

'REALITY' AND THE PLEBISCITE

JOHN HARTLEY

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John Hartley is a Federation Fellow (Australian Research Council), and Research Director of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation, at Queensland University of Technology. He is a Distinguished Professor of QUT and was foundation dean of the Creative Industries Faculty. Previously he was head of the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University in Wales. He is the author of 15 books including *Creative Industries* (ed., Blackwell 2005), *A Short History of Cultural Studies* (Sage 2003), *The Indigenous Public Sphere* (with Alan McKee, Oxford 2000), *Uses of Television* (Routledge 1999) and *Popular Reality* (Arnold 1996). He is Editor of the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* (Sage). His research crosses the fields of media, cultural and journalism studies, and current ARC-funded projects include the uses of multimedia, consumer-led innovation, digital storytelling, creative industries in China, and youth internet radio.

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‘Politicotainment’

The very form of Kristina Riegert’s neologism says something about how the realms of politics and entertainment have crash-merged. The term itself is not a pretty sight, perhaps because it describes an unlikely amalgam; two opposing worlds whose ‘heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together,’ as Dr Johnson would have put it.¹ The resulting idea is counter-intuitive, since it seems to betray the essence of both of the originating terms. Surely entertainment is characterized by escapism; while politics ought not to be confused with private pleasure consumption? So says traditional political science, at any rate.

At the root of democratic politics is the vote. In the spirit of ‘politicotainment’ this chapter shows how the vote is faring in entertainment formats, especially ‘reality’ television, where it seems to be thriving, as if someone had pressed the refresh button on one of the oldest technologies of democracy.² The chapter opens (Part I) by arguing that ‘politicotainment’ is as old as democracy itself. What is new, it is argued (Part II), is a shift from ‘modern’ democratic processes to a new paradigm based not on representation but on direct participation; a shift led from consumer rather than from political culture. It goes on (Part III) to identify a new form of intermediary that has grown up in the interface between consumers and popular media, which I call the ‘plebiscitary industries.’ These may be defined as those agencies, production companies and technical service-providers whose business it is to commercialise the popular vote by turning it into an entertainment format. They have evolved from existing ratings, polling, marketing and production agencies, which

themselves grew out of an earlier ‘representative’ rather than ‘direct’ model of mediation. But the ‘plebiscitary industries’ are not the same as ‘pollsters’ in just the same way that the ‘creative industries’ differ from the ‘cultural industries’ – they belong to a new paradigm of business practice that values consumers for what they *do* rather than for how they can be made to *behave*. During the modern era of ‘mass’ communication, the preferences of consumers and audiences were ‘represented’ in media only indirectly, notably via ratings. Now it is possible for individuals to express their views and votes directly, and the evidence suggests that they’re having a ball while doing so. The plebiscitary industries have caught the digital wave and are using new interactive technologies and software for what Stephen Coleman calls ‘conversational democracy’ (Coleman 2005). Part of its appeal is the straightforward fun to be had from making public, by voting, the personal act of choice.

The chapter goes on (Part IV) to sample some ‘reality’ TV formats that use the plebiscite to a lesser and a greater extent, drawn particularly from talent shows in fashion and music. These plebiscitary *formats* may be distinguished from plebiscitary *industries* in the same way that *Big Brother* can be distinguished from Endemol (which makes it), the aggregators who collect the votes, and the various TV networks that screen the show. Plebiscitary formats have proven very popular internationally in recent years. For the industry they are a live experiment in different ways to incorporate voting into existing light entertainment. The plebiscitary format is sometimes ‘about’ politics (*American Candidate*) but more often the formal world of politics is the last thing on its mind (*Idol*, *Big Brother*). However, the ‘politico-’ and the ‘-tainment’ ends of the ‘reality’ spectrum are both expressions of something new – a widespread popular desire for participation in a direct open network rather than control by closed expert systems. In fact, plebiscitary formats in ‘reality’ TV may be seen as *transitional*

forms through which the plebiscitary industries are conducting R&D to see how far they can maintain the scale of modern ‘behavioural’ or ‘mass’ communication while accommodating new demand for personal choice and direct participation in large-scale communicative interaction. In some of these formats ‘democratic’ progress is minimal – viewers do little more than vote (and the votes are rigged). But even among these early and hesitant experiments, the ‘medium is the message’ – the ‘plebiscitary format’ *is* an experience of democracy; the demos is *doing* something together, not just being told what to do or how it has behaved. Thus the chapter concludes (Part V) with comments on the pressure that is now being exerted on ‘representative’ models of both media and politics to reform, in order to make space for the desire for direct active participation by consumers in the very human process of choosing their own representations. This process has not yet reached maturity by any means, but in the meantime the plebiscitary industries (not formal politics) are the place to look for both technical and imaginative progress.

PART I: POLITICS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Crash-merging politics and media – the story of modernity?

The plebiscitary industries and plebiscitary ‘reality’ formats, taken together, are acting as a catalyst for the mutual modification of politics (democratic deliberation, policy decisions, national identity, security) and entertainment (engagement/affect, narrative, personal identity, conflict). The admixture of power and pleasure, decision-making and celebrity, reason and ‘affect,’ democratic deliberation and individual identity, citizenship and consumption, war and drama, has long been at the centre of attention in cultural and media studies, especially those emanating from an interest in popular culture and the everyday life and audiencehood of ordinary people. But political science has been much slower to accept

that mediated entertainment is at the centre of the political process. Political scientists are generally trained in the formal operations of the democratic process and government, such as deliberative debate, lobbying, political parties and elections, government agencies and NGOs, policy formation and participation, and also public opinion (seen as a science of measurement). The nearest they get to mediated popular culture is 'the news media,' on the model or ideal type of political coverage in newspapers of record. While political scientists are well aware that the media are a crucial component of politics, it is to CNN, Fox, and the electronic or latterly Internet-based *news* media that they turn to see what's going on. This is natural enough, but it ignores two crucial truths about the media: first, that news is a small and declining component of the overall media mix (some media like cinema have learnt to do without it altogether); and second, that what attracts and holds popular media audiences is not news, never mind politics. In short, political science has a skewed image of the media. From that blinkered perspective, most of what people do with and like about their TV usage is invisible. And so the antics of 'reality' TV formats must seem very foreign, a continuation of what has long been seen as a contamination of the political process by demagogic mass spectacle or populist manipulation by corporate interests. But the political process has never been pure (as media theorists have long been arguing). Indeed it must be mediated, using the rhetorical arts and media technologies of its time. Politics depends on the arts of persuasion and on the power of emotion; these need to be communicated to vast cross-demographic publics in real time.

Meanwhile, using the same means of communication, the world of 'escapist' entertainment is often able to use dramatic conflict and narrative, character and action, not least via celebrity-personifications, to get very close indeed to fundamental human, social, cultural (and

political) dilemmas in ways that may capture and fire up the popular imagination for straightforwardly political purposes. Think back to popular drama from Greek tragedy to Shakespeare or popular literature from Dickens to Orwell; children's fantasy from *The Wizard of Oz* to *Lord of the Rings*; or on television how a single show like *Cathy Come Home* (UK) in the 1960s might directly change government policy; or how a movie like *Apocalypse Now* (USA) summed up a war for a generation; or how Black music from the blues onward expressed minority experience and carried new political consciousness across the world; or how the counterculture learned its politics and ethics from songs by Bob Dylan; or how Band Aid and its successors Live Aid and Live8 conjoined pop music and global foreign policy (see also Spiegel and Curtin 1997; Curtin 1995; Torres 2003).

So there's nothing new in the basic idea of 'politicotainment.' In fact the con-fusion of politics and entertainment can be traced back to any originating moment of any contemporary polity that you care to name, including the great modernising political 'revolutions' of the USA in 1776 and France in 1789. The same applies to Russia in 1917 and China in 1949, not to mention Italy in 1922 and Germany in 1933 – whose totalitarian visions of mass politics as emotion-laden entertainment and spectacle served as a dreadful warning of just how potent the mixture could be in unscrupulous hands.

Despite the warnings of Frankfurt-School critics against the aestheticisation of politics, of Hannah Arendt against populist demagoguery, or even Susan Sontag against 'fascinating fascism,' there is no type of popular political participation ancient or modern that is not also mediated, spectacular, irrational and emotion-laden. Democratic polities as well as totalitarian ones are served by 'politicotainment' both routinely in the daily news round and

at crucial times of heightened political risk such as elections, wars, scandals and economic downturns. Semiotic as well as social leadership has always been needed to capture the popular imagination, alongside or even in advance of reasoned argument. Democracy was fanned and disseminated by popular journalism as well as by political activism. Since Camille Desmoulins, Tom Paine, Joseph Pulitzer, *Life*, *Picture Post*, James Cameron, Ed Murrow,³ good journalism has always prioritised a clear story, dramatic conflict, and latterly compelling visuals, as the means by which it must address the information- and enlightenment-seeking citizen. Michael Schudson (1999; see also Schudson 1998) has pointed out that when the idea of the rational ‘informed citizen’ took over in the USA in the 1880s from the previous model of political participation based on spectacular partisanship, actual voting numbers dropped. People had to be brought back to the ballot box by showbiz razzamatazz and campaigning chutzpah.

