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RESEARCHING MEDIA, DEMOCRACY  
AND PARTICIPATION

THE INTELLECTUAL WORK  
OF THE 2006 EUROPEAN MEDIA AND  
COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL



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# Participation and power in the television program *Temptation Island*: *'Tits'* and *'Melons'* on *'Slut Camp'*<sup>1</sup>

Nico Carpentier

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The reality show, *Temptation Island* (TI), was televised for the first time in 2001 on the FOX network in the USA. Many television networks bought the rights to this format, and in Belgium and the Netherlands the local version was produced by Kanakna Productions for two SBS Networks broadcasters, namely VT4 in North-Belgium and Veronica in the Netherlands. The first Dutch TI was televised in 2002, and since then a new series has been produced every year, with the fifth, and last, series broadcast in April 2006.

The format of TI is relatively simple, based on a clear and quasi-impenetrable categorizing of the participants. Eight couples, four men and four women, are housed separately in 'resorts' on two tropical islands<sup>2</sup>, where they meet a number of so-called 'bachelors' (or 'tempters' and 'temptresses'). The program format revolves around a relationship test, where each partner receives the attention of the 'tempters' and 'temptresses' for two weeks.

The eight partners (and their 'tempters/temptresses') spend most of their time having fun, in smaller or larger groups, while every action is filmed and recorded by the (sometimes hidden) cameras and sound recording equipment of TI's production team. The different episodes consist of a montage of this footage, with commentary, as well as inter-

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Bart Cammaerts and Sofie Van Bauwel for their help with choosing this title, and to Fernanda Snyman for her translation of this text to English. An earlier and more elaborate version of this chapter was published (in Dutch) in *Freespace NieuwZuid*.

<sup>2</sup> The television text hardly makes any reference to the locality of these resorts, disconnecting them from their (post)colonial realities.

views with the participants. The (group) interactions are alternated with two subformats. On the so-called 'dates', which culminate in the 'dream date', the partners choose one of the tempters/temptresses for a private date during which they undertake a romantic or adventurous activity. In the second scenario the participants are shown video clips of their partners' escapades at the so-called 'bonfires', while at the same time being interviewed by one of the presenters, Hans Otten (VT4) or Tanja Jess (Veronica). The reunification of the couples also takes place during such a bonfire. Both the dates and the bonfires are aimed at increasing the pressure on the partners. In the final episode the couples are visited some months after their TI stay, and an inventory is made of the damage caused to the relationship.

## 2. POPULAR BANALITY?

At first glance a program such as TI appears to feed a banal voyeurism on the side of the viewers, and to afford participants an opportunity for entertainment (as far as relationships go, as well as from a tourist perspective), with possible stardom as an added bonus. At the same time popular culture is a site where social meanings are constructed, where we are offered definitions of what our society would tolerate, would strive for, or would sanction. These constructional processes are not always homogenous. In fact, popular culture is characterized by a criss-cross of the many contradictions inherent to our culture. It is a place where attempts are sometimes made to transcend or transform rigid and impenetrable discourses. As John Fiske (1989) argues, popular culture serves as oxygen for these transgressions. At the same time it is also the stage where hegemony operates, finds foot and is resisted again.

Television programs such as TI are microcosms allowing us to examine our boundaries as well as elements in our culture that we take for granted. It is in particular the emphasis on human relationships and sexuality, core elements of society, that makes TI so relevant as research material. In addition, this program generates viewing pleasures for large audiences. In one of the many discussion forums<sup>3</sup>, this viewing pleasure

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<sup>3</sup> This text is based on an analysis of the broadcasts combined with an analysis of the postings on Temptation Island on the following forums, blogs and feedback pages: fok.nl, sbs.nl, belg.be, zattevrienden.be, whitelinefirm.nl, veronica.nl, goedZO?!.com, femistyle.be and vt4.be. The online postings are quoted verbatim. The author does not necessarily agree with them as to form and content. Please note that the postings from the forums are all translated from the original Dutch.



is summarized as follows: *'Of course, it supplies viewers with sufficient "suspense and sensation". That's why we watch. And don't forget the lovely bodies'* (Bobette, 02-05-2006, femistyle.be).

