



Engaging Audiences Through Multi-Platform Television: Danger-5 and the Diamond Girls

Matt Loads 1*

 0000-0001-8715-3074

¹ Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, AUSTRALIA

* Corresponding author: matthew.loads@monash.edu

Citation: Loads, M. (2022). Engaging Audiences Through Multi-Platform Television: Danger-5 and the Diamond Girls. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 12(4), e202231. <https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcm/12450>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 18 Apr 2022

Accepted: 7 Sep 2022

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the production processes of an Australian television drama, focusing on webisodes produced as part of a multi-platform program *Danger 5*. This program was broadcast on the Special Broadcast Service (SBS), Australia, in two series (2012 and 2015). Levine's (2007) modes of production are applied to the creation of the webisodes. Through set visits and nine interviews with key creative staff, this study examines how cultural factors shaped these ancillary texts.

The SBS's chartered purpose to use innovation to reach audiences was a key factor in the creation of these webisodes. The findings from this project include that the environment, routines, and practices in the creation of the webisodes were very similar to the broadcast *Danger 5* program. However, this paper will demonstrate that shaping story for the webisodes and the efforts to reach an online audience meant that content changes were made. The more immediate feedback and clearer ability to measure audiences using social media were the reasons for a change in emphasis toward this form of online engagement during production in the program's second season.

Keywords: webisodes, television, digital media

INTRODUCTION

This paper studies production processes at work in the creation of a webisode series connected to a network drama. The program selected, *Danger 5*, was first broadcast on the Special Broadcast Service (SBS) in 2012. A second series aired in 2015. The broadcast program was released on DVD, distributed internationally on television-on-demand service Hulu, and in Australia on Netflix. Ancillary short form videos (webisodes) were produced as part of the first season under the separate title *The Diamond Girls* but were not produced for the second series. Analysis of the webisodes connected to *Danger 5* show how various cultural and economic forces shaped their creation, while also giving insight into the larger television industry in Australia. This insight begins to explain why some drama programs utilize webisodes and others do not. It also helps document how the television industry is experimenting with online material to engage diverse audiences.

The transition from predominantly story-based webisodes for Season 1 to stronger social media engagement (without webisodes) for Season 2 will be discussed and explained. SBS's chartered purpose to innovate and reach audiences was a key factor in the creation of the Season 1 webisodes, and also in the decision to not produce webisodes for Season 2. The environment, routines, and practices in the creation of the webisodes were very similar to the program they were connected to. We will see the creative difficulty in trying to repeat earlier successes online, and how internal and external pressures to do this can shape both an ancillary text (e.g., a webisode) and the key program it is connected to. We will also see that shaping the story for these additional texts and the efforts to reach an online audience meant that changes were made to the texts.

The more immediate feedback and clearer ability to measure audiences using social media was the reason for Season 2's emphasis on social media as a form of online engagement. The sense that the Season 1 webisodes were almost identical to the original program was the motivation to move away from creating webisodes when the program went into production for Season 2 in 2013.

With the increase in the production of television drama seeking to tell one narrative across multiple modes, new labels have appeared to describe this process, such as 'transmedia' or 'cross-platform' production. Caldwell (2003) argued for the inclusion of the study of online ancillary texts as part of an approach called 'second shift aesthetics' (understanding television-based online practice), in comparison to 'first shift aesthetics' (understanding television production from the perspective of shows being interrelated through the flow of the production schedule). He argued that the idea of flow is still evident, but that it is the audience that is now in flow across mediums rather than the programs themselves. This perspective grew out of the need to re-evaluate television production due to the increasing convergence between television production and the Internet. Despite this argument being ten years old, television production studies are still based more heavily on a broadcast audience rather than online. This paper will do this by analyzing *Danger 5's* webisodes (known as *The Diamond Girls*) through Levine's (2007) five modes.

LEVINE'S FIVE MODES OF PRODUCTION

Levine (2007) applied a framework to examine the process of television production in a variety of modes in her study of American daytime television soap opera *General Hospital*. Set visits and interviews with a range of people working in various roles on the program were conducted as part of that study. Five production modes were outlined. In addition, a cultural studies gap in the production of television texts was highlighted. Building on these two approaches, Levine (2007, p. 135) attempted to 'categorize, describe, and analyze five major factors that shape a particular type of cultural production.'

