Skins and the impossibility of youth television

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In 2007, the UK media regulator Ofcom published an extensive report entitled *The Future of Children's Television Programming*. The report was partly a response to growing concerns about the threats to specialized children's programming posed by the advent of a more commercialized and globalised media environment. However, it argued that the impact of these developments was crucially dependent upon the age group. Programming for pre-schoolers and younger children was found to be faring fairly well, although there were concerns about the range and diversity of programming, and the fate of UK domestic production in particular. Nevertheless, the impact was more significant for older children, and particularly for teenagers. The report was not optimistic about the future provision of specialist programming for these age groups, particularly in the case of factual programmes and UK-produced original drama.

The problems here were partly a consequence of the changing economy of the television industry, and partly of the changing behaviour of young people themselves. As the report suggested, there has always been less specialized television provided for younger teenagers, who tend to watch what it called 'aspirational' programming aimed at adults. Particularly in a globalised media market, there may be little money to be made in targeting this age group specifically. Meanwhile, the report also noted a dramatic change in young people's media consumption habits: while television remained popular, use of the internet had significantly increased. Mobile phones had overtaken television as the medium 12-15-year olds would miss the most, and the internet was not far behind. As far as television was concerned, younger teenagers could be seen as an instance of 'market failure', where market forces alone would not adequately provide.

Ofcom's opinion surveys found that teenagers and their parents expressed a desire for specialized programming aimed at them – and particularly for UK-produced 'public service' television, rather than US programmes. However, this was not just a matter of consumers' opinions and 'desires'. The report is implicitly informed by a widely-held normative view, that young people somehow *need* television that does not just entertain, but also educates and informs them – television that is in some way 'good for them'. They are also seen to need programming that reflects their everyday experiences of life in the UK. These needs, the report assumes, are less likely to be met in a globalised, US-dominated television market.

Perhaps ironically, 2007 also saw the launch of *Skins*, which was to become one of the most successful and longest-running British youth TV dramas of all time. The series was not entirely unprecedented: the UK school drama *Grange Hill* (1978-2008) and the teen-oriented soap *Hollyoaks* (1995-) – both created by the maverick producer Phil Redmond – had successfully targeted children and youth audiences for

many years. There had been a short-lived flurry of factual youth programming in the 1980s and 1990s, mostly in entertainment 'magazine' formats. However, by the mid-2000s, almost all the teen dramas on British screens were from the US: following in the wake of long-running shows like *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990-2000), series like *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *The O.C.* (2003-2007) were immensely popular among UK teen viewers. UK teen dramas of the period – such as the BBC's *As If* (2001-2004) and Channel 4's *Sugar Rush* (2005-2006) – had been less successful. However, *Skins* was an immediate critical and ratings hit. Some episodes peaked at 1.5 million viewers, and the programme went on to win several Royal Television Society and BAFTA awards. It ran until 2013, and was also (unusually) adapted for US television by MTV, where it ran for a single season before being scrapped, for reasons that will be explored in due course.

Skins was an ensemble drama whose interwoven narratives focused on the lives of a group of 16-18-year olds attending a sixth form college in Bristol, in the west of England. It eventually ran for six seasons of around eight to ten episodes, with a shorter final season, which caught up on some of the earlier characters, now in their early twenties. Each season followed a group of seven or eight main characters, each of whom was typically the main focus of a single episode. At the end of the young people's two years at college, the main characters were replaced by a new 'generation': seasons one and two are therefore referred to as 'generation one', seasons three and four as 'generation two', and so on. *Skins* is often described as an 'iconic' programme, that somehow defined the 'zeitgeist' – and as one that initiated a new era in television for young people. Along with the highly successful sitcom *The Inbetweeners* (2008-2010), it paved the way for a new generation of British youth drama, including series like *Being Human* and *Misfits* (both 2009-2013), although none of these enjoyed the success of *Skins*.

Skins arrived at a moment of historical change in British broadcasting, and in patterns of young people's media use. More arguably, it also reflected a wider process of change in the lives of young people themselves – a sense of growing instability and uncertainty that some have seen as characteristic of the 'precarious generation'. It appeared to offer a youth-centered perspective, marginalizing teachers and parents, and avoiding obvious moral lessons. It treated risky aspects of teenage life – sex, drugs, violence, and the wild pursuit of pleasure – as largely taken-for-granted, everyday realities. As such, it actively courted both youth appeal and adult controversy.

As we'll see, the success of *Skins* casts an interesting light on the concerns raised in the Ofcom report. It was by no means *children's* television, of course; although its audience was much wider than the age group it depicted, and definitely included younger teens. To some extent, it defined itself in opposition to the glossy, somewhat bland world of the US teen dramas, and hence as distinctively 'British'. It was broadcast by Channel Four and initially aired on its 'youth' channels E4 and T4; and to some extent, it fulfilled a key aspect of the channel's original public service remit, to reach minority audiences (including young people). Despite the controversy that sometimes surrounded it, *Skins* would seem to represent many of the qualities that the regulator regarded as desirable. Yet in all these respects, *Skins* also raises some broader questions about the nature – and indeed the very possibility – of 'youth television' itself.

The impossibility of 'youth television'?

In her influential study of J.M. Barrie's children's story *Peter Pan*, Jacqueline Rose points to some fundamental contradictions at the heart of children's literature. As she points out, children's literature is not produced *by* children, but *for* them. It is 'impossible', not in the literal sense that it cannot be produced, but because it is premised on a difference between writer and addressee that cannot be overcome. Children's literature, Rose argues, 'sets up the child as an outsider to its own process, and then aims, unashamedly, to take the child in.' In this sense, the texts which adults produce for children represent adult constructions, both of childhood and (by implication) of adulthood itself. They are one of the means by which 'we' attempt to regulate our relationships with 'them' – and perhaps also our relationships with those 'childlike' aspects of our own identities. As such, children's literature should be read, not so much as a reflection of children's interests or fantasies or desires, but of adults'. As well as asking what children want or need from the text, we need to analyse what it is that adults, through the text, want or demand of the child.

Patricia Holland extends this analysis to media representations of, and for, children. She sees these representations of childhood as part of a continuous effort on the part of adults to gain control over childhood and its implications - not only over actual children, but also over our own childhoods, which we are constantly mourning and constantly reinventing. The idea of childhood serves as a repository for qualities which adults regard both as precious and as problematic - qualities which they cannot tolerate as part of themselves; yet it can also a serve as a dream world into which we can retreat from the pressures and responsibilities of maturity.

I've applied these ideas elsewhere in analysing children's television; but similar points can be made about literature and other media aimed at youth. The *idea* of youth itself is inherently unstable. It implies an in-between stage, a period of transition in the progress from childhood to adulthood. It is defined as much by what it is *not* as by what it *is*: youth no longer possess the charming innocence of children, yet they are often denied the 'maturity' of adulthood, and the privileges that accompany it. Youth, like childhood, is often a focus of adult projections, fears and desires. As we've seen in several of the previous essays in this series, youth are often represented as a problem to be solved, an inchoate force in need of discipline and control. And yet equally, they are often used as a vehicle for adult fantasies of energy, creativity and freedom.

This has complex and ambivalent implications for 'youth television'. Youth programmes are largely produced by adults – although, as in the case of *Skins*, they do sometimes involve young people, not only as actors but also as writers and advisers. The audience for such programmes is often broad and loosely defined. The marketing of youth media – of computer games or rock music, for example – increasingly seems to reflect a broadening of the youth demographic. There is a sense that 'youthfulness' is something that can be invoked, packaged and sold to people who are not by any stretch of the imagination any longer youthful. On the other hand, there is also the element that Ofcom describes as 'aspirational'

consumption: from the very early years of television, children have always watched more 'adult' programmes than children's programmes. The popularity of teen programming may equally speak to childish fantasies of a future in which they will enjoy much greater power and freedom from adult control.

