

***The West Wing* Legacy : Rescuing Democracy and Civic Engagement**

“We’re going to raise the level of public debate in this country.
And let that be our legacy.”

John Spencer as Leo McGarry, “Let Bartlet Be Bartlet,” *The West Wing*

Emerging from the pelting rain of a tropical storm, the President passes steadily by the burning flash of a hundred cameras, his every step echoing against the walls of the Department of State under the murmur of inquisition and hastily scribbled notes. Having recently disclosed a terrible secret, he knows that the fate of his re-election – nay, his entire legacy – now dangles atop the precipice of his forthcoming words. His loyal aides stand to his side, eager to confirm whether recent transgressions will lead to impeachment or miraculously grant a chance at a second term – as are the pride of reporters poised with questions for the attack. The President points to a female African-American journalist who wastes no breath in asking if he will indeed seek re-election.¹

A melancholy guitar riff crescendos with the storm’s growing ferocity as the camera moves its frame from the crowd to each main character, panning slowly towards a tight close-up of the President in profile. Illuminated by fierce lightning, the American flag cuts proudly through the wind and thunder directly behind a distant window – its panes framing the President’s determined gaze into a perfect portrait of patriotism. He grins subtly, a secret grin, letting the previous question dangle like the proverbial carrot in front of the reporters, in front of

¹ Sorkin, Aaron (2001) “Two Cathedrals” *The West Wing*

his staff – indeed, in front of the very viewers who have remained transfixed for six seasons by a show that has been hailed “the most compelling drama on the air.”²

Superlative and hyperbole are devices frequently noted when glancing through the reviews praising *The West Wing* and its creator Aaron Sorkin. Both are often credited for providing “inspiration and hope while [entertaining] a loyal audience that desperately wants to believe in the nobility of the American dream.”³ Self-described (or critically rebuked) as a “valentine to public service”⁴, the show has drawn accolades for its innovative, fast-paced, steadicam-mediated style; an excellent cast wielding flawless execution; bold, brilliant dialogue and some of the most evocative uses of lighting and music ever experienced in television– all of which contribute to a compelling hour of storytelling that makes public policy and electoral politics engaging, entertaining and *sexy*.

According to Donna Pompper, “Popular culture has impacted politics in subtle yet important ways by disseminating and molding values, beliefs, and behaviors.”⁵ In its narrative focus on what Heather Hayton refers to as the “King’s two bodies,” Sorkin provides a refreshingly nuanced representation of both the *institution* of the American presidency and the *human* drama that propels both king (President Josiah “Jed” Bartlet) and cavalry (Bartlet’s troubled family and gleefully over-worked Communications staff).⁶ This discourse of duality drives much of the show’s dialogue and mis-en-scene: the show’s infamous “walk and talks” often involve characters quickly moving between pools of light and dark as they debate the pros and cons of a myriad of complex issues, suggesting that in the creation of public policy, even the most altruistic motives can have nefarious consequences. In tackling the most pressing and

² Season 1 DVD dust cover

³ Rollins 2003, “Introduction” *The West Wing*, p.13

⁴ Sorkin 2000, *PBS Newshour*, Interview

⁵ Pompper 2003, “The West Wing: White House Narratives” *The West Wing*, p.22

⁶ Hayton 2003, “The King’s Two Bodies,” *The West Wing*, p.63

controversial issues of our modern history (from national security and African-American reparations to nuclear nonproliferation and the contentious politics of gun control), *The West Wing* has been praised for elevating television's ability to entertain while promoting educated topical debate and challenging astigmatic public perception of governance and civil service as corrupt and Machiavellian.

Despite frequent assertions to the contrary, Sorkin is often praised (and accordingly criticized) for bringing to TV a "high-minded, conscience-haunted upgrade of the Clinton White House."⁷ While Sorkin's publicly-acknowledged liberalism is evident throughout the show's characterization (the Bartlet administration is Democratic and conservative views are often personified by far less sympathetic characters) and dialogue (although the show presents all facets of an issue, the more liberal argument often prevails), what remains paramount is that these contentious topics find a voice at all. Furthermore, while the show's depiction of White House staff is often criticized as glorified and idealized, these same detractors quickly concede that *The West Wing* is a critical "counter to the anti-Washingtonian stereotyping and presidency-bashing that is so much a part of pre-9/11 American political culture."⁸

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam's eponymous work on the decline of American social capital, there exists an entire chapter on proven corollaries between television watching and civic disengagement. Social capital, which Putnam refers to as the "connections amongst individuals [and] the social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them," predicates a strong and sustainable democracy.⁹ Undoubtedly, engagement in one's community (through volunteering, leading a club or writing an elected official) ultimately contributes to a

⁷ Lehmann 2003, "The Feel Good Presidency," *The West Wing*, p.214

⁸ Levine 2003, "The West Wing (NBC)," *The West Wing*, p.43

⁹ Putnam 2000, *Bowling Alone*, p. 19

greater public good. However, circumstances and technologies surrounding our modernity have led to a rapid decline in social interconnectedness and a consequent rise in political cynicism and civic malaise.

