

*American Idol: Audience Reaction and Behaviors*

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Abstract

*American Idol* is a unique cultural phenomenon in that it cuts across all demographics, from gender and age to those who are culturally and technologically savvy versus the folks looking for some old-fashioned entertainment to relax to for the night. It is not just a reality television program, but a perfect intersection of programming and promotion, both by the producers and the artists themselves, taking advantage of an eager public, using tried-and-true sensationalistic and suspenseful tactics to get viewers to watch and participate. This paper argues that *American Idol* stands apart because it is one of the few shows that inspire such elevated levels of fan involvement while simultaneously encouraging passive viewing. *American Idol* is the only television show that paradoxically allows viewers to be rabid consumers of its product without necessarily watching the actual program itself.

In this paper I further explore how the “values” communicated through the show binds its community of viewers. It is able to have such a large and divergent fan base because it courts both the people who prefer it as light, family-friendly entertainment, since there are no murky ethical, violent, or sexual situations, and those who take gleeful pleasure in denouncing the talentless and reveling in the nasty comments made by the judges. The show’s easy accessibility, in both format and taste, is its undeniable strength, and it is these contradictions that make *American Idol* so incredibly successful.

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### ***American Idol*: Audience Reaction and Behaviors**

*American Idol* is the subject of mass adoration, critique, and general obsession for millions of Americans for the five months that it airs, and as the season reaches its climax every May, it often seems as if the entire nation is whipped into a frenzy trying to figure out the winner of the competition. In the midst of this mania, it can be hard to see that there are indeed people who do not care about the results of a television game show, since *American Idol* reaches heights of fandom that are practically impossible to dream. The show has become more than just a television show when offhand statistics are given about the amount of voters for *American Idol* compared to any governmental election, and editorials are written about how the show is either ushering in a new wave of family entertainment or causing the downfall of society. Considering that *American Idol* has completely changed the music industry and has also transformed the television industry (the network that airs it, Fox, makes its schedule around the show) and has introduced a whole legion of songwriters and singers to a large public, it has indeed shaped popular culture, just by the large amounts of people it reaches on a weekly basis, and many of these people do not watch the show, they just absorb it by osmosis.

### **Reality Television and Community Construction**

This immensely popular Fox program is the only show on television currently that courts audience participation; in fact, the entire outcome of the show is predicated on finding out exactly what the audience wants from a pop star. It is the brainchild of Brit Simon Fuller, whose 19 Entertainment Group is active in the music industry and is the talent agency responsible for the backing and branding of all the *Idols* in the world. The show was originally broadcast in the United Kingdom in 2001 but was quickly adapted to

an American audience, premiering in the summer of 2002. Combining elements of an old-fashioned variety show with a contest of singers, mixed in with a cavalcade of judges, adding in a modern twist of technology, where the audience can vote for their favorites and in turn, vote out those they do not think worthy of the title, the show has since reached cultural relevancy in a way few programs have just in its scope. Even those who do not watch the show are aware of the effects of the program, knowing that at certain times of the year they will be barraged by the singles, songs, and sound bites of the contestants and of the fans.

As *American Idol* is broadcast twice consecutively every week from January to May on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, there is ample opportunity to catch a glimpse of the contestants and to feel that you are plugged in, regardless of how much actual viewing time you put in. The Tuesday broadcast revolves around the contestants' "back story," their lives back home, and their performances, where the audience votes, by text message or phone, for their favorites. The next day the votes are tallied and the lowest vote-getter is booted off. The show starts off with several audition rounds before showcasing finalists in February, which is slowly whittled down until there is a top twelve in March, when each week someone leaves.

*American Idol* is by far the most-watched show on television. According to Nielsen Media Research, the show averages over 30,427,000 viewers a week for its 2006 season between its Tuesday and Wednesday night airings, over 5 million more than the second most-watched show, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (Season-to-date by viewers: 2005 - 2006 season through 05/07/06, 2006). The ratings for this particular season, its fifth, have jumped 15 percent, at least in the first episodes. Reasons for this unusual

explosion are not definitive, but are being attributed to first season winner Kelly Clarkson's enormous success in the last year, the show's entrenchment into the culture, and the surge of blogs and other media outlets that have covered the show in far more depth, complexity, and regularity than before.

While there is some argument as to what the title really means besides being crowned the winner of a particular season, *American Idol* has become more than a cultural phenomenon. It might be easy to suggest that just because a television show gets high ratings it is a phenomenon, but that is not the case. Indeed, my research initially wanted to reflect the growing online community of watchers in relation to voters of the show, to explore the unique relationship this television show has because it is so interactive. The media trumpets nearly every aspect of the show, but is *American Idol* really as big as they say it is? My research, on one level, has lead me to answer no. Although *American Idol* might seem to be the biggest television show currently on the air, in terms of viewers, in terms of influence, in terms of watercooler discussion both off- and online, it is in some ways a mediated construction. The media fuels the appetite for *Idol* by adding more and more analysis and content, hoping to reach a bigger pool of people, even those who do not watch the show, and that is crucial.

