Media narratives, agonistic deliberation, and *Skam*

An analysis of how young people communicate in digital spaces

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Abstract

Increasingly, the means of engaging young people in constructive public debate and democratic society has shifted to online digital media platforms. This assumes that participants have the necessary media literacy skills to engage in a meaningful way. We discuss how and to what extent responses in an online blog elicited by two different scenes from the popular youth television series *Skam* [*Shame*] demonstrate agonistic deliberation and media literacy in digital dialogue spaces. Our study includes an analysis of the rhetorical characteristics of the dialogues; the mapping of key themes that characterise reactions of blog commentators in the online discussions; and a discussion of the characteristics of – and degree of deliberation in – online comments. We propose that narratives which employ agonistic deliberation around pertinent social themes are most likely to encourage and elicit public engagement that moves beyond emotional outbursts, reflecting a deeper consideration of the themes and topics.

Keywords: digital media literacy, youth participation, democracy, agonistic deliberation, Skam

Introduction

Media literacy facilitates young people's participation in democratic life. For example, critical thinking skills enhance their ability to understand and interact with media in their everyday lives. This and other capacities – such as problem-solving, research skills, creativity, collaboration, and exercising skills for working within social networks and negotiating across cultural differences – allow youth to engage in public life (Jenkins et al., 2009). The key goal of our study is to provide research-based understanding of the different types of approaches that young people use to make sense of and share perceptions or opinions within digital dialogue spaces. In other words, we define media literacy in this article as the ability to adapt to the cultural requirements of participation and meaningful dialogue. This entails that we see young people as active knowledge

producers who accommodate to affordances provided by the digital media they use. We focus on how young people's participation as active knowledge producers requires the appropriation of methods to handle dilemmas and controversies in a pluralistic society. With this study, we contribute to the understanding of young people's media literacy competencies by examining how two vital scenes in the popular Norwegian youth television series *Skam* [*Shame*] address and depict pressing social matters in ways that offer different potential for deliberation. We consider how this is reflected in the reception of these scenes in commentaries on the series blog hosted by the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK P3.

Drawing on textual-intertextual analysis (Ceccarelli, 2001; Rønlev, 2020), we present and analyse two scenes – aired in 2016 and 2017 respectively – and their related blog commentaries posted on NRK P3. We consider how the participatory format employed in those scenes inspired engagement with key narratives and social issues. By delving into these, we illustrate two ways of engaging young viewers.

With this article, we seek to add to existing literature addressing knowledge gaps pertaining to relations between digital media and civic, democratic, and social participation as dimensions of public spaces. There is a need to explore dynamics through which digital dialogue spaces shape, and are shaped by, cultural activity and media participation. In terms of actors' participation in digital communication, innovative media studies have already illuminated meaning-making and public participation in digital media production (e.g., Carpentier, 2011) and how social media relate to contemporary media culture (e.g., Fuchs, 2014). In youth media studies, pioneering work has been conducted into how networks support youth creativity (Drotner, 2018; Eleà & Mikos, 2018; Livingstone, 2009). The field of digital humanities has focused on digital archives, computational cultural analytics, textual mining, analysis, and visualisation (e.g., Manovich, 2013), whereas recent co-design studies have explored media innovation and citizenship (e.g., Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Huybrechts et al., 2017). Similarly, important literature that maps transmedia skills of production and consumption among young people emphasises that while young people have content production and social management skills, they may lack the ability to understand ideologies and media representations of stereotypes (Scolari et al., 2018).

While *Skam* has received much attention in academia, media literacy – especially as it relates to this popular youth series – is underresearched (Duggan, 2020). A series is an interesting format to explore, as serial narratives are seen to offer a "sense of security which is particularly appealing to children whose literacy skills are developing" (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2017: 171). We begin by presenting an overview of research conducted on *Skam* before we analyse the two scenes and related blog comments.

Previous research on *Skam*

Skam was a Norwegian television series produced by the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK that aired for four seasons between 2015 and 2017. Focusing on the everyday lives of a group of high-school students, the series was designed to appeal to and attract youth, and in particular girls, as a television audience (Sundet, 2020). *Skam* turned out to be a tremendous success, not least because NRK let the story unfold in real time via social media, in parallel with the weekly television episodes. When NRK

conducted a survey after the second season, it discovered that as many as 98 per cent of Norwegian teenagers between the ages of 15 and 19 knew about the series, and more than 67 per cent had watched the show (Sundet, 2020). Gradually, the series went on to attract a substantial international audience.

