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# The Shorter, Faster, Cruder, Tinier TV Show

By RANDY KENNEDY

One morning earlier this spring, Dave Sirulnick and a group of fellow MTV executives gathered in a 29th-floor conference room overlooking Times Square to observe a time-honored television ritual, one they'd performed dozens of times. They were shaping a pilot, the hopeful chrysalis of a television show. Three months of hard work and soul searching had gone into this particular effort, so the assembled team waited to see its work in progress with no small amount of anticipation. In these kinds of meetings, someone usually pops the show into a DVD player and it materializes on a flat-screen television the size of a coffee table. But this time the six people in the room ambled over to Sirulnick, a slender man who was peering over a pair of rimless glasses at a small, black Samsung cellphone. "Do we all stand behind each other or what?" he asked, unsure of the protocol. As everyone circled around his chair like kids gawking at a science experiment, Sirulnick pressed a button on the phone, and the tiny screen in his palm flickered to life.

What appeared on it didn't feel much like a TV show as you and I have come to know it. Clocking in at just over three minutes, it seemed vaguely schematic, with lots of close-ups and static scenes. But Sirulnick watched it with the hope that what he was seeing — even through the pixel smears and buffering pauses of today's mobile-video technology — was nothing less than the future of television.

A boyish-looking 41-year-old man wearing jeans and a green-and-purple-striped sweater, Sirulnick was in the room that morning because just a few months earlier MTV redrew its organizational chart and gave him a new job it considers extremely important, one with the unwieldy title of executive vice president for multiplatform production, news and music. Translated, it means that he is the guy responsible for figuring out how his network — one of the most recognizable in the world, with annual ad revenue of more than a billion dollars — will continue to thrive creatively, and thus financially, in a world where television's center of gravity seems to be rapidly shifting, away from immobile TV sets and toward roving screens: laptops, P.D.A.'s, iPods, game players and, most important, cellphones. The shift is not simply changing the way the medium looks and feels. Even now, in its infancy, mobile video is starting to make the very definition of television, as a place where people watch "shows" on "channels," sound pleasantly anachronistic, like a description from an old issue of Popular Mechanics. It may also be creating a new way to make a whole lot of money: one model projects that the worldwide market for mobile television will be \$27 billion by 2010.

By the most optimistic counts, there are only about 3 million people out of the almost 200 million cellphone users in the United States who now watch video on their

phones. Other analysts say the number of those who watch regularly is much lower, which leads them to ask whether people really want another version of television, one they can literally take anywhere. Judging by what is happening in other parts of the world, where the mobile-television experiment is well under way, the more pertinent questions are: What are they going to want to watch? Will it be regular live television, redirected to their phones? Or typical television fare, edited and re-packaged to suit a screen smaller than a business card? It might end up being neither, but instead a new amalgam that feels little like traditional television and more like the increasingly video-dominated Web — like computer games, like the kind of shaggy user-generated video and mashed-up video clips that began as novelties for people killing time in their cubicles but are now on their way to becoming big business.

MTV's international channels have been providing cellphone entertainment, mostly repackaged TV clips, for almost a year. In fact, MTV claims to be the world's largest mobile-content provider. When the demand for cellular television materializes in the United States, people like Sirulnick say that it is likely to be most intense among the generation of young people that has never known a world without wireless, for whom a cellphone is not just a phone but an entertainment center, a dating service, a scrapbook, a virtual hangout and a fashion statement — in other words, MTV's core viewers, the network's to keep or lose.

You could argue that of all the traditional television empires, MTV has a better-than-even shot at keeping them. It has had to reinvent itself constantly (some critics would say for the worse) to keep pace with its ever-young audience. And it popularized short-attention-span creations like music videos and created artful station breaks that at least seem likely to translate well in an on-the-fly wireless world.