Does Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* provide the requisite antidote to public ennui? While I hesitate to provide a direct causality, it seems the critically-acclaimed series – with its steadfast commitment to Socratic storytelling – does, at the very least, challenge wide-spread perceptions of a sullied tradition of public service while alleviating myopic political discourse crippled by simple delineations of black and white. In offering a seamless blend of education and entertainment, *The West Wing* has and can continue to salvage the notions of public debate and civic engagement upon which our very democracy was founded.

TELEVISION AND CIVIC DISENGAGEMENT

As Putnam indicates, “nothing – not low education, not full-time work, not long commutes in urban agglomerations, not poverty or financial distress – is more broadly associated with civic disengagement and social disconnection than is the dependence on television for entertainment.”¹⁰ Indeed, according to Pompper, “only half of the public votes in presidential elections, and voters aged fifty and younger seem to have lost faith” in the great institutions of democracy (particularly public service and the American presidency).¹¹ By atomizing the citizenry into passive consumers of increasingly niche-oriented programs, despite great leaps in digital innovation and picture clarity, T.S. Eliot's comment about television from its earliest days

¹⁰ Putnam 2000, p. 231

¹¹ Pompper 2003, p. 17

remains remarkably relevant: “it is a medium of entertainment which permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome.”¹²

Putnam’s exhaustive study into what factors have contributed to the steady decline in America’s social interconnectedness charts a number of interdependent events, technologies and circumstances of which television viewing is a major component. While the television device, in its earliest days, was said to inherit the radio’s legacy as an information-transmitting hearth around which families (rather, communities) could gather and learn together, in actual contemporary practice, television viewing has become a solitary, often passive endeavor. Until the twentieth century, no other technology had usurped leisure time more rapidly; channel surfing, for example, has gone from being a simple method of traversing the broadcast spectrum into an automatic, almost obsessive habit – indicating a socially-ingrained perpetual discontent with televisual programming (despite the ever-cacophonous growth of new shows, new genres and new channels).¹³

While television viewing co-exists with other factors depressing civic involvement (poverty, old age, low education etc), according to Putnam, “each additional hour of television viewing per day means roughly a 10 percent reduction in most forms of civic activism...”¹⁴ The specific influences are simple enough: given time’s zero-sum nature, hours spent watching television minimizes hours that could be otherwise occupied by volunteerism, familial activity, letter writing or other forms of civic engagement. This is best exemplified with a comparison between those who grew up prior to television and those who matured during the device’s proliferation.

¹² Putnam 2000, p. 217

¹³ Putnam 200, p. 226

¹⁴ Putnam 2000, p. 228

According to Putnam, those born before 1933 were two-times more likely to be “selective” viewers who watched television for specific programs (otherwise turning the boxes off when nothing was of interest) than those born after 1963 – the majority of whom were identified as “habitual” viewers who turned on their televisions without regard for what was being shown (and continued to leave the device on as background noise). While retirees sought camaraderie through social interaction, those raised through the age of televisual ubiquity were much more likely to prefer companionship with a seventeen-inch screen attached to a cable box.¹⁵

By the end of the twentieth century, during every period of every day, at least one-quarter of all adults reported some TV viewing. After work, this statistic rose to up to 86 percent during the appropriately named “prime-time” hours. If this were not enough to convince one of television’s omnipresence in our daily ritual, consider how viewing television beats other ways Americans could spend their evenings: while 27 percent do household chores, 30 percent read newspapers and 56 percent converse with family, a whopping 81 percent report watching TV.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, when interviewed, selective/ light viewers admitted to attending more town hall meetings, played more leadership roles and advocated on behalf of interests groups far more often than their habitual/ heavy-viewing counterparts. Consider the statistics: 39 percent of light viewers attended parent-teacher association meetings, 28 percent wrote Congress, 29 percent headed local organizations and were three times more likely to have made speeches than the average TV viewer; of demographically-matched heavy viewers, only 25 percent attended meetings, 21 percent contacted their elected officials, 18 percent led an organization and 5 percent engaged in public speaking and debate.

