

Audiovisual Content for Children and Adolescents in Scandinavia

Production, Distribution, and
Reception in a Multiplatform Era



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NORDICOM

**AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT FOR CHILDREN
AND ADOLESCENTS IN SCANDINAVIA**

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RECEPTION IN A MULTIPLATFORM ERA

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Scandinavia: *Production, Distribution, and Reception
in a Multiplatform Era*

Pia Majbritt Jensen, Eva Novrup Redvall, &
Christa Lykke Christensen (Eds.)

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Preface

This anthology was initiated by the collaborative research project “Reaching Young Audiences – Serial fiction and cross-media storyworlds for children and young audiences” (RYA), funded by Independent Research Fund Denmark (grant no.: 9037-00145B) and based at the University of Copenhagen (2019–2024, PI: Eva Novrup Redvall). Luckily, other Scandinavian colleagues were interested in contributing, and the chapters are written by Danish RYA scholars as well as Norwegian and Swedish scholars, who all share our interest in screen content for young audiences, bringing together a wide range of approaches and perspectives. As editors, we would like to sincerely thank all contributors.

During the RYA project, it has been highly rewarding to discover how there are many Nordic film and media scholars with an interest in young audiences across genres, formats, and platforms out there. Additionally, there are many different qualitative as well as quantitative approaches to studying and thinking about the youngest media demographics, ranging from screenwriting, production and policy studies, textual analyses of series or social media phenomena, to various forms of reception and audience studies. Another great inspiration has been to see other research projects emerge, such as “Global Natives: Serving Young Audiences on Global Media Platforms” (University of Oslo 2021–2025, PI: Vilde Schanke Sundet), leading to new collaborations and publications on the many changes that are currently happening in the Nordic media landscape and the field of screen media content for children and adolescents.

Much can be, and has been, learned from knowledge exchange and collaboration with Nordic as well as international peers, and we are extremely thankful to the many people who have contributed with their input and feedback in conferences, seminars, and workshops during the RYA project, or commented and discussed different texts and reports, such as draft chapters for this book. Over the course of the RYA project, there have been far too many smart, fun, and wonderful people to mention here. We would like to, however, acknowledge our dedicated RYA project partners, assistant professor Petar Mitric, scientific assistant Jakob Freudendal, and PhD fellows Katrine Bouschinger Christensen and Amanda Skovsager Mouritsen.

Finally, we are grateful for the constructive suggestions from the peer reviewers, and the always helpful and competent editors from Nordicom: Josefine Bové, Kristin Clay, Karin Zelano, and Karin Andén. We hope this book can inspire new research – and new collaborations – in what we regard as an essential topic in Nordic media scholarship.

Pia Majbritt Jensen, Eva Novrup Redvall, & Christa Lykke Christensen

Aarhus & Copenhagen, August 2023

Introduction

Audiovisual content for children and adolescents in Scandinavia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter outlines some of the many recent changes and pressing issues to consider when studying the production, distribution, and reception of audiovisual content for children and adolescents in the current Scandinavian media industries. Building on the work of media scholars Anthony Smith and Roberta Pearson, the chapter addresses five main specificities to consider: medium, national, institutional, technological, and audience specificities, the last being particularly important when thinking about content for a quite specific audience, such as children and young people. The chapter ends by introducing the chapters of the book.

KEYWORDS: children's and youth film and television, reaching young audiences, Scandinavian public service media, media production, media distribution, media reception, media use

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The Scandinavian countries have a long and proud tradition of taking children and adolescents seriously in cultural and media contexts, as an audience with their own specific needs, in wider policy frameworks focusing on children's culture [børnekultur], and in specific film and media productions as well as in literature and theatre (see Bakøy, 1999; C. L. Christensen, 2006; N. Christensen, 2003; Drotner, 1997; Juncker, 1998; F. Mouritsen, 1996; Rydin, 2000). In a film and media context, the media use and viewing habits of children and adolescents have changed dramatically in the past decade, challenging many of the traditional ways of thinking about what to produce for them and how to engage them. Audiovisual content in the shape of films, series, and various social media video content on, for example, Netflix, Disney+, YouTube, Twitch, or TikTok are now a major part of the media diet of young audiences, while encounters with domestic films and series are in decline. The contributions in this edited volume explore these recent developments in the context of the Scandinavian countries, focusing on the production as well as the distribution and reception of fictional content for children and young audiences in the digital and, if not globalised, then at least thoroughly transnationalised Nordic mediascape.

There are many reasons why it is important to study not only what is produced for this particular audience and how this content is circulated, but also what the young audience members actually watch in a time marked by pull rather than push patterns of media use (see also Livingstone & Das, 2013). One reason is that the representation of children and childhood in content for children reveals how a culture and society understand children and children's lives. In a Scandinavian context, since the 1960s, ideas of content production for children in a wide variety of genres form pairs with the concept of the welfare state, attaching importance to also inform, entertain, and create a public good for children in the Nordic region. From the early years of radio and television, the Scandinavian countries pursued a strategy of having children be heard and visible in the programmes made for them, reflecting their lives and concerns, and children are still a priority at the public broadcasters (Bakøy, 1999; C. L. Christensen, 2013; Rydin, 2013). In the world of film, the state-funded film institutes have for many years allocated money specifically for producing films for children and youth. As an example, the Danish Film Institute has earmarked 25 per cent of its production funding for this purpose since 1982 (Breuning, 2002).

While for many years it was rather easy to attract the attention of children and adolescents in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden – as the mediascape was dominated by national public service broadcasting – this exclusive access to domestic audiences has become increasingly challenged in the 2020s with the arrival of still more platforms, content providers, and devices on which to watch. A striking figure to illustrate this development is that young audiences in Denmark have access to an average of between four and five streaming

services each (DR, 2020). Another telling example is that, in 2021, young Danes spent an average of 90 minutes on social media each day, compared with 20 minutes dedicated to traditional television (DR, 2022). Finally, another recent report states that the young Danes who use TikTok regularly spend an average of 57 minutes a day on the platform, corresponding to no less than 225 videos (DR, 2022).

In this new and highly competitive market, characterised by an abundance of content and providers, domestic players (i.e., broadcasters, funding bodies, distributors, and production companies) have explored a variety of strategies to stay relevant. The public broadcasters have branched out with still more specialised children's channels and online offers and, as such, have interestingly "ghettoised" the children's content. For example, the Danish public broadcaster DR has three different children's brands – DR Minisjang targeting 1–3-year-olds; DR Ramasjang targeting 4–8-year-olds; and DR Ultra targeting 9–14-year-olds. Also, the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK launched the TikTok series *Toxic* in 2022, filming every scene twice to accommodate viewers on TikTok with a vertical format, and viewers on platforms with a more traditional landscape format, such as YouTube, with a horizontal format (A. S. Mouritsen, 2022).

In addition, producing quality content is not enough in itself; efficient launching and distribution of new content has become increasingly important as well. Children and young audiences must be able to find this domestic content among the multitude of competing content productions, ranging from YouTube or TikTok videos to highly professional productions from global Anglo-American players such as Netflix and Disney+. Consequently, producers and distributors in Scandinavia must balance numerous considerations on how to be present in the lives of young audiences and, importantly, on which platforms. Since the 2010s, a recurring dictum from DR was that the national public service institution should be present on the platforms that young audiences are already using, rather than expecting them to find DR's own platforms.

Pursuing this strategy raises several questions about who owns and controls the external platforms. This was illustrated when Google decided to remove access to the DR Ramasjang app based on arguments about the inappropriateness of programming with what was regarded as "subversive" characters such as Onkel Reje, a (liquorice) pipe-smoking, farting, and just generally misbehaving pirate, who was considered by the tech giant to be encouraging smoking and violence (Bjerregaard, 2020). Although the DR Ramasjang content was eventually allowed back on Google's platforms, the incident poignantly illustrates tensions that beg to be addressed, for politicians as well as content producers, when hitherto domestic content providers act in a global and competitive market.

Content marked by both continuity and change

Before introducing the content of the individual chapters, which offer case-specific analyses, we outline some of the many current tensions and pressing questions linked to the production, distribution, and reception of audiovisual content for children and young audiences in Scandinavia today. When researching and writing about children and youth content, there are different specificities to be aware of. We draw on the work of British media scholars Anthony Smith and Roberta Pearson (2015) who, in the introduction to the anthology *Storytelling in the Media Convergence Age: Exploring Screen Narratives*, outlined different contexts of contemporary screen narratives in the age of media convergence. Smith and Pearson addressed how some scholars argue that traditional boundaries, such as the boundaries between nations or mediums or between audiences and producers, have diminished in importance. However, while acknowledging various recent changes, they challenged the notion of a general blurring of boundaries and argued in favour of “the continued importance of media distinctions and national borders to our understanding of the production and circulation of screen narratives in the media convergence age” (Smith & Pearson, 2015: 2).

The importance of media distinctions has also been highlighted by media scholars such as David Hesmondhalgh (2018), who argued that it is often easier to focus on change rather than continuity when studying technological and industrial developments and innovations. Most often, Hesmondhalgh (2018: 2ff) argued, new developments or innovations happen in an intricate interplay between continuity *and* change, with new ideas and practices building on traditional ways of doing things and on existing structures within, for example, a specific media system or industry. One such example could be that public broadcasters in the past used to encourage children to write letters, call on the telephone, or fax their thoughts about children’s television. Today, digitalisation has made these media redundant, but children are integrated in other ways, for example, in co-creation processes and online panels.

As argued by Smith and Pearson (2015), film and media studies have naturally been reconfigured following the radical impact of digitalisation on all aspects of the mediascape, and they have acknowledged that media scholars must think more about transmedial and transnational aspects. They also insisted that there are still many meaningful specificities at play, pointing to the value of approaching the current mediascape with an emphasis on continuity as well as change.

Smith and Pearson (2015: 4) advocated for analysis based on four main specificities: medium specificity, national specificity, institutional specificity, and technological specificity. In the following, we discuss researching content for children and young audiences in relation to these four specificities, adding a fifth dimension: audience specificity. This specificity refers to change and continuity with regard to perceptions of children and young audiences as a special kind of audience with particular needs in relation to audiovisual content in the 2020s.

Medium specificity

Even though mediums are converging in different ways, we argue along with Smith and Pearson (2015: 5) that “distinctions in production and circulation practices continue to preserve each medium’s identity”, with implications for each medium’s narrative forms, for example. Consider film versus television: Generally, films continue to be produced as single self-contained narratives, while television content is typically produced as serial narratives. Another example is how film and television still belong to fairly “distinct sets of cultural, and more specifically, industrial conditions” that work to preserve each medium’s specificity (Smith & Pearson, 2015: 5).

When zooming in on the Scandinavian countries in relation to fictional content for children and young audiences, we see this medium specificity in the ongoing discussions of whether the film institutes should also fund television series, or whether directors, producers, and other professionals of the audiovisual industries should be educated within film as well as television *and* social media. New support schemes, such as “Univers” from the Danish Film Institute, encourage the creation of cross-media content and immersive storyworlds. Yet, there are still limited cross-over and hybrid forms that truly challenge the fundamental specificities of each medium. While cross-media or transmedia storytelling has been a buzzword for many years, there are few examples of narratives trying to merge existing forms in new ways. Despite some important and interesting exceptions, such as the NRK hit serial *SKAM* [*Shame*] that worked with social media communication of the fictional characters around the scripted serial content (Sundet, 2019; Redvall, 2018), or the Danish television Christmas calendar series *Kometernes jul* [*Christmas of the Comets*] that integrated the teaching of natural sciences within the 24 episodes of fiction (Redvall & Christensen, 2021a), most content for children and adolescents is still produced independently for either film, television, streaming, or social media.

DR continues the long tradition of producing children’s television, but in the 2020s as more serialised content and with remarkably shorter episodes in the realm of scripted fiction. This is partly based on an analysis by scholars researching DR that children appreciate having many short episodes to engage with (see also the discussion about the DR “ingredients of a streaming hit” in Redvall & Christensen, 2021b). Combined with a general focus on producing national fiction for Danish children, this has led to DR Ultra offering 257 episodes of scripted fiction in 2020, compared with only 23 episodes in 2015 (DR, 2020). Moreover, the changed viewing patterns and attention span of children have made DR rethink classical dramaturgical models, sometimes working with the “dragon model”, which attempts to capture the audience’s attention with a dramatic hook from the outset rather than building the drama more slowly (Heiselberg & Ebbesen, 2022). In this way, the traditional television medium is being distributed online, affecting

episode length, number of episodes, and storytelling strategies. At the same time, though, many fundamental ideas about “good” public service television content remain the same.

Studies of viewing patterns reveal that audiences in fact still watch films and series in different ways (Johnson, 2019): Films are to a greater degree than series watched with others and without distractions from a second screen or other activities, whereas the consumption of television series happens mostly on an individual basis and, more often than not, whilst engaging in other activities (P. M. Jensen et al., 2021).

National specificity

When it comes to national specificity, Smith and Pearson (2015: 6) argued that national contexts “continue to distinctly inform how narratives are made and received” via, for example, specific national policies, regulations, and practices that all “have the capacity to influence the construction and understanding of screen narratives”. In our case, this is of course where the specific national perspectives within Scandinavia become interesting.

As we know from publications on the specificities of the Nordic media systems, such as Trine Syvertsen and colleagues’ (2014) *The Media Welfare State*, the Scandinavian countries and the larger Nordic region tend to cluster in global comparisons, characterised by high social welfare and a large degree of happiness and wealth, but also how media are regulated, managed, and consumed. An example in relation to children’s media is the generous allocation of public funds to produce films for children and young audiences (as discussed by Anders Lysne in Chapter 3 in this volume on Scandinavian screen fiction for youth). Another example is the comparatively well-funded public broadcasters and their ability to offer a relatively large variety of outlets and content catering to children and adolescents, despite the (small) size of the national markets.

As pointed out by international scholars, such as Anna Potter writing about Australian children’s television (2015, 2020), other countries also have histories of allocating funding for the youngest audiences in public service contexts. However, the Nordics have a long and quite unique tradition of sharing programmes and cross-border collaborations through established institutions such as the Nordic public service partnership organisation Nordvision (founded in 1959). The Nordic broadcasters still work together through Nordvision, and the Nordic drama co-productions for children doubled in 2015–2020 (Hartmann, 2020). 2020 saw the establishment of the B14 [Childrens14] framework intended to give children in the Nordic region access to at least 14 new Nordic children’s fiction series each year (I. K. Jensen, 2021). Initiatives such as these can be regarded as a continuation and even strengthening of existing national patterns of collaboration,

whilst at the same time adapting to the changing mediascape (Redvall, 2021).

There are other similarities in the general structure of the small national markets as well, such as the arrival of new platforms or issues of access and regulation. In small markets, relatively few commissioners, or gatekeepers, have extensive power to influence what content is produced and why. As emphasised by a production analysis framework such as The Screen Idea System (Redvall, 2016), screenwriting and production frameworks are an intricate interplay between creative practitioners proposing new ideas in specific contexts marked by certain trends, and the tastes and traditions of powerful experts in a field with specific mandates. In Danish children's television, for example, Mogens Vemmer, head of programming at DR's children and youth department from 1968 until 2000, managed to secure great freedom for groundbreaking – and at times rebellious – children's programming (see also C. L. Christensen, 2022).

Another example of the impact of commissioning decisions in small nations is DR's *FredagsTamTam* [*FridayBangBang*], a 60-minute-long cartoon show with a high share of Nordic cartoons that replaced the popular and long-running *Disneysjov* [*Disney Fun*] in the beginning of 2023. The latter, as the name reveals, was the Danish version of the American *Disney Afternoon*, and it had been offered as Friday-night entertainment for 31 years. This indicates that substantial funding is being spent on boosting the Danish and wider Nordic animation industry, whilst at the same time becoming more independent from global players such as Disney (Rasmussen, 2023). Such commissioning decisions have a huge impact on small national film and television industries, in terms of what content is produced as well as watched in a specific country.

Institutional specificity

Turning to the institutional dimension, Smith and Pearson (2015: 7) pointed to the fact that, even within the same national context, “the characteristics of the institutions that commission screen narratives – such as film production and distribution companies, television production companies and networks, and video game developers and publishers – can significantly vary”. In relation to the production, distribution, and reception of audiovisual content for young audiences in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, the nation-specific traits are evident in the different institutional revenue models. That is, the institutions are divided between those publicly funded by various taxes (to replace the licence fees of the past) and profit-driven commercial players, many of which operate on a transnational level, such as Discovery Network and the Viaplay Group, or a global level, such as Netflix and Disney+. The latter category of commercial providers focuses on attracting and retaining worldwide viewers and subscribers and hence aims to provide content appealing to as many within a target group as possible. Public service broadcasters,

on the other hand, cater specifically to domestic audiences, including children and adolescents.

In addition, publicly funded providers adhere to specific quality stipulations, such as genre variety, themes, and artistic ambitions, set up in public service and film-funding remits. These stipulations serve to assure that publicly funded content rectifies market failures by providing content that might not otherwise be provided by the commercial market. A poignant example of this is DR Ultra's news programme *Ultra Nyt* [*Ultra News*], a relatively popular short-format programme that digests important news for children. Another example is the series *Salsa*, a much-acclaimed series about high schoolers' sex lives, which DR produced with the intention of educating young viewers about sex with an entertaining fictional format (Ludvigsen, 2022). This type of content is less likely to be produced by commercial players due to relatively high costs of productions and uncertain returns.

That said, new and global players may be able to provide content mimicking what we have come to know as public service content. Netflix-originated series such as *Sex Education*, *Heartstopper*, and *The Young Royals* arguably contain elements that could be labelled as public service, namely educated and complex treatment of coming-of-age topics that adolescents around the world can clearly relate to, even though these series are playing out in the UK and Sweden, respectively.

YouTube provides more low-key examples of content that could have been produced by public service media. In 2020, the self-taught producer and director Jonas Risvig published the web series *Centrum* on YouTube, a series depicting Danish adolescents' lives during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Centrum* attracted a dedicated viewership, not least because Risvig involved viewers directly in the creation of the series (K. B. Christensen & Redvall, 2020). Risvig has since published other web series on YouTube and directed the above-mentioned series *Salsa* for DR. While the national legacy broadcasters and players still have an important role in the production of often-expensive fictional content, both global streaming services and more do-it-yourself practitioners entered this field in remarkable ways in the 2020s. This was partly due to changes in how content can be produced and circulated, which brings us to the fourth specificity focusing on technology.

Technological specificity

When it comes to technological specificity, Smith and Pearson (2015: 8) focused on the connections between contemporary screen narratives and their technological contexts. In our opinion, different technological specificities are at play when dealing with children and adolescents than with adults. First and foremost, children and adolescents are first movers and early adopters of new production and distribution technologies on media platforms such as

TikTok and Twitch. This is no wonder when children have access to mobile technologies early on, for example, in Denmark, the average age of a child getting their first smartphone is just nine years old (Hansen et al., 2020). Children thus quickly become independent media consumers and, sometimes, also skilled media content producers. A recent report found that Danish children love producing films as part of their school curriculum, but they are less fond of *watching* films at school (DFI, 2023). Gaming is another area where especially boys bond with their friends, outside the realm of their parents. In fact, gaming has become an important facilitator of boys' social lives and communities, and as such, a direct competitor to films, television series, and social media. When 9–14-year-old Danish children were asked in a large survey what they would prefer to do if they had three hours of free time, the majority of boys said they would play videogames (the girls would go to the cinema) (Hansen et al., 2020).

The above-mentioned and technologically led change in children's media consumption has forced established institutions producing content for children to react – for the most part through a mix of what Napoli (1998: 319) called diversification and differentiation strategies. Diversification happens when existing players adapt their content strategies to distinguish themselves from new technologies or players in the market, examples of which include the already mentioned *Ultra News* and *FridayBangBang*. Differentiation is when actors expand into precisely these new technologies and markets, such as NRK's strategies of producing short-form fiction for TikTok or Instagram and their live-streamed reality gaming show *LL35* on Twitch (NRK, 2022). Examples of diversification strategies discussed in this volume are Vilde Schanke Sundet's Chapter 5 on NRK's YouTube programme *4ETG*, and Andreas Magnusson Qassim's Chapter 7 on SVT's short-form and online-first tween drama *Kär [In Love]*.

There are also continuities in terms of certain forms of content maintaining popularity despite technological change and innovation. In addition, technological changes happen at varying speeds across different age groups, which is why we find it appropriate to add a fifth specificity to consider when thinking about children's content: audience specificity.

Audience specificity

While Smith and Pearson's terminology of four specificities is helpful, we propose a fifth one: audience specificity. Scholars such as David Buckingham (2005), Natalie Coulter (2021), Anna Potter and Jeanette Steemers (2021), Christa Lykke Christensen (2013), Stine Liv Johansen and Malene Charlotte Larsen (2019), and Kirsten Drotner (1999), have all pointed to the fact that children and young people are a particular and "special" media audience. Children are, for example, often considered as a particularly vulnerable au-

dience that needs to be protected from harmful content, but also sometimes from their own “questionable” (from an adult perspective) taste.

As discussed in Christa Lykke Christensen’s Chapter 2 in this volume, there can also be a tendency to consider children as “becomings”, that is, as individuals who are to become adults and not as “beings” in their own right. This perspective risks devaluing children as an audience. Consequently, it is often regarded as less prestigious to produce content for children, children’s content budgets are (much) smaller, and children are not always taken seriously and, even more rarely, actually involved or even asked for input in the production of content. However, as highlighted in Chapter 4 by Eva Novrup Redvall, some of these circumstances often make children’s content a fruitful place for talent development. Chapters 5–7 by Vilde Schanke Sundet, Ewa Morsund, and Andreas Magnusson Qassim similarly document new ways of approaching content for young people based on researching and engaging with audience members.

While there are general patterns and perceptions regarding children and young audiences across broadcasters and national borders, some scholars argue that producers of children’s media content in Scandinavia have in fact regarded children as independent, competent, and socially responsible to a higher degree than in other countries (C. L. Christensen, 2006, 2013; H. S. Jensen, 2017). This is in line with the traditions of the Nordic welfare state – egalitarian ideals of participatory citizenship and citizens’ right to freedom of expression and information – including children, at least more so than elsewhere. There have been recent initiatives of co-creation to ensure that authentic and relevant stories of children’s lives are reflected, particularly among tweens and teens (Redvall & Christensen, 2021a).

Finally, when speaking of the specificities of children as audiences, we must also remember, however, that children and adolescents are far from a homogenous group. Apart from the many developmental differences according to their age, the children come from varied socio-demographic, national, ethnic, and educational backgrounds (exactly as is the case with adults), all of which affect the way they see the world and, consequently, make use of media. To paraphrase Natalie Coulter (2021: 23), not only scholars, but also producers and commissioners of children’s culture and media must shed the idea of “the imagined global child”, who is often Western, white, and middle class.

Concurrently, there are still more research attempts to understand the rapidly changing interests and media use of the youngest viewers. A reason for this extensive audience research is that children and adolescents of today are “virtual natives” (Henry & Shannon, 2023) and, as such, first movers when it comes to the changes in the current mediascape. Children’s media consumption and media habits today may very well indicate the media consumption and media habits of us all tomorrow. That children and adolescents are very much in focus in the established media industry these years is evident in the many

industry reports containing analyses of this target group (see EBU 2020; Hansen et al., 2020; DFI, 2023; DR, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023). Testament to the fact that young media consumers constitute an important audience for the incumbent media institutions is the final chapter of this volume, in which Pia Majbritt Jensen and Petar Mitric, on the basis of a national survey among Danish 8–17-year-olds, reveal a preference for global American streaming services as well as American films and series. This preference is in fact so strong that American streaming services and content have arguably become the standard – as opposed to the nonstandard (or maybe even sub-standard) – for domestic services and content.

Structure of the book

The chapters in this edited volume relate to the five specificities outlined above and bring into focus aspects of production, distribution, and reception of audiovisual content for young audiences within a Scandinavian context. Some of the chapters present analyses primarily based on Danish empirical material and context, and others are primarily based on Norwegian or Swedish materials and contexts.

In Chapter 2, “Relevance and identification in television content for children: Analysing DR commissioners’ perceptions of children’s media interests”, Christa Lykke Christensen analyses the perceptions of children among commissioning editors at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, DR. An historical overview of perceptions of children in earlier Danish programming for children is combined with interviews with commissioners at DR, to argue that increased competition, media professionalism, and digitalisation during the last 10–15 years have influenced how DR perceives their young audience. Before the turn of the century, children were perceived as representatives of informed future citizens. Today, children are primarily perceived as media users whom media professionals must take into consideration as a sort of partner to meet stipulated requirements, stay relevant for children, and attract as many viewers as possible. In this process, Christensen argues, relevance is understood by the DR commissioners as recognisability. For content to be relevant, it must mirror (Danish) children’s close surroundings and activate emotions and moral feelings to increase identification.

Chapter 3, “Coming out differently: Making queer youth known in Scandinavian screen fiction”, deals with the representation of queer adolescence in fiction series produced for young audiences in Scandinavia. Anders Lysne analyses the representational strategies of two different screen media texts produced for young audiences: the Swedish youth film *Fucking Åmål* [*Show Me Love*] and the Danish youth drama *Puls* [*Pulse*]. As queer characters and themes become increasingly visible in youth screen media, so does the need to explore just how these texts make queer youth known. Lysne shows

that the conventional coming-out narrative – emphasising coming out as the ultimate narrative climax in queer coming-of-age stories – is challenged in the two Scandinavian media texts, and he argues that the process of queer identity formation represented does not fit within a tight linear narrative frame. Instead, queer identity formation is negotiated and challenged through representational strategies gesturing towards new beginnings instead of a finite ending. As such, the two media texts are examples of how queer youth can be made known by coming out differently.

While the national broadcasting landscapes have become more competitive with regard to content for children and young audiences, broadcasters have increasingly specialised their offers for the youngest viewers. In Chapter 4, “Creating serialised live action drama for children: Talent development, affordable volume fiction, and portable brand characters at DR”, Eva Novrup Redvall examines how the Danish Broadcasting Company, DR, has adapted their production strategy to these competitive conditions when making live action fiction for its young audience of 4–8-year-olds. Based on a case study of the fiction series *Oda Omvendt* [*Oda Upside Down*], Redvall explores the guiding commissioning ideas as well as the screenwriting and production practices behind the series. The analysis deals with three components in the processes of producing fictional content: working with talent development, working with notions of affordable volume fiction, and working with portable brand characters. All three are found important for production, on limited budgets, of relevant and recognisable serialised live action drama for young audiences.

In Chapter 5, “Public service youth content on social media platforms: Reaching youth through YouTube”, Vilde Schanke Sundet investigates the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK’s efforts to reach young audiences. Sundet analyses public service content on third-party platforms and how legacy media organisations adapt to social media logics when creating content for youth. The analysis builds on a production study of *NRK 4ETG*, which was a recent NRK YouTube programme with the goal of creating “authentic” online content to serve the young audience with popular entertainment. The chapter deals with the strategic function of the programme, and Sundet discusses how it fits NRK’s overall ambition to serve youth with public service content. In particular, the chapter highlights empirical evidence of producers’ self-perception concerning the creation of YouTube content within a public service context. Sundet argues the future importance of YouTube programmes in two respects: They serve important strategic functions by engaging young audiences as well as new content creators, both of which, according to Sundet, will be essential to public service media in the future.

In the context of general discussions of public service media’s role in the production of youth content, in Chapter 6, “Representing and engaging new target groups: The case of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation and

Rådebank”, Ewa Morsund also addresses the strategies and production of media content for young audiences at NRK. Morsund specifically focuses on how NRK works to achieve representation for different demographics in their media production. Through the case study of *Rådebank*, a youth drama series about young, less-educated men living in rural areas of Norway and dealing with mental health issues, Morsund discusses the challenges and dilemmas for public service broadcasters who have, on the one hand, a public mission to reflect societal diversity, and on the other, difficulty attracting so-called niche groups of viewers who, for a long time, have been a problematic audience segment to reach.

Reaching young audiences in a digitalised media-saturated environment has clearly required thinking in new directions for producers of public service media in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Online-first and mobile-first strategies are implemented as public service media initiatives for reaching young audiences in competition with YouTube, subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) services, gaming, and social media. In Chapter 7, “SVT Barn online and *In Love*: Searching for a new identity in a world of smartphones and digital interaction”, Andreas Magnusson Qassim analyses how SVT Barn, the Swedish public service broadcaster for children, with its online-first policy (i.e., focusing all efforts on its streaming platform rather than traditional broadcasting), has maintained the attention of children up to the age of twelve. Qassim’s analysis builds on a case study of the short-form tween drama *Kär [In Love]*. Based on interviews with SVT creatives and executives involved in the production, *In Love* is analysed as an example of a mobile-first strategy, as the series was crafted specifically for the smallest screen and revolves around mainly smartphone-mediated interaction between two lead characters of the drama. Qassim argues that, with *In Love*, SVT succeeded in reaching the targeted audience, and that digital strategies such as online- and mobile-first, combined with intensive audience investigations and interactions with the young audience, may be a successful path for the public service providers in the future.

The public service broadcasters in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the larger Nordic region find themselves in great competition with other content providers, such as commercially driven production companies and global players like Disney+, and they go to great length to reach young audiences. Still, they have difficulty catching the attention of young media users, and in keeping them loyal. In Chapter 8, “The appeal of public service fiction in an internationalised media context: Findings from a survey of 8–17-year-old Danes”, Pia Majbritt Jensen and Petar Mitric take an audience perspective on audiovisual screen content for children and adolescents. Jensen and Mitric present the results of a survey among Danish children and adolescents regarding their media habits and preferences when it comes to fictional content. The results point to the fact that children prefer global (or, rather, American) and

genre-driven content, and that they spend time on YouTube with gaming, music videos, and memes. Jensen and Mitric thus point to several dilemmas for public service broadcasters of how to strategically develop audiovisual content that can appeal to, attract, and stay relevant for young audiences. Jensen and Mitric also reflect on methodological challenges in the process of designing the survey.

By outlining the many pressing questions linked to audiovisual media content for children and young audiences in Scandinavia today, and briefly introducing the contributing chapters, this introduction has emphasised what an exciting moment of time it is to be researching screen content for children and youth. It is therefore our hope that the chapters in this volume individually and together will address several of these questions and make its readers a little wiser, as well as inspire new research questions and projects about children's and adolescents' media.

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Relevance and identification in television content for children

Analysing DR commissioners' perceptions of children's media interests

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ABSTRACT

This chapter studies the perceptions of children among the commissioning editors responsible for children's television at the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, DR. Taking as a starting point the historical evolvement of Danish children's television, the chapter provides a framework to understand commissioners' perceptions of children as an audience within the transforming logic of public broadcasting. Empirically, the study relies on interviews with commissioners of children's television at DR. The analysis illustrates how increased competition, media professionalism, and digitalisation influence how the young audience is perceived. Before the turn of the century, children were considered as representatives of informed future citizens; the current view primarily perceives children as media users whom media professionals in public service companies consider as competent partners, in order to stay relevant and attract and keep as many young viewers and users as possible.

KEYWORDS: children's television, media logics, media professionalism, perceptions of children, digitalisation, commissioning

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Introduction

Since the early days of Danish television in the 1950s, the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, DR, has addressed children via television content; therefore, DR has extensive experience of considering the media interests of young audiences. However, during the last 10–15 years, the television landscape has been transformed by globalisation, increased competition, and digitalisation. In this chapter, I discuss whether the perceptions of children have been the object of a similar transformation. During a period of radical changes in the television environment in general, what, if anything, has changed in the perceptions of children and their role in Danish public service children's television?

In this chapter, I investigate what commissioners of television content for children at DR understand to be children's media interests. The question is important, as media influence children socially, creatively, emotionally, and cognitively; may contribute to their educational development and identity formation; and may influence their quality of life, affecting them in terms of what they find important, relevant, and what is good or bad to engage with (Buckingham 1993, 2007; Davies et al., 2014; Marsh, 2005).

Children's television is produced by adults and situated within a media system shaped by adults, and the associated commissioning of children's television content is based on adults' perceptions of what a child is, or should be, or could be. The production of children's television can be based on adults assuming they *know* what is good and quality content for children, on the one hand, or adults trying to *imagine* what content children themselves prefer, on the other. In either case, adults must take into account the broader cultural and media systemic frameworks that determine the production of children's content. Naturally, production conditions are different depending on whether the content is produced for a global platform like Disney+ or for a small, national broadcaster like DR. Regardless of how professionally qualified the adults commissioning and producing children's content are, the challenge concerning how they can be sure they meet, represent, and express children's interests and preferences always remains.

Conceptualising this inherent challenge, I analyse how commissioners at DR perceive their role and conditions as commissioners for children's content, what perceptions of children they take into account when commissioning content, how they argue for and legitimate the relevance of their content for children, and how they fulfil children's interests.

Methodological approach

To answer the above, interviews were carried out with commissioners of children's television at DR. These informants have an important influence on addressing the children's audience, as they are key persons for obtaining information about the general priority processes and final decisions regarding

what content to aim for. As a result, the informants are considered as both elite and exclusive (Bruun, 2014; Hertz & Imber, 1995), in the sense that they are placed in central and powerful positions in the organisation, they own the strategic overview of DR's children's television profile, and they have responsibility for legitimising the choices made regarding children's content.

I carried out individual semistructured interviews with four commissioning editors of children's content at DR:

- the director of children's programming (2 December 2020)
- the digital commissioning editor of children's programming (30 September 2020)
- the commissioning editor of fictional content at Ultra (content for the 9–14-year-olds) (1 October 2020)
- the commissioning editor of Ramasjang (content for the 4–8-year-olds) (12 November 2020)

The interviews lasted 60–90 minutes each. The informants were asked about their perceptions of children as an audience and what challenges they found important in relation to children's content production. Questions did not address specific age groups in detail, but more generally referred to the young audience of DR which includes children aged 1–14. Questions concerned how the commissioners managed the dilemma of being in a field of increased competition between being relevant to children and providing quality content they think is important for children. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded in thematic categories (Miles et al., 2020), and quotes for use in this chapter were translated from Danish into English. In addition to interviews with the commissioners, the empirical study relies on readings of internal documents, strategic papers, and policy reports from DR, dealing with children's content.

Theoretical framework and institutional context

Before I proceed with the analysis of the considerations of the commissioners, I consider the concept of children and childhood theoretically, as well as some historical perspectives on perceptions of children in children's television at DR. These perspectives constitute an overall framework for understanding children as a specific audience and point to some of the dilemmas related to producing public service television for children today.

Concepts of child and childhood

Media production for children presupposes a well-considered purpose of the content; this is necessary to reach the audience (children) and to meet adults' and parents' ideas about "good" content for children. Ideas attributed to childhood and children are, however, socially constructed and changeable

(James & Prout, 1997: 7), though not always clear. As Gisela Eckert (2001: 9) has pointed out, “within a society there exist shared, taken-for-granted, everyday ideas about what children ought to do or not to do [...]. Such ideas about children and childhood are not necessarily explicitly articulated at all times”, but they can be studied in many ways, for example, they can be “manifested in behaviors, conversations and cultural artifacts”. Studying television commissioners’ perceptions of children may illuminate manifestations of both explicit and implicit ideas regarding the audience for which media content is produced.

