

Telephone Television - I started it all!

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It dawned on me very quickly, after experimenting on The Brits and watching Eurovision, that this new technology was making it possible for INTERACTIVE ingredients, starting with phone in votes, to be a very positive element of TV and Radio.

As I remember, we first perfected this on Radio - Radio Two to be precise, and the Wogan Show, finding the most genuinely popular of the finalists in our Song For Europe quest.

I remember sitting with the compilers as the votes came in, discounting those which seemed like Hype (we could see the area of calls and if the home area of a band or artiste was way higher than the rest of the country, we took it out). The point was - to find a genuine hit and a winner. I wasn't interested in profits - though it became apparent that there could be a lot of money made from punters calling in. Still, as I stress, my total motivation was programming - finding a truly popular, instant entry and involving the viewers by getting them to vote.

After achieving my first Eurovision change (allowing backing tracks on the show - sadly too late to save Love City Groove, my first entry), I managed to get the second - scrapping the juries and replacing them with phone calls. Due to slow technology in some countries, this began with only a handful of countries but built to the entire contest. It did transform the voting and boosted the ratings (Eurovision was dying and very close to being dropped, as had happened to Miss World - intellectuals considered both rubbish TV).

By the time we won (1997) I had also persuaded the man who brought me into the BBC for Eurovision (and who had moved to ITV) to let me start the Record of the Year Show - which involved phone calls and the public throughout and was a huge success.

So much so that Simon Cowell, my friend who was an A&R guy at BMG, decided to borrow the concept along with his tweaking of Pop Stars, to become Pop Idol and then X Factor (and American Idol).

However, by then I'd gone right off phone voting. For a start, everyone was doing it and it was boring programming. For a second, I noticed the financial benefits were superceding my original reason for interactive involvement. The greedy TV companies were sharing the income with the phone organising companies and LOVED the income, not worrying (as usual) that my original idea was becoming bad TV.

Which is why I'm so sceptical when companies like Cactus, GMTV, the BBC and so on say... it's nothing to do with us, we didn't know what was going on.

Turning a blind eye is the phrase that springs to mind.

Let me make my position perfectly clear - I don't care about ripping off the public. I've done it for years, perfectly legally. But I do mind when greed makes bad entertainment. And, as usual, that's what this scam is all about.

Getting income instead of putting out great TV (which, in reality, gets far more income - look at Dr Who).