

Chapter 6

Bridge Content

Driving Engagement In-Between Episode Airings

Television audiences met Southfork Ranch’s Ewing family for the first time on Sunday, April 2, 1978 while watching a five-part miniseries called *Dallas* that was broadcast on CBS.¹ In the end, however, there was nothing “mini” about the series; *Dallas* ended its 357-episode run exactly 13 years, one month, and a day later.

The now-famed TV show dramatized the extravagant, complicated, and shady lives of a fictitious eight-member dynasty who got their wealth from the family oil business started by patriarch John “Jock” Ewing Senior. His eldest son, John “J. R.” Ewing Junior—Ewing Oil’s hardnosed CEO—quickly became the series’ main focal point, and for good reason: His character was brilliantly written in a way such that viewers could not help but love and hate him at the same time.

The end of *Dallas*’ second season (or third, if you count the miniseries) would go on to set the stage for a major moment in television history. The episode, entitled “A House Divided,” was broadcast on Friday, March 21, 1980—the same day that President Jimmy Carter announced a US boycott of the Moscow Summer Olympics.² It soon became clear that the buzz around a fictitious TV narrative would trump a current real-world event among the general public.

In the final 112 seconds of that infamous season finale, audiences find J. R. working late at his office high-rise. Except for the spot illumination of a bankers’ desk lamp, it is otherwise quite dark inside. The phone rings: “J. R. Ewing here,” he answers—but is met with only silence on the other end. “Hello?” J. R. asks, but hears just two quick clicks, followed by the stark sound of a dial tone.

After about a minute of viewers watching J. R. mull around his office, the camera suddenly fades to black as the ominous sound of footsteps are heard.

When the visual returns, TV audiences see the camera panning J. R.'s office suite, as though through the eyes of another individual. The arresting noise of a click and a bump startle J. R. out of a seemingly deep thought. "Who's there?" he abruptly asks. There is no answer.

J. R. hurriedly walks toward the noise's origin, but as he turns the corner into his office's pitch black entryway—"BANG!" A shot is fired as J. R. reels back, grabbing his stomach. "BANG!" A second bullet penetrates him and he doubles over while trying to maintain his balance. He is forced to let go of his grip of the doorjamb and falls to the floor, landing on his back.

The camera quickly zooms into J. R.'s face as he breathes what almost appear to be his last two gasps for air as the episode's background soundtrack reaches a dramatic climax. Bright bold orange letters overlay atop the seemingly lifeless body of J. R.: "Executive Producers PHILIP CAPICE and LEE RICH." The rolling of *Dallas*' familiar closing credits leaves no doubt that season two of the popular television drama has suddenly ended. Viewers are left in complete shock over what just happened on their TV screens.

Not only had *Dallas* redefined the notion of the television "cliffhanger,"³ it had also triggered a pop culture firestorm as people around the world obsessively began to wonder who shot J. R. And they would have to wait a bit longer than originally expected to find out; a Screen Actors Guild (SAG) strike during the summer of 1980 delayed the start of *Dallas*' third season.⁴

A slew of content in between episode airings further fueled audience curiosity, which was a publicity dream for CBS and their hit show. T-shirts and other memorabilia asking, "Who shot J. R.?" were mass-produced. The July 14, 1980 issue of *People* magazine reported that J. R. bumper stickers outnumbered those of the Carter and Reagan presidential campaigns that were simultaneously taking place.⁵ A front cover feature in the August 11, 1980 issue of *Time* headlined, "TV's Dallas: Whodunit?"⁶

At last, during the fourth episode of *Dallas*' third season, incredibly eager audiences around the world had their answer. An estimated 83 million Americans tuned in to the "Who Done It?" episode—an audience amount just shy of the total voter turnout for the 1980 presidential election, which also took place in November, just 17 days prior to the show's premiere.⁷

Today, that episode of *Dallas* ranks as the number three highest rated television event in history following Super Bowl XLIV and the *M*A*S*H* series finale.⁸ Friday, November 21, 1980 will forever be remembered as the day 350 million people worldwide found out "who shot J. R."

