

STUDENT LIFE

Universities watch out for torrent of users

By Erika D. Smith
Knight Ridder Newspapers
(KRT)

Who says students don't learn anything over the summer?

Chances are quite a few of them attended the new school of file sharing. They learned all about BitTorrent, and how it's easy to download full movies, CDs, video games and software.

But the University of Akron and Kent State University are prepared.

"We monitor network usage and bandwidth and we respond to complaints," said spokesman Paul Herold, summing up UA's strategy.

Kent State isn't much different.

"We know we have a lot of people out there using it," said Greg Seibert, Kent State's director of security and compliance.

The university doesn't root out and punish students for using BitTorrent or any other file-sharing network. It does, however, limit how much bandwidth a single student can use. That way the university's high-speed network won't get bogged down by a few users swapping the new Eminem CD.

The only time that changes is when the Recording Industry Association of America slaps Kent State with a cease-and-desist notice. Then, the university will block a user's access to the network until he removes all the offending files from his PC.

Last year, Kent State received 45 of those notices; small potatoes compared to the hundreds and thousands sent to other colleges. No numbers were available Thursday for the University of Akron.

At Kent, more and more of those notices list BitTorrent as the partner in crime, Seibert said.

"They don't understand how it works," he said of students. "They just go to a Web site, and they see movies and they see songs, and they're happy."

This year, Seibert expects even more students to switch from peer-to-peer (P2P) sharing programs like KaZaA. They are regular targets for lawsuits.

In a way, that's good because BitTorrent tends to manage bandwidth better than its file-sharing cousins, he said. It's incredibly efficient and stable, even though people tend to swap huge files of full-length movies.

That could be behind BitTorrent's growing popularity.

By some measurements, the use of BitTorrent has eclipsed that of KaZaA, the most popular file-sharing program for music. A six-month analysis showed BitTorrent accounts for 53 percent of all file-sharing traffic in Europe. In June, CacheLogic also reported that about 8 million users were online at any given time sharing a petabyte, or 10 million gigabytes, of data.

"It's much stealthier," said Eric Garland, chief executive of the P2P tracking firm BigChampagne LLC.

But buzz aside, BitTorrent is still largely the domain of early adopters in the United States - typically teen-agers and college students. Much of mainstream America is still taking its legal chances with P2P.

"They feel there really is safety in numbers," he said. "They think, 'Yeah, I could get hit by a bus, but I'm not going to.'"

Laughing till it hurts

By Allan Johnson
Chicago Tribune
(KRT)

Thank goodness for bad news. Otherwise, Bill Maher wouldn't have an act. "We do live in trying times, but that is good for stand-up," Maher says. "It gives you a lot of material."

Did somebody say George W. Bush? "Sometimes I'll do a Bush joke or something, and people will be laughing," Maher notes. "And I'll say, 'Well, look, I'm not going to stand up here and rag on George Bush all night,' and they go, 'Yes, you'd better. ... We paid good money to hear that!'"

But Maher is an equal-opportunity comic: He attacks Democrats as well. "There are places where I take the Democrats apart because they infuriate me sometimes," Maher says. "But you know, as with any comedian in any era, you're always going to attack more the people who are in power."

"That is, to me, the job of the comedian: Attack the powerful and the people who are running things. Sometimes some people will say, 'Hey, you know, the white men, they're like the last group of people you can attack in America.' Well, yeah, because they run everything!"

Maier is taking on both parties and other topics in a new act that runs the gamut from the debate over gay marriage to the war in Iraq.

The number of those comics doing what Maher calls "hardcore" political jokes can probably be counted on at least all of one hand and part of the other is fairly small. They include George Carlin, Chris Rock, Lewis Black, Jimmy Kimmel, Will Durst and Jackie Mason.

The six of them join Maher, who displays a deft knowledge of the issues (and how to rib them) on his weekly roundtable discussion "Real Time" (11 p.m. EDT Fridays, HBO). Maher says he enjoys "Real Time" more than his previous series, political/social talk show "Politically Incorrect," partly because "I don't have to deal with people who were not that bright."

"It's a lot better than pretending Pauly Shore has something to say about gun control," he says.

Why aren't there more of those who make light of the issues? Maher jokes that some acts are just selfish.

"The George Carlins and those kinds

of people who really bring it, that is harder to come by because everybody wants to be popular," mocks Maher, 48. Comedian and frequent "Real Time" guest D.L. Hughley says Maher's conviction for political commentary and humor might run deeper than some other comedians are willing, or able, to go.

