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Interactive stunt backfires for NBC's 'Criminal Intent'

October 29, 2004

We have some advice today for the next network executive who thinks about making good shows interactive: Don't.

Put down the phone, let go of the mouse and walk away. It'll save your dignity - wait, you're a network exec; too late. It will, however, save the dignity of your show.

We're not talking about reality or local news or other gimmick shows, but for dramas with some distinction, nothing good can come of it when networks start asking viewers to vote on plot or characters.

Case in point: NBC's "Law & Order: Criminal Intent," a top-notch and good, fun procedural that managed to tick off a sizeable portion of its fans with a stunt finish and a vote.

On Oct. 17, NBC showed two endings. East Coast viewers saw the last-minute escape of sociopath Nicole Wallace (Olivia d'Abo), who's become the nemesis of Detective Goran (Vincent D'Onofrio), and, no, you don't need an apostrophe in your name to be on this show.

Anyway, West Coast viewers saw Goran shoot and kill her. Then viewers across the country went to NBC's Web site to see both endings and vote on which one they preferred.

The result: She lives - 62,074. She dies - 54,224. Wallace will be back to joust again with Goran. Cue the evil laughter.

Here's the thing: If you voted for her demise, you feel a little cheated. If you saw Wallace get shot, it's going to be freaky to have her show up again if you didn't get the results.

But mostly, if you like this stylish whodunit, it just feels cheap.

Fan sites for the show have not been thrilled by the outcome of the vote, and are even less thrilled by the vote itself.

Now, many viewers say, they sense the hand of NBC lying heavy on the show, and "Criminal Intent" was doing just fine on its own.

NBC is among the worst of the networks for messing with shows - it starts and ends some a few minutes off the hour, it stunt casts like mad, and it hypes shows so much you can't watch promos for "Law & Order" because they give away the plot.

This trick was just unnecessary. "Criminal Intent" has dropped a couple of spots in the ratings - it's down about 1 million viewers from last year to just over 12 million - but still ranks 23rd for this season. And most of the drop is because it airs Sundays opposite ABC's "Desperate Housewives," the hottest new show this season.

In other words, "Criminal Intent" is doing as well as could be expected and its repeats may get even better ratings than they have in the past. Unless NBC keeps messing with it.

If you want to feel a bit better about TV news, or at least what TV news once was, catch "Making History with Roger Mudd: A Conversation with Walter Cronkite" tonight on The History Channel.

It's a one-hour chat between Mudd and Cronkite, former colleagues at CBS News, and it's a reminder of how honorable and responsible TV journalism could be.

Cronkite had always "seemed fair, candid and steady," as Mudd says, and earned the title of the most trusted man in America. When Mudd asks Cronkite how he thinks he got that, Cronkite says, "I'll be darned if I know."

Cronkite goes on to talk about why network news was so well regarded through its first decades and at least up until his retirement in 1981.

"You didn't play tricks on the air," he says. "You didn't fool around with the news. The news was more important than you were."

Watching Mudd and Cronkite, two former lions of journalism, feels both warmly nostalgic for how high they tried to reach and a bit sad for how far TV news has fallen.