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Hating Skyler White: audience engagement, gender politics and celebrity culture

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ABSTRACT
Skyler White is a protagonist in the top-ranking television series Breaking Bad. She is also one of the most hated characters on television. This paper focuses on how the character of Skyler and Anna Gunn – the actor that plays her – are turned into a ‘composite celebrity’ in audience discussions. This is achieved by analysing threads on the social news website Reddit that specifically discuss Skyler. We discovered three main speaking positions: ‘savvy’ viewing; moral realism; and public shaming. This type of audience research may help further discussion on how celebrity culture is supported by neoliberal changes in the public sphere and caught up in the devaluation of professionalism and professional status – which, as will be shown, has especially dire consequences for professional women. Breaking Bad showcases predominantly masculine narratives. The derogation of its key female character therefore does not come as a surprise. However, a feminist defence of both the character and the actor – although a minority perspective – is also voiced. This article reveals how the interlinking fields of celebrity gossip and television criticism are a space of vibrant and sometimes frightening discussion in which a neo-conservative gender agenda is simultaneously asserted and contested.

In everyday media talk, celebrities figure as key characters (Hermes and Kooijman 2016, p. 483). Celebrities provide fixed points in shared narratives that serve social cohesion and identity formation (Driessens 2012, p. 642). Fictional characters, it seems, may do the same and become celebrities in their own right. This article focuses on Reddit discussions of Skyler White, a protagonist in the top-ranking television series Breaking Bad (AMC 2008–2013, dir. Vince Gilligan) who regularly tops lists of the most-hated television characters. A Facebook page called ‘Fuck Skyler White’ has more than 31,000 fans, ‘with posts and comments dripping with violent, misogynist hatred’ (Mittell 2015, p. 347). Significantly for our analysis in this chapter, in online discussions the fictional character Skyler is merged with Anna Gunn, the actor playing her. Those discussing her do not always make a clear distinction between Gunn and the fictional character of Skyler. They

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become a single entity – a composite celebrity as it were, to whom viewers address their deep dislike and even hatred. In this article we attempt to uncover the mechanisms at work and how deep hatred of Skyler should be understood.

According to P. David Marshall (1997), celebrities are seen as ‘elevated individuals’ (p. 3). They are ‘the production locale for an elaborate discourse on the individual and individuality that is organised around the will to uncover a hidden truth’ (ibid., p. 4). We study celebrities to understand the value of individuals to determine when and why they deserve social recognition. As such, celebrity is ‘implicated in new categorizations of the public sphere [. . .] connected to the heightened significance of popular culture and democratic culture. The celebrity embodies the empowerment of the people to shape the public sphere symbolically’ (ibid., p. 7). The lack of structural barriers to access power and stardom is surely a good thing. There is a dark side to celebrity culture, however, that needs further exploration and discussion.

In academic research, we understand celebrity in semiotic and functional terms as the embodiment of a public configuration. From the perspective of the (temporarily) elevated individual, such embodiment may come at a high price, especially if she happens to be a woman. In this paper, we will argue that in our understanding of celebrity and the ways in which celebrities are used by audiences, we need to pay careful attention to the gender politics involved. Whether in slut-shaming or ‘star testing’ (Wilson 2010, Allen and Mendick 2013, Jackson et al. 2016), everyday discussions of celebrity police femininity far more restrictively than masculinity. This imbalance is reflected by the media: ‘Boys will be boys. Girls will be hounded by the media’, writes New York Times journalist Alex Williams (2008). The reference is in Holmes and Negra’s (2008) introduction to ‘Going Cheap?’ – a special issue of Genders on female celebrity in which they address how academic research is lagging behind in addressing ‘the stark differences in the contemporary treatment of male and female celebrities’ (Holmes and Negra 2008, p. 1).

Following in their footsteps, we focus on the hatred of Skyler as an extra layer to the discussion of female celebrity. Understanding how Skyler/Gunn becomes a composite celebrity adds greatly to making visible the links between celebrity culture, everyday sexism, gender ideology, and neoliberal governmentality. Following Mitchell Dean (1999), neoliberalism is understood as a re-coding of government through a range of processes that work through the freedom and agency of individuals and collectives (p. 149). It deploys indirect means for the surveillance and regulation of that agency. Neoliberal rationalities exist, according to Dean, in complex interrelations with neo-conservatism and populist, anti-governmental reaction, as well as with debates on morality and community. We understand the ‘composite celebrity’ to be a neoliberal technique that aids the linking of the notions of valorisation and self-actualisation of individuals to a conservative gender agenda. From a feminist perspective, neoliberalism may need to be lauded for ending the paternalist logic of the welfare state, as Nancy Fraser (2013) has argued. Its effective critique of the professions and their exclusionary expertise that delegitimised local forms of alternative knowledge allowed a reassertion of autonomy and self-assertion over the body. Perversely, this occurred over a period in which women were gaining professional authority and status. It is against their new status that neoliberal accountability and the right to democratic control are now asserted via such technologies as viewer-led media criticism. This makes criticising the composite celebrity Skyler/Gunn a political act.
Gunn is not a celebrity actor. She understands herself to be a professional doing a job. In a reaction to the overwhelming volume of hate mail and threats uttered on social media forums, Gunn (2013) wrote an open letter to The New York Times (Aug 23):