Being such a unique television phenomenon, *Skam* has received scholarly interest from several scientific angles. First and foremost, media scholars have analysed and discussed the innovative narrative structure of the show, often in the context of Jenkins's term "transmedia storytelling" (e.g., Jenkins, 2006). The show's success is often linked to the way the story unfolded seemingly in real time through updates in social media and short clips on the official *Skam* blog (Andersen & Linkis, 2019; Bengtsson et al., 2018; Bom, 2018; Duggan, 2020; Lindtner & Dahl, 2019; Pearce, 2017; Rasmussen & Valtysson, 2017; Sundet, 2017, 2020; Sundet & Petersen, 2020). Moreover, studies of the show's format are sometimes interwoven with fandom studies. Focus group interviews tend to emphasise how the series created a feeling of belonging and taking part in a community (Rasmussen & Valtysson, 2017; Sundet & Petersen, 2020). Lastly, studies of the aesthetics demonstrate how the soundtrack and extensive use of close-ups facilitated identification and empathy with the characters (Dahl & Lindtner, 2018; Jerslev, 2017). Taken together, these studies suggest that the show's major success should be explained less by the fact that it is about teens and deals with recognisable aspects of the audience's own lives. Rather, it is the way the show invites the audience to care for its characters combined with the continuous suspense of how the story is going to unfold in social media, and the social aspect of the fan groups, that propels the interest (see, in particular, Lindtner & Dahl, 2019). These findings are supported by several analyses of audience comments on the official *Skam* blog or in other social media. We review these studies in some more detail, as they provide the closest foundation for our own empirical analysis.

Prøitz and colleagues (2019) analyse users' comments about an Instagram post that officially declared that the fourth season of *Skam* would be the final one. Their analysis indicates that the show had positively impacted a lot of viewers' sense of belonging and hope for the future – very much in line with the intentions of *Skam*'s production team (Sundet, 2017, 2020). The affective aspects of the user comments are also addressed by Rasmussen and Valtysson (2017), who find that the comments on the *Skam* blog created a community which affects the individual user's emotional life and invites them to share these emotions. Krüger and Rustad (2017) interpret this experienced community in light of Winnicott's (1953/1971, 1986) concept of "transitional objects", showing how the *Skam* blog allowed the users to link specific scenes to their individual challenges with coming of age. The comment section works as a relatively safe place to discuss, for example, female sexuality, and according to Krüger and Rustad (2017: 76), one of the success factors is that the show itself "avoids coming across as a top-down, didactic, and 'preachy' affair – a trap that public-service-oriented media products for children frequently fall into".

Some studies have looked specifically into the democratic potential of comments. Lindtner and Dahl (2019) point out that *Skam* combines elements from soap opera (twists and cliffhangers that encourage continuous discussion) and melodrama (characters learning from their mistakes). Along with the complex characters in the series, this opens up for sound moral debates that make viewers see their own feelings and experiences

as examples of more general phenomena. Lindtner and Dahl (2019: 67) claim that this "contributes to an understanding of the conditions for the development of deliberative democracy in modern media societies, insights relevant both for democratic theory and democratic practice". Similar points are made by the same authors in a chapter that analyses readers' responses to Isak, one of the main characters, coming out as gay in the third season of the series (Dahl & Lindtner, 2018). *Skam* is seen as a democratic resource in this instance because it generates an empathic understanding of "the Other".

Closely related are the didactic possibilities of the series. An edited collection by Lindtner and Skarstein (2018) examines the form, topics, and reception of *Skam* with reference to how the series could be used as teaching material. In addition to Dahl and Lindtner (2018), we put forward Skarstein's (2018) analysis of the comment section as an interpretative community. Following Bruner (e.g., 1986), Skarstein distinguishes between two general modes when interpreting a text. One is the syntagmatic way of approaching a narrative, which means being absorbed in the fictional universe and expressing feelings and desires about what is happening or should happen. This kind of "intersubjective closeness" is the most intuitive and everyday way of engaging with narratives. There is, however, also a paradigmatic way of reading where users see the series from more distance and interpret allusions, metaphors, and deeper messages. An important objective in secondary school education is to move students from syntagmatic to paradigmatic reading. According to Skarstein (2018), both these readings occur on the *Skam* blog, but they rarely mix – they are parallel interpretative communities, and notably the share of paradigmatic comments does not increase across the four seasons. We therefore refer to these readings when discussing and analysing reactions on the *Skam* blog.

As shown in this section, previous academic literature outlines three main themes: personal development of viewers; didactical potential or educational value of content; and democratic value development. We expand on the last theme in this article by emphasising media literacy and deliberation on pressing social issues.

Material and analytical approach

We analyse two scenes from *Skam* that were debated in the news media and which were among the most commented upon on the *Skam* blog for their respective seasons. They first appeared in two video clips on the blog before they – like all the other *Skam* clips – were assembled into full episodes and transmitted on prime-time television. The first clip was released on Thursday, 16 May 2016 with the title "Trussel" ["Threat"] and received 652 comments (the last registered in 2017) (Andem, 2016). The second clip was released on Friday, 2 June 2017 with the title "Fakker over vennene sine" ["Fucking over one's friends"] and received 896 comments (the last ones registered in 2018) (Andem, 2017). We have chosen to concentrate specifically on written comments. While we are aware that the use of "likes" is a form of interpassivity, and thereby a means of virtual participation, our purpose is to evaluate how deliberation is affected by the narrative devices employed in the selected clips. Since many of the blog comments are in Norwegian, they have been translated into English, with effort made to ensure that the translations are as true to the original meaning as possible. Given that commenters use anonymous nicknames, thereby ensuring that respective posts cannot be traced back to specific individuals, we deem it ethically acceptable to quote directly from the blog.

