (Gerbner cited in Chandler, 1995).

Interestingly, public and critical opinions voiced in Western countries, where cultural values are said to generally contrast with Eastern countries, share common views with the ones from Thailand. For instance, Hill and Palmer (2002) state concerns by critics regarding the *Big Brother* format – in particular, that it negatively affects viewers because it involves a “dumbing-down” (p. 251) of culture, while projecting a poor image of reality. In France, some viewers, in a protest that police had to quell with tear gas, claimed the show undermined public morals (ibid).

**Audiences’ Views on Websites**

A range of audience reactions to *Big Brother Thailand* can be found on the program’s own linked website (http://www.gsmadvance.com/wap/bigbrother/web/index.aspx). Viewers’ online behaviour on the *Big Brother* website is directly influenced by what is happening in the television broadcasts. The television content is, therefore, a crucial driving force in both the use of the website and in the comments posted there, (Oegema, Kleinnijenhuis and Vaneka, 2005). Richard Barrow (21/05/2005) apparently a British expatriate posted his comment on the Thai version of *Big Brother* he saw on UBC 16, claiming that he had never watched the UK version and expressed the assumption that the British version must have been the opposite of the Thai version. Demonstrating the gap between British and Thai cultures, Barrow further expressed surprise that same sex touching was acceptable in Thailand – and in the *Big Brother* broadcasts – when it would be unacceptable in his home society. On *Big Brother Thailand* housemates massaged each other and shared the same mattress through the nights without drawing any public criticism. Same gender hand-holding in public is acceptable in Thailand as a sign of friendship, particularly amongst females, but not in Britain. Yet touching, hugging and showing affection between people of different genders caused outrage amongst critics in Thailand.

Comments by other expatriate viewers posted on www.tvfanforums.net also criticised the first version of *Big Brother Thailand* revealing an unfamiliarity with some of the cultural values projected in the show. The following are examples of four viewers posted:

[It] seems [like] you can go [to] Thailand and have sex on any downtown street and in any strip bar or massage parlour but you can't show it on TV…a bit like America then!...It's unimaginable to me to have to live like I wasn't a human being and didn't need physical contact even innocent as holding hands...[I] can't imagine how boring the show would be to have to watch for
any physical contact. Glad [the US Big Brother] is not like that then again the extreme is the Australian [Big Brother]. Guess we are never happy no matter what they do (18/05/2005).

Comments on the second series, posted on www.mythailanddiary.com also demonstrate an unfamiliarity of Western viewers with Thai cultural values:

Pathetic…there is a guy from Big Brother Sweden called Anton who got exchanged with a guy from Big Brother Thailand...The Thai guy said the Swedish girls are cute and that they walked around naked in the house... In between I see this lost look on [the Swedish’s (sic)] face and wonder how bad his culture shock is. No dating, no sex, no gossiping with someone from his own culture, no fighting and certainly no naked women on Big Brother Thailand. In Europe that’s what Big Brother is all about…who is dating who, who is the first person to totally crack under pressure…Go Anton, you should win just for having the guts to join Big Brother Thailand. Anton must have felt like he had walked into another world.

A popular Thai website, www.sanook.com, created a web board for audiences of the second series of Big Brother Thailand to post their views of the program. A total of 81 viewers posted their opinions (a mixture of positive and negative perspectives) from the 21 February to 1 April, 2006 (See Tables 1 & 2). Although the number of posters provides too small a sample to draw definitive conclusions about the way the program was viewed, these responses nevertheless provide an interesting insight into the way the second series was perceived by ordinary viewers at home.

Table 1: Positive views of Big Brother’s audiences towards the Housemates and the TV program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Total Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jeff, one of the contestants, is cute and a darling.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Oe, a female contestant, is nice and lovely.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Oum, another female contestant, is a poor girl. We feel sympathy for her.</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nok, a young lady dentist, and Nui, another female housemate, are straightforward. Why can’t people appreciate them?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Birdday, a contestant, is a fine man.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>It's an exciting and fun show.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Watch everyday out of curiosity as to how all contestants behave when they get angry.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Don’t be too serious. Just watch it for fun. People are insincere in real life anyway.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The host of the program on ITV is good.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Negative views of Big Brother’s audiences towards the Housemates and the TV program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Total Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The show is fake, uncreative and nonsense.</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>It’s boring to see aggressive behaviours.</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Nok who is well educated but acts in an uneducated manner, always blames, gossips about and discourages others. She should be voted out.</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Nui is an awful girl like Nok and should be evicted.</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>None of the contestants behave properly as they all try to pair up as couples.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>All housemates have nasty characters.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>All housemates are good-looking but are unskilled to do housework.</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The producers are deceitful.</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These tables suggest that six of the 15 housemates drew comments from the 81 active audience members who posted comments on the web board. Positive comments related to familiarity, in the sense that those who posted framed their remarks in terms of aspects of the shows/characters that they saw as providing good or suitable role models. Jeff was the most liked contestant in the first series because of his perceived character (see Table 1, item 1), while Oum gained sympathy due to her weak character and the fact she was seen to be taken advantage of by others (see, Table 1, item 3). Amongst the negative comments was criticism of Nok and Nui who were seen as portraying non-Thai characteristics such as being too direct (see Table 2, items 3 & 4). The comments showed an appreciation of the behaviours of Oe and Birdday (see Table 1, items 2 & 5), while there was also appreciation for the way the show was formatted (see Table 1, items 5-9).

