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Interactive television quizzes as gambling: A cause for concern?

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a significant increase in the number of UK television shows in which viewers call into the show using a premium-rate telephone service. At one level it could be argued that in these instances viewers are participating in a lottery. Viewers are typically asked to call a premium-rate telephone line to answer a simple question. Winners are then chosen from all those viewers with the correct answer. It could also be argued that the viewer is staking money (i.e., the cost of

the premium-rate telephone call) on the outcome of a future event (i.e., whether they will get the correct answer). This again could be defined as a form of gambling. Interactive television quiz shows share many of the dimensions of interactive television gambling and also raise the same concerns about vulnerable and susceptible populations. These concerns are discussed.

Background

Interactive television (i-TV) services are increasingly being linked to actual television programmes ([Griffiths, 2006](#)). Over the last few years in the UK, there has been a significant increase in the number of television shows raising revenue through the use of interactive programming. One of the most popular methods has viewers call into the television show using a premium-rate telephone service to either answer simple quiz questions or vote somebody out of a reality TV show. The television programmers clearly see this as a way of raising extra revenue. There are also those who argue that this form of television programming is gambling in another guise. Whether this television phenomenon is a bona fide type of gambling is debatable, but, as outlined later in this paper, some elements certainly resemble gambling.

This innovative form of interactive viewing experience raises many questions about whether viewers are being exploited or whether such programming is just another enjoyment-enhancing dimension of the viewing experience. However, there is a fine line between customer enhancement and customer exploitation ([Griffiths, 2003](#)). Programmers will argue that when viewers 'put their money where their mouth is' the viewing experience is enhanced. This is very similar to the gambling industry's maxim that 'it matters more when there's money on it'. However, callers are charged at a premium rate (usually between 75p and £1.50 per call) even if they fail to get through to register their answer. Typically, on failing to connect, callers get a recorded message saying, 'Even though you haven't got through this time, we still want you to be a winner'.

Many may argue that this type of practice is exploitative. Furthermore (and beyond the scope of this paper), there may be issues surrounding those individuals who begin to feel part of the show by continually ringing in and starting to build pseudorelationships with the presenters.

The similarities of i-TV quizzes to gambling experiences have not gone unnoticed by those of us in the UK who do research in the gambling field. Interactive quiz shows and the opportunity to gamble tend to increase television viewers' interest in the event they are watching. They also have the added advantage of boosting ratings for the television companies. So why be concerned? In the UK alone there have been increasing numbers of media stories from people who feel they have

been exploited by television companies and from politicians calling for increased legislation and/or consumer protection relating to i-TV games. If media reports are to be believed, some individuals are certainly in financial crisis as a result of i-TV games. However, there are (as yet) no statistics on what portion of gambling helpline calls, credit counselling caseload, and use of other such services can be linked to such games.

Before we examine this issue further, note that no empirical research has been carried out in this area and that the role of this paper is to raise some potential issues of concern based on what we know about other forms of remote gambling. The paper is not about trying to create a 'moral panic' but attempts to explore issues surrounding the psychosocial impact of i-TV's links with gambling and gambling-type games.

I-TV's gaming and gambling

In the UK, uptake of interactive digital television is crucial to government plans for universal Internet access and for turning off the analogue signal by 2010, and i-TV gaming and gambling (including pseudogambling experiences such as i-TV quiz shows) are likely to flourish ([Griffiths, 2006](#)). It should also be noted that there are two possible routes that i-TV gambling/gaming can take. Firstly, there is television quiz show participation, which may feature gambling and/or gambling-like experiences. Secondly, there is the option of using the television as a medium on which to gamble. Although the emphasis in this paper will be on television quiz show participation, it is clear that issues surrounding psychosocial impact on users and social responsibility of the industry appear to apply to both equally.

To grow fast in an evolving digital landscape, television companies are formulating strategies for targeting particular segments of the industry. Platform operators appear to be deploying consumer-driven applications such as gaming (including both i-TV participation quizzes and more traditional forms of gambling via the medium of television). An environment has been created where content originators and channel operators can innovate and profitably create interactive broadband content. I-TV is seen as a way of rapidly expanding gaming and gambling because of its naturalness and ease of use. I-TV gaming can span a wide range of activities. This includes nongambling activities such as playing video games like *Tetris* on the television, playing along with game shows like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* via television remote control, and directly gambling on sports events such as horse racing and football via television remote control. Lots of companies have done well financially in Europe and Asia, where more than 30% of television shows have an interactive element ([Griffiths, 2006](#)).

Through the television remote control, UK television viewers can already gamble at the push of a few buttons. Such income streams are likely to grow rapidly, with

many interested parties hoping to cash in (e.g., the gaming industry, television programmers, sports rights holders). Merrill Lynch predicts the global remote gambling industry will be worth £125 billion by 2015 and that i-TV gambling is likely to account for 50% of the income. This would be more than 10% of the overall world gambling industry (estimated at £600 billion). In addition, *Datamonitor* published a report, 'iTV games and gambling in Europe' (2003; cited in [Griffiths \(2004\)](#)), noting that games (including interactive quiz participation shows) and gambling are two of the most profitable revenue streams for i-TV. The report also noted that 'pay-per-play' business models would dominate i-TV games service provision, accounting for over 60% of revenues by 2007 ([Griffiths, 2004](#)).