Content Turns the Wait in between Episodes into Share-Worthy Anticipation

The far more interesting story about the *Dallas* murder-attempt mystery is not the fact that Kristin Shepard (the vengeful younger sister of J. R. Ewing's wife) was eventually revealed as the anonymous gunman. Rather, it was the way in which content helped TV viewers build excitement in between episodes.

This is what we refer to as “bridge” content, and it is the fuel that is pumped to loyal television series’ fans in-between broadcast episode airings keeping the TV show top-of-mind and buzzed about. Bridge content energizes its viewers, helps spread the word, and aims to increase program tune-in as a result. While clothing, buttons, mugs, and magazines were used as bridge content for *Dallas* during the summer of 1980,⁹ TV networks today have the Web—along with the publishing, distribution, and amplification power of social media.

A research study of over 1,500 TVGuide.com users revealed that, overall, people are more likely to use social media to talk about a television broadcast before and (most heavily) after their favorite TV show airs.¹⁰ This is especially true with serial dramas (like *Dallas*), where television viewers become deeply immersed into the actual broadcast content—and are much more likely to share their feelings at the end of the show versus during.

TV networks that are clued into this pattern are able to add a little “content kick” to the inertia of the organic conversations that are already taking place about their shows. This allows producers, writers, and marketers to help connect the tail of the conversation about the previous episode to the head of the conversation for the upcoming one—thus maintaining (or increasing) overall levels of chatter about their shows.

Facebook Is an Ideal Engagement Platform for a TV Show’s Bridge Content

It was reported in May of 2011 that over 275 million people have “liked” at least one TV show on Facebook—totaling well over one and a half billion show “likes” within the social network.¹¹ Furthermore, 17 of the top “liked” Facebook pages belong to television shows. In case you are wondering, the most liked TV series on Facebook (as of September 2011) is *Family Guy*—with over 35 million likes.¹²

We all know by now why every page owner covets a quality “like” on Facebook. Once someone has liked your page, they have, in essence, signed-up to receive your page’s posts within their own newsfeed. You no longer need to worry about a user coming to visit your page; now your content will be delivered directly to them. However, not all people who like your page will see your posts. Actual estimates put the amount of people who ever return to a Facebook page after having “liked” it between only 10 and 12 percent¹³—which makes appearing in users’ newsfeeds of paramount importance on

Facebook.

But getting Facebook page likes is only half the battle. Only about 3 to 8 percent of a Facebook page's fans (a.k.a. "likes") actually see a given post within their newsfeeds.¹⁴ This has to do with the fact that Facebook gives higher priority to those posts it deems as "top stories" and appear, using an algorithm called EdgeRank that is based on the amount of feedback a post receives.

"Feedback" is expressed as a percentage and is defined by the amount of likes and comments each post receives relative to its page's total fan base. The goal is therefore to create Facebook posts in such a way so that they inherently garner fan responses. The more responses one receives, the better the chance more fans will join—and thus, more people will see your post. This requires that TV networks (and all brands, for that matter) create Facebook posts with content that resonates.

But how do you know whether your brand—or your page—is appealing to your current and potential fans? Facebook page owners are able to monitor, in real-time, the percent feedback a given post currently has. They also have access to more detailed analytics by using Facebook's "Insights" tool that shows and ranks posts by their feedback scores. This allows page owners to see common themes among most and least popular posts; they can then dial up the kind of content that is getting the best feedback, and reduce or eliminate it for posts that are not.

With more than 30 billion pieces of content being shared on Facebook each month,¹⁵ there is a lot of competition for one's newsfeed real estate. Pages that favor acquiring rapid large quantities (versus quality) of likes will suffer from low feedback scores and an overall disengaged social community. Therefore, a TV show's content strategy must include a targeted fan acquisition approach.

TV networks who take the time to do this for their television series pages are able to tap in to the 50 percent of Facebook users who log into the social network every day. Since each user has an average of 130 friends, the bridge content with which they interact has a chance of being shared and amplified organically to their friends.