As such, the intended – and indeed the actual – audience of youth television is not always as self-evident as one might expect. Regulatory bodies like Ofcom tend to draw the line at sixteen, while broadcasters and market researchers work with shifting categories that may go up to the age of 24, or even 34. In the case of *Skins*, the characters are mostly aged sixteen or seventeen; yet the DVDs carry an 18 certificate, and the scheduling of the programme (at 10 pm.) purportedly placed it outside 'family viewing' time. Ratings for the series suggest that just over half the audience was aged 16-24; but by the same token, almost half of it was not.

Young people are a potentially lucrative market, but they are also notoriously hard to reach. As the Ofcom report suggests, the younger audience is increasingly abandoning broadcast television in favour of various forms of streaming, downloading and online viewing (both legal and illegal) – a trend that massively increased during the lifetime of *Skins*. As we'll see, the producers worked hard to capitalize on these developments, but managing viewers' engagement and participation on online platforms can be difficult and problematic. Youth are often considered to be a 'fickle' audience, or (more positively) a highly 'media literate' one. While this can undoubtedly be overstated, there are countless instances where producers just get it wrong: they underestimate the sophistication (or perhaps just the cynicism) of young viewers; they misread trends and fashions in youth culture; they preach and patronize, imposing heavy-handed moral lessons.

This difficulty in reaching the youth audience partly accounts for the uneven history of youth television, and (despite successes like *Skins*), it has arguably intensified in the digital age. The period considered here is littered with failed initiatives: the BBC launched and then abandoned Switch, a teen brand that lasted just three years (2007-2010); while its youth-oriented channel BBC3 was eventually replaced in 2016 by an internet-only service. Meanwhile, YouTube in particular has grown to become young people's main source of moving image media, with its own economy and star system of youthful 'influencers'. Over the longer term, *Skins* may come to be seen not as the start of a new golden age of British youth television, but as the triumphant last gasp of an outdated system.

Looking yonder

Much of the promotion of *Skins*, and the critical debate that surrounded it, focused on the claim that it was somehow more *authentic* than the youth television dramas that had preceded it. Authenticity is of course a fundamental preoccupation within youth culture – as I've suggested in several other essays in this series. When it comes to youth television, it's the quality that adult producers must work hard to achieve, and frequently get wrong. Authenticity is a kind of youth cultural capital or currency, and its opposite – fakery – is the veritable kiss of death.

In the case of *Skins*, this claim to authenticity had several dimensions. The 'origin myth' of the programme is that it arose from a conversation between the producer, Bryan Elsley (who had previously worked on episodes of mainstream TV series like *Casualty* and *London's Burning*) and his son, Jamie Brittain, then aged nineteen. In response to his father's ideas for a new teen series, Brittain apparently responded:

> *You should do something for kids; but not the usual crap. Get rid of all the moralising, the constant pumping rock music that old people seem to think kids like, the fantasy sequences, the flashbacks, the wobbly camerawork, the middle aged portrayal of emotions, the stupid issue based stories, the crap voice-overs, the glammed up 20-something actors who play them. Get rid of all that shite and do something FUNNY instead.*

Brittain's comment implicitly distinguishes between the US dramas that dominated the world of 'youth television' at the time, and the potential for a more authentic – more youth-centred and less serious and worthy – UK equivalent. This was a familiar distinction at the time. American series like *Beverly Hills 90201* and *The O.C.* were often mocked and condemned by British critics for their lack of authenticity and realism. These series generally focused on highly affluent, white middle-class characters, albeit with occasional intruders from the other side of the tracks. Potentially shocking or taboo topics were addressed, but in relatively safe, bland terms; the 'edginess' and risk of youth culture was effectively blunted. As Faye Woods describes, such series were a staple of T4, Channel 4's specialist youth channel, but they were often presented in ironic and cynical ways. *The O.C.,* for example, was accompanied by snarky commentary and overt satire, in some cases in the form of parodic re-enactments. Such shows were implicitly deemed to be bland, melodramatic and moralistic – and ultimately conservative.

This distinction was also apparent in the adaptation of *Skins* for the US market, and the critical response to it. Publicity materials – including interviews with Elsley and others – made much of the programme's 'Britishness'. Unlike the airbrushed glamour of the US series, British youth shows were described as more gritty and realistic. They were also praised for their apparently unflinching focus on shocking and taboo aspects of teenage life, including sex, drugs, 'bad' language, violence, and mental health issues – issues that US shows frequently side-stepped or used as an opportunity for moralistic messages. If US dramas were derided as escapist, British ones were promoted and praised (whether accurately or not) on the grounds of their realism and truth-telling.

The UK version of *Skins* was already being screened on the BBC America cable channel when MTV's adaptation appeared in 2011 – and the differences between them may have contributed to the latter's lukewarm reception among critics and youth audiences already familiar with the show. MTV hoped that its adaptation would provide a degree of youthful 'edginess' and authenticity that might enhance its brand, and differentiate itself from its competitors in the teen market, most notably WB. However, it was wary of going too far. Even in the BBC America version, sex and drug scenes had been trimmed, nudity was pixellated, and swearing bleeped. While some episodes in MTV's adaptation (such as the first) were almost shot-for-shot recreations of the original, changes were made to render the series more palatable for the more censorious context of US television. Swearing and sex scenes

were edited down; and the male gay character of Maxxie was replaced by a female character, Tea, who has an on-off romance with the male lead, Tony. In place of the tangle of semi-naked bodies that featured in UK publicity materials, the US promotion featured clean-cut, fully-clothed portrait shots. Rather than glossy settings like Beverley Hills and Orange County, the MTV version was originally intended to be set in the unglamorous parts of Baltimore, although for budgetary reasons it was eventually filmed in Toronto; and the fake 'Canadianness' of the programme was mocked by some commentators. The series began with promising ratings, and was later shown on more than twenty local MTV stations worldwide; but the audience fell away fairly rapidly, and the series was cancelled after a single season.

However, the demise of MTV's adaptation was not primarily due to this response, but to a concerted campaign by conservative campaign groups like the so-called Parents Television Council. The programme's unwillingness to moralise about illicit teenage behaviour was certainly an issue. However, the campaigners hit the jackpot when they filed a complaint to the Department of Justice alleging that the series was violating child pornography laws, on the grounds that some of the actors were aged under 18. This in turn led several leading companies to withdraw their advertising, and this essentially sealed its fate. This situation has changed somewhat in recent years: at the time of writing (2019), the US teen drama *Euphoria* (adapted from an Israeli original) is provoking controversy for its explicit portrayal of adolescent sex, drug-taking and mental health issues. At the time, however, *Skins* proved a step too far for US youth television, even in its somewhat watered-down adapted form.

The trouble with authenticity

Skins' claim to authenticity was partly to do with the context of production. The show employed several younger writers in their late teens and early twenties, collaboratively developing storylines in a 'writer's room' in a way that was then unusual in British television. It also used young people in a more arms-length way as advisers and consultants (although it would be interesting to know more about how this process worked out). By season three, the average age of the writers was reported to be just 21. Likewise, the core characters were not played by 'twenty-somethings' (as in many of the US teen dramas that Brittain was implicitly referring to), but by actual teens; and while some were established child actors, most were unknowns recruited through open auditions, and were then recycled as each 'generation' ended.

This emphasis on youth participation was also evident in the programme's embrace of digital media. This was not merely a matter of providing alternative ways of distributing content (for example, trailers or cut scenes), but also of inviting viewers to create their own, or at least to respond and debate in their own terms – although, as we'll see, this was not without its problems.

However, *Skins*' claim to authenticity is also apparent in the form and content of the programme itself. In various ways, it implicitly claims to be 'youth-centred' – to adopt a youth perspective rather than the adult one that Brittain so vehemently condemns. This is partly manifested through the roles that young people and adults

play within the narrative, and by the avoidance of didactic 'moralising' – although, as I'll suggest, the programme does embody particular ethical values, and is far from being as nihilistic or merely hedonistic as some critics have maintained. Likewise, while *Skins* does contain what might be called 'issue-based stories' – anorexia, mental illness, teenage pregnancy, adoption, sexuality and so forth – these are embedded within the characterization in ways that are not always so effectively managed within British soap operas, for example.

