

Adolescents and the Media: Teenagers Talk about Television and Negative Representations

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Young people are an elusive and exciting audience and user of all media. They are both the most desirable yet indefinable set of groups and individuals who must be attracted, intrigued and held in thrall if media organizations are to succeed in their quests to keep in step with their ever moving interests, This article presents the views of diverse groups of young people aged between nine and nineteen in Birmingham, United Kingdom in the winter of 2010/11 and reveals in their own words how they feel about the way that they are represented in British media. They are avid watchers of television and even more active users of new media. They reveal their eclectic and heavy viewing habits. While they are diverse in their education, social backgrounds and ethnicity, they are united in expressing their unhappiness and discontent about the way that they are represented on British television both in news coverage, documentaries and in dramas directed at them. More worrying is the fact that they feel and give evidence that this negative view of teenagers, affects the way they are perceived by other members of the public. While they are critical of British television they do single out American television as being more aspirational and optimistic.

Keywords: Teenagers, UK television, US television, negative representation, drama, reality TV, news, quiz shows, diversity, ethnographic research, social media

Young people are an elusive and exciting audience and user of all media. They are both the most desirable yet indefinable set of groups and individuals who must be attracted, intrigued and held in thrall if media organizations are to succeed in their quests to keep in step with the ever moving interests of this potential audience. To represent them is almost impossible and to succeed in delighting or even gaining an acknowledged interest from them, results in rich rewards. For this group is attractive to advertisers and essential for public service providers. The period in human development known as adolescence is the time between childhood and adulthood. Children can have many different life experiences during this period and their progressions to adulthood are disparate. However, one set of experiences are

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shared by individuals and groups, in that they consume, reject, subvert and create media in all its forms. The relationship between the adolescent audience and the media, and television in particular, and the way that adolescents perceive those media representations of adolescence are the subjects of this article.

In December 2010, I began conducting research for a book about Adolescence and the Media which will explore the programmes which are identified by young people as programmes which they watch and also their views on the way they are represented in television programmes. This article does not analyse the programmes but rather gives an initial opportunity to hear the voices of the young people who were interviewed, as they identified programmes which they watched. At the heart of this article is the dichotomy between the love of media which is felt by young people and their disdain for the many attempts to attract and represent them. Equally media providers need their young audiences and are always developing ideas and plans to try to attract them.

Teenagers and Television

When Mark Abrams identified the teenage consumer, young people already existed¹. Abrams identified them as a special group who were not catered for by the commercial world. American advertisers and creative cultural providers identified the teenager and both boys and girls went on to dominate popular culture from the 1950s until the present. The teenager has also dominated cultural developments across a wide range of global media. While American culture dominates the world of media, it is necessary to understand its universal appeal and its connection with young people of many cultures. There is an affirmation within American popular cultural forms which creates and engenders a universal affinity with those forms. It is not afraid to show emotions and to invite audiences to share those universal feelings. Never is this more obvious than in its films and television programmes which are for young people. Family programmes are at the heart of many American productions. *High School Musical 1.2.3* (2006, 2007, 2008 Disney) targeted at early teens but a success among children as young as five, who responded to the music, dancing, singing and the positive storylines. On closer analysis it is clear that this is also a series of films which gives children and young people a story and a lifestyle which is not destructive or alienating.

The main thrust of British television for young people often reveals a different perspective. Children's programmes have traditionally been both educational and reassuring beginning with the radio programmes, children's dedicated television channels CBeebies, CBBC and CITV. However, there is less output for adolescents and the themes are certainly less aspirational. Some programmes have made an instant impact on their prospective viewers. In the 1980s *The Young Ones* (1982 BBC) instantly connected with a young adolescent audience and word-perfect episodes would be re-enacted in school playgrounds the day after transmission. More recently, *Skins* (2007 Company Pictures for Channel4) and *The Inbetweeners* (2008-10 Bwark Productions for Channel 4) are successful as programmes for young people and a wider audience and *Outnumbered* (2007 Hat Trick Productions for BBC) perhaps the nearest to a programme which explores the humour within family life and which appeals to both adults and young people. Children and young people also watch programmes which are not directly targeted to them.

