Media Experiences Project

2013–2016

Media Experiences is a big picture project that pieces together the puzzle that is being an audience today. A broad research question includes how do producers create experiences and how do audiences actually engage with these experiences? Our innovative approach is best described as a dialogue between academic researchers, executive and creative producers, and audiences, where we listen to the voices of producers and the values they create and we investigate how these conversations connect or disconnect with audiences. In this way, the project investigates how producers and audiences can co-create, shape and limit cultural experiences within emerging mediascapes.

Media Experiences is funded by the Marianne and Marcus Wallenberg Foundation (6.3 million Swedish kronor), in collaboration with Endemol Shine, and includes a team of eight people from assistants to post doctoral researchers, consultants and experts working over a period of three years (2013-2016).

The project critically examines media experiences by combining analysis of production and audience perspectives in three key countries Sweden, Denmark, the UK, with further work undertaken internationally in countries such as America and Mexico, connected to case studies. Our cases include a range of drama, and reality television, such as The Bridge crime drama format (Filmlance International and Endemol Shine), Utopia cult drama format (Kudos and Endemol Shine), Masterchef entertainment format (Endemol Shine), and Got to Dance reality talent format (Princess and Endemol Shine). We also study independent documentary films The Act of Killing and The Look of Silence (director Joshua Oppenheimer). The project uses multi-method and multi-site research where each television series, or documentary film, is treated as a fit for purpose study. We use a range of methods from interviews, focus groups and participant observations, to social media analytics and analysis of scheduling and ratings.

Our goal is to better understand contemporary audiences and their complex experiences of media as live audiences, catch up viewers, illegal users, as consumers and users, fans and anti-fans, contestants and participants. We see people’s media experiences as performative and interactive practices, which are evolving within the broader transformations taking place within production, consumption and social relations.
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The research team for *Utopia* includes Professor Annette Hill, Julie Donovan, José Luis Urueta, and Dr Koko Kondo (see Research Team for more information). Annette Hill is a Professor in Media and Communication at Lund University, Sweden and Visiting Professor in the Communication and Media Research Institute (CAMRI), University of Westminster. Hill is the author of seven books and numerous articles on media audiences and cultures of viewing. Her latest book is *Reality TV* (Routledge 2015) and her next book is *Media Experiences* (Routledge 2017).

The production and audience research for *Utopia* involved a method of cultural conversations, where the voices of producers and the values they create are connected with the voices of audiences and their experiences. A total of 77 qualitative interviews with producers and audiences were conducted from April 2015 to April 2016. The data includes 21 production interviews with executive and creative producers and actors; and 56 audience and fan interviews with individuals and groups of young adults and adults, aged 16-38, from Europe, Russia, America, Canada, Latin America, Australia and New Zealand.

The key findings from the empirical research highlight how *Utopia* hits home, appealing to an underground, international audience that goes far beyond national audiences or formal distribution models. The writer, director, and the Kudos production team engage in a geopolitical conversation with alternative viewers, watching the drama in informal ways. By far the most significant theme of the research relates to the way the drama dares to address moral and philosophical issues and asks audiences to consider the big question about the fate of humanity. The transgressive aesthetics of *Utopia*, experimentation in image, colour and sound, all contribute to a unique audio-visual experience. This experience has a profound impact on audiences and fans, as they passionately engage with multi-faceted storytelling about power and morality. For many fans, *Utopia* is happening – the drama speaks to them directly about current affairs, global capitalism, and political regimes. Although *Utopia* is over, the drama lives on, whether through online fan discussions, in people’s dreams, or in media and political activism.

When people talk of *Utopia* they use words such as unique, dazzling, inventive, and they say this without hyperbole. One fan called the show ‘superhyvergenius work’, merging superlatives to get across the sheer force of the creative vision and their appreciation of it. Season one attracted a crazy cult audience, and season two was even more cult, creating a tipping point into niche television that ultimately led to its cancellation. What caused the death of *Utopia*? The most common answer is that the drama was too ahead of its time. But this is not the full story.
“Utopia” appeals to streaming, binging, anti-commercial, illegal viewers around the world. One Italian fan noted: ‘I spoke to people after the first season and it felt like Utopia was fuelled on the underground level, most of the people who know about it was by word of mouth’ (24 year old Italian male student).

We can say Utopia attracts underground audiences. The drama’s dialogue about geo-politics and subversive tactics resonates with viewers who deeply distrust neoliberalism and shadow democracies. Rather than picturing the unmeasured audience as one big, immoveable problem, we can see the many faces of piracy in the activities of Utopia fans. We may consider these fans as self-informing media citizens, consumer choice advocates, de-centralised media sharers, and activists. As this fan said: ‘Just make Utopia available where its audience is, so you are not forced to sit there at a specific time. I mean, it’s a no-brainer!’ (30 year old Swedish male record producer).

Writer Dennis Kelly noted ‘my view of Utopia is that there is a hunger for imaginative work that is outside the norm.’ For fans, Utopia is beyond television, more malleable art form than serial drama. Audiences feel the drama treat them as intelligent members of storytelling. We can see creative engagement with Utopia, where fans make videos and music inspired by the drama. What is more, we can see creative producers inspired by fans. Utopia pushes the boundaries of popular culture, where creativity flows across artists, artefacts, and audiences.

When asked ‘what and who is Utopia?’ producers and audiences gave very different answers, struggling to put words to feelings, how to describe something you have never seen before? ‘It’s very unique, I may say the word unique a lot’ (16 year old Australian male student). This feeling about Utopia is connected to transgressive aesthetics. Utopia breaks the rules of television drama, always going ‘against the grain’ (Luke Dunkley, editor). To make something so unique requires passionate labour, continuous conversations, and a high degree of attention to detail in every aspect of the production. ‘No compromise’ became a mantra: every frame says something, every bit of clothing counts. Sound designer Tim Barker noted: ‘It’s a constantly evolving dialogue. Everyone involved throughout the project has been in tune with it, like one mind thinking together.’

The creative play off between the writer and director, working in tune with Kudos and the Utopia team, led to experimentation in the production culture. Influences from film and abstract aesthetics, 1970s photography, jazz music, all mixed together in what one fan described as the ‘glitchy palette’ of Utopia. Such experimentation is highly valued by audiences who notice, reflect and obsess over the smallest details in the drama. Colour matters, many fans described being haunted by yellow dreams. Sound matters, the squeaky squeak of the Early Bird Joe scene re-watched by fans via a YouTube video. Framing matters, all those wide shots and negative space, where the fate of humanity hangs in the balance. The soundtrack has a life of its own, a sticky sound that catches fans and never lets them go: ‘It’s creepy and crazy and violent and moving, all these added sounds relate to the way the plot is presented and how the characters develop’ (27 year old Argentinean male student).

