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Sleeping with the Television On: How Popular Culture Content Implicitly Informs Political Reality

Grace Amato

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Sleeping with the Television On: How Popular Culture Content Implicitly Informs Political Reality

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from
The College of William and Mary

by
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Introduction

In 1875, just 145 years ago, there were no telephones and few commercial radios. By the turn of the next century 25 years later, scientists driven by humanity's inherent yearn for connection had transformed the way we interact. As society of the 1900s grew complacent with their current modes of entertainment and communication, the human need for interconnectedness grew seeking new modes of interaction. Within 100 years, humans created audible moving pictures, television, computers, the Internet all in various attempts to solidify an increased rate of human interaction.

Since the mid-20th century, television producers have used their medium to solidify their national, regional, ethnic, or generational culture. As television serials grew more popular from around the 1940s onward, producers made a concentrated effort to make their content relatable so as to encourage viewership. The theory behind this is obvious. Viewership will surely increase when discussion about the show amongst the public increases. People want interaction and having these discussions is a key form of interaction. Interaction happens when content is accessible for more than one person. Content is accessible when it reflects the world the audience is familiar with. Even films as otherworldly as Star Wars use romance and friendship to anchor the audience in a sense of familiarity. Television series, in this way, are cultural artifacts in themselves. With the development of the Internet, the conversations surrounding these cultural artifacts are suspended in time through social media and Internet forums. Despite Internet users deleting comments over time, ample content remains to study exactly what role these conversations play in creating new understandings of the world. This study goes on to discuss exactly how this formation of a new political reality might happen and explore the changes in society as a result of such Internet conversations about television shows.

Conversations about television shows and other popular culture content are happening constantly through various media. These conversations are undervalued and underexplored in terms of their ability to explain just how much popular culture content influences audience members' beliefs about how the world works. By examining shows about the American government, the study is expected to reveal the societal expectations that lead to change in local and national politics. The primary goal is to understand how public opinion is shaped by popular culture and, in turn, how politics are shaped by public opinion. All being well, this will provide a framework for analysis of international politics as well as local politics in other nations.

Literature Review

In many major world powers - the United States, Great Britain, and Germany- the populous has become increasingly divided along political party lines over the course of the last decade.¹ These divisions are frequently highlighted by the conversations happening both in private and in public on the Internet. From these interactions, it will soon become clear that popular culture is at the heart of our political reality. Popular culture has already infiltrated our politics through celebrity diplomacy and the thought leadership that occurs on late night television talk shows. It is easy to understand how a consumer would be influenced by these aspects, but fewer people are able to follow the pattern of influence that other popular culture content might have – content that is not explicitly about politics and might still shape our understanding of it. As such, this thesis will look into how popular culture content, in particular television shows, shape conversations on the Internet and thus influence public understanding of the current political reality.

¹ Pew Research Center, December, 2019, “In a Politically Polarized Era, Sharp Divides in Both Partisan Coalitions.”

Conceptualizing Political Reality

Alexander Wendt described the interplay between individual perceptions and the current reality as constructivism, a structural theory of International Relations that claims the key structures of the international system are intersubjective rather than material and that state identities and interests are at least in part constructed by these social structures². State identities, as will later be explained, are part of a collective identity shared by all those willing to participate in debate about the topic.³ Wendt's theory of constructivism can easily be applied to the human idea of political reality. Political reality refers to the current understanding of how politics within a given state or country work, who or what controls those politics, the driving forces behind political activity, and who gets to contribute to political actions.⁴ It is a combination between politics - "any persistent pattern of human relations that involves, to a significant extent, power, rule, or authority" - and the foundational set of rules that govern these interactions.⁵ That is, political reality is a series of structures of expectation created within each individual, processed through conversations between individuals, and finalized as a shared understanding between the domestic public, political leadership, and, to some extent, foreign publics and political leaders. Political reality is not how a person thinks of oneself in daily life. It is instead how a person thinks of oneself in relation to the larger political apparatus. That is,

²Alexander Wendt. "Collective Identity Formation and the International State." *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (1994): 385.

³ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge Studies in International Relations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

⁴ Shaul R. Shenhav, "Political Narratives and Political Reality." *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale De Science Politique* 27, no. 3 (2006): 249.

⁵ Robert Dahl, *Modern Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 6.

political reality does not generally concern interpersonal relationships or day-to-day activities unless these relationships and activities are directly impacted by the current political state.

The current political reality is determined in a variety of ways. In the United States, many would point to the importance of the Constitution as a founding document and the underpinnings of democracy laid out in the Declaration of Independence as the basis for the current political reality. In North Korea, the excessive role of Kim Jung Un and his family history in daily life would likely be an overarching part of the political reality. In places like Russia and China, where internet access and press are censored by the state, government leaders are able to limit deviations from political reality so as to ensure a consistent and stable political understanding among their citizens. In general, political reality is determined by current events and the public's response to events.⁶ In the United States, political reality was rapidly and radically changed forever after the events of September 11th, 2001. In the previous political reality, the American government and its citizens operated on this idea of American geographic, economic, and political dominance. After the 9/11 attacks, the American public and its politics were much less ambitious, acting more frequently on the defensive out of fear and concern for the future. There is an understanding in International Relations that the attacks revealed a previously unknown vulnerability of the United States as a superpower.⁷ Years later, the war on terror lacked any major accomplishments and again the political reality of the United States changed as the public lost confidence in its political leaders.

The Role of the Individual and Public Discussion in Developing Political Reality

⁶ Shenhav, *Political Narratives*, 249.

⁷ Kuniharu Kakihara, "The Post-9/11 Paradigm Shift and Its Effects on East Asia" *IIPS Policy Paper 292E*, The Institute for International Policy Studies, January 2003.

Since active changes to political reality require some degree of efficacy in the public, Constructivism explains that some individuals react differently to political reality because of their identity as an agent in a larger social structure. Social identities are important in this capacity as they are sets of meanings and characteristics that an individual attributes to oneself when taking on the perspective of another.⁸ These social identities are often in flux within an individual as the individual usually has multiple social identities that vary in importance from one moment to the next. Social identities, as a result, are keys to an individual understanding their role in a larger narrative and creating terms of individuality that allow agents to relate to one another and create a larger group. Wendt described, “These terms lead actors to see situations as calling for taking certain actions and thus for defining their interests in certain ways.”⁹

With defined interests, relations within groups, and social identities, individuals then form a personal narrative. Narrative is the process and state of considering an individual’s past and imagining the future in a way that is logically sound and provides unity, purpose, and meaning.¹⁰ Through such narratives, individuals tell themselves and the people around them a story of their lives. Psychological researchers have worked to explain the dynamics of private life narration and external stimuli that influence how an individual publicly represents themselves. For example, preliminary results show that adults who self-report a strong commitment to improving society show redemption sequences, a psychological term for the experience of attributing an emotionally negative moment into a positive outcome later on. The

⁸ George McCall and J. L. Simmons, *Identities and Interactions: An Examination of Human Associations in Everyday Life*, New York: Free Press, 1978: 61-100.

⁹ Wendt, *Collective Identity*, 385.

¹⁰ Shenhav, *Political Narratives*, 247.

researchers concluded that seeing their own lives as redemptive allows the adults to sustain hope to endure small obstacles and reinforce an idea of long-term success or goal-achieving.

Frank Ankersmit takes this internal identity transition to personal narrative a step further to explain how political reality is constructed. An individual's personal narrative contributes to a larger public narrative through conversations with other individuals who have different identities and narratives. The larger public narrative is what then creates political reality. Ankersmit explains that the political reality is stagnant if each individual's personal narrative construction is in line with what is occurring in external objective reality. This is what classical theorists call the input-output model in which the citizens' beliefs of how politics operate are the input and the representation of politics by political leaders is the output.¹¹ Political reality is unchanging if the input and output are equal.

Romantic and classical theorists disagree over the value of the input and output model. Romantic theorists are those inclined to believe that public opinion create the output. Romantic theorists disagree with the input and output model because there are often gaps between the input and output and romantic theorists believe that input and output should be equal. Classical theorists explain this conundrum by positing that the output actually creates public opinion, rather than vice versa. Classical theorists point to the original concept of constructivism in forming political reality and explaining that there is a constant interplay between political actors and their constituents that allows for alterations to political reality from both parties.¹²

¹¹ Dan Combes and James E. Nimmo, *The Comedy of Democracy*, (Westport CT, Praeger, 1996): 28.