The top rated soap opera *EastEnders* (1985 BBC) has a large audience of children and young people and other soap operas also attract teen audiences. Channel 4, BBC3, and

E4 also seek to attract young audiences and succeed in their aims. Equally, there are many programmes which identify and criticize the behaviour of young people from early childhood to adolescence. Rarely are programmes celebratory, save for young people who appear on the hugely successful talent shows *The X Factor* (2004 Talkback Thames and SYCOTV for ITV), *Britain's Got Talent* (2007 ITV), and *The Young Apprentice* (2010 Mark Burnett Production for BBC). Whatever their shortcomings, they do recognize young talent and they appeal to some young people. The importance of this disparate group of audiences and users is that they are essential for all forms of media, and while they lead the way with new technology, social networking and other forms of new media, they still have a relationship with traditional media forms. Their methods of viewing may not always be traditional, but they still make up a considerable percentage of the audience for all forms of media. They are also the future viewers which all providers need.

A Moment in Time

The interviews which are discussed in this article are selected because they had a meaning in retrospect which was not entirely evident at the time of their recording. While they are part of a larger study, it is appropriate that they are recorded in isolation as they allow a glimpse of how these young people were feeling in their everyday life at the time of the interviews. In December 2010 and January 2011, I conducted a series of interviews with young people to find out their opinions on television programmes which were directed to them and the way that they perceived how young people were represented in general in television programmes. As I hope, I show in the selection of their comments, they were not enamored either by the programmes which were offered and less so by the representations therein. However, one significant view which came through was a general feeling of unease and sadness both at the representations and at the way that those representations were perceived by other members of society. They were also unhappy about politics. They volunteered views of the political situation in the country and the way that the government coalition was affecting their future lives. They were worried that they would not get to university or get a job and when they brought it up in conversation, they feared for their futures.

Eight months after I conducted these interviews, in August 2011 there were a number of riots in London and other major cities in the U.K, including Birmingham. Young people ran riot, looted and in some cases set fire to buildings. Various opinions were mooted about the cause of the problems and those involved, not always young, were deemed to be out of control, have no respect for or little sense of connection with the greater society. While not wishing to become involved in this debate in this article, I would like to identify that the young people whom I interviewed were feeling alienated from both society and television. Not all television and not all aspects of the greater society, but enough for us to consider their opinions and look for solutions not blame. Some of the views which they express in this article may help to highlight their worries and fears. They were not the young people who took part in the riots, but they were sufficiently disturbed about the society in which they lived to express real sadness about their situation and the situation of others.

A Diverse Set of Interviewees

The young people whom I interviewed were selected across a wide range of age, gender, education, cultural and ethnic diversity. They were all from Birmingham and the West Midlands, an area which has cultural and class diversity and which I know well. Birmingham is my city and the West Midlands, my place of work, and the nuances and hints and suggestions which the young people made are the stuff of ethnography and the sharing of their opinions and views is both professionally informative and personally intriguing. The initial groups were from a further education college, a direct grant girls grammar school, a comprehensive girls school, a local authority youth project. They were aged between 13 and 17, with a few 20 year olds and one young 9 year old. They were ethnically and educationally diverse. All were interviewed in small groups of between three and seven except for exceptions which are indicated in the text. Some of them were studying media but most had no special educational interest in the subject but deemed themselves to be average viewers. Ethnographic studies must take account of the variations in results which are determined by the different demographics of those who are interviewed. By the end of this article I will have revealed the almost unanimous set of opinions held by these young people, regardless of their age, gender, education and ethnic diversity.

It would be difficult to find a more diverse group of young people from such differing backgrounds. They were united by their youth and their views were so similar as they identified with almost resignation that the way that young people were represented and selected for inclusion in programmes was negative. Programmes and channels were identified as being seen as targeting young people, but their views of these programmes and channels were ambivalent. They were aware of the restrictions and problems which programme makers had and were under no illusion that programmes must entertain in order to engage an audience. However, they had few positive feelings about the programmes which they were offered and it was hard not to feel that they had every right to expect more from the productions which were made for them. Their revelations of the effect which they felt that media representation of them had upon other members of society was the most alarming and disturbing and is discussed below when they identify their experiences and views.

Ethnography and the Ability to Surprise

One of the many fascinating aspects of conducting ethnographic research is the ability to be surprised². In socio-cultural ethnographic research the methods of interviews and discussion will reveal different views and the analysis will attempt to explain why such views are held. While there were different views about television programmes and different choices of what was watched, there were unanimous views on representation of young people in television programmes. The 'surprise' was in the unanimity of views. Different groups, different ages but a shared experience and perception of the representation which is offered of them on television. Young people are the most sophisticated watchers, users, inter-actors with the media. They are aware of what is happening and knowledgeable of the needs of the productions. However, while they had different choices of viewing, especially if they were watching with members of their family, they still had the same negative experience of the portrayal of their groups across a range of media.

Who Are My Groups?