Actor Fiona O’Shaughnessy described the world of Utopia as a ‘unique atmosphere that enveloped me.’ She reflected on how ‘the writing interweaves with your mind.’ Such a comment is typical for audience engagement with the characters, emotions, moral and political themes of the series; the story weaves itself into their everyday lives. Audiences intensely engaged with the mix of fact and fiction, the ‘reality around the corner’ that Dennis Kelly created. For many fans Utopia is ‘reality through a filter’, a heightened take on their paranoia of power and politics. Perhaps more than any other topic, the issues of morality and amorality dominated audience conversations about Utopia. Put succinctly by this fan, ‘it’s rare to see a show that deals with moral and philosophical themes’ (24 year old American male student). There are no easy answers and audiences praise the show for daring to do this. There are even fans who believe Utopia is happening because they see a parallel between the fictional landscape of the drama and the reality of abuse of political and economic power, or the threat of environmental disasters.

Utopia fans are angry about the cancellation of their favourite series. These fans have turned into activists, calling, writing, signing petitions, letting rip on social media about their passionate engagement with the drama. Fans as activists feel they are not acknowledged, do their voices still matter? There is intense speculation about the cancellation of the drama, did Kelly get too close to the truth? ‘The political punch of Utopia is not a localized matter, these issues are not only taking place in England, Spain, Russia or the USA, these issues are worldwide and no other series dares to touch on these issues’ (21 year old Chilean male student).

Not only did Utopia really grab and engage fans, it did something very special – making an impact on people’s lives. The drama did this symbolically, through the writing, aesthetics and moral conversations, and it did it literally, inscribing itself into people’s minds and bodies, appearing on tattoos, changing people’s politics. As this fan said: ‘Everyone that I have shown Utopia to agrees with me that it’s the best piece of popular culture ever produced. It has changed their lives and probably driven them a bit insane’ (30 year old Swedish male record producer).
UNDERGROUND AUDIENCES

‘SUPERHYPERGENIUS WORK’: THE RISE OF UTOPIA

Commissioning editor Piers Wenger (Channel 4) read the first script over a weekend, while in the bath. Still in the tub, he excitedly texted his colleague: ‘I wanted to green light it because the script felt like it had a bright light shining through it.’ Wenger’s enthusiasm was connected to an original story: ‘I just thought that the idea was so sophisticated that an audience would really connect with and appreciate it.’ Alex Wells, who was director of marketing for Utopia, said after reading the script: ‘This is incredible, I really want to work on this.’ The combination of the writer Dennis Kelly, director Marc Munden, and Kudos’ reputation for original drama, ensured creatives scrambled to work on Utopia. Actor Alistair Petrie said he would walk over hot coals to work with such a team.

For Alex Wells this was a huge story, full of esoteric influences in sound and image, lots of dirty shots, and lots and lots of graphic violence. On set, Wells would pore over the scripts and early footage, struggling to create a coherent marketing campaign for an unruly artwork:

I just felt like one of the dementors in Harry Potter. I was in a fun place and I was the only one saying ‘right I have gone through the scripts for episode three and someone gets shot in the head in this page, there is a person in this page that gets stabbed; and some of those things are really problematic from a press perspective so can we have a conversation about this?’ To Dennis that was tantamount to ‘you are killing my creative vision.’

She wondered how to promote this original drama: ‘there were so many ideas in the script…how are we going to present this in a way which is true to the heart of the series but equally gives it a broad appeal?’

Wells created a viral marketing scheme using tailor made content on YouTube and Twitter that alluded to the Network as digital surveillance. Danny Layton (Endemol Shine) worked on a marketing campaign that brought out the soundtrack on eye catching yellow vinyl and Soundcloud, and encouraged fans to make their own sounds in a participatory project. On the day of transmission for the first season the viral marketing campaign led to 24,000 tweets mentioning Utopia (14,000 during the broadcast window), and 1.1 million viewers, skewing to a younger, cult, male audience.

And then Utopia’s cult status became a problem. Producer Karen Wilson noted: ‘people stacked Utopia. They were so excited about the second season that they wanted to binge watch. And yet the industry and press reports do not reflect that. What I get in my inbox is the overnights and +7s.’ Channel 4 did look carefully at catch up viewers. Wenger noted: ‘Utopia was a show that was watched mainly on catch up’ and this was valuable to the channel ‘because when you watch on demand you have to watch the adverts once you log into that platform.’ But, even with the catch up option Utopia did not reach the ratings the channel was looking for to justify public-commercial funding, and the drama was cancelled after two seasons.
‘GEO-POLITICAL CONVERSATIONS’: INTERNATIONAL ILLEGAL AUDIENCES

What caused the death of Utopia? The most common answer within the industry is that ‘Utopia was ahead of its time.’ Such a comment is a compliment to the producers – ‘this is visionary stuff’; and it implies audiences are just not ready for this kind of thing – ‘people want to be entertained.’ One fan who watched via the Channel 4 streaming services echoed this common perception of the cancellation of Utopia: ‘it’s a show that requires a lot of effort from the viewer and it’s difficult to hook them’ (23 year old British male student). But, this story that viewers caused the death of Utopia is really not the full picture. Utopia is not ahead of its time, it is a television drama that is of its time, attracting underground audiences.

There are several reasons why Utopia appealed to an international audience. Perhaps the most significant is that the drama was intended as a dialogue about global matters. The writer Dennis Kelly explicitly said he wanted to create ‘not a national conversation, but a broader geo-political conversation.’ Utopia fans certainly represent a broad geo-political community, and these people are finding Utopia in informal, advert free, hard to measure ways, from online streaming and cloud sharing, to friendly passwords and personal exchange of discs and sticks. Even British viewers, who could access the drama legally and for free, live on television or via catch up services, often chose to watch in their own way. This was due to the summer scheduling slot and the advert loop of the formal streaming service. Many chose the informal, advert free route to Utopia.