¹² Frank Ankersmit, "Democracy's Inner Voice: Political Style as Unintended Consequence of Political Action¹." In *Media and the Restyling of Politics: Consumerism, Celebrity and Cynicism*, edited by John Corner and Dick Pels, 19-40. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2003: 22-23.

Using the classical theory, gaps between personal narrative and external reality are necessary for political reality to change in response to current events. When gaps exist between the empirical facts of politics and the public's understanding of politics, the public faces a crisis of ontological security – the sense of order and stability that arises in humans from continuity of an individual's experiences.¹³ When significant discrepancies arise between internal political narratives and external political realities, humans begin to feel disconnected and powerless to change their political reality. As such, they are stripped of agency which is especially catastrophic to ontological security in democracies which are based on the idea of an individual's agency in the political reality. In order for ontological security to be restored, political realities must change. The world requires its populations to absorb new understandings and adapt to new stimuli, to recognize a gap between the input and output and react accordingly to reestablish stability. Each individual must go through a two-step process to adapt: recognition and processing. People must first recognize that there is a deviation from political reality before responding to the deviation.¹⁴ With that said, Friedrich Schiller explains that there is the possibility that some individuals do not recognize the deviation. This naïve individual forms the first of what Schiller describes as “styles of understanding”.¹⁵ The naïve person does not or cannot comprehend that personal narrative can be different from objective reality in any given capacity and, as a result, does not feel a threat to their political reality nor a need to take action to make the outputted objective reality correspond with their personal narrative.

¹³ Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence*, (Chicago, Markham, 1971): 3.

¹⁴ Ankersmit, *Democracy's Inner Voice*, 26.

¹⁵ Friedrich Schiller, “Über naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung,” *Schiller's Werke Band 12* (Stuttgart: Cotta).

Once individuals do recognize that there is a gap between the input and output, though, some become sentimental in so far that they are aware they are an outsider – or in more applied terms, those who recognize a gap between personal narrative and political reality feel the threat to ontological security and acknowledge that not everyone involved in creating the public narrative feels there is a threat. Schiller says this creates the two remaining styles of understanding. The first, the elegiac, tends to restore security by altering the output in an idealistic way. The elegiac will remedy this threat through art and culture which, according to Schiller, they find to be realistic in contrast to nature's idealism.¹⁶ In other words, the elegiac recognizes that the way they originally understood political reality was idyllic and is seeking other resources to make sense of this new diversion so as to ensure that they do not fall into naïveté. These individuals actively try to change political reality because of the discrepancy it has with what they believe to be public opinion. Such public opinion is, in all likelihood, a manifestation of personal narrative projected onto the individuals the elegiac interacts with.

The satirical individual, the third and final style of understanding, feels the same deviation but is less interested in remedying the threat they feel to their ontological security. Rather, the satirical takes a Machiavellian approach by rejecting the ideal as the highest political reality. They instead focus on the empirical reality. In this way, the satirical individual is much the same as the romantic political theorist that believes political reality's output determines its inputs.¹⁷ Empirical facts of how politics work determines an individual's views about the topic rather than the public determining how politics work. These individuals recognize the gaps

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

between input and output and say that it was simply a misunderstanding, rather than finding an explanation for it.

Ankersmit argues that interactions between the naïve, the elegiac, and the satirical are what create a change to political reality. He says like the *inner stimme* in music, which is the melody the human brain creates in the absence of an actual instrument playing a melody, the new political reality is the shared understanding the human brain comes up with despite no one individual holding that understanding. In music, the *inner stimme* arises from the interplay of several instruments playing *around* the melody much like how political reality arises from the debate between the naïve, the elegiac, and the satirical *around* how politics should operate.

Murray Edelman explains that gaps between input and output in and of themselves will not create a new political reality, rather they will only create new outputs. However, once individuals of the three different states of mind begin to interact, the discovery of opposition to one's own reaction will create a new political reality. That is, political positions are largely formed by the acknowledgement that there is opposition to an individual's perception of political reality. Such is the case because there is no need to take a position when no opposition exists as is believed by the naive individual.¹⁸ New political realities are therefore akin to an *inner stimme* because there is no one understanding that creates reality. Rather new political realities come about through an internal remedying of an individual's personal narrative in context of the other viewpoints and debate between the two. There is no explicit political reality, rather each individual will interpret it differently depending on the extent of their interaction.

¹⁸ Edelman, *Politics of Symbolic Action*, 3.

Media and the Construction of Political Reality

Modern popular culture is positioned to drive conversation. Marshall McLuhan, one of the foremost scholars studying contemporary media, coined the phrase “The media is the message.”¹⁹ McLuhan meant by this that media content is not independent of the medium through which it is delivered. Consumers consciously observe and form opinions based on media content. However, the same consumers are passively influenced by the medium through which they view content. For instance, McLuhan describes the movie as a catalyst for a new understanding of time, space and perspective not previously introduced to the human psyche. Movies are produced in such a way that consumers are privy to every possible perspective of the given environment; prior to this innovation, humans were constrained by a linear way of thinking with one person, one perspective, and one timescale. By this standard, then, it is apparent that consumers are now able to take on several personas of a character: forming logical conclusions about the way a character thinks, justifying the character’s behavior, and comparing the character to individuals in the real world and how they may react to the given situation.

Political scientists have long agreed that media content, as well, is a driving factor for individuals to create political reality whether it be through news media, modern representation of historical events, or documentary work explaining current events. The way in which humans relate to the media they consume, though, is key to understanding how political realities are constructed. In 1975, Will Wright thoroughly outlined how strongly media consumers relate to the hero of the given media content. His specific study was that of the Western canon. As previously explained, a gap between political reality and perception of political reality can create an extreme threat to ontological security. This threat is what encourages viewers to search for

¹⁹ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium Is the Massage*. London: Penguin, 2008.

reason in the media they consume. In doing so, individuals transplant their own logic of thinking unto characters they observe in order to explain any given series of events.²⁰ Humans also have a tendency to seek gratification and therefore look to implant their logic into the protagonist of any given form of media so as to position oneself to achieve this gratification. Gratification is achieved by proving to oneself that you, too, would behave in such a way that wins the approval of viewers. In Wright's analysis, he points out the uniqueness of the historical setting of the American West. Perhaps the widest variety of lifestyles and ideals in history came together in the Western frontier, allowing each member of the audience to relate to a different character and interpret their identity as pioneering at the least and heroic at the best.²¹

Content creators, of course, develop media in such a way that invites consumers to relate. Creators benefit greatly from stories that deeply resonate with their audiences and making content relatable is clearly key to this success. Such content does not necessarily need to represent positive feelings either. While audiences enjoy finding heroes to relate to within movies, media theorists often point to the horror movie hypothesis to explain that some popular movies succeed because they represent the audience's contemporary fears.²² Stephen King, one of the world's most successful horror movie writers and theorists, refers to going to see a horror movie as "daring the nightmare," a feeling he can only parallel to riding roller coasters with the reassurance that we are "light-years away" from the true danger and violence the two actions represent.²³ Adam Lowenstein, a media theorist, argues that this danger and violence is a

²⁰ Will Wright, *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western*, (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1975): 7.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema and the Modern Horror Film*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 1-16.

²³ Stephen King, "Why We Crave Horror Movies," in *Models for Writers Short Essays for Composition* ed. Alfred Rosa and Paul Eschholz (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012) 524-525.

reference to past trauma and is extremely powerful in cases like the Vietnam War and the September 11th attacks when a whole population was heavily impacted by the same event or series of events.²⁴ This shared historical trauma contributes to national identity and allows media producers to create content marketed directly at these identities.

Perhaps content creators' most blatant manipulation of consumers' yearns to relate to content appears in propaganda. Propaganda – defined as “the employment of non-logical or affective appeals in the public dissemination and modification of ideas, attitudes, and beliefs” – heavily relies on the same stimulus-situation gap to convince consumers of a certain idea.²⁵ However, most people do not want to be manipulated so propagandists are thereby forced to make their manipulation as attractive as possible. This is why propaganda often makes use of the power of suggestion. Rather than obtusely shove content into the faces of consumers, propagandists combine the unattractive manipulation with attractive stimuli.²⁶

There is a similar explanation for why late night talk shows like *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, and *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah* continually gain popularity.²⁷ There are two aspects of why satirical news like late night television is important to this study: First, it provides a social context for resolving ontological security crises provided by media. Second, it proves the influence that television can have on the public. Julia Fox, comparing television satirical news hosts to court jesters, argues that these characters are “part of the very fabric of the human experience, embodying a fundamentally human response to

²⁴ Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*, 1-16.