As far as negative views are concerned, posters to the website mainly showed their indignation towards two housemates, (see Table 2, items 3 and 4) - Nok, who was disliked the most, and Nui. The behaviour of these two people was found to be unacceptable. Fans of the show who posted thought they should be evicted. Items 2, 5, 6 and 7 of Table 2 show that audience members who posted to the website perceived a form of general indignation about the housemates’ behaviours, personalities and skills, even reacting to the contrived nature of the series and the manipulations (deceit) of the show’s producers (Table 2, items 1 & 8).

Conclusion

Regardless of how audiences view the Thai glocalised Big Brother versions, identifiably or controversially, the show has generated phenomenal waves in what Habermas (1989) describes as the public sphere. People in bourgeois societies around the world, including via the press, have responded and talked about events in the Big Brother house - events that are made to happen in a specific way with intended specific impacts on participants and a specific end in mind (Scannell, 2002). The program producers have successfully created a closed environment where the behaviour of contestants can be both manipulated by producers and then scrutinised
by the public leading to what Lumby (2003) calls “human dilemma and conflicts for commercial purposes” (p.20). Primarily aimed at entertaining audiences for financial gain, the show raises ethical debate wherever it has been shown, including in Thailand where the debate centred around its suitability for viewing by Thai audiences and participants.

*Big Brother* is defined as a commercial hybrid product that combines different genres (Hill & Palmer, 2002; Lumby, 2003), aimed at securing and keeping audiences. Scannell (2002) calls it “a made-for-television event” that uses familiar storytelling tropes. Over the decade, the show has been running internationally, the use of interactive media to enrich the format has increased dramatically, stimulating audiences to participate and interact with the program. Its popular multimedia format, in Thailand as elsewhere, relies on interactivity to promote itself and boost profits via the use of SMS, SMS News, SMS News Flash by way of encouraging viewers to vote, send cheer-up messages to contestants and post messages online. This demonstrates co-creativity between the production company Kantana, the contestants and viewers. *Big Brother* has become a “multimedia phenomenon [which refigures a form of] active citizenship” (Hill & Palmer, 2002: 253).

Not only do the program makers profit from the screening of the *Big Brother* programs, but contestants, internationally, are also drawn into the *Big Brother* house by the promise of fame (Woods, 2002), in return for what may be a minor cost - the surrendering of their privacy while potentially opening themselves to criticism. If they win, they also earn minor celebrity status and a cash prize. As well, the media gets benefits from the show being aired, profiting from its role as “a generator of publicity and associated spin-offs” (Hill & Palmer, 2002: 252). While it is clear that audiences respond both positively and negatively, within a context of realisation that the ‘real life’ of the program is contrived, audiences still see the housemates as real (*Big Brother Thailand*, according to commentators such as Kasien Thechapira (1997 cited in Siriyuvasak 2000: 112), Itthipol Pretiprasong, Panpimol Lortrakul, Ladda Thongsupachai and Kuthep Saikrachang, may be corrupting Thai culture and encouraging Thais to adopt inappropriate Western values to their own detriment and the detriment of Thai society. At the same time, new cultural values are being created by the show, as noted by Nithi Aewsriwong.

Although the viewers actively express their voices or interpretations on the website, some questions in turn arise. Do the Thai audiences, especially the young ones, really benefit from viewing the glocal show in any aspect? Do they deserve to be manipulated by the show format and its controversial themes? The answer may be ‘no’ for the critics who cannot identify themselves with the program since they culturally value ‘Thainess’ and collectivism. They do not want to see the young Thais being influenced by any unsuitable Western values through the reality program and subconsciously adopting them to their life.

**References**