Our analysis is inspired by textual-intertextual analysis (Rønlev, 2020). This type of analysis supplements close readings of influential media texts (primary texts) with a mapping of the reception in media forms that provide spaces, such as blogs, where users have the possibility to comment on and discuss influential texts (secondary texts). The concept of text here is understood not in a limited sense as words on a page, but rather as any object that can be "read". It may therefore encompass forms such as video clips and television series and their different modalities, whether visual or verbal, as presented on different media platforms. However, in our mapping of the rhetorical strategies of the primary texts (the clips), emphasis is placed on the interaction between the main characters in the two scenes, and the way that this interaction may elicit deliberation on social issues addressed in them. We therefore seek to analyse whether different types of narratives require and elicit higher levels of engagement, the extrapolation of more in-depth understanding and meaning-making, as well as the active questioning of elements of rhetorical device.

To this purpose, we find Kent and Taylor's (2018) conception of dialogue and monologue along opposite ends of a continuum useful. Whereas monologue generates adherence and obedience, dialogue places emphasis on meaning-making, co-creation, and empathetic interactions. Dialogue includes features such as risk (e.g., openness to unanticipated experiences and consequences), mutuality (collaboration with others in a spirit of mutual equality), propinquity (e.g., awareness of the temporal flow of relationships), empathy (confirmation of others, supportiveness, communal orientation), and commitment (e.g., to maintaining open conversation and interpretation of what others say and feel). Persuasion is nevertheless involved in dialogic interactions. Dialogue participants with a history of tension have the potential to influence others and develop a new understanding of each other from the other's perspective. The dialogic encounter may result in increases in critical reflection skills, perspective-taking, and critical awareness of social issues.

We also draw on the agonistic model of democracy and consider how conflictual interaction may encourage deliberation amongst young people about social issues more effectively than traditional hero-protagonist (moralising) narratives or consensus-seeking dialogues and argumentation (see, e.g., Habermas, 1993). The agonistic model of democracy (Keegan, 2021; Mouffe, 2005) sees conflict and antagonism as constitutive features of the social. A major task of democratic policies, according to Mouffe (2005: 103), is not to eliminate passion from the public sphere "but to mobilize these passions towards democratic design". Building on Mouffe's agonistic political theory, Lo (2017) has proposed changes to the use of deliberative discussions in civic education classrooms, for example, by coupling agonism and deliberation to "allow students to draw upon their passionate responses to social injustice" (Keegan, 2021: 17). In this article, we understand deliberation (from the Latin *deliberare*: consider carefully) as young people's engagement with media narratives in order to consider and discuss different positions on a social issue. The result of agonistic deliberation is envisioned here as "negotiated action steps to address a social issue" (Keegan, 2021: 17), rather than compromise or consensus.

The conceptions of dialogue referred to above are based on agonistic models developed within political theory or within critical affective literacy in civic education. Furthermore, the understanding of dialogue presented by Kent and Taylor, and theorists

that they draw on (e.g., Cissna & Anderson, 1994; Pearson, 1989), is developed within a framework of organisational rhetoric and strategic communication. We find that the characteristics of dialogue the different scholars present can also be used to analyse mediated and representational dialogue (see Richardson, 2010) in television dramas such as *Skam*. We furthermore find that comments on the *Skam* blog are suited to evaluating the influence and deliberative potential the two scenes had on the followers of the series. In analysing the reception of the series, we (in addition) draw on the categories of interpretation, engagement, and consumption presented by Skarstein (2018), Andersen and Linkis (2019), and Lindtner and Dahl (2019). Furthermore, we discuss to what extent and how the responses in the comments – elicited by the two scenes – may contribute to a critical and deliberative media literacy among young participants in digital dialogue spaces. We are aware that NRK moderators may have removed some controversial comments. However, according to Lindtner and Dahl (2019), their level of tolerance tended to be high before interfering in the *Skam* discussions.

Our analysis is conducted along the following levels of interpretation:

- An analysis of the rhetorical characteristics of the dialogues (or lack thereof) that unfold in the two *Skam* scenes.

- A mapping of key themes that characterise the reactions of blog commentators when they discuss *Skam* online.

- A discussion of the characteristics of – and the degree of deliberation in – the blog commenters' comments about the two scenes.

We first provide a detailed description of both scenes so that the reader may better understand the textual narratives employed in the comment section on the NRK *Skam* blog.

Narrative 1: "Trussel" ["Threat"]

Description and analysis of primary text

This clip is the culmination of the wider narrative of the second season. The episodes revolve around the relationship of the protagonist – the independent and self-declared feminist Noora Amalie Sætre – with William, whom Noora initially viewed as sexist, but with whom she has since fallen in love. The episodes also address other feminist issues, eating disorders, violence, and sexual assault.

