

Celebrity Big Bully: Race, rage and retribution in the demise of a ‘demotic’ celebrity.

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Abstract

Some commentators currently claim that ‘incivility’ is increasing in public discourse (Lakoff 2003). This article presents a case study of this phenomenon, focussing on a notorious incident of so-called ‘racist bullying’ on the British version of the TV show *Celebrity Big Brother*. Discourse analysis of this incident suggests that it can be understood as an extreme example of aggravated oppositional argument or ‘rage’. Furthermore, as ‘discourse-in-interaction’ (Schegloff 1999) both parties, the ‘bully’ and the ‘bullied’ are shown to be jointly and actively involved. On this basis, questions are asked about the extensive public reaction to this incident, particularly in the tabloid press, where the main protagonist, Jade Goody, was uniformly vilified and condemned.

Key words

Celebrity Big Brother, Jade Goody, Shilpa Shetty, celebrity, incivility, argument, rage.

1. Introduction: public incivility.

In a recent chapter, Robin Tolmach Lakoff (2003) has discussed what some American commentators have identified as a ‘coarsening’ or ‘new incivility’ in public discourse.

This phenomenon has been noted in a variety of contexts ranging from formal political debate to talk on television, particularly in the language of talk shows.

Broadly it refers to the ‘use of emotionally explosive and vitriolic language’ in public discourse, often where this involves previously excluded social groups (lower class, and ethnic minorities). Contrary to the critical view adopted by many pundits, Lakoff is herself relatively sanguine about these developments, seeing them as a disturbance to a middle class consensus which represents ‘an increase in democracy’ (p43).

However this liberal view might have been severely tested by events that occurred in Britain, early in 2007.

This article presents a case study of ‘incivility’, in a particular British context¹. That context is the television programme *Celebrity Big Brother*, broadcast on Channel 4. In January 2007, a series of incidents took place on that programme which provoked extensive debate in the national press, questions in parliament, an international diplomatic incident, and severe criticism of Channel 4’s editorial policies. The events that sparked these reactions were cast, particularly in the British tabloid press, as the ‘racist bullying’ of the Indian Bollywood film actress, Shilpa Shetty, by a group of three young white female ‘housemates’ led by Jade Goody. Goody herself is an interesting personification of celebrity culture, having risen to fame through her performance as a contestant on UK *Big Brother* 3 (in 2002); her visibility subsequently sustained through regular appearances in the tabloids and mass market

magazines. She is an example of what Graeme Turner (2004) has discussed as the ‘demotic turn’ in contemporary celebrity, and I shall return to this point later.

Here however, I am primarily interested in this so-called ‘racist bullying’ as a discourse event. From this point of view, it was discursively constructed, on at least three levels. It will be interesting, firstly, to investigate the discourse of journalistic and political commentary that transformed this event into a topic of national debate. Secondly, those comments were based on interpretations made of particular instances of broadcast talk, and I shall focus in particular on a notorious argument that took place between Jade and Shilpa (first broadcast, in its edited version, on January 17th) which came to be known as the ‘Oxo cubes’ affair. These edited highlights also featured interpretations of the unfolding discourse event offered by housemates themselves (in a state of shock) and some of these might have influenced the wider public debate.

At the centre of this furore, as its focal point, was the ‘Oxo cubes’ argument. Widely referred to and quoted in the press, it became the exemplary illustration of all that was wrong with Jade’s performance on the show, and by extension, the tendencies in British culture that she was taken to represent. It was in view of this and related incidents that *The Sun* exhorted its ‘army of readers’ to vote Jade Goody off the show; and at the end of this article, having analysed this incident in some detail, I will ask some critical questions about *The Sun*’s position. However as a starting point, an initial orientation to what is to come, it will be helpful to recall some features of the ‘new incivility’ as described by Lakoff:

The increasing use in public venues of language generally recognised as vulgar...of language both traditionally vulgar and contemporaneously

politically incorrect...Road rage, air rage and other 'rages'...the allegedly increasing tendency [for some people] to behave in a hostile fashion to others in their environment (2003:37)

All of these features were certainly present in the 'Oxo cubes' argument, and so it was around these forms of discourse that the wider debates revolved.

2. A 'moment of truth for Britain'.

The public debate about 'racist bullying' in *Celebrity Big Brother* was as wide-ranging as it was unprecedented. It had two main aspects. Firstly, although for many commentators the racist remarks were self-evident, there was some debate as to whether they could be attributed to racist attitudes per se, or whether other factors such as class and cultural differences were involved. It should be noted that this debate pre-occupied the housemates themselves, as much as the media, to which of course they did not have immediate access. The second aspect of the public debate was however, very much a media construction. Here the focus was not so much interpretative as programmatic – it was a question of the wider implications of these incidents and what should be the public response to them.