West Midlands Further Education (FE) College : The students at this college were studying media. They were informed about programmes and had opinions which were partly informed by their studies but also by their own experiences. Male and female aged between 17 and 22. Diverse ethnicity.

Community Project, Birmingham : Young people and youth leaders- school, college, unemployed, employed. Male and female 100 per cent black or Asian. Aged 9, 13-17 (youth leader 26) not studying media.

Girls Direct Grant Grammar School : Girls in two groups aged 12-13 and 17-18. Ethnically diverse – mainly white and Asian. Not studying media.

Girls Comprehensive School : Girls in two three groups aged 12-13, 14-15 and 17-18. Ethnically diverse, mainly white, black and Asian. Not studying media.

Eclectic Viewing—Similar Views

Before I began the interview, the respondents filled in questionnaires which asked them their names, ages, employment/education status, living arrangements and family details, where they watched, who they watched with, number of televisions, details of other media related technologies, and how much time they spent on viewing and social networks. This rich data formed the background to much which they then discussed and it gave them the opportunity to relax and chat with each other about what they did, mostly in relation to social media. This material is not discussed at length here but it is of interest to note the profusion of television sets in their family homes, often 2, 3, and 5 or 6, and the average hours which they watched television ranged between 3 to 8 and their engagement in social networking ranged from a few minutes a month, four to five hours and an answer which many gave, which was ‘too many hours!’ These are definitely children of new and old technology.

Interviews—Wild and Engaged

All the interviews began with me asking the young people which programmes might be of interest to them. The general questions they were asked are included below with their own responses. Some programmes were identified across the board as programmes which they chose to watch. A number of these were expected and lists of programmes were recited in all the interviews. Their collective taste was eclectic. Some were watched and liked; *Skins*, *InBetweeners*, *Family Guy* (1999 Twentieth Century Fox Television) *Shameless* (2004 Company Pictures for Channel 4) and others. An interesting observation was that there were some genres and programmes which were as universally loved as they were hated and avoided. Reality TV was the genre which elicited the most comment. Many young people hated the genre while others loved it. A good example was *The X Factor* which was admired because it did give opportunities to young people. *I'm A Celebrity Get me Out of Here* (2002 ITV) was watched but was criticized for showing over dramatized and yet under-achieving celebrities.

One young man, who was studying media at the FE College had some perceptive comments to make on the genre:

You see I always try and avoid *Big Brother* (2000 Endemol, Bazal, Brighter Pictures, Channel 4 2000-2010 Channel 5 2011) but every year I have ended up getting into it. But anything else like that *X Factor* I can't stand. I think it's

been on too long now and its just gone too far. And I don't like what they do with it now. Like Jedward³ last year and things like that. It's just getting a bit too stupid.

I asked if he was watching *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* or *Strictly Come Dancing* (2004 BBC).

No, I don't watch any of these. I think it is because of the celebrities. They are not really...I mean you don't really know any of them. I mean Sean somebody – I don't really know who he is. (Sean Ryder from the Happy Mondays.)

Another young man had the same view in answer to the question of whether there were any programmes which he would never watch, he replied immediately:

Yes, Reality TV. Anything that's reality. Like *Big Brother* and *I'm a Celebrity*. I hate that.

A 17 year old girl at the Girls' Grammar School supported the view:

I would not watch Reality shows. They just seem boring to me. Everything seems to be staged when it is supposed to be 'reality'. Sometimes they are interesting but most of the time they are just boring.

For some Reality TV was a favourite and one 14 year old girl at the Girls Comprehensive School enthusiastically replied to the question seeking their views:

Yes! Yes! *Dancing on Ice* (2007 ITV), I watch *X Factor*, *Britain's Got Talent*, *Celebrity Get Me Out of Here*, *Strictly Come Dancing*. I never vote.

I questioned that they had never voted:

I only vote on the last week.

In unison her friends joined in:

Yes! Yes!

She continued:

You vote for the final.

The eclectic nature of the viewing of the young people in this research can be encapsulated in an opening discussion with a group of 14 and 15 year olds at the Girls Comprehensive School. I am re-producing the transcription at length because it shows how they quickly they move between subjects and also how they watch and with whom and what they think of programmes. As this was a very fast moving interview, the girls are not always named but the change of speaker is indicated together with my questions. They assume knowledge of the programmes and shared opinions and they only make direct comments if it is something about which they have a personal opinion.

I began by asking them which types of programmes, channels or programmes they watched:

E4 (Yes! Yes! All agree).

I watched *Glee* (2009 20th Century Fox Television, Brad Falchuk. Teley-Vision, Ryan Murphy Productions) (Yes! Yes!).

