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Extra - ordinary

For 15 years 'Extra' has survived through evolution. But can it survive its toughest battle yet — with the Internet?

By Mary Murphy

In May of this year, Lisa Gregorisch-Dempsey, longtime senior executive producer of Telepictures Prods.' syndicated "Extra," had to make a critical decision: who to name as her show's new host. She was leaning toward Mario Lopez, host of MTV's "America's Best Dance Crew," but she wanted another expert's advice before locking in. So she called "CBS Evening News" anchor and managing editor Katie Couric.

"I told Katie to go to dinner with him and give him the once-over," says Gregorisch-Dempsey, who has been pals with Couric since 1984, when both worked at WTVJ-TV in Miami. "I told her, 'I want you to grill him and make sure that he is up for this job.'"

It might seem unusual for one of the nation's top journalists to take an assignment — albeit a friendly one — vetting personnel for a celebrity magazine show, but Lopez got the thumbs-up, an approval that will be pivotal as "Extra" enters its 16th year with a new host, a new look and a new mission.

Lopez, who debuts tonight (replacing Mark McGrath and Dayna Devon), is part of a grand strategy to revamp the veteran show, which is facing an uphill battle not only against longtime syndicated nemeses "Entertainment Tonight" and "Access Hollywood," but also a slew of new Web-based venues for entertainment news, from TMZ to Perez Hilton.

As the Internet has encroached on its territory, "Extra" has managed to hold its own, but not without a struggle.

"'Extra' has never been linked with the slapdash, gotcha-type stories of other tabloid-magazine shows," says one industry analyst. "It has taken the high road more often, sometimes to its detriment. I think it hasn't been branded as well as its competitors, and the ratings reflect that."

Gregorisch-Dempsey is hoping her new plans for the show will change that. The revamped "Extra" features a high-tech set, along with interactive elements that add a large component of social networking — including Skype, Flip cameras and an interactive red-carpet segment, where fans will interface with the stars. Those changes are geared not only toward boosting "Extra's" ratings, but also giving advertisers what they crave — more eyeballs in the key 18-34 demographic.

Whether this will be enough in an environment that has become increasingly crowded is uncertain.

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New "Extra" host Mario Lopez

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Tanika Ray
interviews
Jessica
Simpson.

“‘Extra’ has made it all these years by reinventing itself. We are like the Madonna of entertainment shows.”

— Hilary Estey McLoughlin

“When I first started covering the red carpet for ‘Extra,’ there were maybe 20 media outlets,” recalls one of its Emmy-winning correspondents, Jerry Penacoli. “Now there are 200. Our advantage is that we have a brand name.”

That brand name first appeared in 1994, as the upstart show attempted to take on industry giant “Entertainment Tonight.” “ET” had already been on the air for 13 years and was the only show in the genre. But “Extra” came in as a powerhouse with two prestigious media companies behind it — Telepictures and Time Inc. — and promised that journalists from People magazine and Sports Illustrated would assist in the reporting. At the time, that was a new direction in television, a move met with some resistance from print reporters. Former “ET” executive producer David Newell was brought onboard to craft the show, and “Extra” pulled in 3.3 million households that first year.

For two years, the competing shows battled it out. But when NBC, a broadcast partner of Telepictures, decided to launch “Access Hollywood” in 1996, “Extra” had to cope with a new rival. (By this point, Time had already pulled out to focus on its print outlets.)

“(NBC) came to us and said, ‘We don’t want two entertainment shows,’” says Jim Paratore, former Warner Bros. Domestic Distribution and Telepictures exec and co-creator of TMZ. “So we turned ‘Extra’ into a pop culture show.”

Forbidden from covering its main beat — celebrities — “Extra” lost its identity. Ratings plummeted. Says Paratore, “It was the closest thing to a near-death experience we had.”

In 2000, he brought in Gregorisch-Dempsey to save the show, and the hard-news producer and former executive producer of “Hard Copy” saw she would need to make radical changes.

“There were shelves and shelves of tapes with stories about children with afflictions and ‘How my breast implants saved me from a

bullet,’” she recalls. “They weren’t exactly freak show videos, but they were a cross between that and reality TV.”

By emphasizing breaking news and hiring a new host, Leeza Gibbons, Gregorisch-Dempsey put “Extra” back on track. Slowly, the restrictions on celebrity coverage relaxed. Two years later, Devon and Sugar Ray singer McGrath replaced Gibbons, and “Extra” stayed in the game.

Today, “Extra” is as established as “ET,” but McGrath’s decision to leave before the end of his contract to pursue his music career has presented an opportunity to make changes. (Gregorisch-Dempsey says he felt uncomfortable doing celebrity interviews, but analysts say he did not help boost ratings as expected.) Lopez is in, and Devon will remain as a reporter.

