



By: *Harvey Morris*

# British TV drama targets toxic online influence on youth crime



A British television drama series highlighting online manipulation driving young men and boys towards violence against girls has sparked a national debate in the UK.

Sociologists, psychologists, parents and politicians have weighed in as the fictional four-part *Adolescence* broke viewing records on the Netflix streaming service.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer was among around six million domestic viewers who watched the story of the disturbing aftermath of a stabbing in which a 13-year-old boy kills a female classmate.

He **told** parliament he had been following the drama with his two teenaged children, adding: "This violence, carried out by young men influenced by what they see online, is a real problem. It's abhorrent and we have to tackle it."

Starmer met the creators of the series soon after it was aired last month, and the government later **announced** that it would be free to watch at secondary schools across the country.

International viewing figures and commentary on the series from around the world indicate that the concerns it raises have struck nerves well beyond the UK.

## Pernicious social media environment

In Britain, the public debate it has generated coincides with worries about a perceived mental health crisis among young men and how best to control a pernicious social media environment that may be fuelling it.

The government has resisted pressure for an outright ban on mobile phones in schools as part of a new children's welfare law. Starmer has argued that it was more important to ensure that the online content to which the young are exposed was suitable for their age.

## Young men were increasingly turning away from traditional mentors and seeking life guidance online - Gary Southgate

At around the time of the TV drama's launch, the former England football manager Gary Southgate **warned** in a BBC lecture that young men were increasingly turning away from traditional mentors and seeking life guidance online.

In the process, he said, they were exposed to manipulative influencers who tricked them into believing that success is measured by money or dominance, that strength means never showing emotion, and that the world, including women, is against them.

Is the nation truly in the grip of an epidemic of misogynistic violence among isolated young men? Or is this the latest moral panic in which adults transfer their own angst about a rapidly changing and uncertain world to their wayward young?

## Pangs of guilt

The *Adolescence* series certainly has its inspiration in the real world. Co-creator Stephen Graham, who also plays the 13-year-old's father, has said he was drawn to the theme by reported knife attacks by boys on girls.

By linking violence to the influence of the so-called toxic manosphere, Graham and his collaborators were also reflecting real life.

In the same month the series was screened, a 26-year-old man was convicted of murdering a former girlfriend and two of her family, hours after viewing allegedly violent misogynistic material promoted by online influencer Andrew Tate.

## Many loving parents may have experienced pangs of guilt as they watched the drama of Adolescence unfold

Many loving parents may have experienced pangs of guilt as they watched the drama of Adolescence unfold. Had they failed to monitor their children's online activity during those hours holed up in their bedrooms? Should they endure further juvenile ire by limiting screen time or telling the younger ones they are not old enough to have their own phone?

The old parental injunction to their offspring to go out and play with their friends has been tempered by a modern paranoia about the perils of the street and daily reports of youth knife crime.

### A social media ban

A good tip for politicians and policymakers might be to listen firstly to the young as they contemplate measures that will affect their safety and their lives.

The UK parliament has made a start in that direction by hosting and **publishing** the findings of a Youth Select Committee, linked to the National Youth Agency, into youth violence and social media. The committee of twelve 14 to 18-year-olds took evidence from academics, child safety officials, digital media experts and the police.

Its report, published last week, starts by acknowledging the prevalence of youth violence, while noting that the number of incidents has fallen in recent years but remains higher than a decade ago.

It also reported that one in four young people surveyed had been pointed to violent content by social media platforms, before noting that "evidence does not conclude that there is a causal link between viewing violent content and incidence of real-world violence".



*"Many parents and carers feel overwhelmed by or do not understand the online world" - Report*

The committee nevertheless backed the introduction of online safety laws and measures to ensure that social media companies did not financially reward purveyors of harmful content, including misogyny.

In a nod to the older generation, the findings noted that "many parents and carers feel overwhelmed by or do not understand the online world".

The teenage drafters succeeded in producing a sober and balanced overview that also highlighted the positive benefits of online access for the young. They opposed a social media ban for young people under 16 that would prevent many of them from accessing such benefits.

### Adults should avoid a panicked response

The critically acclaimed Adolescence, like other examples of socially aware drama, has a role to play in the current debate on the latest threat to the young.

Adults at large, however, whether parents or policy-makers, should avoid a panicked response that pathologises youth itself. Not every child is a victim-in-waiting.

Measures should be pursued to create safe local environments for young people to meet

their contemporaries face-to-face and not primarily online.

## Britain is no stranger to moral panics about the young

Like their elders, they should be taught how to spot the opportunists and conspiracists who attempt to delude them.

Britain is no stranger to moral panics about the young, in which the aberrant behaviour of the few has been taken as the norm. From the sometimes intimidating Teddy Boys of the 1950s to the rampaging mods and rockers of the sixties, the popular knee-jerk response was to call for more discipline, corporal punishment included.

In this respect, at least, we live in a more enlightened age. The overwhelming contemporary response to the problems confronting the young is to try to understand the challenges they face rather than reaching for the cane.