Digital Memoirs

Alex Kleimenov

Editor's note: The study of fandoms has shifted from its earlier emphasis on the formation of online communities to viewing fandoms as critical links in the media production process. As such, fan practices are more than simply 'spontaneous' acts of creation; they happen within mediated frameworks set up by companies, TV channels or other kinds of media institutions. This is particularly the case with online media content that develops, either as an extension of TV shows, or as an independent media format that feeds off that television show. Here fans are sought after, drawn into practices that involve becoming participants in a TV show and producers of media content in this way. This kind of media format determines just what fans can do online and the extent of their participation.

This is DI's rationale behind inviting the former media director of a successful company WantMore, which was based in Ukraine, to write about a project that he developed and that has become a narrative of success – X Factor Online. In 2010, reports began to appear in the media announcing the project, the first of its kind. Although X Factor[1] is a global format, X Factor online is the only one of its kind to allow fans an opportunity to perform once on the TV show, by winning an online contest.

The online format invites fans, emphasising both the possibility of attaining celebrity without leaving your home, and offering the format as a corrective if contestants have previously been 'unjustly' rejected during the auditions. The format thus plays on fans' desire and ability to participate, and any feelings of injustice they may harbour upon being excluded from the TV show.

In this memoir on how his company came to create the new format, Alexander Kleimenov writes of the germination of the idea, the new kind of storytelling it involves and the need for 'new heroes' that it feeds. Kleimenov, however, also highlights the nature of the

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[1] X Factor is a British song contest on television that has been running since 2004, and is now a global franchise with many local spin-offs. The music contest has many stages beginning with auditions, proceeding through a rough boot camp phase and ending with live shows on TV. In Russia it ran as '*Sekret Uspekha*' (the Secret of Success) from 2005-2007, and now is a successful show on Russia 1 called Factor A (after Alla Pugacheva who heads the jury). In Ukraine, it has run as X Factor since 2010.

economy that X Factor Online constitutes, and the need to make it 'psychologically easy to spend money' (to paraphrase him) and the range of services that users/fans can purchase to enjoy the show optimally. Fan practices such as these are thus very much embedded in the media economy; fans are workers or labourers that do emotional as well as creative labour to sustain the financial viability of the online production.

Further, the incorporation of YouTube videos into professionally generated content on television is yet another illustration of a now common trend for large media companies to subsume amateur video content into their production economy. It is an example of both convergence culture and the resilience of large media companies despite all the early millennial rhetoric about the power of grass roots digital media. A case in point, X Factor Online is now no longer run by WantMore, but by the channel STB itself.

I write these words by way of discursive context, so the ensuing memoir by Kleimenov feeds seamlessly into some of the other debates and questions raised in this issue. And now I will let him do the speaking.

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Just four years ago, I heard from several Ukrainian TV executives some serious arguments that putting videos from their shows online might harm TV-ratings. That thinking has definitely changed by now and what was once everyone's fear suddenly became a must-have accessory. You can check out websites of just about any first-tier Ukrainian broadcaster these days and find plenty of show clips, behind the scenes footage and even complete episodes. Industry-wide there's a strong belief now that additional online content will, if not increase viewership, then definitely not diminish it.

These days, launching a show and not setting up a group on one or, better, two social networks is considered counter-intuitive. And when broadcasters happen to come up with an interesting project that could become a TV show's online companion deployed on their website, they think they've hit the bull's eye. Although many online ventures undertaken by broadcasters are still experiments at their top-management's own risk, those brave executives say they know: extending TV shows online scores them a more dedicated audience, especially in the demographic coveted by advertisers—the young audience.

There are two basic kinds of online "additions" to TV shows: one that feeds on the content from the TV show and the other that creates its own content. The challenge, especially with the second model, is to bring the power of storytelling broadcasters have mustered on air to what is often, mistakenly, considered a self-fuelling mechanism.

"Don't we pay IT geniuses hefty sums to devise some divine mechanics? Won't this thing just keep on turning all by itself?" I've encountered that thinking in the Ukrainian TV landscape, but that approach does not quite work. It is only if you know you will offer your audience the suspense of the middle and the joy of the end that you can expect them to join you for the beginning. And, yes, it will cost money to maintain additional staff taking care of the editorial controls.

How deeply the audience gets engaged with your project depends largely on the reasons you'll give your users to do so at every log-on. Will there be enough value in the status of the

competition that others should be willing to check on it? Will there be enough motivation to start spending money, even though there are plenty of free tools? Will there be heroes for users to root for? And will there be an employee on duty at all times to channel the process the way you know would make it more rewarding? It might be quite difficult to hit the bull's eye trying to come up with a successful viral game, but it is possible to offer your audience an opportunity to put together an exciting story.