'Racist bullying' was the interpretation offered by *The Sun* in its front-page headlines on Wednesday January 17th. Here, before the Oxo cubes argument was transmitted, the reference was to a series of comments about Shilpa, made not only by Jade herself, but also by her mother and her boyfriend (who were also housemates) and by fellow 'celebrities' Jo and Danielle. In the same edition, *The Sun* also reported that the MP Keith Vaz had tabled a motion in the House of Commons attacking racism on television, and that an unprecedented number of viewers were complaining to Ofcom and Channel 4. By January 18th, according to *The Sun*, the situation had escalated into

a ‘race war with India’, as representatives of the Indian Government made formal complaints and street protests occurred in Indian cities. The former Chancellor Gordon Brown, on an official visit to India, was obliged to comment, as was Tony Blair at Prime Minister’s question time. Blair spoke about ‘opposing racism in all its forms’, though he conceded that he had not seen the show. That ‘Shilpa’s treatment is bullying’ was taken as a given in *The Sun*’s editorial on January 18th, with ‘millions of people here and in India think[ing] it is something more repugnant than that – racism’. These comments appeared the morning after the Oxo cubes argument was transmitted.

At the same time however, other themes were starting to emerge in the public debate. Again in *The Sun* on January 18th, under the heading ‘So is it racist?’, former *Big Brother 2005* contestant Derek Laud suggested that ‘It’s more about class. She’s posh. They’re lowlifes who don’t want to eat foreign muck. It’s prejudiced but it’s everyday stuff on the streets of London or Bradford’. This class analysis was developed particularly by commentators in the liberal broadsheet press. It was highlighted as the main premise of the show by the TV critic of *The Observer*, Kathryn Flett (on January 14th) and repeated in an op-ed piece by Barbara Ellen (*The Observer*, January 21st). Significantly this class perspective also started to incorporate further, cultural dimensions. On one level the commentary was about culturally specific ways of speaking, uses of language and manners. More stridently, it was about ignorance. This was not only ‘a total ignorance and lack of curiosity about India’ (Hari Kunzru *The Guardian* January 17th); it was also an ignorance of British Asian culture: ‘Even people who go out once a week for “an Indian” don’t realise and don’t care that they are almost certain to be in a Sylheti restaurant (Sylhet is part of Bangladesh)’ asserted Germaine Greer in the same issue.

In this way, particularly in the ‘quality’ press, commentary on *Celebrity Big Brother* frequently involved displays of cultural capital and class distinction. Jade and her colleagues were representatives of a formation in British working class culture which the liberal middle classes, with their superior knowledge and manners, could disdain. Barbara Ellen’s piece contains an interesting reminder to her readers of the perils of ‘chav bashing’ – ‘as in, what else could one expect from such ill-bred oiks?’ - and she points to the ‘stealth racism’ of the middle-classes. Nevertheless ‘chav bashing’ is what some of this cultural commentary certainly became². In her ‘racist bullying’ of Shilpa Shetty, Jade Goody was taken to personify a white, underclass identity, confident in its ignorance and strident in its foul-mouthed incivility.

It was noticeable too, that aspects of this kind of cultural interpretation began to frame the wider, programmatic debate. This was partly a debate about trends in reality TV, but it was also about the appropriate type of public response, as defined both by newspapers and by politicians. In the broadsheet, as well as the tabloid press, this type of reality TV was denounced as cynical and manipulative, presenting personal confrontation as entertainment, and (according to Germaine Greer) using bullying as editorial policy. In an opportunist fashion, Channel 4’s chief executive Andy Duncan, attempted to defend the programme by saying that ‘these attitudes, however distasteful, do persist – we need to confront the truth’. Which was all too much for *The Sun*: ‘the truth is that Channel 4 bosses and Celebrity BB makers are way out of order. This is not a stimulating cultural or social experiment. It is calculated cynical nastiness for commercial gain’ (*The Sun* says January 19th). The show’s sponsors,

Carphone Warehouse, seemed to recognise the potential damage when it withdrew support at this point.

But ultimately, in its inimitable fashion, *The Sun's* editorial of January 19th also nailed its true colours to the mast. Its campaign to evict Jade Goody took on a nationalistic urgency:

Let's root out Big Bruv bigot

TONIGHT is a moment of truth for Britain

Out of nowhere, a Channel 4 show watched by a few million has erupted from being a bit of a laugh to a defining moment in the way Britain is seen by the rest of the world. Make no mistake. Much more hangs on tonight's Celebrity Big Brother eviction vote than the issue of whether Jade Goody or Shilpa Shetty stays in the house.

At stake is whether we are happy to be seen as a nation willing to tolerate vile bullying and foul-mouthed yobbishness.

That is why *The Sun* urges every reader who loves Britain to pick up a phone and make sure the ghastly Jade Goody is kicked out tonight.

