After Shows Prolong the Afterglow

Super fans stay tuned to meet cast and crew, kibitz and share the love.

"She said what?!"

Imagine how hollow that would sound bouncing off the walls of your empty living room. Now imagine sharing your disbelief with a roomful of equally shocked TV fanatics, immediately after the episode. That's the appeal of "after shows," those postmortem roundups that follow buzz-worthy series such as The Walking Dead, Downton Abbey and Bates Motel.

Like a digital water cooler, an after show draws fans who just can't get enough and love to discuss every detail with other diehards. In some cases, they even get to hear from the show's cast and crew, who offer juicy insider intel.

"Super fans are deeply connected to the show," says David McKillop, executive vice-president and general manager of A&E. He oversees production for Bates Motel and its after show, After Hours. "They will consume almost anything that gives them more information and more insight into how it's produced, the actors, et cetera. After shows are very effective in rewarding these super fans. We try to keep the social buzz alive between seasons, and after shows play into that strategy."

Ernie Manouse, who hosts and produces Manor of Speaking, a live half-hour Downton Abbey after show produced by the Houston PBS affiliate, recalls the days when "Who shot J.R.?" was debated around actual water coolers. "As we move more into the DVR generation and the Netflix world, where people are getting their content when they want it, we've lost that sense of community around television. These shows bring that back a little bit — they give us somewhere to go to share our excitement. You feel connected to a bigger picture."

The second season of Manor of Speaking, which wrapped in February after Downton's season-four finale, drew 50,000 viewers across just a handful of PBS stations; it will broaden nationwide next season. The set replicates the parlor of an English country manor house, and Manouse, clad in formal wear, holds court over a revolving cast of experts, historian and anyone remotely connected with Downton, including fans.

Among the show's guests so far: executive producer Gareth Neame, Lady Carnarvon of Highclere Castle (where Downton is shot) and Jessica Fellowes, the niece of series creator Julian Fellowes and the author of two books about the show. Standing sentinel over the proceedings is a tuxedoed butler by the name of Mr. Rodgers (actor Luke Wrobel), who addresses the host as "m'lord" and delivers printed tweets to him on a silver platter.

Unlike The Talking Dead and After Hours, which are produced by their respective networks and feature their series' actual casts and crews, Manor of Speaking comes from just one PBS affiliate, so it's hard-pressed to wrangle any of the show's principals.

"Because we don't have that access, we make it more like a book club," Manouse says. This book club often focuses on one character in particular: the dowager countess and her acerbic zingers. The live studio audience "will be yelling at the screen, gasping. They can't seem to get enough of those one-liners," he says, adding with a sigh, "Maggie Smith would be a dream — come — true guest."

If only to hear her ask, "What's a weekend?"

—Robin Roberts