The Story of X Factor Online

Where the story—the one with a beginning, middle and end—gets told in X Factor Online may not be obvious at first glance. The very name indicates the project is connected to the internationally acclaimed TV singing competition show. In Ukraine, the X Factor is aired by a commercial broadcaster STB and in the fall of 2012, the show was already in its 3rd season.

The story of the online project associated with the TV show began at the most off-line of events possible: a wine-tasting party. One of the attendees, STB's marketing director, between a sip of Pouilly-Fuissé and a bite of a cracker, revealed to me the news that the broadcaster was seeking proposals for an online project around the X Factor, which they were preparing to launch for the first time. "We want to create online momentum around the show," he said, adding they were looking for something resembling a game that would engage the audience 24/7 with the show that was slated to air once a week.

It just so happened that our company that specialized in the development of cross-platform entertainment projects had recently licensed from the Spanish company BMAT software called "Skore"—a technology evaluating one's vocal capacity online and in real time.

With the help of Skore we could propose to the X Factor's audience more than the usual treat of voting for videos, some extra information and comments. Instead, we devised a full-fledged entertainment environment built around an online singing contest. The premise was simple: "You enjoy the X Factor on TV? You regret you are not part of it? You can still do it!" X Factor Online (XFO) allowed aspiring singers to turn themselves into stars in a matter of weeks and dash from their desktop webcams and built-in microphones to the country's top TV stage: the X Factor's live broadcast. That was exactly what XFO allowed them to win on a weekly basis: singing on the X Factor's stage on live television in front of millions of viewers.

What is the story?

X Factor Online is a website (xfo.stb.ua) (see Figure 1) that was first set up independently of the TV show's webpage (which also exists and follows the on-air developments; both sites were cross-linked.) XFO offers its visitors an opportunity to participate in an online singing competition under the show's brand. XFO merges with the TV show during each live broad-

cast when XFO's weekly winner sings on X Factor's stage. This fills up a pause as votes for the TV show's contestants are counted to determine who will leave the show that week.

Figure 1: X Factor Online in its current season
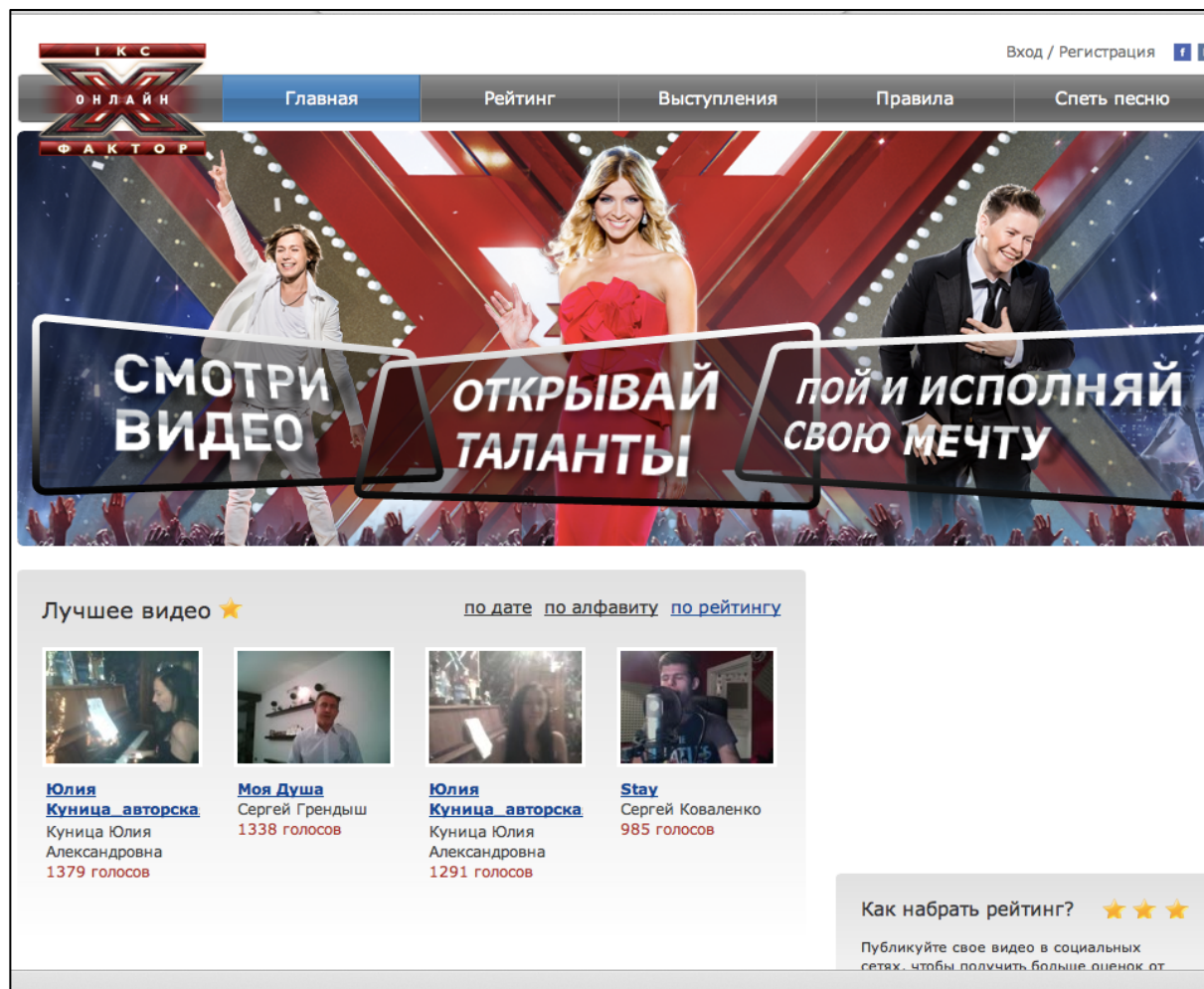
Source: http://xfo.stb.ua. (Accessed November 12, 2013)