But the use of entertainment techniques to reach the popular voter was not a corruption of previously pure political communication. It was constitutionally required by the very form of modern representative democracy. Political modernity is inaugurated in any country when the source of sovereignty shifts from the monarch (think Charles I, Louis XVI, Nicholas II, or Cixi Dowager Empress of China), as the personification of divine authority and thus in a real sense the ‘author’ of his or her people, to ‘the people’ (think Jefferson, Adams, and Paine).

In this shift ‘the people’ remained a *representation* – there are no *direct* democracies working at the industrial scale of mass societies.⁴ Instead, ‘the people’ themselves were ‘textualised’ via a series of mechanisms both directly political (e.g. foundational ‘representation of the people’

acts) and mediated; i.e. ‘the press’ as both representative and representation of the public (‘the fourth estate’). The further that suffrage was extended – eventually to become more or less universal – the more a democratic polity needed a universal medium of communication that linked active political representatives and economic leaders with the formally sovereign voters, and vice versa. The only mechanisms to come anywhere near this ideal were the pulpit and the press; and in an era of secular, scientific empiricism where truth was held to reside in objective facts rather than revealed faith, and where in any case competition among religious sects meant that there was never a time when just one sect could prevail over all the others, the fact-hungry press quickly attained universal supremacy as the intermediary between ‘the people’ and their representatives in politics, government and business.

Nevertheless, sovereign citizens were not directly involved in the arts of business and government, and the daily run of news events was often of little intrinsic interest to the general population. It was therefore necessary for the press to find reliable techniques for getting lay people to attend to them and to follow issues that bored or repelled them. The trick of getting uncommitted non-professionals to read things they don’t want to know about should not be underestimated, but success in achieving it is a precondition for media power. It always must come first. As Lord Beaverbrook pointed out to the Royal Commission on the Press in the 1940s, there was no point in owning a newspaper, even if one’s intention was to use it for proprietorial propaganda, as was the case with his *Daily Express*, unless it was in a ‘thoroughly good financial position’: he said, ‘in order to make the propaganda effective the paper had to be successful’ (Royal Commission 1948: para. 8660). Such success was at least partly in the hands of the readers themselves, who did not put up with everything that was thrown at them, no matter how powerful and manipulative the

‘regime’ of ownership and control. It became imperative to know what sovereign citizens *liked*, what they thought, and how they would act. Three great questions of commercial democracies needed answers, every day anew:

- *Will they vote* (for me)?
- *Will they buy* (this product or message)?
- *Will they riot* (against what)?

A range of intermediate agencies developed, including pollsters, circulation auditors and media monitors, publicists and marketing firms, whose purpose was to gauge public opinion and advise both commercial and political clients on how (and whether) their campaigns were ‘playing in Peoria.’ From political propaganda to celebrity endorsement they were on hand to monitor and manage the risky interface between popular entertainment and public affairs. As can be gauged by the wealth and influence of the sector and the prominence of its successful practitioners, these intermediaries remain at the heart of the democratic process. They produce the polls, ratings, circulation figures, charts – and now the direct votes – that take the daily temperature of the demos; what’s hot, and what’s not.

Consumption and citizenship

‘Politicotainment’ – entertaining mediations of politics and business – is in fact only the sharp end of a much wider phenomenon that pervades popular media in the modern era. In a 1999 book I coined the comparable term ‘democrataintment.’ It refers to a wider range of content on broadcast television than the purely political. Indeed it suggests that commercial media as a whole, especially routine TV entertainment formats like drama and comedy,

perform a public function, representing – and *teaching* – aspects of contemporary citizenship to vast cross-demographic populations (Hartley 1999, chapter 12 and 14).

If ‘democratainment’ can be found in sitcoms, then public participation in the democratic process is not confined to TV ‘election specials’ with entertaining pedagogic devices like Bob McKenzie’s 1955 ‘swingometer.’⁵ It extends through to the deep bedrock of television entertainment, linking the top of society with the bottom; right down to children’s shows that teach citizenly values – my example was Nickelodeon’s *Clarissa Explains It All*, but the whole point about that show is that there’s nothing special about it: check out *Daria* or *The Simpsons* in the animated format; or *Dead Like Me* and *What I Like About You* in live comedy-drama. Commercial entertainment *in general* explores, explains and exploits public and civic values; in a sense all of popular broadcast television is ‘democratainment.’

Perhaps the reason that political science remained sceptical about the civic attributes of television entertainment was that the latter was seen as ‘mere’ consumption. Modernist politics was never very comfortable with ‘the consumer’ as opposed to ‘the citizen’ – perversely hanging on to the idea that the consumer was an *effect* of commercial or political manipulation while the citizen was a *cause* of the political process, despite the fact that consumers and citizens were sited within the same corporeal persons. Throughout the modern period that contradiction was masked by gendering it. Citizens were imagined as activist (read masculine), rational individuals participating in the democratic process, guided by the press and political parties, while consumers were feminised as housewives at home who read ‘lifestyle’ magazines for purposeless private pleasure, which nevertheless guided their choices in the supermarket. Out of the blokey mateship of citizenship was forged such

heroic attributes as national identity and the public sphere, with ‘civil society’ represented by news-media who militantly mythologised their own status as watchdogs of the democratic process. This was the ground cultivated by political science. The private and feminised world of consumption was seen as *behaviour* not *action*. It was barely recognised as part of the political process at all. Instead it was seen as the effect of manipulation by marketing; of ‘government’ by private enterprise not public institutions. But it was here in this unworthy place that media studies pitched its analytical tent.

Small wonder that there’s little inter-disciplinary traffic between political science and media studies, although the idea has grown that public communication requires engagement and ‘affect’ as well as information and evidence, as participation in the formal mechanism of politics has dropped, especially in the USA.

PART II: A PARADIGM SHIFT

Shifting along the value chain

In other publications (e.g. Hartley 2004), I’ve taken the idea of the ‘value chain’ in its simplest business sense (i.e. the links from producer/originator, via commodity/distribution, to the consumer/user), and argued that the concept applies to cultural and symbolic ‘values’ as well as economic ones. The ‘cultural’ value chain links author/producer, via text, to audience or reader. I’ve argued further that over time the *source* of value (or what is taken to be the ‘source’ of *meaning*) has been located on different links of the chain, shifting down a link over three distinct historical periods, pre-modern, modern and contemporary:

- from *author* [producer] – modelled on the Medieval Christian God as ‘author’ of all meanings, which gave rise to intentionalist interpretations of the source of meaning more generally, as in ‘what Shakespeare really meant’;
- via *text* [commodity/distribution] – modelled on modern (i.e. post-Francis Bacon) scientific observation of the properties of objects in themselves, which in the cultural domain means texts. Meanings arise directly from observation of empirical or documentary evidence including and physical properties of objects;
- to *reader* or *audience* [consumer] – nowadays, widely shared cultural meanings are tested by investigating how many consumers choose a particular meaning.

In other words, the shift down the value chain in both economic and symbolic values is *epochal*; so that one can speak of *pre-modern*, *modern* and *contemporary* (or *global*) epochs, in which a specific link in the value chain is dominant, resulting in something like a ‘paradigm’ for each epoch. Further, I argue that the current period (the last and the next half-century) is witnessing an epochal shift, from the modern to a new global paradigm, across many different but homologous domains.

One manifestation of such a shift is the pervasive sense of crisis (positively in a desire for innovation and opportunity; negatively in fear of destructive change) associated with the modernist paradigm as a whole. This extends into every nook and cranny of modern life, including the very terms of trade upon which entire industrial-cultural sectors are founded, among them both the entertainment media and representative politics. Therefore, I take current disquiet about audience measurement, and new initiatives in ‘direct representation’ of personal choices, as symptoms of more than mere technological improvements in consumer

sampling techniques. I suggest that they're part of the evidence of a new paradigm beginning to take shape.

Consumers as cause, not effect

The dynamic and innovative branch of the creative industries is the digital content sector (see Hartley 2005). It depends for success not only on *production* (which in this sector comprises ideas or intellectual property rather than manufacturing – the data not the disk) and the *commodity* ('content' in various formats), but also on creative *consumers*.

In industrialised manufacturing industries of the modern era the locus of power and profitability lay in control over the production end of the value chain; the Fordist assembly-line where consumers could 'have any colour they liked so long as it was black.' In the modern cultural industries, power came from control over distribution, with newspapers, cinema and broadcasting leading the way. But increasingly since the 'information society' took hold in advanced economies in the 1990s and with the rise of the creative industries, the locus of both economic power and social impact has shifted decisively along the value chain – to the consumer.

Consumers have not merely been 'active' as the spenders whose collective dollar drives economic growth. They have also taken on a new role as drivers of innovation and makers of content in the information, creative and media sectors. The value 'chain' is no longer linear; it's more like a value 'web,' because consumers and producers are *co-creators*.

So at last changes in the economic sphere have forced a wider reconceptualisation of the very idea of the consumer, such that even among sceptics the mixture of citizenship and consumption can now be seen as having positive aspects, rather than being seen only as a disaster for democracy.⁶ The changes include all manner of consumer-driven innovations in the creative industries, especially in digital (as opposed to analogue) media content. For examples, think about: consumer-created content from ‘tribute films’ (amateur remakes of *Star Wars*) and fansites to zines and blogs; the input of players into the development or evolution of games (like *The Sims*); the entire open source movement (Linux); the creative commons; ‘ProAms’ in services (Leadbeater and Miller 2004); music-sharing and podcasting; ‘citizen journalism’; digital storytelling; the Wikipedia; flickr and deviantART (photo and picture archives and networks); genealogy websites (etc.); BitTorrent; massive multiplayer games (like worldofwarcraft.com, which has 5 million paying users world-wide); user-led mobile applications.

