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Quantum fluctuations in space, science, exploration and other cosmic fields... served up regularly by MSNBC.com science editor Alan Boyle since 2002.



Alan Boyle covers the physical sciences, anthropology, technological innovation and space science and exploration for MSNBC.com. He is a winner of the <u>AAAS Science Journalism Award</u>, the <u>NASW Science-in-Society Award</u> and other honors; a contributor to <u>"A Field Guide for Science Writers"</u>; and a member of the board of the <u>Council for the Advancement of Science Writing</u>.

Check out Boyle's biography or send a message to Cosmic Log via cosmiclog@msnbc.com.

ARE YOU AN ONLINE 'IDOL'?

Are you an

online 'Idol'?

Posted: Thursday, April 17, 2008 1:00 PM by Alan Boyle



Mario Anzuoni / Reuters file

Guests mingle at a party for "American Idol" finalists in Los Angeles.

If you're a big fan of the <u>reality-TV celebrities</u> on shows such as <u>"American Idol,"</u> "Dancing With the Stars," "Survivor" and "The Biggest Loser," you're more likely to pursue a kind of celebrity for yourself as well, by building up virtual fan clubs on social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace. At least that's the major finding from a survey of students conducted at two U.S. universities.

Researchers at the University at Buffalo and the University of Hawaii <u>report a statistical correlation</u> between heavy reality-TV watching and several metrics of social network usage, ranging from time spent per session to the prevalence of "promiscuous friending." Are you on your way to becoming an online "Idol"? Find out how you compare with the average 20-year-old.

We'll begin by setting the context: The communication scientists behind the study - Michael Stefanone and Derek Lackaff of the University at Buffalo and the University of Hawaii's Devan Rosen - started out with the proposition that online media, and especially social networking sites, gave regular people the opportunity to craft an identity and an audience for themselves just like celebrities do.

They thought reality TV, which has been turning regular people into celebrities for years, might provide a media model for savvy social networkers.

"Andy Warhol predicted in 1968 that everyone would receive 15 minutes of fame, and contemporary observers such as <u>David Weinberger</u> suggest that Internet technologies such as Web logs will make everyone famous to 15 people," the researchers wrote. "Reality television, however, demonstrates to viewers that anyone can become famous to an audience of millions, and Web 2.0 tools and applications put that potential within reach."

To find out whether there was a correlation between reality TV and social networking, the researchers surveyed 452 students at their two universities. The average age of those surveyed was 20, and about 58 percent of the students were female. The participants were asked to fill out online questionnaires about their TV-watching and Internet-using habits as part of a class assignment.

"I'm the first to admit this is a difficult thing to measure, when you have people self-report on this," Stefanone told me, "but this is acceptable practice in the field."

Running the numbers

The survey results indicated that the average student watched 30 hours of television per week, which is roughly equal to the U.S. average. The students detailed what they watched by category: On average, six hours went to reality TV (such as "The Real World" or "American Idol"), six hours went to news programming, nine hours went to fiction TV (such as "The Simpsons" or "CSI"), five hours went to educational TV (such as the Discovery Channel or the History Channel), and the other three hours or so went into the miscellaneous category.

The social networking figures broke down this way: The average student spent about 50 minutes per session on their networking account, shared about 70 photos on the network and had 282 friends in his or her online circle. Fourteen percent of those friends were known only through the social network, with no external relationship. That's what the researchers called "promiscuous friending."

"Promiscuous frienders may be reproducing the fame-seeking behavior that is modeled by reality-TV characters," the researchers wrote. "Having a large social network ... can be construed as a sign of popularity (being at the center of a large social network) and conversely as a sign of superficiality (e.g., 'whores' who are blatant status-seekers). In either case, a large 'friends' list implies a large number of social connections, even if many of those connections have little social value in the traditional sense of friendship."

The researchers matched up the statistics for TV-watching and social networking to check for correlations. They looked at overall TV viewing first, and found a mild correlation with some categories of social networking behavior.

Then they ran the numbers separately for the five categories of TV programming. That's when they hit the jackpot. Four of the categories showed no significant statistical linkage, but there was a strong correlation between watching reality TV and engaging in intense social networking.

"The more time you spend watching reality television, the more likely you are to engage in these behaviors," Stefanone said.