Sure enough, with its army of readers duly mobilised, Jade Goody was evicted on January 19th, by an 82% majority. In its editorial on January 20th, *The Sun* proclaimed that this was 'the most important vote in Britain since the last General Election', the political significance of which politicians themselves seemed to recognise. On the page facing that editorial, Gordon Brown, still in India, was said to endorse *The Sun's* campaign, urging voters to demonstrate that 'Britain is a nation of tolerance and fairness'. Clearly there was a consensus here, not only that Jade's bullying of Shilpa was out of order, but more significantly that it was representative precisely of that kind of 'anti-social behaviour' that has been the focus for much New Labour social policy. Moreover the 'authoritarian populism' of *The Sun's* approach to these events seemed to be echoed in the knee-jerk reaction of some of the political comment: 'I think this is racism being presented as entertainment – I think it is disgusting' (Tessa

Jowell). Apparently then, a national community was speaking with one voice against a perceptible threat to its identity.

3. Aggravated oppositional argument: the structures of ‘rage’.

There was however, in all the furore surrounding Jade’s treatment of Shilpa, just one hint of dissent. Perhaps because of her jaundiced view of the programme as a whole (she walked out of a previous edition of *Celebrity Big Brother*) Germaine Greer’s criticism extended to all the main protagonists, including Shilpa herself. Greer reminded her *Guardian* readers that ‘Shilpa is a very good actress’. Passing critical comment on her manner and demeanour, Greer suggested that Shilpa was in control of her self-presentation, and moreover she knew how to exploit this in the ‘disorienting’ atmosphere of the show. ‘Everyone hates her because she wants them to. She also knows that if she infuriates people enough, their innate racism will spew forth’ (Greer 2007 p12).

That of course was pure journalistic speculation and possibly intentionally mischievous. Beyond what she could see on TV, Greer had no access to Shilpa’s motives or understanding of the situation. Furthermore, that Shilpa herself might be implicated in these events does not excuse them, from a moral or political point of view. What it does begin to do however, is open up the issue of ‘racist bullying’ to a more complex kind of analysis. We can start to explore this if we examine the incidents that occurred in the programme as instances of broadcast talk.

There are two preliminary points to be made. The first is about ‘acting’, which is an interesting issue for reality TV. Shilpa may be an accomplished actress, but on

Celebrity Big Brother she was not acting in the sense of performing a character within the confines of a pre-existing script. What she was doing was ‘performing’ for an overhearing audience which is what everyone does on live (or ‘as live’) television. Moreover as our awareness of such performances has become more sophisticated, such that it is a feature of viewers’ judgements of participants in reality TV (Jones 2003), so it has been reflexively incorporated into styles of self-presentation, as a principle of ‘performativity’ (Tolson 2006). In colloquial terms, participants are aware of the need to ‘come across’, and they style their performances accordingly. There have been several recent discussions, particularly in relation to *Big Brother*, of the need to come across as authentic, as ‘ordinary’, without artifice, as expressed in the virtues of just ‘being yourself’ (Tolson 2001, Hill 2005). Indeed Jade Goody’s success in *Big Brother* 2002 was attributed to her seemingly naive demonstration of these qualities.

So all the participants were performing in the sense that they were stylising their self-presentation for the judgement of the overhearing audience. On a second level however, they were also engaged in discursive interaction. Indeed this is what the Oxo cubes incident was – it was a discourse event, in which what was foregrounded were certain ways of speaking. From the perspective of discourse analysis, events such as this are always interactive, involving the turn taking of two or more participants, and so Shilpa Shetty was not only performing in the general sense of being on TV, she was also a co-participant in a particular kind of ‘talk in interaction’ (Schegloff 1999). This can now be examined in detail to begin to understand its dynamic.

The Oxo cubes incident was played out over much of the edited episode of *Celebrity Big Brother* screened on Wednesday January 17th. It was sparked off by Shilpa suggesting to Jade that it was not necessary to cook pasta with three chicken stock cubes which Shilpa herself had ordered and intended to use. There was an additional factor, that Shilpa herself was doing much of the cooking and was perceived to be exercising control over it. Moreover on a previous occasion she had failed to cook a chicken properly, mistaking the grill sign on the cooker for the oven (such are the routine trivialities of the Big Brother house). The way this episode was edited, we firstly see Jade in the diary room explaining the cultural differences between herself and Shilpa. Then she appears to shift into a confrontational persona, rehearsing and ‘psyching herself up’ for the main event, transcribed here³. After this, Shilpa and shocked fellow housemates try to make sense of what has happened.

Jade: Shilpa you didn't only order the Oxo cubes that's really stupid to say
 Shil: 'Scuse me?
 Jade: You didn't really only order the Oxo cubes [...
 5 Shil: [I didn't say I owned them I just I didn't say I owned them [I only asked you if you'd used them
 Jade: [Did you say (.) You did not say I only ordered Oxo cubes [did you say that?
 10 Shil: [Jade I don't want to fight. You want to get argumentative it's fun for you please go on be my guest [I don't want to do that it's not my style
 Jade: [Did you say I only ordered Oxo cubes? Did you say I only ordered Oxo cubes?
 15 Shil: My life doesn't run for this TV show maybe it runs for [you please be my guest
 Jade: [Now you're contradicting yourself you're pathetic you're pathetic you're pathetic you're absolutely pathetic [you're pathetic=
 20 Shil: [You must be pathetic
 Jade: =my opinion of you is you're pathetic [and a fake that is my opinion of you you're pathetic and a fake
 Shil: [You know what is pathetic you actually blamed all that chicken going to waste only because of me. What about all the
 25 Jade: Yeh and I've ate it I never said the curry went to waste did I 'cos everyone ate it I'm saying that the chicken went to waste. You're saying [you only ordered Oxo cubes
 Shil: [So what? So what? [(...) what about the eggs were frozen whose fault
 30 was that?