Here are some typical ways underground audiences found Utopia:

I torrented it and had a Utopia marathon. (21 year old Chilean male student)

The first scene was on the TV sub Reddit. I watched that and was immediately hooked. Right now I use Reddit to find out about new shows and all the best things I have ever seen on television come from there. I have to pirate it to watch because it’s not available legally in the US... all I use are illegal sharing sites. (19 year old American male student)

My friend came over with a flash drive and he had the soundtrack. I streamed it in some random sites... and binge watched the whole thing. (29 year old Russian male, unemployed)

Such encounters with Utopia highlight the common experience of watching this kind of drama when and how you want it.

Another reason Utopia generated a global conversation was the geo-political issues and subversive tactics of the characters. Like director Marc Munden, viewers are ‘drawn by things which are counter culture and subversive.’ For example: ‘Utopia is probably the best thing I’ve ever seen on the television. The storyline of abusive power was very relevant to current times’ (26 year old British male musician). Or, ‘I saw some tweets about it and how excited people were. I knew that there was a lot of controversy and I watched it on a Russian website. I still can’t forget about this show’ (19 year old Russian student). Many noted how the drama uncannily echoed headline news, from the school shootings at the time of the first season transmission, to the Ebola virus of the second season, and more recently the Zika virus. For some conspiracy fans, Utopia articulated their own concerns about global capitalism and an imbalance of power: ‘My friend and I were talking of how the world is going down the drain and Utopia is one way of researching that... I downloaded it and I binge viewed it’ (35 year old Slovenian female translator).

A third reason why Utopia appealed to underground audiences is the way it addressed viewers as intelligent members of the story. The producers created a drama that gave viewers space to think and reflect on big issues. Marc Munden explained:

People are often challenged on tv with ideas and stories, for example about politics or morality, but they are very rarely challenged with tone, or visual grammar. You want to challenge the audience to draw their own conclusions about tone and morality. I want to make content that is a demanding experience.

One American fan spoke about this dialogue between creative producers and audiences:

I seek stuff out so I found Utopia on the web. I am a very intelligent viewer, and so for me this story was one of those that ‘got me.’ I was trying to figure shit out and being surprised and rewarded and devastated. I was just like ‘man this is so good!’ It treated me like an intelligent audience member of the story. (28 year old female American musician)

Such an experience highlights how dramas such as Utopia are a co-creation between producers and audiences.

‘JUST MAKE UTOPIA AVAILABLE’: THE FACES OF PIRACY

We can see various faces of piracy in Utopia fan activities. Four types of illegal fans emerge from the empirical data: fans as self informing media citizens, consumer choice advocates, de-centralised media sharers, and activists. For example, this self informing media citizen saw herself as an underground news feed for Italian audiences:

I am a TV series addict and Utopia was one of the greatest discoveries that I made... I am the one who spread the news about Utopia because it was just new when I discovered it, so I watched...
it every week after it was aired, and in the meantime I told everybody about the show. (30 year old Italian female translator)

Another fan was a consumer choice advocate:

I just ran into it by chance. I downloaded it… right now I have twenty-five different series running during the week… I have so many series waiting in line right now. When shows get released I have a pop up that says ‘hey, today is season one from this show.’ I have some friends writing blogs and I see if I get a feeling I would like something. (24 year old French male student)

Typical for Utopia was the anti-industry fan, favouring decentralised media sharing in order to watch television in spaces free from advertising:

No commercials. I do binge view, I am terrible if it takes two days I probably won’t do anything for two days… the nature of how we watch things and how we get our entertainment is different. It does always seem like the best TV shows get cancelled. (35 year old British male, unemployed)

And this was an audience member as media activist, signing petitions, contacting Netflix:

If they measure ratings on shows like Utopia from a TV channel, well you are doomed to fail because the numbers are not going to be true or realistic. Utopia is a show that you watch in your space, up close and personal, on your own terms. (24 year old Chilean male student)

None would describe themselves as criminals who lurk in the dark web marketplaces. They see themselves as ordinary people who like being treated as intelligent viewers and who want to watch Utopia in their own way. Many fans first saw Utopia on Pirate Bay in its top 100 list: ‘I downloaded it and then as soon as the DVD was available to buy I bought the DVD because I thought that those guys deserved to get paid for their work’ (38 year old German male spacecraft operator). Here we see a viewer checking out the show through informal routes, and then buying the DVD in order to watch the rest of it in formal ways. As this fan explained, streaming and binge viewing, without commercial breaks, is just a normal experience: ‘I followed the Reddit threads and it seems to be a very stupid rating system, I say stupid because of how it ruins our lives. So, they should really get with the times and look up what this Internet thing is and utilize it’ (30 year old Swedish male record producer).

‘POETRY OF THE SENSES’: BEYOND TELEVISION

Composer Christobal Tapia de Veer described Utopia as ‘poetry of the senses.’ Actor Alistair Petrie echoed this: ‘It’s really a piece of poetry.’ We can see this sense of Utopia as poetry reflected in fan experiences:

I had an insane experience watching your show. The uncompromising nature of the show was great, and the visuals, the narrative, the characters, the little nuances of the show will stay with me. It really felt like poetry, the bright colours and those crazy in-your-face moments. I never had a show that meant so much to me, so powerful, so vivid. It felt like this was happening right now, not some world elsewhere. (24 year old American male cable contractor)

For this fan, he sees the possibilities of television pushing the boundaries of popular culture.

It is not unusual to see a flow of creativity from fans to the drama and its creative producers. There are certainly examples in the data that supports this creative engagement, for example the making of videos by fans. However, what is unusual is to see a reverse flow of creativity where producers are contacting fans as artists, seeking their creative input. For example Danny Layton organised a collaborative project where musicians and composers could riff off the Utopia soundtrack and send in samples of their own work, which were then distributed on Soundcloud. This initiative is a good example of treating audiences as artists, who can collaborate on musical form, rather than fans invited to participate in a competition. This mirroring of creativity is apparent in this example of a female musician who watched Utopia. This musician described her creative engagement with the drama:

From the first episode I knew this was my show. Everything about it, from the aesthetics, to the art direction, to the score, to the writing, to the characters, the casting, every single part of it was beautiful… I feel like you can see this other way of narrating a story and Utopia was really forward in that respect. You do not have to confine the story to specific hours, but break it up into these fragments where you get to weave the story into people’s thinking. (28 year old female American musician)
TRANSGRESSIVE AESTHETICS

‘WHAT IS UTOPIA?': SERIAL IDENTITY

What is Utopia? For actor Adeel Akhtar Utopia is a series of feelings: ‘terrifying, beautiful, ugly and harrowing.’ Production assistant Alison Aird called it ‘so bright and beautiful and yet horrific.’ When director Marc Munden read the script:

The first thing that struck me was the politics of it. It felt like there was no one talking about the politics of population control. Secondly, I really liked that it was funny, it’s not an obvious humour. Then alongside those things, I thought the characterisation and the storytelling were just brilliant. Utopia is so distinct, it’s really never been done before.

