

WIGS channel aims for TV-quality scripted shows on YouTube

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The wails of an infant haunt much of the 13-minute YouTube clip. On the Internet's dominant video site, recordings of laughing babies, talking twin babies, roller-skating babies long have made for amusing, sure-fire click bait. This case of a crying newborn represents something entirely different: It's an attempt at groundbreaking original programming from the site.

"Susanna" is a 12-part series starring "True Blood's" Anna Paquin as a new mother who develops acute postpartum depression and her struggles in caring for her child. The Web series, which saw the last of its videos posted on June 21, is the latest commission from female-centric WIGS, the top channel for scripted drama on YouTube.

"This whole platform for female-driven narratives and storytelling is just really exciting," Paquin said. "As a woman, it's sometimes a little hard to find material that's challenging or interesting, where you're not playing a wife or a girlfriend. I'm lucky enough to be on a TV show where I get to play a ballsy tough chick. That also is a rarity. This fits into that category. That's why I wanted to be a part of it."

Launched a year ago by Jon Avnet, the writer, director and producer best known for "Black Swan" and "Fried Green Tomatoes," and Rodrigo Garcia, director of "Albert Nobbs" and the HBO series "In Treatment," WIGS has constructed a roster of fan favorites, such as "Blue," starring Julia Stiles as a single mom who moonlights as a prostitute; and "Lauren," a drama about sexual misconduct in the military that features

"Pretty Little Liars" star Troian Bellisario and Jennifer Beals.

Its marquee talent, which also includes Jennifer Garner, Alfred Molina, Stephen Moyer and Virginia Madsen, and carefully crafted stories have attracted about 46-million views - a modest performance by YouTube standards, where a South Korean pop star doing a horsy dance can capture 1.7-billion clicks and the site's most-viewed channel, gamer-focused Machinima, which has logged nearly 4.3-billion video views.

But Avnet and Garcia say they are in it for the long haul, thanks to backing from a big-name advertiser, American Express, and a television network, Fox, which views the channel as a way to inexpensively test dramatic concepts that could reach the television screen. Avnet, Garcia and their Hollywood collaborators are eager to learn the nuances of storytelling in a medium that rewards brevity, rapid pacing and near-immediate plot reveals - and do so without creating second-class, tiny-screen entertainment.

"We're old fuddy-duddies as far as the Internet's concerned, but ... you don't have to read the crystal ball to know that the Internet is here to stay," Garcia said. "But storytelling is not going to go anywhere. We wanted to tell them on the Internet in a valuable way."

WIGS also represents a programming experiment by YouTube, which financed 100 channels of original content more than a year ago in hopes of broadening its audience and changing the perceptions of Madison Avenue ad buyers. The experiment yielded mixed results - not unlike the world of broadcast TV, where 65 percent of new network shows can fail in the first season.

Avnet and Garcia received a \$5-million initial advance to create 100 episodes of original scripted programming for and about women. WIGS fit with YouTube's efforts to migrate new audiences to the youthful

platform. The creative duo were eager to figure out how to exploit a site that reaches 1 billion users each month at a time when digital distribution, through services such as Netflix, Amazon and Hulu, plays an increasingly important role in delivering programming to new screens and viewers.

"Could it be we could be creating the sort of water cooler experience for the iPad generation?" Avnet said.

Robert Kyncl, YouTube's global head of content and business operations, described Avnet and Garcia as the ideal YouTube students who search for fresh insights and information to attract and retain audiences. They pay attention to YouTube's scientific analysis and travel frequently to its headquarters in San Bruno, Calif.

"One of the reasons they've succeeded is they have an incredible creative core. Because of that, they're able to attract amazing talent," Kyncl said. "Most important, Jon and Rodrigo have embraced this platform model incredibly well. There are no better students of YouTube than Jon Avnet and Rodrigo (Garcia)."

The little-discussed issue of postpartum depression allowed for an evocative yarn. Avnet had been mulling the idea since an actress in London years ago confided details of her severe depression after the birth of her child.

He wrote several episodes of "Susanna," in which a new mother, Katie, develops acute depression and is hospitalized, leaving her and her baby in the care of a career-focused younger sister, Susanna, played by Maggie Grace. The little sister struggles to close a big business deal while accepting that Katie won't be recovering soon - thrusting a resentful and unprepared Susanna into the role of nurturing the infant April, with whom she falls in love. Paquin accepted the role, which she

fit in on weekends, while working on HBO's "True Blood" and before filming started on "X-Men: Days of Future Past."

"Blue" and "Lauren" have established a fan base, and both returned for second seasons. A more high-profile breakthrough could help define WIGS as an entertainment destination, just as "Mad Men" elevated the AMC cable network or "The Sopranos" made HBO appointment viewing.