I asked them about a series which had begun the previous evening which was targeted at young people:

DH : Did you watch the programme last night on BBC3 about drugs?

Grace: Yes I knew most of it.

DH : I thought it was on too late to be of much benefit?

Grace : Yes, it was. I was falling asleep through most of it. I think the ones about other drugs will be better.

They went on to discuss programmes which they would choose to watch:

I watch *Friends* (1994-2004 Bright/Kauffman/Crane Productions, Warner Brothers Television) all the time.

I watch the *Vampire Diaries* (2009 Alloy Entertainment, Bonanza Productions, Warner Brothers Television, CBS Television Studios, Outerbank Entertainment).

I watch a little bit but I am a bit of a wush, so I don't watch much.

I watch *The Weakest Link* (2000-2012 Razer Television for BBC), with my Nan.

Mock the Week (2005 Angst Productions Ltd. for BBC).

Have I Got News for You (1990 Hat Trick for BBC).

I watch *QI* (2003 Talkback Thames for BBC).

I watch *Dr. Who* (2005 BBC). My guilty secret!

I like *CSI* (2000 CBS Productions, Alliance Atlantic Communications 2000-6, CBS Paramount Network Television 2006).

I like it but it scares me. I am really squeamish.

I watch *EastEnders*.

I like *Countdown* (1982 Yorkshire Television for Channel 4) and *Eggheads* (2003 12 Yard for BBC).

I don't like *Cash in the Attic* (2002 BBC) though.

I don't like *Antiques Road Show* (1997 BBC) but I don't suppose they are targeted at us.

I don't like *Scrubs* (2001-10 Doozer, Tower Productions, ABC Studios).

I love *Scrubs*.

Scrubs, I think is something you have to get in to.

Yes and I haven't.

DH : What about *Skins*?

Yes, I watch that. I watched the first series and *The Inbetweeners*.

I love *The Inbetweeners*.

You can catch up – I've loads to catch up on.

I watch *Skins*. It's a new cast. Everyone says they don't look very good, but if you look at the cast of the first series you see they are the same.

DH : So what do you think of a programme like *Skins*?

It's entertaining but I don't think it's what teenagers are really like.

It's not

There are not very many people who are like that is there?

As they moved quickly between different programmes and interests they revealed that while they liked targeted programmes they were not always particularly enthused about them. However, they indicated that they also watched a number of programmes which might not be seen as of particular interest to them. *Countdown* and *Eggheads* are quiz shows which are shown in the daytime and early evening and these are programmes which they chose to watch although they were not the target audience. In fact, across the range of young people, there was an inclination to watch quiz shows and find them enjoyable and educational. Drama emerges as one of the favourite genres, and this continues throughout

the research, with teen drama, heavily criticized and soap operas and drama series enjoyed although with critical reserve when young people are portrayed.

In the following discussions I have begun to show how these groups of young people responded to television at this particular time in the winter of 2010/11.

Winter in Winson Green

Many people will have heard of Winson Green. Famous for its HM Prison, and more recently for the terrible deaths of the young men in the August riots in Birmingham. It is also a suburb of Birmingham with streets, houses, schools, hospitals and community centres, and a diverse population. On a freezing December night just before Christmas 2010, I travelled through the snow to a community centre in Winson Green to interview a number of young people at a city council funded 'after school club'. Everywhere looks beautiful in the snow and the building shone out and inside it was warm and buzzing. Buzzing with young people who were engaged in different activities and socializing. I found my contact, the youth leader, and he showed me to a large room and suggested to the group of young people who were hanging around in the main hall, that they might like to join us for the chat about television about which he had spoken to them earlier. We went into a room with a large table and all sat around. There were about 15 people aged from nine to early twenties but mostly they were early to mid-teens. It was a large number for a group interview and it quickly became a wildly animated discussion about every topic I asked about or they brought up. They lived in a range of rented accommodation, all the young ones with a parent or other members of an extended family. A couple of them were fathers looking after their children. There was also a female youth leader. Their possession of technology was legion and their use of various media revealed a skill and involvement which was impressive. Mobile phones were much in evidence and texting was prevalent throughout the interviews. The pace was very fast. Misleadingly like a media studies seminar, this was like no group discussion I had experienced. They were all experts on television, terrestrial and satellite and users of social media and gaming products par excellence. Possession of televisions in their homes varied from 2 to 7. Some came from large families and every family member had a set in their room. Viewing was often done with other family members – mothers, sisters, brothers, children if the respondents were parents and sometime alone. Hours spent watching television were many and varied.

