

YouTube seeks to click with a more diverse audience

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Russell Simmons has made a career - and a fortune - programming to audiences that the mainstream media has ignored.

The hip-hop impresario co-founded the Def Jam label, launched the Phat Farm clothing line, started a film and television production company, and branched out into stage productions with Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam on Broadway.

Now Simmons is moving to Los Angeles to spearhead ADD Video, a YouTube channel designed for what he describes as a "post-racial America." It will offer lifestyle programming and showcase current and rising stars from entertainment, music, fashion, sports and film, with a focus on the kind of diversity that the [mainstream media](#) is missing.

"Hollywood doesn't realize - it's not like 'Do more black stuff,' " Simmons said. "I'm an American. I don't want to be patronized. I want to be included."

Simmon's ADD Video is among a number of new YouTube channels targeting African-American, Asian-American and Latino viewers who already flock to the site by the millions. YouTube executives see an opportunity to fund original programming for these audiences, which are underserved by traditional media.

Some of the most recognizable names in the entertainment industry - including rappers Jay-Z, Queen Latifah and Diddy, and former BET Entertainment President Reginald Hudlin - will unveil channels in the coming weeks, joining those already launched by former Los Angeles Laker Shaquille O'Neal, Grammy Award-winning musician Pharrell Williams and "The Original Kings of Comedy" producer Walter Latham. YouTube also announced Monday it would fund a new generation of original channels in Europe.

Traditional media - particularly film and television - have been slow to embrace multiculturalism, either in front of the camera or behind it.

Minority directors have made few strides in getting jobs on leading television shows, according to a recent survey by the Directors Guild of America. The survey found that out of 190 scripted television series on cable and network television last season, white males directed 73 percent of all episodes. Some high-profile shows, such as HBO's "Veep" and TNT's "Dallas," hired no women or minority directors.

White actors command most of the television and film roles too, according to the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists. Whites accounted for 79 percent of the lead roles in big-budget theatrical productions in 2010, based on an

analysis of casting data for union productions.

Latinos reached their highest share of lead roles that year, the study found, but the portion of African-American actors cast in lead or supporting roles hit a five-year low. Minorities fared worse in major roles on low-budget films, those costing less than \$2.5 million. African-American, Latino and Asian-American actors won just 1 in 6 lead roles, SAG-AFTRA found.

"It's still a pretty male and white environment," said Adam Moore, SAG-AFTRA's director of equal opportunity and diversity. "We have a long way to go for our screens to represent the world we all walk around in."

Therein lies the opportunity for YouTube. Minorities watch videos on YouTube at a higher rate than white viewers, according to a study by ratings firm Nielsen. Roughly 6 in 10 African-Americans and Latinos in the United States access the site in a typical month, as do 7 in 10 Asian-Americans. In contrast, 58 percent of whites spend time on YouTube.

"These voices aren't really heard loudly on other platforms," said Malik Ducard, YouTube's director of content partnerships. It's a "really amazing and large opportunity we have with online distribution for the African-American marketplace, for the Latino and for the Asian audiences that hunger for content. And we are happy to get it and serve it up for them."

Entertainment executives are eager to fill the entertainment void.

"We all know where the world's going," O'Neal said. "People are always on their phones, on their laptops, on their iPads. When YouTube made the announcement (last fall) that they wanted to do original channels, I thought it would be good to do a Shaq comedy channel."

Comedy Shaq Network has enlisted veteran writers Michael Anthony Snowden ("White Chicks," "In Living Color") and Rodney Barnes ("Boondocks," "Everybody Hates Chris") to develop original programs featuring popular talent from film, live comedy and television. Noted comedians Kevin Hart, Gary Owen and Katt Williams already have had stand-up segments featured on the channel.

O'Neal's business partner, Codeblack Entertainment Chief Executive Jeff Clanagan, said Comedy Shaq is the outgrowth of an entertainment strategy that began three years ago with Shaq's All-Star Comedy Jam tour. Film of that first live show was licensed as a Showtime comedy special and later sold 350,000 DVDs. Now Shaq's comedy channel is the centerpiece of a growing online network that also will offer original series targeting the 18- to 34-year-old males who will drop by Comedy Shaq for laughs.

Clanagan learned, while accompanying Hart on the European leg of his comedy tour, that YouTube is the best media platform for reaching Comedy Shaq's audience.

"We interviewed people in every market, and the way that everybody found out about him was through YouTube," Clanagan said. "YouTube is the place (people) learn about American artists and American culture."

Hudlin plans an eclectic mix of entertainment offerings: comedy, action, horror, pop culture and reality, with casting that better reflects contemporary society.

"A lot of television networks are very white or very black or very Latino - and that's cool," Hudlin said. "But what about creating programming that actually looks like the world you live in?"

Among its initial offerings is an animated sketch comedy show, "Shut

Your Pie Hole," that delivers two-minute bits, Hudlin said. Another series features Lamorne Morris, who portrays Winston Bishop on the Fox comedy "New Girl." He will "moonlight" with New Nation Networks in a series of videos that parody such popular TV shows as "The Bachelor" and HBO's "24/7."

Actor Jason George, who has a recurring role as Dr. Ben Warren on ABC's "Grey's Anatomy," said YouTube's strategy of programming to niche markets is a familiar media gambit. When the upstart Fox television network launched in 1986, it challenged the established broadcasters with shows that appealed to young and minority viewers, such as "The Arsenio Hall Show" and later the sketch comedy series "In Living Color."

"The niche market becomes the cool market becomes the young market," George said. "And 'Arsenio' and 'In Living Color' become 'Beverly Hills, 90210' and 'Melrose Place.' "

The flood of online series represent new opportunities for actors looking to take on roles other than the "BBF" - "black best friend" - parts often reserved for African-Americans. For some breakout acts, [YouTube](#) has led to mainstream media gigs.

"I really am excited because it's the democratization of media in a way we've never seen before," George said. "When it trickles up to the network ... the opportunities are showing up behind the cameras, in the writing rooms, in show-running positions and in the executive seats. And that's happening more and more."

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