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Big Damn Fans:
Fan Campaigns of *Firefly* and *Veronica Mars*

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Chapter One: You Can't Take the Sky from Me

In the spring of 2005, my Livejournal Friends List was flooded with people raving about a new television show, *Veronica Mars*. I didn't know any of these people in 'real' life; rather I had met them virtually in Livejournal communities in which we shared common interests. The show's presence across the site was ubiquitous, and its fan base so fervent that when one friend announced her intention to tune in that evening, I replied to her entry with this comment; "And I watch as you give in to the dark side. I swear pretty much all of LJ is obsessed with this show."¹ That summer I started watching the show, and convinced some of my closest friends to watch as well.

I start with this anecdote as a way of making my fan persuasions visible. It is not a fact that I hope no one will notice; it is the very thing that makes this research viable. It is not happenstance that I take the television show *Veronica Mars* as a case study; I was certainly a fan of the show while most of the events documented were unfolding.

As this confession illustrates – I was a fan before I found it was possible to think critically about fan practices. The thought of concentrating on fans was sparked by reading a *New York Times* article in which the author described the actions of an executive producer; "...[his] attempt to reach out to his show's viewers reflects a growing awareness among television writers of their shows' online communities, as well as of a variety of ways to engage them."² Although my fan persuasions had given me a sense that this was true, I also realized it was an empirical statement. I wanted to undertake an academic project to understand the nature and importance of an emerging

¹ <http://www.livejournal.com/users/breezybee/46852.html>. (04.19.2005)

² Aspan, Maria. *TV is now Interactive, Minus Images, on the Web*. The New York Times. July 8, 2006.

online space in which fans were interacting with authors. To this end, I started by first reading previous work on fandoms in an attempt to enter an ongoing conversation. While some of this reading includes published work, some of the ideas most influential and important to my own thinking of fandom and online space have been informed by academic fan blogs – especially those of Henry Jenkins, Nancy Baym and Jason Mittell.³ Beyond that, it was also important to adopt and own an academic persona. This included thoroughly investigating, documenting and understanding events of which I thought I was *already* aware, and finding out there was more to know, and to learn about conveying my analysis to a larger academic audience.

The two cases documented in this paper are *Firefly / Serenity* and *Veronica Mars*. They are two recent American television shows that could be considered cult; that is television shows with small passionate fan bases. Both have been associated with fan efforts to save the shows from cancellation. In this chapter, I provide an introduction to some of the issues surrounding research on fan campaigns, including briefly outlining television industry practices. In Chapter Two, I first describe and document the fan efforts surrounding *Firefly / Serenity*, paying particular attention to the manner in which fan efforts were attributed to the fans as successful by the television creators and popular media sources, and also to the way in which fans appropriate language from the source products. In Chapter Three, I describe and document fan efforts surrounding *Veronica Mars* on a season-by-season basis, again highlighting themes of fan efforts being attributed as crucial to the show's continued success.

³ These blogs can be found at <http://www.henryjenkins.org/index.html>, <http://www.onlinefandom.com/>, and <http://justtv.wordpress.com/>, respectively.

The fan campaigns I describe and analyze are efforts by an organized group of fans – of a particular television show – to attempt to guarantee the show’s continued survival on broadcast television. The important themes in this definition are organization and intent. A single fan that writes a letter to a network executive, or buys a DVD would not necessarily be contributing to a fan campaign. The single letter lacks organization within a larger group of actions, while buying a DVD lacks intent to connect to the goal of a larger group. Because fans learn by doing, television fan campaigns evolve quickly even over short time periods. Suggested fan campaign ideas are subject to critique by a group of fans who are aware of a running catalog of previous fan efforts and outcomes.⁴

Studio 60: Criteria for Fan Campaign Development

My empirical focus is the two television shows described above, both of which have large fan bases. By thinking in a broader comparative frame, it is possible to conceptualize why some shows have large sprawling fan campaigns and others do not. Take, for example, the show *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, which provides an intriguing comparison of a high quality show that lacks campaign efforts of the type I document. The show was heralded as the next great coming by television creator/writer Aaron Sorkin. He is best known for creating and writing *The West Wing*, a show about the senior officers of a fictitious Presidential Administration. *The West Wing* was also known for its rhythmic snappy intellectual banter and received wide critical acclaim. From the moment NBC announced the new show in May 2006, fans were buzzing with excitement. The tagline of the Studio 60 Livejournal community started that summer was “True fans

⁴ For example, see the comments on the Livejournal post in which Micheal Muhney’s proposed fans donate \$22. This is an instance I will discuss more fully in Chapter Three, but fans in regard to other campaigns quickly critiqued and dismissed Muhney’s suggestion.

love shows even before they start.”⁵ But as hyped and heralded as the show was, the ratings didn’t live up to expectations, and cancellation rumors surround the show.

However, no large successful fan campaign effort has been mounted, aside from one online petition with over 10,000 names.⁶ This seems to indicate that many people are interested in the fate of the show, but there is no more active fan campaign.⁷

Using this case and drawing on my own experiences as a fan and research of my two cases, I want to sketch likely criteria for the growth and expansion of fan campaigns. The first condition is something I would call ‘the importance of a unified front,’ or the importance of a unanimous love for the show. The reliance is on creative choices; by this I mean mostly the plot and characters of the show. If the fans do not agree with the creative choices – that the show in question is both a great show, and the greatest show possible by the creators involved – fan efforts fall apart because the disagreement over those issues is too much to overcome. Fan discussions will be dominated by what could have happened differently on the creative level. In contrast, in successful fan campaigns, discussions are typically centered on executive decisions; by this I mean discussions will center on scheduling conflicts or viewership. This in turn is only possible when the love for the show is unanimous. A glance at the Television Without Pity forums⁸ for *Studio 60* shows fans bickering about creative decisions; there is no discernable agreement by a

⁵ http://community.livejournal.com/studio_60

⁶ www.petitionspot.com/petitions/Save-NBC-Studio-60

⁷ The tagline for the *Studio 60* Livejournal community now reads, “true fans love shows before they even start... truer fans stick with it after that.” This is in response to those opinions by some fans on the quality of the show.

⁸ Television Without Pity (TWP) is a website that provides both detailed recaps of certain television shows (often with a mocking tone) and message boards where users can discuss a variety of television shows and actors. The message boards are known for their elaborate rules and inside lingo. The site was also recently acquired by the Bravo division of NBC Universal.

large group of fans that this show should remain on the air. The varying opinions of fans are not worth attempting to address here, but most blame Sorkin in some fashion.

Another criterion for successful fan campaign efforts might also have to do with the audience demographic. That is also another possible reason why *Studio 60* may lack larger fan campaign efforts as the show attracts older fans. When the ratings for *Studio 60* were lower than anticipated, NBC leapt quickly to explain that while it may be smaller than anticipated, the audience that was watching included the highest concentration of adult fans with household earnings over \$75,000.⁹ These are widely considered in industry speak to be ‘alpha fans,’ because these are the wealthy fans advertisers most want to target. This demographic tends not watch much television, therefore making shows attracting ‘alpha fans’ more sought after by networks and advertisers. Put in terms of its audience demographic, then, it does not seem surprising that *Studio 60* would not have such robust fan campaigns; the viewers lack the time required to organize fan campaigns.

Another way of thinking about the interaction between demographics and fans is in terms of fan cultural capital, defined by Fiske, following Bourdieu, as “the knowledge that a fan has about their object of fandom.”¹⁰ Hills then goes on to define fan social capital as “the network of fan friends and acquaintances that a fan possesses as well as their access to media producers and professional personnel linked to their object of fandom.”¹¹ I find this concept to be particularly useful because it would seem that having a combination of fan cultural capital and fan social capital is imperative for making

⁹ This was first reported by NBC, most likely from Nielsen reports not made available to the general public, but the information quickly circulated in various spaces. For example, (http://online.wsj.com/public/article/SB116251729343012097-wW9pWIuuIFpOmb2jEJF1adLjIg_20061109.html?mod=blogs)

¹⁰ Fiske in Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 2002:57

¹¹ Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 2002: 57.

successful fan campaigns happen. Speaking from experience in fandoms and on the basis of my research for this paper in two specific fan campaigns, I would argue that currently the fans with highest fan cultural and social capital are between the ages of 18-22, which is slightly older than many fans but still much younger than the population at large.¹²

These criteria suggest that there are conditions under which it is more likely that fan campaigns will occur. After all, although the efforts described may appear easy, there is a significant amount of work involved. I am suggesting that fan campaigns are not an inevitable outcome of fan practices; they are instead a set of carefully constructed interactions that have a set of practices that make them more likely. Before I detail my argument and the approach I will take, I want to briefly discuss the importance of television programming and previous literature on fan practices.

Television Programming

In recent years, fan's understandings of the television industry have become impressive in their scope and depth. Much of the structure of fan campaigns is based on the television production cycle, when new shows are produced and aired. Understanding the production cycle illuminates the nature of the fan campaigns. It provides a context for why, for example, over the summer there are few fan campaign efforts. There is a lack of new shows, because most shows have seasons that run from September to May. Moreover, there is no one to appeal to as networks have just announced their fall schedules.

¹² This statement is based on the age distribution of Livejournal users (<http://www.livejournal.com/stats.bml>). Although this is by no means an exhaustive or objective manner of measurement, it does provide a rough estimate of Livejournal users (Appendix One). This data is self-identified by users and provided by Livejournal.

As the *Encyclopedia of TV* suggests, television programming is not a static set of practices, but rather a locus of commodities and practices which have the “capacity to convey meaning” and which comprise “particular kinds of social exchange [which] can be redefined as the institutions profiting from them alter their strategies.”¹³ This is to suggest that television programming is historically specific. Our current set of practices has been inherited and is characterized by a consumer model based on advertising. What is aired during primetime is based on a wide confluence of factors that one could reduce to ‘programming,’ but to do so eclipses any kind of conversation about how programming came to be organized and understood. This is precisely the concern of my work. For example, TV programming is usually the split between special broadcasts, such as a TV movie or variety show special, versus a series. For a series, there is an enduring notion that television shows should have narrative arcs occurring over an entire run of twenty-two episodes, making it necessary for a viewer to watch every episode for the latest episode to make sense. This is a cultural construction. My point is simply that when we think of the television landscape of serialized television so familiar to us, we should think of a set of culturally constructed practices that are dynamic, and ask how and why they function the way they do. Below, I provide a brief outline of how series are usually organized.

Currently, serialized network seasons typically start every year in September, with the premiere of new and returning shows. There are usually twelve new weekly episodes through the first two weeks in December. Since a season is normally around twenty-two episodes, that leaves approximately ten new episodes to air between January and May. New episodes typically begin again in late January to coincide with the Nielsen Ratings

¹³ <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/P/htmlP/programming/programming.htm>

sweeps throughout the month of February. Nielsen Media Research collects data throughout the year on television viewers based on a standard sample, but four times during the year – February, May, July and November – NMR mails out ‘diaries’ to be completed by families in smaller markets normally not represented in the other sample. Networks typically pull out all the stops for sweeps programming, with the most first time airing of programs, while outside the sweeps periods reruns are more likely. Most shows then typically go on hiatus in March, to return once again in mid-April and May for the May sweeps period. Shows then finish airing at the end of May. Meanwhile Mid-May marks another important time for television shows, the upfront presentations. These are events where network executives give a presentation in which they unveil their schedule for the coming fall; this is typically the time cancellations are announced. The production cycle then starts again in September.

Technologies and Fan Practices

In addition to the production cycle, technological change has transformed fan practices. With the rise of widespread Internet usage, the nature of media participation has changed, the distinctions between media authors and media consumers have become less clear, and the nature of fan interactions have been altered. Fans are now entering into new relationships with each other, producers, and authors of widely circulated cultural texts. How we understand this depends on understanding the nature and importance rising interactive media spaces.

As I mentioned earlier, previous research on television fandoms focused widely on Science-Fiction and was primarily interested in mapping spaces of fan interaction. For

example, Jenkins found that fans were actively constructing their own universe by taking, or poaching, elements from an established universe, mainly in the forms of fan fiction and fan art.¹⁴ He then argues that there is power for fans in these interpretive strategies, a point which is critical to the development of research on fans. Bacon-Smith builds on Jenkins' themes by considering how gender interacts with fan status, finding that women are just as engaged with fan practices as men are.¹⁵ Bacon-Smith also chronicles – through her own ethnographic experiences – the process by which women join fandoms. While these two works provide a basis from which to consider fandoms as a legitimate source of inquiry, fan practice was ultimately changed as other cultural non-fan practices underwent rapid changes with the rise of widespread Internet usage in the mid-nineties.

While there are many ways in which to consider fandoms and the role of interactive spaces, as a variety of other research suggests,¹⁶ my work takes up the specific question of changing relationships between fan and authors. Some of the tensions that exist between fans as poachers of the product and executives as owners of the product – originally suggested by Jenkins – remain unresolved. However the Internet fundamentally changes the very nature of this argument by reducing the costs of production and distribution associated with fan products and interactions. This expands the number of fan products exponentially, and it also makes it harder to bracket fan activities as “something only those people attending conventions are doing.” As my

¹⁴Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

¹⁵ Bacon-Smith, Camille. *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

¹⁶Baym, Nancy. *Tune in, Log on: Soaps, Fandom and Online Community*. Sage Publications, 2000. Hills, Matt. “Defining Cult TV: Texts, Inter-Texts and Fan Audiences.” *The Television Studies Reader*. Ed. Robert Allen and Annette Hill. New York: Routledge, 2004. 509-523. Shefrin, Elana. “Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, and Participatory Fandom; Mapping New Congruencies between the Internet and Media Entertainment Culture.” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 21.3 (2004): 261. Gray, Jonathan. “Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television without Pity and Textual Dislike.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 48.7 (2005): 840.

argument suggests, the Internet also creates a space in which fans can claim authority over certain cultural products – such as movies made from comic books, or the courting of Lord of the Rings fans during the movie production.¹⁷

The Internet and other television related technologies (the VCR, the DVD Player/Recorder) are also important to a consideration of fandoms and more specifically fan campaigns. By altering the product itself and how it is viewed, VCR and DVD technologies along with the Internet, alter the conditions of information and interaction among fans.

Changing the Product

Technologies change the way television as a product is conceived, produced and viewed. One of the earliest technological changes – the VCR – is highlighted in Jenkins analysis which points out that the VCR allowed fans to more easily collect their favorite series for re-watching, and in turn to participate more fully in a fan culture predicated on knowledge of the product.¹⁸ Just as television programming is not a static set of practices, technological shifts are also part of changing practices by networks involved in a complex series of relationships. Reeves, Rodgers and Epstein offer a list of some of the technologies that fundamentally change our perception of television products: “syndication, globalization, the rise of multi-channel cable, satellite and digital television...remote control handsets, videocassette recorders, and networked personal

¹⁷ See Shefrin, Elana. “Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, and Participatory Fandom; Mapping New Congruencies between the Internet and Media Entertainment Culture.” Critical Studies in Media Communication 21.3 (2004). Also (http://popwatch.ew.com/popwatch/2006/10/peter_jackson_v.html) specifically.

¹⁸Jenkins, Henry. Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture. New York: Routledge, 1992.

computers.”¹⁹ Occurring at the same time as the switch away from the three network model which characterized U.S. programming in the 1950s and 1960s, these changes start to create more fractured audience demographics.

The rise of these technologies and the relationships they mediate also contribute to a broader shift in programming, and allow for television shows to become much more complicated.²⁰ Before widespread VCR usage, shows had to be understood by an audience the first time through, and consequently networks were unlikely to attempt to confuse or challenge viewers. Because new technological forms allow for and encourage repetition, television shows with layered meanings have become more profitable and are also a rich site for fandom to occur. The Internet provides a space in which digestion of these more complicated shows can take place: “as the shows have complexified, the resources for making sense of that complexity have multiplied as well, ...because the online world offers resources that help sustain more complex programming than other media.”²¹

Changing Fan Interactions

The sense that fandom is different after the Internet is because the Internet changes the nature of fan interactions. Connections are able to occur quickly and over vast spaces. With the rise of technologies like streaming video, and more devices able to access the Internet from varied locations, the speed as well as the number of possible interactions is multiplying. Hills demonstrates that online fan experience does not directly

¹⁹Reeves, J., M. Rodgers, and M. Epstein. “Rewriting Popularity: The Cult Files.” ‘Deny all Knowledge’: Reading the X-Files. Ed. D. Lavery, A. Hague, and M. Cartwright. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996. 22-35.

²⁰ Johnson, Steven. Everything Bad is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter. New York: Penguin Group, 2006.

²¹ Ibid, pg 116.

mirror the experience of being an offline fan. Online fan experiences and fan identities are constantly being performed by fans. This I have found to be especially true on message boards. The online space creates an area in which fans can perform their fan behavior “knowing that other fans will act as readership for speculations, observations, and commentaries.”²²

My research takes this idea a step further and documents that fan performances are becoming not just a part of fan experience but they affect the experience of television creators as well. That is, successfully being able to perform in online fan spaces is becoming a form of cultural capital for the authors and creators of television shows, and the ability to successfully parlay that capital in fan spaces might mean a higher rate of invested fans and successful fan campaigns. For example, as I will detail more in Chapter Two, Joss Whedon is particularly adept at interacting in different fan spaces where he is broadly read, or interpreted, by fans as being extremely authentic. Changes in the technology of television change both the television product and its authors and consumers, but fan interactions as well.

Changing Available Information

These technologies also allow fans to participate in discussions that they couldn't be a part of previously. Fans can talk in ways they were not qualified to do before. For example, many fans demonstrate a complex understanding of the Nielsen Media Ratings system or television production or programming schedules and optioning periods. One factor of course is the participation in online spaces by those involved in the television

²² Hills, Matt. Fan Cultures. New York: Routledge, 2002: 177.

industry, but that is not the entire story. More information is available quickly and easily and users and ‘friends’ are available to help interpret that information.

What about Other Campaigns? The Selection of Case Studies and Methods

To conduct this research I first selected *Firefly* and *Veronica Mars* as cases. This was done on the basis of several factors. The first was my awareness of both shows and their fan campaigns through experiences as a fan. I also use these cases because they are two of the best cases for documenting current and recent fan efforts. These cases allow me to see things that I would not otherwise be able to see. Both cases captured mainstream/traditional media attention and both are generally viewed through the public attribution process in official and unofficial media spaces in the entertainment industry as ‘successful fan campaigns.’ There are other shows that have been surrounded by fan efforts that I also considered choosing, namely *Family Guy* and *Arrested Development*. The cancellation of *Family Guy* was announced by Fox (2000 and 2002), but due in part to high sales of the first season DVD set, Fox reversed its decision (2005). Importantly for my purposes, *Family Guy* is almost an anomaly, since it was an animated show that was simply drawn back in to existence. This would not be possible to the same extent with a live action show like *Firefly* or *Veronica Mars*. Secondly, *Arrested Development* was cancelled and un-cancelled several times by Fox, but in the time since its final cancellation the main fan sites have become inactive and inaccessible. Thus, an account of the fan campaigns of *Arrested Development* would rely heavily on secondary media attributions of fan support for the show since fandom resources are unavailable or

difficult to access. As this brief discussion suggests, my thoughts surrounding the selection of these case studies is based in a larger framework of the universe of fan campaigns, that is culled from fan experiences and empirical research.

