That’s Me: Nationalism and Identity on Balkan Reality TV

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Abstract: In this article, we consider the themes and reception of To Sam Ja (That’s Me), a Big Brother–style Balkan reality TV show filmed in Macedonia in 2004 and 2005 that featured several cast members from former Yugoslav republics living together. Drawing on examples taken from the production and reception of To Sam Ja, we explore the way in which the show manages political and economic conflicts by transposing them into the realm of the personal.

Keywords: Former Yugoslavia; Reality TV; Neo-liberalism; Individualism; Nationalism

Introduction
In an era in which reality TV has so permeated media culture that it has become a ready metaphor for both politics and business, the genre has already made several tentative forays into the realm of the political (Andrejevic, 2004). In both England and Australia, reality shows nicknamed “Poll Star” have selected and fielded candidates for public office. The African version of Big Brother touched on hot-button religious and political issues, as have some U.S. formats, including Wife Swap and the never-aired Welcome to the Neighborhood, which featured conservative White families in Texas deciding who should win a house in their neighbourhood. The genre lends itself to the kind of experimentation pioneered by...

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by behavioural psychologists in the 1960s and early 70s and has been used to
dramatize issues of race and class (recurrent themes in the “wife swapping”
shows, in which families of very different backgrounds trade mothers for a short
time). Indeed, part of what this paper sets out to explore is the way in which the
commercial imperatives of a cheap, portable programming format align them-

selves with the promise of an engineered “social experiment” to reinforce, para-
doxically, a naturalized version of nationalism. This is in keeping with the
tendency of more politically inclined reality formats to serve as a forum for
exploring social issues in microcosm—a strategy that has a tendency to abstract
away from broader social and economic issues in order to focus on interpersonal
relations.

Although much of the academic research on reality TV has focused on for-
mats in Western Europe and North America, the genre is a staple of low-budget
programming around the world and has had successful formats in Asia and
Africa. Jacobs (2007) has usefully pointed out the political and public discussions
around issues of globalization, democracy, and African unity that followed the
success of Big Brother Africa. One of the common denominators of international
press coverage in a variety of regions, including Africa and China, has been the
framing of voting-format shows (including talent competitions such as Pop Idol
and elimination shows such as Big Brother) as forms of cultural democracy, or
what Hartley calls “democratainment” (Hartley, 2008, p. 132). In the case of Big
Brother Africa, for example, Jacobs notes that “[m]any observers of the African
media scene chose to see in such reactions a broad-based will to democracy”
(2007, p. 858). Such sentiments are characteristic of the equation of market par-
ticipation with political democracy that has become one of the signature confla-
tions of the neo-liberal era. Even war-torn Iraq has turned its strife into camera
fodder with several reality formats, including one devoted to the confessions of
insurgents and a home-grown version of Extreme Makeover: Home Edition that
helps citizens rebuild homes destroyed in the fighting.

This article focuses on another war-torn region, the Balkans, and in particu-
lar the former Yugoslav republics, whose conflicts have become raw material for
another successful reality format. To Sam Ja (That’s Me) was a reality show sim-
ilar in structure to (but unaffiliated with) the successful Big Brother franchise.
The show started in 2004 and ended in 2006, and it was one of the many reality
series that have become successful in Eastern Europe, mostly because of their
low production costs. In the past couple of years, reality shows have dominated
many Eastern European television markets, which have featured shows including
Pop Idol, Big Brother, Wife Swap, The Chosen, Weakest Link, Who Wants to Be a
Millionaire, The Dating Game, and Take It or Leave It. A local format based in
Bosnia-Herzegovina’s Sarajevo sought to reunite citizens of the war-torn region
by allowing them to communicate with former friends and neighbours from
whom they had become alienated during the war via videotaped messages. The
show, which aired in all of the former Yugoslav republics, was described by its
creators as part of a larger project “aimed at assisting reconciliation in the
Balkans” (Associated Press Newswires, 2005). For the most part, however, the
reality TV boom has been supported by U.S.-based Central European Media
Enterprises, which operates television stations in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Slovenia, Croatia, Romania, and Ukraine. In Slovenia, for example, the show Bar (Big Brother) was the most-watched TV show in the 18-49 age group in the 2006 season (Marko, 2007).

The show To Sam Ja (That’s Me) assembled residents of all six nations of the former Yugoslavia to live together in a camera-equipped house promoted by producers as a model of post-conflict harmony. Described by its Macedonian producer Zoran Ristoski as the first pan-Balkan reality show, To Sam Ja took shape against the background of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, when Yugoslavia fractured violently into the constituent republics that have since resumed an uncomfortable, contentious, and violence-prone co-existence as separate nation states. The show’s goal, according to its creator, was to use commercial entertainment as a means for promoting communication and understanding among young people in the region (Zoran Ristoski, personal communication, February 4, 2006). In keeping with the social-psychological pretences of the genre, the show also billed itself as an experiment in learning what happens when a group of young people who speak different languages, come from different countries, and follow different religions, but share a conflict-ridden past, are thrown together.

As in the case of other political reality shows, To Sam Ja promised to supplement the shortcomings of reality with a model for overcoming them in reality TV. To Sam Ja was framed as an attempt to negotiate ongoing ethnic, religious, and regional tensions symbolically—and in doing so, to invoke a sense of nostalgia for the pan-Slavic dream of Tito’s Yugoslavia: the hope that Slavic identity might be strong enough to foster unity amid diversity. This hope is of a piece with the phenomenon of Yugo-nostalgia that has emerged, albeit unevenly, in the post-Yugoslav states’ confrontation with the sometimes brutal realities of postsocialism. Like other forms of nostalgia, Yugo-nostalgia mobilizes the appeal of the past by emphasizing its (often unfulfilled) potential selectively and de-emphasizing its less savoury aspects (Volčič, 2007). Insofar as To Sam Ja resuscitated in commercial form the unfulfilled dream of pan-Slavic community, it is perhaps not surprising that it was most popular in those republics that suffered the worst consequences of the breakup of Yugoslavia, including Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia.