Closely preceding "Trussel" (episode 10), Noora attends a party held by William's brother Niko (episode 8), and subsequently wakes up naked beside Niko and another character, Mari (episode 9). Noora is unable to remember anything, but she suspects that she has been raped. At the end of episode 9, Noora receives on her phone a nude picture that Niko has taken of her. Throughout episode 10, Noora grapples with her feelings and her understanding of what happened that night leading up to the "Trussel" scene, where she meets Niko in a bar.

The scene unfolds over seven minutes and presents several different phases which gradually build up to a dramatic confrontation. First, Noora is sitting at a table, fiddling nervously with a pen, glancing at her phone, and finally grabbing her jacket to leave. Niko arrives, clearly late, seemingly bursting with confidence, and he orders two beers before Noora reminds him that she has not turned 18 (the legal age to buy liquor

in Norway). Niko says he thought she would "chicken out" of the meeting, leading to Noora saying that she remembers little of the party evening. Niko says that she blacked out, and she agrees.

Noora increasingly takes control of the situation. She starts by expressing her wish to know what happened that night and says she will leave if not told about it. Niko replies that it is pretty "ballsy" to be rude towards someone who possesses nude pictures of her. Noora asks if that was a threat, and a grinning Niko affirms that it was. She then asks him what he studies in Stockholm, and Niko replies, "international finance". Noora comments that he ought to have chosen law instead.

This leads to a climax in the narrative, when Noora explains the situation Niko is in – he will be convicted for child pornography. To a sarcastically laughing Niko, Noora states:

> According to the Penal Code paragraph 204 A, the penalty for producing and possessing an image that sexualizes children is imprisonment for up to three years. And as I am under 18, I am still considered a child according to Norwegian law.

She goes on to inform him that not only was it illegal to take the nude photos of her without consent, but also to store them on his phone. She says that other penal paragraphs of the law will enter if he distributes the pictures.

Although starting to appear uneasy, Niko laughs at her mention of child pornography. Unfazed, Noora shows that she is recording their conversation on her phone, pointing out that he has just threatened her. She then refers to two other penal paragraphs – about threat and force, respectively – and how this can add more years of imprisonment. She also brings up, in an increasingly ironic tone, how his violations of the law paragraph on serving alcohol to minors is really something to have on his CV. The scene ends with Noora, who – apparently with *Schadenfreude* ("Enjoyment obtained from the troubles of others"; Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a) – asks Niko what happens in prison to those who are convicted for child pornography: "I wouldn't pick up that soap in the shower if I were you. To put it that way". She leans triumphantly towards him, before leaving the bar to the rising soundtrack of the artist Fergie rapping "Here I Come". Niko is depicted from the back, sitting alone by the table in the bar.

This scene depicts the characters after a critical incident of situational shame. Noora's "coming back" and confronting Niko is entertaining and engaging on an emotional level. Its dramatic narrative corresponds well with *Skam*'s mission statement, to help young girls "to strengthen their self-esteem by breaking taboos, make them aware of interpersonal mechanisms and demonstrate the rewards of confronting fear" (Furevold-Boland, 2016, cited in Sundet, 2020: 75). There are also elements of education here, particularly tied to legislation related to the sexual violation of minors, as presented to young viewers by someone with whom they can strongly identify. It is an approach that helps the Norwegian national broadcaster NRK fulfil a public service ideal of combining the popular with the important, to create popular enlightenment (Sundet, 2017, 2020). Questions, however, arise as to how well the educational intent is made clear in the revenge narrative and the extent to which the scene triggers dialogue and deliberation among dedicated *Skam* followers on the legal and ethical issues it raises.

There is clearly little dialogue of the kind conceived by Kent and Taylor (2018) in the depicted exchanges between Noora and Niko. There is little risk in terms of the

characters projecting a sense of being "open to the unexpected". Rather, they play out prescribed roles of hero and villain in a narrative that does not allow for a spirit of mutual equality, confirmation of others (empathy), or a commitment to maintaining an open and ongoing conversation. The characters' exchanges may, on the contrary, be interpreted as a representation of one-way monologues. However, unlike Niko's utterances, the protagonist Noora's monologue ultimately does not appear as primarily self-serving in the context of a public service youth television series. It may rather be interpreted as a model speech for empowering young girls to believe in themselves and be able to tackle similar situations. Our expectation, then, was that in the *Skam* fan community, the protagonist's gleeful educational monologue would trigger expressions of praise and condemnation of the two characters, respectively.

Analysis of blog reception

We expected Noora's educational monologue to trigger expressions of praise and condemnation, respectively, of the two characters – and the majority of comments do exactly that. Most comments are euphoric outbursts like "YESSSS!" or "Noora is back <333333". Evidently, the clip released tension for a lot of viewers as Noora finally managed to reclaim her position as a feminist role model. As with many other series, it is common for viewers to address the characters directly in their comments, as if they were talking to a real friend: "You should consider being a lawyer", "Good work Noora", "Hell Noora I love you", and so on. One of the viewers even gives the character a bit of advice:

> Hi Noora. I think you were very tough today, and one can see that you have paid attention in law class. Law is very important, because then one can be aware of the rights one has as a Norwegian citizen. But enough about that. But my point is Noora, you must not forget that you may have been raped!!!