¹⁵ Putnam 2000, p. 225

¹⁶ Putnam 2000, p. 227

These viewing statistics could lead us to presume that, according to a strict time corollary, the only effect of TV on civic engagement comes from the number of hours watched. However, one must also consider that simply removing the television from America's living rooms and bed chambers will not turn its culture consumers into citizen activists. While an argument can certainly be made that less television watching *could* lead to more of virtually every form of civic participation and social involvement, one must also consider "the character of the watching, the watcher, and [most significantly for the purposes of this paper] *the watched*" (emphasis mine).¹⁷

According to Putnam, "Americans who follow the news on television (compared with those who don't) are more knowledgeable about public affairs, vote more regularly, and are generally more active in community affairs..."¹⁸ Indeed, studies reveal that most Americans get their political news from TV, a phenomena that has captivated audience and critics alike for its consensus-building potential and the ease with which it places public affairs within the preferred status of social ubiquity. In the realm of electoral politics, no other medium has changed how political candidacy is perceived and ultimately validated. In fact, "politicians use television to showcase their credentials and expose their opponents' vulnerabilities...[it has] replaced communal storytelling sessions that organize social experience and transfer culture over generations."¹⁹ As a conveyor of information (both tragic and triumphant), TV at its civic best can be "a gathering place, a powerful force for bridging social difference, nurturing solidarity"²⁰ and building a sense of community, as displayed by the brief period of national comity shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

¹⁷ Putnam 2000, p. 229

¹⁸ Putnam 2000, p. 220

¹⁹ Pompper 2003, p. 19-20

²⁰ Putnam 2000, p. 243

However, overall citizen consumption of the news (both print and broadcast) has been on a steady decline: regular viewership of nightly network news plummeted from 60 percent to 38 percent of adults between 1993 and 1998. Recalling the aforementioned generational difference regarding television viewing, it seems that age is *also* a contributing factor to what is being watched: the audience for network news is aging rapidly, with average ages for these programs teetering above fifty-seven (compared to forty-two for prime time programs).²¹

Recent scandals surrounding compromised verity in reportage (i.e., the Dan Rather “Bush services memos”)²² may be turning viewers away according to a growing perception of tainted journalistic practice. Pompper adds that the very nature of news making is deliberately biased and relies heavily on omission, with contemporary news sources becoming exclusively dependent on issues and events that have enduring mainstream appeal (often forsaking substance for scandal and ratings). With regards to reportage of our elected leaders, “without *conflict*, the Washington press corps ‘rarely tries to offer a rounded, human portrait,’ leaving citizens bereft of immediate (granted, easy) opportunities to compose balanced information before casting a vote.”²³ John Hartley adds that a definite transformation can be observed within the news from “journalism as a discourse of power to news or journalism as a discourse of... celebrity. News [that] was once about security... is [now] about personal comportment and... confession.”²⁴

While public affairs and news programming can be presumed to have positive influences on civic engagement, “dependence on television for entertainment is not merely *a* significant predictor of civic disengagement. It is *the single most consistent* predictor...”²⁵ Compared to moderate viewers, people who claim TV as their primary source of entertainment (41 percent of

²¹ Putnam 2000, p. 221

²² <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/09/06/politics/main641481.shtml>

²³ Pompper 2003, p. 18-19

²⁴ Hartley 2004, “Democratainment,” *The Televisions Studies Reader*, p. 528

²⁵ Putnam 2000, p. 231

American viewers) were less likely to contact friends and relatives, less likely to attend club meetings, less likely to attend church and were far more likely to commit minor acts of social aggression (such as “giving the finger” to another driver during rush-hour). Entertainment television, it turns out, is bad for both individualized and collective civic engagement, cutting American engagement in its political processes by as much as 40 percent, thereby dampening the very activism on which our democratic principles reside.²⁶

But what is the nature of entertainment-oriented content that renders it so adverse to promoting engaged citizenship? Theorists surmise that “television as a medium creates a false sense of companionship, making people *feel*... engaged with our community without the effort of actually *being* engaged.”²⁷ In privileging personalities over issues and materialism over public service, most soap operas, prime-time dramas and reality programs “erode social and political capital by concentrating on characters and stories that portray a way of life that weakens group attachments and social/ political commitment.”²⁸ Some media watchers have noted the increasing role of late-night comedy sketches such as *Saturday Night Live* as both barometers and broadcasters for public opinion; however, Pew Research Center reports indicate that while 50 percent of the viewing populace cite late-night comedy as having influence over their political decisions, in actuality, only 27 percent of those are registered voters.²⁹

