


# “Nobody Is Ever Alone”: The Use of Social Media Narrative to Include the Viewer in SKAM

JILL WALKER RETTBERG 

“**B**ECAUSE EVEN THOUGH IT SOMETIMES FEELS LIKE IT, NOBODY IS ever alone.” These words are taken from the speech Jonas gives at Sana’s Eid party in the final episode of the Norwegian teen drama show *SKAM*, a television/social media hybrid that gained cult-like popularity with fan communities around the world in 2016 and 2017. *SKAM* did not just *tell* its audience that we are not alone, it enacted collectivity in its narration. *SKAM* used social media to engage its viewers and invite them to comment on and discuss the show. That has become a fairly common technique in contemporary television. What *SKAM* did beyond this, and beyond the emphasis on the group in the story’s content, was to expand the narrative voice to a *we-narrative* that included the viewer.

Although this inclusive *we* is touched upon throughout the show, it only becomes explicit in the final minutes of the final episode, in Jonas’s speech, at the Eid party where Sana and her family are surrounded by Muslim and non-Muslim friends, all together after a season of conflicts and misunderstandings, finally happy and united. “Because even though it sometimes feels like it, nobody is ever alone,” Jonas says.

---

*The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 0, No. 0, 2021

© 2021 The Authors. *The Journal of Popular Culture* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited and is not used for commercial purposes.

Third-person plural narration—the narrative “we”—has recently been theorized in relation to print literature by narratologists including Monica Fludernik, Natalie Bekhta, and Uri Margolin. I build upon this work, and upon recent research on social media narratives and fandoms, to develop an understanding of how the collective voice is expressed in audio-visual narratives. This essay begins with an overview of *SKAM*, followed by an analysis of the final speech, where the use of the inclusive we-narration is made most explicit. Next, the theoretical idea of the we-narrative as discussed by narratologists is examined, followed by an analysis of two narrative techniques *SKAM* uses to develop this third-person plural narrative voice: temporality and mirrored storyworlds through social media. Finally, the transmedial and fan-driven aspects of the collective *we* in *SKAM* are analyzed.

*SKAM* was a fictional Norwegian television show for teens, written and directed by Julie Andem for Norway’s public broadcasting company, NRK. Mari Magnus was in charge of social media content. The show had four seasons and ran from September 2015 to June 2017. Each season, the show followed a different teen in an Oslo high school, and it dealt with topics such as sexual harassment, mental illness, same-sex relationships, drug use, and Islamophobia. The word “skam” means shame in Norwegian. Although NRK has announced that they will not produce more seasons of *SKAM*, rights have been sold to producers in other countries, and there are multiple adaptations of the show, including in France, the United States, Germany, Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands.

A key feature of *SKAM* is that it was published online first, in daily or more frequent posts to *SKAM*’s website. The content of these posts varied between short video clips, screenshots of text message chats between characters, and Instagram posts from the lead character. In addition, fictional characters from the show shared Instagram and YouTube posts that were not published to the official website but that were picked up and shared by fan groups on Facebook and elsewhere. Video clips from each week were compiled into traditional television episodes of 20–40 minutes that were broadcast on Friday nights.

*SKAM* was developed based on extensive interviews with teens and had an explicit mission statement based on the needs the team identified among their very specific target audience. In a conference presentation, the creators describe their mission statement: “*SKAM* aims to help 16-year-old girls strengthen their self-esteem through

dismantling taboos, making them aware of interpersonal mechanisms, and showing them the benefits of confronting their fears” (Andem and Magnus).

The show became popular well beyond its original target audience. According to polling by the Norwegian Citizen Panel in March 2017, about 30 percent of the Norwegian population over the age of 18 followed *SKAM* to some extent, and in the 18–25 age group, over 80 percent of Norwegian women and 60 percent of Norwegian men watched it. In addition, the show had a large international fan base providing pirated versions of the television episodes (to work around the region block that made the website inaccessible from outside of the Nordic countries) as well as translations of subtitles and social media content into languages including English, Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, and Chinese.<sup>1</sup> The international fans also engaged in extensive discussions and analyses on Tumblr, Facebook, and other sites.

The speech given by Jonas at the Eid celebration at the end of the last episode is the point in *SKAM* where the audience is explicitly included in the narrative voice. In a quite literal sense, the narratee is turned into a narrator, as the episode ends with images of words written by audience members on the screen. The speech only lasts for 2 minutes and 20 seconds, but it is densely packed with meaning and can be divided into three sections, with the narrative focalization twisting from section to section. Of course, we only hear Jonas’s voice throughout the speech. He speaks in the third-person plural: “we,” at first speaking to Sana, who is “you,” but soon his “we” expands to include a much larger group of characters in the fiction and, finally, even the audience. Visually, the images clearly show the shift in focalization from fictional characters to the actual audience (Figure 1).