Perhaps most problematically, the claim to authenticity is also implicitly a claim to *realism* – that is, to represent the everyday realities of young people's lives in a truthful, non-glamourised way. Brian Elsley is on record as saying that the programme was 'a very serious attempt to get to the roots of young people's lives. It tries to tell the truth. Sometimes that truth can be a little painful to adults and parents.' Yet while there is a certain kind of social realism in the programme's use of locations, for example, the dominant tone veers (sometimes quite awkwardly) between comedy and melodrama: *Skins* is not, in my view, especially realistic at all. While there may be a kind of 'truth' in this, it is more of an emotional truth than a factual or empirical one.

In the sections that follow, then, I explore this question of authenticity in relation to two overlapping concerns: representation and audience. I consider how the programme claims to speak on behalf of youth, and how the youth audience is addressed and defined. I examine *Skins*' claim to realism, and how this sits alongside elements of comedy and melodrama. I also look at how the producers attempted to draw in youthful audiences, especially through the use of social media. As I'll suggest, achieving authenticity in youth television is a precarious and challenging business – and perhaps ultimately impossible.

Youth at the centre

Skins' claim to youthful authenticity is partly established through its content. It focuses almost exclusively on a familiar (and perhaps even stereotypical) set of 'youth' concerns. The characters are preoccupied with their place in their peer group, and with romantic and sexual relationships. They suffer from emotional uncertainty and stress as they struggle to find a true or stable identity. They negotiate the conflicting demands of adult authorities (parents, teachers), as they attempt to evade or resist regulation. Their lives are dominated by particular forms of teenage sociality: drinking alcohol, taking soft drugs, getting into fights, dancing and partying. This is the kind of list that would probably feature in any developmental psychology textbook.

Right from its launch and its pilot episode, the programme was keen to announce its 'youth appeal', and indeed its affront to conventional notions of youth television. This was apparent not only in its publicity materials, but also in its pilot episode, which seemed calculated to shock older viewers of a sensitive disposition. In the course of Series 1, Episode 1 ('Tony'), we encounter drug-taking, explicit sex and drinking, and full-strength swearing. One character is seeking his friend's help to lose his virginity; while another suffers from an eating disorder and a form of OCD.

There are ribald jokes about penis size and masturbation; and a comical supporting cast of prostitutes and drug-dealing gangsters.

As the series proceeds, *Skins* studiously sustains this shocking youth appeal through the manipulation of several staple elements. Very few episodes pass without a mandatory party or clubbing scene, typically followed by sequences of the characters waking up the following morning, hung over, dishevelled and surrounded by semi-naked fellow partygoers. More often than not, parties end in collective punch-ups; and especially as the series proceeds, no episode appears complete without a mandatory sex scene between a new pair of the leading characters. There are copious amounts of bad language, on the part of both teenage and adult characters; and there is a good deal of semi-nudity among both male and female characters, although most of the full-frontal variety is reserved for the adults. All this is carried out against a backdrop of (mostly) current rock and pop music, whose lyrics may or may not be taken to indicate the characters' inner feelings.

'Youthfulness' is also defined in terms of what it is *not*; and this generally entails the marginalization and mockery of adults. Much of the action in *Skins* takes place in 'youth spaces' – teenage bedrooms, the college common room, bars, pubs and cafes, dance clubs and parties, and houses conveniently left unoccupied by absent parents. Indeed, adults are represented in almost entirely negative terms – as variously ineffectual, self-obsessed, pathetic, uncaring, hypocritical, and in some instances actively predatory. Most of the parents have problems of their own: many of them argue constantly, or split up at some point; while others take up with embarrassing and inappropriate sexual partners. Teachers and other professional carers seem to fall into three main categories: those who try and fail to be cool; neurotic and sadistic authority figures; and those who are drawn into (or actively seek) sexual relationships with their students or young clients. While there are a few adults who are positively sympathetic and caring, this behaviour tends to appear only once the situation has reached crisis point. Significantly, it is often the parents who swear more graphically and profusely than their children – and while this has a comic effect, it's easy to see how it would have outraged some morally sensitive viewers.

All this might be seen to embody a kind of 'youth-centred' rhetoric. Directly and indirectly, it proclaims that this is a series that takes young people's point of view. It's interested in what young people are interested in, and it doesn't give a shit about anything else. It couldn't care less about adults or teachers, or about what young people are expected to do. As Jacqueline Rose might have argued, it sets up the young person as an outsider to its own process, and unabashedly seeks to draw them in.

Beyond moralizing

A key issue here – as in some of the 'juvenile delinquent' movies I considered in an earlier essay – is how the series deals with 'disapproved' or risky behaviour. Within youth media, such behaviour can be a focus for voyeuristic fascination, not least on the part of adult viewers; yet it can also provide a vehicle for moralistic messages. As I've suggested, *Skins* set out to avoid the didactic approach of some US teen dramas. While various forms of risky behaviour are represented, these are mostly seen as

everyday occurrences that pass without comment. The recreational use of drugs such as cannabis, MDMA and (less frequently) cocaine is seen as a relatively banal fact of life. Sex among the lead characters is also a fairly regular event, which is rarely resisted by either party. Indiscriminate sex is sometimes seen as a sign of desperation, or going off the rails; although it isn't until generation 3 that there is much evidence of characters feeling uncomfortable or unsatisfied by sex.

In US teen dramas, and indeed in some British soap operas, such activities typically result in damaging consequences that serve as a form of moral warning. To some extent, *Skins* eschews this approach, although it isn't always the case that such behaviour is without consequences. In season 3, for example, Effie has a bad trip as a result of eating magic mushrooms, and attacks another character, leaving her hospitalized; while season 4 begins with the suicide of a marginal character who has taken MDMA supplied by one of the lead characters, Naomi. There are two instances where sex leads to an (initially) unwanted pregnancy, for Jal in season 4 and Mini in season 6; although the risk of sexually transmitted infections is mentioned only in passing.

Some academic critics have maintained that, in spite of its apparent refusal of adult moralizing, *Skins* is nevertheless quite conservative. Susan Berridge argues that underneath what she calls its 'nihilistic ethos', the series promotes relatively conventional views of gender roles and sexuality. However, her argument is based on a partial analysis of the first two seasons, and many of her assertions are contradicted by the evidence of later seasons. For example, season 1 does indeed centre around a dominant heterosexual white male character (Tony). However, at the end of the season, he is literally run over by a bus, and throughout season 2 he effectively has to learn a less arrogant and manipulative way of relating to other people. In the following two seasons, his dominant role is taken by his younger sister (Effy), although she too loses this position when she succumbs to mental illness. Likewise, Berridge's argument that the female characters are seen to be without independent sexual desire is manifestly not borne out as the series proceeds; and her claims about hetero-normativity are equally unfounded, especially when considering the key relationship between two lesbian characters, Naomi and Emily, that evolved over seasons 3 and 4.

The details here – which were debated at length by fans on online forums – are less important than the broader point, which is about the serial nature of the narrative. As in soap operas and other long-running serials, the consequences of characters' choices and actions are often manifested over the longer term, and in indirect as well as direct ways. In the case of *Skins,* this is facilitated by the two-season structure: the second season of a given pair (thus, seasons 2, 4 and 6) is typically 'darker' and less comical than the first. Both Tony and Effy, for example, encounter the consequences of their actions only some way into their second seasons. Meanwhile, the generational structure of *Skins* also enables it to avoid the overt moralism of 'coming of age' narratives, which are particularly prevalent in teen film. The characters get older, they learn things, but we do not follow them beyond school age: they move on and out before they reach any kind of mature, adult state. The narrative resists closure – and particularly any kind of closure that might enforce a simplistic moral lesson.