Krüger and Rustad (2017) have pointed at similar ways of supporting and caring for the characters on Instagram. However, while such posts may sustain and even increase the viewers' emotional investment in the show, they do not trigger much deliberation. Most of these comments are left with no replies.

However, there are some signs of deliberation triggered by Noora's use of law. Several commenters argue that she is partly referring to an outdated law, which sparks a discussion on whether the clip is supposed to give the viewers correct legal advice (an educational reading), or if the actual law does not matter as long as Noora is able to use it as a rhetorical device to retaliate against Niko (a more intersubjective, syntagmatic reading, see Skarstein, 2018). This is demonstrated by the following thread, where four commenters (C) discuss the scene:

> C1: Go Noora! She should be a lawyer!

> C2: Lawyer? Lying on the floor laughing!

> C3: Apart from doing the major mistake among lawyers and referring to the WRONG LAW, sure she should be a lawyer […]

> C4: One doesn't have to refer to the right law, as long as the effect on Nikolai is the same (and of course that the content is correct)

The large number of expressive comments suggest that the latter interpretation is the dominant one.

The clip was hailed by several Norwegian institutions – for instance, the police, who pointed out that Noora's conclusion was right even though she referred to the wrong paragraphs (Lindtner & Dahl, 2018; Svendsen, 2016) – as well as several institutions for rape victims who argued that the clip should be used in school for educational purposes (Jørgensen, 2016). Interestingly, the final comments on the *Skam* blog are indeed written by pupils who appear to have been instructed to analyse the clip one year later. These comments are far less enthusiastic:

> Can someone tell me what the message in this video is? I have a school assignment for tomorrow and could use some help.

In general, the comments suggest that what sparked the audience's interest was not the educational element (the legislation on sexual violation of minors), but rather the narrative twist of Noora finally triumphing over Niko – a moment they had been desperately waiting for over several episodes. This echoes Lindtner and Dahl's (2019) finding that the real appeal of the show lies in the transmedia format and feeling of immediacy, as well as the intimate portrayal of the characters, rather than the specific teen topics raised. While top-down education of the viewers was integrated in the storyline, it did not generate much fruitful deliberation on this subject. After all, the legal and moral lesson in the clip does not really invite debate, as most viewers would probably agree that sexual harassment is unacceptable, and the information is presented in terms of the law.

Narrative 2:
"Fakker over vennene sine" ["Fucking over one's friends"]
Description and analysis of primary text

The second clip chosen for study is from episode 7, season 4. The protagonist Sana Bakkoush, a young Muslim woman, attempts to find her place in a secular society. Sana is determined and articulate but faces challenges in combining a Norwegian high-school lifestyle with a traditional Muslim way of living. For example, tensions arise in her relationship with the boy Yousef when it turns out that he is not Muslim.

Preceding the clip, the Muslim holy month of fasting, Ramadan, has been used as a backdrop. Aarvik (2018) points out how Ramadan is a month for personal transformation for the Muslim individual, for example, by strengthening one's empathy towards those who have little of it. However, in this period, Sana discovers that she is about to be excluded from a russebuss (a Norwegian cultural phenomenon where a group of graduating students – russ – hire a party bus to celebrate graduation). She also believes that Noora is about to steal Yousef from her and that her friend Isak is being harassed by her brother because Isak is gay. Sana becomes more unapproachable to her peers. She seeks religious relief, but then chooses to get revenge on her "foes" by unsubscribing from the russebuss and exploiting her friendship with Isak to harm the reputation of the bus leader. This, however, has unforeseen consequences for people she did not mean to target, such as her friend Vilde. Sana finds that she is not living up to the ideals of being a good person in her religion and philosophy of life.

The introductory 7-minute-long scene in this episode addresses cyberbullying and displays Sana's bad conscience resulting from putting Vilde in a difficult situation. Sana meets Isak, who asks her what she thinks she is doing. As the two sit on a park bench, Sana's facial expressions signal tenseness. Isak continues to confront her, first when he reminds her that she had recently said that the one thing she dislikes is when people "fuck over" their friends. He brings up her relation to the leader of the russebuss, Sara, asking Sana what she has against her. Sana replies that she is a "racist bitch" who tried to squeeze her off the bus. Then Isak comments that maybe Sara removed her from the bus because Sana is a "condescending bossy bitch". Isak goes on to ask why she is so hard on people, and Sana replies that it is because of how she is treated as a Muslim in Norway. Isak responds by saying he has grown up gay in Norway, to which she replies that it is not the same thing, because he does not get the same stares that she does. This is followed by the following excerpts from their exchange, which gradually take on a different character when the discussants start relating their experiences and views to a wider cultural context:

> Sana: Do you know what people think when they see my hijab? They think I wear it because I'm forced to, not because I want to. If I say it's because I want to, then I'm brainwashed. I do not have my own opinions. We are talking about religious freedom and all kinds of freedom here in Norway, but to be allowed to wear an extra garment, is there something wrong with that? […] Do you know how tiring it is to walk out the door and know that this is another day you have to prove that you are not oppressed?