²⁵ Leonard W. Doob and Edward S. Robinson. “Psychology and Propaganda.” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 179, no. 1 (May 1935): 88.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Geoffrey Baym, “*The Daily Show*: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism,” *Political Communication* 22: 260.

our social and political environments.”²⁸ Traveling court jesters used to use satire to break complex political situations down into “edible” pieces of information for an uneducated public. There is an inherent fear of not understanding across human history. Court jesters, and now satirical news, help resolve this fear – this ontological security crisis – by making complicated information more accessible. Television, Fox says, is just the latest iteration as it is the dominant media of our time. These shows, by explicitly covering political content, are easily able to change the political reality by mocking some beliefs and respecting others.²⁹ This paper hopes to explain that most popular culture content reflects the same process by providing perspective on events that parallel real political events (making them accessible) and later influencing the political reality as a result of the conversations occurring about such events.

Both the producer and consumer relationships with media are focused on convincing audiences to identify with the content. In this paper, I posit that consumer identity will lead to each of the three responses to deviation between internal narrative and political reality as explained by Ankersmit, Schiller, and Edelman. Elizabeth Anker claims identity and narrative formation are emphasized by the use of melodrama. There are three aspects of melodrama: the victim, the villain, and the hero. In melodrama, the position of each of these actors is clearly and thoroughly distinguished. Both right and wrong as well as good and evil are clear and, as previously mentioned, most viewers believe they are on the good side.³⁰ With this combination of knowledge, one can then understand how emphasizing the separation of the hero from the

²⁸ Julia R. Fox, “Wise Fools: Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert as Modern-Day Jesters in the American Court” in *The Stewart/Colbert Effect: Essays on the Real Impacts of Fake News* ed. Amarnath Amarasingam, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011): Kindle Locations 1927-1928, Kindle Edition.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Elisabeth Anker, “Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media and September 11,” *Journal of Communications* 55, no. 1 (March 2005): 23-24.

victim and the villain, as well as good and evil would then further emphasize the identity and narrative the audience takes on when consuming content. It is especially important when this connection is reinforced. In modern society this is done through seeing a film several times, or more likely, watching a series with characters that reiterate the fundamentals of their personality episode after episode.³¹

Popular culture content is innovative in this perspective, then, as it combines the psychology behind propaganda and late night – that is, the ability of content creators to purposefully create content that is easily understood and explicitly intending to influence the consumer’s perspective – with the attractiveness of melodrama. Consumers actively seek connections with others and popular culture content exploits such a need for connection thereby influencing how consumers understand themselves in relation to the “bigger picture.” Furthermore, the accessibility of popular culture content like television and movies ensures that consumers are able to relate not only to the characters they are viewing, but also to their fellow consumers. Being able to discuss television shows and movies with neighbors, relatives, and even strangers creates a second layer of connectivity that the human brain inherently needs. These are the same connections that lead to the conversations Ankersmit and Edelman believe will create a new political reality.

Since it is true that popular culture content has some degree of impact on identity and narrative formation, one can assume that popular culture also presents a crucial divide within the input and output model of political reality. While popular culture can change the input by presenting a new basis for identity formation, it can also create a new output by presenting an

³¹ Michael D. Slater, “Reinforcing Spirals Model: Conceptualizing the Relationship Between Media Content Exposure and the Development and Maintenance of Attitudes,” *Media Psychology* 18, no. 3, (2015): 371.

alternative to the current external political realm. The discussions surrounding each consumer's opinions on this new output enforce a need to form a new political reality. Exploring the impact that aspects of popular culture like television and cinema have on political identities, narratives, and thus political realities poses a unique challenge to political science.

The Internet as a Modern Forum

Ancient Rome has been beholden for centuries as the pinnacle of democracy largely because of its respect for this interaction between individual opinions. Scholars have long noted the importance of public forum and debate in leading public discourse for the Romans. The key to the success of Roman Forums over two thousand years ago was the extent to which such forums were accessible to the average man. It was not, as is often heard regarding the American form of governance, reserved for a certain elite subset of the population. Instead, forums happened right in the middle of the city, open to all who entertained the idea. These forums, as a result, led to decision-making processes representative of the whole electorate because each person was equally as capable of contributing to the conversation on a given topic as their neighbors. The modern democratic form of government has spent the centuries since Ancient Rome trying to reconvene this sense of political efficacy. It is a process occurring not only in the United States, but also in the dozens of iterations of democracy across the globe. Getting young people to vote, ensuring the right to vote for everyone, and ensuring that those who are voting are informed on the issues at hand has been the task of hundreds of lifetimes. It is inherently clear that these votes are what shape any given political reality and public forums, when they were in use, were the first step to ensuring that such votes were informed by the narratives and identities of the whole electorate.

The modern era has borne witness to the rise of a new type of forum. The Internet allows for an unprecedented level of interaction across state and party lines. Thus narratives and identities of one state or party are subject to the narratives and identities of other states and parties. Such interactions only increase as the popularity of the Internet expands to every region of the world. As previously described, an individual's identity and narrative are constantly adapting to the information presented so it is not surprising that identity and narrative are impacted by information from forums. The Internet, to that end, is key to observing identity and narrative development for two reasons. First, the extraordinary degree of interaction provided by the Internet ensures an individual is presented with new information that impacts identity and narrative. That is, because there are so many interactions across the web each day, it is nearly inevitable that the average individual is able to avoid an opinion different from their own or content that changes the individual's understanding of the world in some capacity. Second, the Internet is a source of raw data in which these interactions can be observed without much filtering. Proving Ankersmit's theory of political reality formation relies on the ability to watch individuals' unfiltered reactions to one another. As a researcher, the Internet provides a degree of neutrality that may not exist if these observations occurred through in-person conversation. Furthermore, the anonymity of the Internet provides insight into what role preconceived notions play into identity and narrative formation that is not granted by usual face-to-face interactions.

Liesbet van Zoonen presents an interesting mode of analysis by examining the commentary about popular culture on internet forums. She references IMDB in particular as an unfiltered and useful perspective on the different responses viewers have to popular culture

content.³² Using her same framework, one can follow groups on social media websites like Reddit and Twitter as well as review websites like IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes to observe the dialogue that is necessary for creating Edelman's new political reality and trace the shifting behaviors related to certain content.

Another key reason for choosing to observe these interactions on the Internet is due to the processing time of the human psyche. Jonathan Haidt points out that humans feel first, rationalize second. Intuition is the foundation of human reaction to stimuli and it is difficult to convince someone to go back on their intuitive assumptions. This stands regardless of how logical and rational the intuition is. Many participants in Haidt's studies could not give reasonable explanations when the logic of their intuition was challenged, but they were steadfast in defending the intuition just the same. Haidt later points out, though, that intuition is more likely to be malleable when participants were given time to process logical challenges to their intuition rather than processing and responding in the same instant.³³

Using Haidt's evidence, the Internet as a medium, then, is more conducive to conversational reasoning about popular culture content than usual in-person conversations. If the natural human instinct is to be defensive of our intuitive feelings toward any content, face-to-face conversations provide little processing time due to the societal expectation to respond instantaneously thus leading to a more likely outcome of defensiveness rather than openness to ideas. The Internet, however, and especially Internet forums do not have any timeliness expectation in the same way that face-to-face conversation does. It is a reasonable excuse to say

³² Liesbet van Zonnen, " 'After Dallas and Dynasty we have...Democracy': Articulating Soap, Politics and Gender" in *Media and the Restyling of Politics*, ed. John Corner and Dick Pels (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 2003), 111-112.

³³ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. (New York: Random House Inc., 2012): 2-110.

someone stepped away from the computer for a few hours. This provides a processing window not present in other forms of communication; a processing window that is very important if the end goal is to convince others to be receptive to a different point of view.

A more easily understood situation would be if Person A and Person B sit down to have a cup of coffee after watching last night's episode of American Idol. Person A thinks Contestant 1 should win; Person B thinks Contestant 2 should win. According to Jonathan Haidt, Person A will immediately become defensive of Contestant 1's talent if Person B starts lobbying for Contestant 2 and the same would happen with Person B in turn. Such a situation provides an ontological security threat, albeit a dramatic one. Person A had not considered that anyone would disagree that Contestant 1 should be the winner and is now attempting to resolve this security crisis by advocating for his beliefs and denying the truth of Person B's beliefs. Most people would agree that sitting in silence after such a threat to one's ontological security would be uncomfortable. However, if Person B advocates for Contestant 2 and then gets up to go to the bathroom, Person A is left with five minutes to think on how Contestant 1 and Contestant 2 compare to one another. Haidt says that this processing time allows Person A to be more easily persuaded as he has time to weigh the pros and cons of each contestant.

