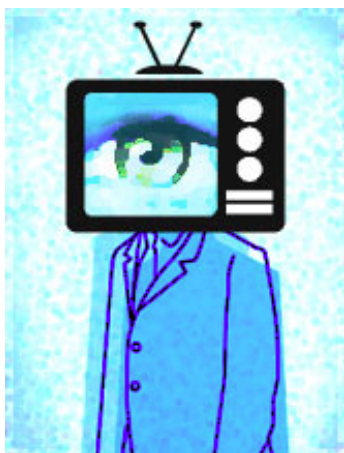[<< Return to article](#)

Convergence Is Reality

Who would have anticipated that reality television would turn out to be the killer app of media convergence?

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[Digital Renaissance](#)
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Imagine *Survivor* as a giant cat and mouse game being played between producers and consumers.

The producers plant clues, foreshadow results, and offer hints in interviews, trying to create enormous public interest they can harvest for their advertisers. Week by week, the eagerly anticipated results are fodder for water cooler discussions and get reported as news—even on rival networks.

Staff Illustration.

The *Survivor* winner is one of the most tightly guarded secrets in the country. Some say that the show's producer, Mark Burnett, engages in misinformation campaigns, planting misleading information in the coding of its Web sites trying to throw smoke in viewers' eyes. Contestants and crew face enormous fines if they get caught spilling the beans.

The audience ranks among one of the largest in broadcast television—and it is hellbent on ferreting out the results. The most hardcore fans, a contingent known as the "spoilers," go to extraordinary lengths. They use satellite photographs to locate the base camp. They form teams that try to surmise the identities of the contestants before they are officially announced. Someone posts a message reporting that the guy in a neighboring cubicle has disappeared for two months without explanation and returned thinner, tan, and scratching insect bites like

crazy. These spoilers spread out across the Web, seeking every bit of information they can find on the suspect (and given how little privacy remains, they can find a lot). They watch the taped episodes, frame by frame, looking for hidden information. They know *Survivor* backwards and forwards, and they are determined to figure it out—together—before the producers reveal what happened.

The French cyberspace theorist Pierre Levy has used the term "collective intelligence" to describe the massive-scale information gathering and processing activities that have emerged in Web communities. On the Internet, he argues, people harness their individual expertise toward shared goals and objectives: "No one knows everything, everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity." *Survivor* spoiling is collective intelligence in action.

Into this intense competition enters ChillOne, a lurker who has never previously posted to a discussion list. On vacation in Brazil, he stumbles into a detailed account of who is going to get bumped from *Survivor: Amazon* and posts it on the Internet. To some, ChillOne is a hero, the best spoiler of all time. For others, he is a villain, the guy who destroyed the game for everyone else. These disappointed viewers, it turns out, were more invested in the hunt than in knowing the results. Either way, he has changed the rules forever.

 You may think reality television is for bottom feeders—even if you secretly, while on the road, flip onto one of the shows in your hotel room and hope your coworkers or family members don't find out. Well, if you only watch these shows on television, you are missing the bulk of what the excitement is about. Reality television has become the testing ground by which the media companies experiment with new approaches to marketing and consumer relations. Reality TV is also the space where consumers get the chance to test new ways of interacting with media content. In fact, the media "convergence" that has been so long predicted for the better part of the last decade is here right now—and reality television shows us what it looks like.

The early experiments with interactive television have largely been written off as failures. Maybe you got a chance to answer some trivia questions about the football teams you were watching and win a prize. Big deal—radio stations had been doing that for years. Critics argued that most of us simply want to sit back and watch television rather than interact with it. The success of reality TV is forcing the media industry to rethink that conclusion. The shift is from real-time interaction toward asynchronous participation.

On an average week, Fox received more than 20 million telephone calls or text-messages casting verdicts on the *American Idol* contestants. This makes the phone companies happy because they have been trying to find a way to get Americans more excited about text messaging, which hasn't taken off in the United States the way it has in Asia and Northern Europe. *Survivor* has rarely dropped out of the top 10 highest rated shows since it debuted several years ago; *American Idol* commanded two of the top five slots throughout the important May sweeps period. This makes advertisers happy, because early research suggests that actively engaged consumers recall advertising messages better than more casual viewers do. Reality television has become one of the primary testing grounds for product-placements and program-specific spots at a time when the industry is searching for new models of advertising that can grab the attention of commercial-skipping consumers. People stopped and watched when the would-be Idols sang and danced their way through Ford advertisements.

