

Mass Communication Tapping into Participatory Culture

Exploring *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Britain's Got Talent*

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ABSTRACT

■ Exploring the vote-in formats *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Britain's Got Talent*, this article examines how mass communication is changing as a result of audience involvement via digital platforms. The central argument is that feedback opportunities provided by new technology represents new ways of connecting with the audience, and thus new challenges for the TV industry. ■

Key Words authenticity, Fan culture, ordinariness, participation, vote-in formats

Introduction

A key question in media research is how mass communication is changing as a result of fragmentation, digitalization and globalization, and to what degree established media institutions manage to incorporate the participatory culture that is increasingly evolving on social media platforms. The media industry increasingly invites individuals to respond and contribute via digital return channels such as the Internet and the mobile phone. For established media companies, there are strategic interests, such as platform expansion, direct income and audience loyalty, related to initiating responses from the audience (Enli, 2007; Winocur, 2003). In particular,

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vote-in formats have become a crucial factor in the TV industry's strategies to capture an increasingly fragmented audience, and to respond to the challenges from interactive online services (Ross, 2008).

In the context of current debates on the changing paradigm of mass communication, the two UK formats *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC) and *Britain's Got Talent* (ITV), illuminate the convergence between one-to-many communication and interactive communication. The formats are currently among the most successful entertainment shows worldwide, and combine features from the classic genres of broadcast show entertainment, gathering the nation in front of the TV screen, and genre features drawn from social media such as vote-in components and online forums for fan activities related to the TV programmes. The article explores the intersection of the dynamics of the 'old' mass communication paradigm and the new collaborative communication paradigm, and draws on analysis of the mass media's coverage and social media's engagement with two incidents in British *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Britain's Got Talent*.

The current changes in the relation between the media institutions and their audiences have been manifested in two specific media narratives evolving in the intersection between TV entertainment and public engagement. The first incident came subsequent to the announcement that the favourite contestant among the voting audience, former political correspondent John Sergeant, was quitting the BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing* towards the end of the sixth season. The second incident involves the global spread of the performance of the contestant Susan Boyle in the third season of ITV's *Britain's Got Talent*, giving her Internet stardom. The study draws on analysis of the actual programmes in which these incidents evolved, and of the subsequent media debates following the exit of John Sergeant and the Internet stardom of Susan Boyle. The cases are selected in order to illuminate the opportunities and challenges related to established mass media's expansion into the arena of social media. Before I present the analysis in detail, I discuss key theories on audience participation and authenticity in media portrayals of ordinary people.

Audience participation and authentic performance

A prominent theory of audience participation is based on a political and idealist critique of the institutional power of mass media, and the way access to the means of production has been concentrated in the hands of privileged media professionals. In this tradition, a key claim is that the audience should not be limited to receiving media content but should also be included in the production process (Brecht, 1979; Enzenberger, 1979)-

This idealist argument of empowering the people through media participation has been repeated in tandem with innovations of new communication technologies throughout the 20th century. Currently, expectations of empowerment are found in the potential of digitalization and convergence to include ordinary people in media production. To a degree, these expectations have been reflected in the contemporary online socializing, storytelling and redistribution of content diagnosed by Henry Jenkins (2006) as 'participatory culture'. As argued by Jenkins: 'Despite the rhetoric about "democratizing television", this shift is being driven by economic calculations and not by some broad mission to empower the public' (Jenkins, 2006: 243). Studies have shown that audience involvement is primarily identified in playful and uncommitted contexts of popular entertainment (Enli, 2007), and it is thus tempting to agree with Jenkins that playing with popular culture seems to be 'a lot more fun than playing with serious matters' (Jenkins, 2006: 246).

Through innovations based on audience involvement, broadcast media are tapping into the evolving 'participatory culture', connecting with the audience at a time when social media increasingly challenge the hegemony of traditional mass media. The popularity of reality-based formats is partly based on a general fascination for 'the authentic', 'the real' and 'the genuine' in contemporary culture (Dovey, 2000; Guignon, 2004). The audiences search for authentic moments in their engagement with reality-based programmes, even if partly aware of the format requirements (Hill, 2007; Kilborn, 2003). Dramaturgic features such as the monologue are used by the producers to signal authenticity through an 'ambiguous interplay of the pre-scripted and the non-scripted, individual and collective, preformed and non-preformed and fake and real' (Aslama and Panti, 2006: 181). The producers format, and to a degree manipulate, audience participation in order to make appealing television, and part of this process involves constructing narratives of ordinariness.

