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# CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED AND CANCELLED

## FX'S *THE BRIDGE*, CHANNEL AS BRAND AND THE ADAPTATION OF SCRIPTED TV FORMATS

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**Abstract:** This article uses *The Bridge* (FX, 2013–2014), an adaptation of the Danish-Swedish series *Broen/Bron* (SVT1/DR1, 2011–), to explore the ways in which the brand identities of channels shape the adaptation process for scripted television formats. By situating *The Bridge* in the broader context of FX's effort to maintain a coherent brand identity, the author argues that producers were not attempting to repurpose *Broen/Bron*'s narrative for the American audience. Rather, the network wanted to provide its traditionally young and masculine audience with another 'muscular' crime series while appealing to additional demographics in the hopes of expanding the channel's overall viewership.

**Keywords:** cable television, *The Bridge*, FX Networks

The premiere of *The Bridge* (FX, 2013–2014), the American adaptation of the Danish-Swedish series *Broen/Bron* (SVT1/DR1, 2011–), was a commercial and critical success. Co-produced by FX Productions and Shine America, the show's debut drew more than four million viewers.<sup>1</sup> Television critics gushed over this exploration of the economic, psychological, and cultural significance of the U.S. - Mexico border. Early reviews characterized the show as a marriage of Nordic Noir's dark narratives and enigmatic protagonists with the gritty realism, sociological depth, and artistic ambition of *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008).<sup>2</sup> As a result of its popularity with time-shifting audiences, the Hollywood trade publication *Variety* claimed *The Bridge* was at the centre of TV's digital revolution.<sup>3</sup> For its portrayal of issues rarely seen on American television such as the 'Lost Girls of Juarez',<sup>4</sup> the show's first season was given a Peabody Award in recognition of its distinguished and meritorious contributions to public service.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the show was cancelled after two seasons.

This article uses FX's *The Bridge* as a case study to highlight the ways in which the brand identities of channels shape the adaptation process for scripted television formats. Discussing the era of TVIII (whose American correlate is often

1 Daniel Fienberg, 'FX's "The Bridge" Gets Off to a Solid Ratings Start,' 11 July 2013, *HitFix*.

2 Alan Sepinwall, 'FX's "The Bridge" A Gripping Look at Crime on El Paso/Juarez Border'.

3 Rick Kissell, 'FX's "The Bridge" at the Center of the DVR Revolution,' *Variety*, 2 October 2013.

4 The notion that Ciudad Juarez was or continues to be plagued by mysterious waves of 'femicide' remains a subject of debate. See: Christopher Hooks, 'Q&A with Molly Molloy: The Story of the Juarez Femicides is a "Myth,"' *Texas Observer*, 9 January 2014.

5 Marisa Guthrie, 'Peabody Awards Honor FX's "The Bridge," Tom Brokaw and Comedy Central's "Key & Peele,"' *Hollywood Reporter*, 19 May 2014.

described as the 'post-network' era), Catherine Johnson posits that "branding has emerged as *the* [italics in original] defining industrial practice" of television's recent past.<sup>6</sup> In particular, channel branding creates the "strong, distinctive, and loyal relationships with viewers" that are central to commercial success in the increasingly competitive television market.<sup>7</sup> As the mechanism that forges such relationships, heavily marketed flagship programming reflects the brand identity that network executives are attempting to cultivate, thereby allowing the channel itself to assume an "authorial functional."<sup>8</sup> To date, however, the operative understanding of branding in scholarship addressing global television formats has been largely limited to the 'programme as brand' model.<sup>9</sup> Sue Turnbull's analysis of *Gracepoint* (Fox, 2014), the American remake of the British crime drama *Broadchurch* (ITV, 2013-), for example, is primarily concerned with addressing the consequences stemming from producers decisions to change as little as possible in the adaptation.<sup>10</sup> She observes that the minimal and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to re-purpose the original format for American audiences made the adaptation fundamentally unnecessary in the eyes of many critics and fans.

In contrast, this article conceptualizes the adaptation process in relation to the 'channel as brand' model.<sup>11</sup> In the next section, the development of FX's brand identity is addressed with attention to the paratexts (taglines, slogans, logos, and promotional materials) and discursive meanings that indicate programming strategies and audience targeting. This portion of the analysis considers the network's history and its long-standing efforts to construct a coherent brand identity aimed at the highly lucrative demographic of male viewers ages 18–49. Although the channel has claimed its diverse line-up of dramas are united by "emotionally complex and authentically human characters,"<sup>12</sup> as one critic observes, "[s]eries on FX have balls."<sup>13</sup> In the following section, this article examines *The Bridge* in terms of FX's attempt to shift its brand identity toward one that appeals to additional demographic segments among adults aged 18–49. Materials from industry and mainstream news sources including statements from network executives and promotional efforts indicate that the series was part of the channel's attempts to expand its reach among Hispanic viewers.

