

## ***American Idol: From the Selling of a Dream to the Selling of a Nation***

Gabrielle Dann

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**ABSTRACT:** *From its beginning, the show American Idol has been a lesson in how to make money. Its spin-off merchandise and use of synergistic relationships is staggering. The show and its related products are under the ultimate control of 19 Management and FremantleMedia, two media conglomerates with expertise in television, music, film, merchandising, publishing, artist/writer and producer management, sponsorship, and promotions. Together, the two corporations have made millions of dollars from Idol, a product that is primarily used to sell other products, all under a single brand name. Originally conceived in England as Pop Idol by former Spice Girls manager Simon Fuller, the show has since been marketed worldwide, reaching its zenith in January 2004 at the internationally televised World Idol competition. This essay examines the political economy of media as it applies to American Idol and attempts to answer such questions as: Who wields the power? How vast is the control? What is media's involvement? Hopefully, this essay will demonstrate to the reader how a single product - the television show - can be engineered to be a "means with no end."*

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"That was dreadful. I do believe you are the worst singer in the universe." "Do you have a singing coach? Do you have a good lawyer? Then I suggest you sue your singing coach and try to get your money back!" The barbs fly from the sharpened tongue of the brutally honest Brit, Simon Cowell. Cowell, along with Randy Jackson and Paula Abdul, judges hopeful pop star wannabes for the hit reality television show *American Idol*. Conceived in England as *Pop Idol* and marketed worldwide, the show features novice singers competing for a chance at stardom. From its beginning, the show has been a lesson in how to make money. Its spin-off merchandise and use of synergistic relationships is staggering. This essay examines the political economy of media as it applies to *American Idol* and asks such questions as: Who wields the power? How vast is the control? What involvement do media have? This essay will demonstrate to the reader how a single product - the television show - has been engineered to be a "means with no end."

The format for *American Idol* was originally conceived by Simon Fuller, former manager of the *Spice Girls*. Fuller's company, *19 Management*, collaborated with *FremantleMedia* to bring the show to fruition. It first aired as *Pop Idol* on UK's *ITV* in 2001 and was an immediate rating success. The final episode attracted a viewing audience of 14 million, or a total audience share of 57%, and a record-breaking telephone vote of nearly 9 million calls in two hours.<sup>1</sup> *Pop Idol* was so successful that the producers launched local versions in the United States, South Africa, and Poland. Fifty-three per cent of the pay television audience watched the finale on *M-Net* in South Africa and 60% on the Polish station, *Polsat*, but the biggest success story was in the United States where, according to a Nielsen Poll:

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<sup>1</sup> *Idols*. (2003), online, 30 March 2003 < <http://fremantle.production.atwww.com>>.

*American Idol* was the highest rated show on Fox in over a year and the highest rated telecast of the summer of any US network. An incredible 22.8 million viewers watched the final results show on Fox on 4<sup>th</sup> September. *American Idol* also generated an unprecedented 110 million telephone votes over the progress of the final ten shows. The last performance on 3<sup>rd</sup> September garnered 15.5 million votes.<sup>2</sup>

Since that time, *Idol* hopefuls have lined up in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, the Pan-Arabic region, and Canada, all vying for the opportunity to achieve instant stardom. In the meantime, Simon Fuller is, not so proverbially, “laughing all the way to the bank,” with his successfully planned and executed global expansion of the show. *World Idol*, which aired January 2, 2004, featured winners from all of the national competitions. *Norway Idol*, Kurt Nilsen (dubbed “the Hobbit”), won the world competition with his rendition of U2’s “Beautiful Day”.

No matter where the show is aired, or under what name, media conglomerates *19 Management* and *FremantleMedia* have ultimate control. *19 Management*, founded by Fuller in 1985, is actually a group of companies (*19 Entertainment*, *19 Recordings*, *19 Publishing*, etc.) representing expertise in television, music, film, merchandising, music publishing, artist/writer and producer management, sponsorship and promotions. It has produced over fifty number one singles and albums, and its children’s program, *S Club 7*, is popular in 104 countries.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, *FremantleMedia* is one of the largest international producers of entertainment programs in the world, producing more than 180 programs in over 33 countries.<sup>4</sup> Together, the two corporations have made millions of dollars from *Idol*, a product that is primarily used to sell other products, all connected and protected under a single brand name. *National Geographic Channel* investigator Eric Olsen writes:

“Branding” is what Fuller is all about. He redefines the role of manager for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He treats pop acts as brands, to be exploited over different media, rather than performers who make money selling records and playing concerts. He’s a genius—he makes everyone else look like complete amateurs.<sup>5</sup>

In his article, Olsen lauds Fuller for his ingenuity while, at the same time, berates him for the contract his contestants must sign. In essence, the agreement stipulates that the finalists are

<sup>2</sup> *Idols*.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Hill, “‘American Idol’ Fans Get Behind the Scenes Scoop Using Interactive Text Messaging Service,” *Mobliss Inc.* (2003), online, 2 April 2003 <<http://mobliss.com/jsp/news>>.