The media myths of ordinary people

The criteria for the stereotype of 'the ordinary person' are different in various genres, and while talk shows require tearful confessions and raw emotions (Grindstaff, 1997), the game show requires unexpected winners and impressive talent (Holmes, 2008; Whannel, 1992). In the latter genre, uneasiness and nervousness about being on television, and references to the contestant's everyday life, are explicitly exposed to connect with the audience (Clarke, 1987). The TV producers know that a genuine amateur performance increases the viewers' fascination with discovering a completely new talent.

Talent shows might be placed in the wider category of make-over television, which offers various forms of transformation, and provides contemporary fairy tales. The stories of transformation do not solely include ordinary people, celebrities are also offered opportunities to seek new challenges through media participation. Transformation occurs by turning ordinary people into celebrities, and celebrities into ordinary people (Heller, 2007: 8).

For ordinary people, there are specific criteria that make them appear as more 'ordinary', such as a specific class background. As a rule, participants from lower socio-cultural classes are regarded as more ordinary than people from the middle class. In an article on the reality-TV format *Pop Idol*, Su Holmes (2004) argues that class backgrounds are used as a 'guarantor of authenticity'. Holmes refers to the 'American Dream', and how ordinariness plays a central role in the success myth of rising from the underprivileged class, and entering the privileged class (Holmes, 2004). Moreover, the class dimension is a prominent factor in talk shows, partly because people from the working class are overrepresented as participants and perform more unconditionally on television (Grindstaff, 1997).

The storytelling of individual empowerment through transformations of everyday people into stars corresponds with tabloid media's focus on supporting the people in their struggle against the elites. Stuart Hall (1981) succinctly defined anti-elitism as: 'The people versus the power bloc'. Popular culture creates an alliance with audiences as advocates for everyday people, against the abuse of power found among the elites. A bottom-up perspective is often a key motive in tabloid narratives, and popular journalism is typically in favour of the people and in opposition to the elites (Langer, 1998; Sparks, 1992; van Zoonen, 2005).

A key character in the narratives examined in this study is the hero or heroine who represents the struggling everyday person, who is thus expected to fight against prejudice, and win against all odds. In the following, I first analyse a narrative in which the people's hero withdrew from the show before the finals, and second, a narrative in which the heroine who expected to win, ended up as second in the finals. The narratives have their origins in the vote-in formats *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Britain's Got Talent* respectively, and involve the UK celebrity John Sergeant and the amateur singer Susan Boyle.

John Sergeant - audience feedback challenging institutional control

The entertainment show *Strictly Come Dancing* was launched on BBC1 in 2004, and has since then been aired regularly in prime time as one of

BBC's most successful interactive programmes. The format is based on a competition between pairs, comprised of a celebrity and a professional dancer, who each week compete to impress a panel of judges and the viewing public in order to survive potential elimination. The format was a continuation of the long-running BBC series ballroom dancing competition *Come Dancing* (1949–98). When relaunched in 2004, the format was turned into a global franchise (*Dancing With the Stars*),¹ and framed as the BBC's flagship interactive programme (phone-in voting). The relaunch reflected the significant tendencies of globalization, participation and convergence in the television industry of the 21st century.

Providing viewers cumulative influence over editorial decision-making involves an element of risk-taking, because the voting might diverge from the institutional intentions for the programme. During the 2008 autumn season of *Strictly Come Dancing*, the judges and the audiences disagreed in their evaluation of the performances of the 64-year-old former political journalist John Sergeant. The producers had invited Sergeant to be a contestant three times before he accepted the invitation, even though he defined himself as a 'self-confessed non-dancer' (Sergeant, 2008). During the competition, the judges repeatedly placed Sergeant at the bottom of the list, while the public votes kept him in the competition. The judges worried that the show was becoming more about the celebrities' personality than the dancing. Arlene Philips, one of the judges in the programme, explicitly criticized the public voting: 'We've never had anyone this bad going this far. It's frustrating. I really hope John does not win, because that sort of changes what the show is about' (Pryor, 2008). However, Diana Jones, founder of the fan group 'We Love John Sergeant', argued against the skill-focused judging: 'It is entertainment and I watch it for the entertainment. I don't know whether their footwork is fantastic. I believe in going for the underdog' (cited in Dowell, 2008). Approximately 1.7 million people voted for Sergeant in the last programme in which he participated, implying that almost a third of the votes supported 'the underdog' (Johnston, 2008). The contestant himself argued: 'The show's judges are out of sync with the views of ordinary people' (cited in Dowell, 2008).