This case study demonstrates the value of thinking about American adaptations of scripted formats within discursive contexts shaped by established brand identities. The creative decisions that guided the adaptation process, including the choice to set the narrative along the Mexican-American border and season two's pivot away from *BroenlBron's* serial killer story-line, are best understood as attempts to balance the demands of FX's core audience members with the presumed interests of viewers outside that niche. From this perspective, *The Bridge* is not so much a national adaptation as it is a channel adaptation.

## 1 Balls and Branding

FX, a subsidiary of the Fox television network, launched in 1994 as a showcase for 20th Century Television-owned classic programming like *Batman* (ABC, 1966–1968). By the late 1990s, the channel's lineup included a combination of movies and reruns of Fox series including *Married with Children* (Fox, 1987–1997). FX's first attempt to attract the male 18–49 demographic was the acquisition of NASCAR Racing in 1999. This was followed by the introduction of the channel's first original series, *Son of a Beach* (FX, 2000–2002), a comedic parody of *Baywatch* (NBC, 1989–1999) with

6 Catherine Johnson, 'Tele-Branding in TVIII,' *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 5, 1, 2007, p. 6.

7 Ibid., p. 7.

8 Catherine Johnson, 'The Authorial Function of the Television Channel: Augmentation and Identity,' *A Companion to Media Authorship*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2013.

9 In a recent article describing the emergence of the global trade in scripted formats, for example, Jean Chalaby asserts, "[T]he issue of brand purity is particularly acute with scripted shows, as too many adaptations risk diluting a brand, and a single poor one can kill a series." See: Jean Chalaby, 'Drama without the Drama: The Late Rise of Scripted TV Formats,' *Television & New Media*, 17, 1, 2016, 17.

10 Sue Turnbull, 'Trafficking in TV Crime: Remaking *Broadchurch*,' *Continuum*, 29, 5, 2015, pp. 706–717.

11 Catherine Johnson, 'The Authorial Function of the Television Channel: Augmentation and Identity,' *A Companion to Media Authorship*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2013, p. 281.

12 FX Network, 'There is No Box: FX Unveils Its First Branding Campaign,' press release, 11 December 2007.

13 Tim Goodman, 'When TV Brands Go Off Brand,' *Hollywood Reporter*, 23 November 2010.



Figure 1. FX Network logo (1994). [Click here to see the source.](#)

radio personality Howard Stern attached as an executive producer. Although these efforts succeeded in attracting a niche audience of men, FX still lacked a cohesive brand identity.

Video 1. FX Channel Promos 1994. Go to the [online version](#) of this article to watch the video.

In 2002, FX reinvented its brand with the complex, hyper-masculine anti-heroic drama *The Shield* (FX, 2002–2008). The show's protagonist Vic Mackey (Michael Chiklis) is a corrupt Los Angeles detective who murders a fellow police officer in the final moments of the series' first episode ('Pilot,' 1: 1). The premiere of *The Shield* drew 4.8 million viewers and was, at the time, the highest rated scripted telecast in the history of basic cable.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Chiklis received the 2002 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Drama Series.

Video 2. *The Shield* Season 1 Trailer. Go to the [online version](#) of this article to watch the video.

Like the subscriber-supported channel HBO's appeal is to niche rather than mass audiences, *The Shield* "exhibited a certain amount of 'edge,' meaning it clearly defined the boundaries of its intended audiences and deliberately excluded some tastes and sensibilities."<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it is difficult to overstate the importance of *The Shield* when considering the recent history of FX. According to the president and general manager of FX Networks John Landgraf:

If we had a building and there was a cornerstone, it would read '*The Shield: March 2002.*' [...] That's really when FX as we know it began.<sup>16</sup>

In the five years following the show's debut, the network's ratings nearly doubled.<sup>17</sup>

In the wake of *The Shield*'s unprecedented success, the channel introduced a slew of original programming and built "a roster of series aimed at its young, male demographic [...] that bear more resemblance to each other as 'FX series' than they do to other examples of their various genres."<sup>18</sup> *Nip/Tuck* (FX, 2003–2010) follows two controversial plastic surgeons - one a dedicated family man and one an unscrupulous playboy - as they try to maintain their business. Premiering in 2004, *Rescue Me* (FX, 2004–2011) chronicles the post-9/11 lives of a fictional crew of New York City firefighters.

