

The Effect of Reality TV on Civic Behaviors

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Abstract: Viewer voting for and participation in reality TV shows such as *American Idol* has been frequently compared to US voting for and participation in American presidential elections. This comparison is often used to substantiate the cultural impact of shows such as *American Idol* and to infer commentary on American values. *American Idol* itself is part of the growing trend in viewer participation and collaboration in driving a storyline and outcome of TV shows and other telemedia. This trend in real-time audience participation runs parallel and most likely not coincidentally with the growth of web 2.0 tools, particularly social networking tools, in which users connect, interact, and react and respond to each other on the direction of the storyline and the fates of the participants. To note, in that the 2008 presidential election was examined and discussed both on TV and through news sites, and leveraged through social networking sites, it is worth considering if skills in online participation for a TV show transfer to a sense of self-efficacy and participation in a real election. This study takes a look at one small piece of the equation: the effect of a popular reality TV show on a viewer's sense of efficacy and attitude towards voting in an election. This study also provides insight into specific groups of people's levels of participation through various online tools.

Introduction

Does watching television change attitudes or behaviors? The advertising industry has built an empire on the effect a calculatedly crafted and timed television commercial has on changing the behaviors and preferences of consumers. Along a similar vein, can a broadcast television show change our attitudes about voting and our participation in a presidential election?

A comparison of viewer voting in the *American Idol* talent contest and voter turnout for American presidential elections is often used to substantiate the cultural impact of *American Idol* and to infer commentary on American values, as reflected by TV viewing and related viewer participation. However, perhaps the comparison is merely a part of the story: perhaps people's participation in reality shows like *American Idol* or *Survivor* has stimulated their self-efficacy, compelling reality TV viewers to get out and vote.

This research compared the extent to which people did or did not view or participate in voting for the reality television show *American Idol* with their previous and current presidential election

voting behaviors and attitudes. The hypothesis was that viewers who researched and voted for their favorite *American Idol* transferred these skills to vetting and voting in civic elections.

As Seen on TV: Defining Reality

The Broadcast Television *Jargon Breaker* (2008) defines a reality show as an “unscripted” program that “follows actual ‘real life’ events as they unfold, usually involving members of the public or groups of celebrities.” *American Idol* is a reality-competition show that airs on Fox. The show debuted in 2002 with 9.9 million viewers, peaking in January, 2007 with 37.7 viewers, and holding at 31.66 million for the May 2008 season finale (RealityBlurred.com, 2008). Based on the crushing effect of *American Idol* has on the ratings of shows scheduled at the same time, NBC Universal chief executive has proclaimed that *Idol* is the most impactful show in the history of television” (Carter, 2007).

The reality show *American Idol* is an expanded, real-time talent show. Contestants perform and are given feedback from a panel of judges. The week following the airing of that episode, viewers can call in or SMS text to place votes for the different contestants. The contestant with the least votes is eliminated in the following episode, during which the remaining contestants perform again for the judges’ immediate feedback and to entice viewers’ votes. During the week between episodes, viewers can go to the official *American Idol* website and read more about the contestants, post to discussion boards, and replay video clips. An enthusiastic community grows around the phenomenon of the show, the competition, and specific contestants. USA Today (4/9/07) describes *American Idol* as part of the “cultural conversation.” Other reality shows operate similarly, engendering a community of audience participants who shape the outcome of the show and the opening storyline of a hopeful contestant’s singing career.

Table 1. American Idol and US President Votes Cast

Year	Candidate/Contestant	Votes Cast (in millions)
1984	Ronald Reagan	54.5
2006	Taylor Hicks	63*
2007	Jordin Sparks	74*
2008	Barack Obama	66

*phoned-in

In 2006, Taylor Hicks, *American Idol* contestant, registered 63 million phoned-in votes and emerged the winner in the show’s season finale. In effect, Taylor Hicks won more votes than Ronald Reagan, who to date has registered the most votes won by a president. Reagan won in the 1984 presidential election with a record 54.5 million votes to Taylor Hicks’ 63 million votes in 2006 [Guardian, 2006]. The following year, Jordan Sparks registered 74 million phoned-in votes. It is worth noting, however, that even those who are too young or who aren’t registered to vote, including non-naturalized immigrants, can vote for *American Idol*, and that one can vote multiple times, which makes the 63 and 74 million vote tallies less than reliable figures; however, Nielsen ratings indicate 36.38 viewers for the season finale in which Taylor Hicks was crowned the newest *Idol* (Reality Blurred.com, 2008). By comparison, Barak Obama won the 2008 presidential election with slightly more votes than Taylor Hicks but 8 million less votes than 2007 *Idol* winner Jordin Sparks, registering 66,882,230 votes to John McCain’s 58,343,671

votes. (CNN, 2009). According to Nielsen audience estimates, on election night, more than 71 million viewers tuned into live news coverage on both broadcast and cable networks (http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/media_entertainment/more-than-71-million-tuned-in-for-election-night-coverage/).