A good example of this can be found in the Naomi and Emily storyline mentioned above. As Deborah Hunn points out, narratives of young gay relationships frequently conclude with the moment of 'coming out'. Some fans of these characters clearly hoped for a kind of idealized 'happy ever after' ending – which, as they reasonably pointed out, would make a change from the ways in which queer relationships are often depicted. Yet *Skins*' serial narrative meant that it could – and needed to – continue past this moment. As the characters evolved, we saw the relationship fall apart and then come back together; and we also saw other characters' perspectives. In this respect, the series deals with queer relationships in the same way as heterosexual ones – and this is accentuated by the fact that queer and heterosexual characters occasionally 'experiment' or hook up with each other, contributing to a sense that sexual identity is inherently fluid and subject to change. Indeed, if there is a message here, it is about the inevitable instability and fragility of personal relationships, irrespective of sexuality.

At the same time, I would not agree with Berridge's claim that the programme has a 'nihilistic ethos'. The characters do routinely engage in behaviour that might in other contexts be portrayed as risky or harmful; and in many instances, they do not experience negative consequences, let alone punishment. These activities are not seen primarily in moral terms, nor are there any overt moral lessons that might be reinforced by adult authority figures. However, this does not imply that such behaviour is always condoned. There are certainly characters – like Cook in seasons 3 and 4 – who are inclined towards destructive (and self-destructive) behaviour, and don't seem to care less about the consequences. But while the other characters may occasionally be willing to go along with Cook and get 'off their faces', they do not consistently share his attitude, let alone celebrate it.

In response to the moral concerns that arose in relation to Skins' US adaptation, Brian Elsley insisted (as well he might) that the characters are in fact 'intensely moral'. I'm not sure this is quite correct either: few of the characters appear to observe any external religious or moral code. Nevertheless, I would argue that *Skins* does convey what might be called an *ethic* that particularly pertains to friendships and to love. It is an ethic that is premised on honesty and integrity, and indeed on fidelity – and it is infidelity and dishonesty (or simply misunderstanding) that fuel the motor of narrative. While the characters have sex frequently and often spontaneously in a range of locations, the programme by no means celebrates 'casual' sex or promiscuity: on the contrary, sex without love is almost always a source of unhappiness and narrative complications. Relationships are frequently destroyed by thoughtless acts of sexual infidelity or 'experimentation', or by characters' inability or unwillingness to tell each other the truth. Yet these qualities of fidelity and honesty are difficult to achieve, and are forever challenged and compromised. As Patard argues, the series displays a kind of ethical idealism: the central challenge the characters face is to learn 'how to love well', but this is something they struggle to maintain.

To some extent, this is part of a broader search for identity – although this too is seen as something that may never be finally achieved. Seasons 3 and 4 in particular are replete with characters urging each other to 'be honest', to 'face the truth' or 'tell the truth'. 'Who are you?' they ask. 'You don't know me,' they exclaim, 'I don't know who you are'. Romance – rather than sex alone – is the key source or locus of

identity: finding who you really are is frequently equated with finding who you really love. Nobody, it appears, is complete or comfortable or fully themselves if they are alone; and much of the narrative is driven by the coupling and re-coupling of the principal characters. And yet, through all this, true identity and happiness are seen as necessarily temporary and provisional.

In all these ways, *Skins* actively moves beyond easy assertions about right and wrong: it seeks to generate a continuing debate, not least by including multiple viewpoints. Any 'messages' it might put across cannot be summarized in simple moral homilies. Indeed, as Patard suggests, what the characters learn is rarely defined in words, but more frequently in images and symbols. The programme shows us the confusions and uncertainties of relationships, and the vulnerability, awkwardness and discomfort they often entail – not only for young people. Yet rather than seeking consent to a singular moral position, it encourages viewers to engage with the characters' dilemmas, and thereby to reflect on their own experiences.

Realism, comedy and melodrama

As we've seen, part of *Skins'* claim to authenticity was to do with its alleged 'realism'. Here again, contrasts were often drawn with the US teen series that had preceded it, not least in the debate surrounding the launch of the MTV adaptation: promotional materials made much of its 'gritty' approach, and its aim to 'tell the truth' about young people's real lives. Critics have also described it as containing elements of 'social realism' drawn from older traditions in British film and television.

There is some validity in these claims. Many of the urban locations are authentically down-at-heel: several of the characters live in run-down public housing estates and shabby terraced houses, although others are more affluent. Many of the interiors are convincingly dirty and untidy. The characters are by no means all attractive and glamorous, or expensively dressed: they are often seen in various states of disarray, with unkempt hair and make-up, and ill-fitting clothing. In the aftermath of the inevitable parties, they are discovered lying in the sordid remains of food, empty bottles and discarded underwear; they are seen vomiting, and comments are made about their smelly clothes. They rarely escape a fight without bloody wounds. As Faye Woods suggests, this can tend towards a kind of 'fashion-spread louche glamour' in some cases (particularly with the more distressed female characters such as Cassie (generation 1), Effie (2) and Mini (3)), but this is by no means universally the case. At the same time, the characters often display a kind of comic relish in disgusting details: bodily functions (urinating, eating, vomiting, masturbating) are a recurring source of humour throughout.

Nevertheless, there are several ways in which *Skins* is far from 'realistic' – and indeed, it is debatable whether this is its primary intention. Rather, I would argue that the series constantly pulls away from social realism, but in two contrasting directions – towards comedy, and towards melodrama. In this respect, it actually has much in common with British soap operas, which are also often loosely described as 'realist': *EastEnders*, for example, takes place in a broadly realistic setting, but its storylines also typically veer into knockabout (and less frequently, satirical) comedy, and into excessive melodrama.

On one level, this can be a risky process. Comedy typically requires and encourages us to take a distance from the characters and the situations: we laugh *at* what we see. Melodrama, on the other hand, requires empathy and identification, even though the emotions and predicaments of the characters may be extreme or unusually heightened. Comedy and melodrama might be seen to pull in different directions, and to undermine mundane realism – although there are also moments where we cry despite our laughter, or laugh despite our tears.

However, on another level, this shuttling back and forth between divergent forms of drama seems to depend upon, and perhaps to construct, a relatively knowing or 'media literate' viewer – one who is comfortable with this kind of fluid, multi-dimensional, and often highly ironic viewing experience. This may be particularly apparent in youth television. In her study of the youth-oriented entertainment shows and magazine programmes of the 1980s and 1990s, Karen Lury identifies a characteristic blend of 'cynicism and enchantment'. Viewers are expected to engage with the content in a direct and intensely pleasurable way, but simultaneously to take a critical distance from it, and to mock its implausibility and its fabricated nature. Such programmes want to be taken seriously, but they also keep their tongue firmly in their cheek. As we've seen, this ambivalence was also characteristic of the presentation of US teen dramas on UK channels like T4; but it is to some extent apparent *within* UK dramas themselves.

In the case of *Skins*, this is accentuated by passing comments that compare events to those in other media. Chris (season 1) complains that the atmosphere in the student common room is like an episode of *The O.C.*; Tony (season 1) gives a speech about needing to be 'who he really is', and promptly comments, 'I sound like fucking Lionel Richie'; JJ (season 3) casts aspersions on the 'overblown teen drama' that fuels Cook's sexual fantasies; while Mini (season 5) compares the characters taking drugs to the beginning of an episode of *Casualty*. The recurring appearance of well-known comic actors and comedians in the adult roles, and the use of well-known songs on the soundtrack (sometimes for ironic purposes), also contribute to this apparently 'media literate' approach.

Jamie Brittain's key requirement was that *Skins* should be 'FUNNY'. The programme's humour takes several forms. There is a good deal of knockabout, even slapstick humour; smart one-liners and put-downs, and comic swearing; and elements of absurdist social observation. With its recurrent emphasis on masturbation, farting, bodily functions and excessive consumption of drugs and alcohol, *Skins* sometimes comes close to 'gross-out' comedies like the *American Pie* and *Porky's* series, or indeed the contemporaneous British sitcom *The Inbetweeners*, especially in its portrayal of the male characters.