To complement its drama heavy line-up, FX expanded into a variety of additional genres. Appearing in 2005, the half-hour comedy *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (FX, 2005-) features five maliciously inclined losers, including Danny Devito as the clan's unstable patriarch Frank Reynolds, who run an Irish bar on the city's south-side. Also in 2005, the network began airing

14 Tim Goodman, "'The Shield' Changed Basic Cable,' *SFGate*, 2 September 2008.

15 Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, New York University Press, 2007, p. 185.

16 Jon Lafayette, 'How "The Shield" Changed Cable TV,' *TV Week*, 29 August 2008.

17 Anne Becker, 'FX Brands Itself with Slogan "There Is No Box,"' *Broadcasting & Cable*, 11 December 2007.

18 Jonathan Nichols-Pethick, *TV Cops: The Contemporary American Television Police Drama*, Routledge, 2012, p. 162.



Figure 2. FX Network logo (2007). Source: ‘**Box? We Don’t Need No Box**’, *The New York Times*, 11 December 2007.

the reality/documentary series *30 Days* (FX, 2005–2008) created and hosted by Morgan Spurlock. The series uses a similar premise as Spurlock’s film *Super Size Me* (2004) in which the filmmaker spends thirty days eating nothing but McDonald’s food.

Between 2005 and 2007, FX’s dramatic output seemed to move away from the hyper-masculine narratives driven by white, male anti-heroic protagonist(s) that helped establish the network’s brand identity. The leading role in the mini-series *Thief* (2006) was played by well-known African-American actor Andre Braugher. *Dirt* (FX, 2007–2008) featured *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004) alum Courtney Cox as the editor-in-chief of a tabloid magazine. Set in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, *The Riches* (FX, 2007–2008) followed a family of Irish con artists and thieves who adopt the identity of an affluent family. The most successful new show during this period was the legal drama *Damages* (FX, 2007–2010; Audience Network, 2010–2012) which starred Glenn Close as the ruthless lawyer Patty Hewes. Despite significant critical acclaim and a host of industry awards, the show performed poorly for FX and the network was set to cancel the show after three seasons.<sup>19</sup> However, satellite provider DirectTV stepped in, acquiring the show for its Audience Network channel where it appeared for an additional two seasons. At the time of the move, Close noted that the show was “kind of a tricky fit for FX.”<sup>20</sup> She continued, “I think FX was defined by *The Shield*, which was a testosterone-laden show, and they continue to be a testosterone-laden network. I think we were kind of off-brand for them.”

Video 3. There is No Box. Go to the [online version](#) of this article to watch the video.

In late 2007, FX unveiled a multi-million dollar re-branding campaign and the new tag-line “There is No Box.”<sup>21</sup> *Sons of Anarchy* (FX, 2008–2014), the first drama introduced after this re-branding, debuted alongside the start of *The Shield*’s seventh and final season. Created by former *Shield* writer and producer Kurt Sutter, the show follows an all-white outlaw motorcycle club fashioned after the infamous Hells Angels. In 2010, FX debuted the modern western *Justified* (FX, 2010–2015). Based on the work of well-known crime writer Elmore Leonard, the series’ protagonist is a U.S. Deputy Marshal whose cowboy boots, white Stetson, and reliance on gun play mark him as “a man from another time unsuited to the modern procedural dictates of criminal prosecution.”<sup>22</sup> In contrast with such hyper-masculine dramas, FX introduced Ryan Murphy’s anthology horror series *American Horror Story* (*AHS*) (FX, 2011–). Unlike *Damages*, *AHS* was a ratings success performing particularly well with female viewers.<sup>23</sup>

In the decade following the premiere of *The Shield*, FX had become the second highest rated cable channel among men aged 18–49.<sup>24</sup> Beyond its success among the demographic most valued by advertisers, the network had “consciously carved a niche in the new television landscape ... with risky, breakthrough and even occasionally offensive material.”<sup>25</sup>

19 Bill Gorman, ‘**Cable Ratings Monday: Damages Season Finale Manages Just A 0.2 18–49 Rating**,’ *TV by the Numbers*, 20 April 2010.

20 Melena Ryzik, ‘**Legal Drama Has a Change of Venue, From Cable to Satellite**,’ *New York Times*, 19 July 2011.

21 Andrew Hampp, ‘**FX Breaks Out of the Box: Rebrands in Effort to Put More Distance Between It and HBO**,’ *Advertising Age*, 11 December 2007.