As Jonas begins to speak, the screen goes black. He begins with politics. “Dear Sana,” he says, “what you’re inviting us to today, overthrows American presidents tomorrow.” As he starts his second sentence, “We’re living in a chaotic world, where it is difficult to understand the rules,” we see a succession of rapid, jerky images moving from what appears to be a warzone through ambiguous images that could show fighting or protests or crowds celebrating before arriving after a few seconds at a series of video selfies of characters in the show. The selfies are joyful but confusing. “Why are some people refugees, while others are safe?” Jonas asks, as a fighter jet apparently dropping a bomb appears for a split second, followed by a jerky



FIGURE 1. Sana's friends and family applaud Jonas as he prepares to read his speech at the end of the final episode of *SKAM*. (Season 4, episode 10). Photographs: NRK.

image of people running that at first looks like people fleeing bombs, but that turns out to show two of the main characters running joyfully on an Oslo street. The videos are brief and jerky, often selfies with the camera held close to the face, and the lighting in these clips is usually poor, distinctly different from the professional cinematography of the rest of the show. Some of the snippets shown are clearly from scenes we have seen, but they are from new perspectives that we have not seen before, and we move from clip to clip very fast. "It's not surprising that people give up, that we stop believing in good," Jonas says. The screen goes black again.

The verbal soundtrack of the speech is clearly narrated by Jonas, although he stated before beginning that the speech was not written by him but by three of the other guests at the party. The visual material, on the other hand, undergoes a shift in focalization in this first section. Before the speech, the camera shows the Eid party from a standard, more or less external third-person perspective, alternating between showing us the whole group and individual people or couples. The video selfies in the first section of the speech turn the visual focalization around, showing us how the fictional characters see themselves. The characters are not shown alone, but in twos and threes and larger groups, laughing and smiling together. And their videos do not stand alone: They are cut together in a chaotic stream, interspersed with images from wars and protests. Their selfies are part of something larger, like the streams of images in a Snapchat feed or the images of friends flickering through an Instagram feed.

The screen goes black again, the sound from the videos is abruptly silenced, and then, we see a professionally shot series of videos. The screen shows the audience of the speech: first Sana alone, as Jonas

says, “Thank you for not giving up, Sana.” Music softly accompanies his next words, which can be read as the key words of the entire show: “Because even though it sometimes feels that way, nobody stands alone.” The camera cuts to Isak and Even, their heads against each other, and finally Sana in the middle of the larger group, as Jonas says, “Each and every one of us is part of the great chaos, and what you do today, has an effect tomorrow.” So, as Jonas describes how we are not alone, the camera confirms his words, moving from the individual to the couple to the group.

The next shift in focalization is the most radical: It shifts from the fictional world and its characters to the viewer sitting at home. We see a series of grainy, slightly distorted shots. The NRK logo at the top right of the screen is doubled, and a careful viewer will realize that the camera is pointed at a television screen that is playing *SKAM*. The camera is seeing from the point of view of the audience at home. We see fragments of scenes from throughout the show, first of the characters alone, then of them reading supportive text messages from each other or caressing each other. The final images are of couples kissing at the very party the speech is held at, and while we have already seen these couples kiss, the images shown now are new and not repetitions of the ones already shown in the episode. Then, the mood shifts, and we see Sana in a flashback, just as she published the compromising screenshots that set off some of the most difficult conflicts in the season. The next series of images zooms out yet another level: This is where not only the focalization is from the point of view of the viewers, but where the viewers themselves become the object of the camera’s gaze. We see images of screens, but not television screens: These are computer screens with comments left by viewers. First hateful comments: “Vilde fucking whore,” “Everything in season 4 sucks,” “Islam sucks.” The images speed up until they cannot be read, then slow suddenly to a screenshot of a series of heart emojis in rainbow colors. A wobbly camera captures a series of loving messages:

Let me hug you for this comment ♥ you’re so right.

Love conquers all <3.

I feel this group has become a big, beautiful, alternative family.

Just thank you!

All is love.

Some of the messages are even more personal:

Yes, I am gay. And Evak<sup>2</sup> opened the door.

Crying, because Vilde is me.

Then, we see just a series of red heart emojis, enlarged and pixelated at the center of the screen. These are comments with no words, just hearts. The wordless hearts are the final image of the show.

The inclusion of the audience's comments is the most explicit inclusion of the audience in the narrative voice, but once we begin to look for this inclusion of the audience, we can see more subtle examples throughout the show. The following discusses some of the techniques used, including temporality, the use of fictional characters' social media, and the invitations for fans to solve puzzles or interpret references. But first, a discussion of some of the recent research on "we-narrative."

A text that is written or spoken by a group, a "we," is not uncommon. The US constitution begins in this way: "We the people," it states, immediately establishing a group, a collective, a democratic union that stands together. Scholarly texts often use a "we" or an "as we will see" that includes the writer and the reader, or to be more specific, the "textually inscribed author and reader roles," as Uri Margolin writes (122). The first-person plural "we" is far less common in fictional texts, but as noted earlier, there has recently been a small surge of interest in we-narratives from scholars. This research is concurrent to though not always directly connected to ideas of distributed consciousness in posthumanism, as theorized by N. Katherine Hayles, Victoria Flanagan, and others, to discussions of social minds in narrative (Palmer) and also to the social media environment that floods our phones and computers with newsfeeds consisting of constant small story fragments from many different people (Rettberg). Narratological work on the we-narrative so far has focused on the technique's appearance in print novels. *SKAM* is evidence that the we-narrative is not only a literary form but can also be used in a

multimodal, transmedia narrative. At one level, it would be possible to say that social media as such is a we-narrative. *SKAM* demonstrates how a fictional transmedia narrative can use this first-person plural narration and focalization quite explicitly.

