Abstract: There is a lengthy history of teenagers on television, and of teenagers as a television viewing audience. Over the past decade, developments in how technology allows audiences to interact with television have affected both the structure and content of television that features and caters to teenagers. Using specific texts (most notably *Gossip Girl* (The CW, 2007-2012), *Riverdale* (The CW, 2017-)*, and *Heathers* (Paramount, 2017)) and the paratexts formed by audience members in their interaction online with the original texts and their creators, this thesis seeks to understand how teen television has adapted itself to fit the models created by the internet and its users and the nature of its potential repercussions for the genre and for television in general.

"Sardonic Humor is My Way of Relating to the World":

Audience Interaction With Teen Television, 2007 - Present

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Introduction

History and Overview of Teen Television

The history of television is a complex history of what is and is not "legitimate." From its earliest days as a visual medium in the late 1940s, television's significance in cultural discourse has centered around its commercial purposes, with the idea that the programming itself is more an afterthought to the advertisements that accompany it than its own independent work. For a significant portion of its history, television has been treated as a lesser art form, if it is allowed to be considered an art form at all. Terms like "idiot box" and "boob tube" have been used to paint a picture of television watchers as mindless consumers, tricked into being sold products by the shiny, colorful mind-numbingness of the programming.

Beginning in the late 1990s to early 2000s, the notion of the supposed "Golden Age of US Television" has slowly changed the discourse around the medium. Television is now regarded as its own formal system, although what is respected within that form remains highly specific. Studied television is often critically acclaimed television, which has overwhelmingly been dramas centered around tragic male anti heroes such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013).[1]

While it has had its own examples of critically acclaimed television in the Golden Age, "teen television" as a genre has remained largely un-legitimized. The shows that have been granted legitimacy are regarded as transcending teen television, not unlike the way in which "legitimate" television shows in general are regarded as transcending the medium. The *New York Times* review of the pilot of *Friday Night Lights* (NBC, 2006 - 2011) refers to the show as "not

just television great, but…great in the way of art."[2] In reading the review, there is an unspoken understanding that the greatness of *Friday Night Lights*, a show centered around high school football players, also transcends any television centered in a high school which preceded it. This understanding is enforced by the fact that the review does not bother to draw comparisons to any other teen television show, but instead to the cinematic teen melodramas of the 1950s and 1960s like *Rebel Without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955) and *Splendor in the Grass* (Elia Kazan, 1961). Teen television faces double the challenge of legitimacy; it must first transcend its own genre status, and then transcend television itself.

Since it has rarely been granted the critical respect or analysis of the "not just television great" shows, to study teen television in the last decade is to study the other ways through which legitimacy can be made or unmade in the cultural consciousness. There is the legitimacy that is granted to a program that finds commercial success in a capitalist system, a legitimacy that is crafted out of proving that said success can lead to further commercial gain for that which ties itself to the program. Then there is a legitimacy given to a program by virtue of becoming a part of the cultural conversation, where to be talked about, whether positively or negatively, is to be acknowledged. In a world of more and more television (and media in general) existing, it is now an accomplishment to be seen in the first place in and of itself. Most recently, a new kind of legitimacy has been created out of social capital, where to be seen as socially aware supersedes being seen as quality. While they can coexist, the former is now often used as a substitute for the latter. To determine what is legitimate and modern in teen television is to answer these three questions: is it profitable, is it acknowledged, and is it aware? Studying the past decade of teen television shows how changing American cultural context has affected the respective values of

versions of legitimacy. But before exploring these values of legitimacy, a more immediate question must be answered: what do we mean when we refer to "teen television"?

Defining "Teen TV"

Defining the genre of "teen television" may appear to be a simple task. It is, after all, right there in the title. Teen television is television programming that features and caters to teenagers. But this assumes a perfect 1:1 ratio that does not exist. Teens do not exclusively watch programming that features characters their own age, and television featuring teenagers is not exclusively watched by those it supposes to represent, but rather can draw in both pre-teen and post-teen audiences. Further complications are caused by the nature of television as a linear narrative; shows that start as "Teen TV" often eventually must age their characters out of teenagerdom, which raises the question as to whether they remain part of the genre. We must also incorporate the shifting understanding of what "television" means. In an age of social media stars and streaming, what media created for and/or featuring teenagers actually classifies as teen "television"? Taking all these complications and questions into account, how can this liminal genre be defined and understood?

The first half of the genre term, "teen," holds both linguistic and symbolic understandings in modern American culture. For the purposes of this study, I will use a definition of this term that refers less to the linguistic definition of teenage as "age ending in teen" (thirteen to eighteen years old) and more to one that uses a more symbolic understanding of "teenage" as representative of the transitional stage of development known as adolescence. While this definition usually overlaps with the linguistic one, it also allows for an inclusion of both pre-teen and early twenties viewers, which more accurately captures the full depiction of the "teens" that

are part of "teen TV." The second half of the genre term, "television," has arguably become even more contentious than the first half in the past decade. My understanding of what television is includes both what is broadcast on traditional, over-the-air cable television and what is broadcast as Internet television. The latter is defined as unique productions provided by a specific service that follows the usual television episodic structure.[3] Most important to understanding what teen television is in a modern context is understanding what it has been in the past. An understanding of the history of the teen television that existed prior to the last decade is essential to being able to have a full grasp of what the term truly means, and to see how the definition has shifted over the course of the last seven decades.

A History of "Teen TV": 1950-2007

The earliest "teen television," defined as narrative fictional programs centered around teen characters for a teen audience, prioritizing the point of view of those teens, were brief blips on the television landscape in the early 1950s. These early shows were based on radio programs such as *A Date with Judy*, whose main character was a loveable blonde teenager named Judy Foster, which aired on ABC daytime television from 1951-1952, and in prime time from 1952-1953. Its CBS counterpart, *Meet Corliss Archer*, whose titular main character was also loveable and blonde, aired on the network for less than three months in the summer of 1951, before being syndicated from April to December of 1954. While these television programs did not reach the levels of success they had had on the radio, they were the first evidence that the networks realized that teenagers could be a lucrative niche audience.[4] On the local market level, individual ABC stations were also beginning to show interest in teenagers. *Bandstand*, which premiered in 1950 on the Philadelphia television station WFIL, switched from showing short musical films

and studio guests (an early predecessor to the music video shows of the 1980s, which would themselves become the territory of a youth audience) to a dance program with teenagers dancing along to popular music in 1952. That same year, *Junior Press Conference*, which featured a panel of college newspaper editors interviewing policy makers, also launched. ABC itself continued to develop a reputation as a "youthful network" through its partnership with Walt Disney Studios and programming shows that appealed to young families with children.[5] It was not until the late 1950s, however, that the network made another attempt at fictional teenage programming.

The first successful American television program produced for a major network to feature teenagers as leading characters was *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (ABC, 1959-1963). The show revolved around the titular, not particularly intelligent, teenage character as he unsuccessfully sought popularity, money, and the attention of beautiful and unattainable girls. Questions of his future were also heavily featured, with Dobie eventually entering the military and then college in later seasons. Dwayne Hickman, the series star, said the show represented "the end of innocence of the 1950s before the oncoming 1960s revolution."[6] ABC followed up on the success of *Dobie Gillis* with several other similar teen-centered sitcoms and nonfiction programming. For the 1964-1965 season, ABC placed *Shindig!* (musical variety series, 1964-1966) and *The Patty Duke Show* (teen sitcom, 1963-1966) back to back, creating the first block of teen programming on primetime television.[7]

By the summer of 1966, however, all the teen-centered sitcoms of the late 1950s and early 1960s had ended production. Media marketing research had found that teenagers actually demonstrated minimal television viewing, being more entrenched in various activities outside of the family environment of the home then other demographic groups. The networks, reliant on

advertisers for revenue, saw little reward in programming for a base that, since they did not watch television, did not watch commercials and thus would not be exposed to advertising. Teenage culture itself was also shifting. The fall of the US birth rate meant that the proportion tenneagers made up of the entire population was declining, and the teenagers who had been teen sitcom audiences were moving on to college and becoming involved in political and social action. Rather than sticking with the demographic itself, as the audience they had understood as teenagers became young adults, the networks adjusted their programming to continue to target these same viewers. Thus, the 1970s featured very little teen television, beyond teenage appearances in family shows and cartoon series, or teenage characters supporting an adult lead cast member in a school setting.[8] Even the teen shows that were successful in this period, such as *Happy Days* (1974-1984, ABC) and *What's Happening!!!* (1976-1979, ABC), quickly aged their oldest teenage characters out of high school in order to capitalize on the new young adult audience.

The 1980s saw a return to teen television's earliest nonfiction roots, with the launch of MTV in 1981 explicitly to capture a young white male audience through music videos. When Viacom bought the channel in 1986, the mantra of "wanting my MTV" was taken up by white teenage girls and then urban teens to demand that their cable provider include the network. MTV's programming expanded to include game shows, documentaries, and reality TV series, many of which featured teenagers. The network also demonstrated early forays into the multimedia intertextuality that would become essential to modern teen television, thus linking the genre to music, but also to film and advertising.[9]

Simultaneously with the development of MTV, FOX launched in 1986 and quickly emerged as the fourth major television network, returning to the early ABC strategy of reaching

out to a teen audience, but modernizing their approach by focusing on a diverse audience base
instead of the white middle class audience of the 1960s. The other three networks also developed
some programs featuring teen perspectives throughout the mid-1980s and the early 1990s,
including *Growing Pains* (ABC, 1985-1992), *A Different World* (NBC, 1987-1993), and *The
Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (NBC, 1990-1996). These series were largely designed to fit the teen
perspective into the already successful sitcom genre, rather than switching strategy to target a
teen audience on its own terms. The 1990s saw more experimenting along these lines, but shows
like *My So-Called Life* (ABC, 1994-1995) would find a larger audience in reruns on MTV after
cancellation than they did on their own network.[10]

By contrast, FOX designed its programming after its initial success to not only fit teen
audiences by focusing on programming that featured characters that shared their ages, but
programming that featured a reflection of their world views. Shows like *The Simpsons* (1989-)
and *Married with Children* (1987-1997), despite not being "teen television," explicitly placed
themselves in contrast to the kind of family programming that ruled the other three networks.
Their attitude was cynical toward virtually every aspect of American society, from family to
nation to relationships, and they privileged the kind of media literacy in which teens were
becoming fluent by using already existing pop culture trends and references embedded within
their programming.[11] While this was not "teen television," it did become a blueprint from which
modern teen television was built. FOX also developed a flagship program in the overwhelmingly
white teen soap *Beverly Hills, 90210* (1990-2000) by airing a "summer season" in 1991 while
most other series were in reruns, capitalizing on a gap in programming that overlapped with a
period in which teenagers were more inclined to be watching television, and creating a new
possibility for scheduling programs.[12]

Two networks, The WB and UPN, launched in 1995 and took FOX's youth "narrowcasting" even further. The WB established a successful broadcast network during the rise of cable by focusing its programming specifically on teens and young adults.[13] UPN built an "urban" audience base by creating a primetime lineup of multicultural youth programming, specifically targeting young African Americans.[14] The WB and UPN moved in on the audiences in which FOX had initially capitalized. This decision worked in all three networks favor, as FOX was able to reach beyond the teen market by no longer being the only "teen" network, and WB and UPN could go after that same market as FOX abandoned it.