22 Justin Joyce, ‘The Warp, Woof, and Weave of This Story’s Tapestry Would Foster the Illusion of Further Progress: *Justified* and the Evolution of Western Violence,’ *Western American Literature*, 47, 2012, p. 178.

23 Bill Gorman, ‘**“American Horror Story” Scares Up 3.2 Million Viewers in Premiere Telecast**,’ *TV by the Numbers*, 6 October 2011.

24 *Advertising Age*, ‘**Cable Guide 2012: FX**.’

25 Amy Choizick and Bill Carter, ‘**A Rough and Bawdy Ad Magnet**,’ *New York Times*, 26 March 2012.



Figure 3. FX Network logo (2013). Source: [YouTube](#).

As a result, among television creative talent, FX became the first stop for those “looking to make shows for the smart set.”<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, as of 2012, the network had garnered more Emmy and Golden Globe award nominations and wins in acting categories than any other basic cable network.<sup>27</sup>

In 2013, FX re-branded once again. At the March television industry upfront, Landgraf announced that the network would be introducing a spin-off channel: FXX.<sup>28</sup> This new channel would be home to many of the shows in FX’s comedy line-up with younger-skewing audiences in the adults 18–34 demographic. In contrast, FX would refocus on targeting adults 18–49 and FXM (previously known as FX Movie Channel) would target adults 25–54. According to Landgraf, this suite of channels supports the larger FX brand’s identity encapsulated in the new tagline: ‘Fearless.’ He explained, “Whatever their age, viewers today are opting for the extraordinary level of quality, boldness and originality that only cable television provides.” As I argue in the next section, the process of adapting *The Bridge* for American audiences was ultimately influenced by FX’s brand identity as the network was attempting to appeal to existing core audiences while also extending the brands reach among new demographics.

## 2 Building *The Bridge* in the Shadow of *The Shield*

FX ordered a pilot for *The Bridge* in mid-2012. Adapted by Meredith Stiehm, creator of *Cold Case* (CBS, 2003–2010), and former novelist Elwood Reid, the show begins with a woman’s bisected corpse left on the Bridge of the Americas connecting Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and El Paso, Texas (‘Pilot,’ 1: 1). Like *Broen/Bron* which brings together a Swedish detective and her Danish counterpart, the investigation at the centre of *The Bridge*’s first season pairs Chihuahua State police detective Marco Ruiz (Demián Bichir) with El Paso detective Sonya Cross (Diane Kruger) as they track a serial killer operating on both sides of the border.

At the time, Landgraf characterized the script as “very compelling and true to its progenitor.”<sup>29</sup> The American adaptation of *The Bridge* however, was originally intended to be set on the US’s northern border.<sup>30</sup> According to Carolyn Bernstein, executive vice president of Shine America, the discovery of a body on the Ambassador International Bridge connecting Detroit, Michigan, in the United States, with Windsor, Ontario, in Canada, was “more of a direct correlation to the Scandinavian version. It would have the same challenging weather conditions, and the same winter light.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, Stiehm and Reid successfully lobbied to set the show along the Mexican-American border. Discussing this change with an interviewer, Reid claims the decision to relocate the show was driven by the need for significant cultural differences between the two nations involved, “Canada and the United States? There’s no difference. What’s going to happen? Are you going to have a debate about socialized health care?”<sup>32</sup>

26 *AdWeek*, ‘[The Adweek 50](#),’ 17 September 2012.

27 *Broadcasting & Cable*, ‘[Brand Builders: John Landgraf](#),’ 11 June 2012.

28 Stuart Elliot, ‘[A New Channel, FXX, Hopes to Extend the FX Brand](#),’ 28 March 2013, *New York Times*.

29 FX Networks, ‘[FX Crosses “The Bridge” - Network Orders Drama Pilot Based on International Hit Series](#),’ 28 July 2012.