After all, as Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg said in May of 2011 during the closing session of the e-G8 Internet Forum in Paris—TV (as well as books and movies) is among the next products to become social through the website.¹⁶

The CW Wants to Ensure It Offers Their Facebook Fans Value over Volume

Our social media audience is one of our most important marketing tools

right now. If we are going to rely on this audience, we need to be very thoughtful with how we treat them. We treat this audience with respect. We're not going to be blasting messages to them fifty-two weeks out of the year. If we don't have something valuable to say, we're not going [to] waste their time and clog up their newsfeeds.

—Alison Tarrant, EVP Integrated Sales and Marketing at The CW

The Vampire Diaries debuted on The CW television network on September 10, 2009. Based on the novels written by L. J. Smith, the TV series centers on two vampire brothers, Damon and Stefan Salvatore, who both fall for the same high school girl, Elena Gilbert, upon returning to their hometown of Mystic Falls, Virginia. The show's plot carries an added twist in that the brothers found themselves in a similar love triangle back in the nineteenth century with a merciless vampire by the name of Katherine Pierce who bears an unusually striking resemblance to Elena Gilbert.

Currently in its fourth season, *The Vampire Diaries* Facebook page is one of the most vibrant of The CW online communities, with over nine million fans. A new cast photo was displayed on the page three weeks before the show's fourth season premiere—and it received over 36,000 “likes” and 4,000 comments.

This reaction contrasts starkly to the kind of feedback acquired by the posts that were displayed before and after the cast photo—which garnered only one-seventh the amount of fan engagement. It is clear based on this response that *The Vampire Diaries* fans engage the most with exclusive or original content. For instance, a series of candid photos taken from the 2011 Comic-Con received close to 32,000 Facebook likes.

The CW has done a great job of varying the content formats distributed on *The Vampire Diaries* Facebook page. One post featured a custom audio playlist from season three that used streaming music service Spotify. Another post linked directly to iTunes to preview or buy the latest season just released for “catch up” watching. In addition, the network used the “Facebook Questions” feature to post a poll asking fans what their favorite episode was—and there were over 100,000 responses.

ABC's *Modern Family* Involves Fans by Asking Their Opinions

As a way to generate awareness for *Modern Family*'s special one-hour season three premiere, the show's network, ABC, posted two cast photos that were identical—except for the lead-in copy. They simply asked their over four million fans to vote (but in a clever way): “We need your help! We can't decide which copy line we like better for our latest poster, so we want to know what

you think. After all, you do have great taste. Take a look, and vote by commenting or liking the poster with the line you prefer.”

One of the poster photos had over 2,600 “likes,” while the other had eight times that amount. By merely asking for their opinions, ABC got its fans to generate millions of social impressions promoting *Modern Family*.

Similarly, just before Mother’s Day, ABC posted a poll asking *Modern Family* fans which parent is more “motherly” (between Cam and Mitch). Cam won by a long shot, getting over 35,000 votes. Not only was the post timely, but it also played to the spirit and humor of the show and its characters.

To help drive viewers to *Modern Family*’s “Boys’ Night” episode that premiered on March 23, 2011, ABC took a simple, built-in Facebook feature and added a little creative twist, thereby making a much more substantial effect. When the character Jay realizes during the episode that his wife Gloria and her son Manny are taking him to the symphony instead of seeing a Frankie Valli concert, he parts ways with them and coincidentally ends up at the same bar where his son Mitchell is having dinner with his partner Cam and their three friends.

Since the focal point of the show centered on the dinner at the restaurant, ABC created a Facebook event and, essentially, invited fans to have dinner with the group on the day and at the time the episode premiered. The event was titled “Boys’ Night with Cam, Mitch, Pepper, Longinus . . . and Jay”; and its invitation yielded a little over 4,000 RSVPs. Not only did each RVSP show up in friends’ Facebook newsfeeds; it also acted literally as a calendar reminder to tune in live to watch the episode.