The detriment of TV’s creation of faux-community is further underscored by Hartley’s essay *Democratainment*. As television evolved to become the dominant cultural medium, so did it begin to mediate the evolving boundaries of citizenship as previously disenfranchised groups fought to acquire equal place within the community’s notion of ‘citizenship.’ However, rather

²⁶ Putnam 2000, p. 232-33

²⁷ Putnam 2000, p. 242

²⁸ McBride, Allan (1998) “Television, Individualism & Social Capital” *Political Science*, p. 542

²⁹ Hayton 2003, p. 67

than honoring the *differences* around which such battles were engaged, television reduced identity into a de-individualized concept of “audiencehood.” According to Hartley, “observers have frequently taken fright at the apparent *removal* of hard-won civic rights and their *replacement* with ‘media citizenship.’”³⁰ This phenomenon of the “mass audience” may imply a rebuttal to Putnam’s argument that television removes individuals from social interconnectedness; in actuality, television’s conglomeration of disparate identities into an indiscernible collective supports the prevailing thesis that TV dilutes our ability to *engage*. Indeed, the passivity implied by the undifferentiated audience (as defined by advertisements targeting “groups,” however niche or segmented) speaks volumes of television’s reduction of individual agency. Furthermore, said audiences are usually removed and virtual (Trekkie conventions are admittedly an exception) which hardly compares to an *actual* community gathered, say, at a peace rally or grade-school bake-off.

Understanding the overwhelming evidence that habitual watching of entertainment TV dilutes one’s engagement in democratic processes and that preferences for news and public affairs programming promotes civic participation, one cannot help but question what would happen if news and public affairs became, themselves, entertaining. If America has and will continue to be a nation transfixed by the screen’s intoxicating glow, what would happen if at least one hour out of five spent each night in the pursuit of passive absorption was captured by intentions that sought to educate *while* entertaining? Would this be enough to promote discussion and debate? Would this be enough to salvage civic engagement?

Aaron Sorkin’s *The West Wing* might just have the answer.

³⁰ Hartley 2004, p. 527

THE WEST WING ENTERTAINS

While its riveting stories and smart, quotable quips are effective vehicles for delivering substantive messages on say, drug addiction or veteran's affairs, Myron Levine reminds us that, "*The West Wing* is first and foremost a television series that is designed to entertain."³¹ Actor Brad Whitford ("Josh Lyman") further attests that the show is primarily "about relationships, about people – the backdrop is politics."³² Sorkin himself concedes that the social service which the show is said to play in raising awareness is incidental to primary considerations for how well the show entertains:

"I think we're all very flattered when we hear that the show illuminates certain things. We hear it from high school history and social studies teachers. We hear it from politicians themselves. We hear it from people who lead causes... We're delighted when we hear that, but it's not our goal [which is] simply to captivate you for an hour and when the hour's over make you feel like, That was worth it. I had a good time and I want to watch again next week. We are storytellers first and last. If we do something else, well then, that just speaks to the power of storytelling."³³

Despite these assertions, on more than one occasion, *The West Wing* has been called a weekly national civics lesson that provides viewers with an insider's perspective of the inner-workings and complex praxis of national governance in the White House.³⁴ As the production team attests, the show privileges human drama over politics, and it is precisely this very fact that makes *The West Wing* such a potent antidote for public cynicism and civic ignorance. As Sorkin attests, "our leaders, government people are portrayed either as dolts or as Machiavellian somehow. The characters in this show are neither. They are flawed, to be sure, but you need characters in drama to have flaws... They are dedicated... to doing good, rather than doing well.

³¹ Levine 2003, p. 43

³² Waxman, Sharon (2003), "The West Wing's New World," *The West Wing*, p. 205

³³ Sorkin, Aaron (2001) *The West Wing Official Guide*, p. 46

³⁴ Pompper 2003, p. 23

The show is kind of a valentine to public service.”³⁵ The lead characters are brilliant yet personable, passionate yet flawed, dedicated to civil service, but vulnerable to tragedy and heartache. While Sorkin’s depiction of White House work culture is frequently derided as overly idealized (John Podhoretz writes: “These characters aren’t human beings – they’re noble soldiers in a noble cause, and they have been washed clean of every impurity because of it”), it does present a counterpoint to a common perception and portrayal of public service that is tainted by scandal and misconception.³⁶

