

## **Idolizing and Monetizing the Public: The Production of Celebrities and Fans, Representatives and Citizens in Reality TV**

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Reality TV has inspired ongoing scholarly analysis of how formerly passive audience members are turned into active participants or even empowered citizens, but the actual encounters between media producers and media participants have been little explored. This article presents a detailed, critical study of the new interfaces to public visibility, combining an historical perspective with the in-depth study of production practices. Beginning with the several participatory forms of reality TV already established in the earliest days of broadcasting, I trace how audience members have long been recruited according to either a celebrity model or a citizen model of participation. I then demonstrate how these models are combined in the production of *American Idol* to support both its preparation and its presentation of participants, and how new media (online and mobile) are mobilized to both reinforce and capitalize upon this participation. Questioning the popular and scholarly hype surrounding the audience's "power" in reality TV, I conclude that the television industry is actually strengthening its grip on people in order to reduce costs and risks while increasing revenues in a time of uncertain financial prospects.

Key words: Audience participation, Media production, Reality game shows, New media

Reality TV is widely seen to be a major proponent of change in the television industry (Murray & Ouellette, 2004; Keane & Moran, 2008), especially in terms of transforming one-way media into two-way communications (Roscoe, 2001; Jones, 2004; Andrejevic, 2008). Reality game shows integrating online and mobile media, such as *Big Brother*, *American Idol* and *So You Think You Can Dance*, are particularly associated with radically opening themselves up to the participation of (so-called) ordinary people. Such programs are therefore often credited with expanding the power of everyday people in the public sphere

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(Jenkins, 2006; Ouellette & Hay, 2008) or alternatively attacked for making tabloid entertainment with people who should, in truth, be protected from themselves (Dovey, 2000; Meers & Bauwel, 2004).

Researchers struggle to thoroughly evaluate such claims of both innovation and participation within reality TV. In this article, I argue that one way of critically approaching these claims is through a comprehensive account of program production practices, combining a historical overview (a diachronic perspective) with in-depth contemporary observations (a synchronic perspective). To do so, I focus on the encounters between professional production teams and everyday participants. These encounters have been gradually transformed by new program trends and multiplied by new media technologies (online and mobile), and these should be studied together in the interests of appreciating both inside and outside perspectives. The first part of this article fleshes out the diachronic perspective as a tool for identifying developments and key components of current program production. Then I investigate current practices and their consequences in depth through a case study of one of the most popular reality TV hits, the talent contest *American Idol*, which so far has been reproduced in more than 40 territories around the world. My primary material is comprised of the show's Norwegian production (*Idol: In Search of a Superstar*), but the analysis is also supplemented with (and contains comparisons to) the American version as well.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Reality TV's Participatory Legacy***

Although a general orientation toward ordinary people is a defining feature of reality TV, this program trend is, in fact, notoriously broad. At one end of the spectrum, some reality TV shows follow people around in their everyday lives (*Airport*) or give everyday lives a twist (*Wife Swap*); others stage huge, national contests (*Idol*) and appear on television worldwide. While the former are cheaply produced and low profile, the latter are costly, highly visible and heavily marketed events. Shows like *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *American Idol* and *The Apprentice* arise from the "special event" aesthetic strategy of 1980s television (Caldwell, 1995), which, in fact, seems to reappear in periods of increased media competition — in the 1980s, with cable and satellite distribution, and in the 1990s and 2000s, with digital broadcasting and the Internet. However, recent "special event" programs boast a much greater emphasis on the radical participatory power of everyday people and the audience itself. Participation is deeply ingrained in these shows' dramaturgy, and this massively promoted participatory turn has not passed unnoticed in the literature.

Considerable research has been done on reality TV's "active audience," especially in the context of theoretical discussions of the active/passive dichotomy (Tincknell & Raghuram, 2002; Holmes, 2004; Cover, 2006). Two specific research perspectives on the radical turn toward participation interest me here. The first is concerned with how television industries are reinventing themselves to deal with recent

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developments and threats, including new media competition (Roscoe, 2004; Syvertsen, 2006; Deuze, 2007). It emphasizes how television breaks itself down into new media platforms with new interactive texts to better engage and contain its audiences. The second is concerned with how reality programs increase the participatory scope and empowerment of audiences and everyday people (Van Zoonen, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). It highlights how audiences are taking control over content and outcomes, and how new two-way media serve audience interests in a fan-based or consumer democracy. These two perspectives, top-down and bottom-up, in effect, are useful for conceptualising the encounter between producers and participants. However, both risk exaggerating the novelties of reality TV if it is primarily assessed as a 21st century phenomenon. And by disregarding concrete production practices, both miss important formative factors that are simply not reflected in corporate strategies or in the participatory displays themselves.

#### *Games and Quizzes*

One reason why the key program practices that anticipated reality TV have been under evaluated is their origin in highly standardized commercial entertainment. Popular participation programs like game shows and talk shows are among these obvious precedents, but reality TV remains most often framed within the research tradition of documentary and realism (Corner, 2002; Jerslev, 2004). Hoerschelmann (2006), however, has shown that even the earliest game shows combined entertainment with a strong sense of social engagement and responsibility. The first quiz on American radio in the 1930s, *Vox Pop* ("voice of the people"), would set up in public spaces to speak with everyday people about local community issues. These encounters would also include a quiz, and the show's creator, advertising man Parks Johnson, used it as a technique for connecting with the listeners, arguing that "a show succeeds in proportion to the degree to which the home audience participates. The home listener loves to imagine himself in the participant's spot and feels that he would answer the question quicker, etc." (Hoerschelmann, 2006, p. 53). It was precisely *Vox Pop's* combination of social engagement with entertainment that later aroused academic interest in participatory daytime talk shows in the 1980s and 1990s (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). Those practices, however, had long been present elsewhere in broadcasting.

Shortly after *Vox Pop*, another seminal contest program started on American radio that had striking similarities to current reality TV hits like *Idol*. The *Major Bowes Amateur Hour* (1934–1952) was a popular musical talent competition that invited amateurs from all over the U.S. to apply, allowed thousands of them to perform, and asked listeners to vote on the best by telephone. The winners of this "democratic campaign" were awarded talent scholarships, and the popularity of the show established an industry-standard trade-off between producers and participants that lasted for several years. The former got attractive content for their audiences, while the latter got a career boost (including Frank Sinatra, and in the later televised version, Pat Boone and Gladys Knight as well). The *Major Bowes Amateur Hour* is an early example of a cultural industry using ordinary people to generate content as well as consumption, organizing them after a participatory model of celebrities and fans. The program should thus be seen as both a reflection and a promoter of a burgeoning popular culture, and celebrity/fan economies evolved in all of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial media systems. As opposed to film production, however, broadcast production lent itself to a closer relationship with everyday people, which resulted in a correspondingly

lower prestige and shorter-lived fame. The *Major Bowes Amateur Hour's* ethos of close contact with the viewing public also fueled its effective utilization of contemporary technologies and practices of communication: it received hundreds of thousands of phone calls, sold numerous records, and arranged big country-wide concert tours. When television arrived, the concept immediately moved to it as well, now called *Ted Mack and the Original Amateur Hour*, which ran until 1970.

