

## Journalism – Interaction Man (The Times)

Nobody has yet, several days after it ended, put forward the key statistic regarding Big Brother Five. It's the one that puts in an appearance round about this time every year, when somebody points out that more people voted over the course of the series than did at the last General Election, and posits that this is a clear signifier of the decline of civilisation, ongoing slide into barbarism, collapse of the nation's moral fibre etc. Of course, it's a nonsense, because, as far as I'm aware, our electoral rules don't allow thirteen year old girls to cast one hundred and seventy consecutive votes for the candidate with the dreamy eyes who's "like, soooo fit..", and anyway, the fuss over who won, and why, and how many of us voted, masks the true scandal of Big Brother. Which is that we do all the work. Us. The viewers. The so called passive receptacles. We, as the tiresome Geordie voice-over man never tires of pointing out, decide. If we didn't, there'd be no programme.

But it's not just Big Brother. It's seemingly every other television and radio programme broadcast, inciting us to phone in, text, e-mail, share our views, voice our opinions, vote and rant and comment. Interact, in short. Don't just sit there, how dare you? Personally, aside from shouting abuse at Ainsley Harriot, I have never felt the slightest inclination to interact with my viewing or listening (not quite true, I did, as a six year old, have a joke read out by Noel Edmonds.....Yes, that's shame my head is hanging in). I interact with human beings, and that's what makes the media so useful. If a programme's boring me I don't have to nod my head politely whilst stopping my eyes from glazing over. If a presenter asks a question I can't answer I feel no need to mumble something platitudinous whilst desperately trying to change the subject. I just turn over to Trisha and feel all smug and superior again.

But maybe I'm missing something. Maybe interaction will make me feel empowered and involved and all those other words the people who decide these things clearly like to scribble onto flip-charts during brainstorming sessions. Which is why, in the interests of open-minded experimentation, I decide to spend an entire day interacting. From dawn 'til dusk, every programme which requests my input or participation is going to get it. That'll teach them. At first, I set myself grandiose aims, such as getting on the same programme twice, as different people with opposing views or broadcasting live on national radio and television simultaneously. After three solid hours of being brutally ignored, however, my sights shifted slightly lower. Somebody let me interact with them.....please.....

I start at six thirty a.m. with Milkshake, Channel Five's pre-school zone, to whom I send a charming e-mail asking, on behalf of my five year old son Oliver (real), for the too-chirpy-for-this-time-in-the-morning presenter to tell my two year old son Adam (fictional) to lend Oliver his Noddy style hat with a bell, because Noddy's his favourite. We are ignored. She just keeps reading from elaborate home-made birthday cards which must have been sent in weeks ago. Is this fair? I feel insulted on Oliver's behalf but, sensibly, he's still in bed and anyway, finds Noddy a bit passé nowadays.

From seven a.m. things start getting complicated. I'm listening to Today on Radio Four whilst simultaneously flicking between BBC Breakfast and GMTV. On GMTV presenters Andrew Castle (the Fox brother who never got into acting) and A Bubbly Blonde Woman are interviewing Paddy The Vet from Emmerdale. Do I have a question I'd like them to ask Paddy? Well, yes I do. Paddy just admitted that he believes in fairies. So I enquire by text whether Paddy thinks fairies believe in Emmerdale, an enquiry, I humbly suggest, with a rich philosophical sub-text. However, the missing Fox brother and Blonde Thing ignore it, in favour of their

existing line of interrogation, namely “Emmerdale’s great now, don’t you think?”

The BBC Breakfast team – not, disappointingly, Natasha and Dermot but a couple of lower-leaguers whose names I don’t bother catching – are presenting filmed reports on the plight of Zamzama, an Afghan refugee. Apparently there have been floods of e-mails and phone calls, several of which are read out but, strangely, not my recorded phone message; “Surely the welfare of the child is all that counts. Any political considerations merely treat the girl like a pawn in a cruel game of chess.” It’s an Alan Partridge quote. What could better capture the tone and mood of BBC Breakfast? But no, Natasha and Dermot’s body doubles think they know better. By nine, I’ve entered a GMTV competition (its b) Are You Being Served), cast a vote for the cake to be used at the GMTV Virtual Wedding (don’t ask, I don’t know) and contributed a Faria Alam joke ( she broke down during her interview – was she crying all the way to the bank?) but it’s pearls before swine. And no, Andrew, your “Thanks for all your e-mails,” is no consolation.

And don’t even get me started on Today. I know I’m battling with the Big Boys here, so I send in several well balanced, thoroughly thought out, carefully planned e-mails and a pointed text on the War on Terrorism. Yet, as far as I can tell (concentration was, admittedly, at a premium) Today doesn’t feature a single listener’s contribution. They invite the plebs to play, yes, to have their say and do their bit, but clearly, where Ed Stourton and Sarah Mountague are concerned, if you’re not a Cabinet Minister, or Spokesman For, or Director Of then interactivity just isn’t going to happen.