This chapter uses the more general theoretical concepts of children as “beings” and children as “becomings” as a point of analytical departure. For decades, these concepts – implicitly as well as explicitly – underlie discussions regarding perceptions of children and childhood (Huang, 2019; James et al., 1998; Jenks, 1996; Jensen, 2017; Lee, 2001; Prout, 2005; Qvortrup, 1994; Tingstad, 2019; Tisdall & Punch, 2012; Uprichard, 2008). The two perceptions concern whether childhood is considered a phase of preparation for children in their process of becoming adults *or* whether childhood should rather be considered a state of being in its own right. The discussion about childhood has often revolved around those two concepts as oppositional ideas, each generating a different perception of children:

Whilst the “being” child is seen as a social actor actively constructing “childhood”, the “becoming” child is seen as an “adult in the making”, lacking competencies of the “adult” that he or she will “become”. (Uprichard, 2008: 303)

When regarding children as “becoming”, attention is focused on the future, while regarding children as “being” emphasises “the child as an integral member of society” in the *present* (Huang, 2019: 100). I shall not go into detail with the different – and often controversial – theoretical approaches this discussion over time has given rise to in childhood research; rather, I use the two concepts as analytical frames in the context of analysing the commissioners’ considerations of the ideas associated with children in media production for young audiences. As I shall come back to, overall, the concepts have and continue to have an influence on the perception of children in the planning of Danish children’s television. Within the dominant paradigm of children as “becomings”, television content for children is regarded as an element that can or should help support children’s development, visions, and competences to grow up to be capable of taking part in culture and society; in that case, content such as magazines, news, and factual programmes about societal and cultural issues is found to be important, as it is considered relevant to children knowing about and being prepared for growing up. Within the paradigm of children considered as “beings”, the dimension of the future is toned down, and typically, programming will be in favour of content that

is aimed at satisfying children here and now with momentary experiences, such as entertainment shows or cartoon series. In DR's productions for children, such a distinction has never been absolute; however, it has been afforded varying levels of importance at different times, to which I return in the following.

The Danish media context

DR's children's television has largely developed in a similar manner as television in general, and Stig Hjarvard's (2013: 23–27) analysis of the institutional development of media and their interaction with other cultural and social institutions can to a large extent also be applied to the development of Danish children's television. Hjarvard has divided the media development into three phases. The first phase runs until 1920, with media being an instrument of other institutions steered by particular interests, such as the church and the party press, and with the purpose of persuading and agitating on behalf of specific interests in specific institutions (see the table in Hjarvard, 2013: 26). The second phase runs from around 1920–1980 and characterises a period during which radio and television were becoming the dominant media, marking “the point when the media began to address a generalized and often national public, whereupon they gradually assumed the character of cultural institutions” (Hjarvard, 2013: 24). Unlike previously, the main purpose of public service media during this second phase was to represent society's common interests in a public arena. The third phase runs from the 1980s onwards, with the agenda of deregulation, marketisation, and globalisation creating “a more commercial and competitive climate in radio and television, in which market forces challenged television's identity and importance as a cultural institution” (Hjarvard, 2013: 25). In this third phase, media have been professionalised while digitalisation continues to challenge the traditional logic of broadcasting (Bardoel & Lowe, 2007; Hjarvard, 2013; Lowe & Maijanen, 2019). The service of digital media was “not least to *produce social relations* between people, and users are increasingly prompted to *generate the content by themselves* [emphasis added]” (Hjarvard, 2013: 26).

The second and the third of Hjarvard's phases are the most relevant with regard to Danish children's television, as DR then started to manifest a wish to make children a specific viewer group and to appreciate them as a group being represented on television. In particular, from the late 1960s, children's programmes often expressed a modern and critical approach to culture and society. From then on, children were portrayed as curiously asking questions and discussing “truths” about the world. Institutionally, in the second phase up to the 1980s, the new media at the time (radio and television) were “meant to represent all parts of society and culture to the whole nation [and] were perceived as part of a national, general education project with all people

becoming acquainted with the important aspects of the nation's life: culture, science, politics, industry, etc. [translated]" (Hjarvard, 2016: 31).

The pursuit to represent society and culture also applied to children's television production. Children's programmes at DR treated almost every subject – pollution, foreign policy, space travel, poverty, experimental art, modern music, technology, satire shows, news, and fiction series – often with children and young people starring (Christensen, 2006). During the second phase of media development, since DR had a monopoly on broadcasting and didn't worry whether children could identify with the content or even found it relevant to watch television, experiments with form and content were often a natural element, with avant-garde tendencies (Christensen, 2022).

In this second phase, children were considered as "becomings" – that is, they were expected to use public service television as a learning opportunity for what their future would hold in modern society. The purpose of children's television was to make children visible in the general culture, give them a voice (Vemmer, 2006), and serve as a spokesperson for them (Christensen, 2006; Jensen, 2017). Ideally, children should be recognised as equal members of culture and society able to formulate independent views on most things. In this way, children's television constituted a cultural forum (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1983) to legitimise children having different views than adults. It was a forum characterised by children being encouraged to confront formal authorities and respected for their independent activities. Gradually, children's television assumed the character of a separate cultural institution within DR, aiming to represent the entire society to a general children's public.

Programming intended to portray children "becoming" *children*, but with the same interests of adult citizens in all parts of culture and society, and incorporating corrective viewpoints from a child's perspective. Children were viewed as representatives of a modernised childhood as far as they created an alternative child's ways of doing things, sometimes in opposition to the adult world (Christensen, 2021). During this time, DR acted as a spokesperson for children, as well as for general societal visions of making children visible and encouraging them to realise their potential as human beings.

Then (corresponding to the third phase in Hjarvard's chronology) competition increased as DR was challenged by a new Danish television channel, TV 2 (established in 1988), which also broadcast children's television (albeit to a much lesser extent); global providers of children's content; and last, but not least, digital media in the twenty-first century. From the 1990s, viewing figures and an increased focus on age and gender segments became crucial to television programming. As a result, issues connected to a future perspective and to the larger world, such as politics, pollution, or poverty, appeared less frequently on children's television, and children's emotions and personal experiences as consumers and media users were more often brought into focus (Christensen, 2006, 2013).

From the turn of the century, increased competition for attracting especially school-aged children to DR resulted in programme strategies that placed more emphasis on entertainment (Christensen, 2006: 96–98), such as fascinating high-dynamic cartoon series, song contests, quiz programmes, and music videos, as well as content associated with individual identification processes, such as lifestyle programmes about shopping, fashion, or bodily appearance. Children appeared, in many ways, as equal to adults in the content produced. Thus, after a number of years, children’s television went from having a public, culturally enlightening and debating role in society, to also offering new, fascinating types of programmes that children were expected to like (corresponding to “modern public service media” in Bardoel & Lowe, 2007). Perceptions of children were manifested by ideas of the “being” child, recognised as an already competent, empowered individual child prepared for living up to and fulfilling the role of an adult actor in a modern consumer and media society.

DR responses to increased competition

During the last two decades, almost all processes related to the production of Danish children’s television at DR have changed: for example, conceiving ideas involves children in creative processes before, during, and after production; new formats, such as shorter web series, are being produced; distribution is taking place on several media platforms, such as third-party platforms like YouTube and Instagram; and even children’s ways of using media content is continuously evolving (Redvall & Christensen, 2021; Sundet, 2021; see also Jensen & Mitric, Chapter 8 in this volume). Particularly, digital media have changed children’s viewing habits while simultaneously supporting children as potential producers of content (Livingstone et al., 2018). In general, most Danish children have access to media content whenever they want, wherever they are. They are independent and prolific consumers on all media platforms, which means that DR – to catch the attention of children – must compete with players like YouTube, Disney+, and Netflix.

As a first response to the intensified competition, DR introduced two separate television channels for children – Ramasjang in 2009 and Ultra in 2013 – both constituting a separate children’s media universe where special values associated with children unfold. In 2020, DR launched the former children’s television channel Ultra as a digital-only platform for 9–14-year-olds, while Ramasjang, targeting 4–8-year-olds, is (still) both a children’s television channel and a streaming service. In 2021, DR addressed their youngest group of viewers ever, launching Minisjang, a digital-only streaming service for 1–3-year-olds (Christensen, 2020).

Ultra has paid special attention to developing fictional content, such as series like *Klassen* [*The Class*] and *Akavet* [*Awkward*]. Typically, series like

those are close representations of kids' everyday life at school and on social media. The content is easy to identify with, as emphasis is put on social and emotional relations among children, and on how to navigate socially.

The changes in the overall mediascape have transformed television from a cultural institution to a media professional institution – with professionalism defined as the capacity “to act in accordance with the demands of a particular media industry, rather than the ability of a particular work profession to serve the public good” (Hjarvard, 2013: 26). As Bardoel and Lowe (2007: 9) have argued, broadcasters had to give up the transmission model to be “effective public service communicators [which] requires demand-oriented approaches to service and content provision”. Such a change has influenced the work of commissioners, as they have to pay special attention to please the immediate interests of children. In this process, according to Bardoel and Lowe (2007: 9–10), it has become important to secure “relations wherein audiences are partners rather than targets” and to have a focus “on forging a *partnership* with audience as active agents [emphasis added]”.

Media professional commissioners of public service content for children may nevertheless still have an agenda in relation to their specific audience – such as ideas of the public good and of enlightening children regarding future challenges – which reaches beyond professional and market considerations. With digitalisation, children's media usage may seem rather diverse, individualised, or even fragmented, and media content is produced to accommodate the individual interests of children in the present. However, general ideas of public good and preparing children for the future, as mentioned above, treat children as a specific group of citizens and as a public to whom media institutions feel a cultural and societal obligation to provide content, for the benefit of children in general. Consideration of children's own interests may therefore be split between several considerations and may require other forms of legitimacy than before.

In the following, referring to the empirical data, I look more closely into the ways the commissioners of children's television at DR navigate their mission between ideas of children as “becomings” and as “beings”. Additionally, I explore how they deal with dilemmas resulting from the tension between a broadcasting logic of transmitting a public good to children, a market-driven and media professional logic, and a logic of digital media dictating that children should be both addressed and considered as individual partners in content production.

Results

The questions examined in the following analysis concern how commissioners perceive children and how this influences the management of their roles as providers of television content for children at DR. Further, how commissioners argue in favour of and legitimise children's content provided by DR is examined.

Identification in public service content for children

The commissioners first and foremost confirmed their identity as media professionals based on their knowledge of how children navigate in the media market. Secondly, they referred to having a holistic approach to the child. The commissioners stated that they always consult other professionals for advice on how to communicate complex or sensitive issues. The director of children's programming at DR said:

It lies in our DNA that we're on the children's side. We don't work from how we think children should be; we ask how children's lives actually are. Children's lives are not always easy, and children do not always behave as the adults want, but it's okay too. Children do not always ask the questions adults want; they ask all sorts of other questions, and we would like to help answer them.

In fact, this reflects what a DR commissioner might have expressed 40 years ago: referring to visions of enlightening and giving children a voice (see Vemmer, 2006). A different approach appears when the director of children's programming continued:

We want the children themselves to put their world and their reality into words; it does not have to be communicated through a host with a microphone. In fact, we could remove that function. This will also increase identification and make clear to children that they are capable – that is, you also give the courage to other children: “Listen, you can actually talk about this, and have an attitude about it, and what you say doesn't need to be translated by others to be relevant”.

Previously, the figure “host with a microphone” was often found in, for instance, children's magazine programmes, where children were interviewed about their interests and points of views. This figure has almost disappeared from children's television, illustrating the weakened transmission logic of broadcasting. Symptomatically, the statement above is about the ways children, as agents and beings in their own world, ought to put that world into words without the mediation of adults. The director elaborated further:

We [DR] must be really good at dropping our adult views and learning from the kids. A basic insight is, we are not kids. We have to be humble towards the target group we're working with [...] for we depend on being able to continually follow them where they are right now.

The director clearly articulated a perceived inherent dilemma with adults producing content for children. The dilemma is not because adult producers know *nothing* about children and their lives, but rather that adults might not know what children *themselves* find relevant. The last part of the quotation above is important: Commissioners do not necessarily prioritise enlightening

children about the future perspective of the world, with children as “becomings” in mind (as was the case according to the transmission model); rather, the commissioners want to “follow [kids] where they are right now”, with children as “beings” in the here and now in mind.

According to the logic expressed above, children are involved in testing content early in production processes, regarding, for example, relevance, identification, and language. Children are considered as agents in their own world, and it seems that media professionals intend to serve children by presenting this “authentic” world of “beings” in media content. The digital editor of children’s programming at DR underlined the importance of making sure that “children can mirror themselves in the content”, and thus, “avoiding the presentation of content in an adult way”. Authenticity and identification seem to be important elements in making content relevant to children. Children are thus both recognised as “beings” actively constructing their own interests and preferences and offered content meant to mirror such experiences of their own life as “beings” here and now.

Empowerment through media content

Collaboration with children has opened the way for a demand-driven logic of public service media in which children are considered partners. Consequently, an important issue for commissioners is how to involve and be “at eye level” with kids. When asked about the meaning of meeting children at eye level, the director of children’s programming explained:

Being at eye level is a historical concept, a reaction against the time when children’s television was more about learning, that is, when children were met with the ambition of learning something for the benefit of the future they were about to enter. We left that ambition, and instead, we asked: “Where are you right now and here, you little child?” I have announced that Ultra is not about preparing children for a good adult life waiting ahead. Other institutions take care of that.

This clearly shows how ideas of the “becoming” child are being abandoned as the basis for commissioning DR children’s content. A general rule of production, the director said, is having children acting in most of the roles: “It has to be children who save the day; instead of adults solving all problems in the end. Children have to come up with the solution to problems”. This is one of the reasons why adults, such as parents and teachers, are fewer in children’s television content than in the past. Similarly relating to portraying the agency of children, the commissioning editor of Ramasjang said:

Children are wise. They know much more than we think they know. Then we have to speak to them on that basis. We should show children who can, who dare and will, but who may also be afraid of things. We have

to show all the nuances. [...] We empower the children. We would like to express that children are, in themselves, a force of power, a children's power. They influence many things; you have to listen to them.

According to the editor of Ramasjang, children are considered inherently competent, independent, and powerful beings: Their voices are important and their actions influential. They are also considered, however, to be vulnerable and afraid of things. Thus, the editor was aware of the importance of not idealising everything and recognising that children might have problems and do not always behave cooperatively. The important thing, however, as the director of children's programming argued, is to "include these emotional aspects in our stories to avoid a 'Disneyfication' or a simplification by only portraying the positive sides of children's lives".

Producing nuanced content based on children's manifold experiences and emotions, such as vulnerability and anxiety, was emphasised as a crucial element by several respondents. Particularly the emotional dynamics among friends seem to be very important to both children and in content production, and they have to be portrayed as experienced by children themselves. Elaborating on the tagline for Ultra: "Ultra får dig til at mærke, hvor du står" ["Ultra makes you feel where you stand"], the commissioning editor said: "We [DR] are trying to show many fates of children and trying to sharpen a lot of issues to make children say: 'I've done that', 'I feel this', or 'I distance myself from that'". In one respect, this tagline is an echo of 1980s Danish youth film and television; this also portrayed independent young people characterised by inward-looking reflection and an emotional sensibility. In another respect, children's television is inspired by reality-TV (Jerslev, 2004), focusing on individuals handling social conflicts and emotional dramas intended to create emotional and moral reactions for or against the persons involved. In sum, the emotional empowerment of children as emotional "beings" in television content is considered important from a media professional point of view.

Navigating a competitive market

Throughout the interviews, the commissioners underlined their interest in children's experiences. This was motivated by a genuine interest in children, but it was also a result of a market logic that requires attracting the attention of as many children as possible to be competitive: If DR's content does not meet children's interests, the children turn to other providers, thus representing a serious challenge for DR (DR Medieforskning, 2021; Det Danske Filminstitut, 2023; Jensen and Mitric, Chapter 8 in this volume). The commissioner of fictional content at Ultra reflected on the issue in the following way:

We have changed our focus from being an omnibus channel, which is, so to speak, a mini-DR which may contain a little of it all, to saying we have

certain areas where we can reach [children] and areas where we should not compete with others, because we cannot compete with YouTubers and influencers. We cannot get so close at all. We should not make content within all genres. If we did, we would just end up representing the institution and not the person.

What the commissioner pointed to is that the transmission model of broadcasting (the “omnibus” model) is inadequate for competing with a demand-driven logic of modern public service media. He realised that children feel attracted to the short formats and authentic aesthetics of YouTubers and influencers who communicate privately, generating content by themselves about intimate, real-life topics. Seemingly, the challenge for DR is to find the ways in which they can communicate with their users as equals and avoid being perceived as an institutional voice. Following this perspective, children are regarded as “beings”, and as individualised communicators who do not necessarily understand themselves as being part of bigger groups (e.g., children) or institutions of society (e.g., DR’s children’s television). Using digital media, children have become accustomed to being addressed individually. The commissioner of fictional content at Ultra expressed frustration in relation to this:

Our experience is that children sometimes watch content we feel is completely far out. For example, several influencers on YouTube communicate with content that is not as interesting, not as innovative or exciting as content we communicate to users. The insight we have in specific cases or specific stories or the fantastic environments we invent in our stories, they should be able to compete, but users are just not there.

As a public service provider, DR must continually legitimise content in the eyes of viewers and users. As professional media workers, all the informants were aware of not only having to struggle to attract viewers and users, but also of the consequences this might have for the content that DR produces. The director of children’s programming argued:

People often think there is a contrast between, on the one hand, public service of high quality, and on the other, commercial content attracting many viewers. My approach is that we have to hold on to public service quality in relation to our productions, our themes, topics, and our approach, but you cannot talk about public service if you have no users.

The challenge of getting users to choose DR has become even bigger with the transition from flow to digital distribution. For a traditional flow provider, a less popular programme can be scheduled after a very successful programme in the hopes that viewers will stay; however, in a digital universe, no viewers are “hanging on” from one programme to the next. Additional choices are thus important, and as the digital commissioning editor of children’s programming explained, “frequency is of paramount importance because, if content

you just got used to, suddenly, is no longer there, then the habit is broken, and you lose the users”. Thus, as the market and media professional logics dictate, volume, frequency, and fascinating content are of key significance when children access content throughout the day.

Children as (dis)loyal production partners

The next theme emerging from the interviews concerns children being perceived as media users. Referring to 9–14-year-olds, the director of children’s programming said: “They are disloyal, they change, they are direct, and we offer something that has followed them throughout their childhood. And then, we still want them to choose DR when they become teenagers”. In other words, teenagers are used to finding content about everything on their private phones and they want different content, not least to mark that they are not children anymore. It is thus a challenge to engage children as they grow older with the potential to become loyal users who could even be considered partners in new productions (in the terms of Bardoel & Lowe, 2007).

Usually, audience loyalty is constituted over time. Branding is a well-known way of creating users who consider themselves loyal partners of products and services. Branding has also become an important instrument for DR to attract the attention of children. Minisjang, Ramasjang, and Ultra have their individual brand platforms, that is, an internal tool helping to describe what makes each of them identifiable. The commissioners repeatedly used the rhetoric of branding when talking about their considerations in commissioning content: They talked about positions in the market, segments, strategies, products, campaigns, users, user investigations, target groups, value, and the like, registered within the rhetoric of business and marketing. They all used words that are seemingly far from words associated with children, childhood, or the production of cultural content (see also Redvall, Chapter 4 in this volume). In this respect, the media professional aspects of commissioning appeared crucial, compared with cultural institutional aspects: Additionally, ideas of children as “becomings” seemed to be reduced to ideas of children becoming future loyal media users.

Quality means relevance – relevance means recognisability

The commissioners were also asked to discuss the concept of quality in relation to media content for children. The director of children’s programming explained that DR has redefined the applied concept of quality, recognising that they could not use their own professional, aesthetic, and adult view of quality in the commissioning of content for children. Regarding the launch of *Klassen* [*The Class*], a fiction series with 13 seasons and 743 episodes around 9–14 minutes each, the director defined quality as relevance:

Klassen did not win praise from colleagues or newspapers, but when we talked to the target group, they did not pay attention to the number of cameras, but to the relevance they found in the topics of the product, which they couldn't find anywhere else.

Being a small national content provider, intending to produce quality content, DR's key policy argument is to produce alternatives to media content from the big players by emphasising characteristics of Danish culture, language, and values (DR Strategi, 2019). According to the director general of DR, Maria Rørbye Rønn, DR is in no way able to produce on the same scale as the big players, but DR offers Danish content to a Danish audience. At the press conference of the launch of *Minisjang* in 2020, Rønn said:

We produce content for children in Denmark. We use as a starting point their reality, their world, and that content does not have to be adapted for it to go in Italy, in China, or in Chile. It is produced in Denmark in Danish, and it has a completely uncompromising Danish distinctive character.

This statement resonated in the answers of the informants of this study when discussing the characteristics of DR's children's content. Relevance was consistently interpreted as recognisability. The digital commissioning editor of children's programming stated that they take Danish children's culture as their point of departure in their work:

We always have as a goal to take as a starting point where the Danish kids are right here and now, and we don't worry about whether this is appropriate for American or Turkish children. We only have a focus on Danish children [...]. This mirroring is important”.

To watch other children tackling well-known situations in different ways could help put into perspective situations children know from their everyday life. On the other hand, following this line of reasoning, children's television could end up forming a bubble of recognisable values only for initiated Danish children who are not confronted with foreign or unfamiliar children and their life conditions. All the commissioners were aware, however, of this dilemma, and they emphasised the importance of their public service obligations to deliver content that not only fascinates but also makes children wise and competent and encourages them to reflect. When asked about what they thought of the earlier, more paternalistic way of addressing children through DR content, the commissioner of fictional content at Ultra said:

I don't think it will ever disappear. If it does, I don't think we can keep faith in what we do. As a human being, I have to have a vision. When I am to choose a topic – whether it is about the most delicious snack or the fact that one in ten is exposed to mental or physical violence – I have to decide what is going to be produced and go with the money. In such

a case, I have a paternalistic attitude in saying that this is important for [children] to know about. I think there is something more important than food and snacks.

Generally, the commissioners were proud to be responsible for children's media production and have the opportunity to work with difficult issues, such as bullying, the body, divorce, sexuality, death, and feelings of sorrow, often in both realistic and experimental and provocative ways. A recent example mentioned by the informants is the programme series on Ultra (for children 9–14 years old), *ULTRA smider tøj* [*Ultra Strips Down*], which is a series aiming to ease body anxiety by exposing children to naked adult bodies. Five adults stand naked in front of a children's audience, and the children may ask all kinds of questions to the five naked persons about their bodies. Even though *Ultra Strips Down* is a quite unique production, it illustrates that the commissioners feel pride in being part of an institution that comments critically and provocatively on the conditions and pressures to which children are subject (see also Lysne, Chapter 3, and Qassim, Chapter 7, in this volume).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I study commissioners' perceptions of children and childhood in their role of commissioning television content for children at the public service provider DR. During a period when DR has found itself being squeezed in competition from global streaming giants, on the one hand, and social media networks available to children night and day, on the other, the dominating media logic has changed from transmission-based to demand-oriented. Against the background of the early days of Danish children's television, the chapter provides a framework to understand the perception of children within the present, transforming logic of broadcasting. Theoretically, the concepts of children as "beings" and "becomings" are used to analyse whether children are addressed as in need of knowledge and education to become "good" future citizens, ideally interested in all aspects of culture and society, or whether children are addressed primarily as beings in their own right, creating knowledge through the mediated mirroring of their own social life here and now.

The conclusion is that the concept of the "becoming" child, in all its aspects, was more visible in content for children before media work was professionalised and digitalised, and that the perception of children as "beings" has increased with competition and digitalisation. The analysis illustrates, however, that addressing children remains as complex as before. As a broadcaster, DR previously had a clear mandate to deliver content for children about almost everything within all genres. Such television content was rooted in the perception that children were open and curious about whatever content *adults* found important, funny, provocative, and interesting for children. Explicitly,

the sender perspective was legitimised by the perception that children were representatives of the future and should be informed, entertained, and involved in content to be as well prepared as possible both for having a good childhood and for achieving a good future life.

With a changing media landscape, DR still has a mandate to deliver content about everything and within all genres, in principle. However, due to a highly competitive market where children have access to all kinds of media content on alternative and social media platforms, the commissioning of children's television content today implies being aware of producing content that, firstly, children do not find on other platforms, and, secondly, is relevant to children on the digital media platforms where children are, such as YouTube.

At DR, children's television content is legitimised by having a direct and specific relevance to Danish children where they are, here and now. Involving children as "partners" before, during, and after production clearly follows a logic of digital media, prompting children to find themselves as professional media partners who contribute to the creation of content. The orchestration of universal themes, such as social relations producing emotional and moral reactions, is taking place in familiar localities meant to represent a Danish way of doing things. Quality is made synonymous to relevance, and relevance is interpreted as recognisability. Consequently, addressing children's own interests relates to the mirroring of well-known everyday activities that children perform with other children, such as texting and socialising with friends.

DR has so far succeeded in the role of a partner to children, constituting a mediated test-room for trying out social and emotional evaluations. However, the study also illustrates that, despite the intentions of reaching children as beings on their own terms, media professionalism has prevailed as a pervasive media logic of commissioning children's content, while the challenge still remains regarding how commissioners can be sure they meet, represent, and express children's own interests and preferences.

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Coming out differently

Making queer youth known in Scandinavian screen fiction

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ABSTRACT

Posing the question of how Scandinavian screen fiction makes queer adolescence known, this chapter provides an analysis of how young audiences are addressed with issues of queerness in Scandinavian screen media produced for youth. Combining queer theory and genre studies of youth fiction in film and television, the chapter analyses a key trope in queer youth narratives: the representation of the coming-out story. The chapter offers a close analysis of two ostensibly different youth screen media texts that nevertheless share some significant representational strategies: the hugely successful Swedish youth film *Fucking Åmål* [*Show Me Love*] and the lesser known small Danish youth drama series *Puls* [*Pulse*]. The analysis explores how Scandinavian youth screen media produce knowledge of queer youth by negotiating and challenging conventional narrative representations of coming out through thematic engagement with stifling normativity, characters that embody queer happiness, and open endings that accentuate potential and possibility.

KEYWORDS: Scandinavian youth fiction, youth films, youth drama series, queer representation, coming-out narrative, coming of age

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Introduction

In recent years, queer narratives have been experiencing a visibility surge in youth screen media (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Monaghan, 2016, 2021a, 2022). In 2016, the gay love story between Isak and Even in season three of the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK's teen online drama *SKAM* [*Shame*] turned the already successful drama into an "international cult phenomenon" (Sundet, 2019). With subsequent international adaptations of the series further proliferating its popular queer storyline, several representations of non-heteronormative adolescents have followed across youth screen media productions. In 2018, the high school comedy *Love, Simon* became the first same-sex teen romance produced by a major Hollywood studio, with queer youth coming-of-age stories being propagated in teen-targeting films like *Alex Strangelove*, *Booksmart*, *The Half of It*, and *Three Months* and in critically lauded art films like *Call Me By Your Name*, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, and *Moonlight*. Perhaps most pre-eminently, queer youth coming-of-age stories have been included in the streaming series format with shows like *Sex Education*; *Never Have I Ever*; *We Are Who We Are*; *Love, Victor*; *Genera+ion*; and *Heartstopper*, to name but a few. These titles evidently reflect the historical global stronghold the US has on youth culture (although *Sex Education* and *Heartstopper* are of course British productions). However, as the case of *Shame* exemplifies, the growing visibility of queer youth in contemporary screen media representations is not an Anglo-American phenomenon alone. Internationally, films like *The Wound* from South Africa, *Girl* from Belgium, *And Then We Danced* from Georgia, and *Summer of '85* from France all featured non-heteronormative youth and reached wide audiences via festivals, art cinemas, and streaming platforms. Simultaneously, teen dramas like Netflix's Spanish hit show *Elite*, the Russian series *Here I Come* (which was distributed on YouTube for 18+ audiences to bypass the country's anti-gay censorship), and the Swedish Netflix drama *Young Royals* have been lauded for their thematic engagement with queer adolescence (Peeters, 2021; Scott, 2021; Solari, 2018).

Visibility is important because it contributes to the formation of identities, affects values, and influences attitudes, perspectives, and views on life. But as Parsemain (2019: 20) has reminded us, visibility is no guarantee of progress, and although queer people are seen, "they are not necessarily *known*". Scholars have argued that the teen genre has particular significance for the young audiences they address, and the possibilities of the genre to influence processes of identity formation have been emphasised (Meyer & Wood, 2013; Monaghan, 2021b). Knowledge about sex, gender, and sexuality is crucial for young people trying to figure out who they are and coming to terms with their identity. For queer young people in particular, studies have shown how popular culture narratives and entertainment media representation can func-

tion as a pedagogical space of hope and resistance in cases where institutional contexts like school and home may falter (Dell & Boyer, 2015; Parsemain, 2019). This invariably highlights the need to move beyond the question of quantitative visibility and examine *how* queer youth are being made known in screen media narratives.

This chapter follows the call of recent studies of queer youth screen media (Clarke, 2017; Monaghan, 2021a, 2021b; Parsemain, 2019) to investigate how queer identity and sexuality are being represented in contemporary youth screen fiction. With the US generally remaining the focus of most studies of youth screen media, due in part to the vast global presence of American film and television, this chapter expands the geographical perspective to Scandinavia to analyse how contemporary Scandinavian screen media makes queer adolescence known. Pertaining to what is arguably one of the most significant representational tropes in queer youth screen media, namely the coming-out narrative, in this chapter, I analyse how the experience of coming out as a key aspect of growing up queer is constructed as a narrative trope in Scandinavian youth screen media. Beginning by recognising that scholarship on queer youth screen media has pertained mostly to an Anglo-America context, I first engage with recent literature to tease out some prevalent generic conventions of the coming-out narrative in screen media representations of queer youth. Secondly, through a close analysis of coming out in the immensely successful Swedish youth film *Fucking Åmål* [*Show Me Love*] (Moodysson, 1998), and the small Danish youth drama series *Puls* [*Pulse*] (Føns & Lundme, 2021), I explore how these two seemingly vastly disparate examples of Scandinavian youth screen media share similar representational strategies in making queer youth known. Through their thematic engagement with stifling normativity, depictions of main characters that embody queer happiness, and open narrative endings that accentuate potential and possibility rather than finality and conclusion, *Show Me Love* and *Pulse* are examples of how queer narratives in Scandinavian youth screen media negotiate and challenge conventional representations of coming out that have been popularised in an Anglo-American context.

Queer youth screen media: A note on terminology

To explore how youth screen media in Scandinavia address audiences with queer experiences of coming out, three key concepts should be elaborated. The first key term is “queer”, which refers to identities, desires, and practices outside of the heteronormative. As an intentionally ambiguous term, queerness is characterised by “its resistance to definition” (Jagose, 1996: 1) and emphasis on “the slipperiness of meaning and the transgression of categories and boundaries” (McCann & Monaghan, 2020: 1). Queer signifies a form of alterity that challenges the heteronormative belief in a natural alignment

between biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual desire (Parsemain, 2019). Emerging as a slogan in the 1980s activism around HIV and AIDS, and reclaiming what had up until then been used as a homophobic slur, the term's original connotation of strange, odd, abnormal, and perplexing also indicates different sexual practices and gender identifications that include, as well as extend beyond, the gender and sexual identities, expressions, and orientations captured by the umbrella term LGBTQIA+. Imagined as "a rallying cry against the regimes of the normal" (Love, 2007: 157), the conceptual emphasis of "queer" on challenging fixed boundaries and categories of gender and sexuality posits an inherently radical quality. However, employing the term queerness to denote the challenging, resisting, or transgressing of heteronormative identities and desires and practices shared by LGBTQIA+ youth also necessitates acknowledging their differences. As sociologist Mary Robinson (2019: 5) noted, same-sex and trans experiences are not things that all LGBTQIA+ youth have in common, even if queerness is. Settling on the term queer, I follow scholars like Driver (2007) and Monaghan (2016) in acknowledging how its conceptual slipperiness and indefinability can easily run the risk of reducing a diversity of sexual and gender identities to a bland cultural sameness that blinds us to the struggles of particular LGBTQIA+ youth (Driver, 2007; Monaghan, 2016), and to the fact that queerness always intersects with other identity aspects such as gender, race, class, and ability (Parsemain, 2019: 19). Despite these conceptual imperfections, however, "queer" is valuable because it offers a framework to explore how Scandinavian youth fiction makes non-heteronormative youth known.

Secondly, I opt specifically for "youth" and "adolescent" rather than "teen". Whereas these terms are frequently used interchangeably in scholarship, I align with scholars like Clarke (2017) and Driscoll (2011) in arguing that the terms youth and adolescence are more appropriate than the term teen for a genre whose preoccupation with themes of liminality and maturation necessarily extends beyond "an identity mapping onto the years thirteen to nineteen" (Driscoll, 2011: 2).

Finally, in employing "screen media", I follow Monaghan (2016) by including youth narratives on all forms of film and television screens, analogue or digital. Despite important medium-specific differences, such as television's arguable advantage in developing narratives and characterisation (Davis, 2004), contemporary youth culture, as noted by Driscoll, is characterised by an increasing "cross-media generic conversation" in that "teen film now far more dramatically speaks to and draws from other media forms" (as cited in Shary, 2014: 304–305) with the result that any screen media "reference to youth brings with it the capacity to 'become' or 'perform' teen film" (Driscoll, 2011: 139). Given that audiovisual youth fictions frequently target the same audience and deal with similar themes and narrative motifs about growing

up and coming of age across media forms, I have chosen two media texts as case examples that arguably represent the farthest ends of the spectrum in the landscape of contemporary Scandinavian youth screen media. Whereas the first, *Show Me Love*, is a critically and commercially successful Swedish youth film from the turn of the millennium, the second, *Pulse*, is a youth drama series from Denmark, released in 2020, and whose critical and popular success have remained miniscule. Considering these youth fictions alongside each other nevertheless highlights the central aim of this chapter, namely, to analyse how contemporary Scandinavian youth screen media have sought to make queer youth known through negotiating and challenging conventions that have governed screen media narratives of young people coming out queer on screen.

The coming-out story in youth screen media

Many youth screen fictions can generically be defined by what may broadly be termed a “sexual coming of age narrative” (Smith, 2017), understood as stories that explore processes of self-discovery and acceptance in which love, sexuality, and romantic relationships play a significant part. For queer youth fictions, coming of age is predominantly a coming-out narrative (Davis, 2004; Mitchell, 2015; Monaghan, 2016, 2021a). According to television scholar Glyn Davis (2004: 131), coming out occupies a crucial position in most narrativisations of queer youth, because it represents the first experience of a queer character of self-consciously taking on a new, specific identity, and it is typically a moment that proves the most emotionally resonant with the character as well as the audience. As a process of claiming a distinct identity, coming out is never a singular act. Rather, it can entail a variety of meanings and actions, such as acknowledging same-sex desire, acting sexually on these desires, claiming non-heterosexuality in private, or publicly proclaiming it (Bronski, 2000: 20). However, in models of sexual development, coming out has historically been viewed as a sort of final stone to overturn, “occurring in the last stages that needs to be overcome before one settles happily on a homosexual or bisexual identity” (McLean, 2007: 151), and sketching a linear process from confusion to acceptance. Culturally, coming out became an explicitly political act during the Gay Liberation movement of 1960s and 1970s, during which it became as much about claiming an identity as an act of coming out on the streets to protest and advocate for fundamental rights (Monaghan, 2021a: 353). As such, the political function and the popular appeal of the coming-out narrative are intrinsically interweaved. As a representation of an individual moving out of a “normal” heterosexual subject position to inhabit a position of the “Other”, the coming-out story is always political. At the same time, it is the inherent celebration of liberation from societal oppression that constitutes the narrative’s main popular appeal (Monaghan, 2021a).