But researching behavior patterns for *American Idol* watchers is not limited to voting; indeed it is inevitable that many watchers of the show do not vote, for one reason or another. I also investigated how viewers see their opinions in regard to others, whether those are their friends or family with whom they watch the show with, the larger public, the judges, or an Internet community. Does a fan base of a particular show constitute a community? Reading survey responses and articles in the press, it was hard not to answer

yes, because all were written with a tone expecting the audience to be made up of eager fans, hungry for new information or analysis. While there is reference to particular performers or episodes, it is expected that the audience does not need an explanation of what happened or who they are talking about beyond a cursory note, adding fuel to the hypothesis that the increasing media attention to the show fosters the feeling that there is a close community out there of attentive watchers, and that it is indeed a wide-reaching spectacle.

Research on reality television reveals that one aspect of a community is constructed around the structure of language, and while there isn't much of a specific language in terms of the show itself, there is a fundamental understanding of the participants, judges, and background of how the show runs. Fandoms must have a level of gossip, or linguistic markers, to associate themselves as belonging to that group, but so far none exists to define this particular group of watchers. Those who are involved with the show as part of an online community feel intimately more connected with the show in that they have a real impact. When the show is over, it is these viewers who follow the participants' lives long after their TV one is over, because they are usually intensely loyal (Sella, 2002), even if they have become disillusioned. They still feel a sense of connection, and do not want to squander their past passion and time spent. Even within studies of reality television, community is built around the particular conventions of the specific show, including characters and places within that context, not as a whole within the genre. Many of the studies discussing *Survivor* or *Big Brother* were not directly correlative with *American Idol* because of the different formats of the programs. While

*Survivor* is still a popular show by Nielsen standards, much of its buzz and cultural relevance has worn off since its inception in the summer of 2000.

Reality television is defined as “programs that film real people as they live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives, as these events occur.” The show must have “people portraying themselves (i.e., not actors or public figures performing roles) ...without a script, with events placed in a narrative context, for the primary purpose of viewer entertainment.” (Nabi, Biely, Morgan, & Stitt, 2003, 304) It “stress[es] the actions and emotions of real people, often using a combination of ‘authentic’ and staged images...with a mix of real-life soap and game-show elements” (Biltreyst, 2004, 7). Because this show is primarily an entertainment contest, it is a subgenre of reality, since it does not impose unnatural surroundings for a narrative to play out but instead combines elements of different types of programs.

What is noteworthy of *American Idol* is its continued ability to draw a large number of people, especially to inspire such ardent fandom of particular performers. These voters are extremely enthusiastic about their favorite, and mobilize on his or her behalf. These People, as Linda Holmes (2004) refers to them in her article on the show’s voting process, are rabid, and like many obsessive fans, do not see past the love their contestant has garnered.

Academic research was often taken from the standpoint of a fan trying to understand a particular response to a phenomenon. Reality television especially invites audience response, even when it is not implicitly interactive like *American Idol*. Unlike other television genres, the spectacle of reality invites viewers to take part, trying to understand contestants’ motivations and attracts discourse and analysis on the outcomes,

because of their somewhat staged vibe. The fact that those on television are not acting is a considerable drawing point, and people watch with the knowledge that those on the television wanted to make themselves a spectacle (Nabi et al, 2003). It is also true that a good portion of the appeal of this program has to do with its inherently contrived dynamic that the audience is supposed to be conned, in a way, in that they are meant to understand the staging is meant for their benefit and that they are supposed to see through it (Andrejevic, 2003).

### **Effect on Popular Culture: Values and Ideology**

Any show that has such a massive audience will inevitably have an effect upon the larger culture, although that can be hard to measure concretely. *American Idol* transmits many values, and is uniquely positioned as the mainstream show that is bringing back the notion of family viewing, with its something-for-everyone vibe, and indeed that is reflected in its demographics. Yet others scorn the show's cruelty in the form of Simon Cowell, the major judge and one of the executive producers. He is an integral part of the program, because his criticisms are often the highlight for many viewers and can be the deciding factor in those who advance in rounds. Taste and style are other merits that are debated endlessly in the popular press, because in the end that is the arbiter for many voters, and that is highly subjective. Because the show is so inherently mainstream, it is Middle America that guides the results, and those that feel "out of touch" with the prevailing wisdom often react in anger, especially if you do not consider yourself part or above that description. Middle American values, at least seen on *American Idol*, transmit the kind of bland, fun, wholesome cheer that guides the song selections. Popular music from all decades is selected, essentially reusing the Top 40

standards that are so beloved. Offbeat, weird or less well-known recordings are usually rejected, and song choices are vetted by the producers before sung by the contestants, even though they get to choose what they want to perform. This is done so as not to offend or alienate the audience, because of course viewers want to see familiar songs sung.