From a minimum of 2 or 3 hours through 5 and 8 hours. Media was a big part of the lives of these young people. They were owners of many other technical gadgets; iPhones, Blackberries, Xbox, Game boy, Nintendo, Wii, ds, PSP, PS3 Play Station, iPod. They spent a considerable amount of time on social media—Facebook, Twitter, MSN. Facebook claimed the most time with some young people saying they spent 3 to 4, 5 or 6, hours, or most of the day, or one who said 12 hours. It must be noted that it was the females who spent the most time watching television, on social media and adding up the hours which they said they pursued these activities, did work out. These young people were heavy consumers and participants in all media. A controller's dream and they certainly had opinions to match their viewing commitments. No one could say that they were occasional viewers and that they may not be involved with the programmes which they watched. Transcribing their opinions was not easy. They moved from subject to subject in their group discussion. Flitting with speed and agility between programmes and themes, as they revealed their eclectic viewing, opinions and expertise.

Programmes and Opinions

This group of young people volunteered programmes which they watched and gave critical comment which might not have been expected. The group began discussing *Waterloo Road* (2006 Shed Productions for BBC) and immediately began talking about a young character in the series who was gay. Their comment to the storyline was not that it should not have been included but revealed a problem and confusion about the topic. A 13 year old boy was forthright in his views:

I think it was just nasty because God never wanted people to be gay.

The youth leader intervened:

These are issues which are happening today.

But one of the young girls took up the topic and expressed an entirely different perspective:

How can you be gay before you get to 18? How can you be still at school and be thinking, 'Oh, I'm going to be gay?' That's just sick.

I intervened:

It is interesting that you think that the problem is that they are too young.

The group responded:

They all do everything too young.

I probed their views on the programme in general:

This is programme which is absolutely targeted at you.

And are you saying that you like it but you don't think it is realistic?

In unison they responded:

Yes.

When we moved onto the question which I asked:

Is there anything that you see on television that offends you or that you don't think should be there?

The views of these young people were different from others which came from all the other groups I interviewed. These teens had specific and well constructed views with definite reasons why programmes or subjects were unsuitable for transmission. While some of the group thought that *Crimewatch* (1984 BBC) was positive and gave you information of what might be happening 'in your area'. One young girl had a heart-rending view on the programme saying that she did not like the programme because it made her frightened to go out at night, because she felt the crimes which featured in the programme were always in areas like she lived in. This was unfortunately a fear of crime which was occasioned by coverage of actual crime.

Again some of these young people were managing contradictions of watching contemporary television. They actually wanted more explicit information about sexual matters. Sometimes, they found the subjects disturbing and yet they wished for further information about the topics covered. One of the young girls had watched the series *Tipping the Velvet* (2002 Sally Head Productions for BBC) a historical drama series with a lesbian theme and content. One young girl said did not know the name of the series but she had found it intriguing but unsatisfactory;

Lesbians, I think should be discussed because we don't know enough about it.

She discussed the drama series and said that she found it difficult to understand because she did not know what they did when the camera left the scene. She continued:

They just go on the floor and then it stops and you don't know what they are doing. They are lesbian. It is not about their relationship, it is because we don't know what they do.

The group skirted round a discussion about lesbian sex and the youth leaders promised that they would return to the subject in one of their group sessions. The young girl continued her theme, which was clearly motivated by what she felt was the lack of adequate sex education in her school;

You know, there was a girl in the school she was in year 9 and she was pregnant.

Explain why that can happen.

I offered an opinion/question:

So are you saying that people in schools in your age group (13-15) don't know enough about sex education?

Yes!

The group discussion continued:

Some people prefer to be told face-to-face but others prefer to watch it on TV.

There was this programme about 16 year old girls being pregnant.

They should always use a condom.

There was a lot of laughing and joking during this discussion, but nevertheless it was clear that they wanted to know and talk about these subjects. I asked them:

So are you saying that you would like more programmes which tell you more about sex education?

The ensuing discussion was animated, too difficult to transcribe, but revealed a very serious lack of knowledge about sexual matters. It was disturbing to hear these young people and to realize that they actually wanted programmes which would give them the knowledge which they needed. A contradiction and dilemma for programme makers who are damned if they do and judged inadequate if they do not show or give information about basic sex education in a form which is accessible to young people.

As with many of the young people whom I interviewed, drama and particularly *EastEnders* was seen as a programme which they liked to watch. If there was one programme which they would not want to miss it would be *EastEnders*. While they did not like all the young or ethnic characters, there was with this group, as with other groups, universal approval and appreciation of the character Fat Boy in *EastEnders*. All these young people were either Black or Asian but they saw little to reflect their lives on television:

I know we don't see West Indian or Indian families on TV, except sometimes on Sky.

