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'Goodnight Burbank' and a made-for-the-Web future

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A couple of years ago, Hayden Black jumped off a cliff, professionally speaking. He quit his job writing on-air promotions for TV networks and set out to pursue his dream of — wait for it, please — writing scripts.

No, this isn't the inspirational tale of how the 34-year-old Black paced bald spots in the carpet, keeping bill collectors at bay while dreaming up the sitcom that would at last make him richer than Larry David. On the other hand, Black's friends don't need to stage an intervention yet — he's not doing too badly for a guy whose filmed entertainment appears only on the Internet.

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"Goodnight Burbank," Black's wicked little satire (— la "The Larry Sanders Show") of local TV news has generated more than 2 million downloads, prompted a tire kick or two from large studios and even earned a recent shout-out from Wall Street Journal tech columnist Walter S. Mossberg, whose verdicts make or break products lavished with far more dollars and ballyhoo than Black's.

The experience has proved a revelation for Black, who realized "that TV wasn't the be-all and end-all" for a career predicated on scripted comic shorts.

"I actually believe it's going to affect the way TV is programmed in the next five to 10 years," Black, a stocky British expat who somewhat resembles Ricky Gervais of BBC's "The Office," said last week of what's been variously dubbed netcasting, podcasting, video-sharing and webisodes.

"When they see alternative programming working," he added, referring to network execs, "they'll start rethinking how they develop shows."

Yup, you've probably heard similar claims for a decade now, ever since tech soothsayers began slinging around the now-dated buzzword "convergence." But lately, accumulating evidence suggests that maybe the claims made for the Internet as an alternative distribution platform weren't a bunch of overblown business-plan hooey after all.

The phenomenal, if controversial, success of YouTube proves there's an appetite for video shorts on the Web, even if much material until now has been clips from network TV and other copyrighted material. Viacom's \$1-billion copyright lawsuit against Google's video-sharing site, filed last week, could help propel needs for original content.

Meanwhile, providers such as Bliptv.com — where "Goodnight Burbank" and many other original scripted and documentary series have a home — are helping build real followings and sometimes finding crucial ad sponsorships for grass-roots series.

"We're just starting to see a switch over to 'shows' " on the Internet, said popular Web personality Amanda Congdon, who has her own free-floating series on Bliptv.

Most of these shows remain technically stunted compared with their big-network brethren; a post-production budget of zero just doesn't buy a very experienced film editor these days. But sometimes, as in the case of "Goodnight Burbank," they're competitive conceptually with the very best that networks have to offer.

Destinations such as Bliptv and YouTube are "really the final piece in the puzzle that has led to an explosion of new, small TV," said Jeff Jarvis, a former TV Guide critic and print-magazine guru turned tech oracle who runs the BuzzMachine.com blog.

"The audience will be big enough — and the definition of 'big enough' has changed: big enough to have fun, big enough to cover low production costs, big enough to be famous for 15 clicks," Jarvis added. "It's a mistake to judge this world by the metrics of old, big entertainment, where you had to be huge — you had to have blockbusters — to cover huge costs and make money. Now, you can be big enough to be worthwhile for a helluva lot less."

Proving he really believes his own quotes, the ever-entrepreneurial Jarvis last month launched his own netcasting site, IdolCritic.com, which features gossip and commentary on "American Idol" from host Liza Persky, whom Jarvis found while surfing on Bliptv.

Congdon, an Internet host whose noisy exit last year from the news site Rocketboom was followed by deals with ABC and HBO, plus a Bliptv-featured series called "Starring Amanda Congdon," said she wanted to "bring Internet culture to the masses."

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But she realizes that quest is still in its early stages. One key challenge is realizing that the Internet calls for an entirely different type of show, not just outtakes and blooper reels from network series.

"The Internet feels a little more personal, a little more connected," Congdon told me.

Certainly that's the case with "Goodnight Burbank," which Black conceived after observing his parents — who emigrated from Manchester, England, to Florida during the 1970s — grow enamored of local TV news celebrities. "I wanted to puncture that bubble," he said.

After quitting his job, he took a class with the improv group Upright Citizens Brigade. "One of the guys said he had access to a green-screen studio, and we could start shooting on the Internet," he said. So Black began thinking in terms of making not a conventional 22-minute sitcom but rather four- or five-minute chunks suitable for Web viewers' short attention spans. "I wrote the pilot script on a Wednesday and we shot it on the following Sunday."

The result can be bracingly funny, with at least a couple of hearty laughs per episode — not a bad ratio for a comic narrative that lasts about as long as a pop song. Black, who had never acted, plays pompous news anchor Gordon Winston-Smythe, who's often at odds with his brittle co-anchor Kelly Jones (Shulie Cowen). In one of "Burbank's" slyest riffs on Southern California's ethnically conscious media, Jones' surname is given a Spanish pronunciation ("HO-ness").

Real news items are used, although covered in ways that satirize media sensationalism: A report on a school herpes outbreak featured a background graphic that might as well have been a medical photo.

"Burbank's" future is still an open question. Unlike Congdon, who has lined up sponsorship deals with Dove and PalTalk, a video chat service, Black is still looking for ad support. But Bliptv co-founder Dina Kaplan said the site's model helped standout shows like "Burbank" thrive.

"We're not Jeff Zucker," she said, referring to the NBC Universal boss. "We're not trying to create hits. There are thousands of shows out there on the Internet. Some are godawful, but the really good ones rise to the top."

That's what Black — and a lot of other folks banking on Web video — is counting on. "Financially, this has yet to make a dime," he said of "Burbank." "But the moment this is monetized, who needs television?"

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Scott Collins' Channel Island column runs every Monday in Calendar. Contact him at channelisland@latimes.com

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