Jade: [Hang about. Hang a-bout (.) You're I don't
know did you put them in the freezer?

Shil: Did I?

Jade: Did ya?

35 Shil: Who did?

Jade: Did ya? I'm asking you did you put them in the freezer?

Shil: You know what? (...) your tone. [I'm not I'm not getting excitable

Jade: [The chicken did you cook it? Yes.
Then it was not your fault. You did not only pick Oxo cubes off the
40 shopping list. So you're a liar. Not only are you fake. You're a liar.
There you go boo-boom [You can look at people like I'm an idiot

Shil: [Jo I mean are you going to say something
here I mean what is happening here?

Jo/Da: eh eh eh eh eh eh [eh eh

45 Shil: [I do not find this funny. Really

Jade: [You come here. You only ordered Oxo cubes

Jo: [You said Shilpa Shilpa in all fairness you said the only thing I ordered
off the whole shopping list was [Oxo cubes. That is what you did say

Jade: [Oxo cubes

50 Shil: **[to Jo]** Okay fine so you know what I take that back. That is one of the things
that I ordered that [is what I meant. I said one of the things

Jo: [One of the things but you said the only thing

Shil: **[to Jade]** Are you happy with calling me a liar?

Jade: You said the only thing

55 Shil: Are you happy?

Jade: Have you just took that back? Have you just took that back? If you
took it back then I'm sorry I called you a liar [Shil: thank you very
much] If you're not taking it back then you're a liar. [Did you only
order the Oxo cubes?

60 Shil: [Ah (.) you know
what I don't need to dignify this stupid stupid argument. It may be fun
[for you Jade

Jade: [caused by you caused by you 'cos you said the only thing you ordered
was Oxo cubes [which is an out and out lie out and out lie

65 Shil: [Oh please shut up (.) shut up

Jade: No I won't shut up. You shut up

Shil: Shut up

Jade: You shut the fuck up. Who the fuck are you to tell me to shut up? You
[might be some princess in fucking neverland=

70 Shil: [Don't use don't use that language with me Jade

Jade: =but I don't give a
shit. You're not a fucking princess here. You're a normal housemate
like everybody else everybody else. And you need to come to terms
with that and don't lie. Don't lie about things. Why come and say the
75 only thing I ordered was Oxo cubes? Why lie? Why lie? You had the
shopping list stuck in between your legs for the whole task Why lie? Do not
tell me to shut up. Shut yourself up (2.0) Or go and fucking cry and put
your glasses on, Go on go in the diary room for another eight times GO
ON (1.0) You're a liar. You're a liar and you're a fake you're a liar (3.0)

80 Shil: I'm not even [going to say anything

Jade: [You're not in neverland here you're not no princess here
you're normal [You are normal Shilpa=

Shil: [Who said I'm a princess

Jade: =and learn to live with it you
85 are normal

Shil: [Jade I am normal

Jade: [Don't come to me tell me=

Jerm: Just forget it, just forget it

Jade: =the only thing you ordered **[to Jermaine]**
90 She had a go at me because I used me and Danielle used four Oxo

cubes. This was the only thing I ordered off the shopping list. [THAT'S
A LIE

Shil: [I
95 ordered the condiments. Oh please get some learn some manners. You
know what?

Jade: Learn some manners learn some manners

Shil: [Yes (...)]

Jerm: [Forget it forget it forget it forget it forget it forget it forget it forget it forget it...]

100 Jade: [(...) I DON'T WANT MANNERS TO YOU I DON'T WANT MANNERS TO
YOU I DON'T WANT MANNERS TO YOU. You know what you need some
real life in your life. That's what you need. You're just so stuck up your own
arse you can't think of anything else other than your own fucking life.

Shil: I'm stuck up?

105 Jade: Yeh you are. You're so far up your arse you can smell your own
shit (.) You're fucking ridiculous (.) You're a liar and you're a fake (3.0)

Shil: **[to Jermaine]** I'm not going to dignify this. This is really funny

Jade: You're a liar and a fake. You're a fucking phoney and you know=

Shil: **[to Jermaine]** I do not have someone calling me a phoney

110 Jerm: **[to Shilpa]** Go in your room. Go in your room =you're so
far up your own arse you can smell your own shit [and no it don't smell of
royalty no it fucking don't it smells of shit (3.0)

Shil: [You know
Jade I don't use that language [so you can

110 Jade: [Well good for you. GOOD FOR YOU
GOOD FOR YOU. You don't use it I do PISS OFF

Shil: You know what? Your claim to fame is this. Good for you

Jade: My claim to fame is meeting you you fucking loser.