Likewise, when depicting an issue, a dedication to parallel, balanced argumentation nuanced with historical background and personal drama helps *The West Wing* sustain viewer eye-balls while massaging their brains. The show’s political schema transcends “left” and “right” binaries and asks more fundamental questions about political agency and legitimacy. In so doing, *The West Wing* focuses on dialogue within the political spectrum, rather than an exclusive assertion of a specific ideology.³⁷ Of the show’s topical representation, Sorkin comments: “One of the things I like...about the way we’re presenting this world is [that] these issues are terribly complicated – not nearly as black and white as we’re led to believe... You’re talking about very learned people capable of arguing both sides of an issue, and it’s that process that I enjoy dramatizing.”³⁸

What makes this narrative focus so significant is how rarely these positive representations of democracy are afforded prime air-time - particularly within a cultural milieu that would sooner relegate political discourse to the televisual sidelines of C-Span and pundit-talk where the viewership is likely to be limited and the focus rests on surveillance and opinion, *not*

³⁵ Sorkin 2000

³⁶ Podhoretz, Jon (2003) “The Liberal Imagination” *The West Wing*, p. 223

³⁷ Chambers, Samuel (2003) “Dialogue, Deliberation, Discourse” *The West Wing*, p. 83

³⁸ Sorkin, 2000

entertainment. Furthermore, it contributes to television's potential to educate and engage, providing its networks an award-winning method of repaying the government's gift of the public broadcast spectrum that doesn't compromise advertising revenue. In fact, when considering *The West Wing's* viewership, one could even say that the show's other triumph is exemplifying how positive representations of civic virtue can be both responsible and *profitable*.

The West Wing, a recipient of eighteen Emmy nominations and nine awards, consistently attracts high ratings and up to thirteen million literate, upscale viewers every week.³⁹ In 2000, the show drew more support from adults aged eighteen to forty-nine earning over \$100,000 a year than any other; these same viewers also had more advanced-degrees, home computers and Internet access than all other prime-time audiences. According to a network official, overall, the show continues to attract a much broader (and older) fan base that many of NBC's other programs. Given the show's subject matter, its fan base is powerful; both President Clinton and Vice President Gore registered public admiration for the series, employing remarkable (if not, characteristic) media savvy in aligning themselves with the show's popular idealism. White House press secretary Joe Lockhart, former Secretary of State Madeline Albright and several prominent Republicans all claim fandom, at times asking when their "counterparts" would appear on future episodes.⁴⁰ Pat Caddell, a prominent pundit and consultant on the series states that "While I don't want to overstate our impact...a lot of people in politics and the press watch it intensely. I think its [influence is] more on a subconscious level than a conscious one."⁴¹

Consciously or not, the show certainly has an enduring influence - at the very least, on the publicity circuit. Its actors have graced magazine covers and hosted political fundraisers.

³⁹ Pompper 2003, p. 23

⁴⁰ Hayton 2003, p. 77

⁴¹ Waxman 2003, p. 211

During the Clinton administration, the cast made frequent visits to their “East coast office.” But just why is it so successful (as it’s audience/ fandom and accolades attest)? This answer becomes clearer when assessing the show’s production value.

FLAWLESS ARTIFICE : PRODUCING THE WEST WING

That *The West Wing* is a product of magnificent writing is one indisputable fact. Aaron Sorkin, the show’s creator, executive producer and chief writer, has been described as “brilliant” and “a genius.”⁴² When asked which writers influenced him most, Sorkin most often privileges William Shakespeare – an apropos mentor given the Bard’s own narrative exploration of the human travails underlying civic duty, leadership and governance.⁴³ In fact, this connection is most explicitly pronounced in the final episode of the third season when a dual assassination of both a corrupt enemy of the State and an agent of the Secret Service occurs, ironically, while the President is watching a stage production of “*The Wars of the Roses*,” a fictional play that condenses Shakespeare’s “Henry” tragedies into a singular musical epic.⁴⁴ Just as Shakespeare is credited as the progenitor of certain classic narrative devices, so is Sorkin regarded as the innovator behind *The West Wing*’s signature style of rhythmic, pithy dialogue – a hypnotic symphony of staccato witticisms and fluid soliloquies that, according to Sorkin, is a deliberate attempt to replicate the sounds of dialogue and smart debate from the plays and poker games of his youth.⁴⁵

That language is such an important element of the show speaks to *The West Wing*’s vital place in the public sphere of political discourse. According to Samuel Chambers, “language

⁴² Fahy, Thomas (2005) *Considering Aaron Sorkin*, p. 2

⁴³ “*The Primaries: The Making of The Pilot*,” Season 1 DVD

⁴⁴ Sorkin, Aaron (2002) “Posse Comitatus” *The West Wing*

⁴⁵ Fahy 2005, p. 4-6

provides the very medium through which to validate political norms... Sorkin's vision of political discourse... grants a key role to language and speech in contemporary politics while it simultaneously rejects and refutes the deliberative democrat's inherent goal of consensus."⁴⁶