CBS Takes Content from *How I Met Your Mother* to a New Level

Over 18 million people “like” *How I Met Your Mother* on Facebook, and CBS does a nice job of integrating a healthy serving of behind-the-scenes bridge content to pique curiosity about upcoming episodes. The network’s Facebook post announcing that the show had been renewed for another two years generated over 42,000 likes.

One of the things that *How I Met Your Mother*’s loyal fans and insiders like best about this show is its “in-character” Web content. When a website or Web content is mentioned on-air, it is a pretty safe bet that it has actually been created for fans to discover and explore.

For example, in season three’s “Everything Must Go” episode, Lily and her fiancé Marshall owe money for costly, but necessary, home improvements. In desperate need of quick cash, Marshall’s solution is to create a website to sell Lily’s expensive clothes. Not only does the site mentioned in the show,

LilyAndMarshallSellTheirStuff.com, actually exist; it also acted as a real live auction featuring items from the show that were sold to help raise money for Children’s Hospital Los Angeles.¹⁷

How I Met Your Mother is a bridge content machine. The fictitious bank where playboy Barney Stinson works has a real website at GoliathBank.com. In addition, fans can actually purchase Barney’s “Bro Code” book, watch his video resume, and read his blog, which is simply called “Barney’s Blog” and kept up-to-date with regular entries by “Barney.”

Early in the second season, it was hilariously revealed that the character Robin Scherbatsky had a teen career as a pop artist when she lived in Canada and was known as “Robin Sparkles.” Back in 2006 when the episode aired, it mentioned that a music video of her had been posted to MySpace; of course, CBS created an actual MySpace page for it, complete with the music video. Today, the official Robin Sparkles Facebook page has over 100,000 fans.

While all of this fictitious yet real bridge content exists in various places online, CBS uses the *How I Met Your Mother* Facebook page as a means to tie much of it together—thus increasing its discoverability. Since a good portion of the content posted on the Facebook page physically lives on CBS.com, the website benefits from a healthy dose of referral traffic, thanks to an ever-growing and active Facebook population.

Not All Bridge Content Is Delivered via Facebook

Ultimately, we are a content company. It’s not about technology gimmicks; instead, it’s about creating great content with which people want to engage. While we execute in a way that’s based on our viewers’ evolving digital behaviors, it all comes back to having great content as a starting point.

— Jacob Shwitz, Director of Social Viewing at Viacom Media Networks

The Canada-born *Degrassi* franchise began in 1980 with 26 episodes of *The Kids of Degrassi St.* It became *Degrassi Junior High* in 1987, with three seasons airing in the United States on PBS.¹⁸ Known for tackling tough and often controversial teen issues, the series gives its viewers a birds’-eye look at students attending a fictional school in Toronto. *Degrassi Junior High* was renamed to *Degrassi High* in 1989 as the series storyline took the cast into high school.¹⁹ Together there were a total of 96 episodes from when the original series aired and its final broadcast on February 11, 1991.

Following a Canadian TV movie in 1992 titled *School’s Out*, the *Degrassi* franchise was revived in 2001 with *Degrassi: The Next Generation*. The new

series (currently in its eleventh season) picks up with the teen children of the original *Degrassi High* characters and maintains the original series' dramatic and topical issues-oriented spirit. Shortened to just *Degrassi* going into its tenth season, the show is broadcast in the United States on TeenNick (part of MTV Networks).²⁰

The network has done a thorough and innovative job of using the Web to build a cross-platform dramatic storytelling universe for *Degrassi* that is filled with bridge content for the show's fans to snack on while waiting for the next broadcast episode. Over the past two seasons, 24 of *Degrassi*'s characters have been brought to life on Twitter through a collaboration between *Degrassi* series' writers and Nickelodeon's digital marketing team. This endeavor was the first of its kind in interactive and cross-platform dramatic storytelling, and it allows fans to follow any of their favorite characters to get a peek of what goes on in between (and during) *Degrassi* episodes. An aggregated tweet stream of all of the show's characters, called "Degrassi DL," lives on the *Degrassi* show pages on TeenNick.com. Additionally, Facebook provides an interconnected view of the characters' Twitter narrative.

