

All over Hollywood, creative people like TV's **Shonda Rhimes** are using Twitter to feed their hungry fans—and alter the balance of power

Sweet Tweet

The bulletin was, for the fans at least, a bombshell. “Ellen Pompeo Says No Baby on Grey’s Anatomy This Season,” E! Online reporter Kristin Dos Santos announced on the Web site Twitter, referring to the lead actress on ABC’s hit medical drama. Within moments the scoop was making its way around the Internet—McDreamy’s squeeze would not have a bun in her oven! There was just one problem: Pompeo had been far less definitive.

Shonda Rhimes, the show’s creator, wasted no time. “I think the word that Ellen used was PROBABLY,” she tweeted right back. “Which was a smart savvy thing for her to say.” Immediately Dos Santos reversed herself: “good call. Ellen did say ‘probably’... Sorry and thx!”

Crisis averted. And in less than 140 characters to boot.

It’s hardly news that Twitter is the great equalizer for stars and their nobody fans. More than 6 million people may follow Ashton Kutcher’s @aplusk account, for example, but the actor still gets the same number of characters as the rest of us to express (or embarrass) himself. Lately in hierarchical Hollywood,

the brevity and immediacy of Twitter—as well as its direct, unfiltered quality—are enabling a subtle redistribution of power.

Rhimes is one of many TV series creators, show runners, and writers who have begun tweeting as a way of taking control of their brands—from the media, certainly (“When the tabloids were reporting that Ellen Pompeo had six toes, I was like, ‘Should I tweet about that?’ Ellen and I have never laughed so hard,” Rhimes says), but also occasionally from the networks on which their shows exist. On Twitter, they find, it’s easy to inject a little oomph into a lackluster marketing campaign, building buzz for a young, struggling show simply by making viewers feel like confidants.

“It’s made a difference in how fans interact with the show and feel a sense of community with it,” says Rhimes, who in addition to *Grey’s* created the spin-off *Private Practice*. While the number of people who follow @shondarhimes (55,844) pales in comparison to her overall viewers (20 million), these superfans are influential. She’s too polite to say so, but we’re not: When managed correctly, that kind of visible audience fervor gives



Rhimes added clout to protect her own shows and to promote the work of others.

"I have all these *Grey's Anatomy* fans following me, and I can say, 'Go watch this show, too,'" says Rhimes. "I like getting to do that."

Consider what happened in October, when @shondarhimes—who on average tweets ten times a day—revealed her abiding love for a show she has nothing to do with. "Okay, peeps, it is Wednesday. WATCH COUGAR TOWN. It's hilarious," she tweeted about the ABC comedy that revolves around a fortysomething divorcée and her dysfunctional group of friends. When an assistant to one of *Cougar Town*'s creators, Bill Lawrence, alerted him to Rhimes's endorsement, everyone in his writers' room agreed: It needed to be capitalized on—and quickly.

Minutes later Lawrence (aka @VDOOZER) took to his keyboard and tweeted a response to Rhimes: "We have stopped writing to figure

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out new ways to thank you for saying nice things about our show (and cause we hate working)." Rhimes replied, "Now I'm all embarrassed because you caught me stalking your awesome show." Lawrence didn't hesitate. "I'm needy," he tweeted. For good measure Lawrence and show cocreator Kevin Biegel (@kbiegel) sent Rhimes a big batch of cookies. In November, when Rhimes weighed in again

("Cougar Town! Who watched it on the East Coast? Cause I am still at work and I need my fix!"), @kbiegel promptly gushed, "I love you, Shonda. I'm sending over more cookies."

"Shonda is such a powerful voice among fans," says Lawrence. "I know without a doubt her viewers tuned in to our show."

Lawrence and Biegel, meanwhile, have used Twitter to do for others what Rhimes did for them. "Watch #Community tonight. Watch it twice," Biegel tweeted in October about the NBC comedy that follows the goings-on at a community college. A few weeks later a fan responded, "Iluv cougar town & started watching commun@ur recommend—and Iluv it too. Any other suggestions?"

"I've never met Dan Harmon once in my life," Biegel says of *Community*'s creator, @danharmon. "But now we have a 140-character relationship supporting each other. You are kind of forced to cut to the quick. Twitter takes the bullshit out of Hollywood relationships."

Even before they learned they had a fan in Rhimes, Lawrence and Biegel were playing the Twitter game, having used it to try to change *Cougar Town*'s image during the run-up to the second season. The dilemma: While the show was originally written about an aging single woman on the prowl for younger guys, over the course of the first season it evolved into a fortysomething *Friends*-meets-*Scrubs*-plus-wine ensemble comedy (not surprising, given that *Cougar Town* stars ex-*Friends* cast member Courteney Cox and Lawrence created *Scrubs*). But most TV viewers, who had already dismissed the show as crass, sexist, and unendearing, didn't know that.

During the summer, the creators pushed ABC to change the name of *Cougar Town* to something more reflective of the new premise, but to no avail. So when the series returned in September, they decided to alter the name on their own, sort of, by adding a parenthetical before the title of each episode. The first one read "(Still) Cougar Town." Another one was more blunt: "(Badly Titled) Cougar Town."

"We're in the awkward position of getting the message out that the show is not what you think it is," says Lawrence. "The network, for savvy financial business reasons, was not interested in changing the title. But they're not giving us an opportunity to let viewers know what the show really is. And we need to correct it via any avenue we can."