Before we look at some of the details of this transcript, it will be helpful to consider some general points about forms of argumentation. To begin with, if argument can be defined as a 'speech genre' (as distinct, for example, from joking or story-telling) then, as Schiffrin (1985) has pointed out, there are two broad sub-categories, namely 'rhetorical' and 'oppositional' forms. Rhetorical arguments develop through a series of propositions designed to persuade; oppositional arguments are confrontational, designed to dispute a position held by another speaker. Clearly, in these terms, the argument between Jade and Shilpa is oppositional, but it is also a particular type of opposition. It is not, for instance, the type of 'sociable argument' also discussed by Schiffrin (1984) where participants are enjoying arguing as a way of bonding with each other. Nor, precisely, is this the type of 'confrontation talk' analysed by Hutchby (1996) in his study of radio phone-ins. That type of argument focusses on the pursuit of controversy over a topic, whereas this type of argument is *personal*.

Some additional considerations are usefully summarised by Hutchb (1996).

Generally, as Conversation Analysis (CA) has shown, the ‘preferred’ (ie. default) protocol for oppositional arguments in ordinary conversation is that they will involve mitigation, to indicate that ‘aggravated’ disagreements are ‘dispreferred’, and to attend to the ‘face’ of co-participants. In some forms of broadcast talk, unmitigated disagreements can develop, but only because participants can be secure in the knowledge that they are contained within a format (such as the ‘panel interview’) where they will be managed by an independent third party, the panel interviewer or chair (Greatbatch 1992). Even in confrontational talk shows like *The Jerry Springer Show*, which possibly this incident most closely resembles, contestants engage in ‘spectacular confrontation’ (Hutchby 2006) on the basis that there are bouncers to protect them and that Springer himself is ultimately in control (Lunt and Stenner 2005). Here however, in *Celebrity Big Brother* contestants are engaged in argument which is extremely ‘aggravated’ and without much in the way of mitigation, either at the level of ordinary conversation or provided by the format in which it occurs⁴.

Particularly on the part of Jade Goody, what we seem to have here is an aggravated, personal (and abusive) type of oppositional argument. In searching for a term to define this, I will adopt Lakoff’s reference to ‘rage’ (as one of her forms of ‘incivility’, above). To continue with the lay terminology, at a certain point Jade seems to have ‘lost it’, she is ‘off her head’ with rage. But from a discourse analytic point of view, it is possible to be more precise about this argument’s structural features. It consists of two main sequences of talk, where the boundary between these occurs on line 65. Up to that point, Jade is making an accusation about a specific

incident and demanding a confession or an apology, which Shilpa duly delivers, in the form of a speech act ('I take that back') in line 50⁵. From line 65 onwards however, the salience of that incident recedes, and Jade's discourse becomes a torrent of generalised personal abuse. She is shouting at the top of her voice, using increasingly obscene language, and seems to be out of control in what one might term argumentative 'flooding out' (Goffman 1974)⁶.

Furthermore, if we look at this in more detail as 'discourse-in-interaction', some interesting observations can be made. Clearly Jade could be described as the chief protagonist, but as in any conversational interaction this is not all one-sided. Shilpa herself plays a constitutive role in both sequences, a role which is neither passive nor simply reactive. In the first sequence, Jade makes repeated accusations ('Did you say...') punctuated by escalating personal insults ('you're pathetic', 'fake', 'a liar'). She also uses devices such as the personal 'footing preface' ('I'm saying', 'I'm asking you') which reinforce the personal nature of the confrontation⁷. Until line 50 however, Shilpa refuses to respond directly to these accusations. Instead she answers questions with questions, repeatedly produces metastatements ('My life doesn't run for this TV show') and is not above trading some of the milder insults, though with some mitigation ('You know what is pathetic'). Shilpa only offers her speech act ('You know what I take that back') as a response to a side sequence with Jo, and not directly to Jade.

In the second sequence (ie. after line 65) Jade becomes increasingly personal and abusive, employing contrastive characterisations ('You're not a princess, you're a housemate'), repeated rhetorical questions ('Why lie? Why lie?') and extended

obscene metaphors. There are many instances of overlapping talk, but at the height of the ‘flooding out’ (lines 96-100) all participants are talking at once without reference to what the other, at that point, is saying. But what is Shilpa’s role in this? In line 53 Shilpa instigates the personal agenda by questioning Jade’s conscience and moral character (‘Are you happy calling me a liar?’). In line 65 it is Shilpa who first abandons the interrogative for the imperative. And there are three moments (marked by extended pauses in the transcript, at lines 79, 105, 112) where Jade’s ‘flooding out’ seems to exhaust itself, only for Shilpa to continue with metastatements to which Jade further reacts.

