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PARTNER CONTENT

Why Online Show Creators Deserve Recognition by Awards Voters: ‘YouTube Is TV as Far as I’m Concerned’

Sean Evans, Brittany Broski, Cleo Abram, Julian Shapiro-Barnum, Kareem Rahma and Michelle Khare detail why they make content on YouTube

By Rande Dawn ▾



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Now more than ever, YouTube is the new television. Watching YouTube on a bigger screen is defining the TV experience for a new generation. Six popular creators – Sean Evans, Brittany Broski, Cleo Abram, Julian Shapiro-Barnum, Kareem Rahma and Michelle Khare – are bringing the best of YouTube to TVs around the world.

Amid the current cord-cutting era and shift in the future of media, these creatives share why working outside the traditional television model is right for each of them. They also discuss how YouTube gives them room to produce original IP and why they make content they want to see in the world.

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Hot Ones

Traditional late-night programs were once the place to see celebrities in more relaxed fashion. Since its debut online in 2015, “Hot Ones,” a spicy chicken wings interview series hosted by Sean Evans, has disrupted the talk series genre and become an in-demand PR stop for A-list talent. In 2024, amid massive viewership, virality and pop culture clout, the digital show successfully petitioned to be included as an awards contender in the outstanding talk series category.

“As absurd as it is on paper, we kind of forget that we’re on a TV show after we

eat a couple wings. It becomes, in most cases, this, usually, very positive experience where two people are connecting while the Scovilles are increasing and the wings are on fire,” Evans says of the format he co-created with Chris Schonberger. “I wouldn’t say that the audience was fully on board in the beginning, but from the first couple of episodes we’d have guests stand up on the tables and do laps around the studio. There was such gonzo chaos in the studio that I knew that the way it would translate to video would be unlike anything anyone’s ever seen before. So I knew right from the beginning that if we could get people to watch, that they’d stick around.”

On the differences between traditional talk series and YouTube, Evans notes that his interviews are more free-flowing. “When you’re on a show, you’ve got to fill nine-and-a-half minutes or 11 minutes, and then you always have to go to commercial. Thankfully, with ‘Hot Ones,’ we don’t go to commercial — our only transitions are to the next wing. You can build a lot of that energy, that rhythm, that rapport, that sense of trust. I’m very grateful that the show just goes wherever the wings take us.”

And asked what his younger self would think of his popular show, Evans shares, “Honestly, I think I would just love ‘Hot Ones’ as a kid because it’s almost adjacent to a cartoon in the watch experience.”

Royal Court

Host Brittany Broski, who has over 2.6 million followers on her multiple YouTube channels — “Royal Court” alone has over 1.17 million — is a skilled conversationalist who offers pop culture royalty a delightful platform. How do we know? They voluntarily show up in a crown and cape, joining her on a set that looks like a Renaissance Faire meets “Game of Thrones.”

Over 150 episodes, Broski genially but insightfully chats with a wide range of guests, from fellow YouTubers to A-list talent. “It’s my goal and mission to ask [stars] questions that are so stupid, but so actually insightful, that they have no choice but to be like, ‘Yeah, let me answer that because I’ve never thought about it before,’” she says.

Since kicking off in 2023, when “Royal Court” began in a spare bedroom, Broski has already booked her dream guest. But one of her outstanding goals is retraining awards voters on their ideas of what great TV can be, as a contender this year in the outstanding variety series category. As broadcast TV shrinks its late-night programming, she thinks it’s time for audiences to recognize that the format needs rethinking.

“Late-night was built and fine-tuned for a straight white guy to do it,” Broski says, adding that because of that, switching up the format has rarely worked well for anyone outside that demographic. She wanted to “switch it up a little bit” and so she has. “I didn’t really see a place at the table for myself with late-night as it stands,” she says. “So I made my own late-night. That’s all that is.”

Challenge Accepted

YouTube creators wear multiple hats: host, producer, talent booker, cameraperson. But Michelle Khare has not only been the main force behind the production of “Challenge Accepted” (which she co-created with Garrett Kennell) since 2018 – for 67 episodes, she’s put herself through incredible physical and mental challenges while racking up over 5.42 million subscribers.

But a recent challenge nearly broke her. “I’m not a quitter,” she says. “But a moment that I considered quitting was a few months ago [when] I attempted seven marathons on all seven continents in one single week.... The community around me pulled me across all seven finish lines.” Audiences love her results. After all, the results aren’t what viewers might expect from a so-called competition series. It’s not about winning or losing; “It’s more about the commitment while you’re doing it,” Khare explains. “I want to show that failure is a noble and fair and honorable exit to a challenge and that deserves praise and success too.”