This statement is not necessarily true, but the fact that this is the way that they perceive television is a problem. These young people expected more from television. Wanted it to educate and inform them and make them feel a part of society. When they asked that television explain more about subjects which they were ignorant of, they were actually confirming that they did respect the media and they wanted more from it. There was no rejection of the forms; mass media in all its guises was for them, but they did not somehow feel that they were a part of what was presented.

At the end of the interview session I thanked the young people for talking to me and told them that they had said some very interesting things. The resultant hilarious laughter and incredulity that they have had anything useful to say, was a sad reflection of how young people do not see themselves as valued in society. Although this group of young people had

views which were often specifically related to their own interests, feelings and opinions, they also had the same basic beliefs that the other groups had.

Girls Direct Grant Grammar School

DH : Do you think there are any subjects which should be handled on television which are not handled?

‘Happiness’

In unison: Yes, Yes. There should be programmes about fun.

This response from 12 and 13 year old girls at a Direct Grant Grammar School in a leafy suburb of Birmingham, showed the same views about television programmes as their contemporaries in one of the most deprived areas of the city, discussed above. Their views were varied and they were quite avid viewers and were knowledgeable about the programmes which they watched and could discuss the content and its relevance to wider social issues. They were united in their thoughts and feelings that television was negative about young people. The interviews with these young girls were again fast. (One of the things I have learned from this research is that 13 year old girls are full of ideas and to keep up with their opinions and thought processes is a skill). They talk fast and non-stop when you let them discuss subjects which interest them and their rate of making connections with social and political issues is impressive. Our interview session began with a discussion about mobile phones. While they filled in the basic information form they chatted and discussed the merits of mobile phones. Cultural comment on the enduring debate about iPhones and Blackberries and the fast fall from elitist status to ‘common’ currency was part of the discussion.

The following long quote shows how these young women moved from one topic to another but with a connection between commerce, new technology, television and their parents.

My dad has two phones. One is his business phone and the other is for family.

I remember when Blackberries used to be for posh executive people and now everybody has a Blackberry (laughter).

I have a Blackberry!

I don’t want a Blackberry.

I just want a smart phone. I want an HSE phone.

Or a Motorola.

I don’t like Motorolas.

I like Blackberries.

Another girl returns to the questions on the form.

I have just seen question 14 and I only watch *The Apprentice* (2005 Mark Burnett Productions, Talk Back Productions for BBC).

I asked if they watched any television on their phones.

Another girl took up the theme.

I only watch *Miranda* (2009 BBC) on my phone. I like *Miranda*.

She then began singing about *Miranda* and the others joined in.

Then a surprise comment.

And I watch *The Sopranos* (1999 Brillstein Entertainment Pictures, HBO).

Before I could ask about her views on *The Sopranos*, the conversation then moved immediately to a subject which must have been put in their heads by the word ‘soprano’ rather than linking the content of the American late night series with the *X Factor*:

I can't believe I missed the end of the *X Factor*

Matt won. (Matt was the contestant who won the series of *X Factor* which had just finished).

DH : Did you want him to win.

I wanted Cher to win.

Oh her.

The group then began discussing where you watched a programme when there were different favourites of different members of the family! Basically the discussion was whether you were able to watch your programme of choice on 'the big tele' or if you had to go into another room:

We watched the World Cup in my neighbour's front room on the HD and we missed the goal.

(When the football was shown on HD the television company put in an ad-break just as a goal was scored. Those not watching on HD saw the goal. There was an audience outcry!)

And my dad was watching it in the back room on a tiny little tele and he saw the goal!

I managed to steer them back to discussing actual programmes which they watched:

Friends that's it?

Reality TV,

I don't like soaps.

I watch *Sponge Bobs (Square Pants)* (1999 United Plankton Pictures, Nicktoons Productions) because my brother hogs the television.

I love *Sponge Bobs*.

I watch children's programmes in the morning, and then soaps at night and

Reality TV.

And *Friends*.

I like Bollywood movies

We just watch Sky because we have just had the movies installed so we watch them all the time.

The discussion moved so fast at this time as they flitted between subjects and programmes and opinions with wild enthusiasm. After talking about programmes which they all watched we moved to the subject of how they saw their representation in programmes. I asked them what they thought of the way that young people were portrayed in television programmes:

I don't like them because all they do is like, 'Oh my god, everything is so awful' and you are thinking, 'Shut up!'

And in soaps they are always worried about social lives. Have they never heard of homework?

