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Gore's TV Seeks Northern Insights

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By Niall McKay | Also by this reporter
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Former Vice President Al Gore's new cable TV channel will go live in August, promising to mix elements of the internet and TV. But the 24-hour cable channel, called Current TV, will be based in part on a 3-year-old experimental TV show from Canada.

ZeD is a late-night, arts-and-culture program from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation that mixes amateur movies submitted through a website with independent film and studio-produced content -- the same model proposed by Current TV.

In fact, this week, executives from San Francisco-based Current TV will travel to Vancouver to ask the Canadians for a spot of advice on how to build their venture.

By all accounts, they'll need all the help they can get.

See photos

ZeD receives between 200 and 300 viewer-produced videos per day, has a production staff of 45 people and still finds it a challenge to find about eight minutes of viewer-submitted content for each 40-minute program.

ZeD allows viewers to shoot, edit and upload their own short-form videos to the show's website. If the editors like the films -- and they often do -- they buy them, and include them on the program, which airs on CBC five nights a week. Many more videos are published on the *ZeD* website.

The program calls itself "open-source television" because it not only encourages artists, bands, graphic artists, animators and filmmakers to use the *ZeD* website to submit content, but also invites them to use the site as an online portfolio.

In return, the site streams about 5,000 short-form videos gathered for the show's 300 episodes.

In the coming months, the site plans to launch a new function allowing users to stream a continuous random shuffle of music, art, animations and short videos to their desktops. The site claims 45,000 registered users.

Short-form content -- be it viewer-submitted videos, independent film or computer animation -- is nearly ready for prime time, according to analysts.

"A lot of the pieces are falling into place," said Gary Arlen, president of Arlen Communications, a media consulting firm in Bethesda, Maryland. "High-quality consumer video cameras together with low-cost digital video editing means that it's become easier for nonprofessionals to produce watchable content."

Broadband internet connections and peer-to-peer file-sharing technologies like BitTorrent are also driving the consumption of digital art, animation and video.

A growing number of websites, such as indie news outlets like Guerrilla News Network and Independent Media Center, allow users to upload content. There are online communities like my5minutes.com and independent film sites like Macromedia's AtomFilms.

Predictably, like personal websites and blogs, the quality of amateur videos ranges from the inspirational to the abysmal.

"Anybody who has watched public-access TV will know that not all viewer-submitted content is good," said McLean Greaves, executive producer of *ZeD*. "You need to filter content."

Greaves, a former AOL Time Warner executive who has worked with Spike Lee and P. Diddy, said *ZeD*'s mission is to democratize media production, but filters must be put in place. The most popular type of media uploaded, for example, is skateboard videos set to music.

So *ZeD* employs a team of online editors to sift through the content, check it for copyright issues and either publish it on its website or pass it along to a producer who will give it a lick of professional polish. If chosen, the network will pay $200 per minute for the video (although it does not pay for pieces that are shorter than one minute).

ZeD's most popular pieces tend to reflect the program's eclectic mix. For example, it acquired Anne Troake's *Pretty Big Dig*, a film that sets dancing construction vehicles to music, and Corey Rutley's *Sheriff of the Tub*, a monologue by a guy in a cowboy outfit who's eating chicken in a bathtub.

The program mixes these quirky, viewer-made films with high-production-value, MTV-style studio pieces featuring hip-hop artists like De La Soul and Michael Franti.

The show also attempts to use interactive elements. Presenters have webcam discussions with viewers and audience members take control of the studio's cameras through an online voting system.

ZeD's biggest challenge is clearing copyright for the pieces it uses on its website.

"Getting permission to use something on air is easy but getting permission to use it on the internet is very difficult," said Sudha Krishna, *ZeD*'s senior producer. "Often viewers will produce a wonderful short film that's creative and inventive but we can't use it because it's set to some music that we do not have the rights to."

So now the organization is investigating the use of the Creative Commons license, which provides flexible copyright protection.

ZeD isn't worried that Current TV will steal its thunder.

"We're an experiment," said Greaves. "A sort of petri dish for Canadian Broadcasting. People can copy us if they wish, but we're a moving target."

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