Social Networks and Web 2.0

The culmination of an online community that grows around a media event is not a new phenomenon. It has been going on since the creation of MOOs in the 80's for users to discuss specific computer games, many of which have evolved over the past 25 years into elaborate web presences in which users can discuss technical issues and game strategies – or upload a modding segment of the game itself. News and commerce websites have adapted to the user's desire for participation, interaction, and synthesis (or dissonance) with other perspectives by providing areas in their news stories and product descriptions for readers to participate and respond through blogging or ratings.

As an audience participation TV show, *American Idol* is part of the growing trend in viewer or user-participation and collaboration in driving a storyline and outcome. This trend in real-time audience participation TV runs parallel and most likely not coincidentally with the growth of web 2.0 tools, particularly social networking tools, in which users connect, interact, and react and respond to each other on the direction of the storyline and the fates of the participants. In both TV and online-supported communication, the participating audience develops a sense of both membership and ownership for the show and its outcome.

An Unanticipated Effect?

With the recent presidential election, which has been examined and discussed both on TV and through news sites, blog sites, texting, and leveraged through social networking sites, it is worth considering if these skills in user participation and contributing to the outcome of the *Idol* contest have reawakened the participating audience members' sense of effectiveness in related situations. This paper attempts to explore the changes in behaviors and attitudes of people based on their participation in a reality show. Specifically, this research attempts to explore the growth and use of social networking, and its effect on our participation in a presidential election. This study takes a look at one small piece of the equation: the effect of a powerful reality show on a viewer's sense of efficacy in the outcome of a reality show compared to their perceived efficacy on the outcome of an election.

Related Theory and Studies

Social Learning Theory

Social learning is a behavioral modeling technique that uses the context of a social group or setting and the resulting group dynamics to teach social, emotional, and practical competencies (Bandura, 1969, 1977). This group dynamic encourages a similar reflexive quality in self-perception, and contributes to the learner's sense of self-efficacy (Ibid, 1997). This developing self-efficacy bolsters the learner's confidence and willingness to further explore and engage in

certain behaviors (Ibid), and to choose activities or behaviors in which the learners feels they will be successful (Ormond, 1999).

Online social networks are rich with opportunities for social learning, with the group dynamics of the discussion boards and blog postings driving and setting the terms for acceptable attitudes and behaviors, along with participant ratings providing immediate feedback. Similarly, if through participating in the social networks surrounding the television show *American Idol*, people learn that they can change the outcome of an episode through their opinions and voting, their self-efficacy may translate to a stronger sense of their role as a civic participant.

Learning Transference

American Idol serves as a simulation, a safe place in which to explore participation and outcomes before applying related tasks to the more serious business of selecting the leader of a major country. Specifically, this research looked into the extent to which learning transference takes place between a popular TV show and civic behaviors. Transfer of Learning is defined by the demonstration of learners applying the skills, knowledge, and/or attitudes learned in one context to similar or related situation (Dredzen et al, 2006). Factors that support learning transfer include the extent to which original and target tasks are similar, and the learner's motivation to both learn the initial task and apply that learning to a related task (Ibid, Cree and Macaulay, 2000; Perkins and Salomon, 1992). Within the context of the theory are several types of Learning Transfer, three of which apply to this study (Ormond, 2004, and Perkins & Salomon, 1992):

- Near Transfer, which occurs when the original and new context are similar, compared to Far transfer in which the two contexts are less similar.
- Positive Transfer, which describes how learning in one context facilitates learning in a different context, while Negative Transfer describes how a learning experience in one context inhibits learning in another.
- Low Road Transfer, which describes the transfer of skills to a level of automaticity in other contexts.