One fan made a YouTube video imploring people to watch the series. He described in an interview how tricky it was to capture the drama in short form:

To answer what is Utopia is difficult because there are different elements coming together. I would say it is a dark comedy, conspiracy thriller that deals with large ethical problems in a visually stylistic way. That is the reason why it is so good because it’s not easy to classify. It is something new and original. (23 year old British male student)

He worried the show was too different, calling it the drama ‘everyone was talking about and not watching’ in his video.

And yet, the fact that Utopia is so hard to pin down is part of its international appeal. Here are fans from America, Denmark and Argentina:

I actually have no way to describe it and that is one of the reasons that I like it so much. It’s a conspiracy thriller but there is some comedy in there, it just flows seamlessly. That’s why I’m unable to put it in one type of genre. Mostly Utopia is the cinematography and the music, every little frame, those shots of fields. (19 year old American male student)

Utopia is fantasy and it’s science fiction, but then it’s also critical-political cinema. (33 year old Danish female teacher and educational activist)

Utopia is a great TV show with excellent artistic direction, a great soundtrack and it’s a great audiovisual experience. (27 year old Argentinean male student)

As their comments highlight, there is not one identity for the series – it’s a multi-faceted audio-visual experience.

‘TRADE OF IDEAS’: COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

Costume designer Marianne Agertoft spoke at length about the creative process of making Utopia. She used the phrase a ‘trade of ideas’ to capture the dynamics of working on this production. In terms of costume craft, the discussion started with the actors: ‘they are the ones doing the performance and for me they really need to feel that this is part of their journey’ (Marianne Agertoft). Ideas begin at the bottom, literally with the feet: ‘I mean even shoes, you rarely see them in these shows but I find them really important because that paves the way the actors walk and move.’ Actor Alistair Petrie explained: ‘I remember her saying that the character starts from the shoes up; it’s a great element of truth there, you put the shoes on and you feel different.’

A trade of ideas means debating the smallest details that become part of the bigger picture. Agertoft described the idea of a second hand suit for Wilson Wilson:

I had the most brilliant fitting with him. We found this really slightly fitted double breasted suit in the Salvation Army, and it just felt so right, he felt right about it. Initially Mark said ‘well, he is going to look too much like a gangster’ but in the end look at what we achieved.

Adeel Akhtar recalls how they went to a department store and ‘we tried on these really crisp, fine looking suits… Then we went to Salvation Army and just picked the first one that we saw and it worked really well, that second hand suit feeling. He makes the power suit fit through necessity.’

There was an ‘ethos of leaving room to breathe’, as producer Bekki Wray-Rogers put it. She used her experience of making independent film to remain flexible and resilient:

To me it is always about giving the approach that everything is under control, even if I am well aware that it isn’t, because I have twenty-five different versions of the plan, and we will just have to choose one of those. There are always ways to make it work. It’s about enabling the others to feel free in being themselves and doing their job.

Akhtar summed up this ethos as: ‘the Utopia experience taught me to be flexible.’

The creative conversations in Utopia are an example of passionate labour, with producers working long hours, indeed doubling their normal workload just to be part of the drama production. Many signed up because of the quality of the script and the reputation of Marc Munden. Editor Luke Dunkley explained: ‘Marc is brilliant to work with, he is a visionary and a control freak and a collaborator. We talked every day, usually during lunch, he listens, doesn’t always agree with you, but he listens.’ Sound designer Tim Barker reflected on the quality of the production: ‘Mark’s incredible attention to detail and
storytelling in every aspect means he will push to get the best out to the scene – ‘oh, that is great, that is really good, can we go further with that?’ He’s a person who is never satisfied with something being good.’

Marc Munden underscored the ‘glorious creative experience’ of working on the series with Kudos and the team. He noted how Dennis Kelly’s writing allowed for experimentation with abstract aesthetics: ‘it is so good in terms of the interaction between characters and the journey that they go on. The quality of the writing gives you a certain liberty.’ Kelly noted how Munden enhanced his script: ‘I am not a visual person, I hear things but usually I have a vague sense of shapes.’ For instance, the iconic yellow bag started out as ‘he enters carrying a yellow Adidas bag, incongruous with his suit.’ Kelly explained ‘I think what’s really interesting about what Marc does is that he picks up on these tiny cues, that probably mean very little to me at the time of writing and he suddenly sees something beautiful and expressive in them. It’s a very unusual thing to have a director so interested in your subconscious.’ Munden chose a huge acid yellow bag and the bag became memorable throughout the series, inspiring the marketing campaign. The bag became Utopia. Colour is also core to fan engagement with the drama:

‘GLITCHY PALETTE’: EXPERIMENTATION

One fan called the aesthetics of the drama a ‘glitchy palette’, a richly suggestive phrase for the Utopia experience. She explained how composition and colour, coupled with music give the drama a ‘whimsical, wondrous, playful quality to a really heavy theme’ (28 year old female American musician). This cognitive and emotional dissonance is crucial to audience engagement with the aesthetics and storytelling. The glitches occur across different aesthetic experiences, for example when dark themes are at odds with the music. For example, Cristobal Tapia de Veer described the character of Jessica Hyde as like ‘a ninja’, but instead of accenting violent sounds we often hear children’s choirs singing, or melodies of lullabies to hark back to her childhood.

Influences for Utopia include the Swedish director Roy Andersson, or the Finnish director Aki Kaurismäki: ‘their films are so dark and funny, and feel totally unique. Roy Andersson’s work exists in a space which is non-naturalistic’ (Marc Munden). He talks about ‘going to places where television normally doesn’t take you’, such as ‘the camera not moving very much, staying wide on a tableau’ or the use of negative space. Other esoteric influences, from the sound of bones symbolising death rituals, to the photography of Martin Parr and John Hinde’s pictures of Butlins, or historical sound archives, all work to create the transgressive aesthetics of Utopia.

