***Skam* (NRK, 2015–17) and the rhythms of reception of digital television**

Critical Studies in Television:
The International Journal of
Television Studies
1–5

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DOI: 10.1177/1749602018796755

journals.sagepub.com/home/cst

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Abstract

As mobile screen technologies are becoming more and more integral to all aspects of everyday life, including toilet visits, this essay argues that understanding situated reception contexts in terms of television culture and aesthetics is key for the further development of the field of television studies. It suggests some key question for television studies going forward like: what effect does the specificity of the screen have, whether the screen is public or private, large or small, mobile or immobile, on television culture and texts? By using *Skam* as a case study, this essay points to some of the implications that mobile screen technologies might have for television storytelling, aesthetics and distribution going forward.

Keywords

Television screen, teen television, reception, digital technology

According to a Netflix study, about 12% of Americans who watch television or movies on their phone outside of the home admit to having done so in a public restroom (Chokshi, 2017). As television streaming on portable devices increases, viewing habits are changing. The contemporary experience of television reception is becoming more personal, ephemeral, mobile and instant than ever before. How people use television in everyday life, as Lynn Spigel (2001) and Anna McCarthy (2001) demonstrate, has long moved beyond domestic space, but the proliferation of mobile screen technology and streaming are now making portable, personalised television part of everyday experience for a mass audience.

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As mobile screen technologies become more integral to all aspects of everyday life, including toilet visits, delineating mobile technology and situated reception contexts in terms of television culture and aesthetics seems key to the development of the field of television studies. Charles R Acland, exploring how mobile screens affect the experience of moving images, writes:

Screen images arrive, occupy a portion of our sensory field with sound and vision, and then leave. In this way screens designate circuits as much as display formats. They represent links between dispersed spectatorial conditions and are best seen as a network built to move texts around. Moreover, screen venues and occasions can compel people to move and gather together, for instance at gallery installations or archival screenings; or they can move with people, as do laptop and vehicular screens. Viewing circumstances can facilitate isolated individuality or spark practices of congregation. (2009: 149)

A key question for television studies becomes: What effect does the specificity of the screen have, whether it is public or private, large or small, mobile or immobile, on television culture and texts? What kind of experience is afforded by watching a Hollywood blockbuster in an IMAX theatre as compared to watching it on a phone in a public restroom?

How can we, then, conceptualise these new situated viewing contexts and what they entail for television production, culture and aesthetics? Building on Raymond Williams' (2003 [1974]) concept of flow, Tania Modleski's essay 'The Rhythms of Reception' (1982) offers an exploration of the phenomenological and cultural experience of television viewing. Modleski argues that the flow and aesthetics of daytime television aligns with the rhythms of the work of the housewife. Her focus on the situated reception of these women underlines how reception contexts affect aesthetic experiences and narrative form. She writes:

The formal qualities of daytime television thus accord closely with the rhythms of women's work in the home. Individual programs like the soap opera as well as the flow of various programs and commercials tend to make reception, interruption and disruption pleasurable. (1983: 73)

She thus offers a perspective to be used in order to explore the phenomenological experience of watching as an everyday practice. In an increasingly mobile and digital screen culture where television is consumed at work, in coffee shops, on public transport and even public restrooms, it seems ever more important to explore the reception rhythms and situated viewing in the context of digital, mobile television. To understand how portable media and streaming affects televisual experience, text and culture, Modleski's notion of rhythms of reception appears apt in order to start theorising how the rhythms of everyday life shape reception experiences and to conceptualise how digital media facilitate distinct media experiences and texts. The everyday rhythms of reception in other words affect viewers in different ways:

1. media use;
2. mediated experiences;
3. formal qualities of television texts.

In similar ways to how daytime programming adapted to the flow of the daily life of the housewife, understanding how television producers adapt to the rhythms and flows of the audience's daily digital networked lives, in order to create new aesthetic and cultural forms, is one way to explore these questions.