Reality Show Research

Hyperauthenticity

In addition to the careful following of viewer shares and Nielson ratings of shows like *American Idol* and comparisons of viewer participation to that of voters in presidential elections, research on reality television shows focus on a show's appeal, a viewer's vicarious identification with the protagonist contestant, and the resulting sensation of a heightened, real-time reality (Rose & Wood, 2005).

In their exploration of the popularity of television reality shows, researchers Rose and Wood (Ibid) determined that reality TV shows appeal to a viewer's desire to blend fact with fantasy, which leads to a more sensational and engaging experience they call "hyperauthenticity":

We argue consumers blend fantastic elements of programming with indexical elements connected to their lived experiences to create a form of self-referential hyperauthenticity," which draws from the more exaggerated experiences of the contestant/stars in the reality shows (Ibid).

Inflated Reality and Pedagogy

Research by Pontius (2008) on the effects of reality television viewing on the viewers' perception of reality concurs with Rose and Woods' concept of "hyperauthenticity." Pontius' research involved asking participants to rate the reality or likelihood of a list of various events. Those who watched reality shows immediately prior to completing the ratings demonstrated an inflated sense of the reality in comparison to those who were asked to rate the reality of the same events without watching reality show clips. The relationship of a sense of inflated reality with levels of viewer participation in reality shows through voting and blogging has not yet been examined, but may suggest insight into factors related to motivation, self-efficacy, and learning transference.

One educational researcher, Ames (2007), has suggested that the pedagogical value of *American Idol* is beyond hyperauthenticity and contestant identification, and lies instead in encouraging viewers to develop and practice skills in discrimination and evaluation:

We might think that Americans are eager to celebrate talented young people who can thumb their noses at the older generation and thus exorcise the lingering resentment so many harbor from being graded and evaluated in the classroom. But what *American Idol* reveals instead is a veritable hunger for realistic evaluation. In a world full of people rating themselves highly, audiences seem to long for the enforcement of standards of taste and judgment.

In effect, Ames points to the value of Social Learning in *American Idol*, which calls for its viewers to set and maintain agreed-upon standards for evaluation, in this case, of the *American Idol* contestants.

This research explored if the Social Learning, hyperauthenticity, and self-efficacy created by *American Idol* interferes with or contributes to the motivation, attitude, and behaviors of viewers as voters in a presidential election.

Methods

To explore how the popularity of the broadcast television show *American Idol* and factors of hyperauthenticity and viewer participation may have lead to the unintended transference of learning to voting behaviors, this research examined the voting behaviors of those who watched *Idol*, voted in *Idol*, and participated in related online forums. This research compared the extent to which participants did or did not participate or view *American Idol* with their previous and current presidential election voting behaviors and attitudes. This research also compared participants' involvement in social networking sites, expectations prior to the outcome of the presidential election, as well as possible contributing demographical factors such as age, gender, and level of education.

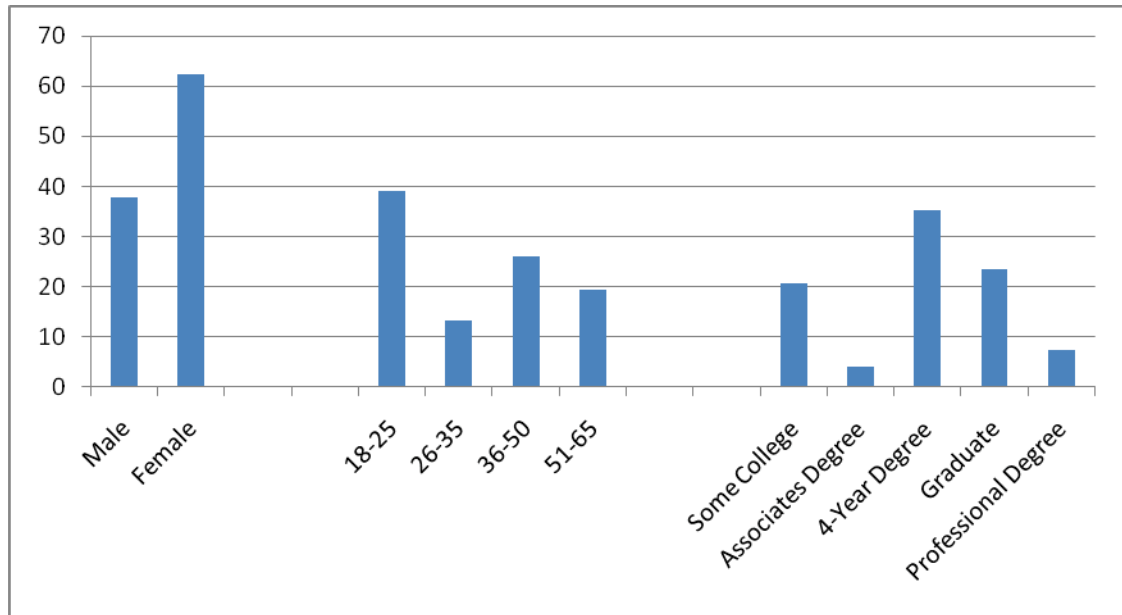
Data was collected through an online survey. The survey also asked participants if they voted in the previous and most recent presidential election, and the extent to which they were involved in related online communities. In an attempt for disperse geographic representation, respondents to the online survey were recruited through online newspaper classified ads throughout the United States, through postings to various volunteer listings in geographically disperse Craigslist city forums, and through blogs, discussion boards, Facebook groups, and webpages dedicated to *American Idol* news and fans.