The collective, the group, is the center of *SKAM*'s fictional world. Each season shows the protagonist first in the group, then separated from it due to misunderstandings or lack of communication; then, the protagonist is finally reintegrated into the group and resolution is achieved. Monika Fludernik calls *we-novels* "the most extended form of communal narrative, putting the collective at their very center" ("Many in Action" 149), and it makes sense that *SKAM* would not just be a story told *about* the group but told *as* a group. In *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*, Brian Richardson notes that "the vast majority of 'we' texts valorize collective identity in no uncertain terms; 'we' is almost always a favoured term and a desirable subject position that is to be sought out and inhabited" (50).

Although *SKAM* very clearly focalizes the narration through an individual in the group, except for in the last clip, the individuals' roles as a member of one or several groups is frequently highlighted, not least by the frequent group shots. We very often see the five girls together in a shot, but we also see other groups: the PepsiMax girls, with their long blonde hair, the Penetrator boys in slow motion shots, or the Balloon Squad boys together at the gym as the five girls gape at them (Figure 2).

Screenshots of group chats are also an important narrative element (Figure 3):

The parties that conclude each season are also a way of pulling out the narrative focalization to show the different groups of friends as a collective. This alternation between individual and collective, or small group and large group, is also noted by Fludernik as a common strategy in *we-novels*, and particularly in depictions of crowds ("Many in Action" 147). The crowd is most visible in *SKAM* in the parties. While the school yard and canteen also have many people present, they tend to stand or sit in separate groups, whereas parties are crowded, and individuals move between groups. There is often a play between moments of community, when the lead character is shown feeling at one with the group, and moments of feeling alone. For instance, in season 4, Sana is shown as separate from the group



FIGURE 2. The five girls who are at the center of *SKAM*'s fictional world are very frequently shown in group shots. Eva, Noora, and Sana (the three girls on the right) each have a season dedicated to their stories, while Chris and Vilde, on the left, also have important roles. Photograph: NRK.

when she goes into a room by herself to pray during a party, as well as in the meeting with the PepsiMax Girls (Figure 4).

The party where Sana's world crumbles, in season 4, episode 5, or the video clip published on May 12, 2017, very clearly shows the oscillation between being alone and being part of a group. The clip starts with standard party shots. Sana is distracted, hoping that Yousef will arrive at the party, and is shown ignoring her girlfriends as she texts her brother (he and Yousef are friends, and part of a group of five boys known as the Balloon Squad, as they were once shown with a big bunch of helium balloons) to ask where they are (Figure 5).

Some people are singing karaoke, and soon it is Even's turn. As he begins to sing "Imagine," Sana and her friends turn toward him and smile, united again.

The camera shows Even winking at Isak, his boyfriend, and then cuts to Isak and the other boys in their gang smiling encouragingly at Even, clearly showing this group's togetherness and care for each other (Figure 6). Then, we see Yousef and the other Balloon Squad boys arrive, filmed from Sana's point of view, quickly followed by a cut to a shot of Sana smiling toward Yousef. But then we see Even,





FIGURE 3. A group chat during a period when Sana feels that she can't speak with her friends. We see the group chat that she sees, and which she does not respond to. ["Chris: What are people doing tonight/Eva: I'm up for everything/Chris: We'll do everything, Eva/Vilde: I think I know about a party."] (Season 4, episode 4, Friday 5 May 2017).

also looking toward the Balloon Squad boys, suddenly unsure and alone. He stops singing—but Isak walks up and sings for him, and Even starts singing again as first Isak and his close friends and then the whole room sing together.

These few minutes show the precariousness but also the safety of the group, where individuals fall out of the collective and are pulled back into it again and again, and for different reasons. Sana is in love, while Even is worried about the resurfacing of old complications that



FIGURE 4. Sana (with her back to the viewer, wearing a black hijab) is very strongly situated as alone against the homogenous, white-clad PepsiMax girls. Sana’s friends Noora (to the left) and Eva (to the right) appear closer to the PepsiMax girls than to Sana, despite wearing different clothes. (Season 4, episode 3; 28 Apr. 2017). Photograph: NRK.

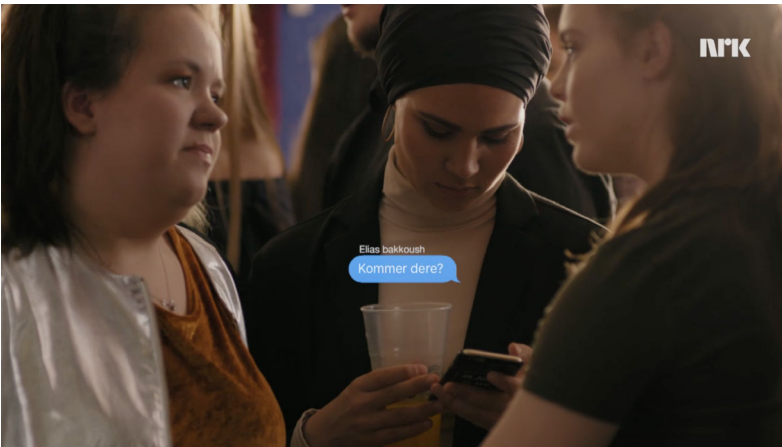


FIGURE 5. When Sana texts her brother Elias from a party, the words on her screen are overlaid on the image: “Are you coming?” (Season 4, episode 5). Photograph: NRK.

he has not shared with his current friends. But it does not matter, because they are part of a group of people who care for each other. “A brotherhood of men,” the characters sing, as people hug and kiss, and



FIGURE 6. Fond looks between Even and his friends before he begins to sing “Imagine” (Season 4, episode 5). Photograph: NRK.

