

Probing Question: Why do we love reality television?

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At this time of year, one can't help but notice those perennial signs of the changing seasons: the leaves begin to turn, the kids return to school, and the summer reality television shows -- "Jon & Kate Plus 8," "America's Got Talent" and "Whale Wars" -- give way to fall reality television shows, such as "The Amazing Race," "The Hills" and "Dancing with the Stars," among many others. The abundance of reality television has begun to seem as reliable as the seasons, with shows like "American Idol" more popular than ever and imitators proliferating on the cable channels.

But what is it about these shows that audiences find so compelling?

The reality genre has been around for a long time, with shows like "Cops" and MTV's "The Real World," said S. Shyam Sundar, distinguished professor of communications and founding director of the Media Effects Research Laboratory at Penn State, but the defining step came in 2002, when American Idol introduced audience interactivity.

"Shows like American Idol have completely changed how audiences watch television," Sundar said. In the past, television generally asked only that we sit back and relax as sitcoms and scripted dramas supplied passive entertainment. When the most popular show of the early '80s, "Dallas," aired its "Who Shot J.R.?" cliffhanger, television writers -- not viewers -- decided what would happen. Game shows such as "Jeopardy!" and "Family Feud" set "average Joe" contestants against one another, but never included the audience. And while you could dream of appearing on "The Real World" (or have nightmares about appearing on "Cops"), a barrier remained between stars and viewers.

The real change, said Sundar, came when the audience became part of the production.

"It's the tantalizing possibility of shaping the show that is offered to viewers week in and week out."

American Idol -- now in its seventh season and one of the highest rated shows in the history of television -- appeared at the perfect time, he said. Years of surfing the Web and playing video games have taught younger viewers to expect more interaction with their entertainment media. American Idol's voting via toll-free numbers and text messaging provides the television audience with a previously unheard-of level of influence.

Similar types of audience feedback have begun to appear outside of reality television, with news broadcasts and sports events especially taking advantage of text messaging interactivity, Sundar said. CNN

recently displayed Twitter responses during the presidential debates, for example. Even scripted dramas such as "Lost" often provide a degree of interactivity through complicated puzzles that viewers solve online.

Yet while reality shows have become ratings bonanzas ("Survivor" finales have rivaled the Superbowl), many viewers remain suspicious of their "reality." Virtually every episode of "American Idol" provokes online speculation about vote-rigging or unfair judging. "It's like televised wrestling where everyone generally knows that things are not as real as they seem," Sundar said. Strict adherence to "reality" is not part of the appeal.

"The non-fictional nature of reality television helps only to the degree to which it promises audience involvement," Sundar said. If "American Idol" sets audience members at odds with the show's producers (especially the acerbic Simon Cowell, who viewers love to hate), so much the better. Such passionate response marks a special kind of involvement that boosts ratings.

Reality TV shows without interactivity still have their appeal. Viewers can fantasize about becoming stars when watching ordinary people attain celebrity on shows like "Survivor."

However, the most appealing aspect of reality television, Sundar said, is its power to make audience members feel like part of the action. No longer mere couch potatoes, viewers join the creative production; the experience feels less like simply watching television and more like being part of a shared national project. "American Idol" is the most popular television show in America not because it produces stars, he said, but because it turns [audience](#) members into what they always wanted to be: star-makers.

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