There are complaints that in order to keep the show “safe” in its Middle American values, there is a dearth of originality and real diversity in terms of song selections, styles, and contestants, and that those that veer from a norm are hurt by the audience. Bland mediocrity is celebrated, a kind of “televisual wallpaper, something to watch with half an eye as you eat dinner, IM your friends and chat on the phone” (Bonné, 2005). It is this type of half-viewing that also lends the show its mainstream reputation because it is not necessary to be fully vested in the show to understand it.

It is clear by the large viewers—and the growing viewership—that *American Idol* reasserts the belief in the American dream by striving to reward “essentially decent people...around the nasty, debasing climb to the top that has become standard practice for modern musicians” (Bonné, 2005). Having plucky, likeable contestants and song choices is a way of hooking viewers just as much as watching the judges sneer and preen. Ideology in *American Idol* is not something that is necessarily overtly broadcast, and there are indeed contradictions between contestants and opposing viewpoints, aside from taste. The “family-friendly” aspect of the show is indeed debated, with those who find it perfect family entertainment because it offers heartwarming stories and no sex and violence, with little to offend, at least in the traditional mode, and those who find it incredibly nasty and vulgar in the comments made.

## Viewers' Responses: Survey and Interview Data

My original thesis was going to connect online activity with voting, how audience participation affects voters and viewers' response to *American Idol*. Upon reading through my surveys, however, I found that significant online activity was minimal at best, and I did not have enough data to investigate my thesis. I was able to categorize viewers' response to the show especially in regard to their behavior watching the program, the reasons why they watched it, and the effect the show had in terms of infiltration.

Although I had wanted to look at the development of online associations with the show regarding specific community markers, I still found plenty of revelations in terms of why people were drawn to *American Idol*, their reactions and beliefs regarding the authenticity of the judges and the impact of outsider opinions on their own viewpoints.

One of the questions I sought answers to was whether or not participation in an online forum increased the odds of voting for a candidate on *American Idol*; that is, if outside participation lead to more direct participation for the show, and how did this influence their voting habits. But I also wanted to see how many viewers who watched out of my sample track the show on the Internet and are involved in discussion forums. In order to properly answer the first question, which was not one of my original questions on the subject, I would have had to survey individuals who directly participated on web forums. I did not go that route. Instead, I asked 52 random individuals who watched the show, ranging from teenagers to those in their sixties, about their viewing habits regarding the program. In that way, those chosen were self-selected, because I made sure that those answering the survey were in some way *American Idol* watchers. One of the failures of my survey was that I did not define what a regular watcher is; I left that up to

the individual. Many who answered me with “sometimes” or “kind of” or “occasionally” I let take the survey. The majority of my individuals were students at a mid-sized college in New Jersey, and this obviously skewed the votes, because their viewing habits varied based on their workload for the week, and many watched more when school was not in session or before they had come to college.

Virtually no one listed that they were a member of any type of website that followed the program. A few even took offense that they would ever bother to spend their time dissecting the show online with strangers: “No!”, but these were people in their 40s or 50s, an older generation that did not understand the point. The most popular website that people consulted about the show was obviously *American Idol*’s official website, but I did not find out why they went there. Presumably, it was because the website was the most obvious and visible to watchers of the show, and they would go there to get more information on the contestants and results.

As someone who is highly aware of the television viewing community especially in regard to online fandom, it came as quite a surprise to me that so many other people are either unaware or do not care for the practice. While at some level I knew this to be true, the survey results came back so strongly for the idea that although this is a show with a large, ardent fan base, there are still plenty of people who prefer to keep their love under wraps. I did have at least one person whisper to me how much they loved the show, but did not want to shout it, for fear of humiliation. This is increasingly considered odd; my interviewee does not believe there is much of a stigma left for the show because its viewership is so large, but it highlights that in our own little world we can still feel like outsiders if we do not know others who share the same passion. Of course, despite the

show being immensely popular, cutting across all ages, there are still plenty of those out there who do not watch, and it often took me several tries to find a person who was able to do the survey.

During the course of surveying others, I realized that there were questions that were confusing or unnecessary, and had I the opportunity to reword them I would have clarified certain questions. My research, and indeed my interview, supported the theme that there are indeed several different types of viewers for the show, watching for many reasons. That might be above all the most important factor for the show, and the key to its success: that it can please so many different types of people.

For my interview I wanted someone who knows the show intimately, inside and out, yet also critiques it. I emailed several critics on various websites, each with a body of criticism pertaining to the show in their name. I received only one response, from Jacob A. Clifton, a recapper for the website Television Without Pity. TWoP, as it is known, is very popular within the television and television fandom world, where paid writers recap episodes of different series in-depth, with a particularly snarky bend to them. The recaps are supported by thousands of fans posting in forums on detailed topics. He emphasized, among other things, the different audiences involved with the show, its heightened Web and cultural presence, and reasons behind its runaway success.