This article uses To Sam Ja as a means of exploring the role played by Yugo-nostalgia in negotiating current and past political tensions in the region through interviews with producers and cast members of the show, as well as a consideration of the show’s public reception in the popular press and online in the former republics of Yugoslavia. The following discussion provides a sketch of the historical-political world of postsocialist Yugoslavia that constitutes the show’s background setting. It then situates To Sam Ja within the broader context of reality TV, a genre that feeds off of contemporary social issues by transposing them into the register of entertainment and thereby promoting a distanced and ultimately inert relationship of viewers to the spectacle of politics.

Drawing on examples taken from the production and reception of To Sam Ja, we argue that reality TV politics—politics as entertainment—serve the double function of relegating citizens to the role of consumers and fostering a knowing
attitude toward the staged character of real politics. Second, we explore the way in which the show manages political and economic conflicts by transposing them into the realm of the personal. In this regard, the show bears a certain affinity with another multinational format: that of Big Brother Africa, which, as Jacobs (2007) notes, lent itself to a politics of individual responsibility and nationalism, at least in some quarters. In this regard, our analysis of To Sam Ja might be described as an attempt to enlist the show as a means of reflecting upon its social context and, more specifically, of considering the way it transposes political tensions into the realm of commercial entertainment.

The political-historical context of the former Yugoslavia

The cast members of To Sam Ja were all drawn from nations that were once a part of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), a patchwork country created after World War II from six different republics: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, and Macedonia. According to its socialist “engineers,” Yugoslavia (literally, “the land of the Southern Slavs”) promised to overcome nationalist and ethnic tensions by stressing (working-) class identity and international solidarity. President Josip Broz Tito promoted the idea that economic and political homogenization would lead to the creation of a pure workers’ state (Woodward, 1995).

After the death of Tito in 1980, Yugoslavia faced an economic and social crisis that eventually deteriorated into civil unrest and the wars of the 1990s—the period during which To Sam Ja’s cast members came of age. Yugoslavia collapsed in 1990, and most scholars agree that the factors that triggered the violent deterioration of its version of pan-Slavic unity and working-class solidarity were part of other external and internal transformations, including the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the Slovene and Croatian independence movements, and the rise of Franjo Tudjman in Croatia and Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia (Banac, 1992; Hayden, 1996). Both major ethnic groups, Serbs and Croats, compounded a long history of tension by claiming to have been the victims of a continued persecution by the other, whom they accused of dominating the Yugoslav federation.

The wars of the 1990s have been described as the bloodiest conflicts in Europe since the end of World War II (Skjelsbaek & Smith, 2001). These were also the first conflicts since World War II to have been formally described as genocidal, and many of the key individual participants were subsequently charged with war crimes. However, as many scholars argue (Bieber, 2004), there is a denial of the past and of the consequences of resurgent nationalism in the region, which leads to a failure to confront past atrocities. This has fostered a resulting “syndrome of victimization” (Bieber, 2004), which exacerbates hostilities, defers reconciliation, and provides ideological legitimation for everyday discriminatory practices and the promulgation of nationalist stereotypes, as well as the ongoing denial of ethnic cleansing and the negative consequences of resurgent nationalism.

Today, the former Yugoslav states live separate and very different lives. Slovenia was the only republic that survived the violent collapse of Yugoslavia without much bloodshed and is seen as the most successful of the former Republics. Croatia experienced a violent war and several years of authoritarian
nationalism under president Franjo Tudjman (1991-1999). It is now in the process of restructuring its economic and political systems. The Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina went through three years of bloody interethnic war (1992-1995) between Bosnian Muslims, Croats, and Serbs. Although fighting ceased in 1995 and the Dayton Peace Agreement brought an end to the violent wars, the conflict is not resolved, and Bosnia and Herzegovina remains a deeply divided state. Serbia under president Slobodan Milosevic (1989-2000) fought wars in Croatia, Bosnia, and the province of Kosovo. In February 2008, Kosovo Albanians proclaimed independence from Serbia. On a referendum on May 21, 2006, the Republic of Montenegro voted narrowly for independence from Serbia. Macedonia came close to civil war in 2001 when Macedonian-Albanian rebels violently demanded greater rights for the ethnic Albanian minority. The conflict set off a wave of refugees. Ethnic fragmentation and the “uncertain transitions” from socialism to democracy (Kolar-Panov, 1999; Verdery & Burawoy, 1999) have contributed to the countries’ current situation of economic, social, and political instability.

