

User-Generated Video: For Advertisers, Volume Doesn't Equal Quality

By Jaffer Ali

Twenty years ago, what the world would the entertainment landscape have been like if every guy with a video camera was a TV producer? Fast forward to today and what you see is what you get, a media ecology polluted by a drawer full of bad ascots.

America's Funniest Home Videos launched the user-generated video craze. The show was pretty good—because ABC left the considerable detritus on the cutting room floor. But now, thanks to YouTube, there's no cutting room floor. *Everything* is ready for primetime.

What's interesting about this free-market mindset is the way it so eloquently, albeit unwittingly, states the case for quality. Spend enough time online and you'll yearn for the old days. There's so much garbage that just the promise of some good stuff really smells nice by comparison.

Ask yourself this: Is it funnier when a skateboarder takes it in the shorts on YouTube, or is it funnier when Blake Edwards only shows you Francois' reaction as Inspector Dreyfus shoots his nose off behind the door? More importantly, will the skateboarder video still work years from now?

The failure to satisfy of the "post it and they will come" philosophy was revealed decades ago in a Contac Cold Capsule television commercial. The protagonist was a nasally, rheumy-eyed guy with a bad head cold. The camera was positioned inside a medicine chest so it faced the guy as he surveyed the sea of drugs before him. An off-camera voice asked: "Excuse me, sir...why are you choosing that cold remedy?" "It's new?" the poor guy replies.

It's not just viewers who get short-changed. Public video forums and social networking sites have been unable to monetize their formats because the content is simply too risky.

I've always counseled against fruitless attempts to legislate taste—advertisers don't want consumers with good taste, they want consumers who taste good. but the absence of any paid advertising on many of the Web's most popular destinations speaks volumes about where even the biggest and boldest mass marketers draw the line in their quest for ubiquity.

We can talk about freedom all we like, but business is business, and at the end of the day we're still judged by the company we keep. The sheer volume of the online universe already catches many advertisers in the questionable-content crosshairs. But when they have a clear choice, advertisers interpret user-generated video to mean "Keep Out."

The fact is, the good stuff is good—and will always be good—for all the right reasons. But why listen to me when our love-hate relationship with quality can be boiled down to quotes from two former mayors of the great city of Cincinnati—the late Supreme Court Associate Justice, Potter Stewart, and media-mahem maven, Jerry Springer—that illustrate just how far we haven't come, and how far we still have to go.

First consider Justice Stewart how described hard-core pornography in the obscenity case of *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964): "I know it when I see it." Forty years later, Jerry Springer in lofty defense of his own contribution to the cause, said "We can't just have mainstream behavior on television in a free society, we have to make sure we see the whole panorama of human behavior."

"Excuse me, sir...Why are you watching that video?" "Because it's there?" Thank goodness, so is Blake Edwards!

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