By the late 1990s, The WB was successfully marketing itself as *the* teen network, which had more to do with its own presentation of itself in pop culture than its actual content. One of the network's earliest and longest running hits was *7th Heaven* (1996-2007), a show which emphasized family friendliness and only featured three teen characters out of its seven child characters (although as the show continued to run, it was able to maintain teenage narratives by focusing on whatever characters had aged into the demographic). Other shows like *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) and *Everwood* (2002-2006) divided screen time equally between teens and adults and targeted a similarly shared audience. Its breakout hits, however, were *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2001, and then UPN, 2001-2003) and *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003), both of which not only foregrounded teenage characters but placed any adults in supporting roles. In addition, they emphasized pop culture knowledge and a cynical attitude in a similar fashion to the "anti-family" FOX programs.[15]

When The WB and UPN were on the decline at the end of their first decade, the two networks were shut down and merged by their respective owners, Time Warner and CBS, into a new network, The CW. Launching in 2006, The CW focused on a demographic of 18 to 34 year

olds, which, while it could be seen as directly rejecting a teenage audience, was actually a successful embrace of the changing desires of that audience. In the early 2000s, marketers developed a strategy around what they called KAGOY, or "Kids Are Getting Older Younger." The idea was that contemporary children, with their increased exposure to the wider world through technological developments like the internet, are more sophisticated than they have been in the past.[16] Material used to target teenagers twenty years ago was now targeted to "tweens." Teenagers themselves, on the other hand, wanted to be "grown ups" by becoming a part of the adult media world, meaning that television was more likely to capture them by marketing to a higher age demographic than a lower one. The CW made up its initial schedule by continuing popular teen programs from both The WB and UPN like *One Tree Hill* (2003-2006, The WB and 2006-2012, The CW) and *Veronica Mars* (2004-2006, UPN and 2006-2007, The CW). The other notable demographic shift The CW made after its launch was towards prioritizing a female audience over a male one--a shift that began to pay off when the network started producing its own programming, including *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012), *The Vampire Diaries* (2009-2017), and *90210* (2008-2013).[17]

Common Characteristics of Modern Teen Television

To integrate these two terms into a complete understanding of the genre, it is useful to look to previous scholarship on teen television to find ways to move beyond the straightforward "teenagers on television" surface definition. In their work in defining the genre, Lori Bindig and Andrea Bergstrom offer four essential characteristics of teen television: a basis in the serial drama; the influence of the 1980s teen film; the use of paratextuality; and intertextuality - the

idea that the show could be adjusted to include developments in television watching that have changed the genre in the past decade.[18]

Basis in Serial Drama: Teen Television as Serial

Teen television, like most modern television, owes its roots to serial drama, both daytime and primetime. Modern television pulls several key factors from this predecessor, including sponsorship, structure, plot tropes, and establishment of its audience.[19] While teen television uses all four of these, its standing within the broader cultural context means that these elements take on a different meaning within the genre than they do outside of it. Originally as radio evolved into television, serial drama is understood as having a continuously evolving and unified plot and set of characters. In other words, the same open ended story is followed through in regular intervals. The classic version of this structure on television is the daytime drama, or "soap opera," named as such after the soap manufacturers whose sponsorship allowed for the existence of these single hour melodramas. Originally, sponsorship was financial backing given by a single company, which supported the program in exchange for the sponsor's name in the title and some degree of creative control.[20] This model eased financial burdens but the level of control that the sponsor had over programming was inconvenient for the networks. As television became more established, networks revised their financial arrangements with their sponsors by moving towards a model in which companies purchased commercial airtime instead of providing outright sponsorship. This is the model that is most associated with television, although more recently, as audiences have embraced ways to either limit or eliminate commercial messaging from their programming, sponsorship has reemerged both in its original form ("this program is brought to you by…") and in the more subtle form of product placement, where sponsors embed their

products within the shows' content.[21] The development of streaming has also led to "networks" making their audiences their key sponsors through a direct subscription, a financial model that is so relatively new that it remains to be seen how sustainable it is in the long term.

While it is still often referred to as serial "drama," most modern serial television operates under a hybrid model that blends multiple storylines, which can be both comedic and dramatic, and unifies them into a single narrative through the continuous presence of the same characters. The hybrid model breaks its story into self-contained subplots that usually resolve within an episode, while still telling an ongoing story, both over the course of a television season and the show's entire run.[22] Almost universally, teen television is serial as opposed to episodic, a structure in which each episode exists independently of the next. Episodic teen television has existed for years in teen sitcoms like *Saved By the Bell* (NBC, 1989-1993), or, more recently, children's television channels offerings like *iCarly* (Nickelodeon, 2007-2012) or *Girl Meets World* (Disney Channel, 2014-2017). But the teen television's centering around coming of age narratives means change is inherently built into even episodic shows. A police or medical procedural can keep its characters in the same positions doing the same jobs for a far longer period than a teen sitcom can keep its characters in the same high school grade, or even within adolescence. Thus, part of our understanding is that teen television is not only serial in nature, but *unavoidably* serial; whether the creator wants it or not, the teen television narrative must move forward.[23]

The hybrid model is used by virtually all primetime television, including the dramas that have been rendered "legitimate" by critical approval. These shows also pull from the history of a focus on social issues in soap operas, in which characters and plots are brought into the narrative in order to examine something about American culture. Starting with *Hill Street Blues* (NBC,

1981-1987)*, primetime television began to incorporate this social consciousness into their serial narratives as well, gaining legitimacy through displaying a desire to expose their audiences to the issues of the broader world. While teen television has also consistently operated in a similar way, the continued influence of daytime television's plot tropes such as heightened emotion and a focus on romantic relationships have caused the genre to be most associated with the more feminized elements of the soap opera.[24] These elements actively work against teen television's legitimacy, making it less likely to be acknowledged critically, despite using similar plot beats to its more critically acclaimed peers.

While the first primetime soap opera, *Faraway Hill*, premiered in 1946, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that serial dramas fully moved into the primetime schedule (usually between 8PM and 11PM), in order to bring in the greatest number of viewers and therefore to charge the highest rates for advertising space. *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989), and *Dallas* (CBS, 1978-1991), replicated the soap opera's usual focus on rich families, their business scheming and backstabbing, and their disaster cliffhanger endings, which kept the audience on the edge of their seats.[25] Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, this version of the primetime soap became a genre dominated by teen characters and teen-driven issues, in order to capitalize on an audience of younger viewers. At the forefront of this programming was *Beverly Hills, 90210* (Fox, 1990-2000), which was originally intended to be more seriously critical of social issues but fully embraced the hedonism of its setting and drama by the end of its first season.[26]

Influence and Reference: Teen Television and the 1980s Teen Film

The modern concept of the teenager in American popular culture is overwhelmingly credited to John Hughes' early 1980s filmography, including *Sixteen Candles* (1984)*, The*

Breakfast Club (1985), *Weird Science* (1985), *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1985), *Pretty in Pink* (1986), and *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987). From these six films, a vision of the American teen experience was crafted, which dominates in pop culture to this day, and which was hugely influential on teen television as a genre.[27] Hughes' films combined the "serious issues" of the teen melodramas of the 1950s and 1960s, including sex, parents, drugs, wealth, and general angst, with romance and comedy, allowing teenagers to be seen on screen for the first time in multifaceted fashion, not merely as agents in morality tales. However, Hughes' films are also very specific in whom they choose to consider--his characters are overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly more or less middle class, and exclusively heterosexual, with a particular vision of the male-female relationship.[28] In being as influenced by Hughes as it is, teen television is subject to inheriting his own biases and blind spots. The world that it crafts is one of largely white teens exploring their emerging sexuality and social and economic class differences within a group of peers. Ultimately, the world of teen television as influenced by Hughes is one where although social issues like gender, class, sexuality, and race are featured, the goal is to be reassuring about the state of the world, not to challenge it.

Stock characters for teen television are also first modeled in Hughes' films, perhaps none more influential than *The Breakfast Club*, which identified each of its five central characters as a particular type of teenager: "the Jock," "the Brain," "the Criminal", "the Princess," and "the Kook." The goal of *The Breakfast Club* was to take these stereotypes and expose complexities and contradictions within them, with the characters ultimately declaring that they are more than their existing high school social definition. Ironically, it is in this exploration of the depth and complexities of teenage stereotypes that new ones were born. One would be hard pressed to find a teen television show that has not done a *Breakfast Club* episode, if not built its entire character

roster to align with the five character archetypes. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, Hughes' films held a heavy influence over the legitimacy of teen television, with "John Hughesian" becoming a shorthand for "quality portrayal of teenagers." Therefore, teen television's consistent reliance on Hughes' work is unsurprising, given that it was one of the few designated paths to critical legitimacy offered to the genre.[29]

In more recent teen television, Hughes' influence is present more as something to subvert than to idolize, with his work still consistently referenced, but now more often as a cultural text than as a model from which to work. While verbal Hughes references abound in successful teen shows launched in 2017 like *Riverdale* (The CW, 2017-) and *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix, 2017-)[30], they largely refrain from replicating their plots or character archetypes. Instead, they favor twisting Hughes narratives into darker paths. For example, the different characters of *13 Reasons Why* are bound together across social groups, not by the experience of detention but by their connection to a classmate's suicide. They are also noticeably more diverse than Hughes' casts, not only in race but in gender, sexuality, and class, which makes them subversive of his narratives simply by virtue of having them be told by minority demographics, who do not hold dominant cultural authority. For these programs, Hughes' films play the role of cultural history more than anything else. While they certainly continue to influence teen television, it is the conscious acknowledgement of their existence by the programs themselves that matters most.

Between: Intertextuality and Teen Television

Intertextuality, as defined by Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz and inspired by Gerard Genette, is when one pop culture text explicitly invokes another one.[31] It moves characters beyond their original sphere and into the world of the viewer's own cultural consciousness.

Intertextuality can be used to expand the depth of an individual character, a particular plotline, or the genre itself by offering commentary from within. It can be manifested in various forms, from direct verbal reference to visual allusion to replication of a plot.

For intertextuality to be effective, it depends on an assumption that its audience knows the text that it is trying to reference.[32] For teen television, a genre whose demographic are made up on average some of the most media literate viewers, this assumption is usually easy to make. Intertextuality becomes a reward for being a consistent consumer of media, making the audience member feel as if understanding all the references makes them an elite viewer, in on the proverbial joke with both the writers and the show itself. Additionally, young viewers are more likely to define themselves based on their cultural tastes; characters and programs that do the same engage them more easily.[33]

More recently, the concept of intertextuality has been applied not only to television referencing movies or other TV shows, but to a broader world of media. Teen television today is just as likely to use internet texts like memes and viral videos as it is to use traditional media, taking easily accessible free internet culture that is massively popular with teenagers and using it for potential profit. Teen television content is also regularly crafted into memes itself. Both *Riverdale* and *13 Reasons Why* have had content turned into memes that use their text to reference other texts (for example, the *Riverdale* quote: "I'm a weirdo. I don't fit in. And I don't want to fit in." was attached to characters like Darth Vader and the Cat in the Hat for humorous purposes). These memes can then be re-referenced (and, implicitly, monetized) by the show.

The Beyond: Paratextuality and Teen Television

"Paratextuality," as defined by Genette, refers to the additional material that surrounds the text itself.[34] For television, this means that the program serves as the primary text, while material like commercials, online presence, and products that utilize the content of the program serve as the paratext. While teen television has always been heavily rooted in a relationship between the text and the paratext, the expansion of the possibilities of the paratext in the last decade has made that relationship even more crucial.

The paratext of teen television expands the genre's ability to deliver its messaging and content beyond the primary text through offering further opportunities for its audience to provide commercial support for the show. It is often "synergistic," meaning that the different paratexts work together alongside the primary text to produce commercial results that would be impossible for the primary text alone.[35] Synergy is what makes the paratextuality of teen television useful for increasing profits for a network, and thus what makes paratextuality a consistent aspect of teen television. The most successful teen shows have been crafted into media franchises, turning the primary text of the television show into a piece of a "supertext" that consists of not only the show, but other media formats as well. Examples include books, video games, and digital productions, all of which can interact across their platforms in creating a single world, and making that which is outside of the primary text seem necessary to being able to fully consume the narrative of the supertext.[36]

Paratextuality can also be used for cross promotion. For example, the album of a teen television show might feature a cast member performing a single that later appears on their own album, or a guest appearance is made by a character from one show on another, usually to promote whichever of the shows is newewer and needs help finding an audience. Teenagers are also consistent consumers of "cool," and an integration of consumerism can be taken advantage

of to promote an outside product. A teenage character talking extensively about their new cell phone will feel more natural than it would coming from an adult character, and also allow the product to then be sold in the "real world" with a connection to the show.[37]

Transmedia storytelling is the latest development in the paratext, and allows the primary text of the television show to be expanded on the internet. In the early 2000s, websites were created both to promote the show and to continue the story of the narrative, with an example being the *Dawson's Creek* companion "Dawson's Website."[38] *Gossip Girl* went even further by building its paratext into the narrative of the show. The fictional anonymous "Gossip Girl" website, which regularly reveals secrets about characters' various scandals throughout the show, was made into a series of social media accounts designed both to promote the show and discuss the various goings-on of the cast. For today's teen television, the internet's ubiquitousness in modern teen lives means that there are many new avenues for the paratext online. For example, the young cast of *Riverdale* regularly tweets along as an episode airs, providing their own commentary on their character's choices in addition to details about behind the scenes of filming, and making live viewing more appealing for the teen audience because of the potential for direct interaction with the cast.

Overview of Teen Television in the Last Decade

Teen television is clearly a genre with a vast history. What, then, does the last decade specifically allow us to study that other eras do not? I identify three key periods over the course of the past ten years: a period of "escapist" teen television; a period notable for a lack of teen television; and, most recently, a period of development of what I have termed "woke" teen television, defined as publicly and loudly "socially aware."

"Escapist" teen television, from 2007-2012, rose to prominence during a period of significant cultural turmoil for American society and exhibits the abilities of the genre to craft a world outside of the "real" one and yet still in conversation with it. Escapism in popular culture is that which removes unpleasant, scary, or simply boring aspects of everyday life from the fictional narrative and replaces it with that which is exciting, romantic, or invokes fantasy in order to create a world that is better than the real one. The CW in particular crafted a form of teen television that depended far more on escapism than past teen TV during this time.[39] The characters of *Gossip Girl*, the program that kicked off this trend, are not merely wealthy, but obscenely so, and their antics lean far more on that wealth than even past series that had starred rich teenagers, including *Beverly Hills, 90210* and *The OC*. Their wealth is also connected to other forms of fantasy for the average teenager such as sex, drugs and alcohol, and intense romantic relationships. Other forms of escapism can be seen in successful teen programs from this period like *Glee* (FOX, 2009-2015), which has its characters regularly experience fantasy sequences in which they perform elaborate musical numbers in their everyday lives, and *The Vampire Diaries*, which entirely foregrounds the fantasy of vampirism above any kind of realism of its teenage characters' high school experiences. This period of escapism aligns clearly with the mass adoption of social media by teenagers, and these are some of the first programs to utilize social media to market through these new platforms, making the totality of escapism extend beyond the television screen and into the viewers' daily internet consumption.

