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Television

Cubicle Dwellers' Funniest Home Video

By DAN CRANE

"I love these clips," said Patrice O'Neal, introducing snippets from shows like "Maury" and "Judge Hatchet" in which men ecstatically celebrate a negative result on a paternity test. "Because there's no greater joy in the world than hearing those five beautiful words, 'You are not the father!'"

The montage was originally shown on "Jimmy Kimmel Live," after which it instantly became Internet viral video fodder — sent around via e-mail messages and posted on blogs and Web sites like iFilm.com, YouTube.com and eBaumsworld.com. From there, the video was scooped up by "Web Junk 20," a weekly countdown of Internet videos on VH1 that began in January and for which Mr. O'Neal serves as host. After being properly ridiculed there, the clips could once again be found online at VH1's VSPOT Web site vh1.com/vspot.

That's more or less the path that all the show's Web junk follows, and it may be perfectly suited to today's multiplatform (television, Web, mobile phone, iPod) media universe. "These things are becoming ground zero for pop culture," Brian Graden, president of entertainment for MTV Networks Group, VH1's parent company, said. "It's no longer the moment on the Jon Stewart show, it's 'Did you watch the viral video of the moment on the Jon Stewart show?'"

But many of the videos on "Web Junk" come from viewers — creative people using affordable digital video cameras and desktop software to shoot and edit and post their own clever shorts. "Saturday Night Live's" rap sketch "Lazy Sunday," perhaps the most widely seen viral video of late, has already inspired numerous parodies, including "Lazy Monday" (featuring two 11-year-old Chicago boys lip-synching to the original), "Lazy Muncie" (where the honor of the Midwest is defended) and "Lazy Saturday" (the West Coast answer to "Lazy Sunday"), which was featured on Episode 4 of "Web Junk 20."

It's an updated version of the long-running series "America's Funniest Home Videos," but with a twist: "The distinction," said Mr. Graden, "would be that I would call 'America's Funniest Home Videos' accidentally created, and these are often purposely created by people to express their own sense of comedy and commentary."

As on the original show, you can still see the occasional child mishap, or animal running amok, but on "Web Junk" odds are good you'll also witness someone throwing up, and there will be at least one clip celebrating the passing of gas. Mr. O'Neal, a rotund comedian who peppers his mocking commentary with numerous bleeped-out expletives and off-color jabs, embodies the other difference between the old show and the new: attitude.

"He's an equal opportunity offender," said Michael Hirschorn, the show's creator and VH1's executive vice president of original programming and production. "He's got a willingness to say the uncomfortable things that not everyone is willing to say." For example, "Web Junk" showed "Tom Cruise Kills Oprah," a homespun video that plays off the actor's infamous appearance on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" but uses sound and visual effects so it seems he is electrocuting her. "See what happens," Mr. O'Neal asked the audience, "when white people touch black people?"

True to the nature of the clips themselves, the concept of using viral videos on television is spreading rapidly. Just weeks after VH1's show was first broadcast, Bravo — which had shown a half-hour special last November — began its own series, "Outrageous and Contagious: Viral Videos," which offers some of the same content but less of the mocking commentary.

Most of the clips look much better on the Bravo show than they do on VH1's, where videos are often so pixilated that they become indiscernible. But Mr. Graden thinks image quality doesn't really matter; in fact, he suggests, the worse the clips look the more effective they tend to be. "People want to believe these were completely homemade expressions," he said, "that they were discovered out in the universe and were brought to air. If they look like slickly produced television I don't think people would buy into the utter randomness that is that show."

Slickly produced they are not. While the shows do pay for some of the content (Bravo paid to use the recent computer geek sendup of "Brokeback Mountain," titled "Broke Mac Mountain," according to the clip's creators), it is obviously a lot cheaper to license these videos than it is to shell out for actors and set designers and so on. Additionally, by partnering with video Web portals like iFilm.com, which also is owned by MTV Networks, VH1 gains access to a virtual community of filmmakers and actors constantly uploading fresh content, each member waiting for his or her 30 seconds of fame.

"You can almost see a continuum with reality TV," Mr. Graden said. "Fame has become an overblown aphrodisiac in our culture, and now here you go: put your video you made on iFilm and maybe you'll be on TV next week."

NBC and USA Networks also have viral video shows in development. Carson Daly is to be the host for "The Net with Carson Daly" on NBC, and USA Networks has partnered with the "extreme content" site eBaumsWorld.com to exploit its digital content for a late-night clip show.

Ruth Caruso, head of development for Carson Daly Productions, identifies an ambitious goal for the show. "Now that our country is more culturally divided than ever," Ms. Caruso said, "we see networks struggling to find shows that have broad appeal. By tapping into the country's talent pool we hope to cross these gaps, much like 'American Idol' massively accomplishes."

And the more new shows there are, the more opportunities for the nation's grass-roots filmmakers to have their material seen. "The technology has opened up in a massive way so that everyone in some way or another is potentially the next great viral auteur," said Andrew Cohen, Bravo's vice president of production and programming. "I think that's great. I just don't want anyone to hurt themselves lighting themselves on fire or jumping off a building."

So far, nobody has reported doing either — though much of what's shown does look painful: one video on Bravo's show features a man getting a pair of scissors thrown into his arm. Both the Bravo and VH1 shows do encourage viewers to submit content online (as will "The Net with Carson Daly," according to the show's creators), driving increased traffic to their respective Web sites. And as "Web Junk 20's" television ratings have been respectable, VH1 has already seen a record increase in Web traffic to their VSPOT broadband channel and to iFilm.com each week since the show began in January.

With four viral video shows soon to be on the air, what's the next wave of user-generated content? "One could imagine a next generation version of 'Saturday Night Live' that's created entirely by the viewers," Mr. Hirschorn speculated. "It might even be better."

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