One concrete example of how media producers adapt to new media habits and thus create new and innovative aesthetics is the Norwegian teen drama, *Skam* (2015–2017). It is currently being remade in France, Germany, Italy and the United States. *Skam* is a collaborative production between the Norwegian Public Service Broadcaster's (NRK) children's channel and their multimedia youth one. In order to regain the teen segment of the audience, the production team wanted to know everything about what was going to be *Skam*'s key demographic: 16–18-year-old girls. The production team conducted over 50 in-depth interviews with teens from across Norway, asking about their daily lives, fears and hopes – and media habits. The data from the interviews were collected and used to identify the needs of the teens and how to help satisfy them. *Skam* is, in other words, created using a qualitative research approach. Producer Håkon Moslet (2016) and creator, writer and director Julie Andem (2016) stress that teen likes and needs were the key driving force behind the programme and fulfilling them was *Skam*'s primary function.

Skam portrays a group of high-school students living in Oslo, and each season has a new central protagonist. The programme follows a group of teenagers as they navigate high-school dramas and intrigue, attend parties, get drunk, take drugs, have sex and fall in love. It follows them through pregnancy scares, eating disorders, mental illness, coming out and sexual abuse. *Skam* has garnered praise for its innovative model of distribution as well as its realistic, flawed, frank, true-to-life and emotionally tense portrayal of teen life. *Skam* is distributed as daily clips with a runtime of between 2 and 20 minutes. The narrative is also told through social media and consists of screen grabs of the characters' messenger chats and Instagram updates. This is all posted on a distinct web page skam.p3.no and is organised as a social media feed. The most innovative aspect of the programme is that the viewers follow the story as it unfolds in 'real time'. The clips are released as the events happen in the characters' lives. For instance, a clip about a character's insomnia was posted on the web page in the middle of the night.

The experience of the programme and its distribution are intrinsically linked to online culture, and *Skam* is one of the first web series to fully embrace the logic of social media in its storytelling. The production team is well aware that for many young viewers, the smartphone is their key personal belonging, it is what they first reach for when they wake up and the last thing they check before they go to sleep. The smartphone is a peculiarly intimate screen space, especially for teens. It is integral to their social lives and being. As dana boyd writes: 'Just as shared TV consumption once allowed teens to see themselves as connected through mass media, social media allows contemporary teens to envision themselves as part of a collectively imagined community' (2014: 9).

Since *Skam*'s storytelling follows the logic of social media, the teens update the *Skam* web page in a similar way to which they update Snapchat and Instagram. The fact that the teen users are able to experience the situations as 'they happen' and have to wait with the characters for the exciting date, the cool party or for a boyfriend to answer a text facilitates an engagement where the story seamlessly becomes part of the teens' online life. The unpredictable schedule seems to facilitate an even stronger loyalty to the programme and several of the viewers check the page for updates several times per hour, waiting for updates. In season two of *Skam*, high-school students struggled to concentrate on their final exams waiting for one of the *Skam* characters to answer another (Max, 2018). 'Real-time' storytelling thus adds immediacy and intimacy to the experience, allowing the users to live with the characters in a way that the regular television schedule of episodes or even binge watching does not allow. *Skam* is a coherent serialised social media story freed from the predictability of the television schedule. The story is intended for immediate consumption, with the characters on the go, at school, work, in coffee shops and on public transport or a public restroom – on smartphones, tablets and laptops. The programme's distributional practice caters to teen users' daily rhythms and media habits, situating them in a viewing mode in which viewers frequently refresh and update the web page to follow the unfolding lives of the characters just as they would do with friends' social media feeds. *Skam* thus works itself into the fabric of the teen users' everyday media consumption, blending perfectly with their social media practice.

As *Skam* demonstrates, television is adapting to the new media habits of the mobile screen. Television consumption is at once both becoming more private and personal as these activities migrate from shared screens of the television in the living room or the cinema to the private phone screen. At the same time, television consumption becomes more public, as the mobile screen makes it an activity that can be done everywhere from the coffee shop, the subway to public restrooms. To explore the role of the situated viewing contexts, I argue, will be significant for the field of television studies going forward into the future. As television consumption goes mobile, what will happen with the television text? Will there, for example, be television like *Skam* created, not to cater to teens' media practices, but especially made for that sweet private time you are allowed in the bathroom?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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