And then they have a teenage pregnancy and you think, 'Most people are not like that'.

And then you get *The News* and they say 'gangs of teenagers' and you are thinking, 'Most of us are not like that!'

And then you get programmes with kids saying I want to go out with him and you say, 'You're ten.'

And all the little kids in these programmes try to be older.

I was watching this one called *Shake it Up* (It's a Laugh Productions Disney Channel

Original Production),

And all the kids try to be older than they are and they talk about changing their phones.

And they are ten!

At this point another group of young girls arrived and waiting outside the door. I asked if we should ask them in and continue the interviews together. In unison they shouted:

Yes, come in. We are having a good time.

They then begin singing '*Hey Jude*' and helping the new girls fill in their forms.

They looked at my iphone and again the conversations moves to iphone and Blackberries.

What is clear from the conversations of these young women is that they move quickly between discussing television programmes, technology, parents, and where they live; and their views about television are part of a wider view of all the things that are going on in their lives. It is part of their culture. It is integrated into their daily existence, and when they think that they are mis-represented they notice the language which is used. They might not make a detailed linguistic analysis but the fact that they repeat 'gangs of teenagers' as recognition of the way that young people are described indicates that they are well aware of the discourse which is used in news programmes when talking about them. They perceive of themselves as different from their generic representation. They are offended by it and they deserve better.

American Series—Geeks and Jocks but Happier Lives

The popularity of American series was prevalent across all the groups with whom I spoke. Not everyone thought that they were necessarily better than British TV but without question they were discussed in a different way. I had considered the representation of young people in television in US productions and identified them as an area for discussion in the planning of the research for this book. However, I had not identified it as a 'special' area of interest to the interviewees. The question I asked was:

Do you think there is a difference between the way that young people are portrayed in American and British television programmes?

Across the board the young people found the American programmes were much more positive.

One young woman at the FE College had experience of visiting America as well as strong views on programmes. She had visited with her family:

Everything's happy in America. Like all the programmes. You don't see many dramas.

It's all like dancing and singing and funny. American TV is funny.

When we went there we were watching a lot, for the whole three weeks.

It was great.

She had spent a three week holiday in New York with her family and had seen television there as well as programmes she had watched in this country. She loved both the country and their television:

I loved it there. It was amazing. Everything about it.

Even the people there are nicer than in England, aren't they?

When we went to New York there were kids, who if you saw them here, you would

think they would like spit on you, but there they held the door open for us and they were really nice.

I just liked it there.

I continued. So do you think that the culture that they represent in their films and television...

It's positive....I know there are bad places in America as well but they show a lot of good things as well.

Another girl offered her views:

I love *High School Musical*. It's so positive. Everyone is friends and everyone ends up happy and you can sing along. It's a feel good film.

Other people held the same views about American TV. While they appreciated that there were as strong dramas on American TV as there were on British TV, their criticism was more with the targeted British drama. The enthusiasm for American TV was not without recognition that some of those representations were not necessarily totally realistic. I asked the older group at the Girls Grammar School if they thought there was a difference between the way that young people were portrayed in British and American drama series. Again they had a reaction in unison:

Yes, definitely. (Yes! Yes!) Well the British stuff you watch on TV say, the dramas, it is always in a safe village and its like farms and stuff and when you go to American TV like *Gossip Girl* (2007 17th Street Productions, Alloy Entertainment, CBS Paramount Network Television), they are always like 'glammed up' and wearing high heels in the middle of the day at school and at the school they are like the elite. I think it's like they don't have to wear uniforms at school either. I mean we are restricted. Obviously, not in the 6th form but we have still got a dress code.

It always seems that everything is more glamorous.

It is so much more exciting. So much more stuff happens in America.

There's things like *CSI* where there is much more going on.

Whether it is the portrayal of teenagers or some of the general drama series most of the young people thought that American television was more positive and certainly more aspirational than British television.

A Dangerous Perception

One of the main findings which came out of this research and certainly the most disturbing relates to comments made to me by the young people about the representation of their contemporaries on television and the effect this had on older people who also watched the programmes. While they watched programmes and made negotiated readings based on their knowledge of the characters or real people who were being represented, they identified that older people were decoding the representations completely from a dominant-hegemonic reading⁴. Older people are also defined as anyone who is in their mid-late twenties and upwards! Two individual comments bring this to light. The first is from a 13 year old at the Direct Grant Girls Grammar School. Located in a leafy suburb of Birmingham and the pupils easily identified by the school uniform. Perhaps the least likely person to strike fear or uncertainty in the mind of a young mother with her toddler walking along the same footpath. However, this is the story told by the 13 year old pupil;

Well you know *The News* (yes) They think there is never anything positive about young people.

