

TV Pilots Crash, Fans Race to the Web for the Next Viral Hit

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Get ready to scan YouTube and MySpace for the next big TV hit. Mid-May is when Hollywood sitcom-makers get their pink slips from the networks (only a handful of the 54 comedies were picked up). It's also when creative malcontents, itching for vindication or a second chance at primetime, typically start uploading their rejected shows for web consumption.

Of course, there's no helpful TV guide for finding these programs, and the inevitable cat-and-mouse game of copyright-obsessed network lawyers snuffing out rogue sites with cease-and-desist letters makes it even trickier.

Gay Robot, produced by Adam Sandler's company Happy Madison, already has its own MySpace page and BitTorrent following, which are prompting renewed network attention after an initial turndown a few months ago from Comedy Central. The show is about the romantic misadventures of a frat-house robot whose "brothers" try to hook him up before the automaton is forced to look for love in all the, well, gay places. Since going online in late March, Robot clips have amassed about 1.2 million views.

Another big-name reject is Nobody's Watching, from the producers of Scrubs. The WB network initially passed, but when the meta-comedy, about two neophyte comedy-show creators railing against the state of network sitcoms, was posted on YouTube, NBC expressed interest.

"First we got a six-episode order," says Neil Goldman, a producer from the show. "Then because of budget reasons or whatever, they said, 'Let's nurture this on the internet.'"

The pilot clips, combined with some specially produced webisodes, produced 14.2 million views. "In March, it looked like we were going to do a live special, and if it did well, a limited summer series. Then the show was pulled, and I was told, 'Never mind.'"

Three Strikes, the Jon Stewart-produced sitcom about a team of borderline psychotic minor league baseball players, made a brief appearance on YouTube after the Comedy Central pilot was rejected. The Los Angeles Times wrote about the show's sneak showing, and soon the clips disappeared. No surprise there -- Comedy Central's corporate parent Viacom is suing YouTube for copyright infringement.

Once execs realize that web-surfing TV fans are perfectly capable of recognizing sleeper hits, networks' air-them-or-hide-them business model is bound to change, says Jordan Levin, former CEO of the WB network.

"It's inevitable," says Jordan, who now helps run the content-creation company Generate. "Whether it's a proactive strategy (by) media companies or whether pilots get posted by producers, directors, editors, a production assistant, an assistant at the network -- all it takes is one person to post a sitcom," says Levin. "We're shifting to a user-empowered era in which audiences take ownership of content."

Network gatekeepers who pick -- and cancel -- shows are hardly infallible. The Freaks and Geeks DVD featuring un-aired episodes made money for NBC Universal after the company's broadcast division took that sitcom off the air. And DVD sales for Family Guy prompted Fox executives to put the canceled series back on the air in 2005.

Two years ago, the WB passed on a show by John Rogers, who penned the initial script for the upcoming The Transformers: The Movie. Rogers had adapted Warren Ellis' graphic novel Global Frequency into a sci-fi television series. He and others are now pushing for a DVD release, based on the show's success on BitTorrent.

Writer-producer Jay Kogen, whose credits include The Simpsons, says Hollywood egos stand in the way of authorized sitcom webcasts.

"Studio and network executives' jobs are based on their ability to pick winners," says Kogen. "If there were a great internet hit, the reaction might range from thoroughly embarrassed to being fired."