

'Modern Family' to air episode that takes place only online

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This photo provided by Twentieth Century Fox Television shows, from left, Claire Dunphy, Jay Pritchett, and Phil Dunphy, in a scene from the episode, "Connection Lost," of "Modern Family." ABC's "Modern Family" airs an episode on Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2015, at 9 p.m. EST that takes place entirely online. (AP Photo/Twentieth Century Fox Television)

How to keep the "modern" in "Modern Family" in its sixth season?
Create an episode that plays out completely on a computer and in the realm of social media.

That's what's in store Feb. 25 on the ABC comedy's "Connection Lost," a

half-hour that revolves around Claire Dunphy's (Julie Bowen) frantic effort to locate daughter Haley (Sarah Hyland) after they squabble.

Other than a few scenes shot with the MacBook Pro, the episode was captured entirely with iPhone 6s and iPads, series co-creator and executive producer Steve Levitan said.

ABC and producer Twentieth Century Fox Television announced the project Tuesday.

This isn't Apple's first starring role on "Modern Family." On the brink of the iPad's retail debut in 2010, the tablet was portrayed as a sought-after birthday gift.

Levitan said the upcoming episode involved no product-placement compensation to Apple and resulted from an epiphany he had during an online experience involving one of his college-age daughters.

"I had emails open, some websites... then my daughter showed up" on FaceTime, he recounted. "I could not only see her, but I could see me, and there was something going on behind me, my wife or somebody."

"I realized on that screen, you could tell so much about my life," Levitan said. It occurred to him that format would be fitting for "Modern Family," he told reporters after a sneak peek at the episode.



This photo provided by courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox Television shows, Claire Dunphy, left, and Phil Dunphy, in a scene from the episode, "Connection Lost," of "Modern Family." ABC's "Modern Family" airs an episode on Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2015, at 9 p.m. EST that takes place entirely online. (AP Photo/Twentieth Century Fox Television)

All the comedy's households represent a contemporary family in some way, he said, including that of gay couple Mitch and Cam, who are adoptive parents, and Jay and Gloria, a cross-cultural, cross-generational pair. With Claire, Phil and their children, the marker is how they communicate.

In the comedy's debut episode in 2009, the parents summoned Haley to dinner by calling out to her, Levitan recalled. Her response: "Why are you yelling, why don't you just text me?"

The in-progress "Connection Lost" looked very much like Levitan's account of his own experience, with a "Modern Family" overlay.

Claire, about to board a flight, must rely on her laptop to get in touch with her immediate and extended family—who pop up via their own computers or smartphones—for help in finding Haley.

The setup allowed for new comedy avenues, said Megan Ganz, "Modern Family" co-executive producer and the episode's co-writer with Levitan. He served as director.

When Claire is online with her brother, Mitch (Jesse Tyler Ferguson), she feigns surprise that he hasn't received her birthday gift as she searches online for a belated one to send. Nice try, he says, since he can check the date on the order when it arrives.

Other funny bits are tucked on to Claire's Facebook page or will be available through links, such as daughter Alex Dunphy's (Ariel Winter) application to Yale University.

Editor Tony Orcena and motion graphics producer John Brown also had key roles in creating the episode that required, as Brown said, each element seen on Claire's Facebook pages to be "handmade."

Levitan credits a 17-minute film, "Noah," which also plays out fully on a computer, with giving him the "proof of concept" that such an approach could sustain an audience's interest and allow for a complicated story.

He said the young Canadian filmmakers behind "Noah" were unable to accept his invitation to contribute to the "Modern Family" episode because of other work.

Apple was informed about the episode, "loved the idea" and provided iPhones for the production, Levitan said, adding that it's commonplace for most major computer companies to have ongoing relationships with TV shows.

"This came from life and it made sense," said Levitan, who cheerfully described himself as "super-geeky" about technology.

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