It is of course a familiar theoretical move in CA to insist that structures of interaction constitute a fundamental social order. As Schegloff argues, these ‘structures of sociality’ obtain even where ‘divergent interests, beliefs, commitments or projects among humans...[are] realized as conflict, disagreement, misunderstanding and the like’ (1999: 427). Extended sequences of aggravated opposition would seem to constitute the extreme case scenario for Schegloff’s position; however, as this analysis shows, even here ‘structures of sociality’ are in evidence. The argument between Jade and Shilpa is jointly produced with each party playing a constitutive role. It is also evident, to adopt another CA term, that its sequences are ‘locally occasioned’ in so far as the strategies and responses of both participants are finely attuned to the evolving situation. At the very least this does raise some questions about ‘bullying’ – if by that we mean the *unilateral* mistreatment of some human beings by others. It also suggests that at some level, even though Jade is ‘flooding out’ with rage, there may be some strategic intelligibility to her dealings with Shilpa.

4. “I’m common and my talking is quite abrupt”

Because, as a broadcast event, this talk is also a performance, there are additional considerations, over and above the conduct of ‘ordinary conversation’ as such. One such consideration is evident in the self reflexive monitoring of their talk by the contestants, not only in the way that anyone might be alert to the possible consequences of their actions, but more specifically, where *Big Brother* contestants seek opportunities to ‘gloss’, or explicitly interpret their own, and others’ behaviour, so as to attempt to influence the overhearing audience. One opportunity for this is provided by the diary room in which contestants, talking to Big Brother, are also directly addressing the audience at home (Tolson 2006). At the start of the edited episode which featured the Oxo cubes incident, Jade is shown talking to Big Brother about her communicative differences with Shilpa:

5 It’s like she like when I was having my arg- well my disagreement no I weren’t even
 having a disagreement when I was telling her what I thought of her cos I’m not going
 to not say it to her face I don’t see why I shouldn’t she erm she said something along
 the lines of erm “you should change your tone by the way you talk to me”. And I
10 thought no. She went “my tone is different to yours”. And I was like “yeh your tone is
 different to me because you’re Indian and you’re quite soft within your speaking. I’m
 common and my talking is quite abrupt”. But if I was actually shouting, she knows the
 difference between when I’m angry and when I’m normal because she’s heard me
 have an argument with Dirk she’s heard me have an argument with Ken so
 you know I just don’t think that she likes people saying their opinion and their
 thoughts to her because she’s not used to that.

It is apparent here that Jade was not entirely devoid of self-awareness, and moreover that she had a discursive strategy in the lead up to the Oxo cubes incident. There is an interesting lay version here of Schifffrin’s distinction: ‘disagreement’ which is presumably topic focussed, and ‘having an argument’ which is oppositional.

However, Jade defines her own strategy in terms of stating an ‘opinion’ of someone and in particular, saying it to their face. That ordinary people have a right to hold, and to publicly express, their opinions, has long been an axiom of talk show culture; it is part of the communicative ideology that Carbaugh (1988) characterised as ‘talking

American'. That such opinions, even when they are face-threatening, should be stated, 'baldly and on record' has been taken as a virtue on reality TV shows like *Big Brother* because this is the opposite of being devious, or 'two faced' (Jones 2003). Perhaps then, Jade's strategy is a product of her immersion in some of the discourses of 'ordinary television'.

Furthermore, there may be some strategic rationality to 'being common' in this context. This was the identity that Jade successfully portrayed in *Big Brother 2002* which led to her celebrity career. Being 'abrupt' also possibly makes sense, as a way of signalling her differences from Shilpa. One can even see how, if Shilpa is being characterised by Jade as 'stuck up', being abrupt might lead her to play, as it were, the vulgarity card. But it is at this point that the rationality of Jade's strategy begins to unravel. For, as several commentators have recognised, *Big Brother* has another requirement, namely 'sociability' (Scannell 2003, Tolson 2006). It is all right 'being yourself' and there are virtues in being 'common', but it is also necessary to get on well with fellow housemates.

Shilpa Shetty's gloss on the Oxo cubes incident came after the event, in conversation with another housemate, Cleo Rocos. As the transcript indicates, with its overlapping turns of hesitant talk, and its many false starts, especially from Cleo, this was a fraught conversation. It hinges around Cleo trying to define the incident in terms of cultural differences and problems of communication, insisting that Jade and the other girls are not racist, against Shilpa's suggestion, that at some level, they are:

- SS: I'm representing my country. Is this what today's UK is? Uh it's scary. It's quite a shame actually. I don't think it's to do with where you come from I don't it's to do with [that
- CR: [no I think yes culturally and you you I really
- 5 don't think there's anything racist in it

