

# Boyle Web sensation: A massive missed opportunity?

May 29 2009, By JAKE COYLE , AP Entertainment Writer

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FILE - In this April 16, 2009 file photo, Susan Boyle, who's performance on the television show "Britain's Got Talent" wowed the judges, poses singing with a hairbrush at her home in Blackburn, Scotland. On Saturday, May 23, 2009, she was voted into the next round of the "American Idol"-style show "Britain's Got Talent". (AP Photo)

(AP) -- The final act of the year's biggest pop culture sensation will not be seen on TVs, beamed out to multiplexes or heard much on the airwaves. Well, at least not in America.

The phenomenon of Susan Boyle, seen by millions of Britons on ITV's "Britain's Got Talent," has been a worldwide digital storm played out in sporadic installments on the Internet. Videos of her first performance in April - "I Dreamed a Dream" from the musical "Les Miserables" - have been watched more than 220 million times, according to Internet [video](#)

research firm Visible Measures.

Boyle's semifinals performance over the weekend showed the craze is far from over. Her version of "Memory" from "Cats" has been the most popular YouTube video of the week in the U.S., the U.K., and just about everywhere else. Visible Measures counts its total views at 16.8 million - a pace nearly as rapid as that for "I Dreamed a Dream."

Though millions will tune in to the show in Britain, the much larger Boyle audience around the globe will witness the last act on YouTube or other video sharing platforms. The 47-year-old church volunteer from Blackburn, Scotland, will sing again Saturday (ready your mouse for clicking around 5:00 p.m. EDT), and whether she wins will be decided by viewer votes on Sunday (also around 5:00 p.m. EDT).

But depending on your perspective, Susan Boyle has been either a runaway hit or a boat missed: While Boyle mania has been a reflection of both the incredible growth of online video as a center of global culture, it's also endemic of media companies' struggle to fully leverage viral popularity.

The production company FremantleMedia Enterprises holds the international digital rights to "Britain's Got Talent" - and one would think they'd be doing cartwheels. Instead, some have suggested they've left millions on the table.

The majority of the hits received by videos of Boyle were unofficial uploads by fans. None of the videos carried advertising.

FremantleMedia, which is owned by RTL Group, produces the show along with SyCo Tv and Simco Ltd. Before the Boyle bonanza struck, the companies reportedly tried - and failed - to come to an agreement with YouTube. FremantleMedia said to be interested in having ads roll

before a video, while YouTube has favored banner ads and ads that appear at the bottom of a video.

A spokesman for FremantleMedia declined an interview request for this story.

Hunter Walk, a product manager for YouTube, credited "Britain's Got Talent" and its producers for thinking "very new media" about their content and moving quickly to distribute it.

"To the show's credit, they immediately got the sense that their audience is worldwide and that's why they chose to quickly partner with YouTube to get this content out there," said Walk. "They worked with us to get this content up immediately after broadcast."

Added Walk: "They should be not only complimented for doing a great job on this, but are probably well-positioned to succeed at this scale in the future."

The suggestion is that "Britain's Got Talent" and its producers opted to utilize YouTube primarily as a promotional tool.

That decision has surely benefited the ratings for ITV (the program has been drawing about half of all Britons watching TV during its time slot) and elevated the show's brand - a brand that includes its American counterpart: "America's Got Talent," which premieres its fourth season in June on NBC.

But that decision also may have minimized the revenue generated from a gigantic international audience. According to rough estimates by the Times of London based on online ad rates, the first Boyle video could have earned close to \$2 million with minimal advertising on YouTube.

That may be a relatively small sacrifice in building "Britain's Got Talent" - and "America's Got Talent," producers hope - into long-lasting juggernauts.

Eliot Van Buskirk, a writer for Wired.com who has covered this territory, thinks a unique opportunity was missed.

"This video of Susan Boyle is quickly becoming the most viewed video of all-time - and nobody's making money," said Van Buskirk. "It's been sort of a growing pains stage of ad-supported media."

Van Buskirk said the situation showed the need for content creators and distributors to have agreements in place for when a sensation strikes.

"We're still in the early stages - somehow - of media on the Internet," he said.

A percentage of the would-be ad revenue also would have gone to YouTube. Instead, the Google Inc.-owned company has earned little directly from what might become its biggest hit since launching four years ago. Accounting for bandwidth, Van Buskirk believes YouTube may have lost money.

Like "Britain's Got Talent," though, YouTube surely benefited tangentially from Boyle. It was clearly the place to go to see videos of her.

At a time in online video where some content providers are trying to carve out their own boutique niche (such as Hulu.com), Susan Boyle was a reminder of YouTube's particular blockbuster power.

"The scale at which Susan Boyle succeeded," said Walk, "could only have happened on [YouTube](#)."

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On the Net:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/BritainsSoTalented>

<http://talent.itv.com/?ps>

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