Although Sorkin himself readily admits that he is not a "political sophisticate," his writing style evokes a Romantic idealism that fits perfectly with a "behind the scenes" narrative about the institutions of power. Regarding the White House, Sorkin said "it's a fantastic world to look behind the scenes of. It's extremely glamorous and appealing, and the possibility to be Romantic and idealistic is huge. There is a tremendous amount of conflict. There is a tremendous potential for intention and obstacle."⁴⁷

Sorkin's is a world of debate and exchange, with consensus being an occasional by-product should characters happen to arrive at the same conclusion (but not before engaging in a few lines of respectful though acerbic argument). The show's perfect blend of dramatic exposition, comedic relief and educational trivia is unparalleled, particularly between the romantically-estranged Josh Lyman, Deputy Chief of Staff (played by Brad Whitford) and his cunning, capable assistant, Donna Moss (played by Janel Moloney).

In the following excerpt from the first season's sixth episode, *Mr. Willis of Ohio*, Josh and Donna are arguing over how to best deal with the budget surplus (familiar territory to viewers at the time since it was the focus of much debate between then-presidential candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush). Donna is convinced that the American people should get their monies back through tax breaks (the Republican scheme) while Josh asserts that the Democratic policy for social welfare better enables a greater public good:

DONNA: What's wrong with me getting my money back?

⁴⁶ Chambers 2003, p. 88-90

⁴⁷ Downing, Spencer (2005) "Handling The Truth" *Considering Aaron Sorkin*, p. 139

JOSH: You won't spend it right.
DONNA: How do you know?
JOSH: Let's say your cut of the surplus is \$700. I want to take your money, combine it with everyone else's money and use it to pay down the debt and further endow Social Security. What do you want to do with it?
DONNA: Buy a DVD player.
JOSH: See?
DONNA: But my \$700 is helping employ the people manufacturing and selling DVD players, not to mention all the people who manufacture and sell DVDs. It's the natural evolution of the market economy.
JOSH: The problem is the DVD player you buy may be made in Japan.
DONNA: I'll buy an American one.
JOSH: We don't trust you.
DONNA: Why not?
JOSH: We're Democrats
DONNA: (sigh) I want my money back!
JOSH: You shouldn't have voted for us.⁴⁸

While the topic of budget surplus and tax reform isn't as sexy as some other issues *The West Wing* has tackled, it is (or was) an important policy concern that had dire ramifications on the citizenry's livelihoods. However, it was a vague concept at best which left those voters without automatic party affiliations confused and alienated from the issue. What Sorkin achieved in less than three minutes of banter neither party could in eight months of campaigning: a clear, personable answer with a tangible example.

Sorkin's characters are a collection of remarkable idealists, and they are executed aptly by one of the greatest ensembles in television history. In accordance with the show's critical reviews, the characters are indeed noble and idealized – cleansed of the power struggles and sycophancy that reportedly plagues the White House.⁴⁹ They are paragons of public servitude:

⁴⁸ Sorkin, Aaron (1999) "Mr Willis of Ohio" *The West Wing*

⁴⁹ Levine 2003, p. 46

willingly absolving themselves of far more lucrative careers (and decent nights' sleep) to serve at the pleasure of the President and the American people. While it is here that Sorkin is said to make his clearest departure from reality (indeed, there is none of the backstabbing nor groupthink that many ex-staffers report is rampant in the Oval office), it does adhere to at least one simple fact: that those who choose to serve often do so because of a passion to change the country and the world for the better.

Beyond this display of civic virtue, what makes *The West Wing's* ensemble particularly important is their diverse ideology (Democrats, Republicans, English Thatcherites), ethnicity (New England, African-American, Native-Indian), religion (Catholic, Jewish, Hindu) and sexual proclivity (gay, straight, celibate, prostitute). The representation of marginalized groups (women, blacks and gays for example) is exceedingly well-rounded - perhaps even heroic (as demonstrated by Dule Hill's "Charlie Young," the show's African-American Presidential personal aide). Much has been written about Sorkin's depiction of minorities in positions of power (Secretary of State Nancy Wells for example, Sorkin's televisual version of Condoleezza Rice) and their struggles for equality (exemplified by topical foci on slave reparations, immigrant worker rights and sexual harassment). While a discussion of minority representation exceeds the scope of this paper, I will concede that criticisms against Sorkin for presenting a glorified staff also extends to his depictions of the "model minority." In the world of *The West Wing*, the battles are fought in courtrooms through negotiation, not streets with guns - a noble effort that achieves Sorkin's desire to story-tell individual circumstances, not the oppression of a collective.