Like demographics for the show, my surveys reflected an interest in all types of people from all age groups, although obviously the majority were young viewers because of the type of people I was exposed to. Of my 52 respondents, 69% were female, which was not surprising. This gender breakdown reflects somewhat the actual demographic breakdown of the show itself. While there has been a 15% increase in ratings this season,

only 4% of respondents started watching this year, with the majority (46%) watching since season one in 2002. But one quarter of respondents started the following season, undoubtedly because they were introduced to the show and wanted to see what all the fuss was about. Six people gave a performer's name as the reason they started watching, the most going to season one winner Kelly Clarkson. Although only a relatively small amount (6 people, 12%) listed "buzz" or outside media as the reason why they started watching, it can be inferred that while that was not the main reason it was a contributing factor, since so many respondents watched because someone else either introduced the show to them or talked them into watching.

While my focus originally was supposed to be on the voting behaviors of the audience, I found that so much other information I gathered took precedence in terms of importance. Voting behavior, in fact, became secondary to other responses. Many people, true to fandom, championed their particular current contestant, even though I did not ask anything specific regarding seasons except for when they started watching. These responses either completely annihilated one contestant (one girl bashed Kellie Pickler every chance she got) or backed another ("I love Chris!"), each proudly defending their tastes or insulting those who somehow voted for "some stupid person" they feel is representing them. Identity, connecting to a contestant, is extremely important to the contestants, the audience, and the executive producers, all of whom work to get people to like a specific performer. Those that felt that contestants who were stupid or untalented and got high votes were very disgruntled with the system. Yet it is clear from many critics that those initially chosen by the judges are meant to be a microcosm of America:

“the world’s most public focus group, a kind of small-screen test to see which singers play best with the audience” (Aurthur, 2004).

The key to any successful television show is the degree in which the audience finds the characters relatable. Although many of the “characters”, in this case contestants, revolve season to season, their relationship to the characters becomes fundamental. Using the family-friendly example, it is clear that although the show offers different ideologies it is still able to transmit a relatable set of experiences for the viewer, and because they are able to pick and choose what contestant represents them the show is able to garner such a large fanbase. Experience is both subjective and the truth, and because *American Idol* is a show fundamentally about gauging tastes and public attitudes it has been able to showcase the red state/blue state divide more than anything else.

### **The Appeal of *American Idol***

These competing ideologies, now being debated, point to how seriously people take the show. While many critics, both professional and amateur, discuss the show with sarcasm, wit, and with a general fun attitude, they all take a lot of time and energy to discuss it, lending it a serious vibe. But there is still a large portion, many of whom watch the show regularly, that deride it: its contestants, premise, songs, its very being. *American Idol*’s appeal falls in so many different and overlapping camps that it is impossible to pinpoint a definite viewer. Jacob, as he is known, believes that because of its enormous ratings it has transcended what is usually defined as a cult viewership, which is what really makes fandom. The “element of critique”<sup>1</sup> is certainly a large draw, one that makes the press constantly feed off each other. It invites anyone to be a fan and to purport their opinions and a definitive way of reading the culture at large, and when disappointed, to

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<sup>1</sup> Interview.

rant angrily at others. The element of competition, of picking a side, of formulation that “the other” is worthless is a notable pastime for many viewers, and indeed for a good portion of Americans. Of thirty-three respondents, 63% answered that they liked to rag on the performers, that it was a draw for them. Yet the exact same number also listed that they liked to support the contestants, to see the talented ones in the bunch.

Agency, in that the viewers are courted in the sense that the show always tries to assert that the power is in the hands of the voters, not the producers or the judges, is a concept strengthened by the nature of the show. Everyone else involved in the show merely is a pawn to help guide public opinion seems to be the underlying ideology. But is this true? The viewers may be lead to believe they have all the power and a lot of decision-making skill, but the show, naturally, does have a degree of manipulation intact within its premise. The judges themselves, by being arbiters of taste and skill, as well as picking the contestants out from an audition pool from which clips are shown earlier in the season, offer up a construction of what is considered worthy of being an *American Idol*, and implicitly, sellable to an audience. An excellent example of the agency in which the viewers have was Taylor Hicks winning the title in 2006; Simon Cowell famously announced that he did not believe that the crooner, older-than-the-average *Idol* contestant, would ever make it. After all, the winner, signed to Cowell’s company, is there to make money, and by extension, money for Cowell and his associates. It pays for him to root on contestants that he feels will be the most marketable.