At the level of research design, I would also like to call attention to the idea that fan campaigns are an ephemeral phenomenon; the more time that elapses since the events occurred, the more likely that websites, links, and e-mails have changed or moved or shut down. Message boards serve as strong archives, since their structure is based on archiving comments. However, message boards can crash or can be deleted as members and spaces become inactive. In this sense then, my research is an attempt to archive and document a cultural moment before it slips away. When possible I have chosen to preserve images, e-mails and posts in their entirety.

TV as the Final Frontier: the Importance of Alternative Production Space

A premise of this research is that it is particularly important to document fan interactions with authors and executives of television shows, because challenges to the power structures of production and consumption – which have occurred in other entertainment industries – have not, for the most part, happened in television yet. For example the book industry has diversified with smaller presses and online publishing pushing production models, especially with regard to web-comics.²³ The same is true for the newspaper industry, with a rise and demand for online content. A proliferation of news blogs also creates more spaces in which different voices can speak.²⁴ The motion

²³ Wikipedia.org is challenging the need for encyclopedias in book form.

²⁴ This is not without caveats; first that there have been traditional smaller newspapers and also this is not meant to imply that the blog space is not still populated with authoritative journalistic voices.

picture industry has varying independent film circuits, and distributors.²⁵ Importantly though for the movie industry, smaller lower quality film mediums have been present for longer periods of time.²⁶ But technological changes to film production – a switch from film to digital medium and a proliferation of personal digital editing software – have continued to bring distribution costs down and these files can proliferate in new ways. The music industry has been going through an over-haul with the rise of digital media files too, first in sheer proliferation over peer-to-peer file sharing sites and then in digital music production. In fact, the music industry has suffered large monetary losses as a result of these changes. Many artists and groups are actively choosing not to sign with large record labels and/or are choosing to market their own music through a combination of extensive touring and internet promotion.

For all of these other cultural products then, there is some sort of alternative space for production. There are options for operating outside the institutions of power, though with varying degrees of autonomy and success. Importantly the same is not true for the television industry. Although smaller cable channels with more specified content such as *Lifetime* have become available, and there are even smaller premium cable channels like HBO, which have been very successful, all of these still operate within the basic structure of power in television. For example, the larger networks own most of the basic cable channels. HBO, because of its very nature, has a different sort of autonomy. Its money is garnered from subscriptions and not advertising dollars; but it is still operating within the

²⁵ The extent to which the independent movie industry is becoming more mainstream is also debatable, with the rise of high grossing independent movies, such as *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, or garnering Oscar nominations, like this year's *Little Miss Sunshine*.

²⁶ For example, Steven Spielberg, as well as other movie directors, made lower quality short 8mm movies throughout his childhood and early adolescence.

logic of the other network television producers. With the rise of spaces like YouTube,²⁷ however, where even the name implies new possibilities, it is likely that we are beginning to see the emergence of a new alternative space for television production and consumption.²⁸

Moreover the creators of new television shows now play an important role in thinking about fan campaigns because they are allowed to operate in official and unofficial spaces that are defined by quite different power relations. Fan campaigns are slowly altering relationships between fans and authors, especially as more fans are coming of age and creating their own media content in the form of fan fiction, fan videos, and fan art. These fans are also some of the most likely candidates to move into mainstream media production channels – the imagined heir of Joss Whedon, one might imagine, has participated in these fan spaces, and is currently learning a new method of authorship and interaction.

There are two realms that I consider – fans and network executives. I am not arguing that fans are completely over throwing the means of cultural production; in fact in some cases they show a strong desire to stick with current models. Rather, this research is interested in documenting and understanding the ways in which these relationships are being negotiated in fan spaces – with a careful eye toward the future and the results such negotiations could bring in very near term.

²⁷ YouTube.com is a site where users can freely post any video content that can then be viewed across the web.

²⁸ It is highly important that this phenomenon is incredibly recent. I have watched the rise of YouTube in the past year and it has been explosive.

Chapter Two: Still Flying, the Fan Campaigns for *Firefly*

The first case I examine is the television show *Firefly* (2002) and the connected movie *Serenity* (2005). Before documenting the organized fan efforts surrounding the show, I begin with a brief introduction to the universe of *Firefly*. I then describe three overlapping timelines; the details of production; comments from Joss Whedon, the creator and executive producer of *Firefly*; and fan efforts. Together these overlapping timelines describe the events as they unfolded, and reveal the ways in which fan efforts came to be narrated as consequential for the longevity of the show as well as the movie, *Serenity*, which followed the show's cancellation. In this connection, I discuss the way language from the show was appropriated by fans, and then used to motivate fan efforts on behalf of the show. I also describe the ways that Fox was constructed as a 'bad father' for the show and distinguished from other important people who cared about the show, including actors, creators and fans. In the end, I do not argue that fan actions had a direct impact on the creative or economic decisions that determined if *Firefly* would continue to appear on television or if the movie, *Serenity*, would be made. Rather, I trace the confluence of fan actions and the ways in which creative and economic processes that shaped the show were attributed to fan efforts and fan involvement. This confluence is the origin of a new narrative in the space of cultural production – the Fan Importance Narrative.

Welcome to the 'Verse

Firefly is a television series set in 2517 AD that follows the adventures of the renegade crew of *Serenity*, a *Firefly*-class spaceship. An ensemble cast portrays the nine

characters that live on *Serenity*. Most of the crew fought on the losing side of a civil war, eking out a living on the edge of space, on the run from the powerful government, The Alliance. The produced content of the show consists of a two-hour pilot and thirteen one-hour episodes. The show originally aired in the United States in 2002 on the Fox Network. Fox announced cancellation of the show in December of 2002. Therefore, it did not air three of the fourteen episodes.

Serenity is the movie written and directed by Joss Whedon after the cancellation of *Firefly*. It involves the same characters and is set in the same universe. Two figures from the show's creative team are important in the fan campaign narrative of *Firefly/Serenity*. The first is Joss Whedon, the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* and *Firefly/Serenity*. The second is Tim Minear, one of the Executive Producers of *Firefly*. These two are important recognizable names from the show's creative team who appear in various online fan spaces and interact with fans. They are able to construct the Fan Importance Narrative.

I will be documenting the fan campaigns as they occurred in three important internet spaces. The first is ***Firefly: Immediate Assistance*** (<http://www.firefly-support.com/>). This is a website created to serve as a "rallying point for *Firefly* fans." The main thrust of the fan campaign was organized on this site and posted about at other message boards. The second is the **Buffistas Message Board** (<http://www.buffistas.org/>). This is "a community dedicated to discussions of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Angel* and *Firefly* with humor, intelligence and obsessiveness." Finally there is **Whedonesque** (<http://www.whedonesque.org>), which is "a community weblog discussing the work of TV maker Joss Whedon." The primary function of this weblog is to chronicle news of

Whedon's productions. Unlike a message board, the main posts contain links to other websites that are of interest and only on-topic discussion is encouraged in the comments.

As a final note of introduction, I would like to emphasize that the events I document are not completely linear and causal. As an initial attempt to describe the phenomenon of the fan campaign, my primary goal is a 'thick description' of actors, events and relationships involved in the fan campaign for *Firefly/Serenity*. For this reason I have subdivided events into different timelines, which we can think of as occurring simultaneously across different locations. The production timeline is the most straightforward account of the events involved in deciding to produce the show and movie, and contains little reference to fan efforts or remarks made by the cast and crew during production. The second timeline tracks remarks made by the show's creators, Whedon and Minear, as they contribute and create a narrative of fan importance. Finally, the last timeline is of documented fan efforts. An analysis of these timelines together yields a picture of fan campaigns as an important moment of attribution constructed by creative authors and mainstream media.

Production

Firefly premiered on Fox on Friday, September 20, 2002 at 8pm. As reported by Nielsen Media Ratings on September 21, 2002, the ratings were low.²⁹ With the announcement of this news on Whedonesque one user commented: "Is it too early to start the "Save Firefly" campaign? Maybe email UPN and WB to pick it up after Fox dumps it

²⁹ <http://whedonesque.com/comments/264>

suddenly in 2 or 3 weeks?”³⁰ From the beginning, it seems there was a sense that *Firefly* needed saving.

Whedon had intended for the episode “Serenity” to serve as a two-hour introduction to the characters and universe of the show. According to Whedon on later audio commentary, executives at Fox thought the episode “Serenity” unsuitable to open the series, and asked Whedon and Minear to create another opening episode, “Train Job.”³¹ Because of this, much of the dialog in “Train Job” alludes to information already provided in the pilot episode. In addition Fox promoted the show as an action-comedy, it was intended by Whedon to be a more serious character study. This theme of Fox ‘mistreating’ the show was often returned to by fans and popular media sources as the necessary reason for fan involvement.³²

Between September and December of 2002, the ratings for *Firefly* remained comparatively low (Table One).³³ In addition, Fox interrupted and preempted scheduled airings of *Firefly* for baseball games, and left it off the schedule for the important November Sweeps period.³⁴ On December 13, 2002, Fox announced the cancellation of *Firefly*.³⁵

After the cancellation of *Firefly*, events become murky. Most of the information comes from Whedon making comments on message boards and in interviews about the

³⁰ Ibid. Also, this is in fact the outline that the fan campaign took.

³¹ Whedon, Joss. *Firefly: the complete series: “Train Job” commentary*, track 1

³² This sentiment can be seen in several different places, for example; “It annoyed me that FOX decided to air episode three, *The Train Job*, before the filmed two-hour pilot episode, ‘Serenity’. (Imagine if the WB had aired *Witch* before *Welcome To The Hellmouth/The Harvest*). FOX was doing its very best to ruin whatever chance *Firefly* had for success” (<http://www.slayage.com/articles/030123-firefly.html>).

³³ <http://home.insightbb.com/~wahoskem/firefly1.html> See also, <http://whedonesque.com/comments/295>

³⁴ “Sweeps are designated months during the year when Nielsen Media Research measures all local markets (November, February, May and July). These months are known as “sweep” months, and the data are used by local stations and cable systems to set local advertising rates and to make program decisions.” From Nielsenmedia.com

³⁵ <http://whedonesque.com/comments/596>. After the show’s cancellation, Fox admitted poor scheduling might have influenced the shows low ratings.

status of the show, but those are spotty and I will cover them more in the next section. On December 17, 2002, there were reports of Whedon's intention to shop the show to other networks.³⁶ He mentioned the possibility that another network would agree to pick up the show, giving them production money and airtime.³⁷ On January 10, 2003, Tim Minear reported that UPN had passed on *Firefly*, and reports of other networks passing it by came soon after.³⁸

In July 2003 Fox announced they would be releasing all fourteen produced episodes of *Firefly* on DVD, including three episodes that never aired.³⁹ The DVD set would also include audio commentary on seven episodes, and some outtakes. The DVD's were released December 9, 2003 and were one of the top movers at Amazon.com, selling over 500,000 copies by September 2005.⁴⁰ As of February 2007, *Firefly* was ranked 39 in overall DVD best sellers on Amazon.com.⁴¹ In comparison *Wonderfalls*, a Fox show that met a similar fate as *Firefly* (cancelled after only a few episodes, fan efforts mounted to bring the show back and finally released on DVD) is currently ranked at 1,113 in overall

³⁶ http://tv.zap2it.com/tveditorial/tve_main/1,1002,271|79373|1|,00.html and <http://whedonesque.com/comments/572>

³⁷ It is worth noting that something similar had happened with Whedon's first show, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. It aired for five seasons on the WB network, and when rumors of cancellation circled, UPN stepped in and aired the show for its final two seasons. This set a precedent and fans hoped for a similar outcome with *Firefly*.

³⁸ <http://whedonesque.com/comments/647>. The original post at timminear.net has since been removed, although the subject title still stands at Whedonesque. For reasons detailed in Footnote 37, UPN was thought to be the last hope for *Firefly's* chance at TV pickup.

³⁹ <http://www.thefutoncritic.com/news.aspx?id=6059>

⁴⁰ <http://fireflyfans.net/amazon.asp>.

⁴¹ <http://whedonesque.com/comments/1766>. On July 22, 2003 *Firefly* was made available for pre-order on Amazon.com and was the second top DVD best seller for the day.

DVD best sellers on Amazon, after being released in 2004.⁴² *Firefly* has managed to sell more copies over a longer period of time.⁴³

In March 2004, it was announced that *Firefly* would be adapted by Whedon as a feature film.⁴⁴ The original cast signed on to be part of the film, and Whedon was making his feature film-directing debut. The original release date for *Serenity* was in late May, but Universal pushed the release date back to September. Its final North American release date was September 30, 2005, and the North American DVD release date was December 20, 2005.

The basic production timeline spans from the premiere of *Firefly* in September 2002 to the release of the *Serenity* DVD in December 2005. But the production timeline is only one part of the story of *Firefly*.

This is Joss, Space is Black and Scary: the Whedon Timeline

I will now document comments made by Whedon and Minear, individuals close to creative production. I argue that these comments had a strong influence over fan actions and these comments helped set up a heroic narrative of fan importance in which the fans could participate. I first document and describe what was said and where it was said. Because Whedon's status is privileged within online spaces tracking his comments is relatively easy.⁴⁵ However, I also will not be documenting everything Whedon said in

⁴² http://www.amazon.com/Wonderfalls-Complete-Peter-OFallon/dp/B0006GAO18/sr=1-3/qid=1170647916/ref=pd_bbs_3/104-6456487-0301506?ie=UTF8&s=dvd

⁴³ *Freaks and Geeks*, another similar example, is currently ranked at 1,387 on Amazon in overall DVD sales after being released in 2004.

⁴⁴ <http://www.browncoats.com/index.php?ContentID=42e95a1f27c00>

⁴⁵ By this I mean to imply it is unlikely that Whedon would have posted in message board somewhere without it being picked up and reposted on other message boards.

print and online between September 2002 and September 2005, the comments in this section pertain specifically to *Firefly/Serenity*.

Whedon first posts on the *Firefly* Original Board⁴⁶ on December 6, 2002. His user name is Joss_Whedon and the post is titled, “This is Joss. Space is black and scary.”⁴⁷

I'll tell you the truth. Rough month. We keep comparing ourselves and our situation to *Out of Gas*.⁴⁸ At once point I told an executive that I thought my life had become that ep, and that I was no longer Mal, I was now the captain of the crappy ship that shot him. I will do ANYTHING to ANYONE to keep this bird in the air...
And you guys. We had this site up every day before we ever aired an ep. Just saeeing [sic] the work and anticipation that went into building it inspired us from the first days of fighting for our lives. You don't even know. So thanks.⁴⁹

This is pretty late in the game for Whedon to be appearing, as the previous timeline indicates, *Firefly* had been on the air several months. Whedon posts six days later, December 12, 2002, on Buffistas. At this point he is responding primarily to an ad fans had run in Variety, an event I will detail more closely later:

(starts to cry...) I promised myself I wouldn't cry... That variety ad... I have the coolest fans ever. So classy, so passionate (the ad AND the fans), I must be doing something right.⁵⁰

This demonstrates the performative nature of online fandom; in this case the phrase “starts to cry” is performative.⁵¹ Also this was posted the day before the announcement on the cancellation *Firefly*. Although it can be nothing more than conjecture on my part, I would say that Whedon knew about the cancellation before it was officially announced,

⁴⁶ It is called the Original Board because it was the main board when *Firefly* was airing on Fox. It is then sometimes referred to as the Fox Board, or the Prospero Board (which refers to the site that provides the board software.)

⁴⁷ Importantly Joss's identity was never called in to question, in all instances he uses the user name and his first post to identify himself, and the fans accept it. This runs contrary to a theme Henry Jenkins discusses in Convergence Culture (2006).

⁴⁸ This is a reference to the episode *Out of Gas*, the eighth episode of *Firefly*. In this episode Serenity suffers a catastrophe that leaves her crew with only hours of oxygen. Meanwhile for the purposes of storytelling they are alone in space, which is the situation Whedon's post and title was referring to.

⁴⁹ <http://forums.prospero.com/foxfirefly/messages/?msg=2732.1>

⁵⁰ Buffistas.org

⁵¹ Hills, Matt. Fan Cultures. New York: Routledge, 2002.

so that in this first post to Buffistas, he knew an announcement would be coming. On December 13, 2002 the day cancellation was officially announced, Whedon posted again on Buffistas:

...don't think for a second that I have given up on this show. I think it has been mistreated shamefully, but the Fox network has indicated that they would not stand in the way (which they can) of my finding a new home for the show. That's no easy prospect. But I will do everything in my power, as always, to keep this bird in the air.⁵²

The next comment came from Tim Minear in an interview on December 14, 2002. He is speaking in reference to Whedon's decision to attempt to sell the show to another network:

From what I gathered from the fan response – and as you know, I'm pretty well connected to the Internet response – the love for the show among what we would consider our core audience was large and was getting larger... We haven't given up... That's going to be a thing that's going to be pursued, and I believe, with vigor. This only just happened. Joss has his relationships, and I'm sure he'll look to those relationships. I don't think he's even remotely close to throwing in the towel or giving up the ghost on this.⁵³

Minear's statement that the core audience was getting larger contradicts the Nielsen Ratings, which show national ratings leveling off after the first three episodes (Table One). What seems more likely is that while *Firefly* was not attracting larger numbers of fans, it had started attracting more vocal fans.⁵⁴ However Minear's vocalized perception of the fans gathered in internet spaces serves to reinforce the importance of actions they would or might take after the show's cancellation.

Over the next few months there was silence, as the previous timeline indicated UPN has passed on *Firefly* in January 2003. A lack of posts from Minear or Whedon is

⁵² Buffistas.org

⁵³ http://tv.zap2it.com/tveditorial/tve_main/1,1002,274|79341|1|,00.html

⁵⁴ Reeves, J., M. Rodgers, and M. Epstein. "Rewriting Popularity: The Cult Files." *'Deny all Knowledge': Reading the X-Files*. Ed. D. Lavery, A. Hague, and M. Cartwright. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996. 22-35.

not surprising. On April 7, 2003, before news of even the *Firefly* DVD release had been announced, Adam Baldwin one of the principal actors in *Firefly* posted a message from Whedon on the Original Board; “Joss says that he hasn't given up! Tell them, we will fly again!”⁵⁵ For the sake of the Fan Importance Narrative it is important that the hope of *Firefly* returning not die.