Playing Skyler White on the television show ‘Breaking Bad’ for the past five seasons has been one of the most rewarding creative journeys I’ve embarked on as an actor. But the role has also taken me on another kind of journey – one I never would have imagined. My character, to judge from the popularity of Web sites and Facebook pages devoted to hating her, has become a flash point for many people’s feelings about strong, nonsubmissive, ill-treated women. As the hatred of Skyler blurred into loathing for me as a person, I saw glimpses of an anger that, at first, simply bewildered me.

Hating Skyler, Gunn says, is a feminist issue. She continues her open letter by analysing the narrative logic of the series, which makes Skyler her husband Walter’s antagonist. ‘I was aware that she might not be the show’s most popular character. But I was unprepared for the vitriolic response she inspired. Thousands of people have “liked” the Facebook page “I Hate Skyler White”’ (ibid.)

Gunn pinpoints the confusion and mixed feelings inspired by female characters who do not adhere to the traditional code of ‘standing by your man’, referring to ‘other complex TV wives’ such as Carmela Soprano (The Sopranos), and Betty Draper (Mad Men). ‘Male characters don’t seem to inspire this kind of public venting and vitriol’ (Gunn 2013, n.p.). Key to the extraordinary situation Gunn finds herself in is that she, the actor, is seen as accountable for the actions of the character she plays, and thus the barrage of online hatred becomes personal. ‘Could somebody tell me where I can find Anna Gunn so I can kill her?’ reads a post she finds online. Skyler is an uncomfortable character, Gunn (2013) concludes, a ‘measure of our attitudes toward gender’; and she is ‘glad’ that the public discussion ‘has illuminated some of the dark and murky corners that we often ignore or pretend aren’t still there in our everyday lives’.

Gunn’s letter is both brave and well-argued, and it deserves following up to further air those ‘dark and murky corners’ of gender ideology. In the first part of this paper we will turn to the discussion concerning Skyler on Reddit across a number of threads that are part of the subReddit thread ‘Breaking Bad’ (r/breakingbad), questioning how Skyler becomes meaningful for Breaking Bad viewers. Whilst reconstructing how Skyler becomes meaningful as a fictional character, a second question emerges that queries the politics involved in the coming into being of the Skyler/Gunn composite identity regarding notions of celebrity, gender ideology, and neoliberal accountability.

For those unfamiliar with the series, Breaking Bad is the story of a chemistry teacher who is diagnosed with cancer. To pay for his treatment and to make sure that his unexpectedly pregnant wife and handicapped teenage son are provided for if he should die, he starts ‘cooking’ methamphetamine. This is the beginning of a process of moral decline that ends in a life of crime that spins completely out of control. Discussion of the series, whether in textual analysis or in audience research, tends to focus on its main protagonist Walter White (cf. Pierson 2014, Blevins and Wood 2015, McKeown et al. 2015). The Methods of Breaking Bad (Blevins and Wood 2015) includes an essay on Skyler in which she is framed as a woman suffering from postpartum syndrome. The essay does not break the mould of understanding Skyler as a ‘nagging, unsupportive wife’ (Blevins 2015, p. 5). McKeown et al.’s (2015) Q-sort of viewer response references dislike of Skyler,
but does not analyse why this is the case beyond mentioning that their respondents identify with the male character. A small minority acknowledges that Skyler might be a tragic character. None find her sympathetic (McKeown et al. 2015, p. 157).

Jason Mittell (2015) maintains that female characters have a difficult time in male-centred dramas. Such shows, he argues, quoting Amanda Lotz, may ‘interrogate submerged sentiments about gender scripts that lurk beneath the surface of largely reconstructed masculinities’ (Lotz in Mittell 2015, p. 253; see also Lotz 2014). Walter’s favourite rationalisation used to justify his criminal career is that he needs to provide for his family. ‘Such overtly patriarchal rhetoric’, Mittell (2015) argues, ‘articulates the hollow, rotten core of traditional masculinity as portrayed on the series’ (p. 253). Whilst Mittell understands Skyler’s perspective and experiences to function ‘as a vital critique of Walt’s damaged masculinity’ (ibid., p. 257), this is a minority perspective that does not get much airplay. In a review of a collection of essays discussing Breaking Bad Glen Jellenik (2016) does state that ‘chapter titles such “Taking Control: Male Angst and the Re-Emergence of Hegemonic Masculinity in Breaking Bad” all but scream […] for a companion-response that considers the show’s negotiation of female agency. But none appears’ (p. 89). Whilst this plea lies outside the scope of this paper and therefore will not be answered here either, we will address the gender politics involved in hating Skyler.