However, beginning in 2012 and continuing through 2016, these escapist programs saw a significant drop in ratings and were largely removed from television schedules.[40] Teenagers moved away from television in general and began to embrace the internet as a replacement for traditional broadcast in several forms. For one, the popularity of "YouTubers," content producers

on the video sharing platform YouTube, allowed teens to interact with media on what is presented as a more personal level, with a direct audience-creator pipeline that conceptualizes both participants as teenagers. In this way, YouTube and other content platforms like Vine become an alternative to teen television where one form of escapism is replaced by another, with the new fantasy becoming an unachievable relationship with the creator.[41] The continued development of internet streaming libraries also offered teens new alternatives to broadcast television, with the appealing ability to watch entire seasons of television that may have been released significantly prior to when the viewer is consuming them and to avoid traditional commercial structure. During this period, technology has outpaced teen television. Networks responded to these shifts in viewing by largely moving away from teenage audiences; The CW, for example, shifted its escapist focus to a more male audience with superhero programming.

In 2017, however, teen television began to return to the cultural landscape, now adjusted for the modern media discourse that dominates the lives of those teenagers who have been born since 1995. Programs like *Riverdale* and *13 Reasons Why* represent a new shift that I am terming "woke teen television," denoting a focus on social awareness and conscious cultural consumption. Woke teen television deliberately markets itself as socially aware by promoting diverse cast members, as well as featuring content about gender, race, and sexuality in its programming. However, woke teen television not only benefits from this social awareness, but from the opposite. These shows seem deliberately built to take advantage of the discourse of the late 2010s in its totality, not only by appealing to a positive idea of social representation but also to the desire to participate in the discourse. In other words, it is both taking advantage of its audience, praising it for being "woke," but also encouraging social justice arguments over whether the show is "woke" *enough*. For this audience, social justice discourse is not just about

the program itself but about how it represents their own self image (presumably, as socially conscious about themselves). In its awareness of this concern, woke teen television functions not unlike the parasocial relationships of Youtubers, allowing an audience to give an emotional and personal support that the show can not equally reciprocate.

Conclusion

Teen television over the past decade shows the different ways that it is made legitimate as a genre, not in cultural criticism or academia, but in the eyes of its audience. Legitimacy can mean many things, but teen television over the past decade shows us three different values. The first is profit, as in how much money a show can make a network; the second is cultural discussion, as in how much the show is talked about; and the third is social awareness, as in how much the show is credited with being positive representation for its audience. The variations in importance between these three values shows how television networks are adjusting to changes in their audience's desires. However, studying the ways audiences have developed in their interaction with these programs, and what values they themselves have emphasized, can help us understand how the complicated relationship between the internet and television has advanced in the past decade. This work seeks to understand how teen television has been remade in the age of the internet, through examining how audience interaction has changed with technological developments, and how teen television has tried to fit its content to the way its audience interacts with and consumes media. In doing so, I believe that we can see both the merits and faults of teen television, and television in general, modeling itself on the internet.

1.   Elana Levine and Michael Z. Newman, *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012), Print. 34.

2. Ibid., 13.

3. While this definition of "internet television" does not include internet productions by an individual creator such as Youtubers, Youtube is understood as a new model that modern teen television has learned from (see Chapter 3).

4. Morgan Genevieve Blue,*Girlhood on Disney Channel: Branding, Celebrity, and Femininity* (New York: Routledge, 2017), Print. 18.

5. Mary Celeste Kearney, "Teenagers and Television in the United States," *Encyclopedia of Television* (New York: Routledge, 2004), Print. 2278.

6. Dwayne Hickman with Joan Roberts Hickman, *Forever Dobie: The Many Lives of Dwayne Hickman* (New York: Birch Lane Publishing, 1994), Print. 107.

7. Kearney, 2278.

8. Ibid.

9. Sharon Marie Ross and Louisa Ellen Stein, "Watching Teen TV," *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2008), Print. 14.

10. Greg Braxton, "'My So-Called Life' Gets a Second Life on MTV," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 Apr.1995, Print.

11. Ross and Stein, 14.

12. Claudia A. Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh, *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), Print. 180.

13. Lynn Schofield Clark, "WB Network," *Encyclopedia of Television* (New York: Routledge, 2004), Print. 2503.

14. Steve Runyon, "UPN Television Network," *Encyclopedia of Television* (New York: Routledge, 2004), Print, 2416.

15. Ross and Stein, 15.

16. Juliet B. Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Cult* (New York: Scribner, 2004) Print, 56.

17. Lori Bindig, *Gossip Girl: A Critical Understanding* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), Print, 56.

18. Lori Bindig and Andrea M. Bergstrom, *The O.C.: A Critical Understanding* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), Print, 15.

19. Ibid., 16.

20. Bianca Ford, *Television and Sponsorship* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1994), Print, 18.

21. Alyssa Rosenberg, "As Consumers Skip TV Ads, Contemplating a Return to Corporate Sponsorship," *ThinkProgress*, Center for American Progress Action Fund, 23 May 2012, Web.

22.   Richard Campbell, Bettina Fabos, Julia Frechette, Douglas Gomery, and Joli Jensen, *Media in Society* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2013), Print, 255.

23. There have, on occasion, been teen television programs that avoid the built in seriality of the genre by representing their characters through animation. However, with a few truly episodic exceptions such as *Beavis and Butt-Head*, these shows often select to use the seriality of the genre (see: *Daria, Young Justice*). This suggests that it is not only the physical development of adolescence that requires seriality to properly represent it, but the mental and emotional development as well.

24. Levine and Newman, 134-135.

25. Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Print, 244.

26. Marisa Meltzer, "When Brenda Welsh Was Young," *Slate*. The Slate Group, 7 Dec. 2006. Web.

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28. Timothy Shary, *Teen Movies: American Youth on Screen* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2005), Print, 68-69.

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30. A quote from the former: "Sorry to interrupt, Sad Breakfast Club."

31. Jonathan Gray and Amanda D. Lotz, *Television Studies* (Malden: Polity, 2011), Print, 44.

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33. Sharon Marie Ross, "Defining Teen Culture: The N Network," *Teen Television: Essays on Programming and Fandom* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2008), Print. 61.

34. Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: The Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Print, 1.

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Chapter 2

"You Know You're Never Going to Be Trending on Twitter With Those Topics":

***Gossip Girl* and the Stratification of Audience Interaction**

The CW's *Gossip Girl* (2007-2012) was by no means the only teen show of the mid-2000s, but it was the one that most successfully permeated popular culture, and the one that would most define cultural perception of the generation of its audience. When it premiered in 2007, now inescapable social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat had yet to launch, and even those social media platforms that did exist, like Facebook and Twitter, were not the world defining forces that they have become since. But the show's fundamental premise, that all of its characters are the subject of a critical and sharp anonymous blogger who spreads their secrets with glee to a constantly updated audience, proved remarkably prescient about the ways in which social media would come to shape the lives and culture of its audience.

But what *Gossip Girl* really displays is how the internet stratified audience interaction in the mid-2000s. While fandoms had found expression online for virtually as long as the internet had existed, it was in these years that official channels began to appear that allowed audience members direct interaction with the network, cast, or creative forces behind the show. I analyzed three different available discussion platforms: the official CW moderated *Gossip Girl* forum "VIP Lounge," the unofficial *Gossip Girl* FanForum, and Twitter posts directed at the show and its creators. These platforms and their content display how having a supposed direct connection to the show changed audience discussion, both in terms of what viewers wanted to say to the show and what they wanted to say to each other.

Gossip Girl's Beginnings

Gossip Girl, the novel, was first published in April 2002 by Cecily von Ziegesar. Based on the author's experiences at a private Manhattan all-female prep school, the book (and eventual series) centered on the lives of privileged teenagers as chronicled by the titular gossip blogger. By 2003, the series had become a bestseller, with the third book being promoted with a massive marketing campaign including radio promotions, ads in teen publications like *Teen People* and *Cosmo Girl*, and an online publicity campaign.[1] In 2004, Warner. Bros. won a bidding war for the rights to the series, intending to adapt it into a film written by WB show *Gilmore Girls* creator Amy Sherman-Palladino and starring the popular teen actress Lindsay Lohan . When Warner Bros.'s rights reverted back to the book's publisher in 2006 after the project failed to get off the ground, Stephanie Savage and Josh Schwartz, who had been the showrunners for the popular teen show *The O.C.*, took over the project and created a television pilot. The show was greenlit in 2007 as The CW's first-ever scripted pilot order in the same week that *The O.C.* was cancelled in its fourth season.

But the youth audience's relationship with the internet had changed massively since the book's first publication in 2002, and even more so since its original intended adaptation in 2004. While *Gossip Girl* the book could center around a single blog, *Gossip Girl* the show had to adapt to the ways in which its audience was becoming embedded within the internet and to the still relatively new concept of social media, both within and beyond the text of the show.

Gossip Girl and The Internet

In 2007, television's relationship with the internet as we knew it was just beginning to shift, and as usual, teen television was at the forefront of changing how audiences interacted with the text. In particular, online platforms were shifting from being the territory of the most fervent of fans to public ground, with many more teens increasingly connecting with each other as a part of everyday life. Participating in online culture was no longer seen as indicative of antisocial tendencies, but rather the reverse-- a way to extend "real life" social reach and popularity to a broader audience.[2] As social media became increasingly embedded in young people's lives, it also became both a way to market to teenagers and for teenagers to "market" themselves, using it to represent an image of their ideal self. *Gossip Girl* used this increasing connectedness within the text of the show, displaying an assumption that its characters' use of the internet as a platform on which to talk about themselves and those they knew in "real life" would resonate with its intended youth audience.

Television itself also began to live on the internet, with shows becoming available both to watch online through streaming platforms and for purchase through downloads. *A*s a show that was regularly watched on these platforms, GG suggested an audience that was comfortable with digital technologies in their everyday watching habits.[3] *Gossip Girl*'s audience also interacted with the show on both an official and unofficial level on the internet, with both corporate-created and fan-created forums and networks existing for the show. While both were used by fans, the types of interaction and engagement varied between the two. They emphasized similar topics, but operated on different levels. They also show us how what the audience wanted from the text and how they interacted with it developed over the course of *Gossip Girl*'s six year run.

***Gossip Girl*, "Officially" Discussed**

With its launch in 2007, The CW's official website for *Gossip Girl* was in many ways a prototype for everything that the future of television would hold, particularly the offer of official streaming platforms. After the airing of an episode on Monday evening on the network, the episode would be posted for free on the website the following Saturday. While *Gossip Girl*'s ratings slowly dropped throughout its first thirteen episodes, the traffic to the website continued to pick up, so much so that for the final five episodes of the first season, the network removed the streaming option in an attempt to draw its online audience back to the traditional television watching that had proved successful when the show achieved its highest ratings since its pilot.[4]

The website was structured to appear like the fictional "Gossip Girl" blog that prominently features within the show's plot. Updates in the form of posts credited to "Gossip Girl" would announce upcoming plot details in the voice of the show's eponymous and anonymous narrator. Online sponsors like Victoria's Secret and Verizon Wireless also had advertisements featured throughout the "blog," and an official forum titled "VIP Lounge" was available for fan discussion.

Like many television fan forums, the VIP Lounge was essentially an online bulletin board. Users started and responded to threads, with varying levels of response depending on their level of interest in the topic. However, rather than being moderated by fans, the forum moderators were employees of The CW. Four central threads were pinned to the top of the thread, largely related to interaction between the audience and the show, such as "Post Your Questions for the Cast of Gossip Girl," and a consistently posted thread entitled "[Air Date of Most Recent Episode] - Tell Us What You Think!"[5]

The forum is no longer accessible, as The CW does not maintain websites for shows that are no longer on the air. However, in her work on the discourses of girlhood, Anne Petersen

archived several of these posts and analyzed them by dividing them into five categories: romantic individualism, fashion/beauty, community, identification, and escapism. I will thus draw heavily on the comments that she archived in order to discuss this mode of audience interaction, and use her designated categories, but I will also bring in two other modes of interaction: the unofficial *Gossip Girl* forum on FanForum, and the social media platform Twitter.

Gossip Girl, Unofficially Discussed

FanForum

FanForum is a discussion site devoted to various entertainment content that has been in use since 1998. Its homepage currently features eleven sections divided between topics such as "Female Celebrities," "TV Shows--Past," and "Music Artists" and forum related topics such as "General Discussion" and "Info Center." The *Gossip Girl* forum exists within the "TV Shows - Past" category. It was opened on July 31, 2007, and became the second board on FanForum to reach two million posts in 2011. It was officially closed on June 29, 2014. The forum was maintained and exclusively used by fans, offering a portrait of how fans of the show communicated with each other, outside of the approved world of the "VIP Lounge" maintained by The CW.