On December 8, 2003, just before the release of the *Firefly* DVD's, Whedon was interviewed by *Sci-Fi Weekly*. This was almost a year after the show had been cancelled, and the theme of the interview was Whedon had not given up hope. He refers to the ‘story or universe of *Firefly*’ and emphasizes that he “is not done with these characters.” In other words, Whedon is not interested in simply returning to prime time television, in other interviews he mentioned other forms including comic books or a movie as other ways of continuing telling stories with these characters, thereby setting his intentions up as opposite to the executives at Fox who had cancelled the show due to concerns about money. Moreover, he praises the fans:

Interviewer: Even though it didn't seem to show up in the ratings, people did watch and love this show. A lot of people fought hard to keep it alive.

Whedon: Yes, they really did. The fans, they came through in a huge way. They've always been so supportive. And when I'm like, 'It ain't nothin'. It's all over. It means nothing.' And then I see what they have to say about it and it's very nice. And I go, 'That's right. I'm one of them. A fan.' [Laughs]⁵⁶

Tim Minear posted at Buffistas on January 20, 2003, this was soon after the *Firefly* DVD release and before the movie announcement: “And, without getting into detail, Joss fought for the show. That's who fought for the show. Joss. And, of course, ya'll.”⁵⁷ In one

⁵⁵ <http://forums.prospero.com/foxfirefly/messages?msg=4235.113368>. Posted by Adam Baldwin, one of the *Firefly* cast members, as a message from Joss, in reference to the possible movie.

⁵⁶ <http://www.scifi.com/sfw/interviews/sfw10478.html>

⁵⁷ <http://www.buffistas.org/archives/index.php#thread13>

post, Minear both upholds the narrative by reaffirming those that are most important to it – Whedon and the fans.

On May 9, 2005, Whedon posted on the Official Serenity Message Board, he was announcing more early screenings of *Serenity*.

It's Joss, your roving reporter, with another ZOWIE! exclusive(!) hot off the presses! Browncoats Bring Boffo B.O.!... It's another vote of confidence from the studio and another chance for us to say 'thanks' to you guys for keeping this all rolling.⁵⁸

In this post Whedon is once again reaffirming that fan actions have made *Firefly/Serenity* so successful and is also using the language from the show in a powerful fashion, an aspect I will detail later.

The next and final comment from Whedon came at an early screening of *Serenity* on May 26, 2005: “Failed TV shows don't get made into major motion pictures--unless the creator, the cast, and the fans believe beyond reason . . . It is, in an unprecedented sense, your movie.”⁵⁹ This is the lynchpin of the whole narrative, throughout the production Whedon praised the fans, but here he finally holds them up as the penultimate reason this movie exists.

I have detailed Whedon’s actions so carefully because they create the space in which the fan campaigns are then able to occur. Because of his position Whedon is able to create and control the narrative more effectively than individual fans. Also, Whedon doesn’t have his own blog or site, even though such a move would be well received. He chooses instead to move and communicate in the fan spaces, as though he was just

⁵⁸ Attributed to the Official Serenity Board, but the post was also archived at Whedonesque.
<http://whedonesque.com/comments/6678>

⁵⁹ Russel, M.E. *The Browncoats Rise Again*:
<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/005/757fhfxg.asp>

another fan.⁶⁰ In the end he allows the fans to claim both the show and the movie as a result of their actions.

Fan Campaign Efforts

I will now document the big moments in the actions of the fan campaigns, these actions were often picked up and repeated in various print media sources, and are moments owned by the fans on sites such as Immediate Assistance. Importantly I am not sure it would be possible to document every action taken by fans in the name of *Firefly* nor do I believe it would be useful. This timeline does not attempt to be exhaustive, but is representative of the phenomenon I am documenting.

As previously mentioned, there was slight talk of the possibility for fan effort from the show's first airing.⁶¹ There were also mentions of "Save Firefly" petitions being circulated through e-mail and message boards. Importantly some fans decided to move beyond petitions, a form that had been established by other fan campaigns. According to Kiba, the Webmaster of *Firefly: Immediate Assistance*, she began the website and the fan campaign in this way:

After receiving a link to a 'Keep *Firefly* On the Air' petition to her email inbox, Kiba decided there was a need for a rallying point for *Firefly* fans. She began announcing her intent to establish a site to serve as this rallying point at various message boards and immediately received an offer of advice and assistance from Allyson. Shortly thereafter, Kristen offered to organize the advertising portion of the fan campaign. Thus, on October 25, 2002, the night when the *Firefly* episode *Out of Gas* first aired, the fans responded to Malcolm

⁶⁰ One possible reason might be that Whedon's shows 'came of age,' as widespread Internet usage and a boom in fandom activities were occurring. Recently a proliferation of television shows actors/and creators regularly keep blogs (the *Grey's Anatomy* writer's blog or Jenna Fischer's many "Posted from the Desk of Pam Beesley" blogs, for example), such was not the case with Whedon's shows.

⁶¹ See Footnote 23.

Reynolds' request for help: This is Serenity. We require Immediate Assistance.⁶²

Also according to the Immediate Assistance website, while they started gathering funds for a larger project, between October 25, 2002 and December 13, 2002 fans sent thousands of postcards to Fox and *Firefly*'s sponsors thanking them for providing such high quality programming.⁶³ Importantly the letter writing campaign is an old tool used in grassroots movements, and fan letter writing campaigns trace back to the seventies with campaigns for *Cagney and Lacey*.⁶⁴

Firefly as case study is important because it captures a moment in which the fans moved beyond the letter writing/petition model. In an article on Whedon.info a fan with the user name Allyson details her involvement with the fan campaigns:

I called Joss Whedon's production company, Mutant Enemy, and informed them that we were going to try and save *Firefly*.

Kristen and I have a history of running fan-funded ads in support of the television shows we love. Stand-up for Buffy, Give Buffy an Emmy, Congratulations on 100 episodes of Buffy. It's a hobby. It keeps us off the streets. Our shared history as Mutant Enemy's head cheerleaders meant that the people at Whedon's production company would take our calls and give us anything we needed, no questions asked.

Our plan was to do FOX's job and actually market the show. We researched who had reviewed *Firefly* and which reviewers panned it. We researched which companies were advertising on the series and kept a running log of them. We started designing a full page ad for *Firefly* to run in Daily Variety.⁶⁵

⁶² <http://firefly-support.com/> (About Us). Importantly this blurb is attributed to Kiba, and in the blurb she then refers to herself in the third person, as though she was operating outside of the events.

⁶³ <http://firefly-support.com/>

⁶⁴ Sabal, Robert. "Television Executives Speak about Fan Letters to the Networks." *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. Ed. Lisa Lewis. New York: Routledge, 1992.

⁶⁵ http://www.whedon.info/article.php3?id_article=11993

Allyson goes on to mention the importance of being seen in the Hollywood community of not being connected to *Mutant Enemy*, even though they had been in contact.⁶⁶ Allyson and Kiba quickly establish an understanding of the television industry and a desire to work within existing structures: “It was hugely important for the advertisers and network to know that there was a growing, devoted fanbase willing to spend an obscene amount of cash to keep the show on the air.”⁶⁷ In fact, Allyson attributes some of the funding of the Variety ad to auctions. *Mutant Enemy* sent signed scripts and merchandise that was auctioned by Allyson and Kiba to fans on Ebay; “three scripts and a t-shirt brought in about twelve hundred bucks.”⁶⁸ It was important to prevent the campaigns from looking directly funded by the production company, even though they contributed indirectly.

Within a few months the fans were able to collect \$3000 dollars to run a full-page ad in Variety.⁶⁹ Understanding the importance of Variety is crucial to understanding the magnitude of this action. Variety is a weekly magazine for the entertainment industry. A prominent component of Variety are the full page ads, usually placed by people within the industry to others within the industry.⁷⁰ Variety’s weekly circulation hovers around 30,800.⁷¹ The placement in Variety indicates awareness by the fans of how the entertainment industry works; this was a direct appeal to Hollywood decision makers.

The *Firefly* ad ran in the December 9, 2002 issue of Variety, and the featured tagline was “You keep flying, we’ll keep watching.” (Appendix Two) According to Allyson, the ad

⁶⁶ Allyson also describes a previous ad she and Kiba ran in response to a particular episode of *Buffy*, feathers were ruffled because some network executives thought Whedon had encouraged or funded the ad directly. See http://www.whedon.info/article.php?id_article=11993

⁶⁷ http://www.whedon.info/article.php?id_article=11993

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ By comparison, a full page in the New York Times can easily run for \$100,000 depending on the day and the ad placement.

⁷⁰ The most prominent example of this phenomenon are the ‘For Your Consideration’ ads which fill the magazine during the awards season.

⁷¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Variety_\(magazine\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Variety_(magazine)) and www.accessabc.com

was well received by those involved with the show and other ‘media executives’; “The ad was passed around to the cast and crew who up until then were under the impression that no one was watching their work. Cranky Hollywood industry folk were abuzz about the classiness of this particular fan effort.”⁷² News of the show’s cancellation came days later.

Minear and Whedon both weighed in on Buffistas on December 13, 2003. Again according to her Whedon.info post Allyson and Kiba reacted in this manner:

That morning, I took up a small collection to send flowers over to the set for the crew who had just found themselves pinkslipped two weeks before Christmas. We were completely deflated for about 30 seconds. But when the Rapture comes, you want Kristen and me on your side. The next day we made calls to find out if *Mutant Enemy* was going to shop the show to another network, and as it turned out, they were taking their pitch to UPN. So we pulled a U-Turn and crashed the campaign through the network’s front door. Kristen posted the new directions before our fandom army had a chance to go AWOL.

This is what Kiba posted at Buffistas:

Attention, K-Mart Shoppers...I mean, Buffistas...

Okay, we have a direction to point you in. We like to call this direction, UPN.

What we need are postcards by the truckload going to Les Moonves and Dawn Tarnofsky-Ostroff. You can send any kind of postcards you’d like to but we thought it would be a nice touch if the cards had a certain uniformity.

There is now a PDF up at [the Firefly Support site] It’s an 8.5 x 11 sheet of postcards that feature the Variety Ad. You can print the document onto cardstock, cut them into fours and, voila, four handy postcards. All postcards should be mailed to:

Les Moonves, CBS 7800 Beverly Blvd. 3rd floor Los Angeles, CA 90036

Dawn Tarnofsky-Ostroff President, Entertainment (CEO) United Paramount Network 11800 Wilshire Boulevard Los Angeles, CA 90025

On the back, let them know how much you enjoyed the show while it was on FOX, and how eager you are for it to find a home with UPN. Keep things upbeat and positive, so they’ll know what classy fans Joss and his crew will be bringing to the network! Some ideas for things to

⁷² http://www.whedon.info/article.php3?id_article=11993

mention: your favorite episode, why the show moves you, why you think the show has potential, etc.

Our two catchwords now are: VOLUME and SPEED.

We need a lot of postcards on their desks really damn fast. Thanks guys!⁷³

Meanwhile there was another event that affected not just the fan campaigns of *Firefly* but fan campaigns overall. When cancellation of another Sci-Fi show *Roswell* was rumored, fans sent thousands of bottles of Tabasco sauce to the network.⁷⁴ This action garnered some mainstream media coverage, which elated fans giving them a sense that they alone had saved the show. For some time, *Firefly* fans wanted to eagerly send some sort of object to network executives. One of the leaders of the original Variety ad reacted on one message board:

Do not send gloves, apples, underwear, flowers, fingerpaintings, Tabasco, pixie sticks, chocolates, or any object, of any kind, to anyone.

Send postcards. That's all. You want to do more? Send a postcard to your affiliate station. More than that? Write a letter to the editor of your favorite magazine or newspaper.

But that's it.

The fans are not in a position to force, intimidate, or convince anyone to pick up this show.

Joss/Mutant Enemy is in that position. We are supporting that position. That is all.

Every object that you send will be perceived as threatening, and make a bad impression. It will hinder, not help.

UPN and FOX will have no friggin' clue what blue gloves mean. They won't. They won't see the symbolism, and even so, what IS the symbolism? Think about who wears the blue gloves, and whether those characters are hostile.

Send postcards, write to affiliates and media outlets, and for the love of all that is good and holy, do not do anything that makes us look like asswipes.

⁷³Buffistas.org

⁷⁴<http://www.scifi.com/scifiwire/art-fandom.html?2004-10/01/09.00.fandom>. Tabasco sauce was a popular condiment of the show's alien characters.

I know intentions are good. I understand and am happy that people want to do more. You're doing enough. We've shown the network that there is heavy interest in the show. Now Joss/ME has to show the network that it would be profitable for them.

Either he will succeed or fail. But NO ONE is going to do something that may cause a friggin' evacuation of UPN's offices.

We're not PICKETING. We're not PROTESTING.

Those things make us look like we've got several screws loose.

So far, we're bright and funny and loyal. Let's keep it that way.⁷⁵

Clearly there were a few fissures in the fan campaign. Allyson also raises – perhaps in a more forceful manner – some of the issues this research illuminates. What should the role of fans be in the ‘convincing’ of a network to continue airing a television show? Allyson constructs Whedon as the only person in the narrative with power to fight, the only one able to ‘succeed or fail.’ Should the fans be picketing and protesting, and what’s wrong with being seen as picketing and protesting, as opposed to being seen as ‘bright and funny and loyal’? This might have something to do with the class of fans – Allyson has a working theory of the social relationships – in that being seen as ‘crazy’ or power hungry would also make the fans appear less logical.

In the period that *Serenity* was being filmed, there was a lot of speculation by fans about the future of the show after the movie’s release. Some factions of fans were hoping *Firefly* would be picked up by a television network, while others hoped future movies would be optioned by Universal.⁷⁶ From the beginning, fans understood that making sure the film was economically successful was the best way to make either of these options

⁷⁵ http://www.whedon.info/article.php3?id_article=11993

⁷⁶ In the film industry, an option is a contractual agreement between a movie studio, a production company, or a producer and a writer, in which the producer obtains the right to buy a screenplay from the writer, before a certain date. Since optioning a screenplay is far cheaper than buying it, options are very popular in Hollywood for speculative projects.

possible. They demonstrated this understanding through buying movie tickets. In April 2005, it was announced that Universal would pre-screen *Serenity* on May 5, 2005. This screening quickly sold out, and more screenings were planned.

Following the sell-out success of the May 5th pre-screenings, creator Joss Whedon recently announced that more advance previews of his movie *Serenity* would appear at twenty theaters in twenty cities, this time on May 26th. By the next morning, well before the official list of cities was posted, fans on the *Serenity* movie site and elsewhere had diligently located half the listings through trial and error and several of the locations were already sold out.⁷⁷

Moreover when the movie was released, there were reports of one fan buying a hundred tickets and standing outside the theatre; he then gave the tickets away for free, hoping to encourage people to see the movie.⁷⁸ Many fans also spoke of seeing the film more than once, as though they were duty bound to do so.

These three timelines combine to document the *Firefly/Serenity* fan campaigns. I will now move from a descriptive mode to an analytical mode and use these three timelines to consider what these fan campaigns might signify. The perception that this movie belongs to the fans is carefully constructed in two different but related ways, Whedon's comments and fan language.

Language of the 'Verse: "Your 'Verse Your Words."⁷⁹

The first point of consideration is the term 'Browncoats', it comes from the show and it is a slang term which refers to the simple brown trench coats members of the Independent Faction wore in the war against the Alliance. The phrase was picked up by

⁷⁷ <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/news/comments/?entryid=194977>

⁷⁸ http://www.whedon.info/article.php3?id_article=11852

⁷⁹ <http://www.bigdamncommentaries.com/>

fans as a way of referring to themselves,⁸⁰ and later picked up by Whedon as well.⁸¹ Browncoats then serves to frame the narrative of *Firefly*; it both pulls the fans into the narrative of the show and excludes undedicated fans. This first quote demonstrates the way in which the term pulls the fans into the narrative. “And not unlike Mal and Zoe, we have refused to lay down in defeat and accept the choices that the ‘Alliance’ has left us. We have made our own path, and continue to fight for what we want, for what we feel was taken from us: *Firefly*.”⁸² Because of the term’s origins, it is easily appropriated as a heroic term. Another fan elaborates on the differences between ‘regular’ fans and Browncoats:

In my own mind I definitely distinguish between ‘regular’ fans of the show and Browncoats. A fan is someone who watches the show and likes it--simple enough. But a Browncoat (in my mind, anyway) is much more of a fan activist, someone who has sent postcards and e-mail or has written a review or donated money for something *Firefly*-related, etc., etc., etc. A Browncoat has taken the next step: Instead of just saying, ‘What a great show--oh well, too bad it was cancelled,’ the Browncoat says, ‘F#ck that! What can I do to keep *Firefly* going!?!’ A Browncoat is not satisfied with the way things are and takes action to make things the way s/he wants them to be. A fan can be passive; a Browncoat never is.⁸³

This term takes on even more weight when Whedon uses it as he did at one of the *Serenity* screenings and on the *Serenity* DVD:

It was ignored and abandoned, and the story should end there--but it doesn’t. Because the people who made the show and the people who saw the show--which is, roughly, the same number of people--fell in love with it a little bit. Too much to let it go. . . . In Hollywood, people like that are called unrealistic, quixotic, obsessive. In my world, they’re called Browncoats.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ <http://www.fireflyfans.net/thread.asp?b=2&t=779>

⁸¹ <http://forums.prospero.com/n/mb/message.asp?webtag=foxfirefly&msg=1217.1&search=y>

⁸² Are You A Browncoat? <http://www.browncoats.com/index.php?ContentID=42e7e88e69ab5>. (Mal is the captain of *Serenity* and Zoe is second in command.)

⁸³ Are You A Browncoat? <http://www.browncoats.com/index.php?ContentID=42e7e88e69ab5>

⁸⁴ Russell, M.E. The Browncoats Rise Again:

<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/005/757fhfxg.asp>

Another use of language, similar to Browncoats is the phrase ‘Big Damn Fans,’ a moniker taken up by the fans. It is an illusion to the episode *Safe*, when Simon and River have been left behind in a very religious village, and when the villagers find out about River’s powers they decide to burn ‘the witch’ at the stake.

[A blast of wind signals the arrival of Serenity. Jayne cocks a shotgun from the cargo hold while Mal and Zoë approach on foot.]

Mal: Well, look at this! Appears we got here just in the nick of time.
What does that make us?

Zoë: *Big damn* heroes, sir.

Mal: Ain't we just?⁸⁵

Big Damn Fans does not carry the same weight that Browncoats does, but it does manifest in several interesting ways. The movie comes to be referred to as Big Damn Movie (BDM), while fans hoping for another movie often use the phrase Big Damn Trilogy (BDT). But the concoctions are endless. This appropriation of language also helps create a community in which those who know the lingo are more accepted.