Now let's say Person A and Person B follow each other on Twitter. Person A posts that he thinks Contestant 1 should win. Person B responds to this post saying, "What about Contestant 2? I really like his stage performance!" If the interaction were face-to-face, Person A would think about his response and then speak with minimal processing time because of the pattern of conversational style. On the Internet, though, Person A can take up to several days or weeks depending on the conversation to form a response. He has the chance to review both performances before responding. Though still immediately defensive, Person A now has nearly

infinite processing time compared to the brief span of time provided by face-to-face conversational expectations.

Additionally, on the Internet, the responses are publicly available. Humans want to be connected. Alienating oneself on the Internet is doing so for a much wider audience than alienating oneself in a coffee shop with one friend. To have a melodramatic reaction to something on the Internet is to allow the whole world to view your actions. Having a meltdown about American Idol contestants in a coffee shop would still be embarrassing but limited in its scope of how it may later influence your life. To that effect, I am assuming that individuals are also more careful with their responses on the Internet, purposely taking the time to process the effect of their reaction to differing viewpoints and thereby considering more of their opponent's opinions than one might in a face-to-face interaction.

Data and Methodology

Research Design

The motivation behind this research is discovering to what extent can current and past political realities be attributed to audience attention and interpretation of popular culture content. My hypotheses for this study are two-fold:

H₁: Popular culture content influences public discussion of current events.

H₂: Public discussion of popular culture content creates new political realities.

The data collected to test these hypotheses will consist of comments posted in Internet forums using two methods of analysis. Coding posts from Reddit, the first forum, will test the accuracy of Schiller's styles of understanding. If Schiller, Ankersmit, and Edelman are correct, Reddit users would fit into these three styles of understanding and conversing with other users of

different styles will create new political realities. Posts on Reddit forums, though, sometimes take years before they garner a response of any kind so it is difficult to see their effects on political reality. Holistic interpretation of two other forums – Twitter and IMDB – will provide social and political context that test popular culture’s influence on political reality through more timely interactions with current events.

Sampling

This study is expressly interested in forums that encourage interaction between users. For that reason, Reddit, Twitter, and IMDB will be the primary sites used for samplings. Reddit was chosen because of its ability to reflect the pattern of interaction between users on a given topic through its division into subreddits. Similarly, Twitter is a very interactive interface in which users rely on responses to their content to find worth. Facebook and Tumblr both have similar uses, but it is more difficult to access certain groups within Facebook and Tumblr. That is, Facebook primarily congregates groups through its “group” function, which allows users to join groups with varying degrees of privacy. As a result, this study would only have ready access to public pages. Those pages marked “secret” would not be accessible by the average person, as the researcher would have to be invited to the group to be able to join it. IMDB was chosen because of its longer existence on the Internet. Users were using IMDB to comment on television shows long before the current mode of social media existed. As a result, the site reflects a different understanding or use of the Internet than the social media we know today. Commentary written on Rotten Tomatoes, Facebook, Tumblr, and other forms of social media may be later used for further explanation, but will not be used directly for the means of analysis.

The first step in collecting data was deciding which show's forums would provide the most fruitful analysis. I chose to focus primarily on shows with a political basis as these would allow the clearest connections to the current political reality. Future studies should expand on this research by including shows with no political affiliation. However, due to timing restrictions and personnel limitations it was simply not feasible to include such expansive analysis at this time. There appeared to be a divergence, though, even within politically foregrounded shows between humorous content and serious political commentary. For the sake of equal representation, I chose *The West Wing* and *Veep* as serious and comedic shows, respectively, about national government. In terms of local government, *Parks and Recreation* as well as *Boardwalk Empire* provide the necessary division with *Parks and Recreation* being clearly comedic and *Boardwalk Empire*'s inclusion of both real and fictional government figures.

Accessibility to content was a primary concern at this stage. While it would be interesting to explore the same concepts as they apply to television shows from different cultures to which the researcher is unfamiliar, using foreign television for this analysis was ultimately ruled out due to concerns that cultural and language differences would be out of the researcher's realm of understanding. Including television shows about American national government, though, allows this analysis to demonstrate American views on foreign policy decisions and thus will give some insight into how international relations develop in terms of public interests.

The forums used for analysis were randomly selected, with some parameters to ensure that actual conversation was happening. On Reddit, the forums (called subreddits) are labeled by r/____. So to find the conversations about these shows, I simply searched r/TheWestWing or r/Veep. Within the subreddits for each show, I sorted the posts by "Top" and then All Time to find the posts with the most interactions across the entire forum. Out of concern for implicit

biases, I then randomly selected ten threads of conversation. This started with the first, most interacted conversation on each subreddit and every second conversation from then on until each television show had ten threads of conversation to draw conclusions from. In observing conversations about four television shows, there were 40 total threads from Reddit.

There is obviously some degree of subjectivity in what each individual deems part of political reality. Given the variety of commentary on Reddit, this study had to define an objective method of determination. This research included specific criteria for deciding a comment would be used in analysis; the comment must:

- Reflect on the television show
- AND reflect on
 - o (1) a real politician,
 - o (2) a real policy, bill, or amendment,
 - o OR (3) a political arena (the White House, Congress, Parliament, “my government,” “the government”)
- AND draw some comparison between the two.

With these criteria in mind, this study ruled out consideration of comments comparing one show to another show, comments simply stating their appreciation for the show, the production, the storyline, or the actors, and other miscellaneous comments that did not present some interpretation of the show in reference to the current political reality.

On Twitter, I searched the name of each show and used the “Top” tab to find posts that have garnered attention. Unfortunately, though, Twitter does not provide the same ability to sort these posts by all-time most interacted posts and the ones provided trended towards the more recent. Additionally, many of the search terms led to tens of thousands of results given the popularity of the terms used for show titles. Given these limitations, I used Twitter’s advanced search tool to refine the dates around several major political decisions. I generally searched within a three-week period following a major decision, but sometimes longer or shorter given the

varied news cycle of the time period. Twitter has only been online since 2006, but all four shows were produced prior to or during the Obama administration. With this historical window, I was sure to read through tweets from three major decisions of the Obama administration and three major decisions of the Trump administration focusing primarily on parallel events. *Veep*, the most recent of the shows used for analysis, started airing the first year of President Barack Obama's second term. In order to use this analysis on all four shows, the events analyzed were only from President Obama's second term onwards. The timelines I researched were the Obama administration's October 2013 government shutdown, November 2014 immigration reform, and November 2015 attendance at the Paris Climate Change conference. While for the Trump administration, I looked at tweets surrounding the December 2018 government shutdown, January 2017 immigration reform, and June 2017 pulling out of the Paris Climate agreement.

IMDB contained much fewer posts than both Twitter and Reddit. As a result, I was able to read through all the user reviews. Based on the dates these reviews were posted and the political figures referenced, establishing the social, political, and historical contexts of each one was rather straightforward.

Coding and Interpretation

There are two aspects of this analysis that will be of value: coding conversations for the three different styles of understanding or lack thereof, and interpreting these threads of conversations more holistically. Coding will allow for quantitative conclusions about the mode of transformation of political reality, while holistic interpretation will allow for conclusions about whether a new political reality was developed from these conversations.

Coding will be fairly straightforward. Each comment within the 40 threads from Reddit will be marked as positive, negative or neutral in reference to the television shows. Positive comments will be those representative of the elegiac style of understanding, negative will represent the satirical style, and neutral will be representative of the naïve point of view. Comments left unmarked will be those that do not represent any of the three styles of understanding as explained by Schiller.

Holistic interpretation will require going through each of the threads and determining which ones, if any, resulted in changing opinions and understanding of political reality. In order to truly understand the formation of a new political reality, the timing of the given show's release, the timing of the comments, the time between comments, and the historical context of the time must each be taken into consideration. It is important to note that these online conversation threads are meant to represent a microcosm of the thousands of conversations happening face-to-face and individual to individual through other, more private modes of communication. Such private conversations are inaccessible in the timeframe and geographical constraints of this research. However, as explained previously, the open access and anonymity of the Internet leads researchers to believe that these forums will be representative of private conversations.