The Early Bird Joe scene is a good example of experimentation in the production culture. Marc Munden reflected on this scene and the influence of abstract aesthetics:

Dennis’ writing always takes you to the edge. For example, in season two, episode three, there is the scene when Lee comes in and kills Early Bird Joe. The way that the scene was written was pretty grotesque, this choreographed violence. The actor that played Joe was so brilliant, using physical movement, bouncing off the desks. You have to work out how to make it less grotesque. That is a good example of trying to keep the camera still and just observing what happens within the frame.

Working with sound designer Tim Barker, the dark humour came through the collage of sounds as much as the actor’s physical performance, alluding to the French comedian Jacques Tati in comic tone:
the squeak of Joe’s bicycle as he traverses across the landscape, the squeak then turns into Lee on the computer screen, it is a super accentuated squeaky squeak. There is also this exaggeration of all the actions, the slicing, the sound of the telephone as it falls, the sound of dripping blood, then the slopping of his hands when he bangs against the glass door adds a glass squeak. To me this was a perfect scene.

Viewers spoke of how they first knew about the drama through watching this scene as a YouTube video: it’s a memorable moment for fans around the world, capturing the glitchy palette of the Utopia experience.

‘STICKY SOUND’: MUSIC AND SOUNDCAPES

One of the most influential aspects of Utopia is the music. Production designer Simon Rogers said the music stuck in his mind, a background hum to everything he did on set: ‘That soundtrack was so important in creating the rhythm of the whole text. The score is always in your brain’. For Danny Layton, who promoted the soundtrack, ‘the music has a life of its own.’ He explained:

When you asked me ‘could I describe the music?, this strange music vocabulary reflects the fantastical nightmare of Utopia. This is a really good example of why music has such an impact. It is something intangible that works on so many levels; you may not be able to articulate this with words but this is a different way of expressing feeling and emotion.

It was Marc Munden who asked the composer Cristobal Tapia de Veer to collaborate. For him:

sound is about idiosyncrasies, what sound can do when it is taken out of context. In Utopia there are a lot of sounds that are not to do with the picture, it’s the opposite. The visual element is not at all dark, or sinister, so the feel of darkness is in the sound.

He and Tapia de Veer listened to drones, working with the sound designer on unusual folio sounds. Not much in Utopia is sound as sound, most of it is enhanced, such as the sound of frogs mating in a series about population control.

Tapia de Veer created a soundtrack that took inspiration from cinema, and from the artists like Miles Davis, whose style is renewable ‘always pushing towards the future.’ He described the collaborative process, where Munden gave him permission to try out new and weird things, to make mistakes. For example, there are Latin rhythms in the theme to Utopia, where did they come from? After Wilson Wilson’s torture, he grabs a gun and tries to shoot Lee, although he cannot see: ‘Both of them are moving in a dance form, so I started to do something with percussions and the director saw that and he almost started dancing; he had this big smile and he said “that’s it, that is what we must do. This is perfect!”’ This surreal combination of graphic violence and dark comedy summed up Utopia. Even then, Tapia de Veer thought this would be too eccentric – ‘I thought it was going to be a catastrophe’ – he just didn’t believe ‘people actually like this?’

Fans describe Utopia as a sticky sound: once you hear it you are caught in its web. ‘It is the best music I have ever heard’ (30 year old Swedish male record producer). Another fan explained: ‘I listen to the soundtrack a lot more than I watch the show… what I like about it is the strange sounds done in such a catchy and listenable way’ (23 year old British male student). Like the production team, audiences found themselves caught in the soundtrack, listening to it at home or walking around the city, music that expressed engagement on a deeper level:

I have the whole soundtrack on my phone and I walk through the city and listen to that and it just sounds so cool when you are just walking and you picture yourself in a scene from Utopia. It is reality enhancing, it is the best way to put it. (19 year old American male college student)
WORLD OF UTOPIA

‘THE CHARACTERS ARE A BIT CHIPPED’: FAMILY DYNAMICS

We asked producers and audiences ‘who is Utopia?’ The answers varied from the network, or resistance, to Jessica Hyde and Arby, Milner and Wilson Wilson. For Ole Birkeland, director of photography, ‘Utopia is about us’, characters we might recognise in ourselves. ‘I think of the characters on the ground, the little people, the ones that I created a close relationship with’ (33 year old Danish female teacher and education activist). Utopia is the kind of ensemble drama where there is not one person that stands out as the series star, but rather there is an odd collection of characters put into extreme situations. Bekki Wray-Rogers described people like Jessica, Wilson Wilson, or Ian, as slightly off kilter with everyday life: ‘The characters are a little bit chipped, they’re a bit rough round the edges, they are seconds.’ Wray-Rogers added to the second hand feel with a personal touch: ‘Wilson Wilson’s dad wore my dad’s pullover.’

Sam Donovan directed the final episodes of season two; working with the actors in rehearsals he felt strongly that the resistance represented ‘people who seem extreme but are functioning as a family, holding it together.’ This family feeling was an undercurrent to the production culture, a community of creatives, holding it together during a demanding shoot, making a memorable drama.

‘There is nothing I have done that I am more proud of than Utopia, truly, truly, truly’ (Alistair Petrie).

In terms of characterisation, actor Fiona O’Shaughnessy described her first encounter with Jessica Hyde as if channelling her through the script:

‘it’s a really lovely memory now, I read the script in a café in Dublin and I was blown away by it. The writing was so sensitive and topical and I remember thinking ‘this is me!’ I really liked her simplicity and lack of guile, her almost total absence of persona. It gave me great freedom to dream. All I had to do was let go of me and let her happen.