But MTV is approaching its 25th birthday; in the cable world, it's what is known as a mature brand. And on the morning that Sirulnick and company fine-tuned their pilot, other veteran producers, screenwriters and television executives were hard at work all over New York and Los Angeles on their own cellphone projects. Maybe more worrisome than these conventional competitors were the countless Web companies, also cranking out cellphone content, led not by television experts but by hordes of 20-somethings all angling to become the Sumner Redstones of broadband and wireless, bypassing the TV industry altogether.

For television veterans, the advance of cellphone television makes for competing anxieties. They're worried that they may be moving far too slowly, but they're anxious, too, that they could be moving in the wrong direction. It's a feeling something like television's pioneers must have had, trying to create visual shows for a nation still huddled around the radio. But another, perhaps more apt, comparison is to the early years of the Internet, when so-called content providers pumped prodigious amounts of material and ideas onto the Web and hoped that the demand for it would follow. More often than not, it didn't.

"If anybody says they've figured this out right now," Christina Norman, MTV's president and Sirulnick's boss, told me, "they haven't."

If Sirulnick and the other producers were feeling any flutters of doubt as they watched the working version of MTV's first domestic made-for-cell series — "Sway's Hip-Hop

Owner's Manual," a documentary-style show that deciphers the ever-changing lexicon of rap — they didn't show it. After watching a couple of episodes on the Samsung, they regrouped around a conference table and talked about how much they liked what they saw. Sway Calloway, one of MTV's most popular on-air personalities, was the show's host, interviewing rap stars and chatting with people on the streets of Los Angeles and Harlem, serving as a kind of dreadlocked detective on the trail of hip-hop clarity. In some ways, the show followed a traditional television blueprint, but it tweaked the almost unnoticed vernacular with its revved-up speed and with the way Calloway worked so close to the camera, seeming to pop out of the cellphone screen.

"If he did that on television, you'd go, 'Wow,' " said Sirulnick, propelling himself backward in his Aeron chair.

But on the phone it seemed to work. Sean Lee, one of the show's producers in the room with Sirulnick, said that on a flip-up screen in your hand, as you wait for a bus or wander through the cacophony of the mall, it becomes personal in a way that television never quite does. "He's saying: 'Hey, it's me, on your phone. I'm talking to you.' "

'm going to have to ask you two guys to stand a little bit, um, unnaturally close to each other."

Rosanna Herrick, a freelance producer for MTV, was talking to Calloway, a large man, and to an even larger man who calls himself E-40, a Vallejo, Calif., hip-hop pioneer considered a kind of rapper's rapper, without the name recognition of a Nelly or a 50 Cent but with a reputation as an innovator and Samuel Johnson of street slang. The two men were in a tiny windowless reception room in the Warner Brothers Records offices at Rockefeller Center. E-40, born Earl Stevens, had come to promote a new record and had also come — as is his custom these days — with a four-liter jug of Carlo Rossi burgundy, his beverage of choice after laying off the 40-ounce beers that lent him his recording name.

It was the last day of February, and shooting on the MTV cellphone show had been under way for a couple of weeks. Less than two months earlier — a rapid turnaround by the usual standards of television production — Sirulnick and some other MTV executives decided to focus on hip-hop for their first foray into wireless, an idea that Calloway encouraged. "Kids are on their cellphones all the time now," he told me, "in the club, at the bar, in the cab, in the bathroom — I mean everywhere." MTV's research seems to support Calloway's impressions, showing, for example, that more than 40 percent of the network's viewers use phones with text-messaging ability.

In many ways, the hip-hop show was a safe bet: rely on a known personality; do it on a tight budget; stick to music and focus on rap, which had sales of \$1.6 billion last year. Compared with cellphone programming being made in Asia and Europe, the show's concept was downright old-fashioned. A British wireless company, for example, recently started something called SeeMeTV, allowing phone users to submit videos of themselves doing funny, often lewd things. If other phone users pay to watch the clips, their makers receive a cut of the revenue. (MTV Networks, acknowledging this wave of do-it-yourself video, recently bought iFilm, a popular viral-video site.)