Using the divisions of styles of understanding, this research will attempt to explain why different styles occur in different discussions. After that, one can begin to understand determine the validity of Schiller, Edelman, and Ankersmit's works. Using these variables will reveal to what extent users relate popular culture to political reality in these forums by counting how many comments reference both. In addition, this research will use the divisions of styles of understanding to draw conclusions about in what ways users actively interpret political reality in

terms of popular culture. It will, of course, be more difficult to measure the formation of a new political reality. Whenever possible, this study will reflect on timelines of decision-making to illustrate the impact or lack thereof of these social media posts on political activity. There is an expectation that some events will gain more commentary than others. As a result, events that gained more commentary and had an active narrative happening between users (i.e. many users posting comments with similar ideas and goals), would have clearer policy changes or personnel changes as a result. Whereas events that did not garner much commentary from social media might be impacted to a lesser extent or not at all.

Discussion

Reddit

There were 7,232 comments analyzed across the four subreddits for each television show. The majority came from *Parks and Recreation* which had 4,949 comments. As Table 1 illustrates, the two shows about local governance have a distinctly higher number of comments than their national governance counterparts. The same level of distinction does not occur when the results are sorted by genre. The two television dramas, *The West Wing* and *Boardwalk Empire*, have somewhat similar median comments per thread despite vastly different total comments while the two television comedies, *Veep* and *Parks and Recreation*, vary dramatically in both total comments and median comments per thread. Additionally, both shows about national governance have a negative difference from the total median while both comedies have a positive difference.

On average, 3.5 threads per show contained information relevant to the formation of political reality. That is, 3.5 threads per show related the politics of the show to the current

political status of the world. Table 2 shows the breakdown of the three styles of understanding across the relevant threads. Parks and Recreation has the largest average number of both elegiac and satirical comments while Boardwalk Empire has the largest average number of naïve comments. Elegiac comments were those that essentially claim they want political reality to be more akin to the show, while satirical comments were those that prefer the current political reality over that shown in the show. Naïve comments were labeled so because they argue that the political reality of the show is the same as the current political reality.

Table 1: Comment Medians

TYPE OF GOVERNANCE	SHOW	TOTAL COMMENTS	MEDIAN COMMENTS PER THREAD	DIFFERENCE FROM TOTAL MEDIAN	PERCENT DIFFERENCE
NATIONAL		600	29.5	-7.5	-20%
	The West Wing	291	30	-7	-19%
	Veep	309	28.5	-8.5	-23%
LOCAL		6,632	231.5	194.5	526%
	Boardwalk Empire	1,683	41.5	4.5	12%
	Parks and Recreation	4,949	361.5	324.5	877%
TOTAL		7,232	37	0	0%

Table 1 used medians for this analysis. While a variety of statistical analyses could have been useful for this discussion, medians seemed the most straightforward. Using the mean would be difficult because of the major outliers, primarily *Parks and Recreation*. The mean would allow *Parks and Recreation* to greatly sway the “local governance” categories. With such a small sample size, ANOVA would also be difficult because it would rule out important data that is useful for analysis. *Parks and Recreation* and *Boardwalk Empire* having significantly more

comments per thread than *Veep* and *The West Wing* reveals a pattern of behavior from television audiences. These patterns of behavior are key to revealing why some shows have more influence on political reality than others and to what extent the content of a show influences political reality.

Table 2: Styles of Understanding

TYPE OF GOVERNANCE	SHOW	RELEVANT THREADS	AVERAGE ELEGANT COMMENTS PER RELEVANT THREAD	AVERAGE SATIRICAL COMMENTS PER RELEVANT THREAD	AVERAGE NAÏVE COMMENTS PER RELEVANT THREAD
NATIONAL		9	2.67	0.67	0.56
	The West Wing	6	3.83	0.67	0
	Veep	3	0.33	0.67	1.67
LOCAL		5	4.2	1.2	2.2
	Boardwalk Empire	3	0	1	3
	Parks and Recreation	2	10.5	1.5	1
TOTAL		14	3.21	0.86	1.14

Styles of Understanding

The content of each show is key to understanding the difference in styles of understanding represented by the conversations about each show. For instance, *Boardwalk Empire* is based on real events and real historic figures. It makes sense, then, that most of the conversations about how *Boardwalk Empire* relates to political reality are reflective of Schiller's naïve style of understanding. Reddit users do not believe that there is much deviation from the political reality because the show was created with the goal of reflecting political reality. *The West Wing* and *Parks and Recreation* are often regarded as idealistic in their representation of

government officials truly working for the good of the people. As a result, most of the commentary of these shows are of the elegiac style of understanding hoping that American government begins to reflect this same idealism. Meanwhile *Veep*, once candidly described as the most accurate depiction of politics,³⁴ has the most equitable division of styles of understanding. Importantly, the most represented style of understanding is, in fact, naïve which means most users in this context believe the show to be highly representative of the way politics currently works.

Given these contexts, there does seem to be some indication that Schiller was right. With just four television shows, there is an indication of each style of understanding. That being said, there is also an indication that the satirical and naïve styles of understanding are underrepresented, which might cause some hesitation in saying Friedrich Schiller's entire theory is correct. This hesitation is valid, but it is also important to note that these Internet forums are meant to only be representative of the larger scales of conversation happening every day. Most of these conversations will be happening face to face or via personal modes of communication and unable to be studied at least within the constraints of this study. Additionally, subreddits were created for people who want to discuss these shows. More often than not, the people who want to discuss a show are people who enjoyed it. Therefore, even when someone joined conversation to express their disgust for a show, they would be shut down by the thousands of active fans of the shows on Reddit. For that reason, social media is not the ideal place to conduct this study, but does show some value as a microcosm for conversations happening all over the world.

³⁴ Dan Crenshaw, April 11, 2019, Twitter Post.
<https://twitter.com/DanCrenshawTX/status/1116351710132408321?s=20>

The results of this analysis strongly imply that each style of understanding does exist and individuals of all three styles do interact with one another. Given that implication, it can be assumed that these styles of understanding would diversify and become more equitable as the population of participants grew more heterogeneous in terms of their support for a given show.

What remains more uncertain, though, is if Edelman's and Ankersmit's conclusions about how these styles of understanding inform one another were accurate. The evidence for Edelman's and Ankersmit's conclusions vary from show to show. Qualitatively, users seemed generally open to hearing various points of view, asking one another questions and editing posts for clarification when conversations went on long enough to warrant such action. However, the politically driven posts struggled for the same openness found in other posts. Kevin Coe and his colleagues propose why this might be the case in testing the Hostile News Phenomenon. Coe and his colleagues proved that individuals are more likely to perceive bias in news programs that do not align with their political beliefs. They also suggest that this is of concern because it promotes individuals' behaviors to not view the content they consume critically.³⁵ These behaviors make individuals avoid content that confronts their political views. In terms of this study, those same behaviors might make Reddit users more avoidant of users who oppose their political beliefs.

It is interesting to note that overall the shows surrounding national government have more consistency in the average representation of each style of understanding. This might be because individuals are more willing to listen to the other styles of understanding to come to a shared political reality when that political reality is applicable to a wider set of audiences. Since

³⁵ Kevin Coe, David Tewksbury, Bradley J. Bond, Kristin L. Drogos, Robert W. Porter, Ashley Yahn, & Yuanyuan Zhang, "Hostile News: Partisan Use and Perceptions of Cable News Programming," *Journal of Communication* no. 58 (2008): 215.

Veep and *The West Wing* cover national issues within their storylines, audiences are able to engage more with policy decisions illustrated on the show because they know how they might be affected by such decisions. *Parks and Recreation* and *Boardwalk Empire* have a much higher difference in averages between each style of understanding. This might be the case for two reasons: First, the representations of local governments were not intended to illustrate the decision making process in the same way that representations of national government do. Second, focusing on local government means local issues so not all users will be able to relate to the few political decisions made on the shows.

Twitter

Twitter users varied greatly in their participation in political conversations about television shows during each political event studied. The most conversation seemed to stem from the Obama administration's government shutdown, perhaps because both *Veep* and *Parks and Recreation* had government shutdown episodes in the previously broadcasted seasons. The *Veep* government shutdown seemed to make many viewers more comfortable with the idea. One user wrote "I'm really glad that I watch *Veep* religiously and therefore know what a government shutdown is,"³⁶ while another wrote "I'm really glad *Veep* taught me the meaning of the word 'furlough' last season. I didn't expect it to come in handy so soon."³⁷ Viewers seem to enjoy the idea that their hours spent watching television paid off and the government seemed to enjoy that there was not much backlash on the idea. Another *Veep* fan on Twitter explained her acceptance

³⁶ Ryan Lattanzio, October 1, 2013, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/ryanlattanzio/status/384901703738204160?s=20>

³⁷ Jenn Carroll, October 1, 2013, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/futurejenn/status/384896474292563968?s=20>

of the current state of affairs, saying, “If it’s like the episode of *Veep* it seemed pretty fun #GovernmentShutdown.”³⁸ It is clear that first witnessing a government shutdown through a comical lens made the real shutdown much less intimidating of a topic to comprehend for these users.