Sana smiles to her friend Chris, “sharing all the world.” Unfortunately for Sana, the cohesion of the collective is shattered in the next few minutes, as four different sets of misunderstandings and betrayals unfold in rapid succession. Sana’s isolation is sudden, complicated, and dramatic, but it is also temporary, to be worked through and resolved by the final episode of the season.

Although *SKAM* is not a we-narrative in its entirety, it has strong elements of collective storytelling. The following explores how this collective “we” is narrated, particularly looking at the way the audience’s world and the fictional world are positioned as mirror images of each other through temporality and the use of social media.

The fictional time of *SKAM* perfectly matched the time of the audience, which is unusual or impossible in conventional narratives in print or on television or cinema screens. Generally, narrative time moves faster or sometimes more slowly than the reader or viewer’s time, with prolepses and analepses complicating the temporality. In *SKAM*, not only do the autumn, winter, and spring of the fictional world match the seasons of the actual viewer (at least in Norway), but even the weekdays and times of day match perfectly. So, the video from the final Eid party in the last episode was released on the actual evening of Eid al-Fitr on June 24, 2017, at 10:45 pm, a minute after sunset in Oslo that day.

The shared temporality between the audience and the fictional characters allows the audience to experience the characters as peers. Social media scholars often refer to the “ambient intimacy” that social media allows for (Reichert), and *SKAM* designed a narrative where viewers could feel this continuous, ambient sense of connection with

the fictional characters, and importantly, with other fans. We knew that video clips and chats that were published on a school day would be different from those published on a weekend or on a holiday. When most Norwegian viewers were on their Easter break, and probably either skiing in the mountains or feeling as though everyone else was enjoying sun and snow in the mountains, we saw the girls from *SKAM* at a mountain cabin trying to have a great Easter holiday themselves.

The frequent release of episodes that match narrative time is emphasized by the show's creators as "real time publishing" (Magnus), and as Vilde Sundet notes, it is a way of erasing boundaries between the fictional and actual worlds. Following other peoples' stories in real time is of course something we are familiar with from social media, but it is also a technique that was pioneered years ago in electronic literature. An early example was Judy Malloy's *Uncle Roger*, which was published serially in a discussion forum on the WELL starting in 1986, and in email and SMS narratives in the early 2000s (Rettberg, "Email Novels"). Real-time publication has been less common for transmedia shows that originate with a traditional television broadcaster. Some very popular shows have used the internet to share extra material between seasons (e.g., *Lost* 2004–10) or for fictional social media accounts for characters in the show, but in these cases social media has provided extra information rather than being used to distribute the main narrative. While shows similar to *SKAM*, like the UK *Skins* (2007–12), used webisodes to keep fans' attention between seasons (Grandío), *SKAM* very strictly limited the time in which material is published, with no material published between seasons except a trailer for the next season. This concentration on the time of the narrative makes the seasons more intense.

Fans often use Twitter as a "backchannel" for discussing televised events or shows. As Highfield, Harrington, and Bruns note, fan activity on Twitter depends upon synchronized viewing: "Users' ability to participate in the real-time social media conversation around shared texts is crucially dependent on parallel, synchronized viewing by large audiences, thus providing a strong incentive for the live viewing even of pre-recorded programming" (317–18). By providing daily content, *SKAM* allowed fan activity to be continuous and synchronized. Highfield et al. describe fans' use of Twitter during the Eurovision broadcast as "audiencing," which they define as "the public

performance of belonging to the distributed audience for a shared media event” (315). Clearly this is an aspect of *SKAM*’s fans’ activity on social media as well, but while Eurovision fans tweet in ways that mark their belonging to particular groups, for instance as fans of a particular artist, *SKAM* fans more typically tweet about their emotional investment in the story, or they offer comparisons and analyses of the story.

Episodic narratives are often structured around cliffhangers that keep readers or viewers waiting for resolution. *SKAM* uses this, of course, but the irregular pace of clips and screenshots published on the site made the cliffhangers even more exciting. Fans were not just waiting for the next full episode on Friday night; they were checking the website regularly to see whether an awaited event had happened. They also needed to stay up to date with the story, or risk seeing spoilers in social media. There was no automated alert that the main website had been updated, but there were Facebook groups dedicated to letting fans know when new content had been posted to the official website.