Data from the survey was analyzed for correlative effects of participation in *American Idol* voting and voting in a presidential election, and by comparing variables such as gender, age, online community participation, and voting behaviors to determine relationships. Findings from the data are not generalizable, but rather based on the participants available and the time of the study.

Data

Idol Viewers

Table 2. Profile of an American Idol Watcher



TV viewing habits of all of those who participated in this study, indicate that

- 14% never watched *Idol*
- 86% watched *Idol* at least once
- 62.3 % of the respondents who watched *Idol* are women

From the data, the following *American Idol* viewer profile emerged:

- 39.1% of the respondents who watched *Idol* are age 18-25
- 13.2% are 26-35
- 25.9% are 36-50
- 19.5% are 51-65

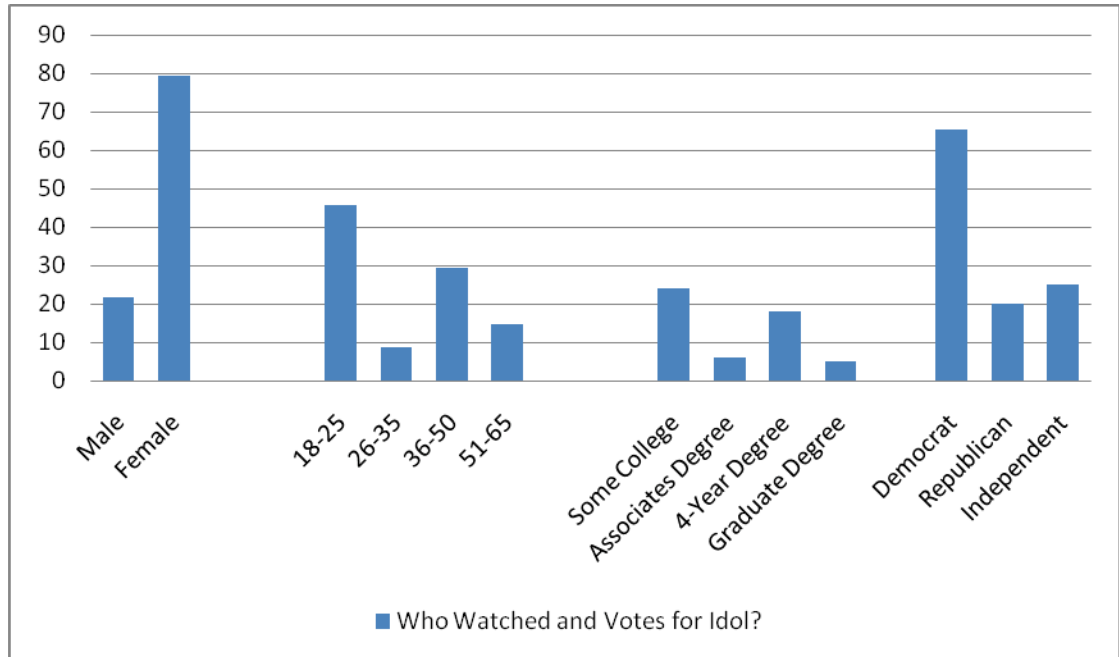
- 35.3% have a 4-year college degree
- 20.6% have some college
 - 4.1% have an associate’s degree
 - 23.4% have a graduate degree
 - 7.3% have a professional degree