Twitter

Launched in 2006, the rise of the social network Twitter as a platform for fan discussion with other fans and with those connected to the show ran directly parallel to *Gossip Girl*. When

the show premiered in 2007, Twitter had roughly 400,000 tweets posted per quarter.[6] By the time the show aired its finale in 2012, more than 100 million users were posting more than 340 million tweets a day.[7] *Gossip Girl* was one of the earliest examples of what would become a common relationship between fans and creators on the platform, with creators promoting their show on a personal level to fans, and fans commenting, questioning, and attempting to persuade the creators to make the decisions about the show they wanted them to make. Since Twitter is a massive platform, it is impossible to truly offer a complete overview of all fan commentary on the show over the course of five years. Instead, I focus on looking at direct commentary tweeted at either the official *Gossip Girl* account (@GossipGirl, started in April 2009) and original showrunner Josh Schwartz (@JoshSchwartz76, started in January 2010), so as to see differences between the fan-fan conversations of FanForum and the fan-creator conversations that are possible on Twitter, as well as the shift from a forum system to a social media one for fandom.

***Gossip Girl* Fan Commentary**

Romantic Individualism

Unsurprisingly, the posters about *Gossip Girl* on "VIP Lounge," FanForum, and Twitter were overwhelmingly young women (or at least, users presenting themselves as such). One of their main interests in posting was also the central theme of the show: heteronormative romance. They follow the rules of what Angela McRobbie identified as "romantic individualism" in her

analysis of the British girls' magazine *Jackie*. The rules are: 1) girls must fight in order to both get and keep their romantic interest, 2) other girls are not to be trusted and will aim to take their romantic interest away from them, and 3) regardless of this belief that romance is a never ending battle, it is something that is enjoyable and, because it is seen as essential to girlhood, girlhood is enjoyable as well.[8] The goal of girlhood under these guidelines is dating, romance, love and/or coupledom. To achieve these is to be successful at being a girl and being happy, despite the fact that it also requires constant paranoia, insecurity, and competition.

The postings on "VIP Lounge" reinforce these ideas as a set of rules and as the lens through which the audience views the show. Language like "KEEP your man" shows up in discussions of plots where two female characters are presented as in competition for a male character. In addition, while the show features characters regularly in sexual situations, the forum posts are usually more focused on romantic desires than sexual ones. The culmination of the romantic fantasy are achievements like marriage and babies, rather than sex.

FanForum is similarly focused on romance, with the 75 out of 86 threads with the most responses on the *Gossip Girl* forum focusing on the romantic relationships of the characters. All of these are relationships and all of them are "canon" relationships, meaning that they were featured on the television show rather than being fan-generated. However, these threads do combine "official" *Gossip Girl* content and fan-generated content. All threads are introduced with an edited first post which features content focused on the relationship taken from the show, as well as creative content from fans like fan art, poetry, music videos, and fan fiction. But this creativity is only expressed in relationship to the source material, and it also reinforces the hegemony of heterosexuality, as the posts on "VIP Lounge" do, rather than using the established universe of the show to explore subversive narratives.

On Twitter, relationships also dominate conversation about the show, particularly as directed to executive producer Josh Schwartz (@JoshSchrawtz76), who once joked that his twitter feed "is often just a war between the Dan and Blair shippers and Chuck and Blair shippers. So it's just 'Dair' versus 'Chair' in a battle royale."[9] Indeed, fans often use language in addressing Schwartz that implies a desire to "win" by having their preferred relationship selected by the show. For example, one tweet from 2010 says, "wow there are so many Dan and Serena shippers lately.. that's freakin' awesome! Don't ever mess with DSers again @JoshSchwartz76 or else ;)."[10] Another asked, "Should NS [Nate/Serena] and DV [Dan/Vanessa] fans "hang in there" too? Or can we stop watching? Why stay if a failed ship is returning?,"[11] implying that the only reason they continued to watch the show was a desire to see their preferred relationships. In this way, "romantic individualism" is transferred from being just how fans perceive relationships within the show to how they practice fandom itself. They must fight for their "ship," other shippers will try to destroy their ship, and despite the fact that shipping is a never ending battle, it is also understood to be the only way to truly enjoy the show.

Fashion/Beauty

Gossip Girl presents a world of economic success beyond what most of its audience can access. On "VIP Lounge," this disparity results in an understanding of consumption as a way to become closer to the ideal self, which is correlated with the world of the show. On the forum, the audience fantasizes about the material objects that are held by the characters and, by extension, the actors performing as those characters. For example, in a question to the actress Blake Lively, one poster asks, "where did u get that dress u wore when u went on a date with Dan in the pilot

episode?."[12] They also seek out specific pieces of character wardrobes, aiming either to own the exact object the character does, or to find a close similarity at their own fiscal level.

The show's advertisers also use its audience's desire to be as close to the characters as possible by placing their own products within the world of the show. One episode featured a character designing a fashion line for Victoria's Secret (a major sponsor, both online and in the network presentation of the show), despite the fact that their products are outside of the extreme luxury of the show. Instead, they represent an achievable luxury that can appeal to the audience in comparison to even further down market options like Walmart.

The FanForum board hosted a similar thread, titled "Gossip Girl Fashion Thread: Because Rodeo Drive Doesn't Have Anything on Park Avenue!" While the discussion still centered around how to achieve looks depicted on the show, the most recurring comment was whether or not The CW had updated its online guide to items worn by the characters in the most recent episode, suggesting that the higher authority of the show itself superseded any advice fellow fans could give. The fashion thread was also significantly less popular on FanForum than the threads centered around relationships, which again suggests that while fans were interested in the fashion of the show, it was not the reason they joined or stayed on FanForum. It is also important to note that fashion comments were more likely to come up outside of the officially designated fashion thread, such as within a discussion of an episode that had just aired. However, these were largely asides within larger commentary rather than commentary itself. Overall, fans did not seem drawn to FanForum to discuss the fashion of the show in the same way they were to "VIP Lounge."

On Twitter, the most direct conversation around fashion and beauty happened with the @GossipGirl account. Instead of merely operating as a representation of the show, the account

behaves as if it is the character of "Gossip Girl," meaning that it uses the tone that the character takes on in "her" role as the show's narrator.[13] It also provides further commentary on not just the show, but celebrity culture in general. While the account does get occasional tweets asking where to find specific clothing items that had been worn on the show, it was more likely to receive tweets where the audience showed off their own outfits for approval. These were also often in character:"as you are the all seeing eye, could you help me find Blair's dress from this picture?" asked one. These tweets often had connotations of the fans trying to be like the characters. For example, one fan tweeted at the account with: "I'm feeling very Serena van der Woodsen today," accompanied by a picture of the fan with an outfit and hairstyle that aligned with the character's "boho chic" presentation. @GossipGirl responded with "Gorgeous, darling! XOXO" and retweeted the picture to share it with their own followers.[14] The fans who followed the account then tweeted at the retweeted fan to ask questions about where her outfit had come from. In this way, fans used the Twitter account as a conduit not merely to connect with other fans, but to elevate themselves through the authority granted to the @GossipGirl account.

Community

Throughout the history of fandom, one of the consistent truths has been that it is fundamentally social; fans form relationships not just with the text but with each other. They are spectators joined together by the consumption of a particular piece of media, but their relationships with each other can and often do stretch beyond the original point of bonding, with their shared interest forming a base of trust to work from. In previous analysis of online fan interactions, focus often has been placed on fan discourse created and moderated by fans. Networks and studios have long acknowledged fan devotion in an effort to cultivate said

devotion and, subsequently, turn a larger profit. But internet fandom was originally characterized by its accessibility and independence, with fan sites and boards made by the fans themselves in order to discuss a specific text, a particular genre or theme, or just being a fan in general.[15] But beginning in the mid-2000s, corporations began to create their own versions of these "fansites," but with offerings that only they could provide. These exclusive offers included access to "behind the scenes" content, connections to people associated with the show, and, as the technology developed to allow it, the show itself. All of these feature on The CW's official *Gossip Girl* website. The "VIP Lounge" itself is limited in a way that previous boards had not been. Discussion largely focuses on the show, its cast, and fan practices centered around the show, such as the writing of fanfiction. The previously mentioned pinned threads help to maintain the structure of discussion to center around these topics, by making them the first conversations to which the fan has access. The framing of topics also inspires the fan to believe that their opinion matters not to other fans, but to the network, as well as to the creators and stars of the show. This simulates a connection between fandom as a group and the text, rather than encouraging connections between fans.

Subsequently, even the fan-created discussions follow this same pattern. The majority of threads are centered around either liking or disliking a specific character or relationship, with fans only seeking to find others who share their particular opinions on the show. A major exception is made for a thread entitled "The Amanda, Katie, Ally, Anna, Beth, Penny, Meika, Megan, And Anyone That Wants To Chat Thread," where fans provide updates on their own lives and their own feelings, outside of the world of the show. While discussions never turn to deeper issues such as politics or activism, some fans were still able to find a sense of comfort and

community characteristic of earlier internet fandom within the sanitized discourse of the official board.

On FanForum, community is more emphasized, but still generally focuses on finding others who agree on the show rather than bonding at a deeper level. The forum is generally not used to argue, debate, or advocate for the validity of a particular couple or opinion, rather, posters seem to be seeking smaller communities based on their own already existing beliefs. Each thread is usually focused around a particular relationship, and a new thread on the same topic can be created after about 300 posts are made in the existing one. There is some friendly competition around whose "ship" gets the most threads, but largely fanbases keep to themselves within their own communities. While this separation means that the FanForum board is characterized by a decorum and friendliness not often seen in fandom, it also isolates fans in their own opinions, creating something of an echo chamber where conversations largely reinforce what fans already believe.[16]

Without this separation on Twitter, community is used as a bargaining chip, such in conversations with the @JoshSchwartz76 account. "Shippers" are presented as a unified front, one that can make or break the show based on whether or not they are pleased. One post read: "@JoshSchwartz76 GG's SUCKFEST=EPIC RATINGS FAILURE!!! Only way to win back the viewers is to give us what we LOVE & CHERISH about GG--CHAIR!"[17] Fans also competed to have their particular ship "trend" on Twitter, meaning that it would be seen by millions of users of the platform under the "trending topics" list ("#DAIR will be trending on Monday!!!! calling all #dair shippers let's tweet #dair as much as we can! i've read chair fans will do the same!").[18] Despite the contentiousness of the "battle royale" of Twitter, however, the platform is also better built for fans to build personal relationships outside of the show. Unlike "VIP Lounge" or the

FanForum board, fans' personal Twitter accounts could be used to discuss anything they wished, meaning that even as they lost interest in the show, or when the show went off the air in 2012, their relationships with each other were more likely to stay intact. It also meant that they could maintain their already established followers, even as they moved on to other topics. These would be factors that would encourage a general shift in fandom away from forums and towards social media.

Identification

Identification is formed out of a combination of individualism and community, when the audience member crafts the personal ideal out of both what they observe in and want out of the character and world of the show. This association with the self by fans takes their connection with the star and/or character from a commercial level to an emotional and social one. In one thread on "VIP Lounge," entitled "Inappropriate Show," a case in point is a poster self identifying as a middle-aged mother questioning the appropriateness of topics of the pilot episode, which included attempted suicide, underaged drinking, and two different cases of sexual assault. The poster asked: "When can our kids just be kids - what happened to worrying about what dress to wear for prom?"[19] Overwhelmingly, the response to this post was defensive. Responders repeatedly emphasized that they found the topics of the show to be relatable and honest about modern teenage life. As one poster put it: "I'm sick of these other shows on Nick and Disney trying to sugarcoat life."

Furthermore, responses in the "Inappropriate Show" thread focused on the idea that not only was *Gossip Girl* reflective of the realities of teenage life, but that it did not need to be for its audience. A poster named BGirl55 said, "[M]ost teenagers are already thinking about this kind of

stuff without the show influencing them. They're not idiots." Another poster named JessicaGGFan said that "[The show isn't] promoting it at all, they are just showing things that HAPPEN." *Gossip Girl*'s audience therefore uses these forums to acknowledge that while the content may be controversial, it is relatable to their own lives and it is what they want to see discussed and represented in media. Later in the thread, the conversation turned to what parent-child relationships should look like around the show. While most posters responded vehemently to the idea of watching the show with their parents, they believed that *Gossip Girl* could and should start conversations between daughters and parents about these issues. This reaction reflects a relationship with media that posits that it should be not a moral guide, but a tool to assist in forming an understanding of the broader world, as well as a way to make connections that allow parents to better understand the world their daughters live in.

FanForum, due to its focus as a fans talking to other fans space, largely does not feature discussion on whether *Gossip Girl* is morally good or not. Because they are fans and they are focused on their specific interest in the show, they do not have conversations about how the show comes across to outsiders. On Twitter, however, tweets to Josh Schwartz and the GGWriters account in particular often imply that there is a morally correct storytelling choice, especially later in the show's run. In tweets about Chuck and Blair's relationship, which is tumultuous and has at times featured behavior that could be understood as emotionally and (once) physically abusive, one user tweeted: "You must be so proud to glamourize abusive relationship and renew #gossipgirl @CW_network ? cc @GGWriters @JoshSchwartz76 #womenarestrong."[20] Another user tweeted a picture of a very large book to the GGWriters account, adding the caption: "I wrote a book called 'things that are offensive/problematic/disgusting about gossip girl'."[21] While the VIP Lounge conversation

centered around the idea that the audience was pleased to see controversial topics discussed, the Twitter discussion seemed to operate under the assumption that depiction was endorsement, and that the show should therefore be critiqued for any depiction of controversial imagery. (This attitude was characteristic of a larger fandom shift due to a move onto social media platforms discussed in later chapters.)