Many of the awaited fictional events occurred in social media, so the audience’s waiting to find out about a fictional event in social media mirrored the fictional characters’ experience of waiting for a text or a phone call, which again mirrors the audiences’ own experiences of such waiting. A notable example is the wait for William to respond to Noora’s many frantic texts and calls after he found out that his brother might have raped her in season 2. Noora is the main character in this season, and she and William have finally become lovers. In a two-and-a-half-minute video clip posted to the website on Friday, May 20, 2016, (so doubling as the final clip of S02E10), Noora learns that William’s brother has told William that he had sex with Noora. William confronts Noora but walks out on her before she manages to tell him the whole story (Figure 7).

Over the weekend, we are shown many screenshots of unanswered and increasingly frantic texts from Noora to William, and between Noora and her friends, discussing why William has not answered. The hashtag #williammåsvare (“William must answer”) was used in a group chat between the girls on the official website<sup>3</sup> and took off among fans on Twitter on the Tuesday night. By Wednesday, the hashtag was so popular that national newspapers started reporting on it: “Everyone wants to know what will happen to Noora and



FIGURE 7. William confronts Noora (S02E10). Photographs: NRK.

William,” the major daily newspaper *Dagbladet* reported (Graatrud). The same day, NRK released a new video clip titled #william-måsvare, thus incorporating the hashtag, and indirectly, the fan conversations, into the main narrative.

At this stage, the “we-narrative” is still subtle. We see it in the feedback between the use of the hashtag by fans and fictional characters. Maybe we can also read it in the camera angle of the final shot of the scene where William walks out on Noora. The season is focalized through Noora, so usually we only see what is happening from her point of view, but in this scene, the camera stays at the window of the high school, watching Noora chase William out of the schoolyard, trying to stop him. It might seem as though we are watching with Noora’s friends, who were with her by that window when William confronted her. But soon we see the friends running across the schoolyard, too, chasing Noora to comfort her. The camera is alone at the window, and we realize that we the viewers are also alone. The fictional characters have left us, and we cannot follow them (Figure 8).

A song plays as William rushes out the door and across the school yard, a snippet from “Noe bedre” (“Something Better”) by Feit’n fra Kolbotn. He only trusts himself, Feit’n raps, because he has learned that no one is there “when you really need help.” Unlike in season 4, where the protagonist Sana is isolated from the group, in the second season it is William, the protagonist’s boyfriend, who isolates himself due to misunderstandings and lack of communication. Noora and her friends try to reintegrate him into the group, but he runs away. The narration of the party in season 4 does not really include the viewer other than emotionally, though, whereas the camera angle at the end of the clip aligns the viewer with the external focalizer of the event.



FIGURE 8. The camera positions the viewer far above the schoolyard as William runs across it, chased by Noora. As he runs out the gate, the angle shifts to show the street outside, and Noora's friends rush to surround her and embrace her. (S02E10) Photograph: NRK.

As viewers, we are visually isolated from the group by the distant perspective of the camera. As William disappears from the screen, we see Noora and her friends so small down on the school yard, and we viewers are left alone, unable to help. We are no longer held close to the characters we care about, but are kept at a distance, helplessly unable to mend the shattered collective.

The fictional world of *SKAM* did not just mirror the audience's world in terms of time; it also mirrored the *media* of the narration. Parts of the story were told in social media, which is a central site for real-life relationships and friendships, especially among teens. Text messages were the most important form of nonvideo narration, and these were shown as overlays over video when they occurred during video clips (Figure 5) and as screenshots on the website when shown in addition to the video content (Figure 3) Several of the fictional characters were also active on Instagram and YouTube, platforms where the audience is also active. The style of narration in social media very closely mirrored the ways teens actually use social media. For instance, when Sana was feeling frustrated and unable to make a choice in the middle of season 4, she posted an image of tangled earbuds to her Instagram, with the text, "when you're being tested"



FIGURE 9. Instagram post by Sana (@therealsanabakkoush) on 29 April 2017. Photograph: NRK.

(Figure 9). This metaphorical use of social media is known as social steganography (boyd; Marwick and boyd), and is a common strategy used to share information with close friends without making the topic obvious to everyone else. Viewers of *SKAM* knew exactly what Sana was referring to, of course, and would thus feel included, as though they were close friends. The familiarity of the rhetorical move has a secondary effect too: By mirroring the viewers own social media practice, the fictional world seems to melt into the viewers' actual world.

Swedish viewers interviewed in the middle of season 4 by students Emelie Bengtsson and Rebecka Källquist said the fictional characters' Instagram accounts made the characters feel more real. "It's as though Isak is just anybody on Instagram. It doesn't feel styled" (*Det är som att Isak är som vem som helst på Instagram. Det känns inte styleat heller*), one informant said. When another informant noted that it did not add anything to the story, the first agreed, but added, "But it really strengthens their personalities. Jonas is real, in a way, both on Instagram and in the clips. It makes them deep." (*Men det stärker verkligen*



*deras personligheter. Jonas är ju verkligen på ett sätt, både på Instagram och i avsnitten. Det ger dom djup*) (38).