Are i-TV quiz shows a form of gambling?

I-TV quiz shows share many of the dimensions of i-TV gambling and also raise the same concerns when talking about vulnerable and susceptible populations. The combination of gambling's impulsive nature, the general public's appetite for quiz trivia, and the ubiquity of television may prove hard to resist for many viewers. There are two main reasons why i-TV quiz shows could be viewed as a form of gambling.

Firstly, at a very simple level it could be argued that in many i-TV quizzes, viewers are participating in a lottery. For instance, viewers are typically asked to call a premium-rate telephone line to answer a very simple question (e.g., 'Rearrange the following letters to make the name of a top rock group—STOLLING RONES') . A winner is then chosen from all those viewers with the correct answer. This, to all intents and purposes, is a lottery. However, unlike lotteries, those participating do not know what their probability of winning is.

Secondly, it could also be argued that viewers are staking money (through the cost of the premium-rate telephone call) on the outcome of a future event (i.e., whether they will get the correct answer). Such a scenario could be defined as a form of gambling. It is clear that the gambling-like analogy is present, as the newly formed UK Gambling Commission is already examining these types of quiz shows and is likely to make regulatory recommendations for them to be included within the gambling legislation. The UK telephone watchdog, the Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of the Telephone Information Services, is also investigating whether such practices constitute a form of gambling. Ultimately, it will be the job of UK government regulators and politicians to determine (in this case) the line between a contest and a gamble. Participation in i-TV quiz shows is a good example of how the definition of gambling is being blurred.

Vulnerable populations

Whether i-TV quiz participation is a bona fide form of gambling or not, there are a

number of reasons why the social impact of i-TV quizzes should be monitored. For instance, i-TV quiz shows appear to be being introduced with little concern for the psychosocial implications that may affect a small percentage of the population. Bringing such activities to a television set in the home carries with it a special social responsibility. For instance, there are issues about consumer protection for vulnerable populations, e.g., adolescents, problem gamblers, and the intoxicated ([Griffiths & Parke, 2002](#)).

It could be argued that the viewers who participate in late-night and 'through-the-night' interactive quiz programming (like *The Mint*, *Make Your Play*, *Quiz Call*, *The Great British Quiz*) may be some of the most vulnerable and susceptible. These viewers are more likely to be those who do not work and therefore are on low incomes and can least afford to participate (e.g., the unemployed, the retired and elderly). Viewers may also be making decisions to play in an intoxicated state (as these programmes typically start just as people get in from an evening's drinking) and/or in a state where they are not fully alert (i.e., at 3 in the morning). They may also be participating because they think their chances of winning are better in the belief that there are very few other people awake at 4 a.m. In fact, this latter point highlights the fact that no-one participating has any idea what the odds are of winning.

There may also be issues surrounding the type of payment used to participate. When viewers spend money participating in i-TV quizzes, they are using a form of electronic credit payment that eventually ends up on their monthly telephone bill. In effect, viewers are 'gambling' with virtual representations of money. Psychologically, this is akin to chips being used in casinos and tokens being used on some slot machines. In essence, chips and tokens disguise the money's true value (i.e., decrease the psychological value of the money to be gambled) ([Griffiths, 2003](#)). Tokens and chips are often regambled without hesitation, as the psychological value is much less than the real value. For most gamblers, it is very likely that the psychological value of virtual money or electronic credit used to pay for i-TV quizzes is less than that of 'real' cash (and similar to the value of chips or tokens in other gambling situations). Gambling with virtual representations of money may lead to a 'suspension of judgment' ([Griffiths, 2003](#)). The suspension of judgement refers to a structural characteristic that temporarily disrupts the gambler's financial value system and potentially stimulates further gambling. This is well known by those in both commerce (i.e., people typically spend more on credit and debit cards because it is easier to spend money using plastic) and the gaming industry. Anecdotal evidence appears to suggest that people gamble more using virtual money than they would with real money ([Parke & Griffiths, 2007](#)).

Remote media, spending, and trust

It has been suggested that people may spend more money on particular kinds of

remote media. For instance, [Griffiths \(2003\)](#) describes the Internet as a 'lean forward' medium. This means that users (who are usually alone) take an active role in determining what they do. Computers are better at displaying text than television and have a wider range of fine-tuning controls through the mouse and keyboard. This makes them more suitable for complex tasks such as obtaining insurance quotations or travel itineraries. In contrast, [Griffiths \(2003\)](#) describes the television as a 'lean back' medium, where the viewer (often as part of a group) is more passive and seeks less control over what is going on. The television is better at displaying moving images than the computer. This may have implications for the types of spending done in particular media. In short, people are more likely to spend money when they are in a relaxed state of mind and sitting in comfort.

