

'Trash' TV galls France

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By CNN's Douglas Herbert



France's 'Big Brother' has garnered controversy along with stellar prime-time ratings

LONDON, England (CNN) -- For Charles de Gaulle, the question was how to govern a country with 246 kinds of cheese.

Latter-day guardians of Gallic integrity insist it's not cheese, but rather the cheek of an ethically lax television broadcaster that threatens to undermine the Fifth Republic.

Opponents say "Loft Story" -- a Big Brother-style TV show that has catapulted into ratings heaven since commercial station M6 first aired it on April 24 -- is turning French prime time into a weekly Peeping Tom session.

In recent days, the debate over "télé poubelle," or "trash TV," has raged across the front pages of the French press, fired by the apparent allure of a programme that drew 7.7 million viewers at peak time last Thursday. That represented three-quarters of all viewers in the 15-24 age group.

Although what viewers see on TV is edited, an uncensored version appears on the show's Web site, which offers a virtual tour of the 26 angles of the loft captured by as many cameras.

At issue is not so much whether the French are becoming squeamish about sex -- though one opponent, the head of TF1, France's largest commercial TV station, suggested in a letter last week to Le Monde newspaper that "Loft Story" gave ample grounds for moral indignation.

"At a prime-time hour when lots of young children and teenagers are tuned in," the TF1 boss, Patrick le Lay wrote, "it (the station) offers a programme based on the sexual exploits of a group of young people locked up for 70 days with cameras that follow them everywhere they go, right into the shower."

Getting close in the pool

Didier Bellens, the director-general of RTL Group, an affiliate of Germany's Bertelsmann that holds joint ownership of M6 along with Suez, hit back by denouncing Le Lay's attempt at "disinformation" and "manipulation."

"I am not for censorship, but for showing things," Bellens asserted. "The audience of the past few days and the public interest demonstrate to us that we are right. One must respect what the audience indicates it wants."

In a recent episode of "Loft Story" a couple in a background shot appeared to be having an intimate moment in the compound's swimming pool, though a confirmation was tricky in the absence of a zoom lens.

Critics have taken aim at the show for purported human rights abuses, likening the loft residents to "caged mice" exploited for base commercial purposes. They have cast the viewers as victims of lowest-common-denominator marketing by savvy private stations.

An anti-racist group, Mrap, has also asked authorities to investigate after viewers complained they heard some participants making unspecified racist comments. A rival broadcaster chimed in, warning of "rampant fascism."

The dispute has been stoked by intellectuals and religious leaders appalled at what they see as M6's reckless disregard for the dignity of the show's participants and viewers.

The criticism is a swipe at the basic premise of "Loft Story": seal 11 20-something volunteers -- six men and five women -- for 70 days in a compound outfitted with 26 round-the-clock surveillance cameras, and let human nature -- and hormones -- take their course.

In vintage Big Brother style, viewers are asked to eject a participant a week, over 10 weeks, subject to a rubber-stamping vote by loft residents, until they have whittled the ménage down to a single coital couple.

The first resident to be ejected, Aziz, subsequently caused a minor frenzy when he showed up at the Cannes film festival.

Pretend real life

But "Loft Story" takes things a voyeuristic notch higher: M6 plans to bestow on the winning duo a \$407,000 house, theirs for the keeping provided they can weather a further six months of shared life under the 24-hour whirl of the camera lenses.

Rivals contend the show's pretensions to being a pseudo-scientific experiment of human nature are bogus.

"They are pretending to show us real life," Jérôme Clément, head of Arte France, an M6 rival, said in a published interview this week. "In fact, there are neither old nor handicapped people, but exclusively young people seeking notoriety and money. It's a universe where there are no newspapers, no books, not even pens.

"In this artificial society, they take people hostage -- even if they have consented to come for speculative purposes -- in order to put their intimate lives on display for millions of television viewers."

"They are appealing to the least noble instinct in human beings," said Pamela Denton, a member of Zalea TV, a small associative group that aims to promote free expression in the media. The group took part in a storming of the loft compound in northern Paris on Saturday in a bid to "free" its residents.

"Loft Raider", as the protagonists dubbed their rescue mission, was ultimately rebuffed by riot police using tear gas.

But hours earlier, a group of demonstrators had dumped trash and hurled rotten eggs and tomatoes at the facade of M6's headquarters in Neuilly-sur-Seine, in western Paris. The protesters brandished banners reading "We refuse to be mice in a cage."

After an initial silence, France's Culture Minister, Catherine Tasca, chimed in with her own, measured opprobrium, saying the show reflected the "cynicism" of its producers at M6.

The critics have kicked up such a stink that France's highest media watchdog, the Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel (CSA), felt obliged to convene an extraordinary session on Monday, after previously limiting its criticism of the show to the resident's "abuse" of alcohol and tobacco.

The panel ruled, in a statement, that the non-stop surveillance could be considered a violation of the residents' basic right to privacy and demanded "daily breaks of significant and reasonable duration in which no audio or visual recording or broadcasting shall take place."

The body added such steps were "imperative from the point of human dignity that there are places and times in which they (the residents) are not subjected to public observation."

M6 agreed to cut the cameras two hours a day - from 11 a.m. to noon and from 3 p.m. to 4 p.m.

Meanwhile, the Internet message boards of France's largest publications suggest no end to the debate in sight.

But some, such as one surfer who wrote in from London to the Web site of Le Nouvel Observateur magazine, are already showing signs of impatience with the whole affair.

"It's clear that everyone can't like everything: life would be too dull. The same goes for Reality shows: you like them or don't like them, and not liking them is not a good enough reason for condemning them.

"Today, there's no compromise: as soon as something displeases someone, that person feels obliged to take to the streets to make themselves heard -- bothering those who might appreciate it."