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Where have all the

By MICHAEL GILTZ

IF "Unsolved Mysteries" did a story on The Case of the Disappearing Actor, the solution would be right at hand.

Newsmagazines, animated sitcoms and reality shows — just like "Unsolved Mysteries" — are taking over prime time and threatening to turn the live actor into an endangered species.

Think this cheap, alternative programming is just a trend, a cyclical fad bound to fade away? Think again.

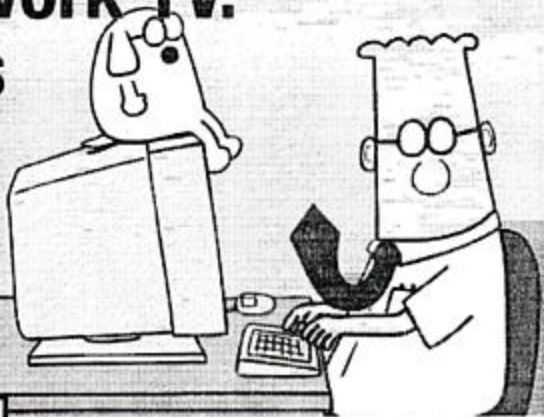
Twenty years ago — when TV meant only ABC, CBS and NBC — reality shows like "Real People," newsmagazines like "60 Minutes" and "Monday Night Football" accounted for less than 10 percent of primetime. Ten years ago, they amounted to about 17 percent.

Today, on any given week, they chew up almost 30 percent of programming. Throw in repeats of theatrical movies and it just gets worse.

During a sweeps month like February — a month top-heavy with specials and reality shows subbing for weak original programming — you can find up to 40 percent of prime time devoted to anything but the traditional drama and live action sitcom.

"I think networks are shooting themselves in the foot," says Tim Brooks, an executive at USA

Original prime-time dramas and live action shows — remember them? — are an endangered species on network TV. So are the stars



At least animated series use actors to supply to voices: (l-r) "The Simpsons," "South Park" and "Dilbert."

Networks and the co-author of "The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows." He sees networks practically conceding the hour-long drama to cable and syndication.

Some argue that the proliferation of newsmagazines and reality shows is one of the main reasons network ratings are on the decline.

"There was a time when you'd have two or three good dramas slugging it

out for a timeslot," says Richard Masur, president of the Screen Actors Guild. "The networks have backed off of that and now it's a matter of conceding the slot to someone else and throwing in a placeholder."

Kevin Reilly, head of television at Brillstein/Grey (the company behind "Just Shoot Me" and HBO's "The Larry Sanders Show")

agrees reality shows and newsmagazines are "an easy fix" and acknowledges it is hurting actors.

"I think it is more competitive for the actor," says Reilly. "But I think it's more competitive for everyone across the board."

One simple reason you're seeing more of these shows is money.

"Networks can produce newsmagazines cheaper

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actors gone?

than an hour of drama," points out Reilly. "And they own them."

In fact, reality shows can cost less than half the amount of a typical drama. And "Dateline," "20/20" and the others have turned costly if prestigious news divisions into unexpected profit centers. Their reruns aren't as profitable, but they can be recycled on network-owned cable channels like MSNBC and Eye on People.

But every time a network plugs a hole with yet another "Dateline" or "20/20," it's another lost opportunity to discover the next Sammo Hung, the star of CBS's unexpected hit "Martial Law."

This sea change in prime-time programming — and all it means to the disappearing actor — is not losing any momentum either.

The successful launch of "60 Minutes II" proved there's no end in sight to the proliferating newsmagazines; NBC has pegged upcoming reality shows like "World's Most Amazing Videos" and "You Asked For It" as high priorities; and almost everyone has a new animated sitcom like "Dilbert," "Family Guy," and "The PJs" on the air or about to debut.

Animated shows feature real actors doing voiceovers, of course, but they're lower profile and lower paying than a live sitcom — and no actor ever got an Emmy for working on a cartoon.

Throughout the '90s, "The Simpsons" has been a billion dollar industry, a linchpin in Fox's lineup and a surprisingly robust syndicated smash. But only now has its brilliant if anonymous voice cast — Harry Shearer, Nancy Cartwright, Julie Kavner, et al — felt confident enough to push for a significant pay raise. In fact, just last week the "The Simpsons" made a joke about how easily voiceover actors can be replaced.

Networks also know that Bart Simpson will never grow up or leave the show for a promising Hollywood movie career. (For that matter, neither will Stone Phillips.)

Of course, the flipside to the disappearing actor in



No real actors here: Reality shows such as "Cops" (below left) are produced at less than half the cost of a typical drama. Newsmagazines like "60 Minutes II" (top) and "20/20" (below) have turned costly news departments into profit centers.



primetime is the flurry of new shows being made for basic cable channels like Nickelodeon and Comedy Central.

Brillstein/Grey, for example, just premiered the acclaimed drama "The Sopranos" on HBO.

"We don't have fewer jobs for actors," says Masur of SAG. "In fact, there's been a growth of jobs because the original programming is being done elsewhere. It's being done for Lifetime and Showtime and HBO. It's being done for different outlets than what you refer to as the Big Four."

But actors still get the short end of the stick. "You have to work for less money and produce it cheaper in Canada," says Brooks, who doesn't think that's necessarily a bad

idea compared to the bloated salaries of the Big Four.

Still, a show done for a cable channel invariably pays far less and reaches far fewer viewers than all but the lowest rated series on ABC, CBS, NBC or Fox. Even shows on netlets the WB and UPN almost never break into the top 70 of the Nielsen ratings. "That's why they call it broadcasting," says Masur, who points out that SAG is in the midst of readying a study of these changes. "We're going to see a lot of these trends that you're talking about," he says.

And while cable has proven a haven for innovators like Tracey Ullman and Garry Shandling, they were already stars. Cable has never created its own

honest-to-goodness TV stars who aren't animated or a flash-in-the-pan spin-off from MTV's "The Real World."

Nickelodeon may have found Melissa Joan Hart, but she had to become ABC's "Sabrina, the Teenage Witch" before most people knew who she was.

So the real world for actors means fewer dramas and sitcoms on the Big Four, and therefore fewer opportunities to create memorable characters and fewer chances to shine in primetime.

Unless, of course, they become involved in a scandal or wreck their career — then they'll find a ready slot waiting for their confession on a newsmagazine any night of the week.