Audiences engaged with the character of Jessica, and the performance of the actress, as part of the dysfunctional family of the resistance. Jessica literally embodied the Network through carrying the virus. Fans talked about the moment at the end of season one as a memorable scene, the reaction of Jessica when she discovered Janus in her blood offered a dark and devastating finale. At the same time fans loved her odd innocence; the moment when she stole the clothes of a teenage girl in season two stood out, that funny inappropriate outfit she wore after escaping from prison in her gore splattered jumpsuit.
The character of Arby signified serial engagement, fans shifting from outright horror to sympathy for his struggle to find a place in his family, with Jessica and the resistance. Production assistant Alison Aird explained: ‘Arby, you are terrified at the sight of him but he is still one of my favourite characters. When he starts to try and redeem himself in series two I was like “yeah, come on Arby.” Arby is Utopia.’ Why might Arby symbolise Utopia? Perhaps it is the uncompromising nature of his personality, memorably summed by the actor Neil Maskell when asked to wear too much yellow: ‘Arby only wears fucking Arby.’ Or, it is the memorable scenes, such as the iconic opening episode, or the school massacre, where Arby makes a mark through the shock of the violence, and the normality of his eating raisins, or the sound of his breathing. For most it is the comic book about face, from Arby the assassin to Pietrie the son of Carvel. ‘I thought his character was the most interesting from the beginning to the end. Despite the fact that he is a cold-blooded murderer of children and animals and people indiscriminately, to see his struggle to find his own humanity was very powerful’ (26 year old British male musician).

Another strong character that audiences identified with was Wilson Wilson, who also experiences a dramatic turn from tin foil wearing conspiracy theorist to leader of the Network. Casting director Julie Harkin spoke about how the actor ‘came from a comedy background and brought a rawness to the performance. He had an organic, instinctive take on the character.’ Sam Donovan worked with Adeel Akhtar on those pivotal scenes where Wilson is prepared to murder for the ideology of the Network. He described wanting to get into the head of Wilson ‘going from a loveable geek we have all met, who turns.’ When he marks his body with the Chinese character for a rabbit, Donovan held the camera close so the audience could ‘be feeling what Wilson feels.’ Those screams by Wilson Wilson embodied Utopia, haunting the production team: ‘the unspeakable agony in everybody’s life’ (Simon Rogers, production designer). For the actor Adeel Akhtar: ‘the theme for Utopia is about over population and the everyday reality of Utopia the dramatic world of Utopia. There are ‘two worlds of Utopia, the world you live in, and the world you are making’ (Simon Rogers, production designer). The two worlds weirdly overlap, mixing the reality of population control and environmental disaster with the saturated reality of the drama’s aesthetics. Editor Luke Dunkley and assembly editor Simon Smith both reflected on this mix:

Luke: Marc created that visual world of Utopia. I imagined it as social realism from the script and Marc gave it a comic book feel. He likes to go against the grain, whatever is prevailing in television he will do the opposite. I remember watching the first rushes and being completely shocked, it was absolutely chilling, done with black comedy and brilliant timing.

Simon: The first rushes were the first scene for episode one, series one, and that set the tone for everybody and everything.

Luke: We watched the first day and said ‘this is going to be great.’

For audiences, it is not just that the aesthetics stand out, the drama really feels uncomfortably close to home: ‘It really changes the way you look at the world. The world in the show is brought into your life, it’s like an alternate reality. It makes you feel like an outsider in your own home’ (18 year old British male student). This feeling of uneasiness was strong amongst fans. It is the clash of the dramatic world of Utopia and the everyday reality of violence and abuse of power that gives audiences pause for thought. ‘What if this is my reality?’ (22 year old German male student).
‘THE BIG QUESTION’: MORAL AMBIGUITY

Right from the start, the *Utopia* production team knew that the moral issues posed a big question and a big ask from audiences. Alex Wells commented: ‘Dennis is asking the audience a question that he doesn’t have the answer to. I had so many moral conversations with the team about how to convey the message.’ Similarly Karen Wilson explained the moral heart of the show: ‘the population control question is so huge and so vast. We got people talking about those really big questions. Dennis was able to put a very important topic out there and talk about it in an intellectual way through these characters who are like you and me.’

These moral conversations circle around the fate of humanity: ‘you have to ask the ultimate moral question to all of us... sometimes bluntly, sometimes funnily, sometimes violently: are we worth saving and how much do we deserve to be saved?’ (Alistair Petrie). For some audiences their reactions to the ultimate question were confusing and unsettling. Here two students reflect on their moral ambiguity:

I really didn’t know where to stand on this and that is the thing that got me trapped in the story, especially because I wanted to have an answer to it and at the same time I didn’t want to. Sometimes I would be more on the side of Jessica Hyde and there were times where I stood next to Milner and say ‘yes the world needs to be restarted.’ (24 year old Italian male student)

There is a part to the story where the moral compass is on one side and then it flips, that is why I think it’s good because it’s thought provoking. It’s a great show. (18 year old New Zealand male student)

The drama leaves audiences to decide: ‘that was one of the things that cemented my love for the show, when you try to humanize everyone so no point of view is dismissed, all opinions are given human faces’ (23 year old British male student).

Luke Dunkley spoke of the ‘amoral tone’ within the mix of dark comedy and conspiracy. He recalls: ‘I remember reading the script and being very worried about the spoon. Are we really going to show this?’ Sam Donovan noted, the drama has to earn the violence, and it does this through the moral heart of the narrative. Audiences repeatedly said that when the violence occurred it was justified within the storyelling. Sometimes they might look away, but nevertheless they felt the show earned their respect for never making the morality black and white. For example, on the iconic spoon: ‘the violence in *Utopia* is quite different, like the chilli, then the sand, then the bleach and then the spoon... actually really normal things but very menacing, a very personal torture’ (36 year old British male charity worker). Here, the spoon serves the purpose of the narrative, never gratuitous, but nevertheless very disturbing: ‘The torture scene has burned itself into my mind’ (24 year old American male student).

Even in the filming of the most extreme violence, the production team felt the moral ambiguity of the characters. Fiona O’Shaughnessy reflected on the challenges in the performance and the moral dilemma of playing Jessica Hyde:

in series one there is a scene where Jessica struggles The Tramp. I felt very strange and isolated and exposed knowing I was going to do that scene. It forced me to question myself. When we got to the scene I just gave myself over to it, and it was a strangely intimate dance between myself and the other actor, this emotional trust in each other. The communication was very tender between us during the performance. For Jessica I had to let go of ideas of moral correctness, and that was not a comfortable experience, but as an actor it was very liberating and because of it I felt very alive.

Such a reflection highlights the personal side to the representations of violence, from the actors, director and editing, to the way the violence is a progression of the story and the moral questioning of the audience.