However, not all viewers are entertained by the program. As often happens with popular television – which was also emphasized in Ien Ang's analysis in *'Watching Dallas'* (1995) – there are two different discourses underlying the evaluation of popular television programs. On the one hand there is the discourse (or the ideology, as Ang calls it) of mass culture, condemning popular television as boring and irrelevant. In some instances this condemnation is somewhat less subtle, as in the following description of TI as *'a fuck-around-program with machos and sluts!'* (kattekop, 30-03-2006, femistyle.be). On the other hand there is the discourse on popular culture which views these cultural expressions as legitimate and (even as) of cultural importance. These two discourses are not totally separated, as the ironic perspective reconciles them. When for instance one poster raises the following question (from the mass culture perspective): *'Is there really no-one who recognizes the sadness of the program?'* (calimero, 13-04-2006, vt4.be), the answer came the following day, and is telling evidence of the ironic perspective: *'Sad? Sure. Pathetic? Definitely. Entertaining? Enormously!'* (sugababe, 14-04-2006, vt4.be).

Therefore an analysis of popular cultural products such as TI can never be made outside of the discursive, ideological, and political-economic contexts. An important part of TI's context is provided by the television and media system(s), which is a commodified system, aimed at the production of a television program of such popularity that it can compete on the television market of North-Belgium and the Netherlands. It is also a professional system, grounded in media-professional identities, structured *inter alia* by means of – interrelated – ethical discourses, discourses on the hierarchy between participants and media professionals, on the format of reality TV, and on the quality of television (not to mention the numerous other discursive formations that encircle and contextualize television).

Of importance for this text are the power relations generated by this context, as it is precisely from this power-laden interactions that the television text, TI, originates, and in turn will feed (as a televised discourse) into culture and society.

### 3. POWER AND THE PRODUCTION OF A TELEVISION TEXT

According to Foucault – in his analytics of power in the *'History of Sexuality'* (1978) – power does not belong to a specific actor (or class), but it

cuts across human relationships. However, this mobile and multi-directional character of power does not mean that power relations are by definition equally balanced. Foucault expressly recognizes the existence of unequal power relations, focusing on disciplining (of the other and the self) in 'Discipline and punish' (1977). He states at the same time that no actor will ever fully realize his strategies and intentions, because there is always the possibility of resistance and contra-strategies. It is precisely this dynamic combination of strategies and contra-strategies, of hegemony and resistance, of creation and restriction, that makes power productive. Through this power logic new discourses and identities are produced, and old discourses and identities are transformed or in fact consolidated.

Applying Foucault's analytics of power on TI's production sphere shows that the different actors effectively find themselves in unequal power relations. On the one hand the media professionals largely control the island context: They developed (*in casu* adapted) the format, they made the rules that have to be followed on the island, they chose (*in casu* cast) the participants, they concluded their contracts, for 24 hours a day their cameras (partly visible and partly hidden) are focused on the participants, they ask the interview questions, and they select the footage and edit it into a cohesive narrative which is broadcast on their respective stations. On the other hand the participants are not totally powerless. The entire format of TI depends on their willingness to commit themselves to the interaction with the other participants, to answer the interview questions, to live with microphones attached to their bodies, and to try and forget the ubiquitous cameras and cameramen, and behave as 'normally' as possible.

This power play become productive because it is exactly through these unequal power relations between the actors - co-determined by the circulating discourses - that the production of a television text is ensured. Because of this productivity, television becomes a discursive machine that transforms human interaction into (television) texts. As all texts, the TI texts are also ideological in character, containing a series of discourses that transcend individual statements and interactions cast in pictures and sounds.

#### 4. KEY DISCOURSES IN TEMPTATION ISLAND

One of the most important discourses generated in (and through) TI, is the discourse about sexual fidelity. In principle human relationships can be organized in many different ways, but in TI - through the emphasis

on the basic dichotomy of the couple / the bachelor a specific form of heterosexual relational organization is privileged, thereby ruthlessly excluding many other societal forms. But at the same time the status of the bachelors is acknowledged, although their identity stands in an antagonistic relationship with the partners. The reason for this is that the bachelors represent hedonistic pleasure, which at the same time is articulated as threatening. It is the forbidden fruit, which is again a specific and reduced presentation of this social category.