"Every single network that has been created, post the three (original broadcasters), has had one hit that put them on the map," Avnet said. "That's what our business is, it's a one-hit business. If we did that today, on our platform, it would be a tectonic shift."

Other industry veterans, including movie and TV producer Brian Robbins and talk show host and comedian Ellen DeGeneres, appreciated the nuances of the new medium - and built audiences by featuring established YouTube personalities and encouraging user interaction. But others in Hollywood have yet to feel the earth move when it comes to YouTube.

"Parks & Recreation's" Amy Poehler attracts a TV audience of 1.7 million on a Thursday night in prime time but took nearly 150 videos over a year to surpass 3.5 million views on her Smart Girls channel on YouTube. Ditto for "Two and a Half Men's" Ashton Kutcher's YouTube channel, Thrash Lab, with its 7.3 million total views.

"On YouTube, creators and brands have a unique opportunity to have a direct relationship with their consumers and build loyalty through engagement. It takes time, it takes energy," Kyncl said. "Some creators are very comfortable in the traditional media business - create content and let somebody else find the audience. ... But YouTube is different."

YouTube's estimated \$200-million investment in original content has paid off for the site. Kyncl said it more than doubled the number of subscribers to YouTube channels and attracted a record number of monthly visitors to the site as a whole. Video consumption rose by 50 percent over the last year, and established media players, including Time Warner, Chernin Group, Bertelsmann and Comcast Ventures, also began investing in YouTube content creators.

A handful of traditional media veterans, including "Kings of Comedy" creator Walter Latham, who brought their pedigree and production expertise to the digital platform, expected the site to behave like a TV network and promote new shows. But YouTube saw its role as a conduit to a global audience, the Internet equivalent of a cable or satellite TV distributor. Although YouTube committed \$200 million to promoting its star-studded channels, it expected its partners to market their material, or hire third-party firms such as Fullscreen with expertise in audience development.

"We spoke about promoting content overall rather than promise individual creators that they were going to get promotion," Kyncl said. "We are evolving the way we promote creators through initiatives like our recent Comedy Week, which included YouTube's first-ever TV ads and yielded a 100 percent increase in subscriptions for participating creators."

Latham, whose tours and TV specials helped launch the careers of Steve Harvey and the late Bernie Mac, invested the money YouTube advanced him into programming, not marketing. As a consequence, the Latham Entertainment channel has struggled, and the producer has returned to a more established medium. He took the "Comedy After Dark" brand he incubated on YouTube and brought it to Comedy Central.

"TV is very easy: You get the ratings, we'll give you another season ... I

understand how that works," Latham said. "This, beats me."

The 13-month-old WIGS began attracting viewers in part through a time-honored Hollywood marketing strategy of courting coverage in the celebrity press, on the talk-show circuit and in mainstream publications.

"A couple of times, people have actually confused it with a TV show - 'Oh, I miss that show you're on,'" Stiles said. "People so often are watching any kind of programming on their computers. The line between traditional TV and the Internet is so blurred."

The quality of the WIGS programming came to the attention of Fox Entertainment Chairman Kevin Reilly, who recognized the channel as an inexpensive development pipeline for programming. The network signed a multi-year agreement this year to help market and distribute WIGS' dramas and recently struck a deal to make some of the popular Web series available through Hulu and Hulu Plus.

"Unlike the cost of a scripted drama pilot, which is not the cheapest thing that's ever been produced, there's a lot more experimentation that you can do, there are a lot more risks you can take," said Joe Earley, chief operating officer of Fox broadcasting. "The ultimate home run for all of us is for one of these series to eventually come to our air."

A bigger priority, for now, is sustaining the channel. Dan Cryan, a digital media analyst with IHS Screen Digest, said WIGS falls in line with YouTube's overarching channel strategy of servicing a broad audience by way of division - but the narrowed focus doesn't leave room for lower standards.

"WIGS isn't exceptional," Cryan said, noting the site's efforts with its BabyTV channel and Machinima to reach niche audiences. "It's just harder to make something like this without a proper production

company. What will be interesting to see is how it performs. It's got 200,000 subscribers. If it grows and those people are engaging with it on a regular basis, it makes its reach - by the standards of a cable network - pretty good."

Even the most accomplished actors and directors recognize that the Internet is as much a part of their futures as the TV or the movie screen.

"Being able to watch things on the phone and on the go is a huge part of people's lifestyles now," Paquin said. "It makes storytelling more accessible to more people. As a creative person, that's what you want. I don't care how a person experiences it ... It doesn't matter if they watched it on their phones or the movie theaters or in some tiny off-off-Broadway theater. Storytelling is storytelling."

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