

## **‘Til Series Finale Do Us Part?: Fan Commitment and the Long-running Series** **Cory Barker**

The value of buzz – Engagement in the new era of television

Thanks to a slew of factors, Nielsen ratings for the major broadcast networks have been steadily declining. *House* and *Grey’s Anatomy* often topped 20 million viewers just four years ago, but this past season rarely hit the 15 million mark. Though five million people appear to have stopped watching television’s biggest medical dramas, the circumstances are too complicated to suggest that is true. There is no clear way to determine which way the pendulum has swung – perhaps audiences have become less engaged in *House* or *Grey’s* or perhaps they have actually become *more* engaged.

Traditional overnight samples say viewership has dipped for *House*, *Grey’s* and *The Office*, but other data points say otherwise. They still rank near the top in the 18-49 demographic, regularly [top Nielsen’s Live+SD and Live+7 ratings](#) that add in DVR viewings and place on downloads charts. Both *House* and *The Office* are found on [SocialSenseTV’s top 20 list of series](#) that have the most engagement online.

To watch, we use laptops, smartphones and iPads. Then we update our blogs and social media accounts, read recaps from Alan Sepinwall and reactions from fellow fans in a private chat room, all while queuing up the DVR. Viewing has shifted, but the engagement is there and perhaps, even more active than before. Big episodes of *The Office* bring in hundreds of comments on the A.V. Club recaps. Users on *OfficeTally.com*, the biggest of the series’ fan sites, hold [summer “Survivor” polls](#) where episodes from the previous season get voted off until only the best is left. Fans have penned over [18,000 stories of House fan fiction](#) on just one site (*FanFiction.net*), and no two series have been written about and commented on more on Entertainment Weekly’s [Ausiello Files](#) than *House* and *Grey’s*.

The stories of these series are not unique. Most of us know about [Chuck fans splurging on Subway](#) or *Lost*’s fans causing uproar over the [fuselage footage at the end of its series finale](#), both of which brought forth network reaction. In every corner of the web, television fans are becoming amateur critics, podcasters and writers, all in an attempt to take in the content they love. That is engagement.

The industry finds itself in a complicated predicament because it has what it has wanted for years in engaged, active audiences. But increased engagement is bumping up against

monetary pursuits. We are showered with countless stories about television's death because the industry has failed to transfer interaction and buzz into its models of success. But is it not time for those models to be thrown out? Although it is easy to blame downloading, DVR or video streams for the downfall of television, who is to say that the technology is not actually keeping the industry afloat in some ways? Might people keep with a series because it is easier to follow through A.V. Club recaps or watch six episodes at once on Hulu or DVR, whereas without those outlets, they could have lost interest entirely? Without these technologies, would engagement through fan organized series re-watches or *Lostpedia.org* exist at all? And though those activities do not directly equate to dollars, having an invested audience is still better than not having one at all.

So what now? It is time to stop reporting on the overnight Nielsen ratings as if they are the final word on television viewership and instead start thinking of them as just one part of a larger picture. Engagement should redefine the ways in which we think of individual television series as a success or failure. Innovations like the SocialSenseTV report, which analyzes millions of blogs, social media and forum postings to see which of the Nielsen top 75 fans are most engaged with, need to be embraced because the process evaluates and prioritizes more than just viewing. The SocialSenseTV numbers and similar reports could be used to pinpoint certain fans' interests, reaction to brands and more, which should appeal to networks fearful of avoiding anything that cannot be monetized. The report is brand-new and should not be considered a final word on what fans are doing either. Instead, a hybrid process that includes overnights, DVR views, downloads and social media engagement should be developed to create a more honest picture of what and how fans are watching television. While buzz does not yet generate revenue for the networks, studios or advertisers (though SocialSenseTV does offer possible monetization paths) it does indicate engagement. In a landscape where traditional signs of success are dipping, it seems newer ways should be available to paint a clearer picture. It is hard to confirm that engagement is on the rise, but until a process is accepted that explains that claim and of course, allows the industry make money, we will be stuck arguing if buzz means anything.