Moreover, the idea of the relationship test is reduced to one of resisting (physical) seduction and of sexual fidelity. A specific and homogeneous representation is offered of what is regarded as primordial in a relationship, and which criteria should be used to test a relationship. The problematic character of (sexual) infidelity and the intrinsic link between love and sexuality is strengthened by the recurrent references in the broadcasts to earlier crises between the partners as result of infidelity. It is precisely this testing of mutual trust that is seen in the TI text as an important motivating factor for participating. Once this trust is backed up by practical evidence during the TI encounter, and the partners have proven their fidelity to each other, the way to an everlasting and harmonic relationship lies open. In this sense TI is articulated as a rite of passage, allowing people to enter the world of 'genuine' relationships. Thus the program becomes part of the hegemonic discourse of heterosexual monogamy, where relationships are regarded as exclusive, and where participants are perceived as striving for a lifelong unity.

When the partners fail the relationship test, another element takes precedence: honesty. The entire configuration (and power dynamic) of TI is in any case based on truth speaking. Participants who are interviewed (alone or during the bonfires) are trusted to be revealing their innermost feelings to others (the presenters, their partners, the viewers), in particular when it comes to sexual infidelity. Of course this emphasis on honesty forms part of the production team's management strategies, but these strategies only strengthen the emphasis on the cultural importance of honesty, presenting it in the television text as an important regulatory mechanism in human relationships.

Apart from the emphasis on honesty, other cultural demands are made on human actions. The strong emphasis on the narration of the self, within the basic framework of the relationship test, presupposes consistent and rational (or rationalizable) action. Emotional fluctuations and (seemingly) inconsequent behavior are frowned upon in the commentary and in the interactions with other participants. At the same time the individual responsibility of the participants is strongly emphasized, which

again pushes the entire structuring context (and in particular the production team's management) to the background.

A second key discourse in TI is based on the ideal of physical beauty as source of and catalyst for attraction and seduction. It is not by chance that a tropical island is chosen as set for the series, resulting in an endless parade of scanty swimsuits, bikinis and shorts. A significant number of the TI scenes support the idea of physical seduction, including a scene that unsubtly copies Kubrick's 'Eyes Wide Shut', the apparently inevitable wet T-shirt competition, the selection rituals for the 'dates' (reminiscent of beauty contests), and short-skirted or bare-chested dancing. In particular, the relationship test comprises exposing the partners to the physical component of sexuality, and to female and male beauty. With this emphasis on physicality<sup>4</sup>, TI's discourse also reinforces the classic ideals of beauty, with symmetry and slimness as key components.

A third and last key discourse involves the 'holy' rules of the game. As the direct interventions of the production team are supposed to remain hidden, their control is translated into the system of rules. The power of the media professionals is never directly seen in operation in TI; we only see the results of this power imbalance. Despite a number of modest manifestations of resistance, the entire program radiates obedience. The participants are docile bodies, disciplined by the production team. In this respect TI is a metaphor for normalization of media power as an impassive mover, the 'primum movens immobile' that manages to hegemonize its own basic assumptions, principles and methodologies. At the same time TI is an alarming discourse of obedience, with participants prepared to let their relationships deteriorate for the sake of the rules of the game, and for the entertainment of the many.

## 5. POWER IN TEMPTATION ISLAND'S PRODUCTION SPHERE

The production team use a number of sophisticated management techniques to place the partners under pressure. The most important of these mechanisms is the unlimited trial. By basing the entire program concept on a relationship test to which the participants voluntarily subject themselves, the extreme interventions by the production team are legitimized.

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<sup>4</sup> This somewhat exclusive focus on physicality and beauty is toned down by the notion of the 'connection', which refers more to an attraction based on character than one based on the physical. But talk about the 'connection' only takes places during the second part of TI and remains on a secondary level.

Based on the concept of the relationship test, TI becomes an unlimited trial, where not only the tempters/temptresses '*do everything in their power to place as much pressure as possible on the women [and men]*' (VT4 website<sup>5</sup>), but where the production team as well try to influence the context in such a way that the carefully selected couples' relationships are placed under pressure, often resulting in a break-up between the partners when the program ends. By taking part in a program of this format, the participants relinquish their power over the nature and intensity of the tests to which they are subjected.