"Most people start to enjoy success, and they want to duplicate it," Hughley says. "They say, 'You know what, I'm going to keep doing this very type of thing because that's what works for me and that's obviously what people want to see.' (Maher) rewrites the blueprint every other week."

It also helps that you have an appreciative audience for that kind of humor that requires the crowd to have some information about the players and issues. And he requires his audience to remain up-to-speed on current events.

"You have to be knowledgeable," says Peter Kimball, executive in charge of programming and development for Stand-Up Comedy Television, an upcoming comedy cable network based in Chicago and set to launch in January 2005.

"I mean, if you don't know what's going on, you don't get (Maher). So he expects a lot. I think, as an audience member, you've got to work. You just can't lay there and expect to hear knock-knock jokes."

Maier, born in New Jersey and raised in New Jersey, has been performing stand-up for 25 years, but he made his mark discussing social and political issues on "P.I.," which premiered on Comedy Central in 1993 and moved to ABC in 1997, where it ran until Sept. 11, 2001.

Actually, the show was canceled the next year. But the Sept. 11 attacks marked the beginning of the end.

A few days after the destruction of the World Trade Center, Maher took issue with Bush's assertions that those crashing planes into buildings were cowardly.

"We have been the cowards lobbing cruise missiles from 2,000 miles away," Maher said in part, which got him public floggings from government officials, and rejection of his show by some sponsors and stations.

But even while all that was happening, Maher's stand-up career never took a serious hit.

"I was even more of a hero with the

people who were there for me to begin with," explains Maher, who began his career in the New York club scene after graduating from Cornell University as an English major.

"The people who made the 'Politically Incorrect' show go away were the people who never watched it to begin with. They just heard about it and then made a big stink about it and then made advertisers pull out."

If you look at Maher's career today, back on television in February 2003 with a show that is a leaner, sharper version of "P.I.," and plenty of road dates when he isn't working on "Real Time," it's as if his comments from 2001 never existed.

It's those with the same political mindset as Maher that kept him afloat, says Dr. Todd Boyd, a professor of critical studies in the University of Southern California School of Cinema-Television.

"(Even though) there probably are a large number of people who still find Bill Maher and his comedy and his politics to be problematic," Boyd says, "clearly there's a large segment of society who agrees with him. And so I think for people like that, and even if people don't agree with him totally, they're sort of leaning in that direction."

Hughley, a comedian for 16 years, says Maher succeeds because of something a lot of other comics lack: courage.

"I think he's probably braver and has had a truer sense of what he wants to accomplish than anybody else," says Hughley, 40.

"Maher (does) something that I heard George Carlin talk about that he likes doing when he performs. He finds out where the line is that you shouldn't cross, drags the audience across it, and then makes them glad they came."

Maier can be brave due to the courage of convictions strengthened by his love of stand-up.

And he loves the trip.

"It's a great pleasure for me," he says. "Stand-up always clarifies my thinking. It tells me what's really, really funny. Because I don't want to do anything that's not really funny. It's not like ('Real Time'), where you can have moments where it's serious or something. With stand-up, people want to just laugh until they hurt."

"That's what I give them: pain."



'Fear Factor': Coney Island's carnival sideshow still hanging on

By Miriam Hill
Knight Ridder Newspapers
(KRT)

(NEW YORK) It is hard to say which of Insectavora's meals is the least appetizing.

The pus-colored maggots she dumps on her tongue, then illuminates with a flashlight so the audience can see them wriggle?

The glistening earthworm she slurps with a gustatory glee more often associated with children eating spaghetti?

The crunchy crickets?

Jolting people out of their seats is one of the points of the Coney Island Circus Sideshow. Before Insectavora, the audience has already watched the Amazing Blazing Tyler Fyre pound nails into his nose and Ravi the Scorpion Swami contort and stretch his body as if it were Silly Putty.

Almost 100 years after its heyday, the freak show is hanging on. This may seem surprising when eating bugs and other gross stunts are standard fare on such TV shows as "Fear Factor," but real-live performing "freaks" seem to have an oddly enduring appeal.

"Geek Love," a novel about carnival freaks by Katherine Dunn, has a waiting list at many libraries. At the Bros. Grim Sideshow in Seaside Heights, N.J., Katzen the Tiger Lady has Teflon whiskers implanted in her cheeks and performs with a live boa constrictor. Her hus-

band, Enigma, has puzzle pieces tattooed over most of his body and silicone "horns" implanted in his head.

