

Predicting the Trends of 'American Idol'

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TiVo has made watching commercials unnecessary. Is it now trying to make watching reality shows a thing of the past, too?

Last month, TiVo said it would predict the loser on "American Idol" by using its own product, StopWatch, which monitors the fast-forwarding and rewinding patterns of 20,000 anonymous subscribers to gauge viewers' preferences.

The announcement signified yet another attempt to flout efforts by "American Idol" to keep its voting results secret. Predictive Web sites already exist, like DialIdol, which calculates the frequency of busy signals on the show's phone lines, and ZabaSearch, which tracks how often contestants' names are entered into search engines.

"American Idol" executives say they are not perturbed by these projection tools, which they view as positive reflections of the show's popularity, even though ratings are down 8 percent compared with the same time last year, according to Fox.

"There are very strict rules we need to abide by to make sure it is a competition, and the fairness of the competition is respected at all times," said Cécile Frot-Coutaz, an executive producer for the show. Even when outside predictions are accurate, she said, the show "is as much about the journey as it is about the endpoint."

Fortunately for "American Idol," the forecasts are often wrong. TiVo predicted on April 10, for example, that Syesha Mercado would be the next contestant eliminated; but Michael Johns was voted off, and Ms. Mercado is still going strong.

"I got to tell you, Murphy's Law strikes again," said Todd Juenger, a vice president at TiVo, adding that StopWatch had made four accurate predictions before making the incorrect one — the only one made public — and has continued to make accurate predictions, including forecasting the demise of Brooke White last Wednesday.

The idea, Mr. Juenger said, came from TiVo engineers who were fans and noticed that some singers made viewers hit the fast-forward button much more often than others.

But TiVo is late to the prediction party. DialIdol said that it had accurately predicted the winner of every "American Idol" season it had covered, but it gave only a range of possible losers.

Last week, for instance, Ms. White was one of three contestants whom DialIdol said were in a statistical dead heat for being voted off. (Jason Castro and David Archuleta were the others.)

"I think we've had one incorrect prediction this year," said James Hellriegel Jr., the creator of DialIdol, who said he built his automatic-dialing software program so he could vote while doing his laundry. "I'm not trying to undermine the 'Idol' system," he said. "I like to think I complement it."

Mr. Juenger said that TiVo had loftier ambitions for StopWatch. "We are already in conversation with political organizations to think about how they might use this type of data to monitor debates or even things like the evening news," he said.

Dave Della Terza, who runs the Web site Vote for the Worst, which aims to steer votes to certain singers, suggested why a TiVo prognosis failed.

"Just because they're watching them doesn't mean they're voting for them," he said. "There are people who would never vote for the bad performances, but will watch them over and over and laugh at them."

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