‘/r/breakingbad’

Television series are discussed in many places, as are celebrities. We collected comments on the subreddit ‘/r/breakingbad’, which has over 200,000 subscribers. By using Reddit we found discussions of Skyler as a character, rather than one-sided hatred – as can be found on dedicated Facebook pages such as ‘I hate Skyler White’. Robert Kozinets (2010) labels our strategy ‘observational “netnography”: a form of internet ethnography in which moderators downplay […] or even eliminate […] the participatory element of the technique’ (p. 96). This constituted the best available course of action, as almost all the discussions we found searching Reddit in March 2016 using the search term ‘Skyler White’ was archived material, meaning that it could be consulted but no further comments added. We found 115 threads that were relevant and discussed Skyler (rather than merely mentioning her name in plot recaps and so on). The original posts had garnered 2–270 reactions per thread. Most had low scores, and only five had very high scores. The top scoring threads as we found them in 2016 were: ‘Anna Gunn has been amazing this season’ (609, started in 2013) and, ‘the moment every BB fan decided they hate Skyler’ (900, started in 2012), showing immediately that on Reddit Skyler is a hotly debated character who is defended as well as hated, with many lauding Gunn’s acting. Most of the Reddit discussion of Breaking Bad occurred in 2012 and 2013, when the show found an enormous audience share via Netflix, slowly tapering off throughout 2014 and 2015, with only a few threads started in 2016.

As discussion had been lively, we collected more than 800 pages of material (when printed in a common font, size and line spacing, with a sizable margin next to the comments filled with ads). These were analysed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin 1990). All material was first coded according to the method of open coding, in which a coding scheme is developed that summarises all content that is of
interest (i.e. content related to a Redditor or commenter engaging with Skyler and Gunn as a character, actor, or celebrity). The codes employed included, amongst others, the praise and swear words used for Skyler; technical terms used to describe decisions of the production team regarding Skyler’s character and Gunn’s acting; references to Skyler being a mother and being in a relationship with an impossible man; and so on. A second round of (axial) coding collected all the codes and sorted them into meaningful clusters. A last round of selective coding reconnected original quotations with an appropriate label and analysis of the logic of the clustered quotations.

A grounded theory approach is well suited for discourse analysis, as it does not sort individuals into specific positions, retrieve intentions, or attitudes. Rather, it finds the best possible way to reconstruct the underlying shared cultural knowledge upon which individuals draw. Margaret Wetherell and Jonathan Potter (1988) employ a similar approach and remark: ‘there is no sense in which we could have divided our respondents into three classes […]’. Each respondent selectively combined different repertoires (Wetherell & Potter 1988, p. 178). The Redditors likewise selectively use speaking positions that reflect different types of shared cultural knowledge.

The three speaking positions we found in relation to how Skyler is discussed are ‘savvy viewing’; ‘moral realism’; and ‘public shaming’. The ‘savvy viewing’ speaking position is characterised by talk of how to read the narrative of the series and its production. It makes full use of the complexity of the Breaking Bad characters and storylines. Here, Reddit posters speak from a position of inside, technical knowledge – as ‘savvy viewers’ (Andrejevic 2008, Teurlings 2010). These quotes bespeak the critical repertoire of television analysts. A second manner of speaking is far more personalised and reminiscent of how celebrities are talked about by gossip magazine readers (Hermes 1995, McDonnell 2014). This we have labelled ‘moral realism’ (see also Ang 1985). Ang uses the term ‘emotional realism’ to explain how melodrama is felt to be of practical use to viewers in so much as characters remind them of people that actually exist, however exaggerated the storylines might be. Celebrity gossip, as Andrea McDonnell (2014) puts it, ‘makes morality meaningful’ (pp. 89–109). In the ‘moral realism’ comments presented here, characters in television series are understood on two levels of abstraction: they refer to archetypes that embody moral codes (or their opposite), and they are seen as standing in for real persons who can be judged for their life choices and behaviour. Television viewing thus becomes an exercise in practical morality.

Of special interest here is a third category of talk that connects the commenter to the character and actor in which the character and actor are merged, thus allowing the character to be treated as a celebrity. These quotes show how codes of twentieth-century professionalism are superseded by twenty-first-century celebrity culture. Before the advent of social media platforms, television viewers would also express themselves forcefully about public figures they disliked. In this sense, celebrity hating is a common phenomenon (Johansson 2015). However, today such feelings are publicised, and all public figures can be treated as celebrities, which can in turn result in them being considered fair game for verbal abuse. This third group of comments shows how the Redditors also make use of a way of talking that suggests it is their right to hold an actor or character to account. The underlying shared cultural repertoire combines the populist politics of social media culture with a neoliberal politics of accountability that is imported into personal life. Social media logic here helps dissolve what was left of
the distinction between the private and the public. In addition, it dissolves the status of the professional, which up until a quarter century ago would have shielded the private individual behind the professional persona. It is as if to play a character in a television series is to urge others to look at and respond to you, to seek status and celebrity, which in turn gives others the right to judge and hold you to account. We have called this third speaking position ‘public shaming’.

