

## **It Isn't Easy Keeping Reality Television Real**

By Charles Goldsmith, Emily Nelson and Matthew Karnitschnig

Believe it or not: Some of the world's reality-television shows are fighting charges that they're not always all that real.

None of the charges are proved, and none have been leveled against U.S. shows, but they serve as a warning for the industry, and small wonder. Some of the hottest TV hits around the globe these days are contest shows, and even a whisper that any one is rigged could wreak havoc with the genre.

This week, the British public was transfixed by the trial of an army major accused of trying to cheat the United Kingdom version of "Who Wants To Be a Millionaire" out of \$1.6 million through the well-timed coughs of a college lecturer in the studio. And in Germany, a show called "Germany Seeks the Superstar" -- modeled after the U.K.'s "Pop Idol" and the U.S.'s "American Idol" -- was roiled recently by audience chants that the telephone voting was "fixed" -- charges strongly denied by the show's producers.

None of that is lost on American TV producers, who also are mindful of the television quiz-show scandals of the 1950s. As a result, American shows are taking intense precautions to stave off any potential challenges such as those being encountered by shows abroad.

"American Idol," an offering of News Corp.'s Fox, hired iTouch U.K., a London media firm to handle its phone-call votes. iTouch monitors where calls originate, spotting group calls. It also trolls Internet chat boards to see if there are any rumors and to gauge viewer reaction.

Because prime-time shows in the U.S. air twice -- once on the East Coast and again, three hours later, on the West Coast, Fox scheduled "American Idol" on two consecutive nights with a separate show on Wednesdays, following its Tuesday broadcast, where it announces the voting tallies from Tuesday's contestants. This allows it time to count all the votes. Fox can't announce winners at the end of the show; otherwise, California residents wouldn't be able to vote.

"By the time Hawaii votes and Alaska votes, it would be too late to include their votes in the process if we didn't do it on a second day," says Gail Berman, Fox's entertainment president. "It was a risky decision."

"Star Search," from Viacom Inc.'s CBS, lets viewers vote online for their favorites and announces the results at the end of the show. A disclaimer runs on the screen in the West Coast reminding viewers that the show aired live on the East Coast so West Coast votes don't count.

Walt Disney Co.'s ABC's "Are You Hot" doesn't accept phone calls; people must vote online, and the show incorporates the results into its telecast the following week.

With direct-response telephone, there is typically a massive surge of calls as soon as the numbers appear on the screen. "American Idol," for example, doesn't open the phone lines until the end of the show so people don't vote until they see all of the contestants. Fox also tries to educate viewers not to expect to get through at first and informs them that they have two hours to make their calls. The show welcomes ballot stuffing, figuring it fosters viewer loyalty and enthusiasm, and takes into account different family members using the same phone to pick different contestants.

"American Idol" does monitor where the calls originate, judging by area code. It received 110 million calls its first season, with 15.5 million calls during the finale. In the U.K., "Pop Idol" -- the original showbiz-legend-in-the-making program -- received nine million calls on its finale. Unlike "American Idol," which allows viewers to call toll-free, British viewers pay for the cost of the call to "Pop Idol."

Fox also takes steps like making sure AT&T Corp., which handles its phone lines, has the same number of phone lines and same capacity for each contestant.

All of this has so far helped the U.S. shows avoid the brouhaha in Europe. In Germany, "Superstar" has been gaining TV market shares in excess of 50%, and the finale is set for Saturday night in Cologne. But the show's lowest moment came last month, as two women in tight evening gowns stared at the cameras, fearing the worst.

"One of these two ladies will have to leave us," said Carsten Spengemann, co-moderator of the program. The outcome should have prompted the usual routine of hugs, tears and polite applause for the loser. But as soon as Mr. Spengemann announced that Gracia Baur, a 20-year-old blonde Bavarian, was out, the crowd exploded in a cacophony of boos and whistles.

With the crowd shouting "it's fixed" in the background, Michelle Hunzicker, the show's scantily clad co-moderator, looked straight into the camera and declared, "I'm not doing this anymore."

The television network that broadcasts the show, Bertelsmann AG-owned RTL, was bombarded with angry calls and letters from enraged viewers convinced that Ms. Baur's sultry rendition of "The Lady Is a Tramp" made her a winner.

Many fans complained they received a busy signal when they tried to vote. Others accused RTL of rigging the results. To make matters worse, a group calling itself the "Illuminatix Crew" said it had hacked into the telephone company's computer system and manipulated the results. Local authorities investigated the claims and determined they were baseless.

"The show has unleashed a lot of emotion," says Ute Biernat, executive producer, who insists that the voting procedure was fair.

In the British court trial concerning "Millionaire," prosecutors allege that 39-year-old Maj. Charles Ingram won the \$1.6 million jackpot in a show recorded in September 2001 with the help of a college lecturer placed in the studio – who, prosecutors said, coughed to signal the right answer when the major muttered a potential answer out loud. The major, his wife, Diana; and the lecturer, Tecwen Whittock, deny charges of conspiring to defraud the program, and the court heard evidence Thursday that the lecturer blamed his cough on an allergy to dust.

The episode in question never aired, after suspicions prompted an investigation, and the show's producers stopped the jackpot check.

Thursday's Daily Telegraph newspaper printed the entire transcript of the show at issue – all 15 questions and answers. Most attention has focused on question 14: "Baron Haussmann is best known for his planning of which city: a. Rome, b. Paris, c. Berlin, d. Athens?"

"I think it's Berlin," Maj. Ingram said initially, according to a video of the program played in court. ... "I don't think it's Paris." This is followed by two coughs. "There's a chance it's Paris. Yeah, I think it's Paris." A loud cough. "I'm going to play Paris."

The program's host, Chris Tarrant, said: "You thought it was Berlin. . . . You changed your mind to Paris – it's brought you [\$800,000]. What a man, what a man. Unbelievable."

When Maj. Ingram correctly answered the \$1.6 million question, choosing "googol" as "a number one followed by 100 zeroes," the host says: "You are the most amazing contestant we have ever, ever had."