Shortly after this debate, Sergeant announced that he had left *Strictly Come Dancing*, claiming that he would not risk winning the competition: 'Even for me, that would be a joke too far', he was quoted as saying. For John Sergeant's fans, however, this was not a joke. Speculations about the BBC forcing Sergeant to quit the show resulted in a public discussion about how the broadcaster demonstrated institutional power against the will of a voting audience. The BBC was forced to close the online *Strictly Come Dancing* message board for 11 hours after becoming overwhelmed by

the number of complaints it had received (more than 170,000 messages). According to Tom van Aardt, the BBC's Communities editor, no previous topic had ever generated that amount of audience feedback: 'In my experience this is the most comments we've ever had on a topic' (cited in Martin, 2008). The BBC also received formal complaints from the viewers: more than 2300 people complained to the Corporation about the former political correspondent's departure (Martin, 2008). The viewers additionally expressed their disappointment through social network media, such as the Facebook group: 'John Sergeant to win *Strictly Come Dancing* 2008' (1469 members). The posts included threats of boycott: 'I will no longer vote. I urge everyone else to boycott the vote as well.' The episode was named 'Sergeant-gate', and widely debated among bloggers and commentators in online publications. In an attempt to put pressure on political and institutional decision-makers, John Tilley, a John Sergeant supporter, set up the site: bringbackjohn.co.uk: 'Once our petition has received 50,000 signatures we will personally deliver it to the man we hold responsible — the director general of the BBC, Mark Thompson. And if that doesn't work we'll take it to Prime Minister Gordon Brown.'

The *Strictly Come Dancing* controversy came as a result of an incident that might be interpreted as institutional arrogance in relation to its publics, and a disdain of ordinary people's judgement. Even though the official version is that John Sergeant decided to quit, the BBC has admitted editorial reasons for not regarding him as a worthy winner. BBC1 controller, Jay Hunt, argued that contestant Sergeant's popularity came into conflict with professional standards of preformed skills and talent for dancing. Hunt claimed that the BBC had produced a show to educate the nation in ballroom technique (Sherwin, 2008). This conflicts with the fact that it was the producers who, over the course of two years, had convinced John Sergeant to accept the invitation to enter the competition. The BBC's aim to select a professionally worthy winner contradicts with the inclusion of participants who are not selected on the basis of their dancing skills, but on the basis of their audience appeal, which in turn shows an ambivalence in the public broadcaster's implementation of participatory formats.

Paradoxically, 'Sergeant-gate' provided valuable publicity and branding effect for the BBC and *Strictly Come Dancing*. The extensive media coverage, fuelled by fan activities and public engagement, resulted in increased ratings for the show: the viewing increased by 300,000 compared to the previous episode of the series, making this a record audience for the season (Johnston, 2008). The viewers are not solely turned into providers of vote-in feedback, but also as an extended arm of publicity management and incognito PR agents for the media company. And in

return, their voting turned out to have limited impact on the final outcome of the competition. *Strictly Come Dancing*?, John Sergeant story did not provide the preferred narrative of the authentic everyday person who wins against all odds and fills the role of anti-establishment hero. Barely six months later, however, the British audience was again introduced to a narrative created by the TV industry and fuelled by public engagement: the performance of Susan Boyle in *Britain's Got Talent*.

Susan Boyle — Internet stardom challenging ordinariness

Contrasting with the competition among established celebrities in BBC's *Strictly Come Dancing*, the talent show *Britain's Got Talent* on ITV1 is based on an idea of turning ordinary people into stars. The format is designed as a search for Britain's best talent act featuring singers, dancers, comedians and other talents of all ages. The winners get a prize of £100,000 sterling and an opportunity to perform at the Royal Variety Performance in front of members of the Royal Family. *Britain's Got Talent* is based on the Fremantlemedia format *Got Talent*, which had its debut on the US channel NBC in 2006.² The UK version, *Britain's Got Talent*, premiered on the British commercial broadcaster ITV in 2007.

The 2009 spring season began on 11 April with a sensational performance by the 47-year-old contestant Susan Boyle, who was introduced as a working-class woman who was currently unemployed and who had no apparent 'star quality'. Boyle admitted to being nervous and disclosed intimate information about herself seemingly spontaneously, and thus fitted the stereotype of an ordinary person. The contrast between the prejudice and scepticism initially displayed in the eyes of the studio audience and the three judges, and the singing talent she disclosed once she started singing created a dramatic climax to the episode. Susan Boyle's performance was characterized by one of the judges as 'the biggest surprise' and 'the greatest discovery' in the history of the TV show. Boyle was a personification of the idea that everyone can 'make it' in a talent show, and that there might be a star in the most everyday person. The 'Susan Boyle story' is produced within a well-established dramaturgy, and the structural narrative is fairly similar to the story of the first winner of *Britain's Got Talent*. Paul Potts, a plain mobile phone salesman from Wales surprised the judges and the audience with his classical singing in 2007. The tale of the unexpected talent of an everyday person is thus a prominent generic formula in contemporary talent shows.