**Savvy viewing**

Savvy viewing encompasses discussions of the series in terms of depth and complexity (or lack thereof). It distinguishes good script writing – which may result in liking or hating Skyler, but with the understanding that hatred appears as a consequence of how the character has been written and is necessary for plot and narrative development – and bad writing and/or acting which results in irritation, as the root cause for viewers’ dislike of Skyler. Generally, the savvy viewing position is the one most commonly found on Reddit (see also Teurlings 2018). ‘Skyler was one of the best written female roles on television and I loved LOVED that she wasn’t a saint’ (eva_brauns_team). The hatred voiced against Skyler, according to Deadhookersandblow, ‘is a testament to how good the writers are and Anna Gunn’s acting is’. Others feel she is a badly written character, which makes her come across as a ‘bitch’. According to Redditer Bexhill, Skyler is ‘underwritten and obnoxious […]’. Skyler’s job in the story was “be pregnant” and “stand in the way”. It’s a thankless role’. When asked by another Redditer to elaborate why the series would be more enjoyable without Skyler, JamesDickens says:

> Erm … how about another wife character that doesn’t [sic] make you want to punch the screen every 2 seconds? I am not even speaking about her deeper plot, from the first second I saw her on screen with every move she makes, she is extremely annoying. It’s just a badly made character.

Gunn’s acting is discussed in similar terms. The hatred towards the character is her achievement, according to some. Deadhookersandblow and Mannbearpiggg laud Gunn’s work: ‘I HATED Anna Gunn’s character and as a result think that she’s an absolutely amazing actress’ (Mannbearpiggg). Retroactive_Spider agrees: ‘If one likes or dislikes a character to that extreme, that means the actor is doing a fantastic job’. Doriantheeking loves both the character and the actress:

> I should say I actually have loved her as a character and actress since the beginning. I totally get her anger and can see the sadness in her eyes just grow and grow as the seasons roll by, and I don’t feel that the show needed to change or spell out anything differently.

Others suggest simply that Gunn poorly portrayed an otherwise normal and neutral character, turning Skyler into a bitch she was never intended to be. ThePestilentTroll states:

> The reason most people think that Skylar is a bitch is because Anna Gunn is a bad actress. Vince Gilligan has said, multiple times, that they never intended for her character to be a bitch. They never wrote her that way. And yet she still comes off as a bitch. That problem, my friend, is a result of the actress failing to portray the character as she was intended.
Savvy viewing takes commenters further to suggest that Skyler needs to be hated in order for us to feel sorry for Walt. Wentwhere states: ‘Initially the writing is designed to help the viewer sympathise with Walt’s decision to turn to cooking meth’. Skyler is an obstacle ‘that Walt had to act against, and we like Walt, so we hate those obstacles’ (wentwhere). In addition, kjeovridnarn says, we are invited to see things from Walt’s perspective:

We have been viewing this from Walt’s side of the story. We have seen the events that transpired and have an understanding of why he went into the meth business. So when Skyler freaks out, she seems like a total bitch to us. If it was told from Skyler’s point of view, it would be very boring, but Walt would seem like a total asshole.

According to Stryhns, Skyler is used to build up tension. She slows down the narrative development, making us ache to know what Walt and Jesse are up to. Stryhns: ‘People hate on Skyler because she slows down the most exciting parts of the show. [Given] that the audience wants to see more of what Walt does when he’s with Jessie, Skyler sometimes feels like the only thing holding us back’.

The fun of discussing Skyler from a savvy viewer perspective is in reverse engineering decisions made by the show’s production team: how do they get us to be spellbound, involved or disgusted. As viewers, these quotes suggest, we are caught up in the story, which has its own rewards. Beyond this, we then have a second type of reward in understanding how we came to be immersed in the story in the first place. Thus, savvy viewing is self-reflexive viewing. It assumes a fair amount of critical and technical knowledge of television storytelling. It prides itself on being knowledgeable and cultured, and appreciative of the professionalism of writers, actors, and producers.