“Challenge Accepted,” which is contending for outstanding hosted nonfiction series or special, could never be squeezed into a traditional TV production schedule: Episodes tend to take three months to shoot and involve 45 days of

editing. That makes YouTube the ideal platform for Khare's passion project.

"This is an opportunity to elevate independent storytellers and democratize the stories we tell," she says. "It is not lost on me that there are not many people who look like me who submit to my category... So even if I don't make waves, I really hope someone else is inspired to do that in the future."

HUGE* if True

For "HUGE* if True," Cleo Abram has explored Antarctica, showed off her frozen eggs and floated in zero G. When she gets her teeth into a topic, the journalist aims to ensure everyone else understands it.

No wonder she's attracted nearly 8 million subscribers to her YouTube channel and amassed nearly 2 billion views since launching the series in 2023. Each episode is unique, prepped over several hours and weeks spent in the field before editing begins. Viewers clearly recognize the effort and resulting quality, which is why it's being considered for outstanding short form nonfiction or reality series.

"I think there's a chance that we can help show people ways in which they can

improve their lives, show them ways that they could help other people's lives get better. Our mission is to help people see better futures so they can help build them," says Abram, who believes that the "best, most rigorous, highest quality science journalism is happening on YouTube."

She's also trying to expand what's possible to create for streaming TV. "I couldn't find this show anywhere, so I decided to just go and make it myself," she says, adding that each show has to be journalistically rigorous, visually stunning and genuinely optimistic. "If it doesn't give you the feeling that you can participate in the future, then I haven't accurately done my job," she says. New episodes premiere this spring and summer.

Celebrity Substitute

On "Celebrity Substitute," a room full of elementary school kids may be an A-lister's toughest crowd yet. Thankfully, host Julian Shapiro-Barnum helps them create heartwarming interactions. "The magic trick we're trying to pull off is how can we show you, the viewer, a different side of these people you know and love," he says. "When you are with kids, you have to drop your act. You just have to; otherwise, it does not work."

“Celebrity Substitute,” a contender for outstanding short form nonfiction or reality series, launched after the success of “Recess Therapy,” which also features kids being their unfiltered selves on camera. Initially, “Recess Therapy” failed to get picked up as a TV show, so Shapiro-Barnum pivoted and found YouTube as the best home.

In 2024, “Celebrity Substitute” premiered exclusively on YouTube, and viewership grew steadily as Shapiro-Barnum and co-creators Benj Pasek and Justin Paul molded their show. “We didn’t have a network breathing down our neck, forcing us to lock a format,” he says. “We had this grace to figure out the show.”

Season 3 premieres on June 2, and two weeks later on June 17, Shapiro-Barnum will launch a new late-night talk show, “Outside Tonight,” on – where else? – YouTube. It’s billed as the first late-night show tailor-made for the internet age. “There’s so many people putting their heart and soul into this platform because there are not the same barriers,” he says. “What’s hurting a lot of mainstream media is all these barriers of entry and these inability to take chances.”

SubwayTakes

Kareem Rahma's "SubwayTakes," a contender for outstanding short form comedy, drama or variety series, is an underground YouTube hit in more ways than one. Since 2023, Rahma's show, with over 760 episodes, has literally taken

place on the New York City subway, where he largely speaks with regular folks using a microphone held up by a MetroCard.

“In an entertainment landscape filled with wall-to-wall celebrities, there was an opening to make the everyday person a celebrity,” says the Cairo-born, Minnesota-raised creator.

So, while yes, he does personally book celebrities, he also slots janitors, taxi drivers, massage therapists and indie comics. The show has no standing set and no control booth. Because it’s filmed on a running, live subway train, the public also feels comfortable weighing in. “Having people from the train jump in and talk to us ... always makes the show better,” says Rahma, who has amassed over 633 million views on YouTube. “It goes back to the original thesis that everyone has something to say and everyone is interesting if you give them a platform.”

And speaking of platforms, Rahma has great admiration for the way YouTube has revolutionized television. “I don’t have to worry about global rights. I don’t have to worry about if my family abroad can watch it ... because of rights issues. It’s just there,” he says. “YouTube is TV as far as I’m concerned.”

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