In an open innovation network everything connects – consumers become producers and producers become consumers. In December 2005 gimlet-eyed bloggers reported the modest beginnings of a personal blog by the inventor of the world wide web, (Sir) Tim Berners-Lee, who quietly launched ‘timbl’s blog’ with ‘So I have a blog’ – provoking several hundred delighted messages from around the blogosphere before he turned off the comments. In short, Sir Tim wanted to remain a member of the community he’d created in 1989. He was looking for ‘discourse through communal authorship... So I am going to try this blog thing using blog tools.’⁷

These changes have transformed the ‘model’ of the consumer from *behaviour* to *action*. Now of course ‘action’ isn’t the same as ‘activism’ but this isn’t an ‘either/or’ game. It’s a change in the generative model of ‘the consumer’ from one where ‘she’ (like a 50s-style housewife) was behaviourally manipulated by experts, to one where consumers (like Sir Tim Berners-Lee as blogger) do things for themselves and for their own purposes. With a change in the enabling model, whole new industries can arise that understand and respond to that. Simultaneously, knowledge-creation has changed too. Charles Leadbeater among others has noted that the ‘model’ of innovation itself has shifted from one where control over an expert system was thought to be vital, to one where participation in an open network is seen as the key to success (Leadbeater and Miller 2004). The difference between a *closed expert system* and an *open participation network* is also the difference between modern representations of consumer preference (knowledge produced exclusively by experts) and new ‘DIY’ participation in open networks by producer/consumers themselves, increasingly expressing their preferences directly. In this scenario, consumer ‘action’ may not be ‘activism’ in the sense of modernist militancy, but it is the driver of innovation based on human connectedness and therefore also of social change.

PART III: PLEBISCITARY INDUSTRIES – A NEW PARADIGM SHIFT?

Modern expertise: reducing culture to number

The *experts* advising the cultural industries have long learnt how to convert consumer preferences into measurable scale via TV ratings (there are also ratings agencies for non-broadcast media like outdoor advertising), audited circulation figures (for newspapers and magazines) or sales (of theatrical and cinema admissions, recorded music charts, software and games). Popularity being the key to advertising dollars, sophisticated mechanisms have

evolved that measure the number of eyeballs in front of which a given bit of content may have passed, down to the minute or less.

Some of these techniques of measurement have become established as general currency among competing distributors network providers. In countries where consumer choice is well established as a market principle it is important to establish a yardstick by which to measure success, otherwise companies have no agreed mark against which to compete with each other. This is especially the case in the creative industries such as broadcasting and publishing where consumer choice is essentially arbitrary. The 'use value' of cultural commodities is novelty, so the economic value of a given title or product it can change from bomb to blockbuster (and vice versa), sometimes overnight. 'Modern' consumers drive innovation indirectly but essentially unpredictably – simply by changing their minds about what they like (Caves 2000, 221). Agreed measurement techniques reduce unpredictability and therefore assist creative producers and distributors to manage risk.

In countries or periods where agencies dedicated to the neutral measurement of consumer choice do not exist or are poorly developed (historically in the West; currently in China) or are not agreed among competitors, the consumer market may be corrupted by false circulation claims, by confusion, or by the intervention of non-market values such as official approval for products that consumers don't actually like (and vice versa). So these agencies are vital to level the playing field for a 'free market' to perform fairly.

But it does need to be emphasised that this is exactly what they are for. The expert agencies that measure consumer preferences in modernity work for industry, not for consumers

directly. They cluster around the media of distribution, not the audience. In short the modern cultural industries have managed to turn consumer choice into a representation for their own purposes – a textual form upon which interested parties can agree in order to compete with each other.

Representative ratings

Given that audiences don't directly purchase a good deal of cultural content such as TV programs, 'the bottom line' is not sales but *ratings* – the textual form taken by consumers in the creative and cultural sphere. In order to be able to claim accuracy ratings agencies must turn culture into numbers. Individual people fill in diaries of their media use, or they answer survey questions, or they express preferences in test screenings, or they talk in focus groups. These are all 'textual' activities which, by the use of complex not to say arcane methods (the more 'sophisticated' the better, because the *method* is the agency's intellectual property or IP), are turned into ratings. Technological developments like the PeopleMeter seek to reduce culture to numbers even further, and to make the role of the consumer yet more passive, but as soon as digital media took off the PeopleMeter was found to be inadequate even by its inventor TNS (Taylor Nelson Sofres n.d.). Its numbers 'missed' much of the consumers' desirable culture and activity, like Internet use.

Ratings agencies must persuade interested parties, from governments to TV networks, that their numbers 'count.' They must have the power to command those whose very livelihoods, share-price and companies depend on them. Such power has been achieved by borrowing scientific methods, to reduce the built-in ambivalence of culture and textuality as much as possible by representing them numerically. The widespread trust that is placed in quantitative

methods is itself a symptom of the modern scientific paradigm. But it only goes so far, because while the *method* must be quantitative the actual *numbers* need to be kept within practical and affordable limits. So quantity meets its opposite in the concept of the ‘generalisable sample.’ Such samples are surprisingly small – Nielsen TV ratings are based on the viewing practices of around 5000 households in the USA (that’s one per 60m of the USA’s 300m people; or one in 22m of the USA’s 110m TV households), and around only 1000 elsewhere.

During a modern era of representative democracy, such methods may have appeared democratic; certainly they aroused no widespread opposition, even though a constant low-level warfare continued among rival ratings systems and technologies, and between broadcasters and those among their audiences who didn’t feel themselves to be represented (including perhaps many academics and intellectuals). They worked because they were useful to high-investment players in government and business, and were accepted by broadcasters and advertisers whose profits and costs rose and fell with the numbers.

Among consumers themselves, ratings can only work when everyone accepts the logic of the regime of ‘representative democracy.’ We must all be able to say: ‘This show is crap but I can see why it is on TV if xxx million people like it (even though I don’t know anyone who does).’ Or in the immortal words of Australia’s Federal Communications Minister Senator Bob Collins (Labor) in 1992, during the run-up to the launch of pay TV in Australia: ‘If people want to pay to watch crud, that is what will be broadcast to them. I’m not going to put myself in a position of telling them they cannot have crud if crud is what they want ... If pay TV doesn’t provide consumers with what they want, it will go broke’ (*Green Left Weekly*

1992). Such acceptance requires quite a few acts of faith, including the restriction of what is meant by ‘consumers’ to ‘people in this country and timeslot,’ and a willingness to be governed by the ‘will of the national majority’ in matters of taste.

As the epoch of modern representative media segues into the era of direct digital participation, both of these preconditions are now fatally undermined. New digital platforms and what Mark Pesce calls ‘hyperdistribution’ (e.g. BitTorrent) (Pesce 2005; see also BitTorrent Inc. n.d.) mean that TV content is increasingly available beyond the confines of broadcasting, and beyond the domestic market, and so consumers may avoid (other people’s) ‘crud’ altogether. This opens TV up to new business plans not based on ‘mass’ communication to passive consumers but on niche marketing and customisation for consumers who aren’t just active but activist.

Even where such action is minimal, such as clicking a computer mouse, it can be traced. Agencies can convert the ‘clickstream’ of myriad users into what they call ‘robust data’ – making the mechanical act of choice into a ‘plebiscite.’ Combine what is already known about consumer choice at the ‘representative’ or expert level – via *surveys* – with what can now be known directly – via *servers* – and you have the conditions of existence for the plebiscitary industries.

Most of the organisations in the plebiscitary industries are also active in some other capacity – commercialising voting is not all that they do. They are forming on the site of the same agencies they are in the processes of supplanting, popping up *ad hoc* as technological opportunity or entrepreneurial instincts allow. They combine all three ‘new economy’ levels

of infrastructure, connectivity and content. They range across the fields of telecommunications, broadcasting and broadband. They use the skills – the dark arts, some might say – of marketing, publicity, surveying and opinion polling, as well as those of production and broadcasting, applied to the global market in entertainment media. It is from among these existing ‘representative’ agencies that Internet-savvy ‘early adopters’ have developed new plebiscitary possibilities using digital platforms. So the new plebiscitary industries are forming around technical and professional innovators who can exploit globally connected networks, massive computational power and software wizardry. Their products and services range from data-mining and mobile aggregating to electronic polling, multinational participant TV to pop charts. While most of these skills and professions were honed in the ‘analogue’ era of representative politics and mass entertainment, the plebiscitary industries extend them to the Internet, mobile platforms and e-democracy.

Behind all this apparently random activity and opportunism, something more patterned can be discerned. The contemporary era is dedicated to the proposition that sovereignty is evenly distributed among a population (that’s what the universal franchise and even ‘the free market’ is meant to express). No longer can an expert determine on ‘our’ behalf what is good, right, beautiful, or true. Those decisions belong to the populace. It follows that truth itself can only assume its traditional power to command once it has been sampled, bundled, scaled up, processed and re-presented in the form of a plebiscite.