But MTV executives figured that, at least at first, it made sense to stick to what they did best. This decision was based more on well-educated guessing than on research — the network is just now starting to assemble focus groups to learn how people toggle between televisions, computers and portable devices. What it did know was that the earliest adopters of wireless video, according to cellular companies, were young men, especially those in the 18-to-24-year-old bracket, hip-hop's prime audience. MTV executives reasoned that if they could score a minor hit with this group and get a buzz going, it would be a way of announcing that the network was serious about cell programming. "You aim for the cred kids, and everyone else follows," says Ocean MacAdams, the vice president of MTV's news division, which is overseeing the hip-hop show.

Shooting a show for a cellphone presents all kinds of technical problems for people used to conventional television production. That day in the Warner Brothers offices, I was already familiar with the drill about to follow, one that a producer described to me dourly as "filming to the phone." To be intelligible on screens sometimes smaller than 2 inches by 2 inches, most shots must be close-ups. Producers also have to limit zooming, panning and quick movement, which can blur because of slow streaming rates and because cellphones often deliver only 15 frames of video per second, compared with 30 frames per second on regular television.

Herrick, a television veteran, was starting to show the strain of shooting a pilot so quickly. At that moment she was trying to squeeze Calloway and E-40 into the same tight shot, for an episode in which the rapper was asked to explain the meaning of "stunna shades," the supersize sunglasses of the Jacqueline Onassis variety that have become popular in the hip-hop world.

"Maybe if you can cheat a little bit to the side, dog," Calloway, laughing, said to E-40, whose impressive gut was making the shot difficult. Herrick cranked her small monitor around to show the men the limits of the frame, catching them at high-chest level and scraping the tops of their heads. "You can see how little space you've got," she said.

Standing against a gold velvet backdrop that looked as if it had been salvaged from a Johnny Carson set, the two men appeared a little ridiculous, and uncomfortable. E-40, who had been filling a Poland Spring bottle with wine from his jug, also seemed to be finding the humor in it all: so much energy directed at less than three minutes of video — for a telephone.

But he finally got his blocking right and they pulled off the scene, one small step for pocket-size television. E-40 breathed and let out his stomach. As he left the room, he asked, "Now, who's gonna be watching this?"

After years of fits and starts, watching television on broadband is only now coming into its own — MTV, CNN and CBS were just a few of the networks that jumped in last year in various ways, giving anyone with a connection almost cablelike viewing of everything from anime to assemble-it-yourself newscasts to reruns of "Chico and the Man." The video iPod has also become more successful than small-screen critics

thought it would; Apple sold 15 million video downloads, including programs like "Lost" and "The Office," in the six months after it was introduced.

But watching in a truly wireless way in America — on what the industry likes to call the third screen — still feels closer to ham radio than the digital revolution. In the spring of 2005, Sirulnick visited Japan, the first country to introduce third-generation video cellphones, in 2001, and then took a side trip to South Korea, where the government's power to shape the wireless infrastructure has propelled cell-TV technology even faster. "It wasn't like stepping in the future," Sirulnick says. "It was stepping into the future."

But when MTV executives started looking into developing new programs in the United States, they didn't get much guidance from the original mobile programming being made internationally. In one meeting I attended, an MTV executive recalled sampling some mobile TV from the Netherlands. "It's very advanced, but it's all naked people cursing," he said. "Not going to work here."

The first American video service, offered by Sprint, began in late 2003, offering little more than a choppy approximation of television. In 2005, channels owned by MTV Networks, like VH1 and Comedy Central, began offering clips of existing TV shows through American carriers like Verizon Wireless; ABC and ESPN did the same thing. MTV began offering its own clips — scenes excised from shows like "Punk'd" and "The Shop" — only early this year.