SS: It is in a way [I'm telling you
 CR: [It's because you come from such a different it's a different
 background and it's it's [not a m-
 10 SS: [What is am I not human?
 CR: Yes well that
 SS: What about me is so different? What about me? She just aired all her
 insecurities
 CR: I know but I will have to say that Jade is not a racist and neither are the other
 15 girls there's nobody in here that's a racist and it may feel it but they're not
 racist they're really not. But but the culture thing and the way in which it
 communicates
 SS: What is it so- what is so different or difficult to understand? Have I been in
 any way condescending? Have I in any way tried to show that I am one up on
 them?
 20 CR: Somewhere there is a fundamental (.) breakdown of communication not
 break down – somewhere I don't know there's a different way of of
 communication

Cleo's interpretation, that this is a 'breakdown of communication' rooted in cultural differences is, of course, the classic liberal response which Shilpa, quite rightly, rejects. But it is the way she formulates her rejection that is of interest here. Let us leave to one side the disingenuous question 'have I been in any way condescending?' - the key issue concerns the way racism is being discussed. Let us be in no doubt that racist remarks were made about Shilpa by all the members of Jade's cohort, and it was also the case that such racism was not directed towards Jermaine Jackson, who of course is a black American. It can be argued then that racist treatment of Shilpa, as an 'Indian', was a specifically English construct, with its genesis in British colonialism, reinflected, as Derek Laud put it, as 'everyday stuff on the streets of London or Bradford'. But Shilpa takes it further than this. Her argument is that just as she is representing her country, so Jade and her cohort are representing theirs. A way of speaking which Jade herself characterises as 'common' is now cast as typical of the country as a whole. It was of course precisely this definition that became the focus for the national public furor, especially in the columns of *The Sun*. In this way then, though she did not herself set the public agenda, Shilpa's interpretation of the 'Oxocubes' affair certainly gave it some justification.

5. Conclusion: (ab)uses of celebrity

As stated earlier, the primary purpose of this article has been to demonstrate some of the complexities of the so-called ‘racist bullying’ in *Celebrity Big Brother*. If it is analysed as ‘talk-in-interaction’ it becomes apparent that both parties, the ‘bullies’ and the ‘bullied’ respectively contribute to its development. Furthermore in the competing interpretations of the event publicly aired by the parties themselves it was the gloss offered by the ‘bullied’ that prevailed. To repeat, this by no means to excuse the racist statements that were made, both explicitly and by implication: at the very least Jade’s reference to Shilpa as a ‘princess in fucking neverland’ is clearly an insult to her and to Indian culture. Nevertheless for *The Sun* to claim that this was a ‘defining moment in the way Britain was seen by the rest of the world’ raises interesting cultural and indeed political questions. These questions are not to do with whether or not *The Sun* was correct in its interpretation; they are to do with the effect of *making* this kind of interpretation and what some of its wider consequences might be.

To begin to sketch out what is at stake here, I will briefly focus on some recent discussion of the culture of celebrity. Firstly, it is apparent that Shilpa Shetty and Jade Goody represent alternative versions of this. As this analysis has shown, the relationship between Shilpa and Jade can be defined as a series of mutual oppositions: British vs Indian; lower/working class vs upper/middle class; vulgar vs well-mannered; and as Jade herself puts it, ‘abrupt’ vs ‘soft-spoken’. An additional dimension of mutual opposition is in the field of celebrity discourse, where Jade is an ordinary person-as-celebrity, as distinct from Shilpa’s glamorous, exotic persona as a ‘star’. Readers of this article who are familiar with media studies will recognise that

this is well-worn territory: the remote, often extravagant, figure of the film star, as against the familiar, ‘down-to-earth’ media personality – the everyday persona who is ‘one-of-us’ (Langer 1981, Ellis 1982, Tolson 1996). Except that Jade is representative of a further development in this type of media personality: she has been perhaps the most infamous personification of ‘demotic’ celebrity, in Britain, over the past few years.

In his account of the ‘demotic turn’ in celebrity culture, Turner (2004) discusses how celebrity has become such a part of everyday life, especially for young people, that it is almost a career option. From sports and pop stardom, through several types of ‘modelling’, to the TV programmes that offer instant fame, ‘celebrity’ is, in principle, available to all. It is of course widely observed that in many of these fields, no particular talent is necessary, or at least, the kinds of skills that might require training. Jade Goody has epitomised this development because her persona has been built precisely on a lack of any ‘cultural capital’ whatsoever. Ill-educated, unglamorous (by conventional standards) and seemingly verging on the socially dysfunctional, she is the complete antithesis of what used to be seen as ‘aspirational’. Her only talent in *Big Brother* 2002 was ‘being herself’, which fortunately included the saving grace of not taking herself too seriously. For this she has been rewarded with a four year career as ‘everyone-can-be-a-celebrity’, which is what the ‘demotic turn’ in celebrity culture promises to all.