NRK “shielded” the actors from media attention during the production period, claiming that this was to protect them due to their youth. Perhaps unintentionally, this protection also lent a mystique to the fictional world. The audience did not see the actors in news interviews or in magazines, only as the characters they fictionally portrayed in the show and on the actors’ personal Instagram accounts. In an interview after the final season, Carl Martin Eggesbø, who played Eskild in *SKAM*, said that he had felt “caught” in the role. People recognized him on the street in Oslo and when he was abroad and yelled “Eskild, Eskild” after him. “A lot of people don’t find it easy to separate fiction from reality,” he said (*Det er veldig mange som ikke synes det er så lett å skille fiksjon fra virkelighet*) (Staude and Ingebretsen). Such a confusion of actor and character is not uncommon, but the narrative technique and the limited access to the actors blur the boundaries more than usual. One of the Swedish informants in the above study actually said she doesn’t follow the *SKAM* characters on Instagram because she would get confused:

I often scroll and don’t check very carefully but just register, like, “Oh, some people went out last night” . . . So if I had the *SKAM*-characters in my feed I’d easily mix up if it was someone I’d seen on TV or someone I know or maybe my sister. (*För jag gör ofta så att jag scollar och inte kollar jättenoga men ändå lite någonstans registrerar typ “ja, men det var någon som var ute där igår kväll” . . . Och bar man då Skam-karaktärerna i sitt flöde då hade jag lätt kunnat blanda ihop om det var någon jag sett på TV som varit där eller om det var någon jag känner eller var det kanske min syster.*)

(38)

On the other hand, many of the key actors have their own Instagram accounts, like Ina Svenningsrud, and a lot of fans follow both the fictional characters’ account and the actor’s account. Ulrikke Falch, who played Vilde, posts political and feminist material to her account (@ulrikkefalch), where she speaks with a confidence that is in contrast to the character she played. A devoted fan would likely follow both characters’ and actors’ accounts on Instagram, allowing both to play into the expanded world of *SKAM*. They would also likely follow Facebook pages and Tumblr sites created by fans of the show,

or at least read comments on the official website. The full experience of watching *SKAM* includes the television episodes, the clips and screenshots from the main character's point of view that were published on the official website, social media content by fictional characters on Instagram and YouTube, the actors' social media content, and extensive networks of fan commentary and discussion. The work of translation and interpretation was even more foregrounded for the many international fans who had to work harder than people who understand Norwegian. Myles McNutt, a television scholar who discovered the show in the third season and binge-watched episodes from the first seasons, described the experience of following the show in real time for the final season as being very different:

While binging the show is all-consuming in one way, watching the show in real time is all-consuming in another, but with the show itself replaced by the hour a day you spend Google Translating the transmedia elements and another few hours sifting through fan speculation or chatting with fellow viewers on Twitter.

(McNutt)

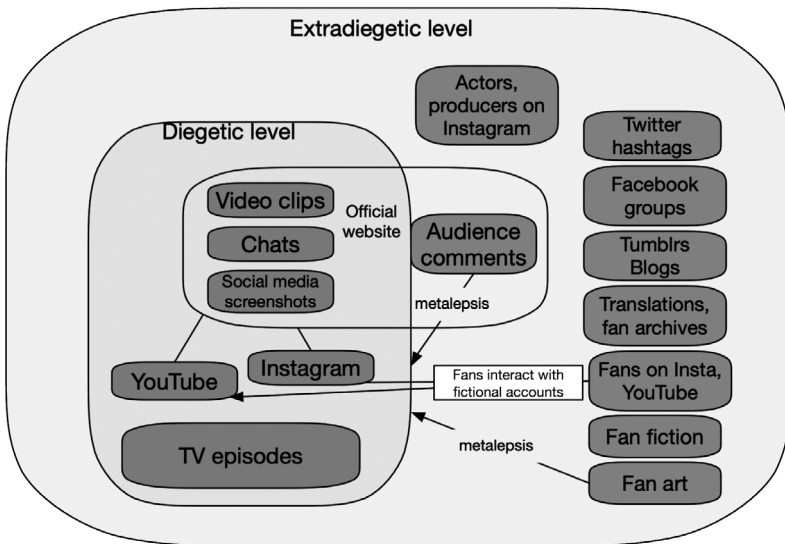


FIGURE 10. A diagram of the diegetic levels of *SKAM* and the social media conversations surrounding it.

The narrative structure of *SKAM* is quite complex, and the full narrative experience includes the viewers. The fan activity is an extradiegetic level to the core narrative. As shown in Figure 10, the official website ([skam.p3.no](http://skam.p3.no)) is not the only place the story plays out. There is a fairly clear division between the diegetic level, or the story of the fictional characters, and the extradiegetic level, which is the frame story of the viewers and actors who are outside of the fiction. The official website contains most, but not all, of the diegetic content, as well as audience comments on each post, which belong to the extradiegetic level. Other diegetic material is available at other sites, such as the official YouTube and Instagram accounts of fictional characters and the full television episodes, which were published on the main NRK website and broadcast on linear television. Then, there is a mass of extradiegetic material produced by fans and also by the actors and creators of the show. This includes Instagram accounts belonging to actors and creators and accounts on various social media run by fans that offer fan art, fan fiction, discussions, archives, translations, interpretations, and translations.

