



OFF THE C H I A

Thanks to buzz and engagement—and viewers who watch on computers and smartphones—*Gossip Girl* is a huge hit

BY JIM COLUCCI

Blair Waldorf rules her prep school peers with an iron fist inside a designer glove. To survive the rich, young New York social scene, all must bow to “Queen B.” The problem is, outside Blair’s tony Upper East Side neighborhood—and *Gossip Girl*’s age 18-34 female fan demographic—there are a lot of Madison Avenue types who may not acknowledge her power.

As pop culture expert and trendologist Marian Salzman says, “Every generation has a defining show—there was *90210*, *Friends* and *Sex and the City*. And I have predicted since the very start that *Gossip Girl* would be that defining show now.”



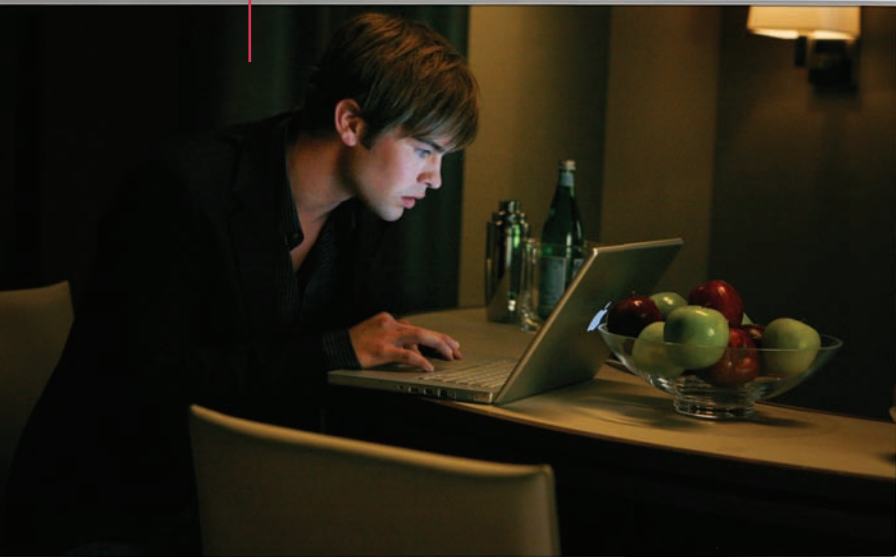
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Salzman points to plentiful evidence of the show's popularity reflected in today's fashions. "With the show's clean-cut, cocktail party attire, I would argue that it's not just Michelle Obama who put J. Crew and its preppy look on the map. It's Michelle Obama plus *Gossip Girl*." The show, she says, holds so much sway over today's teens, it can take a potentially stuffy look and make it hip. "It took madras shorts from being New Canaan, Connecticut, and made them SoHo and Williamsburg."

We all know what the word "popular" means to girls like Blair and her frenemy Serena van der Woodsen— and how far

they'll go to stay that way. But it turns out, becoming "TV popular"—that is, attractive to ad men instead of boys— is a whole different pursuit. Advertisers, and therefore network executives, gauge a show's success according to three basic statistics, says CBS ratings guru David Poltrack. First is the overall audience, as estimated by the Nielsen ratings; by this old-fashioned measure on its own, *Gossip Girl* has never cracked the top half of network shows in prime time. Second, Poltrack and his peers look to a show's audience demographic makeup. In this case, score one for *Gossip*, which has a particular appeal to the young, female audience coveted by

Episodes streamed online have fewer ads than those seen on TV, but the viewer cannot fast-forward through them.



the many advertisers seeking to win brand loyalty at an impressionable age. And so that's why, despite the show's overall scores, you'll often read stories describing the show as a "hit."

As Associated Press reporter David Bauder observes, with The CW network focused on attracting just that smaller niche of viewers, "*Gossip Girl* really seems to have hit the sweet spot for them."

The third ratings measurement, Poltrack continues, is based on a newer concept, which network types refer to as "engagement." Yes, the thinking goes, you may watch the show—but how much do you *love* it? Traditionally, networks have looked to a company called

TVQ, which calculates a simple numerical "Q" score to describe the likeability of both shows and individual performers. Is the show, the company asks, one of your favorites?

In recent years, the company IAG Research has begun testing a panel with a battery of trivia questions designed to see if we're truly paying attention to the show and its ads. Studies have shown that people who say they're "engaged with" a program—who are passionate, who seek it out, who watch every moment without fail—are more likely to recall the commercials aired during its breaks. And advertisers, who foot the bill for our favorite shows, want us to listen to what they have to say about their brand of shoes.

"Who watches TV on a TV anymore?" *Gossip Girl*'s youngest character, Eric, once wondered. And for today's teens, that's a good question. *Gossip Girl*'s young, tech-savvy audience happens to have a high level of engagement; they just don't typically watch the show live on television at 9 p.m. on Mondays. Today, *Gossip* fans have plenty of ways to watch: on their DVRs, on their laptops, on their phones.

As Poltrack explains, "If you look at just the streamed Internet audiences of television programs, *Gossip Girl* ranks right up there with the big guys because it's a show that appeals to the people who do the most streaming."

So for the ad sales team at The CW, the blessing of high *Gossip Girl* viewer engagement, manifested in its many, multimedia ways, is a challenge in disguise. After all, each of these viewing media has



Gossip Girl fans use new media to alert others where the show is filming, discuss plot points and even find out where to buy Serena's outfits.

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its own quirks. When watching shows on a DVR—viewership that most advertisers have now agreed to throw into the pot if the show is watched within three days of airing—audience members have the power to fast-forward through the ads (although as Poltrack explains, studies have shown that many of us typically don't.) Episodes streamed online are filled with fewer commercials—usually only two—but we can't skip past them.