Social responsibility and i-TV gaming

As there is little to stop innovative developments in i-TV gaming from moving forward, all interested stakeholders must start to think about the potential psychosocial impacts, and all companies (who, in effect, are gaming operators) must have social responsibility codes in place to ensure that viewers are not being exploited, that games are fair, and that there are protective measures in place for vulnerable individuals. I-TV gaming and gambling (including both i-TV quiz participation and more traditional i-TV gambling) are likely to bring about new and more immediate interactive opportunities. Viewers will eventually be able to make spontaneous bets during sporting events, everything from whether someone will score from a penalty in the World Cup final through to whether someone will sink a particular putt in the US Open Golf Championship.

A 2002 'white paper' (*Design guidelines for interactive television gambling*) by Stephen Voller of *TV Compass* (cited in [Griffiths \(2004\)](#)) did at least try to address some of the issues raised by the introduction of interactive gaming services. As Voller notes, when interactive gaming technology is brought into households, the operators have a duty to act responsibly. This applies equally to i-TV quiz participation. Voller has argued that systems that allow gaming access should have a particular requirement to provide controls that reduce the risk of gaming-related social problems. The six broad design criteria are access, reality checks, separate payments, messages, information, and self-exclusion periods.

Access. No-one under 18 years of age should be able to gamble. Therefore, to access the gambling functions, there should be a regularly changing PIN code with only three attempts before a lockout. Voller also says a physical access device (e.g., token, smart card) should have to be inserted by the adult gambler.

Reality checks. The technology must allow reality checks such as a built-in pause every 20 minutes to help overcome the engrossing and intensive nature of gambling) to give gamblers time to reflect on their actions.

Separate payments. On opening credit card accounts there should be a customer-led credit limit for a predetermined period of time. It is crucial to separate the setting of credit limits from the gambling process itself so that people cannot just press a button on their remote to raise credit limits.

Messages. During the gambling process there should be socially responsible gambling messages displayed at significant points in the gambling process (e.g., 'Bet with your head, not over it' when first accessing the gambling platform). Further messages could automatically scroll down the screen at regular intervals.

Information. All systems should be able to provide easy access to information such as account details, the amount won or lost in a session, and advice on where to go for help in case of a gambling problem. Furthermore, there should be no encouragement to reinvest winnings or chase losses.

Self-exclusion periods. Households should easily be able to exclude themselves from the gambling process (which may include returning the remote control itself) and not be able to reapply for an agreed-upon minimum period.

Most of these are broadly applicable to those playing i-TV quizzes. Hopefully, social responsibility measures being introduced by operators in relation to television quizzes will help minimize the potential problems brought about by (what is in effect at present) an unregulated form of gambling.

The future of i-TV gaming

In future, television viewers are more likely to participate in a much wider array of events than interactive quizzes and sporting events. This is likely to be via credit payment directly through their digital interactive service. This may include popular UK television events like betting on who will win the Eurovision Song Contest, who will be evicted from the *Big Brother* house, or who will pick up an Oscar. Such nonsport gambling may also bring in new clientele such as female television viewers. The take-up of i-TV quiz participation and/or i-TV gambling may also be very popular with those people who would not dream of going to a casino or betting shop. The use of i-TV quiz participation and/or i-TV gambling may help change people's attitude about gambling by destigmatizing and demasculinizing it. These new types of gambling and gaming experiences could lead to a more social experience shared by clientele across the demographic spectrum.

In the UK, *Sky TV* has made no secret that it wants to earn £400 a year from each of its digital viewers (on top of the basic subscription package). The plan is to recoup the cost of interactive services through i-TV quiz participation, games, gambling, and broadcast-driven television applications. In an economically uncertain climate, turning viewers into consumers is not easy. However, i-TV

quizzes and gaming appear to be *Sky's* proverbial golden goose. For digital service providers to make a profit, viewers will have to have an incentive for them to interact and will expect more from a set-top box than linear broadcast. Interactive quiz shows and gambling at least offer the chance for viewers to win some money. Whether i-TV will be an effective revenue model remains to be seen, but television commerce, premium-rate telephony, games, and gambling are likely to provide a commercial remedy. However, this must not be done at the expense of exploiting potentially vulnerable viewers.

Final thoughts

The issue of i-TV quiz participation can also be framed more widely in a contemporary society that is increasingly governed by virtual processes. The kind of manipulation that is involved in getting people to respond to an event, even if they have to pay to respond, is achieved by offering a prize that the individual is very unlikely to win. In getting people to respond through this kind of process, the entrepreneurial operators are assured that they will have increased financial revenue through the money they raise by facilitating people to voluntarily behave in these ways. This opens up a discourse examining the ways that people are intentionally manipulated to behave in ways that cost while promising an improbable outcome. This may help us construct useful models which could help us understand and provide insight into gambling behaviours. It also invites discussion of what policies should inform the ways that media such as television and the Internet engage and prime people who have become 'enchanted' by a theatrical experience to behave in ways that, if not inevitable, are statistically predictable. There may even be factors of vulnerability that correlate with the likelihood that people will act that way.

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