There were audiences who did take a moral stand, either picking the side of the resistance or the Network. For example, one viewer made a YouTube video passionately arguing against moral identification with the Network. She explained why she made the video:

I think it’s the product of a broken system in which you believe that not everybody can be taken care of. This is brain washing bullshit that has been going on through capitalism and is simply not acceptable in the 21st century where we have space rockets and mobile phones and we are a technologically advanced species. For us to believe that many of us have to die for others to live a decent life is just complete and utter bullshit. (35 year old Slovenian female translator)

Another viewer reflected on her harsh realism regarding the global political landscape and environmental crises:

We are humans and we are selfish in nature. There is no solution and that’s why such moral ambiguity in the show just makes it real... That is what’s so brilliant about the show, it’s not directing anyone towards either side, it’s leaving it up to the viewer to make the ultimate decision, to pull the trigger or not... Although, I understand the romantic vision of the resistance, it’s unsustainable in the long run if we just continue like this. So, I’m on the Network’s side. (31 year old Colombian female, unemployed)
UTOPIA IS HAPPENING: POLITICAL LANDSCAPES

Utopia asks us to question the motivations behind people in power. Kelly explains: ‘we live in a world where we have to negotiate truths.’ On the taboo topic of over population, Kelly felt that we’d stopped talking about rising sea levels, the end of phosphates, the earth’s inability to support human life, because ‘we don’t know what the fuck to do about it.’ This led him to create Utopia where ‘the people who are doing the worst things are perhaps the most ideologically driven.’ Kelly’s conscience is split between the character of Mr Rabbit, ideologically so pure that they will stop at nothing in the plan to release the Janus vaccine, and Ian who is torn between the moral truths of living a normal life and leading the resistance.

The political landscapes of the real world butt against Utopia’s fictional world: ‘I think Milner is probably a subscriber to liberal democracy but it may be a luxury that we can no longer afford. Liberal democracy is not going to do anything about global warming. If we think composting and separating our glass from our plastics is going to have any real and lasting impact on the problem then we are fooling ourselves’ (Dennis Kelly).

Bekki Wray-Rogers said she was drawn to make Utopia partly because of this message in the drama: ‘you have to take responsibility for your truth.’ There are many fans in our study who believe Utopia does represent an alternative truth, a harsh reflection of their fears about the environment, or their experience of living in troubling times:

Utopia is going to happen naturally anyway. I feel pessimistic saying this but there is going to be either a natural disaster that wipes everything out, or there is going to be some pathogen that mutates and knocks out half the population. (36 year old British male charity worker)

Utopia is not only plausible it is in some ways happening right now. We have come to an apocalyptic moment. I think a day will come where either we will all kill each other with atomic bombs or we look for solutions like the one presented in the show. (31 year old Colombian female, unemployed)

One fan from Chile felt that Utopia spoke to him personally, as if the writer knew his innermost thoughts:

For me Utopia has been the only series that actually has represented the stuff I believe in since I was young, that there is an unmeasured abuse of power, that there is no real value to life, that we are lied to in order to get stuff from us, everything because of this hunger for power… Here in Chile there is way too much corruption, injustice, social differences and control of information by Chilean elites. To see this happening in a TV series was spectacular, it felt like meeting a missing twin brother. (21 year old Chilean male student)

These comments reflect how Utopia symbolises different truths for international audiences coming from varied cultural and political experiences.

Many fans in our study refused to be interviewed – around fifty. Even to be recorded for an interview might put them at risk, either through a digital record of their illegal viewing activities, or a record of their opposition to political regimes in their home countries. Some were conspiracy theorists, real life Wilson Wilson’s that would withhold consent and terminate the interview because of their distrust in the project as perhaps linked to Channel Four, or maybe even a real life version of the Network. But, for many others the feeling that Utopia is happening is connected to their pessimism about the tender fate of humanity, the dark answer to the ultimate question of the drama.
**AFTERLIFE**

**‘BRING IT BACK, DAMN IT!’ FAN REACTIONS**

Fans are passionate about the afterlife of *Utopia*. Those who followed the drama at the time of transmission did their damndest to be heard. This fan from New Zealand said: ‘I signed all the petitions I could at the time. I was crazy, I was mad for a few days there’ (18 year old New Zealand male student). Another fan reflected on the reasons for the cancellation:

I think the reason Channel 4 gave was that it wasn’t drawing enough viewers, so it was partly the audience’s fault, and I think part of it was a lot of British newspapers complaining about the show and these newspapers completely suck. I did sign a couple of petitions and I contacted Channel 4 and said ‘I’d love if you put *Utopia* back’ but I got no replies obviously. (18 year old British male student)

Fans do everything to keep the conversation going, and viewers in our study were coming fresh to the drama in the past year, all through word of mouth: ‘I discovered the show after it was cancelled. It’s a very good series that should not have ended so quickly. It should always stay alive’ (17 year old French male student). This British fan said: ‘I actually feel genuinely sorry for people that haven’t seen the show yet… and it is genuinely upsetting that Channel 4 didn’t renew it for a third season. Apparently the guy has four seasons worth of script so it’s still only half way done’ (18 year old British male student).

Some conspiracy fans wondered if *Utopia* was cancelled because Dennis Kelly got too close to the truth:

I think it was so strange how season three got dropped right when the Ebola virus was happening. I was like ‘what the fuck, what the actual fuck!’ I really think that had a lot to do with season three not coming back. I just felt like the climate of news and the climate of the environment really didn’t lend itself to *Utopia* continuing. (28 year old female American musician)

This overworld of *Utopia* has led to speculation about the cancellation of the drama. ‘Perhaps the government has got something to do with the cancellation’ (24 year old French male student). Such speculation was also directed at this research project, where potential interviewees questioned if we were part of a conspiracy to silence *Utopia*.

The Chilean fan base were clear on why *Utopia* was cancelled:

We here in Chile are under the impression that there are outside pressures, some people are not interested in keeping this series going because it touches on quite delicate matters that are real. They are not false, it is a combination of things that are happening all over the world. (21 year old Chilean male student)

These fans want to crowd source the next season, sending a strong message to the makers: ‘*Utopia* can be insanely famous. It can help to bring awareness and change to the issues it presents. We are in Chile, at the end of the world, and we know about *Utopia*. We just love it’ (23 year old Chilean male student). And, these fans gave a positive message to research that includes audiences in the conversations around *Utopia*:

Well I think it’s amazing that a TV series develops this kind of connections with the fans. Usually we just sit here and watch and perhaps become a number in the ratings, but we also want to have a voice. I feel that I have a voice through this interview, you get to know us, you get to know who we are behind the ratings and what we think. (21 year old Chilean male student)

**‘I KNOW THE SHOW BY HEART’: PASSIONATE ENGAGEMENT**

We asked audiences what message they would like to give to the producers. Common responses related to ‘bring *Utopia* back.’ There is a hunger for the story to continue. This Russian fan pleaded: ‘Please make it happen, please make it happen. I believe there are a lot of people who would see season three, and perhaps a digital distribution would be better for *Utopia*’ (29 year old Russian male, unemployed). Such a criticism of the distribution flow of the drama was repeated by illegal fans who wished for a digital future for the series where there was no geo-blocking: ‘I would actually ask them why they keep cancelling the best shows, because I have seen this trend in the smartest shows getting cancelled’ (35 year old Slovenian female translator).