- 1. Production constraints:** This mode fits most easily into an economic perspective. Production is viewed through the filter of constraints such as the ownership structure of a program and its network, key production stakeholders, program production history and the status of production within the industry itself. A program's genre also affects how it is viewed institutionally, as well as the history of the show itself. Levine (2007) argued that *General Hospital* had some degree of security and/or prestige because of its perceived worth to its network, and that this was counterbalanced by the effect of budgeting decisions limiting what could be achieved on the program.
- 2. Production environment:** Two factors shape production: economic (e.g., institutions like unions) and cultural (e.g., hierarchies around gender and institutional positioning). The day-to-day production of *General Hospital* was organized through the roles and responsibilities of key production staff. Distinctions were made between technical and artistic decisions. Some areas were more clearly defined through gender and gender roles (Levine, 2007).
- 3. Production routine and practices:** Everyday work practices, such as production meetings or the responsibilities of key staff, should not be analyzed just by cost or efficiency, but also as a cultural practice that can shape meaning in texts before they are viewed by audiences. This occurred on *General Hospital* both directly (e.g., through meetings) and indirectly (e.g., a writer's bias toward certain characters) (Levine, 2007).
- 4. Production of character and stories:** Meaning is encoded in the creation of character and story through production. How a writer conceives and executes character and story, how an actor portrays a character and how other departments create character and story worlds (e.g., through make-up, lighting, hair, and costume) are all influential in producing meaning (Levine, 2007).
- 5. The audience in production:** Traditional frameworks for understanding the viewer (e.g., ratings, market research and program fan mail) are considered by crew production staff to create meaning in storyline discussions (Levine, 2007).

THE SBS CHARTER, TV DRAMA, AND INNOVATION

SBS was established through an amendment to the *Broadcasting Act of 1942* as an independent statutory authority on 1 January 1978 (SBS, 2014, p. 3). 13 years later it became a corporation, as a result of the *Special Broadcasting Act 1991 (SBS Act)* (SBS, 2014, p. 3). Ang et al. (2008) argued that SBS has been a success in building a profile recognized around the world. Flew (2009) described SBS as 'a broadcaster that critically reflects on the challenges of a multicultural society, not only providing non-English language programming for Australia's ethnic and other minorities but providing all Australians with access to programming from throughout the world that facilitates cross-cultural communication ...' (Flew, 2009, p. 1).

SBS's charter sets out its purpose to provide multicultural and multilingual programming across radio, television, and digital services that 'entertain all Australians and in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society' (SBS, 2014, p. 3). The charter lists eight points outlining how SBS must articulate these goals, including an emphasis on audience, advocacy, the delivery of multicultural perspectives and multilingual programming. The eight points also outline the resources that should be drawn upon in the creation of programming, the need for SBS to differentiate from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and community broadcasting through offering innovation, alternate and multiple viewpoints.

Since commencement of SBS broadcasting in 1980, roughly 80% of its television programs have been imported, mainly due to the significant cost of local production (Ang et al., 2008, p. 92). Compared to the broader focused ABC, its budget is roughly a third of the ABC (ABC, 2014; SBS, 2014).

SBS initially defined itself as a home for multilingual programming through documentaries, feature films and news (Ang et al., 2008, p. 92-134). Sports such as soccer and cycling which were not featured prominently by other channels became increasingly popular with viewers (Ang et al., 2008, p. 122). Drama production was not such a strong focus; however, there has been a range of programs such as *The Circuit*, *Remote Area Nurse*, *Women of the Sun*, *East West 101*, and *Kick* that have been both critical successes and supported by audiences. The creation of SBS Independent in 1994, a separate institutional body focusing on funding film, television and documentary that was 'innovative and concerned with Indigenous issues and cultural diversity' (Smaill, 2003, p. 108) showed a commitment to fund television drama, offering producers greater ownership and even the ability to screen their productions in cinemas or other (i.e., non-SBS) broadcast channels.

Despite this initiative, investment in local drama by SBS has been sporadic. In recent years SBS annual reports have discussed drama under a broader category: 'Comedy, Drama & Light Entertainment', with funding and the hours of drama broadcast often amalgamated under this banner. In 2014, excitement around new show *Better Man* was partly based around the fact that it was their 'first drama in four years' (SBS, 2014, p. 4). SBS has relied on outside production companies to create local drama throughout its history. It is currently reliant on international organizations with local production offices like Freemantle Media Australia and Endemol Australia. SBS also works with a range of smaller local production companies.

However, SBS positions itself as a home for 'quality' imported TV drama, achieving rating success with critically acclaimed cable dramas such as *Fargo*, *the Walking Dead*, *Orphan Black*, and *Borgen*. Between one and three million viewers tune in per calendar month to watch both imported and local drama). This seems to suggest a stronger SBS emphasis in directing finances to imported drama, which offer linguistic diversity and innovation. It provides evidence that SBS can 'tap into international television trends' (SBS, 2014, p. 4) for local audiences.

Bruns (2014) argued that the mere existence of the network is evidence of innovation. SBS argues it has lived up to its charter through programs commissioned and broadcast since its inception, with a range of challenging documentaries on programs like *The Cutting Edge*, multilingual film, and an emphasis on international news and sport. Its drama output has often tackled issues of particular concern to multicultural Australians in both serious and lighthearted ways. For example, SBS has given a 'genuinely alternate choice' (Ang et al., 2008, p. 92) to viewers through broadcasting comedies such as *Pizza*, *Bogan Pride*, or *House Gang*, as well as more serious dramas such as *The Bridge*, *The Girl from Steel City*, and *Carla Cametti PD*. This is based on the idea that other channels would not produce these types of programs.