By nine I’m feeling dispirited and let down, like the small child at the back of the class who keeps his hand up for hours but never gets to ask a question. Then along comes Victoria Derbyshire. Victoria hosts the daily phone in debate on Radio 5 Live and today’s topic (“Please call, I’d like to have a conversation with you...” – you’d better not be toying with me Victoria) is ‘Has Britain become too sexually tolerant?’ I call in – No, if it had there wouldn’t be so much fuss over Sven’s various peccadilloes. Thank you for calling, we’ll pass your views onto the producers. Click. Brrrr..... Then, while I’m firing off several ignorant but opinionated e-mails, the show calls back but, because I’m online, they can’t get through and leave a plaintive message. Have I missed the chance to Have My Say on The Nations Debate? I refuse to give in. If a man who somehow links lesbianism to the rise in street crime gets to flaunt his views then surely I can? And then it happens. I put forward an opinion. They call back. I wait in a queue behind a woman extolling the virtues of Rent-A-Dyke magazine (I’m fairly certain I didn’t mis-hear) and then it’s “Over to Steve in Manchester.” I pithily pronounce that the least tolerant callers are plainly obsessed with sex and the topic of what other people do with their genitals. Victoria says thanks and moves on to her next caller. I singularly fail to spark a heated debate, but, nonetheless, I interacted. The fact that, as the debate ends, Victoria reads out one of my e-mails with a different name and diametrically opposed viewpoint is a thrilling bonus.

Across at radio One, Nemone (all the nomenclature she seems to feel necessary) is holding forth on the attractiveness of Big Brothers Stu. Seizing the moment, I fire off a text; ‘Watch the praise for stu Nemone, or you’ll have a certain Geordie bunny boiler waiting for you outside the studio! Gary’ Note the exclamation mark. Note the name. Obviously, I’m not saying that everyone who watches Big Brother and listens to Radio One is called Gary but, in a very real sense, they are. Nemone knows this which is why, five minutes later, she’s reading out Gary’s message. And laughing and everything. With Jeremy Vine (Radio Two) I’m not so fortunate. Farmers, apparently, are asking for a level playing field. But they’d just shoot anybody who set

foot on it. Now, this is no more ignorant, blinkered or ill-informed than the opinions which make it onto the air, but I'm deemed not good enough for Jeremy. Nor for Channels Five's Interactive game-show Memory Bank. I'm invited to call in and take part. I call. A voice tells me that I haven't been selected but should try again. This costs me sixty pence. Yes, this is Channel Five 'interacting' with my bank account and emptying it in sixty pence pieces.

But who cares, because at One the Loose Women appear on ITV. Four women sit behind a desk being typically 'feisty' and 'controversial' while a studio audience gurgles and whoops. TV's Jenny Powell tells us that, since the birth of her baby, she's had 'boobs like puppy dogs ears.' If they were to huddle, cackling, at a nearby restaurant table, I'd move away, to the one next to the toilet, but today I have to interact, so when they ask for memorable tales of conception, I don the mantle of Sue, and e-mail them as follows: 'I know to the very second when my fifth child Adam was conceived, because it was the one time a year that the other four actually let us have sex!' I've realised it's a question of tone, in this case female, middle aged, vaguely dissatisfied, prone to drinking Chardonnay with my friends, laughing, being sick and crying myself to sleep. This is why, just before the ad break, presenter Kay reads out my e-mail and everybody laughs in a rueful 'Ooh, we've been there,' manner.

Radio Fours You and Yours ask to hear my thoughts on Blood Donations and Rural Public Services, but seem to spend the entire programme reading out listeners' letters. Letters? How very last century. How very pre-digital. Well, never mind, because Phil Williams, on Radio 5 Live, wants to know if I have a question for Captain Mark Phillips. No, Phil, no I don't, unless 'You're very boring, will you go away?' counts as a question. But I'm not just me, I'm The Interacting Public Personified, so I ask 'Do the (three day event) riders form an emotional bond with their horses, or are they merely 'the tools of the trade'?' And Captain Mark answers my question; "The riders get extremely close to their horses," he admits, "I wouldn't quite say a marriage, but it's a big time partnership." Not quite a marriage. Intriguing. I'm still reeling when another of Channel Fives Interactive quizzes rolls into view. I enter 'Brainteasers' via the internet. I enter fifteen times and am finally told that they'll call me back if I get through. I sit, a forlorn figure, by the silent telephone. By now I feel like I've been working all day. Having this many opinions is, frankly, exhausting, but still they keep coming – 'We should not attempt to legislate against obesity – vote yes or no.' I rouse myself for one last effort and text Big Brothers Little Brother with a Question for Stu. Now, I'm guessing that keeping things simple will be the key here; 'stu, whats v difference between 'dude' n 'man'? but, really, this is of an almost Wittgensteinian complexity compared with those that get on – 'stu is sooo gorg. Luv clairexxx' 'stu is v coolest. bevxxx'

BBLB, you defeated me but, determined not to go out on a low note, I respond to 5 Live Drive's request for amusing tales about the time you called the police out by mistake. I've never done this. Who has? But the persona of Adam Blatt sends an hilarious anecdote for Peter Allen to convey (to précis; I was at a friend's house, heard the sounds of a violent struggle next door and called the police who burst in – little realising that next door was where the local Am-Dram held its' rehearsals!) Peter finds this hilarious, and doesn't even indulge in his trademark 'Not sure I entirely believe that one' scepticism.

As Interaction Day draws to a close I cast a vote on DIY SOS ( BBC One – cretin wrecks their house, the BBC sorts it out), Restoration (BBC Two – saving an old building. I think I voted for the transsexual one. It's late and I'm confused) and, to bring things full circle, Big Brother, opting for Jason on the grounds that he'd be the

least pleasant winner.

During the day I also take part in half a dozen Yes/No text votes. I vote 'Yes' 62% of the time and am on the 'winning' side of 37% of the polls. If you agree with this finding, please text 'meaningless' to the paper, because we really do want to get you involved.