

## **‘Til Series Finale Do Us Part?: Fan Commitment and the Long-running Series** **Julia Price Baron**

“I Bet This Show Won’t Ever End”: TeenNick, *Degrassi* Promos, and the Long-running Fan Relationship

When television scholars consider the flow of broadcasting, promos often fall through the cracks—perhaps because they are viewed as artless, shameless marketing tactics of primary texts. However, in what Jonathan Gray terms “the age of the promo,”<sup>1</sup> it would seem that the promo is an especially fertile text to study; it plays a key role in series buzz and audience anticipation, show and network ratings, and uniting network and series branding. Gray writes,

Promos quite frequently create a text. This process begins with advance promos and buzz campaigns that hail a specific audience and that promise that audience a very particular set of pleasures, dictating what a text is while also creating a tone, mood, and sensibility for it.<sup>2</sup>

Having worked as a promo producer at TeenNick, Nickelodeon’s teen network (previously The N), it has proven interesting to witness, and take part in, how the cult series *Degrassi: The Next Generation (DNG)*—now in its 10<sup>th</sup> season—negotiates its relationship with *DNG*’s fan base. I wish to focus on how TeenNick’s promos rely upon, respond to, and directly address its loyal, long-running *Degrassi* fan community.

*Degrassi: The Next Generation* is just that: a series revived in the Millennium for the Millennial generation from the 1980s series *Degrassi: Junior High*. Like its predecessors, *DNG* is shot and produced on set on Toronto by Epitome Pictures, and follows the lives of an ensemble group of teenagers. The series airs in Canada on CTV and in the United States on Nickelodeon’s TeenNick network (formerly The N).

*Degrassi: The Next Generation*, like many long-running series and most high-school based series, has necessarily retired all of its original teen characters and replaced them with new ones, again and again. The series has attempted to appease its fans and hold on to its ratings by keeping as many of its original cast members either as series regulars, or as return guests in season specials and *DNG*’s two feature-length broadcast movies. *DNG* is by far TeenNick’s biggest hit, with a majority of female viewers. It garners enough ratings, more or less, to keep the network afloat. While it has taken some dips in ratings over the past few seasons, threatening to end after each current season, the current season has not only retained recent fans and brought back old fans, but it has also acquired new fans.<sup>3</sup>

Between viewer lambasting and lauding of *Degrassi* on TeenNick’s web site and elsewhere on the web, *DNG* fans tune in season after season to watch the series. Their passion for trying to crack the spoiler codes based on promotional campaigns, their investment in mimicking particular campaigns themselves, and their lifer dedication, does

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<sup>1</sup> Gray, Jonathan. “Coming Up Next”: Promos in the Future of Television and Television Studies,” 55.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>3</sup> TeenNick’s two-hour *Degrassi* movie, “The Heat is On,” brought in 1.2 million viewers on its 7/19/10 premiere—the network’s highest rating to date. Subsequent episodes of the series—this season premiering new episodes daily—have been hugely successful.

not go unnoticed by promo producers.<sup>4</sup> The proliferation of blogs and user commentary among teenagers has increasingly facilitated discussion about what new plotlines—based on promos—their favorite long-running series will develop. Nostalgic users will also use the boards to show off their old-school dedication. I am interested in the how TeenNick’s promos influence and are influenced by *Degrassi*’s by its fans and its anti-fans, by its past and current fans (sometimes the same, sometimes disparate).<sup>5</sup>

With a wink and a nod, TeenNick tenderly walks the line between mocking and rewarding its viewers for their obsessive loyalty. In one “Chairman Nick” promo, Nick Cannon jokes with the “Degrassiheads” when giving them a first look at the new 2010 *Degrassi* movie, “Y’all need to play that back frame by frame.” Sure enough, within days of the promo’s airing, YouTube user had provided a slowed down, frame by frame look at the footage—followed quickly by fan comments and speculation:

**lightwiz**: “WAS THAT EMMA GETTING MARRIED!?”

**tina36zera**: “shes getting married to spinner”

**Taytayxoxo01**: “Emma? Married???? To who? Kelly dumped her!”

Did Sean come back? I hope he did!”<sup>6</sup>

This repartee between long-running fans and their long-running series is not only acknowledged, but also spoofed—TeenNick’s teens are simultaneously teased and rewarded for their *Degrassi* fandom. In a TeenNick promo starring the Chairman at his laptop, Cannon pokes fun at fan loyalty *and* at TeenNick’s role in *DNG*’s long, long run with a faux viewer avatar supposedly from TeenNick.com:

