

Live From the Quad, Student TV on the Web

By **BROOKS BARNES**
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Harvard University students have produced a TV soap opera called "Ivory Tower" on and off since 1994, but hardly anyone has ever seen it.



That is because Harvard, like most schools, has no distribution system for the shows its students produce. From time to time, "Ivory Tower" has aired on a local public-access channel, but usually the budding producers have to settle for screenings in common rooms. "It's not a very good situation," says Stevie DeGroff, a junior who is the Harvard-centric soap's marketing director.

Now "Ivory Tower" and student-produced shows across the country may have gotten their big break thanks to a new, Internet-based TV network. The Open Student Television Network launched in April 2005, and it has signed up a wide array of schools in the past few months -- it claims 30 member schools with access at 208 institutions. Shows range from comedies such as "Elected," a five-episode satire on student government from Brown University, to news programs and documentaries such as "Froshlife" from Duke University.

OSTN is part of a burst of TV channels targeting college students, mostly over the Internet. There is also mtvU Uber, a slick, seven-month-old broadband channel from **Viacom** Inc.'s MTV Networks that boasts a variety of content, from music videos to student-produced short films. Cdigix Inc., a Seattle company run by a former **News Corp.** executive, aims to deliver music and on-demand movies and TV to students through the Web. So far, the company has signed up 50 schools, including the University of California, Los Angeles, and Yale University.

Thus, even as big TV companies like **Walt Disney Co.**'s ABC and **General Electric Co.**'s NBC Universal strive to create broadband channels, there are already several streaming into dorm rooms across the country. "These Web-based channels for college students -- so far pretty under the radar to the general population -- will undoubtedly help

shape how the networks move content online," says Brad Adgate, an executive vice president at Horizon Media, a New York consulting firm.



The college channels may also become incubators for future TV shows. Ross Martin, director of programming for mtvU Uber, says part of the mission of the online channel is to uncover bits of content that could flower into full-blown series on its mtv2 and MTV channels. Every Friday, Mr. Martin's team posts new student-filmed short movies. There is also a broadband show called "Fresh Produce" that offers weekly episodes of kids filming each other "doing wacky stuff," Mr. Martin says.

The launch of these broadband channels parallels an explosion of amateur TV and film content on the Web, fueled by the ever-dropping cost of producing a professional-looking product. Popular video-sharing sites such as YouTube.com have also led more students to pull out video cameras and post their work. Students at Boston College this past winter created a Web-based spoof of Fox's teen soap "The O.C." and have drawn an audience of about 400,000 people.

OSTN, a nonprofit linked to Case Western Reserve University, solves a big problem confronting campus television curriculums: Students are making more and more shows, but individual colleges don't have enough programs to build true TV schedules. That makes it hard to develop much of a regular audience even if campuses do have a distribution system.

By aggregating offerings from different schools -- in essence syndicating college shows -- there is more than enough content to fill a network. Says Rich Griffin, vice president of technology for OSTN: "Not every student has the same drive or talent, so maintaining momentum at a campus TV station can be difficult as people graduate. We try to fill that gap."

The student shows can be very high quality, which isn't surprising considering that many Hollywood shows are created by fresh-out-of-college 20-somethings. "These kids are very serious," says Shane Walker, OSTN's vice president of programming.

Brown University juniors Matt Vascellaro and Kent Haines decided last spring to produce a five-episode mockumentary about student government. Called "Elected," the miniseries skewers the leadership of Brown's Undergraduate Council of Students. (One ditzy character is obsessed with making posters with glitter lettering; the executive council nixes a new candidate on grounds that she is "too pretty.")

Brown doesn't have a television-production program or station, so the two producers relied on a couple of friends to help them write each 30-minute episode, cast dozens of

students, build sets and gather filming equipment. It took the pair about eight months to finish the project. Mr. Vascellaro says he edited the entire show on a laptop computer in his dorm room.

Many producers in Hollywood use some of the tricks Mr. Vascellaro discovered while putting the show together. For instance, he says, he found that if you put a good song in a scene that doesn't look very good, "nobody will notice."

Like most students working on campus shows, Mr. Vascellaro intends to pursue a career in entertainment, and that is one reason OSTN is valuable, says Don Tillman, executive director of Trojan Vision, the student TV station at the University of Southern California. "This allows students to review each other's work and get noticed," he says. Trojan Vision, whose 300 student participants make it one of the largest student TV operations, delivers six of OSTN's 29 programs.

There is a catch in terms of actually breaking out via OSTN, though. The network operates only on Internet2, an ultrafast, separate version of the Web designed for academic researchers. As a result, only students and faculty can view it, though most colleges and universities are hooked up. As a result, in addition to OSTN, some producers have developed Web sites to screen their shows. "Elected," for example, can be viewed at www.electedtv.com¹.

The mtvU Uber site is in its infancy -- the site received only 92,000 unique visitors during March, according to comScore Media Metrix Inc. -- but it is available to anyone with an Internet connection.

"Every college student in America has a camera or knows somebody who does, and they play with them all day long," says Mr. Martin, the mtvU Uber programming director. "These students increasingly want to see content that they have a hand in making."

Write to Brooks Barnes at brooks.barnes@wsj.com²