With the growing visibility of queer characters and themes in youth screen media, scholars have increasingly considered coming out as a significant narrative trope in youth screen media (Bronski, 2000; Driver, 2007; McWilliam, 2021; Mitchell, 2015; Monaghan, 2016, 2021a). Given the dominant global presence of the US in youth screen media, the focus of these studies has remained significantly on a US or Anglo-American context, and as such, their insights may not be readily applied to queer narratives in youth screen media beyond this context. However, by surveying this literature, it is possible to tease out some significant shared conventions of the coming-out story that may serve as a blueprint. As I aim to show in this chapter, these may aid not only a general understanding of its generic form in and of itself, but also offer a framework to explore how youth narratives of coming out are negotiated in a different context, like Scandinavia.

Narrative conventions of coming out

Drawing on narrative analysis of the coming-out storylines of queer characters Kurt in *Glee* and Rickie in *My So-Called Life* – the latter frequently cited as the first character to come out in youth-centric television (Davis, 2004) – Whitney Monaghan (2021a: 354) has argued that the classical coming-out narrative in youth screen media plays out in three stages. These stages, Monaghan argued, move along a linear narrative development, going from initial emotional confusion, through attempts to fit in, to the ultimate revelation of an authentic queer self. Typically beginning with a recognition of difference, the first stage sees the queer character generally understood as straight within the diegesis but coded as queer for the viewing audience. Most frequently, this coding of difference is achieved through strategies of *mise-en-scène*, such as costuming and performance. The second stage then develops from the initial narrative emphasis of difference with efforts by the character to fit in. Typically, the character's rejection of difference is achieved through attempts at "passing" as straight within the normative framework of the diegesis by entering a heterosexual relationship as a means of accessing an easier life (Monaghan, 2021a: 354). Thematically, this passing-as-straight strategy is employed to reflect belonging as the central existential and social concern for the queer character. Lastly, in the third and final stage of Monaghan's understanding of the classical coming-out narrative, the conflicts that ensue from the character's attempts to pass as straight inevitably lead to a resolution through an emotional saying-it-out-loud moment – whether in the form of a public declaration, an intimate confession, or as a disclosure by another character.

Surveying the coming-out narrative in Australian youth films, Kelly McWilliam (2021) noted how the introduction of homophobia frequently serves as a queer-specific rite of passage in coming-out narratives and functions as the main challenge to the maturation process that structures coming of age

for young queer characters. Screen media narratives generally rely on at least some externalisation of conflict. For coming out, which is primarily the result of a complex internal process, homophobia primarily tends to be represented as an external factor in the coming-out narrative, either as a feature of the peer group or a family member (see also Bronski, 2000: 20). Often, though, homophobia appears as both an external and internal antagonist. Whereas the internal struggle can serve as an important means of fostering empathy in audiences, the externalisation of homophobia through specific characters can provide a context for conveying what it means to grow up queer in a heteronormative society (McWilliam, 2021: 254). Further, McWilliam pointed out how coming-out narratives can be distinguished as queer coming-of-age stories in their thematic focus on the transition from one sexual identity to another. Even as sexuality remains a vital aspect in most screen representations of growing up, the coming-out narrative departs from the coming-of-age story's emphasis on identity formation in general by focusing on it specifically as a transition from one sexual identity to another. This distinction between coming of age as identity formation in general and as transition from one identity to another is important, because it highlights how coming out as a coming-of-age narrative may propagate the premise that "one should realize what one is to live one's true sexual identity" (McWilliam, 2021: 254). Thus, as Monaghan (2021a: 354) has added, coming-out narratives easily end up reproducing the very societal expectations of stable identity and settling into coherent gender and sexuality that queer theory and queer activists have actively sought to destabilise.

Finally, as the coming-out moment frequently serves as the main climax of the narrative, the very utterance or declaration of identity all too easily ends up "not only an end in itself, but *the* end to this singular narrative", as film scholar Michael Bronski (2000: 20) has phrased it. Expanding on Bronski's argument, scholars like Driver (2007) and Monaghan (2016) have noted how the conventionally repetitive equation of coming out and coming of age in teen fiction complicates the genre's ability to represent the complex aspects of queer adolescence as other than a simplified life-course linearly structured around coming out as the narrative climax. The temporality of coming of age inherently involves an orientation towards the future as a process of overcoming adolescence to become an adult. For Monaghan (2016: 53), this "routinely linking" coming out with coming of age in many queer teen fictions not only leads to the displacement of other possible storylines but also excludes other possible temporalities. Beyond coming out as "the brief moment of visible difference" (Driver, 2007: 58), queer adolescents are simply left with very little to do once the realisation and verbal enunciation of queerness has been completed.

Much of the scholarship on queer representation in youth screen media has focused on the period from the 1990s until the mid 2010s. However, as

detailed in the introduction, recent years have seen a significant increase in depictions of queer youth characters and themes. Even as the coming-out narrative continues to be the dominant frame for narrating queer experiences and identities in youth screen media, as some critics have lamented (Giese, 2018; King, 2022), the recent increase in queer youth visibility has been accompanied by some significant representational changes in the genre. Firstly, with queer youth-centric fictions like *Sex Education*, *Genera+ion*, *We Are Who We Are*, and *Heartstopper* depicting a still wider range of queer youth characters, the genre's traditional "cisgender heteronormativity" has become increasingly challenged (Monaghan, 2021a: 356). Looking at how notions of stability have become "less alluring and more complex" in coming-out narratives, literary scholar Jennifer Mitchell (2015: 457) has argued that the representational tropes of coming out seem increasingly to be less about simply acknowledging the existence of queer subjectivities in a dominantly heteronormative world, and more "about negotiating various queer identities and experiences". Secondly, noting that the coming-out process remains affectively textured by negative emotions like fear and danger, Mitchell argued how recent narratives in young adult literature, as well as in youth screen media, highlight the role of a surrounding support network. Relying less on the trope of the singular queer character confronted with the fraught issue of difference, coming-out narratives increasingly choose instead to frame their young queer characters as existing within broader queer and allied communities, thus making room for an expansion of identities and experiences (Mitchell, 2015: 454).

However, if the enduring stability and stable construction of the coming-out narrative in Anglo-American youth screen media is being increasingly challenged in the recent surge of queer youth presentations, then it has long been anything but straightforward in Scandinavia. In the following section, I explore how the coming-out narrative has been negotiated in a Scandinavian context.

Passing on straight: *Show Me Love*

Swedish director Lukas Moodyson's debut feature film, *Show Me Love* (Moodysson, 1998), is arguably the most successful and widely known coming-out narrative in Scandinavian cinema. The film centres on the complex friendship, love, and desire between two teenage girls, Agnes and Elin, growing up in a small, conformist Swedish town. Released in 1998, *Show Me Love* was Sweden's "first lesbian coming-out story" (Stenport, 2012: 31). The film was euphorically celebrated by critics, who lauded it as a milestone in Swedish cinema. The film sold more than 900,000 cinema tickets in Sweden, immediately elevating it to the status of a modern classic in Swedish film, and youth cinema at large. As a youth-centric narrative, it

represented a paradigmatic shift in Swedish youth films at the time, partly by signaling a shift in narrative focus from centring predominantly on young male protagonists, rough urban lifestyle, and gang crime, while at the same time announcing the beginning of a wave of Swedish films made for younger audiences by younger directors (Lysne, 2022). As a returning reference point for Swedish and Nordic youth filmmakers, as well as an important addition to the international canon of queer cinema, *Show Me Love* has been thoroughly examined in scholarship within Nordic cinema, queer cinema, and youth cinema, as detailed by Monaghan (2016). Through its unlikely combination of contemporary social realist concerns with issues of class, bullying, suicide, and loneliness; a visual style linking it to the contemporary Danish Dogme 95 movement; a fundamentally uplifting story of self-realisation and first love; and a character gallery and dramaturgical structure that borrows from the American teen genre, the film is characterised by ambiguity on several levels – a point frequently highlighted by scholars. Interrogating how “ambivalence” extends through the film’s production, reception, and thematic and aesthetic form, Anna Stenport (2012: 36) argued that this ambivalence carried all the way to its English title:

[The English title *Show me Love* is] on the one hand, vague and generic – a kind of whitewashing of the intensity of the Swedish title [*Fucking Åmål*]. On the other hand, the English title explicitly labels the film a love story and suggests that love can have a performative element – it can be enacted, demonstrated, and repeated: “shown”.

According to Henderson (2007: 262), the film is essentially an adaptation of the American teen movie, “incorporating the same settings, styles, and structures as those found in numerous Hollywood youth movies”. Yet, it also retains a crucial difference, not just by “shifting subject positions and setting” to Sweden, but most significantly in the sexuality of its protagonists. Henderson argued that the crucial difference “between this film and the sorts of films it borrows from is in the sexuality of the two main characters” (Henderson, 2007: 262). A similar argument that *Show Me Love* queers the teen genre through the inclusion of lesbian protagonists has also been made by Jenny Björklund (2010: 38), who stated that it “fulfills most of the genre expectations of the romantic comedy” but also “challenges and queers the genre”.

However, when viewed through the lens of the current youth screen media landscape, and the challenges and expansions of queer youth narratives in American teen media discussed by Mitchell (2015) and Monaghan (2021a, 2021b), it might be just as clear that the queerness of *Show Me Love* is as much located in its deployment of the coming-out narrative as in the sexuality of its protagonists. That is, what *Show Me Love* represents is not just a queering of the teen genre by focusing on same-sex love and desire between its teenage protagonists, but also just as much a queering of the coming-out narrative itself.

Seemingly complying with conventions from the outset, the film begins with a typical recognition of difference. As the sounds of keys being pressed on a computer are heard, we see Agnes in front of a screen alone in a bedroom writing a secret wish list in her diary. In a familiar shot, or reverse shot structure, the camera focuses on Agnes's face and the computer screen as she writes her three secret wishes: first, to not have a birthday party; second, that Elin will look at her; and third, that Elin will fall in love with her – as she continues to type in capital letters, “I LOVE ELIN!!!!!!” The scene works to gain the viewer immediate intimacy with Agnes by offering insights to her subjectivity while immediately coding her as “different” by sharing her secret articulation of lesbian desire. For Monaghan (2016: 118), the film adheres to the classical coming-out narrative by representing Agnes and Elin as opposites who are drawn together by mutual feelings of dissatisfaction and a profound experience of boredom. However, despite clearly representing differences in socioeconomic backgrounds (Elin from a working-class lower-income home, Agnes with an affluent middle-class background) and personalities (Elin a brazen extrovert, Agnes a quiet introvert), both girls are discernibly coded as non-normative from the outset. And in ways, I would argue, that offset the conventional opposites-attract trope argued by Monaghan (2016), or what Stenport (2012: 33) termed a “paradigm of opposition”. This is signaled already at the beginning of the narrative, when, following Agnes's intimate confession on her computer, the film cuts to Elin having a heated argument with her big sister Jessica, ending with Elin erratically pouring a glass of chocolate milk over Jessica and throwing an empty box of cocoa at her. The scene, which is frantically shot and edited, retains a clear contrast to the lingering and intimate shot, or reverse shot structure, in Agnes's introduction. Crucially, these two scenes not only function to highlight differences between Elin and Agnes in class and demeanor, but they also set up an important connection between them and marking them both as non-normative. Despite the difference in modality, Elin's inarticulate and loud expression of unruly, overflowing emotion mirrors Agnes's articulate and quiet expression on the computer, in which equally unruly and overflowing emotion is expressed through the use of capital letters and exclamation marks, thus establishing a queer connection between them from the very beginning.

Whereas Agnes's desire for Elin renders her queer from the outset, the transitional aspect inherent in the coming-out narrative is instead structured around Elin. This is set up, among other things, by the film's emphasis on her interaction with complementary characters, primarily Jessica and her boyfriend Markus, and Markus's friend Johan, who, like Agnes, also has a crush on Elin. This interaction is another important connection to the American teen film genre (Stenport, 2012: 78). It is, however, also crucial to Elin's coming-out trajectory in that it establishes the baseline heter-

onormative ideology that structures the social world of the diegesis, from which Elin feels alienated. When, following a kiss in the backseat of a car as they attempt to hitchhike their way out of Åmål, Elin attempts to hide her feelings for Agnes from Jessica and gives in to Jessica's pressure – and social expectations – to pursue a relationship with Johan, thus initiating the “passing-as-straight” strategy. Johan is rendered as a sensitive but weak guy who can only echo the culturally constructed heteronormative attitudes and “sexist posturing” represented by Markus (Henderson, 2007: 265). After a disappointing sexual encounter shortly after they become a couple, Elin decides to break up with Johan when his inability to voice his own opinions and challenge Markus becomes all too evident. During a discussion in Elin's home while watching the entertainment show *Bingolotto* together with Jessica and Markus, Elin attempts to challenge Markus's sexist views on gender difference, but when Johan sheepishly appears to echo Markus, Elin promptly gets up, walks into the next room, and calls Johan to break up with him. As such, Elin's inability to pass as straight through her failed relationship with Johan serves a wider function than merely convincing the audience of the queer character's inauthentic straightness and thus of their need to pursue an authentic, queer self. It works as a cultural critique of the oppressive confines of the heteronormative expectations that underpin the lives of all the characters.

The final challenge to the coming-out narrative comes in the film's ending. Setting up the familiar final articulation of identity, the penultimate scene in *Show Me Love* shows Agnes and Elin having locked themselves inside a toilet booth to have a private conversation. Elin, seemingly having made up her mind about declaring her feelings for Agnes, grabs her by the arm and pulls her into a toilet stall to escape the social surveillant gaze of their peers. Inside the toilet stall, Elin finally confesses her feelings for Agnes, whose distrust and anger turns into happiness and relief. Outside, a jeering crowd has assembled and demands that Elin unlock the door and come out, assuming she has shut herself inside with a guy. Finally, she summons the courage and flings the door open. Walking through the flabbergasted crowd of pupils, hand in hand with Agnes, she defiantly proclaims, “Here I am. This is my girlfriend. We are going to go and fuck now”. The camera then follows the couple outside as they stride across the schoolyard with the wind in their hair and sunlight on their faces to a pulsating electro beat on the soundtrack.

However, rather than closing the film with this spectacular declaration of queer love in the school hallway that turns the conventional happy ending into a “brief moment of visible difference” (Driver, 2007: 58), *Show Me Love* concludes with a scene that renders coming out less an ending than an opening. Cutting to Elin's bedroom bathed in natural sunlight, the two girls are shown laughing innocently and awkwardly while enjoying a glass of

chocolate milk on Elin's bed. Revealing the brazen declaration of lesbian love and desire at school to be a performative gesture, the final scene stays with the girls during an improvised dialogue about "excess and lack" (Stenport, 2012) in finding the right amount of cocoa powder to put in the milk as the decidedly feel-good title song from Swedish pop singer Robyn begins to play in the background. For Monaghan (2016: 125), this image of Elin and Agnes evokes Sara Ahmed's (2010) notion of "the happily queer", a figure that insists on their own desire even if it takes them outside conventional parameters of happiness. The happily queer may still encounter a world governed by the stifling social norms of a small town like Åmål but will – like Elin and Agnes sitting on a bed drinking chocolate milk and laughing – "refuse to be made unhappy by this encounter" (Ahmed, 2010: 117). In narrative terms, the final scene in *Show Me Love* thus complicates the conventional linearity of the coming-out story by moving beyond the trope of coming out as an end in and of itself. Instead of a conventional happy ending through the promise of happiness by coming out, the film's open ending does not negate the oppressive confines of the social world that exists outside their window, but simply leaves its queer youth characters with the hopeful possibility of a new beginning.

Anything could happen: *Pulse*

In the Danish youth drama series *Pulse* (Føns & Lundme, 2020), characters continuously stare at each other intensely in tightly framed close-ups just long enough to suggest that anything could happen. Unlike *Show Me Love*, it is a densely dramatic, affectively high-strung, and theme-packed series, in which a lot does happen. Like Moodysson's film, however, the series explores the challenges of coming out in a small-town environment governed by stifling social norms in ways that offsets the conventional coming-out narrative. *Pulse* follows a group of seven friends in a sleepy, indeterminate suburb somewhere outside of Copenhagen, whose entangled lives unravel when secrets they carry unwantedly begin to emerge. Samir and Bastian are best friends, and both are on the school basketball team, together with Bastian's brother Adam and their classmate Erik. Bastian is dating Anna, who has just lost her mother, while her sister Sophia constantly returns from trips to Copenhagen with expensive new clothes. Samir, on the other hand, is dating Tenna, who is struggling to negotiate teenage life with social monitoring by her conservative Muslim sister. Samir is the star of the basketball team, and the girls adore him, much to the envy of Erik, who is harbouring feelings for Tenna. One day, when Erik accidentally discovers notifications from a dating app for men on Samir's mobile, he seizes the opportunity to disrupt Samir's social standing and assume a new position in the group by revealing Samir's secret to the whole gang of friends.

Compared with the major visibility and recognition of *Show Me Love*, *Pulse* is a small media text. Released on the streaming platform TV2 Play in two parts during 2020, with the first season premiering in July and the second in December, *Pulse* consists of 18 short episodes of approximately 15 minutes each and has thus far not been released outside of Denmark. The series is directed by Mette Føns, who co-wrote it with co-creator Tomas Lagermand Lundme and Christian Gamst Miller-Harris. Through themes and tone, *Pulse* clearly distinguishes itself from the “social utopia” characteristic of the themes and tone of *Shame* (Christensen, 2018). Instead, it gestures towards a kind of social dystopia characteristic of a show like *Euphoria* and the Norwegian series *Delete Me* through similar use of expressive formalism to highlight the characters’ intense emotional reality, as well as to the “starker realism” generally characteristic of the themes and tone in Danish youth films since the turn of the millennium (Christensen, 2021: 139). Upon its release, reviews were moderately enthusiastic, with critics generally praising the series for its aesthetic form, mood, and the acting performances (Damsgaard, 2020; Høgfældt, 2020) but also criticising it for being “overdramatic” (Høgfældt, 2020) and “unrealistic” (Damsgaard, 2020) in its representation of pervasive homophobia. Interestingly, in interviews ahead of its premiere, Føns detailed how the production had conducted extensive research on behaviours and attitudes towards homosexuality among members of the show’s target age group before the scriptwriting process began, including surveys, interviews, and video dairies, which laid bare the fact that “among young people, prejudices are alive and well [translated]” (as cited in Thomsen, 2020a). Similarly, the show’s main actors, who were roughly the same age as their characters during production, discussed the experience of an undeniable presence of homophobia in contemporary youth culture (Thomsen, 2020b).

In the coming-out narrative, homophobia functions to “contextualize queer coming of age within a heterosexist society” (McWilliam, 2021: 254); in *Pulse*, homophobia is initially embodied in the character of Erik. As an alpha male figure on the local basketball team, Erik propagates a culture of toxic masculinity in the locker room through constant posturing and derogatory speech. When his position on the team is threatened by Samir’s promotion as lead player, Erik employs homophobia to assert power over Samir by hurling hateful slurs in the locker room and endlessly distributing GIFs that mockingly insert Samir’s body or face in images of explicit gay pornography. The pervasive presence of GIFs throughout *Pulse* highlights a digital media culture including dating apps and messaging apps, which function ambivalently throughout the story as technologies of both intimacy and oppression. Most frequently, these are interconnected. As expressions of homophobia, the explicitly sexual GIFs work as a kind of “interpersonal panopticons” (Manning & Stern, 2018) used to monitor and control cul-

tural heteronormative norms and to punish deviance through the humiliation that the publication and distribution of the GIFs ensure. In the second season of the series, however, homophobia is gradually taken over by Erik's criminal big brother and his gang of thuggish friends, who assume the role of guardians of the heteronormative norm and are unequivocal antagonists, culminating in the penultimate episode when they lure Bastian and Samir into a deserted construction area and violently assault them. Thus, the stifling heteronormative attitudes expressed by Markus in *Show Me Love* can arguably be understood as having hardened into more explicitly violent homophobic forms in *Pulse*.

Despite being an ensemble drama, the main storyline in *Pulse* revolves around the relationship between Samir and Bastian. And like Elin and Agnes, they are both marked for the viewer as different from the outset. In the opening scene, the camera follows the two characters as they spend a lazy summer day skating in the sun. As they laugh, play fight, and occasionally pause to lie down on the ground and look up at the sky, the camera lingers unhurriedly on them in slow-paced and reverse shots to register an atmosphere of indeterminate intensity that, as in *Show Me Love*, "infuses the mundane with erotic implications" (Stenport, 2012: 71). Like Elin in *Show Me Love*, the focus of the coming-out narrative in *Pulse* is Bastian, who reluctantly tries to come to terms with a budding homosexual identity. His narrative arc thus chiefly aligns with the conventional coming-out narrative, as he spends most of the plot time attempting to pass as straight and make sure his feelings for Samir remain hidden from the rest of the group. Even so, the general emphasis on the characters' emotional reality makes room for several scenes that explore Bastian's secret queer desire in ways that disrupt the otherwise suspense-driven forward movement of the narrative. In one scene early in the first season, the camera lingers on Bastian's eyes, mouth, and hands as he curiously installs and, quietly aroused, flips through explicit images on the show's fictional hook-up app Boydate. Later, when Samir and Bastian finally give in to their desire and have sex for the first time, the camera cuts slowly back and forth between backlit shots of their intertwined bodies and ultra-close-up shots of their ecstatic faces being stroked by the daylight from the window above.

Contrary to Bastian, Samir, like Agnes in *Show Me Love*, can articulate his queer desire from the very beginning, even if it is done in secrecy. Already in the opening episode he is shown communicating on the Boydate app. And by episode four, his sexual identity has been disclosed to the entire group, as well as to his understanding mother. Crucially, however, Samir is never seen struggling with his queer identity beyond his coming out. Even when the disclosure of his sexuality leads to his social exclusion from the friend group, he is depicted as maintaining strength of character by refusing to internalise Erik's homophobic bullying. As a queer representation, Samir is coded as

“happily queer” (Ahmed, 2010). Whereas Elin and Agnes are rendered happily queer only in the final scene of *Show Me Love* (Monaghan, 2016), Samir takes this position almost from the outset. Strong-willed, articulate, and with a stable sense of self, he insists on partaking in queer culture, as illustrated by his repeated use of Boydate, and he effortlessly engages in queer kinship that also extends beyond sex, most notably in the depiction of his friendship with an older guy, the mentor figure Kevin. As a happily queer figure, Samir “does not borrow from the conventional repertoire of images” (Ahmed, 2010: 115), refusing to give up his desires and to be made unhappy even as he encounters a world that is unhappy with queer love.

In the end, *Pulse*, like *Show Me Love*, subverts the finality of the conventional coming-out narrative through an open ending. Jumping to a month following the violent outcome of Erik’s homophobic revenge plan, Bastian attempts to make things right with Samir, who has withdrawn from the group. In the final scene, Samir is shown lying in the grass as a point-of-view shot shows us Bastian’s feet approaching. The camera lingers as they look at each other intensely, before the scene fades to black. It’s an ending that keeps with the decidedly darker tone and themes of the series. Rather than a promise of romantic relationship or clear articulation of sexual identity, it’s an open ending that merely nods to the possibility of a new beginning, keeping the queer promise established in the series’ opening scene that anything can happen.

Conclusion

As queer characters and themes become increasingly visible in youth screen media, so does the need to explore just *how* these texts make queer youth known. This chapter expands the dominant Anglo-American perspective in scholarship on youth screen fiction to explore coming out as a key narrative trope in two Scandinavian youth screen media narratives. Focusing on two ostensibly different case examples that, despite their obvious disparities, nevertheless share significant narrative similarities in their representations of coming out – the critically and commercially successful Swedish youth film *Show Me Love* and the less-known small Danish youth drama series *Pulse* – I analyse how narrative conventions of youth coming out on screen have been negotiated and challenged in a Scandinavian context. The conventional coming-out narrative in youth screen fiction, primarily forged in Anglo-American media, has generally emphasised coming out as the ultimate narrative climax in queer coming-of-age stories. Within this narrative script, coming out has predominantly been rendered as the transition from one sexual identity to another. A plot that has generally been presented in conventionally linear, forward-moving transformation narratives that develop from an initial recognition of difference through an intermediate

phase of denial before concluding in an inevitable, final articulation of the authentic self. In *Show Me Love* and *Pulse*, this premise – that the process of queer identity formation may fit within a tight linear narrative frame – is negotiated and challenged through shared representational strategies. By employing critical engagement with themes of oppressive gender norms and homophobia, by offering representations of happily queer figures, and by narrating endings that do not eradicate challenges and oppression faced by the queer youth protagonists, *Show Me Love* and *Pulse* instead gesture towards new beginnings rather than finite endings. As such, they are examples of how queer youth can be made known by coming out differently.

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Creating serialised live action drama for children

Talent development, affordable volume fiction, and portable brand characters at DR

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the production strategies of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) when making live action fiction for its children's channel and brand DR Ramasjang, targeting pre-schoolers. Based on a case study of the serial *Oda Omvendt* [*Oda Upside Down*], the chapter begins by discussing the reasons behind DR's decision to produce more national live action fiction for the youngest audience members. Following this, the case study of *Oda Upside Down* demonstrates how the commissioning, writing, and production of the series can be regarded as the result of clear institutional strategies for working with talent development, with notions of affordable volume fiction, and with portable brand characters.

KEYWORDS: serial fiction for children, DR Ramasjang, talent development, affordable volume fiction, portable brand characters, *Oda omvendt*, *Oda Upside Down*

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Introduction

In the late 2010s and early 2020s, having a wide range of fictional content and “original series” became increasingly important in a television landscape marked by still more online viewing and on-demand players. This was the case for legacy broadcasters as well as subscription video-on-demand (SVoD) services, which had to accept the fact that many viewers considered strong fiction a crucial element when deciding which subscriptions to buy and where to invest their time (Lotz, 2014: 12). The 2010s thus saw a boom in the number of series being produced, since new players such as Netflix and HBO Nordic (later HBO Max) regarded fictional content – preferably not only in English but also as local originals to cater to many different audiences – as an essential part of their distribution strategy (e.g., Jenner, 2018; Lobato, 2019).

This development primarily initially focused on fiction for adult audiences. However, due to the wide variety of content and services on offer in many Scandinavian homes, producing more fiction for children and youth also became a necessity (Redvall & Christensen, 2021; Sundet, 2021). The competition for the youngest national viewers was suddenly fierce, and combined with YouTube, TikTok, gaming, and a range of social media, Scandinavian public service broadcasters had to find an appropriate response in the rapidly changing media landscape to attract, appeal to, and keep the youngest viewers.

In this chapter, I investigate how part of this response consisted of having an even more specialised approach when making children’s content for very specific audiences and offering more live action fiction in the national languages. I analyse these changes by focusing on the development at the Danish public service broadcaster DR’s children’s channel Ramasjang. Specifically, this case illustrates a focus on how to produce more Danish live action fiction for the youngest audience members prevalent since the late 2010s.

The chapter begins with an outline of major structural changes in the overall approach in the content set-up, such as changing the age span of the target audiences for the children’s channel Ramasjang and the tween channel DR Ultra and introducing a new brand, Minisjang, producing content aimed at 1–3-year-old viewers. Following the introductory contextual framing, I zoom in on a case study of the serial *Oda Omvendt* [*Oda Upside Down*] (Scott & Sabroe, 2018–2020) (henceforth referred to as *Oda*), with three seasons and 30 twelve-minute episodes produced by SAM Productions for DR Ramasjang, which was a new attempt to create fun and engaging fiction for 3–6-year-olds.

The case is used to answer exploratory research questions about what DR commissioners currently consider crucial when writing and developing strong live action fiction for their youngest viewers, and how screenwriters navigate in and adapt to these perceptions. The chapter thus identifies fundamental ideas of how to write and produce a specific kind of fiction within the DR Ramasjang framework as well as the creative constraints associated with doing so for the screenwriters. The case study hypothesises that developing

low-budget ideas is crucial in this framework. The inductive analysis reveals additional elements in the creation and production of niche content, which I also discuss. Accordingly, my analysis highlights how *Oda* is an example of talent development, affordable volume fiction, and portable brand characters (used in different ways), in television, online, and in real-life settings. In terms of empirical data, the exploratory case study (Yin, 2017) draws on semistructured qualitative interviews with four “exclusive informants” (Bruun, 2014). These interviews are supplemented with data from e-mail correspondence with the producer of *Oda*; pitch documents, bibles, screenplay examples, and other written documents on *Oda*; and a range of material from industry events such as the DR pitch sessions for independent producers, The Children’s Media Conference, and observational studies of a writing workshop focusing on teaching new talent to write children’s fiction. Table 4.1 presents a detailed overview of this empirical material.

TABLE 4.1 Overview of empirical material

Source	Format	Date
Ida Mule Scott & Iben Albinus Sabroe (creators and screenwriters of <i>Oda</i>)	In-person interview, Copenhagen	20 October 2020
	5-page synopsis for <i>Oda omvendt</i>	28 September 2017
	<i>Oda omvendt</i> , final short bible (12 pages)	10 November 2017
	THE ONE – <i>Oda Omvendt</i> , short bible (14 pages)	12 January 2018
Iben Albinus Sabroe (creator and screenwriter of <i>Oda</i>)	Writing workshop for DR in Aarhus	2–4 December 2020
Ida Mule Scott (creator and screenwriter of <i>Oda</i>)	Workshop notes. Personal notes by Scott from the workshops on children’s content in Copenhagen	2017
Niels Lindberg, DR Head of Content (2019–2022)	Zoom interview	11 February 2022
Pelle Møller, DR Head of Content (2015–2019)	Zoom interview	18 February 2022
Meta Louise Foldager Sørensen, Producer of <i>Oda</i> , SAM Productions	E-mail correspondence	4 November 2020

Børnemediekonferencen [The Children's Media Conference]	Children's media conference, organised by DR and the Buster Film Festival	7 October 2021
DR	Børneproducenterne dag [DR pitch day for producers of children's content]	5 September 2019
	Børneproducenterne dag [DR pitch day for producers of children's content]	18 August 2020
	Børneproducenterne dag [DR pitch day for producers of children's content]	19 August 2021

The case study thus focuses on “deep texts” of the industry (Caldwell, 2009) as well as industry research interviews. The latter involve certain risks, particularly in terms of remaining critical and impartial when also aiming for a sustained dialogue across a long-running research project (Potter, 2018a). I have been aware of this during the gathering and analysis of data and when presenting the findings to the industry informants.

Based on the varied empirical material, I investigate how writing and producing television fiction for children within a public service framework is currently marked by specific ideas of what this particular audience wants and needs (see Christensen, Chapter 2 in this volume). Moreover, I analyse what is considered to be the ideal production strategies for providing this kind of content in a highly competitive television landscape, where the national public service broadcasters have the ambition to make quality content, but have limited budgets to do so.

Rethinking the structures for children's television content in the 2020s

Denmark has a long tradition of producing television in a wide variety of genres for children (Christensen, 2013), and this “special audience” is regarded as particular and important in the public service television context (Buckingham, 2005; Potter & Steemers, 2021). Children's fiction is popular content, but it is expensive to produce, making it vulnerable in times of political, platform, and production transition (Potter & Steemers, 2017). This is particularly the case for live action fiction, which has been under pressure in many public service contexts since the 2010s. Animated children's content can more easily be dubbed, and can thus more easily cross borders (e.g., Potter, 2018b, 2020). Moreover, it can be difficult to make live action

fiction which appeals to a wide age span, since there are big differences, for example, between preschoolers and tweens, both in terms of basic cognitive competencies and main interests.

While the national broadcasting landscape has seen still more competition in content for children and young audiences, the Danish broadcasters have become increasingly specialised in their offers to the youngest viewers. In 2020, DR redefined their target audience for the two channels DR Ramasjang and DR Ultra: DR Ramasjang would now be for 4–8-year-olds (rather than 3–6-year-olds), while DR Ultra would extend its age range and offer content for 9–14-year-olds. Thereby, DR actively started reaching out to the teenage segment which had basically been ignored for many years, with Ultra previously defining its audiences as 7–12-year-olds. This change was accompanied by the launch of a new Minisjang universe, targeting 1–3-year-olds, based on acknowledging that even “viewers in diapers” were watching screens, and thus public service broadcasters ought to also produce quality content for them (Christensen, 2020).

For many years, DR was the only broadcaster focusing on children in the Danish national arena, with the one possible competitor, TV 2, producing only the occasional advent calendar for family audiences, but otherwise not trying to compete for the youngest viewers. This changed in the 2020s. TV 2 then launched the children’s universe Oiii for their TV 2 Play platform in 2020, focusing on 3–9-year-old children, with international programmes as well as national originals. As argued by the head of content for Oiii, Kirstine Vinderskov, an important ambition for Oiii is to offer content that Danish children can mirror themselves in, meaning content which is recognisable and close to their everyday life (as cited in TV 2, 2021). Part of doing this is moving into live action fiction in combination with having the rights for popular animated brands such as *Gurli Gris* [*Peppa Pig*], *Barbapapa*, or *Alfons Åberg*.

The main reason for the TV 2 move into children’s content was acknowledging that this content is needed in an on-demand universe where broadcasters and streaming services need to offer content for all members of a family. As stated by the head of content for TV 2 Play, Sune Roland, TV 2 Play should offer content for *all* Danes, including children (as cited in TV 2, 2021). However, another reason for moving into children’s content is the fact that children and young audiences are the adult audiences of the future. Strong children’s content can be a way to attract the audience of tomorrow, teach children to expect good content from certain platforms, and hopefully even build some sense of loyalty to certain broadcasters or brands. With new players offering a huge catalogue of children’s content for Danish subscribers – such as Disney+ from September 2020 – the competition has become fierce in this market, and public service television commissioners are trying to navigate and content calibrate accordingly, possibly rethinking children as audience members in this process (see Christensen, Chapter 2 in this volume).

Part of the challenge of reaching young audiences is that they don't necessarily watch what their parents or television commissioners and producers would like them to watch. There's a lot of viewing "up the age range" (Brown, 2014: 163; see also Jensen & Mitric, Chapter 8 in this volume), with children watching content intended for much older viewers. Since many Danish children now have their own smartphones from around the age of eight or nine, a substantial amount of their viewing time is spent on their private screens rather than as shared family viewing (Jensen et al., 2021). This is particularly the case in the realm of fiction. This development led DR to focus more on producing live action children's fiction during the late 2010s. As an example, DR Ultra offered 257 episodes of scripted fiction in 2020, compared with 23 episodes in 2015 (DR pitch day for producers of children's content, 2020).

This new focus on fiction led to the creation of the popular *Klassen* [*The Class*] for DR Ultra, which actively involved children during the making of the series (Redvall & Christensen, 2021), as well as a wide range of other Ultra productions. But the focus on live action fiction also led to producing fictional content for the even younger Ramasjang audiences. This is the focus of this chapter: analysing how Ramasjang approached the making of one of these series – *Oda Upside Down*. The chapter identifies central notions among commissioners attached to making children's content within the Ramasjang framework since the late 2010s, such as working with talent development, creating affordable volume fiction, and developing portable brand characters.

Children's fiction as talent development

According to Pelle Møller, head of content for DR Ramasjang, one of his main missions when hired in 2015 was to develop more live action fiction for the Ramasjang brand. DR had a clear idea that this was needed in the Ramasjang universe; the question was, however, where to find strong writers for this kind of content. Møller argued that it can be hard finding talent with an ambition to work in children's fiction, since this content has traditionally been regarded as less prestigious and artistic than working with, for instance, prime time drama. As a result, writers working with children's content often quickly move to other more prestigious formats and genres, making it hard to build on the experiences from one production to the next and creating a strong and sustainable production environment for children's content, according to Møller.