<sup>4</sup> Hill.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Olsen, “Slaves of Celebrity,” *National Geographic Channel* (18 Sept. 2002), online, 2 April 2003 <[http://www.salon.com/ent/feature/2002/09/18/idol\\_contract](http://www.salon.com/ent/feature/2002/09/18/idol_contract)>.

“forever and throughout the universe” properties of *19 Management*.<sup>6</sup> This includes not only personal management, but also control of all recordings as well as all advertising, endorsements, sponsorships, and merchandise associated with the contestants and the show. Los Angeles music attorney Gary Fine believes that this is a dangerous agreement because it jeopardizes the protection usually inherent in the artist-manager relationship.<sup>7</sup>

By example, *19 Management* arranged for Kelly Clarkson, winner of the first *American Idol*, to sing the American national anthem at the first September 11 Commemoration Service in Washington, D.C. When several news sources learned of this arrangement, they criticized it, saying that “a day of national mourning is being turned into a giant promotional opportunity.”<sup>8</sup> In response, Clarkson wanted to withdraw from her obligation. Quoted in the *New York Times*, Clarkson said, “If anyone thinks I’m trying to market anything, well, that’s awful. I am not going to do it—I am not going to sing on September 11.”<sup>9</sup> A press release issued the next day by *19 Management* clarified:

Kelly Clarkson will sing the national anthem on September 11 in Washington D.C. As she has previously said, she is ‘honored by the invitation.’ Media reports to the contrary are incorrect.<sup>10</sup>

Clarkson quickly discovered that her career, along with her personal convictions, was no longer in her own hands. She had become a conduit through which *19 Management*, *FremantleMedia*, and their partners would deliver the *Idol* message—whenever and wherever they desired.

*American Idol*’s patriotic alignment has been a very successful marketing ploy in the United States, especially since the war on Iraq. The program went from selling the American dream to selling America. The right to air *American Idol* was acquired by *Fox Network*, which pays Simon Fuller one million dollars per episode.<sup>11</sup> *Fox*, in turn, is owned by *News Corporation*, and the head of *News Corporation* is one of the most powerful media men in the world, Rupert Murdoch. He has an information empire that spans two thirds of the globe. “He counts among his holdings dozens of major U.S. media outlets (including *Fox Network*, *HarperCollins* publishers, more than 20 television stations, and the *New York Post*), several British Sunday and daily newspapers...and the biggest network of broadcast satellites in the

<sup>6</sup> Olsen.

<sup>7</sup> Olsen.

<sup>8</sup> Alex Kuczynski, “‘American Idol’ Star Wants to Withdraw From Sept. 11 Event,” *The New York Times*, 6 September 2002, sec. J, p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> Kuczynski.

<sup>10</sup> “‘Idol’ Kelly to Sing at 9/11 Youth Event,” *CNN.com* (9 September 2002), online, 3 April 2003 <<http://www.cnn.com/2002/SHOWBIZ>>.

<sup>11</sup> Jason Deans, “Money rolls in for Popstars,” *Guardian Unlimited* (11 November 2002), online, 4 April 2003 <<http://media.guardian.co.uk/realitytv>>.

world.”<sup>12</sup> He is a self-professed “radical conservative”, who does not apologize for criticism that his right-wing politics lower the standards of everything that he touches.<sup>13</sup> “Along the way, Murdoch has repeatedly used his media holding to advocate his political views and to promote or punish politicians.”<sup>14</sup>

Has Murdoch personally had a say in the *American Idol* series? His conservative stamp of approval is written all over the show, from squeaky clean contestants to patriotic flag waving. By taking advantage of the American mood during the “attack on terrorism”, the show saw an unprecedented growth in audience share. According to the Nielsen Rating for the week of March 24 – 30, 2003, *American Idol* was the number one show in America, suggesting that nothing sells like good old Yankee patriotism. Those who tuned in that week witnessed contestant LCpl. Joshua Gracin, of the U.S. Marines, express his feelings about the competition. When host Ryan Seacrest asked Gracin about how it felt to be a finalist, he replied:

Once I made the initial cut, I spoke with my wife about the pros and cons of continuing in the competition. What kind of image was I going to give the Marine Corps because I’m not just another singer stepping on the stage and representing themselves and their families—I’m here representing the whole Marine Corps. So the pressure is on me to represent them well.<sup>15</sup>

On the following evening, March 26, the show opened with an onstage screen, showing the Statue of Liberty in the bottom left-hand corner. The camera panned to the audience. Many were holding patriotic signs. One was decorated in red, white and blue. The words read “God Bless Joshua”. Fellow marines stood proudly in the front row, watching Gracin and the other finalists sing a group number, Lee Greenwood’s “I’m Proud to be an American”. Obviously moved by the song, tears flowed down the face of contestant Kimberley Locke. It was a poignant moment captured on camera.