And this makes networks happy because these shows represent the last gasp of appointment-based television. Viewers want to watch these shows when they are

aired so that they can talk about them the next day with their friends. Such shows yield enormous amounts of free publicity since each booted contestant gets covered as news by the morning shows, talk radio, newspapers, magazines, and various Web sites (and of course, in many cases, the networks cross-promote them across the various divisions of their own conglomerates).

These shows are also being used to determine whether consumers are willing to pay to download additional content. Series like *Survivor* offer as much as 45 minutes of additional content each week to Web subscribers. *Big Brother*, as aired on television, represents simply the digest version of a pay-per-access programming flow that runs 24-7 on the Internet. Contrary to what you may have heard, reality television—especially those series with large casts and international production schedules—is not necessarily cheaper to produce than fictional programming (and it typically doesn't yield secondary revenues through reruns and syndication). It does, however, leave behind a surplus of material at no additional production costs that can be marketed via other channels.

The appeal of reality television rests on the idea that average men and women might have exotic adventures, win a million dollars, or attract the interest of a major record company. This approach represents the major media companies' efforts to box and sell the participatory culture that has taken shape around newer media technologies. Would-be contestants need to download their applications off the Internet and to have access to camcorders to make their videotaped auditions. (Acknowledging the digital divide, some of the shows have created audition centers in major cities where contestants who lack home production equipment can come and record their tapes.) These contestants remain celebrities in the online realm even after they have faded from view on traditional media.

Reality television content seems ideally designed for the kinds of social interactions that thrive in online discussions—gossip, speculation, and investigation. These shows provides consumers with a steady stream of ethical dramas, as contestants are forced to make choices about whom to trust and what limits to set on their own behavior and such debates, among people from very different backgrounds, provides fodder for lots of discussion list exchanges and more than a few flame wars.

Historically, gossip has facilitated group cohesiveness, both by providing opportunities for intimacy and as offering examples for testing and reasserting moral norms. As we move into the virtual communities of the Net, the focus shifts away from gossiping about people we know face-to-face and toward people we know mostly via the media. Into that space steps the complex, often contradictory figures who appear on reality television. We can argue about whether Joe Millionaire picked the right woman, about whether it's OK to lie your way to success on *Survivor*, or about whether Clay, Ruben, or Kimberly sang best on *American Idol*.

Moreover, reality television series have a narrative complexity that rivals the best of the hour-long, serialized, ensemble dramas (*The West Wing, The Sopranos, Six Feet Under*). Their constant plot twists encourage speculation about likely future developments. And everywhere you look, reality television fans are using the Internet to expand their viewing experience. *Big Brother* fans, for example, set up shifts to monitor the 24-hour Internet feeds, making transcriptions of key

exchanges. They also pooled resources to hire planes to fly over the household bearing banners warning "house guests" about various schemes by the producers or the other contestants.

American Idol fans became adept at "gaming" the results—reporting back on which contestant lines are most congested, following online surveys to anticipate which contestants are badly in need of support, and thus putting their votes where they are most needed. The hotly contested outcome turned out to be almost as close as the 2000 presidential election, with the two finalists separated by a little more than a hundred thousand votes out of 24 million cast. In what could amount to a turning point in the history of U.S. telecommunications, the text message votes all got through and were counted—several million worth—whereas millions of telephone callers faced endless busy signals. And again, people used the Net to compare voting experiences and bitch about how they were shut out of the process.

The Web site The Smoking Gun (www.thesmokinggun.com) repeatedly "outed" *Idol* contestants who had criminal records, again and again forcing the program's producers to rework their plans. In response, some fans used the Web to rally support for the ousted contestants, trying to use grassroots activism to reverse decisions made in response to the Smoking Gun revelations. More traditional activist groups have launched letter-writing campaigns to protest what they see as racism in casting or homophobic banter on these programs. The discussion boards have become platforms for consumers to debate the commercialization of U.S. media and to organize protests against what they see as unethical practices by the producers.

Reality television is also inspiring its own fan fiction. One fan has created two seasons worth of imaginary all-star episodes of *Survivor* (with each episode some 40 or 50 pages long). When he has questions about how a particular contestant would respond to a plot development, he sends them e-mail seeking their advice.

In 1993, novelist, screenwriter, and television producer Michael Crichton wrote that "what we now understand as the mass media will be gone within 10 years. Vanished, without a trace."

Not quite. Hollywood and the networks are here to stay. But the future of television lies at the intersection between the corporate media's aggressive new marketing campaigns and the consumer's collaborative efforts to outwit, outplay, and outlast them.

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