XFO's singers do not interfere with the "on-air" contest, but receive the full attention of the judges. These judges make critical remarks about the "on-air" contestants, and are usually very charitable and encouraging towards the XFO's weekly winners for whom these moments are a lot more than a minute of fame. For some, it has been a turning point in their careers, a moment of truth, of tears and joy, a moment of sheer happiness. No other internet project offers its participants a chance to get happy so fast in front of a millions-strong audience. In a nutshell, each week, XFO brings one "Cinderella story" to a climax. All the project's tools are devised to engage the audience in making this story happen.

Here's how XFO works

Fans on the internet can start participating in XFO's contest by singing via Skore's interface any song, but under two conditions: it must be a solo and an "a cappella" performance. The user will, quite obviously, need a webcam and a good microphone. Skore rates the recorded piece in two categories: "vocal musicality" and "expression" and also calculates the average of the two. If the recording scores above the minimum threshold (we set it at 4 points out of max 10), the contestant can authorise its upload to their profile and entry into competition. Fans can log on to XFO via popular social networks, such as Facebook and vKontakte.

Contestants are divided into groups, just as they are on the TV show: "girls 14+", "boys 14+", "men and women 26+" (since Skore can only rate solo performances, there are no "bands" online, unlike on the TV show.) Within a group, contestants are rated based on their Skore results, fan votes and points they earn through various activities in the project. Each Sunday midnight a line is drawn under the top-5 across all groups and the list of runners-up is submitted to the TV show producers, who pick the winner. The winner is announced on XFO's site on Tuesday and just five days later that brave contestant gets to shine in the lime-light on the TV show's stage.

In addition to weekly winners, the overall season's winner is chosen before X Factor's grand finale gala concert. The season's winner performs in the gala and is awarded a place in the TV show's next season, bypassing the dreaded audition stage.

How can one win?

Basically, XFO is a game of show business where singers must come to terms with one cruel reality: it is not enough to sing well in order to become a star. Learning to sell your talent to fans, recruit fans and have them spread the word about you is key. This is why the Skore's mechanical evaluation of the contestant's vocal performance is only a starting point for a singer's rating. Contestants can sing as many songs as they want and as often as their vocal chords allow—we set no limits to that because every new song brings a singer better expo-sure on the site, resulting in new votes from the audience.

Each recorded video can be commented upon via a social network login. The comments appear right under the video and the commentator can opt out from having them appear in his/her social network profile.

From season 1, XFO has equipped its contestants with a variety of tools helping them to promote their videos and engender better interaction (with each new season the selection of tools is growing). Some are free, while others are the so-called "premium services" with a price tag—all are available to both singing and non-singing users. One "premium-service" example is the "the Board of Fame"—a special bloc on the main page where singers or their fans can post any video, luring the audience to check it out. A total of 8 videos can be posted on the Board, the last one getting bumped out when a new one gets posted. The price of a spot is calculated on an auction-like basis: the more people are willing to post videos, the higher is the price. Another premium service is as simple as giving extra votes: while any visitor to the site can give any video 1 vote for free, "+10" and "+100" votes cost money.