Escapism

As Jackie Stacey articulates in her work on Classical Hollywood Cinema and female spectatorship, "escapism" is often used to dismiss forms of popular culture as unworthy of critical or academic attention. This is particularly true of those forms characterized as having predominantly female audiences, such as soap operas, romance novels, or romantic comedies.[22] In Stacey's work, however, escapism is largely understood as consisting of something more frivolous taking away from something more serious. Because she focuses on adult women, what is being escaped is the mundanity of adult life through indulgence in a particular, often romantic, fantasy. For the *Gossip Girl* audience, escapism is shaped differently, particularly because technology has embedded the show far more deeply in the lives of its audience than a single novel or film could ever do.

Beginning in the mid-2000s, modern teen audiences were described as "platform agnostic"; their spectatorship had fundamentally shifted toward a highly mobilized mode of viewing that allowed for watching media regardless of original intended platform.[23] In October of 2007, when *Gossip Girl* launched, the Pew Research Center reported that 53% of teens personally owned an iPod or other mp3 player, 25% owned a laptop, and 72% had their own desktop computer.[24] All of these platforms offered options through which to watch the show, far

from its original intended one of the television. Moreover, the technological diversity means that the viewing experience of *Gossip Girl* could be vastly different for different viewers. It was possible to watch *Gossip Girl* alone, or while multitasking, or even watching simultaneously with friends from different locations and simultaneously discussing it via social media or other means of communication. It also means that while *Gossip Girl* had many viewers, they were not necessarily viewing the show in the way the network would prefer them to watch.

In its first month, an average of 2.7 million viewers watched the show during its live air time, Mondays at 8 PM (EST).[25] But when accounting for delayed DVR viewing, the show's Nielsen ratings rose 20%; it was streamed 1.5 million times from the CW's website during that first month; and, although the network do not offer official numbers, it was the most downloaded show on iTunes and the most streamed on Yahoo! during that period.[26] Additionally, when breaking down the ratings by demographic, *Gossip Girl* was a top-five network show among teen girls, which indicated that when teens *were* watching network television, *Gossip Girl* was one of the ones they were making time to see. Across the "VIP Lounge," FanForum, and Twitter, posters reinforce this data. Many reference the fact that they have viewed episodes multiple times, which is only possible through either DVR or streaming online. Others seek out not-yet-posted episodes that they were unable to view during the original airing, with more internet savvy posters leading others to either the iTunes download link or to less legal options such as download links on BitTorrent or streaming sites like SideReel or even YouTube.

Still, other posters sought to support the show through operating within the established system of ratings. "WATCH IT LIVE!!!! It needs ratings!!!" posted one user on VIP Lounge under the name chuckblairfan.[27] These often use a "true fan" angle that argues that fans who truly care for the show will watch it during its original airing. In fact, many of them almost brag

about their insistence on watching it live even though they also engage in other viewing practices like DVR recording and streaming.

It could be argued that this version of viewing is a lesser form of escapism than the previously studied romance novels and films. But it also seems true that having more options for viewing, and thus, more options for escaping, increases control over the choice of when and how to escape. The immediate availability of the indulgence, as opposed to the necessity of following an already set schedule, makes the escape an act of immediacy and one that therefore has even more appeal. If the escape is available whenever you want it, it stands to reason that one would be more likely to indulge in that desire and do so more often than if it is only available at a specific time.

On the other hand, escapism through social media was becoming increasingly complicated. As fandom conversation moved from the forum to public social media, anonymity steadily disappeared. Escaping into fandom discussion was more difficult when your identity became inherently tied to you, either because the social media account you were maintaining was one for which you used your real identity or because, even if the account was not tied to your "real" identity, it remained the consistent place you talked about fandom. Where discussion had once needed to be sought out through a forum, fandom identities now largely stayed stable on a single platform. This meant that true "escapism" became less and less likely, after all, if you maintain a single identity than you can not merely leave it behind when you develop another interest. You could exist wholly within the world of a single discussion on forums like VIP Lounge; that is not possible on something like Twitter, where all your conversations remain tied to you. Social media encouraged fandom to become less escapist and more performative,

something that would also be seen in the lessons teen television itself would learn from the success of YouTube.

Conclusion

The trajectory of *Gossip Girl* illustrates the ways in which audience interaction developed rapidly between the show's initial premiere in 2007 to its finale in 2012. Originally, the rise of Twitter meant that audience interaction became stratified, with different discussions taking place in different spaces. However, as discussion began to move fully into the space of social media, television began to become replaced by YouTube and other forms of internet media in the viewing habits of young audiences. Forums became smaller and smaller, eventually closing completely - both the "VIP Lounge" and Gossip Girl FanForum site are no longer accessible for posting. Looking at this next step can illustrate the lessons that teen television learned from social media, both in structure and content.

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Chapter 3

YouTube as Teen TV, and Teen TV as YouTube

While *Gossip Girl* had success with social media, it still existed before the true proliferation of social media to teen show audiences. The years 2012 to 2017 witnessed a massive shift in teenagers' use of technology. By 2015, 88% of American teens had access to a mobile phone, with 73% having a smartphone; 87% had desktop or laptop access; 92% of teenagers said they used the internet daily; 52% said they were Instagram users; 33% used Twitter, and while 14% total teens used Tumblr, 23% of teenage girls did. By 2015, 17% read or commented on discussion boards such as Reddit.[1]

Simultaneously, "tweens" and teens were found to be watching significantly less live TV than adults. Where the average adult watched two hours and 58 minutes of television, the average teen watched one hour and 32 minutes of television. Teens were also watching about 33 minutes a day of short video clips, which made up about a fifth of their daily viewing. Adults only watched a daily average of five minutes of online video, which accounted for just 2% of their daily viewing. A quarter of eleven to fifteen year olds said that some weeks they did not watch any live television.[2] By 2016, a semi-annual survey of 10,000 teenagers found that 26% watched YouTube daily, and 25% watched cable TV, which was the first time YouTube had overtaken broadcast television in that survey.[3]

How did YouTube's surpassing of television change teen audiences? And how would television have to change to find a way to get those audiences back? I propose that as YouTube became a substitute for television, it fundamentally shifted the way in which its audiences interacted with the original medium. To understand the effects of this change, we must consider

the theoretical ways that we conceive of television itself. YouTube and other streaming video are not an entirely different platform that exists simultaneously with the traditional one, but new models for television which teen television has successfully begun to adopt.

Structure and Endlessness

In 1984, Beverle Houston wrote in "Viewing Television" that television insists upon the "repetitive reformulation of desire," in which the fragmentation and interruption of the format is used to keep the audience in a state of desire by never truly fulfilling the implicit promise that it makes.[4] Television is deliberately structured to dismantle itself into parts, whether that means the mid-program interruption of the commercial or the repetition of the same segments and sequences. As television has developed outside of the traditional form of broadcast in forms like cable channels, the new goal has been to make interruptions that do not break the flow of the pleasure, but rather seem to belong to it. If audiences can avoid commercials, than television must make those commercials something that audiences want to view.

Theoretically, YouTube would be, like cinema, a medium that fetishizes the fulfillment of the unachievable desire of television. The film in cinema exists in a complete form and is, thus, a complete experience. YouTube could be the same;a video is a complete form and watching a single one is a complete experience. But instead, YouTube has reshaped the "repetitive reformulation of desire" for a generation that explicitly rejects commercials and the delay or denial of pleasure.

The most successful YouTubers usually operate on a schedule, releasing videos on a weekly or daily basis. Their videos rarely exceed fifteen minutes, and they often have a regular start and end pattern, such as a phrase that signifies the beginning of the episode and another one

that signifies the end. They craft a structure that encourages endless viewing by putting their videos in "playlists" that can be watched uninterrupted for hours on end. There is no interruption built into the structure of the average Youtuber format, because their audience lives in a world where interruption is tantamount to uninterest. The continuous endlessness of YouTube is as much built into it as commercials are built into broadcast television.

The unfulfillment of desire comes instead from the impossibility of ever being able to fully consume the YouTuber. Instead of having central plots and characters, YouTubers are themselves their own product,a product that is impossible to fully experience. However accessible the YouTuber is, however many platforms they provide content on and however regularly they update, they will never be truly consumable in full for their audience because they are real human beings. The YouTuber both creates the illusion that they are wholly available and maintains a distance. In a 2016 study done by Google, 70% of teenage YouTube subscribers said that they related to YouTube creators more than traditional celebrities; four in ten said that their favorite creator understood them better than their friends.[5] It is impossible for the creator to ever confirm this fact, because the creator will never actually know their audience member. And yet it is the desire to have this confirmed that also fuels engagement with the creator. When Youtubers reply to comments, hold frequent Q&A sessions across platforms, or even meet fans in person, the appeal is that they are both "normal people" but also exist within the impermeable world of the internet, in a model almost identical to that of the star system in Classical Hollywood Cinema. Engagement is in fact significantly higher for YouTubers; the top 25 YouTube stars were found to receive three times more views, twelve times more comments, and two times more "actions" (meaning thumbs up, shares, clicks, etc.) than mainstream celebrities on the same platform.[6]

Could television find a way to recreate this particular form of denial of desire? In some ways, it has done so. Through streaming platforms like Netflix, television performs endlessness in the same way that YouTube does, with shows available to be watched uninterrupted in their entirety. This has been a massively successful form of content delivery for teen audiences. By 2017, teenagers were found to be watching about twice as much Netflix as live television.[7] In a survey of US college students, only 8% said that they did not have a Netflix account.[8] From 2012 to 2017, the percentage of US teens who felt that they could live without a cable or satellite TV subscription rose from 32% to 55%.[9] But while teenagers may be watching streaming platforms in massive numbers, this does not provide evidence that they are engaging with it in the same way that they are with YouTube. To demonstrate this disparity, we have to consider not only the content of YouTube, but how its audiences perform their interaction--with an emphasis on performance.

Audience Performance and Liminality

When one watches television, one can only ever serve as a witness. The program is already complete, either because it was already recorded or because it is untouchable in its form. For example, while the sketch comedy program *Saturday Night Live* is, in fact, live television, the audience can never actually change what is already planned while they serve as a witness. The same is accurate for YouTube, in general. Released videos are already completed and live streams, even if they feature audience interaction, can not actually be truly joined by the audience; while they serve as a speaking witness, they are still witnesses only. The audience member can not decide that they will suddenly appear as a figure within the video.

But the important distinction between YouTube and television is that it is infinitely easier to become a figure that exists in the "megatext" of YouTube, a term that Nick Browne uses to mean everything that has appeared within a specific medium, than it is to become a figure that exists in the "megatext" of television.[10] To join the world of television is a deeply difficult process that usually requires years and years of hard work and perseverance. To join the world of YouTube takes a camera and a YouTube account, and can be done in about thirty seconds on a whim. The line between creator and fan is not just thin because the creator is accessible; the line is thin because it is easy for the fan to decide to become a creator.

One way to consider this new mode is to understand YouTube as a "liminal" space, an anthropological concept usually used in religious contexts, referring to when in the midst of a ritual participants hold neither the status they did before the ritual nor the status that are seeking through the ritual. They exist in between; they are both and neither. On YouTube, creators are liminal, as previously established, because they exist simultaneously in the spaces of the rarity of fame and the accessibility of normality. But audiences are liminal too; they exist simultaneously in the space of the witness and the space of the performance. It is impossible to leave a YouTube without some form of identity. Similarly, it is impossible to send a Tweet or make a post on virtually any social media site without some kind of identification, even if it is one that is created for the explicit purpose of being anonymous. True anonymity on the internet, entirely unattached to any identity, is increasingly rare. Every viewer who wants to engage instead of merely witness has to be on some level, a creator themselves, even if it is just creating commentary on what they are witnessing. And creators in public spaces are performers, even as they remain audience members. They can be witnessed just as they themselves are witnesses.

It is difficult for television to replicate this situation because television is not structured for the same level of engagement that YouTube is. Even streaming platforms like Netflix have no built in space for witnesses to become performers; there is no comment box, and no public identity whatsoever. Netflix viewers exist on Netflix only within their own spaces. Its content is there only to be witnessed. If the space of television can not be liminal, either in traditional broadcast or streaming form, than television itself has to become liminal.

The "Ultratext"

Television has begun to transcend its own space in order to exist on multiple realms. It does this through social media, living in officially licensed accounts on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat. A specific television show now seeks to function the same way Youtubers do, by expanding out from its original medium into other platforms and extending its reach into its audiences' lives. It creates a new version of Browne's conception of the "supertext" of television. Not just the show and everything that happens while the show is broadcast but every paratext that is officially recognized as connected to the show exists as the "ultratext," if you will. While the paratext is acknowledged as what is tangential to the show, the "ultratext" would understand the paratext as a piece of the show itself. The ultratext is malleable and limitless. For example, the social media accounts of actors on a show, even when they are not discussing the show itself, are connected to the show through their image.

If the "ultratext" is everything officially connected to the show in any capacity (as well as the show itself), than the "paratext" can be understood as the audience's interactions, which are connected to the show but not the show itself. Therefore, audience interaction is elevated in importance not just for the audience, but for the show as well. Having consistent audience

interaction is a way to prove the success of your show, especially with an audience which is often perceived as uninterested in traditional television.