At the same time, much of the action takes place against a background of satire. This is especially apparent in the treatment of education: the fictional Roundview College is led by authoritarian managers who are obsessed with targets (most notably the ludicrous Professor Blood in seasons 5 and 6), and yet most of the teachers appear utterly incompetent. Along the way, there are several other moments of highly self-conscious parody: in generation 2, for example, a group of identical blondes in Pandora's hair and beauty class file their nails to the accompaniment of the Singing

Nun; Freddie's sister competes in a sex-obsessed version of the TV show *Pop Idol*; Cook's mother turns out to be a ludicrous conceptual artist, while Naomi's mother runs an absurd feminist commune, 'saving the world one lentil at a time'; and Freddie visits an inept counselor with a Michael Jackson fixation, called Mr. T. Love.

On the other hand, melodramatic elements often come to the fore, especially in the treatment of romantic relationships. One characteristic trope of melodrama – which it shares in curious ways with romantic comedy – is that of the 'dream deferred'. Characters are unable or unwilling to confess their love; they misunderstand the true feelings of their intended partner; they encounter obstacles, make mistakes or miss opportunities to say what is in their heart; they suffer with feelings that can never be requited. Their pain is often accentuated and prolonged through a series of coincidences; and while they may experience moments of romantic fulfillment and joy, these are often shown to be temporary – especially, as I've suggested, in the case of serial narratives. At the end of the story, love is often finally denied by death, abandonment or terminal separation. Timing is critical here: the fulfillment they (and we) desire is frequently denied by the fact that the characters get there *just too late*. The bittersweet poignancy of these stories is often accentuated by the fact that we know more than the characters do: we know what they *should* do, even if they fail to do it; we can foresee the disasters that lie ahead, even if they cannot; and while we hope that characters may be saved from their fate, we recognize that this is always less than likely.

Thus, while *Skins* may often provoke laughter, it also invites and (for this viewer at least) produces tears. This is typically accentuated by the use of music, which is a key characteristic of melodrama more broadly (the term originates in the ancient Greek, where 'melos' means music). While at times this can be very effective, it becomes somewhat predictable and intrusive as the seasons proceed. By seasons 5 and 6, maudlin indie laments are used much too frequently to fudge or simulate emotion (although I confess that I am not a fan).

The movement back and forth between these dramatic modes – realism, comedy and melodrama – occurs across the arc of a whole season, but also within individual episodes. If we take season one, for example, some episodes are clearly more comic as a whole than others. Episode 6 finds the group on an implausible school trip to Moldova: there is much farcical sneaking back and forth between bedrooms (of both students and teachers), and the central storyline, in which Anwar attempts to rescue a sexy Moldovan girl whom he believes is being abused by her father, is replete with knowingly exaggerated Eastern European stereotypes.

As in this case, there are some storylines that are contained within single or few episodes that are self-consciously played for laughs. In this respect, psychopathic gangsters are a recurring feature across the series as a whole. In season 1, Sid becomes the fall guy for a drug-dealing plot involving an absurdly-moustachioed dealer called 'Mad Twatter', who threatens his life when he is unable to pay and subsequently reappears (entirely implausibly) both in Cassie's therapy group and as a supply teacher at the college. In other instances, minor characters are introduced in roles that either exaggerate established stereotypes or subvert them. Episode 3, for example, introduces us to Jal's brothers, who are caricatured teenage rappers, and the recurring background figure of 'posh Kenneth', a black character who poses as a

street-wise kid from the hood, yet occasionally slips back into upper-class received pronunciation.

On the other hand, this season also contains some highly melodramatic storylines, which deal with – and seek to evoke – intense emotion. These are largely to do with romances between the leading characters, which run across into the following season. Sid and Cassie's 'will they – won't they' relationship has elements of rom-com, but it also contains many of the obstacles and difficulties I've described above as characteristic of melodrama. Sid is initially infatuated with Michelle, but eventually comes to realize his true feelings. However, he can't seem to speak his love for Cassie; and then she can't speak hers for him. Both characters have sex with other people, because of availability or desperation, and are then discovered. Meanwhile, Cassie struggles with an eating disorder, and then spirals into a more serious mental illness.

As I've suggested, these darker melodramatic elements often come to the fore in the second season in each generation. Another familiar *Skins* trope is its fondness for killing off one of the central characters: Chris suffers this fate in season 2, as a result of a hereditary brain condition; Freddie is bludgeoned to death by a psychotic psychiatrist wielding a baseball bat towards the end of season 4; while in season 6, this fate befalls Grace, who is killed in a car accident while the group are on holiday in Morocco. The regularity with which a leading character is dispatched encourages more cynical fans to begin speculating on the online discussion boards, and might encourage a more distanced, 'media literate' approach. Nevertheless, the careful handling of these storylines – most notably in Chris's funeral in the finale of season 2, while his girlfriend Jal is now pregnant with their child – can be very moving, not least because it concerns characters whom we have come to 'know' over an extended period.

Nevertheless, *Skins* constantly oscillates between comedy and melodrama, even in episodes when the predominant tone is in one direction or the other. In season 1, this is especially apparent in episode 4, 'Chris'. In the opening scenes we see Chris experiencing the awkward after-effects of taking Viagra; we learn that his mother has left, possibly for good, leaving him with money that he proceeds to splash out on the obligatory wild party; and we also learn more about his ongoing sexual relationship with his psychology teacher. However, events spiral into chaos, as Chris is barred from his home by a squatter and left wandering naked down the street. Along the way, we learn of the train-wreck of his family – the fact that he was unwanted by his parents, how his mother separated and his brother died (the reasons for which – and its implications for Chris – are not fully revealed until season 2). Across the course of the episode, Chris moves back and forth between being a comic character, a kind of fall guy, and a tragic one: laughter turns to pity and then back to laughter.

This kind of movement is also evident in the season finale, episode 9. The central event is inevitably a party, although in this instance it is Anwar's birthday party, with his extended family in attendance. The tension between Anwar's Muslim background and the hedonistic culture of his college friends – a running theme throughout earlier episodes – comes to the fore here, although it is given added intensity through his ambiguous relationship with his close friend Maxxie, who is gay. If the tensions here are easily resolved – Anwar's parents turn out to be more tolerant than he had

assumed, and a new female love interest is provided for him – other unresolved romantic relationships are still lingering. Cassie has left for Scotland: she misses Sid, and Sid misses her, but they are constantly failing to communicate and misinterpreting each other. Meanwhile, Tony is finally on the point of telling Michelle that he loves her when he is run over by a bus – an event whose ramifications are played out right across the following season. Yet strikingly, the final scenes feature most of the cast – including a resuscitated Tony – miming direct to camera, not to a contemporary tune but to an old Cat Stevens hit from 1970, 'Wild World'. The lyric – warning the singer's girlfriend to beware that 'it's a wild world', and that she should 'take good care' – could be seen as a knowing commentary on the events of the series to date; but it also clearly steps outside realism, as well as helping to allay the shock and melodrama.

When it is handled well, this movement between comedy and melodrama can be extremely effective: it makes for a particular kind of poignancy, or a kind of rueful amusement. In other instances, however, it can prove rather clumsy and awkward. Cynicism and enchantment – or at least comic distance and melodramatic engagement – pull in different directions. If we do not already care about the characters, or if they are too frequently the butt of the joke (as is to some extent the case with Anwar in season 1), it is hard to make the emotional investment required for melodrama. As I've suggested, this kind of movement assumes a 'media literate' viewer: it presumes that we are quite aware of the fictional, constructed nature of the text, but also that we are capable of consciously choosing to suspend our disbelief when circumstances require.

Character

One of the perils of retrospective research of this kind is that it inevitably depends upon binge viewing. Watching seven seasons – around 45 hours of television – across a couple of weeks can produce a degree of exhaustion, to say the least. How I respond to a text under these conditions is often quite different from how I responded at the time it was broadcast – not least because then I had no option but to wait for the following week's episode, or the new season, to appear. Watching a series like *Skins* in this way inevitably makes you more aware of its formulaic aspects, and the elements of repetition. Even with one's notebook in hand, it's hard to avoid becoming bored and disenchanted. This is almost certainly compounded by the fact that I am well beyond the programme's core target age group – even if many older adults like myself undoubtedly watched the programme when it was broadcast. Equally, I suspect that many younger viewers would probably have watched for one or two generations, but not for the entire duration, feeling perhaps that they had 'grown out' of *Skins*.