For *Parks and Recreation* viewers, the idea still seemed a bit comical with one user claiming, “OMG I thought that government shutdowns were a fake thing that happened on parks and rec,”³⁹ and another asking “Is this an episode of parks and rec or is this actually the us government?”⁴⁰ These quotes might indicate that *Parks and Recreation* is regarded to be so far from reality or so isolated in its scope that it is not reflective of any real politics. Nonetheless, the viewers past experience with shutdowns seem to make them a bit less alarmist than the news headlines of the time as one user wrote, “You guys calm down. I just watched the episode of parks and rec where the Pawnee govt is shut down for the summer and they were all fine.”⁴¹

Additionally, *The West Wing* had a government shutdown episode in which the president walked to the Capitol Building on foot so fans were ecstatic to tweet about the parallels between this and President Obama and Vice President Biden walking out of the White House on foot during the government shutdown. Users wrote “Maybe they HAVE been watching the West Wing government shutdown episodes,”⁴² and “Confirming that this whole week is like the West

³⁸ Megan Gailey, October 1, 2013, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/megangailey/status/384906937860915200?s=20>

³⁹ @Stewartful, October 1, 2013, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/Stewartful/status/384927341920526336?s=20>

⁴⁰ @thisisnotally, October 1, 2013, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/thisisnotally/status/384913948132122624?s=20>

⁴¹ @zoEurs, October 1, 2013, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/zoEurs/status/384894217945759744?s=20>

⁴² Alan Sepinwall, October 4, 2013, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/sepinwall/status/386167659080863745?s=20>

Wing,”⁴³ in response to the news of Obama and Biden’s outing. Another Twitter user noted during this period how interesting it is that Hillary Clinton confirmed the Burmese government learned about the United States from watching *The West Wing*⁴⁴, perhaps emphasizing that many viewers get a lesson in civics from idly streaming the show. An apparently avid viewer contributed to this mentality asking, “Which West Wing episode can I watch to understand what is going on in Congress now?”⁴⁵ In this capacity, it seems obvious that each of these shows shaped the way that viewers understood their reality.

Boardwalk Empire fans seemed to be at a distinct disadvantage at this time. The local government of Atlantic City in the 1920s did not have these issues, apparently. One of the only viewer comments during the government shutdown said, “I’m going to pretend to understand this shutdown the same way I pretend to understand what’s going on in Boardwalk Empire.”⁴⁶

The Obama administration, however, did not seem to garner much attention from Twitter users in the other major events analyzed as each show’s viewers had barely any commentary on the presidency after Obama’s immigration policy or participation in the Paris Climate Conference. Twitter users also had limited conversations about Trump’s government shutdown as well as his pulling out of the Paris Climate Accords.

President Trump’s immigration policy provoked a significant amount of conversation, though. From cast members of *The West Wing* referring to him as #PresidentBawbag, to *Veep*

⁴³ Ethan Klapper, October 4, 2013, Twitter Post.
<https://twitter.com/ethanklapper/status/38616699920832512?s=20>

⁴⁴ Zeke Miller, October 5, 2013, Twitter Post
<https://twitter.com/ZekeJMiller/status/386591608881164288?s=20>

⁴⁵ @biorhythmist, October 6, 2013, Twitter Post.
<https://twitter.com/biorhythmist/status/386884698854539264?s=20>

⁴⁶ Josh Comers, October 1, 2013, Twitter Post.
<https://twitter.com/joshcomers/status/384898099128197120?s=20>

and *Parks and Recreation* viewers noting just how absurd this reality is, television viewers seemed unhappy with the president's decisions to say the least. Twitter user Kurt Andersen asked fellow users, "Remember back when *West Wing* was the standard for scrupulous realism and people criticized *House of Cards* for being way too over the top?"⁴⁷ Andersen, here, is indicating that the current White House has now become the way too over the top scenario like notoriously immoral television show *House of Cards*. He seems to believe *The West Wing* is way too over the top in its idealism given the current president's activities. Andersen's tweet is an important indication that television shows give a certain structure of expectation to its viewers and, in this case, that expectation of democratic ideals has not been met. Similarly, another user wrote, "Trump admin makes *Veep* look like *The West Wing*"⁴⁸ noting that *Veep*'s level of absurdity has been overcome by the current presidency and replaced *The West Wing* as the expectation for "normal" politics. *Parks and Recreation* viewers also agreed that the current White House has reached absurdity as they reflect on the show's final episodes that aired years earlier predicting what 2017 would look like for the characters. Two Twitter users seemed upset that the real 2017 did not come close to paralleling that of *Parks and Recreation*'s fictional 2017.

Other *Veep* viewers were quick to chime in as well since the show's latest season had just begun. One Twitter user wrote, "How will the writers of *Veep* compete with real-life? Prior seasons all seem weak now,"⁴⁹ while another member of the community explained, "Suddenly #*Veep*'s next season will look like a ridiculously naïve, sanitized and optimistic version of actual

⁴⁷ Kurt Andersen, February 13, 2017, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/KBAndersen/status/831197882145439750?s=20>

⁴⁸ @pronouncedjan, February 12, 2017, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/pronouncedjan/status/830950041002995712?s=20>

⁴⁹ Yoni Freedhoff, MD, February 2, 2017, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/YoniFreedhoff/status/827172244027617280?s=20>

reality.”⁵⁰ Another user went so far as to say that “House of Cards and Veep are fantasies about a better world”⁵¹. In particular, users took issue with then Press Secretary Sean Spicer’s response to the immigration changes saying “Sean Spicer is a Veep character,”⁵² and responding to a screenshot of CNN coverage of the Press Secretary saying, “This is the worst episode of Veep yet.”⁵³ Spicer had started his job as press secretary just a week before the immigration policy was announced. He resigned just six months later. Trump’s immigration policy was halted in two district courts within three months.⁵⁴ These are further indications that these viewers both understand contemporary politics and the inner workings of political office through these television shows. Not only do these shows set structures of expectation, but those structures of expectation clearly shape the way that audiences respond to presidential activities and, as a result, impact the steps viewers are willing to take to respond to such activities.

IMDB

IMDB proved interesting and useful to understand the groups of people observing these shows. The most diverse yet clear commentary on political reality came from reviews of *The West Wing*. *Veep* audiences contributed to political reality as well through their comparisons to both American and British politics. *Parks and Recreation*, however, had barely any relation to political reality while *Boardwalk Empire* had no clear connections.

⁵⁰ Eric Goldman, January 27, 2017, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/TheEricGoldman/status/825054824601300992?s=20>

⁵¹ Arthur Chu, January 29, 2017, Twitter Post.

https://twitter.com/arthur_affect/status/825725343910727682?s=20

⁵² Gerard Mulligan, January 30, 2017, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/GerardMulligan1/status/826283609015386114?s=20>

⁵³ Olivia Nuzzi, January 30, 2017, Twitter Post.

<https://twitter.com/Olivianuzzi/status/826140545076645888?s=20>

⁵⁴ ACLU Timeline of the Muslim Ban, <https://www.aclu-wa.org/pages/timeline-muslim-ban>

Parks and Recreation, and Boardwalk Empire

Unfortunately, there was no analysis to be done with IMDB reviews of *Boardwalk Empire*. Of the 190 reviews, not a single one related to any political reality. This was the case likely because the show takes place in the early 1900s and few if any audiences are able to make comparisons between the way politics takes place on the show and the way it actually occurred.

Parks and Recreation had very few comments about political reality. One noteworthy review came from a user who identified themselves as a member of their own local government and described extensively how they felt about the show. They wrote:

I've been thinking about all the ways that one could do a riff on local government a la 'The Office.' I figured if done right it could hit a chord with all the poor unfortunates like me who are stuck in the bowels of government - stuck in a Dilbertesque half-life of government cubicles.
I'm torn on this one so far - there are funny moments and places here I go "Ok, wow, that was funny and this is how it really is." Most of the time, though, It's just kind of flat, like they don't get it...⁵⁵

This review reveals much about what attracts audiences to television shows. At least for this viewer, there needs to be some semblance of reality. The show cannot be completely absurd, especially for those who have experience in the field being covered. Does this mean our real politics are some combination of all the shows that cover politics? It's possible. *Veep* and *The West Wing* often receive praise for their accurate portrayal of the current political climate. As earlier described, some viewers were even surprised to see how much politics follows timelines

⁵⁵Saskplanner9, "Not Sure What to Think After Just the one Episode," Review of *Parks and Recreation*, April 2009, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw2050036/?ref_=tt_urv

that shows have already acted out months or years earlier. Television, in this way, might be a way for audiences to become comfortable with a variety of scenarios for our political reality.