There is also a definite aspect in the audience that watches the show because it is family-friendly. While this was ostensibly a reason listed by those surveyed who were not teenagers or young adults, many of those in that age range listed watching it with their

family or as becoming addicted through their parents. Thirty-five people, 67%, listed this as a draw. In fact, *The New York Times* published an editorial recently decrying the show's family-friendly vibe, feeling that it was not only not pushing family values but it was sending a "truly dreadful message to millions of young viewers about the proper way to treat fellow human beings" ("American Awful", 2005). With the tone of the show becoming harsher and harsher, which it is clear many celebrate—"American Idol has made it safe to say something uncomplimentary about another's talent without a thousand voices whining about the 'cruelty' of being 'mean'" (Tucker, 2002)—there has become a definite divide in those who watch it for the pleasure of mocking those that are inferior to themselves, the stupid, deluded, and vulnerable folks who go on the show in the misguided belief that they have talent, and those that genuinely like the performances, the suspense of watching who will be eliminated each week, and the glamour of watching a singer in the making. Either way, the show is immensely entertaining to both parties.

However, what is contradictory in some of the survey results is how many people felt bored by the show, yet continued to watch it anyway. A rule of thumb regarding television for decades, especially since the advent of the remote control and the explosion of cable, was that if a program offended, disturbed, or just plain bored the viewer then he would not bother to stick around because there was always something better to watch. *American Idol's* huge viewership, as well as the survey results and the interview, attest to the peculiar notion that in this case this is not always true. *American Idol* is the type of show that can be watched passively; indeed, the show's format practically invites casual viewers. The show's popularity has sunk programs running opposite it—most notably the Grammy Awards and the Olympics—and many viewers switch between *American Idol*

and other programs, do their homework, go online or engage in other behaviors during the course of the program. What facilitates this move is the familiarity with the format, the extended commercials, filler (in the form of chitchat between contestants, judges), and repetitiveness in regard to the contestants' personalities and back story. The frequency in airings and the fact that results are easily available, especially with the creation and the word-of-mouth of websites like You Tube, which offers clips of the show for free viewing, makes it ok if a fan misses parts or even entire episodes; it is easy for non-watchers to know a good deal about the program already without ever watching a single episode in its entirety.

### ***American Idol* as a Microcosm of America in Terms of Taste**

What my research highlighted for me without me even being aware of it at first, and what Jacob emphasized, was that there is a definite fractioning of the audience in terms of being plugged in. It is easy enough for fans and for Internet-savvy people to think that everyone thinks or acts like them; indeed, I fell under this trap by assuming that I would get a decent amount of respondents to say that they participated in online chat forums, when only one person out of fifty-two said yes. Especially with the explosion of media and research available on *American Idol*, in the forms of blogs, critiques, recaps, and just plain mainstream media outlets to explore the show with other passionate viewers, it can seem hard at first to reconcile this accessibility with those who are unaware of it or reject it outright. Again, those that laughed or mocked the idea of going onto websites to find out more information, let alone to share their responses with strangers, were generally older fans, a different generation that would not quite understand the way youngsters today do. Jacob underscores the fact that America is really

a nation divided by technology, those that are plugged in and those that are not. He likens it to a comparison between “home theatre” and “clock radio” types, and it is very, very hard to reconcile one with the other. Some might call it a red-state/blue-state divide, in that many of the southern contestants get flack from those in the north, for example. The respondent who criticized Kellie Pickler, a young, gullible blonde whose shtick was that she was southern and naïve did not work with many people, who found her too out there, clueless and disconnected from the culture to last. But this also illustrates why contestants like that often do very well, leaving a certain segment of the audience perplexed as to why anyone on Earth voted for them. These type of contestants, those who epitomized the “clock radio” viewers, are usually ripped apart in the popular press, further emphasizing the divide between those that are connected, that feel they are hip and somehow have better standards and elevated tastes than those that are not following the media’s consumption of the show. “It’s best described as two separate conversations, both of which tend to find the other horrifying. I do think that the non-internet viewership (as well as non-internet America) is vastly larger, and each year more tired of being overlooked,” writes Jacob. It’s easy to forget that this other America even exists for those “home theatre” types, simply because they do not get the attention and the coverage that the other side does.

### **Criticism, Critique, and the Underside of *American Idol***

The three aspects that get the most coverage are the contestants, the voting, and the judges. Respondents’ reactions to the judges varied depending upon if they were casual viewers or regular viewers. Sixty-five percent of regular viewers trusted the judges’ comments, especially Simon, because he is “dead on” and “tells the truth”. By

