Network fear of the Net as copilot

The honchos’ word isn’t final anymore. Dropped pilots are finding fans on the Internet.

PATRICK GOLDSTEIN

THE Internet is giving Hollywood a nervous breakdown.

Way, way back in prehistory — let’s say, 2004 — if you made a TV pilot and the network didn’t pick it up, the judge’s decision was final.

But now you have a savior, an ally, a friend with millions of other friends. You have YouTube.

Alex Gregory and Peter Huyck are smart young TV writers with an impeccable r–sum—, their credits including “King of the Hill,” “Frasier” and “The Larry Sanders Show.” (Gregory is also a cartoonist for the New Yorker.) With the influential backing of Jon Stewart’s production company, they sold a pilot to Comedy Central called “Three Strikes.” It’s about a bunch of vagabond baseball players who, having been kicked out of the majors for various offenses — from steroid use on up — are trying to keep their dream alive playing for a backwater minor-league team in Fresno.

Did Comedy Central blow the call? See for yourself. The entire pilot, in three segments, was posted on YouTube several weeks ago. (To watch, go to YouTube and type in “Three Strikes.”) Whether it is still there after this column appears is a matter of life and death’s fury to hope.

"You can see why people find YouTube subversive,” says Gregory. “If you were to put all the failed pilots up there and some of them became popular at a time when the shows the networks put on as series were failures, it would make them look terrible. In fact, it would make their jobs look superfluous. If you prove their taste wrong or incorrect, that’s a pretty dangerous scenario.”

This isn’t the first time Web denizens have been able to second-guess network judgments. Last year, not long after a failed WB network pilot called “Nobody’s Watching” from “Scrubs” creator Bill Lawrence became a YouTube sensation, NBC agreed to take a new look at the show — though the network never put the show on the air. In 2005, “Global Frequency,” also a failed WB pilot, ended up on BitTorrent, sparking a flurry of fan interest in the show, though not a major network pick-up. “Aquaman,” a pilot ditched by the CW network last year, also briefly made it up on YouTube — and is actually being sold through iTunes.

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So far, none of this Internet buzz has saved a pilot from extinction — and most of the pilots have been pulled off the air. Yet the fervor of fans, and the potential for new marketplaces like BitTorrent, is forcing networks to pay attention.

"He who is first to die in his dreams is a bloody idiot,” says Joss Stone, who got her first break as a singer from a rejected CD that got picked up by YouTube. "You have to stay on top of it. The game is different now. You can keep three levels on your DVD and you still don’t get the whole story. YouTube will be around for a long time, and it’s a new form of self-publishing. It’s a new form of power to the people.”

"If there’s a large enough community who wants to see a piece of content — and spend their own money for it — someone will find a way to reach that market,” says Jordan Levin, the WB production chief who commissioned the pilot for “Global Frequency.” Now a partner in Generate, a production and management firm active in Internet projects, Levin believes that as long as audiences are disenfranchised, someone will create a new business to serve them, much in the same way that MTV, Fox and the WB themselves were created to cater to younger viewers not being served by more traditional networks.
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Unfortunately, most media conglomerates view these flurries of support for a failed pilot as a threat, not as a sign of fan enthusiasm. "What's really amazing is that TV had the perfect test case, seeing the music business practically destroying itself and totally alienating their core fans for the past six or so years — and they look at that and say, 'Yeah, that's the way to go,' " says John Rogers, "Global Frequency's" writer-producer. "When our pilot surfaced, [Warners] didn't go, 'Wow, people in Finland are forming fan groups and it's being shown in gaming cafes in Korea.' Instead, they kept going, 'No, no, no. Shut it down.'"

The Internet is wresting control from the gatekeepers, one reason why big media companies are trying to rein in YouTube, either with lawsuits, as Viacom is doing, or by creating rival sites for their product, as Fox and NBC-Universal announced last week.

There was no better example of the Web's disruptive force in action than the appearance of "Vote Different," an ingenious attack ad on Hillary Clinton that cast her as a Big Brother figure surrounded by glassy-eyed drones in a brilliant mash-up of Apple’s 1984 Super Bowl ad. The ad spread like wildfire around the Internet last week.

While most of the coverage focused on whether the ad came from a Barack Obama operative or not, the most telling revelation wasn't who did it, but how it was done. In an era when most political ads are the result of endless opposition research and focus group polls, "Vote Different" was made on a Mac computer in a small apartment on a Sunday afternoon. Uploaded to YouTube, it became a sensation in a day.

The "Three Strikes" pilot isn't a sensation, but it's good TV and it shows the surprising cautiousness of a cable network that should be thriving on risky programming. Gregory and Huyck shopped the pilot to other networks but received polite rejection.

"NBC said it was too dark and not hopeful enough," Gregory explains, "though I can't imagine what isn't hopeful about a 15-year-old blind kid getting to touch a prostitute's breasts."

Hearing the two writer-producers discuss their career, it doesn't take a genius to figure out that a big part of TV's future is on the Internet, where YouTube has proved that pure democracy works better than the top-down bureaucracy of network decision making. Even though they had great TV credentials, Gregory and Huyck got nothing made during a two-year development deal at NBC, in part because the network was still in the thrall of "Friends," a show Huyck says "almost destroyed comedy because it made networks think there was a whole new set of rules for sit-coms, like everyone having to be young and beautiful."

Once NBC hit rock bottom, it finally began to take risks, out of which came shows like "The Office" and "30 Rock." But most networks today are still ruled by top-down decision making, not bottom-up ingenuity. It's nice to see guys like Steven Bochco and Michael Eisner experimenting with Web-based entertainment, but my guess is that the first great Internet TV show will come from a nobody, not a somebody, and will be made cheaply on his or her home computer, just like the "Vote Different" ad.

The key is economics. When you only need $1,000 to do a TV pilot, not $1 million, you'll see a new, level playing field. As Gregory puts it: "The Internet is totally democratic because it uses a simple rule of thumb — less money, more creativity."

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The Big Picture runs each Tuesday in Calendar. Questions or criticism can be e-mailed to patrick.goldstein@latimes.com.