If it is the case that a paradigm shift is under way that sources sovereignty, meaning and even truth to myriad consumers rather than to god-like author-producers or to modernist scientific-age experts, then it is imperative to develop reliable measures to find out what they

mean. The numbers of people involved mean that you can't collect individual choices one by one, so you have to bundle them up. It's a specialist job, and it is only now becoming a practical possibility with computational power measured by the petabyte (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petabyte).

Reality TV with voting-as-entertainment is a symptom of the shift to the plebiscite as the preferred methodology of our era for revealing what anything might mean. So are the endlessly proliferating charts telling us what is best and worst of a given category. These judgements are not based on the godlike taste of a judge or the intrinsic qualities of an object as revealed by scientific or professional expertise, but on the vote of the punters.

PART IV: PLEBISCITARY FORMATS – ‘REALITY’ TV

Reality TV – a matter of talent, mostly

America's/Australia's Next Top Model

Not all ‘reality’ TV formats are plebiscitary (yet). A good example of one that is not is *America's Next Top Model*, created, produced and hosted by Tyra Banks. An Australian re-version of the show also exists; it went into its second series in early 2006. The ‘reality’ aspect is that the contestants must perform various modelling-related tasks throughout the series, where they – and viewers – are introduced to the real world of fashion shows and photography.

Tyra Banks enjoyed a successful career as a top international model, which lent credibility to the format, but fashion values were not in fact ascendant on *ANTM*. Despite the ‘top model’ tagline, it was not primarily looking for a contestant who would win acceptance in

the international fashion world. The appeal of the show rested heavily on its qualities as ‘good television.’ Compare the *real* ‘next top model’ during the same period (2003-5): Australian teenager Gemma Ward. She was discovered in the audience for the Perth heats of *Search for a Supermodel* in 2002, aged 15. She was persuaded to enter the competition but went no further than her hometown heats where she was one of 20 finalists. She didn’t make it to the national finals or on to Ford Models’ *Supermodel of the World* international competition. However a photograph of her ended up on a desk at IMG in New York. Described by the scout who spotted her in Perth as ‘surreal, beautiful, very European, wide-set eyes, angelic, not a skerrick of make-up,’ there has never been a contestant like her on *America’s Next Top Model*.⁸ Instead, contestants of non-standard height or build (compared with the look favoured by ‘directional designers’) were over-represented among finalists, as were women of colour, either because Tyra wanted to make a point about their aptitude and beauty, or because such contestants were thought to represent aspirations among the target audience demographic, or both.

America’s Next Top Model is a perhaps a late example of ‘reality’ TV as a closed expert system. The role of the audience is merely to like it or lump it; take it or leave it. Each week the young woman chosen for elimination, and also the eventual winner, were selected by an expert panel in a process not shown to viewers, although it seemed to have been heavily influenced by Tyra herself. Neither the viewer nor the fashion world played any direct part in deciding the outcome. Not surprisingly then, finalists and winners across the first five ‘cycles’ of the show (to date) tended to emerge from ‘reality’ (or ‘soapie’) values – authentic self-expression, overcoming adversity, personal growth during the series, eye candy, coping with tests and with the competitive dynamics and dramas of the group. Human values and

personal conflict were foregrounded, as was the dominance of Tyra Banks herself, who was simultaneously the contestants' role-model, soul-sister and executioner. And the eventual winners gravitated towards US-based TV careers, not towards international fashion, where Gemma Ward (among innumerable Eastern-European and Brazilian teenagers) reigned supreme.

Plebiscitary TV

Plebiscitary TV shows are those that find a way to make voting and viewers' choices a part of the show, influencing the outcome of stories or events like a character in the plot. The plebiscite has shifted from industry tool to creative content and become a prominent feature of the entertainment package itself, notably (although not only) in 'reality' formats, from *Big Brother* to *Mongolian Cow Sour Yoghurt Super Voice Girl*.⁹

Plebiscitary television was kick-started by the wide availability of mobile phones and the cheap cost of SMS messaging. Previously 'representative' voting (by panels) had played its part in variety entertainment, for instance in *Juke Box Jury* (BBC, 1959-67) and *Thank Your Lucky Stars* (ITV, 1961-66). The former used celebrity panellists to vote a song a hit or a miss. The latter went a step further by introducing representatives of the target demographic, in the shape of guest teenagers who rated recent singles on a scale of one to five. Most famous was Midlands schoolgirl Janice Nicholls, 'a 16 year old Black Country lass,' who 'became a star overnight when she uttered the immortal words "Oi'll give it foive". She remained on the panel for three years and the phrase became part of British colloquial language . . .'¹⁰

While most such shows have long since disappeared, the *Eurovision Song Contest* has carried on for fifty years since 1955. One of its principal attractions is the vote, where a panel from each participant country (which have grown from 10 to 39) awards points to the others.¹¹ This practice is prey to nationalist sentiment among other biases; for instance Cyprus was notorious for always awarding maximum points to Greece and the minimum to Turkey (who both returned the favour). The Benelux, Nordic and Eastern European countries were suspected of voting *en bloc* too. Germany never won, despite being Europe's largest country (it has only ever one once, in 1982). And some progressive countries (like Sweden) criticised the 'backward' musical tastes of New European countries across the Baltic Sea. Under the Eurovision kitsch there always simmered political (or rather national) rivalries. The voting system was constantly modified to minimise them.

Thus Eurovision adopted interactive and audience-participation technologies as they became available. In 1998, as soon as it was technically feasible (though not all participant countries had the infrastructure for it), 'televoting' was introduced as a complement to panel-voting.¹² That year, though not necessarily as a result, the contest was won by Israeli transsexual diva Dana International. The contest was streamed over the Internet from 2000, and by 2004 'centralised televoting' was installed, resulting in over five million votes being cast during ten-minute live windows in the semi-final and final.¹³ The plebiscite had become the pleasure.

Talent shows as Presidential election campaigns

American / Australian / Pop Idol

Talent contests like the *Eurovision Song Contest* are a hybrid between the true plebiscite and previous 'representative' or 'expert systems' formats, because they combine viewer voting with judging panels. The latter can occasionally override the popular vote, just as the Electoral College sometimes does in US Presidential elections (it happened in the Australian version of *Dancing with the Stars*. The event sparked controversy, as reported in *The Age*, February 16 2005).

The *Idol* family of shows marks a definite shift away from traditional musical talent shows like *Pot of Gold*, *New Faces* and *Young Talent Time* (and *ANTM* too). Comments by professional judges about the aesthetic, commercial and talent aspects of contestants' performance are designed to guide viewer choice: like all others, this is a 'guided democracy' where 'leadership' plays a strong role. Expert advice is still seen as necessary, not least perhaps because the successful contestant wins a recording contract, so attention needs to be paid to commercial realities. However, the relative autonomy of the viewing experience (human values) from the commercial imperative (musical appeal) is demonstrated by the fact that several *Idol* losers have gone on to more successful recording careers than their season's winners.

Effectively, each *Idol* series *is* a twelve- or thirteen-week election campaign. The rhythm of the campaign follows that of an American presidential election. Early rounds parallel the open primaries where devoted fans (like registered party-members) whittle down the candidates to two. These contest the ultimate goal via a large-scale, national election in the final episode. If all goes well the finale will attract a much larger audience than the 'primaries,' and all 'citizens of media' within this population are able to vote (putting aside

questions of literacy and access that plague all elections), whether they are ‘party members’ (loyal viewers) or not.

The perception that the winner of *Idol* is the contestant with the most votes is integral to the *Idol* format. Plebiscitary service providers have sprung up to conduct the vote and keep it clean. A company called Telescope Inc. managed the mechanics of the SMS-voting for *American Idol* on behalf of FremantleMedia (producer) and Fox (broadcaster).¹⁴

As in presidential elections, hanging chads notwithstanding,¹⁵ the process itself is subjected to close scrutiny (Higgins and Seibel 2004). Indeed, viewers grew cynical about the legitimacy of *Idol*'s voting process:

- Fans were concerned about phone-line congestion – in the 2003 season phone companies recorded 100 million+ calls, Fox recorded 24 million votes (Ibid.);
- Auto-diallers potentially skewed the vote by enabling some viewers to find an open line to vote through, while simultaneously contributing to line congestion (Ibid.; Seibel 2004);
- There was evidence AT&T digital text-message votes had a greater chance of getting through than landline phone votes (Seibel 2004).

The latter issue seemed to indicate phone-company opportunism, because phone lines were tariff-free while SMS voting was charged at 10c a message.¹⁶ Deborah Starr Seibel (2004) argued that the phone-line problems reduced the democratic nature of *Idol*. The winner was chosen only by those who could get through, not all those who wanted to vote. Fan discontent was registered in discussions online and in complaints to the FCC and Fox:

The FCC has received more than a thousand complaints (69 e-mails sent to the FCC directly, 1,140 sent to Fox and copied to the FCC) about legitimate *Idol* voting. Most of them are from last season and center on the inability of Aiken fans to get through. The agency doesn't make public whether it is considering a formal investigation. But the trigger for such an investigation, according to the FCC's Rosemary Kimball, would be clear evidence of the show's intentionally 'fixing' the numbers (Ibid.).