> Isak: Do you think that's what people think?

> Sana: Try a day with the hijab and you will realise that most Norwegians are racists.

> Isak: That's bullshit.

> Sana: Huh?

> Isak: That's bullshit. Most Norwegians are not racists. Most Norwegians are interested in freedom, peace, are interested in other cultures and want to learn about it. They are concerned that other cultures should be fine here. But it is not so strange that many are afraid of Muslims when you read in VG and Dagbladet about female genital mutilation, IS, terror, and foreign fighters. You know that most people are not like that. There are damn few who are like that. When you first meet a Muslim face to face, you do not know what to say. Can one say "foreigner", or "multiethnic" or "multicultural"? What is correct? You do not know if you can handshake with one with a hijab. Is it disrespectful to ask about Allah? Then you end up not asking about anything because…

> Sana: Maybe that's just fine. I've had a hell of a lot of stupid racist questions in my life.

> Isak: No, Sana! The stupid questions are damn important! People must not stop asking stupid questions. If they stop asking stupid questions, they start coming up with their own answers. Now, that's dangerous. You just have to stop looking for racism in stupid questions. Even though they are damn annoying and feel racist, it is crucial that you respond to them. You have to answer them.

> Sana: Who the hell are you, really? I swear, you sound like my Imam or something.
>
> Isak: That one is new. Imam Valtersen, I like it. I am not saying that there are no racists in Norway. There are probably a hell of a lot of them. I did not grow up as a Muslim girl, but believe me, I have been where you are. As soon as you start looking for hate, you will find it. When you find hatred, you begin to hate yourself.

Isak goes on to correct Sana's misconceptions about her brother and his friends being homophobic before the two agree that they are "buds" (friends), if not "best buds". The scene ends with Sana expressing she is not so sure that she has any best friends any longer, leading to Isak assuring her that of course she does. In the overall narrative of season 4, this encounter with Isak marks a turning point for Sana, who decided to admit and address her own unfortunate actions and reconcile with friends and the outside world.

We find that this scene displays narrative propulsion in the way the dynamics of the represented dialogue between the two characters leads to conflict resolution. The dialogue may also be more indirectly viewed as contributing to resolving tensions Sana has experienced towards other persons with whom she has socialised. We further interpret this dialogue as being characterised by a willingness of both parties to reach a higher level of abstraction and insight on the cultural and social issues raised. In this regard, the narrative's dialogue may appear as a mediated materialisation of the conception of how dialogues may produce insight by, and for, the participants which transcends what each of them could be capable of on their own. To achieve this insight, both activity and passivity are required of the participants; one must both influence and allow oneself to be influenced. This conception aligns with Kent and Taylor's view of dialogue as ideally being characterised by co-creation of reality and a spirit of mutuality, with interactions being built on an equal footing (Kent & Taylor, 2018; see also Bakhtin, 1975/2010).

However, we also note how agonistic confrontation and expressions of emotions play out in the portrayed scene. For example, the characters' use intensifiers such as "damn" in "damn annoying" and "damn important", or voicings of disagreement, such as "That's bullshit!" The exchange is not – at least not initially – marked by a consensus-seeking rhetoric. Rather, there are two strong individual voices with seemingly opposing views on Norwegians' (in)tolerance for religious minorities, each trying to persuade and influence the other.

In contrast to the first scene, "Trussel", there is no clear winner and loser here. However, like the first scene, there is still a public service educational intent in the dramaturgy and way of informing viewers about conflict resolution, in that the two characters reach a point of acceptance and understanding of each other's perspective. But the "enlightenment" of young viewers in this scene concentrates more on how a willingness to challenge your dialogue partner in constructive discussion may be a good thing. In this scene, the courage to confront another person's point of view through verbal exchanges appears as a precondition for productive deliberation. We expected that the way this scene is dramatised would trigger deliberative responses from the larger fan communities on the *Skam* blog.

Analysis of blog reception

We expected more deliberative responses to be triggered in the fan communities by this second clip – again, this was the case. While a substantial amount of the comments include emotional outbursts ("ISAK ISAK ISAK ISAK <3 <3 <3"), many posts follow up on the discussion between the characters, often from a paradigmatic point of view. While comments about the first clip had a lot of viewers syntagmatically addressing the characters as friends in real life, the second clip tended to provoke paradigmatic meta-readings that discuss the moral message of the series. Several commenters point out that the two characters do not represent one right and one wrong answer, but that they see the subject from different points of view. There are viewers who clearly identify with Sana:

> So tired of Isak now. No, he is technically not wrong but he is not right either. The alternative to stupid questions is not hate. I have a lot of stupid questions, but I choose not to pose them loudly every time. There is a lot of info not coming from racist people. Everyone can choose what to do, no person is forced to educate you because you are too lazy to find the answers yourself. It is possible to have conversations like the one Yousef and Sana had about religion. One may ask questions, but one cannot always expect an answer.