*Vox Pop* and the *Major Bowes Amateur Hour* were followed by a variety of participatory entertainment contests in the 1940s and 1950s (Cox, 2001) that peaked with the big money quiz craze started by *The \$64,000 Question* (1955–1958). The concept of *The \$64,000 Question* was to let ordinary people have a chance to display extraordinary knowledge in some field or another and thereby earn a new financial start in life. One of the first academic studies of how participants are strategically managed in popular participation programs was based on the success and subsequent scandal of the big money quiz shows. In his detailed historical analysis, Anderson (1978) reveals the process of reading applications, interviewing contestants, and anticipating audience responses that was conducted by executive producers who “don’t want hard cases, whiners, or smart alecks . . . We want personable, although not necessarily good looking, people. Nice people, intelligent people — people that look like your neighbor” (Anderson, 1978, p. 14). The producers would also carefully consider both social background and prize plans for the contestants to cull only those people with the broadest and strongest appeal. If they succeeded in attracting the public’s eye, contestants could be kept around week after week, sometimes using the techniques that would ultimately cause the historic scandal.

#### *Talkshows and Docusoaps*

Hoerschelmann and Anderson both point to strategies and practices for emphasizing popular values in game shows, such as casting participants who will spend their prize money on a worthy cause, thereby contributing to a sense of television’s social involvement and purposefulness. The emphasis on everyday people increased in the daytime talk shows of the 1980s and 1990s, and they comprise the second participatory program trend leading up to reality TV. Programs like *Oprah* and *Geraldo* in the U.S. mobilized the more political dimensions of “participation” by inviting the citizenry to the studio to discuss (and represent) social issues and values while reaching out to their peers in the audience. As commercial enterprises, however, these programs also have keen ratings and profitability aims and therefore cultivate entertainment value over social responsibility, sometimes in experimental or even abusive ways, in turn spawning heated debates about their actual public value (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Gamson, 1998). Game shows and daytime talk shows are not actually very different in their use of everyday people. While they seem to represent two different models of participation, one where participants are organized as “attractions and consumers” (ideally, celebrities and fans), and the other where they are organized as “representatives and citizens,” they are, in fact, hybrids. Game shows combine an entertainment form (games, suspense) with social engagement; daytime talk shows combine a socially engaged form with entertainment. Grindstaff (2002) underscores this point in her detailed analysis of how daytime talk show producers work to maximize the entertainment of socially engaged interaction, mapping out the casting, preparing, and framing of participants in order to best feature their most expressive moments.

Whereas nighttime talk shows were typically based on the participation of established celebrities and other media professionals, daytime talk shows turned to everyday people as program resources. Other genres picked up on this trend in the 1990s, and docusoaps like *The Real World* (in the U.S.) and *Vets in Practice* (in Britain) worked on the principle of replacing professional actors in fictional dramas with (so-called) everyday people. The docusoap was particularly suited to combining entertainment with societal involvement due to its participants' immediacy and relevance to the lives and circumstances of their viewers, at least in terms of the rhetoric of realism and identification. It was therefore strongly embraced by both commercial and public service broadcasters, blurring the distinction between them in the 1990s (a development criticized by Born [2004] with regard to the BBC and partly commended by Ouellette & Hay [2008] with regard to American commercial television). The docusoap represents an obvious early example of the program trend called reality TV, which is again characterized by its unprecedented dramatization of everyday people and its dependency on the non-professional performance (Kilborn, 2003). The success of the docusoap gave rise to reality game shows like *Survivor*, *Big Brother* and *Idol*, which mobilized a far greater range of participatory forms and created expansive participatory events. A defining feature of the reality game show is, in fact, the staging of a spectacular event — survival on a desolate island, a social experiment inside a bunker or a competition to be a future pop star. Although the game show is its most obvious predecessor, the reality game show also includes elements from the talk show and the docusoap (see Gitlin, 1983, and Mittell, 2004, on the industry tradition of recombining programs). Moreover, this program trend was the first to exploit the new media technologies, flourishing around 2000 in its approach to audiences. Given their network structure (node-to-node), the Internet and mobile telephony were associated with reciprocal and unrestrained forms of communication (Holmes, 2005), and reality game shows speedily appropriated those associations in their participatory concepts (typically inviting “you” to “decide the outcome” or “meet the contestants online”).

In sum, though reality TV asserts a radical inclusiveness and transparency, its claims must be seen in relation to a corresponding growth in professional practices for managing non-professional participants. These practices have received little academic attention — one of the few existing surveys of reality TV's vast casting apparatus is Huff's (2006) journalistic account, where he sums up the work behind the scenes: “Ask any reality-show producer what is necessary to create a hit show and the answers are usually the same: an interesting cast and good storytelling” (Huff, 2006, p. 32). I want to contribute further to the examination of this craft, particularly in terms of how participants are channeled into engaging roles (as attractions and consumers, and as representatives and citizens). A first step in the analysis of a specific reality show is to identify its unique combination of program forms (game show, talk show, docusoap). A second step is to examine its encounters between producers and participants, and the processes through which participation is managed, from initial invitation to public projection in different media (television, telephony, Internet).

Two prominent analytical issues arise with regard to the program concepts and producers of reality TV. First, the programs that led to reality game shows were all characterized by a rendering of the world from the perspective of the everyday participant. Reality game shows often further this impression by making the participants' encounter with the production apparatus itself a theme of sorts, centered on the privileged space “backstage” (see Caldwell, 2008, p. 1). Program Web sites contribute profoundly to

extend backstage access. Obviously, these looks behind the scenes are constructed and edited, with certain backstage areas purposely avoided. Establishing the actual conditions of the encounter between producer and participants is therefore a complex (and interesting) research job that requires multiple sources of information, including applications and contracts.

