

Offbeat shows turn Web into world wide TV network



By Bob Tourtellotte Tue Apr 4, 3:44 PM ET LOS ANGELES (Reuters)

The widely hyped merging of the PC and TV is finally taking shape in a way that only a few people imagined in the late 1990s Internet boom. From independent producers like Mondo Media to big media companies like MTV, and even kids who post videos on community sites like YouTube.com, the World Wide Web is becoming a sort of worldwide TV network for audiences seeking offbeat entertainment not shown on mainstream television.

Mondo's cartoon characters, "Happy Tree Friends," survived the dot-com bust of 2000 and are now a thriving, worldwide phenomenon. And this week a little-known British rocker named Sandi Thom signed a record deal with Sony BMG after building an audience by webcasting her own concerts from her basement.

"I still don't think people have a handle on the fact that, for all intents and purposes, we have a TV network working for us, essentially free, that is worldwide," said John Evershed, co-founder of Mondo Media, which owns "Happy Tree Friends."

The "Friends" are a collection of lovable forest animals with names like Giggles and Lumpy who get into trouble that inevitably leads to violence and death. San Francisco-based Mondo shows 16 million, two-minute programs monthly on the Web which have spawned the sale of 750,000 DVDs. The "Tree Friends" Web site, its t-shirts, toys, and cell phone episodes are hot items in more than 20 countries in Asia, Europe, North and South America, Mondo Media says. The "Tree Friends" were a product of the technology boom when venture capital and advertisers chased producers who were delivering TV-like episodes on the Web. When the boom ended, money dried up and only a few players like Mondo remained.

WORLD WIDE TV

Evershed said this new wave of Web video is fueled by the rising number of people with high-speed Internet access which makes video watchable on PCs. Moreover, younger audiences are increasingly accustomed to watching video on PCs and laptops.

Other independent producers building audiences with a TV network on the Web include Joe Cartoon, Homestarrunner and JibJab. Community building sites like YouTube.com are thriving by making it easy for users to post video clips. Teens also turn to the Web when traditional TV shows get boring. Seeing this trend, major media companies are getting in on the act so they don't lose viewers and advertising to Web competitors.

Viacom Inc's MTV has started "MTV Overdrive" at MTV.com. E! Entertainment webcasts "The Vine" at eonline.com and The Walt Disney's Co.'s ABC Television Group has plans to stream shows for kids on its Disneychannel.com and Jetix.tv sites in coming months.

As with the "Friends," keys to success for "MTV Overdrive" have been offering short programs and original content that fans do not see on broadcast or cable TV. That philosophy is a far cry from the late 1990s when the dot-com boom fueled the notion that eventually all TV would be delivered on the Web, on-air broadcasting would become wired webcasting and computers would be the TV sets of the future. "Really, I had this vision 6 years ago," said Mike Tuinstra, chief executive officer of Joecartoon.com Inc. "It's just now kind of happening."