To Sam Ja: The first pan-Balkan reality show

This recent history of nationalist and ethnic conflicts provides the raw material for Zoran Ristoski’s reality TV experiment. The show started out as an exclusively Macedonian program, similar in format to the successful Big Brother franchise, with a Macedonian cast whose trials and tribulations were aired on Macedonian public TV. At first, the show had moderate ratings. But in its third season (2004/2005), the concept of the show was changed, and To Sam Ja started to be advertised and promoted as “the first Balkan reality show.” The producers decided to place twelve contestants of six different nationalities (a man and a woman from each country) from the former Yugoslavia in a house in Skopje, Macedonia, where they engaged in a range of routines of daily life, from the mundane rituals of cooking and cleaning to talking with friends, playing sports, making music, and falling in love. Moderators, also from different former Yugoslav countries, entered the house to give the participants different tasks and challenges. Occasionally the house was visited by celebrities, including singers and movie stars from the participating countries.¹

All five languages from the former Yugoslavia (Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian [Serbo-Croatian], Macedonian, and Albanian) were spoken in the house and by the hosts, who provided daily summaries of the show. Despite the multiple languages, the show used neither subtitles nor dubbing and made no effort to translate for either viewers or cast members. The assumption was that former Yugoslavs would understand the polyglot format. Moreover, as the Macedonian producer Zoran Ristoski put it (somewhat misleadingly, given the decontextualization and dehistoricization that lay at the heart of the format), the goal was to model a community of difference: “It is all about respect for the other and for individual communication” (Zoran Ristoski, personal communication, February 4, 2006). Ironically, the (officially defunct) Serbo-Croatian language soon became dominant, with all the participants communicating in Serbo-Croatian, and that attracted much public criticism for reproducing the Serbo-Croatian linguistic hegemony of the former Yugoslavia (Sopar, 2005).
The audience, like the show’s cast, ranged from across the former Yugoslavia. *To Sam Ja* was broadcast on both public channels and the satellite channel of the public broadcaster in Macedonia, as well as on commercial television stations in several former Yugoslav republics, including Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, and Slovenia. Because it was carried by the satellite channel MKTV SAT, the show was accessible to a global audience. The show succeeded in attracting an international audience, with callers to the evening show from across Europe, the U.S.A., Canada, and Australia. Not surprisingly, most of the viewers were of Yugoslav origin or members of one of the national communities in the region. The evening installment of *To Sam Ja* showcased feedback from this international audience, running crawls composed of telephone and text messages from viewers around the world—but mostly from countries with large diasporic communities originating in the former Yugoslav republics (such as Canada, the U.S.A., and Australia). Two contestants were voted out of the house every 20 days by phone calls and SMS messages from viewers at home; the last remaining resident won a cash prize and a car.

The show also had an interactive website, which producer Zoran Ristoski claimed drew roughly 1.5 million visitors over the course of the show. The ratings were high: again according to Ristoski, the show had more than 5.6 million viewers on average. In the first three days, some 340,000 people visited the show’s website (Večernji List, 2004). Although international market research shows that *Big Brother* formats are usually most popular with a younger demographic (in the 16-44 age range) (Hill, 2002), this was not the case with *To Sam Ja*. Audience research showed that it was the 40-49 age group that watched the show most (25%), followed by the 50-70 age group (21%), and then the 10-19 demographic (18%) (Sopar, 2005).

The research does not specify reasons for the idiosyncratic skew in the ratings—at least with respect to Western European and U.S. formats. However, it may have to do with the fact that interest in the former Yugoslavia tends to be greater among those for whom the pan-Slavic dream espoused by Tito’s rule in the postwar era retains some purchase—perhaps not least because of its failure. Those who grew up in the post-Yugoslav era came of age in a time when the public emphasis was upon a revitalized nationalism that highlighted the differences between the former republics rather than their shared history or any sense of Slavic unity.

On a slightly more mundane note, it is worth pointing out that older viewers are more likely to be comfortable with Serbo-Croatian, the language of the *To Sam Ja* house and of former Yugoslavia. In the wake of Yugoslavia’s disintegration, the separate republics resuscitated their national languages and worked to differentiate dialects that Tito had sought to unify. Indeed, the show recalled the attempts at Yugoslav unity supported by Tito’s regime. The appeal to an older demographic proved effective. When the show switched from an exclusively Macedonian cast to one that included representatives from all the former republics, the ratings went up in Macedonia (they almost doubled after the first two seasons), and the show became popular throughout the region. In Macedonia, the show was, by its third season, the most watched program after the national news.2
Reducing the political and historical to the personal

If the premise of *To Sam Ja* was to recreate an experiment in former-Yugoslav unity, this promise reincarnated a political project in commodified form. To paraphrase Marx’s formulation: history repeated itself, first as tragedy and then as prime-time entertainment. It is against the background of the violent failure of Yugoslavia’s political project of Slavic unity that *To Sam Ja*’s director sought to resuscitate a postsocialist version of unity via reality TV. Precisely because it was a reality show and not postwar Balkan reality, Ristoski was able to invite the cast members to get to know one another not as representatives of national stereotypes, tokens of ethnic rifts and violence, but as individuals. He claimed that in so doing, the show attempted to overcome the ethnic, religious, and nationalist barriers that have divided former Yugoslavs in the post-breakup era. In Ristoski’s words, “The goal was to bring together all these young people from different cultural backgrounds in former Yugoslavia . . . [In] coming together . . . and living together peacefully . . . [they were] proving that it is possible, of course, to . . . enjoy each other and learn from each other” (Zoran Ristoski, personal communication, February 4, 2006).

Breaking down barriers, for reality TV at least, often means abstracting away from the social relations that foster them and thereby forcing everyone to “start over” at the same level, creating a TV-world approximation of the liberal ideal of equality of opportunity. In this regard, the fact that cast members on *To Sam Ja* are taken out of their own national contexts and placed in simulated equality for the duration of the show serves the added function of enforcing an abstract sense of equality. That is to say, the show trades upon the promise of diversity only insofar as it is something to be overcome or left behind. This also means abstracting away from historical circumstances—a process that is reinforced by the invocation of a pseudo-social-scientific experimentalism. The predictable result is that repressed historical and social relations—albeit unrecognized as such—have a way of resurfacing in the characteristics attributed to the individual cast members.