The most compelling part of TeenNick's *Degrassi* bridge content strategy is how the network uses its characters' Twitter accounts to converge its online properties. On August 30, 2011, the morning of the *Degrassi* graduation episode premiere, Chantay Black's character (known as the school's gossip queen) tweeted "it's graduation day!!! Remember when we just started at Degrassi? #nostalgic <http://ow.ly/6gssV>." The hyperlink that "Chantay" included leads people to a specific post on the *Degrassi* Daily Gossip Tumblr blog. The post showcases a photomontage of Chantay from over the years, and helped to get viewers even more excited about the upcoming episode. The *Degrassi* Daily Tumblr blog is another platform that the series' producers utilize to enrich both the broadcast and online storytelling experience. The Twitter and Tumblr accounts work in tandem to create a multidimensional online *Degrassi* universe that provided new content daily—including photos and quotes from the characters' perspective.

Most of the *Degrassi* characters' Twitter profiles—who also tweet during the on-air broadcasts—have at least 5,000 followers; several have double that amount. One character, Elijah Goldsworthy, who tweets under @RealEli, has close to 16,000 followers. He is, apparently, one of the more popular characters on the show.

Bridge content is a vehicle that extends a television storyline beyond the boundaries of its broadcast airing. Jacob Shwartz, Viacom Media Network's Director of Social Viewing, sees social media as a catalyst that opens up creative possibilities and fosters cross-team collaboration:

Social TV breaks down the barriers between the TV people and the marketing people who are working much more collaboratively with show producers, creators, and talent. Consumers and fans have a growing desire

to be a part of the show every single step of the way. They expect to be able to have their voice heard on everything; not just after the show has been edited and put online, but starting even earlier. The closer that digital folks and linear TV folks start to work, the cooler the experiences we'll be able to create.

Television networks like TeenNick are increasingly using social media to put new twists on their digital content. However, the idea of bridge content has been around for quite some time.

Sci-Fi Used Bridge Content in 2006 to Connect Two Television Seasons

The 1978 dramatic outer space science fiction series *Battlestar Galactica* was updated and aired as a two-part three-hour miniseries in December of 2003. Because it was SyFy's third most-watched program ever,²¹ the network developed it into a full-fledged television series that premiered on October 18, 2004.²²

Battlestar Galactica's second season ended as an abrupt cliffhanger in which the main characters' new home planet had just been discovered and taken over by the very arch enemy (the Cylons) from whom they had been running and hiding. This, of course, left show viewers with a bit of angst having to wait seven months for the new season premiere's plot resolution.

In order to satisfy anxious *Battlestar Galactica* fans' appetites, the network released a 10-part Web series of short (under five minutes) online videos one month before its season three premiere.²³ Two "webisodes" per week were posted on SciFi.com, YouTube, and iTunes. The serial bridge content helped to fill in the gap of events where season two dramatically left off and where season three picks back up.

While many TV networks have produced online companion content for their TV shows for years, advances in technology—along with growing social media and mobile adoption—continue to pave new ways for people to experience and share that content.

Bravo's Bridge Content Influences Its On-Air Content

In the old days, it was all about digital extensions. We don't want to be an extension. We want to be a digital experience that helps drive overall

viewing, whatever the platform, where the digital series is just as critical as the show.

—Lisa Hsia, Executive Vice President of Digital Media at Bravo

The first season of Bravo’s *Top Chef* made its debut on March 8, 2006.²⁴ The reality show uses a competition format to feature aspiring chefs who perform various cooking-related challenges. Their culinary results are then judged by a panel of four renowned food and restaurant industry professionals. Over the course of the season, contestants are eliminated until only one is declared the “Top Chef.”