Second, reality TV consists not of discrete program productions but of formats that are reproduced season after season in numerous countries. Reality formats are generally created by global agencies that market and franchise their concepts to national television companies and then assist in adapting them to local conditions (Jensen, 2007). Big event shows like *Survivor*, *Big Brother*, *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Idol* demand big budgets from both format developers and license buyers, but their investments pay off in hugely successful reproductions around the world (Kjús, forthcoming). Broadcasters are especially concerned about investing in strong, visible brands in a crowded market and about maximizing profits at a time when revenues are shifting from old to new media (Arsenault & Castells, 2008). A key response to these concerns involves mobilizing the audience as participants, both as content and as consumers of it, and the study of this process is also the study of the future of the television industry.

### ***Approaching Idol***

*Idol* is a contest to determine a future pop star that was developed by record producer Simon Fuller and his company, 19 Entertainment, and first launched in 2001 (on ITV). In the 1990s, Fuller had managed the Spice Girls, a pop group marketed as everyday, next-door girls that became one of the bestselling female acts in history. *Idol* was thus developed by someone with expertise in managing and capitalizing on the transformation of everyday people into celebrities. The story about the making of a girl band was, however, transferred to television in 1999 in the show *Popstars* by TV producer Jonathan Dowling. Observing this successful collaboration between the television industry and the music industry around his girl band concept, Fuller began to develop *Idol*. Given his experience in the music industry, though, *Idol* was never meant to be only a TV show but also an extensive music marketing campaign. It takes the form of a national quest: a board of music professionals visits regions of the country to hear auditions from anyone within a preordained age limit. The one singer who eventually survives all of the rounds of public voting is rewarded with a major record contract with Sony BMG. Its pervasive campaign places *Idol* among the most participatory programs in the entire reality TV lineup. The first run of *Idol* was hugely successful, and 19 Entertainment subsequently franchised the format license to FremantleMedia, one of the world's largest television format agencies (Moran & Malbon, 2006, p. 94), which, in turn, has distributed it to 43 territories and so far reproduced 139 series seasons. FremantleMedia is owned by the global media conglomerate Bertelsmann, which also owns half of Sony BMG and thus also profits from the show's substantial record sales.

The Norwegian channel TV 2 bought the *Idol* format license in 2002. It engaged the local production company Monstermedia to produce the actual television episodes, but handled online and mobile media services in house. Due to the show's phenomenal success, it was produced annually until 2008, when it went off the air (it is likely to return). For my case study, I contacted TV 2 at the start of the 2005 season and was allowed to observe production firsthand. Over the next three seasons, I

attended nine full production days of the talent contest, including auditions, semifinals, and finals, and spoke with various production personnel, including the project leader, producer, production leader, press contact, casting staff, program hosts, interactive producers, and online editors. Key staff members were also interviewed separately (and sometimes repeatedly) through semi-structured formats to clarify points I noted during my observation. I thus had access to important production practices, including how FremantleMedia regulates (and assists) the many localized realizations of its formats. Yet, there were also several meetings, certain locations, and some documents of production to which I was denied access, partly due to TV 2 management's anxieties about strategic and sensitive information, and partly due to FremantleMedia's policy of protecting its formats.

However, *Idol* has created an extensive interface with everyday people via multiple media, and since everyone is a potential participant, everyone, including researchers, gets a firsthand participation experience. The first encounters between participants and producers usually involve some kind of formal procedure, including application forms and online registration, and this has become increasingly relevant to the production process and, consequently, its analysis. Moreover, since so many people participate, information about these encounters (particularly involving those people who go on to compete in the singing contest) tends to leak out in different online forums that are available to researchers as well. I will use such sources to supplement my analysis of the Norwegian *Idol* with information about the format's American reproduction. I will also address contextual factors from both media history and the contemporary media environment (see Born, 2004, and Caldwell, 2008, for some methodological forerunners).

My analysis of *Idol* progresses chronologically from auditions to finals, then evaluates how participation is produced for television, online, and mobile media in turn. I will begin, however, by reviewing the core concept as it is projected publicly.

### ***Idol Stages and Components***

The *Idol* contest is structured through auditions, semifinals, and finals after the model of a sports tournament, beginning with a national tour of auditions that summons hopeful amateurs to perform before a panel of music industry professionals. Out of these masses of people, 24 to 50 of the most promising singers are selected, and the program follows the twists and turns of this process closely. These early episodes focus on participants' nervous journey through the system, presenting ordinary people attempting something extraordinary in their lives. Auditions are staged and taped months before being broadcast, then edited together in docusoap form.

In the next stage of the show, groups of six to 10 singers compete before a live studio audience and the judges, and from this point on, television viewers select the best through telephone voting. The show is now split in two, with the first part featuring the song performances. These performances are taped hours in advance to give the amateurs a second chance if they fail, but they are broadcast as live (using the "live-on-tape" technique; see Bourdon, 2000). During the break, the viewers vote. In the second part, the poll is counted, live-to-air, and the two best singers proceed to the finals. These five or

six episodes resemble traditional game shows, with their multi-camera set-up, cheering studio audiences and compelling tension around "who will win."

In the final stage, the remaining contestants, normally 10 to 12 of them, compete in weekly episodes, and the one receiving the least votes is "evicted." To begin with, these finals resemble the semifinals, apart from largely being produced live-to-air. But as the group diminishes and we get to know the participants better, more time is normally devoted to their social interaction. Alongside the increase in talk-show sequences, the song performances are staged more and more as real pop concerts. Depending on popularity and ratings, *Idol* will, at this point, feature backstage docusoap episodes, talk show specials, replays with viewer reviews via mobile messaging, and so on. Reaching the pop culture promised land, several broadcasters have even succeeded in promoting *Idol* as a national event, saturating the surrounding media and capturing the public eye.

This overview shows how *Idol* events are staged through the systematic use of a variety of participatory genres, and it explains why the producer in Norway calls the project a "crash course in television production."<sup>2</sup> I will now turn to the telling practices of handling reality TV participants by first examining how the rhetoric of open participation must be balanced against the need for engaging television characters.

### ***Combining Casting With Universal Participation***

As participation becomes a central feature in television entertainment, casting has become a crucial feature of production. It constitutes a key interface between ordinary members of the public and the broadcast programs, and it is essential to the show's appeal, a fact of which researchers have become increasingly aware (Roscoe, 2001; Collins, 2008; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Casting efforts generally mirror investments and profit expectations, and *Idol* arguably has the most expensive casting process in television. Numerous auditions are arranged nationwide, then ingeniously integrated into the program itself (a twist adapted in numerous subsequent formats). However, because *Idol* auditions are explicitly represented as open and universal, combining them with effective casting represents a substantial production challenge.