The *Idol* format 'enacts' the process of democratic choice by following the rhythms of real election campaigns, but it also introduces a new character into broadcast entertainment – 'the vote.' This is like the old anarchist slogan: 'it doesn't matter who you vote for, the government gets in.' In this case it doesn't matter which contestant you vote for, or even what motivates your choice. What matters is that the show cannot come to a conclusion without a vote, and the viewer 'at home' (or on the mobile) is complicit in that vote even if they don't exercise it. Viewers become 'actors' on one side of the screen, while contestants (as viewers' proxies) are 'actors' on the other. The vote itself is a force – like a Fairy Godmother or *deus ex machina*. Without it the wish-fulfilment elements (which are largely the point of the show) can't be fulfilled. *Idol's* format insists that the fame and celebrity enjoyed by winners belongs to the consumer, because it is the *act* of the scaled-up viewer that produces both plot development and narrative closure.

More votes than the President

Mongolian Cow Sour Yogurt Super Girl

The *Mongolian Cow Sour Yogurt Super Girl Contest*, produced by Hunan Satellite TV in South Central Hunan Province for their Entertainment Channel, was an open singing contest.¹⁷

The 2005 version was one of most-viewed programs in the history of Chinese television – the *International Herald Tribune* (27 November 2005) reported more than 400 million tuned in for the finals in August. *The Times* reported that the figure exceeded the estimated 400 million who watched the *Chinese New Year Festival Gala* on CCTV, but pointed out that no official figures were available (Macartney 2005, 25). But *The Times* did show how greatly *Super Voice Girl* outstripped Western audiences:

- Australia: 3.3 million watched *Australian Idol* (2003 final)
- UK: *Pop Idol* topped 12 million (2003 final)
- US: Nearly 48 million watched *American Idol* (2004 final)
- India: *Indian Idol* hit 48 million.

The plebiscitary element of the show was unprecedented in China. Over eight million votes (or ‘messages of support’ – the term ‘vote’ was avoided) were cast by mobile phone for the three finalists (Marquand 2005). These participatory statistics were widely reported, as were the economic implications of the show. *Danwei* for instance carried a commentary by Li Yu (2005), translated from the Chinese *Legal Mirror*:

Supergirl is a money game. Income from mobile phone SMS topped 30 million yuan (US\$3.7 million); naming rights took 1.4 million yuan (US\$173,000); the seven commercial spots during the finals pushed 20 million (US\$2.47 million); and printing pictures of ‘supergirls’ on T-shirts, accessories, toys and other items had immense potential – production ended up somewhere north of several million yuan. Experts have calculated that the *Supergirl* brand by itself is worth at least 100 million yuan (US\$12.3 million). When a *Super Voice Girl* can bring in this sort of cash, how can we not submit?

One of the things that appealed to viewers about *Super Voice Girl* was that anyone (except boys) could go on the show, regardless of talent, looks or aptitude. The initial number of hopeful contestants topped 150,000. Many were ordinary girls without singing skills who just wanted their ‘15-minutes of fame’ on TV. The whole thing *felt* democratic to participants and viewers alike.

The eventual winner, Li Yuchun,¹⁸ was a surprising alternative to the beauty-school types that are generally endorsed as pop-singers in China (Marquand 2005; Yardley 2005, 4.3). Said the *Economist*: ‘*Super Girl* ... appealed mainly because of its racy format ... and the pleasure that many enjoy from watching amateur singers embarrass themselves. Rebellious young women apparently identified with the self-confident and boyish-looking winner, Li Yuchun’ (*Economist* 2005). *Time Asia* commented:

The Li Yuchun phenomenon, however, goes far beyond her voice, which even the most ardent fans admit is pretty weak: her vocal range drifts between Cher territory and that place your little brother’s voice went the summer before seventh grade. As a dancer, she’s not much better. ... What Li did possess was attitude, originality and a proud androgyny that defied Chinese norms. ... For an audience reared on the bubble-gum, lip-gloss standards of Chinese girl pop, Li’s disregard for the rule book produced an unfamiliar knee-weakening. Her fans wept openly and frantically shrieked when Li took the stage (Jakes 2005).

The Age also commented on the winner’s appearance in emancipationist terms, reporting that Li’s ‘transgender appeal’ suggested to some Chinese observers that her win ‘signalled that men could no longer dictate how women should dress and look. Li Yinhe, China’s best

known researcher on gender issues, likened her appeal to that of Boy George or Michael Jackson' (McDonald 2005).

The degree to which the show resonated with people seems to have unsettled the government's propaganda leaders. Fans crowded shopping centres holding posters of their favourite contestant in an attempt to rouse votes. Unruly fans caused security guards to be called into one shopping centre. The *Economist* (9 October 2005) reports some songs were raunchy, although by the time of the finals song choice had bowed to official sensibilities: 'They included folk songs, communist favourites and Western numbers such as *The Colour of My Love* by Celine Dion, and Ricky Martin's *Maria*. Gone were the raunchier songs of previous rounds.' And apparently its appeal was not confined to the masses. The *Christian Science Monitor* reported:

Even older Chinese have been caught up in the show. One high-ranking minister who was hosting a lengthy business reception scheduled to last until 9 p.m. was suddenly missing at 8 p.m. on Friday night. Sources close to the minister noted that *Super Girl* started at 8:30 p.m. (Marquand 2005).

As soon as the popular success of the series became apparent, speculation surfaced that future series would be cancelled. Officials criticised the show for being too 'worldly,' for being vulgar, boorish, 'and lacking social responsibility' (Macartney 2005: 25). CCTV, the main state-run TV network, was particularly critical. 'Technically, CCTV officials can shut down *Super Girl*, since they hold a monopoly position on broadcast decisions.' But a rat was smelt:

Many ordinary Chinese say that it won't be worldliness that prompts any shutdown, but the fact that CCTV's advertising revenue on Friday night was lower than that of

its modest Hunan competitor. A pilot of an official version of *Super Girl* produced by CCTV reportedly failed (Marquand 2005).

Western media like the *New York Times* noted that ‘Unlike China’s leader, Hu Jintao, Ms. Li was popularly elected’ (Yardley 2005), celebrating the program as a democratic incursion into China. As *Time Asia* put it: ‘like *American Idol*, but unlike China itself, *Super Girl’s Voice* is run democratically.’ The *Economist* reported as ‘frank’ a front-page headline in *Beijing Today* that read: ‘Is *Super Girl* a Force for Democracy?’ An article circulating on official websites in China suggested the contest had caused Chinese intellectuals to ‘fantasise about arrangements for democratic elections and notice the awakening of democratic consciousness among the younger generation’ (*Economist* 2005). Australian papers labelled the program ‘cultural democracy’:

The country’s media experts have been transfixed as much by the program’s formula as by the outcome. Some labelled the show ‘vulgar’ and called for more classical shows of culture on TV, but the well known critic Zhu Dake said the show had ‘blazed a trail for cultural democracy.’ It showed the public breaking loose from the ‘elitist aesthetics’ strangling China’s entertainment industry, he told the *China Daily* (McDonald and AFP 2005: 8).¹⁹

But in Danwei, Li Yu (2005) remained sceptical about its democratic potential:

Some people have said that Chinese people have poured their enthusiasm for voting into Super Voice Girl. Commentaries with titles like The Civic Awareness in the Supergirl Selection Process, Super Voice Girl and Civil Society, Super Voice Girl and the Construction of a Democratic System, and Rays of Idealism in the Super Voice

Girl Selection Process have poured forth. Super Voice Girl has become ‘the dawn of civic society.’ But can Super Voice Girl really carry such a large burden? The *China Daily* pondered: ‘How come an imitation of a democratic system ends up selecting the singer who has the least ability to carry a tune?’ (Macartney 2005; Yardley 2005; *Economist* 2005). The *Economist* had a ready reply: ‘That, of course, is democracy.’

Reality President

American Candidate

Eventually the worlds of plebiscitary ‘reality’ entertainment and formal politics had to collide, which they did via *American Candidate*. This show was initially developed by FX out of an original plan to make a documentary that followed a young candidate who hoped to run for President in 2012 (Franklin 2004). In the reality version it became a political *American Idol*, where viewers were to choose a candidate who would then enter into the upcoming presidential election. The plan was for a candidate to be chosen and then left on their own to run for office with their own cash. That idea was dumped (*New York Times* 2005). The concept was picked up by Showtime, who ran it as a fake presidential election (Franklin 2004).²⁰

The format became ‘a simulated presidential campaign on national television,’ debating a range of issues and offering the winner US\$200,000 and ‘the chance to address the nation on TV’ (Boykin 2004, 54). The program featured a series of Primary-style events after which candidates chose the weakest among them to be eliminated. The outcome was eventually opened up to viewing voters. A Christian lobby group got behind the eventual winner (as in recent political elections).

The Advocate describes the program as ‘part civics lesson, part *Survivor*’ and offers ‘props’ to the program for ‘reserving spots in the cast for an openly gay man and a lesbian’ (Graham 2004). *The Advocate* also explores some of the intersections between the program and formal politics in the US:

Showtime has placed its bets on *American Candidate* because the American electorate is extremely polarized and attentive to anything political at the moment – even if it is a fictional reality show. Gephardt and Boykin both say they probably wouldn’t run for the real presidency because candidates are placed in fishbowls and every detail of their lives are picked apart. However, the 2004 Bush-Kerry race is never far from their minds. Like most politically active gay men and lesbians, they are pained by the attempts by George W. Bush and the Republican Party to gaybait voters. Meanwhile, they are not pleased that Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry does not support marriage rights for same-sex couples.