That Sorkin compares his process for writing *The West Wing* to a composer creating his symphony should bring little surprise that music is a powerful element of the show's execution. From the grand, orchestral opening to Hendrix-esque guitar riffs, folksy banjos to a performance

by Yo-Yo Ma, *The West Wing's* Musical Director, W.G. Walden traverses the soundscape of the American experience, deftly plucking the proverbial heart strings as only a virtuoso can as he supports Sorkin's prose – itself a lyrical masterpiece. Similarly, lighting in the show is a carefully considered construct, with pools of dark and shadow rendering every shot a perfect photograph. From the harsh fluorescents of the office spaces to the warm, golden glow of the Oval office, there exists a dramatic connection between the times when a character is in light or shadow and when that character oscillates between candor and secrecy.

Given Sorkin's aforementioned commitment to "sell the reality," the mis-en-scene's ability to convey White House grandeur and Washingtonian gravity becomes remarkably important. It is upon architecture, props, costuming and design that *The West Wing's* claim to visual verity rests, and it does so comfortably given the meticulous detail that has gone into every shot. President Bartlet's desk is an exact replica of John F. Kennedy's "Resolute" desk; each prop notepad bears the seal of the President; briefing folders on nuclear attacks frequently have actual nuclear briefings inside them.

All this considered, in actuality, much of what exists in *The West Wing* is hardly there in the actual West Wing: there are no glass-walled offices, the hallways are far more narrow and the busyness often portrayed by extras in the background is far more realistically witnessed in the Old Executive Building across the street. Of course, these elements exclusive to the show exist to facilitate storytelling (glass walls allow cameras to shoot through, wide hallways facilitate Sorkin's infamous walk-and-talks and the frantic, ever-present staffers exist to convey urgency and a sense that the White House might actually be *working*). This illustrates the artistic license that removes programs like *The West Wing* from the traditions of documentary film or cinema verite. Rather, it is a *representation*, and a pretty convincing one at that. But what makes

it truly remarkable is that despite the glamour and narrative genius that allow the show to *entertain*, it never fails to also *educate* and *engage*.

THE WEST WING EDUCATES

Apart from the presidency, the primary focus of *The West Wing*'s "civics lesson" is the creation of policy and the subsequent management of these decisions' release by the Department of Communications. While a version of "the news" remains the primary source of public information for many (if not, all) viewers, as Pompper suggests, what journalists are able to report (particularly those of the White House press corps) is largely contingent on official releases and limited clandestine sources.⁵⁰ What is never shown in broadcast news are the mechanisms underlying news making itself; where *The West Wing* first finds its pedagogic value is in its ability to reveal these mechanisms with both savvy and heart.

Indeed, "a popular television drama can complement journalism by offering an entertaining and realistic view of the White House that sharpens images of the presidency and national politics... *The West Wing* shows the back story by picking up where the formal news product stops."⁵¹ From the message foibles of character Josh Lyman (Brad Whitford) on day-time talk shows to the triumphs of C.J. Cregg (Allison Janney) in the briefing room, audiences are provided a vital view into the delicate political maneuvering, negotiations and compromises that belie public assumptions that news simply "reports." News is not a practice of social surveillance, but a diplomatic dance of selective disclosure.

In focusing on news production, *The West Wing* provides ample argument for the promotion of media literacy, which is defined by its supporters as a critical discourse of how

⁵⁰ Pompper 2003, p. 17

⁵¹ Pompper 2003, p. 19

media shapes communities, relationships and habits.⁵² As the term “literacy” implies, the movement to educate the public on the effects of media is founded on learning its codified language, rules of distribution and the fundamental praxis of its production. Just as teaching children how to read and write empowers them to communicate and produce their own body of knowledge with which to challenge the educational institution that informs them, so too does media literacy empower the public to engage the culture industry in critical dialogue. By *producing* responses that can either comply with or utterly disavow the intentions of the maker, audiences can reclaim their agency and the promise of egalitarian exchange upon which our democracy was founded. As Staci Beavers proclaims, “American democracy itself may be hanging in the balance of whether viewers (i.e., voters) can learn to view film and television critically.”⁵³