Watching in this way, it's hard not to imagine the discussions in the writer's room. I envisage the writers mapping out the storylines schematically on large flow charts, moving the characters around on post-it notes. In a large ensemble drama, with several interwoven narratives, it's important to ensure that viewers can keep track and don't lose interest. While particular stories may need to develop quite quickly, it can be a struggle to keep others going. Producers have to judge whether particular storylines fit with the established brand: there is bound to be a temptation to repeat

or rework previous successes, albeit with sufficient changes to make them seem novel and interesting. And, as we'll see, there may also be an ongoing dialogue with fans on the online forums expressing their wishes and preferences – as well as their criticisms – as the production proceeds.

One obvious dimension of this is characterization. Each generation of *Skins* comprises seven or eight main characters. From the outset, these characters have to be distinctive and easy to interpret, but they also have to be sustained and developed across the entire run of eighteen or nineteen episodes (the equivalent of nine feature films), without losing interest or plausibility. Each episode focuses on a single primary character, or sometimes a pair of characters; while in the opening and closing episodes of a season, all the characters are featured. Nevertheless, even within a given character's episode, the other storylines have to be kept going; and while the interconnections between the characters and their frequent meeting points makes this possible, there may also need to be unusual coincidences, as the characters happen to bump into each other purely by chance, lest we might forget about them.

Inevitably, the characters gain in depth as the season proceeds, as their individual episodes fill in their back-stories and present new developments. However, at the start of a season, the characters need to be introduced by means of a kind of shorthand, and it is easy to feel that they are merely shallow stereotypes. In season 1, for example, we quickly recognize the charismatic, cocksure alpha male who needs to taken down a peg or two (Tony); the vulnerable but sexualized melodramatic heroine who is bound to suffer (Cassie); the sensitive male misfit who will win through in the end (Sid); the stoner with a tragic past (Chris); the sexy, love-lorn leading lady (Michelle); the conflicted ethnic minorities, torn between family and peers (Anwar, and the studious classical musician Jal); and the token gay character, who appears curiously isolated from any wider gay community (Maxxie). While it's implausible that such people would all associate with each other in real life, they are required to become an ill-matched group; and as the series proceeds, they couple up with each other in different permutations, and become entangled in various love triangles, again in ways that sometimes strain credibility.

This pattern is essentially the same across the two generations that follow. The range of stereotypes through which we initially read the characters is extended, and there is some variation (for instance by gender); but there is also a considerable amount of repetition. In generation 2, the mysteriously controlling Effie has several echoes of her brother Tony; Thomas plays the conflicted ethnic minority; JJ, an autistic character, partly repeats Sid's misfit role; while the kooky Pandora has elements of Cassie's hippy vacuity. On the other hand, we also have a sustained queer relationship between two central characters, one of whom struggles constantly with her straight twin (Naomi, Emily and Katie); and a more unhinged and destructive variation of the stoner character (Cook). Generation 3 also has misfits (this time female, Franky), warring siblings (Nick and Matti), a sexy leading lady, albeit one who is somewhat of a 'Mean Girl' (Mini) and a studious ethnic minority character (Grace); but it adds a sports jock (Nick), a sensitive heavy-metaller (Rich) and a well-hung farm boy (Alo). In this case, the ensemble makes for a particularly implausible friendship group, not least when they go on holiday together, as they do at the start of season 6.

Presenting each generation of characters in this way points to the potential for comedy that is central to *Skins'* appeal. However, it also illustrates the somewhat formulaic approach, and the elements of repetition. There is an evident danger of tokenism, as single characters may appear to stand in for wider social categories: the gay character, the black character, the disabled character, and so on. To be fair, *Skins* does not entirely fall prey to this, not least because of its long-term serial narrative: across the six main seasons, there are *several* black, gay and variously disabled characters, who play diverse and often complex roles.

Furthermore, these initially two-dimensional characters are filled out as episodes proceed. In some respects, the edges are knocked off the stereotypes as we learn more about the characters; and some elements that strongly differentiate them are abandoned as they become part of the group. In generation 3, for example, Nick decides to leave the rugby team, Rich's enthusiasm for heavy metal becomes less evident, and Franky's sexual ambiguity gradually fades. Other innovative storylines are also sacrificed – most notably Mini's initial anxiety about her appearance, and about sex – as the characters are required to come together in sometimes unlikely couplings. In other instances, characters never quite take on depth (Alo in generation 3, for example), fail to develop beyond their involvement in a particular love triangle (Freddie in generation 2), or fade into the background because they are given nothing much to do (Rich in season 6, and to some extent Naomi in season 4). In some instances, new central characters are brought on board in order to provide new momentum (Sketch in season 2, Alex in season 6), although such characters rarely take on much depth.

As I've suggested, the melodramatic aspects of a serial drama like *Skins* depend upon us taking the characters seriously, and caring about them. This is obviously encouraged by the fact that, however thin they may initially appear, we eventually 'get to know' them over several hours of screen time: the characters take time to acquire emotional resonance. Nevertheless, *Skins* is not Tolstoy or Jane Austen: it would be unrealistic to expect it to have a large cast of fully individuated, 'rounded' characters. Most of the minor characters – especially the adults – are instantly recognizable stereotypes or caricatures, who exist either as comic background or as threats to the major characters, and they remain so: parents are hippies, sex fiends, moral prudes, or embarrassing dads; while teachers are disciplinarians, pretentious arty types, slackers or merely buffoons. Barely any of the parents enjoy stable or happy relationships. In some cases, parallels and comparisons are implicitly drawn between the young characters and their parents: in season 1, for example, Sid's struggles with relationships are echoed by his father's difficulties. When it comes to the core group, this ensemble approach allows us to shift our identifications, and to see any given character from a range of perspectives. To put it more cynically perhaps, the viewer is given choice: even if we are bored or irritated by some of the characters, others will be along shortly, or at least in the following episode.

Narrative

If *Skins*' characters sometimes carry a formulaic air, so too do its narratives. Again, this is especially apparent when binge viewing: the storylines sometimes appear to be assembled like Lego bricks. Each episode typically combines a range of longer-term

storylines – mostly romances and love triangles that develop across whole seasons – with shorter, one-off narratives that are often resolved within one or two episodes. The latter are generally more comical, and frequently involve characters being placed in some form of jeopardy. Generation 2, for example, has several romantic story arcs that are interwoven across the two seasons: Effie, Freddie and Cook; Naomi and Emily; Thomas and Pandora. Other characters like Katie and JJ are somewhat less implicated, although they both at some stage have sex (or almost have sex) with various of the other characters, provoking misunderstanding, confusion and jealousy. Interwoven with these continuing storylines are several shorter ones. In some instances, these function as 'back story' in individual episodes: the story of Thomas's migration from Congo, for example, or Naomi's mother and her hippy commune. In others, which tend to evolve over several episodes, they entail the characters being placed in some kind of jeopardy, mostly entailing violence or illness: Cook incurs the wrath of a psychopathic gangster; Naomi becomes the focus of a police investigation after she gives drugs to a girl who is stalking her, and who eventually commits suicide; Effie is manipulated by her obsessive psychotherapist; and so on.

Here again, it's tempting to regard the plotting as a matter of dispassionate calculation. It sometimes appears as though the characters are moved about like pieces on a chess-board, shifting almost arbitrarily from one relationship or love triangle to the next; and seemingly random developments are introduced merely to stave off boredom and keep things going. *Skins* sustains its ability to surprise and to shock, although this begins to wane across successive generations; and the cynical viewer might well be forgiven for coming to regard shock and surprise as part of the formula as well. The game of prediction can then become rather tiresome. Which characters are going to couple up with each other? Which one is going to be killed off? Which character is going to be threatened by deranged gangsters? Which ones are going to end up in bed with somebody they don't really love?

