Netflix can kill The OA, but it can’t kill a movement

Enlarge / In *The OA* S2, Prairie finds herself in a mysterious hallway straight out of science fiction.
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There’s something ironic about #SaveTheOA. For those who need a primer, the hashtag—and the movement around it—sprung up a few weeks ago when Netflix announced it was canceling the beloved but little-watched sci-fi drama *The OA*. It’s not strange that fans would rally online to save a show; such methods have saved everything from *Community* to *Veronica Mars*. What’s peculiar is that the most impactful results of #SaveTheOA have manifested IRL, somewhere far from the Netflix queues and web forums where the show found its home.

The latest manifestation happened in New York City’s Times Square earlier this week. As flash mobs descended, a massive billboard—paid for by a GoFundMe—projected #SaveTheOA throughout the main hub of Midtown. The flash mobs performed the show’s “movements,” odd-looking dances meant to transcend time and space and also foster community. The billboard, which raised more than $5,000 in 24 hours, was made using fan art and was animated by a team that spanned the globe. Last week, on the other side of the country, fans picketed outside Netflix’s Los Angeles headquarters with signs reading “Algorithms don’t tell stories. Human hearts do.” One fan even

went on a hunger strike to bring back the show. There may be a hashtag, but the efforts to bring back *The OA* go far beyond the usual internet slacktivism.

To be clear, there is also a Change.org petition. Nearly 80,000 people have signed it since Netflix canceled the show on August 5. But at a time when Twitter can save a show like *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, which got scooped up by NBC almost as soon as Fox dropped it, *The OA*‘s fans are going to far greater lengths than most do to save their favorite programs. This shows a deep understanding of how TV works now. The *OA* devout, as evidenced by their promotional campaigns and protest signage, know that a company like Netflix is primarily driven by viewership numbers. They believe the streaming giant didn’t do enough to promote their show, so they’re doing it themselves.

“Many people haven’t seen this show,” organizer Mandy Paris told the *Los Angeles Times*. “But rather than run a hostile campaign, we want to bring the attention to *The OA* and demonstrate to Netflix that the show could have a much wider reach if people knew about it. We’re running a multifaceted campaign, organized through a Discord chat with watchtheoa.com as our hub, focusing on fans who want to help campaign for the show’s renewal.”

In ye olden days, fans would write letters to save *Star Trek* or mail lightbulbs to NBC to renew *Friday Night Lights*. More recently, online boosterism brought back *Community* and raised the funding for a *Veronica Mars* movie. But Netflix isn’t short on cash, and its highly unlikely they company would let the show go to another outlet, so fans have to speak in the language the streamer understands: viewership numbers. The best shot they have is convincing so many people to watch *The OA* that Netflix has to take notice and make more of it. It

might be a long shot, but the fandom of *Sense8* was able to persuade Netflix to make a two-hour finale for the Wachowski siblings' quirky sci-fi drama. They may not get the five seasons Netflix once said it had planned, but they might get something.

In a climate where the streaming wars have rendered new series easy to ramp up and shut down, getting a coda is a big deal—especially for fans of a show like *The OA*. The series, created by Brit Marling and Zal Batmanglij, has largely been embraced because of the diversity it represents, which includes LGBTQ+ characters, folks confronting mental health issues, and people of color. It's about facing adversity and overcoming it. Completing its narrative arc could bring closure for those who found solace in the show, just as the series itself built community among its fans—including on sites like The OA Is Real.

Over the weekend, Marling posted a long letter to fans of her show on Instagram. In it, she noted that *The OA*'s "unexpected cancelation begs larger questions about the role of

storytelling and its fate inside late capitalism’s push toward consolidation and economies of scale.” She doesn’t mention Netflix, but it’s implied. As she closed the note, she proclaimed that the show’s story was no longer being written by herself or Batmanglij; it was being taken over by the fans. “You are standing on street corners in the hot sun in protest. You are meeting new people in strange recesses online and sharing stories about loss and renewal that you never thought you’d tell anyone,” she wrote. “You are learning choreography and moving in ways you haven’t dared move before … All of it is worth something.”

All of it, it seems, is part of the movement.

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