There is one route to your destination. Do you accept?

An analysis on Black Mirror: Smithereens and the world of social media

Hannah B. Malugen

Department of Communications, High Point University

POP-2204: Media and Pop Culture

Holly Williams

December 9th, 2020

There is one route to your destination. Do you accept?

An analysis on Black Mirror: Smithereens and the world of social media

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live in a world where animations could become president, or we could take screenshots with our eyes? These futures are filled with almost unthinkable realities that develop with the use of technology and the creative minds behind it. If you are like me, you probably have thought of technology-driven futures that are so different from today, yet so familiar. Well, have you ever wondered what it would be like to live in a world where people could know everything that you are thinking or the bing of a device could destroy a life? Welcome to the 21st century where those things are possible and happen almost every day. Through the narrative perspective, Black Mirror: Smithereens conveys the effects of social media, looking at the decline of mental health, society's "need" for online networks, and the overarching dichotomy of social media.

So, what exactly is Black Mirror? Well, Black Mirror is a British TV show that aired on Channel 4 in 2011 and is still being produced today. However, Black Mirror is now produced by Netflix and is shown on a worldwide scale, and not just to England. Netflix describes the show as "A sci-fi series that explores a twisted, high-tech future where humanity's greatest innovations and darkest instinct collide." (Netflix, 2019) Black Mirror is an anthology series, which means that each episode offers a different plotline and story arc, all pertaining to the themes of technology and society. There are 5 seasons and around 15 total storylines to watch and enjoy.

One of the storylines that stuck out in my head the most was Season 5 episode 2 titled *Smithereens*. "A London rideshare driver ignites an international crisis when he kidnaps a worker from a social media company." (Netflix, 2019) This episode follows Chris (played by Andrew Scott) and his odd obsession with the social media company Smithereen and its creator, Billy Bauer (played by Topher Grace). So, why is this episode so important? Why does it deserve to be studied compared to the 14 other stories in the Black Mirror series? *Smithereens* is one of the first "realistic" Black Mirror episodes. This episode takes a stance on issues with modern technology, rather than the futuristic technology that is shown in other episodes. For example, in the show called *Nosedive,* characters are able to see social media with embedded technology in their eyes and brains, which we most definitely do not have in the 21st century. The most advanced technology in *Smithereens* is social media networks and an Uber-like public transit system. With Smithereens having more realistic technology and events, it was designed to hit closer to home for the viewers of the episode.

I have decided to use the narrative perspective to analyze this episode. The narrative perspective is "a rhetorical method for understanding the underlying moral of the story, argued in a text." (Selnow, 2017, pg.92) I chose this particular perspective for *Black Mirror: Smithereens* because this episode, along with the TV show as a whole, is filled with underlying morals that often go over the heads of some viewers. One of the most important underlying morals of this particular episode is the moral of society developing a "social media dichotomy."

First, I will be discussing the decline of mental health within *Black Mirror: Smithereens*. One of the main plot points of the episode is when they address Chris' mental state after he has kidnapped the intern. An academic journal titled *How people with serious mental illness use*

smartphones, mobile apps, and social media showed just how people like Chris use the technology at their fingertips. This study done by 3 people in 2016 showed that 93% of people with mental illness owned cell phones and 71% of those people used social media often. (Naslund, Aschbrenner, & Bartels, 2016) This correlates with Chris, who uses social media and apps to constantly keep up to date on the company Smithereen, after his trauma with the app occurred. His trauma heightened this obsession with the social media site, this time, in a much more negative sense. Chris constantly speaks of how the app is "addictive," while performing addictive actions and tasks to his own personal goal of getting in contact with Billy Bauer.

The next theme or moral that Black Mirror: Smithereens tackles is society's "need" for online networks. This can be seen in three different characters and their respective plotlines in the show. The first is Billy Bauer who is the creator and CEO of Smithereen. You can see Billy's need for online networks through his job. Without the creation of Smithereen, Billy would have no success. The second character is Jaden, the intern that works for Smithereen. According to an article by Rosanna Guadagno in 2019, "When Chris picks up Jaden, he is initially so engrossed in his phone that he doesn't realize they aren't going to the airport as planned." (Guadagno, 2019) Jaden represents the majority of society that is preoccupied with their "every-day" technologies, like their Facebook feeds or snapchat stories or even phone calls. Jaden is glued to his phone from the moment he enters the car, becoming oblivious to the fact that he was in serious danger.

The last character is Hayley, who is a side character with a small, yet very important plotline. Hayley is a mother who recently lost her daughter to suicide. Every day, she has three attempts to guess her daughter's password to one of her social media accounts to try and find

some information about why her daughter took her own life. We meet Hayley for the first time in a support group, where she speaks of her almost obsessive attempts at the password. In a way, Hayley needs this social network in order to give her clarity and answers about her daughter's life. While this is not inherently common, like Jaden, the every day person in society, or Billy, the people who get success from social media, but, nevertheless, Hayley's reasoning is just as acceptable.

With this negative of how social media and a decline of mental health relate and society's "need" for social media both existing, it creates something called the dichotomy of social media. This term refers to how social media can save lives, while also harming them. Both of these instances exist at the exact same time, making this a dichotomy. This is representative in Black Mirror: Smithereens within Chris' trauma with his wife and their car accident and Hayley's realization with her daughter. While Chris' wife dies in the accident caused by the ding of Chris' Smithereen profile and Chris' life is ruined as well, Hayley's life was "saved" when she finally logged into her daughter's account and got that clarity. Charlie Brooker, the creator of Black Mirror, created this episode for people to recognize the dichotomy that is embedded within our "society of socials." (Netflix, 2019, Behind Black Mirror Season 5)

The ending of the episode is completely left up to interpretation and does not explicitly tell the fate of Chris, Jaden, or any of the characters. After this episode premiered on Netflix in 2019, the hashtag #smithereensending trended on Twitter. Many people were curious as to the fates of the characters that they had just gotten to love and understand. However, this very fact proved that we do need social media, even for small things like figuring out the ending of a show, where the fate is most likely grim. So, we need to know the answer through Twitter of the

character's lives, which are ruined by the social media in the show. The ironic situation proved Brooker's point.

In conclusion, this episode offers a more realistic feel, while creeping into our modern-day fears of our current technology. Charlie Brooker wrote this episode with the intention of exposing the realities of the dichotomy of social media.

References

Brooker, Charlie (Writer) & James Hawes, F.M. (Director). (2019) *Smithereens* [Black Mirror Season 5 Episode 2]

Guadagno. (2019, August 28). People as Commodity: Black Mirror's "Smithereens". http://www.scienceandfilm.org/articles/3246/people-as-commodity-black-mirrors-smithereens

Naslund, J. A., Aschbrenner, K. A., & Bartels, S. J. (2016). How people with serious mental illness use smartphones, mobile apps, and social media. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal, 39*(4), 364–367. https://doi.org/10.1037/prj0000207

Netflix. (2019, June 6). *Behind Black Mirror Season 5: Smithereens* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/bO7FQsCcbD8