There is also an economic side to the scarcity of writers for children's content. As addressed in the next section, children's drama has remarkably lower budgets than television fiction for adults, meaning that the pay is generally lower. Talent can be afraid of getting pigeonholed in what is regarded as a less prestigious form of content, with, for instance, screenwriters fearing that

certain credits can make commissioners regard them as writers for children's programming only, making it hard to move on if you write children's content for too long (see, e.g., B. Johnson & Peirse, 2021 for a discussion of this in relation to issues of gender). Where people train for working in the film and television industries also matters in terms of generating an interest in working with particular kinds of content. The traditional film schools have historically not prioritised children's content, even though, in the Danish context, 25 per cent of the national film funding has in fact been earmarked for the production of children's films since 1982, and children are also an important part of the public service remit (Redvall, 2021).

Film education and talent training is an obvious place to try to change mindsets and impact the perceptions of children's content among upcoming talent before they even start their professional careers. As discussed in the scholarly literature on educating filmmakers, where people train and what they are taught matter for how they become “a particular *kind* of filmmaker, where ‘kind’ encompasses skills, as well as narrative and aesthetic priorities, preferred modes of practice, and understandings of what the ideal roles and *contributions* of film would be [emphasis added]” (Hjort, 2013b: 1). And there are many discussions of how particular structures of such “sites of becoming” can have great impact, not least in small film and television industries (see, e.g., Petrie, 2010 or Petrie & Stoneman, 2014 for a discussion of the UK; and Hjort, 2013a, 2013b for a global perspective).

In Danish prime time drama, the so-called TV-term – where the DR drama department ventured into a collaboration with the National Film School of Denmark to help train talent to be showrunners and episode writers of long-running high-end drama series – is an excellent example of a broadcaster taking an active part in ensuring the emergence of a special kind of writers. During the TV-term, students of screenwriting, production, and production design spent half a year developing a potential television series for DR, helping to create interest in writing serial drama among screenwriters while still at film school and giving DR an opportunity to meet strong talent at an early point in their career and influence their direction and career choices (Redvall, 2015).

The making of *Oda* points to a similar – although small-scale – attempt to interest new talent in writing for children and helping them develop original ideas. Specifically, *Oda* grew out of a series of workshops about making fiction for young children, organised by Pelle Møller and DR Ramasjang in collaboration with a production company in 2017. The DR Ramasjang universe was presented to participants, but writers were encouraged to develop all kinds of ideas and were told they would own the intellectual property rights for anything that might come out of the process. In the interview, Møller argued that a main mission was to identify talented writers and directors with an interest in writing for children and strengthen the children's writing and producing community.

Oda emerged from this initiative, based on an original idea by Ida Mule Scott, developed and co-written by her and Iben Albinus Sabroe in collaboration with director Oliver Ussing. According to Scott and Sabroe, they had just finished a screenwriting programme at the University of Southern Denmark with little specific teaching on children's content. Having small children of their own, however, they were naturally interested in telling stories to children. In addition, they found children's content to be suitable for developing what researchers of children's fiction define as a double or "dual address" (Brown, 2017: 21) – that is, creating content which is engaging and entertaining for children as well as adults. In the case of *Oda*, the main character turns the world "upside down", inviting children as well as adults to question classic definitions of "the right way" to do things and be more imaginative and playful in their approach to life.

According to Møller, the workshop leading up to the production was made possible by a special allowance for more Danish fiction. As limited budgets are often an issue when working with children's fiction, it was crucial for Møller to have an early dialogue with talent about what is possible, or not, in a DR Ramasjang production framework. In the case of *Oda*, this meant having many iterations of how to make *Oda* and her magical universe come alive in an affordable way that could be sustained for many episodes and over many seasons.

Affordable fiction and creative constraints

During the interviews with Pelle Møller and Niels Lindberg about DR Ramasjang, they often referred to insights coming from the DR media researchers about preferences or feedback from children as well as parents. The commissioning decisions are clearly marked by continuous input from the target audience and their rapidly changing preferences, interests, and media use. This is common in the world of television, and points to a high degree of professionalisation of the DR children's universe (Ramasjang launched in 2009, as the first specialised children's niche channel from DR).

Among many other things, DR media researchers have researched "the ingredients of a streaming hit" for children, which – besides general advice on creating strong drama, such as working with both identification and fascination or having a strong cast – pointed to the importance of having many episodes (Redvall & Christensen, 2021: 169–170). Children are accustomed to an abundance of content on other platforms, and they often follow certain YouTubers or TikTokers closely on a regular basis. In a similar vein, children appreciate having many episodes of a series to engage with. As Lindberg explained, having several episodes also makes it easier to build a brand, resulting in the DR channels Ramasjang and Ultra increasing focus on serialised content with more and shorter episodes, preferably also additional material

to accompany the series (such as music videos or different forms of social media challenges). Lindberg denoted this “volume fiction” [volumenfiktion]. As it is expensive to produce fiction, having a high-volume demands finding a productional set-up where one can make affordable fiction (similar to the set-up of *The Class*), for example, using few locations, a limited cast, and a simple episode structure (Redvall & Christensen, 2021).

The demand for serialised, affordable volume fiction has several constraints attached to it that the team developing an idea for a new Ramasjang series had to deal with: 1) finding an intriguing and yet affordable and practical arena, 2) creating a cast with multi-season potential, and 3) working with certain storytelling structures and visual repetition. From the outset, writing fiction for children is accompanied by several quite specific demands in terms of what is regarded as appropriate content for the target audience at a public service children’s channel (which, at the time of creating *Oda*, targeted 3–6-year-olds). While there is much to analyse in this regard, the focus here is on the logistical and practical demands and creative implications related to the final choices of arena, cast, and storytelling structure. *Oda* went through several iterations. Notes from the talent workshops by Ida Mule Scott point to how there was quite concrete advice in terms of what signified good Ramasjang fiction, such as aiming for the following:

- several seasons
- low-budget concepts (e.g., few locations)
- creating a new character or a whole new universe
- facilitating user involvement
- having possibilities for learning outcomes
- possibly mixing fantasy or magic and realism
- always remembering that the series is for small children and the Ramasjang motto that one hour of watching Ramasjang should lead to 100 hours of play in the real world

(translated and condensed based on workshop notes from Scott)

The main idea behind *Oda* was to create a character that could be like Pippi Longstocking as a grownup, fighting for children’s rights and the importance of being playful and imaginative. According to Møller, this premise fit the Ramasjang notions of mixing fantasy or magic and realism and encouraging play. Early pitch documents open with questions of whether children’s lives of today are being too controlled, focusing on how all activities should be related to certain learning outcomes, even in kindergarten. In the pitch documents, the writers argue that free play and experimenting is under pressure, which is why there is a need for a character such as Oda who tries to liberate children from being small “control freaks” in an everyday life marked by the busy and all-efficient agendas of adults. The premise for the series asks whether “free childhoods” are endangered today and wants to explore this in episodes

where Oda helps challenge boring notions of, for instance, having to draw things in a correct manner (synopsis and short bibles by Scott & Sabroe).

In the first episode of *Oda*, Oda helps the boy Karl protect his right to paint a whale exactly the way he wants to. In later episodes, Oda helps children challenge widespread parenting principles like learning to sit still and be quiet, not making a mess, or sewing, building, and cooking traditional rather than non-traditional things (see Figure 4.1).

FIGURE 4.1 Screenshot from *Oda Upside Down*



Comments: In the first episode of *Oda Upside Down*, “Karl maler” [“Karl paints”], Oda helps the boy Karl paint a whale exactly the way he wants to. In later episodes, she helps children challenge other widespread parenting principles.

Source: DRTV, 2023

While the main character and premise for the series remain the same in the different versions of the short bible for the series, many things changed while screenwriters Scott and Sabroe developed the final concept for *Oda* in dialogue with Pelle Møller from DR, producer Meta Louise Foldager Sørensen from SAM Productions, and director Oliver Ussing. As for the main arena of the story, the first idea was to have a town called Regelsted [Rulestown] where the mayor at the town hall is stealing people’s imaginations. Some of the notes on this idea were that the town hall setting didn’t really have anything to do with children. It was an expensive set-up with several city locations. And then there was the fact that Oda had a traveling ice cream parlour in the early versions: probably a lot of fun, but a potential production nightmare – besides the fact that ice cream melts, making it difficult to work with for continuity reasons, as Scott and Sabroe explained.

Production-related comments such as these led to rethinking the arena, based on an idea from Møller to make the main setting a kindergarten. Kindergartens – and private homes – are where children frequently encounter

rules and conflicts about what they can do and how to do it in their everyday lives. This choice of setting led to the villain becoming the kindergarten teacher, Balder, who has strict ideas about what children should and shouldn't do and how they should spend their time. For authors Scott and Sabroe, this was an inspiring setting that they both knew from having children and an arena with the potential of encompassing different conflicts as well as activities. For the production, this meant zooming in on kindergarten interiors, individual (but very similar) homes of children living in a suburban environment, and the colourful home of Oda, who went from living in a small ice cream truck to owning an orange bubble where everything is upside down and with space for having children come over and visit. The three main locations thus became centred on reusable interiors rather than working with a whole city and substantial exterior shooting.

Meanwhile, Oda went from being a magical ice cream seller to having a magical zapper that can make parents want to play and be more fun. The magical element in the story had caused quite some headaches in early pitches; Oda is a superhero with magical powers, but how would she execute her magic and what does magic look like – on a reasonable budget? Part of finding the solution was talking with producer Meta Louise Foldager Sørensen about keeping it simple, like Astrid Lindgren's character Karlsson på taket [Karlsson on the roof], who can fly without anyone really explaining why. Magic should be naturally embedded, but not necessarily explained. Children accept this kind of premise, and the solution ended up being that Oda has a magical zapper – where this comes from or how she got it doesn't matter. What matters is the effect it has in making the world a more fun and imaginative place, according to Scott and Sabroe.

In terms of the cast, it was quickly decided that Oda should be the main character for all seasons while the children and adults around her change. This was partly because it is hard to shoot several seasons with children, since they grow up. Either a series evolves and grows up *with* its characters (like the Harry Potter franchise) or finds a set-up where one can replace the children (like the set-up in *The Class*, starting with new pupils in the fictional sixth grade of the series for every season). Scott and Sabroe wanted to stay in the kindergarten universe and thus decided to have new children around Oda for the different seasons. They also decided to make these children and their families diverse, with different family constellations in terms of ethnicity and gender. According to Scott, Sabroe, and Møller, this was not because of any diversity concerns from DR, but rather a decision of the writers supported by the producer.

As for the storytelling, the decision was to combine episodic and serial storytelling, meaning that Oda has a case to “solve” for a child in each episode, but there is also an overall arc for the season, with Oda having to defeat Balder the kindergarten teacher as the ever more frustrated villain. This

represents a break with most Ramasjang series, where episodes can be seen independently. In terms of storytelling, there is a recurring structure for each episode of *Oda*, starting at the kindergarten, where a child is picked up by their parent before going home, finding the parental take on things boring, and then looking up Oda for assistance. The opening credit sequence (with a popular theme song) is the same for each episode, as is a short midpoint song about how no one should steal a child's imagination. These elements are important for keeping the costs of episodes down and catering to children aged 3–6 years old who appreciate repetitions, not least with music.

The development process illustrates how all ideas for film and television naturally go through many stages and iterations, and how many of these are linked to specific budgetary constraints where writers have to find affordable ways in which to tell what they would like to tell without changing the core idea. All in all, the choices made during writing and development turned the original idea for *Oda* into a concept that was affordable to produce. Finally, Ramasjang commissioned a first season and later two more, adding up to 30 episodes.

Scott and Sabroe both found the process constructive and appreciated the input from the collaborators along the way. They argued that even though there were numerous constraints for the process, they didn't feel limited from the outset. Møller expressed that part of the reason for this may be that the workshops focused on exploring the original ideas of new talent wanting to write for children and then trying to shape them into a fitting Ramasjang concept in a collaborative process. Møller said that, as a commissioner, he liked the original *Oda* idea and wanted it to find the right Ramasjang format. The main ingredient was there from the very start, namely a potential “portable” main character that could be a brand character, able to be used beyond the specific series in the Ramasjang universe.

Portable brand characters and creating the Ramasjang Universe

An important part of the work as head of content for Ramasjang during 2015–2019 was acting as a brand manager. Particularly, that meant developing and nurturing the Ramasjang island, a fictional country which is home to all the characters in the Ramasjang universe (established in 2009). Most of the Ramasjang original Danish content involves these characters, who represent different aspects of children's lives and offer points of identification (see Figure 4.2).

FIGURE 4.2 Ramasjang characters from the content carousel



Comments: On the Ramasjang website, pictures of main characters are used as the entry point for many kinds of content, both foreign or animated content and original Ramasjang content. On the far far right is *Oda* as part of the Ramasjang content carousel on the Ramasjang website.

Source: DRTV, 2021

At the DR pitch day for independent producers in 2020, Ramasjang presented their target audience (now 4–8-year-olds) as seeing the whole world as an invitation to play. The presentation explained how children don’t distinguish clearly between fantasy and reality: What they see on screen has a character of “reality, just in a different place”, and they find their own imaginative and wondrous logic in things. The intended target audience was presented as having extensive knowledge of the Ramasjang country and its characters:

Each child has his or her own favourite character and the thought that the Ramasjang country might exist in reality fascinates particularly the younger part of the target audience. (Condensation and translation based on DR Ramasjang slides, DR pitch day for independent producers)

Møller recognised *Oda* as an intriguing addition to the existing Ramasjang characters. Most of the existing characters focused on teaching something specific in a fun way – for example, a language, numbers, or baking – and they were all quite straightforward in their approach. The idea of having a character who can turn things upside down was fascinating, not least from a visual perspective. Møller argued that Ramasjang is about making something crazy and quirky: Children should learn something, but in a different way.

Both Møller and his commissioning successor Lindberg compared the Ramasjang island and its fictional characters to the Marvel cinematic universe and to having a group of superheroes such as The Avengers. According to Lindberg, part of the Ramasjang strategy moving forward is to combine some of these characters in different storylines, as children like to see what happens when they interact. However, according to Møller, this requires a strong sense of the core idea of the Ramasjang universe and its characters.

As illustrated by the notes from screenwriter Ida Mule Scott from the DR talent workshop for writing children’s content, workshop participants were encouraged to think about potential new characters for the Ramasjang brand. However, Møller explained in his interview that this was not a strict requirement, and there were other paths to pursue (e.g., based on input from a DR media research analysis on the main interests of children in the target

audience, which are also present in Scott's workshop notes). Developing particular traits or properties is always important when trying to create engaging characters (Smith, 2022). However, developing a series with what film and media scholars discuss as cross-media characters (Freeman, 2015), or portable characters (Smith, 2021), can be regarded as a great advantage in many contexts, since it potentially expands the fictional universe in different ways. As discussed by Derek Johnson (2008), most successful franchises build on strong characters, some having "trademarked, corporate-owned characters" that can be played by different actors over time, since the fictional franchise character is more important than the star.

The media landscape of the 2020s has been marked by popular character-based franchises (such as the many Marvel and Star Wars productions for both film and television), but also by examples of engaging characters moving between commercials and series (such as Ted Lasso) as well as characters getting spin-off series. Most often, portable characters have certain easily identifiable visual or character traits with some sort of cross-media appeal. In the case of Oda, the colourful universe, her eye-catching hairstyle, her backwards clothing, and her zipper make her easily recognisable, and one can imagine many "upside-down" scenarios with her, as television programming or as other real-life events. Moreover, this character's recognisability makes it easier to change the character actor if needed, since the most important aspect of Oda is the core and iconic identity of the character rather than the individual actor embodying her. In *Oda* there ended up being a new main actor for season 2 and season 3, which wasn't regarded as a major challenge from the Ramasjang perspective.

According to Møller, a criterion of success for any Ramasjang character is to be part of the summer circus live shows, where the actress Coco Hjørdemaal (who plays Oda in season 2 and 3) got to participate as Oda for the first time in 2021 (with delay because of the Covid-19 pandemic). The live events of the Ramasjang universe are considered an important part of the brand, and having characters that work on screen as well as off screen is thus a gift. Møller also argues that the live events are a productive way for commissioners to meet the audience and see how they react to content and characters. When *Oda* premiered, it was thus inspiring for him to see images on social media of how children watched the series upside down in their homes. However, it is even better to see how children respond to and engage with Ramasjang characters in real life settings, also as a source of inspiration for new productions and commissioning strategies, according to Møller.

In this way, *Oda*'s premise of defending children's right to be imaginative and playful; the final choice of the kindergarten arena, the cast, and the storytelling structure; and the character of Oda were all a good match with the Ramasjang brand. The series did not have high viewing figures when premiering, but all three seasons are still being watched online, and Oda is

still an integrated part of the Ramasjang character gallery. *Oda* appealed to 3–6-year-olds, but also to slightly older children who could, for instance, be spotted dressed up as Oda in the streets or at DR events, Scott and Sabroe pointed out in their interview. The series stopped after three seasons and has travelled outside of the Nordics following its Danish run, being shown in a dubbed version on the French pay television channel Piwi+ (owned by the Canal+ Group) (e-mail correspondence with Sørensen). It is rare for live action series targeting pre-schoolers to travel, and it would be interesting to know how French children and parents responded to the series, but this is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Concluding remarks

The case study of *Oda* points to how making television fiction for the youngest viewers at DR Ramasjang is marked by several specific ideas about what signifies the Ramasjang brand and core audience. Several of these ideas are based on findings of media scholars who have researched DR and who continuously try to track the interests and media use of the young audiences across genres and platforms. The idea of a best practice for the brand and new commissions are clearly communicated at industry events, such as the annual pitching days for independent producers. At those events, commissioners at the DR children's brands now ask for certain ideas or formats based on the DR analysis of what is needed to appeal to children today (DR pitch day for producers of children's content, 2019, 2020, 2021). These content ideas have certain productional notions and constraints attached. As an example, having many episodes and seasons means working with affordable volume fiction, and keeping the Ramasjang island relevant and interesting involves working with portable brand characters who can play active parts outside the series themselves. DR wants to satisfy the appetite for Danish live action fiction among the target audience, but this involves finding strategies for producing many hours of content on limited budgets, compared with the money being spent on fiction for an adult audience.

The *Oda* case study also illustrates how DR tries to be actively involved in encouraging new talent to take an interest in children's fiction. The workshop that led to the making of *Oda* is one example of this, and Lindberg explained in his interview that, in the 2020s, Ramasjang has been collaborating with the state-funded film workshops [filmværkstederne] as well as the newly established Cross-Media School for Children's Fiction [Manuskriptskolen for børnefiktion] to meet new talent and try to orient them towards writing and producing content for DR. Another initiative has been trying to teach DR in-house talent working with entertainment and factual content for children and young audiences at DR B&U (DR/Children and Young Audiences) to possibly move into writing fiction based on their intimate knowledge of the target audience. Observation studies at a workshop on dramaturgy for

DR B&U in Aarhus in 2020 pointed to interesting perspectives in trying to reorient talent with an interest in children to work with fiction rather than the more traditional approach of trying to make fiction writers take an interest in telling stories for children. According to Møller, another strength of trying to build upon in-house talent in DR B&U is to hopefully create a strong production environment with talent who stays on from one production to the next, ensuring the continuity and knowledge-sharing in children's fiction that he considers missing, and which he wanted to encourage with the workshop that led to *Oda* in 2017.

Screenwriters Scott and Sabroe enjoyed creating and writing *Oda*, and they described how they found the process of developing and making the series constructive, not least since they managed to incorporate a clear political agenda of criticising the performance society where children should learn to be efficient and plan for their careers already in kindergarten, (rather than “wasting” their time on playing and having fun) in an entertaining universe for 3–6-year-olds and their parents. They said they might go back to writing for young children, but as noted by both the DR commissioners and media scholars (such as B. Johnson & Peirse, 2021), there is traditionally more prestige and better pay in other genres and formats, as Scott and Sabroe also discussed.

Since the making of *Oda*, DR has ventured into producing still more fiction for children, and they plan to continue in the years to come, Lindberg said. This makes it even more relevant to explore the guiding commissioning ideas as well as the screenwriting and productional practices behind the making of new fictional content for younger audiences, since the institutional framework naturally influences what moves into production and shapes the final result. As an example, in the late 1990s and 2000s, when DR decided to prioritise the one-hour drama series for mainstream audiences on Sunday nights at 20:00, this led to the emergence of strong content in this particular genre and timeslot, but at the expense of other genres and more experimental or niche productions with narrower appeal. The *Oda* case illustrates how the making of current Danish public service television children's content is marked by a similar interplay of different notions of quality, relevance, and best practice among different players. This influences what is available for Danish children on the national screens, and this also has an impact on which Nordic co-productions and collaborations DR decides to pursue. It is important to continuously track and analyse the approach to making content targeting young audiences to achieve a nuanced understanding of the constant negotiations and productive, and potentially unproductive, consequences of different constraints in the current landscape for making television fiction for the youngest viewers. Hopefully, the findings of this chapter offer interesting points – and points of comparison – regarding the writing and production of publicly funded, serial live action fiction for children in other national contexts or production frameworks.

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Public service youth content on social media platforms

Reaching youth through YouTube

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses public service content on third-party platforms and, more specifically, how legacy media organisations adapt to social media logic when creating content for youth. It builds on a production study of *NRK 4ETG* – the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation’s (NRK) YouTube programme – using elite interviews and document analysis as main methods. The chapter answers two research questions: First, what strategic function and rationale inform the programme and how does it fit NRK’s overall ambition to serve youth with public service content? Second, what industry logic guides the programme’s production and how is this logic different from the media logic guiding traditional youth television? The chapter contributes to existing scholarship by providing empirical evidence of producers’ self-perception concerning the creation of YouTube content within a public service context and argues that these programmes – while overtly differentiated from traditional public service offerings – serve important strategic functions by engaging young audiences and new content creators, both of which will be essential to public service media in the future. Challenges remain, however, primarily regarding how to expand public service value in new digital settings.

KEYWORDS: NRK, public service media, social media entertainment, youth content, YouTube

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Introduction

A central task for all public service media is to engage young audiences and ensure the relevance of their content for future generations. Yet, it is a widely held concern that youth tend to migrate from traditional radio and television to social and global media platforms (EBU, 2021; Ofcom, 2021; Strømmen, 2022). This “youth challenge” (Andersen & Sundet, 2019), or “lost generation” issue (Lowe & Maijanen, 2019), has compelled public service media institutions to regularly describe their re-engagement with youth as core to their future legitimacy and existence. More generally, media executives tend to pay close attention to young people’s preferences and behaviours because they indicate future consumption patterns (Sundet & Lüders, 2022). According to Woods (2016), youth programming represents a nexus of the broadcasters’ responses to a changing television landscape.

In this chapter, I explore the attempts by public service media to develop a programme for a young audience from production and media policy perspectives. More specifically, I analyse public service youth content created for third-party platforms, departing from a case study of the Norwegian public service broadcaster, NRK, and its YouTube programme, *NRK 4ETG*. There is a growing corpus of literature on public service drama made for youth, teens, and tweens (see, e.g., Andersen & Sundet, 2019; Krüger & Rustad, 2019; Lindtner & Dahl, 2019; Redvall & Christensen, 2021; Sundet, 2020, 2021b; Woods, 2016), but there are fewer studies addressing public service teen content made for social media (see, however, Boyle, 2018; Enli, 2008; Moe, 2013; van Dijck & Poell, 2015). Such studies are nevertheless essential, as they uncover production models that differ from models commonly used in television drama and also highlight the new skills demanded of the talents and professionals working on social media productions (Boyle, 2018). Moreover, studies of teen content produced for social media are likely to spur media policy debates (Michalis, 2021) about whether public service institutions even *should* be on third-party platforms and, if so, *how* to best be there. As such, they tap into broader debates about the role of public service media in Western society today.

Two research questions guide this chapter: First, what strategic function and rationale underline *4ETG* and how does the programme fit NRK’s overall ambition to serve youth with public service content? Second, what industry logic guides the programme’s production, and how is this logic different from the media logic guiding traditional youth television? The analysis relates to the overall theme of this volume by engaging with youth media produced by a public service institution in terms of how global media platforms form and frame online youth content. In terms of theory, this chapter combines perspectives from production studies and media policy studies, including insights from studies of public service youth content (Andersen, 2019; Lury, 2001; Redvall & Christensen, 2021; Sundet, 2020, 2021b; Woods, 2016) and

platforms and social media logic (Abidin, 2018; Bishop, 2018; Boyle, 2018; Poell et al., 2022; van Dijck & Poell, 2013, 2015). Furthermore, I discuss how legacy media organisations translate and incorporate social media logic when creating youth content and how these actions may impact policy debates about public service media.

NRK reflects the specificity of the Nordic context for public service media, characterised by a broad remit, solid public funding, and an ideal of universality in access and content. These organisations typically occupy central cultural positions and are among the few public service media which continue to avoid advertising (Van den Bulck & Raats, 2018). Many have historically been allowed to expand and explore “new media” services (Donders & Moe, 2011), and some have even been assigned the role of “digital locomotive” by national policymakers (Syvertsen et al., 2014: 77; see also Bruun, 2019). While the analysis of NRK can therefore not be considered representative of public service media in general, it offers vital insights into a youth production created by an institution which is allowed to test new ways of reaching young people, and the debates and dilemmas that have arisen as a result.

Methodologically, this chapter offers a production study of *4ETG*, a programme produced in-house as a YouTube comedy programme following a social media logic and aesthetic, and made available on NRK’s TV Player to allow for more traditional viewing modes. The data stem from elite interviews with *4ETG* team members and document analysis of vital institutional and policy texts expressing NRK’s mission and strategies. Both methods are frequently used and combined in production studies (Paterson et al., 2016a; McDonald, 2021) and media policy studies (Van den Bulck et al., 2019), including production studies of public service media. The chapter contributes to the field by providing empirical evidence of producers’ self-perceptions concerning the creation of YouTube content and their conflicted relationship with the public service remit and broadcast practices. Furthermore, I argue that such productions – despite differentiating from traditional public service offerings – serve strategic functions by engaging young audiences *and* new content creators, both of which are essential to public service media in the future. Challenges remain, however, including how to expand public service value in new digital settings driven by different media logic.

Public service, youth content, and social media logic

Previous studies document well the challenge faced by public service media in attracting, engaging, and serving young audiences (Andersen & Sundet, 2019; Boyle, 2018; Davison et al., 2020; Lowe & Maijanen, 2019; Sundet, 2020; van Dijck & Poell, 2015; Woods, 2016). Relatedly, some television

scholars use the term “youthification” (Hagedoorn et al., 2021) to describe the constant need for television to renew itself toward these ends. The term has a double meaning, referring, on the one hand, to the *strategic* focus which television executives bring to the production of youth content in the interests of answering the “youth challenge”, and on the other, to the *conceptual* focus on making sense of television as a perpetually changing medium which must constantly “youthify” itself to stay relevant (Sundet, 2021b: 146). These aspects interlink, so that youth productions serve to strategically attract young audiences and explore innovative ways of telling stories. For instance, television productions aimed at younger audiences tend to involve new media platforms, publishing models, and storytelling techniques, reflecting the industry perception that digital and social media serve relatively tech-savvy young people. The quest for innovation and “newness”, of course, often coincides with the need for cost efficiency, meaning that youth productions branded as innovative are usually produced on a small budget by small production teams (Sundet, 2021b; see also Woods, 2016). Many of these youth productions further call for a unique professional skill set, meaning they require different types of talent (Boyle, 2018). While talent can be bought, borrowed (through freelancing), or cultivated from within, it is nevertheless often difficult to come by, perhaps especially in the case of television-ready talent *with* social media skills – a career (or single video) on social media may be both easier to achieve and financially more lucrative than traditional television work (Boyle, 2018: 6, 17).

When public service media organisations expand their content into social media, they must incorporate the industry logic of social media platforms, which differs significantly from traditional broadcasting. A useful term in this context is social media logic, put forward by van Dijck and Poell (2013: 3) to describe the strategies, mechanisms, and economics underpinning social media platforms. The term relies on Altheide and Snow’s (1979) concept of media logic, a set of principles informed by common-sense rationality cultivated in and by media institutions which penetrates the public domain and dominates organising structures. Relatedly, social media logic refers to the processes, principles, and practices through which platforms process information, news, and communication, and, in turn, channel social traffic (van Dijck & Poell, 2013: 5). van Dijck and Poell formulated four grounding principles of social media logic – programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datification – as critical to understanding how social interaction is mediated in our networked society. Social media logic, they claimed, has gradually been entangled with mass media logic, for example, in the way in which social media logic complements mass media logic and enhances its norms and tactics. Hence, while mass media logic and social media logic are inherently different, they are often mutually reinforcing (van Dijck & Poell, 2013: 3).

Other social media scholars have identified similar reinforcing effects between legacy media and social media. Discussing the phenomenon of online celebrities, Abidin (2018: 37) observed that an increasing number of Internet celebrity formats “derive from, overlap with, and display spillover effects with other media industries in society”, and that this proves that the attention economy on digital spaces is “simultaneously capitalising on and being cannibalised by legacy media, as both industries compete and cooperate for a digital audience”. A helpful concept in this regard is “lending fame”, which Abidin (2018: 60) used to describe the tendency wherein legacy media invite or cast already-famous Internet celebrities, exploiting their fame to profit from their “Internet-native audience” and appeal to the youth market. Following this line of argument, we can also expect public service media to lend fame by recruiting online personas and content creators to work on youth productions.

While all four of the social media principles defined by van Dijck and Poell (2013) are relevant to content creators, Burgess (2021: 22–23) claimed that datafication – the “extraction and collection of digital traces of cultural practices and social interactions so that they can be sorted, aggregated, analysed, and deployed for strategic purposes” – is the most important of them. Datafication has the power to “make or break” the careers of content creators, as well as shape what counts as value and how value is measured (Burgess, 2021: 23). Relatedly, other scholars have addressed how data and metrics shape the activities of television companies and content creators alike, and how the *perception* of data, platform features, and algorithms shapes actions as well. Drawing on the work of Bucher (2017), Bishop (2018) examined YouTube’s algorithms and their impact upon content creators in terms of both what the algorithms are doing and what content creators *think* the algorithms are doing. In a later study, Bishop (2019) introduced the term “algorithmic gossip” to describe the public discourse about the YouTube algorithm and how such gossip shapes content creator practices. In turn, we also expect online content creators within public service media organisations to be affected by both the perceived and actual impact of algorithms.

Social media logic affects all legacy media organisations that expand onto social media platforms. Still, it has distinct consequences for the public service media in particular because of its remit and obligation to culture, society, and democracy. While some scholars stress the need for public service media to expand and evolve in this way, others are more sceptical, claiming that its presence on third-party platforms raises serious dilemmas regarding ownership, trust, and control (Ihlebak & Sundet, 2021). According to van Dijck and Poell (2015: 157), public service media organisations must transfer and translate their mission, values, and “publicness” beyond traditional broadcasting – that is, *outside* the designated space of public television. Many such institutions, they argued, have historically played a critical societal role in

promoting and facilitating value outside this space and their public service programmes (van Dijck & Poell, 2015: 160; see also Donders & Moe, 2011). van Dijck and Poell (2015: 151) have pointed to the alternative of *not* expanding, which risks not only the engagement of a younger audience but also the interest of younger content creators, “many of whom are attracted by the innovative potential of multiplatform production and distribution”. The trick, they claimed, is to manage expansion without “compromising public value” (van Dijck & Poell, 2015: 148).

Making a similar argument in the context of the British public service media, Boyle (2018) emphasised the importance of developing and nurturing talent in a multiplatform environment. The television industry has always been “talent hungry” (Boyle, 2018: 140), but new formats and social media platforms demand new skills and practices while offering alternative pathways into the industry. New formats might even work as a proving ground for fresh voices and media “personalities” and “profiles”; while some talents settle in for good on YouTube, others see it as a “starting platform that might just lead to television” (Boyle, 2018: 152–153). Engaging young people on YouTube might therefore be beneficial to public service media companies not only for attracting and keeping young *viewers*, but also for attracting young content *creators*.

Case and method

This chapter presents a production study of *4ETG* (started in 2018, ended in 2023), NRK’s profile-based online youth universe. The programme’s central platform is YouTube, where *4ETG* typically posts two weekly videos, often involving other YouTubers, comedians, or humourists as guests. *4ETG* also hosts Instagram and TikTok accounts through which the programme team promotes videos, communicates with followers and fans, and offers peeks behind the scenes. Since 2019, the programme has been available on NRK’s TV Player, where it is described as a “humour collective where everything is allowed”. The *4ETG* team frequently contributes to other NRK productions and has also launched several sub-series, including *4ETG dater* [*4ETG dates*] and *GYM* in 2021, a dating programme and comedy sports competition, respectively, with Norwegian content creators, humourists, and television personalities.

As a format, *4ETG* builds on NRK’s YouTube programme for children, *NRK FlippKlipp*, and many members of the *4ETG* team came over from *FlippKlipp*. Both programmes are profile driven – that is, centred around their hosts and their personas – and they recruit those profiles from among active YouTubers, which demonstrates the way NRK lends fame (Abidin, 2018) while seeking creators with social media experience (Boyle, 2018). Both programmes also frequently change their profiles, and “old” profiles often

go on to host or contribute to other radio or television shows, indicating the ability of both *FlippKlipp* and *4ETG* to contribute talent to the broader field. At the time of this study (2021), Karsten Blomvik and Annika Momrak were hosting *4ETG*.

Administratively, *4ETG* is aligned with NRK's entertainment division, not the youth division (NRK P3), even though its target audience is young people. This in-house positioning likely signals NRK's ambition for the programme to be an entertaining playground for youth and new content creators rather than a source of the "popular enlightenment" traditionally expected from NRK's children and youth divisions (see Sundet, 2020). It also signals a different "production as culture" (Meyer et al., 2009; see also Paterson et al., 2016b).

To analyse *4ETG*, I draw from elite interviews (Bruun, 2016) with industry executives and document analysis (Karppinen & Moe, 2019) of vital institutional texts. Interviewing industry elites is a valuable means of gaining in-depth insights into industry perceptions and strategies (Brinkman & Kvale, 2015). Elite informants possess expert knowledge (Van Audenhove & Donders, 2019: 170) and function as gatekeepers of information (Bruun, 2016: 132–135). Two *4ETG* team members, programme profile Annika Momrak and producer Zack Jacobsen, were interviewed. At the time of the interview, both had worked for *4ETG* for about two years and were seasoned participants in the team's tasks, practices, and decision-making processes. The interview with Momrak and Jacobsen took place in October 2021 using a semistructured interview guide with questions about the programme, work tasks and routines, production logic, and audience relations. The interview was transcribed and thematically analysed (Herzog et al., 2019), with analytical weight given to the informants' "self-reflexivity" (Caldwell, 2009). The interview was conducted in Norwegian, and all quotes have been translated to English.

I also rely on document analysis, as institutional and policy documents provide vital information on remit, strategies, and actions for publicly funded media organisations. More specifically, the document analysis relies on policy and industry texts articulating NRK's mission and strategy, including most notably NRK's article of association (NRK, 2019), corporate strategy documents (NRK, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2021), annual reports and public service accounts (NRK 2016, 2020a), and (parts of) *4ETG*'s in-house contract (NRK, 2020b). While some of these documents are publicly available and written in a standardised and corporate manner, others are internal working texts intended for the production team in question. The list of documents thus includes both publicly disclosed and fully embedded deep texts, as described by Caldwell (2009: 202). The documents were thematically analysed (Herzog et al., 2019) to identify NRK's youth strategy, contextualise interview statements, and relate the case to overall media policy debates. All quotes have been translated from Norwegian to English.