There is interaction between the diegetic and extradiegetic levels that blurs the boundaries between the actual and fictional worlds. When fans comment supportively to Instagram posts made by the fictional characters, they take on the role of confidante or friend, a peer to the characters. Steffen Krüger and Gry Rustad use the example of when Eva, the lead character in the first season, posts a selfie on Instagram showing her face half buried under her pillow, with a text explaining that she doesn't want to go to the Halloween party (@evamohn, 30 Oct. 2016). "It is literally in the hands of the teenage users to either support Eva or let her down," they write (11), proposing that *SKAM* provides a "holding space" for the audience to act out being supportive of the fictional characters and to tell their own stories to each other and to actually support each other, whether in conversations about not wanting to go to a party or about pregnancy, sexuality, or rape. Comments on Instagram posts include both diegetic comments, where fans "play along" and respond to the fictional characters as if they are real friends, and extradiegetic comments, where commenters make the fictionality of the show explicit. So when Eva asks, "Can I dress up as a doona?" one viewer responds, "Yes, yes, that's allowed," and another writes "I feel you." Other commenters discuss when the next episode will be released. When

viewers write themselves into the diegetic level by supporting Eva, Sana, and the other characters, and write “in character” as their friends or peers, we see an example of metalepsis, which as Genette describes it, is “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse” (88). Genette’s examples did not include actual readers intruding into the diegetic universe, but then in the print novels he based his narratology upon, readers were not able to write into the text. In social media narratives such as *SKAM*, they often can. This bridge between the actual world and the story-world is arguably built into all digital narratives due to the reader’s interaction (Bell and Ensslin, 53). However this *interactional metalepsis* (Kukkonen) is more extensive in the case of a narrative like *SKAM* because the audience does not simply interact with a settled text, they actually contribute to the storyworld.

Other forms of metalepsis in *SKAM* occur when material created by fans is validated by the actors or creators referencing it in their extradiegetic posts and when fan material is integrated into the core



FIGURE 11. Fan art by @elli\_skam.

narrative. An example of the first is the way the term “cries in Norwegian” spread through the fandom and then was used on several occasions by actors and creators of the show. Fans created subtitles in multiple languages for each episode of the show, and in an early episode, Vilde is shown crying in a bathroom at a party. The fan-created subtitles state “[cries in Norwegian].” Ulrikke Falch, the actor who played Vilde, later posted an Instagram photograph of herself referencing the subtitles: “Im not drinking tonight.” Two hours later: “\*cries in Norwegian\*” (@ulrikkefalch, 28 Dec. 2016). After the last season was over, Julie Andem also used the phrase in a thank you note to the “coolest fanbase on earth” (@julieandem on 24 July 2017).

The most explicit example of fan material being integrated into the core diegetic level was probably the recreation of a piece of fan art in a scene in season 4, episode 1. Many fans shared drawings and remixes of scenes from the show, and often of imagined scenes as well. One such drawing was posted to Instagram by the user @elli\_s-kam on 24 February 2017, during the hiatus between the third and fourth season (Figure 11). In the first episode of season 4, posted to the official website just over six weeks later, the boys are shown in exactly the same clothes and almost exactly the same positions as in the fan art, in a very obvious reference that was immediately picked up on by fans (Figure 12).



FIGURE 12. The boys hanging out after helping Even and Isak move into a shared apartment in the first clip of season 4. Photograph: NRK.

Readers, especially adolescent readers, often find *leaving* a fictional world they have loved to be very difficult, sometimes leading to “an overwhelming dissatisfaction with their lives outside the stories” (Bruns 355). Fan communities obviously work together to sustain the fictional worlds they enjoy, not just discussing the stories they love but expanding them further. How to survive the end of *SKAM* was a major theme in the social media discussions of *SKAM* fans in the weeks leading up to and following the conclusion of the last season. Cristina Bruns argues that the reason that young people are so likely to be swept up emotionally by fiction is that they are still in the process of developing a sense of self, and so narratives with strong, heroic protagonists allow them to experience “a firmer or more stable self-experience” than they have yet established in their own lives (359). *SKAM* skilfully balances protagonists who are sometimes heroic and sometimes deeply flawed with a sense of community that extends to include the audience. By making that inclusion explicit at the end of the final episode, *SKAM* managed to leave its audience without leaving us alone. “Fiction reading must always lead us back to our shared reality and to the embodied others with whom we share it,” Cristina Bruns reminds us, because “the imaginary matters primarily as it fosters the living” (367).

*SKAM* told its stories not simply to us, but with us. It left us with each other.

## Notes

1. Some sense of the intensity and the international nature of the fans can be seen in the many stories fans tell about what *SKAM* meant to them on the Instagram page “Thank You *SKAM*,” at <https://www.instagram.com/p/BOj2EPzDS3p>.
2. Evak is what the fans call Even and Isak, the gay couple at the center of season 3.
3. “Vandrende Rompehull,” 23 May, 2017, 8:59 pm., <http://skam.p3.no/2016/05/23/vandrende-rompehull/>.

## Works Cited

- Andem, Julie, and Mari Magnus. *SKAM Case*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6gCzxtIPs>. Mediamorfosis, 2017. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.