contrast, many in the same group derided Paula for being “too nice” and effectively not judging, because she liked everybody. Many people in this category recognized the experience of the judges’ collectively and often supported them because they agreed with their statements. However, the divide between those that consider themselves casual viewers also agreed with the consensus on Simon, that “he tells it like it is,” while Randy and Paula were essentially useless. Although only 20% (4 out of 20 people who considered themselves casual viewers) respected the judges, twice that amount was unsure or gave a definite no. In essence, the results flipped regarding whether you saw yourself a casual or regular viewer, but in their individual assessments, they tended to agree either that Simon was right and the others worthless, or that Simon was too “mean” and “harsh” to be really effective, and that he is too polarizing and argumentative to be helpful. Some viewers, obviously, respected one but not the others; this generally fell to liking Simon but not the other two. However, there were some participants—those that fell into the regular viewers category—that realized the authenticity of the judges, even if they did not necessarily agree with them. One participant who said no realized that despite the fact that he nearly always disagreed with them (probably an overriding factor on why he didn’t respect them), he understood the reason why: “Probably because I am not [as] music savvy as they are.” This is something Jacob understood implicitly, and something that does not get across to many viewers: “That they come from very different areas of the industry (Randy as a producer, Paula as a performer, and Simon as a businessman) that are all important to the way things work—and their comments tend to stay in those areas.” He adds that the audience, regardless of whether they are aware of the judges’ backgrounds, which have been widely publicized, tend to respect them less

because judging is an inherently subjective art form: “Simon in particular pays a price...because he speaks for the part of the industry that the fewest people understand, and thus he appears highly arbitrary or ‘mean’ with his responses.”

There are viewers, of course, who understand the role the producers have and realize that the judges play up their respective roles but nonetheless fill a certain requirement and are there for a reason. But the veracity of their comments is largely dependent upon how they view the show. I asked the question, “Do you believe that the results are rigged, that the producers/judges pick out favorites before and “work” the audience accordingly?,” and 41% of regular viewers responded in the negative. (The question is flawed, because it is asking multiple questions in a single sentence that really deserve to be broken down and clarified.) Jacob, like many watchers, can see subtleties in the production that might call attention to a certain performer or create a mood that might sway voting in one arena. Because my question was flawed, the results aren’t exactly accurate.

The music business aspect of the program is the one least understood, but it is an important detail to note. While only a few respondents mentioned music or the music business as a factor to watching the show (18%), the music industry is the backbone of the program, because the winner receives the be-all and end-all for aspiring musicians: a recording contract. But *American Idol* “is first and foremost a television show, set within the television industry, than an organ of the music industry” (interview) and that drives the show to stay within the realm of making it entertaining television, not to make a perfect performer. That’s a side effect. The fact that a good portion of respondents preferred Simon as a judge is a testament to his veracity as an arbiter of good musical

taste with regard to the talent on display: “It becomes more clear that he’s speaking with the voice of business and business acumen, and not with malice [more and more as each season continues]” (interview). Writes Ken Tucker (2002), *Entertainment Weekly’s* television critic (note it is not the music critic that weighs in on the show until after a contestant’s CD is released), “[Simon] is just doing what a rock critic or an A&R man at a record label does: assess the quality and commercial viability of a musician.” After all, writes one survey participant, “Why shouldn’t he be tough? After all, it *IS* his recording contract.”

*American Idol*, unlike many other television shows, courts a passive viewer, and that is one reason for its phenomenal success. It has the ability to connect large amounts of viewers with widely different tastes under one umbrella, and makes it easy for those who are busy or distracted to follow the show with minimal effort. Usually passive viewing is a negative trait, derided by critics because it does not encourage thinking. Yet in this instance it is an asset to the show, enabling those that only have time or the care to follow the show intermittently to do so, and the proliferation of blogs, websites and other related content available only intensifies this need.

However, what struck me the most was the sharp divide between the reasons behind watching *American Idol*, how the show has managed to take pure American themes and reflect back the nation’s culture. While so many lament a red-state/blue-state divide, an argument can be made that this show not only promotes this thesis but also cultivates it by showcasing singers who are big in their respective small towns but are naïve and at odds with some other level of the culture. This is spread to the outside influence of technology, and the fact that those that are plugged in rein a superiority

complex over those that don't, hoping to influence voters and trends through the mainstream media.

Community is above all a construct of identity through communication with other people sharing the same values and traits as yourself. *American Idol's* immense popularity and phenomenal success, not just in the realm of television, constitutes a community, if not its own culture, just by the sheer number of watchers. But what might be originally subjected to the labeling of subculture isn't necessarily true, and while the show's audience naturally splinters off into fan base cultures and the like, those that watch the show, even briefly, tend to invest some of their time into finding out every week what greater America thinks. Watching *American Idol*, being involved in this community, even if it is just discussing the show with your friends, is a way of being connected to the rest of the country in a way few things are able to do today. That is why it is often so hard to understand why a particular contestant does so well, because such scope in such a large country with so many different regions and beliefs is often hard to tie together, and *American Idol* tries to do that. It succeeds.

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### American Idol Questionnaire

This survey is **anonymous**. When answering, please **be as specific as possible**. If you select other, please **fill in a response**. It will help me greatly.