The show’s ninth season premiered in November of 2011 and included a major new “transmedia” twist. A parallel web video series, appropriately called *Top Chef: Last Chance Kitchen*, gave eliminated contestants a second chance to get back onto the show. Hosted by lead judge Tom Colicchio, each week’s eliminated contestant from the TV series competed against the previous week’s winner of the Web series. The remaining two *Last Chance Kitchen* contestants went head-to-head to qualify for the on-air *Top Chef* finale.

The Web series marked the first time that Bravo’s digital content affected its on-air show content. This was a brilliant move on the network’s part to use the concept of bridge content to help drive the TV show. Fans of *Top Chef* who truly wanted to be “in the know” needed to watch both the TV show and the Web series in order to see who might be coming back to compete in the season finale.

Bravo has demonstrated a consistently curious and determined “test and learn” approach over the years when it comes to social TV. As the network’s Executive Vice President of Digital Media, Lisa Hsia, said to us:

When you’re innovating, there is no template. I would describe social TV as we know it today as still in the caveman era. You have a rock and you’re trying to make it into an arrowhead, or a bowl, or mortar and pestle. I don’t think we’re yet able to say what works or what doesn’t. I think it’s really about understanding what the various components are and how users are responding to them, and then evolving the experience around that.

Bravo’s *Top Chef* transmedia play allowed the network to elevate its Web bridge content to a similar “premium” status as the TV show itself. Most likely, this is just the beginning.

NBC Is Baking Digital Components into Its TV Shows from the Onset

We don't necessarily think of it as bridge content; it's the core of what we do at NBC.com. We take what's on air for 30 or 60 minutes and we continue that storyline online. We try to create additional experiences and fan engagement online so that when the show is not on-air the users can remain as interested—if not more so—in the show.

—Dana Robinson, Senior Director of Social Media at NBC.com

Top-rated entertainment website NBC.com²⁵ is jam-packed with Web content in just about every size, shape, and flavor across the broadcast network's television series. From social games and quizzes to exclusive webisodes and video mash-ups, NBC approaches its online content and properties as a key component to its overall content strategy. And there literally is something for everyone within the NBC.com Web ecosystem.

Since November of 2006, the site has been showcasing a segment called “Ask Tina” during which viewer questions for *30 Rock*'s Tina Fey are collected from the show's message board, Facebook page, and Twitter. Every so often—maybe about once per month—Tina is informally captured on video answering a few of the more stand-out questions. The comedic actress started doing this from the show's infancy and there are now over 40 “Ask Tina” videos on NBC.com.

Questions have ranged from series-related insights to asking what Tina's superpower is (her answer, incidentally, is, “I can be as mean as a tornado in one second”). Tina layers her off-the-cuff comedic flair on the answers, making for low-cost, simple-to-produce, yet extremely funny and compelling bridge content. Not only does it energize loyal fans and make them feel closer to the show; it also inspires them to want to share and, hence, generate social impressions.

While “Ask Tina” works well for *30 Rock*, there is not a one size fits all bridge content formula germane to all NBC shows—or programs from any network, for that matter. Since each show is very different, it would not make sense to treat it according to some kind of standardized template. However, there is one thing that is common across NBC's digital executions, as NBC.com's Senior Director of Social Media Dana Robinson shared with us:

Different genres play to different strengths. Reality shows allow you to work directly with the contestants, because they are real people who are using social media, just like the viewers. With scripted shows, we find the webisodes, highlights and viral mash-ups continue to be popular. We try different things for different genres of shows, but ongoing community management is the common thread that ties everything together. Once you've brought loyal fans to the table, nurturing them and keeping them around as evangelists for the shows is critical. Fans tend to feel a little more important and respected when they know they are talking to somebody; we want them to feel like they're engaging with real people and not just a giant TV network.

NBC recognized early on in the process how vital it was to give content to fans that they could discuss when their favorite shows were off the air, during hiatus, or in-between seasons. An original Web series in 2006 for *The Office* featured show characters who ordinarily did not get a lot of TV airtime. “The Accountants” was a big success for NBC.com, due in large part to the collaboration between the online team, the show’s writers, and producers. The network has worked over the years to scale this collaboration to the present day.