**Moral realism**

The second way of talking about Skyler considers her as a mother and a partner, and aims to evaluate her behaviour as morally good or bad. Specific views hinge on the commenter’s position on femininity. Conservative gender notions regularly surface, as exemplified by remarks that imply that Skyler ‘only thinks of herself’, which is not what mothers or good wives do (cf. MacDonald 1997, p. 135). Her smoking especially is felt to be a painful example of her badness, and of course, smoking in the presence of a lung cancer patient, at the very least, comes across as insensitive. Stewsie522 sees Skyler’s smoking as proof she only thinks of herself: ‘As if her husband with lung cancer, son with MS, and infant daughter could use the extra second hand smoke’. Not only does she smoke around Walt, she smokes while pregnant. ‘I just can’t forgive a woman who smoked while she was pregnant (Indeed). Others do defend Skyler, again in highly personalised terms: ‘[S]he’s incredibly stressed out after finding out her husband is a murderer, and even more so that he acts as though nothing happened and doesn’t feel any guilt’ (EndlessIrony).

Hating or defending Skyler becomes even more heated by the third episode of season three: ‘I.F.T.’ (2010), in which Skyler has sex with her boss Ted. Walt and Skyler may be living apart, but they have not divorced yet, and so the question arises whether this actually constitutes cheating or not. CMelody comments: ‘[S]he cheated. She was having sex with other men while maintaining their relationship’. Although others
disagree, for those who want to hate Skyler, this provides the perfect justification. ScreamingGordita simply says: ‘She fucked Ted’. Naxx78 takes more words to condemn Skyler: ‘Seriously she cheated in her marriage, thats a bfd bigger then lying. By doing that she declared herself a whore, so fuck her’. What is interesting here is that Skyler’s infidelity is considered to be so much more important than Walt’s lying. Whilst it can be taken as a given that those using the moral realism repertoire have intimate knowledge of the story development, it is remarkable that they do not connect Skyler’s actions to how Walt’s actions (he has finally owned up to her that he produces drugs) may have spurred her on. The savvy viewing speaking position is not used to analyse and understand what happens. Rather, Skyler’s actions are taken out of context and put under a microscope to be held against her. The underlying reasoning is not merely geared towards moral condemnation; it also presents a classical patriarchal argument, upholding the idea that the integrity of the family needs to be maintained in order not to undercut the community (Donat and D’Emilio 1992, p. 10).

Other comments do defend Skyler, using the same speaking position, yet this time in a more positive way: ‘She cheated on him because he was lying to her, and their relationship was in the shitter already anyway’ (vhagar). MaxX_Evolution states that hating Skyler for her infidelity is wrong:

[S]he finds out he’s cooking meth, which was far worse than anything she imagined, so she tries to divorce him. […] He continues the lying and manipulation, winds up putting his family in danger, and now Skylar knows her husband is a murderer who caused an explosion in a fucking retirement home. All within a year. Seeing people say they hate her for stupid shit like cheating on Ted makes me wonder if they’re even watching the same show.

Fiction in these quotes is used to learn and to acquire insight in moral questions and categories: why do people do what they do, and how to understand and value their behaviour? This is a very different focus on Breaking Bad than in the savvy viewing repertoire. Rather than discussing the series from the perspective of its writers and producers, it takes the story as a realistic tale in its depiction of human emotions, relations and actions. Storytelling thus becomes an opportunity to learn and to sharpen people’s reading and moral evaluation skills. A similar mechanism can be found in reading about celebrities in gossip magazines – a parallel to which we will return below.

Here we want to underline that even if Skyler and Walt are fictional characters, they can be taken as standing in for real people – for behaviour that also occurs in real life. Examples of these evaluative remarks are: ‘Skyler did what she did only to hurt Walt’ (Orngarth); and ‘Walt’s motivation was always to provide for and protect his family’ (Orngarth). Bezzie disagrees, and feels that Skyler protects no one and is just ‘a stupid person’, read: a morally flawed character. A minority of comments comes to different conclusions when reading Skyler as a character. Mattkatzbaby relates:

You know what we call a lady who, when she finds out her husband has lied to her and that he has endangered the lives of their kids, does everything she can to leave and protect her kids, even to the point of endangering herself? Round my house we call her a good mother.

Breaking Bad is rich drama. It offers many more moments for commenters to ponder social relations in emotionally realist terms that are translated into moral evaluation. Thedramallama01 sums this up eloquently:
My problem with Skylar is that she decides on her moral code based on what is most comfortable for her, rather than have a strict line of right and wrong. [She] has a strict moral code that she feels everyone has to abide by [but when] she’s given the opportunity to act in ways that she shouldn’t deem moral (cheating, accounting fraud, helping Walt), suddenly that moral code disappears and she feels justified, and not even a little guilty, in what she is doing. tl;dr: her moral code is too subjective, and is based on her whims. She picks and chooses to whom and where her personal values apply.