Conclusion

The lessons that teen television learned from YouTube were lessons in reconsidering what television could be, and how audience interaction could be understood. However, structural changes would not necessarily provide the complete answer to how teen television would find success in the age of social media. A successful example of the ways in which the content of teen television also adapted to be successful in a new world exists in *Riverdale*.

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Chapter 4

"You Need a Dead Body" : *Riverdale* as "Clickbait" and "Sharebait" Television

In 2018, it is impossible to truly assess what will be the defining teen television show for the current generation of teenagers. They live in a world with more access to television than ever, both in terms of sheer level of current content (since *Gossip Girl* ended in 2012, the number of streaming shows has increased 680%) and in terms of availability of archived content[1]. Series that are off the air are now easily available for rediscovery on platforms like Netflix and Hulu. The co-creator of the massively popular sitcom *Friends,* which began in 1994 and ended in 2004, said that friends of her teenage daughter, having started binging the show on Netflix, thought that it was a newly produced period piece.[2] The increasing fragmentation of media consumption in general also means that the "defining show" for one teenager may be very different than the one for another. Nevertheless, The CW's *Riverdale*, which premiered in the winter of 2017, seems to be the show best aligned to appeal to and represent the ways in which today's teenagers consume media.

Like *Gossip Girl*, *Riverdale* is the adaptation of a popular existing franchise, which had its development roots in film. Archie Comics announced in 2013 that Warner Bros. would produce a live-action film based on the comic's characters, which would have been the first film adaptation for the comic after 72 years of publication. It would be directed by Jason Moore, the director of the 2012 college musical comedy *Pitch Perfect*, and written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, a playwright, Marvel Comics writer, and co-producer and staff writer for the FOX musical comedy-drama high school program *Glee* (2009-2015). While the project was described

as a modern day John Hughes film, Aguirre-Sacasa said about his script in progress that "There are parts of the story that I think people will be surprised how dark and real it gets".[3]

Aguirre-Sacasa already had a long history of playing with the wholesome, idealistic, All-American world of the series. His 2003 play *Weird Comic Book Fantasy* (later rewritten as *Golden Age*) had originally been titled *Archie's Weird Fantasy*, and had centered around the titular character, who was usually embroiled in a heterosexual love triangle within the comics, coming out of the closet. The title and any connections to the Archie franchise were removed after legal action was threatened.[4] By 2013, Aguirre-Sacasa was writing the comic book *Afterlife with Archie*, which depicted an alternative reality where the zombie apocalypse began in the town of Riverdale. It was the first official *Archie* series to not be aimed at children and featuring extensive realistic violence verging on gore, necrotic themes, diverse sexual orientations, moderate language, and an overall disturbing tone. The first eight issues sold out and in 2014 Aguirre-Sacasa was named Archie Comics' chief creative officer on the basis of its success.[5]

The project stalled as a film when priorities were shifted to the already established tentpole franchises more characteristic of Warner Bros., but was moved to Berlanti Productions, the production company of writer and producer Greg Berlanti. Berlanti had previously written and produced teen coming of age shows on The WB like *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003) and *Everwood* (2002-2006), as well as the successful comic book adaptation *Arrow* (The CW, 2012-). His major influence on the show was the proposal that the show, which was at the time based on quieter, cult classic high school shows like *Freaks and Geeks* and *My So-Called Life*, needed something to cut through and draw attention and, subsequently, to be successful. Berlanti told Aguirre-Sacasa: "you need a dead body".[6]

The result of this demand was a show calibrated for a media landscape that circulates around "clickbait," a pejorative term for online content whose main goal is not to provide any particular information but to get users to click on a link to visit a web article, video, or other form of content. Clickbait over-promises or otherwise misrepresents what the actual content to which it links will contain. It is often characterized by wording like "You won't believe," "What happened next will shock you," or some other kind of speculative phrasing that specifically aims to create a "curiosity gap" that draws in the audience, and a cliffhanger within the viewer's mind. However, more recently clickbait has developed into what some journalists call "sharebait," which is content that exists to make an audience want to share it on their own social media through either its reaffirmation of things they already believe or its specific appeal to their sense of outrage. In other words, "sharebait" is specially targeted at how people would like to present themselves as either in support of or in opposition to a certain position, perspective, or moral choice to the broader audience on social media. *Riverdale* successfully uses the tactics of both clickbait and sharebait to create a show tailor-made for both purposes; it both draws its audience in and then, more vitally, encourages them to share either support or opposition as publicly as possible.

The Success of the High Concept in 2010s Teen Television

FreeForm and Pretty Little Liars

The idea that *Riverdale* was fundamentally not marketable as a coming of age series without its literal "dead body" seems based in the reality that there is more competition for viewers than ever before, with networks having to compete not only with each other but with streaming platforms that hold both original and archived content. While teen shows had noticeably waned in number since the end of *Gossip Girl*, some of the few success stories of the early 2010s were high concepts. Most notably, *Pretty Little Liars* (ABC Family/FreeForm, 2011-2017), based on a book series and originally developed as "*Desperate Housewives* for teens," found significant success. The series follows the lives of four teenage girls who begin receiving threatening messages from a mysterious anonymous figure going by the name "A," and continue to try and solve the mystery of "A"'s identity as their torture escalates. In its peak ratings season, 2013-14, with an average of 3.9 million viewers per episode, *Pretty Little Liars* had a median viewer age of 21 and was the third most tweeted about series after *Breaking Bad* and *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-), both critically and commercially successful anti-hero dramas. Even as ratings dropped, it remained the most successful show in terms of social engagement across major platforms, registering more than 256 million interactions for 2016.[7] It took *Gossip Girl*'s original integration of social media even further by continuing conversation and speculation year round, through targeted use of youth-dominated platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr and a team of six to ten live tweeters per episode (including the show's central stars). *Pretty Little Liars* also directly rejected the "rarified world" of *Gossip Girl*, instead centering its characters in an idealized Middle America by way of Pennsylvania.[8]

FreeForm tried to extend the success of *Pretty Little Liars* to other teen programming with limited results. An even more high concept fantasy spinoff, *Ravenswood* (ABC Family, 2013-2014), was cancelled due to low ratings after just one ten-episode season. An attempt at a

more reality-based series from *Gilmore Girls* (The WB, 2000-2007) creator Amy Sherman-Palladino, called *Bunheads* (ABC Family, 2012-2013), about a woman teaching teens at a small town ballet school, was critically acclaimed but deemed a commercial failure and cancelled after its first season. Still, *Pretty Little Liars* fundamentally shifted perception of its network, turning it from the home of wholesome, family friendly fare to a network characterized by its appeal to young, female, social media-friendly viewers.

"No Longer the Gossip Girl Network"

The CW had also shifted away from coming of age narratives under the leadership of Mark Pedowitz, who became president of the network in 2011. Pedowitz wanted to turn the network away from being "the *Gossip Girl* network," and towards appealing to a broader 18-34 year old demographic. While the network found that advertisers and affiliates were generally willing to follow their new mission, viewers were less so, largely due to the success of pre-existing, no longer on air shows like *Gossip Girl* on Netflix, which they felt repurposed the idea that The CW was the place for teens - specifically, teen girls. By the 2014-15 season, the network had successfully launched high concept superhero shows based on DC Comics properties like *Arrow* and *The Flash*, both of which had a larger percentage of male viewers than female.[9] In appealing to advertisers, the network emphasized how its percentage of total female viewers was 54%, down from 66% for its initial 2006-07 season.[10] The female-targeted shows the network did pick up were high concept as well, and were targeted at millenial women rather than teens. Critically acclaimed dramedies like *Jane the Virgin* (2014-) and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-) brought the network its first ever nominations and wins from the Golden Globes. In 2015, when the network launched its "Dare to Defy" campaign, Pedowitz said that, ""We

discovered we're best suited as a brand to make a very high concept or genre based show that has serialized elements. That's the best way for us to succeed in our storytelling. If the shows check off the boxes, we have a good chance to succeed. Our audience will not come to us if we're procedural."[11]

Sacasa, when he had heard from The CW while *Riverdale* was still being pitched as a coming of age story, was told that the show was not "genre" enough, and that the network needed a hook beyond "Archie Comics, modernized." While genre television has long been a space with which teen television overlaps (as in the case of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB/UPN, 1997-2003) and *The Vampire Diaries* (The CW, 2009-2017)), it used to be merely one possible story. *Buffy* ran on the same schedule as *Dawson's Creek*; *The Vampire Diaries* ran on the same schedule as *Gossip Girl*, *90210*, and the various other rich-teen shenanigans that used to dominate The CW. *Riverdale*, by contrast, premiered as part of a schedule where the only other teen show featured was *The 100* (2014-), a post apocalyptic science fiction teen drama. Why had genre television become the only space teens were centered on television?

"What in God's Name Is Going On?": Initial Audience Reactions

From the beginning, *Riverdale* successfully aimed for a very specific reaction: surprise. In May 2016, The CW announced *Riverdale* officially for its midseason 2017 lineup as part of its upfront presentations. As part of the announcement, they released a synopsis that featured the first true hints at the project's plot beyond occasional character descriptions. Included was the fact that the kick off event for the show was the death of minor Archie Comics character Jason Blossom, as well as the fact that Archie would be involved in a relationship with his music teacher, Ms. Grundy (significantly aged down from her elder, "Mrs. Grundy" persona long

featured in the comics). Reception to these new, "edgier" elements of the show were significantly   mixed.

While many reporters who were in attendance at the upfront tweeted positively about the surprise of the show ("#Riverdale trailer reveals a much darker, insidious, and stylized series than I was expecting. Real hyped for this one now. #CW Upfronts"), online reaction was decidedly more interested in the seeming weirdness of the show's plot.[12] Most major entertainment publications reporting on the plot went along the lines of Vulture's single sentence response: "Uh, wow! That will not be what people expect from the Archie brand!," in between quotes from the cast and creator about how the show was indeed "darker" and "more subversive".[13] But io9, a Gawker subsite, got closest to typical internet reaction with "What in God's Name Is Going On in This Riverdale Synopsis?"[14] The Livejournal hosted gossip blog Oh No They Didn't, one of the few still regularly used forum-like platforms for fandom, responded largely with similar bafflement, writing "The f**k is this baby-Twin-Peaks nonsense?," "this makes Pretty Little Liars and Gossip Girl look like Seasame [sic] Street," "Like, I had to rewatch rn and.... it is not even cute and bubbly at all. Not even anything legitimately iconic. So I'm trying to understand the f**k out of this lmao. What is this what is going on. Not fun at all. So disappointing but I should know better I guess lol."[15] One of the most interesting insights, however, came from a user going by "jeff_koons," who commented that, "They want this to be way more controversial because no one really cared about Gossip Girl/90210 characters from the beggining [sic] and here people will be mad because they are already emotionally attached to the kids." The idea that outrage might be something the show was deliberately aiming for, and that people were responding with not just surprise, but displeasure, was in fact the intended reaction. It is one that seems at first counterintuitive but has, since that original announcement, actively

worked for *Riverdale*. By the time the show was being presented at the Television Critics Association in January before its premiere, Executive Producer Jon Goldwater declared that "the backlash was all good."[16] Although he followed this up with an explanation that comics like *Afterlife with Archie* had seen a similar skepticism before being fully embraced by the audience, it still reflected that at the least, initial backlash was not a bad thing for the show. It did the same job that the "dead body" did, by cutting through the noise of an increasingly crowded television discourse to draw attention. This is a trend that is reflected throughout *Riverdale'*s relationship with its audience, where aspects of the show seem deliberately built to take advantage of a media discourse and fandom that centers around argument over what ethical ramifications artistic choices have. On the Dreamwidth forum, "Fail Fandom Anon", (an entirely anonymous forum offered as an alternative to an increasingly public fandom through social media), one poster detailed how tailor-made *Riverdale* seemed for "wank," a term here used to mean a loud and public online argument. The poster wrote: "Archie is played by a white passing dude with red dyed hair playing a character that is white in the comics but he is Samoan and strongly identifies as such. Jughead is asexual in the comics but may well not be in the show. The Betty/Archie/Veronica triangle now includes a blond white woman and a latina woman. All of the characters will be high-school students. It will have a canon relationship between a teacher and a student."[17] Indeed, all of these aspects did come up in various fandom arguments over the course of the show's first season. The "clickbait" of the show can be best seen in its casting; the "sharebait" of it can best be seen in audience interaction centered around relationships.