SBS's innovative approach has pushed the boundaries of the definition of Australian TV drama. Programs such as *Going Home* in 2000/2001 presented viewers with a scripted hybrid of soap opera and current affairs

panel discussion. This program was innovative not only in terms of its content and characters, but also in how it was produced and its audience engagement. Episodes were often produced very close to broadcast dates and viewer interaction that was encouraged online shaped the direction of the program.

SBS's online audience interaction methods reflect its mandate to innovate. In 1997 its website was created to support television, radio, and merchandising. Currently SBS defines its online audience as a combination of those who use either the catch-up service SBS ON DEMAND, or audiences watching through third party hosted video sites such as YouTube. It is clear that distribution on the web is a strong focus, with more than 7 million unique catch-up views per month online. The audience count grows by 25% in some cases (e.g., *Masters of Sex*) and nearly doubles in others (e.g., *Orphan Black*) (SBS, 2014).

Roose and Akbarzadeh (2013) outlined some significant barriers that SBS has faced in fulfilling its charter and engaging audiences, including financial restrictions. It has also been argued that SBS could not be created 'under present conditions, be they political, cultural, technological or financial' (Cunningham, 2009, p. 15), and that 'The history of SBS has long been tied to the shifting politics of Australian multiculturalism' (Flew, 2011, p. 216). Changes of government have often led to changes in SBS focus and funding. For example, the introduction of advertising on SBS in 1991 was not welcomed by many viewers, being seen as a way to raise revenue for local production and reduce the 'burden' of SBS on taxpayers. To build audiences and please advertisers SBS is moving away 'from its original multicultural identity to something else,' (Ang et al., 2008, p. 128).

DANGER 5-CHASING THE YOUTH DEMOGRAPHIC WITH OFFBEAT COMEDY

Danger 5 is a pastiche program, part comedy and part 60s spy action/thriller. It draws upon a range of sources, including: 60s/70s European exploitation films (*3 Dev Adam* [*3 Giant Men*], *Ilsa*, and *She Wolf of the SS*). Characters and historical figures are repurposed with scant respect to the source material. Popular genre programs of the 1960s such as *The Prisoner*, *Thunderbirds*, and *The Avengers*, as well as men's adventure magazines of the same period are other inspirations. This fits well with contemporary comedy programs that present exaggerations of certain genres within certain time periods (e.g., *Garth Merenghi's Darkplace* and *The Spoils of Babylon*).

In *Danger 5*, a team of five spies drawn from different countries are tasked each week with sabotaging Nazi plots and attempting to kill Adolf Hitler. Each episode has elements of action, high- melodrama, comedy, salaciousness, and thickly condensed plots that could easily be strung out over entire seasons of other programs.

The show was commissioned by SBS in 2010 and Season 1 went into pre-production in the second half of 2010. Its core production team is Director/Producer/Writer/Composer Dario Russo, Writer/Creator/Actor David Ashby, and Producer Kate Croser. SBS had initially approached Russo and Ashby after the success of their third-year university film *Italian Spiderman* which generated nine million unique views on YouTube. The program was produced by Dinosaur Worldwide, a production company formed by Russo, Ashby, and Croser. After SBS deemed the first season a success in 2012, a second series of seven episodes was commissioned and these were created between September 2013 and January 2014, airing in January 2015.

Danger 5 has a number of aspects that reflect SBS's charter and audience. Although the program is predominantly in English, four languages are spoken onscreen in keeping with its 'international spies' theme. Two key cast members speak exclusively in Russian and German (with English subtitles). It is a light entertainment comedy, a genre the SBS has moved into to reach new audiences over the last ten years. It has alternative perspectives pitched squarely at a youth demographic and is typical of SBS's current Monday night line-up.

A five-part webisode prequel series for *Danger 5* (titled *The Diamond Girls*) was produced alongside the six broadcast episodes. It was released online in late 2011, in the lead up to the program's broadcast on SBS' main channel in February 2012. The webisode series was one broadcast episode divided into five parts between four and six minutes in length. *Danger 5/The Diamond Girls* were key cross-platform projects and part of SBS's overall innovation strategy (SBS, 2012). From a transmedia point of view of extending the story through additional texts, the webisode series was the main focus of the first season. Season 1 also had some

merchandising and a website hosted by SBS to help promote the show. This strategy changed for Season 2 in 2015. Social media platforms were given a much stronger focus, and no webisode series being commissioned. This change in direction will be discussed in detail over the rest of this paper.

Danger 5 and The Diamond Girls in Production: Methodology

The framework for this discussion will be the five modes of production outlined earlier (Levine, 2007).

This work was completed as a pilot study for a PhD thesis. Because of this, a rigorous process of approval through Swinburne University's (Melbourne) ethics committee was completed before contact with the participants listed below. Participants gave full consent for use of the interview material, including approving quotes and paraphrasing seen throughout this article.