NRK's social media youth remit

To put the analysis in context, the next section provides a short description of NRK's public service remit regarding youth and third-party platforms. NRK's overall assignment is to provide the entire population access to a broad range of (public service) content, and its public service mission is formally articulated in the NRK placard [NRK plakaten] and incorporated in NRK's (2019) article of association. NRK has several obligations concerning its service to young people and its use of social media platforms. Regarding the former, NRK is obliged to prepare an overall offering relevant to all age groups and social segments, including youth (§21), as well as regular Norwegian-language programmes for young people (§22). NRK's article of association even specifically obliges NRK to develop in-house content for children and young people on the Internet (§50). Regarding the latter, NRK is obliged to strive for high quality, diversity, and innovation (§21) and to be present on (and develop services on) all important media platforms, including the Internet, to share NRK's overall programming slate as broadly as possible (§24). Consequently, both youth content and "new" media platforms are formally defined aspects of NRK's public service remit.

NRK's (2021) corporate strategy – reflecting the formal obligations and adjusting them to current trends and perceived threats to meeting the obligations – is structured around three overall strategies: "strengthening and developing the Norwegian democracy", "uniting and engaging everyone living in Norway", and "being a world-class publisher and content producer". Sub-strategies which are especially relevant here include "providing content people find, choose, and love" and "connecting with the audience, knowing Norway best, and being to everyone's benefit". Moreover, in institutional documents, NRK often stresses the importance of "serving young people", and since 2012, this has been a specific goal of NRK's content and publishing strategies (NRK, 2012, 2014; see also NRK, 2016, 2021). A focus on youth is also commonly articulated in NRK's public communication – when NRK's new director general (Vibeke Füst Haugen) was interviewed about future challenges, youth engagement featured prominently in her responses (as cited in Mangelrød, 2022).

NRK's corporate strategy also defines strategy focus areas such as being "younger and more accessible", offering "more content for youth and children", and being "best on our own platform" (NRK, 2021). The latter is a new formulation which represents a substantial shift from earlier strategies. Whereas NRK formerly endorsed the extensive expansion onto third-party platforms (Moe, 2013), the company presently stresses that these platforms only be used for the following three purposes: to promote content, communicate with followers and fans, and, importantly, "bring back" audiences to NRK's services and platforms (Lund, 2022). In part, this appears to be because NRK fears the loss of control over content that accompanies activ-

ity on third-party platforms and wonders whether it will strengthen global competitors (moving audiences away from NRK) or reduce the audience's trust (Grut, 2021). Consequently, NRK announced in 2022 a strategy to put their own platforms first for radio and podcasting, and it began to delay publishing content on Spotify to attract audiences back to NRK's platform for audio services. NRK also recently closed its Facebook news and youth sites with the following message:

NRK will publish less on social media in the future, and one of the consequences is that our P3 account will be closed. [...] You can still find us on Instagram (@nrkp3), and, of course, on P3.no and NRK.no. See you! (NRK P3, 2022)

The shift from expansion to caution regarding social media is part of larger media policy debates which characterise the global impact of these platforms as a potential threat to democracy (Ministry of Culture, 2022a, 2022b). In short, NRK appears to be in a period of transition as it explores, develops, tests, and evaluates new social media strategies.

NRK 4ETG: Strategic function and rationale

The first research question concerns the strategic function and rationale of the programme and how it fits within NRK's overall ambition to serve youth with public service content. In publicly available documents, *4ETG* is sparingly described as an example of NRK's "narrow entertainment provision" (NRK, 2018: 129) and a "shared universe providing a break for young people in their everyday life" (NRK, 2020a: 53). Similarly, in the interview, *4ETG* profile Annika Momrak characterised *4ETG* as a "humour collective and universe that exists in various places online". The production team honours an in-house contract to deliver one hundred videos a year (for 2020) on the YouTube channel as well as nrk.no and NRK TV. The contract also states the mission and target audience of *4ETG*:

The production team shall continuously develop video content and series relevant to the target group of 14–20-year-olds (with the 17-year-old as the primary segment) and meet demographics in rural and urban areas. Unique insight into topics that concern young people online and in everyday life should ensure that stories are relevant and humorous. The series will be promoted on social media, on NRK, and through the profiles' network. (NRK 2020b)

Regarding *4ETG*'s strategic value to NRK, the informants first noted that the show is essential for *reaching a target youth audience*, which is otherwise elusive, and hopefully "bringing them back" to the organisation's programming (NRK, 2021). Both informants emphasised the importance of getting to know

the audience and serving their needs and habits, and as Momrak explained, they “spend *a lot* of time thinking about what 17-year-olds are interested in”.

On the one hand, the focus on relevance echoes findings from studies of other NRK teen productions, which have emphasised that insight into young people’s everyday lives is a crucial selling point for small-budget productions in particular (Sundet, 2021a: 57–65). On the other hand, *4ETG* aspires to go even further by inviting youth to participate in an immersive and interactive online experience across social media platforms, according to producer Zack Jacobsen: “We are more deeply engaged with what 17-year-olds think is fun at this point in time and are trying to appeal to the rapidly changing trends in Internet and YouTube culture. I think few others at NRK do that”. For instance, young people are not solely addressed as the audience or social media platform followers, but also as contributors and co-owners; according to Momrak, “they are a big part of the *4ETG* universe – they get involved and feel ownership of our content”. Hence, while *4ETG* ratings are often lower than many traditional television programmes for youth, the production team redefines the measurement of success by stressing how the programme does well in cultivating a deep, engaging, and “intimate relationship” (Abidin, 2018; see also Duffy, 2017) with its core audience: Creating a deep relationship with a few hard-to-get members of the audience was perceived as more valuable than reaching a large number of people.

Both informants also stressed the need to communicate to the target audience that NRK is working for *them*, hoping in turn that this would promote loyalty and investment later in life. Again, we see the strategy of “bringing back” viewers, even if it here refers to actions for future generations, as laid out by Momrak in the interview:

4ETG is important to NRK because the target group we reach is not otherwise using NRK. They generally trust NRK and perceive NRK as a good thing but not as something serving *them*. When we meet them and their needs, they discover that “shit, this is *4ETG* and NRK”. They realise that NRK takes them, their lives, and their interests seriously. It makes them value NRK as necessary for them in later life.

Bringing-back arguments like this are widespread in the industry and are often used to legitimise new media services aimed at younger audiences. These arguments also reflect perceptions of youth as distinctly different from other audience groups, again legitimising why new strategies and services are needed (see also Sundet & Lüders, 2022).

A second strategic function of *4ETG* involves the ways in which the show explores *new ways of making content*. This is useful not only for bringing back audiences but also for testing new production models and attracting new talent. As Jacobsen explained in the interview, creating content for young audiences on YouTube is fundamentally different from producing

television programming, and other (more traditional) divisions within NRK often struggled to understand YouTube's style of production. The rough and speedy editing rhythm of YouTube, for example, fundamentally differs from the editing of traditional television programmes, according to Jacobsen:

We often feel that other people at the NRK don't understand what we are making. They hardly know what they are watching because it goes so fast. For many, watching our videos is like having a fever dream. But that's what 17-year-olds on YouTube want. I want the same myself. I don't expect YouTube to go slow.

According to the informants, *4ETG* is among the few NRK programmes intended for social media from the start (it is a native social media production) rather than initially made for radio or television and subsequently edited into social media content (as a means of promotion). Jacobsen compared *4ETG* with NRK's youth division (NRK P3): "NRK P3 produces mostly NRK-native content and edits it into [social media] content afterwards – short snippets to post online after a radio show or a television series. We create *for* YouTube".

Both informants noted that YouTube allows them to experiment and position their work outside the "safer" and more established public service media organisation. Momrak stated: "We are supposed to be the outcast of NRK, and we are supposed to push boundaries. We might even need to be more ground-breaking and get more complaints than today. I sometimes think we are too nice". As a small-budget production for YouTube, *4ETG* offers its team the space to cultivate a distinct production culture, valued by both audiences and team members precisely because it represents an alternative to the more established public broadcaster. Momrak summarised that "it doesn't look or sound like NRK, and it shouldn't. They [the young audience] are amazed: 'This is also NRK – it's cool!'" In short, for both Momrak and Jacobsen, being "different" was a selling point for the programme.

When asked about the programme's relationship to NRK's public service mission, both informants pivoted to it being the primary function of *4ETG*: engaging youth via humour and minimising the influence of any public service obligations or the need to generate "public value". "We are not expected to focus on that; we are expected to focus on making engaging content", Momrak stated, and Jacobsen agreed: "I don't go around thinking about it [the public service mission]. It's something my boss takes care of". Statements like these reflect a narrow working definition of what public service is – something established, slightly old-fashioned, unengaging, top-down, and impersonal – that is difficult to cultivate for a young digital team, even though many examples of the opposite exist (Sundet, 2020). According to both, followers and fans are sensitive to "inauthentic content" – that is, content not originated by the profiles or the *4ETG* team. Introducing issues or "value" beyond the profiles' areas of interest therefore represents

a challenge because the audience considers it fake. Similar “authenticity claims” feature prominently in studies of content creators and online celebrities, where presenting oneself as “real” is considered a key currency (Duffy, 2017; see also Abidin, 2018). While both informants acknowledged the importance of being relevant to (and engaging) young people’s lives, they mostly wanted to reach and retain this target audience, not edify or educate it. Jacobsen elaborated:

NRK gives us a lot of freedom. Most people in the building don’t understand what we are doing, but that’s only an advantage, since it allows us to keep going without much interruption and critical barriers from the house. They let us [produce our content] because they see that it works and that we reach our target audience, even though they don’t understand what we are doing. We are getting a new audience to NRK and the viewing numbers we need.

Again, the informants operated with a distinction between NRK and *4ETG*, with an us-versus-them rhetoric defined by the target audience and the use of platforms. *4ETG* is presented as a bottom-up initiative, providing an alternative culture of production.

Simply existing as a (public service) YouTube programme is fraught with challenges, the informants observed, and trust, control, and predictability are crucial aspects of success on the platform. Momrak explained: “Of course, it’s challenging being on third-party platforms. We can’t trust them. And they change all the time. A big challenge with TikTok is that we have no control”. When asked about the general criticism of NRK’s use of third-party platforms, Momrak pointed to the bringing-back strategy and the dilemma involved in communicating with an audience you do not already have:

I understand the criticism well. I also understand that NRK wants to bring the audience “home” to compete with companies like Netflix and HBO. NRK must get the audience home to succeed. But we can’t start there. Our target audience is on these platforms, and we need to be present where they are.

Momrak and Jacobsen considered it strategically preferable to use NRK’s platforms for producing and publishing content, but they are less sophisticated than YouTube and lack “critical functionalities”. Jacobsen argued that young people do not “check NRK” on a routine basis:

YouTube is well established. It’s been here so long. There are so many content creators gathered there in one place, and it’s free and easy to use. Young people have their routines for checking YouTube. In comparison, few people have routines for checking nrk.no or NRK TV. It’s very different. Most young people are on YouTube.

To summarise, *4ETG* is perceived as strategically important to NRK for at least two reasons. First, it serves a young audience which can be difficult to reach, and it reassures them that NRK, as a public service media organisation, cares about them, their interests, and their everyday life. Second, and as further discussed below, *4ETG* cultivates an alternative culture related to producing content by exploring the various forms public service media can take on social media to connect with young audiences.

NRK 4ETG: Industry logic

The second research question asks about the industry logic that guides the production of *4ETG* and how it differs from the media logic guiding the production of traditional television programming for youth. Although the informants did not refer to van Dijck and Poell's concept of social media logic as such, they operated with a notion of what makes YouTube productions different from traditional television productions in terms of rhythm, authenticity, and context.

In terms of *rhythm*, YouTube's aesthetic of speedy editing is intended to bombard the audience with new content. Both Momrak and Jacobsen considered the YouTube audience as fundamentally "unfaithful" and "roaming" – the latter term introduced by Hill (2019: 11) to capture the way in which audiences traverse the media landscape, following pathways created by the industry as well as making their own way. To retain a restless audience, the informants argued, one must not waste time: "Something needs to happen all the time; otherwise, they disappear because they have a thousand other things popping up and wanting their attention", as Momrak put it. Jacobsen agreed:

You must think fast, quickly, and efficiently. You must "catch" the viewer fast – within the first five seconds – otherwise, you lose them because it's so easy to click on a new video. We use a lot of "jump cuts", speedy editing, and quick information delivery before jumping right into the action.

Telling stories speedily was also a known strategy for manipulating the YouTube algorithm, as videos must prove that they will not lose viewers after the first sequence to remain visible. This is a clear example of the structural impact of algorithms and their influence upon creators' practices (Bishop, 2018). Jacobsen continued:

We are very keen on attracting viewers and keeping them through the videos, especially at the beginning of each video, because that's important for YouTube's algorithm. If people lose interest and "click out" during the first five seconds, it impacts how the video is "recommended" and pushed on YouTube. We carefully edit videos to suit YouTube's algorithms.

In short, knowledge of how platforms work and the logic guiding them was considered essential to any successful expansion into the social media realm. This principle evokes van Dijck and Poell's (2013) concept of datafication and the related perception that minor adjustments can "make or break" a programme's performance on the platform.

Authenticity relates to the personal approach which YouTube audiences tend to favour and informs the appearance and skill set required of profiles. Jacobsen stressed that successful *4ETG* profiles must be "personal, open and unfiltered", and, Momrak added, "authentic and original". The programme was seen to be largely defined by its profiles, and their authenticity was considered the programme's main currency. Momrak insisted: "It should be real and raw. We are often 'meta' in our videos. It's no big deal if the cameraman appears on tape; in fact, that could be a good thing. [...] It must feel genuine". Momrak added that *4ETG*'s Instagram account is crucial to providing followers and fans with a behind-the-scenes version of the programme's universe and thereby enhancing its authenticity:

Instagram is important for us. [...] On Instagram, we have a relationship with the audience every day, and they get a peek behind the scenes, which is a part of our universe. They follow the stories beyond the videos. Also, what's happening in our office is essential. Instagram makes it easy for us to have two-way communication. We can ask for feedback and responses: We can post things like, "Hey, do you have any questions we can answer in today's video?"

The programme's profiles are vital not only for producing and hosting the show but also for promoting it across social media platforms. As a result, profiles act as intermediaries between the various parts of the *4ETG* universe. The cross-platform universe created by *4ETG* resembles the storyworlds made via reality formats (Ytreberg, 2009) and transmedia storytelling (Evans, 2011); yet, the profiles serve as the critical junction points, again recalling those social media influencers and content creators who often use their online personas to create pathways between social media (see also Abidin, 2018; Cunningham & Craig, 2019). The programme's authenticity is defined not only by its profiles but also by its editors, according to Jacobsen: "Much of *4ETG*'s identity lies in how the videos are edited and who is behind it". Momrak added: "You know when Zack [Jacobsen] or Jonas [Lihaug Fredriksen] edited a video because their editing voice is different and incredibly important. It's very personal". Clearly, for both Momrak and Jacobsen, creating a viable YouTube programme means revealing and using one's personality. In this process, the profiles' brands might become stronger and more valuable than the NRK brand, moving the show even further away from the ideas of public service and public value as the result.

The focus on *context* points to how the programme relates to both the

audience *and* other YouTubers and content creators. For example, the two informants differentiated *4ETG* from traditional television programmes by describing it as a “fresh product” (Jacobsen), in that the production process is short – typically, the team develops ideas, shoots, edits, and publishes within one to two weeks – and that the episodes are part of an extensive web of other YouTube videos. This recalls van Dijck and Poell’s (2013) principle of connectivity – in this case, in terms of the larger YouTube culture. As Momrak explained, making good *4ETG* content means knowing the context very well: “We are talking about an extreme reference culture. [...] It contributes to creating our community: We are together, and we understand this”. A sense of what is trending and how to acknowledge it was considered important to the success of *4ETG*.

Furthermore, the focus on context encompasses the show’s followers and fans and the closeness many feel to the programme and its profiles. Fostering a solid industry–audience relationship brings many benefits to the production team, including the provision of an ongoing focus group: “We always know what they are thinking, and that’s positive. We know when we ‘hit’ and when we ‘miss’”, according to Momrak, who continued, “we have a core group of fans who have created a Discord group where they talk and have become friends for real. It leads to a lot of engagement”. Here, again, the relatively limited number of fans is perceived as less important than the strength of their engagement and loyalty, not only concerning the show but also towards one another.

This vigorous industry–audience relationship has drawbacks as well, noted Momrak: “I check comments on our YouTube channel all the time, and I don’t even notice I’m doing it. You can get tired of getting responses. It can be a real disadvantage at times”. The production team also experiences harsh critique at times, particularly when the programme changes profiles. The personal relationships many fans cultivate with their favourite profiles generate pained, occasionally angry responses to their departures. At such times, the positive “feedback loop” (Busse, 2018) with fans can sour, squandering the goodwill that the programme has worked towards for so long (see also Grey, 2003).

To summarise, *4ETG* follows a social media logic that fundamentally differentiates the programme from traditional teen television programmes with regard to its rhythm, authenticity, and context. This rationale fosters a speedier, tighter, and more personal relationship between the production team (and especially the programme’s profiles) and the (young) audience, although this relationship, in reality, might be stronger between audiences and profiles than between audiences and NRK. In the end, it enables the programme – and NRK – to cultivate and retain a young audience while also encouraging a younger generation of content creators to experiment and thrive in the world of public service media.

Conclusion: Lending fame and skills and the implications of it

4ETG is not a public service programme brought to YouTube, but rather a YouTube programme created by a public service media organisation seeking a presence on social media. *4ETG* originates in NRK's solicitation of well-known YouTubers (lending their fame) to create authentic content online (lending their skills) – content which sits outside a traditional public service perspective. The aim is twofold: to reach a young audience that is difficult to reach through traditional programming and to explore new ways of creating youth content on social media platforms.

The ambition to reach young people on social media platforms and “bring them back” to the public service fold is not new; similar motivations underpin many of NRK's youth initiatives, including NRK's teen drama (Sundet, 2021a). In contrast to teen drama, however, *4ETG* has no explicit intention of providing popular enlightenment. Instead, the programme is motivated by the need to reassure the young audiences who have fled to social media that NRK also cares about them and aims to serve them – if not with popular enlightenment, then at least with popular entertainment, and in a social media form they are familiar with. As such, the new social media talents of *4ETG* are tasked with engaging young people through relevant content otherwise freed from any specific public obligations. This personality-driven, bottom-up approach to content for young followers and fans is made possible by the programme's platform-driven ability to fly under the radar of mainstream audiences and its mission of engaging hard-to-reach youth.

A contribution of media production research is emphasising what is at stake politically and the implications media productions have for media policy debates (Paterson et al., 2016a). Michalis (2021) has argued that media industries and media policy are inextricably interlinked, and one cannot study one without tapping into the other. One of the findings of this study is how NRK's YouTube production succeeds in engaging youth and online content creators but has few ambitions of providing public value. On the one hand, this lack of ambition might reflect *4ETG*'s location in the entertainment division, although entertainment can also have public value, for instance, by unifying the nation, facilitating public connection, or empowering sub-groups (Nærland, 2019; Nærland & Dahl, 2022). On the other hand, it might reflect a more general notion among a new generation of online television producers on the difficulties of transforming public value to social media platforms because of the distinct logic governing the platforms. The latter indicates a more profound shift from within, with fundamental implications for the future of public service media. If a new generation of content providers find it difficult to provide public value on social media platforms, how will it impact public service media's survival in the future? Or put differently: Is it enough for public service media to reach young audiences, or should we also

discuss with “what” do we reach them? It is in this context that this analysis activates “old” media policy questions, namely, how to expand public service value beyond these institutions’ original domain (van Dijck & Poell, 2015).

An alternative approach considers online public service youth content as balancing on a false dichotomy of (stuffy) public service ideals, on the one hand, and authenticity and immediacy, on the other. One could view 4ETG’s self-imposed ideals for production as a bottom-up “youthification” (Hagedoorn et al., 2021) of NRK’s interpretation of its public service remit. If that is the case, we must reconsider the values that productions such as 4ETG give to (young) audiences and (online) content creators. While a single study such as this cannot answer these questions alone, it can invite more studies and debates about how public service media can fulfil (and update) their remit for young audiences, attract online content creators, and increase the public value of online entertainment.

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Representing and engaging new target groups

The case of the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation and Rådebank

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the strategies and making of media content for young people at the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). I discuss public service media's (PSM) role in the production of youth content and how a specific public service broadcaster works to achieve representation for different demographics in their media production. Using the youth drama series *Rådebank* as a case study, I investigate how NRK actively tries to reach young audiences – specifically younger male audiences – through telling stories from certain environments and representing characters in an authentic manner within the public service mandate. The chapter emphasises how NRK differentiates itself from commercial actors and contributes to existing research on youth drama for young adult audiences.

KEYWORDS: public service media, *Rådebank*, public service mission, media representation, media production

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Introduction

Public service media's (PSM) mission is to contribute to "the democratic, cultural, and social objectives of society" (Donders, 2019: 123–124). Guided by its public service remit, PSM does not serve commercial or political interests. PSM organisations' ability to reach younger audiences is important due to their ambitions of universal reach and appeal, including the intention that the content should have value for every member of society. Reaching young adults is important for the institutional future of PSM because many media habits are formed at an early age and retained for decades (Schulz et al., 2019: 15).

In this chapter, I analyse *Rådebank* (Fahre, 2020–2022), a series about young men dealing with mental health issues that aims to portray a specific youth culture in Norway. The show is one of several new youth fiction series from the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK, and it has been regarded as a success. *Rådebank* was produced following NRK's production of *SKAM* [*Shame*], which ended up as a global phenomenon (K. I. Jensen, 2019), and NRK is often described as a driver in the production of Nordic youth drama series (Hartmann, 2021).

Despite the general sense of success around the NRK youth series, NRK has not achieved its ambition to reach four out of five children and young adults (12–29 years old). The male segment in this age group has been especially challenging for NRK to reach (NRK, 2020a). NRK produced the youth series *Rådebank* to address that gap, specifically trying to reach young male viewers with low levels of formal education. Although targeting a niche group that NRK struggles to communicate with, the series ended up attracting a broad range of audiences in the Nordic countries. This chapter addresses the way NRK formulates its strategies for reaching young audiences and how *Rådebank* represents the culture and identity of a niche target group.

Several scholars have researched Scandinavian television drama and the role of PSM more generally (P. M. Jensen et al., 2016; Redvall, 2013; Sundet, 2017), but less has been written about niche series that find success beyond their intended target group. This chapter contributes to understanding how public broadcasters can work to reach their universal ideal, but also how they position themselves in relation to commercial producers. I ask the following two research questions:

- RQ1. What are NRK's current ambitions and challenges when it comes to reaching young adults, and how are these reflected in the making of *Rådebank*?
- RQ2. What were the discussions about the representation of a specific target group during the commissioning and production of *Rådebank*?

Methodologically, the study relies on an analysis of institutional documents and qualitative interviews with executives working on *Rådebank*. My goal is

to understand the ways in which practitioners reflect upon their work to reach young people, rather than the way the audience experiences being represented or not in PSM content. I hence investigate decisions related to the production and the way the production team worked to reach a specific group.

In the following, I present the chapter's theoretical framework concerning PSM and youth content before outlining my methodological approach. Next, I analyse NRK's approach to producing youth content as well as the specific production strategies for *Rådebank*. In the conclusion, I link these findings to overall questions of how NRK differentiates itself from commercial actors when it comes to the production of media content for young audiences.

Young people in the public service media context

Young people's media use is a pressing issue for PSM institutions. Recent research shows that young people use social media and global streaming services to a greater extent than the older age groups do (Frees et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2018). In particular, the news consumption of young people has been widely researched (see, e.g., Autenrieth et al., 2021; Slette-meås & Storm-Mathisen, 2018). Research also suggests that young audiences are less likely to subsidise online content (Kammer et al., 2015). These shifts in media use make it challenging for both PSM and private media companies to reach young audiences (Autenrieth et al., 2021; Reiter et al., 2018), but they also create opportunities for new ways of producing and publishing content. An Austrian study has suggested that a clearer distinction should exist between PSM and commercial actors as a way of increasing value for younger audiences (Reiter et al., 2018). In their findings, Reiter and colleagues (2018) found that young audiences generally had high support for PSM, and they emphasised that these young audiences must be taken seriously, not least in order to influence their future media use. According to a report from the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), an essential part of PSM organisations' strategy to reach young audiences is to understand young people (EBU, 2022). This should be done through in-depth studies and reflecting the attitudes, values, tastes, and everyday lives of young people with topics and scenarios they can relate to. The report points to several examples from the fictional world, such as NRK's youth series *17*, and addresses how fiction programmes should aim to be relatable and local in order to distinguish themselves from the output of global producers like Netflix and HBO. Programmes that contain something more than just entertainment have been labelled by Redvall (2016) as "double storytelling", where public service productions aim for stories that are not only entertaining, but also contain ethical and social connotations.

In this regard, one cannot talk about NRK's success with youth fiction without mentioning *Shame*, an online drama where the story unfolded daily through video clips, social media posts, and chat messages (Sundet, 2020,

2021). *Shame* hit the global stage with an English-language version in the US and several European countries making their own versions of the Norwegian teen drama (Bronson, 2016; NTB, 2017). In the aftermath of *Shame*, a growing body of literature on teen series has addressed the global expansion, transmedia storytelling, and key production factors related to both characters and distribution strategies (Andersen & Sundet, 2019; Christensen, 2018; Stollfuß, 2021; Sundet, 2020, 2021). *Shame* was intended to reach 16-year-old girls but ended up transcending age groups and genders. The series was produced within a public service production culture and was based on the assumption that “teens would become better prepared to master difficulties in their own life by working through realistic scenarios through representation” (Sundet, 2020: 83).

Media representation of youth, especially in news media, has been given a significant amount of attention (see, e.g., Bernier, 2011; Lepianka, 2015; Levinsen & Wien, 2011). Less attention has been accorded to the ways young people are represented in fictional media formats. This chapter contributes with new insights into NRK’s strategies for fiction production while addressing issues of media representation and why it matters.

Theoretical framework

Media representations of youth have been studied for more than 60 years (see, e.g., Stensaas, 1961). The concept of media representation refers to the ways various groups or individuals are presented in media (Levinson & Wien, 2011). Research regarding media representation often deals with questions of gender, age, race, sex, or religion, but in this chapter, I use media representation theory to analyse the way in which a particular niche group was represented in a PSM production.

Media representation is related to the concept of identity, which can briefly be defined as the characteristics, affiliations, and social roles a person or a group give themselves (Martinussen, 2001: 320). According to Gripsrud (2015: 16–17), one can distinguish between two main types of identity: social or collective identity and personal identity. The two are closely related but not quite the same. Social identity is based on the ways other people perceive us, as well as the various social or collective contexts of which we are a part. Our personal identity distinguishes us from other people and makes our emotions and experiences special. We might find personal identity is difficult to define, not least when we are young (Gripsrud, 2015: 17). Giddens (1991) claimed self-identity might be regarded as a reflexive project, where the media can be seen as reference points. According to these researchers, the media play a role in the way individuals develop, and the media can also construct or reproduce stereotypical identities. Stereotypical representations simplify and exaggerate differences by presenting groups as “us” and “them”

(Aalberg & Elvestad, 2012: 115). The way role models and stereotypes are constructed in the media affects the way we see ourselves and connect with other people. In this chapter, I aim to investigate how NRK thinks about issues of identity and representation when producing youth drama and how this specifically influenced the production of *Rådebank*.

Data and methods

Empirically, this chapter builds on institutional documents from NRK and qualitative interviews with key executives involved in the production of *Rådebank*. The documents used in this chapter include institutional documents describing NRK's strategies, actions, goals, and obligations. These include NRK's public annual reports that describe the ways it fulfilled its public mission during the previous year as well as its "audience strategy" (internal document), describing strategies and challenges for the forthcoming years. Furthermore, this study relies on working documents from *Rådebank*, which address missions and strategies.

There are several advantages to performing document analysis. Compared with other sources, documents are stable, and they can be stored and copied (Karppinen & Moe, 2019), which gives the method high transparency. Documents are also an efficient data source compared with, for instance, observation (Bowen, 2009), but a number of issues arise when using documents. In practice, all industry documents are framed from a certain perspective, often addressing only one of all the possible courses of action and containing elements of self-representation (Karppinen & Moe, 2019). Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 137) emphasised that all documents must be seen as social products: products that are created in a specific context, by specific people and under a set of circumstances. Therefore, it is important to take motives and contexts that are induced in the production of the documents and interpret them in the light of who has produced them.

In particular, public annual reports such as NRK's can be labelled as political communication, as they are often used to convince politicians and the public that the agency in question (in this case NRK, as a publicly funded broadcaster) has fulfilled its public mission in a satisfying manner. The eagerness to present NRK in a positive way may prevent the broadcaster from revealing failures that can affect both financial support and the possibilities to expand services. According to Caldwell (2008), television studies must see industrial texts for what they are, which is not simply a product of political economy but also rich objects for analysis. Industrial textual practices matter to media scholars, he said, because these practices provide insights into the ways modern multimedia companies function at three levels: internally, industrially, and publicly (Caldwell, 2008: 123–124). Among other things, these practices can work to "rebrand" companies in terms of reaching niche

audiences, using new technology, and adapting to the current media environment. Excerpts from these documents quoted in this chapter that were not originally in English have been translated.

In addition to document analysis, three semistructured expert interviews were conducted. Expert interviews are a fruitful way to generate expert knowledge. These informants can be regarded as exclusive due to their role and the knowledge they have about the specific broadcaster and production studied here (Bruun, 2016). However, the term expert knowledge can be vague. Therefore, Van Audenhove and Donders (2019) have divided expert knowledge into different types of interviews: exploratory interviews (to uncover technical knowledge and develop hypotheses), systematising interviews (to gain expert knowledge in a comprehensive and systematic way), and explanatory interviews (to acquire subjective knowledge and explanations). Some of the interviews touch upon all three categories, but particular attention was paid to subjective knowledge as well as expert knowledge related to the making of *Rådebank*.

I sought expert knowledge from three informants:

- Linn-Jeanethe Kyed, creator of *Rådebank* (“series creator”), interviewed on 25 October 2021. Kyed works mainly as a screenwriter for film but also for television series. In the production of *Rådebank*, she worked with developing the main idea for the series and was a part of the production team.
- Melike Kaveh (“executive producer”), interviewed on 23 November 2021. Kaveh produces fiction series at NRK and worked with developing and approving the cast, screenplay, and distribution of *Rådebank*. She thus worked with *Rådebank*’s external production team from preproduction to the launching of series.
- Iacob Christian Prebensen (“NRK analyst”), interviewed on 5 January 2022. Prebensen analyses viewing habits at NRK and contributed with data on how *Rådebank* reached various audience segments in Norway.

I conducted the interviews in Norwegian via Zoom, and then transcribed and analysed them thematically with an emphasis on the subjective knowledge and self-reflexivity of the informant, especially regarding reflections, choices, strategies, and the production process in relation to NRK and *Rådebank*. All the interviews and citations from documents have been translated from Norwegian to English. The translated quotes were sent to the informants for approval and the informants gave permission for the use of internal documents in this chapter. In the analysis, I refer to the professional occupation of the informants rather than their names.

The case: *Rådebank*

Rådebank is a Norwegian drama series with three seasons, produced by Fenomen Film for NRK P3. The meaning of the word “rådebank” is a loud knocking sound in a car engine, and the series is set in Bø, Telemark in a rånemilieu. The term “râne” means driving around aimlessly in a car as a leisure activity, according to the Norwegian dictionary (Språkrådet, n.d.). An English translation could be “cruising”, but råning also has a cultural meaning. A person who engages in råning is called a råner. Key themes in the series are cars, partying, and love, but as presented at an industry event, the main purpose of the series was to tell stories about young men’s mental health (Mediedager, 2021). *Rådebank* was inspired by a quote from Tove Gundersen, secretary-general of the Norwegian Council for Mental Health: “What if more men could talk about living completely ordinary lives, how to deal with financial uncertainty, heartbreak, or finding one’s place? [translated]” (as cited in Brandvoll, 2021). In the first season, the main theme is heartbreak, while the second season revolves around the suicide of one of the characters. Suicide was initially meant to be the theme of the first season, but it was considered too harsh, so the first season was made to build up and to get to know the characters and prepare the audience for the second season. The third season revolves around finding one’s place in society. *Rådebank* aired in several countries – among them Sweden, Denmark, Finland, and Russia – after its Norwegian premiere.

Rådebank’s content, preproduction stages, and production are further discussed in the analysis below.

Analysis: Public service media and young audiences

The first part of the following analysis focuses on the first research question about NRK’s ambitions and challenges for reaching young adults, and how these are reflected in the making of *Rådebank*. This part of the analysis seeks to illuminate NRK’s strategies for reaching younger audiences in the current media landscape. I also discuss elements that can be regarded as peculiar to NRK in comparison with many commercial actors because of the broadcaster’s public service remit.

The second part of the analysis addresses the second research question, focusing on the issue of representing a specific target group in *Rådebank*. The stages from idea to distribution will be the focus, including measures that NRK and the producers used from the research stage to the production and distribution stages of *Rådebank*.

NRK and the youth mission

As a publicly funded broadcaster, the station's overall public mission leads to NRK's production of youth content. In the mission statement, Paragraph 21 states that "NRK should strive for high quality, diversity, and innovation. NRK's offer should have diversity in themes and genre. NRK's offer must appeal to all age-groups" (NRK, 2019b). In Paragraph 22, the "youth mission" is further described: "We must promote children's rights to freedom of speech and information and shield them from harmful forms of content" (NRK, 2019b). The mission also includes regularly making Norwegian television shows for young people.

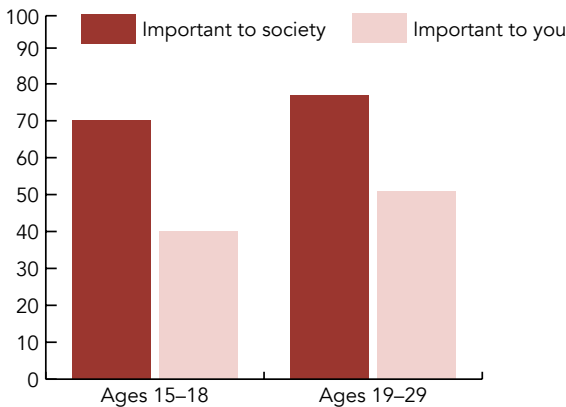
The young and uneducated

Discussing challenges related to serving its public service mission and maintaining its strong position with the audience, NRK (2021b: 4) addresses some main priority areas. These include taking advantage of NRK's unique position, reaching a younger audience, providing more content for children and young people, building a position that makes NRK's productions appealing, increasing loyalty, and being the best on their own platform.

According to numbers from 2020, 89 per cent of the Norwegian population older than 12 years old uses one of NRK's services daily (NRK, 2021a). Even though the use is high in the overall population, people have different relationships with the broadcaster. Therefore, the population is divided into audience segments according to life stages, demographics, media usage, level of education, urban or rural residence, and whether children live in the home (NRK, 2020b). NRK upholds a strong position in the Norwegian population, especially when it comes to the segment of the population older than 50 and with a higher education. The younger part of the population and the less educated, however, are more difficult for the broadcaster to reach (NRK, 2020b: 5; 2021b: 5). The same tendencies can be seen among other European broadcasters, where the PSM audience is described as "old, educated and politically diverse" (Schulz et al., 2019).

NRK has the ambition to reach four out of five children and young adults (12–29 years old), but the male audience in this age group has been especially challenging to reach. These ambitions have led NRK to prioritise targeting children and young men 12–29 years old (NRK, 2020a). In the audience strategy, NRK (2021b: 5) stresses the importance of reflecting society as a whole: "The diversity in Norway must be reflected in everything we do – or else we don't reflect a modern Norway".