I don't know about you but I am sitting there 'OK so you are telling people that all we do, pretty much is walk around with knives and kill people.'

And that is why people think we are like that.

I was walking to school the other day and there was a woman with a toddler and she looked at me and just looked and crossed the road.

And then did not cross back until I had walked in the school gates.

And then she crossed right back.

And I thought like 'What do you think I am going to do?'

Do you think I am going to knife you?'

Raisa, a young Muslim girl added to the story:

I know with all these terrorist bombings and that, with young people, and you have all these knife crimes and you know that they think that if you have got a really thick coat on, they think you have a bomb in your coat or something

I was shocked young girls had experienced these negative attitudes from people who did not know them. I commented that this might be expected if they were young boys, but were they sure this happened to them?

DH : Are you saying that even girls are treated like this?'

Yes, yes! People just don't trust teenagers.

It's like with drugs as well. Like everyone expects, oh yes..

I think it is almost expected that you are all taking drugs and smoking and carry knives, and that we are going to rob a shop

Another young student at FE college told a similar story which indicated that perceptions of young people are negative. She told how she was walking along a road and a young woman in her thirties, crossed over the road to avoid her and when she had passed by she looked round and the woman crossed back to the same side. This young 17 year old, was smartly and youthfully dressed, nothing about her would make anyone fear that she was a threat to them. Especially, someone of the next generation. This aspect of media representation of young people is the most serious and destructive aspect of my findings of this research.

Negative coverage of young people was also singled out as part of news stories. While it is well known that news agendas will take negative themes as part of the new agenda, nevertheless, these young people did not see this as a positive situation:

I think that TV shows like *The News*, they show bad stuff. They never show anything good. Maybe that is how you get people's attention.

Russell Howard's Good News Show (2009 Avalon Television for BBC).

It's a breath of fresh air. Like all the news there is good.

Why does the news never show anything nice? The news is always negative and they don't really ever look at the positive side of things.

These young girls also revealed how they related to programmes and how they saw the representations as not realistic, but dangerous to the way that their parents thought they might be behaving. Again it was the omission of positive representations which were of concern to them. One girl states it clearly:

I am not saying that there are not those sort of people because some teenagers are like that but what I don't really like is how people just assume that all teenagers drink and take drugs and smoke. That is not true.

This girl continued with a sensible and heartfelt comment about the way that she and her friends experienced various representations and coverage of young people:

People seem to think that teenagers can't cope with anything.

I don't know about you, but like there are loads of things which they think you can't cope with and you think, 'If you just stopped putting us down and just let us get on with our own lives and you get on with yours.'

Where are the Positive Representations?

Of course it is easy to say that there are positive representations of young people and these have been identified by those interviewed and revealed in their words. However, there is no denying that as a wide group they are unhappy. Sadness was a prominent emotion during these interviews. Negative stereotypes are how they see themselves as portrayed. And if that is how they perceive the representations that is how they are perceived. Perceptions are indisputable. It matters little if there are sprinklings of programmes which are positive if the overall representations are negative – or are perceived as negative by the audience. A major point to be understood from this research is that it is not just the way the young people see these representations, but the way that they think this affects the way that older people view them in their real lives. A huge responsibility for programme makers and one which cannot be ignored. If young people feel so alienated and mis-represented in television programmes it is not likely that they will be avid viewers. The problem is circular and programme makers need to look at their programmes and see where they are relying on easy stereotypes and also where they could show more positive images either in documentaries, dramas or news coverage. Thinking that young people want to see programmes which depict extreme examples of their contemporaries is not something which is confirmed by this research. The sense of genuine disappointment and sadness was evident from the young people I interviewed and the fact that this feeling was shared across the range of people was enough to suggest that this was a serious mis-representation.

One student at the FE College interviewed with some of his contemporaries made a comment to one of his friends who was black:

No disrespect mate, but young people are the new black people.

All representations are stereotypes.

Again, a serious indictment of media representations and the recognition that the laziness and bias of mis-representation is both painful for those who are 'represented' and also detrimental to the support and interest which, in this case, young people feel towards the media.

What is clear from this brief examination and exposition of the thoughts of these young people is that they are not enamored with the way that they are represented on television. Their views about programmes which they watch and like are varied and often positive. However, it is in the programmes which are directed to them and about them that the major problems occur. The representations are hurtful and while not being seen as necessarily inaccurate, it is the fact that they are the only available representations which cause the most problems and cause for concern on the part of the young people.

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