The next important use of language plays a big part in the fan-based narrative, and is often invoked by Whedon and fans as a rallying cry or mantra.⁸⁶

Take my love, take my land / Take me where I cannot stand
I don't care, I'm still free / You can't take the sky from me
Take me out to the black / Tell them I ain't comin' back
Burn the land and boil the sea / You can't take the sky from me
There's no place I can be / Since I found Serenity
But you can't take the sky from me.

In a related theme there is the movie tagline, “You Can’t Stop the Signal.” Both the theme song and the movie tagline, construct a powerful other who is attempting to stop *Serenity*. This construction works on two levels; the first is within the narrative arc of the show, the characters are fighting against the larger more powerful government figure, the

⁸⁵ *Firefly, Safe*.

⁸⁶ “You can't take the sky from me ‘became a mantra, repeating over and over in my head reminding me of *Firefly*” (<http://www.slayage.com/articles/030123-firefly.html>).

Alliance. In both instances, this is literally what the ‘you’ is referring to - the Alliance wants to stop the renegade crew of *Serenity* from existing. However, this also works as part of the larger narrative of *Firefly/Serenity*. In this instance Fox stands in as the force attempting to stop the show from continuing. In both cases, the underdogs are deemed heroic and victorious. The close identification of the fans to the show’s characters is one of the reasons fans follow the narrative of the show so closely; they identify as heroes.

They Were Glemphy: The Narrative of Fox

As I alluded to previously, Fox, the television network, is constructed as a bad parent, charged by Whedon and the fans of mistreating the show. In a speech aired before the early screenings of *Serenity*, Whedon said the show was “ignored and abandoned”⁸⁷ which further moves to cast Fox as a neglectful parent, one that didn’t nurture the show properly. To push upon the metaphor further, networks are often referred to as the ‘home’ for television shows. Some of the specific charges against Fox have been mentioned elsewhere in this chapter – *Firefly*’s timeslot, the promotion of the show and scheduling conflicts. Moreover, Fox had developed a reputation among fans of not nurturing cult shows since they had cancelled high quality critical success such as *Wonderfalls*, *Family Guy*, *Arrested Development* and *Dark Angel*.

Whedon also contributes to this perception of Fox as inadequate by blaming them outright, in an interview with *Sci-Fi Weekly*

You know, I understand why they thought they had to do what they had to do. The new word for wrong that we're going to come up with—they were *glemphy*. They were just completely glemphy. It really has to do more with the fact that they just had no use for the show. They didn't

⁸⁷ Russell, M.E. The Browncoats Rise Again:
<http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/005/757fhfxg.asp>

want the show. They didn't get the show. It was just never something that they wanted in their lives. And unfortunately they were unable to either communicate or realize that. And I say unfortunately. I guess fortunately because it lived a short life, but it's one of the happiest experiences I've ever had making something.⁸⁸

In this telling, *Firefly* is a high quality cultural product, and Fox couldn't understand the appeal, because they were more interested in ratings and money.

Fans and the creative authors construct reality TV as the antithesis of *Firefly*. It is the evil alternative to quality character based scripted shows.⁸⁹ Minear contributes to this narrative when posting at Buffistas about *Firefly*'s cancellation: "and Fox says they're going to somehow air all eps. One expects with giant banner ads over them for Meet My Rich Phoney Sex Date or whatever unreality series they've got up their. Er. Sleeves."⁹⁰ This is not a new argument. It is a new form of the art/capitalism debate. *Firefly*'s construction as outside the realm of capitalism leaves it as a pure cultural product. Therefore this leaves it untainted by 'dirty money,' and also aids in providing fans with a reason to be involved – to in particular save *this* show.

The Neighborhood Pub: the Social Element of Fan Campaigns

There is one last piece to add. Through this documentation I have emphasized the ways in which developments were *attributed* to fan campaigns. This is not to belittle the fan actions as inconsequential or to suggest that I think their actions did not affect Hollywood executives during decision-making processes. This is to argue that the evidence does not support a theory of fans taking over the means of television production. In fact most of their actions operate within already established capitalist structures and

⁸⁸ <http://www.scifi.com/sfw/interviews/sfw10478.html>

⁸⁹ See for example, <http://whedonesque.com/comments/1148>

⁹⁰ <http://www.buffistas.org/archives/index.php#thread13>

methods of production. I don't want to deny an important piece of the puzzle, the important role fan campaigns play for fans. One person instrumental in organizing the fan campaigns associated with *Firefly* wrote about that feeling in an article:

I look at TV the way some people look at their neighborhood pub. It's the way I escape the monotony of everyday life, the daily typing of memos and cleaning of the cat's litter box. In the end, *Firefly* gave me some measure of joy in my otherwise painfully dull life. The campaign kept my head busy, kept me focused on something interesting outside of my tiny world. It meant a great deal to some folks I adore: it provided me with some sort of clear goal that wasn't about expense reports or choosing the right 401k stocks. The *Daily Variety* ad we designed is featured on the *Firefly* DVD set, and when we ended the campaign, those closest to us in the fandom sent us huge bouquets of flowers and gift certificates to our favorite spa. So gracious.⁹¹

Fan campaigns are about connections, both to the creators of the show and to other fans. In the introductory literature, I discussed that organizing fan campaigns required parlaying amounts of cultural capital, but the recognition by the rest of the fandom is also an important motivating factor. If fandom is equivalent to the neighborhood pub than it is a social space complete with seasoned regulars and people passing through. This also speaks to way in which certain fans are able to become prominent speakers in space by building fan cultural capital.

Still Flying?

To reiterate, in Whedon's attribution, the fan campaigns was the reason the movie was made. It also seems that awareness of fans through campaigns such as the Variety Ad, mailing of postcards and buying of DVD sets could have demonstrated a fan presence to movie executives. I also detailed some ways in which the universe of *Firefly* was already equipped to produce a heroic narrative that the fans could participate in.

⁹¹ http://www.whedon.info/article.php3?id_article=11993

It is impossible to fully understand the role organized fan efforts played in the movie. It would seem unlikely for the network executives – in deciding to cancel the show and green lighting the movie –to not consider a demonstrated fan presence, i.e. an audience for the movie. I argued that while it not empirically possible to make a claim for direct causation, their actions might have influenced decisions. But moreover, what I have documented empirically is that fans perceived their actions as being partially responsible for the movie, and they were allowed that interpretation by the authors of *Firefly*.

Chapter Three: Veronica Mars, a New Fan a Day Keeps Cancellation at Bay

For my other case I will consider the television show *Veronica Mars*. In the same fashion as my previous case study, I am interested in a thick description of the events surrounding *Veronica Mars*, especially the fan efforts. The structure of the analysis will be similar to that of the previous chapter, as I will pull apart the events into several timelines. Here I will argue that three factions are contributing to a Fan Importance Narrative; the mainstream media critics; the actors/creators; and the fans through their fan campaigns.

I will first begin with a small introduction to the space I am documenting including the show, personalities and fan spaces. *Veronica Mars* is a critically acclaimed American television series, with strong elements of teen drama and mystery/noir themes. The show is set in the fictional town of Neptune, California. The plot centers on a teenage girl, Veronica Mars, as she solves mysteries often with the help of her father, an ex-sheriff/private investigator. The first two seasons of the show aired on the UPN network. In early 2006, it was announced that two previous networks, the WB and the UPN would be merging to create one new network, The CW. *Veronica Mars* is now in its third season on The CW. There are several personalities that are important in the narrative of *Veronica Mars*. The first is the creator and executive producer, Rob Thomas.⁹² The second is Kristin Bell, the actress who plays Veronica. There is also Michael Muhney, the actor who portrays Sheriff Lamb, a recurring character.

⁹² Importantly, *Veronica Mars* is Thomas' first major television show. Unlike Whedon, Thomas was not able to rely on an established fan community to support the show.

There are several spaces I will rely on heavily in this description, and as such will refer to them by name. The first is **Mars Investigations** (<http://www.marsinvestigations.net/>), a *Veronica Mars* fan site that has a section devoted to fan campaign efforts. The other two spaces are both Livejournal communities.⁹³ There are close to a hundred Livejournal communities devoted to various aspects of *Veronica Mars*, however, for the purposes of this documentation I am only interested in two or them. The first is **Cloud Watchers** (http://community.livejournal.com/cloud_watchers); “Fans of *Veronica Mars* who want network executives and advertisers to see that they are committed to the show, not just as viewers, but as promoters.”⁹⁴ The second community is **Rack of Lamb** (http://community.livejournal.com/rack_of_lamb); “the purpose of this community is to discuss all things related to Michael Muhney and his *Veronica Mars* character Sheriff Don Lamb.” Now with this sense of a common vocabulary of actors and institutions critical to this space, I want to describe the case of *Veronica Mars*.

Veronica Mars

Veronica Mars premiered on the UPN network on September 22, 2004. Although there was some mention of low ratings in the first season, it was doing as well or better than other programs on the network. The second season premiered on UPN on September 28, 2005. In an attempt to attract more viewers to the show, the complete first season was released on DVD on October 11, 2005.⁹⁵ As with the first season, the ratings were

⁹³ As I have detailed previously, Livejournal is a virtual community where users can keep a journal. The other strong component of Livejournal is the communities, in which users with common interests can post and discuss common concerns.

⁹⁴ This community is also mirrored at <http://www.watchveronicamars.net>.

⁹⁵ The current Amazon.com rank for The Complete First Season is #2,072 in DVDs. Importantly Amazon rankings are updated daily and not archived.

continually low, and some attributed this ratings problem to poor scheduling.⁹⁶ In its second season *Veronica Mars* aired Wednesday nights at nine pm (eastern), the same time slot occupied by *Lost* on ABC.⁹⁷ One television critic summed up the second season ratings; “But last year the show performed even worse than it had in its first: It ended Season 2 with an average of 2.3 million viewers.”⁹⁸

On January 25, 2006, the WB and UPN announced that they would be merging to create one new network, The CW.⁹⁹ This jeopardized the position of *Veronica Mars* in a unique way. It was now up against twice the number of shows for a space on the new network. Logically with a move from one to two networks half of the shows airing on either network would have to be cancelled. From the time of the announcement, prospects for *Veronica Mars* looked promising; for example, CBS Corporation CEO Les Moonves was quoted in an interview about the merger, “The [WB's and UPN's] programming is very complementary. The idea of putting *Gilmore Girls* and *Veronica Mars* together is really exciting.”¹⁰⁰ The pairing of *Veronica Mars* with the WB's program *Gilmore Girls* on Tuesday nights was often referred to as a ‘best case scenario,’ by fans and media articles.¹⁰¹ Additionally because no announcement would be made until May 2006, there was plenty of time for fans to worry about the decision.

⁹⁶ For Season Two Ratings see Table Two.

⁹⁷ Although I lack explicit documentation, this was no doubt a complicated decision for UPN. Putting *Veronica Mars* up against *Lost* was not a suicide attempt, UPN's highest rated show, *America's Next Top Model*, aired on Wednesdays at eight pm. It would seem they were attempting to give *Veronica Mars* the strongest lead-in possible, in hopes that *Veronica Mars* would retain the audience. However at this point *Lost* was a ratings behemoth, sucking upwards of twenty million viewers a week.

⁹⁸ <http://www.topix.net/content/trb/3707505366089070302042152265841019201076>

⁹⁹ <http://www.cbcorporation.com/news/prdetails.php?id=173>

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1152689,00.html>

¹⁰¹ Zap2it a television entertainment website, posted a speculative ‘Dream Schedule’ for the new network: “Les Moonves is no dummy, so we're going to take his suggestion and pair *Gilmore Girls* and *Veronica Mars* on this night. We'd be hard-pressed to find a better two-hour block of dramas on network TV” (http://tv.zap2it.com/tveditorial/tve_main/1,1002,271|99710|1|,00.html).

On May 16, 2006, at The CW's first upfront presentation, it was confirmed that *Veronica Mars* would be part of the new fall lineup.¹⁰² Upfront presentations are held in May, at which the networks announce their following fall television schedule. On August 22, 2006, the complete second season of *Veronica Mars* was released on DVD.¹⁰³ On October 3, 2006, the third season premiered on The CW and it is currently still airing. The fan campaign narrative then intersects with this timeline at specific points of particular interest, for example around the WB/UPN merger and at the time of the upfront announcement. I will deal with a more nuanced documentation of these events in the later sections.

Friends in High Places: The Role of the Mainstream Media

These shows are collaboratively created cultural processes. I will go on to highlight the ways in which the actors/creators and fans of *Veronica Mars* have created cultural meaning through online interactions. Before I do, however, I want to look at the interplay of a third space, the important mediating role played by the mainstream critical media in defining the shows as a particular kind of art or media product. From the beginning *Veronica Mars* was presented as a high quality television production. Traditionally at the end of the calendar year entertainment magazines publish Top Ten lists, and at the end of 2004 *Veronica Mars* was on a great many of these lists.¹⁰⁴ The show also appeared as the subject of several comic strips, both in print and online.¹⁰⁵ (See Appendix Three). In addition to the adoration of the mainstream press, *Veronica Mars*

¹⁰² <http://community.tvguide.com/thread.jspa?threadID=700002002>

¹⁰³ The current Amazon.com sales rank for the *Veronica Mars* Complete Second Season DVD set is #892

¹⁰⁴ See http://marsinvestigations.net/media.php?id=22&category=critics_best_lists

¹⁰⁵ See http://marsinvestigations.net/media.php?id=19&category=comic_strips

also attracted three high status outspoken fans, which endows the show with a certain high status cachet.

The first is a familiar name, Joss Whedon. On August 12, 2005 Whedon started a thread on Whedonesque, “Joss Luvs Veronica”:¹⁰⁶

Best. Show. Ever. Seriously, I've never gotten more wrapped up in a show I wasn't making, and maybe even more than those. (...) These guys know what they're doing on a level that intimidates me. It's the Harry Potter of shows.¹⁰⁷

Importantly, from the beginning other media critics had referred to *Veronica Mars* as “the New Buffy,” referring to Whedon’s first big hit *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Whedon does not implicitly address this reference – he doesn’t need to – those reading the site will do so for him. One comment sums up Whedon’s endorsement in this way; “Joss, I think it’s cool that you’re using your power for good.”¹⁰⁸ Other comments either reiterate this sentiment, declaring love for *Veronica Mars* along with Whedon’s, or declaring an intent to act based on Whedon’s recommendation; “See. Now I **have** to get into this show. If Joss likes it then why can't I?”¹⁰⁹ But Whedon moves further than simply recommending the show on a fan site dedicated to his work. In the October 14, 2005 issue of Entertainment Weekly, Whedon wrote the review of Season One DVD set:

Season 1 works as mystery, comedy, and romantic drama, often simultaneously. But what elevates it is that in a TV-scape creepily obsessed with crime-solving, *VM* actually asks why. It knows we need our dose of solution as a panacea against the uncontrollable chaos of life's real mysteries. And it shows, feelingly, that having the answers is never enough.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Importantly by posting in this way, Whedon is also outside of the normal posting rules for the site, which require the information to pertain to cultural products produced by Whedon. Of course, no one on the site minds that Whedon is transgressing the rules of the site.

¹⁰⁷ <http://whedonesque.com/comments/7502>

¹⁰⁸ <http://whedonesque.com/comments/7502#77452>

¹⁰⁹ <http://whedonesque.com/comments/7502#77395>

¹¹⁰ <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1114734,00.html>

But Whedon's involvement recruiting viewers was not over just yet, he also guest starred in a Second Season episode, (*Rat Saw God*, 2.06). Although he was only on camera for two or three minutes, his appearance was wildly hyped and anticipated, which I would imagine was the reason for his appearance.

Kevin Smith, a popular film writer/director¹¹¹, follows much the same trajectory as Whedon.¹¹² He first comments on the show in his personal blog in the summer of 2005; "*Veronica Mars* is, hands-down, the best show on television right now, and proof that TV can be far better than cinema."¹¹³ Then he also appeared as a guest star in the Second Season, (*Cheatty Cheatty Bang Bang*, 2.03). Finally, author Stephen King offers his opinion of the show; both of his comments are from a bi-weekly column he writes for Entertainment Weekly:

Nancy Drew meets Philip Marlowe, and the result is pure nitro.¹¹⁴ ... Why is *Veronica Mars* so good? It bears little resemblance to life as I know it, but I can't take my eyes off the damn thing.¹¹⁵

Importantly all of these high status figures are highly regarded creative writers, across many platforms, media and demographic segments. In combination with the mainstream entertainment critics, *Veronica Mars* is given a high status as a quality cultural product. This interplay is crucial for later understandings of fan campaign narratives, because it is through these claims that fans are able to make authoritative claims about the show.

¹¹¹ Smith is best known as the writer/director of the movies *Clerks*, *Mallrats*, *Chasing Amy* and *Dogma* among others. His movies are often filled with popular culture and comic book references.

¹¹² Thomas responds to both of these endorsements in a mass e-mail, see Appendix Four.

¹¹³ <http://silentbobspeaks.com/?p=160>. Importantly this is also a sentiment that is currently being echoed in various spaces, including mainstream media. This seems to be especially true as the technological changes I detailed in Chapter One begin to occur and television shows become more complicated. Steven Johnson (2005) rightly points out this complexity is tied to the length of television shows, (twenty two episodes at forty minutes) versus the maximum length of a feature film (around two and a half hours to three hours).

¹¹⁴ http://www.ew.com/ew/article/commentary/0,6115,1176379_3

¹¹⁵ http://www.ew.com/ew/article/commentary/0,6115,1148634_7

Actors/Creators and the Fan Importance Narrative

In a similar way as in my *Firefly/Serenity* case, the creator of *Veronica Mars* played a crucial part in the cultivation and nurturing of what I call the ‘Fan Importance Narrative.’ This is a narrative in which fans are widely acclaimed as an important factor in the show’s continued success; fans are commended and admired for their intelligence, passion and fan campaigning practices savvy. However, in the case of *Veronica Mars*, the actors play a larger role. I will begin with the show’s creator and executive producer Rob Thomas, and then discuss the contributions of Kristin Bell and Michael Muhney.

Rob Thomas demonstrates an awareness of fan spaces surrounding the show he produces, but as a voice, fan or producer in fan spaces is infrequent and inconsistent. On January 29, 2005, Rob Thomas made his first post on the forum Television Without Pity, in which he discusses the show’s chances of returning for a second season.

Let me say, first and foremost, thank you for watching, commenting on and caring about the show. I promise you, we value your feedback more than the overnights. (Though I would cut off a digit for a 5 share.)

Here's what I know about our chances for a second season...

UPN, despite our low numbers, treats us like gold. Usually when a show is failing to do the numbers a network wants it to do, the network tries to “fix” a show. UPN isn’t tinkering with *Veronica Mars*. They have told us to “keep doing the show your doing. It’s up to us to bring an audience to the show.” Creatively, the executives at both our studio and our network have been tremendously supportive.

