

66 When the audience decides

What happens when an audience refuses to participate in reality TV's textual meaning-creation?

by Megan Knight

New media technologies have changed not only how content is produced and distributed, but also the audience's relationship to it. The line between audiences and producers is becoming blurred, whether the media is produced for commercial purposes or subversive ones. The rise of "the public decides" games and telephone voting on reality TV shows have given the audience power in a way that Stuart Hall could only have imagined.

In *American Idol* participants compete for the audience's vote to win. Although a panel of "judges" presides over the show, they do little more than comment; who is eliminated each week, and who eventually wins, is decided by the vote-casting audience. The show has an inherent tension – between the expertise of the judges (who score contestants' singing ability), and the will of the audience (which is more likely to be swayed by admiration of or sympathy for other traits).

For the producers and participants, the show's ideological *raison d'être* transcends the immediate gratification of viewing and the revenue it generates.

The emphasis on accepted musical standards, the use of guest artists, the credentials of the judges as arbiters of taste and their centrality even once the decision-making power moves to the audience, are all part of the conceit that the show is engaged in something important – the discovery of talent.

In addition, the show deploys the "democratic" process – the slogans "America decides" and "you choose" are heavily used – and in the voting phase the studio audience is encouraged to disagree with the experts.

Reality TV has always had a complex relationship with the material it presents. Several shows have a kind of dual meaning: the official meaning, and what the audience gets out of it. *American Idol* panders to voyeurism in the beginning, and then changes tack, expecting the audience to accept the seriousness of the enterprise and the influence of the judges.

Of course, the audience doesn't always do what the producers want, and alongside the fan sites there are anti-fan sites. During season three of *American Idol* (2004), *Votefortheworst.com* was launched.

The site's stated purpose is to "support voting for the entertaining contestants who the producers would hate to see win". To them, the entertainment value of the show lies not in the ability of the contestants but in their awfulness.

This "decoding" is not necessarily

aberrant, but it is not in line with the show's stated purpose. Yet the producers clearly understand the appeal of watching people embarrass themselves: why else would the auditioning focus so often on the cringe inducing?

On the other hand, *American Idol* is at pains to ensure that it is not seen as simply about watching people do awful things. Simon Cowell and his colleagues insist they are not a Chuck Barris or a Jerry Springer, but serious music producers with successful careers.

In 2007, *Votefortheworst.com* succeeded in keeping contestant Sanjaya Malakar, the site's choice for "worst" from March 8, on the show until the week of April 18, when he was ranked 7th of 20 contestants.

In the weeks leading up to his elimination, as it became increasingly clear that he was outclassed by the other contestants, but was consistently not voted off, the show began to unravel in interesting ways.

The judges stopped critiquing Malakar's singing, focusing on his hair (which had always been a subject of commentary – the "nice" judges Jackson and Abdul had in previous weeks said "the hair is rocking" and "nice hair").

Cowell stopped playing the game in top-10 week, when he commented to Malakar: "I don't think it matters any more... I think you are in your own universe, and if people like you, good luck" (season seven, episode 2007a).

The following week, the judges threw up their hands: "I can't even comment on the vocals any more," said one, and Cowell could manage only a single, ironic "Incredible". The following week, the comments on Malakar's performance were minimal, and the week after that, Cowell pronounced the performance "utterly horrendous... it was as bad as anything you see at the beginning of *American Idol*". He later added, "I know this has been funny for a while, but based on the fact that we are supposed to be finding an *American idol*, it was hideous," with explicit reference to the vote for the worst campaign.

The *Votefortheworst* phenomenon goes beyond simple aberrant decoding,



and beyond fan culture, which, despite its disagreements with the producers of media texts, is largely appreciative, even adoring.

There are elements of culture jamming, of a refusal to participate in the media's textual meaning-creation. There is some protest-movement polemics, but the overall mood is one of mockery, of a court jester poking holes in the pompousness of the show, of the genre and of television itself.

It will be interesting to see, given the fickleness of viewers, and the importance of maintaining viewership in the face of continued fragmentation of the sector, how producers engage with this newly-empowered audience.



This is an abbreviated version of a paper given at Transforming Audiences 2007 at Westminster University. The full paper can be accessed at <http://transforming-audiences.googlegroups.com/web/Megan%20Knight%20-%20Rise%20of%20the%20rebellious%20audience%20-%202007.pdf>