This approach fits with Levine's (2007) method which included set visits and interviews as well as some observation. I spoke to personnel on set, in-person and over e-mail between 2014-2019. Speaking to personnel in a production ranging from directors, writers, make-up artists, actors, and camera people, gives an overview of webisode creation and enabled me to better respond to research questions. Levine's (2007) approach highlights informal and formal forces, and also considers how all personnel contribute, so a sizeable group of personnel is necessary

The following key *Danger 5* production staff were interviewed in pre-production of Season 2 in September/October 2013:

1. Dario Russo: Creator, Director, Writer, Editor, Composer
2. David Ashby, Creator, Writer, Actor, Creative Consultant, Second Unit Director
3. Kate Croser, Producer
4. Caterina DeNave, Executive Producer, Commissioning Editor for Drama, Comedy and Entertainment, SBS
5. Chloe Spalding, Costume Design
6. Sophie Spalding, Costume Design
7. Matt Tarrant, Social Media Manager (Season 2)
8. James Parker, Miniature Landscapes and Model-Maker.

Participants were chosen based on their range of responsibilities, their impact on the production of the webisodes, or their involvement in the webisodes.

Production Constraints

The production of the Season 1 webisodes was shaped by number of broad industry and cultural factors which impacted the final product seen by viewers. SBS shaped the series through its policies and previous expectations of similar series. Funding was a key reason for this prequel series and its online release to audiences. Investment in the show was primarily from SBS, with the South Australian Film Corporation (SAFC), the Adelaide Film Festival and Screen Australia providing additional funding.

How this series was ultimately perceived in terms of both story and promotion also had an impact. According to the production team, how the broader television industry perceived risk and the brands of other channels were also factors. Subsequent changes to all of these factors explains why *Danger 5* opted to not go ahead with a second season of webisodes for Season 2.

Produced alongside the six broadcast episodes, the webisodes were seen largely as a 'seventh episode' in five parts that cost 14% of the budget. Producer Kate Croser explains:

... It really cost 1/7th of the budget, because it was scheduled as part of our main shoot, so it had equal kind of attention and schedule time, but the reason why we did that was because we knew that where our fans had come from was online, and we wanted to deliver them something exclusive first, so that was very much part of the whole process (interview, 25 September 2013).

The Diamond Girls had a larger budget than other productions of its kind, as between five and ten percent of an overall budget is emerging as more of an industry standard (Eckersley interview, 21 August 2014) (Mayfield interview, 27 November 2014).

According to Croser, funding went into one 'pool' of money, but the outcomes were reasonably specific. The case for funding for webisodes had to be argued separately to the network and the SAFC. The webisodes were then funded by the SAFC and SBS directly, but they premiered as part of the Adelaide Film Festival (in their short film section) before going online. Funding for website materials also came from the SAFC, but part of the provision for that was that promotion had to be a strong part of the webisode purpose. Without specific efforts to argue the case for funding this additional content, *the Diamond Girls* would not have been part of the production.

For the production team the size of the budget was a double-edged sword. The fact the webisodes were budgeted the same as a broadcast episode meant there were significantly cheaper than the average produced drama (Screen Australia, 2014). The webisodes did not face the usual 'low budget therefore low expectations' that many webisodes present to audiences. The webisodes look and feel the same as the broadcast episodes. However, the process of creating web material through the TV production system with a budget was a limit to how spontaneous creative output could be:

Ashby: ... from a logistical standpoint, it's hard to make high budget, spontaneous content, because without a doubt you'd have ... process (interview, 25 September 2013).

Russo: You know, as soon as you have investors to answer to, your options in terms of Internet content is kind of limited, and the ... the magic of web content is that usually the people who make this have absolutely no one to answer to and they can do whatever they want, and that's why people enjoy it so much ... (interview, 25 September 2013).

Both creators expressed a feeling that the television production process dampened a feeling of having no rules. They felt it resulted in the webisodes feeling contrived and made them a less enjoyable experience for audiences.

SBS's charter and network strategies helped shape the webisodes. Both Croser and DeNave (Executive Producer) said that a show like *Danger 5* and *The Diamond Girls* would not have been made anywhere else in Australia, with its innovative style and cross-platform storytelling (interview, 24 October 2013).

Danger 5 and *The Diamond Girls* clearly fit within the SBS charter of differentiation and unusual perspectives. The multilingual aspects of the program and the youthful audience it targeted fit well within SBS's current goals. *The Diamond Girls* webisode series was shaped by broadcast marketing expectations, but distributing the webisodes online meant partnering with SBS online. Croser saw their role as very promotion focussed: 'their mandate is to promote the show' (interview, 25 September 2013). As an investor, Screen Australia (2014) also had similar attitudes as they 'very much saw the webisodes as promotion.'