Programmers found that some traditional television translated well, like news, stand-up comedy and talking-head shows like Jon Stewart's, partly because they involved little movement. But producers quickly began trying to figure out how to reinvent television for cellphones. Fox made three wireless series, coining the term "mobisode" to describe them. Although those shows did not attract a huge audience, research shows that viewers don't want just repurposed TV; they want short-form programming conceived for mobile devices. So despite the lukewarm reception for some early original shows, networks are spending a lot of time trying to come up with the right formula. CBS is now at work on a cellphone soap opera; VH1 and Comedy Central have shows in the works; two Hollywood producers have completed a futuristic series starring Dennis Hopper, edited for small screens.

Assuming that producers can figure out how to make the creative leap to original cellphone programming, the biggest question for their companies is how they're going to make money. Under most business models for mobile TV now in place, wireless carriers — for now the gatekeepers — charge customers a premium above their normal phone bills for a package of video clips they can stream anytime, just as cable companies charge extra for premium channels. Verizon, for example, charges \$15 per month for about 30 "channels" containing dozens of shows, from weather reports to "SpongeBob SquarePants." (In Europe and Asia, customers sometimes pay per clip — similar to buying videos for \$1.99 from the iTunes store.) The carriers then pay content providers like MTV — sometimes a flat fee for shows, sometimes a portion of the revenues.

Greg Clayman, vice president of wireless strategy and operations for MTV Networks — the umbrella group that includes MTV, Comedy Central and several other channels

— says that while the network jumped into mobile programming early in part to plant a flag for its brand, it is already making money. "This is a revenue source for us, and it's a fast-growing one," he says, though he, like other television executives, will not provide specifics. And because wireless carriers, for competitive reasons, are reluctant to allow detailed numbers about video usage to be released, it's hard to tell how MTV's cell traffic — about 2.5 million shows streamed during the month of March, up 40 percent from February, according to the company — stacks up against its competitors.

Even if MTV is making something now, the big-money expectations for cellphone television — the \$27 billion market by 2010 projected by A.B.I. Research, for example — assume that advertising will make up much of the revenue. Clayman says that he has begun talking to advertisers, but nobody knows yet what a cellphone commercial will look like. Is anyone, for example, going to watch a 30-second ad in the middle of three-minute show? Recent British consumer testing suggested that viewers might accept ad-supported programming if they could get mobile shows free, but it didn't provide any ideas for how to cram them in: most of the participants in the study, who were watching mobile television during their commutes or lunch hours, said that any cellphone show longer than three minutes was too long.

Sirulnick says he spends his days thinking about little but these kinds of studies, and the way he sees it, his network doesn't have much time before the beta test of this phenomenon is over. "It's kind of like we're all in this together right now, the audience and us," he said. "Like: 'Ssshhh. Let's just talk among ourselves, figure this out. And then when the other 100 million people come over for dinner, maybe we'll have it right.' "

If you were casting the role of television executive most likely to understand its next iteration, Sirulnick would not be a bad choice. He literally grew up in the industry, where his father, Sid, worked as a production supervisor for CBS News and then for soap operas like "Another World." As a child, Sirulnick remembers being taken by his father to a Long Island studio where he clambered around atop a mock-up of the moon's surface, assembled for CBS News reports on the lunar landings. It was his first encounter with television's strange artificiality, employed even in the service of better rendering reality. "I just remember thinking, This is so cool," he says. "You'd start the day with just ideas, and you'd end the day and it was a television show."

Sirulnick has the long, elastic face of a stand-up comedian but a demeanor that is all business. In meetings with producers nearly half his age, he sounds a little awkward uttering phrases like: "So how do you rock your grillz?" (In other words, what's the proper etiquette for wearing the diamond-encrusted tooth jewelry favored by rappers.) But Sirulnick comes by his knowledge of hip-hop as honestly as his knowledge of television. Raised in Teaneck, N.J., he became obsessed with rap in junior high school when some of its first hits were starting to emerge from Sugar Hill Records in nearby Englewood. In college, he talked his way into promoting rap concerts at a roller rink in Bergenfield and presented then little-known young artists like LL Cool J, Run-DMC and Doug E. Fresh, who was then still a teenager. "I used to go and sit with his

mom in his living room and wait for Doug E. to come home from school so I could take him to the gig," Sirulnick recalled.

