The Precarity of Fan Campaigns in the Age of the Algorithm

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Internet-based television platforms are capable of tracking viewing patterns to minute detail; their ability to quantify audience investment far exceeds the representative sampling that has been industry standard in television for decades. But viewer information is a carefully guarded secret, leaving viewers with limited options to identify programs in danger of failing to secure renewal and with fewer strategies to collectivize as an audience to save a particular show. In an era in which algorithms, not published programming schedules, shape viewer patterns, and in which the data metrics that determine a TV show's greenlighting and renewal are proprietary and hidden, how do audiences organize to save a TV show that the data (may) suggest should not continue?

Save-our-show campaigns illustrate audience resourcefulness, as fans come together and make use of ratings information, programming schedules, and viewing trends to build a case for producers that a particular program – and its viewing audience – continue to have commercial value. The potential for audience-driven campaigns is made precarious by many practices of online television; platforms' variable, occasionally capricious, development and production calendars mean there is often no official announcement of cancellation to spur a show's fans into action. When the producers of *One Day at a Time* took to social media in early 2018, not long after the show's second season dropped on Netflix, to urge viewers to recommend the show to friends and family, it did not create a sense of urgency among fans. It was only as weeks passed and Netflix made no move to pick up the show for a third season that fans became anxious about its future. Given that raw data remained invisible to viewers, they were unable to offer empirical arguments based on specific viewerships, interpretations of the audience, or comparable numbers for other shows that have been renewed. Instead, efforts to prod Netflix to renew the program were dependent on individual accounts of cultural significance of Latinx, queer, working class representation. Their pleas were individualized rather than collective; rather than make arguments that assumed the reach or scope its viewership, fans spoke of the show's importance to them. While this particular effort was successful, and a third season of *One Day at a Time* is currently in production, this case does illustrate the difficulty of audience collectivizing in an environment of data-driven business decisions reliant on data not available to viewers. Fans have to rely on Netflix's recommendation algorithms and their own personal social networks to effectively promote a program – and don't even have indicators to know when to do so.

Fan campaigns, regardless of outcome, reveal the strategies viewers have adopted to maximize the affordances available to them in traditional industry model in order to navigate and influence television programming decisions. But data metrics that

determine greenlighting and renewal of shows online are hidden, proprietary, and emergent. Do algorithms that shape viewing also obviate the possibilities for fan collectivizing? And, perhaps more troublingly, do they do so equally across all audiences? After all, if demographic valuation is opaque and viewer collectivizing is dependent on the diversity and reach of individual viewers' recommendation circles, online platforms have the potential to perpetuate the marginalization of audience groups without oversight or repercussion. The reliance on proprietary algorithms and data that are only interpreted behind closed doors limits the position of audiences: to present a case for a particular show's value, to interpret the viewer data in ways to convince platforms of its continued relevance, and even to recognize and collectivize around underperforming programs. The repercussions of these shifts could be ameliorated by a move toward transparency – more shared data on viewing numbers, demographics, and patterns, for example, but also more predictable programming strategies in which Netflix and Hulu announce cancelations rather than quietly "failing to renew" shows and perhaps Amazon revives its now-defunct Pilot Season in which users could at least know, if not influence, upcoming programs. But these strategies are not strictly necessary: the reliance on data in internet-distributed television is resulting in irrevocable shifts. Perhaps the most fruitful approach is to recognize the implications of proprietary data on the possibilities of audience community and for fans to likewise shift their resourcefulness towards adopting new strategies to maximize the agency afforded to them in the age of online TV.