30 Anneke Arentsen, ‘[Interview: Hans Rosenfeldt over zijn misdaadserie The Bridge](#),’ *Film1*, 5 December 2013.

31 Paige Albinak, ‘[“The Bridge” Goes Global](#),’ *New York Post*, 28 August 2013.

32 Margy Rochlin, ‘[Border Mystery, Moved to a New Border](#),’ *New York Times*, 5 July 2013.



Figure 4. Promotional art for *The Bridge* (season one). [Click here to see the source.](#)

As FX was in the process of ordering *The Bridge* to series in early 2013, Landgraf positioned the show as meeting some of the channel's long-standing needs. At the Television Critics Association (TCA) winter press tour, he claimed to be "getting a little tired of male anti-heroes" and expressed hope that Kruger and Keri Russell, the female lead in the network's Cold War spy drama *The Americans* (FX, 2013-), would attract female viewers.<sup>33</sup> Speaking more generally about the traditionally masculine appeal of FX, he said, "From the earliest time that I had the opportunity to start making decisions about what we would put on the air, I have felt really strongly that I don't think FX should be a male or a female brand. I think it should be a brand, like HBO or Showtime, that appeals to both."<sup>34</sup>

In February, when FX formally announced a series order for *The Bridge*, it was clear that the show was expected to expand the channel's demographic reach in other ways as well. In a press release, Landgraf said, "For years networks having been trying develop a drama series set on the U.S.-Mexican border without any success."<sup>35</sup> Although the stated goal was the production of a television series that could replicate the success of Western films set along the border, this location was also an opportunity for FX to make headway with Hispanic and Latino television audiences. In a phone interview with the *New York Times*, Landgraf said that *The Bridge* was the first-ever American "premium television show that's substantially spoken in Spanish and has a specific thematic connection for the U.S. Hispanic audience."<sup>36</sup> FX emphasized this point by holding bilingual press conferences and announcing plans to broadcast the show on MundoFox, its Spanish-language network, dubbed entirely in Spanish.

In the weeks and months leading up to the July premiere, FX promoted *The Bridge* with a diverse marketing campaign. In April, the channel released four ambiguous teasers. Responses to these brief (less than twenty seconds long) "cryptically intriguing" videos typically noted that audiences were not given "any sense of what to expect plot-wise."<sup>37</sup> This was followed by the mid-May release of a ninety-second trailer.

Video 4. *The Bridge* FX Trailer. Go to the [online version](#) of this article to watch the video.

33 Andrea Morabito, 'TCA Winter 2013: Landgraf on Violence Debate: Blame High-Capacity Guns, Not TV Content,' *Multichannel News*, 9 January 2013.

34 Christina Radish, 'John Landgraf, President and General Manager of FX, Talks AMERICAN HORROR STORY Season 3, THE AMERICANS, IT'S ALWAYS SUNNY Season 10, and More,' *Collider*, 10 January 2013.

35 Nellie Andreeva, 'FX's "The Bridge" Picked Up To Series,' *Deadline*, 12 February 2013.

36 Margy Rochlin, 'Border Mystery, Moved to a New Border,' *New York Times*, 5 July 2013.

37 Tanya Ghahremani, 'Here Are the First Four Teasers for FX's "The Bridge,"' *Complex*, 9 April 2013.



Figure 5. Outdoor marketing campaign for *The Bridge* in Los Angeles Source: [The Bridge series premiere TV billboards](#), 28<sup>th</sup> June 2013 *Daily Billboard Blog*.

In several markets, FX promoted *The Bridge* with a visually aggressive outdoor marketing campaign. In addition, FX held mural contests in predominantly Latino neighborhoods in New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Houston and Chicago.<sup>38</sup> Artists were asked to contribute submissions that would “reflect the collaboration and connection of Latino and American cultures and contest winners were announced the weekend before the July 10<sup>th</sup> premiere.”<sup>39</sup>

In addition, Stiehm and Reid gave a number of interviews to critics and journalists for articles appearing in the days before the premiere. In an interview with well-known television critic Alan Sepinwall, for example, Stiehm claims that *The Bridge* will “not just be another cop show.”<sup>40</sup> As she explains, she and Reid are “both just crazy about *The Wire*. And so our model in our minds of this is the way *The Wire* became about so many things in the city. It wasn’t just a cop show.”<sup>41</sup> According to Stiehm, the ‘girls of Juárez’ perform a role in *The Bridge* that is akin to the place of drugs in *The Wire*’s sprawling five-season narrative, “It’s a chronic, horrible crime and a situation that we want to take on. And to us that’s really what our second season is going to be about but we’re going to start it now, *The Girls of Juárez*.” Beyond explicitly aligning *The Bridge*’s subject matter with that of *The Wire*, by addressing the show’s second season before the series’ premiere, Stiehm is asserting that both shows are driven by similarly large narrative ambitions. In terms of

38 Lacey Rose, [‘FX Courts Latinos for Crime Thriller “The Bridge,”](#) *Hollywood Reporter*, 12 June 2013.

39 New Generation Latino Consortium, [‘FX’s The Bridge — Mural Contest,’](#) 8 June 2013.

40 Alan Sepinwall, [“The Bridge” producer Meredith Stiehm on translating Denmark/Sweden into U.S./Mexico,](#) *HitFix*, 8 July 2013.