Says Chrissy Gephardt, lesbian presidential candidate interviewed in *The Advocate* article, the program makes politics interesting by adding a *Survivor* edge to it.

They put an entertainment factor in it-sort of like a *Survivor*-type elimination process, and it combines entertainment and politics. If it was just politics, it would be CNN or C-SPAN. They’ve made it interesting with character development, which makes for a good story. We’re more than just candidates; they do a bio on us and talk about who we are as people. The audience becomes engaged by our life stories.

American Candidate was not exactly run ‘democratically’ however. *People* magazine criticises the campaign model in the program:

The winner receives \$200,000 and what host Montel Williams vaguely calls ‘a chance to address the nation.’ Too bad viewers don’t get to vote till the series’ last two weeks. Up to that point, each episode includes some sort of campaign challenge (a straw poll here, a focus group there), and the two competitors who perform least impressively must face off in an ‘elimination debate.’ The loser is determined by a vote of the other candidates. Sad to say, that makes *American Candidate* less democratic than *American Idol* (*People* 2004).

In the world of ‘reality’ TV of course, as in politics itself, ‘democratic’ doesn’t mean ‘attractive,’ just as formal democratic processes like the vote don’t necessarily result in freedom for all voters. However, it is clear that the same urge that drives political activists to make the democratic process transparent and open as possible also motivates the plebiscitary format on television. It’s an urge to move away from representative and towards direct democracy. Yet to be faced are the problems associated with getting what you wanted, including a democratic process that produces ‘unworthy’ winners like singers who can’t sing or candidates with reprehensible views.

Mirror, mirror on the wall, which is the purest plebiscite of them all?

Big Brother

Big Brother, now venerable in television terms, remains the purest of the ‘reality’ TV plebiscites, because viewers vote for (or rather against) contestants on the basis of what Martin Luther King Jr. called ‘the content of their characters.’ Musical or other talents, no matter how dubious, are not the criteria for survival or success. In short, *Big Brother* is a polity.

Claims of ‘political disengagement’ are frequently made by political scientists in the language of crisis, and it is usually said to be the voters, particularly younger citizens, who are disengaged from politics. People are blamed for failing in their civic obligation to engage with the democratic process. But Stephen Coleman (2003) suggests that an alternative perspective on the question of political disengagement would put the boot on the other foot. Political elites and agencies have moved away from the citizen, who is nevertheless still the root of democracy. In this scenario it would be very unwise to assume that ‘the demos’ is disengaged from democracy. Instead, the formal apparatus of politics and government has disengaged from it.

Coleman identified declines in voting rates; in participation in broader political activities such as joining political parties; and in watching news and reading newspapers (particularly political commentary). He also found that people’s trust in politicians, to represent the public interest ahead of party, fell. Most respondents, but particularly those under 30, showed low faith in the efficacy of government, particularly in its legal or formal capacities or activities (Coleman 2003).

While these figures seem to suggest a drift away from politics, they may in fact indicate that people want to participate but there’s limited access to a democratic machine that responds to their desires. One indicator that people are willing to vote (and even to pay for the privilege) is of course plebiscitary television. The numbers who ‘vote early and vote often’ for *Big Brother* do not suggest disengagement but rather that *Big Brother* provides them with an activity and a mechanism that inspires them to participate in elections.

Does it follow that those who do vote in ‘reality’ TV shows are interested only in mundane or trivial things? No; Coleman’s study suggests that young people are interested in mainstream political issues but not participating in mainstream political processes. Their participation in *Big Brother* votes is driven by a different mode of engagement. Coleman suggests that those who vote in *Big Brother* employ a form of emotional intelligence to assess candidates. Four general features were admired:

- honesty,
- the ability to get on in the world,
- cleverness,
- people who are witty and amusing.

Honesty emerged as a predictive quality, especially when it related to perceived authenticity: those who were seen as honest were generally considered to possess an authenticity and they were usually not voted out. The qualities of politicians were compared against the same scale. The same hierarchy applied to them. Again consistency of values was not as important as honesty.

Voting in *Big Brother* measures contestants’ achievement on an emotional scale, rather than by assessing natural talents, as in programs such as *Idol* or *Dancing with the Stars*, where the relative merits of an individual performance can be judged against others. However, one of the attractions of *Dancing with the Stars* is to follow the embarrassments and improvements of those who – like many of the audience at home – can’t dance very well. Thus good dancers are often eliminated before celebrities who can’t dance but are ‘up for it’ when it comes to

trying. In other words, emotional attachment, authenticity and honesty pay off even in talent-based plebiscites.

The failure of a German re-version of *Big Brother* suggests that the plebiscitary element is itself a key element in the entertainment. German broadcaster RTL 2 announced plans to produce *Big Brother: The Village* – a version that conceivably might never end (Koehl 2004; McGuinness 2005). It was touted as an open-ended reality soap-opera. The set-up involved the construction of an entire village, segregated into class regions, featuring living-quarters and workplaces. Participants were to live in the town ‘indefinitely.’ Launched in March 2005 the program was cancelled in November because of low ratings. This echoes the failure of Fox program *Forever Eden* in May 2004, which had similarly been touted as a conceivably never-ending reality soap opera (Fienberg 2004).²¹ While *Big Brother: The Village* offered a €1m Euro prize (*BBC News* 2005), the idea that the program was an ongoing soap opera, rather than an electoral race that would come to a compelling conclusion, may be seen as a contributing factor in its demise. Indeed, the thrill of voting has been claimed as part of the appeal of successful shows. Discussing the short window of opportunity *American Idol* voters have to cast their vote, Fox Networks Group President Tony Vinciguerra argued the window ‘increases the excitement for the show’ by offering participation in ‘the most democratic way – it’s first come, first served’ (Higgins and Seibel 2004).

‘So what if he wore a Leotard?’

Celebrity Big Brother

Politics and reality TV were literally ‘con-fused’ when a British Member of Parliament entered the *Big Brother* house for the fourth series of *Celebrity Big Brother* in January 2006.

George Galloway, MP for Bethnal Green and Bow in London, already had a colourful reputation as a politician, having been a Labour MP in his native Scotland. He was expelled from the Labour Party in 2003 for his opposition to the Iraq war, but won in 2005 the London seat for 'Respect' (an alliance based on the Socialist Workers Party), defeating high profile Blairite MP Oona King (one of the UK's few Black MPs) by 800 votes. Galloway was a long-term supporter of the Palestinian cause and had a strong track record as a firebrand speaker 'on the anti-imperialist left,' supporting Pakistani claims in Kashmir and taking an interest in Libya and the Arab-Israeli conflict. His notoriety became global when he was accused of benefiting from the UN oil-for-food program in Iraq and appeared in front of a US Senate committee in 2005 to deny the corruption allegations. Video of him meeting Saddam Hussein and his son Uday also circulated around the world.

Meanwhile, Galloway's performance as a voting parliamentarian was minimal. As Respect MP since 2005 he had the lowest possible voting record, being placed 634th out of 645 MPs. The eleven with lower voting records than himself were five Sinn Fein members (who don't take their seats), the Speaker and his two deputies (who are ineligible to vote), two members who had died and the Prime Minister.²² During *Celebrity Big Brother* his sequestration in the BB house meant that he missed at least one vote in the House of Commons that directly concerned his own constituency.

It is clear from his views, his career and his voting record that George Galloway had little respect for traditional politics. He claimed that his sojourn in the BB house was an attempt to reach young people who were otherwise disengaged from politics, to speak up for Palestinian people and to raise funds for a Palestinian charity. But it was not George

Galloway the politician and philanthropist that viewers saw on *Celebrity Big Brother*, it was Galloway the narcissist and egoist. As with any other version of *Big Brother*, it was not his views or his intentions that interested viewers, it was his conduct and interaction with the housemates, which the newspapers agreed was ‘gripping and appalling in equal measure.’ His housemates variously described him as a ‘manipulative bully’; ‘two-faced’; ‘unworthy of respect’; ‘a wicked, wicked, wicked man’; and ‘as democratic as a Nazi’ (*Independent*, 26 January 2006: 3).

Galloway’s antics included various fancy-dress charades, provoking not only astonished reactions among viewers but also apoplectic articles in the following day’s newspapers. He dressed up as Dracula and Elvis, did an impression of a cat lapping pretend milk from actress Rula Lenska’s hand, and donning a scarlet leotard to complete a task set by Big Brother: Galloway and transvestite singer Pete Burns (of 80s band Dead or Alive) were told to express ‘the emotions of bewilderment when a small puppy won’t come to you’ through the medium of robotic dance (see picture).

Soon after this, real voting took over: Galloway was evicted. The *Sun* was gleeful; vengeful: ‘Is this most hated man in Britain?’ it asked (January 26 2006), and sought to answer its own question in the affirmative:

Galloway ... was last night booted out of the house to a chorus of jeers as:

YOUNG viewers he had hoped to attract by his participation in the show railed against him.

A RADIO 1 poll about his antics showed 92.5 listeners despised him.

HORDES of his constituents in Bethnal Green and Bow, East London, said they regretted backing him. ...

MORE THAN 25,000 Sun readers have now signed our petition calling for

Galloway to be suspended from the Commons (*Sun*, 26 January 2006: 4-5)

Here were subsidiary plebiscites in the press and on radio to supplement the reality plebiscite on *Celebrity Big Brother* that had all too evidently been taken more seriously than Galloway's own parliamentary vote or his constituency voters.