Dawn Ostroff, the network president, gave us an encouraging speech about how *Seinfeld*, *Cheers*, even our OTH competition (see, I’m catching on) were ratings flops until Season 2. At the recent Television Critics Association network meetings, Dawn said that nearly every critic in America let her know that she simply can’t cancel *Veronica Mars*.

That’s the good news. If there’s bad news, it’s that shows are often cancelled by networks even when they love and are proud of a show. At some point, an executive that I don’t even know because he/she is so far up the corporate food chain may simply look at the numbers and

pull the plug. Still, I would bet on us being back before I bet against us.¹¹⁶

From early on Thomas is making an effort to affirm the importance of passionate fans versus impersonal numbers (the overnights).¹¹⁷ This becomes a common theme, since the number of people watching the show is small, the quality and passionate nature of the group of fans is continually praised. Interestingly, Thomas is also reaffirming UPN as a ‘happy home.’ This is a running theme for *Veronica Mars*, which contrasts with to the Fox network, which was constructed in the case of *Firefly* as a bad parent.¹¹⁸ Thomas appears again on Television Without Pity on March 29, 2005 to thank the fans for their support: “I think these final seven episodes (in a row!) are going to be a great ride. Thanks for the ongoing, rabid support. It means so much.”¹¹⁹ Just before the second season premiered, Thomas sent out a mass e-mail. This e-mail came from an e-mail list on his personal website and was consequently reposted in various forums and communities across the net. (See Appendix Four) In the summer before the third season premiere, and after The CW upfront announcement, Thomas was interviewed, and discussed his participation in fan spaces:

Thomas said he reads the message boards in large part to see if fans are understanding the mystery, into the mystery and buying into the red herrings that the writers throw out. He also reads the boards to know if fans are giving a particular episode the “thumbs up or thumbs down, but generally I know that long before I read” what fans are thinking.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3122604&st=0&p=2458589&#entry2458589> OTH most likely refers to One Tree Hill, another show on WB/The CW.

¹¹⁷ ‘Overnights’ is a Nielsen term, it refers to the ratings data gathered and released the next morning.

¹¹⁸ This could be because at the current moment *Veronica Mars* has not been cancelled, while *Firefly* was; and the networks UPN/The CW have now renewed *Veronica Mars* in two different occasions.

¹¹⁹<http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3125164&st=0&p=2711376&#entry2711376>

¹²⁰ http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment_tv/2006/07/when_the_cw_ses.html

On October 23, 2006, during the show's third season, he again emphasizes the quality of the fans while speaking to Entertainment Weekly, "Both shows [*Lost* and *VMars*] attract people who really get involved in television. They're not shows for people who watch very passively."¹²¹ Throughout his comments to various media sources and interactions with fans, Thomas upholds the quality of his fans as paramount to the show's continued success.

Micheal Muhney is an actor who played the character of Sheriff Lamb on *Veronica Mars*. Since Veronica's father was ousted from his position as Sheriff and replaced with the less-competent Lamb, the character's main role is to serve as an adversary to Veronica and her father Keith. Just before the second season premiere Muhney started becoming an active presence in specific fan spaces, especially the Livejournal community dedicated to him and his character, Rack of Lamb. On September 17, 2005, the Livejournal account and username 'thewizrdr' was created.¹²² This was the username Muhney used to post at Rack of Lamb. The community was created on October 1, 2005.¹²³ On October 27, 2005, Muhney's 'thewizrdr' posts at Rack of Lamb for the first time. In his premier post, he thanks the community creator and announces his general presence in the space, effectively 'delurking.'¹²⁴ On November 3, 2005, Muhney posts with his own fan campaign idea.

We'll give the network an offer it CAN'T refuse. If we start a campaign,
if we ask every viewer (roughly 4 million) to send 22 dollars to the

¹²¹ <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1549635,00.html>

¹²² <http://thewizrdr.livejournal.com/profile?mode=full>; this was a reference to a line of Lamb's, in the pilot after Wallace refuses to go against the biker gang and report a crime; "You need to go see the wizard. Ask him for some guts."

¹²³ http://community.livejournal.com/rack_of_lamb/profile?mode=full

¹²⁴ In truth there is no way of knowing if the poster is really Muhney, or someone being paid to post as him. However like other creators and actors, his authenticity is never challenged, as it is clearly not an imposter posing as him. The conception of the role played by lurkers and consequently 'delurking' is explored by Ridings and Gefen. "Virtual Community Attraction: Why People Hang Out Online." Journal of Computer Mediated Communication 10.1 <http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue1/ridings_gefen.html>.

network (the 22 dollars would be for a 22 episode season 3) and the turnout is only about 25% of the viewing audience...the network will be sitting on 22 million dollars. That is what it costs them to make the show for an entire season! If they were thinking of cancelling the show, I'm sure every VMARS fan would be willing to part with 22 dollars before they'd be willing to part with VMARS forever. This would also be the single-handedly largest publicity coup in the world. This will garner so much attention that EVERYONE will be talking about this show! Millions will tune in to season 3 just to watch a show that was literally PAID FOR by the adoring audience. That would certainly ensure many seasons to come for VMARS. Hey, it's a dream, it's my dream.¹²⁵

Muhney's invoking of many seasons of *Veronica Mars* as his 'dream' is important – this makes him a fan in some sense, as that is also the dream of many fans. It's also interesting to note that Muhney's post was met with a fair amount of skepticism, and, as far as I can tell, no serious effort was made to follow through with this plan.¹²⁶

On November 21, 2005, Muhney once again posted to express his appreciation at the fan response to the episode *Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner*:

I have read EVERYTHING that has been said here and at TWoP and FanForum. Everything I've read this week has been enough complimenting for a lifetime. I think I'm all filled up and topped off in the "compliment" department. Now we can start complimenting someone else cuz I'm not too sure how to handle all of this...
>-----I-----< ...that is a picture of me spreading my arms as wide as possible to give you all a hug. With a kind of admiration I cannot fully express...Thank You.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ http://community.livejournal.com/rack_of_lamb/38958.html

¹²⁶ Comparatively in April 2005, this plan had actually been attempted by fans of the newest show in the Star Trek franchise, *Enterprise*. The events surrounding these fan efforts are long and complex, but briefly after the cancellation of the fourth season fans sought to raise \$30 million for another season of *Enterprise*, and after collecting upwards of \$3 million they were told by Paramount Studios that "they would not accept contributions from fans for a fifth season of *Star Trek: Enterprise*." (www.trektoday.com/news/120405_03.shtml) This development set a precedent by which other fan campaigns would follow, in other words money can't buy everything.

¹²⁷ http://community.livejournal.com/rack_of_lamb/52306.html. Muhney is referencing the fan response from the episode, *Nobody Puts Baby in a Corner* (2.07). In the episode, Veronica had broken into a house to investigate a child abuse claim, and when the parents return to find her in the house, they call the Sheriff. In the end Lamb deters from his normal modus operandi as Veronica's adversary and lets her go. He also threatens the father, and alludes to being abused as a child. Fans posted responses praising both the character development of Lamb and Muhney's acting: "Yeah, wow, that small scene at the end just floored me. Michael really is an amazing actor; I think all of that was perfect. I just...ghrioyhjerio agh [sic] it's got me all emotional. But, wow, Michael? If you read this? Your acting is so incredibly powerful--that ending is going to stick with me more than anything else to-night, I think." (http://community.livejournal.com/rack_of_lamb/47399.html?thread=955175#t955175)

In a very short amount of time, Muhney has cultivated his own specific fan base under the broader *Veronica Mars* fan base. As the holiday season approached in 2005, he posted further to solidify his appreciation for the fans. On November 21, 2005, “Happy Thanksgiving...I am certainly thankful for you all.”¹²⁸ Then again in early December 2005:

...in the spirit of giving, I'd like to give you all a very genuine compliment. It has been a blessing to have you all alongside me this past year. I have been a professional actor for 8 years now and some years I have made a great deal of money, other years have been just enough to get by, some years have resulted in some great pieces of work (sometimes mediocre), other times, just great exposure, but this last year has been quite different from all the others...I haven't necessarily been the star of anything (the 7th banana on VMars doesn't count as “starring”), I haven't made an incredible amount of money this year, but I have been blessed to have gained the admiration of you all. This year I have been able to communicate and feel close to the people who enjoy watching my work. It has been an indescribable feeling all year long, and I thank you all for being there to give me this gift. ... Thank you all for being so vocal with your support for my talent and my job. All your compliments over at TWoP are being heard by my bosses and agents and I thank you so much for it. I really am so thankful that the internet has provided the means to which we all can communicate on a semi-regular basis. And neverending thanks to Laura (schnappycat) for the idea for this LJ community. I don't take anything that any of you post for granted, and I read EVERY single thing you write on this LJ site and over at TWoP. I hear all of you and feel as though I am getting to know all of you bit by bit. Thank you for having this dance with me. Merry Christmas.¹²⁹

Muhney's assertion that the compliments were “being heard by bosses and agents,” seems to particularly speak to the question of influence. Since he specifically references TWoP, can we then infer that Muhney's “bosses and agents” are carefully reading different forum threads? This then also plays in to the Fan Importance Narrative, which asserts that fan opinions on a wide variety of aspects of television show are considered seriously by television executives.

¹²⁸ http://community.livejournal.com/rack_of_lamb/54196.html

¹²⁹ http://community.livejournal.com/rack_of_lamb/65150.html

What seems particularly interesting about Muhney's flying leap into fan worlds, and, of course, part of his appeal is the lack of reservation he seems to show towards the fans. The next two examples of his public persona exemplify this, the first in an interview with iFMagazine on April 12, 2006:

If there is energy behind the show and it makes peoples' imaginations run wild, then great!... Nothing that has been sent to me has been weird, and nothing in the extremes has been too much for me. All of these wonderful gifts and things that people create and send to me are great. I love it and embrace it all. I've gotten some chocolates in the shape of handcuffs and my sheriff's badge. I've received tons and tons of music videos that people make of me. I've received all sizes and shapes of lambs. They're from key chains up to larger stuffed lambs. People have given me gifts to give to my wife like earrings. I had a guy from France take his sweater off of his back at the MARSATHON, because I had walked by and commented on it. He took it off and gave it to me, and I still have it. I made a point to wear it later on at the panel.¹³⁰

This is a public declaration by Muhney that he is not 'creeped out' by his fans, an important moment in the greater Fan Involvement Narrative. Fans preferences for characters do not occur in a vacuum, there are clearly ways of shaping and directing fan energy and Muhney is actively engaged in such a project. It's about interaction and feeling close to the object of one's fan passions, and both Muhney's participation on online fan spaces and his embracing of fan affection invite this closeness. At several points, Muhney posts announcements about public appearances, and encourages fans to come meet up with him. This is not to be overly cynical about the motives behind Muhney's involvement, but it is to acknowledge that unlike 'regular' fans, he has one foot in the realm of television production. The stakes of participation for him are different than for fans. Another example of Muhney's interaction with the fans, was posted to Rack of Lamb the night of the *Veronica Mars* season three premiere on October 3, 2006:

¹³⁰ <http://www.ifmagazine.com/feature.asp?article=1470>

Email me your number to michael@michaelmuhney.com in the next few hours and I'll copy down as many numbers as I can. I will be in traffic tonight, on my way to go out for my twice-a-week rock-climb with a director-friend of mine. It is in Santa Monica and the traffic should keep me in my car on the way there for about 45 minutes. That would be around 7-8 p.m. pacific time. If you have a United States number, I'll try and call you for a brief moment during that time and you can put me on speakerphone so I can thank your whole VM viewing party for starting season 3 with a bang! p.s. this whole idea got started in my head because i have been all excited about calling schnappy¹³¹ tonight before her vmars viewing party.¹³²

Muhney is clearly a strong presence in the fan spaces of *Veronica Mars*, membership at the Rack of Lamb community was boosted by his presence, and cultivated by the feeling of being able to speak with him directly, a strong sense of connection.

Kristin Bell plays Veronica. Importantly, she is the actor from the show who does the most media publicity (primarily magazines) and has not appeared in any online fan spaces as herself, which make her contributions to the fan narrative different. For example, she has time or warning to prepare for the interviews, and she is often asked similar questions. Unlike Thomas or Muhney, Bell's responses – though not inauthentic – are more scripted, and, when compared over time, mirror the same message more closely. On July 18, 2006, shortly after The CW announcement was made regarding the third season, and while participating in the TV Critics Association's Summer Press Tour, Bell was asked about the fan efforts in the previous season; “[she] called the actions ‘crazy and really awesome,’ and noted that ‘there’s no one that’s dumb who watches *Veronica Mars*.”¹³³ Then in a TV.com interview published July 28, 2006, Bell once again spoke about the fans and the campaigns:

The actress expressed gratitude toward the fans who have helped support the show... “I think it’s really crazy and really awesome that

¹³¹ [schnappy] the user name for the creator and moderator of Rack of Lamb.

¹³² http://community.livejournal.com/rack_of_lamb/155755.html

¹³³ <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/13917389/?page=6>

they would go to those lengths,” she gushed. “The bloggers are pretty much the reason we’ve gotten a lot of the ratings. We’re all extremely thankful [about] the lengths they have gone to.” But Bell says she herself doesn’t have the time to check out Internet message boards, which are often buzzing with praise for the show and her.¹³⁴

Then again in an interview with *Geek Magazine*, February 2007, she praised the fans in much the same manner:

I love our fans and we have some amazing fans—a lot of weird fans, a lot of cool, quirky fans,’ says Bell. “Fans that take action when they want a show saved, which to me is absolutely the reason that we are on the air... They come with so many awesome, creative ways and they are phenomenally intelligent. I don’t go on the internet all that often in general but I have read some of the blogs, that people have about the show or the conversations they have online. The notice continuity mistakes, they notice unbelievable things. And that’s kind of cool where you are being reviewed by intelligent people and they are still giving you good reviews.”¹³⁵

In this last interview she notes the cultural distinctions in the product, in that this show is high quality. In both of these articles when asked about the fans, she is consistent in praising several aspects: 1) their intelligence; 2) how grateful she is for their support; and 3) the impact the campaigns have had on the fate of the show. She also is quick to reaffirm the absence of her presence on the Internet. In this way, the interactions the fans have with Muhney and Bell are markedly different; Muhney’s door is wide open while Bell’s is closed. But overall the attributions made by these three central figures, Thomas, Muhney and Bell, all create a narrative of fans as being the key factor in the shows continued success. It is a narrative in which the show would not be possible without fan support. This creates a space in which the fan campaigns can come to exist.

¹³⁴ <http://www.tv.com/story/5581.html>

¹³⁵ Renaud, Jeff. “Fan Girl: Kristen Bell is a Bigger Geek Than You!” *Geek* Feb. 2007: 40-45.

The Documentation of Fan Efforts

I will document the fan campaign efforts focused on ‘Saving *Veronica Mars*.’ Importantly for this consideration the fan efforts surrounding *Veronica Mars* have consistently changed and adapted based on various conditions in regards to the show’s status. This is especially apparent when contrasted with *Firefly* which was on the air for such a short amount of time, and therefore saw little ongoing adaptation or restructuring of efforts. *Firefly* had one main fan effort, the running of the advertisement in *Variety*. But *Veronica Mars* has constantly been in danger, and interestingly in danger in different ways. The long-term goal of keeping *Veronica Mars* on the air, primarily by attracting new viewers to the show has remained throughout, but the overall efforts are better understood on a season-by-season basis.

Season One; Getting People Hooked (September 2004 – May 2005)

The first season efforts are minimal compared to later efforts. The first season efforts were two fold – attract new viewers to the show and petition through letter writing to *UPN* in order to demonstrate fan presence. The first concrete suggestion made on the *Mars Investigation* fan site suggested ‘pimping’ the show by starting *Veronica Mars* threads on non-*Veronica Mars* based online message boards:

During my site-pimping, Google-based spam-a-thon, I came across quite a few *Veronica Mars* threads on non-VM boards, such as boards about food, Incubus, Christianity, baby names, sports, *Alias*, *Lost*, *Star Trek*, comic books etc. Quite a few VM fans were able to talk their fellow posters into giving the show a chance. Since they already knew each other, these non-fans trusted the glowing recommendations of their fellow posters.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ <http://marsinvestigations.net/campaigns/index.php>. This also speaks to the ways in which online spaces can be thought of in a neighborhood pub metaphor, in that people gathering around one common interest *Lost*, might also share other interests like *Veronica Mars*, and not seek out a different space to talk about these two passions. People stay where they are comfortable, and know other people.

Importantly the site points out that an established relationship is part of plan, and they didn't suggest the random spamming of message boards. This alludes to an on-going theme of not appearing too 'crazy' or out of control. Clearly, being seen as out of control is something fans are seeking to avoid and there exists a line between being passionate about a show and being 'over the top.' This was the theme of the other main suggestion for drawing in new fans; the LiveJournal friends recommendation. "LJ users, continue pimping the show on your journals in order to convince the non-VM-fans on your friends list to give the show a chance. Your friends list can be a powerful weapon in this battle against VM apathy."¹³⁷ This was originally the main reason I started watching *Veronica Mars*, many of my online friends started watching the show and constantly posted rave reviews.¹³⁸ Because I already trusted their opinions I was much more willing to start watching the show.

The main fan campaign of the first season was "The \$2 Campaign," which was started on Television Without Pity and quickly spread to LiveJournal. The idea was to send a *Veronica Mars* themed two-dollar bill to Dawn Ostroff – the President of UPN – to demonstrate support for the show (Appendix Five). Fans were also encouraged to write "Veronica Mars is smarter than me" on the bills.¹³⁹ When attempting to map out fan campaigns, the learning curve becomes readily apparent. The fans learn how to mount successful campaigns and they learn quickly. When someone posted information on the \$2 Campaign at the LiveJournal group *Veronica_Mars*, they unconsciously invoked previous unsuccessful fan campaigns as inspiration to be proactive.

¹³⁷ <http://marsinvestigations.net/campaigns/index.php>

¹³⁸ http://users.livejournal.com/wisteria_/519636.html#cutid1

¹³⁹ This is in reference to the episode *Clash of the Tritons* (1.12). In a scene in which Veronica outwits Sheriff Lamb, she writes the phrase on a dollar bill and he reads the phrase out loud.

The reason we are starting this “renew our show” campaign now, instead of waiting until after the show is canceled to start a “save our show/move Veronica Mars to another network” campaign is because it is so much easier to persuade someone to do something that they want to do, than it is to convince someone to reverse a decision that they have already made.¹⁴⁰

This user is actually invoking *Firefly*, because the show was cancelled so abruptly their letter writing was focused after the cancellation. In this way fans demonstrate an understanding the implication that low ratings might have for a new show; as such they learn to come out of the gate fighting. This post also holds up Dawn Ostroff in a ‘good mother’ role as consistently fighting for the show and being very supportive of it in spite of the low ratings. Overall the efforts in the first season were aimed primarily at attracting new viewers to the show, and also showing support for the show by mailing themed two dollar bills to the President of UPN. However, while cancellation was a possibility at this point, it didn’t seem like a foregone conclusion, and as such the first season campaigns lacked an energy and desperation that came to characterize the second season campaigns.