He took a job at MTV at age 23, joining a fledgling news department made up of fewer than a dozen people. He rose through the ranks to run the department and was soon being named to lists of television executives to watch. He went on to form MTV's documentary unit, which has created award-winning programming like "True Life," a popular series that examines issues like drug abuse and the perils of being young in Iraq.

But he also helps oversee many of the network's highly visible entertainment mainstays like "Cribs," "Laguna Beach" and "8th & Ocean," shows that exemplify MTV's increasing reliance on money, celebrity and sex as its trifecta programming formula. The most recent variation on that theme, the hit "My Super Sweet 16," chronicles — or glorifies, depending on your point of view — the excesses of the rich teen social scene. A critic in Time magazine derided the show as little more than "an infomercial for class war." So Sirulnick arguably ranks pretty high on the list of people you could blame for making television, over the last several years, a place that caters to ever-more vapid tastes, running after the hearts and wallets of America's free-spending youth.

If his early experience with cellphone programming is telling Sirulnick anything right now, it's that these trends will become even more pronounced in mobile television. People prognosticating about this world talk a lot about "video snacking," with all the implications for brevity and empty calories that the term suggests. MTV's wireless strategists are already seeing the craving for this diet. They are able to review daily download data returning from their wireless carriers, a sort of instant cellular Nielsen rating, and they have found that it's easy to catch the attention of viewers with a few simple junior-high-level wording changes. For example, when the network began uploading cellphone clips of the new insult-takedown show "Yo Momma," and gave them titles like "Friday's 'Yo Momma' Sneak Peak," the snippets did O.K., but not great. Then they changed the titles to ones like "Yo Momma Is So Nasty" and "Yo Momma Is So Poor." The clips were consistently among the most-viewed of MTV's mobile shows.

MTV Networks' president, Van Toffler, calls mobile handsets "the new holy grail of electronic devices" and likes to say that the next Steven Spielberg is going to develop for them. Festivals devoted to mobile films are starting to spring up around the world, so he might be right. But the more likely situation in the near future is something that feels nothing like the polish of Spielberg or even the slick predictability of television — something a lot more homemade, younger, sillier and cruder. If TV viewers of a certain generation once wanted someone to articulate their rage, as Faye Dunaway said in the movie "Network," the youngest generation of viewers now may simply want someone to give them their own platform to articulate their feelings — or maybe just to alleviate their boredom. As technology improves, cellphones will begin to allow users to watch things made by pretty much anybody who makes things to watch, from networks to Web companies to simply "some kid," Sirulnick says, "that's got some site devoted to a band he or she loves."

As this free-for-all approaches, Clayman doesn't equivocate about what it means. "Once you get to a world where you can get anything," he says, "then everybody competes with everybody."

bout a half-dozen blocks from MTV's headquarters are the offices of [Heavy.com](http://Heavy.com), one of those everybodys. Heavy is a seven-year-old Web site that eked its way through the Internet market collapse and is now creating and buying funny, strange, perverse, disturbing and sometimes inexplicable video. Heavy's goal is to attract young viewers, mostly male, and it says it is drawing more than five million viewers a month, generating ad sales of \$15 million to \$20 million this year.

In May, Heavy began offering its own shows on Verizon Wireless's video service, alongside those of MTV, CNN, CBS and other traditional networks. These shows make a lot of what is on MTV look thought-provoking. It's not the kind of stuff you'd expect to see on television, except maybe on late-night public-access cable: blurry homemade video; kung fu clips overlaid with funny, obscenity-laced dialogue; and machinima (video-game scenes transformed into a kind of narrative animation, again usually with lots of profanity). The Web site's catch phrase is "Because TV sucks and you know it." Heavy simultaneously mocks traditional broadcasters, especially MTV and VH1, while at the same time cleverly piggybacking on the name recognition and brands they've created. One of its most popular creations is called "Behind the Music That Sucks," an animated parody of VH1's "Behind the Music." One of its channels is called "eMpty Vee," which recently featured an extremely low-budget video created by two New York comedians who filmed themselves jumping around in tights in the forest and singing about the joys of sexual congress with a unicorn.