Others embrace Isak's philosophy:

> What Isak says about questions, that people who stop asking questions make up their own answers, which is dangerous, that applies not only to racism but to all non-existing communication in this season. It is kind of the theme for this season. All the times Sana has drawn her own conclusions instead of asking (e.g., lastly with Noora, when she believes she knows what Noora is about to tell about Yousef). Still, it was Sana who said wisely in season 2 that misunderstandings are what triggers war and violence. There is a lot of communication going on, in all channels, but the most important things are seldom said. <3 nice clip!

There are also comments that address or question the role of Julie Andem, the creator of the series:

> Thanks. Just thanks, Andem?! Among the finest, most important and best I have ever seen!

However, others seem to interpret Isak's point of view as the preferred reading of the clip, and hence as Andem's point of view. As the comments develop, the dominant rhetorical topos moves away from discussing Isak's deliberative ideal towards a "racism does exist" topos and eventually a more woke-oriented topos addressing Isak's right to say these things, being a white male himself. (The term woke is primarily US slang, meaning "aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)"; Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b).

On a basic level, there is a debate about what Isak actually says in the clip. A number of commenters argue that he has claimed there is no racism in Norway, while others point out that he merely rejected Sana's claim that *most* Norwegians are racist, and that he indeed admits that there are surely a lot of racists. In other words, the general impression left by the clip is discussed versus what was literally said.

Quite a few commenters interpret the very scene as disrespectful towards Sana's experiences and argue that the narrative naturalises existing power hierarchies, which is another example of how Julie Andem's position as script writer and director is discussed:

> Hmm. A beautiful and important clip. BUT – also a bit too close to neglecting racism / whitewashing. Indeed, it is Isak's view, but hard not to see it as JA's view. And can't avoid thinking that you will have to be a white, ethnic Norwegian (like Julie Andem) to fire off something like this. There IS racism and xenophobia. Even in Norway. It is NOT just made up. And it is NOT ok! And NO ONE shall accept it. Not even Sana. THAT would be great to hear Isak say loud and clear.

By season 4, *Skam* had turned into an international cult phenomenon (Sundet, 2020). We therefore also found several comments from non-Norwegians. The above quote is originally in Danish, whereas the harshest critique comes in English and seems to be initiated by American viewers. "Victim blaming", "whitesplaining", and "mansplaining" are recurring concepts:

> But the worst is the quote "If you look for hate, you will begin to hate". WTF. How can you possibly victim blame and stigmatize more. Julie Andem does not get racism at all. You don't go looking for hate. It comes to you. It's not voluntary. Victims don't go out looking for it. […] Andem really does not get it and is just preaching a very white, very navel gazing, self-congratulatory and victim blaming take on racism.

> I know, this gave me a stomach ache. It is true that people should keep talking to each other. But what Isak said is so bad because he puts the responsibility for education on the victim of racism/ micro aggression. […] Isak can't have the last word on this. He has no right to tell Sana to rise above. He is white and male. It is too sad and unfair.

> Page one of the "How to justify low-key racism" handbook x(I thought this show was better than this. It's even more sad how the comments are filled with people praising Isak for this. […]

A disappointed Dane writes: "I thought this was a woke show?" Many commenters use quite internal concepts from the current woke rhetoric – like "PoC" (people of colour) – and frequently reproach each other for using the wrong terms: "the term 'c*loured' is racist. so i guess we know what side you're on". Commenters who try to argue that "white gay boys" are not in the position to educate Muslims, risk facing the objection that "white gay boys" is in itself a stigmatising category.

Many of the comments are quite extensive and elaborate, indicating that the authors of them may be considerably older than the series' primary target group. At first glance, this might look like a group of activists hijacking and polarising the debate. However, several Norwegian commenters engage to nuance the activists' interpretations:

> As for the definition of racism, it is clear that you are defining that word as it currently is used in the USA. If you spend time in pretty much any other country in the world, you will learn that racism is defined and understood very differently from place to place. This may help explain why Norwegian-speakers (including

> Norwegians of color) seem to be reacting very differently to this clip than English-speakers on this site.

In this way, an intercultural topos is introduced in the debate, which among other things addresses how the word "race" is interpreted in different cultures and even triggers comparisons between the American and Norwegian history of slavery (and definitions of slavery). Despite some angry voices and tendencies to polarisation, the overall debate ends up addressing the questions raised in the clip from a range of viewpoints and cultural backgrounds without turning overtly hateful. Overall, it is fair to say that the spontaneous debate amongst the viewers was quite deliberative and even addressed intercultural understandings of a controversial societal issue. As a Norwegian commenter concludes after one of the "whitesplaining" comments:

> And the whole discussion below this comment is why this is a so important topic to illuminate.