Season Two; Look to the Skies (September 2005 – May 2006)

The second season of *Veronica Mars* has three distinct campaign efforts happening in the fan spaces: 1) the ongoing theme of No Guarantee; 2) the \$4,000 Shower; and 3) the Cloud Watcher campaign. Although I have no data on the time periods at which more people started watching the show, from personal experience and observation/participation in online spaces at the time, I propose that the most marked period of growth happened between May to September 2005. There seemed to be a sense that the ratings for the second season would be much higher than they had been for the

¹⁴⁰ http://community.livejournal.com/veronica_mars/100442.html

first season. However, this was not the case. The theme of the season was outlined by Mars Investigations as ‘Season Three: No Guarantee;’

One option is to resign yourself to the fact that if the ratings continue to spiral downwards, the show might not be back next season. The feeling of defeated hopelessness is a very common reaction among fans of so many lowly-rated shows. They have had their hearts broken one too many times by the cancel-happy TV execs, and therefore they feel they have no other viable option but to sit idly by. ...Another option is to ignore the ratings, and pretend that everything is superfine....Or you can try to do something about.... The show needs new fans, and we need them now. Three million viewers and the show is part of the CW lineup. Two million viewers and the show gets yanked during sweeps.¹⁴¹

This call to action is structured to give the fans hope, that in the past the decision has rested with ‘the cancel-happy TV execs,’ but in this case it is the duty of the fans to get involved and influence that decision. This narrative of hope is only possible because the show had not been cancelled; while the show’s position was in danger, the odds were not seen as insurmountable. Importantly true fan status relies on being involved, and not sitting by idly. This theme would be pervasive in the two larger fan efforts during season two (Appendix Seven).

The first of these was the \$4,000 Shower Campaign. During an interview online at UPN.com Rob Thomas spoke about some recent renovations he had done at the office. He said that he “...spent four grand putting a shower in our office bathroom. Now, I wouldn’t spend four grand putting in an office shower if I didn’t think we were going to be there for three more years.”¹⁴² Thomas then went on to say that “[the show] could use another half-million fans. If you could tell a half-million friends to tune us in each week, I think we’d be safe for a hundred episodes.” In response to these comments, the same people who had put together the \$2 Campaign started the \$4,000 Shower Campaign.

¹⁴¹ http://marsinvestigations.net/campaigns/season_three_no_guarantee.php; see also Appendix Six.

¹⁴² <http://marsinvestigations.net/campaigns/postcardintro.php>

They created printable postcards with a picture of Thomas in the shower and the tagline “A \$4,000 shower is a terrible thing to waste” (Appendix Eight).¹⁴³ At Mars Investigations the back of your printable postcard would include a space for you to indicate how many ‘peeps you hooked.’ It would also include “...basic demographic info because that’s the kind of thing that networks execs love to drool over.”¹⁴⁴ The fans are quite able and willing to work within existing methods of cultural production, they are well aware that demographic information is important and are eager to provide it to the network. Then again as far as campaigns go, it’s not much more than a streamlined letter writing campaign popularized by other grassroots organizations. In some respects, these are not brand new methods; the fan campaigns are expanding and adapting old methods. What is also new is the speed and the streamlined nature in which they are able to occur.

The second campaign – Look to the Skies – was more outside of traditional methods. The Livejournal community Cloud_Watchers was created for this campaign; “the group's biggest effort is ensuring that on TUESDAY, MAY 9, the day of the VERONICA MARS Season 2 Finale, "CW" will stand for something entirely different: CLOUD WATCHERS.”¹⁴⁵ The plan was to raise the money to fly a plane over the new network headquarters of The CW in Los Angeles. Since this was before the upfronts where the show’s fate would be announced, fans didn’t know if *Veronica Mars* would be returning for a third season. In an un-attributed section on the Watch Veronica Mars website, one member explains the impetus for this plan;

¹⁴³ In the universe of *Angel*, TBTB were ‘the powers that be’, powerful and enigmatic forces that help the side of good. The other tagline for the campaign was “Let TBTB know you want to see Veronica go to college.” This is both a reference to the show because Veronica was a high school senior in the second season, and it is also a Buffy/Angel language reference. This suggests a cross-population of fans.

¹⁴⁴ <http://marsinvestigations.net/campaigns/postcardcreate.php>

¹⁴⁵ http://www.marsinvestigations.net/look_to_the_skies.php

When I learned the fate of *Veronica Mars* was once again up in the air, I decided to take a page out of Veronica's book and take action. Rather than passively wait for others to decide whether or not I would get another year of mind-blowing mysteries, I proposed something fun and splashy and out-there -- a last ditch, grassroots effort to save something I love dearly. It's clearly absurd, but that's why it has the potential to be effective. Some fandoms sign online petitions, *Veronica Mars* fans send airborne messages!¹⁴⁶

In this construction we can spot themes that have been used before, specifically the idea of being proactive and appropriating the character traits of Veronica. The LiveJournal community was created on May 2, 2006, and by this point two things had happened; all the money had been raised and the logistics worked out.¹⁴⁷ This is also a mere week before the plane flew, so either the group got its act together quickly, or primary organization had occurred elsewhere. There is no evidence that I can find of this occurring on other message board spaces, either the evidence has been erased from websites or the collection of funds and the gathering of this group happened in a non-archived or locked internet space. According to Mars Investigations, the group of fans responsible for this campaign “[raised] over \$5,000 -- in just 4 days -- from fans on various websites.”¹⁴⁸ That amount actually exceeded the amount necessary to fly the plane. On May 2, 2006 one of the members posted a budget break-down for the campaign:

Big pie in the sky: 1800 (paid)
 Care Packages: Shirts (340), Shipping (?), Pom Poms (50), Binoculars (12), Hats (185): Total pre shipping: 588, so we are estimating another couple hundred for the priority shipping: estimated total 800.
 Flowers: 12 bouquets, 360
 Total used: 2960
 Amount remaining: approximately 900!¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ http://www.watchveronicamars.net/cloud_watchers/

¹⁴⁷ http://community.livejournal.com/cloud_watchers/profile?mode=full

¹⁴⁸ http://www.marsinvestigations.net/look_to_the_skies.php

¹⁴⁹ http://community.livejournal.com/cloud_watchers/1482.html

The plane flying ended up being a very visible public display of dedication, and was appropriately picked up in some mainstream media coverage, and mentioned extensively by cast and crew of *Veronica Mars*.¹⁵⁰ (Appendix Nine)

However, it is what this group decided to do with the extra money that intrigues me more. The group decided to put the remaining money towards donating Season One DVD sets to libraries in major Nielsen Markets. This demonstrates a complex understanding of the television industry, members of the community contacted libraries in these markets to determine existing availability. Moreover, they did not just donate to libraries in their hometowns; they were strategic with their resources and realized that some fans –those in larger Nielsen ratings markets – are quite simply more valuable than other fans.¹⁵¹ By this I mean of course, the fans are more valuable to network executives. In this way the fans are acting much like the network executives and decision makers. They also have an operating theory of the culture.

These two fan efforts culminated in a resolution at the end of May 2005 during the first upfront presentation by The CW. Notably upfront presentations are not fan friendly, the audience is made up mainly of members of the press. As such many newspaper columnists or bloggers post minute by minute (live-blogging) commentary from the presentations.¹⁵² In one such accounting of the events, the author said, “People actually cheered when execs announced the return of *Veronica Mars*.”¹⁵³ The cheering audience would then most likely be other members of the press. It is then at this point that the fan effort narrative is cemented with the heroic resolution of the fans success which is

¹⁵⁰ See the Media Tracking section at http://marsinvestigations.net/look_to_the_skies.php for a full list.

¹⁵¹ http://community.livejournal.com/cloud_watchers/1154.html; all of the comments in this post display a sophistication and understanding of the Nielsen ratings systems that can only be described as impressive.

¹⁵² By not fan-friendly I mean that fans are not invited, and showing up would not be accepted.

¹⁵³ <http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,1197346,00.html>

attributed to them by the mainstream media. In a public space composed of decision makers and media, the mainstream media is also contributing to the Fan Importance Narrative. One example of the attribution, “in the meantime, the extremely dedicated *Veronica* fandom did all they could to insure the series would be renewed, including flying a banner over the offices of UPN and The CW in support of the show.”¹⁵⁴

Also the previously hoped for dream line-up, *Veronica Mars* following *Gilmore Girls* on Tuesday nights came true, in season three the show was now paired with a strong lead-in with a hope of a high audience retention rate. TV Guide was also quick to point out that the renewal might not have been a completely rational decision; “Looking purely at numbers, *Veronica Mars*' survival defies the gods.”¹⁵⁵ The efforts of the second season both continued the themes of previous campaigns from the first season and other shows in a similar fashion, the petitioning campaign. But they also did something different, in flying a plane over The CW headquarters. In important ways we can also see these fan campaigns as offering groups of fans a sense of validation; in that the success of the show is attributed to them.

Season Three; Double or Nothing (September 2006 – May 2007)

Even from the beginning of Season Three there was -- by some fans -- a marked pragmatism in the approach to a new season. As I mentioned with regard to the Second

¹⁵⁴ <http://tv.ign.com/articles/708/708985p1.html>

¹⁵⁵ <http://www.tvguide.com/News-Views/Columnists/Ask-Matt/default.aspx?columndate=5-June-2006>, other examples include: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/18/AR2006051801258.html>, and http://www.wfaa.com/sharedcontent/dws/ent/stories/DN-WEB-cwsked_0519gl.State.Edition1.20374b68.html

Season, though fan space may have appeared to be populated by more fans, the ratings numbers hadn't risen with any gusto. There is also an ongoing and ever present nature of the threat, which is almost strikingly Orwellian – the fans constantly 'at war' and in a state of worry over the fate the show. The desired resolution of the Second Season conflict – having the show renewed – also reopens the same set of fears, cancellation on the new network. Over the summer, Mars Investigations summed up this feeling:

However, this sense of hopeful optimism is tinged by the knowledge that the ratings for *Veronica Mars* almost have to double in order to keep in line with the ratings for *Gilmore Girls*. If the VM ratings don't hit the mark within the first few episodes, there's a chance that the show might be cancelled.

The CW network execs took a gamble by renewing *Veronica Mars*. Now it's up to the fans to help make sure that gamble pays off. With the pressure for higher ratings at an all-time high, this is not the time to stand idly by.¹⁵⁶

Not shockingly, the theme of 'not sitting idly by' is present and yet again fans needed to be proactive to prevent cancellation. Within the context of this third season I will talk about some of the strategies suggested by fans to find even more viewers, discuss pervasive cancellation rumors, outline a little bit about fans and the death of Sheriff Lamb and discuss the main campaign of the Third Season, the Fake Ids campaign.

The real source of the constant state of worry among *Veronica Mars* fans Season Three remains low Nielsen ratings.¹⁵⁷ More viewers are needed, but continually recruiting viewers over an extended period of time such as three years is hard. After all, by this time any serious fan recruiters would have exhausted previous social networks both online and in-person. Those friends a fan couldn't convince to watch last year are

¹⁵⁶ http://www.watchveronicamars.net/support_quality_tv/double_or_nothing/

¹⁵⁷ Interestingly, the focus of the fandom doesn't seem connect this to the more general problems with the Nielsen Ratings system. One could for example imagine fans attempting to de-legitimize the Nielsen's claim to authority about viewership by challenging the selection of the sample; like the exclusion (until very recently) of college students from the sample. But although these conversations may occur, and I would argue probably do, in isolated online spaces, there is no broader movement within the fandom to take this approach.

unlikely to be persuaded this year. However in spite of this challenge, Mars Investigations listed a few suggestions for finding more fans, watching parties, Bring Your Own Newbie to the watching parties and fan swap campaigns.¹⁵⁸ Importantly, producer Rob Thomas addressed the issue of attempting to introduce new fans to a complex world of characters, and promised the season three premiere would be more accessible to new fans. This was an attempt to attract more viewers, and a hope to convert those news viewers into new fans. Fans decided to organize viewing parties across the country, and were encouraged to bring someone new to *Veronica Mars*.¹⁵⁹ The last idea is an interesting one, a fan swap in which a fan “pledges to watch another show, while another fan agrees to watch *Veronica Mars*.”¹⁶⁰ This demonstrates a growing sense of ‘the work’ involved in regularly watching a television show.

When season three began, there were other concerns about the fate of the show. Thomas was able to sum up the tension succinctly “Here’s what’s going to happen,” he said. “We’re either going to retain most of the ‘Gilmore Girls’ audience, which will keep us on all year. Or we drop precipitously and we’re going to get canceled.”¹⁶¹ As is standard with many television shows, when The CW renewed *Veronica Mars* in May, they really only ordered 13 episodes. In November they would announce a decision on the rest of the episodes to fill a typical twenty-two episode season, which is commonly referred to as ‘the back nine.’ As Table Three indicates the early season three ratings were still low even though they were retaining a large percent of the *Gilmore Girls* audience. This caused concern among fans. In November, The CW ordered seven more

¹⁵⁸ <http://marsinvestigations.net/campaigns/byon.php>

¹⁵⁹ http://www.watchveronicamars.net/viewing_parties_map.php

¹⁶⁰ <http://marsinvestigations.net/campaigns/byon.php>

¹⁶¹ <http://www.topix.net/content/trb/3707505366089070302042152265841019201076>

episodes, for a twenty-episode season.¹⁶² After the announcement there were two conflicting opinions, the first was put forth by TV Guide columnist Matt Roush:

I wouldn't worry yet. But then, this is the sort of show that has always had to sweat it out from season to season, so what else is new? What I was told about the shortened pickup for *Veronica Mars* is a simple matter of supply and demand and the not so simple matter of keeping budgets in line.¹⁶³

The other side of the camp came in another TV Guide column, this one by Michael

Ausiello, and backed with a quote from Thomas:

I'm worried, and so is Rob Thomas. 'There have been times in the past when the fans were very concerned, when I was pretty confident,' he says. 'I have to admit that in this case, I'm losing some faith.'¹⁶⁴

Currently the show exists in limbo; it is on a typical mid-season hiatus returning in late April to air the last four episodes. The CW is currently trying out a new show in the post *Gilmore Girls* timeslot, and if its ratings are better it could be anyone's guess. Some fans feel that cancellation is imminent, but most agree nothing will be sure – once again – until May at the upfront presentations.

This last event falls outside the rubric of typical fan campaigns, but because Muhney factors in so strongly to the creation of the Fan Importance Narrative, and fan response to the event was so big, I decided I should touch upon it quickly. In the episode *Mars, Bars* (3.14) that aired on February 20, 2007, the character of Sheriff Lamb was unexpectedly killed off. Less than an hour after the episode aired in which Sheriff Lamb was unexpectedly killed; the moderator at Rack of Lamb had already posted with the following information:

¹⁶² <http://sepinwall.blogspot.com/2006/11/veronica-mars-gets-full-season-order.html>

¹⁶³ <http://www.tvguide.com/News-Views/Columnists/Ask-Matt/default.aspx?columnid=27-Nov-2006>

¹⁶⁴ <http://tvguide.com/News-Views/Columnists/Ask-Ausiello/default.aspx?posting={CD9A5391-1FFD-44DB-9CD3-875E81051E6C}>

Given the major and upsetting turn of events tonight, there is understandable outrage among Lamb fans. In fact, I have already received a few emails asking if there is something fans can do to express their displeasure...I think we all owe it to Michael for his three years of fantastic work portraying Sheriff Lamb and his unrelenting loyalty to his many fans to contact Mary Buck. While we can't bring Michael back to *Veronica Mars*, we can express our unhappiness at his early exit, let TPTB [the Powers That Be] at Warner Brothers know how much we loved and appreciated his talent, and urge them to consider him for future projects. I know we all want Michael back on our screens very soon.¹⁶⁵

This response speaks to the power of interaction. It was not the first time a side character had left the show. Veronica's ex-boyfriend Duncan fled the country. It also was not the first time a side character had died on *Veronica Mars*. But the bleed over from the actor to the character is slippery and clearly one that was experienced here. In the end it was not a widespread fan effort to bring Lamb back to the show, most importantly because it didn't even quite make sense with earlier narratives. According to previous comments by Muhney "his bosses and agents" were well aware of his fervent fan base. However, it is interesting that the first response, moments after it 'occurred' it was in the form of a call to action; like soldiers constantly prepared for battle. Of course, not surprisingly Muhney posted two days later, thanking the fans and reaffirming how important they are to him:

I have been touched by so many emails, so many posts on several different sites.(By the way, I've read every post, every email.) There's an amazing thing about people: we have an incredible ability to make one another feel warmth from our hearts. You all are doing just that. I honestly don't know what to say. I feel like I owe you all so much. The way I see it...every single person who has posted every single comment both here and at other sites represents someone. A real person. None of this email/internet/board-posting crap. You guys are REAL. That's what makes the outpour [sic] of affection even more meaningful.¹⁶⁶

Here Muhney also reaffirms the form of the online space; asserting that to him these online interactions have been just as real as traditional in-person interactions; "you guys are REAL."

¹⁶⁵ http://community.livejournal.com/rack_of_lamb/203353.html

¹⁶⁶ http://community.livejournal.com/rack_of_lamb/210392.html

During the show's mid-season hiatus, fans at the Cloud Watchers community have decided to mount another fan campaign. This is also a petition type attempt – the Fake IDs Campaign. The structure of this campaign aligns with previous campaigns in the fandom. Because of Veronica's extra-circular sleuthing activities, fake identification cards have occasionally been used. Since a fourth season would place Veronica and her friends in their second year of college, the ids created for the fan campaign have the tagline, "Let Veronica turn 21 naturally! Renew for Season Four!" In this campaign fans are encouraged to place their picture and demographic information on a blank Neptune ID, (the city from which Veronica hails) or a blank Hearst College ID (the fictional college Veronica and her friends attend). Fans who don't want to use a picture are encouraged to print and mail a fan created ID for one of the characters, and send it to The CW headquarters. (For card images see Appendix Ten).

It is hard to conclude the events of the third season, because it is a script still being written. The fans have attempted some new strategies in hopes of attracting more viewers, and once again have started a traditional petition / letter writing style campaign. Of course, the flashy effort of Season Two – Look to the Skies – didn't happen until May, so it is unclear if a similarly flashy campaign will be attempted closer to the upfront presentation this year.

I have detailed the season-by-season events in this fashion to illuminate several key concepts: 1) that these campaigns take their cues from other campaigns, such as *Firefly* and *Enterprise*, and that it is possible to see the campaigns adapt over even brief periods of time; 2) that fans use new technologies to update and adapt previous methods;

and 3) actors such as Thomas, Muhney, Bell and the mainstream media have created a Fan Importance Narrative.