Venture capitalists recently gave Heavy \$10 million, but you wouldn't know it to look at Heavy's offices, housed in a former sweatshop in the Garment District, with ink-stained couches and a front desk fashioned from plywood. When I went there recently, Simon Assaad, a former filmmaker and one of the company's founders, showed me plans for the company's next idea. It was not really a show at all but an interactive twist on "The Dating Game," in which cellphone owners will communicate by text-message with a potential hot date, probably a B-list celebrity, who will pick one of the callers for a night out in Vegas, for example.

In other words, Assaad and the company's other founder, David Carson, both 35, are betting on a world of mobile television where the inherited knowledge of television entertainment simply won't be worth much. In their world, the "cred kids" that MTV's MacAdams is trying so hard to court probably won't want a billion-dollar network helping them keep up with street slang. "They just think 'audio-visual show,' and that's kind of where they're stuck," Assaad says of traditional television types, adding: "If you're a consumer, I think the real question has to be: O.K., well, I'm kind of saturated at this point. I watch it on TV. I watch it on broadband. Do I really need a third screen to watch more of the same stuff on a phone?" "

He says he thinks the answer is no and that, furthermore, the new stuff shouldn't be created by someone like him, at a hoary three and a half decades old. "I would rather see 18-year-old kids developing shows for us for the handsets," he says, "because I

think they're going to have a better idea of what somebody's going to watch than we are."

He added, with sympathy but also a hint of gloating: "We don't have to decide what the hit shows are. We don't have to spend millions of dollars to pilot something. We don't even have to create it. Those guys investing millions of dollars every pilot season based on a gut reaction? I'm surprised any of them live past the age of 45. It's got to be nerve-shattering. For us, we spend 5 or 10 grand or \$200, whatever it is, to buy something. We put the thing up on the site. We know a day later whether it's a success. If it's not, we move on."

MTV executives are not ready to be consigned to the television past just yet. The hip-hop show was its most-streamed mobile show the weekend after its debut earlier this month. The network has made three episodes of the show; it has 10 other made-for-cell series in production, from animation to an interactive reality show, and it is fielding dozens of pitches a week from outside producers.

"I certainly think that we've had to be honest with ourselves that our expertise in television may not automatically be expertise in these other areas," Sirulnick says. "But again, I think because of the kinds of television we've made for years that we feel pretty good about it, as good as anybody can."

Clayman, who's been hearing a lot of sniping lately from upstarts like Assaad, adds, "I'd argue that if there's anyone out there who knows what a 15-year-old wants, it's MTV." Considering "Beavis and Butt-head" and "Jackass," he could well be right. But does MTV know what a 15-year-old will want on his phone?

It's trying very hard to figure it out. One day recently, I went to the office of Tina Exarhos, MTV's executive vice president for marketing, who is also responsible for nurturing short-form mobile shows. She and her colleagues were about to give the green light to a computer-animated show tentatively titled "Puberty," brought to the network by a young ad copywriter named Clay Weiner, who works at the firm Bartle Bogle Hegarty. The show is made of up short, funny interactions between characters who sound a lot like insecure high-school students but look like something else entirely. They are the walking, talking avatars of acne, vomit, feces, urine, gas, small breasts and pubic hair. Gas is the kid, Weiner explained, whom everyone in school can't stand to be around, and he added, grinning as the executives in Exarhos's office laughed and beamed, that he was thinking about adding another character. "Pubes has a little sister named Peach Fuzz," he said, "who's really a little slutty."

The show's tagline: "Maturity is overrated."

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