SBS and Dinosaur Worldwide team did however agree that the webisodes needed to be more substantial and to present something closer to the original television text in addition to marketing. Croser felt that engaging an audience online using communication solely for marketing was too narrow a purpose for the webisodes. She argued that the webisodes were about connecting with online audiences and showing them, they were valued beyond providing them with simple information driving them to a specific time to connect with the show on television (interview, 25 September 2013). For Ashby, speaking about the webisode strategy and the tension between storytelling and promotion makes defining purposes difficult: 'the model itself is quite grey so to speak' (interview, 25 September 2013).

Watching *The Diamond Girls*, it was hard to see a strong promotional or marketing angle at work. The episodes finished airing three months before the debut of Season 1 of the show. There were no narrative tricks to drive audiences to the broadcast program, like ending with a cliffhanger to be continued. In terms of production values and scripting, the webisodes felt almost identical to the show itself.

The broader industry's attitude to risk-taking and innovation with webisodes were a factor that the team felt could have inhibited the creation of *The Diamond Girls*. The Australian industry was risk-averse compared to other countries and being an innovative comedy with cross-platform components, the project was hard to

finance. Croser stated that even the ABC tended to be cautious with newer production companies, with a lot of their comedy output using the same production staff and resulting in some programs looking and feeling similar (interview, 25 September 2013).

Ashby pointed to U.S. channels like HBO and FX averting risk by building brands around the channels themselves, with strong content and innovation as a selling point to viewers 'because they have a reliable history of killer content' (interview, 25 September 2013). Russo feels that even the Australian subscription television industry does not have clear branding yet, and that while the initial content needs to be strong, it is riskier for channels to commission content without a built-in audience 'because you do not have the brand name behind it' (interview, 25 September 2013).

While SBS was willing to risk resources and time on *Danger 5/Diamond Girls* team, due to the risk and the financial pressures at SBS the program was made with a budget about a third to a half of the average Australian drama budget (Screen Australia, 2014).

The Production Environment

Levine (2007) discussed two factors shaping production: the economic (through institutions like unions) and cultural (such as hierarchies around gender and institutional positioning). The production process for *The Diamond Girls* was similar to the broadcast episodes. The series was created by the same production staff that created the first season of the program. Institutional forces shaped the shooting schedule of the webisodes, which were shot in a 10-week block in late 2010, out of order. On any given day, work could be done on a scene from a regular episode and then a scene from the webisodes series.

The set environment had a clear hierarchy with a relaxed, professional environment. However, there was some initial confusion in how to remunerate crew members, as industry awards had no definition of what the work they were doing entailed. The producers decided to pay staff at the same rate. The production crew numbered between 20-30 in pre-production, grew to 50 during shooting and shrank to 15 during the post-production period. The same fifteen department heads managed the production under the guidance of Russo, Croser, and Ashby, whether working on regular episodes or webisodes.

Croser described the shooting environment as being closer to film than television, in that roughly three minutes of footage was produced a day, as opposed to eight minutes a day which is typical for TV drama production (interview, 25 September 2013). Less financial resources and a smaller crew with some production staff taking on multiple roles are explanations for this. More time was available for costume and set changes, as well as the incorporation of more effects and miniatures within the production.

While there was more time available to shoot, length of shooting that did take place was dictated by institutional factors. Shooting was built around Screen Australia board meetings, as funding from them was crucial. With some additional pressures from SBS to shorten the shooting time, the shoot was a week shorter than expected (nine weeks instead of ten). It is logical to assume if the original ten weeks had been available, it could have resulted in better outcomes.

The general atmosphere on the set of *Danger 5* enabled production staff to contribute to creative decisions in a fairly open way. Communication methods were both formal (e.g., through documents such as scripts, program spreadsheets and briefs for each department) and informal (e.g., emails, skype, meetings, and one-on-one conversations). Because it was a smaller than average crew that was in pre-production of a second season, most already knew each other, with many having worked together on other projects over a number of years.

Production Routine and Practices

Everyday work practices, such as production meetings or the responsibilities of key staff, should not be analyzed just by cost or efficiency. They should also be analyzed as a cultural practice that can both directly and indirectly shape meaning in texts before they are viewed by audiences. It is important to note there was little difference in this mode between the regular *Danger 5* program and *The Diamond Girls* webisodes.

Danger 5 organized production of *The Diamond Girls* in an almost identical way to the rest of the series production. DeNave worked with different departments of SBS, such as Marketing and Publicity and SBS Online, having approval over the budget, casting, scripts, opening titles, style, key cast and crew, edits and the

music. This approval occurred through face-to-face meetings, email, phone calls and skype. This communication is also two-way with department heads able to offer ideas for the show and obtain feedback in their areas of responsibility. These department heads would then communicate with their respective teams on how best to put the ideas into action. When asked directly about any differences between the practices of the regular episode and the webisode series, various interview participants only outlined a difference from a scheduling perspective.