The basic mechanism of the unlimited trial as management technique is strengthened by the artificial setting, which is strongly reminiscent of a panopticon. The participants are cleverly isolated by housing them on a distant tropical island, which offers a wide range of tourist (and sexual) attractions, but at the same time strongly resembles a prison (including the occasional 'escape'). Within the imaginary walls of the so-called 'resorts' the participants are subjected to numerous surveillance techniques by means of which (almost) all their activities are captured day and night. These images are then shown to the viewers and their partners. Finally TI is 'safeguarded' by numerous rules, contractually enforced, which direct and discipline the participants' behavior.

A third management technique is based on what Foucault has termed confessional power. *Inter alia* through interviews the participants are continually urged to describe their activities and emotional state, and to confess even the slightest 'infringement' to the presenters and thus also to the viewers. The interview questions are (partly) enabled by the production team's Olympian perspective (due to the ubiquitous cameras). This not only results in an endless series of (self)revelations, which the presenters of course do not reciprocate, but it also makes the presenters the first witnesses (and judges) of the, often inevitable, 'lapses' of the partners. The culmination of the confessional power is found in the subformat of the bonfire, where the partners are not only questioned on their reactions when seeing suggestive or explicit clips of their partners, but where they also confess their own 'bad behavior'. It is in particular at the last bonfire, where the partners are re-united and have to confess their 'sins' to each other (and to the presenter and viewers), that the most intimate details are confessed, often leading to emotional outbursts.

Two remarks have to be made regarding this analysis of the production team's management techniques. First, the power dynamics are more complex, because the partners try to support and protect each

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<sup>5</sup> At the time of writing, this website was no longer online.

other, but they also discuss and judge each other's behavior during the interviews. Second, and more important, is the fact that resistance against the management of the production team is evident amongst all participants. Despite having very little opportunity, participants sometimes do manage to escape the cameras and microphones, for example, by swimming far enough out to sea, thereby becoming invisible and also inaudible, or by simply removing the portable microphone. Also refusing to participate in the interaction by locking themselves in or by 'going to bed early', can in some instances be seen as resistance. This is also true of the roles of the tempters/temptresses', that were sometimes not performed with as much enthusiasm as expected.

## 6. THE TELEVISION TEXT AND THE VIEWER

The TI production process is aimed at creating a television text, which in turn has the objective of reaching as many viewers as possible. But the viewers engage with this text in their own interpretative manner, and not necessarily follow the intentions of the producers. However, the audience is not hyperactive, and might often be satisfied to accept this dominant reading of the television text.

The popularity of the program is not only evidenced by the many hundreds of thousands of viewers, but also by the many responses and discussions on online discussion forums, blogs and feedback forms, which make it possible to involve the voices of the viewers in this analysis<sup>6</sup>. As could be expected, these online responses are extremely diverse. A large part of the postings is purely informative, asking for or offering information on how the program is developing, but also on the private lives of the participants. These more informative postings are supplemented by a limited number of predictions of future developments and analyses of geographical<sup>7</sup> and gender differences (or expressions of geographical and gendered (lack of) comprehension). However, the main attitude displayed by the postings on the forums that were analyzed was of a judgmental nature. In other words, the posters expressed themselves

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<sup>6</sup> This method has its drawbacks, as online forums are specific communicative systems with their own specific characteristics. For example, a number of these forums were moderated, so some postings were removed or only partially shown.

<sup>7</sup> The focus of this text is not on cultural differences between different categories of viewers or posters. Differences between the North-Belgian and the Dutch broadcasts are not considered, as are the differences in online culture between Northern Belgium and the Netherlands, and the difference in status between the posters ('ordinary viewers' and participants).

on many different levels about the participants, their behavior, their physical appearance, their personalities and their moral fiber, as the following quote illustrates.

*'I find it an amazing program; just cannot understand that there are still couples who want to participate, because by now everyone knows the game so well!! I would never participate, but I like to watch it.'* (praia, 12-05-2006, verionica.nl)

It is in particular the idea of the (unlimited) trial that emphasizes the indisputable element of play. In a number of instances the words 'play' or 'game' are expressly used. It is a game in which the stakes that the participants will fail, are high, and some viewers watch with drooling eagerness for the participants to 'transgress'. Others again strongly support certain participants, so that the program is turned into a race into decline, rather than a series of smaller and larger human dramas.

