Who's Watching the Watchers?

Reality TV is All in Good Fun, But it Reflects a Growing Anxiety Over the Loss of Privacy

By Shari Cohen

Big Brother is still with us, but where?

In the old Soviet Union, a foreigner staying in the hotels reserved for non-Soviets had only to say aloud that she needed a light bulb changed for her request to be mysteriously met (although sometimes at the expense of a look at the contents of her hotel room). Traveling though Russia even several years into Gorbachev's rule, I continued to call friends from phone booths rather than from the hotel phone, which was bugged, and to meet them on park benches rather than in their homes, so as to allow for free conversation.

How strange it is that ten years after the fall of the Berlin wall one of the most highly anticipated TV shows is something called "Big Brother." Versions of the show have aired in several European countries; the American version is set to air this summer on CBS. The same network's "Survivor," based on similar ideas, is already a TV ratings phenomenon.

These shows rely on a degree of surveillance of everyday lives that would make Stalin envious. As Marshall Sela explained recently in the New York Times Magazine, "Big Brother" will feature "10 people who have never met [and] move into a house and live under …total surveillance. Twenty-eight cameras and 60 microphones will be in the house. There will be no dead zones, even in the dark; even in the bathroom. There is no mail and no media. They may leave at any time but doing so means they give up on the possibility of the $500,000 prize."

It is nightmare scenario worthy of Orwell's 1984:

"The voice came from an oblong metal plaque like a dulled mirror which formed part of the surface of the right-hand wall…..Winston turned a switch and the voice sank somewhat, though the words were still distinguishable. The instrument (the telescreen, it was called) could be dimmed, but there was no way of shutting it off completely…The telescreen received and transmitted simultaneously. Any sound that Winston made, above the level of a very low whisper, would be picked up by it; moreover, so long as he remained within the

field of vision which the metal plaque commanded, he could be seen as well as heard…You had to live - did live, from habit that became instinct-in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized."

At the same time as this phenomenon has emerged in full force, the press has been full of stories about the threats to privacy posed by the Internet and other technologies. In one well-known example, the Internet advertising company DoubleClick came under fire for gleaning and then making available to marketers the identities and on-line purchasing profiles of millions of Internet users.

What is going on here? I believe that in a number of important ways the popularity of so-called "reality" television and the fears about pervasive possibilities for the violation of privacy are intimately related.

Contemporary threats to privacy are scary because their source is difficult to discern. Where does our credit card information go after we offer it up to an e-commerce site? Who is behind those ubiquitous video cameras pointed at city streets and intersections? When the EasyPass lane collects my toll electronically, will anyone else find out that I was travelling on that particular highway at that particular date and time?

Orwell's Big Brother seems almost quaint compared to these contemporary privacy threats; Big Brother is, after all, the state, and the locus of the threat is clear. In the year 2000, corporations, organizations and individuals can reach into our personal records and buying habits in ways we are only vaguely aware of.

Reality TV, by contrast, offers viewers and participants complete control. Participants eagerly compete to be on the show (as Sella noted: "Being spied on once is a violation. Being spied on continually is celebrity"). In a show like "Big Brother," participants can leave at any time. Outside of the social experiment they are participants in a highly democratic society. They are not subjected, as were members of communist societies, to an endless barrage of propaganda making it difficult to distinguish truth from manipulation. We choose to watch them and to bring success to the broadcasters who then give us more of the same.

You can also interpret the popularity of reality TV in ritualistic terms. Reality TV is a mirror of the fears being produced by systems of surveillance more extensive than any Orwell could have even dreamed of-a collective ritual reenactment to allay our fears and, perhaps, to adjust to the coming realities.

A sinister, conspiratorial read of this would be that the corporations behind reality TV are deliberately trying to make people feel better about a kind of intrusion on privacy that they hope will be good for corporate profits. Or another version: They are trying to take advantage of a collective fear and in the process defuse the

public discourse that should be taking place over privacy by transforming it into entertainment with little civic value. According to this scenario, thought control comes from the omnipresent and often highly manipulated nature of corporate attempts to win our attention and dollars.

But it is not necessary to talk about the conspiratorial when looking at a system of power in which all are in part complicit.

Vaclav Havel's discussion of post-Stalinist communism is helpful here. As Havel wrote in his famous essay "The Power of the Powerless," the most important differences between the post-totalitarian (post-Stalinist) and classical dictatorships is that a line of conflict can still be drawn according to social class. In the post-totalitarian system, this line runs de facto through each person, for everyone in his or her own way is both a victim and a supporter of the system.

So while it is a bit of a stretch to compare reality TV to life under totalitarian regimes- with their coercion and thought control, and the entry of the state as representative of the "community" into most aspects of private life-it is necessary, even if too early, to map the contours of the system of corporate dominance that is changing the relationship between public and private life in potentially radical ways.

We need to look at these changes and ask what they mean for democracy. Market "totalitarianism" is very different from the versions earlier in the century; we need to use the analogy intelligently.

As Zygmunt Baumann pointed out in his discussion of the Milgrom experiments, in which participants were willing to inflict electric shocks on other humans when instructed to by a scientist, there are tendencies inherent in modern society that allowed the Holocaust to take place. We have a greater burden when the extreme versions are not present in our lives; it is harder at that point to see the systems of power and the potentials for abuse that are part of our day to day lives.

Ultimately it is an issue of power and of avoiding ceding power to forces that will use it coercively.