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CHANNEL ISLAND

Now she has their attention

'Crazed fan' Brooke Brodack harnesses the power of YouTube -- and networks are noticing.

By Scott Collins
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When Brooke Brodack, a 20-year-old receptionist who lives in western Massachusetts with her mom and younger sister, started getting fan mail from Carson Daly's people, she figured it was all a joke, that somehow she'd been punked.

But strange things can happen when you post goofy homemade videos of yourself on YouTube.com, the website that the TV industry can't decide whether it should embrace or dread.

Daly, former MTV phenom and currently host of NBC's late-night show "Last Call," was noodling around on YouTube one weekend this spring when he told an executive at his production company to check out Brodack's short video parodies. An intense young woman with flyaway hair and a gap-toothed smile, "Brookers" had in eight months become one of the most popular hosts on the video-sharing site, which logs roughly 200 million page views per day and is ranked No. 18 in worldwide Internet traffic. One of Brodack's videos, "Crazed Numa Fan!!!!," a wry takeoff on the Internet lip-syncing craze inspired by the popular dance tune "Dragostea din Tei," has been viewed more than 1.4 million times since October.

"I thought there was something extremely charismatic about this girl," Daly said Friday. "Her directing, her use of music — it was very MTV to me."

You can probably write the next paragraph yourself: Carson Daly Productions signed Brodack to an 18-month overall programming development deal, splashed across the pages of Variety last week. Other terms weren't disclosed, but it's believed to be the first time a recognized Hollywood firm has established formal ties with one of the homegrown (and mostly young) talents on YouTube.

Brodack — who deleted as junk the first couple of exploratory emails from Ruth Caruso, a development executive at Daly's company — is still trying to grasp what happened. Daly himself "emailed me for the first time about a week ago," Brodack said. "He goes, 'I'm a huge fan of yours,' and I'm thinking, 'Aren't I supposed to be saying that to you?' This is kind of 'Twilight Zone'-ish."

Well, we might be living in a media world more mixed up than anything "Zone" creator Rod Serling concocted.

To many in the industry, YouTube, launched in February 2005, and other sites like it are potential enemies, the TV version of Napster, whose early reputation as a song-piracy enabler made it a pariah to record companies. After all, in addition to allowing people like Brodack to distribute their own work, these sharing sites also allow the free exchange of previously broadcast, copyrighted material — exactly the kind of stuff that studio executives hope to make big syndication and DVD dollars from down the road.

That's why in February, NBC, Daly's own employer, asked YouTube to take down the "Saturday Night Live" clip "Lazy Sunday" — even though the site was largely responsible for turning the rap spoof into an Internet sensation. (NBC now sells "Lazy Sunday" for \$1.99 on the Apple's iTunes site, though you can still watch it free plenty of other places online). C-SPAN, of all networks, last month demanded that YouTube remove videos of Stephen Colbert's infamous address at the White House Correspondents Dinner.

"Copyright laws can be a tricky and a somewhat complicated matter, but we want our community to be one where everyone's creative rights are respected," a YouTube staffer wrote on the company's blog, explaining why the Colbert material was taken down. The site also recently cut the time limit on submitted videos from 15 to 10 minutes, partly to allay copyright holders' concerns by making it more cumbersome to make copies.

But Daly isn't alone in seeing YouTube as fertile frontier rather than pirates' cove. Major TV studios have also started trolling YouTube and similar destinations for the next generation of acting and directing talent. In the process, the Web is offering the kind of instant connection to Hollywood that countless denizens of public-access talk shows have craved and seldom received.

For example, Twentieth Century Fox Television, producer of "The Simpsons" and "24," has junior executives scouring the video-sharing sites. "We also have a casting executive assigned to discovering new talent, and these sites can be particularly fertile ground," Jane Francis, senior vice president of Fox's boutique programming arm Fox 21, said in a statement. "While these efforts have not yet resulted in a major piece of casting or story idea or project, we believe it is only a matter of time."

In fact, the networks may need YouTube more than YouTube needs them.

The most-watched video on the site is "Evolution of Dance," in which motivational speaker Judson Laipply spends six thoroughly silly minutes grooving onstage to song samples like "Kung Fu Fighting" and "What Is Love." Since April 6, the clip has been watched more than 24 million times — a viewership figure far larger than any current network sitcom can boast.

It doesn't mean prime time will soon be filled with faux music videos by a teenager who borrowed his dad's digital camera. As Daly put it, "I don't think you'll see a 30-minute sitcom made from someone's bedroom."

But at the very least, Hollywood's gate-keeping practices might change: Schwab's Drugstore may have been reinvented, electronically.

"I just love it that no middleman is involved," said Daly, who has yet to meet Brodack face to face but hopes to work with her on "webisodes" — Web-based video content — and other material. "There's no agent, nothing. The pipeline is direct. I think it's going to exponentially change how the business is run."

Brodack — whose equipment is so hit-or-miss that at one point she cobbled together videos with a camera that could shoot only 30 seconds at a time — is just happy to have a new outlet.

"I don't know where this is gonna go, to be honest," she said last week. But "I have so many ideas in my head, and I need to get them out."

The Channel Island column runs every Monday in Calendar. Contact Scott Collins at channelisland@latimes.com

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