Even though *Britain's Got Talent* had its highest launch figures in 2009, the show experienced a 'Susan Boyle-inspired ratings bounce' and

the following episode reached nearly 12 million viewers, improving market share by 6 percentage points (Holmwood, 2009)- The peak audience, during the final episode, was nearly 19 million viewers, which is rare in an age of fragmentation and thus contradicts such claims as 'the end of mass media'.

The broadcaster ITV also had increased traffic on its website itv.com after the news of the singing talent Susan Boyle had spread globally, and US citizens were responsible for a significant share of the increase in online visitors. Boyle's success had massive appeal in the US, and was widely covered by US television shows such as *Oprah Winfrey*, *Good Morning America* and *Larry King Live*. This transnational appeal might be explained by a US fascination for British peculiarity and class divergence, in addition to a resonance with the 'American Dream'.

British and US TV channels were, however, not necessarily the major drivers in the spread of the 'Susan Boyle story'. The global interest in Boyle should be also understood as a result of ordinary people's engagement in the story, and their activity in social media networks. Henry Jenkins (2009) terms the phenomenon as 'spreadability in action', because the users discovered Susan Boyle before the TV channels, as they acted on a desire to share their discovery. In less than a week, the video of her performance on the show had been viewed more than 47 million times on the video-sharing website YouTube, and approached 'levels of some of the biggest viral hits of all-time' (Ostrow, 2009). By 1 May 2009 the Susan Boyle performance was ranked as the fifth most-watched video on YouTube, with 186 million viewings (van Grove, 2009). The TV performance by Susan Boyle was also widely discussed on the microblogging site Twitter, where it peaked as one of the top five most-debated subjects in April 2009, and on the social network site Facebook (1,719,641 fans was registered by May 2009).³ Social media transformed Susan Boyle from a plain middle-aged woman to an Internet star and a global phenomenon.

After her sensational performance, the online debates were dominated by praise of Boyle's ordinariness and the contrast she made with glamorous and image-based artists. In this context, Susan Boyle was regarded as an icon, and her success represented hope for everyday people, and for a general protest against a commercialized and standardized culture industry. There were, however, also critical comments questioning Susan Boyle's authenticity as a genuine 'everyday person' — claiming that she was not a true amateur because she had performed publicly previously — such as the article on the website *Televised Revolution*: 'Television, cynicism and you: SUSAN BOYLE IS A FAKE!' (Band, 2009). In the period between her first appearance on *Britain's Got Talent* and the

competition's final, Susan Boyle had become a celebrity and stories about her were widely covered in the news media. In tandem with her global stardom, the critique against Boyle increased and her status as a heroine started to splinter. In particular, stories about prima donna behaviour damaged her image; she had been known as the 'hairy angel' and when she dyed her hair, dressed glamorously and tweezed her eyebrows her credibility as an everywoman was questioned. The tabloid newspapers additionally reported two episodes where she had lost her temper publicly, in one of which she had sworn at two journalists. In the days before the finals, it became obvious that Susan Boyle had experienced instant stardom, but was quickly being introduced to the downsides of celebrity. Susan Boyle had been the nation's favourite, but ended up second in the finals to the dance group Diversity. A possible explanation for Boyle getting 20.2 percent of the public votes, while the winner got 24.9 percent, is that the thrill of experiencing untouched talent and supporting the outsider had vanished after she 'virally spread'. The new dynamic between mass communication and social media networks has imposed a situation in which the broadcaster has control over the production process, but not over the distribution process.

The new dynamics of broadcast media and social media networks

How does the analysis of the John Sergeant and Susan Boyle cases inform the discussion on the current status of mass communication in relation to participatory culture? First, the study has demonstrated that social networks and one-to-one communication are challenging the one-to-many communication model of broadcast media. Social media have provided non-professionals with tools for reproduction and redistribution of media content, and thus imposed changes to the relation between mass media companies and the audience. The phenomenon of Susan Boyle is a key example of how established mass media increasingly work in tandem with social media. The rapid spread of the online video illustrates the 'strengths of the weak ties' and the power of 'collective intelligence' in the digital age, and how established media companies are tapping into this new culture of digital sharing. Broadcast companies are becoming increasingly aware of the potential of social media as publicity management, and thus might incorporate Jenkins' (2009) catchy slogan 'if it doesn't spread, it's dead' in their strategies. Thus, the trend of sharing through digital networks provides a range of new opportunities for 'old' media to reposition themselves in relation to a participating and interacting audience.