A key issue of casting in commercial television arises around securing characters that will attract audiences for which sponsors will then pay. One means of achieving this in *Idol* is through age limits, normally 16 to 35, but negotiable depending upon market strategies. In Norway, applicants have annually totaled five to eight thousand people, whereas producers in the U.S. have had up to 300,000 from which to choose. It is unprecedented for a program to regularly attract this amount of interest, which is arguably related to the transfer of the application process to the Internet. For TV 2, the *Idol* program was the first to do so (in autumn 2002), and the ease and informality of submitting an online form probably enticed applicants, but also explains why one-third never actually show up. On the production side, the Internet application system created a database that greatly assisted contestant evaluation and management,

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Ingvild Daae, *Idol* series producer from 2004 to 2006, in a conversation on April 7, 2006. All quotes from Norwegian informants are translated into English by the author.

according to TV 2 personnel (interviewed 16 June 2007), and this has since become standard for TV 2 programs.

### ***Managing People as Content***

The numerous applicants serve many production needs, including the imperative to find people that answer to format demands. First, *Idol* needs strong personalities, preferably with intriguing backgrounds, in keeping with docusoap casting practices. Moreover, these people need to be able to function well in live studio settings, in social interactions resembling those of the game show and talk show. Finally, at least some of the contestants need to have substantial singing talent. To single out "storyable" personalities, for example, the online application form contains numerous questions like these: "What are you most proud of having achieved?" "What is your occupation?" "Where do you see yourself in five years' time?" "Why should we choose you and why do you want to participate in *Idol*?"<sup>3</sup> Applicants are also encouraged to immediately upload photos and song and video recordings, which greatly aid selection. About 20% of these applications are discarded out of hand (in the Norwegian production). The rest of the applicants are invited to a precast, and about 10% of those will be singled out for special consideration.

These 10% constitute the material that producers will use to represent and entertain their desired audience segments. They ultimately represent valuable story content, whatever their talent level; this is why the application includes an acknowledgment that "the producer and later acquirers rightfully can use your name, picture, voice, biographical details, photographs and recordings for advertising and promoting the project." The *Idol* casting process, in fact, takes control of a substantial amount of contestant-generated "content." The contract further claims "exclusive distribution rights" for television, as well as Internet and mobile networks, prohibits "cooperation with other media corporations" and demands "full discretion regarding all information related to program, your participation and the production team." Thus a "participatory" program that is often discussed in terms of its empowerment of contestants and audience may, for production purposes, actually exercise tight control of people behind the scenes. Collins (2008) has discussed how reality TV, in fact, erodes the rights of actors and participants to the benefit of the increasingly flexible and cost-cutting television industry. An examination of application forms and program output can yield the basic conditions and principles of participation; Ouellette and Hay (2008, p. 47) did so in their analysis of the casting and presentation of "needy individuals" in the charity program *Home Edition*. However, important management practices only reveal themselves when one attends the production process that unfolds between the application stage and the presentation stage.

As I mentioned, *Idol* applicants not immediately rejected attend a so-called precast, which, in Norway, involves about three to four thousand candidates. Allowing everyone an audition before the judges would not only be impracticable (they might complete 120 auditions on a good day) but also costly and profligate in terms of the material it would generate. Therefore, auditions in every city are preceded by these precasts, in which several producer teams divide the bulk of the applicants between them, a

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<sup>3</sup> The Norwegian application form was retrieved on March 18, 2007, from <http://na-prod.TV2.no/idol/idolform2007.jsp>. The American application form was retrieved June 28, 2007 from [www.americanidol.com](http://www.americanidol.com) (both are now removed).

process I witnessed during my observation of *Idols'* production. Special attention is paid to the performance of the 10% of contestants already singled out, and the rest are just speedily evaluated and taped. Only 10% to 20% of the people attending the precast actually get to audition before the judges, and about one in five is selected due to a *lack* of talent, or to other laughable or unsociable qualities. Unaware of this, these people generally endure brutal encounters with the judges that, in turn, suggest the drama and comic eventualities of allowing (seemingly) everyone to participate. Their poor performance, disappointment, and despair contrast with the talent, joy, and gratitude of the successful contestants in the broadcast episodes. The "losers" are also portrayed far more superficially than the "winners." Based on participant applications, producers routinely select a number of promising candidates about whom they produce a report in advance, and these are shown just before he or she goes in to the audition. These people always have a commendable story to tell — for example, how they transcend a handicap, devote all of their time to an amateur choir, or entertain their local community. Firmly embedded in a community setting (hometown, workplace, and family), these candidates are presented as brave and positive, with a dream that *Idol* might, in fact, help them to achieve, and they often receive many votes and do well in the contest. The losers are not presented in reports of this kind, coming across instead as guilty of completely misjudging the *Idol* concept as well as their own singing talents. They often leave an impression of being incompetent and unsociable (even ill-natured), thereby legitimizing the emphasis put on the character and community spirit of the successful contestants.

*Idol* can be seen as a cruel example of how the already dispensable class of reality TV participants even has its own underclass. Reality formats demand heroes and rogues, winners and losers, and *Idol*, *Dance Fever*, *Got Talent* and so on project literally hundreds of participants into these roles at a very early stage. The production challenge, then, is not so much to make a participant interact suitably through the duration of a broadcast (Grindstaff, 2002; Ytreberg, 2004). Rather it is to accumulate the necessary material and then edit it to answer to the dramatic requirements of the format, which, of course, includes a formidable array of losers. They belong to the dark side of the "participatory turn" in the media and have so far barely been taken into account in empowerment discussions.

### ***Precasts, PR and Collective Participation***

Arranging national auditions also generates press coverage that projects the show's campaign more aggressively than TV 2 could ever manage on its own. Precasts are the key to attracting external media, as endless queues of hopeful aspirants stretch into the streets. Members of the public are even invited to just show up without applying (a point heavily promoted by producers), but are only allowed to perform if time permits. However, they certainly add to the hoards of participants, giving journalists the impression of an all-inclusive talent quest. Importantly, these precasts are explicitly staged and recorded as auditions, with the program hosts walking through the crowds and addressing the camera as well as the many hopefuls. However, the actual auditions before the judges occur a few days later, without press, because by then about 90% of the candidates (this varies from country to country) have already been sent home. I became aware of this discrepancy between the external impression and the actual progression of the singing contest by observing the production at close range, but because literally thousands of people have been through this, several inside accounts (generally confirming mine) also appear on user-generated content sites like [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org) and [www.votefortheworst.com](http://www.votefortheworst.com). One

strategy for containing the participant experience is to demand “full discretion regarding all information related to program” in the participant contract, and as we have seen, producers employ a number of control and editing measures precisely to protect the impression of an open and transparent campaign.