Veep

Reviewers of *Veep* reiterated the earlier point that the show is shockingly accurate to the modern political landscape. One person mentioned, “For anyone who has any appreciation for the system, however - or any first-hand experience - *Veep* comically portrays the vanity, obsessiveness, and narcissism that attract (and are promoted by the offices of) elected officials.”⁵⁶ Another user said it felt like the show’s creators had a backstage pass to the political arena and presented it in a way that had never been featured before.⁵⁷ The humor, one British commentator referenced, is an interesting choice as it differs from the usual American humor:

I am not sure if a British sense of humour can work in this situation. Americans look at their leaders as people you can be proud of and be inspired by. Us Brits look at our leaders as figures of ridicule. but that being said it is worth a watch.⁵⁸

This review suggests that Americans experience some degree of cognitive dissonance when they watch comedic shows about their government. Again, viewers are forced to become comfortable with alternatives to reality to enjoy the show. There is evidence, then, that television shows expand political imagination, making audiences think of different scenarios each season and

⁵⁶ SalsaBoy201029, “Wonderful, Acerbic Comedy,” Review of *Veep*, June 2013, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw2821934/?ref_=tt_urv

⁵⁷ Toby-brace28, “As good as it gets,” Review of *Veep*, June 2013, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw2821446/?ref_=tt_urv

⁵⁸ Kevinroddy506, “Kinda fills the void, now *The Thick* of It is over...” Review of *Veep*, May 2013, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw2793323/?ref_=tt_urv

acknowledge how that might happen within the current political reality. In doing so, these shows demonstrate a new political reality to the public – those who happen to be responsible for electing public officials – and force the public to address what exactly is possible in the current state of affairs. These new political realities illustrated on television shows could very well be the catalyst for electing officials to make certain decisions that were previously thought to be out of the realm of possibility.

The West Wing

The West Wing audiences provided unique insights as the first review of the show was from 1999, and the latest one came from mere weeks ago in March 2020. The show began right at the end of the Clinton administration and continued through George W. Bush's presidency. Reviews of the show noticeably increased as the Internet grew more accessible and IMDB users continued to make comparisons between the show and political reality through both the Obama and Trump administrations. A striking trend appeared, though, as I considered the dates of each of these presidencies. In December 1999, one viewer wrote that “[Martin] Sheen’s President is a wish-fulfillment Chief Executive,” in reference to the actor’s portrayal as President Jed Bartlet on the drama.⁵⁹ Another user wrote in February 2000 – in the midst of a contentious election with no incumbent – a more complex explanation of why the show resonated so well with audiences of the time:

Your assumption by comparing the Clinton Presidency and the current political climate to that of a television comedy is probably correct... Instead, NBC has risen above the bad jokes or rips on our political system, and created a television show that provides us hope

⁵⁹ SteveM-6, “A Great Show for the New Millennium,” Review of *The West Wing*, December 1999, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw0649896/?ref_=tt_urv

and comfort in the belief that those in government service and politics truly do care about the ‘man or woman on the street’.⁶⁰

This commenter is no doubt struggling with the scandals that accompanied Bill Clinton’s time in office, but also seems to appreciate the democratic ideas represented by the United States and illustrated in *The West Wing*.

When George W. Bush took office, the comments initially tend toward something along the lines of “This is how the White House should be!” They do take a turn, though, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and become more understanding of opposing views. Another audience member says, “The issues are contemporary, and the people grappling with them have such humanity and tenacity etched into their lives it's easy to forget it's a TV show,”⁶¹ perhaps indicating how the characters are grappling with concerns for national security much the same way that the audience is with 9/11.

As the 2004 election came, the comments returned to some degree of hostility with one viewer writing in May 2004, “Free from a need to create simplistic sound-bytes or follow poll numbers of real-world politicians, Sorkin's world depicts the kind of well-reasoned discourse lost in the modern, media-driven political climate.”⁶² This comment clearly indicates the viewer’s dissatisfaction with the current state of politics and appreciation for an escape through *The West Wing*. Following the election, a user wrote “If real politicians could be as compelling as these two men, the apathy so many of us feel towards the political process might begin to fade.

⁶⁰ Gagliano, “West Wing Rocks!” Review of *The West Wing*, February 2000, https://m.imdb.com/review/rw0649899/?ref_=rw_urv

⁶¹ Mrs_ashton, “Review,” Review of *The West Wing*, August 2002, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw0649949/?ref_=tt_urv

⁶² liquidcelluloid-1, “‘Wing’ is a beautifully written, cinematically packaged series that satisfies the audience’s desire to see behind these particular closed doors,” Review of *The West Wing*, May 2004, [imdb.com/review/rw0649993/?ref_=tt_urv](https://www.imdb.com/review/rw0649993/?ref_=tt_urv)

Unfortunately I see the future of politics continuing down the path of divisiveness and polarization that has become the American Way,”⁶³ in early 2005 implying both annoyance with the discord that arose from the highly contested Florida presidential election recount as well as respect for the presidential candidates shown in *The West Wing*. Even more obvious, a December 2005 reviewer wrote:

When you size up this White House, full of chatty, constantly debating and always pregnable to criticism and dissent cabinet and staff-members and headed by a thoughtful and literarily voracious Commander in Chief against our real life current administration (or, for that matter, the previous administration), one will probably be heartbroken or about reduced to tears.⁶⁴

A review with such disdain most clearly demonstrates that *The West Wing* gave its audiences an unusually high expectation for its government. The real government, apparently, fell short. An October 2018 review aptly described the phenomenon: “Basically liberals watched this show for 7 years and pretended Martin Sheen was the president instead of George W. Bush.”⁶⁵

When Barack Obama became president in 2008, the content of these user reviews again shifted first and foremost because the show was no longer on air. After two consecutive presidential elections with *The West Wing* running alongside current politics, this was the first election that stood on its own. The reviews, however, shifted when the show ended in 2006. A 2009 reviewer from the Netherlands says *The West Wing* “set a bar for what an administration should look like,”⁶⁶ while another foreign reviewer in 2010 wrote:

⁶³ doctor_selar, “Keep this show around, we need more,” Review of *The West Wing*, April 2005, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw1057155/?ref_=tt_urv

⁶⁴ KUALum26, “Too good to be true.,” Review of *The West Wing*, December 2005, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw1256781/?ref_=tt_urv

⁶⁵ awkaz, “They should have just called it the left wing.,” Review of *The West Wing*, October 2018, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw4402468/?ref_=tt_urv

⁶⁶ hyperbart, “They say a good man cannot be elected president. I don’t believe that!” Review of *The West Wing*, February 2009, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw2020199/?ref_=tt_urv

I'm not American, but I am interested in how the world works and I recognize the US is a huge influence on that. I don't think it's always been a positive influence, but it can be with Democrats in particular, there's hope. I am liberal, so is this show. *The West Wing* is a vision of how government can be a noble endeavour, how good people can make a difference. Bureaucracy is usually a dirty word these days, but *The West Wing* takes a wholly different view of it⁶⁷

Both of these viewers have found some degree of respect for both the government portrayed in *The West Wing* as well as the Democrat-led government of the United States at the time. This speaks levels to the influence *The West Wing* had on foreign and domestic views of the United States especially during the Obama administration. The commenters seem to concur that the Obama administration, in context of *The West Wing*, was the gold standard. One reviewer even went far enough to write, "I somehow think that the Obama administration made the people on this enlightened program look average in comparison and an actual documentary of the Obama years would make great TV."⁶⁸ While during the Bush administration the show received several comments about being too fast-paced or lacking a story line,^{69 70 71} a few reviews appreciated that the show's writers expected a level of commitment and intelligence from their viewers.⁷²

⁶⁷ gizmomogwai, "A triumph in television," Review of *The West Wing*, January 2010, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw2186171/?ref_=tt_urv

⁶⁸ leftbanker-19, "As Good as TV Gets," Review of *The West Wing*, December 2016, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw3595148/?ref_=tt_urv

