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Fine Line Between Humans and Other Beasts

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WHEN PBS canceled "Scientific American Frontiers" after 15 seasons in 2005, many fans mourned its loss, particularly its accessible approach to complicated material, which featured the host, Alan Alda, asking questions that nonscientists could understand while throwing in a bit of humor as well.

A successor attempt to engage a new, younger audience, "Wired Science," failed to catch on, but now Mr. Alda has another chance to deploy his participatory brand of science journalism with the three-part program "The Human Spark."

The show, being broadcast on consecutive Wednesdays on most public stations beginning Jan. 6, tackles a currently hot science topic: the fine line that separates humans from other species, from the Neanderthals to chimpanzees. Or as Mr. Alda summed it up over lunch at a restaurant on the Upper West Side of Manhattan: "How are we different from the other animals, how did we get that way, and where is it in the brain that these things have taken root?"

The questions take him, among other places, to an archaeological dig in France; to Leipzig, Germany, where researchers work with apes; and to the Laboratory of Neuro Imaging at the University of California, Los Angeles.

Mr. Alda, whose passion for science spills over to topics like how chaos theory can be applied to finding the right mix of hot and cold water in the shower, is an active participant, chipping spear points, dragging boxes for ape experiments, even getting his brain scanned.

John Wilson, the PBS chief programming executive, said the past search for a new science show "to freshen the schedule" wasn't meant as a dig at "Frontiers."

In the new program "Alan Alda really serves as that surrogate for the viewer," Mr. Wilson said. "He's not a scientist by training by any means, but he has a curious mind," he said, adding that Mr. Alda "makes it accessible and understandable and never did I feel like I was having to compromise my intelligence."

As with "Frontiers," Mr. Alda said, the goal is to "keep it a conversation."

Sometimes, he added, the scientists and researchers would "lapse into lecture mode, and I'd have to bring them back into a conversation. I don't try to explain their work to anyone, I just try to understand it."

Mr. Alda, who won Emmys for his acting on 'M*A*S*H' and "The West Wing," calls the former science program "the best thing I ever did in front of a camera."

He just finished teaching a six-week course of workshops at Stony Brook University on Long Island instructing scientists how to use improvisational acting techniques -- including those developed by Viola Spolin decades ago that were instrumental in the formation of the Second City troupe -- to express themselves more clearly. "The idea is you can't really communicate ideas unless you know what's going on in the other person's mind," he said.

"The Human Spark," produced by the Chedd-Angier-Lewis Production Company for the New York public television station WNET, originated in the mind of Graham Chedd (who with John Angier was executive producer of "Scientific American Frontiers") in 2004, just before "Frontiers" was canceled for being "old hat," Mr. Chedd said. A year later he had lined up half the roughly \$3 million for the new show from the National Science Foundation, he said in a telephone interview from his office in suburban Boston. But it took another two years to raise the balance, or at least enough to proceed. (A fourth hour on the future of humanity and the interface between brains and machines was dropped for lack of funds.)

"It just sat there, with me fuming as I saw more and more stories in the press picking up the same ideas," Mr. Chedd said. "I was frustrated because I felt the story was getting away from me." One of the show's advisers, the neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga, who was originally going to write a companion book for the PBS series, published "Human: The Science Behind What Makes Us Unique" on his own last year.

And in a bit of internal PBS one-upmanship, "Nova" (for which Mr. Chedd was the original science editor) decided to tackle almost the same topic in October -- the originally scheduled broadcast date for "Spark" -- in the three-part series "Becoming Human." Although the two shows reached somewhat different conclusions, "The Human Spark" was moved to January to avoid the head-to-head competition.

"I think the two approaches are so unique, there's absolutely room for both of them," Mr. Wilson said.

As it happens, some of the science in the field changed in the period between concept and funding. At the outset of Mr. Chedd's research, scientists were beginning to map the chimpanzee genome and expected great breakthroughs in comparing it to that of humans. But so far the research "never really yielded the insights that were expected," he said, and when Mr. Chedd went to put the program together, that avenue of inquiry was dropped.

Mr. Chedd originally conjured Michelangelo's painting in the Sistine Chapel that shows God touching Adam's finger, passing a spark of life. But only in Episode 3 does the program come around to religion, and it is dealt with mostly in the context of why humans are drawn to it.

At a public screening of excerpts of the film in St. Paul in October, Mr. Chedd said, the very first question came from a man who angrily questioned why the show didn't discuss the soul. But, he said, "if you believe there's a soul that's the human spark, then, bingo, you're done." By contrast, he said, "science is always trying to seek an answer in the natural world."

The title of the series suggests that scientists have been able to discover what makes us human, a question only partly answered by the program. Still, Mr. Chedd said he wasn't worried that he was setting out on an unknowable quest.

"The questions you ask are often much more interesting than the answers you get," he said. "There are lots of answers. The gulf between us and the other animals is just colossal. What we've come up with is a lot of people's best guess."

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