To be able to define this program as play, it is imperative (at least in part) to place the players in a not too favorable position and to avoid identification, so that pleasure can be derived from seeing their problems displayed on the screen. It is for this reason that so much emphasis is placed on the fact that the participants themselves carried the responsibility to decide whether they wanted to participate, or that they are discredited by calling them 'mad', 'silly' or 'stupid'. Via this mechanism some of the partners are reduced to jokers.

The evaluations are largely on par with the key discourses described above. It is not surprising that the debate about sexual fidelity plays an important role in the discussions of the program. One of the words that are used most frequently to describe (at least some of participants), is the word 'slut'. On the strength of this, one of the posters (Zagato, 11-04-2006, zattevrienden.be) calls the entire program '*Slut Camp*'. One section of the viewers sees the female singles as 'sluts', as their assumed promiscuity is in conflict with the traditional monogamous moral values, in the good old tradition of the double standard. While the television text portrays the hedonism of the singles in a mostly positive manner, the attitude of (some of) the posters is more negative. And the partners who (presumably) succumb, are not spared the censure. One of the most striking postings (by Jaytonism) identifies each partner with a specific characteristic. Two are described as 'whores'. The same day a reaction appeared defending (only) one of the women.

*'Kevin is smart. Matthieu is gross. Len is smart. Lisette has a sweet smile. Bianca is a whore. So is Cheyenne. Björn is naive.'* (Jaytonism, 22-05-2006, fok.nl) *'Ok, Cheyenne had sex with the Smoothy...but come on, this does not suddenly make her a whore? Though it is sad that she*

*was not honest about this ... Kevin is far too good, and perhaps he would even have forgiven her.'* (hardsilence, 22-05-2006, fok.nl)

It comes as no surprise that the second woman, Bianca Mommen, was not defended. Very soon after the first broadcast, the news that Bianca Mommen (aka Alana) was an erotic masseuse and prostitute, was circulated on some websites, and it also appeared in an article in a major North-Belgian popular newspaper, *Het Laatste Nieuws*. Bianca Mommen defended herself in this newspaper article with the Clintonesque statement: *'I only give massages with my breasts. That is not sex. I have never been paid to have sex with a client.'* These first articles generated an avid online investigation into Bianca Mommen's private life, creating a whole series of texts parallel to TI's text. In addition, photos and a masturbation video were posted, and there were a whole series of testimonies by clients, contradicting her statement. More important than this privacy-infringing variation of which is sometimes called citizen journalism, was the abusive tirade that broke over Bianca Mommen's head. An almost endless row of posters insulted her, and her initial reticence and her emotionality were held against her. The fact that she was seen as a prostitute brought all the traditional registers about prostitution to the fore in the discussions, resulting in her being dehumanized and objectified, defined as abnormal and deviant, and stigmatized. The following posting is only one of the many insulting postings that were made on this issue:

*'An ugly whore who gives a stupid and prudish performance on TV [at least at first]. One should throw such a person in the Willebroek channel.'*(danzig, 11-04-2006, zattevrienden.be)

A small number of posters spoke out in defense of Bianca Mommen, for example by trying to make a distinction between a 'slut' and a prostitute, but these postings were ignored or countered. Bianca's denials of both her professional activities and her sexual escapades with Stephen also elicited negative responses. Also other participants who were suspected of lying were condemned, and their deceived partners then received messages of sympathy. These participants were expected to confess and apologies. If they did not do so, the postings got even more condemnatory. This again emphasizes the cultural importance - or even the hegemony - of the traditional monogamous relationship, of sexual fidelity, and of honesty.

