

# Who Saved *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*? An Investigation Behind the Politics of Television

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I never *meant* to become a fan of the television show *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*; it just happened. I decided to try out a Hulu subscription because they were doing a Christmas sale where you got the first month free, and so I figured that I would take advantage. I answered some questions about my television preferences, and a box popped up, urging me to click on *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, which is a fictional sitcom that focuses on the dynamics and relationships within Brooklyn's 99<sup>th</sup> precinct.

*Brooklyn Nine-Nine* revolves around a core set of characters, but the star of the show is Jake Peralta. Peralta is a talented carefree cop who always seems to land himself in a sticky situation, and he is constantly looking toward the bright side of a situation. He is head-over-heels in love with his partner, Amy Santiago, and he looks at his Captain, Ray Holt, as a father figure and mentor. The show breaks boundaries by featuring Holt as an openly gay captain and having two Hispanic female leads, one of whom is bisexual.

As I started watching, I was not impressed with the show. I had heard a lot about its diversity and how its comedy was not at the expense of others, so I knew that I should have liked it. I just simply did not find it that funny. So, when my free month of Hulu ended, and I went to unsubscribe, I was confident that I would not miss the show. But later in the year, I could not stop wondering about what happened in the season that I never got around to watching.

Eventually, I caved. I did not realize how much I had become attached to the show, and I missed it. Hulu was right after all. I bought the rest of the series on iTunes and fell in love with the show and the characters.

So, when I heard that *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* was being cancelled two short months later, I was devastated. I had just started to understand the appeal of the show; FOX could not possibly be planning on taking it away. When I opened *Buzzfeed*, I saw that was not the only one who felt this way. The #Save99 began to trend on *Twitter*, and famous viewers such as director Guillermo del Toro and Broadway Lin Manuel Miranda tried to leverage their star power to get *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* renewed for a sixth season (McKee; Wanshel). Articles started popping up titled things such as “‘Brooklyn Nine-Nine’ Has Been Canceled, And Twitter Mourns” and “Fans in Mourning: Brooklyn Nine-Nine Cancelled After 5 Seasons” (Wanshel; “Fans in Mourning”).

The mourning did not last long, thank goodness. Just one day later, good news arrived: NBC was going to pick up *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* for another season, saving it from the cuts that FOX had made (Heritage). New articles were popping up everywhere, but this time they were spreading a happier message. Headlines like “Brooklyn Nine-Nine Saved by NBC After Outcry on Social Media” and “Brooklyn Nine-Nine: NBC Saves Cop Show After Outcry Online” (McKee, “Brooklyn Nine-Nine: NBC Saves Cop Show After Outcry Online.”). Stuart Heritage of MSN fittingly wrote that “even Jesus stayed dead longer than *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*” (Heritage).

But the articles got it wrong: NBC saving *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* was not due to fan outcry. According to an interview with *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* writer Dan Goor, “Bob [Greenblatt] has always said, for the last five years, every time I’ve seen him, ‘I really love Brooklyn. I’d love to have it on NBC’” (Goor). FOX had been thinking of canceling *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* for some time before they actually made the cut: it barely even got renewed for a fifth season. This information was no secret and it means that NBC has been able to plan on making arrangements long before the show actually got canceled, swooping in at the last minute in order to act as a savior to fans, and the fans fell for the trick (Heritage). This

is problematic because of the false attribution that NBC gave to the fans that took to *Twitter*.

Both the fans and the cast were thrilled by the news that *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* would be saved. NBC suddenly became a hero, who falsely “rescued” the show from its death. FOX was vilified for cancelling the show, and it was almost like it had killed it along with its characters. When I heard the news, I was elated: I felt like I needed to celebrate the news somehow.

The cast, fittingly, tweeted to their fans, thanking them for saving the show. Dan Goor, the lead writer of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* tweeted “Hey everyone, just wanted to say no big deal but.... NBC JUST PICKED #BROOKLYN99 UP FOR SEASON 6!!! Thanks in no small part to you, the best fans in the history of the world! Nine-nine!!!!!!!!!!” The actors mirrored the sentiment tweeting things such as “THANK YOU INTERNET!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” and “SQUAD YOU DID IT #BROOKLYN99 WILL BE ON NBC FOR OUR 6<sup>th</sup> SEASON.” Actress Melissa Fumero even went as far to say “... You [the fans] did this!! You got loud and were heard [sic] and you saved our show!! Thank you...” (*BBC*). All of the tweets by the actors and director made the fans feel directly responsible for the salvation of the show, perpetuating the falsity that NBC created.