Holding skyler to account: public shaming

The third category of comments consists mainly of threats and swear words addressed to the character. Many more of these addressed to the actor herself can be found on the dedicated Facebook pages mentioned earlier. These posts are reminiscent of the hate speech found on right-wing populist web communities that seek to be provocative, suggesting it is all for the ‘lulz’ (just a joke). They are deeply disturbing in the violent suggestions made against individual persons. Only a small portion of the Reddit comments actually go this far, but throughout the ‘public shaming’ category of comments a visceral emotion can be discerned that appears to stem from a sense of ownership of those who are ‘publicly available’, for instance as a character or as an actor providing that character. This sense of ownership is deeply embedded in celebrity culture, as part and parcel of its democratic character that promises access but also a vote, whether this is a text message vote to oust a reality television candidate on a show, or a more personalised version on Facebook or Reddit.

Public shaming in this context is not so much a substantial speaking position, but more a confirmation of the right of collectives to decide on how their ideas and ideals are represented across public culture. As a perspective it grants the speaker the right to be judge and jury of, in this case, a character/actor/celebrity. Through this ‘holding to account’ of individuals in the spotlight, we encounter the dark side of the empowerment entailed by celebrity culture that Marshall (1997) describes. The Reddit quotes below bear witness to a feeling of deception with a character that has come to feel like a real person. Whilst public shaming suggests a moral component, it is more akin to publicly confirming the falling short of expectations and standards of a given individual. The quotes in this category mostly annunciate unease with Skyler, for which the fictional character/actor is subsequently blamed. The implied message here is: Who does she think she is for making me, as a viewer, feel uncomfortable?

Mind_the_gap’s comment suggests a feeling of betrayal over a sexual fantasy. The comment is uncomfortable to read in its overly strong wording: ‘I think she’s the queen cunt. I fucking hate her. At first I liked her and even thought she was hot, now I just want her to die. I’d bang the hell out of her sister though’. Knocker of the Door says: ‘She’s a Grade A shithead’. Whilst TwoHigh Yo Science! states: ‘I FUCKING hate Skyler! She’s such a cunt every scene with her in it now just pisses me off and i want her dead!’ An anonymous Redditter who deleted her name states: ‘I’m a female, and I hate her everliving guts! When anything tragic happens in her life, I laugh inside. I don’t know why my hatred for her is so deep … I think it’s her stupid face. >:I’. Different scenarios suggest themselves as a way to understand this quote, all highly hypothetical. Skyler may have come to embody what makes a woman vulnerable in a patriarchal family
situation, even today. Such a reminder can be painful and unwelcome. Skyler may also simply stand in the way of identifying with the male characters and their deep self-absorption and need for recognition, or be hated for being an obstacle in Walter’s narrative arc of self-realisation, as pointed out in the savvy viewing quotes.

The obvious need felt to publicly shame Skyler and express hatred of her is part and parcel of the affordance of online social media communication. Here, what Mittell (2015) has called ‘allegiance’ may be carried over from fictional characters to living persons. Much of the hate speech in the public shaming category hovers between anger and abuse on the one hand, and pranking or trolling on the other. Pranking is usually associated with immature behaviour. In her ethnography of teenage life, It’s Complicated, danah Boyd (2014) includes pranking in a category named ‘drama’: ‘performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media’ (p. 138). The Redditters do not appear to be teenagers. The anger they voice, however, alludes to a similar powerlessness; an appetite for drama; and the gratification of seeing yourself assume the position of someone whose opinion matters.

The most outspoken of the shaming quotes suggest the type of prank played by trolls. In a review essay, Richard Seymour (2016) notes that for ‘gendertrolls’, the goal is to ‘silence publicly vocal women by swarm-like harassment, misogynistic insults (such epithets as “cunt” and “whore”) […] and threats of rape and murder’ (ibid.). This fits the Skyler/Gunn insults and threats rather well, and explains them as outrage at this particular woman standing in the way of beloved anti-hero Walter. How dare she! Women need to know their place and should not upset a gender order some of us thought had changed. The public shaming of Skyler/Gunn is an amplified version of savvy viewing and moral realism. It positions both in the misogynist frame of threatened masculinity, with the sole purpose of bringing an erring woman back to heel. It appears to be born from what we might call ‘counter-allegiance’.

Allegiance

In Complex TV (2015), Mittell focuses on how television tells stories. He reveals how practices in the industry – of audiences, critics, and creators – ‘work to shape storytelling practices’ (Mittell 2015, p. 5). In the digital era ‘a television program is suffused within and constituted by an intertextual web that pushes textual boundaries outward, blurring the experiential borders between watching a program and engaging with its paratexts’ (ibid., p. 7). Television characters that fascinate audiences infuse paratexts, and in doing so, become celebrities of a kind in their own right. Mittell’s discussion of Walter, Breaking Bad’s anti-hero main character, is instructive. It helps us to understand the mechanisms and interwoven layers of analysis and affect that build a connection with someone you do not have to physically interact with; someone you are allowed to study and feel for (whether positively or negatively). Mittell (2015, p. 163) writes how he came to love Walter, ‘not as a person’ but ‘as a character’:

We might think of this engagement as operational allegiance – as viewers, we are engaged with the character’s construction, attuned to how the performance is presented, fascinated by reading the mind of the inferred author, and rooting for Walt’s triumph in storytelling, if not his actual triumph within the story.
Allegiance with Walter, Mittell argues, is built on the relative morality of the character. Walt, as Mittell calls him, does not start out as the amoral antihero he will become. He is a very ordinary guy, the antithesis of a sex object and a master rationaliser (ibid., p. 154). He can also be overbearing and conceited, suggesting he is a man raised to understand himself as a pillar of society. Mittell is fascinated by how, throughout *Breaking Bad’s* seasons, we ‘watch Walt convince himself that various immoral decisions are the right thing to do, given a lack of alternatives, leading to a descent into monstrous behaviour that is always presented as reasonable within Walt’s own self-justification and immediate context’ (ibid., p. 155). Walter’s self-rationalisation rubs off on Mittell (ibid., p. 162) as the viewer:

By the end of *Breaking Bad’s* fourth season, we have witnessed the remarkable transition of Walt from everyman schlub to amoral criminal kingpin, a gradual enough shift that we have still maintained a degree of allegiance to him – in part because we have invested so much time in following his exploits, an instance of ‘sunken costs’ of attention and engagement. Walter’s deeper goals – the real drama of the series – surface over the seasons. He needs to be seen, understood, recognised, and appreciated for his talents and for his moral drive to take care of his family – irrespective of what he has to engage with in order to do so, and notwithstanding the fact that this is not what his family wants him to do.

The moment allegiance with Walter develops – as it did for most of those who loved the series – Skyler becomes a problematic figure. Walter develops the type of rugged masculinity that leaves little space for caring, consultation, or listening. Skyler suffers through it all, including two scenes of marital rape in seasons two and five (Wilder 2013). She neither fights back, nor does she break. Her choices are painful and difficult to understand, and she is slow to take decisions. She is simply not a character for whom it is easy to care. To hate her and become angry with her is a much easier way to deal with her role as an obstacle than it is to root for her. That said, comments grouped under the moral realist repertoire show that indeed, despite the difficulty, some viewers do. They understand Skyler as a tragic heroine, as a woman who tries to take responsibility under impossible circumstances, a position also recognised in an audience study (McKeown et al. 2015).

**Celebrity gossip and the professional woman**

The hating of Skyler as a form of ‘counter allegiance’ boils down to how gender ideology works across popular culture. It invites a tragic understanding of a strong woman as victim, and an equally tragic misunderstanding in which the victim is blamed for not fighting back. These are the hallmarks of the logic of melodrama that, interestingly, suffuses gossip as well as contemporary quality television, according to Mittell (2015). The very success of *Breaking Bad*, he writes, is predicated on the fact that the series has made its viewers care about the drama. Melodrama has become a shared vocabulary, a ubiquitous presence that is crucial to how complex television works (ibid., p. 245). Such shared vocabularies help connect characters to actors – to ‘live’ celebrities. As melodrama also supplies much of the vocabulary of celebrity gossip, we are now able to reconstruct how a professional actor unwittingly may become a ‘composite’ celebrity whose other half is the character she plays, and who is essentially hated as both.
Whilst melodrama might provide the generic rules for hating Skyler, gossip provides the vocabulary and the justification for vociferous online hatred. Gossip functions via a process of inclusion and exclusion, and doubles as a de facto citizenship forum (cf. Meyer Spacks 1985, De Vries 1990, Dunbar 1998, 2004, Hermes 2005). Judging others – especially celebrities – serves the dual purpose of showing oneself to be a discerning individual and reminding (especially young) women of the standards they need to aspire to (Edwards 2013, p. 28; see also Wilson 2010). It has been suggested that more attention needs to be paid to the wide variety of amateur and pro-am media making in understanding cultural citizenship (Burgess et al. 2006). In the Reddit posts we found savvy viewing to be a form of fan co-authorship, whilst moral realist viewing and public shaming were revealed to be forms of bottom-up democratic control and holding to account. Read as a specific form of celebrity gossip, the moral realism and public shaming Reddit posts make sense as a terrain in which femininity is policed.

Celebrity gossip represents a key social site in which to define, discuss, and reconstruct gender – often in a negative way (Vares and Jackson 2015). Whilst building a sense of community through its discussion of moral standards (even if by way of slut-shaming), it reinforces neoliberal individualism by insisting it is important to be a subject of value (Allen & Mendick 2013, p. 77; see also Skeggs and Wood 2012). Typically, such demands are easiest made of others, and fuel a double pleasure of assuming control and holding someone else to account. In this way conservative notions of gender are reconfirmed. Tim Edwards (2013) concurs that ‘the world of celebrity, for the most part at least, tends to underline not undermine gender divisions’ (p. 166). Edwards’ (ibid.) interest is in the Beckhams: ‘If “gender-bending like Beckham” cannot undo the regressive and divisive casting of the celebrity spell, then it is precisely the machinery of celebrity itself that would seem to be the problem’. Edwards may be right in pointing to celebrity culture as the root cause of the hatred of ‘demons of female fame’ (ibid.).