FIGURE 6.1 The perceived importance of NRK, by age (per cent)



Source: NRK, 2021b

The answers reflected in Figure 6.1 are based on a survey conducted by NRK, and the numbers are from the first quarter of 2021 (NRK, 2021b: 6). The first question asked whether the respondents believed NRK was important to society and the second whether NRK was important to them personally.

Around 70 per cent in the two age categories believed that NRK is important to society, whereas less than half or half of the others believed that NRK is important to *them*. These statistics do not explain *why* this is the case, but they illustrate how adolescents and young adults are aware of NRK and acknowledge its position in society, but at the same time do not see NRK as personally interesting or useful. This finding corresponds to findings in other European countries, where young audiences value PSM as important to society but do not see particular personal value or relevance in it (Autenrieth et al., 2021; Reiter et al., 2018). Trying to produce fiction that feels relevant to young people can be one way to improve these numbers.

Tools for reaching adolescents and young adults

Most users come to NRK directly through NRK’s own platforms, but another way is through social media, where the target groups are teenagers (12–18) and young adults (19–29) (NRK, 2021a). NRK’s plan is to depend less on social media, reducing the number of NRK accounts and publishing less content (NRK, 2021b). Another tool for reaching a younger audience is implementing search engine optimisation as a way to rank higher in search engine results. Search engines, such as Google, are one of the main ways people discover content online. 7 per cent of the visitors on the NRK website (www.nrk.no) come from search engines; therefore, NRK sees great potential in enhancing these numbers. The aim is to increase the number of daily visits from search engines by 50 per cent, which is viewed as a simple way to bring users to the website (NRK, 2021a: 15).

One objective is to bring young people to NRK's website, but another is to build loyalty and foster repeat visits. To ensure further growth and increase loyalty among the population, NRK wishes to "create content so that the 17-year-old feels at home – because when we reach young people we reach a broader audience" (NRK, 2021b: 13). A part of this overall goal is to write and speak "in the language of a 17-year-old". This should be reflected in sources, pictures, videos, graphics, and formats in the content on NRK's website (NRK, 2021b: 13).

The ambitions and challenges for reaching the young and less educated part of the population are connected to the great competition from global media companies (Frees et al., 2019). One explanation for these challenges may also be that NRK does not provide this group with enough personal value. As tools to reach young people, NRK uses social media and search optimisation, but to increase loyalty and build user habits, they need to reflect *them* in PSM content (see, e.g., Sundet, 2020). This is what NRK tried to do in *Rådebank*, where there were many discussions about how to best appeal to young audiences and represent young men – who are rarely present in NRK output – in a new and different way.

From pitching original ideas to matching these to the public service mission

The idea for *Rådebank* was initiated by the production company Fenomen Film. The company wanted to make a drama series following people in a *rånemilieu*. In the original idea, the drama series was supposed to be based on a true confrontation that happened between the mayor and the *rånemilieu* in the city of Notodden some years ago.

The conflict was that the mayor wanted to pedestrianise the main street, something the *råners* opposed. It quickly escalated, and one of the *råners* ended up in jail. The clash was supposed to be the backdrop of a comedy series scheduled to be pitched to the commercial television channel TVNorge, but the series creator explained in her interview that she was reluctant to produce entertainment on the topic:

While he [the producer of *Rådebank*] was introducing the first idea, I got the impression that they were making a comedy, and I noticed that in the way they were talking and the way they showed me pictures that they were saying, "Ha-ha, look at those stupid people".

TVNorge was looking for a production that would gain a decent number of viewers to be a part of their focus on light entertainment and comedy, and the premise for producing a series about the *rånemilieu* at TVNorge was making fun of its members. As a commercial company, TVNorge is dependent on maintaining market share and it does not have a clearly stated societal

mission as in the public service remit. Thus, they were not concerned about portraying the *rånemilieu* in a truthful manner. Similarly, at the early stages of development, the production company Fenomen Film was not worried about stereotyping the people in the *rånemilieu* by exaggerating their characteristics and emphasising a gulf between them and other groups of society (Aalberg & Elvestad, 2012). By doing so, the series would have reproduced current stereotypes that already exist in the media and the public eye.

The series creator stated in her interview that she had the impression that both the broadcaster and the production company were mocking the characters:

It's always like that. [...] They make so many movies where they present their preconceived notions about the *rånemilieu* because they live in a village and don't have higher education and they are a group of coarse men who just mess around. I remember them differently. I remember them as boys that took care of each other and boys that struggled.

The series creator wanted to move away from this, but it was hard when pitching the original idea. However, discussions gradually focused more on not making a stereotypical comedy, but rather a more serious series with a message that might be better suited for NRK. In this way, the development moved from what can be regarded as its initial approach – which would have represented the *rånemilieu* in a stereotypical way in terms of the concept of social identity (Gripsrud, 2015) – to presenting an internalised way of perceiving the *rånemilieu*.

Pitching new ideas and series to NRK is a balancing act between coming up with a good idea and offering something to enhance the public service mission. An interesting television drama is not enough, it must also be a production that can meet the objectives of the public service mission. Therefore, when *Rådebank* was later pitched to NRK, the NRK team looked for a way the series could help them fulfil their public mission. According to the NRK executive producer,

Rådebank had several of the things that we were missing in our portfolio. For instance, the theme of mental health, it was a series from a small town, it was about a milieu that we didn't really know that much about, and it was something to reach the boys with our public service content.

NRK thus looked for a series that could give value to society (NRK, 2021a). Moreover, the series was an opportunity to reach and reflect a group of people who were rarely represented in NRK content and who traditionally did not engage with it.

After receiving the basic idea for the series, NRK financed the creators to do research on the *rånemilieu* to ensure the series would move beyond the stereotypical notions of the *råners* and their lives and be marked by their input in several ways.

Researching the target group

At NRK's request, the team researched the milieu in Notodden. The research process followed in the footsteps of the *Shame* production, which had devoted a significant amount of research to identifying a specific target audience (Andersen & Sundet, 2019; Redvall, 2018; Sundet, 2020). This research method in media production hinges on giving something of value to an audience based on their needs (Redvall, 2018). According to Redvall (2018: 157), asking young people about their dreams, their language, and everyday problems might help producers avoid clichés and stereotypes.

However, *Rådebank* was an external production, while *Shame* was produced internally at NRK. In the NRK system, the extensive research was highly valued as a way of taking the young audience seriously (Redvall, 2018), but this is not a research method generally used by commercial producers. *Shame* also came from a long line of work on teen drama from NRK and was inspired by NRK's comprehensive knowledge of the target group (K. I. Jensen, 2019; Redvall, 2018; Sundet, 2021).

The research on *Rådebank* was done to obtain correct references and make an authentic presentation of the chosen target group: "It's about putting aside your own theories and entering an environment with an open mind, talking to the teenagers and trying to make something based on that", the executive producer explained during her interview. The plot and themes of *Rådebank* emerged from the research stage, she continued:

Authenticity is so important. They will see through it quickly if we don't take the target group seriously or underestimate them. Even though they are young, they demand quality and are used to watching expensive productions.

This also reflects aspirations in NRK's (2021b) report on the importance of creating relatable and authentic content to reach younger audiences. In other words, the research phase was a way to avoid stereotyping and create an authentic representation of the *rånemilieu*.

The external production team interviewed students at various high schools to ask them what they thought about *råners*. None of the respondents were part of the environment and none seemed to know anything about it, according to the series creator:

The answers we got were pretty similar, nothing juicy, and I guess we thought that the milieu didn't exist anymore. But then the production team met a guy who was smoking a cigarette in his car. He was sceptical and said that he did not want the milieu to be portrayed as a space for drunk people who partied, and he ensured us that that was not the real picture of how it was. He told us that we should drive to Bø [a small municipality next to Notodden] and wait at the gas station to find and talk to them.

After this, the production team continued to knock on car doors to meet more people from the *rånemilieu*. At first, it was difficult to gain access and get them to talk, but after a while, the production team managed to gain their trust: “They started testing our knowledge on cars, and I tried to convince them to trust us. We had to promise to take them seriously”, the series creator explained. When the locals connected with the production team, the young people began to trust them and share their experiences from everyday life. Eventually, the production team gained access to Snapchat groups and a closed Facebook group, where people would post videos of what they ate and did in their free time as well as videos of them driving. Sometimes the videos even showed them driving too fast or flirting with the law. The series creator described it as like being “a fly on the wall”:

In one of the videos, we could see a person that smashed a car window because he had trouble with his girlfriend. And the boys talking to us told us to look around, as there were many broken windows in Bø.

In this way, the production team got access to quite detailed knowledge about the *rånemilieu*, which was helpful in moving beyond a stereotypical portrayal of this environment.

Creating the mission statement

After conducting extensive research, the production team in Fenomen Film – along with a team from NRK – organised several workshops. In this part of the production process, it was important to know what they wanted to make and why. To clarify what the production team wanted to achieve with *Rådebank*, a mission statement was created. The mission was to show the consequences of not talking about your mental health, and *Rådebank* illustrates a worst-case scenario with the suicide of one of the characters in Season 2 (NRK, 2021c). Overall, the plan was to create episodes based on real stories from the *rånemilieu*. Nevertheless, according to the executive producer, viewers should be left with no doubts about it being a fictional series:

We do a lot of research when it comes to reaching boys with our content and what we do know is that it is important to be a bit edgier with the boys and show the real things that happen when you are young.

Each season of *Rådebank* addresses young men’s encounters with difficult challenges in life, and part of the mission is to give them tools to respond to these challenges and explain why dealing with feelings can be difficult (NRK, 2021c). According to the series creator,

the mission statement really helped us choose what stories we wanted to tell, and that suicide was the absolute worst thing that could happen if they don’t deal with challenges in life. It was scary, but it is also a part of the public service mission to help these men and tell them what they can do.

Finding a clear core mission statement was thus an important part of the process of moving into production. And after the production of the series, discussions of how to best promote and position the series continued in terms of the right platforms to use in order to reach young audiences.

The distribution of *Rådebank*

The final stage of the process was to launch and distribute *Rådebank*. To reach its main target group, NRK tried to share relatable, funny, or exciting clips through internal and external platforms. In addition, they shared interviews with the actors and the production team on the radio and in the general press. In contrast to other series for young audiences produced by NRK, the use of social media was mainly for promotional reasons and not to increase participation or create new content (Stollfuß, 2021). But there was a clear sense that certain choices needed to be made in order “to create a balance between the needs of the target group and the rest of the audience” (NRK, 2019a), as stated in the promotional strategy document for the first season of the series.

For instance, the show has a unique title that was meant to target adolescents interested in cars, according to the series creator:

It was tempting to just use the mission statement; here is a series about mental health and young men, but then we wouldn't have reached our target group, especially when we are trying to reach a group where it is taboo to talk about feelings.

Instead, the promotional tagline for the first season became, “this is a series for you who enjoy burgers and cars”. The series creator asserted that – based on knowledge from audience ratings and respondents in the target group – this was just enough to “get away with” a series about men and mental health:

I don't believe that we would have reached them if we had promoted the series for what it was. We didn't lie, we just told them what they got in addition to everything else. That was probably the smartest thing we did.

The first season premiered in March 2020, and all the episodes were released in a single day. The first season is about the character GT, who struggles to move on with his life after a breakup, while in the second season, one of the main characters commits suicide (NRK, 2021c). As discussed earlier, the original plan from Fenomen Film was to have the “suicide story” as the main theme of Season 1, but NRK considered it too difficult and harsh to start off with a suicide, so they decided to wait until the second season – although at that point it was not decided whether there was going to be a second season.

The series creator explained that the precondition for creating the second season was an average of 250,000 viewers per episode: “It was quite nerve-racking because we all knew that the second season would revolve around

the suicide of one of the main characters, and without high enough ratings, the story would never be told”. The first season had a rough start, but the numbers increased after audiences beyond the target group discovered the programme, the executive producer explained. And, the series creator stated: “Even though I was nervous about waiting with the suicide story, I do believe it was the right decision. It gave the viewers a softer transition to the suicide in the second season, and they came more prepared”.

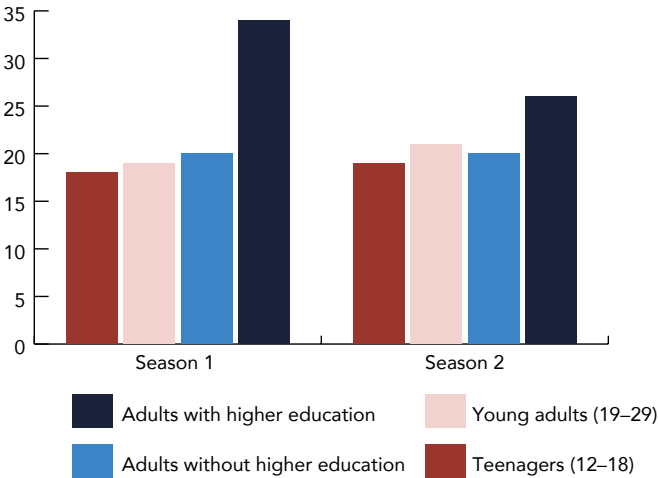
In promoting the second season, the first three episodes were released first, and the remaining episodes distributed a few days later. The suicide in the second season created a great deal of attention, but the production team refused to use the suicide as “clickbait” to get good ratings. This was, according to their promotion strategy, something the audience should see for themselves (NRK, 2021c). According to the NRK analyst,

it did take a bit of time before the audience discovered *Rådebank*, but then the first season got a viewer boost after the launch of the second season. It was clear that the hype from the second season inspired people to watch Season 1.

The NRK analyst further explained that 30 days after publishing Season 1, *Rådebank* had been seen by 240,000 viewers, whereas Season 2 had over 200,000 in less than a week. He emphasised that it is usually the opposite, where most people watch a series shortly after the episodes are published.

Figure 6.2 shows the average ratings of the first and second season of *Rådebank*. NRK only stores data for the first 30 days after publication, and then a running total; hence, the figure shows total ratings until 16 November.

FIGURE 6.2 Average ratings for the first and second seasons of *Rådebank* (per cent)



Comments: Data collected 16 November 2021. This is the total rating numbers up to this date.

Ratings were calculated from a representative sample (3,000) of the population in Norway. Ratings in one demographic group were calculated as (sum of minutes / the length of the programme in minutes) / number of people in the demographic group = rating in per cent (as explained by the NRK analyst).

As shown in Figure 6.2, the average ratings from Season 2 are similar to the ratings in Season 1. We can also see that the average rating for all the episodes in both seasons among the hard-to-reach target groups was around 20 per cent. The series also reached audiences in other age groups, according to the analyst: “Demographically, the main trend is that the series reaches across all age groups, but we can see that it is a bit easier to reach the younger groups, people with higher education, and women”. According to the executive producer, “it is easier to reach girls. Overall, our general qualitative insight suggests that we need to customise content for boys”. She continued to explain that girls are often less “picky” when it comes to what programmes they watch, while boys or young men prefer content more adapted to them, such as *Rådebank*.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to investigate NRK’s challenges and ambitions for reaching young people (RQ1) and then investigate the measures that the production team used to try to create an attractive series for young audiences, focusing on a particular niche group in *Rådebank* (RQ2).

According to NRK’s corporate documents, young and less-educated male viewers have been a problematic audience segment to reach. This failure is important due to NRK’s public mission to reflect societal diversity, which implies reflecting all audience segments in its media content. According to its audience strategy (NRK, 2021b), the majority of teenagers and young adults in Norway believe that NRK is vital to society. Still, they do not think NRK is important to *them*. One explanation could be that young people are not always aware when they are consuming PSM content (Reiter et al., 2018), but it could also be because they are not represented or made to feel “at home” by the broadcaster (Andersen & Sundet, 2019). In common with other European broadcasters (Autenrieth et al., 2021; Stollfuß, 2021), NRK uses search optimisation and social media to reach young people and become more visible as a public broadcaster, but as illustrated in this case study, they also think carefully about how to create content that can represent and appeal to certain audiences.

To ensure representation, the production team did thorough research on the *rånemilieu*, and the series was based on real stories and authentic representations of the young men they interviewed in the process. An essential part of this preparation was also targeting the distribution of *Rådebank*

on social media and marketing the series as something that would trigger the interest of young male audiences. However, it is interesting to see that *Rådebank*, which was intended for a particular target audience, reached a broad range of age groups, just as previous teen-drama successes at NRK had done (Sundet, 2021).

Rådebank reflects the young, the less educated, and youth living in rural areas, particularly in the *rånemilieu*. Even though the idea of *Rådebank* came from an external production company, it became a PSM production after the idea was pitched to NRK and fitted to their agenda, as documented in the careful research and formulation of the mission statement.

One can ask whether the same effort would have been made for getting to know the *rånemilieu* if the series had been made by a commercial broadcaster. It would definitely have been a very different series if made as a comedy production and likely would have conformed more to people's preconceived and stereotypical notions about the milieu, in contrast to the final drama series. How groups are represented in media can contribute to reproducing values and stereotypes, and media can be reference points to our self-identity (Aalberg & Elvestad, 2012; Gripsrud, 2015). In this way, a series such as *Rådebank* can have a positive impact on both self-identity and the public representation of the *rånemilieu*. As a public broadcaster, NRK has a mission to educate and reflect societal diversity, and the intentions behind *Rådebank* illustrate the many considerations of how to contribute to this endeavor by taking the *rånemilieu* seriously.

This chapter cannot conclude anything about whether *Rådebank* did, in fact, have an impact on how the public perceives the *rånemilieu*, but it illustrates the many discussions and negotiations that currently go into making public service content for young audiences to try to ensure they are taken seriously and offered appealing stories with an authentic feel. But the struggle to reach this demographic – particularly the boys – is far from over.

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SVT Barn online and *In Love*

Searching for identity in a world of smartphones and digital interaction

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ABSTRACT

This chapter uses the short-form tween drama *Kär [In Love]* as a case study to explore SVT Barn's digital transformation. The data stem from interviews with SVT creatives and executives involved in the production – from commissioning to writing and directing the series. Specifically, the chapter analyses how online-first and mobile-first strategies are implemented in the public service media (PSM) attempt to attract young viewers in competition with YouTube, subscription video-on-demand services, gaming, and social media. SVT Barn's search for a new identity in the digital media environment mirrors the identity search of the tween characters and viewers of *In Love* themselves, in a world of smartphones and digitally mediated interaction. The analysis concludes that an increased focus on interaction between producers and young audiences could result in a clearer, up-to-date PSM identity and an improved intergenerational dialogue.

KEYWORDS: public service television, digitalisation, datafication, online youth fiction, smartphone culture, tweens, identity, interaction

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Introduction

The motto “to inform, educate and entertain” – coined by the BBC’s first Director-General John Reith in the 1920s – comprises three foundational values for public service organisations worldwide (Bolin, 2016: 111). However, fulfilling these goals in the over-saturated media environment of today is a huge challenge for public service organisations, not least regarding young audiences. Swedish children and youth aged 9–19 years old spent less than 10 per cent of their total viewing time in 2018 on Swedish public service television (SVT), including broadcast and the online service SVT Play (Swedish Government, 2019: 15). Reaching the young clearly requires thinking in new directions for producers of public service media (PSM).

In this chapter, I explore one attempt to do so, namely the tween drama production *Kär [In Love]* (Lagerberg & Bylund, 2020). No longer children, and not yet teens, the 9–12-year-old or “tween” segment corresponds to the end of the age range in which SVT Barn still has a steady viewership. Since shifting to an online-first policy – that is, focusing all efforts on its streaming platform rather than traditional broadcasting – SVT Barn has been successful in attracting children up to 11–12 years old. However, after age 12, there is a sharp drop in reach (according to an interview with the commissioner of children’s and youth content at SVT and head of SVT Barn in Stockholm). In addition, *In Love* represents a mobile-first strategy, as the series was crafted specifically for the smallest screen and revolves around mainly smartphone-mediated interaction between the two lead characters.

In this chapter, I aim to explore how SVT Barn strives for relevance online and trace how the producers worked to be “close to the audience”, the official slogan for Swedish public service 2020–2025 (Swedish Government, 2019). *In Love* is investigated here as a potential model for improved intergenerational dialogue, in particular between PSM and young audiences. Before proceeding to the main analysis, I present and contextualise the series, after which I lay out the theoretical approach of analysing the production and media text, followed by a presentation of the production interviewees.

The series: *In Love*

The small-scale, online-only series *In Love* ran on SVT Barn and SVT Play between 19 August and 18 December 2020. With its tiny budget of SEK 2.8 million and experimental format – 122 episodes, usually around 2 minutes each, 5 hours in total, published daily for an entire semester – the series did quite well, despite not receiving the same promotional push as SVT’s regular shows (according to an interview with the project leader for *In Love* and MAXA Barnplay, SVT Malmö). The average online rating per episode was 72,000.¹ For comparison, *Klassen [The Class]*, SVT Barn’s flagship drama for younger teens, has 160,000–170,000 ratings per episode, and *Kokobäng*,

SVT's most popular humour show, has around 600,000 ratings per episode. In February 2021, a repackaged version was published called *Kär: långa avsnitt* [*In Love: Long Episodes*] with the intent of making the series more attractive for catch-up viewing. The original 122 episodes were later removed from the platform.

In Love tells the story of Adam and Bianca, two musically gifted twelve-year-olds who became friends during a summer music camp after sixth grade. They go to different schools and keep in touch mainly via their smartphones. In addition to everyday “Snapchatting” and “FaceTiming”, they record songs that they send to each other. Sometimes they meet in real life, record music together, and publish their music videos online, looking for likes and followers and dreaming of making it big. It is obvious from the start that they like each other. Are they just good friends, or is there something more?

In Love marked the debut for SVT Malmö producers Hanna Lagerberg and Anna Bylund as writers and directors of an original drama series. The series is clearly related to other Nordic “short-form, small-budget online fiction series in which social media function as a central part of the narrative with the aim of accommodating a digital native youth audience that was otherwise turning its back on the institutions” (Andersen & Sundet, 2019: 2). The game changer for this genre, Norwegian teen drama *SKAM* [*Shame*] has been hailed as an example of “the Scandinavian approach to public service”, offering creativity, innovation, and the creation of world-class drama on a modest budget (Sundet, 2020: 71; Duggan, 2020: 1005). *In Love* was created within the same tradition, although for a younger target group.

Theoretical approach

In this chapter, I alternate between a “helicopter view” (Havens et al., 2009) and a ground level view of *In Love*, from early preproduction and onwards. Using this methodological approach commonly used in media industry studies, the chapter offers insights into some of the complexities of PSM production in the digital era, from working in a commercially driven platform society (van Dijck et al., 2018), to making the most out of highly restricted budgets in small language territories (Donders, 2019; McElroy & Noonan, 2018). Media industry studies emphasise the role of context (Freeman, 2016), the main contexts here being the digitalisation and datafication of Nordic public service television (Jackson, 2020), smartphone cultures of the young (Vincent & Haddon, 2018), and the “youth challenge” of contemporary PSM – which is the overarching focus of this volume.

The study is exploratory and uses an abductive, iterative approach (Bazeley, 2013: 336). The interviews were thematically designed and analysed in a recursive process that fed back into the design of further interviews (Seale, 2018). The conceptual underpinning is Hill's (2019: 16) “analytic dialogue”,

originally developed for assessing the dialogue between producers and audiences, in which the researcher takes part in the conversation as a “bridge across the industry-audience divide”. It can also be used to assess dialogues within media companies, for example, the exchange of ideas amongst creatives or discussions between creatives and executives (Hill, 2021: 6–7). An analytic dialogue draws attention to how multidirectional dialogues shape media production, highlighting the relational aspect of production and engagement. Other scholars have similarly emphasised the importance of having a people-focused methodology in production research, as “it is people that remain the unchanging anchor of the media industries” (Ashton, as cited in Freeman, 2016: 118) even in times of fast-paced technological transformation.

Theoretically, I assume a meta perspective on identity, juxtaposing the identity search of the *In Love* tween characters with SVT Barn itself, trying to work out what kind of public service television SVT is aiming to be in the digital age for young viewers. According to Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (1996: 4), identity is a “process of becoming rather than being”. Tweens might be the quintessence of “becoming”, busy as they are in their identity construction process, approaching adolescence. Tweens are also characterised by their state of being in-between age categories (childhood and adolescence): a liminal state of being “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1967). Those existing in liminality tend to “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner, 1969: 95). Like tweens, SVT Barn could be said to lead such a liminal existence, as it is currently in mid-transition between the broadcasting era and a digital future that has not been fully written yet.

According to psychologist Stephen Frosh (1991: 5), the modern state of mind is a condition in which maintaining a self is “nearly impossible”. In a fluid and contradictory reality, the self can never be stable, it will always be in flux. However,

modern individuals are subjects within a culture which is in part constituted by its ability and tendency to produce precisely that experience. It is in the nature of modernity to provoke crises of identity: that is what modernity is about, that is what supplies its immense energy and productiveness. (Frosh, 1991: 191)

Modern identity search, then, can be seen as a struggle without end, as well as a source of energy that offers opportunities for trying new directions.

Methodology: Production interviews

Six semistructured interviews were conducted between 19 January and 18 March 2021, involving five participants, who all gave consent for using their names:

- Efva Henrysson: project leader for *In Love* and MAXA Barnplay, SVT Malmö
- Hanna Lagerberg: writer and director of *In Love*; producer and editor at SVT Malmö
- Anna Bylund: writer and director of *In Love*; producer and editor at SVT Malmö (interviewed on two occasions due to a tight schedule)
- Petter Bragée: head of children's, comedy, and entertainment programming, SVT Malmö
- Safa Safiyari: commissioner of children's and youth content, SVT; head of SVT Barn, Stockholm

The following analysis is divided into two parts. The first deals with how and why SVT Barn is striving for relevance online, whereas the second traces how the producers of *In Love* worked to be close to the audience in this case.

Analysis part 1: Striving for relevance online

Using online platforms to pursue relevance

Swedish public service television is currently running two online platforms or apps: SVT Play and SVT Barn. The interviewees sometimes referred to SVT Barn online as “Barnplay”, and the word “Play” was sometimes used to talk about SVT online in general. Since 2019, SVT Barn is the name of both the broadcast channel and the online platform. However, the participants spoke of broadcasting as a bygone era. According to Henrysson, the *In Love* project leader, the broadcast channel today mostly functions as an “ad window for Barnplay”: All new ideas and strategies are focused online, she said. The head of children's, comedy, and entertainment programming, Bragée, explained that the programmes for children and youth produced in Malmö constitute slightly less than half of SVT Barn's national in-house production. These are visualised as four worlds, as illustrated in Figure 7.1, assembled by SVT Barn to present their 2020 offering of programmes. The worlds are considered to correspond to four “needs” of an audience (an SVT Barn Malmö approach that is not the same for SVT Barn nationally):

- The SVT Barn world: Suspense and imagination for the 7-year-old (the blue triangle)
- The Arts and Crafts world: Creativity, DIY (do-it-yourself), and participation for the 9-year-old (the green triangle)
- The Alex & Carro world: Fun, pranks, and your friends for the 9-year-old (the yellow triangle)
- The Drama Tweenie world: Relations, identification, and genuineness for the 11-year-old (the purple triangle)

FIGURE 7.1 The four worlds and MAXA © SVT Barn Malmö (2020)



In Love started out as a commission within the framework of MAXA, an ongoing project aiming to “maximise” SVT Barn as an attractive online platform (but it ended up in the Drama Tweenie world). Such an online-first approach can be seen in many other children’s divisions of European PSM, in response to changing consumption patterns (Donders, 2019). MAXA is pictured as a fifth world in the middle, overlapping the other four, a place for experimenting with new ideas and offering audiences added value and online-exclusive material. According to Bragée, MAXA has two main purposes: “one is to be a development hub and come up with the new stuff that can become big formats, and the second is to kind of keep an eye on the audience”.

According to Safiyari, the commissioner of children’s and youth content and head of the channel, SVT Barn online has become a more “YouTube-ish” platform than SVT Play and is therefore the natural home for short-form content like *In Love*. This was echoed by Bragée, who predicted that SVT Barn might evolve into becoming “SVT’s YouTube” (for solo viewing), while SVT Play will be “SVT’s Netflix” (for social viewing), hinting at a major reconstruction being under way. The differentiation of their two online platforms is not only about age groups, then, but also formats and viewing habits.

The interviewees were quick to point out that they, formally speaking, have no competitors, as they are commercially independent. Yet, the frequent comparisons with YouTube and subscription video-on-demand services like Netflix are testament to how positioning oneself in a platform society (van Dijck et al., 2018) ruled by the Big Five – Google, Apple, Facebook (Meta), Amazon, and Microsoft – necessitates playing by those rules to some extent, even for publicly funded, non-commercial PSM. Essentially, they are all competitors in the same market, but on very different terms (see Steemers, 2019; McElroy & Noonan, 2018).

Using format to promote loyalty

The starting point for *In Love* was a commission towards the end of 2019, according to Lagerberg, in which SVT Barn's headquarters in Stockholm asked its Malmö branch to come up with concepts for "lots of TV for little money"; Safiyari called it an "exploratory commission". It did not necessarily have to be short-form, it could just as well be longer than regular formats, for example, live transmissions. Format here was more about certain characteristics that make content better suited for online engagement than broadcast. Genre was less important, and the main "tentpoles" were volume, frequency, durability, and a small budget. In Safiyari's view, one of the easiest ways to build audience loyalty is to make programmes with lots of episodes (see also Redvall, Chapter 4 in this volume).

The perception that children and youth are losing interest in longer storytelling formats – see, for example, the University of Copenhagen research project Reaching Young Audiences (RYA, n.d.) – was dismissed by Bragée, who said that there used to be a belief that children consume "snacking formats" only, for instance, on the bus between home and school, and "entire production companies were started for the sole purpose of providing such content". However, children might as well start watching something long on the bus and continue when they get home. According to him, children will watch 2-hour videos of *Jocke & Jonna* (a popular Swedish YouTube vlog) as well as *Gissa Alex* (an SVT micro-short-form series starring Alexander Hermansson): "Format is quite irrelevant for them. It just needs to be right".

With *In Love*, SVT Barn was looking for a continuous presence in the lives of young viewers. Hill (2019: 121) refers to this as "embedded engagement", which is about "how people form relationships with entertainment over time, in the context of their everyday lives". Indeed, ratings showed that *In Love* was mainly watched in the morning before school, afternoons and evenings after school, and then peaked during weekends, according to Henrysson. With its many episodes and daily publishing model, engaging with *In Love* seems to have developed into something of a ritual, embedded in the everyday lives of viewers.

To remain relevant, PSM must keep an eye on what goes on in other parts of the industry. It has been noted that television is becoming increasingly expensive *and* increasingly cheap, as "budgets are gravitating towards either massively high value and production or YouTube do it yourself (DIY)" (Sørensen, 2018: 509–510). Safiyari compared Swedish influencer Therese Lindgren with the Netflix hit series *The Crown*: the former super cheap to produce, the latter astronomically expensive, both with a huge reach in Sweden. For a publicly funded company in a small country who could never afford to produce *The Crown*, "the cheap production is what we must explore", Safiyari stated. *Malins vlog* and *Alex & Carro* are examples of cheap "public service vlogs" meeting the MAXA criteria described above. As we have seen, *In Love* ended

up outside the MAXA world but was characterised by the same “YouTube-ish” thinking, in terms of volume, frequency, cost, and (online-only) format.

Reaching the target groups

According to Safiyari, SVT Barn’s online transition has improved their reach compared with broadcast-only times, and digitalisation has led to “an increased niche focus on specific target groups, in more genres, and in more contexts”. During this transition, SVT chose to focus on the youngest and the oldest children. For the latter group, they have produced drama series such as *The Class*, *Jobbigt* [*Awkward*], *Vi 4ever* [*We 4ever*], *Snart 13* [*Soon 13*], *In Love*, and more recently, *Strula* [*Make Out*]. At the older end of this age segment, however, there is a sharp drop in engagement: Among 9–11-year-olds, SVT has a reach of around 70–80 per cent, while for 12–14-year-olds, it is 40 per cent, according to Safiyari.

SVT Barn must also keep in mind that they often hit below target with their programmes. Many viewers are considerably younger than the intended target group, whereas the actual target audience will watch “much, much more advanced stuff, like *Riverdale* or *Stranger Things*... content about adults or college or high school students... and so they reject us”, Bylund, one of the writers and directors of *In Love*, explained. Henrysson said that the childish-looking SVT Barn website does not help: “There’s a dilemma of identification there... if you’re on your way to becoming a teenager, would you admit that you’re watching something that includes the word child?”

Bragée expressed frustration with the lack of interest in funding content for teens, that is, the target group next up from that of *In Love*. Other Nordic public service television channels have specialised youth departments, often with roots in youth radio channel P3, “with expertise on how the target group works”, whereas SVT does not (see Andersen & Sundet, 2019). “SVT basically has problems reaching people from 12 to 50”, Bragée stated. SVT’s current policy is to focus on “the upper half of that problem”, hoping engagement will spill down onto younger audiences, whereas in Bragée’s view, it should be the other way around: “There’s an attitude that ‘they’ll come back after they’ve been out playing’. I don’t understand that thinking. If I’d been CEO, I’d have prioritised differently” (see also Sundet, Chapter 5 in this volume).

Henrysson suggested a lack of confidence within SVT – that youth have simply been deemed too difficult to reach and keep as audiences. Indeed, youth television has a history of being regarded as a “market failure” sector, considered too small to be interesting to investors (Steemers, 2017). For Safiyari, it is not a question of “yes or no” anymore, as *Shame* and other series have shown that the young *can* be reached by PSM. The question is instead how to achieve the same thing in other genres: “Outside drama, few things work”, he said, pointing to how variation and genre breadth are also part of the public service remit: “We can’t spend all our money on drama”.

The interviewees generally downplayed the importance of age when discussing the loss of viewers, or the claim that tweens and teens would be harder to reach than other groups, as discussed by Bylund:

I would love to see more youth content... but honestly, I think that some of them, we lose much earlier... like those watching nothing but Netflix from an early age or so... it probably goes for the whole age span... How do we attract people for whom SVT isn't a natural place to search for "What should I watch today?" ...it's a job that needs to be done for everyone.

Nonetheless, there seems to be a blind spot in SVT policy for late tweens and teens. At the time of interviewing, new programmes were in the pipeline. For example, Hanna Lagerberg's *Bror* [*Brother*] was under preproduction, a drama series aimed at teenage boys that was not to be "held back by the restrictions of the SVT Barn platform", according to Henrysson. However, there is still no specialised youth television department in sight, as there is in Danish and Norwegian public service television.

Using data to produce popular content

Television is traditionally a "gut feeling business", according to Brag  , meaning that producers and commissioners will base ideas and decisions on what they like themselves, or used to like as children; he started out that way himself three decades ago, but now he finds such an approach completely irrelevant. Brag   considers that public service is not primarily about *making* programmes, it is something that happens when people *watch* programmes: "If nobody watches, there is no public service", he said, and that is why he is "so obsessed with online statistics". Safiyari had a similar outlook: "Consumption equals relevance... if we disregard all other values". Aside from the market language, indicated here is that SVT Barn has chosen a trends-led or audience-led approach. "Viewers simply do not choose content they do not want to watch", as Safiyari put it. Children and youth themselves define what is relevant for them.