A second insight drawn from the study is that the audience's user patterns, and in turn their expectations of influence, have changed. Besides being more active in the sense of responding more to media content through voting, discussing and redistributing, the audience is less national and more global in the sense that even a country-specific show like *Britain's Got Talent* does not stop at the UK border, but spreads internationally through social media. The tension between the global spread of social media and the national limitations of broadcast media is illustrated by the fact that foreign citizens, particularly from the US, engaged in the Boyle story and wanted to vote for Susan Boyle in the talent show. As shown in the quote below, the fan sites received questions about foreign voting on their discussion boards, but had to disappoint the non-British fans:

Sorry, all you people outside the United Kingdom, but you definitely WON'T be able to vote (voting lines will only accept calls originating in the UK). The next best thing you can do is to ask a UK-based 'proxy' to vote on your behalf. (SusanBoyleFanClub.com, 5 May 2009)

Traditional cultural boundaries between national publics and global publics are blurring, and national broadcasters are no longer capable of controlling the reach of their content. The global reproduction and redistribution seem to change the broadcasters' functions as national institutions, and turn them into players in a global arena of digital sharing.

A third finding is that traditional broadcasters face editorial dilemmas of including audience feedback, such as vote-in features, in programming. The study has demonstrated that people want to engage and interact with media when they are offered entertainment and playful activities. In return, the audience expects recognition by the broadcaster expressed as a certain degree of influence on programming. This might, however, be problematic for established broadcasters accustomed to editorial control and autonomy and relatively autonomous decision-making. For public service broadcasters in particular, the inclusion of audience-produced content, even at the level of vote-in formats, might contradict editorial standards and institutional obligations. The controversy following the exit of John Sergeant is a core example of conflicting interests between PBS legitimacy as a promoter of professional dancing, and the voting viewers' desire for entertainment and their fascination with the outsider.

A common trait of the TV shows *Britain's Got Talent* and *Strictly Come Dancing* is that that the participants undergo a process of transformation with the viewers as witnesses. The television productions provide opportunities for individuals who want to investigate their potential in new areas and doing so before a mass audience, and the TV formats might be

regarded as a catalyst for personal development. For the viewers, the preferred narrative is to watch extraordinary talent performed by ordinary people, and an authenticity story of non-glamorous, everyday people who succeed against all odds. To a degree, the story is perhaps creating a false image of opportunities for ordinary people that are not really realistic. The stories of the outsider who fights against an establishment represented by professional judges and a prejudiced music industry might be interpreted as a anti-elitist political statement. In addition to the playfulness inherent in the entertainment aspects of the stories, they also include an aspect of protest against the decisions of the dominating forces in commercial culture such as the beauty-terror regime in the Susan Boyle case and the institutional arrogance in the John Sergeant case.

To conclude, this article has illuminated changes in the ways people communicate with traditional mass media. Factors such as digitalization, convergence and globalization have made audiences more involved in the production and distribution of mass-mediated content. The increasing collaboration between established media and social media, blurring boundaries between professionals and producers on the one hand and reproducing and redistributing audiences on the other. The fact that Susan Boyle is described as a 'U-tube star' demonstrates that established media institutions are not the only mass distributors, and that the BBC enters the territory of social media by offering interactive service opportunities and online communities. In sum, this new dynamic increases the total media pressure on individuals such as Susan Boyle. In the new situation, the old and new media are mutually feeding each other with material, in a circle of exchange where there is a mutual interest in engaging ordinary people, either as viewers, redistributors or storytellers. In this collaboration between old and new media platforms, one of the most successful examples of raw material is the story about authentic, ordinary people who struggle against the elite establishment.

Notes

1. *Dancing With the Stars* was developed by the British public broadcaster BBC and sold internationally by the institution's commercial arm, BBC Worldwide. *Dancing With the Stars* was by January 2009 adapted by more than 40 countries, including Australia, Russia, Norway, United States, Chile, India and Japan, and was in 2008 ranked as the most-watched programme worldwide.
2. Since 2006, the format *Got Talent* has been adapted in more than 30 countries, including Australia, China, Israel, South Africa, Germany and Russia
3. Among the online fan sites dedicated to Susan Boyle, offering video clips, product sales and discussion forums is susan-boyle.com with the motto: 'Never judge a book by its cover'.

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