Seacrest began the April 2 episode with a “special announcement for America”. He said:

The response to last week’s show was overwhelming. Even the most cold-hearted out there couldn’t help feeling the power. While the *Idols* live out their fantasies, their thoughts, like everyone else’s are on the very real world events.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Crouteau, David and William Hoynes, *The Business of Media* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2001), p. 199.

<sup>13</sup> William Shawcross, *Murdoch: the Making of a Media Empire* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p. 227.

<sup>14</sup> Crouteau and Hoynes, 199-200.

<sup>15</sup> “March 25 Episode,” produced by Cecil Frot-Coutaz and Nigel Lythgoe, *American Idol*, Fox TV, March 25, 2003.

<sup>16</sup> “April 2 Episode,” produced by Cecil Frot-Coutaz and Nigel Lythgoe, *American Idol*, Fox TV, April 2, 2003.

A camera panned to the onstage screen. A clip, identified as an Address to the Nation featured President Bush saying: “and may God continue to bless America.” Then Seacrest continued:

The *American Idol* charity single to aid the Red Cross humanitarian effort has been changed. Instead of Burt Bacharach’s “What the World Needs Now is Love,” the single will be a double recording of Greenwood’s songs, “I’m Proud to be an American” and “God Bless the USA.”<sup>17</sup>

The camera solemnly faded away to a production studio, where the finalists were cutting the single. Perhaps by coincidence, but probably by design, the male singers were dressed in red, white, or blue. In an almost crass display of subliminal advertising, contestant Clay Aiken was dressed in an *Old Navy* sweatshirt, satisfying both a “we support the troops message” and a sales pitch—*FremantleMedia* owns the retail chain. Cory Clark was wearing a shirt that said “24”, the name of another show aired by *Fox TV*. Ruben Studdard, nicknamed by guest judge, Gladys Knight, the “velvet teddy bear” because of his enormous size and heart, wipes away a tear. As the saying goes, “not a dry eye in the house.”

Mom, apple pie, the flag, and *American Idol* all rolled into one. How could any patriotic American not be swayed? This is the building of brand loyalty at its best. Trust in America, trust in *American Idol*, and trust in every product that *American Idol* sells. The product list is extensive: single song releases, albums, posters, DVDs, books, t-shirts, temporary tattoos, key chains, and a CD-Rom computer game, to name just a few of the items available to fans. In addition to the paraphernalia, there are cross-country tours, as well as a movie, starring *American Idol*’s Kelly Clarkson and Justin Guarini. Not surprisingly, the movie plot promotes the show that spawned it. Also not surprisingly, all of the merchandizing and each of the events are controlled by *19 Management* and *FremantleMedia*, or one of their many partners. For example, Simon Cowell, a producer and judge for both *Pop Idol* and *American Idol*, also produces for *BMG*, which owns *RCA*, the company responsible for all of the *Idol* recordings. The aforementioned Rupert Murdoch not only owns *Fox TV*, but also *20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox*, the film company responsible for *From Justin to Kelly: the Rise of Two American Idols*. In one form or another, the parent companies are in synergistic control of all aspects of *Idol* and, therefore, can use every event or item to self-promote every event or item.

Carina Chocano, in her article “How to make an ‘American Idol’”, quips about the real goal of the program being a footnote in an enormous marketing scheme:

To say that the marketing cart was put in front of the talent horse

<sup>17</sup> “April 2 Episode,” 2003.

with 'American Idol' would make me sound unnecessarily Amish. I will only say that there was never a horse and the cart was always a Ferrari.<sup>18</sup>

Eventually every CD, t-shirt, book and poster will be sold, and Simon Cowell's biting sarcasm will be a distant memory. By then, the producers will most likely be trading in their Ferraris for newer models. The 'wheels' are already turning. Simon Fuller is planning a spin-off show called *Second Chances*, which will give losing Idol finalists an opportunity to try again. As for Rupert Murdoch, he has enjoyed his ride with *American Idol* so much that he is using its format for *American Candidate*. Airing this summer, the show is the ultimate blending of politics and media.<sup>19</sup> One hundred political hopefuls will compete in a game/talent show, broadcast by Fox TV. Using elimination rounds and viewer vote-ins to determine the winner, the final show will be broadcast live from the Mall in Washington D.C. What reward awaits the winner? He or she will be encouraged to run on a 3<sup>rd</sup> party ticket for President of the United States of America, only proving that with power, wealth, and media behind you, anything is possible.

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<sup>18</sup> Carina Chocano, "How to make an 'American Idol,'" *National Geographic Channel* (4 September 2002), online, 2 April 2003 <<http://www.salon.com/ent/tv/diary>>.

<sup>19</sup> Lisa de Moraes, "The Ultimate TV Candidacy," *The Washington Post*, 21 September 2002, sec. C, p. 1.

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