

*From the Los Angeles Times*

## CHANNEL ISLAND

### CHANNEL ISLAND: Could a strike be a ball for Web?

Internet-only fare such as "Clark and Michael" and "Quarterlife" are alternatives for the tech-savvy.

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SO, assume you may have heard about this writers strike thing.

Most of us might not notice much difference in prime time right away, but as of tonight, if the Writers Guild of America strike was called as planned, Leno and Stewart and Colbert, and perhaps Letterman and Kimmel too, are likely zapped till further notice (and it's five nights into November sweeps -- how great is that for local stations?). The supply of series such as "House" and "The Office" won't hold out forever, either.

So what happens, viewer-wise? Of course, no one knows. And years from now, no one may remember (fun experiment: Try asking your friends who are old enough to reconstruct their viewing habits during the last writers' strike, a five-month ordeal in 1988).

But it seems one of the biggest unknowns has to do with the vast quantities of entertainment that are now being generated for the Web -- and remember, the value of scripted material broadcast over the Internet and other non-TV media is one of the major issues that writers and producers have been squaring off over. The Web, as a matter of fact, is the one obvious difference between now and '88. Faced with a long drought of fresh scripted material on network and cable TV, are we all going to end up junkies for the junk on YouTube? Hey, catch you later on MyDamnChannel.com! FunnyOrDie.com -- it's alive again!

Simply put, will the strike be a watershed moment for Web TV, the same way the 1988 strike was for cable? Maybe convergence -- how many laptops have you burned through since you last took that term seriously? -- will arrive at last, a meeting of the twain.

Well, maybe. Certainly that's the hope of the teeming legions of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who are crossing their fingers for their own YouTube jackpot. But strike or no, there remain a lot of obstacles to mainstream acceptance of made-for-Internet entertainment.

Like, for instance, me.

Mind you, I've no objection to the concept of Web video, scripted or otherwise. My love for Will Ferrell in FunnyOrDie's "The Landlord" knows no bounds. But as someone who covers TV for a living, and watches a lot of it (and spends even more time online), I have a hard time believing that throngs of viewers are suddenly going to become Internet-video converts, at least as the Internet currently exists.

As Quincy Smith, the former tech venture capitalist tapped a year ago to lead CBS Interactive, told Forbes.com in September: "Faced with a choice between watching something on a beautiful plasma-screen television or on a PC, you're going to opt for the plasma-screen television."

Quite so. Last week, for a column I'd hoped to write about ABC's comedy "Samantha Who?" (oh, drat this accursed strike-news cycle), I logged onto the network's website hoping to catch an episode I'd missed. On YouTube and many other sites, the user-made content can easily be watched without any additional futzing, although many of the videos have all the production values of single-reel stag films from the 1950s.

But the ABC site told me that first I needed to download a plug-in -- something called the Move Media Player -- but promised the maneuver would yield "stunning video quality." By Web standards, the video was nice, though not nearly as nice as the picture on the flat-screen HD set in our bedroom.

Here, friends, is the basic conundrum of watching Web entertainment: How much convenience are you willing to surrender for the sake of quality (and the other way around)? Wouldn't you rather flop on your sofa and just watch TV? Isn't this a lot of trouble to go to for video viewing?

"No," Marshall Herskovitz told me. "You're just old."

Herskovitz and his longtime producing partner Ed Zwick were the creative team behind "thirtysomething" and "My So-Called Life," as well as movies such as "The Last Samurai." Their latest project is "Quarterlife," an advertiser-supported, Internet-only drama about 20-ish artists that will premiere next week and unspool over the next few months with 36 eight-minute segments. (For the record, Herskovitz is older than this columnist, although that did little to salve the columnist's wounded pride.)

"Young people do watch stuff on the Net," Herskovitz said. "Convergence is coming. Now, whether it's two, three, four years from now, whether it's on a computer or a 50-inch screen -- we're not there yet. But that's where we're headed."

That seems a hard point to argue. But would a strike push us closer to that moment? Doubtful.

For one thing, virtually all the made-for-Internet scripted entertainment is of notably lower quality than what you'd see on TV, even off-hours on a second-tier, basic-cable network. Network series these days typically cost about \$2.5 million to produce; an Internet episode might run \$35,000 or less (Herskovitz would say only that "Quarterlife" is somewhere between those two extremes.) Anybody sitting down to enjoy Internet TV -- even acclaimed efforts such as "Goodnight Burbank" or "Clark and Michael" -- needs to dial down their expectation level by one or two full turns of the knob.

Moreover, the most experienced writers may not be able to work at all for Internet entertainment sites during a strike. That's because the WGA's position on such work is murky. Guild spokesman Gregg Mitchell could not say last week whether WGA rules would permit members to work on Web-based projects during a strike, whether or not the websites belonged to the major studios. Herskovitz and other writers say it's likely that members would have to petition the guild for waivers on a case-by-case basis.

That'll be an iffy proposition, because working for Internet sites during a strike might undermine the guild's arguments -- one of the main sticking points of the current negotiation -- that writers deserve a better deal for studio work that turns up on the Internet.

"It'd be interesting to me if [the union] green-lights Web projects," said John Rash, senior vice president at ad firm Campbell Mithun.

If you envy the small, independent Internet producer in all this, think again. Some mom and pop shops are freaked that the guild may push a hard line that will result in low-budget Web entertainment sites being forced to follow the same union work rules as, say, Disney or Warner Bros.

"If projects like ours, with a modest budget, are held to the same rules as large budget webshows, then it could make it far more difficult to produce our material," said Brad Winderbaum of the thriller site It'sAllInYourHands.com. "In these negotiations, it is imperative that the guilds include ways for little guys like us to continue practicing our craft."

Oh, dear. Does this all sound grim for a viewer just trying to make it through a writers strike of unknown duration? That's not what your columnist intended.

Look on the bright side. At last, you'll have a chance to watch all those old shows piling up in your DVR.

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