Even though I do not even have a twitter account, and never once mentioned *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* being cancelled to any of my friends, I felt seen by this sudden revival. NBC actually listened to the people, and everyone who banded together actually got things done. This movement felt like such a relief from all of the other bitter battles that our country is fighting today. Grassroots movements have become a popular way to make a difference during this presidential administration, and people have been speaking out through movements such as Black Lives Matter and the Women’s March. But the

administration has seemingly continued to turn a blind eye to these movements: until *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*.

As Melissa Fumero said, “[we] did this”; we participated and made our voices heard and it actually made a difference. It felt like a scale model for the other, larger movements. I could not help thinking that this is how things are supposed to go.

This feeling was not a lucky coincidence; the producers at NBC knew exactly what they were doing. According to a *Vulture* interview with writer Dan Goor, NBC gave the cast the good news and then told them all to “tweet about it at 9 p.m.” (Jung). This was a strategy employed by NBC in order to gain a stronger viewership.

By increasing participation, NBC ensured that their viewers would feel more connected to the show, and therefore would be more likely to continue watching it through its transition to NBC. People form connections with others and feel as if they are taking control of their own life by actively involving themselves in a community. In fact, researchers from the University of Michigan have found that emotion is a strong short-term motivator by studying how emotion links to voter participation (Valentino 157). If something bad happens, then people are much more likely to get out and vote because they are reminded about why it matters. These researchers also discovered that anger is the most powerful emotion for eliciting action (Valentino 168). This shows why fans were so active on *Twitter* during *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*'s brief cancellation.

This anger thrust fans into a tweetstorm. After all, tweeting is much easier to do than voting, and therefore their anger acted as a propellant to fuel their public outrage. But *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is not the first show to be cancelled. All shows must come to an end at some point. Just two years ago, when ABC cancelled the popular Marvel show *Agent Carter*, fans were devastated. They created a petition that gained 127,000 signatures urging Netflix to pick it up. This was not enough, and *Agent Carter* remained dead,

unsaved by the plight of its fans (Heritage). The Netflix original *Sense8* had a very large and dedicated fanbase when it was cancelled, but still nothing happened (Heritage). This just goes to show that large television corporations do not really listen to their fans; they just look at their ratings. No matter how sad fans get at a show's cancellation, the only thing that really matters is whether or not companies can turn a profit from the show.

As people are feeling more and more hopeless in today's political climate, this "win" felt like a breath of fresh air. People are desperate to have their stories told in an era of "fake news," and individual involvement has been on the rise through grassroots movements.

This is why *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* felt so empowering. It may seem like just a silly television show to some, but it really turned into something that was so much more than that. It turned into a movement. The steps that the fans took that led to a false success mirrored larger grassroots movements across the country, and therefore felt like a grassroots movement itself.

A grassroots movement is one that works from the bottom-up, engaging ordinary people to make a difference in a larger corporation. It uses a type of lobbying that political scientists have coined "outsider tactics." This is when an interest group, in this case the fans of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, cannot get in contact with the entity that is in charge (TV corporations). Instead, they contact ordinary people to make a difference. They put pressure on the large organizations through getting media attention and through threatening to withdraw support (Jacobson et al. 544).

An example of a successful grassroots movement is the movement to reduce plastic waste through reducing the use of plastic straws. After a viral Facebook video of a straw being removed from a turtle's nose, people fought from the ground up to reduce straw use. Their movement gained traction, and more and more people began to go

without a straw in their drink. Then, naturally, companies began to notice. Large brand names such as Starbucks and American Airlines have pledged to phase out plastic straws by replacing them with environmentally friendly alternatives, and even the city of Seattle has banned plastic straws throughout the city (Gibbens). This gained them positive media coverage and also people who were boycotting straws began to visit their stores again, increasing their funding. This is an example of an ideal grassroots movement. People see a problem, and they work to fix it, and groups like these have grown exponentially more popular in the recent year. Movements such as Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement have gained enormous cultural significance, and have been shaping the world that we live in.