Gender:            Male            Female

Age:    10-17    18-25    26-35    36-45    46-60    61+

1. When did you start watching the show? (If you can, list season/year)

2. Why?

3. Do you consider yourself a regular viewer? How often do you watch?

4. How do you (generally) watch the show?

- a. alone
- b. with friends/roommates
- c. my family
- d. other: \_\_\_\_\_

5. How does this impact your opinion of the performers?

6. Do you participate in any type of discussion afterward? Yes    No

7. What do you like about the program? Answer as many that apply.

- a. It's family friendly. I can watch it with pretty much anyone.
- b. The performers, because I get to mock how crappy everyone is.
- c. The performers, because I get to see the real undiscovered talent out there.
- d. The contest aspect of it. I get to decide who the next American Idol is!
- e. The judges. They're hysterical.
- f. It's easy viewing, nice to wind down to.
- g. Everyone I know watches it, so I do too to keep up.
- h. Theme nights!
- i. Guest judges. A fresh perspective.
- j. The host.
- k. The format/rules.
- l. I can vote!

m. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

8. What changes would you make? What do you dislike? Please answer all that apply.

- a. The contestants. They don't know how to pick them.
- b. The judges. They're boring, stale, and aren't judging at all.
- c. The format/rules.
- d. There are too many commercials and too much filler. Put in more singing!
- e. Shorten the season. It's too hard to follow the rounds of finals and semifinals.
- f. The timeslot/how often it's on.
- g. Eliminate theme nights.
- h. Eliminate guest judges.
- i. The voting aspect/voting restrictions.
- j. Other: \_\_\_\_\_

9. Do you vote? (If answer no skip numbers 10, 12, 13)

Yes                  No                  Sometimes

10. What method do you use? Check as many that apply.

- a. Home phone/landline
- b. Cell phone
- c. text

11. Why do you vote or not vote?

12. How often do you vote?

13. What determines your vote? Please put down as many as apply.

- a. judge's comments (positive)
- b. judge's comments (negative)
- c. personality of the performer
- d. style of the performer (vocally/musical talent)
- e. style of the performer (looks/fashion)
- f. My favorite is losing and needs help
- g. I'm trying to eliminate the untalented

- h. My favorite is winning and needs to stay on top.  
 i. Other: \_\_\_\_\_
14. Do you go on to any American Idol-related websites? If so, which ones?
- No, I do not.
  - Television Without Pity
  - American Idol Official Site (American Idol.com/idolonfox.com)
  - Idol Forums
  - AOL/MSN/Google/Yahoo! (or other provider) Chat forums
  - General TV sites (TV.com, Zap2it, etc.)
  - Dial Idol
  - Idol Me
  - Big Boards
  - Reality TV Talk
  - blogs like TVGasm, idolblog.com, etc.
  - Those affiliated with newspapers or magazines, like EW.com or People.com
  - other. \_\_\_\_\_
15. Are you a member of any forums and post opinions online? If yes, please list. If no, skip questions 16 and 17.
16. How long have you been doing this?
17. How does this experience impact your viewing?
18. Do you do any other activity while you are watching the show? Please circle as many that apply.
- talk
  - talk on the phone
  - do homework
  - do chores/other errands
  - surf other channels
  - talk/surf online
  - other: \_\_\_\_\_
19. If you do these other activities during the course of the program, when do you do them? Circle as many that apply.
- the entire show
  - only during commercials

- c. about halfway through
  - d. when I get bored
  - e. other: \_\_\_\_\_
20. Do any of the above behaviors (voting, chatting, surfing, etc.) change as the season continues? Why or why not?
21. Do you believe that the results are rigged, that the producers/judges pick out favorites before and “work” the audience accordingly? Yes No  
Sometimes
22. What makes you think so?
23. Do you think the votes matter? Yes No
24. How do you determine a favorite?
25. Do you consider yourself a “rabid” fan, one of the fanbase? Why or why not?
26. Do you vote after your favorite has been eliminated? Does it matter?
27. Do you respect the judges’ criticisms? Why or why not?

**28. Any other comments? If you are an occasional viewer, or have skipped seasons, please let me know. Thank you for taking my long survey, it is greatly appreciated.**

American Idol Survey Breakdown

1. Gender Breakdown

Female 36 69%  
 Male 10 19%  
 Omitted 5  
 Total 52

2. Age Breakdown

10-17 1  
 18-25 44 84.6%  
 26-35 0  
 36-44 3 5.7%  
 46-60 1  
 61+ 1

1. When did you start watching?

Season 1 (2002) 24 46%  
 Season 2 (2003) 13 25%  
 Season 3 (2004) 5 10%  
 Season 4 (2005) 7 13.%  
 Season 5 (2006) 2 4%  
 Total 51  
 Omitted 1

2. Why? (Answers were categorized the following way.)

Performer 6 (Kelly Clarkson, S1 winner, listed 4 times; Ruben 2 and Clay were also given)  
 Music 4  
 Other people got them into the show (usually friends or family) 11  
 Interesting concept (“entertaining” “fun to watch” “funny” all fell under this category) 19  
 Heard from outside media/buzz appeal/popularity 6  
 Other (music industry, advertisements, stumbled across it) 4  
 Total 50  
 Omitted 2

3. Do you consider yourself a regular viewer?\*

Yes 33  
 No 19 (many people who said no were originally introduced to the show by other people, and they tended to concentrate their viewing on either the beginning of the season—the auditions—or the end, when the field had narrowed considerably.)

