

Barnhart's TV book decodes insider info for average folk

[RANDALL ROTHENBERG]

LIKE MATT DRUDGE, Aaron Barnhart is a young Internet journalist who's making waves in the world of mainstream journalism. Unlike Matt Drudge, those waves are washing over advertising agency media departments and laying bare to average folk the arcane, raveled processes of network programming and agency time-buying.

Barnhart, 33, is the writer, editor, publisher and distributor of "Barnhart's Unauthorized TV '98," a comprehensive guide—reviews included—to the new fall TV season. Available via the Web (lateshownews.com), e-mail (barnhart@lateshownews.com) or snail mail, "BUTV" manages in 114 tightly packed pages to include most of the insider information top agency media departments used to share only with their most cherished clients.

"If you wanna know why 'Beverly Hills 90210' still creaks along," says Barnhart, "note that while it's only 51st in total viewers, it's No. 7 among women 18 to 34. And if you wanna know why 'Dawson's Creek' is on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly's* fall preview issue, consider that it's the highest-rated returning show among teenagers,

if only 133rd overall."

Barnhart's \$9.95 paperback guide is filled with such statistical insights, married to cheeky critiques and insider reporting. In here are the answers to such questions as "Why are there five 'Date-lines' on the fall schedule?" (Answer: It's the only newsmagazine show to finish in the top 20 among adults 18 to 54.)

"BUTV" lifts the veil off ridiculous sitcom premises. (NBC executives believe viewers don't like to watch people struggling, which is why, a producer told him, "Suddenly Susan" and other girlcoms star women who "live in apartments they couldn't possibly afford and work at magazines.")

This slim publication represents the intersection of several technologically driven developments that are upending the way the world does and perceives business, particularly the infotainment business.

Barnhart not only uses the Internet to gather and instantaneously distribute the news, secrets, gossip and analyses once limited to office conversations and trade publications, but his book also turns the information and entertainment industries into a spectator sport for the masses. As Drudge has done with politics, and as the ain't-it-cool-news.com site has

done with movie test screenings, Barnhart is dedicated to democratizing access to expertise.

"There are no more secrets; that ought to be true of more aspects of life," he says of his desire to render the opaque transparent. "It's in this spirit I want to get as much of this out there as possible."

Slim, balding, bearded, bespectacled and articulate, Barnhart in meatspace comes across the way he does in cyberspace, where I first encountered him: as an intellectual. At Northwestern University, he took a certifiably intellectual major, classics. He currently holds an intellectually respectable job, as the TV writer for the *Kansas City Star*. But Barnhart still refers to himself as an "Internet journalist"; his life and career trajectory give the phrase meaning.

He carries few prejudices about media institutions, a residue of his childhood in Billings, Mont. There, exposed from an early age to cable TV—as medium and as programming—he grew up with little sentiment for or against the broadcast networks, an attitude that infuses his work.

Working as an executive secretary at a Chicago real-estate firm, he became an active participant in the alt.fan.letterman newsgroup, a bulletin board on that woolly part of the Internet known as Usenet.

David Letterman's move from late-night cult hero to the 11:30 p.m. time slot increased his TV audience as well as the number of peo-

ple accessing the Net to look for more. Barnhart, as editor of the group's frequently-asked-questions list, bore the responsibility of obtaining answers to fans' questions.

Pretty soon, he found himself trafficking in information about the entire late-night TV scene. Posting breaking stories on proprietary online systems, such as *The Well*, drew immediate feedback. That gave him the idea for a Web-based 'zine, "Late Show News."

"Late Show News" rapidly became a must-read for pros and fans alike. Leno's slow rise against the Letterman juggernaut first became apparent through reporting there. Barnhart's obvious qualities as a reporter drew the attention of print publications, and by last year he was formally an ink-stained wretch—albeit one with the heart of a digital renegade.

Some of Barnhart's insights might unsettle the reigning lords of TV. Cable networks such as the History Channel and Discovery are not mere niches, he affirms: "People are plainly replacing their old television-viewing habits with nonfiction. It's a booming genre in every age group."

He also sees the WB Network moving into a profitable middle ground between mass and niche, because its black-American-themed shows are gaining popularity among white teens disaffected by standard network fare.

None of this, he says, will compare with the advent of digital cable through set-top boxes.

"Inevitably and inexorably, television will be oriented around consumer choice," says the Internet's premier TV rebel. "It'll be our ultimate revenge against the broadcast networks for not listening to us for three generations." □