We have also developed an array of virtual presents—a must have for online social interaction—ranging from inexpensive to "super presents" that can influence the recipient's rating. Presents have proven to be an effective way to help users express their emotions towards someone. Recipients can also see who the present is from—the feature definitely adding to the XFO's flirt-factor.

Monetisation

To simplify payment for premium services we introduced the "x-money"—the project's virtual currency. It can be purchased with real money via a simple interface on the XFO's website integrating bank cards, SMS and several online payment systems. By introducing the x-money we have diminished instances of the difficult decision 'to spend or not to spend'. Instead of asking yourself that question before each premium service use, you would face it only once when purchasing the x-money. Once you have it, spending the virtual currency on all sorts of occasions, psychologically, is a lot easier than real money.

The challenge we always face was to propose new services x-money could buy (with few options for spending, x-money could accumulate on user accounts, leaving no reason to acquire it again.) The option to pay for a single simple action by sending a premium text message (to vote '+10', for instance) was also available. It is always important to satisfy an immediate desire to do something (spend money) without making users go through a complicated process, because they may change their mind along the way.

XFO's x-money was the first case on the Ukrainian media scene of a TV show's online component having a 'direct-from-users' monetisation mechanism. We feared the introduction of paid premium services would frighten users and bring on a deluge of complaints. Surprisingly, users figured out how to use premium services for their own benefit or that of those they supported, and actively used these services. In XFO's season 1, premium services were used close to 80,000 times!

Brand presence

XFO is a valuable platform for brands to communicate with their target audience both by associating themselves with the emotions participants relive in the project and by making use of the available mechanics. In season 1, Henkel came on board with its Taft hair product line sponsoring two features: a daily contest for a song with the best hair style and a branded gift that anyone could give to any user. The gift required activation on a special brand page: once activated, the gift topped up the recipient's account with some x-money.

Unusually for the Ukrainian market, the brand was only integrated with X Factor Online and had no presence in the TV show.

Editorial presence

It would be a great mistake to think a project such as XFO could function all by itself without any editorial control. We learned that the audience actually puts great value in presence of the project organizers so they can be reached at any moment.

And not just at the level of technical support, responding to questions such as. 'Why is my x-money account not topped up? Why do I not see my video? What is the name of the person selecting the winner? Can you block this particular user?'. But what is more important is that a project such as XFO keeps the team constantly thinking about new ideas to propose to the show's fans.

In order to better engage both singers and non-singers, XFO has an integrated blog where we cover all of the project's news and respond to the audience's concerns. We give advice on how to succeed in XFO. We organize daily 'contests within the contest' such as 'Song of the day', 'Today's funniest video' and others meant to give contestants more opportunities to expose their talent and the voters to discover it. These contests are linked with XFO's group on social networking sites: contest participants post links to their videos there and collect 'likes'. (This way we can separate votes for a video within that contest from votes it receives in the XFO weekly race.) Winners and the most active participants receive x-money or special totems that help them move up the ratings ladder faster.

We have hired a professional vocal teacher who offered online singing lessons and gave advice to particular contestants on improving their performance. After our weekly winners sing on X Factor's stage, we organize a video chat with them where they share their impressions and advice. Some chats have lasted for hours.

The story and its heroes

The key difference of XFO is that it is not based on the 'on-air' heroes (i.e. the online audience is not offered content revolving around characters from the TV show.) XFO introduces its own heroes, thus stories develop online, independently of what is going on air.

All the participants are given tools to create narratives about themselves and fill their profiles with text and multimedia. The drawback in the first season was that only singing participants found real use in those features. The most active and dedicated singers were constantly updating their profiles. Besides adding new songs via the Skore interface, they were also adding links to YouTube videos, mostly showing their off-line performances (for instance, signing gigs at clubs or more sophisticated performance in the comfort of their apartments, than just web-cam a cappella singing.) They also provided links to their profiles in social networks, mostly in vKontakte, where their XFO fans would converge as 'friends' and engage in discussions of what could be done to help them win (and how unjust the world around them is).

Often, the problem online extensions of TV shows face is the absence of a story. Unlike projects devised for brands that often involve strategic games, real-life quests, broadcasters' internet offering is often limited to the audience voting/liking something that is 'on-air', recruiting other participants or creating a prize-winning pyramid of sorts. Such projects rarely

engage participants on the emotional level, basically, feeding on their greedy desire to win some expensive prize in the end. And when such a project is over, people hardly remember it a month later. Although we considered it a problem, absence of material prizes was surprisingly not a problem for users to find value in XFO. Although it may sound idealistic, most participants were in it to prove they had talent worth demonstrating to the world. We had participants from a number of countries joining in and some of them even winning: one week's winner flew to Kiev from Sacramento, California where she sang in a church choir, another—from the Egyptian resort of Hurghada where she sang in hotel shows.