Many also, given the high population of young adults, said they watched the show more regularly before they entered college)

Total 52

21. Of those who do not consider themselves regular viewers, how many believe Do you believe that the results are rigged, that the producers/judges pick out favorites before and “work” the audience accordingly?

Yes 6 (don't feel their votes correspond with results; final song treatment is unequal; judges' comments, untalented left)

No 7 (not worth the scandal that would happen if rigged)

Sometimes 6 (pretty people left; judges' comments; results)

Total 19\*

9. Of those who do not consider themselves regular viewers, how many vote?

Yes 4

No 16

Total 20

23. Of those who do not consider themselves regular viewers, how many do believe the votes matter?

Yes 10

No 8

Sometimes 1

Omitted 1

Total 20

9. Of those who consider themselves regular viewers, how many vote?

Yes 15

No 17

Total 32

23. Of those who consider themselves regular viewers, how many believe the votes matter?

Yes 29

No 1

“little bit” 1

omitted 1

Total 32

24. How do you determine a favorite?

(Because this question was open-ended, many people had multiple responses; I categorized the following way.

Singing talent/ability 38

Personality 20

Performance 8

Appearance/looks 5

Songs chosen 5

Style 2

Other (included “energy” “judges” “stage presence” “versatility” “ability to make it in the pop world” “way they come across” “idol material” “attitude” “confidence” “votes”) 13

Omitted 1

27. For those who do not consider themselves regular viewers, do you respect the judges criticisms?\*

Yes 4

No 8

Somewhat 8

(Many fell into one of two camps—either to keep Simon because he “told the truth” and nix Paula and Randy for being useless, or those finding Simon too “mean” and “harsh” to be really effective.)

21. Do you believe that the results are rigged, that the producers/judges pick out favorites before and “work” the audience accordingly?

Regular Viewers

Yes 8

No 13

Sometimes 9

Omitted 2

Total 32

Not Regular

Yes 6

No 7

Sometimes 6

Maybe 1

Total 20

26. Do you vote after your favorite has been eliminated?

Not Regular

Yes 1

No 14

N/A 5

Total 20

Regular

Yes 8

No 11

N/A 7

Omitted 4

“rarely vote” 1

“he’s never been eliminated, nor will he!” 1

Total 32

## 13. What determines your vote?

## Regular

- a. judges' comments (positive) 8
  - b. judges' comments (negative) 5
  - c. personality of the performer 14
  - d. style of the performer (vocally/musical talent) 16
  - e. style of the performer (looks/fashion) 5
  - f. My favorite is losing and needs help 8
  - g. I'm trying to eliminate the untalented. 7
  - h. My favorite is winning and needs to stay on top.
  - i. Other 8
- Omitted 14  
Total 32

## Non-Regular

- a. judges' comments (positive) 2
  - b. judges' comments (negative) 1
  - c. personality of the performer 7
  - d. style of the performer (vocally/musical talent) 9
  - e. style of the performer (looks/fashion) 3
  - f. My favorite is losing and needs help 2
  - g. I'm trying to eliminate the untalented. 6
  - h. My favorite is winning and needs to stay on top. 3
  - i. Other
- Omitted 10  
Total 20

## 14. Do you go on to any American Idol-related websites? If so, which ones?

- a. None 36
- c (official site) 14
- d. (idol forums) 1
- g. dial idol 2
- k. blogs 1
- l. those affiliated with newspapers or magazines
- m. 1 (IMDB)

15-17. Only the IMDB guy was a member, on for a year, where he fuels his hatred of certain performers.

18. Do you do any other activity while you are watching the show? Please circle as many that apply.

(non-regular)

- a. talk 12
- b. talk on the phone 12

- c. do homework 9
- d. do chores/other errands 6
- e. surf other channels 13
- f. talk/surf online 10
- g. other: \_\_\_\_\_ 2

(regular)

- a. talk 20
- b. talk on the phone 8
- c. do homework 15
- d. do chores/other errands 4
- e. surf other channels 5
- f. talk/surf online 11
- g. other: \_\_\_\_\_ 2
- Omitted 1

19. If you do these other activities during the course of the program, when do you do them? Circle as many that apply.

Regular

- a. the entire show 9
- b. only during commercials 21
- c. about halfway through 0
- d. when I get bored 12
- e. other: \_\_\_\_\_ 2
- Omitted 2

Non-Regular

- a. the entire show 6
- b. only during commercials 12
- c. about halfway through 2
- d. when I get bored 11
- e. other: \_\_\_\_\_ 2

20. Do any of the above behaviors (voting, chatting, surfing, etc.) change as the season continues? Why or why not?

Regular

- Yes
- No