Within individual episodes, the narrative often follows a familiar pattern: the lead character's life begins to unravel, they attempt to pull themselves together and get back on track, they partially succeed, but by the end things often take a further turn for the worse. In terms of narrative theory, this would be described in terms of equilibrium and disequilibrium – although in the case of serial narratives like *Skins*, this is often a matter of moving back and forth between them, rather than a steady progress towards resolution.

Across the longer duration, the central characters do learn and change – if sometimes in fairly predictable ways. They learn to care for others (Tony), to assert themselves (Sid), or to acknowledge their own sexuality (Naomi); they conquer mental illness and disability, however temporarily (Cassie, Tony, Effie, JJ); they come to terms with grief (Rich, Mini), or with the trauma of their own past (Franky); and they are reconciled with their parents or siblings (Emily and Katie, Nick and Matti). Above all, and in line with the ethic I have identified, they learn to 'be themselves', to 'tell the truth' and to 'love well'. *Skins* may evade the overt moralism of most 'coming of age' narratives, but it does project a kind of individualistic psychology that some might see as symptomatic of neoliberal times. Ultimately, the problems that the characters encounter cannot be addressed by any wider social change: on the contrary, they need to pull themselves together and learn to deal with life.

Here again, this kind of account tends to underplay the inventiveness with which the stories are related – and particularly the use of visual elements. The nuances of relationships are often conveyed not so much by dialogue but by nicely symbolic or quirky visual details. In seasons 3 and 4, for example, Naomi and Emily come together (and then fall apart) very slowly: in one scene, they sit on either side of a door, holding hands through a cat flap; in another, Naomi wakes up with the impression on her face of a written note Emily has left on her pillow. Carefully chosen locations are also important here: for example, the hillside graveyard in which Chris is buried at the end of season 2; or the atmospheric dockside town where Cook goes in search of his father at the end of season 3.

Even so, both in terms of narrative and characterization, a serial drama like *Skins* is bound to operate according to formulas – and these formulas are likely to become more evident to viewers as it proceeds. As it moves into its fourth or fifth season, there's a danger that it will become derivative of itself, merely reworking established tropes and clichés, albeit with a few surprising variations to keep them interesting. We can get tired of feeling that we are being manipulated, however 'knowing' this may appear. Meanwhile, it may also become harder to maintain the balance between comedy and melodrama that I have described: the transitions from one to the other may come to seem awkward and contrived. This makes it difficult, not just to sustain the energy and forward movement, but also the emotional conviction that viewers require. The characters may cease to matter to us. Reading through the online forums and reviews, it's clear that many viewers were aware of this: as we'll see, they tend to support a series that they love, but this in no way precludes criticism along these lines. There was a widespread agreement among fans that *Skins* gradually lost its way in these respects, and that the decision to terminate after six seasons (the seventh is a rather separate matter) was both inevitable and wise. I would agree.

Ultimately, authenticity is the key quality here; but as I've implied, authenticity is not quite the same as realism. Despite some of the claims that were made about it, *Skins* is not 'gritty' social realism, and it doesn't intend to be. It plays with stereotypes, and knowingly recycles its own well-established tropes. It revels in parody, and it frequently plays things for laughs. It exaggerates and goes over the top, but in a self-conscious and ironical way. Yet while these elements might well encourage audiences to come on side, and to buy into what I have called its youthful 'rhetoric', they are also risky. They encourage us to think of ourselves as 'media literate', knowing viewers – but they also run the risk of distancing us too far. *Skins* did not set out to be *empirically* realistic or truthful, but it did nevertheless have to be *emotionally* truthful, especially in the way it handled its characters. By creating empathy and identification, however temporary, it allowed the viewer to recognize and think about parallels in their own experiences. Its claim to authenticity – to speak *to* and *for* youth – rested on this extremely difficult emotional balancing act.

Exploiting 'interactivity'

Skins arrived during a period of significant change within the media industries, as established media like television struggled to respond to the challenges and opportunities of digital technology. Much of the rhetoric here was based on claims about the distinctive characteristics of techno-savvy 'digital natives'; and in order to

reach and retain this seemingly elusive youthful audience, *Skins* needed to develop an active and multi-faceted online strategy.

The series' web presence was designed both to raise viewers' expectations of upcoming episodes, and to keep them engaged long after they had aired. It offered teasers, extensions and elaborations of the narrative, including back-story material and video diaries or blogs by the characters, as well as a range of related merchandise and giveaways. On the official Channel 4 website, there were MP3 downloads, competitions, trailers, publicity stills, interviews with the cast and writers, and a mailing list. Much of this material was exclusive to the website, not least in the form of 'unseen' episodes and 'cut' scenes. In many instances, viewers were alerted to new developments before the programmes actually aired; and new 'generations' of characters were profiled online before they appeared on screen. More than five years after the series ended, a great deal of this material is still online, both on the Channel 4 site and on other platforms: YouTube has numerous 'official' trailers and tasters, as well as compilations focused on specific characters ('The Best of Pandora', 'Effy's Story').

However, *Skins'* digital strategy also made use of emerging social media, where viewers were invited to interact and share their own content. There was a dedicated space on the youth-oriented social network MySpace (and subsequently on Facebook), which enabled fans to discuss characters and episodes, and to speculate about future developments. Also on MySpace (and in some cases subsequently on Twitter or Facebook), each of the leading characters had a profile, in which they posted content 'in role', for example about their media tastes and preferences, and about their back-story. Meanwhile, fans could sign up to a 'Skins Messenger' service on MSN Messenger to receive automated alerts about upcoming developments, as well as music credits, gossip and trivia.

These kinds of developments are typically accompanied by a familiar rhetoric about the democratic possibilities of online media. In the digital age, audiences are apparently becoming 'empowered', and television is becoming a more participatory medium – or so it is alleged. As the consumption of television becomes more of a cross-platform activity, the 'text' of television is certainly extended, and potentially made more open, in various ways. By moving beyond the limits of the broadcast programme, these approaches appear to provide new ways of relating both to characters and to narratives. Characters enjoy a 'life' beyond the series itself, and viewers are invited to join in a more intimate personal relationship with them, for example via video blogs, and to imagine that they are communicating with them directly. As 'teasers' and 'cut scenes' are released, viewers are also actively invited to speculate and share ideas about future developments in the narrative.

To some extent, this approach can also speak to – and perhaps help to create – a more 'media literate' audience. Viewers are given insights into what goes on behind the scenes; they are encouraged (albeit within limits) to express their own opinions, and to make suggestions about what they would like to see. For all the reasons I've suggested, these approaches are typically seen as more appropriate for a younger audience. In Jacqueline Rose's terms, they appear to address the 'impossibility' of youth television. They promise to overcome the gap between the producer and the

audience, literally drawing the young viewer 'into the text', and positioning them as active and engaged.

Nevertheless, there are some significant caveats here. For the media companies, these 'participatory' opportunities serve primarily as means of promotion. They help to engage the audience and bind them more fully into the world of the text, and thereby to promote consumer loyalty. In the case of *Skins*, some of the series' more lurid and controversial elements were more apparent online, and viewers were invited to take on the task of defending the series from (adult) criticism. In the process, at least with commercial television, these online resources also provide further opportunities for targeted advertising (the streamed episodes on the 40D website seem to have a good deal more advertising than I remember from the original broadcasts). To this extent, digitally 'active' fans might well be seen as the quintessential consumers.

Furthermore, much of this audience activity – responding and commenting via social media – can be construed as a form of work, or 'digital labour'. While there is no way of telling how representative the most active participants may be, they do nevertheless provide producers with valuable market research data, and they do so voluntarily, for free. As Michael O'Neill describes, season 2 of *Skins* was accompanied by a promotional campaign entitled '*Skins* needs you!', in which fans were invited to send in questions and comments that subsequently featured in a podcast. However, none of this 'fan labour' was paid, and very little of it had any influence on the development of the series.