XFO's biggest story, hero and success

Sometime early in the 1st season (2010-11), a physical education teacher from Kherson, a regional centre in Southern Ukraine, joined the XFO competition. His name was Victor Romanchenko and he added songs at an incredible rate, quickly recording more than a hundred. He also posted a YouTube video showing his photos at the gym coaching students, and wrote a text about himself. A powerful tenor, his singing was reasonably good, his fan base grew exponentially and for weeks he finished in the top-5 of the '26+' group. But the show producers routinely picked someone else as the week's winner.

Victor's fans were losing patience. Once the weekly winner was announced and it was, once again, not Victor Romanchenko (although he was among the runners-up), they posted angry comments in XFO's vKontakte group and on XFO's front page paid message board. They claimed the judges were unjust and suspected the whole project of being a scam.

Victor was finally selected as the winner of the week in the very end of December. His live appearance on X Factor's stage ended with the audience and the judges giving it a standing ovation. Just a week later, Victor was announced the overall winner of XFO's Season 1. His performance of the Scorpions ballad 'I'm Still Loving You' at the grand finale gala gave many a listener shivers and made everyone look forward to his appearance in X Factor's season 2—getting a confirmed spot in the training camp was his grand prize.

When X Factor's Season 2 started in September 2011, participants of X Factor Online had in Victor a great example, as he survived vote after vote on the TV show and, as expected by many fans, won X Factor's Season 2 with a prize close to Euro 20,000.

In June 2012, on the eve of the Euro Cup final in Kiev, Victor Romanchenko performed on stage alongside Elton John and the British band Queen during a free concert in front of a 250-thousand strong audience in downtown Kiev.

Not quite a Cinderella story, but I do not think any other online project has created a star sensation like him.

How did XFO impact the TV show?

There has been no research done showing how XFO's audience was adding up to the TV show's share of viewers. But the willingness of the broadcaster to deploy XFO for X Factor's season 3 (2012-13) means, at least the channel's management, sees value in it. A similar

singing contest called 'Star Factory' broadcast by another Ukrainian broadcaster Novy Kanal, according to its own research, scored up to one extra rating point when its online extension 'FanFactory' was launched in the fall of 2011 (Novy Kanal and STB are part of the same media holding.)

XFO created a feeling among the TV show's fans that the fairytale they watch unfold on the screen is actually quite possible to realise. X Factor, being one of Ukraine's most expensive TV productions, has magical appeal. Watching people, if not quite 'from the street' then definitely 'from a room with a carpet on the wall', became an integral part of it within weeks and enabling everyday celebrity has been a wonderful experience for X Factor's fans.

Notes:

Awards:
2011, Propeller Digital, International Internet Competition:
1st Prize 'Best Innovative Solution'
Motivation, awards:
Weekly winner: live performance on the X Factor
Season's winner: live performance at X Factor's grand finale gala, a place at the show's next season's training camp
Additional motivation for runners-up and active participants (both signing and non-signing): tickets to X Factor's live shows
What the participants could do
-sing
-vote
-comment
-give presents
-participate in contests
-build up profiles
Taft stats:
Unique visitors during campaign: 174,000
Contacts with users: 2,500,000+
Contacts via branded contest: 19,594
Contacts via branded gift activation page: 5,045
Challenges:
1. Provide instruments for singers and constantly give them a chance to win
2. Enabling contestants to increase exposure if their videos
3. Provide activity for non-singing participants
4. Provide motivation to acquire x-money
5. Provide reasons to spend x-money
'Daily contest' prizes:
x-money
totems improving rating
tickets to the show

ALEXANDER KLEIMENOV has worked and interned at various Ukrainian and international media companies since 1992, among them: ICTV (Ukraine), MTV (USA), Voice of America, Novy Kanal (Ukraine), France 5, Studio Pilot (Ukraine), SolarMedia (Ukraine). In 2013, he helped launch a new independent Ukrainian TV channel Sonce formatted around the concept of 'positive emotions' and family entertainment. He is currently supervising projects in development at one of Ukraine's largest media holdings. From 2008 to 2012, working at WantMore, a Russian start-up specializing in cross-platform branded entertainment, he focused on cross-platform storytelling and produced award-winning Ukrainian and Russian versions of 40 Weeks, an online video-guide on pregnancy, and also came up with the idea of X Factor Online—now Ukraine's longest-running online extension of a TV show. Alex graduated in 1995 from Kiev Taras Shevchenko University with a degree in foreign linguistics and has a Master's degree from the University of Missouri Journalism School.