Was this a gain for democracy? Writing in *The Observer*, Nick Cohen lambasted the 'liberals who think it's worse to appear on a TV show than in the court of a fascist tyrant' (15 January, 2006: 11). Tim Gardam, former Director of Television at Channel Four, wrote in the *Evening Standard*: 'Big Brother is the great leveller; and Celebrity Big Brother has shown once again its true democratic virtues; one might argue that it is one of the most effective current affairs programmes on television' (19 January 2006: 39). As former head of Current Affairs for the BBC and Controller of News for Channel Five, Gardam was in a position to judge. He wrote:

In its first series, more people voted for the housemates than had just voted in the Scottish, Welsh and London mayoral elections combined. In 2002, class war broke out as the house was segregated into rich and poor. Last year, as the housemates divided along ethnic lines, it laid bare the incipient racism that lies not too far from the surface of modern Britain. And now it has succeeded where the Labour Government, the US Congress and the Daily Telegraph have all failed. It has allowed George Galloway to destroy himself. (*Evening Standard*, 19 January 2006: 39).

Galloway felt it necessary to ‘conduct a highly orchestrated media offensive’ to restore his standing with his constituents. The *Independent* reported that ‘despite an avalanche of negative publicity and polls suggesting plummeting popularity in his constituency, the Bangladeshi community of Whitechapel appeared fairly unperturbed by the politician’s three-week stint on *Celebrity Big Brother*.’ (27 January 2006: 5). Even so, asked ‘if he was glad he had done the show, Galloway replied: “Well not after I’ve seen those press cuttings.”’ (*Independent*, January 26 2006: 3).

The power of the plebiscite was felt among the parliamentary and pundit classes, but its real achievement in this series of *Celebrity Big Brother* had nothing to do with George Galloway. The eventual winner was not a celebrity at all, but a ‘once unknown Essex girl’ called Chantelle Houghton, who had been planted in the house by Big Brother to con the housemates that she was a celebrity too. In this she succeeded so she was allowed to stay. At the end she outpolled all the ‘real’ celebrities, and naturally became one herself the instant she emerged from the house. The *Guardian* commented: ‘Though nobody in the crowd dared say it, they knew they were taking part in a new peak for reality TV. When storylines emerge like Chantelle’s everyone must see why the master dramatists ... number among Big Brother’s more vocal fans.’ (*The Guardian*, 28 January 2006, front page).

Reality TV had reduced dramatists to fans; the plebiscite had made a celebrity where there was not one before. Soon a Chantelle lookalike (a copy of the fake that won anyway) was on the prowl (www.thisishertfordshire.co.uk/display.var.687334.0.0.php). Channel Four basked in ratings glory:

The fourth series of *Celebrity Big Brother* proved to be a ratings success, with Friday's show attracting 7.5 million viewers, not to mention enormous media coverage.

Sharon Powers, executive producer of the show, said: 'This series has had everything – moments of jaw-dropping amazement, moments where you wanted to scream at the television, moments of high drama and utter hilarity.'

(www.thisishertfordshire.co.uk/news/borchamwood/display.var.683353.0.big_brother_mania_strikes.php)

PART V: THE PLEBISCITE GOES INDUSTRIAL

That obscure object of choice

Across the world various pay-TV operators have included a plebiscitary button on the remote control. Shows like *Sky News* run instant polls every day on some topical issue, and the results become part of the show they're watching. The pleasure of the vote is now a business plan in its own right. Opinion.com.au (Australia) offers people a place to vote, on pretty much anything: 'Did you see the Jude Law penis photos before they were censored?' and, 'What is ur opinion of brazillian ppl? [sic.]' – for which the two voting options are: 'never met one' and 'their ok' [sic.]. The purpose of the site seems to be merely to vote.²³ Other voting sites are more traditional in their political focus; for instance Vote.com (USA). Meanwhile, online petition sites like Petitiononline.com encourage petitions on politics & government, entertainment & media, environment, religion and technology & business. The most active sites include those petitioning to bring back loved but cancelled TV shows, like *Arrested Development* and *Dead Like Me*.

There is a new format of TV reality show based on the plebiscite, where viewers can choose the ‘greatest’ person or ‘favourite’ object in a category. The BBC seems to be a lead player in this game. In 2002 they ran a series of TV documentaries on the *Top Ten Great Britons*, a list that was itself derived from a top hundred nominations by 30,000 people. Each episode of the series was introduced by a celebrity ‘champion’ of the nominee. Viewers were then invited to vote on ‘the greatest’ of them all:

The Top Ten Great Britons (and their champions) were:

<u>Nominee</u>	<u>votes</u>	<u>percentage</u>	<u>champion</u>
▪ Winston Churchill	456,498 votes	(28.1%)	Mo Mowlam
▪ Isambard Kingdom Brunel	398,526 votes	(24.6%)	Jeremy Clarkson
▪ Diana, Princess of Wales	225,584 votes	(13.9%)	Rosie Boycott
▪ Charles Darwin	112,496 votes	(6.9%)	Andrew Marr
▪ William Shakespeare	109,919 votes	(6.8%)	Fiona Shaw
▪ Isaac Newton	84,628 votes	(5.2%)	Tristram Hunt
▪ Queen Elizabeth I	71,928 votes	(4.4%)	Michael Portillo
▪ John Lennon	68,445 votes	(4.2%)	Alan Davies
▪ Horatio Nelson	49,171 votes	(3%)	Lucy Moore
▪ Oliver Cromwell	45,053 votes	(2.8%)	Richard Holmes ²⁴

The format has proven to be both portable and versatile. Discovery Channel shortlisted the 25 greatest Americans. No surprises there, but an online poll conducted for BBC TV’s *What the World Thinks of America* (June 2003) received over 37,000 votes – nearly half of them for Homer Simpson. The BBC felt constrained to warn viewers: ‘Results are indicative and may not reflect public opinion.’²⁵

Who is the greatest American?	
<u>Homer Simpson</u>	<u>47.17%</u>
Abraham Lincoln	9.67%
Martin Luther King Jnr	8.54%
<u>Mr T</u>	<u>7.83%</u>
Thomas Jefferson	5.68%
George Washington	5.12%
<u>Bob Dylan</u>	<u>4.71%</u>
Benjamin Franklin	4.10%
Franklin D Roosevelt	3.65%
Bill Clinton	3.53%
37,102 Votes Cast	

The BBC also ran an egghead version of the idea, receiving 34,000 votes in a radio poll to discover the ‘Greatest Philosopher.’ The winner was Karl Marx with 28% of the vote, followed by Hume, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Plato, Kant, Aquinas, Socrates, Aristotle and Popper – five Germans, three Greeks, an Italian and an economist (no-one from outside Europe; no women). Elsewhere, you could vote for the best PM of India; or find out who was ‘elected’ as the greatest Czech of all time (Charles IV).²⁶ In 2004, the CBC received 1.2m votes for the greatest Canadian (someone called Tommy Douglas).

In April 2003 the BBC featured *The Big Read*. ABC (Australia) ran a TV special along the same lines in December 2004, called *My Favourite Book*, featuring a National Top 100 (and 10) and a Kids’ Top 10. While the same book, JRR Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, topped the BBC and both adult and children’s ABC lists, there was criticism of the ABC show in *The Age* and at *Crikey.com*. The criticisms demonstrated common responses to the plebiscite, commenting on the scrupulousness of the method, the size and composition of the ‘electorate,’ and the height of its collective brow.²⁷

But the BBC at least is not to be put off. It is a plebiscitary serial offender. Without even mentioning sport, you can vote for:

- the best opening and closing sequences from a cult show;
- your favourite sitcom;
- your favourite Top Screen Scientist;
- best *Blackadder* episode;
- the hottest burning issue on *EastEnders*.²⁸

All of this activity suggest that voting is something of a craze. The idea that there might be such a thing as purposeless voting, voting-for-pleasure, does not go down well in political science, where it is generally seen as a sort of work, or at least a duty, rather than play. However, the plebiscitary industries have discovered that people like to vote, and are providing them with plenty of opportunities to do so. Scorning that as pointless is perhaps to miss the point. It is doubtful whether people really expect instrumental outcomes, for instance, to a petition to bring back a favourite show, but that doesn't stop tens of thousands of them going online and voting – often leaving detailed comments about why they're doing it. So just as people use magazines, television and even the news itself as an accompaniment to the rhythms of everyday life, so they're using the plebiscite to put on public record what they think about this and that. It's quite possible that as time goes on the craze will decline, although places with the most people – China and India – seem the least jaded in this respect.

But in the meantime, it is important not to dismiss voting-for-pleasure as inconsequential or worse, without first trying to identify why such activities are popular. An example of counterintuitive meanings in this regard might help. Nobody in their right minds would claim go-karting or paintball battles as 'democratic practices.' However, a recent report from Iran showed how young people in that country are using these pastimes precisely to get away from its heavily regulated 'public sphere.' Go-karting is popular for instance because it allows the sexes to mix, and this is seen as 'defiance of the religious men who run the country' (Woodruff 2006). Bearing this in mind, beware critical complaints that people doing what they like doesn't amount to democracy. At best it's merely demotic, they say (see Turner 2006); at worst it's a simulacrum that authoritarian regimes seek to install in place of the real

thing (Victor S 2005). Despite such criticism, it is still a good idea to ask what it is that people like to do, just in case they're on to something. It's politics, Jim; but not as we know it.