In terms of online behaviors related to the TV show, data indicate that of those who ever watched *Idol*:

- 45.8% visited online *Idol* sites
- 22.8% posted to *Idol* discussion boards
- 31% participated in online *Idol* polls

Voting Behaviors

Table 3. Profile of an American Idol Voting Participant



Data on *Idol* watchers who vote for their favorite contestant indicate the following:

- 42.7% of all of the respondents who watched *Idol* also voted for their favorite contestant
- 78.7 % of the respondents who voted for their *Idol* are women

44.3% of the respondents who voted for their *Idol* are age 18-25

- 8.2% are 26-35
- 29.5% are 36-50
- 16.4% are 51-65
- 1.6% are over 65

- 26.2% have a 4-year college degree
- 23.9% have some college
 - 6.0% have an associate’s degree
 - 17.9% have a graduate degree
 - 6.0% have a professional degree

In terms of voting behaviors for *Idol* watchers compared to all respondents:

Table 4. Voting Behaviors of Idol Watchers

	<i>Idol</i> watchers	All respondents
Voted for <i>Idol</i>	42.7%	37.4%
Voted in Presidential Primary	60.7%	63.3%
Voted in Presidential Election	85.4%	87.5%
Visited Online Sites About 2008 Presidential Candidates	93.5%	94.4%
Participated in Online Polls for 2008 Presidential Candidates	63%	61.2%
Posted to Discussions About 2008 Presidential Candidates	26.3%	26.7%

Of those who voted for both *American Idol* and in the 2008 presidential election...

- 65.4% were Democrats
- 17.9% were Republicans
- 25% were Independents

Voting Behaviors of Idol Watchers

- 78.3%% of all respondents who voted for *Idol* voted in the 2008 presidential election
- 69.9% of all of the respondents voted for *Idol* and in the 2004 presidential election, compared to 71.9% of all respondents

This suggests that participation in the TV show had no effect on whether or not a person voted in the presidential election. Furthermore, data indicate that while people who voted for their favorite *American Idol* may have participated in online resources about the contestants, they were more active in using similar resources for 2008 presidential candidates, but at a rate that was no different from people who didn’t vote for contestants on the TV show.

Online Behaviors

Table 5. A Comparison of Online Behaviors for Idol Voters and US Presidential Election Voters

	<i>Idol</i> Voters		All 2008 Presidential Voters
	For <i>Idol</i> Contestants	For the 2008 Presidential Candidates	
Visited Online Sites	76.1%	94%	95.2%
Participated in Online Polls	58.2%	71.6%	60%
Participated in Online Discussion Boards	41.2%	27.3%	27.2%
Voted for Their Favorite	100%	78.3%	100%

Online Behaviors of All Respondents

- 87.5% of all respondents voted in the 2008 presidential election
- 95.2% of all respondents who voted in the 2008 presidential election visited online sites to learn about 2008 presidential candidates
- 27.2% of all respondents who voted in the 2008 presidential election who posted to online discussion boards about 2008 presidential candidates
- 60% of all respondents who voted in the 2008 presidential election participated in online polls for 2008 presidential candidates

Online Behaviors of People Who Voted for Idol and in the Presidential Election

- 94% of those respondents who voted for *Idol* visited online sites to learn about 2008 presidential candidates
- 27.3% of those respondents who voted for *Idol* posted to online discussion boards about 2008 presidential candidates
- 71.6% of those respondents who voted for *Idol* participated in online polls for 2008 presidential candidates

Online Participation by Groups

Data for this study was to determine a relationship between voting for a reality TV contestant and voting for a US presidential candidate, and between online activity for a reality TV show and a presidential election; however data also provide information on online behaviors, which may be useful in making decisions for tools to use in a virtual learning environment or any type of information campaign. What follows is a breakdown of online behaviors by gender and demographic. This data indicates that:

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- While most groups were likely to go online for information about a presidential candidate at the same rate, females ages 18-25 are more likely to go to a site for a reality TV contestant
- Females 18-25 were also more likely to post to reality TV discussion boards
- Males were less likely to post to discussion boards in general than females
- Most groups were likely to participate in online polls about a political candidate, but males in general were less likely to participate in online polls
- Participants 18-25 were more eager to participate in online polls, particularly for a reality TV show