The two creators of *Danger 5* and *The Diamond Girls* had more control over the production process than is typically the case with other programs. The multiple production roles Russo and Ashby occupied is typical of lower budget television and film allowed them to influence more areas of the production directly. This was not as large an issue in terms of stifling the creative contribution of people outside the pair as expected, because of the fact that the crew was small, and many had worked together on many previous projects. There was flexibility in recognizing specialized experience and knowledge of staff which would enhance the production.

Production of Character and Story

How a writer conceives and executes character and story, and how other departments create character and story worlds through other means (e.g., make-up, lighting, acting, hair, and costume) are outlined in this mode. The story and creation of the narrative was identical for both the webisodes and the broadcast episodes in the make-up, costuming and miniature crew. Strong similarities also existed in production values. During the production process members of the technical crew also felt they were contributing to story in the same way they did to the broadcast episodes.

However, the writers expressed some frustration about writing plots specifically for the web. Ashby and Russo stated that they wrote the webisodes differently from the broadcast episodes and their choices about scenes, storylines and access to sets affected the shaping of plots for *The Diamond Girls*. However, they struggled to make them different. Initially they felt a lot of pressure to be more original and daring with the content, to try and recapture some aspects of their earlier viral success with *Italian Spiderman* (interview, 25 September 2013).

DeNave indicated that SBS evaluated the online material as being successful content if it was close in style and production values to the original show (interview, 25 September 2013). Watching the webisodes, it is hard to argue they are radically different to the six broadcast episodes. Overall, it seemed that *The Diamond Girls* was plotted to fit into existing material, which could be a reflection of the commissioning later in the pre-production process. There were two story elements that were altered for the webisode series. Russo and Ashby decided to keep all five of the team's characters together for most of the web series to make the webisodes less confusing for audiences with one main story arc, rather than numerous plot lines. The webisodes used all the key actors and have the same number of locations and action sequences.

There were two production benefits in making the webisodes similar in story, tone, and style to the original show:

1. it matched SBS's expectations and
2. it was efficient for the production in using elements of existing scripts and sets within an existing production schedule.

Finding and Defining an Audience

The final production focus is how the audience is perceived (Levine, 2007). The interviews for this study were conducted near the end of pre-production of Season 2. Questions of who the audience was for the webisodes was a key concern. The interviewees in this study repeatedly stated that the webisodes had not been included in Season 2 because they had not reached a large enough audience in Season 1. The first webisode attracted approximately 250,000 unique views, dropping to 90,000 for the second and to 74,000 by the fifth and final section. Beyond ratings, numbers of downloads and website hits, there seemed to be very limited information on who was engaging with them online:

There's very little demographic information available on the people who use online in Australia. So, I do not know if they're voracious or not. I do know this: people use online to catch up on shows they've missed last night. You know, the on-demand thing is quite big. We know that tens of thousands of people come to... the online, original material. Whether they're voracious users, I have no way of knowing (interview, 24 October 2013).

Social media platforms were selected for Season 2 as a different way to engage online audiences, with resources and time were being devoted accordingly. The immediacy of feedback and the interactive approach offered by social media was seen as a better return on investment for the producers and another option for growing audiences in Season 2.

The Diamond Girls did not have much formal pre-production audience research, which may have contributed to its lack of success. Key production staff felt that the serialization of the story did not meet the expectations of their audience and that how it was distributed may have also been a factor. The similarity between the show and the webisodes was also seen by the creators as something that did not meet audience expectations.

There was a strong sense among the production team Russo and David Ashby's success in reaching a large audience with *Italian Spiderman* could be replicated. However, Russo was quite open in describing that he did not know what made *Italian Spiderman* such a hit (interview, 25 September 2013). In television production it is standard for commissioning networks to rely on the previous work and expertise of creators to reach an audience, so clearly SBS was following this convention.

Dividing *The Diamond Girls* narrative into five sections as a serialized storyline was perceived as a barrier to audiences by some of the production team. Ashby and Russo both expressed the view that their previous work was successful because it was short, chaotic and had many fast jokes. Russo believed that the trailer format was the kind of material that audiences wanted: brief, original and humorous. 'The trailer was more successful (in reaching audiences) than any of our webisodes individually, and that speaks directly to the kind of experience people are looking for from the web content first' (interview, 25 September 2013).

When looking at TV viewing figures, Croser argued that because of a drop off in numbers after the first ad break, audiences as a whole are going in a shorter direction. She felt the targeted audience for the program had a desire for shorter form comedy, and a short form version of the entire TV show would work better. Both the webisodes and the TV show had a loss in viewing figures after the first few minutes, which could support her view and further supports the argument against serialization.

Croser also sees the drop in viewers for the second webisode as evidence of this: 'people do not watch serialized content online. They just like to watch clips and snippets (interview, 25 September 2013). However, this view does not really explain why the first webisode still had by a relatively small audience by their own judgement. DeNave felt that releasing the webisodes three to four months before the broadcast episodes was premature, and that not supporting them with any other online or offline marketing media meant it was hard to reach audiences. She also felt the webisodes should have been released more frequently.