In addition to the debate on fidelity, the debate on physicality and beauty is paramount in the postings. In some instances the clips of specific body parts (especially female) were applauded, for example in the postings by eronmiller: *'To quote HUMO: TITS, TITS and again TITS!*



*Whether it is Rebecca or Bianca, they are wiggling there for our visual pleasure...*' (eronmiller, 12-04-2006, vt4.be) and by FreCas *'Melon time again'* (FreCas, 11-04-2006, zattevrienden.be). Often certain participants were singled out, and the attractiveness (or lack thereof) of their bodies exhaustively discussed and evaluated. In some cases this resulted in renewed attacks on participants, with Bianca Mommen once again being the target. These discussions are supported by the classic ideals of beauty and slimness. Those singles (and sometimes also the partners) who fit the beauty ideal, were judged in positive light, and called 'pretty', 'nice' or 'sweet'.

Finally, some posters did also mention the production team's management. In rare instances the posters actually critiqued the (legitimacy of) TI's management and the program (or a facet thereof) was then defined as 'ridiculous' or 'miserable', or the posters gave vent to their annoyance. In a small number of instances this annoyance led to fundamental criticism against the production team's (and in particular the presenters') behavior. The posting by believer was one of the few where the deontology of the program makers is indeed questioned.

*'And I actually find that the whole thing can no longer be justified by the producers. OK, the participants ask for this, but surely as a human being, this must kill you?'* (believer, 28-04-2006, femistyle.be)

The criterion that is applied is based on the seriousness of the emotional and relational impact on the participants, but once again they are reminded of their individual responsibility, and relatively little is said about the structural limitations. Most of these 'critical' readings of the television text (with some exceptions) in fact refer to a specific aspect, and ignore the all-encompassing character of the production management, which in any case remains hidden from most of the posters.

Besides the criticism leveled against the way in which the program is managed, as discussed above, the television text is also critically evaluated on a second level. This criticism goes to the heart of the program concept, as the authenticity and the real-life quality of TI as reality show is questioned. The contradictions in Bianca Mommen's behavior, the sensational news that she is a prostitute, and also the presence of participants who have taken part in other television programs and therefore are no longer considered 'ordinary people', was enough for one group of posters to call the entire program a 'put-up job'. In this roundabout way the production management then comes under fire (and heavy, at that) because the credibility of the program is prejudiced through interventions from the production team - negating the idea of fair play, or the

idea of 'ordinary people'. This type of resistance is not aimed against the production team's deontological code, but against the fact that they transcended the program format, and it is sometimes extremely radical in form and content.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Besides entertainment, TI offers many viewers an in-depth look at our culture. The conclusion that they draw from this viewing is often not very optimistic. Both the program and the viewers who responded online, show a rigid moral perspective on sexual fidelity and monogamy. While the television text still offers scope for hedonism (through the central, and legitimately-defined role of the singles), the online discussions are dominated by a conservative perspective that in some instances escalates to intolerance, moralization and stigmatization.

Through the logic of photo-negativism, where visions of order are photo-negativized into stories of disorder (see John Hartley (1992)), TI confirms the hegemonic interpretation of the ideal relationship. The partners, who one after the other succumb to the pressure, present negative points of identification against which the viewers can measure themselves, enabling them to confirm their own moral value system as presented on the (television) plate. That is the source of the malicious satisfaction as well as the pleasure that the viewers experience when they see how people whom they consider (with all their faults) as inferior, fail. When the partners do succumb, the viewers in addition await the catharsis of the final confession that has to restore social order.

In order to legitimize the pleasure, the viewers enter into a social contract with the program, allowing them to ogle the bodies, and in particular to tolerate emotional abuse in the name of the game. The program cleverly creates a distance between the viewers and the participants, discouraging identification through the participants' articulation as 'stupid' (for entering into a situation which will unavoidably lead to their downfall), and through their articulation as being individually responsible. This is further strengthened by conferring an element of play on the happiness (or unhappiness) generated by human relationships. In this respect TI is truly an anti-empathetic program.

TI once again illustrates how the television system manages to hide its power very effectively, and how it makes the production team's management role largely invisible. This raises the deontological question of how the members of the production team can justify treating other people in such a destructive manner. The question is not whether the participant's

should be protected 'against themselves', which would place us in a paternalistic position. The question is how media professionals can justify – both for themselves and towards the entire media sector – spending two weeks (and more) trying to destroy people's relationships. The argument that it is 'only a game' and that participants voluntarily take part, is not a satisfying answer to this ethical question.

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