In this respect, reality TV engages in what might be described as fetishism at the interpersonal level: the misrecognition of social constructions as elements of individual essence. This has long been the drawback of certain empirical social-scientific approaches: in abstracting away from larger social and structural issues, they tend to incorporate these as givens and thereby reproduce as ahistorical truths the eminently historical conditions that structure the findings. In this regard, there is an affinity between empirical social science and commodification—an affinity highlighted by Theodor Adorno’s assertion that in the capitalist era, “the experiment became a surrogate for authentic experience” (as quoted in Buck-Morss, 1977, p. 77). We might think, for example, of the logic of experimental deterrence targeted by Baudrillard (1994): the forms of interaction, modelling, gaming, and simulation that have come to characterize both military planning and marketing campaigns.

Experiences to be desired or avoided are modelled in one form of laboratory or another and serve to supplement or replace extra-experimental experience as a basis for decision-making. The result is that particular sets of prejudices, exclusions, and abstractions from historical experience make their way into the models,
where they are “laundered” by the experimental method. Such is also the fundamental operation of the market, which relies upon abstracting away from the history that shapes free exchange as a presupposition of its alleged freedom. It is in this regard that those who champion the “natural” character of markets downplay the distributions of property they presuppose and reproduce. It is in this double sense—as both a structured surrogate for decision-making and as a means of naturalizing historical conditions—that we might read the affinity between capitalism and the experimental model alluded to by Adorno and enacted by To Sam Ja.

Since the rise of social psychology, contrivance has been presented as a means of extracting and isolating authentic elements of human behaviour. The experimental character of many reality shows transposes this logic into the realm of entertainment. Thus, for reality TV producers, the definition of authenticity relies upon the ostensible surrender of their own control within the frame of an admittedly contrived setting. As producer Mary-Ellis Bunim, who helped create MTV’s successful The Real World series put it,

We can’t predict where conflict will arise and we don’t do anything to provoke it. . . . Sure you can see beforehand some of the differences in attitudes, but how far and deep those differences will go, we can’t predict. That is what makes it fascinating for us and for the audience. (Weinstein, 1993, p. 8)

Nevertheless, the entire structure of the show and many attributes of its setting are managed carefully by producers to create optimal conditions for conflict, drama, and romance—the staples of reality TV entertainment.

Similarly, To Sam Ja’s producer described the show in terms of a social experiment: a carefully selected group of individuals was forced to follow a fixed itinerary and to engage in a carefully planned sequence of activities in order to reveal how group members would react to and interact with one another and to force them to confront the “real” people behind the stereotypes. In Ristoski’s words, “We ask our participants to be who they are . . . and to try to leave their old stories, prejudices and stereotypes behind . . . to get to know each other as people in order to show all former citizens of Yugoslavia that deep down, we are all the same: peaceful, love-making people” (Zoran Ristoski, personal communication, February 4, 2006). The formulation is a telling one insofar as it opposes a sense of authentic identity to the contingency of personal history and historical pressures. The true essence of an individual, according to this account, is something that can be extracted in the controlled conditions of the laboratory from the historical circumstances in which it is embedded. The result, as implied above, is a naturalization of history—both its repression and the consequent return of the repressed in its essentialized form as an aspect of individual character.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the default image of the subject revealed by Ristoski’s commercial version of pan-Slavic unity was that of homo consumeris—the hip, youthful shopper of the MTV generation. Cast members embraced this version of dehistoricized, global, commodified individualism, welcoming the chance to leave the legacy of conflict behind. One of the participants put it this way: “Look. . . . I believe that here we are all good and equal . . . regardless of our national or religious differences. . . . We are all young, love pop cul-
ture . . . and that’s it. . . . We don’t care about differences, all we want to do is have some fun here in our house” (personal communication, October 1, 2006).

Producers framed the participants as a “future generation”—an ideal target market, united by communication technology and global commercial entertainment. Ristoski claimed that “this is an Internet generation, and not some kind of unique ‘national cuisine.’ . . . All of them are young, alive, love popular culture . . . and love to chat on the Internet” (Zoran Ristoski, personal communication, February 4, 2006). The appeal is to a version of the consumer as transcendental subject characterized by a universal desire to consume and communicate in terms structured largely by global capitalism and abstracted from the vicissitudes of national history and Balkan identity. It is a marketplace version of transnational identity that might be described as the obverse, in an era of global capitalism, of Le Monde’s famous response to the 9/11 attacks: “We Are All Americans.”

As in the case of the social-psychology experiments so often referenced by producers and promotional materials, reality TV shows promise an element of insight about human nature in addition to their entertainment value. The promise of reality is not, as pundits so often assume, that everything on the show is uncontrived, but rather that the structured elements of the show, the “petri dish” created by producers, can nonetheless help yield insights into social life or human nature—insights that might not be possible to gain without the structured element of artificiality. In the case of To Sam Ja, the ostensibly educational element goes a bit further: the producer hopes to model the possibility of post-conflict harmony for the MTV generation, thanks in part to the amnesia provided by commercial entertainment. As Ristoski, put it, the program’s goal is to show how young people from the region of former Yugoslavia can interact and socialize after all the conflicts. Young people need to go on, live their lives, and have hobbies, lifestyles . . . while not being pressured by past events. History is history, let’s leave it alone. We need to forget, and focus on the positive aspects of our lives . . . and emphasize the role of each individual in all this. . . . So really, the show tries to present the participants’ characters as much as possible. (Zoran Ristoski, personal communication, February 4, 2006)

What is already an internalized convention of U.S. reality shows, based largely on their cultural context, becomes an explicit goal of To Sam Ja: to suppress historical narratives and thus reduce the political and ethnic tensions that they help to structure. Only in a space in which such tensions have been relegated to the background, Ristoski suggests, can the consumerist version of pan-Slavic harmony be realized. The goal here is to cut through the Gordian tangle of Balkan identities not by weaving them together, but by erasing them wholesale, which perhaps explains why the version of unity envisioned by Ristoski has not yet succeeded.