41 Such comments closely mirror *Wire* creator David Simon’s assertions that his show differed dramatically from traditional television crime drama. In his pitch to HBO executives, Simon wrote, “... as with the best HBO series, *The Wire* will be far more than a cop show, and to the extent that it breaks new ground it will do so because of larger, universal themes that more to do with the human condition, the nature of the American city, and indeed, the national culture.” See: [‘The Wire: A Dramatic Series for HBO,’](#) 6 September 2000.



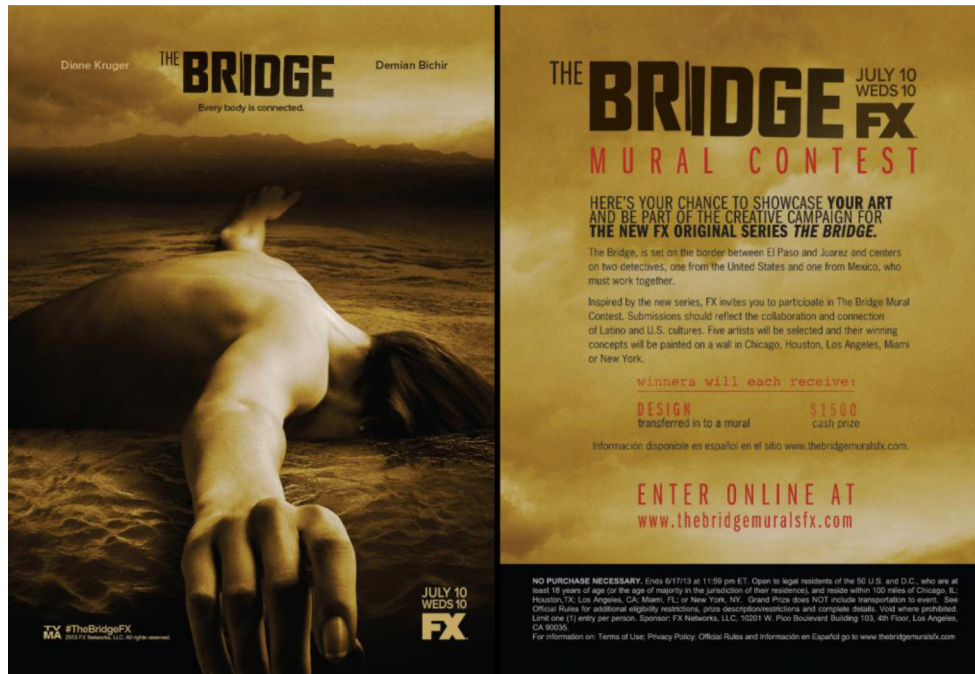


Figure 6. Mural contest poster. [Click here to see the source.](#)

marketing, name checking *The Wire* invites comparison. As such, this interview acts as a potential lure for the types of viewers who agree with the critics claiming *The Wire* is the ‘best’ show to ever appear on American television.<sup>42</sup>

*The Bridge*’s ninety-one minute debut, presented in back-to-back showings, attracted in total 4.12 million viewers, of whom 1.16 million were in the key demographic of adults 18–49.<sup>43</sup> In addition, the critical response was overwhelmingly positive. Critics found the show’s realistic depiction of developmental disability to be particularly laudable. Like *Broen/Bron*’s female lead, Cross displays personality and behavioural traits associated with the form of autism known as Asperger syndrome. In addition, many critics were quick to celebrate *The Bridge* for addressing issues that are largely ignored by American popular culture including the brutality of drug cartels and widespread violence against women. For example, one prominent television critic claims the show forces audiences to confront fundamental and unpleasant truths:

[I]t’s such a relief to encounter a show willing to examine the messy present without blinking. Nobody wants to think about what’s been happening in Mexico or America’s own culpability in the madness.<sup>44</sup>

Although subsequent episodes never matched the premiere’s viewership numbers, *The Bridge*’s first season delivered solid ratings. When factoring in time-shifted viewers, the DVR audience more than doubled the show’s live audience.<sup>45</sup> Considering this data, *The Bridge* was the summer’s third most popular new cable drama among adults 18–49. In addition, the show’s substantial number of time-shifting viewers made *The Bridge* 2013’s most time-shifted programme (when ranked by the percentage increase in viewership).<sup>46</sup> In late-September, FX renewed the show for a second season. Less than two months later, in a move *The Hollywood Reporter* described as a ‘shake-up,’ Stiehm stepped

42 See: Matt Zoller Seitz, ‘The Greatest TV Drama of the Past 25 Years, the Finals: *The Wire* vs. *The Sopranos*,’ *Vulture*, 26 March 2012; Rebecca Traister and Laura Miller, ‘The Best TV Show of All Time,’ *Salon*, 15 September 2007.