How much is too much?

So are you a social-networking whore? It's impossible for Stefanone or his colleagues to say how much is too much. What's more, the study itself can't determine whether watching reality TV causes celebrity-style behavior on the Web, or vice versa.

All the researchers can say is that they found a linkage between the two behaviors - which is just the kind of linkage they expected to find, based on their ideas about reality TV and social networking. Above-average numbers on one side of the equation are likely to translate into above-average numbers on the other side.

"If you're watching several of those [reality-TV] shows a week, then you can look on your social network profile and see just how many photos you're sharing," Stefanone said.

If you have more than 70 photos online, and if you have more than 300 friends in your network - at least 50 of whom you've never met offline - you would rank above average on the researchers' social networking scale. And if your stats are *dramatically* higher than that, you may be well on your way to online celebrity status.

Defending the data

Stefanone said the study has come under some criticism because it focused on a relatively narrow age range - that is, college kids. "But these are the early adopters in terms of networking sites," he said. "They've got the tools at their disposal to model their behaviors."

He said much more research could be done on the cultural and gender-related factors behind social-network usage. For example, women tended to share more pictures online than men.

Also, the researchers didn't ask their experimental subjects to reflect on their online behavior - which raises questions about the nature of the linkage to the reality-TV habit. Stefanone suggested that heavy social networkers may not even be conscious that they're patterning their behavior after "American Idol."

"The real question is, what is the effect of media? As another illustration, you can look at the application and enrollment rates - and then the subsequent dropout rates - for forensic-science programs after the rise of shows like 'CSI.," Stefanone said.

That "CSI Effect" has been well-documented, as has the <u>potentially embarrassing effect</u> of online disclosure.

Social-network "Idols," just like TV "Idols," sometimes get tripped up by the <u>tangled information trail</u> they've left behind. Facebook has already tried once, unsuccessfully, to <u>capitalize on that data trail</u> - and Stefanone said it's just a matter of time before someone hits upon the right formula.

"The smart money would be betting on people starting to mine this data and use it for commercial purposes," he said. "If you're just talking about yourself, that's really rich data for someone like TRW to add to the information they already have about you."

Is the idea that anybody could become an online "Idol" liberating ... or downright scary? Feel free to share your opinion in the comment section below.

<u>"We're All Stars Now: Reality Television, Web 2.0, and Mediated Identities"</u> will be presented in June at the Association for Computing Machinery's <u>Hypertext 2008</u> conference.

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Comments

Hahaha I have 5000 myspace friends. I only know 1000 of them roughly. And only regulary associate with less than 50 of them. How sad. Im a myspace whore

ADD ME! www.myspace.com/shontaeurie.

Oh and I have 300 photos.:D

Hahaha.

TV IS GAY THOUGH.

I HATE TV!!!!!! I refuse to watch it.

So hows that for your correlation...

Betches.

Shontae Denver CO (Sent Thursday, April 17, 2008 5:22 PM)

I don't get it... What has this got to do with REAL science??

Confused by the Stupidity of it all.... (Sent Friday, April 18, 2008 8:29 AM)

These folks began with a hypothesis, designed an experiment to test that hypothesis and found that the evidence supported their idea. It's just a start, but I guess that's how science is done. When you start to see reality-TV shows promoting their branded social networks and somehow giving social-network stars exposure as part of their venture ... then you'll know why they're capitalizing on the TV/online linkage.

Alan Boyle (Sent Friday, April 18, 2008 9:48 AM)

"If you're a big fan of the reality-TV celebrities on shows such as "American Idol," "Dancing With the Stars," "Survivor" and "The Biggest Loser," you're more likely to pursue a kind of celebrity for yourself as well, by building up virtual fan clubs on social networking sites such as Facebook or MySpace. At least that's the major finding from a survey of students conducted at two U.S. universities."

Shontae, did you even bother to read that? ^



"We will only approve comments that are directly related to the blog, use appropriate language and are not attacking the comments of others."

I'm still wondering why Shontae's comment was even accepted.

Anyway, the article didn't say JUST because you watched reality shows that you'd become an online celebrity <_< READ before you actually post something like that

Amanda (Sent Friday, April 18, 2008 10:23 AM)

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