The differing standards and technologies only serve to complicate the question advertisers want answered most: How do I make sure I can reach *Gossip Girl's* hot young audience, wherever they are, and however they consume media? As Bauder notes, "These are people who are much more apt to be experiencing shows in all these different ways. So not having a reliable enough system that measures all these is a particular problem for a network like The CW."

Every day, *Gossip Girl* fans are Googling their favorite quotes and trivia. They're posting their thoughts on Blair's latest outfit to fan forums and reading similar critiques in both print and online magazines. They're tweeting about watching Serena and Jenny in a scene being filmed on location in New York. They're even becoming Facebook friends with the show's actors and fans of its characters. And the ultimate question for an advertiser, Poltrack says, is "Without butting in and seeming uncool, 'How do I become part of this *Gossip Girl* conversation?'"

In some ways, research companies have sought to answer this literally. Because we still talk to each other more in person than online, the Keller Fay Group has sought to measure our "word of mouth." Their goal is to find out what we tell each other about *Gossip Girl* and any other brand names that may pop up by recruiting research subjects who agree to the seemingly maddening task of logging everything they say.

It may seem Big Brother-ish, but it's all in service of a goal—to offer advertisers the chance to sponsor the entire *Gossip Girl* experience. "Social networking sites, *Gossip Girl* fan sites, chat—whatever you've got," Poltrack says. "We'd like, and advertisers would like, to be able to say, 'All of these are brought to you by the same people.'"

As of now, no one has come up with one way to wrangle the whole "conversation" about each TV show and its many moving parts into one number, to be used in an apples-to-apples comparison of any two or more shows. Currently, Nielsen,

the company that has for decades produced the traditional TV ratings, is experimenting with a "Convergence Panel" to tie TV and Internet usage into one system. "More and more of the pieces are coming together," Poltrack suggests. "And you can take a show like *Gossip Girl* and say fairly definitively that its rating on that eventual new 'cultural impact' scale is going to be a lot higher than its rating in the traditional Niensens."

During the 2009 "upfront"—the few weeks each May and June when most advertisers buy ad time for the TV season to come—CW President Dawn Ostroff began talking about her network's shows' ranking according to a index compiled by buying agency OptiMedia. Under the system, which takes into account everything from live ratings to "buzz" going around about a particular show, *Gossip Girl* would rank not below 100, but at No. 19 among its target demographic. "We would have a top 20 show," Ostroff declares.

For now, this proprietary ranking methodology has yet to be statistically validated as anything more than a guideline. But it does show how much things have changed in television; in decades past, any show ranking as low in the overall ratings as No. 100 would be an automatic candidate for cancellation. Now, with so many other factors coming into play, the network's view of a colorful show like *Gossip Girl* is far less black and white.

The goal now is to convince advertisers who are slow to adapt their old-fashioned notions of Niensens. "I think everybody looks at the numbers from Nielsen and doesn't really know how to interpret them," Ostroff says. "First of all, we sell only women 18 to 34, so those are really the only numbers we're interested in. On top of that, they don't understand that we've got consumers who view our shows by streaming them online, by downloading them, even by getting them illegally on various sites. There *have* to be more people watching these shows. Because how else is it possible that we could be such a big part of pop culture today?"

Poltrack agrees that *Gossip Girl* is reaching many of the right people. "Teen influencers," he describes them in marketing terms. "They were the people we all hated in high school because we weren't one of them," he jokes. "But they're the ones who are watching *Gossip Girl*, and they set the fashion standards and the styles." That's why, Ostroff adds, despite whatever all these different



"Teen influencers"—the real-life versions of Blair and Serena—are a big audience for *Gossip Girl*.

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—Marian Salzman

Gossip Girl character Chuck Bass has 99,000 fans on Facebook; poor Georgina Sparks has to make do with fewer than 2,000.



numbers say, advertisers ultimately want to be on *Gossip Girl*, and The CW as a whole.

Studies have shown that once every minute, someone somewhere is tweeting about The CW. "These trendsetters set the tone for pop culture, and advertisers want to be in that environment," Ostroff says. "They want to be on our air, associated with our shows and talent, and, to a large degree, associated with the network."

As technology offers more ways to watch, TV networks are working to keep up with the times. That's why last year, The CW studied groups of women in 10 cities, watching them watch its shows.

"The women would be sitting next to each other on the couch, and they'd actually text each other 'I love that!' rather than speaking out loud, which is hilarious," Ostroff remembers. "But we also saw how they look at The CW. They want to see what the clothes are. They want to know what the music is. They want to see what cars our characters are driving. So they literally watch our shows the way they would read a magazine, to get information to

help them set their own styles—maybe looking to get a scarf off one character from *90210*, a jacket from another on *One Tree Hill*, and maybe some music from that new artist they heard on *Gossip Girl*. It was really very telling, and it showed us how the many ways you can get information are all blending together for this younger consumer. Nothing is in quite the same box it used to be."

That's why marketers need to redefine their old ways, Salzman says. "Because *Gossip Girl* is more than a show—it's today's defining cultural commentary, capturing the aspirational voice of where we are. *Gossip Girl* is a lifestyle, one we want to be voyeurs into. I think that's why it's really fun for people."

And while "fun" and "buzz" are important, for now, they're subjective terms, says Bauder. "Evidence of those things is anecdotal, which requires you in the end to go with your gut."

Or, as rich girl Serena once said to her on-again/off-again boyfriend from

the wrong side of the Hudson, "What do you say we just forget thinking, and follow our hearts?"

GOSSIP GIRL AIRS
MONDAYS AT 9 P.M.
ET/PT ON THE CW.