43 Michael O’Connell, ‘FX’s “*The Bridge*” Opens on Par With “*The Americans*,’ *Hollywood Reporter*, 11 July 2013.

44 Andy Greenwald, ‘*The Bridge* of Tears,’ *Grantland*, 10 July 2013.

45 Rick Kessel, ‘FX’s “*The Bridge*” at the Center of the DVR Revolution,’ *Variety*, 2 October 2013.

46 The Nielsen Company, ‘*Tops of 2013: TV and Social Media*,’ 17 December 2013.

down from her role as *The Bridge's* co-showrunner.<sup>47</sup> Although Stiehm retained her title as executive producer, Reid became the sole showrunner for the upcoming second season.

At the time of the announcement, multiple unnamed sources claimed the creative pair disagreed about the direction of the series. Speaking at the 2014 TCA summer press tour nine months later, Reid did not mention Stiehm's departure instead emphasizing that he "didn't want to do the serial-killer-of-the-year story."<sup>48</sup> He elaborated, "If I'm going to tell a story about the U.S.-Mexican border, one which these characters warranted, I couldn't tell that story while they were tracking a serial killer." Abandoning the plot device that drove *Broen/Bron's* procedural narrative, Reid and his creative team crafted *The Bridge's* second season around a more serialized narrative exposing the brutality, and the futility, of the drug war while also drawing attention to the ways in which corruption and violence against women become institutionalized.

The critical response to these changes was largely positive. As one critic observes, in moving away from the source material, "What had become a rote potboiler simmering on someone else's stove is now bubbling over with fresh eccentricities and exhilarating menace."<sup>49</sup> Other critics praised the show's newfound consistency.<sup>50</sup> However, over the course of the season, ratings steadily declined.<sup>51</sup> In response, more than a few critics tried to generate viewer interest by ominously describing *The Bridge* as "the best show you aren't watching."<sup>52</sup>

Weeks after season two's finale, FX executives announced that the show would not be returning for a third season. Speaking at the 2015 TCA winter press tour several months later, Landgraf noted that *The Bridge* was the network's first attempt to produce a series based on a format. Although he characterized the shift from season one's serial killer narrative to season two's broader exploration of issues related to the US/Mexican border as "kind of [an] uncomfortable marriage,"<sup>53</sup> he added, "I really endorse all the risks that [showrunner] Elwood Reid and his team took in season two."<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, the decision to cancel *The Bridge* was driven by low ratings, "At end of the day, we looked at the ratings trajectory, it was a relentlessly downward trajectory."<sup>55</sup> Describing the FX's decision making process, Landgraf explained, "We ignore [ratings] for a long time, but by the time you get all the DVR [digital video recorder] numbers in and you get all the VOD [video on demand] numbers in ... if not only it's not particularly strong, but it's still falling after twenty-six episodes, you have to say, 'Maybe as much as I love it, it just doesn't have a place on our schedule.'"<sup>56</sup> He added, "It was a great cast and it was a subject material I wanted to pursue. It brought diversity and difference to our channel, but at the end of the day you have to also pay some attention to ratings."

Considering what has traditionally been FX's core audience and understanding *The Bridge* as an attempt to broaden the channel's appeal, the show's cancellation reflects both the failure to serve existing viewers and the failure to attract new ones. For FX viewers, an autistic female protagonist and a narrative centrally concerned with violence against women hardly seems like a drama built in the image of *The Shield*. As one FX executive has observed, "Our dramas have a muscular quality about them ... So far, we haven't done a successful drama that has not been muscular."<sup>57</sup> In addition, a bilingual drama with a nuanced perspective on Mexico might well have limited appeal for FX's largely white audience.<sup>58</sup> For viewers beyond FX's most reliable demographics, *The Bridge* did little to extend the channel's reach. The first season viewership was only 15% Hispanic<sup>59</sup> and it seems unlikely that the show captured the attention of FX's

47 Lacey Rose, 'Showrunner Shake-up: "The Bridge's" Meredith Stiehm Departs for "Homeland,"' *Hollywood Reporter*, 19 November 2013.