Casting As Click-Bait

From the very beginning, *Riverdale*'s casting of its central characters showed a keen awareness of the media landscape within which it would be competing. In the original November 2015 casting breakdowns for its "Core Four" (meaning Archie, Betty, Veronica, and Jughead), several elements that would become central to the show's general casting strategy are already apparent. Indeed, all four casting breakdowns are described in terms of attractiveness; Jughead is an "emo heartthrob," Archie is "pumped and looking good" as well as "boyishly handsome," Betty is pretty, and Veronica is a stunner.[18] This is unsurprising, due to a long history of teen television (and prior to that, teen melodramas on film) casting aesthetically pleasing young people in central roles to further the goal of creating a world of complete fantasy. However, because *Riverdale* was using the largely sexless canon of Archie Comics, to cast them explicitly as attractive was a divergent element, especially Archie. While the female characters of Archie Comics have regularly appeared in skimpy clothing and are drawn with curves and cleavage, Archie and Jughead's imagery, and to a lesser extent, the other male characters of the comic book, has always been decidedly "goofy" in nature. In the world of Archie Comics, Betty, Veronica, and the various other female characters of the book are sex symbols, while Archie Andrews and the other male characters are not. As Aguirre-Sacasa described in an interview discussing the casting of the show, "It felt like one of the things we had to try to answer from the comics books. Why would these amazing, gorgeous women be falling for this kind of vanilla, edge-less, fine-looking guy?"[19]

Riverdale's eventual Archie, New Zealander KJ Apa, is not just a sex symbol within the show; he is, by his own admission, a "sex object."[20] One of the central plotlines of the pilot episode is the meta-idea that Archie "got hot" over the summer. The camera watches from Betty's window as Archie removes a shirt and reveals, to the appreciative voyeuristic in-show

audience of Betty and gay character Kevin, that he does indeed have abs. Of the show's many affectionate nicknames on Twitter, "Hot Archie" is one of the most used; on the microblogging social media platform Tumblr, gifsets featuring images of Archie in various states of undress on the show have thousands of reposts and likes.

The other "clickbait" aspect of Apa's casting is that he is, in fact, a diverse member of the cast in his own right. His father is a Samoan chief, and he has said that his culture is a major influence in his life; he has a traditional shoulder tattoo which commemorates his father becoming a High Chief.[21] However, the tattoo is covered up for *Riverdale*; Apa may be Samoan, but Archie Andrews, even "Hot Archie," is not. As diverse as Riverdale may be, there are still rules to the universe that must be followed. Hot Archie is still, at his core, the comics' Archie, the all-American boy next door, which means that he must be white. Allowing Apa to emphasize his own heritage in personal interviews but not including it within the show is "clickbait," by offering an audience something that will not truly be delivered merely to get it in the door.

Still, diversity that is not present in the long history of Archie Comics is emphasized within the original casting breakdowns, with the call for Veronica saying that producers ideally wanted to cast a Latina actress in the role, and the call for Jughead specifically seeking a hearing-impaired actor. The former goal was achieved with the casting of Camila Mendes, whose parents are Brazilian and whose character is explicitly Latina. Other characters who were "race swapped" included the members of the band Josie and the Pussycats, who went from being two white girls and a Black drummer to an all-Black trio, as well as Reggie Mantle, whose "bad boy" Archie alternative went from being white to being Asian-American. These swaps were some of the most well received original aspects of *Riverdale* within fandom. On Oh No They Didn't, one user posted: "The bully is Asian, Veronica is Latina, and all three of the pussycats are black. Of

course I'm going to watch this!!"[22] The promise of a more diverse Archie Comics world was as necessary to the show's initial marketing as the promise of a more sexual one.

However, Jughead's intended diversity, in which he was to be performed by a hearing-impaired actor, was not achieved. Instead, the show's casting went a different "clickbait" route by referring to an actors' previous roles. Cole Sprouse, well known to young audiences from his past as a child actor, most prominently in his popular Disney Channel series *Suite Life of Zack and Cody*, in which he starred alongside his twin brother for most of his adolescence. Sprouse's casting took the clickbait of "Hot Archie" even further. Not only would Sprouse be portraying "Hot Jughead," but also "Hot Cole Sprouse," due to his existence within the audience's cultural memory as a goofy young boy in his previous career. A popular variety of online clickbait uses this exact strategy, saying "You Won't BELIEVE What This Actor Looks Like Now!" or "15 Child Actors Who Got Hot" can be found across the internet. Sprouse is the human embodiment of that clickbait; his very image is, in and of itself, a reminder of an already held cultural memory that is evoked at every appearance. Jean-Louis Comolli explores this complex relationship as the coexistence of two bodies: the body acting (actor), and the body acted (character).[23] Sprouse carries his previous body acted through his current body acting. The trade off of the potential clickbait of Jughead as a disabled character through his hearing impairment for the automatic clickbait of Sprouse seems to have been made.

Throughout its adult cast, Riverdale has used a similar strategy by casting adult actors who made their name in teen television and movies as the parents of teenagers. Archie's father is portrayed by Luke Perry, who rose to fame as *Beverly Hills, 90210* bad boy Dylan McKay in the 1990s; his mother is played by Molly Ringwald, who starred in several John Hughes teen films which made her one of the most iconic figures of the 1980s. Jughead's father is played by Skeet

Ulrich, best known for his antagonist roles in popular 1990s teen films like *Scream* and *The Craft*. Betty's mother is played by Madchen Amick, best known for her role as a young waitress in David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*, which centered on the murder of a beautiful teen girl and was a major stylistic influence for *Riverdale*. All of these characters serve the same function for a potential adult audience that Sprouse serves for a young audience; their very presence draws in people who hold a cultural memory of them thanks to their previous roles in other teen media. To some extent, they can even serve that purpose for the same audience that Sprouse does. While young people will not have the same nostalgic tie to these performers that an older audience might, they could have been easily exposed to their past work through streaming platforms like Netflix, where many of those teen shows and movies are available.

The faster speed of today's media discourse also means that Riverdale could capitalize directly on clickbait as it happened with some late casting, such as with Shannon Purser as Ethel. Purser played Barb in the first season of the massively popular Netflix science fiction series *Stranger Things* (Netflix, 2017-), and became something of a cult figure when her early death in that series was responded to with #JusticeForBarb, an online push for the less popular character in-series to get some due outside of it, which eventually spread into products. There are all kinds of official and unofficial Barb merchandise, including a book dedicated to Purser's character.[24] *Stranger Things* premiered in July; Purser was officially cast for *Riverdale* just one month later, and virtually every article about her casting placed her role as Barb as prominently as her own name in the headline. Purser had become her own, more immediate version of the potential clickbait of Sprouse or Perry et. al. Although she did not create feelings of nostalgia, there was an immense affection for not just her image but the idea of righting a wrong done against her. Casting her in *Riverdale* could become an action that stood for #JusticeForBarb, making the

casting of a popular breakout actress not just a reminder of the other role but a move of symbolic justice. Although Barb could not receive the justice demanded for her, further success for Purser and characters she portrayed could serve as a proxy.

Relationships as "Sharebait": Betty, Veronica, and Developments in Love Triangles

One of the longest running and most iconic elements of the comic series is the love triangle between Betty, Archie, and Veronica. The "Betty and Veronica" has come to be a representative labeling for a specific kind of love triangle, in which the main character (the "Archie") is caught between two love interests with drastically different personalities. The "Betty" is usually sweet, reliable, and everyday—the quintessential Girl Next Door. The "Veronica" is more alluring, exotic, and edgy, but also has a more mischievous/icy personality. This duality also translated to their physical appearances. While both Betty and Veronica were variably sexualized in the comics, Betty was usually pretty but more modest in her clothing choices, and Veronica wore clothing designed to accentuate her figure, with consistent revealing of cleavage, midriff, shoulders, and legs. Another clear differential of the "Betty and Veronica" archetypes is their hair colors; Girl Next Door Betty is blonde; exotic Veronica has jet black hair. Their appearances easily code their differences. The most commonly seen version of the story has Betty as Archie's close comrade and often described as his "best friend." She secretly pines for him while he is attracted only to Veronica, who is largely unattainable and only notices him when he becomes valuable due to Betty or someone else's desire for him. The essential element of the "Betty and Veronica" in Archie Comics is that it remains unresolved; while comic series have regularly run that claim to answer the question of who Archie will be with "once and for all," they are usually either fakeouts or alternate timelines. The most notable example of the

latter is "Archie Marries Veronica"/"Archie Marries Betty," published from 2009-2010, and which offered two possible futures where Archie makes his ultimate decision one way or the other.

Archie Comics did not invent the "Betty and Veronica." The exact story beats can be traced back to the 1800s through some fairy tales such as "The Little Soldier," where a soldier, attempting to find a princess he would like to marry, is helped by a fisherwoman and ends up falling in love with her instead.[25] But the Archie Comics version has been made an essential part of American pop culture, where it has appeared in films, literature, country-pop music videos, and even "real life" in the form of the tabloid-pushed feud between the movie stars Jennifer Aniston (the Betty) and Angelina Jolie (the Veronica) over Brad Pitt.[26] So it seems notable that *Riverdale*—virtually the first time the actual "Betty and Veronica" appeared in live action form —started out eschewing the iconic love triangle altogether.

In part, this rejection may have been because of an increasing backlash to the concept of the "love triangle." Throughout the 2000s, the love triangle had dominated teen media in the form of young adult fiction novels and film adaptations of said work. The massive popularity of the *Twilight* franchise (Summit Entertainment, 2008-2012) and its supernatural love triangle, in which human Bella (the Archie) is torn between vampire boyfriend Edward (the Veronica) and werewolf best friend Jacob (the Betty), inspired fandom and significant marketing based around the concept of "Team Edward" and "Team Jacob," depending on how fans wanted the series to culminate romantically. Later successful franchises like *The Hunger Games* (Lionsgate, 2012-2015) continued this pattern, and a trend of "young woman who cannot choose between two young men" dominated teen media. But beginning in the early 2010s, there began to be a backlash to this particular narrative device. Fandom posts advocating for "healthy polyamorous

relationships" instead of "toxic love triangles" began to accumulate tens of thousands of likes and reblogs on Tumblr.[27] Perhaps in awareness of this, Aguirre-Sacasa underplayed the love triangle in original press for *Riverdale*, saying that "It was much more important for me to have Betty and Veronica be real friends, not bitchy frenemies. The truth is, Archie, Betty, and Veronica will all have romantic storylines that don't lock us into the love triangle — not at all during Season 1, at least."[28]

While the first few episodes of *Riverdale* did use the love triangle—Archie debates over whether to take Veronica or Betty to the homecoming dance—the relationships the show's publicity material focused on were Betty/Veronica and Archie/Ms. Grundy, the two relationships least supported by the canon of the comics, and therefore the most inciting to any long time fans. In the pilot, Betty and Veronica kiss passionately in an attempt to achieve a spot on the cheerleading team, only to be told "Faux lesbian kissing hasn't been taboo since 1994," by head cheerleader Cheryl (another Archie pursuer in the comics). In the pilot's script, the moment is described as "Veronica plants a big, wet KISS on Betty's lips—and the heads of every Archie fan on the planet explode! It's the watercooler moment of the 2016/17 television season! Or...is it?"[29] This moment is characteristic of a trend often referred to as the "Sweep Weeks Lesbian Kiss" in which straight female characters kiss each other with little long-term implications for the character's sexualities within the show, often as a ratings stunt.[30] The dichotomy of *Riverdale* both performing the "Sweeps Week Lesbian Kiss" and yet simultaneously referring to it as a outdated trend is characteristic of the show's role as "sharebait." While the kiss itself functions as "clickbait" (an attempt to inspire direct interest from audiences based on something inflammatory), what surrounds the kiss is designed to generate conversation and encourage viewers to spread that conversation further. Acknowledging that the trend is no longer appealing

to some viewers places them on the side of those viewers, while at the same time reaping any potential reward still left from the kiss itself. By both performing and questioning the kiss, the show both aims for the audience that would be taken in by the kiss (the clickbait audience) and the audience that would like to have a conversation about the faults of the kiss (the sharebait audience).

Further still, the kiss also makes a grab for the sharebait audience through a technique often referred to as "queerbaiting." "Queerbaiting" means that an audience of LGBT+ people is appealed to with the marketed possibility of seeing a non-heterosexual relationship on screen, only to have the show in some way stop short of making it a true feature of the show. The Betty and Veronica kiss was heavily featured in pre-release press for the show, and a vocal group of fans (many of whom identified as LGBT+) wondered if the show would be featuring the only version of the triangle never explored by Archie Comics by having Betty and Veronica in a full romantic relationship, entirely separate from Archie.

Lili Reinhart, who plays Betty, caused controversy with her remarks about the Betty and Veronica kiss. "There's a group that very, very much wants it. It's just in our show, they're not romantically involved… They're soulmates in a friends' way. Our show is not meant to be fan fiction. We give them a taste of it when they kiss, but that's all it is. People love Beronica and they want to see them together, but that's just not our show".[31] Reinhart referring to *Riverdale* as not "fan fiction" was heavily critiqued in light of the show's subversion of the comic's tropes in a way not dissimilar to how "fan fiction" often takes the world and characters of a certain media piece and places them in alternative situations and plotlines. As one user on Oh No They Didn't said, "I truly cannot get over "our show is not meant to be fan fiction." If the names were changed, I wouldn't even connect this show to the Archie comics. Betty and Veronica never

kissed in the comics, but having them do so in the show isn't fanfic apparently--as long as it's just to be edgy/titillate men."[32] Not only did Reinhart's response dismiss the idea of Betty and Veronica having a relationship other than heterosexual friendship as "fan fiction," but it also clearly laid out how the clickbait of *Riverdale* works: as Reinhart says, there is a "tease" that ultimately is never followed through on because "that's not our show." Nevertheless, Betty and Veronica as "Beronica" has been continuously popular throughout the show's run, and when Reinhart discussed the relationship again in an interview at the end of the first season, she used the phrase "queerbait" herself, although in a slightly different context. "They think Cami [Mendes, who plays Veronica,] and I are in love. They think that we queer-bait them [...] Honestly, we are so goofy with each other and are really close friends. That's what girls do. Like, "I'm obsessed with her. I want to marry her. I'm in love with her." It's just because we're in the spotlight and playing girls that people want to see them sexually together. They kind of pin that on us which is…you can't get mad about it. People want Veronica and Betty to be together!"[33] Reinhart and Mendes regularly post pictures and other content of themselves together on set, doing press for the show, or just hanging out together. This is often flooded with comments such as "Beronica is real," conflating the actresses with their characters. Content of the actresses serving as a substitute for content of their characters means that the show does not have to continue placing "clickbait" within itself. Instead, the actresses come to function as "sharebait," with fans encouraged that the possibility of interacting with them by spreading their personal content (which often doubles as marketing for the show) will lead to the content they want within the show itself.