Let’s see what’s happening on the TeenNick message boards. Confused-X writes “I bet this show won’t ever end! I bet you they will have a season 26. *Degrassi: The Next Generation’s Generation*. Well my dear Confused-X, you are absolutely right. We are working around the clock to make sure *Degrassi* goes on forever!”<sup>7</sup>

Several of the comments left by YouTube users are in response to the promo’s humor, but others—like this one from **jtissohott**—are more heartfelt acknowledgments of the fans’ dedication to the series: “oh god... if this show ever ends...i think i'll die.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For examples of *Degrassi*’s Season 9 Campaign, shamelessly: <http://juliapricebaron.com/videos.html>. Videos > Degrassi Season 9 Campaign.

For examples of fan parodies of the campaign:

“Degrassi is About to get Afroey Season 9 (Spoof)” by YouTube user **wonderwheat**:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XCmpR67sMl4>

“Degrassi Season 9 Promo (Parody)” by YouTube user **Venomous289**:  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7\\_pLTpkPpY&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7_pLTpkPpY&feature=related)

“DEGRASSI SEASON 9” (Spoof) by YouTube user **MrKevinManansala**:  
[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0c43y\\_kgNak&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0c43y_kgNak&feature=related)

<sup>5</sup> Gray, Jonathan. “New audiences, new textualities: Anti-fans and non-fans,” 71.

There are always haters—and *DNG* viewers are not shy. Many *DNG* anti-fans are as invested as fans because they once *were* fans, and lament the loss of specific characters, and resent repeated storylines and character mutations (ex: “Bad Boy” character is now “Reformed Good Guy” which is boring<sup>5</sup>). Gray remarks that, “...clearly anti-fans construct an image of the text—and what is more, an image they feel is accurate—sufficiently enough that they can react to and against it.” In other words, these fans know better. They are anti-fans often because they feel betrayed by their beloved series. Others, however, are non-fans—they never liked *DNG* and can’t imagine why their peers are engaged by it. The Facebook group “Degrassi Sucks Ass-i” publicly describes its existence, “For those who think the show ‘Degrassi’ on the Noggin<sup>5</sup> television network is the stupidest television show ever created. Including Jimmy and his stupid wheelchair.”<sup>5</sup> The detail these users note—Jimmy and his wheelchair—is particularly interesting, as Jimmy (actor Aubrey Graham, otherwise now known as hip-hop artist, Drake) was an original *DNG* character and the event that propelled him into a wheelchair occurs in what many diehard *DNG* fans consider the height of the series. The non-fans are thus differentiating themselves not only from fans, but from anti-fans or once-fans; not only do they not like *DNG*—they never did.

<sup>6</sup> “Degrassi Movie 2010 SLOWED DOWN?! -- frame by frame :)”

<sup>7</sup> “Teen Nick: Degrassi Forever.”

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

What do fans think of their favorite networks' and/or series' portrayals of them? Do they feel flattered, humiliated, amused? How does a promo, a series, or a network represent its fans *to its fan*?<sup>9</sup> In the case of TeenNick and *Degrassi* fans, I would argue that a promo can function as a useful vehicle or a mediator for fan/series/network dialog. *DNG* is an especially interesting text to consider since its fan base has literally grown up watching the series for a decade. It has lost fans, gained new ones, re-gained old ones, and kept ever-loyal ones; *Degrassi* has endured an audience's entire adolescence, an impressive testament to the series/fan relationship.

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<sup>9</sup> While at TeenNick, I was asked to write and cast a promo wherein the premise was that Chairman Nick interviews potential candidates—one of which was to be a *Degrassi* "Superfan"—for an internship position at the network. I look forward to discussing the experience of negotiating the script and the talent at the roundtable.

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[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0c43y\\_kgNak&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0c43y_kgNak&feature=related)
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- YouTube user **xSadisticAngel** "Degrassi Movie 2010 SLOWED DOWN?! -- frame by frame ;)":  
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