

Taking REMOTE Control

Sofa drones unite for their favorite TV shows

By Amy Wu, New York U.

Couch potatoes are a feisty group. Instead of going through bags of chips and staring with glazed eyes, they are banding together to save their favorite TV shows. And they're saving them any way they can — by advertising, selling T-shirts, starting letter campaigns and even going on the Internet.

Fans have flooded ABC offices with e-mail to save *My So-Called Life* from cancellation. They've sold T-shirts and have asked for contributions to advertise in *USA Today* and *TV Guide*. They received form letters from ABC promising it was trying to save the critically acclaimed show, which ran its last episode on Jan. 26, when it enjoyed its highest Nielsen rating ever.

Kori Gerland, an admitted TV addict and *MSCL* diehard, is a member of the grass-roots movement that has emerged in cyberspace: Operation Life Support. "Seventy-five percent of the whole activity is on-line e-mail," Gerland says, "either distributing information or writing other magazines."

To Meaghan Rynne, a sophomore at the U. of Maine and member of OLS, the campaign would be slower and more costly without the Internet. She received a response from ABC via e-mail in one week. "They never would have responded to snail mail," she says.

Taking it to the streets

Whether *MSCL* is the first campaign on the Internet is questionable. Dennis Morgan, a computer science major at Oregon State U., remembers cruising the Internet and finding group efforts to save *Twin Peaks*. "Most viewers aren't involved in Nielsen ratings," Morgan says. "Most don't feel they have an influence."

Despite massive campaigns, shows like *Brooklyn Bridge*, *I'll Fly Away*, *Homefront* and *Twin Peaks* weren't renewed. So why spend hours a day when networks monotonously loom over individual efforts?

Dorothy Swanson, founder and president of the 3,000-member Viewers for Quality Television, says that campaigns can make a difference. She credits her group with saving *Designing Women* and *Cagney*

and *Lacey*. VQT also worked on rescuing *MSCL*, *Party of Five* and *Under Suspicion*.

Despite the outpouring of support from the media and Claire Danes' Golden Globe Award for her performance in *MSCL*, the show's future is still in limbo. To be saved, an endangered show must have the support of critics, media, industry and fans.

Ratings game

But letters and phone calls won't save shows; Nielsen numbers will. Jack Curry, managing editor for *TV Guide*, says, "[Campaigns] usually work when networks want to renew the show anyway."

To many, Nielsen is an ogre that devours great television. The fate of TV shows lies in the hands of 4,000 households randomly selected by Nielsen Media Research designed to fit the U.S. census demographics. Some audiences, like nursing homes and college campuses, are not measured. But customers — specific networks or advertisers — can request that Nielsen conduct a special survey on a particular target audience, such as college students or senior citizens.

Does Nielsen cancel low-rated programs? "We have nothing to do with what networks choose to air," says Susan Chicone of Nielsen Media Research. "All we do is provide ratings."

But Ray Faiola, director of audience services at CBS, says that the Nielsen rat-

ings influence whether shows stay or go. "Both the network and advertiser refer to Nielsen numbers for reference points."

If the Niensens don't nab a TV show, the time slot might. Many fans and others involved with *MSCL* blame the show's low ratings on its 8 p.m. Thursday slot. They believe the show should be slated to run later in the evening so it's not up against college favorites, such as *Martin* and *Mad About You*. "It's totally crippled us," says Winnie Holzman, creator and co-executive producer of the show. "It doesn't suit the show."

ABC spokesperson Chris Alexander says that some shows never find an audience and that at this point there is no time slot to move it to. "They've done on-air promotion during the day and during kids' shows," Alexander says. "They've run commercials on other cable stations."

The network's reasoning for the time slot is that it's a teen show, Holzman says. But when creating it two years ago, she didn't see it as a teen or adult show. "I saw it as a show that could appeal to many different people," she says. "A lot of people in their 20s are really into the show. It shows that it's possible to appeal across lines."

For the love of fluff

College students don't always want intellectually stimulating or challenging shows.

According to Kyle Melinn, a Michigan State U. senior and TV cynic, there are plenty of fans of mindless TV. "If *90210* or *Melrose* is on, you know where everyone is," Melinn says. "[Students] like brainless TV. You come home from studying and you sit in front of the TV set and become a lemon."

Melissa Bean, a senior at Brigham Young U., says she enjoys the show's challenging issues. "I like it when you can put some intellectual effort into the show. *90210* is nice if you want to watch something totally mindless."

A.J. Langer, who plays Rayanne on *MSCL*, says that the supportive fan base is essential to the show's success. "The support that's come up [from viewers] is so appreciated," Langer says. "Our show is demanding of our audience. It's one of the few shows that gives respect to the audience."

While the definition of quality programming continues to be duked out between viewers and networks, Holzman holds fast to her belief that the uniqueness of *MSCL*, whose fate will be decided in May, is worth a second look. "I'm not saying we're better entertainment — we're another kind of entertainment."

■ Amy Wu is a reporter for NYU's Washington Square News.

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My So-Called Life: Nielsen's so-called flop is viewers' so-called triumph.