The *Idol* casting process, then, appears to encourage massive participation, and the much-reported total count of the contestants always includes everybody who indicated interest (including those who never showed up). The success of the show's national campaign evokes Durkheim's studies (1965) of the significance of collective participation in terms of social devotion. He argues that for a group to be united, it needs tangible experiences and images of itself, and these are most compelling when the group is joined in action. Dayan and Katz (1992) picked up this line of thought in relation to televised events in which societies and populations drop what they normally do and engage collectively in them. In Norway, few events, outside of the national holiday and the general elections, manage to mobilize the population to the extent that people gather in streets and city centers all over the country, as they do for *Idol*. However, unlike the mediated events studied by Dayan and Katz, the events of *Idol* are organized entirely by media companies and deliberately designed to reach and then perpetuate the show's audiences. For example, to capitalize upon traditional habits of social and cultural mobilization, local theaters, schools, and civic buildings rather than hotels and conference centers were booked as audition locales for the 2007 season, according to the *Idol* project leader (interviewed 4 December 2007). The auditions were, in this way, meant to evoke a sense of citizenship, local pride, and engagement, and several other adjustments of this kind were initiated by FremantleMedia's format consultant to reinforce the *Idol* brand (Kjus, forthcoming). As noted previously, participatory entertainments have a long tradition of appealing to community spirit, particularly in European public service broadcasting (Reijnders, 2007). The remarkable thing about *Idol*, however, is its intimate connection to the commercial celebrity system of pop music. In addition, it is managed by a global format agency that is able to reach national audiences much more thoroughly than national producers are able to do on their own. FremantleMedia's partners, resources, and competences help this agency to persuasively combine a celebrity model and a citizen model of participation, projecting a star rising from the midst of the people. This combination is an essential part of the branding strategy, and it is refined and elaborated throughout the course of the show.

### ***Producing the Devotion of Fans and Witnesses***

In the semifinals and finals, *Idol* becomes a live studio show and begins its innovative mobilization of a traditional participatory technique: the studio audience. The basic function of a studio audience is to provide the immediate visible and audible responses that television viewers obviously cannot, creating a sense of presence that reaches back to the dawn of broadcasting (Peters, 1999, pp. 206–225). This “mental bridge” of live audience support has since been adjusted to the type of program in question, be it a talk show (Bruun, 1999) or a sports event (Maasø, 2002) and so on. In the context of a music contest for a future pop idol, the producers of *Idol* therefore instruct their studio audience to act as *fans* in different ways (fans being defined by their extraordinary involvement; see Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998). Before each broadcast, the audience is drilled on how to cheer loudly and wave posters supporting their favorites and on how to boo when the judges are being negative. As the number of contestants shrinks throughout the season, the size of the audience increases from one hundred in the semifinals to five hundred in the finals and up to eight thousand in the ultimate episode, which is held in a

famous concert hall (exact attendance figures vary). The audience's growth contributes to the impression of the remaining contestants as rising pop stars, and crane shots of the studio audience are increasingly edited into each episode, contributing to the impression of a large gathering and a significant event.

*Idol* thus creates a sense that one is witnessing something out of the ordinary, particularly during the dramatic moments when one of the would-be idols is voted out at the end of each episode. Importantly, viewers are given front-row seats to this drama, and their perspective is made to resemble an eyewitness's privileged access to an event. Experiencing something *when* it happens as well as being *where* it happens defines the act of witnessing (Peters, 2001), and a sense of both temporal and spatial *presence* increases through the *Idol* season. As mentioned, auditions are taped months before being broadcast, the semifinals are partly produced live-on-tape, and the finals are entirely broadcast live-to-air. There is no studio audience to begin with, but as the contest moves forward this audience appears and grows, both literally and in terms of its role in the show. Thus viewers experience ever more direct and privileged access to singing performances, and in turn they are asked for their (increasingly relevant) votes. As Peters (2001) underscores, the act of witnessing not only entails the authority of opinion but also the duty to speak up when called upon. The *Idol* program host through three seasons (interviewed 25 June 2005) sees viewers as aware of this moral obligation: "I think the viewers feel a responsibility, particularly after having seen a few episodes. They get a sense of who deserves to win, and who definitely does not. And they risk watching 'that jerk' win unless they vote."

An ever-sharpening audience awareness of being eyewitnesses in turn generates a successively greater proportion of votes tallied to televisions tuned to the program as the season goes on. For instance, this is the relation between ratings and televotes in the last three episodes of the 2005 *Idol* season: 807,000 to 345,000; then 863,000 to 725,000; finally 1,240,000 to 1,292,000. These episodes also reveal another recurring pattern: increased ratings when the vote results are announced (935,000, 1,034,000, and 1,473,000, respectively). In the ultimate episode, the television producers also emphasize the significance (and universality) of participation by inserting live reports from supporter gatherings in contestant hometowns and elsewhere.

Access to events in society and the ability to communicate about them are key qualities of citizenship (Born, 2005). *Idol* keenly and profitably follows the democratic model in representing its audience as directly responsible for its outcomes. I would further point to a certain climactic moment in this regard with the advent of voting (and providing testimonials) via mobile phone.

### ***Transformations in Telephonic Participation***

In *American Idol*, viewers can vote for their favorite contestant via toll-free telephone numbers, a gesture that underscores the democratic inclusiveness of the program. This generates a massive response: 609 million votes were received in the 2007 season (an average of 30 to 35 million per episode). Interestingly, 67 million votes, or 11% of the total, were text messages from mobile phones, which were not free, and voting via mobiles phones is rapidly increasing. In Norway, text messaging is even more common and indicates how far the trend may well extend: the percentage of text message votes in *Idol* voting overall has risen steadily, from 31% in 2003 to 59% in 2007. Each season has

received an average of five million votes in total (this varies along with the viewing figures) at 0.6 euro each, and this activity actually comprises an essential part of reality TV's revenues (Bignell, 2005; Bazalgette, 2005), although it is split between the format agency, the broadcaster, and the telephone operators. This is why shows like *Idol* always encourage the audience to vote multiple times and never comment on the consequent "democratic deficit" of the elections.