The result is the naturalization and, hence, reinforcement of the stereotypes that exacerbated the very tensions the show sought to defuse. The invitation to abstract away from history serves to attach these stereotypes not to a particular sociohistorical context, but rather to the “essential” nature of each individual. The paradoxical result is that by naturalizing character traits and attaching them to an individual chosen to represent a specific ethnic group, these traits come to be
associated with the essence of the represented group. The attempt to abstract away from history serves not to eliminate the stereotypes, but to reproduce them. That is, it serves to portray particular, stereotypical traits not as the result of historical circumstances and conflicts, but as core elements of the essential character of a people, as embodied in its selected representative. Consider, for example, the reaction of cast members to one of the challenges engineered for them by the show’s producers: to write and perform in Skopje’s main square a song commemorating the victims of the 2006 tsunami that struck parts of Southeast Asia. After the public concert, debates about mixed marriages took place on the show. All of the cast members, with the exception of the Albanian participant, expressed their tolerance toward marriages between different ethnic and religious groups. The Albanian participant in contrast argued that mixed marriages should be prohibited since one cannot really mix different religions. One of the Serbian cast members responded with the observation that “such religious fundamentalism is characteristic only for you Muslims.”

An Albanian participant, Admir, was at the center of another conflict, this time with the Macedonian cast member Drago—again, perhaps not a coincidence given the tensions between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians in the country at the time, although this was not directly referenced in the exchange. The conflict started with an escalating exchange of nationalistic statements and culminated with Admir’s threatened plan to stab Drago while he was sleeping. To compound threat with insult, he showed Drago his genitals—an incident that generated both widespread publicity and debates about decency rules governing broadcasting in Macedonia. The rest of the participants attempted to de-escalate the confrontation but avoided more in-depth discussion of the incident, which nevertheless confirmed the Serb participant’s stated mistrust of Muslims.

In a personal interview, one of the participants claimed that “you cannot trust Albanians . . . Never. I knew that then, I know that now” (personal communication, January 20, 2006). One other cast member also referenced the incident to make a broader generalization that reinforced the tendency in the region for each group to look down on those to the south: “It was that incident . . . between Drago and Admir, when I thought . . . Islamic radicals around us . . . kind of crazy southerners [juznjaki] . . . they just have this in their blood, you know, to fight” (personal communication, February 1, 2006).

Reinforcement of national(ist) stereotypes on Internet listservs
Not surprisingly, the stabbing threat sparked interest on Internet listservs devoted to the show—interest that manifested itself in much more blatant stereotyping under the cover of anonymity. A contributor to the listserv called “Vuk” invoked a Bosnian military leader known for his ferocity to his enemies during the Bosnian war: “Islamic terrorists . . . you are all like Naser Oric. . . . Look at this . . . they kill us all—when we sleep. . . . They even proudly say they will kill us all. . . . The Albanians . . . Muslims . . . they are all the same. . . . They kill us in reality, and on reality TV!”

The occasional manifestations of nationalism and ethnic tension on the show were echoed and amplified in the anonymous free-for-all on the listservs. The voting process whereby cast members were selected to remain in the house
tended to provoke nationalist competition and rhetoric on all sides, but often with
distinct anti-Muslim overtones. Sentiments such as the following capture the gen-
eral tenor of such exchanges. As one post to the listserv, signed as “Dragan”
addressing the Serbian cast members and invoking the conflicts of World War II
put it, “Miodrag, Dijana, all the Serb nation is with you, kill the Ustase [members
of a Croatian movement that allied itself with the Nazis] while they sleep.” Other
posts continued this exchange: “Serbs, vote for Serbs!!!” or “Croats around the
world, unite and vote!” These posts tended to articulate ongoing prejudices with
current political claims and conspiracies, as in the case of one listerv contributor,
who identified himself only as “Proud Serb”: “Do you really want to know what’s
going on?? Muslims in Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia are connecting with Syria,
Iran, Yemen, Saudi Arabia . . . they are all coming. . . . [F]orget peace and democ-
ry . . . [I]f we don’t stop them, we will be burnt.”

Often the messages served to comment on contemporary political disputes
over borders and the postwar settlements. Again the general tenor can be captured
by a few selected posts: “Slovenes, peasants . . . you have no historical strength
whatsoever” or “Slovenes . . . you Alpine Serbs, greedy [profanity], you will
never put your dirty hands on the Croatian coast!” Indeed, the issue of the
Croatian coast—one of the most desirable real estate markets in the former
Yugoslavia and the subject of several competing land claims, came up repeatedly:
“Yes, yes, you are Europe, you Slovene asses, and we are the Balkans . . . but then
you come and want the Croatian sea and land. . . . [W]hat was ours in Yugoslavia,
remains ours. . . . [G]et lost!”

Those further from the fray would, on occasion, step back to reflect on the
more hate-filled messages—and perhaps to exacerbate them: “Watching this
show just proves to me how happy I am . . . far, far away from you all. . . . canada
[sic] saves me. . . . [Y]ou crazy [profanity] . . . [profanity] Serbs and Croats and
Bosnians . . . you are all the same.”