> If everything Isak said in this clip had been perfect and politically correct, it would not have been realistic.

> Isak is not perfect.

> Sana is not perfect.

> The discussion here is important.

Closing discussion

As mentioned in the opening section, by taking a media literacy perspective on participation, we see young people as active content producers who adapt and accommodate to affordances provided by the digital media they use. They are frequent users and contributors to social media platforms and are familiar with the freedom and constraints of those formats and genres. They therefore navigate and interpret narratives across platforms and are accustomed to "real-time" communication.

Both clips present the viewer with moments of personal discomfort that require constructive confrontation and conflict resolution with another. However, the narrative devices employed in the two scenes are quite different. The first confrontation takes the form of a monologue where resolution is found in "besting" the other within a legal framework, whereas the second takes the form of a dialogue where resolution is reached through a better understanding of both parties' positions and perspectives. The first is more informative, the second more deliberative. Both are educational. Both address important social concerns. However, it is the second clip that elicits more paradigmatic discussion and debate on the *Skam* blog.

Arguably, in comments about the second clip, commenters also demonstrate a higher level of engagement with the content and extrapolate the deeper meanings and implications of that content through social contextualisation and ethical consideration of the central themes. They more actively question elements of rhetorical device, from both the creators of the series as well as other contributors. There is clearly an increase in democratic deliberation in this discussion. As with the script that elicits those responses,

in this case dialogue, critical reflection and understanding is the goal, not necessarily the reaching of consensus or common agreement.

The character of unfolding discussions about social issues on a blog is necessarily different from the carefully scripted dialogue appearing in a scene of a television series by a public service broadcaster. The discussions on the blog follow a different logic, with various voices spontaneously engaging with the moral message of the series. What we witness in the discussions about the scene with Sana and Isak is more in line with Mouffe's (1999) conception of "agonistic pluralism" in the realm of politics than the scripted dialogue in narrative 2. According to Mouffe's model of agonism, politics aims at "creating unity in a context of conflict and diversity" (Mouffe, 1999: 755). Compromises are part of processes of politics, but they should be seen as "temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation" (Mouffe, 1999: 755).

 Parts of the blog discussion of narrative 2 may be seen within this framework. Engaged and affective discussions do not necessarily reconcile differences as much as they display disagreements and conflicts between adversaries, who may continue to struggle with the perspectives of "the Other", while possibly also reaching an understanding of the other's views in deeper ways.

Considering how the analysed responses to the *Skam* scenes are voiced on a blog hosted by a public service broadcaster with popular enlightenment ideals, we may see the function of this dialogue space as partly analogous to that of the aforementioned civic education classrooms (Keegan, 2021; Lo, 2017). The blog provides participants with a space to voice and exchange opinions in ways that may contribute to developing their critical affective literacy skills. This, again, may help participants develop a critical awareness of the role emotions and conflict play in politics – which may empower them to act. The *Skam* blog can be viewed as an example of a digital space that allows young people to hold on to their passions while participating fruitfully in political discussions.

At this stage, we must acknowledge two reservations in the findings of this study. The first is that we are unable to determine the age of participants commenting on the blog. We cannot claim that all comments are made by young people nor that the more participatory narrative devices employed in the second clip were necessarily better at eliciting paradigmatic media literacy competencies and democratic deliberation within that age group. We can only state that the series was designed with young people in mind, and that previous studies have shown that it was extremely popular with viewers in that group. We can therefore anticipate that many of the commenters are young people. However, the show was undeniably watched by people of all ages, and therefore anyone could contribute to the discussion. Secondly, we acknowledge that there are shortcomings when extrapolating media literacy out of comments or short public documents, as we do not have insight into the context or personal experience or competences of the contributors. We interpret their views based on our own understanding of the texts, and do not know the extent of their knowledge of the content (series), their motivations, or purpose for posting. We do not know if they have even watched the scene or the whole series.

It is also apparent that several comments are responses to earlier comments, and not necessarily based on knowledge of the scene at all. These are merely discussing the discussion, a trait often found in online comments, and that may lead to a kind of monologic interaction instead of dialogue. Also, for this reason, we cannot be certain that

the narrative devices employed in the second clip were better at eliciting paradigmatic media literacy competencies and agonistic deliberation leading to an acceptance of the opposing parties' views. A prerequisite for productive deliberation is that the participants agree on what they discuss, and the notion of media literacy does not only entail technological and transmedia competencies, but also the dialogical skills we mentioned above: risk, mutuality, propinquity, empathy, and commitment. These are therefore skills we must look for when we study media literacy.

Despite these reservations, we are still able to determine that the two clips have generated a sharing of pluralistic views, and therefore contribute to democratic deliberation to some degree. It is clear that narratives where characters engage in dialogue and work towards accepting conflicting philosophies of life in a reasonable and consultative manner through agonistic deliberation seem more effective in eliciting a higher level of media literacy where critical and ethical competencies are more apparent.

Acknowledgements

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