But New York - a city some have called its own freak show - has always been the center of this kind of entertainment.

"In New York, there's just such an incredible culture of circus and freak shows. This is where the freak show started in its sensational and institutionalized form," said Rachel Adams, a professor of English at Columbia University and the author of "Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination."

In downtown Manhattan's Soho, Todd Robbins, a former performer in Coney Island's sideshow, had a hit with his own show, "Carnival Knowledge," in which he eats light bulbs and sticks his hand into an animal trap. Robbins teaches fire-eating, sword-swallowing and other skills at twice-yearly Sideshow Schools, where participants pay \$600 for six four-hour classes.

The progenitor of this comeback is Dick Zigun, 51, the goateed, tattooed, self-proclaimed mayor of Coney Island. He was raised in Bridgeport, Conn., P.T. Barnum's hometown.

"I grew up thinking elephants and midgets were patriotic and American," Zigun said.

Armed with a master's degree in fine arts from Yale, Zigun thought Coney Island offered the perfect staging ground

for a new version of his old love, the sideshow.

The sideshow grew out of European fairs that occasionally featured "freaks" such as dwarfs. In the late 1700s, Philadelphia's Peale Museum featured not only portraits of American heroes, but mastodon bones as well as albinos and other "human curiosities," according to "Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit," by Syracuse University sociology professor Robert Bogdan.

The short-lived Peale museum aimed to educate people about science and the arts. But Barnum turned that idea upside down when, in 1841, he opened his American Museum in the heart of New York. He filled it with giants, fat people, dwarfs, a family of albinos, and "the Living Aztecs," a brother and sister with a medical condition known as microcephaly that gave them unusually small heads. Performers such as Tom Thumb became household names.

By 1850, the museum was a top attraction and spawned many imitators, which made "freak-hunting," or finding performers, a full-time job.

A half-century later, the steady stream of tourist dollars at Coney Island made it a popular spot for freak shows, and Coney Island's Dreamland amusement park featured "Lilliputia," where every building and piece of furniture was scaled to the 300 dwarfs who lived there.

As medicine led to an understanding of

many "freak" characteristics, the sideshow began to fade. "People were no longer giants: They had hyperthyroidism," Bogdan said. "It kind of took away the mystery."

Todd Robbins, however, thinks the amusement-ride technology that emerged after World War II killed sideshows.

"They could make more money with these rides," Robbins said.

Attitudes toward disabled people changed, too, and society began to believe that freak shows exploited people with medical problems.

In 1984, a protester demanded that "Otis the Frog Boy" be banned from performing at the New York State Fair. Otis Jordan was black and had underformed limbs; he rolled cigarettes with his lips. Jordan complained to Bogdan that he loved performing and wished the protester had talked to him first.

Zigun took Jordan into his show, but instead of calling him "The Frog Boy," he called Jordan "The Human Cigarette Machine" to avoid the demeaning "boy." Soon after, Zigun formed Coney Island USA, which aimed to revive the amusement park by harking back to the old days. The organization now oversees the freak show, the popular annual Mermaid Parade, the Coney Island Museum, and Burlesque at the Beach, a revival of the old Coney Island girlie shows. Insectavora has a burlesque act in which she shoots flames from an unexpected body part.

Performers find their way to the sideshow in various ways.

"I dropped out of college and ran off with the whole hard-core punk scene," said Eduardo Arrocha, 42, who performs as Eak the Geek. Years of slam-dancing provided natural training for his act, which includes lying between beds of nails while people stand on him.

"I have a high tolerance for pain," he said, "but I'm not like a masochist."

Tattoos cover most of his hulking body. He's met people, he said, but relationships didn't last. "I figured the steadiest thing in the world would be tattoos," he explained.

Looking different has taught him the importance of tolerance. At the end of his performance, he urges the audience to remember that "in the real world, there are no freaks or geeks, only human beings, so treat each other with respect."

Insectavora, 34, turned a childhood dare (eating a worm) into a career when she met Coney Island Circus Sideshow performers at a tattoo convention. She buys the bugs and worms at pet stores and bait shops and has learned to grow maggots in her Brooklyn apartment.

She advises people not to eat bugs themselves.

It's not easy, she said, "to make your own maggots that aren't going to make you sick, because what they live on is death." She herself has had her fill, she admitted, and is hoping to move on to a proven sideshow tradition: eating fire.