The Office’s most recent Web series was born out of a season seven episode mention of characters Kelly and Erin’s girl band. The online videos tell the story of the faux musical group Subtle Sexuality as they film their very first music video, “Male Prima Donna.” Their second song and video, “Girl Next Door,” debuted on SubtleSexuality.com in the spring of 2011. An entire in-character Web universe was created around the band—including a fan club, tour schedule, and the ability to buy real Subtle Sexuality concert t-shirts.

Bridge content is no longer just an afterthought that gets tacked on after a show has been created. In fact, the label “bridge content” may have an almost demeaning, second-rate connotation at this point. It is an exciting element of the future of television, as viewers increasingly get to experience rich content that is much more editorially woven together, or complementary to the show’s storylines (across media channels) that endure well beyond the confines of a show’s broadcast airtime.

Yes, Even Sesame Street Is Doing It

The *Sesame Street* YouTube channel has garnered close to 200,000 subscribers since its creation in 2006. The library of videos contains over 1,000 vintage clips from the educational children’s show from over the years that have collectively received over 500 million views. The folks at *Sesame Street* have also included several more recent pop culture spoofs that virally spread like wildfire.

Their most popular spoof was on the now-infamous February 2010 Old Spice “The Man Your Man Could Smell Like” campaign. However, *Sesame Street*’s version featured furry blue monster Grover assuming the role of actor Isaiah Mustafa. While Old Spice was promoting shower gel in its commercial, *Sesame Street* was demonstrating the word “on.” As the video progresses to the humorous “I am on a horse” reveal that takes place at the end of the original Old Spice ad, viewers find Grover riding “on” a cow instead. *Sesame Street*’s “Smell Like a Monster” video was posted to YouTube on October 6, 2010, and has amassed over eight million views.

Some of the other *Sesame Street* TV-related spoofs available on YouTube

include “30 Rocks,” “Desperate Houseplants,” and “True Mud.”²⁶ They also did one about *Mad Men* called the same, which had a puppet of Don Draper from the AMC series expressing his anger because he is “mad.” That video has been viewed about a million times so far.

Although the YouTube *Sesame Street* content does not specifically or directly bridge any two of the show’s episodes or seasons, it does reignite top-of-mind awareness and nostalgia for the long-running PBS series among adults who may then tune in with their children more frequently—or at the very least, help to spread the funny content they saw.

Advertiser Sponsorships Help Monetize Television Bridge Content

All of the “Ask Tina” videos on NBC.com are preceded by a 15-second video ad. While preroll is one way to align your brand to bridge content, there are additional methods to execute integrated sponsorships—approaches that just might increase consumer receptivity to your message.

Networks like NBC work hard to create brand integrations that feel organic. For instance, *The Biggest Loser*’s online community hosts a food journal section where members can blog about what they are eating. This section of the site has been sponsored by brands related to eating healthier, such as Milk, Extra, and General Mills.

The Degraasi DL bridge content referenced earlier is “brought to you by” a major feminine hygiene brand. The brand’s logo not only appears on the aggregated tweet stream creative but also embeds its brand message into the actual Twitter conversation as a sort of “commercial break” using a branded hashtag.

The *Top Chef: Last Chance Kitchen* Web series was sponsored exclusively by Toyota. Similarly, when The CW wanted to do something special for its *Vampire Diaries* Facebook fans, Ford funded the production of an exclusive video series that featured the show’s producers (Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec) answering fan questions. Ford branding was included in the messaging around the “Inside the Vampire Diaries” video series but more powerfully, as branded content itself.

Show actress Candice Accola, who hosted the series, kicked off each webisode by engaging with the 2011 Ford Fiesta. While it may sound like blatant product placement, its execution was much more naturally built in to the bridge content’s narrative storyline. For instance, in one of the videos, Candice meets Executive Producer Julie Plec to ask her questions from Facebook fans. Along the way to the studio, she stops at a cupcake shop to get a treat to bring Julie. To get there, she is shown driving the Ford Fiesta in which

she makes a hands-free call to get directions. This, of course, naturally showcases some of the car's features—but in a more indirect way.²⁷

However, embedding one's brand into network TV's online extensions is not the only way for advertisers to use bridge content to reach their target audience. They can also create their own.

