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THE BIG PICTURE PATRICK GOLDSTEIN

Hollywood is seeing fans pull a power play
PATRICK GOLDSTEIN
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HOLLYWOOD has always been full of Cinderella stories, so it wasn't exactly a shock to see Jennifer Hudson go from singing on a Disney cruise ship to showing up in a Vera Wang dress at the Golden Globes last week, where she took home a best supporting actress trophy. Now she's a shoo-in to wake up this morning with an Oscar nomination, quite a turnaround for someone who was ignominiously booted off "American Idol," with Simon Cowell telling her she was "out of her league."

If Hudson goes on to win a best supporting actress Oscar, it will be another landmark moment in the breakdown between our pop culture's major and minor leagues. If anything bridges the chasm between amateur and professional, between crass and class, it would be a performer bouncing from the raucous populism of "American Idol" to the solemn elitism of the Academy Awards.

Seen through the prism of what's happening on the Internet, "American Idol" is a classic example of user-generated content, being at its heart an event propelled by nonprofessional talent and a rabidly involved audience that has more of the shared community feeling of a Web phenomenon than a TV show.

Whether it's Hudson, lonelygirl15 or Jade Goody, the foul-mouthed ex-nurse who, thanks to her antics on "Celebrity Big Brother," is just as celebrated in England as Posh Spice, celebrity has been rudely down-marketed and democratized.

As Aaron Sorkin so eloquently put it the other day, complaining about the blogger influence on media coverage of his "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip" TV drama: "We live in the age of amateurs."

Sorkin may spend much of his show exploring the conflict between artists like himself and soulless media conglomerates, but in the new era of You Stardom, Sorkin and GE are in the same leaky boat. Just as the music industry saw its business crumble before its eyes as kids began sharing songs from unauthorized downloading services, media behemoths are scrambling to protect their content as it migrates to YouTube.com and other fan-driven video sites.

"Ultimately these big media companies are all wrestling with the same thing — the power is being taken out of their hands," says Jordan Levin, the onetime WB network chief who now helps run Generate, a production and management firm active in Internet projects. "This is an industry that for its entire history has imposed its model on consumers. They've always said, 'We'll tell you when you'll watch our TV show or see our movie.' But that's fundamentally changing. The whole structure of people who control content is being supplanted by the content users themselves."

For Web junkies like me, YouTube is a TV network unto itself. If I missed Bill O'Reilly's visit to "The Colbert Report," I can watch it on YouTube. It doesn't matter if I'm looking for something as frivolous as the cartoon rap "George Washington" or something as weighty as "Undercover Mosque," a riveting new documentary on Britain's Channel 4 about the radicalization of mosques in England. No one limits my choices. YouTube's content is shaped by enthusiasts, not a network programmer who thinks a clip would be a lot more relatable to women over 30 if only it had a likable next-door neighbor in it.

If you're running an old-school media company, it doesn't take a weatherman to see where the wind's blowing. In England last week, an unsigned band scored a Top 40 hit for the first time, all of its sales from digital downloads, mostly to kids using mobile phones. "We've got to get the creativity to stand up against user-created content, because that's what people are watching at my house," MGM chief Harry Sloan told Variety last fall. Describing his 17-year-old son's viewing habits, Sloan said that while the TV was on behind him, "he's got two screens in front of him, one connected to friends and the other to play World of Warcraft."

The day isn't far away when some studio executive, instead of buying a bestseller, will acquire the rights to a Web thriller that's become a lonelygirl-style phenomenon. "The problem for us will be that people are going to create a movie character on the Web and they'll own the content — we'll end up just renting it," says Sony Pictures chief Amy Pascal. "We'll buy the movie rights, but they'll own everything else. We haven't bought anything from YouTube yet, but it's going to happen. Trust me, when 'lonelygirl' was happening, everyone was asking, 'Is that a movie?'"