An important secondary role, however, is also played by the ongoing hollowing out of professionalism. Gunn’s experience shows how the earlier protection offered by what John Ellis (1982) and Marshall (1997) describe as an ‘aura of distance’ no longer exists, not even for actors in high quality dramas. Television’s aura of intimacy grants intimidating liberties to audiences (Kavka 2016, p. 309), especially if it connects with the public accountability demanded of those who hold positions of status and power. Accountability generally has become part of ‘the conduct of conduct’ – Foucault’s enigmatic definition of governmentality (Dean 1999, pp. 10–16). Celebrity culture, including all public discussion of celebrities – whether positive or negative – helps remind us that lives and bodies need to be shaped in certain ways, and that responsibilities have to be met. Whilst the rhetoric of neoliberalism speaks of choice, in reality it is about discipline (Fraser 2003). Twenty-first-century, post-Fordist self-discipline is not about normalisation, even if that is still part of the vocabulary of (celebrity) gossip (Jorge 2015). Rather, this is a form of discipline that is tested in markets. Under neoliberalism, the position of professionals as intermediaries who operate in and from sovereign fields – be they e.g. social care, the law or indeed the arts – has been very much eroded.

For an actor, this change to a neoliberal public and work culture is not an easy one. They may not have realised to what extent they are now in a market place rather than in a professional field, and that, as a result, they no longer enjoy the protection of the field’s codes, hierarchies, and status. An actor who is understood through the character...
they play as a celebrity and as acting in celebrity mode will face a whole new set of demands. It means that you are open to forms of criticism that in pre-social network days would have reached an actor or presenter much less directly and less voluminously. Organisations such as a network or a studio would have worked as a shield by providing staff to deal with publicity, and if necessary with media and audience attention if it were to get out of hand. The process of what Dick Pels (2003) has called ‘deauraticization’ (p. 58) means that Gunn is not seen as a professional, and is thus given no respite from vicious hate messages and threats simply for doing her job. Neither a professional nor a beloved character, she becomes both a celebrity and an object of hatred who finds herself at the receiving end of contemporary narratives of gender confusion. Whilst neoliberalism may be cast as a technical project, from a feminist perspective it is a deeply political and troublesome one in its assigning of the duty of moral valour to women (cf. Gill and Scharff 2011, pp. 5–7).

Conclusion

‘Hating Skyler White’ is a multifaceted social phenomenon that shows the triple affordance of public discussion on social media, celebrity culture, and neoliberalism. It allows for the discussion of gender norms via a character in a television series. By turning the fictional character and the actor into a composite celebrity, this discussion becomes political – even if these politics can be disavowed at any moment. A bottom-up neo-conservative agenda is thus established as a form of control and therefore, effectively beyond control. Social media platforms allow for a populist ownership of public persons that is enabled by neoliberal insistence on accountability and the importance of being a ‘subject of value’ – a responsibility that falls to Skyler, rather than to Walter, White.

The codes of melodrama embedded both in the series and in celebrity gossip in general further stack the deck against Skyler and demonstrate how neoliberalism aligns with a conservative gender agenda. Most of all, ‘hating Skyler White’ highlights contemporary struggles with gender – the outcome of which should not be assumed or taken for granted. Despite all the online venting and hatred against Skyler on Reddit, there are many who do not take this out on Gunn the actress, as has happened elsewhere on social media platforms. Watching and discussing Breaking Bad functions as cultural citizenship: the series allows for public, unforced reflection on traditional masculinity as much as it allows for attempts to re-inscribe traditional gender values via the misogyny directed at Skyler. However, it does not do so uncontested. Clearly, cultural citizenship can come in many different guises. Regretfully, neither reflection, nor politics, nor celebrity culture are by their nature progressive or geared to produce equal chances in life. We are deeply grateful, therefore, that we found much more than hatred voiced against Skyler/Gunn. Witness the thread ‘Skyler White Is Fucking Justified, Dammit!’ in which PhantomMartyr lists Walt’s selfish and criminal acts to conclude: ‘I simply don’t see why she gets so much damn hate. It’s fucking bullshit, if you ask me’.

Notes

1. See e.g. Bennett (2012) for the changing politics of and in (social) media culture; or Keen (2007) for criticism of user-generated content such as found on Reddit.
We have used verbatim quotes, as used on Reddit. Misspellings and factual errors have not been corrected. Where Redditors included comments in brackets, they have been left in. Nothing has been added to the quotes. All quotes are identified by the screen names as employed by Redditors themselves. Reddit employs a fair use policy. Material can be used for educational and academic purposes.

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