If Twitter is the avenue, it stands to reason that the more people involved with *Cougar Town* who are tweeting, the better. After all, it's not just each Twitterer's followers who can see what they write—anyone searching for references to the show can read the tweets. So Lawrence and Biegel ordered their entire writing staff to converge on Twitter—and then ordered fans to "find and torture them." (Writers tweet collectively at @CougarTownRoom.) The cast has gotten involved, too. When *Cougar Town* star Busy Phillips (@busyphillips25) asked fans to tweet suggestions for parenthetical titles for upcoming episodes, Lawrence tweeted about the impact: "Busy Phillips exploded my Twitter account. Thanks for suggestions. Some of you nailed one we are using. We will pick another from fans."

Lawrence and Biegel also plan to use Twitter as a backdoor focus group for story lines. For example, they're seriously pondering a romance between Phillips's character (Laurie) and Dan Byrd's (Travis). "They have such great chemistry," Lawrence says, "even in scenes they're not supposed to. In real life they're much closer in age than in TV life, so we'll probably go on Twitter and see what the response is as to when it's OK to put them together. Hopefully fans will confirm our feelings."

And if they don't? "I can always tweet 'you suck,' too," says Biegel, adding that Twitter has become something of an addiction, particularly for Lawrence. "I have to wean him off of responding to everyone. He promised some guy he'd help him with his Halloween costume. There are boundaries, man!"

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Now, on *Private Practice*, Kate Walsh (whose handle is @katewalsh, with 66,133 followers) was concerned that ABC's promotional execs were treating her series like *Grey's Anatomy*'s red-haired stepchild. So she took the matter into her own hands, rallying the whole cast to Twitter.

All but two of the leads tweet daily. Walsh posts pictures of her cats, dogs, shoes; musings from the Atlanta airport; shout-outs to fans. Clearly @katewalsh does not believe there's a price to pay for tweeting too much. As for her costars, KaDee Strickland (@kadeestrick) gives fans weekly previews ("saw epi. 406!" she'll tease. "big issues...lots of couple conflict! happy ending?"). Taye Diggs (@thetayediggs) shares random facts about himself ("What up, y'all—stupid personal fact #3—I didn't learn to drive a car until my thirties"). And everybody regularly tweets photos from the set.

The fans have responded—in at least one instance—in a way that has been memorialized on the show. After viewers started referring to the romance between Walsh's character, Dr. Addison Montgomery, and Diggs's Dr. Sam Bennett as "Addisam," Rhimes wrote the nickname into an episode.

Walsh has also used Twitter to expand her merchandising empire. In November, when she launched her perfume, Boyfriend, her Twitter account was on fire (as was @Boyfriend, the scent's own handle) with video links and other promotions. Boyfriend sold out on the first day.

Promotion aside, Twitter can also be a brilliant platform for personal revelations—particularly the kind that the revealer isn't eager to elaborate on. Neil Patrick Harris (@actuallynph) deftly tweeted all of twice about becoming a father. The first tweet said that he and his partner, David Burtka, were expecting twins ("We're super excited/nervous/thrilled. Hoping the press can respect our privacy...") and the second stated that the twins had been born ("Babies!! On 10/12, Gideon Scott and Harper Grace entered the Burtka-Harris fold. All of us are happy, healthy, tired, and a little pukey"). The tabloids, which would have been all over the story if given an opening, had nothing to report. Harris gave no interviews. Every subsequent

article was forced to cite his tweets.

But if the promise of such control is Twitter's upside, ever-present vulnerability is its downside. What makes Twitter appealing—suggested intimacy—has also made many a tweeter wish they'd used more restraint. Who can forget Ashton Kutcher's infamous twitpic of wife Demi Moore bent over, wearing only white underwear? And one can easily imagine @kanyewest's publicity team pulling out its hair as the rapper's round-the-clock tweets prove, again and again, that there is such a thing as sharing too much.

Rich Sommer, who plays Harry Crane on *Mad Men*, is only the latest celebrity to fall victim to what might be called tweet-in-mouth disease. In November, as contract negotiations that would determine the show's future continued, Sommer tweeted, "I have no idea if there will be a season 5 of MM. I am operating under the assumption that there won't be, until I hear otherwise." Judging from a "MAJOR CLARIFICATION" he later posted on his blog, Sommer got a lot of flak from his colleagues. "I did not intend to start the s**t storm I've clearly started, and I did not intend to ruin anyone's day, fans and coworkers alike," Sommer flailed. "That is all. Retreating to my hole now."

Rhimes offers some Twitter etiquette that works whether you're famous or not. "Don't tweet while drunk. Drunk tweeting is bad. Twitter can backfire," she says. "There's a danger when you're speaking directly to the fans and they're talking back to you. If you're not self-loathing like me, you can begin to think you're way more important than you are."

"Say what you plan to tweet out loud beforehand," advises Lawrence. "Twitter can't understand your tone." To wit, after Rhimes gave *Cougar Town* its first mention, Jamie Rorison, a 22-year-old aspiring filmmaker in England who goes by the handle @Bonus_mosher, sent this tweet addressed to Rhimes (but viewable by all): "surprised u and @VDOOZER are friends given the frequent lashings of Grey's in scrubs but hey, I love both!"

Lawrence immediately defended his honor: "Bonus trying to stir up trouble? Not true, by the by. Two mentions of Grey's in nine years." Plus, @VDOOZER noted in another tweet, those two mentions only poked fun at both shows' "unavoidably similar hospital stories."

Rorison demurred—he'd been misunderstood. "I love scrubs," he tweeted, attaching a link to a photo of a signed *Scrubs* script that he said he'd "paid a lot for." Lawrence reassured him in just 95 characters: "No problem, my friend. Thnks for watching. Shonda has been so nice to us that I got protective." ■

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