

Why Britain needs the X Factor (and other useless reality TV shows)

Only a few years ago the main reason for buying a newspaper was to explore the goings on in the world. Of course this was before the days of 24-hour news channels that herald even the most innocuous item of news with massive red banners displaying the massive tagline:

BREAKING NEWS: The Duke of Edinburgh just Farted in the Sultan of Brunei's Face!

So now, what do we use the empty space in the newspapers for? Partly for semi-celebrities to write weekly columns on the daily rigours facing their highly lucrative lifestyles. Partly to examine the frailty of the current economic situation and to emphasise that it wasn't poor planning on the governmental side of things that led to the biggest stock market slump in recent times. It was actually those crooked banks. You remember that don't you? Boy! That was a hard eighteen months for me... Or not, in fact, if I had been better prepared, I could have bought myself a house. I qualify for a mortgage right now, the only problem being that I don't have nearly enough for the 10% deposit. Hold on; let me check down the back of the sofa. Nope, still not enough.

If you were one of the majority of the country who kept a job throughout the financial crisis (which due to the way this country operates means we're still technically in recession, despite the rest of the civilised 'first world' countries have made it out and are already recording growth again) you'd have found that things were cheaper to buy, mortgages were more difficult to get, but houses lost a lot of their value very quickly.

If you lost your job, my heart bleeds for you, it truly does, after all, it's not like anyone saw this coming... right?

I feel I must take this opportunity here to point out that the well-respected papers have never needed to cover celebrity 'news' in any great details. By this I mean The Times, The Guardian, The Independent and The Telegraph. The newspapers I refer to are known collectively as red tops or tabloids. (If you are wondering what sort of paper you read is classified as, open the front cover and if you see a nearly naked woman smiling back at you congratulations, you're reading a tabloid.)

So newspapers have trouble filling their pages with actual content. What's more, TV channels have trouble filling their 24-hour stations with erm... content? Not only are there single channels, there are multiple channels that are lacking programming. It should have been clear that if for example, ITV1 doesn't have a

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full schedule for 24-hours a day, 365(366) days a year, ITV2 shouldn't have been created. However, the answer to this problem was to arrive with an Orwellian name from none other than The Netherlands. Of course Big Brother, it's all so clear now, we have an hour or two long highlights program of the highlights of the last 24 hours shown every night. Not only that, but we can broadcast live for the remainder of the day. Then all of a sudden we had an explosion of the reality TV genre with dozens of shows with public integration as a key dynamic of the show.

Then Pop Idol was born, it was genius, promoting an effective battle of the bands to produce a pop star with which the public had already formed an emotional attachment. Fame Academy came and went. Then it was time for The X Factor. Easily the most successful of the reality 'talent' shows. It's spawned countless international versions and launched careers of a number of singers.

Not to mention filling in all of those column inches which were left empty by the introduction of news channels on TV. Whilst I dislike the majority of X Factor Contestants, I have indeed found myself watching this year. Whilst at first it was for nothing more at laughing at people who had been told all their life they could sing when they can't, but it gets better, they then start arguing that they've been hard done by with the decision that goes against them. It becomes, a case of well who needs you, I'll do it by myself and then you'll be sorry.

This is genius, showing people who can't sing being mocked and ridiculed and then showing a truly talented person. I keep mentioning the basics of humanity, and this is another one. People like watching other people getting ridiculed for doing something badly. It's called schadenfreude in German, but whatever it's called, the outcome is funny television.

The British social interaction has always been based on a number of scenes and conversation starters. Firstly, in a pub we have the ever traditional: "Did you see the match yesterday" which will always lead to a heated debate over which judgments the referee got wrong, what the problem with x player is, what you would have done in that situations. Discussions of what you'd do getting paid £75,000 a year let alone per week and so on.

In the office you have conversation starters such as "what did you get up to at the weekend?" when you walk in on Monday morning with a massive black eye and broken nose and I'm sure you can imagine where that conversation could lead. Personally, I can see topics being covered starting with sex touching on racism and finishing with a night in a police cell to sober up. Although, recently, it's become very much the "did you see The X Factor on Saturday/Sunday night?" "Can you believe that Simon sent it to deadlock" or "I really don't understand how Jedward didn't go out?"

The X Factor is the Marmite of modern TV. You either Love it or Hate it and there's about a 50/50 split of lovers to haters. I've hated every other year and for once, I can actually see true star potential within this current crop. I refer of course, to Olly Murs, whilst described by many as dull and lifeless, Olly has the makings of a star. He's a natural performer and in many ways is similar to Robbie

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Williams in terms of how he acts on stage. Now, the beautiful part is that aside from everything else that's going on in the world (The Public Inquiry into Iraq has just started and it has emerged that Tony Blair and George W. Bush Jr. may have entered into a pact to invade Iraq over a year before it actually went ahead.) people will still argue that my opinion is wrong as if it's the most important thing in the world. Day to day governance has been so far removed from the life of the normal folk that when there is finally something that they can have a say on (ala voting on The X Factor) it becomes the most important thing that's going on. This is another aspect of humanity that is also true. Everyone wants everything that they do to be important. This isn't even on a short-term basis. Everyone wants to have strangers turning up at their funeral saying how "so-and-so helped me when I needed it most and for that I'm always going to be thankful"

It sucks that they aren't the ones topping the charts, but are the first to say...

"Oh, I voted for Leona Lewis the whole way through. I just knew she was going to win" because then, they get to share in some of that limelight. Especially when discussing the live final with friends who were backing someone else.

Not only is the X Factor taking up prime real estate on weekend evening television, it also uses the empty space in the red top newspapers. It has become essential viewing for anyone who wishes to have a conversation the next day. Or for that matter, any one who wishes to read the entire newspaper. Or anyone who wants to listen to the radio and understand what's being said. Or anyone who wants to know who this new celebrity is and why they're famous.

The X Factor and other reality TV shows have become essential viewing if you want to talk to anyone the next day. It's an essential part of culture in the modern world where scripted programs are brought to a halt because of arguments over writers' earnings from DVD sales. There is nothing of the sort required for a reality show other than a general idea, a camera and a bunch of idiots although, they are sometimes talented, they are idiots nonetheless.