It could be argued that these kinds of activities merely exploit willing fans under the guise of offering participation. Platforms like the 'Skins Messenger' service mimic and co-opt peer-to-peer social media practices, but merely with the aim of keeping audiences within the approved official channels (and thereby maintaining profitability). Indeed, one of the key aims of these ancillary forms of 'participation' is to incentivise the core activity of live viewing, not least because this is most valuable to advertisers: viewers are encouraged to anticipate and prepare for the live broadcast, even if they might well be using digital media as they watch.

Ultimately, there is a fundamental dilemma here for producers. As O'Neill suggests, broadcasters need to exploit the potential of new technologies and social media, yet they also have to keep audiences consuming content in ways that serve their own economic purposes. As far as possible, they need to contain viewers' participation within the 'branded enclosure' of the television channel and the official site, and thereby retain control of their brand. In this respect, audience *activity* should not be confused with *agency*: a more active, participatory audience is not necessarily any more powerful than one that 'passively consumes'.

Managing fandom

Indeed, there are many instances where this fan activity becomes the focus of a struggle for control *between* producers and audiences. This is partly about copyright, as fans illegally upload episodes and extracts to sites like YouTube, and thereby recoup the advertising revenue that comes from this. Nevertheless, fans (and indeed

those who are more critical of the series) can also take the opportunity to create their own versions, in the form of re-edited 'mash-ups' or 'swedes', where they recreate scenes to comic or satirical effect. Such material may encourage further 'bonding' between the viewer and the text, but in some instances it may also subvert and challenge the programme brand. As such material proliferates, the companies have to work hard to eradicate it or at least keep it under their control. In the case of *Skins*, Channel 4 repeatedly closed down 'unofficial' fan channels on YouTube and fan-created profiles on MySpace and Facebook. Most of the material that remains today is linked back to the official site, although fans' drawings and designs can easily be found on generic platforms like Pinterest and Flickr, as well as specialist fan sites like Fanpop and Fanart, while Youtube still hosts fans' mash-up compilation videos relating to their favourite stars or moments from the series.

Social media platforms can also become the vehicle for viewers to express their criticism and dissatisfaction, as much as positive appreciation. Some researchers have found that such forums are dominated by 'snarky' and ironic commentary. For example, Mark Andrejevic discusses the US site 'Television without Pity', where viewers congregate to share their responses, primarily to reality shows and soaps. This may be simply a matter of summarizing episodes, or drawing attention to continuity errors or inconsistencies in the narrative; although in some instances, the criticisms can be much more forthright. Viewers participate partly in order to entertain each other, and to make the shows more interesting, although there is also the hope of 'having their voices heard' by producers. However, Andrejevic finds that participants are often quite cynical about the idea that they will ever be able to influence the producers – and in this respect, while participation might feel 'empowering', it can often reinforce the audience's sense of powerlessness.

My own research (with Jose-Maria Masanet) on the official *Skins* forums found that participants were under no illusion about the constructed, fictional nature of the series, and were sometimes equally cynical about it. Even so, they were keen to engage *because of* the appeal of the show, and not *despite* it: they were not primarily seeking to make it more interesting. Furthermore, the series also provoked some sincere discussion of personal issues – especially about relationships and sexuality – that went well beyond the fictional world of the narrative. Participants were effectively using the forums as an informal, peer-to-peer method of learning about sex and relationships – which, as we argued, was important in a context where formal sex education is generally so limited.

Even so, this interaction between audiences and producers in social media can sometimes become quite fraught. This was particularly apparent in relation to the lesbian storyline of Naomi and Emily in generation 2 – which became known, first by fans and then by the producers, as the 'Naomily' story. As Deborah Hunn describes, the feedback on the forums led to the storyline being given greater prominence, and encouraged the happy ending which concluded season 3. However, fans became disenchanted as the couple's relationship began to fall apart during season 4, even though they were uneasily reconciled by the end. In some respects, the 'fantagonism' here reflected the classic dilemma: on the one hand, viewers were calling for 'positive images' of gay couples; yet on the other, they wanted those representations to be 'realistic'. This is especially difficult in the case of a serial narrative: the story

has to continue beyond the moment of romantic fulfillment (and in this case, of 'coming out'), but in doing so it cannot simply be a matter of 'happy ever after'.

However, in this case, the complication in the narrative came primarily from the existence of a third character, Sophie, with whom Naomi had a brief relationship, and who kills herself at the very start of season 4. Naomi and Emily eventually discover that Sophie had been stalking her for some time. Hunn argues that this character is a further instance of the 'dangerous lesbian' stereotype – although in fact there is an equivalent heterosexual character in season 2, a girl called Sketch who stalks the gay male character, Maxxie. Interestingly, Hunn argues that Sophie is also a kind of surrogate of the 'obsessive fan' – and perhaps implicitly a means for the producers of *Skins* to push back against the perceived excesses of some of their online followers.

A rather different fan phenomenon in this case was the *Skins* parties – which were remembered very clearly by a couple of my informants. It seems that, during the first season, groups of young people spontaneously organized house parties intended, as *Vice* puts it, 'to be every bit as nasty as those on the show and in its ads'. The term '*Skins* party' became part of the lexicon of youth culture: it was defined by the *Urban Dictionary* (which always approaches such matters with a heavy dose of irony) as 'a huge party in someone's house where nearly everything is broke, lots of people are having sex and almost everyone is either drunk or drugged up'. A few spectacular cases attracted media attention, which may then in turn have become part of the appeal: again according to the *Urban Dictionary*, such a party 'self consciously aspires to be infamous, preferably on the evening news'. Despite some of the media coverage, the *Skins* parties were obviously not just a 'copycat' phenomenon: as Hannah Ewens puts it, 'teenagers have been doing drugs and having sex for decades', although it's possible that the show might have exposed some underage young people to 'a form of party culture they might not have encountered until university'. In addition to these house parties, several commercial club venues – not only in the UK but across Europe – also mounted *Skins* party nights, sometimes marketed as '*Skins* secret parties'.

While the producers might initially have found this a little hard to deal with, they joined in fairly rapidly. As early as 2008, official '*Skins Live*' tours were visiting major UK cities, with promotional parties promising live music, DJs and lightshows (and implicitly, sex, drugs and alcohol). Tickets were obtained through style or music competitions online, and lucky winners informed by text message – again pointing to *Skins*' early use of social media. It was promised that the crowd would be filmed, and that scouts would be looking for potential cast members for upcoming series.

As this suggests, these kinds of fan phenomena can be highly ambivalent and difficult to manage. On one level, cultivating active forms of fandom can help to overcome the 'impossibility' of youth television. By drawing viewers in, by offering at least the illusion of participation and dialogue, such activities reinforce the claim for youth-centredness, and can help to establish a kind of youth cultural credibility. Yet in the process, they can also become another focus for the continuing struggle over authenticity and power between producers and audiences.

Conclusion

In this essay, I've used *Skins* as a means of illustrating some of the broader problems at stake in the whole phenomenon of 'youth television'. *Skins* was undoubtedly innovative and influential in all sorts of ways: it is worth revisiting for its own sake, although I would probably caution against too much binge viewing. However, it also points to some of the broader difficulties and dilemmas at stake in attempting to create television that speaks to, and on behalf of, young people. These are apparent at several levels – in how the programme seeks to engage and address its viewers, and in how it purports to represent youthful perspectives and experiences. As television loses its former dominance in young people's media lives, the difficulties that are raised here are likely to become significantly more acute – and youth television itself may well come to seem increasingly 'impossible'.

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In addition, Valerie Wee's *Teen Media: Hollywood and the Youth Market in the Digital Age* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010) focuses more on the industry.

Bill Osgerby's *Youth Media* (London: Routledge, 2004) remains a useful overview, with a broader global scope.

Specifically on UK television, Karen Lury's *British Youth Television: Cynicism and Enchantment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) provides a useful look at the non-fictional youth programming of the 1980s and 1990s.

However, when it comes to fiction, the definitive account is Faye Woods's *British Youth Television: Transnational Teens, Industry, Genre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016). This is very well-written and comprehensive, although like many academic books these days, it is prohibitively expensive.

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