But if it is no longer the function of such celebrities to act as aspirational ‘role-models’, or even as entertainers, what is their purpose? Turner develops his argument in two parts: firstly that several types of celebrity (including sports stars and the royal

family) are the focus for ‘popular deliberation on the [moral] conduct of life’; and secondly, that much of this deliberation takes the form of mediated gossip:

Gossip is way of sharing social judgements and of processing social behaviour; this is true whether it involves people we know directly or people we know solely through their media presence... The choice of figures about whom gossip is exchanged is as likely to include those regarded with resentment or derision as those regarded as heroic. Importantly though, gossip seems to serve an assimilating and normalising function, providing a means of integrating the celebrity and stories about them into one’s everyday life. (2004:107)

In short, the function of ‘demotic’ celebrities like Jade Goody, even when they are ‘regarded with derision’, seems to be to act as a focus for popular moral judgement - not of the extravagant excesses of the superstars, but of the acceptable boundaries of ordinary social behaviour.

But ‘gossip’ didn’t quite capture the tone of the British tabloid press, on this occasion. The ‘normalising function’ was apparent in its treatment of Jade Goody, but this was articulated through an interventionist strategy, firstly exhorting its readers to vote her off the programme, and subsequently, where the press itself took an active role in her demise. This was most explicit in the *News of the World* on Sunday January 21st, which led with an ‘interview’, putting the questions to Jade which Channel 4’s presenter, Davina McCall, had “failed to pose”. On its front cover, Jade was depicted in extreme distress, alongside the headline: ‘It WAS racist. I AM a bully’. The text confirmed Jade’s physical discomfort during her interrogation:

Throughout the interview she grabbed for tissues, squirmed and yanked her hair as we asked: THE RACISM ROW BECAME AN INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT. DO YOU FEEL YOU LET BRITAIN DOWN? Yes... My actions have upset and offended a lot of people. If it’s resulted in people from other races having problems I’m sorry and it’s not acceptable.

This article has explored a number of complicated issues involved in the ‘racist bullying’ on *Celebrity Big Brother*. As the discourse analysis shows, these events were not one-dimensional, not were they simply one-sided. There are also issues to do with the format of the show, with its lack of the standard procedures in other TV formats that ultimately mitigate and control oppositional arguments. There is the question of whether, for all its offensiveness, the new ‘incivility’ in public discourse represents a positive development, as Lakoff has suggested. At least part of the shock value of Jade’s outbursts on *Celebrity Big Brother* is that one had never heard anything quite like this on British television before⁸. These are issues for further reflection; but they are surely not advanced by reducing their protagonist to tears, in what has every sign of a forced confession. It is of course naïve to expect anything else from the British tabloids – their role is to police, from their authoritarian position, the boundaries of acceptable moral behaviour. Nevertheless with this unquestioned, self-righteous position aggressively mobilised against a vilified Jade Goody, one couldn’t help but wonder, in the last analysis, who was bullying whom?

Notes

¹ A preliminary version of this article was given as a paper at the Ross Priory Seminar on Broadcast Talk, University of Strathclyde, May 2007. I am grateful for the comments of co-participants.

² ‘Chav’ is a contemporary English slang expression which refers to an assertive form of cultural visibility adopted by the socially excluded, white, under-class.

³ The transcript presented here uses some of the conventions of CA notation for transcription - in particular, overlapping talk, pauses, “latching” of utterances, and LOUDER speech (cf Hutchby & Woffitt (1988)). However some parts of some sequences of overlapping talk are indistinguishable and thus impossible to transcribe. These are indicated by three dots enclosed by round brackets thus: (...)

⁴ I think it is interesting however that as the argument reaches its most ‘aggravated’ level (from line 86) Jermaine Jackson tries to intervene. Unlike the bouncers on *The Jerry Springer Show* it is not his job to do so, but there may be some circumstances, in ‘rages’ such as these, where an altruistic third party is prompted to self-select.

⁵ I have suggested that ‘speech acts’ (in the classical form, as defined by J.L. Austin) are used systematically in TV talk shows as a way of demonstrating a speaker’s commitment to a course of action. The public production of a speech act (a promise, a declaration, an apology) frequently appears as the climax to a process of interrogation (Tolson 2006, Chapter 7). It has a similar, though inconclusive, function here.

⁶ ‘Flooding out’ is a term used by Goffman to refer to instances of emotional disturbance where a speaker loses self-control. Typical forms of flooding out include bursting into tears, or uncontrollable fits of laughter, though in *Frame Analysis* Goffman also refers to anger in this context (1974: p 350ff).

⁷ As distinct, for example, from the ‘token argument preface’ used in football phone-ins where arguments are framed as ‘sociable’ (Tolson 2006). One way of distinguishing between forms of oppositional argument might be to examine the prefaces through which speakers indicate their argumentative footings.

⁸ However, though these levels of personal abuse were unprecedented, there have been instances in the past, on *Big Brother*, where arguments have got ‘out of hand’. In 2004 a contestant had to be removed for her own safety and in *Celebrity Big Brother* 2006, ‘flooding out’ was a feature of some arguments involving Michael Barrymore, who was, by his own admission, under considerable personal strain.

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