Conclusion: You Can't Stop the Signal

In the previous two chapters I have documented and described the fan efforts surrounding both *Firefly / Serenity* and *Veronica Mars*. I have also argued that the fan efforts are only one piece of the full picture, the other piece is the attribution of success to the fans that occurs by the cultural authors in online and print media sources. There are several other reoccurring themes as well, the importance of fans to be seen as 'in control' and 'classy,' as compared to 'out of control.' This more broadly speaks to the nature of fans and their role as fans. The comparison of the two author/creators (Whedon and Thomas) also proves illuminating in that Whedon is more comfortable with his fan persona than Thomas appears to be; Whedon seems more at home in fan spaces, as though he has always been and will continue to be a fan first and foremost, and a cultural author second. Importantly, I think that these are ongoing issues that will continue to be negotiated in the years to come. Now I want to briefly highlight a few of these themes; the importance of fan campaigns in the political arena and the negotiation of power between fans and television programming.

My Barack Obama [dot] com: Fan Campaigns and Politics

There is another presumption that this research relies upon which I have not previously addressed and has, in fact, been assumed from the beginning; that is, that popular culture, specifically television, is worthy of academic consideration. In order to make this visible, I want to highlight two issues. First, popular culture is a large realm of shifting relationships products, practices and forces, and it is a realm that continues to grow in size. Television shows and online spaces are more than frivolous cultural

products without meaning. In fact, as I have argued, people are using cultural products and new spaces to create new cultural meanings and understandings of citizenship. I think it is very possible that fans asserting control over cultural products will in the same way want to assert that power over political leaders. Older forms of grassroots lobbying attest to the connection between cultural and political citizenship, but I have taken grassroots models a step further and documented ways in which technological changes have continued to up the ante of what is possible and expected of fans. There are two recent examples which are particularly illustrative – controversy around recent *American Idol* contestant and the social networking elements of Barack Obama’s presidential website.

Sanjaya

Recently there has been debate surrounding a specific contestant on the television show *American Idol*, a popular reality television show in which ‘regular’ people, from across the United States, compete for a recording contract. In a series of singing competitions, the group of finalists is narrowed down to one final American Idol. The most important aspect of *American Idol* is undoubtedly its reliance on audience participation. Although three qualified judges express their opinions on the candidates, the final decision comes from viewers across the country who call in their votes on a weekly basis. Recently a contestant, Sanjaya Malakar, became an object of controversy when he was able to survive rounds of elimination, despite a widespread sense that he should have been voted off the show. He was endorsed by the website VoteFortheWorst.com which “...was started in 2004 to support voting for the

entertaining contestants who the producers would hate to see win on American Idol.” Popular shock-jock radio personality Howard Stern catapulted into the fray when he encouraged listeners to vote for Sanjaya.¹⁶⁷ With every week that Sanjaya was not eliminated, the fervor grew. There were even reports that some *American Idol* fans claimed to be on hunger strikes until he was voted out of the competition.¹⁶⁸ The issue, as it was expressed in criticism of the VotefortheWorst campaign, was that some voters were using their votes for the ‘wrong reasons’ – they were being bad cultural citizens. Finally, during an appearance on a call-in radio talk show, Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton was asked for her views on Sanjaya and the malicious voting. She replied, “That’s the best question I’ve been asked in a long time, well, you know, people can vote for whomever they want. That’s true in my election, and it’s true on *American Idol*.”¹⁶⁹ The mere fact that such a question was deemed important enough to ask a Presidential candidate implies that these are not frivolous matters. Moreover that a group of citizens were capable of hamstringing the ‘fairness’ of *American Idol* represented to some people a similar crisis of the ideals of democracy.

Barack Obama

Secondly, I think that as fans begin to receive and praise interaction from creators and authors of cultural texts, they will come to expect the same from their political leaders. Presidential candidate Barack Obama’s website reflects this growing shift with the section MyBarackObama.com. Users can register, meet and chat with other Barack

¹⁶⁷ http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1555113/20070320/id_0.jhtml

¹⁶⁸ <http://entertainment.bodogbeat.com/sanjaya-malakar-inspires-a-hunger-strike-68543.html>

¹⁶⁹ http://popwatch.ew.com/popwatch/2007/04/hillary_tackles.html

supporters and there is even space for keeping a blog. It is a social networking site for fans of Barack Obama that is similar to Livejournal, Facebook or MySpace. As Nancy Baym highlights “it just goes to show that whatever his political strengths and weaknesses, this guy gets the internet and has good insight into how to get the people who want to identify with you to rally around and start working for you.”¹⁷⁰ At the bottom of the MyBarackObama website is the tagline, “Powered by Barack ’08 (and supporters just like you). Expectations of interactions surrounding cultural products like fan campaigns will parlay and change relationships between political leaders and supporters.

Locating the Power in Television Programming

As I write this it is April, a month particularly fraught with tension. The May upfront presentations are coming, and occasionally pick-ups or cancellations of shows will be announced in the weeks leading up to the presentations. For example, on April 5, 2007 NBC announced that it would be renewing the critically heralded and modestly rated show, *30 Rock* for a second season. Many were excited that the show had been renewed, and are hopeful it will build an audience over the summer, when television viewing is not as competitive. Such has been the case for some shows like *The Office*, but not for others such as *Veronica Mars*. In a recent post to the Entertainment Weekly blog, PopWatch, one author articulates the inherent complexity of fan campaigns:

When great shows like *Freaks and Geeks* and *The Tick* are prematurely axed, often after being moved all over the schedule, we can righteously froth at the mouth about how network execs don’t know how to nurture a special series. We can point to shows like *Cheers* and *Seinfeld* that started small but grew into monster hits because they were given the time to cultivate and audience. But then, whom do we blame when

¹⁷⁰ <http://www.onlinefandom.com/archives/mybarackobama/>

these pearls are left on for longer than their ratings warrant, and nobody new ever gives a damn? You can set up all the ‘Save our show!’ blogs and petitions you want but at a certain point it’s up to the viewers, not the networks.¹⁷¹

When the author says it is up to the viewers and not the networks, they are invoking previous fan campaigns and an on-going discussion of where the power in television programming lies. At what point are network executives justified in pulling a show off the air when it fails to build an audience? Certainly many would argue that *Firefly* deserved more than thirteen episodes to build an audience, while others would argue that the failure of *Veronica Mars* to build an audience in its second and third season warrants its cancellation in May 2007.

Moreover these fans are also making arguments about where the power should lie. On this basis I tend to disagree that there might be a metaphorical tipping point for all shows, at which cancellation could at some level be deemed ‘justified.’¹⁷² To believe in a sense of justification is to accept the terms of the debate as they stand. One such term is that television shows should only continue as money making products for television networks, and not as cultural products on their own merit. There is also a deeply problematic assumption that advertising rates and profitability should be determined by the Nielsen Media Ratings system. NMR collects data on a viewership model based in social conditions from the 1960s which assumes that homes have one television that the entire family watches. This model yields a sample that up until recently did not even include college students. This is especially strange since advertisers are very interested in the 18-24 year old male demographic, a high proportion of which can be found at college.

¹⁷¹ http://popwatch.ew.com/popwatch/2007/04/were_pushing_30.html

¹⁷² Indeed one particular website has attempted to quantify this point as the moment a show, “jumps the shark.” The site contains a list of television shows and a number of reasons for the shows possible moment of jumping. After a show jumps the shark most viewers agree the show should end.

College students are excluded, however, because college students are not considered 'family units,' by Nielsen. Another term of the debate is that because television networks as cultural institutions own and organize all the means of production, they have the right and the power to gather fan input when it is convenient for them and to ignore fans otherwise. There was a mild uproar when The CW didn't pick up *Everwood* and chose to renew 7th *Heaven* instead. But it hardly brought the system down; some mild complaining is simply the cost of doing business.

In this way fan campaigns have always been and will continue to be arguments over where the power lies and should lie in television programming. As these cases have illuminated, technological changes and the interaction of fans with cultural authors continues to contribute to this debate. The Fan Importance Narrative is especially important because it cultivates a sense that fan actions and fan opinions are becoming more valuable and important, and it is a narrative, that at some level is self fulfilling.

Still Flying: The Release of the Fan Importance Narrative

I have argued that these cases that I have studies in detail illuminate an emerging Fan Importance Narrative, to which the fans can connect by defining themselves and their actions in terms of its narrative logic, effectively giving them a sense of belonging and ownership. Once created this Fan Importance Narrative has the possibility of mobilizing fans across fan spaces, so that fans of *Firefly* and *Veronica Mars* carry such experiences with them into new and different fandoms as they develop.

Moreover, once this narrative is related to the fans, it seems outside the control of network executives. Instead, network executive must come to terms with the created

narratives and new media spaces. For now it seems that television executives are learning about the influence of new media spaces at the same time as those spaces are growing. For the first time in recent memory, all of the four major networks (ABC, CBS, FOX and NBC) have their serialized prime-time content available for free viewing on their websites with only limited commercial interruption. In October 2005, Apple announced it would begin selling video content in the iTunes Store. The first deal was primarily with Disney shows and movies, but over the course of the following years most network and cable content has become available for purchase. One Newsday Entertainment Opinion columnist argues that iTunes downloads ‘saved’ *The Office*, from “...the fate of a hundred thousand other shows that labored under the tyranny of Nielsen.”¹⁷³ The column goes on to quote the president of NBC Universal Television Studio, which owns and produces *The Office*: “[iTunes downloads] gave us another way to see the true potential other than just Nielsen.” The same sentiment is likely true with DVD sales, another way of measuring potential – it is in fact the same product in different form – but this new form allows for immediate feedback and a low upfront cost for the television networks. One could also argue that iTunes sales are an important measurement for shows on specific cable channels, like *The New Battlestar Galactica* series that airs on Sci-Fi and is weekly at the top of the iTunes download list. Technological changes will continue to shape the scope and content of media products, while at the same time shaping what is possible for fans in terms of communication and participation.

¹⁷³ <http://www.newsday.com/entertainment/ny-ettel4954426nov01,0,7904591.column?coll=ny-entertainment-columnists>

Tables

Table One: Nielsen Ratings for *Firefly*.

| Date | Episode | National Rating | Rank: All Prime Time Shows | Rank: All FOX Shows |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| December 20, 2002 | Serenity (2-hour Original Pilot) | 2.7 | 88/131 (t) | 17/19 |
| December 13, 2002 | Objects In Space | 2.6 | 96/135 | 17/17 |
| December 6, 2002 | War Stories | 2.4 | 99/136 (t) | 19/20 |
| November 15, 2002 | Ariel | 2.9 | 103/136 (t) | 22/22 |
| November 8, 2002 | Safe | 2.9 | 89/127 (t) | 18/21 |
| November 1, 2002 | Shindig | 2.8 | 101/135 | 19/20 |
| October 25, 2002 | Out Of Gas | 2.9 | 90/131 (t) | 15/15 |
| October 18, 2002 | Jaynestown | 2.7 | 98/130 (t) | 13/14 |
| October 4, 2002 | Our Mrs. Reynolds | 3.3 | 89/128 (t) | 12/12 |
| September 27, 2002 | Bushwhacked | 3.6 | 78/125 (t) | 14/16 |
| September 20, 2002 | The Train Job (Series Premiere) | 4.0 | 66/119 (t) | 14/15 |

From (<http://home.insightbb.com/~wahoskem/firefly1.html>)

For the 2002-2003 television season, each ratings point represents 1,067,000 households or one percent of the nation's estimated 106.7 million television households.

Table Two: *Veronica Mars* Second Season Ratings¹⁷⁴[The Futon Critic](#): May 10, 2006

| Episodes | Households | Adults 18-49 | Comments |
|----------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------------------------------|
| 2.01 | 2.1/3; #14 | 1.3; #14 | |
| 2.02 | 2.1/3; #17 | 1.3; #T16 | Baseball |
| 2.03 | 2.1/3; #14 | 1.3; #15 | |
| 2.04 | 2.2/3; #15 | 1.5; #15 | |
| 2.05 | 2.5/4; #14 | 1.6; #T14 | <i>Lost</i> in repeat |
| 2.06 | 2.1/3; #17 | 1.3; #17 | |
| 2.07 | 2.0/3; #16 | 1.2; #16 | |
| 2.08 | 1.7/3; #13 | 1.0; #13 | Day before Thanksgiving |
| 2.09 | 2.2/3; #T15 | 1.2; #T16 | |
| 2.10 | 2.4/4; #14 | 1.4; #T14 | <i>Lost</i> in repeat |
| 2.11 | 1.5/2; #16 | 0.8; #16 | Basketball |
| 2.12 | 1.5/2; #16 | 0.9; #16 | Basketball and <i>Lost</i> in repeat |
| 2.13 | 1.4/2; #13 | 0.8; #13 | Basketball |
| 2.14 | 1.8/3; #15 | 1.2; #15 | Basketball and <i>Lost</i> in repeat |
| 2.15 | 1.8/3; #T16 | 1.2; #16 | Basketball |
| 2.16 | 1.6/2; #17 | 1.0; #17 | Basketball |
| 2.17 | 1.9/3; #16 | 1.2; #16 | Basketball |
| 2.18 | 1.4/2; #17 | 0.8; #17 | Basketball & Baseball & New timeslot |
| 2.19 | 1.5/2; #18 | 1.0; #T17 | Basketball & Baseball |
| 2.20 | 1.4/2; #T18 | 1.0; #17 | Basketball & Baseball |
| 2.21 | 1.6/3; #17 | 1.2; #17 | Basketball & Baseball |
| 2.22 | 1.5/2; #16 | 1.1; #14 | Basketball & Baseball |

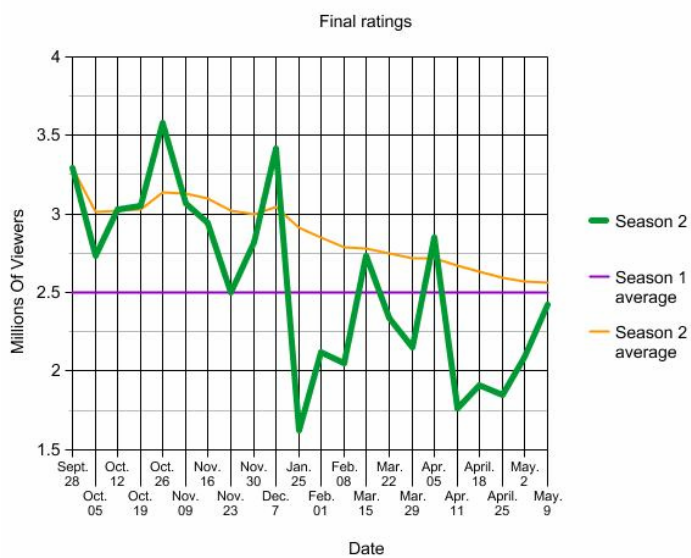
¹⁷⁴ <http://www.marsinvestigations.net/media.php?month=5&year=2006&id=20>

Table Three: *Veronica Mars* Third Season Ratings**The Futon Critic Ratings**[The Futon Critic](#): February 14, 2007

| Episodes | Households | GG retention | Adults 18-49 | GG retention | |
|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|----|
| 3.01 | 2.1/3 | 64% | 1.4 | 70% | |
| 3.02 | 2.0/3 | 63% | 1.4 | 70% | |
| 3.03 | 1.9/3 | 61% | 1.4 | 70% | |
| 3.04 | 2.2/3 | 69% | 1.5 | 75% | |
| 3.05 | 1.6/2 | 84% | 1.2 | 92% | *1 |
| 3.06 | 1.9/3 | 63% | 1.3 | 65% | |
| 3.07 | 1.8/3 | 60% | 1.3 | 65% | |
| 3.08 | 1.7/3 | 58% | 1.2 | 63% | *2 |
| 3.09 | 2.1/3 | 68% | 1.6 | 73% | |
| 3.10 | 2.2/3 | 81% | 1.5 | 88% | *3 |
| 3.11 | 1.8/3 | 64% | 1.3 | 62% | *4 |
| 3.12 | 1.5/2 | 47% | 1.1 | 52% | |
| 3.13 | 1.6/2 | 55% | 1.1 | 55% | *4 |

*1 Halloween, *Gilmore Girls* rerun and *House* returned.

*2 Preempted in L.A. for Basketball.

*3 No competition besides *The State of the Union Address*.

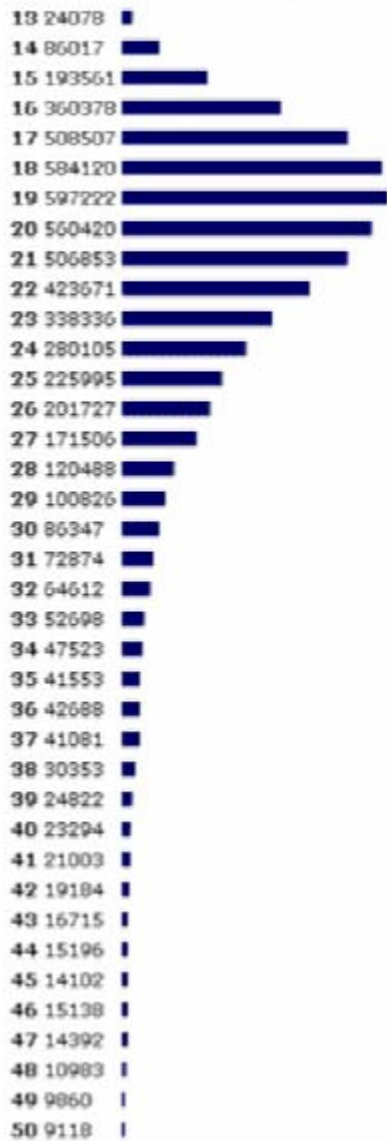
*4 Preempted several places for Basketball.

Appendices

Appendix One – Livejournal Users

Age Distribution

The following shows the age distribution of LiveJournal users:



Appendix Two – *Firefly* Variety Ad



Appendix Three – Joe Loves Veronica Mars.¹⁷⁵

JOE LOVES VERONICA MARS

selling veronicaMARS

There is no good way to make **Veronica Mars** sound appealing to your friends.

Try all you like but TV's best show is a hard show to sell.

Let's give it a shot!

It's about a teenage girl that solves mysteries! Like Nancy Drew or Harriet the Spy.

Strangely accurate, but your little sister already watches.

It's kind of like Buffy... except without all the magic.

So it's a unique show without the thing that made it unique?

It's on after Gilmore Girls now!

You're not helping...

www.DigitalPIMPonline.com

©2006 Joseph Dunn

¹⁷⁵ <http://www.digitalpimponline.com/strips.php?title=movie&id=194>

Appendix Four – Rob Thomas’ Mass E-mail (2nd)¹⁷⁶

Hey gang,

I spent the morning catching up on the past few weeks of e-mail, and as I did so, I kept a list of the most common questions. I'll give the responses in no particular order.