Apart from its convenience, the mobile phone also makes the act of voting more personal. As opposed to stationary phones, the mobile phone is not a collective domestic utility but a personal medium specifically designed for and modified by individual users according to their habits, tastes, and social identities (May & Hearn, 2005). When one is asked to vote in *Idol*, his or her mobile phone underpins the individual act of selecting a favorite. The medium's huge distribution (in 1999, 58% of the Norwegian population had one, and in 2007, 95% did) has thus been very effectively appropriated by the reality game show.<sup>4</sup> Yet broadcast audience response via telephone is no novelty; talk radio has of course relied upon it for decades. Peters (1999, pp. 177–225) has discussed how broadcasting and the telephone have constituted a "couplet" in public and private communication since the start of the 20th century, allowing dissemination from one to many, as well as dialogue between individuals. These communicative forms have a long tradition of intersecting with participatory genres; however, the rise of the mobile phone (and the Internet, which I will return to later) facilitates a new range of combinatory possibilities, and reality TV is a primary exploiter of them (Spurgeon & Goggin, 2007; see also Beyer et al., 2007). The integration of the mobile phone in *Idol* emphasizes its awareness of the viewers as individuals in their homes rather than faceless public crowds (Scannell, 2000). In genre terms, engaging viewers as mobile phone respondents is particularly suited to game shows, which explicitly "blur the line between audience and performance" (Shattuc, 1997, p. 6) and ask the viewers to partake in the game.

The appeal of the immediate, unmediated, individual response is gloriously realized by *Idol* in the heat of a national campaign of singing talents fighting for recognition. In Norway and elsewhere, *Idol* has become the iconic program of television viewers turned telephone voters (and in the U.S., *American Idol* is, in fact, credited with popularizing text-messaging technology in general (see Jenkins, 2006, p. 59). This particular success is largely due to the collaboration that arises around this global format, through which the programs are continuously refined among the various countries that produce them. For example, the Norwegian version was among the first to superimpose the telephone voting number for each contestant on the TV screen *during* each singing performance. It had been standard to present the numbers following all of the performances, so that each contestant would have equal time to receive votes from his or her supporters. However, TV 2 producers insisted that audience members should be able to vote at the very moment they were struck by a performer (according to the *Idol* project leader, interviewed 13 January 2005). This twist was seen as one of the reasons why the Norwegian *Idol* received significantly more votes than other versions (thereby earning considerably more money), and producers in other countries soon adopted it.

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics on mobile and online media use in Norway are provided by Statistics Norway and available at [www.ssb.no/media\\_en](http://www.ssb.no/media_en)

The only way for viewers to respond during the live contest broadcasts is through their telephone votes. These votes are aggregated by national telephone operators like an election result, integrating viewers' participation easily and prominently into the flow of the program. The nature of the balloting, however, has been a keen concern in the Norwegian production; during the early seasons, program hosts constantly reminded viewers that they actually decided the outcome of the contest. In seasons 3 and 4 there was a tendency for obvious favorites to be evicted fairly quickly, presumably because viewers considered them safe and not in need of their votes. Program hosts then began explaining this dynamic to viewers and encouraging them to vote for their favorites regardless. Producers welcome surprises because of the suspense and emotional involvement they create, but not to the extent that the entire contest is thrown into doubt. Speculations in the press regarding which viewer segments are supporting which contestants are therefore also appreciated, as long as they do not undercut *Idol's* sense of positive, lighthearted togetherness.<sup>5</sup>

By staging a national participatory campaign, *Idol* has clearly become a potential site for people to support the person that best represents them in cultural terms, including music taste, lifestyle, social background, values, and even race. In a small and culturally homogeneous country like Norway, *Idol's* producers have had no trouble avoiding antagonisms. This is not true of more segmented and conflicted countries like the U.S., however, and in 2004, *American Idol* was the subject of much controversy when several African American contestants were voted off despite their obvious talent, and charges of racism flew.<sup>6</sup> Casting noncontroversial representatives of the people is an important tool in the creation of a suitable level of involvement, balancing entertainment with social engagement. A fair election is also important to avoid negativity and potential detachment, but managing this key point in the event is also challenging; technical problems have for instance been known to fuel widespread suspicion that many votes are not counted.<sup>7</sup> The ballot has also been threatened by online services like [www.dialidol.com](http://www.dialidol.com), which predicts who will be voted off each episode, thereby killing the suspense. Moreover, in 2004 the community site [www.votearetheworst.com](http://www.votearetheworst.com) was established as part of a campaign to make viewers vote perversely for the candidates "that go against what the producers want in a winner and that annoy the viewing public." This Web site has remained very popular among people who reject the roles bestowed on them and prefer an antagonistic stance in reaction to *Idol's* insistent demands of devotion. In the U.S., Norway and elsewhere, *Idol* is regularly attacked in the press for both producer manipulation and questionable voting, but producers concisely downplay or dismiss the criticism in order to minimize its public visibility. Reducing and increasing visibility is also a core exercise of managing *Idol's* online forms of participation.

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<sup>5</sup> I witnessed discussions among the executive producer, the interactive producer, and the program hosts about these issues during my observation of *Idol's* production in 2005 and 2006.

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, the article "Elton John: 'American Idol' Is Racist" by Catherine Donaldson-Evans of Fox News, April 28, 2004, accessed November 10, 2008, from <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,118432,00.html>

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, the article "American Idol Outrage: Your Vote Doesn't Count" by Deborah Starr Seibel in *Broadcasting & Cable*, May 14, 2004, accessed on August 1, 2008, from <http://www.broadcastingcable.com/article/CA417981.html?display=Top+of+the+Week>

### ***Extending Sociability and Eventfulness Online***

The Internet facilitates participatory forms that are far too complex to be channeled directly into *Idol's* highly contrived broadcasts (as opposed to telephone voting), but they are constantly available in their own right, before, during and after the show itself. With its capacity for two-way communication, the Internet is widely considered to be a medium with unprecedented democratic potential (Shane, 2004); it should therefore be well suited to extending the participatory elements of *Idol* and its ilk. A number of two-way communications have indeed developed online, such as Web interviews, discussion forums, blogs, and communities that can facilitate new audience relations when they are employed on television program Web sites (Siapera, 2004). As with mobile phones, the Internet has also paralleled the rise of reality TV in popular culture today: whereas 13% of the population in Norway had Internet access in their homes in 1997, 83% had it in 2007. Reality game shows incorporated the new medium faster than other programs, and the *Idol's* Web site is the most visited program site in Norway (as well as the U.S.). *Idol* thus represents an excellent example of "second shift aesthetics" (Caldwell, 2003), where the effort behind managing a viewing flow in a television schedule is supplemented (rather than supplanted) by the effort of creating a user flow across different media. The success of reality game shows makes them a central part of the television industry's dual strategy of strengthening audience loyalty and developing new revenue, such as online advertising and merchandising (Jenkins, 2006). In realizing these aims, however, *Idol* has never directly applied new participatory forms as they emerge online but rather modified and adapted them as necessary to suit the program.