“It’s an asset that I am a celebrity and that fellow celebrities know where I am coming from and have felt their struggles,” Lopez says. “I know how to ask tough questions, but not in a smarmy way — that is not my style.”

Lopez’s style will be put to the test starting

this week. His success or failure could affect the show’s \$5 million in annual revenues and the \$60,000 it charges advertisers for a 30-second spot, especially if he attracts a strong Hispanic viewership.

Some critics are dubious. “I wonder, at a certain point, how they hang on,” says USA Today television critic Robert Bianco. “They are not crude enough to match the desire for ever more personal information. (Hiring) Lopez is a relatively smart move for them, but I am just not sure how close he is to his celebrity expiration date.”

That said, Bianco adds, “he is bigger than any celebrity I can remember taking over an entertainment news show.”

Lopez himself is confident, and so is Gregorisch-Dempsey. More important, so are the show’s backers and its 150 staffers.

“‘Extra’ has made it all these years by reinventing itself,” says Hilary Estey McLoughlin, president of Telepictures Prods. “We are like the Madonna of entertainment shows: We are always coming up with new ways to re-create our image.” **ET**

A little bit ‘Extra’

Four factsoids about the 15-year-old

NUMBER OF EPISODES: The 15th season premiere on Sept. 15 is episode 4,314.

DAILY HOSTS OVER THE YEARS: Arthel Neville, Dave Nemeth, Libby Weaver, Brad Goode, Maureen O’Boyle, Leeza Gibbons, Dayna Devon, Brian Unger, Mark McGrath, Mario Lopez

HIGHEST-RATED STORY: Exclusive eyewitness reports on Princess Diana’s car crash (September 1997)

TOP CONTROVERSIAL STORIES: “Jerry Springer Is a Hoax” (April 23, 1998); “Michael Jackson’s Secret Room” (Nov. 19, 2003); “Britney Spears in Rehab” (Feb. 16, 2007); “David Hasselhoff Drunk” (May 3, 2007)



Dave Nemeth
and Libby Weaver

Playing Her Cards Right

Lisa Gregorisch-Dempsey has an ace up her sleeve for 'Extra's' next incarnation — and his name is Mario Lopez

Q&A

Lisa Gregorisch-Dempsey doesn't get up from behind her massive desk when someone enters the room. She doesn't have to — she's a force of nature whether sitting or standing, and possibly even in her sleep. In 2000, she took over the reins as "Extra's" senior executive producer, guiding the entertainment news show through major shifts in content and personnel, and today, as "Extra" begins its 15 season, she's ready for her toughest competition yet — the Internet. Thanks to a new host in Mario Lopez and a revamped show format, she had plenty to discuss in a recent chat with Mary Murphy for *The Hollywood Reporter*.

Why hire Mario Lopez?

Lisa Gregorisch-Dempsey: He's the future of the genre. It's his time. Mario came to me five years ago and said, "What do I have to do for you to consider me for the main job?" I said, "You have to become a household name on your own. I know you grew up in the business and that Eva Longoria is your best friend, but I want you to go out there and make your own path." And to his credit, he did.

What makes him the future?

Gregorisch-Dempsey: He is relatable on every level. He has a huge following in the Hispanic community. He is on the cover of every single magazine out there. He is a risk taker. He is disciplined. He has the Midas touch.

A lot of your competition comes from the Internet these days. How will you meet that challenge?

Gregorisch-Dempsey: The ("Extra" Web) site will be more about social networking, more interactive. Stars will be able to talk to stars, viewers will be able to ask stars questions. Viewers will have more of a role in the show through Skype and cyber cams and texting and Flip cams — this is a big element in our future. We have to evolve the genre to keep up with the world. After all, pretty soon we will be getting into our cars and flying to work.

Aside from your co-producers and staff, to whom do you turn for advice?

Gregorisch-Dempsey: Simon Cowell is literally my counsel,

and I am his. Every show I do and every show he does, we give each other a critique.

How did you two become each other's sounding boards?

Gregorisch-Dempsey: My hair guy was doing Simon's hair. So I slipped a note to him, and he gave it to Simon, who called and said, "Let's have dinner." I gave him some good career advice about working in America, and he told me, "You will be my friend for life." He is one of my best friends on the planet.

To do your job right, do you have to work 24/7?

Gregorisch-Dempsey: Are you kidding? I am in bed by 5 p.m. My husband could kill me because I am on the BlackBerry all night. I am awake at 3:50 a.m., in by 5:10 a.m. and my biggest decision is: Should I put on my mascara or should I return to the BlackBerry? I live, breathe and love it. And I can't wait for the Mario era to begin. **THR**

