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Where Everybody's a Critic : On the Internet, TV shows create endless chatter about everything from characters to plot. The networks say the online talk doesn't result in program changes, but isn't it only a matter of time?

November 12, 1995 | Diane Garrett | *Diane Garrett is a Los Angeles-based free-lance writer*



Cyberbia has weighed in on the fall television season-- with predictably quixotic results.

Out on the wild and woolly Internet, lots of people have opinions, and they're not afraid to share them. Posted comments about new shows and returning series alike have ranged from the simple--the always popular "It sucked" or "It was great"--to thoughtful analysis and sublime suggestions from viewers eager to play programmer for a day.

Why not cast David Letterman as Phoebe's dad? suggested one "Friends" fan in the newsgroup devoted to that NBC series.

A "Melrose Place" fan cast that show's players in "The Brady Bunch" with beleaguered Allison as Jan. "Amanda, Amanda, Amanda, why is it always Amanda!" he wrote.

All is not stunt casting, however. Plot twists have drawn their share of heated reactions, with cybernauts divided over the Ross-Rachel "Will they or won't they?" story on "Friends" and the addition of Jeremy Piven's character, Spence, on "Ellen."

"Why are they messing with the cool femaleness of the show?" asked one "Ellen" fan on ABC's America Online site. "Isn't that the quality that made it a hit?"

"As I remember correctly, the show is called 'Ellen,' not 'My Cousin Spence,' " another fan pertly responded, though several defended the new character.

Meanwhile, over at the "ER" newsgroup, which is normally dominated by medical chatter, many wagged their fingers at a character's liaison with a married woman. "Dr. Benton, shame on you!" was one posted remark.

All this sound and fury has not escaped Hollywood's attention. Increasingly, network executives and creative staffs are making it their business to monitor cyberspace for viewer feedback. While no one will admit to having changed a story line based on such comments, no one is ruling out the possibility in the future, either.

Already, CBS has used cyber-travelers visiting its World Wide Web site for both focus groups and input

in developing some programs.

"It's a good way to hear what people want," explains George Schweitzer, CBS executive vice president for marketing. "Look, people on the Internet are not shy, and that's important. They're for the most part articulate and very passionate."

"We definitely monitor it," says John P. Roberts, Fox's director of online entertainment. "We keep tabs on what people are saying about our shows."

The danger is giving too much weight to a few online postings, says Josh Grotstein, vice president and general manager of NBC Online Ventures. That's why he prefers online focus groups to random samplings.

"The problem is basing a decision on eight people who were really angry about a certain thing that happened one night in February," Grotstein says. "That's the danger, but I think it's going to be something you're going to see more and more of in the future as the Internet becomes more of a mass medium."

ABC actively solicits comments about all its shows at its America Online site. The bulletin board, checked daily by staffers, has folders for new and returning shows.

That's key, because it often takes a while before shows build a strong enough base for an Internet newsgroup. As it is, postings about new programs such as "American Gothic," "Central Park West" and "The Single Guy" are shoehorned into newsgroups for "The X-Files," "Melrose Place" and "Friends," respectively.

Once a newsgroup has been established, it can be a powerful rallying point for its fans. Last year, viewers of Fox's "Party of Five" used the newsgroup to plot ways to save the struggling show.

But mostly, the comments--wherever they are found--give television's creative staffs an instant barometer.

"When I read what they like and don't like, I factor that into the general charting of where I think the show should go," says Chris Carter, creator and executive producer of Fox's sci-fi program "The X-Files."

"It's very funny," he says. "You know what it is? It's really cocktail chat. Instead of sitting around the quad or the water cooler, they're writing on their computers."

"It's a whole different thing than fan mail, which is disembodied," says Brad Buckner, co-executive producer of ABC's "Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman," another show with a rabid online following.

"This is very visceral," adds fellow co-executive producer Eugenie Ross-Leming. "When you read this, you see all those exclamation points--it's like a comic book."

The two, who read weekly printouts of postings, have used the comments as ammunition and story ideas.

"It gave us permission as writers," Ross-Leming says. "If we get a note from the network that might be more conservative than we would want it to be, we could point out to them, no, they want this."

"ER's" Tracey Stern gathers medical case studies from online sources. "A good many of the things we get turn into 'ER' stories--though they change quite a bit," the staff writer says. "It's food for thought."

Drew Carey, creator and star of ABC's "Drew Carey Show," hasn't gotten the chance to see too many online responses to his show yet--it's too new. But when a viewer recommended making the character Kate stronger, since the show is sandwiched between "Ellen" and "Grace Under Fire," he posted a message telling why he disagreed.

"I imagine they just want a perfect female character that is leading every scene, but that's not what Kate's like--and it's my show," says Carey, who says he was champing at the bit for ABC to add his show folder.

Ever since then, he's been comparing responses to his show to those for other new programming.

"We're right up there with 'The Naked Truth' and 'Hudson Street,' " he says. "And we have more than 'The Jeff Foxworthy Show.' "



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