In assessing the pedagogic value of using cultural texts such as *The West Wing* to teach social studies, Beavers instructs her students to question why certain narrative and production devices designed to evoke certain emotions affect them accordingly. What is it about the show’s dialogue, characterization, lighting, music or set design that compels a viewer to feel or think a certain way? And as this is indeed a *representation* of the White House, how can a teacher assure students that what they are seeing isn’t *real*.⁵⁴ Beavers claims that “One simple way to begin addressing *The West Wing* in the classroom may be to knock away any impressions that the series depicts the final “truth” about the presidency.”⁵⁵ Indeed, it behooves all citizens to recognize the *construct* of “reality” behind television (indeed, the construct behind all institutions, particularly the hyper-mediated presidency) and the limited ability of media to

⁵² Potter, James (2004) *Theory of Media Literacy*

⁵³ Beavers, Staci (2003), “The West Wing as a Pedagogical Tool” *The West Wing*, p. 180

⁵⁴ Beavers 2003, p. 182

⁵⁵ Beavers 2003, p. 180

convey all truths without bias or agenda. While there has always existed a complex negotiation in television (in fact, all media) between transparent reportage and self-conscious artifice (reality versus representation), *The West Wing* is one cultural product that exists in the convergence of the polars: it is *both* reportage and artifice. Moreover, it demands a *responsibility*: if Aaron Sorkin and his peers in the world of cultural production are only responsible for producing entertainment, it falls on us, the audience, to find and exploit the vast pedagogic and civic values of said texts.

The West Wing is a national civics lesson not because of its creator's intent, but because its viewers (its teachers, its public leaders and civil servants) have deemed it so. As entertaining as it surely is, television's potential for affecting social change and reclaiming civic virtue can only be fulfilled if its audience is willing to engage its program's assertions. As John Nein attests, "Sorkin's *The West Wing* might not be real, but its ideal depiction of politics as the realm of difficult decision-making by enlightened humanists and rigorous thinkers not only creates a moral complexity that is sadly lacking in both popular entertainment and the public face of politics, but begs the question, why should we readily dismiss its idealism?"⁵⁶ Allow me to add that as we accept and appreciate *The West Wing's* idealism (its reclamation of civil service and glorification of public debate), the fundamental fact that Democracy is predicated on an informed citizenry demands that as complicit benefactors of our political process, we have a responsibility to learn from the show as well.

⁵⁶ Nein, John (2005) "The Republic of Sorkin" *Considering Aaron Sorkin*, p. 9

THE WEST WING ENGAGES

In assessing the potential influences of *The West Wing* on voter turnout and the election results of the 2000 American presidential race, Hayton concludes that while it would seem that the popularization of the show's Democratic President and consequent liberal ideologies would automatically lend public favor to the real-life Democratic candidate, in actuality, this corollary was not as simple.⁵⁷ That *The West Wing* is composed of left-leaning producers, writers and actors was clearly demonstrated when the cast hosted fundraisers for Democratic candidate Al Gore on their set and were featured guests at the Democratic National Convention. Support for Gore, however, coincided with a highly aggressive publicity campaign for *The West Wing*, resulting in real-life campaign materials that claimed "Bartlet for President." Having so intimately known the televisual Head of State, Americans seemed to concur that compared to a candidate that had visited their homes every Thursday at 9pm (rather than periodically through televised town hall debates), the real-life candidates, Democrat and Republic, didn't stand a chance. Quoting Dan Schnurr, former Communications Director for John McCain, "politics as entertainment definitely has an effect on the electorate. It's overly simplistic to say that because voters have gotten used to being entertained by TV politicians, they feel more of a need to be entertained. But they're increasingly impatient. A natural, human politician doesn't have a prayer."⁵⁸

While it is difficult to assess what the exact affects were on voter turnout, it is nonetheless clear that the reclamation of the President as a personable, intimate figure (rather than a removed institution) had a tangible influence on viewer perceptions of what a national leader *could* be. Aspirations are changed while cynicism is challenged; and the nature of

⁵⁷ Hayton 2003, p. 77-78

⁵⁸ Hayton 2003, p. 78

discussion over public policy turns from the esoteric to the deeply personal. What this means for civic engagement is clear: if viewership and the production of genuine public programming is on the decline, then *The West Wing* provides a captivating vehicle for a reclamation of the civic engagement that the news provides. While *The West Wing* was never intended to spur Congressional letter writing or public marches, as an answer to Putnam's assertion that television (particularly *entertainment* television) is one of the predominant detriments to social capital, it does provide a claim to the medium's potential to educate while maintaining its commitment to entertain. It is an offered hope that as the show enters into its seventh season in the Fall of 2005, so too will it maintain its proven legacy to raise the level of public debate and, thereafter, our active participation in American democracy.

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