... we did not promote them properly. I mean, how is anybody going to find them? I mean... social media is reliant on people just stumbling upon something, and then retweeting it or Facebooking it. If I was doing it all again, I'd find some clever way of marketing *Diamond Girls* so that people knew it was there. So, we needed to market it, and I think our release plan was too long. We should've been releasing two a week, not one a week (interview, 24 October 2013).

Both of these perspectives contributed the move to engage audiences with social media for Season 2.

The desire for *The Diamond Girls* to closely resemble the broadcast episodes was seen in retrospect as a hindrance to online audiences by the show's creators. Ashby found the stricter conventions of the TV format as 'stifling' and contriving the nature of the web content, with this lack of spontaneity being picked up by audiences (interview, 25 September 2013).

Looking ahead to further projects and with network and funding bodies being more broadly supportive of cross-platform drama, how to successfully create texts like webisodes is less clear because each medium requires something different, but not *too* different. Russo viewed this as a key problem

... now we actually have two distinct audiences with online content and the television content, and people are actually looking for completely different things from an experience standpoint... and it's almost impossible to create one project that is genuinely cross-platform in the sense that you can just throw it on one platform or another, and it's going to be equally as successful. So this is the problem we've got now, it's sort of more of a creator conundrum than it is any kind of financing conundrum, because people can access money to make x web series to try and get them to the next level, and now financing bodies understand the value in people being able to leverage further success over the minor success of something on the Internet (interview, 25 September 2013).

For the creators of *The Diamond Girls*, utilizing social media seemed a better option for Season 2 engagement with viewers. A dedicated social media campaign with interactive fan engagement on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram through competitions, promotional clips, trailers, and character/plot revelations was implemented.

This social media strategy provided SBS with clearer and regular on-going feedback through web hits, likes and followers. There was also less risk, as the majority of the materials were clips from existing or upcoming footage, so the investment in original material was less. How this will be measured in translating that audience to the broadcast program is less clear. In 2013 at the time of my set visit, 13,000 Facebook likes and 2,000 Twitter followers was seen as a good measure of success, this has grown to 33,000 Facebook followers and 22,000 twitter followers by 2016. The 250,000 views of *The Diamond Girls* on YouTube were viewed as not being successful, with the main comparison for *The Diamond Girls* being the unique views of *Italian Spiderman*, not other website unique visits.

CONCLUSION

The production process on *Danger 5* shaped the webisode series *The Diamond Girls*. Without the background and persistence of the three key creators, and funding, the series would not have existed. Webisodes were chosen as an engagement strategy because the producers believed that this format would reach audiences. This approach was supported by the SBS network.

Funding for the webisode series was secured late in the pre-production process for Season 1, and without that funding the series would not have been produced. The show's creators and producer approached funding bodies and the SBS, who were viewed as being more supportive innovation than commercial channels. *Danger 5* was an attempt to replicate the creators' successful *Italian Spiderman* to develop a network television program with an audience.

The process of producing the webisodes in almost identical fashion to the broadcast episodes ensured a very high quality. *The Diamond Girls* featured the same crew, cast, production values and budget as any other episode of the broadcast *Danger 5* show, distinguishing it from the vast majority of webisodes produced in Australia in 2012 (Loads, 2014). This is consistent with Scolari (2009) who argued that transmedia materials have an inherit hierarchy with webisodes that are almost identical to the original material being at the top of the four levels. From Scolari's (2009) viewpoint, webisodes are more successful because of these similarities.

However, why were *The Diamond Girls* webisodes seen as a failure? Undoubtedly the SBS network saw the purpose of the webisodes as promotional, drawing viewers toward the broadcast episodes, something it was unable to do in satisfactory numbers. The argument by the creators that the webisodes were too close to the original program as an issue seems to have merit. The webisodes are like a seventh 'prequel' episode. Watching them seems the same as watching an episode on a catch-up service, except for the division of the episode into five parts.

In addition, the self-contained storylines in the webisodes (i.e., not relating to specific broadcast episode storylines like programs such as *The Offspring* or *Secrets & Lies*) could point to a failure of the texts to connect viewers from the webisode to the show, and vice versa. This is speculated by producers based on the idea that the webisode audiences quickly became smaller as each was released. The broadcast episodes had a similar audience drop-off after the first ad break, and it could therefore be speculated that the webisodes and broadcast episodes simply failed to engage audiences. If this point of view is taken, then it could be argued

the reason *Danger 5* went into production for Season 2 and the webisodes did not is due to the success of each format being evaluated differently.

How the success of the webisodes is measured was a factor. The unique views of the successful *Italian Spiderman* were a significant hurdle for *The Diamond Girls* team to traverse. Expectations of building on that success were focused on creating a quality television program, with webisodes funded later in the production process. The decision was made that the webisodes would simply be another episode of the series, and not worked on very differently from the anchor program. By the criteria outlined for success for SBS, if *The Diamond Girls* had gained 250,000 unique views on its catch-up service after being broadcast on its network, it would have been judged as an equal success to drama imports such as *Orphan Black*.