If the goal of the house was to model peaceful co-existence, the apparent
appeal to online fans was a pretext for indulging in public displays of intolerance
that reinforced the ethnic tensions fomented during the wars of the 1990s.
Although many different forms of exclusion and intolerance were manifested in
the online commentaries, the one that sticks out is the nationalist one (complete
with its sexist overtones). Apart from the manifest and diverse vulgarity of some
of the commentaries, what emerges from the listservs is the fact that the debates
have little direct connection with the show itself. Rather, the show served as a
jumping-off point for a full-fledged dive into ethnic and nationalist stereotyping.

Nevertheless, the Macedonian producer and director, Zoran Ristoski, claimed
the show was, from the start, based on the goal of providing a celebration of “our
common South Slavic identity, of our different cultures, and to learn from each
other.” He rejected the theme of Yugo-nostalgia that characterized the show’s
popular reception:

The show is not Yugo-nostalgic, even though some people see it this way.
People need to communicate after the wars . . . and they need to commu-
nicate especially when economic co-operation is in question—then, there
are no borders and limits. The show is about entertainment. . . . It is prac-
tical in that it gives people what people want to see. (personal communication, February 4, 2006)

However, Ristoski performed a couple of provocative interventions that helped draw media attention to the show. For example, the television stations in Bosnia, Croatia, and Slovenia pulled To Sam Ja from the air on January 19, 2005, for two days. The move was the result of a disagreement between the stations and Ristoski, who made some changes to the show’s set, adding three large portraits of Tito, a hammer-and-sickle insignia, a Tito signature, and the slogan of the Communists’ prison colony, Goli Otok. He also wanted the show’s hosts to wear white shirts and red handkerchiefs, a reference to Tito’s socialist youth brigade. Anja Alavanja, one of the Croatian hosts, refused to participate in the show after the request was made. She claimed, “It was too much to demand of us to be dressed in those communist uniforms. . . . I refused to be a part of it, because I know what a horrible system communism was” (Krikšić, 2005, p. 5). One of the participants responded by professing a salutary ignorance of the past: “What is that all about . . . ? I am too young to remember Yugoslavia; I don’t want to remember it. . . . We live in new times now. . . . Give us a break with the history and the past” (personal communication, September 14, 2006). When asked about this incident, Ristoski responded that “sometimes . . . you need to trigger a debate . . . be controversial . . . all in order to reflect upon the problems around us. . . . Yugoslavia was something real, and we need to respect this fact that we were all different, we are different—different languages, ethnicities, religions, but we need to cherish this” (Zoran Ristoski, personal communication, February 4, 2006).

When pushed on the question of whether the show attempted to recreate Yugoslavia, he responded playfully that “we are not occupying ourselves with this question. We focus on more important dilemmas, such as whether the girls in the house will finally take off their swimming costumes when they shower” (Zoran Ristoski, personal communication, February 4, 2006). Ristoski subordinates his show, then, to the logic of the marketplace and profit when he celebrates difference. If the show’s participants for the most part avoided expressing overtly confrontational nationalistic statements, the voting process (with text-messaging included!) did precisely that: it resuscitated the old stereotypes and resulted in the exclusion of cast members on the basis of nationalist themes. In the end, the invocation of Tito’s version of socialism came across more as a ratings gimmick than as an attempt to trigger political debate or to stake a claim to the ideals of Yugoslavia’s socialist past.

Participation and relationship marketing
Unlike U.S. and Western European formats, To Sam Ja was broadcast repeatedly throughout the day, with fresh installments of 10 to 15 minutes aired four times a day and a daily summary of one to two hours in the evening. The program played, in short, like a breaking news story on cable television, with repeated updates and in-depth evening coverage. The summary show included highlights, analysis, and live feeds of activities taking place within the house. Usually aired at 11:10 p.m., this summary-chat-show offered a so-called “Feature of the Day” (the selection of the most interesting events in the house during the day) and ranked participants by the number of votes they won, inviting viewers to submit votes. The viewers were
offered the option to call into the show directly or to send SMS messages. And they did call, from all the towns of former Yugoslavia and from abroad, commenting on the events in the house and the behaviour of its residents. For example, viewers, fans, and critics alike celebrated “the event” of the first sexual encounter in the house—between a Serbian man and a Slovene woman—with a flurry of posts, many of which made (sometimes crude) political analogies, such as, “[I]t was worth seeing . . . a Serb screw a Slovene . . . but this time nicely and gently.”

This reference was to the historical fact that the wars of the 1990s were preceded by economic conflicts between the republics. Serbia was seen as exploited economically by Croatia and Slovenia, which explained its economic backwardness. Indeed, Slovenia was framed as a kind of a colonial power in the Yugoslav context by the less developed regions—extracting raw materials cheaply from the southern republics and selling the finished products back to them.

Even if the love and flirting encounters attracted most of the attention (and incited nationalist disputes on the listserv), different online discussions shifted frequently to a consideration of the “ethnic belonging” of the participants. Viewers pointed out repeatedly that the show was not really “real,” but was a “Balkan mix,” since the participants were not “ethnically pure.” In keeping with the mixed character of the former Yugoslavia, Edin, who represented Bosnia and Herzegovina, was actually born in Montenegro, while Serbia’s Miro is ethnically Serbian but had lived in Skopje for many years. Dijana, who represented Serbia, is not ethnically Serbian at all: she is half Croatian and half Hungarian. Similarly, Slovenia’s Miro is ethnically Macedonian and Croatia’s Edis is half Croatian, half Macedonian. Perhaps not surprisingly, the lack of ethnic “purity” was invoked by those who sought to reinforce ethnic prejudices: “How can Miro pretend to represent Slovenia? One can tell he is not a Slovene—he just lies around all the time in his bed, does not work or initiate anything.” In other words, many of the viewers did not take the show as an opportunity to break down ethnic stereotypes, but to recapitulate them.