TV Commercials Have Experimented with Their Own Bridge Content

In February of 2010, Toyota launched a campaign for the all-new Sienna minivan. The series of TV spots depicted a very relatable and somewhat quirky family of four: Two parents with two very young kids (a girl and a boy). Delivered in an almost *Modern Family/The Office* sitcom-style format, the series of TV commercials are funny and resonant by themselves. But sometimes more is better, as Toyota decided to give viewers of the spots additional content with the hope of extending their receptivity and driving choice-based and social impressions.

The end of each of the Sienna commercials includes the voiceover, "Meet the family and the new Sienna on YouTube," accompanied by a lower third displaying the URL, "youtube.com/sienna." Toyota clearly understood the difference between its TV audience and the YouTube audience, as online visitors were shown a hilarious two-minute, 36-second "Swagger Waggon" music video.

In what is a prime example of content-as-advertising, the Sienna parents are lip-syncing a relatively heavy rap song with the lyrics, "Where my kids at?" The online video is not only extremely funny because of its surprising juxtaposition; it also naturally compels viewers to want to share it. And share it they did, as "Swagger Waggon" currently has close to 10 million views on YouTube.

Bridge content for TV commercials allows advertisers to push their boundaries a little bit and produce hard working (yet still brand-appropriate) stories that would not ordinarily air as a 30-second television spot. This bridge content does not have to necessarily be an off-the-wall comedic video; it could instead take the form of an extended storyline.

Purina's Fancy Feast took the latter approach with its "Storybook Wedding Commercial" that aired starting in August of 2011. This was a continuation of the brand's successful "Engagement" ad that ran six months prior featuring a white fluffy kitten wearing a "Will you marry me?" medallion.

For the wedding ads, however, the brand opted to end their TV spot with a set of art cards that prominently read, "There's much more to this love story. Watch now on YouTube." Those viewers who executed their "choice-based impression" were welcomed with an extended three-minute version of the

wedding TV spot that resolved its emotional cliffhanger and, of course, had a tear-producing happy ending.

Together, the Toyota and Purina examples illustrate that bridge content does not discriminate against genres. Whether comedy or drama, what gave these brands success was not merely the tactic of bridge content. It was the actual resonant content in the TV spot *itself* that left people craving more. A bridge content strategy will not work if it does not springboard off of great content in addition to being great content.

TAKE ACTION: BRIDGE CONTENT

Television bridge content can be a powerful place for advertisers to embed their brands to reach an inherently engaged audience. The following are three ways to maximize the receptivity of your brand message using bridge content.

1. *Span screens.* Bridge content provides a unique opportunity to continue the story and thus, your brand sponsorship. Carry over your broadcast TV series integration into the show's corresponding bridge content in order to reinforce and connect your brand message across media channels.
2. *Become part of the story.* People engage with bridge content because of the *content*—not the advertising. So find ways to integrate your brand message into the story line or context of the content in order to drive both brand receptivity and resonance.
3. *Push for innovation.* The most exciting part about content is its complete lack of creative boundaries. When sponsoring a TV show's bridge content, partner with the television network to *collaboratively* create an innovative experience that energizes the audience who engages with it.

Remember That Bridge Content Is Choice-Based

The phrase “bridge content” might sound a bit second-class, but that could not be further from the truth. The coveted value of this kind of content is due to the choice-based impressions that result from audiences *choosing* to engage with it. This is valuable to both television networks and advertisers. As more “transmedia” type of content is created, there will be greater (and more creative) opportunities for brands to impact target audiences.

Scan for More

Scan this QR code using your mobile device for videos and visuals of the examples and cases referenced throughout this chapter.



Don't have a smartphone with a QR reader app? No problem. You can access companion content directly by going to <http://www.socialtvbook.net/tagged/chapter6>.

Notes

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