For the producers, the expectations of social media content engagement for Season 2 was much lower, in line with the investment required. *The Diamond Girls* webisode series illustrates how creating engaging online content is a difficult skill and not something that is easy to replicate. This is best summed up by Russo:

'... for networks who want to create an all-encompassing show that's successful on the Internet and has content that is online, free, exclusive to their catch-up services or YouTube or whatever, it's really, really difficult, because you basically have to be writing two completely contrasting types of material that then have to blend into the same entity... More often than not, the online material ends up just looking like a marketing campaign for the television content and you can break your freaking brain, trying to figure out how to do something that's actually intelligent' (interview, 25 September 2013).

Limitations of This Article and Further Study

This article has expanded Levine's (2007) analysis to suit webisode production, it is effective, and I argue this framework would also suit analysis of other ancillary texts and shows how this analysis can be adopted to other professional environments outside the U.S. This article has also argued that the role of government is crucial in the production of Australian Drama and was crucial in funding these webisodes. Further examination of how policies, funding bodies and screen associations help, or hinder webisodes would certainly give an alternative account of this type of production.

Another survey of transmedia texts, looking at Australian drama specifically, following on from my previous work (Loads, 2014) would be able to put forward an argument that this type of production is growing or shrinking since 2012. Discussion of the arrival of streaming services - a part of the television industry - and any further study of this type of production should consider drama on these platforms.

Recently scholars have started to examine screen production at the intersection of television and promotional practices (Curtin & Sanson, 2016; Grainge & Johnson, 2015). A production studies examination of multi-platform screen production from the perspective of commercial sponsorship would also help build an understanding of Australian drama production on television.

Funding: The author received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

Ethical statement: The study was approved for ethical review by or on behalf of Swinburne's Human Research Ethics Committee (SUHREC) on August 2, 2013 (SUHREC Project 2013/049), and extended on June 29, 2016 until October 31, 2018.

Declaration of interest: The author declares no competing interest.

Data availability: Data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the author on request.

REFERENCES

- ABC. (2014). *Australian Broadcasting Corporation annual report 2014-15*. <http://about.abc.net.au/how-the-abc-is-run/reports-and-publications/>
- Ang, I., Hawkins, G., & Dabboussy, L. (2008). *The SBS story: The challenge of diversity*. UNSW Press.
- Bruns, A. (2014). Media innovations, user innovations, societal innovations. *The Journal of Media Innovations*, 1(1), 13-27.
- Caldwell, J. T. (2003). Second shift media aesthetics: Programming, interactivity and user flows. In A. Everett, & J. T. Caldwell (Eds.), *New media: Theories and practices of digitextuality* (pp. 127-144). Routledge.

- Cunningham, S. (2009). Under great pressure, a diamond is being formed: The SBS over time. *Media International Australia*, 133, 15-18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0913300104>
- Curtin, M., & Sanson, K. (2016). *Precarious creativity: Global media, local labor*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.10>
- Flew, T. (2009). The Special Broadcasting Service after 30 years: Public service media and new ways of thinking about media and citizenship. *Media International Australia*, 133(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0913300103>
- Flew, T. (2011). Rethinking public service media and citizenship: Digital strategies for news and current affairs at Australia's Special Broadcasting Service. *International Journal of Communication*, 5, 215-232.
- Grainge, P., & Johnson, C. (2015). *Promotional screen industries*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315718682>
- Levine, E. (2007). Toward a paradigm for media production research: Behind the scenes at *General Hospital*. In H. Newcomb (Ed.), *Television the critical view*. Oxford University Press.
- Loads, M. (2014). Transmedia television drama: Proliferation and promotion of extended stories online. *Media International Australia*, 153(1).
- Roose, J., & Akbarzadeh, S. (2013). The Special Broadcasting Service and the future of multiculturalism: An insight into contemporary challenges and future directions. *Communication, Politics & Culture*, 46, 93-115.
- SBS. (2012). *Special Broadcasting Service annual report 2012-13*. <http://www.sbs.com.au/aboutus/corporate/view/id/111/h/Annual-Reports>
- SBS. (2014). *Special Broadcasting Service annual report 2014-15*. <http://www.sbs.com.au/aboutus/corporate/view/id/111/h/Annual-Reports>
- Scolari, C. (2009). Transmedia storytelling: Implicit consumers, narrative worlds, and branding in contemporary media production. *International Journal of Communication*, 3, 586-606.
- Screen Australia. (2014). *Australian TV drama hours produced and costs per hour by format, 2000/01-2012/13*. <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/research/statistics/dramatvdramahoursxformat.aspx>
- Small, B. (2003). Commissioning difference? The case of SBS Independent and documentary. *Media International Australia*, 107(1), 105-116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X0310700111>