- Bekhta, Natalya. "We-Narratives: The Distinctiveness of Collective Narration." *Narrative*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2017, pp. 164–81, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2017.0008>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- Bengtsson, Emelie, and Rebecka Källquist. #WILLIAMMÅSVARE: *En mottagarorienterad studie om transmedialt berättande i TV-serien Skam*. University of Gothenburg, Spring 2017, <http://expo.jmg.gu.se/?p=10427>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- boyd, danah. "Social Steganography: Learning to Hide in Plain Sight." *Apophenia Blog*, 23 Aug. 2010, <http://www.zephorio.org/thoughts/archives/2010/08/23/social-steganography-learning-to-hide-in-plain-sight.html>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- Bruns, Cristina V. "Reading Readers: Living and Leaving Fictional Worlds." *Narrative*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2016, pp. 351–69. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2016.0021>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- Ensslin, Astrid, and Alice Bell. *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method, and Analysis*. The Ohio State UP, 2021.
- Flanagan, Victoria. *Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction: The Posthuman Subject*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Fludernik, Monika. "Let Us Tell You Our Story: We-Narration and Its Pronominal Peculiarities." *Pronouns in Literature*, edited by Alison Gibbons and Andrea Macrae, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 171–92.
- . "The Many in Action and Thought: Towards a Poetics of the Collective in Narrative." *Narrative*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2017, pp. 139–63. *Project MUSE*, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2017.0010>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cornell UP, 1988.
- Graatrud, Gabrielled. "Skam'-Frustrasjon Skapte Viral Hit." *Dagbladet.No*, 25 May 2016, <http://www.dagbladet.no/a/60385310>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- Grandío, María del Mar. "Transmedia Audiences and Television Fiction: A Comparative Approach between Skins (UK) and El Barco (Spain)." *Participations*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2012, pp. 558–74.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman*. U of Chicago P, 1999.
- Highfield, Tim, et al. "Twitter as a Technology for Audiencing and Fandom." *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2013, pp. 315–39. *Taylor and Francis+NEJM*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.756053>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- Krüger, Steffen, and Gry C. Rustad. "Coping with Shame in a Media-Saturated Society: Norwegian Web-Series Skam as

- Transitional Object.” *Television & New Media*, 2017, pp. 72–95. *SAGE Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476417741379>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- Kukkonen, Karin. *Metalepsis in Popular Culture*. Walter de Gruyter, 2011.
- Magnus, Mari. “SKAM—Når Fiksjon Og Virkelighet Møtes.” *Nordicom Information*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2016, pp. 32–38.
- Malloy, Judy. *Uncle Roger*, 1986, <https://people.well.com/user/jmalloy/uncle Roger/partytop.html>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- Margolin, Uri. “Telling Our Story: On ‘We’ Literary Narratives.” *Language and Literature*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1996, pp. 115–33. *SAGE Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/096394709600500203>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- Marwick, Alice E., and danah boyd. “Networked Privacy: How Teenagers Negotiate Context in Social Media.” *New Media & Society*, vol. 16, no. 7, Nov. 2014, pp. 1051–67. *SAGE Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814543995>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- McNutt, Myles. “18 Minutes of Foreshadowing: Skam Season 4, Episode 2.” *Cultural Learnings*, 22 Apr. 2017, <https://cultural-learnings.com/2017/04/21/skam-season-4-episode-2-review/>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- Palmer, Alan. *Social Minds in the Novel*. Ohio State UP, 2010.
- Reichelt, Leisa. “Ambient Intimacy.” *Disambiguity*, 1 Mar. 2007, <http://www.disambiguity.com/ambient-intimacy/>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- Rettberg, Jill Walker. “Snapchat: Phatic Communication and Ephemeral Social Media.” *Appified: Culture in the Age of Apps*, edited by Jeremy Wade Morris and Sarah Murray, U of Michigan P, 2018, pp. 188–96.
- Rettberg, Jill Walker. “Email Novel.” *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan et al., Johns Hopkins UP, 2014, pp. 178–79.
- Richardson, Brian. *Unnatural Voices: Extreme Narration in Modern and Contemporary Fiction*. Ohio State UP, 2006.
- Staude, Tone, and Christian Ingebretsen. “Skam-skuespillerne bryter stillheten: – Litt fanget i rollene våre.” *NRK*, 23 June 2017, [https://www.nrk.no/kultur/skam-skuespillerne-bryter-stillheten\\_-\\_litt-fanget-i-rollene-vare-1.13571249](https://www.nrk.no/kultur/skam-skuespillerne-bryter-stillheten_-_litt-fanget-i-rollene-vare-1.13571249). Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.
- Sundet, Vilde Schanke. “‘Det er bare du som kan føle det du føler’ – emosjonell investering og engasjement i nettdramaet SKAM.” *16:9 filmtidsskrift*, June 2017, <http://www.16-9.dk/2017/06/det-er-bare-du-som-kan-foele/>. Accessed 11 Feb. 2021.



**Jill Walker Rettberg**, is Professor of Digital Culture at the University of Bergen. She is the author of *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs, and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves* (Polity 2014) and *Blogging* (Palgrave 2008, 2014), and is co-editor of *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader* (MIT Press 2008). She is Principal Investigator of the ERC Consolidator project *Machine Vision in Everyday Life: Playful Interactions with Visual Technologies in Digital Art, Games, Narratives and Social Media* (2018-2023). Jill blogs at <http://jilltxt.net> and is on Twitter at @jilltxt.