Brag   praised the *In Love* creative team for being "data-driven", that is, that they base ideas and creative decisions on audience data instead of intuition only. He particularly commended Lagerberg, one of the writers and directors, who came to SVT from a digital media background, "without the preconceptions of how it should be in TV production", who took a genuine interest in target group behaviour by studying the numbers and graphs:

To be data literate in online statistics, you need to have been doing it for a while, so that it's in your spine how every show looks and how the curves for those shows look. And she understands how to do that... few producers do.

There can be prestige in terms like “data” and “digital”, by which media companies strive to be perceived as innovative players within the media industries. McElroy and Noonan (2018: 159) pointed out a tendency for “futurology and technophilia” in discourses around digitalisation that can obscure the social world, and van Dijck (2014) has warned about “dataism”, an over-reliance on objective quantification that risks leading to alienation. Being “data-driven”, according to Jackson (2020: 210), is partly about basing decisions on data, but also about a fluid, agile way of working, an “approach that is alien to most producers accustomed to working in a linear way within television and radio”. For SVT Barn, “data” seems to be more about being audience oriented, whereas production processes remain quite conventional. Projects follow a preset pattern of preproduction, production, and postproduction. The blueprint of a project might be adjusted along the way, but it will not change dramatically, as it might in the IT and tech world, for example.

The interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the tools available for measuring online engagement. Gender, for example, is largely invisible in the statistics. They *assume* that the majority of *In Love* viewers are girls, but “as long as we don’t make more focused investigations, we don’t know... we only get viewing time, and devices used”, Henrysson explained. In “broadcast times”, SVT had access to more nuanced data through traditional audience investigations. Online statistics lack the demography: “Now we only see ‘OK, *Klassen* is being watched. But how old are they?’ We don’t know”, Bragée stated.

Analysis part 2: Close to the audience

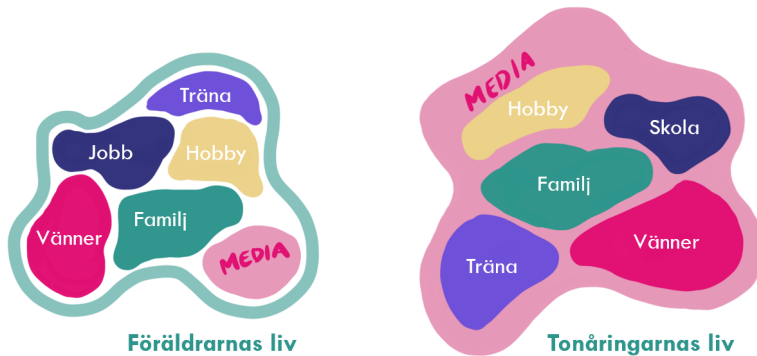
Bridging the generational gap

[The young] are difficult to reach *if* we assume that they are like we were when we were kids. [...] That’s the simple trick we came up with at SVT Barn, to not think that they are like us. Because they’re not. (Bragée)

According to Bragée, “the gap between children and adults today is bigger than it has been since the 1950s, a time when adults wore hats and spoke in a nasal way and did not understand what the youngsters were up to”. An investigation into media habits commissioned by SVT showed two kinds of viewer profiles, as represented in graphics in Figure 7.2: For the parental generation, “media” floats in a bubble next to family, friends, job, hobbies, and exercise; and for the 12–15-year-olds, media *is* the bubble in which all other areas (family, friends, school, hobbies, and exercise) are embedded. “They swim in it, you see, it’s like their bloodstream”, Bragée said, echoing Deuze’s (2012) “media life” of people living in, rather than with media, or perhaps the “deep mediatisation” of Couldry and Hepp (2017), in which

social life and mediated social life are so intertwined that it does not make sense to treat them as separate. Brag  e’s reasoning is also in line with the idea that personalised mobile technologies amplify generational segregation (Chambers, 2013: 101), that is, that the young have their world and the old have theirs, and that these rarely overlap – that there is a basic lack of understanding between the two.

FIGURE 7.2 “Media is the glue”



Source: By Augur: The Human Experience Agency    SVT Barn Malm  

SVT Barn tried to bridge this perceived gap during the production of *In Love*. Step one was audience research conducted by the writer–director duo, starting with casual chats with children in schools and libraries, and by “hanging out where kids hang out” in social media, Henrysson explained. Bylund and Lagerberg found that love and mobile phones were engaging themes: “There was this twelve-year-old boy asking ‘What if we could peek inside a girl’s Snapchat?’, and then the idea grew from there”, Bylund recounted.

Chats were followed by in-depth interviews with fifteen 12–14-year-olds. The youngsters were asked the same questions that the writer–director duo later asked their fictional characters, Adam and Bianca, when crafting them. The questions were inspired by Laurie Hutzler’s (n.d.) *Character Map*, a character-driven dramaturgical model used by Julie Andem for the production of *Shame*, and by Maria Karlsson Th  rnqvist for the SVT teen drama *Festen* [*The Party*]. Bylund explained:

I asked them questions about who they are, what they are afraid of, what they hope for in their lives, this thing about being in a relationship. I asked them to describe it... how it ended... how much you share with your parents, and how much you share with friends.

A central concept in this model is that we all wear masks, that we try to hide

our fears and insecurities. One of the interview questions was: “What would you say is the greatest misconception about you?” Lagerberg explained that “the answer is that character’s mask, which might not be the true you, but the first thing that meets the outside world, and how other people see you”. As an example, the main character Bianca’s mask is “Little Ms. Perfect”. She is pretty, smart, properly behaved, gets top grades in school, and so on. That is what her friends and family seem to associate her with – and perhaps someone she pretends to be at times – but we as viewers learn that there is more to her than that. Underneath the spotless surface there is a real person, struggling with emotions, stress, and identity.

This is classic Erving Goffman (1959) territory: juggling front stage and backstage selves. Goffman used the metaphor of theatre to explain human social interaction, comparing it with putting on various masks for various social situations. The theory is about performance, impression management, and life as social drama, also referred to as dramaturgical sociology or dramaturgical analysis. The Hutzler *Character Map* approach was used again when child stars Eva Jumatate and Oscar Stenbridge had been cast, asking them the same questions about fears, desires, and misconceptions. The fictional characters were then crafted not too differently from the actors: “When you’re that young and inexperienced, it’s easier to play a character who is close to oneself”, asserted Lagerberg.

From the audience interviews, the writer-director duo picked three outgoing girls and formed a reference group that they would consult throughout the production. They enjoyed being “nerdy with details”, asking them about everything from abbreviations used in chats to names of contacts in their phonebooks, which were often not proper names, Bylund shared. “Such things are fun and contribute to the feeling of authenticity”, added Lagerberg. In a RYA blog post (Christensen & Redvall, 2019), such an approach is referred to as working with junior editors: “a way to give the audience agency and get important input on the current lives of children”. The junior editor label could also be applied to the actual editor of *In Love* – a young person “not too far away from that reality”, Henrysson said. The editor insisted on keeping misspellings and such things in the “Snapchat graphics” to make it look more authentic. In the repackaged version *In Love: Long Episodes*, Lagerberg and the editor took it one step further, giving the digital communication a more coherent, and often rougher look. Throughout the production process, then, the writer-director duo approached the younger generation through dialogue and interaction, setting the stage for relevance.

A mirror or an ideal?

In Love is an interesting mix of everyday life and “larger than life”, a bit like how a musical switches between spoken parts and musical performance, or backstage and onstage. According to Henrysson, tweens are highly efficient

on their smartphones but inexperienced emotionally. For this reason, “the music layer” was given a prominent position. Twelve-year-old expressions of love might not be so advanced; therefore, music was used to “maximise the drama”. Adam and Bianca could be angrier, happier, more in love, and more hurt through music, Bylund said. The writer-director duo also spoke about wanting to make their series “goalsy”, something to strive for and dream about. Their two lead characters are not the average tweens, according to Bylund:

Well, they’re kind of “A Kids”, aren’t they? Super talented singers, really cute, they’re like... in that way, maybe we are showing an ideal... It’s a balancing act, to strengthen kids in various ways without becoming moralistic, or giving them too unattainable ideals... How many twelve-year-old boys would make an “I’m your biggest fan” [music] video for their girlfriends? In a way, that is raising the bar a lot...

Bragée defended the somewhat glossy world of *In Love*, referring to their repertoire as a whole, saying that it is not the same in all their programmes. Then, he countered by asking why this would be an issue in children’s content: “It’s a dream world. It’s an elevated reality, and that’s what we want. You know, that’s what we get all the time, us adults”. Regarding glossiness and music, Lagerberg compared it with *The O.C.*, a drama series she grew up watching about affluent Californian youth. However, “*In Love* is much closer to reality”, she asserted. Ratings showed that episodes featuring full music videos had more uncompleted views than other episodes, according to Henrysson. In the end, music, stardom, and glossiness did not seem to constitute the main appeal of *In Love*.

Adam and Bianca are noticeably well-behaved (most of the time) and their social world is a pretty gentle one. Their digital communication contains hardly any swear words, no “inappropriate” pictures, and they do not talk behind people’s backs. Bragée explained:

There is so much talk about children’s roughness and bullying... but the majority of what goes on online isn’t like that. And that’s important. If we were to portray everything that goes on online as we usually do in the adult world... that it’s hard and raw and problematic, they wouldn’t recognise themselves.

There were discussions regarding “bad behaviour” during the production of *In Love*. For example, Adam and Bianca try smoking, they break into a restricted area, Bianca tries wine, and Adam sometimes shoplifts. As the editor-in-chief [ansvarig utgivare], Bragée must weigh every such inclusion against the risk of being reported by the Swedish Broadcasting Commission [Granskningsnämnden]. The paragraph called “the special impact of the medium” in their licence agreement states that they cannot encourage or

inspire dangerous or criminal activities (MPRT, 2020: 7). Wine drinking, for example, can be included, “but we’re not allowed to portray it as all pleasant”, Brag   explained. While the creatives would have preferred “less disclaimers”, they expressed an appreciation of these discussions, as they “keep them on their toes”, as described by Bylund:

It’s an interesting balancing act. If we get too scared, we’ll lose relevance. But if we’re too... if we don’t take our public service role seriously, at the other end of the spectrum, then maybe we’ll lose trust, so in a way, that’s where we work all the time.

The above is an example of how dialogues become sites for articulating, performing, and negotiating values of credibility, relevance, and trust (Hill, 2021). Values are not just words in a policy document, they must be constantly re-articulated and re-invented in living, breathing production cultures.

Adapting to a smartphone culture

Marshall McLuhan claimed already in the 1960s that “all technologies are extensions of our physical and nervous systems” (McLuhan, 1964/1994). In *In Love*, we see Adam and Bianca constantly texting, Snapchatting, Facetiming, “lurking” (checking each other out on social media), updating, filming, publishing, and commenting. Their digital communication is certainly “anytime, anywhere, always on” (Vincent & Haddon, 2018: 5). By showing mobile screen action on top of live action, we are invited as spectators of the “performance of self” (Goffman, 1959) as the characters perform their selves in multiple social worlds, often simultaneously. One such example is when Bianca watches television with her mother in an early episode, while at the same time texting with Adam. By comparing the mobile phone dialogue with the verbal dialogue, we can clearly see the performance in both. It is striking how unextraordinary such a complex social situation has become, in life as in mediated representations of it. Brag   commended his creative team for how they handled the digital layer – for example, when all we see is Bianca scrolling on her phone, how we read drama into the pace of scrolling, what images she stops at, the way she scrolls back up, and so on: “It’s like being inside her brain”, Brag   said.

The smartphone culture of *In Love* can be situated within a celebratory or idealised representation of digital communication among young people. Such a positive picture is not entirely uncontroversial in a country where discourses around children using screens can be negative. There is no trace of the “child at risk” here: phenomena like addiction, bullying, or antisocial behaviour (Mascheroni, 2018). Adam and Bianca are more social through their smartphones, not less. Safiyari said that it partly has to do with

relevance, but also with an “anti-authoritarian model of thinking” and a “core democratic idea”:

A large part of Scandinavian TV culture for kids... is built on a philosophy of not pointing the finger [...]. One should not patronise kids, not be on a mission to raise kids... what is bad for them and what is... you know, but instead having a more affirmative attitude towards life.

It would be something of a paradox for SVT Barn to prescribe less screen time for children: “How could we ever join an anti-screen movement? Because we work with screens ourselves”, Safiyari stated. In the world of *In Love*, smartphones are unproblematic devices, even when Adam and Bianca lie sleepless in bed because the other did not reply. Difficulty sleeping is otherwise one of the risks that has been outlined, as are expectations of constant availability and reciprocity (Mascheroni, 2018). Instead, this was put forth by Lagerberg as one of the main elements of *appeal*:

I think that one of them is recognition... and intimacy... That you're allowed into someone's bedroom when that person can't sleep, because he or she didn't get a reply on a “snap”. I don't think we've seen that being portrayed a lot for this target group in Sweden.

Not too long ago, it might have appeared strange to see twelve-year-olds “glued” to their mobile screens in a public service drama. However, surveys showed already in 2017 that more than one-third of Swedish 7–8-year-olds, and 98 per cent of 11-year-olds had their own smartphones (Davidsson & Thoresson, 2017: 24). Danish public service television (DR) even changed how they divide the target groups for their two online platforms for children and youth, Ramasjang (4–8-year-olds) and Ultra (9–14-year-olds), based on when Danish children receive their first smartphone, which is around eight or nine (Christensen & Redvall, 2019). Being able to reach children through personal media devices, then, changes the way content is planned, produced, and provided for this group.

Steemers (2019) has pointed out that even in highly digitalised parts of the world, the level of digital literacy varies. We cannot assume, for example, that all children are equally at home with social media apps, or that they can or want to (or are allowed to) run their own YouTube channel. It seems that *In Love* targets a particular kind of child: the mediated digital literate with a strong online presence. The “digital layer”, however, does not appear to be the main thing that drew audiences to the series. SVT's ratings showed that episodes featuring live interaction were more popular than “Snapchat episodes”, according to Henrysson. In the end, the core appeal of a series with so much digital communication turned out to be old-fashioned human contact and intimacy.

Looking for the “i” in interaction

Digital media technologies have been said to speed up children’s emancipation from the family sphere and provide them with an autonomous “private sphere” with continuous access to the peer group (Chambers, 2013; Mascheroni, 2018). In such a secluded space, identities and social worlds can be constructed and experimented with beyond the scrutiny of authority figures like parents and teachers. However, identity search remains emotionally stressful. Bylund explains:

Bianca has got one foot in family life and one foot in a world of friends that is starting to exert more pressure, and all the time... even in the relationship with Adam, all the time she gets exposed to having to make choices about who she is. Trying to find that voice, what you want yourself and who you are.

In Goffman’s (1959) interactionism, the self is not fixed but fluctuates according to whom one is interacting with. Likewise, Hall and du Gay (1996: 4) emphasised that identities can only be maintained in relation to the Other. Bianca puts on different masks for different Others. Who does she want to be? The mask she wears when she is with Adam (the outsider), or the one she wears for Oliver (the popular guy) to impress her friends? Or the mask she wears at home for her mother?

Seen through Frosh’s (1991) “crisis model”, Bianca’s identity search would potentially go on forever. However, she is a character in a television drama with a beginning, middle, and end. There is closure to her struggle. In the final episode of *In Love*, Bianca confronts her mother, portrayed as a strict and demanding parent throughout the series. Forced to give up her love for being “a good girl”, Bianca now follows her heart and chooses Adam, the only person who has ever asked her what *she* wants. As it turns out, they both want to be the selves they are in their co-constructed world: a world that exists only between them, through their interaction and mutual interest.

Likewise, SVT Barn can only be “public service” when audiences choose to be served – and they did: 72,000 online ratings per episode are decent numbers for an online-only small-budget experiment. *In Love* is a small piece in the larger puzzle of SVT Barn’s identity search in the contemporary digital media environment. Unlike the tween characters of *In Love*, however, who complete their transition and leave their liminal existence, SVT Barn must keep searching, stay in transition, and always be “in process” (Hall & du Gay, 1996) to remain relevant.

Conclusion

Informing, educating, and entertaining young people in the 2020s is a complex endeavour. SVT Barn is searching for ways to redefine and strengthen its brand identity, aiming to regain the ground it lost or simply never had in some segments. Public service productions are now influenced by popular online formats from other, essentially different areas of the digital media landscape. SVT's strategy is to try to attract viewers to its own platforms (and not having much of a presence on other platforms), where formats tailored for online and smartphone consumption are tested and evaluated. Although Nordic PSM must compete (for attention) in a commercially driven platform context, how could they ever, with such limited budgets, provide the full range of nuanced, niche content that audiences have come to expect? Glancing too much at Netflix and YouTube might prove to be a dead end. Without losing sight of new, popular formats, maintaining and cultivating its unique position as an alternative is what will continue to make public service stand out from the rest.

“Love and smartphones” were themes that came out of audience investigations and interviews, traditional methods that still constitute an essential part of remaining close to the audience. Music was used to maximise the drama, to paint a picture of a “goalsy” world in which twelve-year-olds have love relationships and can express their emotions like mini-adults. Dreaming about becoming famous through self-promotion online could be assumed to be close to a tween world of YouTubers and influencers. However, ratings showed that audiences were hungrier for “offline intimacy” and “live” social interaction, perhaps a reflection of pandemic times of social restrictions, or an indication of a general longing for the genuine.

The smartphone culture of *In Love* is positive and pro-social, celebrating independence from parental influence, emphasising the opportunities for performing selves, and conducting personal relationships. The “anytime, anywhere, always on” connectivity was put forth as recognisable and appealing, not as something problematic. This rendition could very well represent “an affirmative attitude towards life”, but also a strategic choice, as SVT Barn considered online and smartphone formats as their best shot at reaching young viewers.

“Data” was the prestige word of the day, as the Malmö branch claimed to have abandoned the “gut feeling” of olden days, instead opting for more modern, data-driven forms of production. The datafication of SVT Barn, however, is more about listening to audiences than adopting fluid and agile production methods. SVT Barn is listening through conversation and interaction, and by studying the numbers and graphs of online statistics.

In Love proves once again that young viewers *can* be reached by PSM. However, producers must keep talking to their viewers to continue to evolve within the digital ecology. Online statistics alone are not sufficient for es-

tablishing a data-driven PSM 3.0 (Jackson, 2020). More focused audience investigations, not least regarding the reception of programmes, are needed, or PSM will keep chasing shadows when seeking young people's attention. Interaction is clearly valued by SVT themselves, as seen in other areas of their repertoire, for example, in initiatives such as *Fika med SVT* [*Coffee with SVT*], in which audiences are invited to “digital coffee sessions” to discuss how SVT can improve. Regarding young viewers, communicating through the SVT Barn Instagram account is not enough. More “old-school interaction” is needed to provide the data required for a “modern”, up-to-date SVT Barn 3.0. Maybe it is time to update that classic trio of public service values with a fourth one? Inform, *interact*, educate, and entertain.

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Endnote

1. The way online ratings work for television, according to the SVT personnel, is that one full view of an episode equals one rating. If, for instance, one person watches half an episode, and another person (or the same person) watches half an episode, it counts as one online rating. For more information about online ratings, see the Swedish website MMS (<https://mms.se>) and the tab “Så mäter online-tittandet” [How we measure online viewing]. MMS is a service for measuring the consumption of moving images in Sweden and Scandinavia. It is owned by SVT (24%), NENT Group (24%), TV4 (24%), Discovery Networks Sweden (24%), and others (4%).

The appeal of public service fiction in an internationalised media context

Findings from a survey of 8–17-year-old Danes

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an inquiry into Danish children's and adolescents' media habits and preferences when it comes to fictional screen content, with a specific focus on the role of Danish content and platforms. The inquiry reveals a strong preference for and large consumption of content originating from the US on global streaming platforms, and, when it comes to specific fictional screen content, Danish children clearly favour American films and series over those from Denmark or elsewhere. When asked to rate specific films and series, they favour genre-driven titles over titles with "higher" artistic or cultural value. The chapter shows that on the global streaming platforms, Danish children and adolescents find an abundance of what to them is high-quality content, perceived as more relevant to them than domestically produced content. A concluding discussion points out the potential implications of the findings for existing curatorial practices in domestic public service broadcasters, both in general as well as in terms of national funding models.

KEYWORDS: audiovisual fiction, children, adolescents, Denmark, reception, streaming, public service, audience

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Introduction

In this chapter, we inquire into Danish children's and adolescents' media habits and preferences when it comes to fictional screen content, that is, films and series. This inquiry focuses on the role of Danish content and Danish platforms in relation to young audiences' habits and preferences, and what this may imply for the curatorial practices of domestic broadcasters and funding bodies. Methodologically, this is done through a survey ($n = 313$) of 8–17-year-old Danish children and teenagers, through which we explore how they relate to various fictional screen content and the platforms providing it. As such, the chapter offers insights about the children's use of and relationship with Danish public service providers of fictional screen content, namely the Danish Broadcasting Corporation, DR, and their dedicated children's channels Ramasjang and Ultra, plus TV 2 and the global providers Netflix, Disney+, and YouTube. The survey also presents children's favourite YouTube channels, films, and series. The respondents were free to define what they themselves like, creating a contrast to the fact that the majority of the content provided is produced, commissioned, and curated for children by *adults*: parents, teachers, and industry professionals.

We begin the chapter by positioning children's fictional content in the Danish context, followed by a theoretical argument on why it is important to investigate children's media from the perspective of children themselves. After this, we discuss the methodological challenges in doing so and introduce in detail how we conducted the survey. Subsequently, we outline the findings from the survey, relating to platform preference, frequency of use, types of content (genres) watched on each platform, favourite content (that is, films, series, and YouTube channels), as well as the children's specific opinions on 14 film and series titles. Finally, we sum up and reflect on the findings in relation to what they may entail for the curatorial practices of domestic funding and production institutions of children's audiovisual fiction and for the future consumption patterns of the children as they become adults.

Children's content in the Danish context

Children's content occupies a prominent place within the Danish audiovisual landscape. The importance of children's films and television programmes is emphasised in the primary policy instrument – Filmaftalen 2019–2023 (Kulturministeriet, 2018) – stipulating that the Danish Film Institute (DFI) shall invest 25 per cent of its budget in content for children and young audiences. In addition, Denmark is currently the best performing country in Europe when it comes to the share of domestic children's films (Ebert, 2019: 9). Moreover, DR has one broadcast channel (Ramasjang) and two online channels (Minisjang and Ultra) specifically targeting children from the age of 1 until the age of 14.

Danish audiovisual policies stipulate generous production investments and public service engagement in content for children, and there are several media literacy initiatives where children receive access to different kinds of fictional and factual content and learn how to reflect on it. The most comprehensive initiatives in this regard are the Filmcentralen [The Film Centre] project, which offers a lot of fictional content and teaching material online as well as its subprogramme – Med skolen i biografen [School Cinema] – that focuses on theatrical screenings of films for children of all ages.

While DFI and DR have different remits and purposes guiding the films and series they curate on behalf of Danish children, they share some overarching criteria for quality: The content they fund or produce, on the one hand, must necessarily have an artistic or cultural value, while on the other, this cultural or artistic value must be balanced with an evident audience appeal (Mitric & Levie, 2016). For example, according to DFI's own document, the core of a quality project combines a strongly relevant theme for Danish culture, history, society, and everyday life, with an original tone and the filmmaker's personal involvement in the film (DFI, 2014). When it comes to DR, and as is evident in the chapters from Christa Lykke Christensen and Eva Novrup Redvall (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, respectively, in this volume), the public broadcaster's productions must also address the value of children's issues, for example, puberty, bullying, or the so-called performance society. In addition to this, both DFI and DR only fund and produce content in the Danish language. Despite the fact that the School Cinema programme also screens foreign films, the leader of the film literacy programme, Jacob Breuning, evokes similar criteria to DFI and DR when explaining how films are chosen:

We want our films to represent different nationalities and create cultural diversity. We also pick art films; our catalogues contain very few mainstream titles. Themes of the films are also important. Finally, the films need to be well-made to be able to keep children's attention, but also provide a cultural experience and have an educational value. (As cited in Mitric, 2022: 7)

Yet, despite these incentives for development, production, and promotion of children's content in Denmark, Danish children spend an increasing amount of time consuming content from non-domestic providers such as YouTube, Netflix, and Disney+. Hence, Danish children are watching proportionally less domestic Danish-language audiovisual content on Danish platforms. This general development has been documented in several reports (DR, 2020, 2021, 2022; Hansen et al., 2020; Kulturministeriet, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c) and is a reflection of media systemic changes and the ensuing increased competition from global Anglo-American players. English is usually no obstacle in itself to Danish children (English is taught in school from the age of seven), and Danes have the highest per-household uptake of subscription video-on-demand

(SVoD) platforms in Europe (Grece, 2021). Thus, English-language content, predominantly from the US – with both universal and niche appeal and high production and entertainment values – is readily accessible to a large proportion of Danish children. In 2019, 15–24-year-old Danes accessed content on no less than five different streaming services, on average (DR, 2020: 18). In addition, younger viewers are the most difficult to please when it comes to content – and the least sentimental when it comes to the platform on which they choose to watch it (DR, 2021: 32).

The changing media landscape, primarily the increasing competition of social media platforms and SVoD services, challenges legacy providers of children’s fictional content. An interesting question is whether the consistent focus on quality in the domestically produced and publicly funded content matters to audience preferences. This chapter presents a survey that investigates how appealing children and adolescents find global providers and international content – as opposed to Danish providers and content – and what it is they like and maybe even prefer about these platforms and content, and how it relates to their use of Danish fictional screen content and platforms as curated by institutions such as DFI, DR, and School Cinema.

Children’s conceptions of quality and relevance in media content

Deeming children’s content to be “bad” suggests that children need to be protected from themselves – from the consequences of their own dubious tastes and uncultured desires. [...] Disparaging children’s cultural consumption is an act of power that works to perpetuate and reinforce distinctions between the child and the adult, often reinscribing adult culture as the “valued” culture. (Coulter, 2021: 23–24)

The above quote points to the fact that often, in scholarship as well as in popular and interpersonal discourse, children’s and adolescents’ preferred media content and media use is considered of poor quality and bad taste: ridiculous, artless, sensationalist, vulgar – or all of the above (see also Drotner, 1999). The quote also reminds us that such labelling of children’s media is an act of power on behalf of adults that not only belittles and disparages children, but also assesses children’s media from an entirely adult perspective. From this perspective, children and adolescents must be protected from their own “dubious” tastes by the intervention and content curation of adults, be they teachers, producers, platform providers, broadcasters, or parents.

This perspective overlooks the fact that children’s media diets are often more complex than assumed (Lange, 2014), and that children’s media habits (also) act to defy adults whilst at the same time defining their own identities (James, 1998). It also stands in the way of getting to know precisely what

children do with media, and why. What media content and practices do children actually like, and why? The point of departure in this study is to map what content on which platforms Danish children themselves prefer and use, as well as why. This aim is associated with particular methodological challenges, which are discussed more in-depth in the next sections.

We focus on audiovisual fiction – that is, series and films – as a cultural experience that in some way impacts viewers positively (Carnwath & Brown, 2014). Our research question is to identify the value attributed to films and series by children – free from adult notions of primarily high and low culture, or good and bad taste.

Methodology and survey design

The survey providing the empirical base for this chapter forms part of a larger two-step and so-called “sequential” (Creswell & Clark, 2017) mixed-methods study on Danish children’s and adolescents’ notions of quality and relevance in audiovisual fiction, in which the survey was the first exploratory step that was later followed by a qualitative study.¹ The survey itself was divided into three sections, each featuring different types of questions to illuminate the preferences of the respondents when it comes to audiovisual fiction on various platforms: multiple-choice questions, yes–no questions, and open-ended qualitative questions. The answers to the first two question groups were quantified in our analysis, whereas the open-ended questions provided nuanced and qualitative insights into the children’s preferences and opinions. As such, the survey was designed to give us, first, an idea of what Danish children and adolescents like and don’t like about audiovisual fiction and the platforms that provide it, and second – via the open-ended questions – some preliminary indications as to the reasons behind their likes and dislikes that could later be explored in more detail in the qualitative second step of the overall study.

Understanding the world from a child’s point of view and finding a way to give children a voice was a methodological challenge when constructing the survey. Methods such as interviews, focus groups, and on-site participant observation run the risk of a power-misbalance between adults and children, which may lead to the children manifesting the tastes and behaviours they think are expected by the adults, rather than freely speaking their minds (Dobson, 2021; Taylor & Rooney, 2017). In such situations, researchers run the risk of creating a school-like setting and, instead of generating new insights and perspectives, achieving little more than reproducing the adult–child power-misbalance and too quickly confirming the pre-assumed patterns of children’s tastes and behaviours (Willett & Richards, 2021). Having reflected on this issue, a survey seemed the best way of “staying invisible” to our respondents – to the extent possible – in the collection of data. Accordingly, a

digitally distributed and fully anonymous survey crystalised as the best solution (using SurveyXact). Respondents could answer all questions anonymously and provide unfiltered opinions in their answers. The only personal data they were asked to provide were gender, age, location, parents' occupation, and languages spoken to assess the sociodemographic diversity of the sample. Making the survey completely anonymous had obvious advantages, such as minimising any desirability bias in responses, but it also presented some challenges. While encouraging respondents to provide uncensored answers, the anonymity prevented us from making the link between their socio-demographic background, or social habitus, and their media preferences. We did, however, include questions about which languages respondents speak and about the profession of their parents, which gave us at least a general idea about the sociodemographic milieu of the entire sample.

While sampling respondents, we prioritised achieving diversity in terms of sociodemographic background, geographical location, gender, and ethnicity. To achieve this, we collaborated with Absalon, one of the Danish regional centres of education, whose representatives connected us with three provincial schools. Additionally, we reached out to several teachers from different parts of Denmark, asking them to circulate the survey link among their students. In addition to distributing the survey link on social media, a total of seven teachers distributed the survey among students within the age group. This meant that we received answers from children from four out of five of Denmark's regions: Central Jutland, Southern Denmark, Zealand, and Greater Copenhagen. Respondents came from different places within these regions and had different sociodemographic backgrounds. The sample included equal shares of boys and girls as well as just under 1 per cent who identified as non-binary.² Approximately 8 per cent of the respondents had an ethnic minority background, which we concluded based on the languages the respondents could speak. An analysis of the jobs of the respondents' parents suggested a diversity of social backgrounds and, as such, the respondents are likely to have been exposed to different types of content through the media preferences and habits of their parents (compare with Lindell, 2018). Thus, even though the survey consisted of a convenience sample and *not* a representative sample, we are confident that the 313 completed surveys represent a fairly typical snapshot of Danish children's and adolescents' opinions and preferences. This is supported by the fact that the general findings to do with, for example, platform use and favourite content, were very much in line with the trends of representative surveys conducted by institutions such as DFI, Nordisk Film, DR, The Ministry of Culture, and The Media Council for Children and Adolescents (DR, 2020, 2021, 2022; Hansen et al., 2020; Kulturministeriet, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

Findings

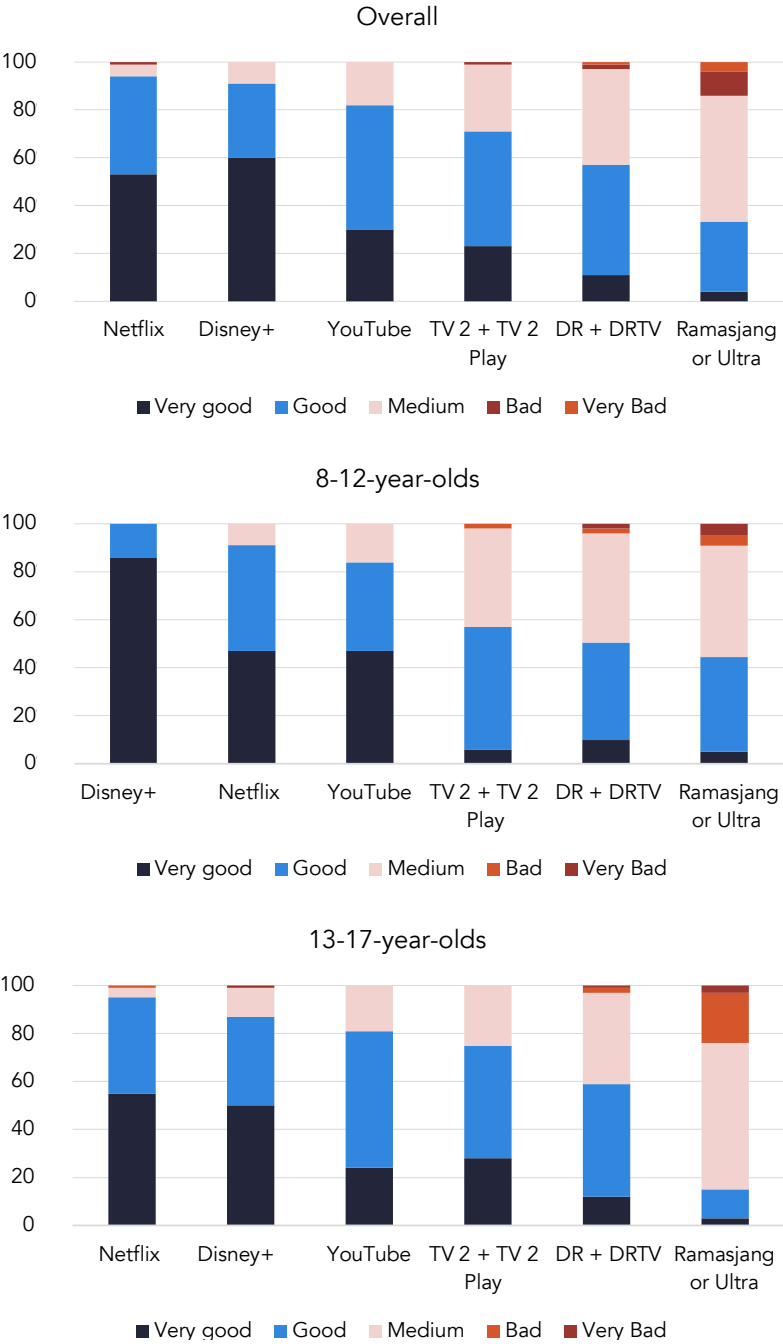
We now present and discuss the overall survey findings. First, we present the children's platform preferences and the frequency with which they use the platforms. Then, we present what types of content (or genres) the children watch on which platforms in order to know specifically where they watch fictional content (and where they do not). After this, we account for and discuss the patterns in the children's favourite films and series, as well as their favourite YouTube channels. Finally, we analyse and reflect upon the patterns in the children's responses to the 14 specific films and series they were asked to rate and comment on.

Platform preferences – Netflix is king

In the first part of the survey, we explored the children's relationship with six relatively popular content providers in Denmark: two global SVoD providers, Netflix and Disney+; public broadcaster DR, with two channels for 5–14-year-old children, Ramasjang (for 5–8-year-olds) and Ultra (for 9–14-year-olds, online-only); and the two national public broadcasters and their BVoD (broadcast video-on-demand) services, DR and DRTV, and TV 2 and TV 2 Play; and finally, YouTube, an AVoD (advertiser-funded video-on-demand) service.

Overall, and as is evident in Figure 8.1, the respondents thought the highest of Netflix and Disney+ (over 90% of them thought that these two platforms are either “very good” or “good”). YouTube follows next with 80 per cent of respondents answering either “very good” or “good”. As for the Danish platforms, TV 2 and its streaming service TV 2 Play had the best score, with 70 per cent positive opinions (i.e., “very good” or “good”), followed by DR and DRTV's 55 per cent. The dedicated children's channels Ramasjang and Ultra were rated as “very good” or “good” by just over 30 per cent – the lowest score. Ramasjang and Ultra are also the only two platforms that a distinct number of respondents (15%) rated as “very bad” or “bad”. Nevertheless, this changes slightly if we divide opinions by age. As seen in Figure 8.1, the 8–12-year-old children's opinions on Ramasjang and Ultra were slightly better than the rest, but they still clearly preferred Netflix and Disney+. At the same time, the interest in and opinion of Ramasjang and Ultra noticeably, and quite logically, decreased among teenagers (outside the identified target group).