Towards direct 'DIY' participation in 'reality'

The *human appeal* of voting in the digital age has been developed first not by political but by marketing and media specialists. They have both popularised and monetised it via various plebiscitary formats in 'reality' TV and elsewhere for their own commercial purposes, by the use of interactive media that can instantly convert individual choice into measurable scale. So the 'plebiscitary industries' have stolen a march on many more directly political uses of the same technologies, which tend to be supply-driven, top-down, earnest and unpopular.

However, commentators from the political side of the fence have begun to take notice, and are seeking to re-import the human element back into the democratic process itself. Popular politics has something to learn from popular media. E-democracy advocates seek new ways to engage citizens and gauge public opinion via interactive media (Coleman 2003). The relationship between the plebiscitary industries and the democratic process is now the subject of intense interest on both sides of the political/entertainment divide.

The democratic credentials of content distribution based on a mere *representation* of the audience (no matter how scientifically achieved) may now be questioned and even rejected. Jason Mittell, stung by the cancellation of his favourite show, writes:

Ratings are seen by many in the industry as the site of viewer democracy, as people vote with their eyeballs what shows they want to watch and what they avoid. But

Nielsen ratings are less like voting than like exit polling (and if exit polls were the measure of democracy, hello President Kerry!) – people cannot choose to participate in Nielsen ratings, and Nielsen only measures a miniscule fragment of the television viewing population. Unless you're in one of the 5,000 households who comprise the bulk of Nielsen's sample, your viewing habits (along with 99.995% of all other viewers!) simply do not register within the media economy – hardly a participatory democracy (Mittell 2005).

Mittell's vision of the future is to invoke the idea of the *passionate* consumer rather than the numerous (but passive) one, suggesting that advertisers will want to reach opinion-leaders and early adopters in the field of content (including educators such as himself), just as they do in technology. The end-point is for consumers to become the producers not only of content but also of programming:

The basic structure of the commercial television industry using ratings as central currency is in crisis in the wake of new technologies and an active participatory youth audience that refuses to watch television solely on networks' own terms. A sizable, motivated, and demographically desirable audience ... awaits the advertisers and distributors who are willing to buck the centrality of ratings as determinant of television's hits and misses. Can the industry change the terrain of broadcasting by asking not 'who's watching what?' but 'how are people watching?' ... By only investing in the traditional currency of ratings, networks ignore the multitude of ways that viewers are already actively engaging with their programs, and forego the option for people to actually participate in the selection of television programming that they want to see (Ibid.).

Jonathan Gray (2005) commented on this issue:

I find it amazing and sad, too, that while the networks, cable channels, and cable and satellite companies constantly try to convince us that what they offer is democracy in action (the logic being that the choice of what to watch is the choice over human destiny), there is so little consumer outrage about the crudeness of this supposed democracy's voting system.

This is where the plebiscite comes into its own. It can be both a response by traditional broadcasters to the challenge of consumer activism and passionate choice, and a potential way forward for the reform of 'consumer democracy' in the creative industries. Do you like the idea? Vote now!

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Notes

¹ See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphysical_poetry; and see also enjoyment.independent.co.uk/music/features/article221903.ecc for a recent discovery that shows how the metaphysical poet John Donne may in fact have been a popular songwriter – 'yoking by violence together' the long-assumed opposition between intellectual high-end poetry and popular music with a wide (and female) fan base – an early example of politicainment, perhaps.

² I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr Joshua Green in the preparation of this paper, and to thank him and Jean Burgess for the conversations in which we developed some of the ideas (would that we had written them down at the time).

³ Any list would be indiscriminate because it represents a pervasive quality among journalists and editors, rather than a scarce category.

⁴ In his *Politics*, Aristotle (7.4) confined the size of a state governed by direct democracy to ‘the largest number which suffices for the purposes of life, and can be taken in at a single view’. Some representative democracies do retain elements of direct democracy – two prominent contemporary examples being the state of California and the Confederation of Switzerland, both of which use plebiscites to decide specific issues of policy on a regular basis. Many other countries use referenda as well as general elections. But the overwhelming majority of nation states are governed representatively; plebiscites are the exception.

⁵ See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swingometer; the swingometer is still in use in UK elections (by Peter Snow). Originally a piece of cardboard with an arrow attached, it has been digitally jazzed up by the BBC.

⁶ Toby Miller, who in most of these matters is a critical sceptic, has coined the term ‘citsumer’ for the amalgam of citizen and consumer (Miller et al. 2001, 178-81).

⁷ Timbl’s blog is at: dig.csail.mit.edu/breadcrumbs/blog/4

⁸ See Valerie Lawson’s write-up in *The Age* (Melbourne), 30 October 2004:

www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/10/29/1098992287790.html?from=storyrhs; and

www.imdb.com/title/tt0266186/ for the IMDb entry on *Search for a Supermodel*.

⁹ *Big Brother* is plebiscitary in most of its national formats, the one exception being the US version where housemates themselves vote to evict housemates. In all other versions housemates nominate each other for eviction but viewers vote them out.

¹⁰ See: www.nostalgicentral.com/tv/variety/thankyourluckystars.htm; see also members.lycos.co.uk/foive/ (Janice’s own website); www.retrosellers.com/features26.htm (interview); and www.nostalgicentral.com/tv/variety/jukeboxjury.htm

¹¹ See: www.eurovision.tv/english/611.htm

¹² See: www.digame.de/ (in German) – the service provider for Eurovision televoting; and see www.redwoodtech.com/applications/televoting.asp

¹³ For how to vote see: and www.eurovision.tv/english/2035.htm:

Televotes cast for the 2004 Eurovision Song Contest by Country:

Andorra	3,003
Albania	812
Austria	284,902
Bosnia & Herzegovina	95,062
Belgium	76,123
Belarus	16,204
Switzerland	503,627
Serbia & Montenegro	20,909
Cyprus	117,751
Germany	1,061,049
Denmark	136,769
Estonia	34,615
Spain	39,005
Finland	45,952
France	54,495
United Kingdom	415,558
Greece	192,564
Croatia	40,220
Ireland	36,998
Israel	14,297
Iceland	46,310
Lithuania	19,627
Latvia	40,453
Monaco	110
FYR Macedonia	47,599
Malta	12,392
Netherlands	158,559

Norway	81,278
Poland	72,295
Portugal	8,597
Romania	11,698
Russia	96,955
Sweden	294,828
Slovenia	61,844
Turkey	121,008
Ukraine	4,323
Total countries	36
Total calls	4,267,791

Source: www.eurovision.tv/english/1182.html

¹⁴ See www.telescope.tv/americanIdol2.html for details.

¹⁵ See for instance: archives.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/11/16/recount.chads/

¹⁶ See www.telescope.tv/americanIdol2.html

¹⁷ See www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-08/12/content_468543.htm; see also www.danwei.org/archives/002149.html and www.danwei.org/archives/002157.html for Danwei's take on the show. Danwei is produced in Hong Kong and hosted in the USA. See also: www.danwei.org/archives/002322.html (unexpected product spin-off); and www.hollywoodchina.motime.com/post/491066 (a spoof item applying Super Voice Girl type SMS voting to Sino-Taiwanese situation). A good roundup of commentary from many sources on 'Super Girls and Democracy' can be found at: zonaeuropa.com/20050829_1.htm.

¹⁸ One of Li Yuchun's winnings was to be invited to London to join Lord Mayor Ken Livingstone to celebrate Chinese New Year and 'the largest celebration of Chinese culture' in London by lighting giant red lanterns over Oxford St and performing to a 'large crowd' of shoppers (*People's Daily*: english.people.com.cn/200601/27/eng20060127_238672.html)

¹⁹ McDonald reports figures for estimated number of viewers and the number of contestants that conflict with other reports (they're significantly lower).

²⁰ See also American Candidate at *Reality Blurred*, www.realityblurred.com/realitytv/archives/american_candidate/.

²¹ See also Forever Eden at *Reality Blurred*, www.realityblurred.com/realitytv/archives/forever_eden/.

²² See: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Galloway

²³ See also Hot or Not www.hotornot.com/ and Australian site Hottest On TV: www.hottestontv.com.au/

²⁴ See: www.bbc.co.uk/history/programmes/greatbritons.shtml

²⁵ See: dsc.discovery.com/convergence/greatestamerican/greatestamerican.html;
news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/wtwta/2997144.stm

²⁶ See: www.cbc.ca/greatest/;
www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/inourtime/greatest_philosopher_vote_result.shtml;
sify.com/itihaas/top10.php?cid=13385804; www.radio.cz/en/article/67495

²⁷ See: www.abc.net.au/myfavouritebook/default.htm; www.crikey.com.au/articles/2004/12/10-0001.html;
www.bbc.co.uk/arts/bigread/top100.shtml

²⁷ See www.telescope.tv/americanIdol2.html for details.

²⁸ See: www.bbc.co.uk/cult/classic/titles/best/vote.shtml?configfile=vote/best/votecontrol.xml;
www.bbc.co.uk/sitcom/winner.shtml; www.bbc.co.uk/cult/scientists/beakerhoneydew.shtml;
www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/blackadder/vote/; www.bbc.co.uk/eastenders/haveyoursay/vote/vote_hub.shtml.