The busiest and most prominently featured participatory form on the Norwegian *Idol's* Web site is the Web interview; originally established by online newspapers, this interview would involve an expert on a topic answering questions submitted by the public. In *Idol*, the interviewee is a singing contestant and the question posers are online visitors; their interaction is framed as a meeting between a rising pop star and his or her dedicated fans. Before each Web interview, the producers tell *Idol* contestants that many of these questions are likely to be disrespectful or derogatory, and that they should answer only those they like (according to online staff, interviewed June 30, 2006). Furthermore, only these endorsed questions are ever displayed on the program Web site. This interaction is therefore dominated by the heartfelt joy of fans actually addressing the idol in person, as this exchange from the 2006 season demonstrates:

Dear Vivian! I have never heard anyone sing like you. I wish you had made it to the final. I have voted much for you! Did it feel bad to lose? Third place is great, remember that! You are a fun girl, Vivian, it looks like you always bring joy. What do you think was the best about *Idol*? I hope you get a record contract! Please answer me! Hugs from Trine

Hi Trine! Thank you so much!!:) Of course, it was a downer to go just before the final, but I am thrilled with the third place!:) I have had so incredibly much fun in *Idol* that it's very hard to select something . . . All the people I have met are of course one of the best things!! Made friends for life!:) Hugs from Vivian.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Accessed June 20, 2006, at <http://pub.TV2.no/TV2/magasiner/idol2006/nettprat/article637131>

This Web "meeting" thus suggests an idealized fan-star relation, evoking fan mail of a strangely exposed variety. It furthers the talk show component of *Idol* as well, creating a sense of close and inclusive social interaction, but its impression of further breaking down the audience/participant barrier is edited and controlled to harmonize with the program.

The online discussion forum might be described as a topical conversation between equals, and it is also a suitable extension of the daytime talk show and its "participating" studio audiences. However, the Internet's radical openness constituted a problem for *Idol* producers, as comments often come into direct conflict with the desired image of the program. This sample is from the discussion thread "Vivian is exaggerated":

PartyMarty: To my great surprise Vivian got a 6 (top score) in VG yesterday, while Jonas and Aleksander, who I think were as good, or better, got a four each. Was this fair?? Is she really so much better than the others, or is it because she was already announced a favourite after the first audition?

Umighty: I think this year's *Idol* is the weakest ever! And Vivian does not deserve a 6 for her singing!! But her looks carry her through to the viewers . . . doubtlessly!<sup>9</sup>

These often critical and agitated discussions clash with the image of devoted, cheering audience members, and TV 2 does not promote program discussion forums, but stows them in a section of [www.TV2.no](http://www.TV2.no) that is situated well away from the official program Web sites. The dilemma of both encouraging and containing audience engagement online was further made evident in 2007, when the producers provided each singing contestant with a blog on the *Idol* site. The blogs were not designed to accommodate visitor comments, however, eliminating their inherent dialogic dimension.

Fox network has attempted a more direct approach with *American Idol*. In 2006, Fox launched the community MyIdol ([www.americanidol.com/myidol](http://www.americanidol.com/myidol)), where registered users can socialize in private chats, as well as public blogs and discussion forums. Fox thus capitalized upon the contemporary proliferation of online communities like MySpace and Facebook (Lüders, 2007), but only within its "terms of service," part of which reads as follows: "Moderation staff reserves the right to remove any post or thread (or you) at any time for any reason."<sup>10</sup> By claiming this right, MyIdol could share in the enormous buzz that *American Idol* was creating online while protecting itself from controversies and the snarky sarcasm of independent bulletin boards (Andrejevic, 2008). By 2006, it had become obvious that online discussions would be overwhelmingly concerned with who *deserved* the title, encompassing message

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<sup>9</sup> Accessed June 30, 2006, at <http://forum.TV2.no/forum/messageview.cfm?catid=78&threadid=27332>

<sup>10</sup> Accessed March 10, 2008, at [www.americanidol.com/myidol/forums/topic/?tid=805891](http://www.americanidol.com/myidol/forums/topic/?tid=805891)

boards, blogs, and articles with headings like "Did Carrie deserve to win?"<sup>11</sup> MyIdol, therefore, explicitly invited fans to "encourage your favorite" and "share your thoughts with the world," and it soon doubled [www.americanidol.com](http://www.americanidol.com)'s traffic.<sup>12</sup>

Significant online activity is intimately related to how *American Idol* became the highest rated program in the U.S. and managed to come across as an all-embracing national event.<sup>13</sup> Importantly, the American version of *Idol* went even further than the Norwegian version in connecting its broadcast campaign to community values, focusing on the contestant's family background and arranging massive homecoming events for the finalists. These social dimensions and the impression they give of everyone being part of the drama of the show often revolve around issues of who deserves to be plucked from the crowd. In accordance with Durkheimian analysis, then, *Idol* raises moral questions about how society and its citizens *should be* (Cottle, 2006). The term "community" is thus particularly suited to describing *American Idol's* extension online. Discussions often weigh in on contestants' backgrounds and moral standards, to a degree that stirred one viewer to start this thread, titled "It's THEIR lives folks, not ours!":

RedialKing: Why is it whenever a finalist's past is dug up and broadcasted for the world to see, we judge them? Like we are all perfect human beings without flaw!! I don't see why the finalists now, as contestants on the show and how they sing, have to be linked to their past.

RaindropBlueRose: If it's an illegal past they should be disqualified. I wouldn't want to vote for a bank robber, or child molester. All of us have things we may not be proud of. But, if you are keeping legal. Who Cares.

HelloItzMe: The show is about America finding someone to idolize. The contestants and of course the winner must be idol worthy.

idolzhyte: What about when a contestant is facing you, making a hand gesture and asking you to vote for him/her, don't you think you need to investigate?

Dianamtz50: If they're going to run the country . . . sure!<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Googling the search words "American Idol" and "deserve" generated 366,000 hits on April 10, 2008 and provided immediate access to the ongoing discussions. See also Jenkins (2006, p. 85) on the moral intensity of *American Idol*.

