To make a long story short...

Steven Bochco, creator of hourlong TV dramas, shifts online with brief, amusing clips.

By Alex Pham, Times Staff Writer
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As creator of "L.A. Law" and "Hill Street Blues," Steven Bochco packed lots of drama into 60 minutes. Now he's trying to entertain in closer to 60 seconds.

Bochco is joining the masses of wannabe online video moguls with "Cafe Confidential," an Internet series that's all about brevity and punch. The 44-clip collection, which premieres today on video site Metacafe, features people in their teens or 20s telling lighthearted, semi-confessional stories.

"The Internet is at its best when it distracts its users," Bochco said. "You're waiting at the bus stop, you're in between classes, you have 20 minutes — so you go online and you have some fun."

The legal fight Viacom Inc. launched against Google Inc.'s YouTube last week highlighted the fear and loathing the Internet has generated in some corners of Hollywood.

But Bochco, former Walt Disney Co. Chief Executive Michael Eisner and former MTV Networks President Herb Scannell represent a new wave of venturesome Hollywood players diving into the new medium. Eisner has invested in video-sharing site Veoh Networks Inc. and online-video studio Vuguru, and Scannell's Next New Networks is creating Web TV channels.

These creators aren't turning only to YouTube, the leading video site that Viacom has sued for letting users post copyrighted shows and movies. They're partnering with online outfits such as Metacafe Inc. and Revver Inc. — or starting their own.

"If you spend your life chasing your consumers and filing lawsuits, that's a fool's errand," Bochco said. "At the end of the day, the consumer always wins. So, do you want to be right and spend five years and millions of dollars in legal fees to prove it? Or do you want to be successful?"

Bochco decided last fall to try his hand at online entertainment. And Palo Alto-based Metacafe wanted to augment its amateur videos with professional work, which advertisers prefer.

After a few conversations, Metacafe agreed to underwrite the cost of Bochco's project and split the advertising revenue with him. They would not disclose the financial terms.

Spending on Internet video advertising is expected to reach $775 million this year and grow to $2.9 billion by 2010, according to research firm EMarketer Inc. That's a fraction of the roughly $67 billion spent on TV ads.

That hasn't deterred Bochco, who saw the project as a way to create entertainment outside the confines of traditional Hollywood.

He came up with a series of videos, culled from more than 100 interviews in which people talk about weird family members, their first sexual experiences, their worst dates, crazy days at work or embarrassing moments.

Metacafe is betting that "Cafe Confidential" will spur amateur auteurs into submitting their own versions. "The idea is that this becomes an electronic online campfire around which we sit and tell stories," Bochco said. "I'm the camp counselor."

Bochco has TV nailed, but he's trying to learn what makes a good online video.
One of his early favorites in "Cafe Confidential" features an attractive young blond recounting the time she was traveling abroad and couldn't find a bathroom. She relieved herself in a tucked-away spot in a parking lot, but a family with small children caught her in the act.

"A good anecdote is like a good joke in terms of length, structure and punch line," Bochco said. "Here I am in the most embarrassing moment of my life — that's the punch line. A lot of people don't know when to stop. Find the punch line and go out with that."

Bochco knows what he's talking about. The 63-year-old, silver-haired producer won 10 Emmy Awards for his television work — six for "Hill Street Blues," three for "L.A. Law" and one for "NYPD Blue."

But his Web project differs vastly. TV shows are generally tightly scripted, feature casts of recognizable stars and cost as much as $3 million an episode. His online videos are loose and spontaneous, feature unknown people drawn from public places around L.A. and cost less than $100,000 combined.

"The charm of this medium lies in its enormous spontaneity," Bochco said, "because these are completely unscripted and sometimes, for a geezer like me, shockingly candid."

He admitted that he doesn't find the typical YouTube fare charming but added, "I have a jaded palate."

Metacafe CEO Erick Hachenburg agreed with Bochco, saying his site publishes only the best 10% of clips submitted by users.

"We're not a video-sharing site" like YouTube, Hachenburg said. "We want to be more of an online video destination where you can reliably go to see the best videos. And we're hoping to seed that with professional content."

It also has a fraction of the traffic. YouTube drew 34 million U.S. visitors in February, compared with 4 million for Metacafe, according to research firm ComScore Networks Inc.

Bochco isn't sure how people will respond to his videos. But he believes he has to try to cross the bridge between old media and new.

"Maybe as this evolves, it will take us to places we hadn't anticipated," he said.

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