⁶⁹ mal karma, "I've Had Enough," Review of *The West Wing*, September 2002, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw0649953/?ref_=tt_urv

⁷⁰ PeteRoy, "Amazingly boring," Review of *The West Wing*, December 2002, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw0649959/?ref_=tt_urv

⁷¹ szigma, "Boring, stupid and worthless," Review of *The West Wing*, July 2003, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw0649915/?ref_=tt_urv

⁷² windchimevoice, "No other word than genius for it," Review of *The West Wing*, February 2003, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw0649960/?ref_=tt_urv

The latter sentiment grew in popularity over the course of the Obama administration with many viewers touting their respect for the way elitism is described in *The West Wing*.^{73 74}

Once Donald Trump is inaugurated, though, the reviews of *The West Wing* change in two ways. Most reviews pertaining to political reality either express a yearning for a different age of politics or a disgust for how *The West Wing* portrays political decision making. One January 2020 reviewer said, “Their motivation and drive and awe inspiring and hopeful for a time the US can quit bickering and do what's best from the best sources of motivation.”⁷⁵ A review from a month earlier explains, “The characters have become part of our psyche here in the U.S. It’s hard to imagine, writing this review during the dark, dismal, days of 2019 that the White House was so...pure.”⁷⁶ These are just two examples of an overarching reliance on this fictional idealism to cope with the distaste for the current political climate.^{77 78 79} As one August 2017 review describes it, some viewers felt that “each episode is a feel good shot to your cortex.”⁸⁰

Other viewers took the complete opposite stance, explaining their exhaustion with the shows idealism and extreme nationalism. One reviewer said “What’s galling is the preoccupation

⁷³ LouE15, “Outstanding political drama with wit, humour and lashings of liberal thinking,” April 2009, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw2046488/?ref_=tt_urv

⁷⁴ apocalypse-thou, “Even for those who don’t understand politics...” Review of *The West Wing*, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw2062912/?ref_=tt_urv

⁷⁵ sankdafide21, “3rd time watching it,” Review of *The West Wing*, January 2020, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw5424373/?ref_=tt_urv

⁷⁶ LauraAnnG9, “Certainly one of the very best television shows ever made,” December 2019, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw5311076/?ref_=tt_urv

⁷⁷ A Magnificent TV Series csm-7811927 January 2019

⁷⁸ immee26, “Just what we needed,” Review of *The West Wing*, May 2018, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw4178870/?ref_=tt_urv

⁷⁹ Isenberg-e25, “A psychological antidote to not just Trumpism but the decline of Western Civilization & ‘Western Liberal’ Democracies,” Review of *The West Wing*, November 2018, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw4479327/?ref_=tt_urv

⁸⁰ mvstan905, “Great show in which each episode is a feel-good shot to your cortex,” Review of *The West Wing*, August 2017, https://www.imdb.com/review/rw3772550/?ref_=tt_urv

with abject jingoist sentiments and imperialist revisionist history in nearly every other scene,”⁸¹ while another wrote “The jingoism became unbearable and took over the soul of the show. Episode by episode it became unwatchable.”⁸² Some reviewers found the show to be a distinct form of propaganda from the liberal left: “It does not surprise me that the Republicans rose to power throughout this show’s popularity. Perhaps this is the subconscious balance of the popular mind when faced with dictated complacency in the face of a Centrist Liberal propaganda.”⁸³

Much like viewers of *Veep*, watching the changing perspectives on *The West Wing* indicated some degree of mental flexibility in the viewership. The reviewers are able to see *The West Wing* as a moral standard that the government is not reaching, but also as an American unity builder during crisis much like that same government. The diversity among reviewers and the way they respond to one another also indicate, similar to the results from the Reddit study, that this show led to debate about both current politics and fictional politics. The audiences tackled issues that the American government had not yet handled during the Bush administration and then later confronted the show’s stances on these same issues during future presidencies. They became comfortable comparing this fictional president to several real ones, and expanded their political imaginations by creating ideal policy options through such comparisons.

Limitations

⁸¹ timcurryisgod15, “unsurprising jingoist nostalgic tribute to U.S. politics in office of the presidency,” Review of *The West Wing*, April 2017
https://www.imdb.com/review/rw3685641/?ref_=tt_urv

⁸² ignastio8, “Good while Sorkin wrote it,” Review of *The West Wing*, July 2019,
https://www.imdb.com/review/rw4983903/?ref_=tt_urv

⁸³ paulcreeden3, “Propaganda of political correctness,” Review of *The West Wing*, January 2015,
https://www.imdb.com/review/rw3155079/?ref_=tt_urv

Parks and Recreation was an obvious and problematic outlier in this analysis likely because the television show is so well known. Only two of the ten threads contained any concern over politics. Of the total 4,949 comments, only 30 were related to political reality and 21 of those 30 were representative of the elegiac style of understanding. Users frequently expressed concern, especially in the longer threads, that conversation deviates away from the show because posts are so highly interactive that they often reach Reddit's trending page. On the trending page, posts appear on the feed of most Reddit users, rather than only the members of the given subreddit.

Parks and Recreation also exemplifies a wider constraint within this research. There appears to be a fine line between popular television shows and television shows that engage audiences in political debate. It is within that line that research is most fruitful. With a show like *Parks and Recreation*, the content is relatable to so many people that Internet conversations were hardly linear as thousands of people jumped at the chance to get a word in. This is emphasized by the fact that the most politically charged thread had relatively few comments in terms of *Parks and Recreation* threads. Similarly, *Boardwalk Empire*'s most politically charged thread had over 1,000 comments within it, but the majority of the political debate occurred within one sub-thread between three users. *Veep* appears to be one of the better shows at balancing popularity and political debate as it is the only show with relatively stable averages across each style of understanding.

The final major limitation was timeliness. To improve upon this research, it should be conducted repeatedly over several years with shows that are all currently being aired. Through both Twitter and Reddit, it was clear that there was more debate about these shows while the shows were being aired weekly. Because of the modern streaming era in which audiences can re-

watch their favorite shows time and again. It would be odd for someone to re-engage with a show they did not enjoy or thought to be unrealistic when it aired on television weekly. This is especially prominent with *The West Wing*. Reddit was in its infancy and Twitter was mere months old when *The West Wing* aired its last episode. Due to the lack of live online conversation about the show, the users looking to engage in debate about the show especially in recent years would be individuals who actively chose to watch the show and enjoyed it. This is reflected in *The West Wing*'s significantly higher average elegiac comment per thread compared to the other national government focused series as well as the other dramatic series.

Conclusions

Given the sample of Reddit posts used for this research, there is some indication that popular culture content is interpreted in different styles and related to the current political reality through conversation between these styles. In such a way, popular culture content of this particular sort (politically charged television shows) does influence public discussion of politics to some extent. It is unclear, though, if this would hold true in other sorts of popular culture, as *Boardwalk Empire* seems to lack influence in this capacity likely because it is the least politically charged show analyzed in this study.

With the IMDB results, it becomes clear that television is a channel through which people interpret the facts of our political reality and, in turn, set expectations for the political reality. That is, if an audience member watched *The West Wing*, these comments seem to reflect that that audience member will expect their politicians to reach a similar level of intelligence and wittiness. Similarly, if an audience member watched *Veep* or *Parks and Recreation*, that audience member will build expectations that follow this idea of humor and chaos represented in

those shows. A recurrent point throughout this study is that television shows pertaining to national governance consistently have more of an impact on political reality. Such is further emphasized with the results of the Twitter study as *The West Wing* and *Veep* viewers were much more heavily engaged with the antics of the current political climate. This is likely because of how the two shows attempt to echo political reality (with some important twists), which allow the viewers to learn while they are entertained. By lowering the costs of entry to discuss politics, many viewers were easily able to describe how the current reality reflects that of the show.

It is not readily apparent that television shows directly affect political reality, but political shows definitely contribute to public discourse of politics. It is feasible, then, that watching these shows and discussing them via social media allow audiences to become comfortable with alternative realities and set expectations for how those alternatives might work. Such expectations could be the changes needed for a certain person to be elected over their competition. On a lesser scale, these expectations might also allow for a certain policy to be accepted by the public thus allowing an elected official to vote for it without any major repercussions when that might not have been the case before this. Acknowledging there is a different path forward may well be the first step to forging that path. Television producers, for this reason, should be aware of the full impact of the content they create as well as the implications it has for certain audiences. Producers may unknowingly promote cultural and political norms that will affect governance at least more than two decades after the show's premiere.

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