A British fan’s message to the producers was twofold: thank you for making a powerful drama, and bring it back:

I never have seen a show that makes you feel that genuinely uneasy and uncomfortable in your own skin… Every big network has their A-game show that they present to all the critics, HBO has *Game of Thrones*, and another has *Mr. Robot*. Channel 4 doesn’t have a big show that really grabs people’s attention and I think that *Utopia* is a perfect candidate to be a cutting edge high quality TV show. Please bring it back!… Actually they should make more reprints of the graphic novel because I would like to have a copy of that. (18 year old British male student).

This fan wasn’t the only one to ask for the graphic novel of the series: ‘they should bring out the *Utopia Chronicles* as a comic book. I was actually trying to find it for my girlfriend as a birthday present and I couldn’t find it anywhere’ (38 year old German male spacecraft operator). In the same vein, fans wondered how to buy the scripts as presents for themselves and friends.
**Utopia** made a big symbolic and emotional impact on audiences. Here is one fan:

Thank you for making something so amazing, but fuck you for making me think so much. I really feel like Wilson, you know? I’ve been thinking about this all the time and I’ve not been able to do other stuff, as I’m still just trying to grasp it. (22 year old Chilean male student)

And for the physical impact of the drama, here is another fan describing the power of **Utopia**:

I showed it to a friend and he watched five minutes and then he went straight to the tattoo parlour and tattooed ‘Where is Jessica Hyde’ across his neck… The show has also made such an impact on a couple of my friends that they went and sterilized themselves. I would do it too if I didn’t have a principle ‘no knives around that area.’ (30 year old Swedish male record producer)

**Utopia** goes beyond television, and beyond audience engagement, giving people so much to enjoy, and worry over, and reflect on, leaving a little chip of itself in everyone who encounters it.

**PROJECT TEAM**

The project team includes: Professor Annette Hill, an audiences specialist with interests in big picture research; Julie Donovan, a creative content consultant with twenty years experience working in the media industry, and interests in the international formats business; Dr Tina Askanius, a Danish-Swedish media researcher with interests in social media; Dr Koko Kondo, a Japanese-British audience researcher with expertise in qualitative research; and José Luis Urueta, a Colombian-Swedish researcher with a passion for audience research.

The Project Advisory Group includes Professor Göran Bolin (Södertörn Högskola, Sweden), Professor Raymond Boyle (Glasgow University, UK), Professor John Corner (Leeds University, UK), Professor Jeanette Steemers (University of Westminster, UK), and Douglas Wood (Endemol Shine Group).


Julie Donovan has been working in the TV entertainment industry for over 20 years. She started her career in production at London Weekend Television (LWT), and worked her way up from researcher to producer on a number of shows for both primetime terrestrial and cable networks. In recent years, she has been involved in the international formats business, most recently within the Worldwide Entertainment Department of Fremantlemedia as Senior Vice President responsible for International Format Development.

Dr. Koko Kondo is currently working at University of Westminster, UK. After working in the media industry in Tokyo for almost 9 years (TV presenter, sales and promotion, and management), she did a PhD on the subject of Japanese children and global media. Her post-doctoral research with Brunel University examined digital media at home to design the interface of interactive TV. She has also assisted Professor Hill’s work on Paranormal TV audiences. Her current interests include viral marketing, social media and digital media use in higher education.

Dr. Tina Askanius is a post-doctoral researcher and lecturer in the department of Media and Communication at Lund University, Sweden. She is mainly involved in the production and audience fieldwork in Scandinavia. Some of her current work in the Media Experiences project involves political documentary audiences and qualitative studies of crime fiction series and their fans.

José Luis Urueta is currently working full time as a research assistant in the Media Experiences project. José holds an M.A. in Public and International Affairs from the University of Ottawa, Canada.
The research on *Utopia* is part of the larger project *Media Experiences*, led by Professor Annette Hill from Lund University, and funded by the Wallenberg Foundation. This research used a qualitative approach to *Utopia* producers and audiences, drawing on individual and group interviews. A total of 77 interviews were conducted overall for seasons one and two.

For the production research, there were interviews conducted face to face and via telephone and Skype during April 2015, many taking place at the offices of Kudos. Interviews resulted in audio recordings and fieldnotes. 21 production interviews took place with executive and creative producers. This included the commissioner, and marketing team, executive producers, writer, directors, cinematographer, production design, composer, sound and costume designers, casting director, and actors; there were 8 female and 13 male interviewees.

For the audience research, 56 fans participated in individual and group interviews (2-3 persons). The field-work time frame was June 2015 to April 2016. The recruitment method involved snowball sampling, primarily through social media and secondarily friends of friends. After the project was flagged on the official *Utopia* social media we received 4,000 views, and 1,000 likes; this led to 170 fans emailing and Skyping about the project. Many dropped out after learning that we would audio record the interview. Although we guarantee anonymity, audio recordings made *Utopia* fans nervous, due to their political beliefs, illegal viewing, and conspiracy theories regarding the cancellation of the television series. For every interview, the researchers needed to patiently build trust with these fans from around the world, conducting most interviews in the middle of the night due to time differences. The overall sample of 56 participants there were 15 females and 41 males, aged 16 to 38, with a range of professions from students, unemployed, artists, activists, musicians, charity workers, graphic designers, teachers, translator and spacecraft operator. Fans were from the UK, Sweden, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Greece, Spain, Slovenia, Russia, America, Canada, Colombia, Argentina, Chile, Australia and New Zealand. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish. Each interview lasted 40–60 minutes and took place via Skype and telephone, or in homes and public places.

The production research was conducted by Annette Hill and Julie Donovan, the audience research was conducted by José Luis Urueta, with help from Koko Kondo, and designed by Annette Hill.