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Guest Commentary: Comedy Can't Escape Narrowcast Trend

By Dan Ruppel

I began the new semester of my Comedy Writing for Television class exactly the same way I had begun it every semester during the previous five years: Before attempting to tell my university students what I've learned from my 30 years in comedy, both in clubs and on network television, I ask three questions in an attempt to understand what they find funny. Throughout the years, the students have been surprisingly uniform in their responses.

Q. Where do you view the majority of the comedy you watch?

A. Usually on laptops-be it through DVDs, Internet downloads or broadcast television webcasts.

Q. What are your favorite television sitcoms?

A. About 75 percent name one of three sitcoms: "Arrested Development," "Family Guy" or "The Simpsons."

Q. What do you find funny?

A. Some respond with words like quirky, irreverent, esoteric, attitude; but the word I hear most frequently is "random." They laugh at incongruities, the unexpected, or at something that is radically out of place.

At the risk of sounding like an armchair sociologist, the commonality and near unanimous trend of these students' answers leads me to the following conclusions:

- They want it their way. The reason the video iPod was last year's hottest Christmas gift is that this is the Burger King generation-demanding everything on their terms. When it comes to their personal entertainment, they want it when they want it, where they want it and how they want it. This is not the generation of *broadcast*. Gone is the sense of community the baby boomer generation derived by knowing that the broadcast we were watching was simultaneously being

enjoyed by the entire country. Today it's *narrowcast*.

Does this mean community through common media is dead? Probably not, but its nature is changing. I asked one of my freshman students what it was, apart from the 24/7 access, that appealed to him about watching webcasts. He said insightfully, "It's the sense of discovery. Finding something really funny, and then sending it to all of my friends."

- They want it fast. As I look over the list of the students' favorite TV shows, one common denominator strikes me: Each of these shows relies on numerous short scenes. While the structure of a traditional sitcom such as "Everybody Loves Raymond" might present two to four scenes per act, those that are popular with the students may have dozens of scenes in a 30-minute episode, each of which is significantly shorter in duration than the "old school" format. As the pace of our culture quickens, attention spans shorten, as they have with the young generation raised on the eye-blurring edits of MTV and video games.

- They want it random. This generation feels that they have seen it all-and in many ways, they have. The global expansion of media access has brought everything and anything to their screens. To strike their comedic nerves, you have to show them something they haven't seen before.

For further clarity, I look to the comedy films they list as their absolute favorites. On the top of nearly every list is "Monty Python and the Holy Grail," a film released a decade before any of them were born. The second choice shifts to whatever quirky new release is currently popular, such as "Zoolander" or "Napoleon Dynamite." All of these films use their story lines as an irrelevant vehicle to string together a quirky collection of random moments. As for character development-fuggedaboutit.

Am I saying that my admittedly subjective, unscientific findings spell the death of comedy on broadcast television? Not at all. I don't think it is an either/or issue, but we must be aware of the "in addition to" in our media future.

Having recently taken on writing and producing comedy for webcasts and iPods, my career shift and opinion on the future direction of comedy media has been shaped by the daily development of personal entertainment technology and by observing the viewing habits of the young generation. Today, when my daughter calls to ask if she can bring some friends home to watch comedy, that's no longer my cue to vacate the TV room, but to boot up the computer.

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