Media companies aren't willing to sit back and watch their content — and, more important, the advertising their content attracts — migrate to Internet rivals. One of the worst-guarded secrets in recent months involves the efforts of News Corp. and NBC Universal to create a website to distribute TV clips as a way of attracting the advertising that is now going to YouTube and other sources.

In the past, networks have tried to squash YouTube's access to their clips. Before the relaunch of the Viacom-owned iFilm site last fall, lawyers had YouTube take down thousands of clips from popular Viacom-owned Comedy Central shows, hoping to steer fans to iFilm or Comedy Central's site. Yet the morning after O'Reilly visited "The Colbert Report," YouTube was full of clips of the appearance.

At a site like iFilm, which specializes in packaging topical mass media events, whether it's the new "Spider-Man 3" trailer or coverage of the Rosie-Trump feud, the hope is to attract viewers by offering a more streamlined experience than YouTube, which is often a chaotic jumble of clips. "We're betting that people do want a guide to help show them what's cool," says iTunes chief Blair Harrison. "But we want to allow our community to do that, so that it's indistinguishable whether the content that's elevated on our site is from our staff or our active audience members."

But will this audience want a new kind of entertainment? Will the art created on the Web have a different aesthetic than the kind of storytelling forms we watch on TV and film? Internet enthusiasts think so. United Talent Agency digital media chief Brent Weinstein, who heads UTA's groundbreaking unit devoted to scouting online talent, is convinced that the Web's interactivity will usher in a new kind of shared creativity.

"We'll see a form that will exist specifically on the Internet," he says. "TV is very linear and passive. But because your computer can talk to other electronic devices, whether it's your mobile phone or your BlackBerry, it opens up a whole new world. And we'll see even more creative freedom, because these new platforms allow artists to bypass big media institutions and speak directly to consumers."

One of UTA's discoveries is a filmmaking collective called Big Fantastic that recently produced 80 episodes of a Web murder mystery called "Sam Has 7 Friends." Designed as a video podcast that ran in 90-second daily installments last fall, it had an irresistible hook: "Samantha Breslow had seven friends. On Dec. 15, one of them killed her." In keeping with the ethos of the Web, the story is slyly voyeuristic, exploiting our inexhaustible fascination with other people's lives. We are cast as eavesdroppers in Breslow's life, seeing her avoid her ex-boyfriend and quarrel with her agent — her character, of course, being an actress. (The episodes are available on iTunes or at <http://www.Samhas7friends.com>.)

The five members of Big Fantastic all have Hollywood day jobs, but they clearly believe in a Web-fueled form of storytelling. "Short and sweet is the way to go," says Chris Hampel, who worked as Michael Mann's assistant on "Collateral" and "Miami Vice." "Five minutes can feel like an eternity on the Internet. This was consciously geared for people who could watch the show in their office when they had 90 seconds between phone calls."

Hampel and his cohorts wrote for the medium, creating 90-second bits of drama. "Whatever was the most emotional thing that happened to Sam that day, we focused on that," he says. "We saw this as a soap opera with someone dying in the end. But no one has the patience to watch a whole soap opera anymore, so we just cut out all the fat."

Even their website is designed so all the information is on one home page. "Who wants to scroll?" says Hampel. "It's a bona fide way to lose people."

Because their story unfolded on the Web, they received instant feedback from message boards. The strongest reaction was inspired by Willie, Sam's ex-boyfriend. "People really loved him or hated him, so we wrote him into more episodes. Everything was immediate. We could shoot something one day and have it on the Net the next."

No one has yet stepped up to fund a new batch of shows, but the show's buzz earned the group meetings with various young studio executives. "We think this is the year people start jumping in the pool," says Hampel. "But at most of our meetings, people said, 'Come back and see us in a year. I get it, but my boss doesn't.'"

Hampel and his buddies shouldn't worry. In Hollywood, big changes are afoot. And the bosses are always the last to know.

"The Big Picture" runs Tuesdays in Calendar. Questions or criticism can be e-mailed to patrick.goldstein@latimes.com.