Individual participation has been especially evident in the political world. This November was a record-breaking month in more ways than one. 49% of eligible voters participated in this past election, which is up from 34% in 2014, the lowest voter turnout in American history. The political world in the United States has flipped on its axis, and 113 million people demanded to be heard this year (Segers). This uptick from record lows to record highs of voters obviously shows how desperate people are to be heard right now. They have felt so unseen as of late, and the record low in voter turnout in 2014 goes to show how disenfranchised people have become with the impact that they have in their community. This hope that we have as a country in 2018, that we can actually make a difference, is so new and fragile that it can easily be broken.

Everyone has been buzzing about the results of the election in 2018, and how we are the ones who are setting the course of history by speaking out. But what happens when corporations start to notice our new fervor? The entire notion of a grassroots movement is that large companies are not involved in the inception, so how can they take advantage of and profit from this trend?

The answer is to do exactly what NBC did. Through a carefully formulated plan, NBC created an artificial grassroots movement. They could have offered to buy *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* the second its cancellation was announced, but instead they waited for other potential buyers such as Hulu to drop out (Goor). This gave them the perfect opportunity to come in and act as a savior, listening to the pleas of the public. By not only overtly saving *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* but attributing their actions to the show's fans, they created their own pseudo-grassroots movement, which made people feel artificially involved.

The example of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* highlights this issue on a small scale, but it just goes to show how vulnerable we are to manipulation. Corporations have taken note of what we like, and what people want right now is democratic change. These companies have literally taken advantage of the basis of American society, the fact that individuals deserve to be heard. They have taken that ideal and twisted it until it is fully unrecognizable.

This presents a danger to the faith that Americans put in their products and in every good story that they have heard. If we continue to hear about companies pulling the wool over our eyes, then that means that we can no longer trust the democratic foundation on which we have based our society. If we as citizens stop believing that our voices matter, then we stop participating: just look at 2014 for an example. The more people that see how corporations are taking advantage of us, the more jaded citizens exist, and the less people take a stand for what they believe in.

There is a concept in political science known as the calculus of rational voting. It states that it is not worth the effort it takes to vote if your vote is not the decisive vote (Jacobson et al. 444). Since our votes as citizens are almost never decisive, it makes no logical sense to vote; there is no use expending the energy to make our voices heard. The more citizens that find out about how their votes matter, the more people will agree with

this concept. Through *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, FOX toyed with viewers' emotions and ultimately showed them why their opinions were irrelevant.

When NBC created an artificial grassroots movement by "saving" *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* due to fan support, they demonstrated the way that corporations take advantage of and manipulate people's wills, serving as an example to the crumbling foundation of democracy. The only reason the fans were able to make a difference in the case of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* is because NBC decided that it would be beneficial. Grassroots participation has been on the rise in society as a whole through different political and environmental movements. Through these movements, ordinary people become involved in shaping the policy of larger organization through local involvement (Kolawole 121).

Although the consequences are limited in this situation, NBC's actions do not bode well for the future. When I found out about their deception, I felt violated in a way that is almost indescribable. They technically did not do anything wrong or illegal, and I was not involved in the movement to save the show, but I was lied to. The story that I felt so elated believing in was only a fairytale told in hopes of a few more dollars.

If other companies take note of what NBC has done, the possibilities are endless. Companies have already been piggybacking off of grassroots movements to gain support (think Starbucks and the plastic straws), but what if a multitude of companies skipped the first step of letting a grassroots movement grow organically and just created one instead?

This could be a marker for a new era of advertisement and corporate manipulation. I am not claiming that companies are going to follow the example of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* explicitly. But if a large company like NBC is already employing these tactics, then I am positive that other companies are as well.



I am not sure if this will change any of my actions looking forward. I am still going to watch *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*; you must be crazy if you think that I am going to just *not* find out what happens to Jake and Amy following their wedding.

I will watch, but something will not feel the same. There will be a little voice in the back of my head, telling me that I am supporting the falsehood that NBC is perpetuating. And I think that this little voice will not go away when I turn off the television. It will follow me as I go holiday shopping, and as I grab a bite to eat. How many of my decisions are orchestrated? I am not sure I'll ever know.

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