48 Anthony D'Alessandro, 'TCA: Throwing the Serial Killer Premise Off "The Bridge" in Season 2,' *Deadline*, 21 July 2014.

49 Andy Greenwald, "'Bridge' Repair,' *Grantland*, 9 July 2014.

50 Alan Sepinwall, 'FX's "The Bridge" finds more consistency in season 2,' *Hitfix*, 8 July 2014.

51 TV Series Finale, 'The Bridge: Season Two Ratings,' 21 October 2014.

52 Alan Sepinwall, 'How "The Bridge" Rebuilt Itself Into the Best Show You're Not Watching,' *HitFix*, 10 September 2014; Andy Greenwald, 'TV Check-in: "The Bridge" Is the Best Show on TV You're Probably Still Not Watching,' *Grantland*, 4 September 2014.

53 Nellie Andreeva, 'John Landgraf: Battle for Best Shows on TV is 2-Network Race between FX & HBO,' *Deadline*, 18 January 2015.

54 Tim Kenneally, 'FX Boss Talks "Fargo" Season 2 and "The Bridge" Cancellation,' *The Wrap*, 18 January 2015.

55 Nellie Andreeva, 'John Landgraf: Battle For Best Shows On TV Is 2-Network Race Between FX & HBO,' *Deadline*, 18 January 2015.

56 Kaitlin Thomas, 'FX's John Landgraf on The Bridge's Demise, What to Expect from Fargo Season 2, and More,' *TV.com*, 18 January 2015.

57 Susan Young, 'FX at 20: Cabler's Dramas Probe Dark Side of Human Nature,' *Variety*, 15 May 2014.

58 Haizhen Lin, David Waterman, and Sung Wook Ji, 'Basic Cable Network Segmentation Toward Minorities and Other Niche Audiences in a Digital World: An Empirical Study of Cable Advertising,' TRPC, 2012, p. 37.

59 Andy Langer, "'The Bridge' Isn't Real; It Just Seems That Way,' *New York Times*, 16 August 2014.

existing female viewers who made *Sons of Anarchy* and *AHS*, 2013's two most popular cable shows among women 18–49.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, with several better performing dramas on-air and several more with potential in the production, the opportunity costs associated with sustaining *The Bridge* were simply too great.

### 3 Conclusion

Like all TV formats, scripted European dramas adapted for American audiences are “ultimately contained in local and national meanings.”<sup>61</sup> Yet, as Andrea Esser observes, scholarship addressing global television formats frequently conflates the local with the national.<sup>62</sup> By centering the brand identity of the channel, this analysis avoids the cultural essentialism of ‘national sensibilities’ and, instead, approaches the adaptation process as one geared towards producing television content for targeted audience segments. Indeed, as this case study of *The Bridge* illustrates, FX was not particularly concerned with making *Broen/Bron*'s narrative work for an undifferentiated mass of American viewers. Rather, the network wanted to reward the loyalty of existing viewers with another ‘muscular’ series while appealing to other demographics in the hopes of expanding the channel's overall viewership.

Moving forward, there are reasons to believe the issues raised in this article will become increasingly relevant for television format scholarship. In 1994, American cable subscribers had access to roughly forty channels; by 2013, they had access to more than 180.<sup>63</sup> In 2015, the total number of scripted series appearing on American television reached a new high of 409.<sup>64</sup> With such market saturation, attracting the attention of viewers outside of a given channel's existing core audience becomes more difficult and the margin of error for scripted series continues to shrink. Yet, within this hyper-competitive environment, American demand for international scripted television formats continues to grow. As such, it seems the fate of European television formats will increasingly depend on their ability to act as platforms for narratives that resonate with American viewers as they relate to content in discursive contexts shaped by channels and their established brand identities.

### Biography

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60 Sam Thielman, ‘**What Women Watch on TV: Their Viewing Habits May Surprise You**,’ *Adweek*, 31 March 2014.

61 Sivio Waisbord, ‘McTV: Understanding the Global Popularity of Television Formats,’ *Television & New Media*, 5, 4, 2004, p. 380.

62 Andrea Esser, ‘Defining “the Local” in Localization or “Adapting for Whom?”’ *Media Across Borders: Localizing TV, Film, and Video Games*, Routledge, 2016, pp. 19–35.

63 Sam Ro, ‘**Americans Are Paying For A Lot of Channels They Don't Watch**,’ *Business Insider*, 25 October 2015.

64 Lisa de Moraes, ‘**FX Study: Record 409 Scripted Series On TV In 2015**,’ *Deadline*, 16 December 2015.