The issue of representation recurs in an overtly political register in the voting competition that forms the central focus of the show. The participatory format of the online world invokes the democratization of commercial culture in the interactive era. As Ristoski puts it:

This is very different from socialist former-Yugoslavia. . . . Now, we are allowed to vote and participate. The show proves that everything is possible when someone wants it to be possible. And it is open: the viewers can participate while they vote . . . but also, the audience interacts and communicates with the candidates in the house, which is not the case with other shows. (Zoran Ristoski, personal communication, February 4, 2006)

But the equation of democracy and the “interactivity” observable in the current popularity of reality-based programming is, to say the least, problematic. To Sam Ja does more than celebrate interactivity and the “active” audience; it revises recent history in the guise of commercial entertainment as postsocialist populism. For example, on the discussion boards, the debate about history focused on World War II and how “the Serbs were on the right side, and the Croats on the wrong side.” As one post by “Joko” put it:
Southern brothers, *brotherhood and unity* was a false utopia, but still, it is all about the wrongs of politics... I really don’t give a crap about Croats... but I do want to go to the sea-side and have a quiet, peaceful Serbian beer there... no hard feelings over the past. ... Give me peace, and I’ll leave you alone. I am a good person.

But such facile pacifism is challenged repeatedly by the more aggressive and conspiracy-theory-oriented posts, such as “Cacak’s” claim that Jugoslavia was already an Islamic state. ... Tito started the process of islamization, he got the money from Saudi Arabia. ... First he created Bosnia as a nation—giving the Bosnian Muslims national rights... what we see today here in the Balkans is the victory of Islam. Europe doesn’t see it, but we have been living it for the last 40 years!

The author of a *Miami Herald* article (Darling, 2000) observed that reality shows tend to reinforce existing racial stereotypes. To *Sam Ja* similarly played out some national stereotypes and thus helped to reinforce them. In contrast with the activity on the listserv, the recreation of former Yugoslavia “under one roof” did not, despite some suggestions and fears, lead to any type of serious nationalist conflict among the participants. Most conflicts were fought on a personal, individual level—however, the participants adopted and played out stereotypical national roles within the former Yugoslav context.

**Post-socialist individualism**

The cast members discussed national and ethnic stereotypes and prejudices during several show segments. They claimed that everyone came to the show with specific stereotypes in mind—that, for example, Slovenes are cold and not particularly friendly, Croats are closed and dishonest, and Serbs crazy and wild. One of the participants claimed he “worried about having a Serb in a house, but it worked out well... After all, we are all equally good individuals” (personal communication, February 8, 2006) The Slovene candidates expressed their view of the Croats as “big nationalists... because everyone in Slovenia thinks that the Croats are too patriotic and nationalistic” (personal communication, March 4, 2006). In a personal interview, however, it was explained,

Croats on the show were so nice... We got along very well! I came to the conclusion that they are just individuals, young people, you know, not Croats, but young people, like me. ... I don’t agree with politicians, who try to use stereotypes for their own political ends. ... They exploited us in the past, but I understand now. (personal communication, September 14, 2006)

The discourse of individualism served as a filter that shaped discussions about social realities and the daily lives of participants. As one cast member claimed, “I did not care where the others came from. What mattered was having fun, living together, singing... hanging out... as ourselves, you know. All the past troubles, you know, are the past” (personal communication, January 20, 2006). This “ideology of individualism” both obstructs honest representations of class and national relations and obfuscates the important structural causes of nationalism. But ignoring class relations and history is not the same thing as erad-
icating them. Stigmatizing class relations, as well as the recent history of resurgent nationalism, results in the return of repressed antagonisms in the form of interpersonal conflict. According to one of the show’s participants,

> We really understood each other well in the house. There were no problems. I have no problems with Muslims, with Serbs . . . or Slovenes. Yes, we are different, but it is all about us, individuals, to make it work out. To understand and respect each other and live with each other. (personal communication, April 17, 2006)

The microcosm was small enough that prejudices were supposed to give way to individual experience. Cast members, for example, may have had preconceptions based on ethnicity and nationality, but the process of having to live and work together was meant to push them beyond their preconceptions: “This show is about resisting and questioning the barriers. And when you do that there are arguments that result. But I think that overall, people learn a lot about each other” (personal communication, January 17, 2006). One of the fans of the show said that “even when and if they quarreled, it was because personally, they had some problems . . . not because they were coming from different cultures” (personal communication, February 10, 2006). In this respect, participants adopted Ristoski’s stated goals for the show, which is not particularly surprising given that this was the way he framed it, presumably during pre-production screening as well as in promotional materials and interviews.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Because the message of individualism lies at the core of reality TV as a social experiment, it merits unpacking. It implies that the abstract character of social relations ought to get the blame for social conflicts based on ethnicity, nationalism, race, gender, class, or social preference. Consequently, such big-picture, abstract social relations themselves must be set aside if our common humanity (as fun-loving, love-making consumers united by our simple affection for transnational commercial entertainment) is to come to the fore. The paradoxical result is that our so-called common humanity takes on the character of an abstraction: it is what would allow us all to get along if only we did not live in society, with all its associated historical baggage. Perhaps this is an appealing promise insofar as it mobilizes the themes of the critique of mass society: social relations have themselves become so abstracted that we need to abstract away from them in order to get to know one another as individuals in all our particularity.

