Rethinking the Audience/Producer Relationship Roundtable
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Producers' Pragmatic Perceptions of Audiences and Fans

Over the last decade, there has been a great deal of discussion both in critical and industrial circles about the television industry recasting itself in our digital age as an active medium with a focus on audience engagement. This is due in large part to the changing relationship between television producers, advertisers, and fans precipitated first by the fracturing of audiences by the introduction of cable, and most recently by the media companies' further loss of control over the way audiences interact with content as a result of technologies like DVRs and mobile devices. Advertisers increasingly demand accountability from media outlets for the degree of actual exposure they receive and for the quality of relationship this creates with their consumers. Meanwhile, some fans have taken advantage of the new power afforded them through digital technologies to mobilize on behalf of their favorite shows and to influence the content of those shows. The writers and producers of most shows, however, appreciate the support of their fans but maintain a healthy skepticism as to the influence and opinions of fans. Most importantly, the time and stress of getting quality episodes written and on the air is more than a full time job, and for the writers and producers of television, catering to fans often becomes something of an afterthought.

One of the best ways shows have found to engage more fully with fans is through providing additional content or social networking activities online, but that content has largely fallen to the networks to develop. Before the writers' strike began in 2007, networks expected the writers to create that online content without compensation, but when the strike ended in 2008, and networks realized they would have to pay their writers for their online content, many networks moved to create their own in-house online departments. Those departments will often consult with the writers of shows, but the work of the online department remains separate from the work of writing the show. Networks and producers have also recognized that the material fans create online can often be more valuable and engaging than that which networks or producers can create; and if fans are creating that content for free, networks have no problem with that.

Discussion boards such as *Television Without Pity* remain one of the most direct ways for producers/writers to get feedback from their fans, but that relationship between fans and producers remains somewhat nebulous. While many writers and producers check *Television Without Pity*, the extent to which regular or systematic monitoring of fans' feedback actually occurs and its impact on the production of the shows is questionable. When a show is doing well and the feedback from fans is positive, writers/producers might visit the site regularly for an additional boost from the fans' support, but if the show is struggling and the writers/producers are already frustrated and stressed, they will not rush to visit a discussion board where fans are ripping them to shreds. As we all know, if someone is looking for constructive criticism, the Internet is not the first place to look. Additionally, these sorts of "focus groups" on fan site discussion boards like *Television Without Pity* tend to be dominated by the loudest and most opinionated people, driven toward consensus decision, and discourage disagreement, making them of limited usefulness.

This love-hate relationship with fans illustrates another potential pitfall of increased online interaction between producers and audiences, and the fickle nature of fans creates another

deterrent to producers making forays into digital content. In a business as inherently conservative as television, these sorts of variables and unknowns have certainly led to increased reluctance on the part of the industry to make more serious attempts to engage with these mediums and their fans. Most practically speaking, getting their name on a broadcasted script remains the ultimate goals of most writers, and although fan interaction has its perks, for writers and producers, it often remains little more than a fringe benefit.