<sup>12</sup> See the article "Making American Idol a Champion" by Jeff King on [www.imediaconnection.com](http://www.imediaconnection.com) July 26, 2006, for the *AmericanIdol.com* general manager's account of the Web site's success. Accessed March 10, 2008, at <http://www.imediaconnection.com/content/10469.asp>

<sup>13</sup> Ratings are available at [www.nytimes.com/2007/02/20/arts/television/20idol.htm](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/20/arts/television/20idol.htm), accessed April 5, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Accessed March 4, 2008, at [www.americanidol.com/myidol/forums/topic/?tid=829044](http://www.americanidol.com/myidol/forums/topic/?tid=829044). When I tried to access this thread two weeks later, it had already been removed.

This exchange demonstrates producers' success in engaging their viewers as both aesthetic and civic witnesses, and this particular thread actually goes beyond who deserves to win to discuss what kind of event *Idol* really is. The roles of fans and citizens that are constructed through the television broadcasts are crucial to the activity created online and to *Idol's* success in connecting the dissemination of broadcasting (communication from center to periphery) with the network structure of the Internet (communication between nodes). The latter's truly pervasive connections are essential to the television industry's use of "viral marketing," using the activity of the public to circulate brands and increase their commercial potential (Caldwell, 2008, p. 313). Broadcasting and the Web are often viewed as representing the old and the new "media age" (Holmes, 2005), with their corresponding paradigms of commerce, but *Idol* demonstrates their intimate commingling in reality TV. The broadcast image of a spectacular event inspires online viral activity, which, in turn, substantiates the event and increases the revenue made from its participants.

Realizing these aims online, however, involves considerable challenges, including protecting the roles that *Idol* offers to the public and promoting a sense that everyone can partake of the continuum between ordinary viewer, devoted fan, and engaged citizen. The discussion thread above actually questions and even rebukes some forms of engagement, and it was eventually removed. Through the forms of editing presented in this section (modifying, censoring, or emphasizing interactions), producers try to cultivate what they imagine is the right balance of engagement. The task of both stimulating and containing the audience online is becoming increasingly difficult, as motivated fans resort to other companies that host forums, such as NBC Universal's [www.televisionwithoutpity.com](http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com), or create their own communities, such as the subversive [www.votefortheworst.com](http://www.votefortheworst.com). For *Idol* producers, the rise of online media therefore represents both the promise of continuous and productive audience contact and the threat of bad publicity and an uncontrollable audience reaction. My*Idol* is a relatively recent attempt to harmonize the medium with the program's purposes, but the overall struggle is likely to intensify and take different forms as new media continue to develop.

### **Conclusion**

I started this article by tracing reality TV's participatory predecessors, which helped me to identify the different components of *Idol* as well as the continuities and innovations it represents. The program then emerges as an offshoot of a long tradition of linking entertainment and politics, commercialism and citizenship, in broadcasting, one that dates back to the 1930s, but picked up dramatically in the 1980s (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Born, 2004; Van Zoonen, 2005; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). These links are being made in new and more comprehensive ways in reality shows like *Idol* as previous program practices are expanded and redirected using new media (online and mobile). The merger of entertainment and politics in the media is of key importance to the public domain, particularly in terms of how reality TV, with its various producers and sponsors, creates a new interface with the general public. It is therefore important that scholars use critical case studies to ask what participation really entails in neo-liberal economies, where big actors advance brand cultures and consumer citizenship (Banet-Weiser & Lapsansky, 2008), and where "activity" is equated with "interactivity" and "participation" with "empowerment" (Andrejevic,

2008). A potentially fruitful step in this regard involves the scrutiny of emerging interfaces between media producers and media participants.

Reality shows like *Idol* present themselves as transparent and can be taken to represent a shift from the asymmetrical communication of broadcasting to the symmetry of telephony and the Internet. These media reinforce an impression of reciprocal and devoted audience relations, but an examination of their production reveals how the traditional asymmetry of the industry is actually maintained, and how old practices around editing audience participation are extended, however awkwardly, to mobile and online media as well. Generally, the participation attracting the most visibility and revenues is also the most resourcefully edited; consequently, as online media grow, more efforts are being put into both stimulating and containing its activity. Aside from observing the casting process at close range, I also examined the documents regulating participation (application forms, contracts, terms of service, and so on) among the various media. Contestant status is perfectly explicit in the *Idol* application form, where one must endorse the following: "I grant to the Producer and its successors the irrevocable right . . . to record, exhibit, edit and otherwise use my appearance . . . in any manner in Producer's sole election and discretion, which use shall not entitle me to receive any compensation whatsoever." This indicates that the program's staging of a national participatory event is less informed by democratic values than by purely commercial aims, which also govern the casting process in which singing contestants are divided into upper and lower "classes." For a very limited few, *Idol* becomes a terrific chance to gain visibility and recognition for personal as well as career purposes. For the rest, however, who are unknowingly cast (and broadcast) for what they lack, not what they have, *Idol* concludes promptly and even harshly. This practice is ethically questionable, to say the least, and it may well be time to establish control measures in the entertainment industry, in the same manner that the printed press has councils overseeing its accountability and truthfulness relative to its sources, participants, and audiences. Reality TV's false premises, of course, also have ramifications for the viewers who participate via telephone and Internet connections, as *Idol* is not the open and fair campaign it is projected to be. Yet the question of whether audience participation involves empowerment or exploitation is ultimately moot: it is both. What is really interesting is how it all works and for whom.

Big budget reality game shows like *Idol*, including *X-Factor*, *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Got Talent*, have for some time dominated televisions (and publics) worldwide (Schmitt et al., 2005), and their audience appeal is constantly enhanced through the coordinated efforts of global format enterprises. Their attraction arises from their staging of an extraordinary event with ordinary people installed as key performers and, in the case of *Idol*, audience members formally engaged as fans, witnesses, and citizens. These various roles entail both commitment and active engagement, which, in turn, helps television companies retain audiences at a time of intensified fragmentation and competition in the media industry (Deuze, 2007). A further benefit of having the audience perform its role via new media is the buttressing of established program scheduling practices; telephone voting occupies viewers until the result is announced (vertically), and online sociability occupies them between broadcasts (horizontally). Reality game shows have, in fact, halted the trend of media fragmentation and to some extent restored the persuasiveness of television as a collective medium capable of hosting national rituals. Rather than empowering their participants, however, programs like *Idol* contribute something culturally significant by creating social bonds via their powerful images of sweeping interaction at a time when media

fragmentation is more often mirrored by social and political fragmentation (Born, 2005). This extraordinary capacity makes reality TV an increasingly important part of public culture and its critical study.

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