Did you see what Joss Whedon posted on Whedonesque.com about Veronica Mars?

I did. Several people sent me the link. His extraordinarily generous comments really made my week. I sent him a thank you e-mail, and he sent me back a note that said that, in watching Veronica Mars, he's come to understand, better, the fervor of Buffy fans.

The things he complimented about our show -- the plotting, the dialogue, the relationships, the acting are all elements I've admired in Buffy. Joss' comments actually meant so much to me that I e-mailed my parents the link though I'm quite sure they don't know who he is.

I've also put Season 2 of Buffy in my Netflix queue. I think I never let myself get fully-hooked by Buffy for the same reason that I feel a lot of people don't watch Veronica. By the time the enthusiastic word-of-mouth reached me, I felt like I'd already missed the bus. I was afraid of being so far behind in the mythology that I couldn't follow the ongoing storylines, though I would occasionally see episodes and admire the snappiness, the pacing, the angst.

For those of you who didn't see Joss' post, here's the link:

<http://whedonesque.com/index.php?comments=7502>

And then “ you heard it here first “ Joss has agreed to guest star on the show. We're firming up plans to have him play a testy, rental car manager in episode six.

Did you see what Kevin Smith posted on his personal blog about Veronica Mars?

I did. It's also very cool. Kevin is appearing in episode three as, of all things, a convenience store clerk. He's fantastic in the episode. Kevin did this Veronica Mars episode as he's a friend of VM producer Dan Etheridge. He hadn't actually seen the show. He watched the episodes later and really dug them, which is extremely cool for us.

¹⁷⁶ <http://www.marsinvestigations.net/media.php?month=9&year=2005&id=17#email2>

Appendix Five – \$2 Campaign



“It would have to be a 2 dollar bill because we all want a 2nd season. On the front replace the President picture with a picture of Veronica. Replace "United States of America" with "United Fans of Veronica Mars." The bill is minted at Federal Reserve Bank of Neptune, CA. Replace "This note is legal tender..." with "This note is a fan campaign for a second season and beyond." Use "N 10032003 VM" as the serial number. N-Neptune, 10-03-2003 is when Lilly was murdered, VM is Veronica Mars. Replace the Treasurer signature at the bottom left with "Slave Rat, Creator of Neptune, CA." The fans can sign their own name for the 2nd signature. Replace "One Dollar" with "Second Season." Replace the Treasure Seal with the seal from the high school floor.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁷ <http://forums.televisionwithoutpity.com/index.php?showtopic=3118677&st=450>

Appendix Six – Season Three: No Guarantee¹⁷⁸

There's a perception among some fans that because critics and Dawn Ostroff love *Veronica Mars*, ratings don't matter and VM is a guaranteed lock for a third season. Here's a rebuttal to some of the most common third-season-is-guaranteed arguments. Warning, it ain't pretty.

Buzz-worthy show vs. Rest of the UPN lineup

Argument: *Veronica Mars* is UPN's highest-rated drama, and it's giving them buzz like nobody's business. It's getting UPN noticed and keeping them on people's radar.

Counter-argument: UPN wanted to prove that they could produce a critically-acclaimed, hit show. And they have done that this season...just not with *Veronica Mars*. *Everybody Hates Chris* is getting the type of ratings and award-show success that VM has never been able to achieve.

Winner: EHC

Also-ran: VM

Network Hype vs. Network Commitment

Argument: It would be seriously bad form, I think, to keep touting VM on their CW schedule and then pull out. Not the way you want to start a brand new network. I still have to believe that UPN/CW President Dawn Ostroff wouldn't have included VM in the CW presentation if it was on the bubble. I just have to.

Counter-argument: Every fall, the networks spend millions of dollars touting their new shows in every single press release, ad, billboard, talk show, etc. As soon as one of those shows tank, they yank the show off the air. Ever since [2.10 "One Angry Veronica"](#), the ratings have disastrous. CBS President Les Moonves and Dawn might have mentioned VM during that news conference and the tentative schedule, but if the ratings continue to tank, they can just as easily put an end to the 3rd season before it begins.

Lesson of the Day: Don't believe the hype.

VM vs. Rest of the UPN and WB lineup

Argument: One more thing to bear in mind is that the absolute number of viewers leaves out the fact that UPN reaches fewer homes than the WB, which means that UPN shows get lower ratings more or less by default. If you really wanted to compare shows on the two networks, you'd have to look at what percentage of the total possible audience they're pulling. They can't drop every show on UPN because the WB's shows beat them in the ratings. Then it wouldn't be a merger, it would be a new name for the WB. Since VM is their top-rated drama, in all likelihood, it will be the one to stay.

Counter-argument: During the week of [2.13 "Ain't No Magic Mountain High Enough"](#), VM finished 143rd out of 146 shows. Of the 15 UPN shows, VM finished 12th. The only shows it beat were *One on One*, *All of Us*, and *South Beach*. VM is a ratings disaster even by UPN standards.

Most of those 11 shows get far less critical acclaim and media buzz than VM, yet they all get higher ratings. Forget about beating *Lost*. How in the hell is VM supposed to get renewed when it can't even beat *Love, Inc.*?

Argument: Because it's not in competition with fucking *Love, Inc.*

Counter-argument: VM isn't *just* in competition with *Love, Inc.*; it's in competition with **every single show** on WB and UPN for a spot on that 13-hour CW line-up. *Gilmore Girls*, *Supernatural*, *Smallville*, *Everwood* — these aren't potential lead-ins; they are the competition. They are all higher rated shows that must-make-a-profit-in-the-first-year Dawn can put on the schedule instead of VM.

Ratings under-performer/disappointment/loser: VM

To VM or not to VM, that is the question

Argument: The CW has slots for dramas and slots for comedies. VM is not vying for a comedy slot. It is UPN's highest-rated drama, however, and considering the president of UPN is the one in charge of the CW, it's a sure bet a UPN drama gets a drama slot, regardless of the WB's ratings. The point is to take the best of both netlets so that there's a mutual benefit.

Counter-argument: The WB does better with dramas than it does with sitcoms. UPN does better with sitcoms than it does with the dramas. *Love, Inc.* plus another half-hour comedy equals another hour of non-

¹⁷⁸ http://marsinvestigations.net/campaigns/season_three_no_guarantee.php

VM programming. You take the best shows from the WB (dramas + *Beauty and the Geek*), the best shows from UPN (comedies + *America's Next Top Model*), throw in a few new shows, and you will have a 13 hour, VM-less lineup.

Final verdict: TBA in May.

Watch UPN Now vs Watch DVDs Later

Argument: Comments like "I will watch the DVD when it comes out" seem to become more common.

Counter-argument: If that is the case, the ratings wouldn't bounce back when ANTM returns.

Another problem with "waiting for the DVDs to come out" is that we don't even know if they are going to release the second season on DVD. People assume that WB is going to automatically release the DVDs, when in truth, that is far from certain. What other shows in the bottom twenty do you expect to be released on DVD?

You're part of the problem, not the solution: People who promise to watch the show "later."

Dawn's Dream vs. Ratings Reality

Argument: Ostroff is reportedly drooling over the possibility of a *Gilmore Girls/Veronica Mars* programming block. Which would make VM's current ratings mildly irrelevant to what she thinks it could do when CW finally hits this fall.

Counter-argument: The main reason this CW deal went through in the first place was because the affiliate deals that UPN and WB had with Tribune and News Corp were about to expire. This merger was a business decision, first and foremost. Moonves, Meyers, and Ostroff weren't really that concerned about the creative aspect. If they were, they would have given the headrunners of some of their top rated shows a little warning ahead of time. And as a business woman, Dawn is going to have to put the best schedule possible to compete with the other big networks. As much as she loves VM, and as much as Fox Peter Liguori loved *Arrested Development*, and as much as ABC's Steve McPherson loves *Arrested Development*, all that love don't mean a thing when the ratings are in the toilet.

CW's fall lineup: Dream come true or worse nightmare come to life?

3 million vs. 2 million

Argument: Michael Ausiello from TV Guide got a copy of the *preliminary* CW schedule, and *Gilmore Girls* and *Veronica Mars* are scheduled on the same night.

Counter-argument: It's still not a sure thing. That's the tentative schedule, before the ratings for [2.12 "Rashard & Wallace Go To White Castle"](#) and [2.13 "Ain't No Magic Mountain High Enough"](#) were in. When Les made announced the formation of CW, VM was averaging 3 million viewers. Since that announcement, VM has averaged 2 million viewers.

Les has said the goal for the CW is to be profitable during its first year. With ratings like 1.6 million and 2.1 million viewers, there is no way that VM fits that game-plan. Dawn might love the show, but with the investors from Time Warner, CBS, and Tribune breathing down her neck for profits in the first year, she will have to create the best lineup she has to achieve the highest ratings possible.

Argument: I don't expect them to cancel VM, since it's one of UPN's most critically acclaimed shows, but networks have done stupider things in the past.

Counter-argument: Sorry to break it to you, but canceling a show with 1.6 million viewers actually qualifies as a smart decision.

All it took was five low-rated episodes before Peter canceled AD. VM had three sub-par rated episodes, and UPN yanked it during February sweeps. What will UPN do if VM continues this ratings spiral?

Well, if the current trend of two-million viewers continue, things are looking kinda murky. Last season Rob said if the ratings go up, the show would get picked up for a second season. If the ratings stay the same, the show had a 50/50 shot. If the ratings went down, the show wouldn't be back.

The last three episodes had lower ratings than last year's average.

William Shakespeare: What is past is prologue...

Love vs. Money

Argument: Right now, I think I will have my own personal final say on the subject (until an official declaration is made) be the following *Entertainment Weekly* article:

Says CBS Corp. CEO Les Moonves: 'The [WB's and UPN's] programming is very complementary. The idea of putting *Gilmore Girls* and *Veronica Mars* together is really exciting.'

Les Moonves is excited about VM. I honestly can't go into panic mode at a point where I'm reading things like that.

Counter-argument: If you want to put all your faith in the supportive words of a network exec, let's see what another network exec had to say about a critically acclaimed, lowly rated show with a rabid cult following.

May 16, 2005 - Peter Liguori, Fox press release.

"*Arrested Development* is one of the best comedies on television. The decision to order another season becomes easy when you consider its amazing cast, creative brilliance, critical acclaim and advertiser appeal," said Liguori. "It's my first official pick-up since taking the job, and I think it's a great way to start." Five sub-par rated episodes later, Peter had a change of heart.

November 18, 2005 - EW article

'The fan base is unquestionably one of the most loyal in TV — it's just too small,' laments Fox Entertainment president Peter Liguori, explaining his 'incredibly painful' decision.

Winner: Money, money, money.

Loser: Shows that dare to be great and the heart-broken fans who love them.

Hope, Hope, Hope

The TV graveyard is littered with series that the critics loved, but the viewers at home didn't give a fig about. (See: *Cupid*, *Arrested Development*, *Wonderfalls*, *My So Called Life*, *Once and Again*, *Profit*, *Undeclared*, *Freaks and Geeks*, etc., etc., etc.) If given a choice between renewing a crappy show with great ratings or a great show with crappy ratings, 95% of time the networks will pick the crappy show with great ratings. However, 5% of the time the networks will actually take a chance and pick the great show with crappy ratings.

The one advantage VM has that most of those brilliant-but-canceled series didn't have is a network boss who is willing to fight for the show. The fact that VM even got a second season is pretty darn amazing. VM was the lowest rated series that got renewed last season. Dawn and Les have made it very clear that they want VM to be a part of the CW lineup. If VM had better ratings, then yes, VM would have a virtual lock on CW's fall lineup right now. Unfortunately the ratings took a nosedive the last few weeks. Dawn and Les don't need much to convince them to renew the show, but they sure as hell need more than 1.6 million viewers.

With [2.14 "Versatile Toppings"](#) being delayed until March 15th, that leaves the fans with some extra time on their hands. What you choose to do during that time is up to you.

"Tragedy blows through your life like a tornado, uprooting everything, creating chaos. You wait for the dust to settle and then you choose."

One option is to resign yourself to the fact that if the ratings continue to spiral downwards, the show might not be back next season. The feeling of defeated hopelessness is a very common reaction among fans of so many lowly-rated shows. They have had their hearts broken one too many times by the cancel-happy TV execs, and therefore they feel they have no other viable option but to sit idly by.

"You can live in the wreckage and pretend it's still the mansion you remember."

Another option is to ignore the ratings, and pretend that everything is superfine.

"Or you can crawl from the rubble and slowly rebuild."

Or you can try to do something about.

The outpouring of fan support was one of the reasons the show got renewed last season. The fans did everything they could to let Dawn know that she simply had to give the show a second season. We sent in \$2 bills, voted like mad in E! Online's S.O.S. poll, stuffed every poll we could find, pimped the show to anyone and everyone who owned a TV set, etc.

"Because after disaster strikes, the important thing is that you move on. But if you're like me, you just keep chasing the storm."

Like Rob Thomas said in the beginning of the season: "At the end of the day, what *Veronica Mars* needs more than anything is more viewers." The show needs new fans, and we need them now. Three million viewers and the show is part of the CW lineup. Two million viewers and the show gets yanked during sweeps.

Based on emails our site has received and various message board posts, we know new viewers are still slowly trickling in. We need to turn that trickle into a downpour by March 15th. Now is the the time to make a move, get in the game. What, you gonna get hurt? Have a beautiful train wreck.

Step 1. Grab your VM DVDs.

Step 2. Grab your friend, sibling, parent, co-worker, and/or roommate by their shirttails and force them to watch season one in order to hook 'em on [season two](#).

Step 3. Turn these [newbies](#) into VM-addicted, [postcard-sending](#), I-want-my-VMTV [yimps](#).

Step 4. Repeat steps 1 to 3 until Dawn announces the CW lineup in May.

Appendix Seven – UPN on VM's future and fan support¹⁷⁹

I know the fans are concerned about the future of the show, so I sent an email inquiring if there is anything that the fans can do to help the show. Here's the response from a UPN spokesperson.

wyk: Any fan-lead attempts to increase viewership are tempered by the fact that unless these new viewers are a Nielsen family, these efforts won't improve the ratings. If we gather stats that show new fans are still tuning in, would the network be interested in this data?

UPN spokesperson: Fan support of any kind is always appreciated and is definitely communicated to the network decision makers. Any time we have a show that the viewers are passionate about, we appreciate hearing from them and we take that into consideration.

wyk: International fans have no affect on the U.S. ratings. Should they get involved with this campaign?

UPN spokesperson: International fans help send a message to the studio (in the case of Veronica Mars, the studio Warner Bros. Television) that there is interest overseas, which means the studio might be able to sell the series in the international market. But, it is true that international fans don't have an affect on the U.S. ratings.

wyk: A lot of fan campaigns use online petitions or letters to advertisers. Do these types of activities have any influence?

UPN spokesperson: As long as there is a large groundswell, all types of fan campaigns can get a network's attention.

wyk: Up until recently, most fans were convinced that a third season was an absolute lock, therefore they didn't feel compelled to take any action. In recent weeks, some fans are beginning to question that assumption.

My feeling is the network wants the show to comeback. With 3 million viewers, the network was willing to give the show a chance to find a bigger audience on the CW. Unfortunately with the recent nosedive in ratings, the future has become less certain. Is this an accurate assessment of the situation?

UPN spokesperson: The two shows that are guaranteed to go to The CW are "America's Next Top Model" and "SmackDown," since those shows had already been renewed by UPN for the fall. "Veronica Mars" is on the short list of already announced series that are in contention for The CW, and that is still the case. Higher ratings would definitely make the decision more cut and dry.

wyk: Fans of low-rated shows often feel their efforts to save the show will have no affect on the network execs, therefore they don't even see the point in trying. Rob Thomas credits the rabid fan support as one of the reasons why the show is still on the air. Is the network still willing to take into account the fan support when they make the final scheduling decisions in May? Or has the attitude changed to the point that scheduling decisions are based solely on ratings?

UPN spokesperson: Scheduling decisions are made based on a variety of factors. Ratings are not the only thing executives take into account and fan support as well as critical acclaim can also have an effect.

¹⁷⁹ http://www.marsinvestigations.net/media.php?media_id=538

wyk: As long as the fans know that the network hasn't completely written off the show or the importance of fan support, that will go a long way in reassuring the fans that their efforts during the remaining six episodes can play a part in bringing the show back for a third season.

UPN spokesperson: UPN has been very supportive of "Veronica." As one of our dedicated bloggers, you've probably noticed that UPN has been judicious in continuing with our outreach efforts. We recognize that bloggers play an influential and vital role in disseminating information and, more importantly, in motivating the public to act. In this case, we want the viewers to watch this show. So, thank you for your support and please keep it up!!!

Appendix Eight – The Shower Campaign¹⁸⁰



¹⁸⁰ <http://marsinvestigations.net/campaigns/postcardprint.php>

Appendix Nine – Look to the Skies Campaign¹⁸¹



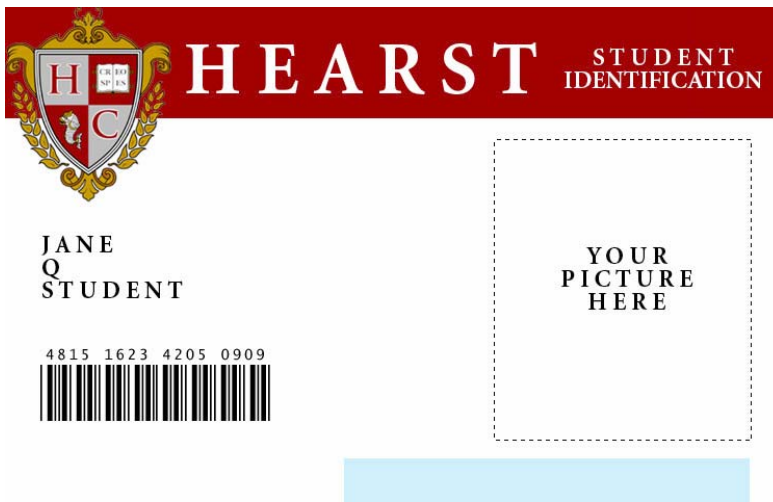
Plane photo: ©The WB/Mitch Haddad.

¹⁸¹ http://www.watchveronicamars.net/uploads/images/FLYBY_FullPlane.jpg

Appendix Ten – The Fake Ids Campaign¹⁸²

- **You can print the ID** (print the PDF file if you want a higher quality ID).
Then, write your name (above the address), your gender, the color of your hair, the color of your eyes, staple a picture, and sign at the bottom.

- **You can use the Power Point file** (also works with OpenOffice).
Click on the "write here" zones. **Your photo will look better if it's 407x471 pixels.**



¹⁸² http://community.livejournal.com/cloud_watchers/64402.html#cutid1

You can also use a **Neptune ID** with one of the characters' picture (just write your name above the address and sign at the bottom).



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