The danger of this solution is that it fails to recognize that an individual deprived of social context also loses the character of his or her particularity. The absolute individual, like a non-dimensional point in space, remains at the level of pure abstraction. Consequently, in an effort to reveal the essence of cast members as individuals removed from the particularity of their social-historical contexts, *To Sam Ja* all but eliminated what is most crucial to the establishment of subjectivity. One result of so doing is a tendency to attribute the return of repressed political or social tensions in the form of conflicts within the household not to historical struggle, but to naturalized “character traits” associated with the groups represented by each of the cast members. Thus, the historical reduction—the
bracketing-off of social relations—allows for the re-assertion of stereotypes, insofar as the show retained the links between cast members and the national groups they represented. The move might be described as inferentially nationalist, borrowing from Stuart Hall’s description of inferential racism, which ignores the social construction of race (Hall, 1981).

The further implication of this approach is a hallmark of the liberal tradition in both communication and politics: conflict is the result of mutual misunderstanding. Once the world is shrunk to the size of a townhouse in downtown Skopje, this formulation has its element of truth. However, the attempt to generalize back to the real world, as it were, is flawed to the extent that social antagonisms result not always from misunderstandings, but from real conflicts between social groups and classes and by the way that these conflicts are often represented in ways that militate favourably to the status quo of power. It may be true that the To Sam Ja cast shares common interests and personal experiences that favour the attempt to move beyond stereotyped preconceptions and to forge personal bonds. However, it is not necessarily the case that, for example, class conflict or nationalist conflict is the result of mutual misunderstanding or of hackneyed stereotypes that can be overcome thanks to the universalizing logic of postsocialist, transnational commercial entertainment.

Such conflict is often between groups of people who understand each other and each other’s competing interests only too well. The assertion of an abstract, shared humanity fails to address these conflicts, which is not to give up on the notion of common human interests, but to suggest these are best addressed by engaging with history and social relations rather than ignoring them. A history of social conflict cannot be erased by ignoring it, for it gains its reality precisely through the individuals who live out this conflict.

Any attempt to subtract the social in order to gain the truth of the individual is, in this respect, a deceptive move. Rather than arriving at the ineffable surplus of individuality, reality television provides an adroit means of transposing social relations into the realm of individual essence and thereby reinforcing the seemingly natural, ahistorical character of the status quo of power. Reality TV follows through on its promise to slip behind the inessential appearance and deliver the essential reality by demonstrating that appearance itself is the reality. This formulation is, as Žižek suggests, constitutive of the functioning of ideology, which in an analysis that lends itself to a consideration of reality TV, he locates not at the level of mental illusion, but of lived social reality: “[I]deology is not simply a ‘false consciousness,’ an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as ‘ideological’” (1989, p. 21).

The crucial point for Žižek is that ideology is not to be read as false consciousness, but as externalized social practice. Žižek’s assessment is meant to address the impasse of ideology critique in an era characterized by the triumph of a culture of “saviness” (Gitlin, 1990) and cynical reason (Sloterdijk, 1987), both of which assert a knowing attitude about ideology and thereby assert their own immunity to illusion. For Žižek, however, ideology is not so easily side-stepped, but returns in the form of real activity: “[T]he illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what people are
They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know” (1989, p. 32). This formulation nicely addresses the reality TV formula, wherein producers like Zoran Ristoski remain quite canny about and conscious of questions of nationalism, but perhaps misrecognize, deliberately or not, the way in which their actions fail to conform to their own savviness. Thus, for example, Ristoski can talk about the importance of breaking down stereotypes—of having former Yugoslavs live with one another in close quarters so as to move beyond their preconceptions—while at the same time producing a show whose practical implications undermine its ostensibly progressive agenda.

At the level of ideas, Ristoski seems perfectly aware of the role that stereotyped portrayals play in reproducing and naturalizing prejudice and social injustice. However, this awareness fails to penetrate the illusion embodied in the social relations and practice reproduced by a show like To Sam Ja. The constitutive illusion—what Žižek terms the “fantasy”—that structures Ristoski’s version of reality is embodied in the way cast members and producers act: as if the Skopje house embodies the ideal of fair equality of opportunity, in which everyone gets an equal “start” and the individuals have been reduced to the essence of their natural personalities. To paraphrase Žižek’s paraphrase of Freud: the producers and cast members know very well that individuals bring their histories and backgrounds along with them—that their reactions and behaviours remain shaped by the power relations within which they operate—but in practice they act as if these relations are merely a reflection of individual essence. Such is the nature of the fetishistic inversion performed by reality TV.

Notes
1. Toše Proeski (a well-known Macedonian singer) was among the first celebrities to visit the house.
2. Predictably, there were a couple of scandals generated by and associated with the show. The public debates at first revolved around issues of morality—an act of masturbation performed by an Albanian participant was shown, which triggered the question of public morality (Sopar, 2005). The public outcry in Macedonia was loud, and questions were posed about the role of Macedonian Public Broadcasting, about the commercialization of its programs, and about the types of shows it helps to produce and eventually to broadcast. On the whole, in Macedonia, broadcasting has been increasingly defined in commercial terms. Traditional views that broadcasting is a public service are being subordinated to marketplace logic. MKRTV struggles with the same problems as other public/national television stations around the world. To start with, increasing financial problems have been discovered, and MKRTV continues to lack sufficient financing. The loss of its program identity is the second problem. As elsewhere, in competing with commercial channels, MKRTV has adopted characteristics of commercial television. The third problem is increased dependency on advertising revenues, resulting in an increased percentage of commercial programming (mostly U.S.) and a decreased share of costly in-house production.

References