FIGURE 8.1 Opinions about content providers, by age (per cent)



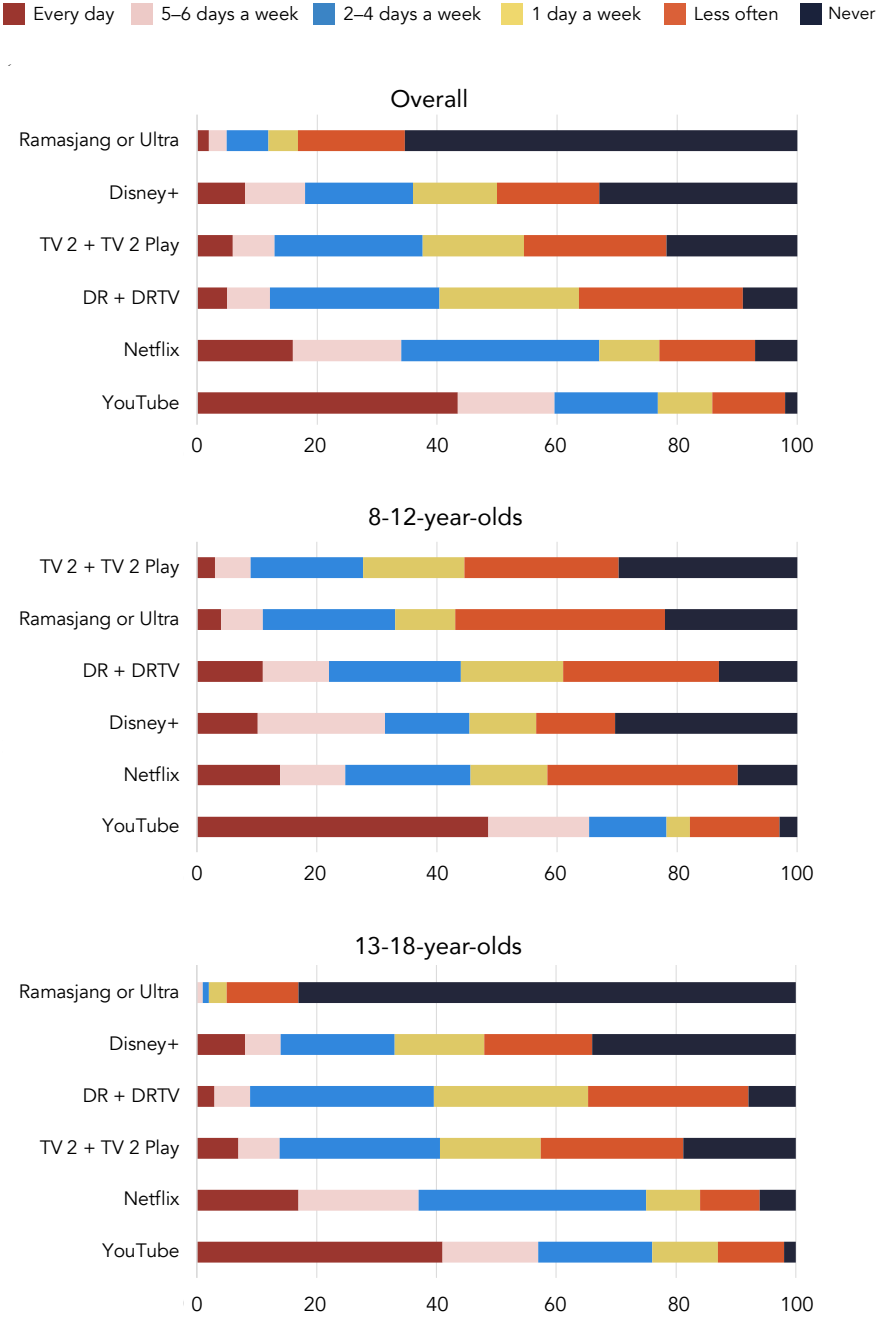
Comments: $n = 313$. Survey question asked: "Hvor godt synes du om [platformnavn]?" ("How well do you like [platform name]?")

It is important to note that, while Danish children do really like, and also prefer, the global Anglo-American platforms, their opinion of DR and TV 2 rises with age, indicating that children remain open and exposed to Danish content as they get older. The rising popularity might also point to a lack of Danish-language content for adolescents over the age of 13, a group that is no longer a prioritised audience for Danish content providers and producers. Even though teenage children's interest in Netflix and Disney+ remains unabated, the number of respondents who replied that Netflix, Disney+, and YouTube were "very good" decreases with age. It indicates that teenagers are not uncritical of global streaming platforms, inviting further research on the opinions of global SVoD services among older children.

Children prefer YouTube over other providers of media content

Children of all ages watch YouTube most frequently (see Figure 8.2), with 40 per cent of them spending time on YouTube daily. Netflix is the second most frequented platform, while Disney+ is watched less than the two Danish providers TV 2 and DR. 30 per cent never watch Disney+, even though Danish children, as shown in the previous section, have a very positive opinion of the platform. This is likely due to the recent introduction (September 2020) of Disney+ in Denmark at the time of survey collection (March 2021), which meant that the Danish subscription uptake of Netflix was much larger than that of Disney+. However, one can argue that the fact that almost as many children watch Disney+ on a weekly basis (after only half a year on the Danish market at the time of the survey) than TV 2 and TV 2 Play is indeed impressive and testifies to the robust popularity of Disney+ among Danish children.

FIGURE 8.2 How often children watch content from different providers, by age (per cent)



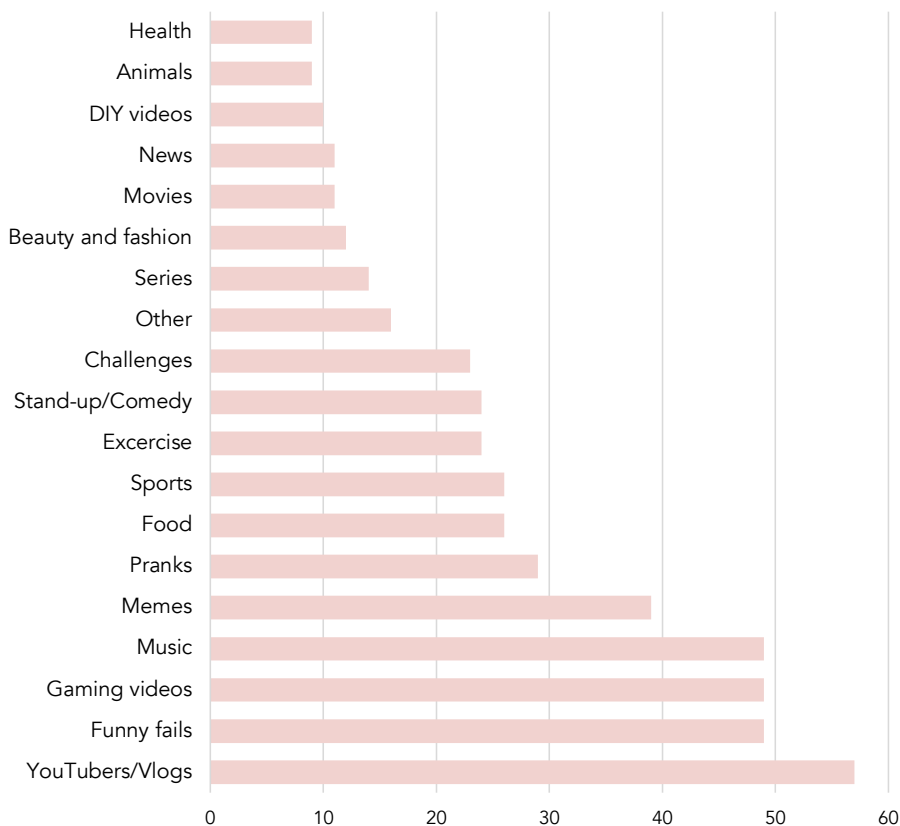
Comments: $n = 313$. Survey question asked: "Hvor tit ser du [platformnavn]?" ("How often do you watch [platform name]?")

As for the Danish providers, the respondents relatively often frequent DR and DRTV (just over 60%) and TV 2 and TV 2 Play (just over 50%) at least once a week. Around two-thirds of the children never watch Ramasjang or Ultra (as indicated by their general opinion shown above). However, the situation changes if we single out the answers from the 8–12 age group: They frequent the public service children's platforms (Ramasjang and Ultra) more often than the older ones do. Additionally, once they become teenagers, it seems that these platforms almost disappear from their media diet, which is a natural consequence of the fact that the two platforms cater to children up until the age of 14.

Genre preferences among Danish children

Although YouTube is the most frequented platform among Danish children and adolescents, only a marginal share of their time on YouTube is spent watching fictional content (see Figure 8.3). Most of their time on YouTube is dedicated to following YouTubers as well as gaming, memes, and music videos. The taste and preference for YouTube genres vary across age and gender. Younger kids primarily want to watch gaming videos, while teenagers spend most of their time watching YouTubers and music videos, even though gaming remains popular (for more details on specific findings relating to YouTube, see Jensen et al., 2021). Despite certain overlaps, boys and girls show different preferences for the YouTube genres. While gaming videos are extremely popular with the boys, they are only the tenth most popular genre with the girls. Instead, girls primarily watch videos by their favourite YouTubers, followed by videos featuring food, music, and exercise (Jensen et al., 2021).

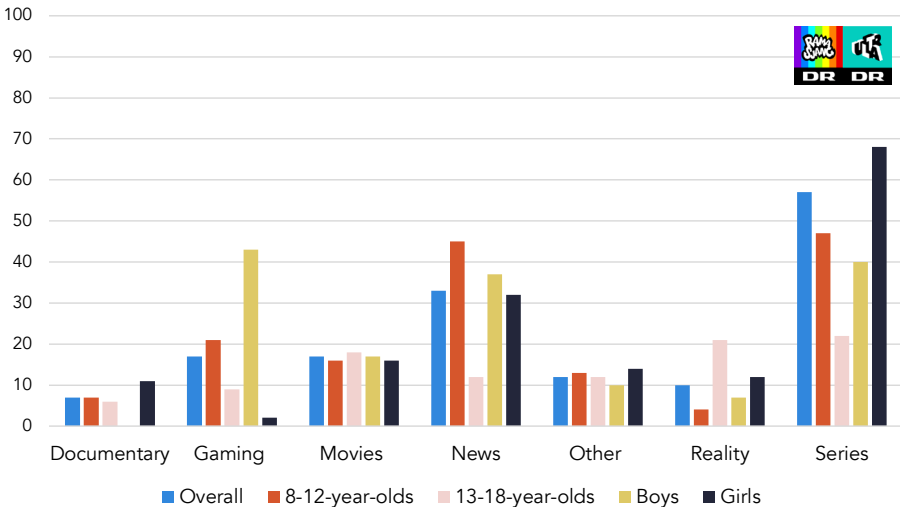
FIGURE 8.3 Genre use on YouTube (per cent)



Comments: *n* = 313. Survey question asked: "Hvilke genrer ser du på YouTube?" ("Which genres do you watch on YouTube?")

Children and adolescents do not seem to use YouTube for watching films and series, even though a lot of films and series are in fact available on the platform. As we shall see in the following, this is most likely because they use other content providers to watch fiction and, as such, do not associate YouTube with films and series. When it comes to Ramasjang and Ultra, on the other hand, children often watch films and series, even though factual genres such as news, documentaries, and reality are also prominent genres. For example, 35 per cent frequent these two platforms to watch news, while 21 per cent go there for programmes on gaming (see Figure 8.4). However, this picture changes if we consider boys and girls separately. The boys frequent Ramasjang and Ultra primarily to watch programmes on gaming (43%), followed by series (40%) and news (37%), while the girls most often watch series (68%), followed by news (32%) and films (16%).

FIGURE 8.4 Genre use on Ramasjang or Ultra, by age and gender (per cent)



Comments: $n = 313$. Survey question asked: "Hvilke genrer ser du på Ramasjang eller Ultra?" ("Which genres do you watch on Ramasjang or Ultra?")

Similar tendencies are evident in the case of the other two Danish content providers – DR and DRTV, and TV 2 and TV 2 Play. The only difference is that the genres children watch on these two platforms are even more diversified (as evident in Figure 8.5a–d). Reversely, genre consumption is less diverse when it comes to the two global streaming platforms Disney+ and Netflix. The children (or, rather, their parents) sign up for Disney+ primarily to watch films (97%) and series (73%). The situation is similar in the case of Netflix, where 94 per cent and 93 per cent of children log in to watch films and series, respectively. On Netflix, a higher percentage of children also watch documentaries, stand-up and comedy, and entertainment. The latter genres are more popular among older children.

FIGURE 8.5a Genre use on DR + DRTV (per cent)

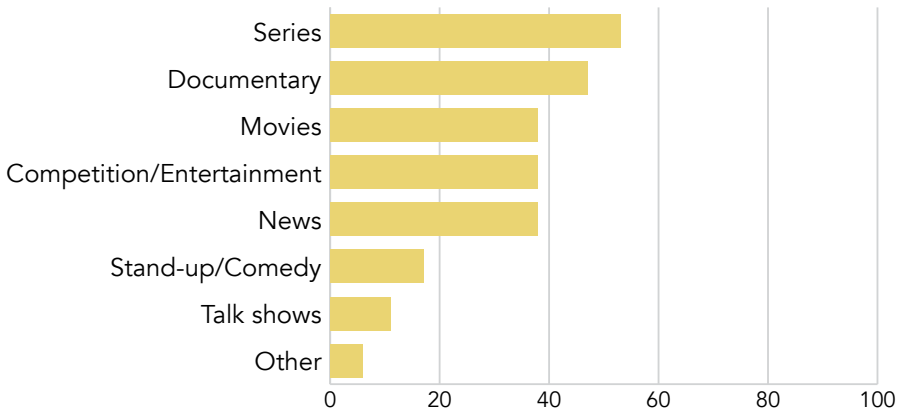


FIGURE 8.5b Genre use on TV 2 + TV 2 Play (per cent)

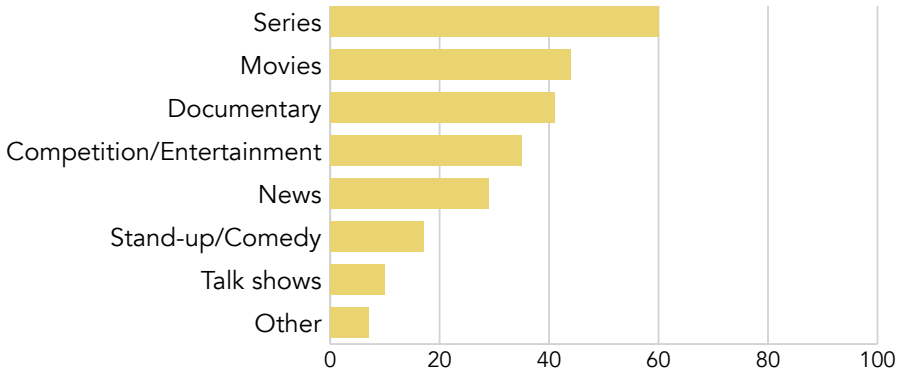


FIGURE 8.5c Genre use on Netflix (per cent)

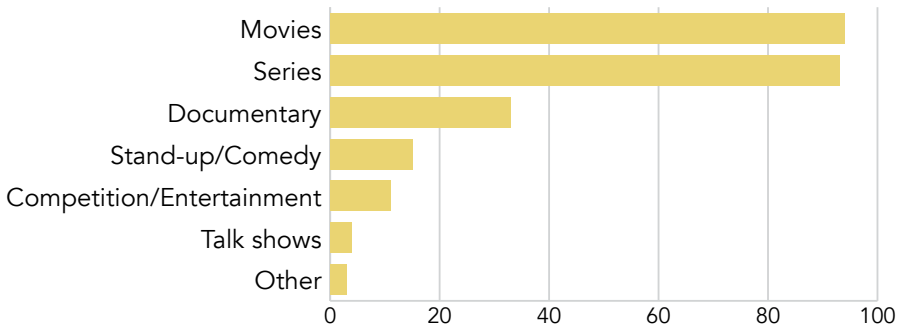
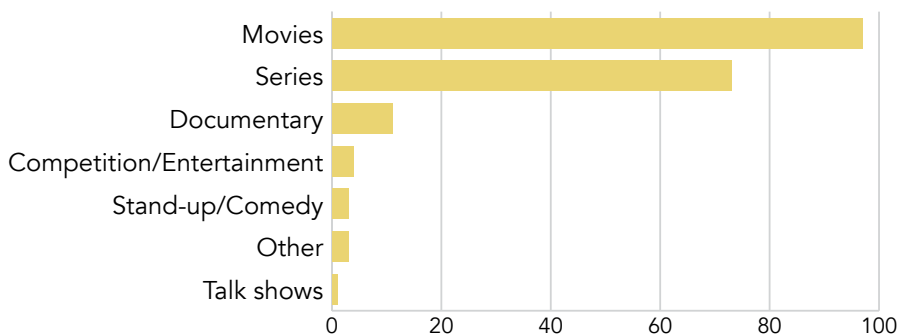


FIGURE 8.5d Genre use on Disney+ (per cent)



Comments: *n* = 313. Survey question asked: "Hvilke genrer ser du på [platformnavn]?" ("Which genres do you watch on [platform name]?")

The above analysis clearly shows how respondents associate certain genres with specific providers. The platform they watch most, YouTube, caters to their need for non-fictional content such as vlogs, music videos, and gaming. When they want to watch a series or a film, they log in to Netflix or Disney+ or the national players DR and TV 2. Children also use DR and TV 2 for watching various factual genres in Danish (e.g., news, documentaries, and gaming). It also becomes evident that, as far as the boys are concerned, gaming content on YouTube is a competitor to watching fictional content in the form of films and series. This is in line with the results of a report from The Danish Film Institute that showed how boys, if given the choice, would rather spend three hours of leisure time playing videogames than go to see a movie in the cinema (Hansen et al., 2020).

Favourite content

The qualitative part of the survey asked children to provide the titles of up to five of their favourite films, series, and YouTube channels, to provide a picture of what respondents perceive to be the best content. As is evident from Table 8.1, the list of the top ten rankings of the most mentioned films contains no Danish titles. Of the twelve movie titles occupying the first ten rankings, ten are American productions, while one is a co-production between the US and New Zealand (*The Lord of the Rings*) and one is a British production (*Harry Potter*), which is in first place. The list of the top ten most mentioned series is also dominated by American series, although it does contain one Danish title (*Those Who Kill*), tied at tenth place, one Spanish title (*La Casa de Papel*), one Canadian-Irish series (*Vikings*), and three British series (*Sex Education*, *Peaky Blinders*, and *The Office*). It is also worth noting that among the most

popular series are a couple of old-time staples: *Friends* (originally running from 1994–2004), *Breaking Bad* (originally running from 2008–2013), and *How I Met Your Mother* (originally running from 2005–2014), while the multi-award-winning movie *Shawshank Redemption* (from 1994) also made it into the top ten.

TABLE 8.1 Most-mentioned favourite movies, series, and YouTube channels

Rank	Movies	Series	YouTube Channels
1	<i>Harry Potter</i> (UK) 47 mentions	<i>Friends</i> (US) 26 mentions	<i>MrBeast</i> (US) 32 mentions
2	<i>Avengers</i> (US) 33 mentions	<i>Stranger Things</i> (US) 25 mentions	<i>KSI</i> (UK) <i>Morten Münster</i> (DK) <i>Sidemen</i> (UK) 14 mentions
3	<i>After</i> (US) 24 mentions	<i>Breaking Bad</i> (US) 18 mentions	<i>Kender du det</i> (DK) <i>Alexander Husum</i> (DK) 13 mentions
4	<i>Star Wars</i> (US) 20 mentions	<i>Lucifer</i> (US) 17 mentions	<i>Josefine Simone Dahl</i> (DK) <i>Emilie Briting</i> (DK) 12 mentions
5	<i>Hunger Games</i> (US) 19 mentions	<i>Riverdale</i> (US) <i>The 100</i> (US) <i>The vampire Diaries</i> (US) 14 mentions	<i>Pewdiepie</i> (SE) 11 mentions
6	<i>Spiderman</i> (US) 17 mentions	<i>Outer Banks</i> (US) <i>Teen Wolf</i> (US) 13 mentions	<i>Signe Kragh</i> (DK) 9 mentions
7	<i>Fast and Furious</i> (US) 16 mentions	<i>Cobra Kai</i> (US) 12 mentions	<i>Emilie Malou</i> (DK) 7 mentions

8	<i>The Kissing Booth</i> (US) <i>Shrek</i> (US) 15 mentions	<i>Falcon and the Winter Soldier</i> (US) <i>How I Met Your Mother</i> (US) <i>La Casa de Papel</i> (ES) <i>Vikings</i> (Canada/Ireland) 11 mentions	<i>Emma Chamberlain</i> (US) <i>JKFIFA</i> (DK) <i>Julia Sofia</i> (DK) <i>Marckoz</i> (DK) <i>Paluch & Momme</i> (DK) <i>Naja Münster</i> (DK) <i>Rasmus Brohave</i> (DK) <i>Rebecca Charlotte Dahl</i> (DK) 6 mentions
9	<i>To All the Boys</i> (US) 12 mentions	<i>Alexa and Katie</i> (US) <i>Grey's Anatomy</i> (US) <i>Modern Family</i> (US) <i>Peaky Blinders</i> (UK) <i>Sons of Anarchy</i> (US) <i>Star Wars</i> (US) <i>The Office</i> (UK or US) <i>Flash</i> (US) 10 mentions	<i>Daily Dose of Internet</i> (US) <i>Guldborg</i> (DK) <i>Johnny Gade</i> (DK) <i>Niki Topgaard</i> (DK) <i>Tine Maria</i> (DK) <i>W2S</i> (UK) 5 mentions
10	<i>Lord of the Rings</i> (NZ/US) <i>Shawshank Redemption</i> (US) 10 mentions	<i>Bridgerton</i> (US) <i>Those Who Kill</i> (DK) <i>Gilmore Girls</i> (US) <i>Sex Education</i> (UK) 9 mentions	<i>5-minute Crafts</i> (RUS) <i>Anomaly</i> (SE) <i>Comkean</i> (DK) <i>Dude Perfect</i> (US) <i>Jonas Risvig</i> (DK) <i>Logan Paul</i> (US) <i>Mathias Ong</i> (DK) <i>Natasja Vind</i> (DK) <i>Spørg Casper</i> (DK) 4 mentions

Comments: $n = 313$. Survey question asked: "Nævn op til fem af dine yndlingsfilm/-serier/-YouTube videoer eller -kanaler" ("Name up to five of your favourite movies/series/YouTube videos or channels").

As Table 8.1 also shows, the most popular content is extremely diverse, especially on YouTube. This is arguably because of the high degree of choices on, for example, YouTube, Netflix, and Disney+. As far as most mentioned films are concerned, the picture is a little less diversified, because we have bundled film franchises such as *Star Wars* and *Avengers* together, with the most popular film franchise, *Harry Potter*, being mentioned 56 times. Considering the total – that is, *all* the series (a total of 329) and films (a total of 230) mentioned – more titles from Denmark and other countries appear,

although the dominance of content from the US is still obvious. Also, if we group the series mentioned by the content provider or franchise that produced them, so-called Netflix Originals take centre stage (for more detail, see Jensen et al., 2021). As for preferences regarding film, there is a large variety of individual titles, but most of them also originate in the US. As with series, Netflix Originals are quite popular, but other franchises mentioned are Marvel, Disney, Star Wars, Pixar, and, of course, Harry Potter. Of these five popular franchises, the streaming rights of the first four belong to Disney+, explaining the large popularity of Disney+ and how a relatively large uptake of the platform had happened in a very short period.

That Danish children are drawn to American films and series is by no means a surprising finding, let alone is it something new. In 1996, professor Torben Fridberg and colleagues carried out a large representative survey study mapping out 15–18-year-old Danes' wider media use (including television and video, cinema, music, radio, computer, and reading) (Fridberg et al., 1997). They also found that young Danes were very much inclined towards American television series, which in 1996 included would-be classics such as *Beverly Hills 90210* and *NYPD Blue*. One of the scholars behind this study, professor Kirsten Drotner, also carried out qualitative interviews with young Danes that showed how American media content (such as *Donald Duck* and Disney's wider universe) had become what she termed “domesticated” among Danish audiences because of the fact that most young Danes at the time had grown up with Disney cartoons, in print as well as on television and in the cinema (Drotner, 2001, 2002). The survey findings presented in this chapter show a continuing strong “domestication” – or, maybe better, appropriation – of American content by Danish children and adolescents. Indeed, due to a wide exposure to American content via various global providers and even more broadcast channels, the appropriation seems to encompass the whole palette of American films and series, particularly blockbuster films from the many Marvel and Star Wars franchises and series such as *Stranger Things* and *Friends*. For Danish children and adolescents growing up with the past decade's video-on-demand abundance, content from the US clearly appears to be the standard, most likely even “the norm”. As a consequence, Danish films and series appear as nonstandard and, arguably, an anomalous supplement.

With the strong preference for American films and series in mind, the list of favourite YouTube channels is interesting because it distorts the image of a US-dominated media diet. Although the most mentioned YouTube channel, MrBeast, is indeed from the US, a majority of the most mentioned channels belong to Danish YouTubers such as Kender du det [Do you know that], Morten Münster, Alexander Husum, Emilie Briting, Josefine Simone Dahl, and many more. This indicates that Danish children and adolescents do in fact enjoy watching Danish content if found on YouTube and, interestingly, as produced within the logics of one of the most popular and globalised VoD

providers in the world and *outside* the logics of publicly funded institutions with cultural mandates such as DR or DFI.

Opinions on selected films and series

After we asked the children to write down their favourite content, they were asked to watch, rate, and comment on trailers of 14 films and series that we had curated based on the quality content criteria set out by public institutions (such as DFI, School Cinema, and DR), our idea of what children may consider to be quality, as well as two Netflix originals. As we were particularly interested in the children's opinions of Danish content, a majority of the trailers were Danish titles, of which one was a Netflix Original, and they also included an American Netflix Original movie and a French arthouse film. Six of the titles were produced specifically for younger children and were shown only to the 8–12-year-olds; eight were produced for and shown to the 13–17-year-olds. The titles included theatrical hits, films from the School Cinema programme, DR series produced after extensive audience research, one web series, and two Netflix Originals. Each trailer was 3–5 minutes long.

In defining quality screen fiction for children and adolescents, we followed four specific criteria: distinct cultural or artistic value, high production value, good storytelling, and high audience potential. We made sure that each curated title combined at least two of these elements, and then we grouped them in four clusters. The first cluster included titles supported by public funds or broadcasters with a strong cultural mandate. This content does not necessarily have a large production value, a classic narrative, or a clear genre identity. These titles take a critical point of view on a socially or politically engaging theme and the authenticity of their visual style. The titles in this category included *Young Ahmed*, *Efterskolen* [*Boarding School*], *Natten til Lørdag* [*Saturday Morning*], and *Puls* [*Pulse*].

The second cluster consisted of culturally relevant screen fiction for wider audiences. This content also insists on cultural value as it pursues themes relevant to society and children's education, which is why public institutions have supported it. The production and promotion of this content resulted from extensive audience research. The content is marked by a classic narrative, faster pace, genre elements, and larger audience appeal. The titles in this category include *Akavet* [*Akward*], *Klassen* [*The Class*], *Skyldig* [*Guilty*], *Valhalla*, and *Hacker*.

The third cluster contains self-produced web series that YouTubers create for their online followers. This content normally has a low production value, but its narrative style, storyline, and genre is tailor-made for reaching specific target audiences. *Centrum* is a representative title for this category.

Finally, the genre-driven content produced by market players makes the fourth cluster. This is entertaining screen fiction for a large Danish or global

audience, with high production value and genre-driven storytelling. It normally does not have a critical take on social or political themes and is, to a significant degree, financed on a more commercial basis, although Danish genre films also receive public funding. The selected titles representing this cluster are *The Rain* and *Let it Snow* (Netflix Originals) and two Danish films, *Gooseboy* and *Iqbal og den indiske juvel* [*Iqbal and the Indian Jewel*].

The children were the least interested in and impressed by the titles from the first cluster. Only one-third rated positively this content and expressed a wish to see more. Among the minority who were positive towards the content, some respondents expressed appreciation in their comments³ that these titles “focus on important topics”, “provide insights into other cultures and religions”, and “talk about serious things in an easy way”. Others liked the content for personal reasons, such as recognising the shooting location or an actor they like. Most respondents, however, found the style and stories of this category to be “boring”, “strange”, “confusing”, “too realistic”, “difficult to follow”, or “too much like school”. These feelings become even more evident when a title is neither in Danish nor in English. Some respondents rejected the French movie *Young Ahmed*, for example, because “it is annoying to see anything that is not in English”. They were also critical of the production values of the relatively low-budget content and of the slow-paced rhythm, as these titles do not necessarily contain multiple exhilarating plotlines.

When it comes to the Danish-language films and series with cultural value and a wider target audience in the second cluster, around a half of the children rated positively the selected titles. However, the remarks remained reminiscent of those about the arthouse titles, ranging from the generic ones – “I simply do not like DR series”, “not my style”, “I never watch Danish films and TV series”, and “it reminds me too much of school” – to the more specific ones – “bad acting”, “I do not like that the characters are quarrelling so much”, “seems like it is poorly produced”, and “it is unrealistic because the characters don’t use the professional terminology”. The children, however, expressed a slightly higher opinion of the three DR series (*The Class*, *Guilty*, and *Awkward*) than of the two films (*Valhalla* and *Hacker*). This may be explained by the fact that the audience-building process for films starts only when the films are finished, while in the case of the DR series, the process starts as early as the development phase (Redvall & Christensen, 2021).

The respondents’ opinion of *Centrum* – the only self-produced YouTube web series that we tested – did not differ much from the opinion of the DR series above: Around half of the children liked *Centrum*. This similarity is not surprising, considering that *Centrum*’s audience development and production models are similar. The only difference is that the children’s qualitative comments about *Centrum* were more positive: They appreciated, for example, that *Centrum* “focuses on everyday problems”, “is relatable”, and “represents LGBTQ teenagers”. At the same time, they think that the web series had a

“funny plot” and “good acting”. Finally, some children liked that “many stars appear in the series” and commented that “all of my friends saw it”, which indicates that some audience-building strategies such as word-of-mouth and collaboration with social media influencers worked well in *Centrum*’s case.

The respondents were the most affirmative about the commercial titles produced by market players. *The Rain* and *Iqbal and the Indian Jewel*, were positively reviewed by more than two-thirds of the children, becoming the most popular among the curated titles. The other two titles from this cluster were reviewed positively by around half of the children. However, judging from the qualitative comments, the respondents’ opinions about this type of content can still be mixed and critical. For example, some respondents differ in their opinions of the first and second seasons of *The Rain*. While the first season “has an exciting storyline” and “does not resemble other Danish series”, the second season “gets pretty boring”, “has a bad storyline”, “shows nothing new”, and “reminds us that Danes just cannot make good TV”. Likewise, the children were divided about the Netflix rom-com *Let It Snow*. While some respondents praised the production value, acting, and story of the film, others dismissed the story as “banal”, “cliché”, “too romantic”, “too sweet”, and “too emo-like”.

Concluding remarks

Summing up, the findings of the survey reveal a strong preference among Danish children and adolescents for the global VoD platforms YouTube, Netflix, and Disney+, which they frequent more often than the Danish counterparts DR’s and TV 2’s channels and online portfolios (with the exception of Disney+, which had only been recently introduced to the Danish market at the time of data collection). Least popular and least frequented are DR’s dedicated children’s channels Ramasjang and Ultra. When asked about types of content watched on the different providers, nuances emerge. Only very few children, for example, watch films and series on YouTube, instead spending their time on vlogs, funny fails, gaming, music videos, and memes. On DR and TV 2 and their online players, as well as on Ramasjang and Ultra, the children watch a much larger variety of genres – including documentaries, entertainment, and news – than on Netflix and Disney+, where they mainly watch films and series. When it comes to specific fictional screen content, the children favour American films and series over those from Denmark or elsewhere; and when asked to rate specific films and series, they favour genre-driven titles over titles with a “higher” artistic or cultural value, produced with public support from institutions such as DFI or DR. Additionally, many comments suggest that the respondents are not devoted to audiovisual fiction from Denmark. However, when asked about favourite YouTube channels, the respondents mentioned a fair number of Danish YouTubers. This indi-

cates that Danish children and adolescents do in fact watch and like Danish content from YouTubers as well as DR and TV 2 documentaries, news, and entertainment. But when it comes to films and series, the children's most cherished content – and arguably the benchmark which, for example, Danish films and series are judged by – is indeed American.

If the goal is to make Danish content more popular among young Danes, this might signal a necessary re-evaluation of the national curatorial practices vis-à-vis children's audiovisual fiction. If Danish YouTubers can appeal to Danish children and adolescents, it is likely that changed curatorial practices and quality criteria within institutions such as DFI and DR could change the children's attitudes to Danish films and series, and that the future of domestic audiovisual fiction is to be found not only in traditional formats but also in shorter narrative formats suited for consumption on, for example, YouTube, as was the case with the web series *Centrum*. On the other hand, domestic films and series may also represent an important alternative to what the children find on the global providers, as is argued by, for example, DR's commissioners and creators in Christensen's and Redvall's chapters in this volume (Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, respectively), or by the commissioners and creators of the Norwegian public broadcaster NRK's youth series *Rådebank*, as described by Ewa Morsund in this volume (Chapter 6). The verdict is still out on these matters. However, with this chapter's findings in mind, there is certainly something to suggest that, on the global Anglo-American platforms, Danish children and adolescents find an abundance of what they consider to be high-quality content that in many ways feels just as relevant as – if not more than – domestic content. If we look at the consumption patterns and tastes of children and adolescents as the metaphorical canary in the coal mine when it comes to what may lie ahead in the consumption patterns of these generations when they grow older, one may argue that there is a danger of accepting the status quo.

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Endnotes

1. In the mixed-methods set-up, the survey formed the first step, whose findings were later explored in more detail in a qualitative mobile ethnographic study of 20 children aged 8–17 years old.
2. These very few non-binary children are not included in the results that are divided into gender. However, their answers are included in all the remaining results.
3. All comments were originally written in Danish but have been translated by us for use in this chapter.

Scandinavian children and adolescents' media consumption has changed dramatically in the past decade. Films, series, and social media content on global platforms like Netflix, Disney+, and YouTube are now a major part of young people's media diet, while encounters with domestic films, series, and platforms are in decline, severely challenging the ways domestic players think about young audiences. The contributions in this book explore these recent developments in the production, distribution, as well as reception of fictional content for children and adolescent audiences in the thoroughly digitalised and transnationalised Scandinavian countries.

Using qualitative and quantitative methods, such as interviews, case studies, textual analyses, and surveys, the contributors present recent studies on how commissioners and producers develop children's content in the highly competitive, professionalised, and digitalised media environment, and on how children think about Scandinavian vis-à-vis global content. Collectively, the book offers readers new knowledge on how Scandinavian media distributors, producers, and creatives – and their young audiences – act in the face of this new reality. This book is relevant for scholars, students, and industry professionals with an interest in children and adolescents, culture, and media.

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