ManiaTV.com offers college kids a broadband barrage of chat, sport, music and film. Is this the perfect media for the digital generation?

WEB EXCLUSIVE
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Aug. 24, 2005 - When ManiaTV has its first birthday this September, the company will throw a weeklong online party from its production booth in the back of a 1966 Ford bus. The Denver-based interactive television Web site certainly has cause for celebration. Despite its humble headquarters, ManiaTV.com saw 1.6 million users in July alone. And this month the fledgling enterprise snagged Coca-Cola’s advertising dollars.

ManiaTV is a curious blend of TV, music program and coffee shop, all located on a single Web site and produced by 75 employees and interns in a 15,000-square-foot warehouse. In addition to on-demand short films, extreme-sports clips and music videos, cyber jockeys or “CJs” also host nonstop live programs in which they interact with their users, via message boards and Webcams. Every so often, an ad will show a TV being destroyed while items available in their online store spell out the site’s motto: “F—k Television.”

Founder Drew Massey, 35, isn’t shy about his plans for this new hybrid medium. “Our goal is domination,” says Massey, a young entrepreneur who founded the 1990s young men's magazine P.O.V. With youth-entertainment goliaths like MTV expanding their online presence, he might not achieve total domination, but at the very least, Massey may be on his way to creating a successful alternative media outlet. With predicted revenue in the seven figures this year, Massey expects ManiaTV to be in the black by 2006.

The foot soldiers for this new revolution are the students and young professionals who spend more time online than in front of the television. For this demographic, “the Internet is not only their medium but their culture, their life,” says Massey who aims to turn the Web into their main source for entertainment, information and communication.

This message is not a particularly new one. In the heady tech-boom days of 2000, the idea of Internet-based television seemed close at hand and sites like The Basement, an Australian interactive-television site, were hugely popular. But with the popping of the bubble, investment dried up before the idea could take hold.

Today the high-speed Internet generation has come of age and multiplatform entertainment is again the talk of the town. Broadband Internet is now available in almost 40 million households in the United States and could reach as many as cable by 2010. The success of Web sites such as MTV’s Overdrive, a hybrid of news, live performances and on-demand music videos which launched in April, suggest that the 18-34 demographic see the Web as a way to get the entertainment they want, when they want it.

Big name Internet players are starting to invest more time, money and expertise in multiplatform entertainment. Yahoo CEO Terry Semel, who already had 24 years of experience at Warner Brothers, hired former ABC television executive Lloyd Braun to head his media division last year. Meanwhile AOL saw a jump of 120 percent in its on-demand video streaming in 2004 and is continuing to develop
music, TV and film content. The company experienced huge success with their exclusive live coverage of the July 2 Live 8 concert series which pulled in 5 million users from around the world. That was followed on July 12 by an announcement that AOL, in partnership with AEG Radio and XM Satellite Radio would create Network Live, a mix of live content, music and comedy online, which will eventually aim to run 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

These developments may have helped restore the confidence of advertising giants in Internet opportunities. As Brad Berens, executive editor of iMediaCommunications Inc., says, many companies are starting to feel that “dollars are being wasted on television and marketing.” Heavyweights like Proctor & Gamble are diverting money into online advertising. Internet ad revenue grew by 28.8 percent in 2004 to $9.4 billion, according to eMarketer.com—an market research organization. This is still far less than the nearly $60 billion spent on TV advertising, but the momentum is continuing on the Web.

Still, some are not yet convinced that a 100 percent Internet “TV channel” can succeed. Former Vice President Al Gore’s new 24-hour youth cable network, Current TV, which launched on Aug. 1, aims for an audience similar to that of ManiaTV, and also features music and short films which it solicits from viewers on the Internet, but it is distributed via broadcast TV rather than the Web. In a recent interview with Red Herring magazine, Current TV’s CEO Joel Hyatt explains why the network decided to stick with old media rather than going straight onto the Web: “The technology isn’t there for full-motion video to mass-distribute to millions of people. There is no business model today. There are lots of people putting content out on the Internet, but it is not clear how you can do that in an economically sustainable way.” (Current, a national student-run newsmagazine created for and by college students, and Current online, are published in cooperation with NEWSWEEK. Neither are affiliated with Current TV.)

“Today, the way people conceive media is just all over the place,” says Susan McDermott, a spokesperson for Coca-Cola, which recently joined the ranks of Levi Strauss, Dodge and the U.S. Navy in advertising on ManiaTV. According to McDermott, the site offers a “great mix of TV meeting the Internet meeting on-demand.”

The multidimensional approach of sites like ManiaTV is a huge part of their popularity among college students. Users can have multiple windows open: one playing the latest music video, another in which they chat with the CJs and each other, and a third for their schoolwork. ManiaTV CJ Tre Rudig, 29, a former high-school teacher and baseball coach, once had to watch his students in class to make sure they weren’t surfing the Web when they should be hitting the books. Now he caters to a Web audience who watch him live, while writing their papers and listening to music. According to Rudig, the Internet’s appeal for “Generation Digital” lies in the fact that there are “more options as far as interaction goes, more stimulation.”

ManiaTV user Chris Watson, 23, better known to his online buddies as “redrix,” is a convert to ManiaTV. As a student in Denver, he hooked his computer up to a 55-inch TV and streamed the program almost all day, every day. Watson “multitasks” by working from home while watching CJ Erin, chatting with her and other users online, and occasionally sending off a message to veto something that he doesn’t like.

This ability to personalize your entertainment capitalizes on this generation’s desire for constant and varied stimulation. Web sites like MTV’s Overdrive and AOL-Music’s Top 11 Video Countdown Show allow you to design your own programs. And, on ManiaTV, if you get bored with the sometimes-stilted feed of the live CJ, you can check out a short film or request a song. But while users may enjoy this ability to demand and receive, some social scientists are concerned about how this new media might be affecting young brains. “It is quite possible that we are fine-tuning the nervous systems of generations of young people who will expect only immediate gratification,” explains Robert Simmons, a clinical psychologist in Alexandria, Va.

Though customizable entertainment may be one of the biggest draws on the Web today, ManiaTV’s long-
term survival may lie in the emphasis it places on other interactive components not offered by most of its rivals. For Jeffery Haas, 48, a freelance music-video producer and a frequent user of ManiaTV, the appeal of the online forums and message boards lies in the common space that they offer their users for interaction. “It’s like a town square that is otherwise missing from society today,” he says. This sense of community, albeit a cyber one, may be the secret ingredient that sees ManiaTV celebrating many birthdays to come.

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