

“THE SECRETARIAT”: A CASE STUDY OF TELEVISION AND PUBLIC OPINION

As the most prolific medium for the dissemination of culture, television’s influence on consumer identity is unmatched in its ubiquity and efficacy. Consider, for example, *The Cosby Show* and its effects on popular perceptions about African-Americans; *Will & Grace* and increasing mainstream acceptance of queer communities; along with *The West Wing*’s ability to humanize the tumultuous administration of US democracy. While I hesitate to posit a strict, unidirectional cause-and-effect between television and society, the medium certainly plays a role in challenging popular sentiment by amplifying minority discourse. When observing television’s ability to affect social change, one finds that the medium is most potent when political ideology is fronted by innovative narrative and personable characters. When television presents itself first and foremost as a medium for entertainment (and succeeds, consequently, to build fandom while staying profitable), whatever ideologies or agendas are *perceived* to propel its narrative is afforded a greater power in affecting public opinion.

While television’s residual affects on public opinion are palpable, it is arguable whether its programs are indeed created with this premise. In fact, one could argue that social influence is a peripheral externality to far more industry-salient concerns over profitability, brand-image and (to a lesser degree) critical acclaim. Bill Cosby asserted throughout the production and eventual syndication of *The Cosby Show* that the program was *not* about blackness, but a family which *happened* to be black (thereby securing popularity across racial, national and class lines). *Cosby* succeeded by concentrating on universal familial themes; similarly, *Will & Grace* has met with considerable public acclaim due to its narrative adherence to humor and not identity politics.

Drawing from the rich public-opinion analysis surrounding *The Cosby Show* and (to a burgeoning extent) contemporary texts such as *Will & Grace*, my paper will explore the influence of *The West Wing* on the concept of “national identity,” public perceptions of the American presidency and the resultant rise or fall in civic engagement. More importantly, my paper will explore strategies for replicating these outcomes in the development of “*The Secretariat*,” a program concept that relocates the *West Wing* format into the halls of the United Nations Secretariat in New York City.

While the underlying agenda in creating *The Secretariat* is the promotion of educated (preferably sympathetic) dialogue about the UN (along with US leadership within the system), the primary focus will be on the compelling narratives and character development that this international body will undoubtedly produce. Acknowledging the recent scandals and tribulations that have threatened the UN’s public image, infusing the gravity of conflict management and humanitarian development with the power of the culture industry to woo (favorable) American interest may be what it will take for the UN to recuperate.