As the show has continued to gain popularity, it has slowly begun to return to the Archie/Betty/Veronica triangle. While the romantic pairing of Betty and Jughead proved to be a

surprise favorite over the course of the first season (possibly aided by Reinhart and Sprouse's real life relationship), by the middle of season two the show had begun to reintroduce the idea of Betty and Archie as a complication to Archie and Veronica's established relationship. Aguirre-Sacasa described it as "the essence of the Archie comics, and it's sort of always bubbling underneath […] it's something that we are going to play a little more aggressively in the second half of the season, but hopefully in a way that is unexpected and a twist."[34] Many fans of the Betty and Jughead relationship responded negatively to this possibility. One tweet responding to teasing about the return of the triangle said, "I see you Roberto, I see you. Don't be too much confident, I'm watching you. If you do me dirty...You really started to take a big place in my heart, I can easily replace you so, Bughead endgame like we said, no last minute modification tolerated."[35] In this way, fans behave as if they are experiencing clickbait; they feel as if they have been promised something that has not been delivered by the content of the show. If Aguirre-Sacasa and the rest of the creative team of *Riverdale* had been concerned about backlash to the love triangle from the beginning, then introducing other relationships that fans became invested in before going back to the triangle did serve as clickbait. The relationships less based in the comic attracted enough fans that the show could then safely return to the triangle, which is the cornerstone of the Archie canon. The fans, meanwhile, behave as if sharing the "sharebait" related to the relationship of their choice (gifs, tweets, other fans commentary) will make it reality within the world of the show.

Conclusion

Riverdale has been successful through operating as if it is going to be consumed by the internet. While that may seem straightforward, there is a distinction between using the internet

for marketing and publicity purposes (as virtually every show does now) and actively incorporating how internet audiences integrate discourse into the structure of the show. *Riverdale* does the latter, and while it has never become a true ratings powerhouse (although it did see a significant raise in between its first and second seasons as a result of its success streaming on Netflix), it has achieved something else: it has become culturally relevant. To be regularly discussed on social media, as *Riverdale* is when it trends on Twitter during every single episode, is its own kind of success. However, simply considering the potential success of being consistently given attention does not give us a holistic view of what functioning like clickbait and sharebait actually does to television. For that, we must look at an example where a show is discussed and yet still fails in Paramount's *Heathers*.

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Conclusion

***Heathers* and the Risk of Sharebait Television**

The *Heathers* television adaptation was announced by Sony Pictures Television in the summer of 2009, and described as a "modernized" version of the original movie, which portrays four teenage girls, three of whom are named Heather, in a clique at an Ohio high school, who begin to be murdered by the main character Veronica (Winona Ryder) and her psychopathic boyfriend J.D. (Christian Slater).[1] Like *Riverdale*, *Heathers* had a long journey from its original form as a cult classic 1988 black comedy to television. In 2012, the Bravo television network announced that they would also be rebooting the film, independent of the Sony Pictures Television project. Their *Heathers* was to pick up twenty years after the events of the first film, with Veronica returning home to Ohio with her teenage daughter who must contend with the next generation of mean girls, all named "Ashley," the daughters of the two surviving Heathers. None of the films' original stars were attached to the project. In August 2013, Bravo decided not to order the series.[2] In March 2016, TV Land ordered a newly developed version of the series described as an "anthology dark comedy set in the present day." It was ordered to series in January 2017.[3] In March 2017, the series was moved from TV Land to the Paramount Network. Paramount Network was the rebranded "Spike TV," which had targeted a young adult male audience and largely focused on the action genre, before the surprise hit competition series *Lip Sync Battle* (2015-) encouraged them to emphasize gender-balanced series and a return to original scripted programming.[4]

Riverdale may have needed a dead body, but *Heathers* already had more than its fair share. Instead, the show created a hook—its version of clickbait casting—by reinventing the Heathers as as "outcasts" who are now high school royalty, rather than affluent pretty white girls.

The new Heathers were a man who identified as genderqueer, a black lesbian, and their overweight "body positive" leader. Theoretically, a show that featured this many LGBT leads, as well as a significant number of LGBT people behind the scenes (including creator and showrunner Jason Micallef, executive producer Leslye Headland, director Sydney Freedland, as well as several members of the show's writing staff) should have been able to generate at least the overwhelming attention, both positive and negative, from liberal minded young viewers that *Riverdale* consistently does. Instead, the early release of the pilot in February 2018 generated headlines like "The *Heathers* Remake Is An Insult To Teens in 2018" and "The New *Heathers* Is a Trumpian, LGBT-Bashing Nightmare".[5] On social media, outrage was swift and fervent. A post with over 30,000 likes and reblogs on Tumblr from a user named donthateonk8 said, "can we all agree not to see the new heather's movie? bc i know we all love heathers, but i really don't want to sit through a movie where the plus sized, poc, and genderfluid characters are the villains who have to be taken down by 2 white straight kids…like that's not okay…the entire purpose of the movie was that it was about a bunch of privileged white girls who are so diluted and unaware of anything outside of themselves that they turn suicide into a trend. i don't want good representation to turn into another chance for the young, beautiful, white, straight kids to save us from the evil of diversity."[6]

On February 28, before its scheduled premiere on March 7, *Heathers* was delayed indefinitely by Paramount Network, which said in its released statement: "while we stand firmly behind the show, in light of the recent tragic events in Florida and out of respect for the victims, their families and loved ones, we feel the right thing to do is delay the premiere until later this year." The network was referring to the shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida, on February 14, 2018, which killed seventeen people and prompted the launch of the "March for

Our Lives" movement by the student survivors.[7] But many believed that the network was taking advantage of this opportunity to not air the show after the panning the pilot received, especially because the announcement came a full two weeks after the shooting. Whatever the reason, it seemed clear that *Heathers* was not well suited for the modern media cycle. But was that a failure of the show or of the cycle? The examination of *Heathers* shows how clickbait and sharebait television fail not only their audience, but their creators.

The Sharebait of Backlash

The official trailer for *Heathers* was first released in January 2018 and received almost immediate backlash. One tweet expressed horror at watching the trailer and "realizing the Heathers tv adaptation is going to have a white straight couple killing marginalized characters because the white straight people see themselves as the victims AND we're supposed to side with the white straight people," and had thousands of likes from people agreeing.[8] Jason Micallef, the show's showrunner, disagreed with this stance. In an *Entertainment Weekly* interview, Micallef said that, "The reason I changed the Heathers surface identities is I think today [the characterization] rings true. Today, all different types of people are more aspirational. People that wouldn't have necessarily been considered the most popular kids in school in 1988 could very well be — and probably most likely are — the more popular kids today. And also because it's a TV show, we have so much more time to explore their characters and get behind it. Of course, no one's seen the show yet. Once they see it, I think they'll get what we're talking about."

This prediction was not supported by the reviews of critics who did see episodes of the series. "*Heathers* is a hateful, bigoted exercise in regression hiding behind the guise of dark

comedy," wrote one.[9] One of several reviews that described the show as "Trumpian" said that "The new *Heathers* is for people who want to see a heteronormative status quo restored before it has even been meaningfully disrupted. ('You know, what if the next truly revolutionary thing was just to be totally normal?' Veronica asks.)"[10] Even reviews that viewed the show as swallowable morally had complaints: "[The comedy] is the stuff of a hastily composed tweet, not rapier-like wit."[11]

The "Trumpian Nightmare" *Daily Beast* review was reposted across Reddit, which offered a fascinating insight as to how different groups responded to the sharebait made from sharebait television. On the subreddit "Television," which centers around general television talk and is the 21st largest subreddit on the site with almost 15 million subscribers, the articles top comment was: "From what I've seen of the show it looked like they completely missed the point of the movie... It's perfectly fine to do this type of spin on popular teen archetypes but that doesn't work as an adaptation of Heathers. Besides we already got a spiritual successor to Heathers, it was called Mean Girls and it's great." The second top voted comment was a complaint about the use of "Trumpian" to describe pop culture.[12] On subreddit "LGBT," which is the 608th most popular subreddit and has close to 200,000 subscribers, the top voted comment said: "Wow what a shitshow. It's like they let /pol/ [a now banned subreddit that advocated white supremacist views] write it. How is it possible to be this out of touch with reality? As a trans person I'm scared to be open in public I'm too scared to even get involved with other LGBT people how the fuck is this anything remotely resembling reality?"[13] On subreddit "Kotaku in Action," (born out of the "GamerGate" controversy and now largely populated by the alt-right), which is the 1,201st most popular subreddit and has over 90,000 subscribers, the top voted comment was a reposted quote from the article: "If you believe that kids these days are fragile

"snowflakes," that political correctness is running amok, and that LGBT people are now society's true bullies, this new Heathers is the show for you," with the added comment "Dang! Sold!"[14] In total, the *Daily Beast* review alone was reposted across all of Reddit over twenty times, and received 927 comments. *Heathers'* own contained sharebait may have backfired on itself, but the sharebait generated on its back was heavily successful with both those who agreed and disagreed with it.

Unsurprisingly, the crew and cast of *Heathers* were unhappy with how the show was characterized. In response to the "Trumpian" review, showrunner Jason Micallef tweeted "We get a lot of dumb 'hot takes' but this one takes the cake. I think I speak for the mostly queer staff when I say 'YOU KNOW YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO THINK THE ADULTS/TEACHERS ARE IDIOTS, RIGHT???'"[15] Writer Price Peterson tweeted: "Heathers is written by, directed by, and starring primarily queer men and women, cis and trans. We are happy to talk about who we are or what we're trying to say if you are willing to be curious in the least, but get those clicks mama"[16] The film's original writer Daniel Waters (who was not involved in the making of the show) said in an interview after its pull from its air date, that, "Having seen the first five episodes, the pilot was really the only problematic one … People are misconstruing the idea that 'the unpopular kids are now the popular kids, blah, blah, blah' as some sort of thesis statement of the show. If you get to the later episodes, you see it's something more than that."[17] In an interview in March, star Brendan Scannell (who portrays genderqueer Heath) was heavily critical of the author of the piece, saying, "It's like, OK, bitch, you obviously have no idea what you're talking about. It's so funny, because, yeah, it's written by the [LGBT] community, but one of the fun things about the show is that it lambasts humorless people, too."[18]

The critics of the show are not wrong that it largely lacks the wit of the original. The jokes in the pilot, the only episode so far available for public viewing, often feel not only heavy handed and unearned, but also outright cruel towards everyone involved. The show seems to mistake harshness for cleverness; its "satire" tries to target every character simultaneously, leaving a lack of clarity in what the show actually wants to convey.

But those behind the show are also correct that they were not fairly assessed. Calling the show "Trumpian" was undeniably sharebait, and virtually no reviews of the show mention the fact that it was creatively defined by people who identify as LGBT+. Whether or not that makes the show's choices earned is entirely up to the critics, but it seems unfair not to incorporate such a vital aspect of its making into an assessment of what the show is trying to say.

Conclusion

Heathers is ultimately a lesson in the dangers of making television in the model of the internet. The buzzworthy twist of the show's premise may have gotten it attention, but at the cost of more people talking about what the show represented than actually talking about the show. Simultaneously, criticism of the show is expected to form sharebait and clickbait of its own, meaning that the show was not given its fair due, with online critics opting for hyperbolic political metaphors instead of assessing the show as a product of LGBT+ work (albeit still one that could be seen as offensive).

What this study of teen television over the last decade, from *Gossip Girl* to *Heathers*, shows is that television based on and marketed towards the internet is, ultimately, interpreted by both its creators and its audience as representative of ideas, of identities, of the creators and audience themselves. When we look at television in this way, we deny it the right to be art in and

of itself. There is absolutely political value in television's work as representation and in the possibility that it might change perspectives, just as there is in all media forms. But to see only that potential value does both creators and audience a disservice. This perspective on television posits that creators should only make material to fulfill a nonexistent quota; it also posits that audiences should only watch to see that that quota is fulfilled. This position, essentially, does not believe that television has legitimacy. Instead, it understands television only as a medium for transmission of larger perspectives and beliefs, rather than something valuable in and of itself.

It is necessary for television, as a telecommunication medium, to adapt to the newest advances in the means through which people communicate. Incorporating the techniques of YouTube and other online media has allowed teen TV to do so even faster, and the commercial success that has resulted for *Riverdale*, as well as the show's dominance in online discourse, proves that it is a sound business strategy. But television can also be an artform, and it is necessary to allow space for it to develop in more complex ways on that level as well. It should not always need a "dead body" (real or symbolic) in order to be successful; it should not always be only understood in the context of the political moment. It should be respected as the complex combination of art, profit, and communication that it is.

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