Aaron Sorkin's America: Politics, Trauma, and the Liberal Genius

Samantha Gray

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Samantha Gray

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Abstract

This thesis demonstrates that, across his body of work, Aaron Sorkin constructs an American cultural imaginary that foregrounds ideas of intelligence and community, areas of his writing that have typically been neglected in existing scholarship. Scholarship on Sorkin's work has tended to focus on *The West Wing* (1999-2006), which is arguably the most critically successful to date. However, I argue that the rest of Sorkin's oeuvre just as overtly demonstrates notions of honour and decency that are forefront in the America that he has constructed, and that any examination of his writing should also take into consideration his films and other, critically neglected television series. Alongside a critical re-evaluation of *The West Wing*, this thesis pays particular attention to Sorkin's television series *Sports Night* (1998-2000), *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (2006-2007) and *The Newsroom* (2012-2014); and his screenplays, including *The Social Network* (2010) and *Steve Jobs* (2015), and directorial debut with *Molly's Game* (2017).

This thesis is divided into eight thematic chapters, examining notions of civic duty and journalistic responsibility; education, intelligence and elitism; the newly identified character type of the Liberal Genius; individual and national trauma; family and relationships; and religion and Republicanism. The thesis not only identifies the continued reoccurrence of these themes throughout Sorkin's work, but engages with their presence in American life and popular culture more broadly, such as the changing role of the genius from the Founding Fathers to contemporary television series. This thesis also examines how Sorkin's engagements run counter to more traditional media responses to, among others, intellect, journalistic practice and political action, to avoid more reactionary stances in favour of a measured representation.

Through identification of different themes and characters in Sorkin's work, this thesis argues that he has constructed a fantasy of America that presents a return to an earlier idealism in which intelligent and civic minded individuals, regardless of the industry in which they work, have a responsibility to come together in order to make nation a better place.

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Introduction — "Quo Vadimus"[1]

The third season of Aaron Sorkin's *The West Wing* (1999-2006) opens with President Bartlet (Martin Sheen) running for re-election.[2] The administration holds his announcement event at a New Hampshire high school and while they are using a classroom to go over the speech that Bartlet is about to give, the senior staff and campaign staffer Doug Wegland (Evan Handler) argue over its content. Doug is concerned that those listening won't understand the meaning of the word 'torpor', to which Bartlet tells him that if they don't, they can look it up. Bartlet doesn't want to hide the fact that he has an education and intends to continue being the 'education president'. Bartlet declares that: "It's not our job to appeal to the lowest common denominator…It's our job to raise it."[3] This moment is monumental in the context of both the episode and the series as a whole because America is presented with a leader who values education and intelligence at a time in which anti-intellectualism has seeped into every aspect of American culture. Moreover, it has become the norm for politicians, in seeking the votes of their constituents, to make themselves as broadly appealing as possible. This effectively means that they must appeal to the lowest common denominator for fear of alienating voters. What screenwriter Aaron Sorkin gives us in Bartlet is a president who refuses to make himself appear anything less than highly intelligent and expects the American public to educate themselves if there is something that they did not understand. However, it is also indicative of a broader message that bleeds across Sorkin's body of work. In an interview with CBS News, Sorkin stated that "I have a big problem with people who glamorise dumbness and demonise education and intellect"[4] and this idea is apparent across his entire oeuvre. This thesis explores the ways in which Sorkin's work intersects with notions of genius and intellect, anti-intellectualism in American culture, and

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[1] 'Quo Vadimus', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 22. First broadcast, ABC, 2000. The title of this episode is Latin for 'where are we going.'

[2] While the episodes 'Manchester Part I' and 'Manchester Part II' were the intended opening episodes for the third season, they were preempted by a play titled 'Isaac and Ishmael' which was written in response to the events of 9/11. As with much of the fall television season of 2001, *The West Wing* was pushed back until October, with the first of the two 'Manchester' episodes airing in October 10th and 'Isaac and Ishmael' airing on October 3rd.

[3] 'Manchester Part II', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

[4] CBSNews. "Aaron Sorkin: From Addict to Academy Award Nominee". 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObIfH4utYPU> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020].

theories of trauma and relationships. Previous scholarship on Sorkin's work focuses primarily on the presidency in *The West Wing*. I argue that his wider body of work provides just as valuable a commentary on the wider world. It is because these ideas extend beyond *The West Wing* that study of his writing must be more inclusive, particularly examining his more overlooked and less successful shows such as *The Newsroom* (2012-2014) and *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (2006-2007). This thesis does not attempt to examine the TV industry as a whole, nor is it an exploration of casting or visual style: this thesis examines Aaron Sorkin's works as a writer through his particular interest in intellect and integrity in the way one conducts themselves in their professions as a utopian, idealistic aspiration in the representation of the United States onscreen. Although there are significant differences between being a showrunner in television and a screenwriter in a feature film, Sorkin bridges the gap between the two roles. In film it is the director who is in charge of a film's vision and the screenwriter is usually, at best, given limited opportunity to influence, and, at worst, utterly powerless to prevent alterations once they have delivered their script. This is quite the opposite in television. In television it is the showrunner (or head writer) who is in charge of the series creative vision, and the directors are often interchangeable.[5] While the rise of the screenwriter's influence is evident in US television as early as the 1970s[6] with series such as *M*A*S*H* (1972-1983) and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) — television producer Jeff Melvoin stated that *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was one of the first to give writers creative freedom — the notion of the showrunner is now well established in contemporary television.[7] Sorkin is credited as the writer for all but eight episodes across all four of his shows (with a combined episode total of a hundred and seventy-nine) and Maciak argues that "the writer is king on television, in part because Aaron Sorkin staged a coup."[8] Despite

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[5] Sorkin does frequently reuse directors in his television series, the most frequent collaboration being with Thomas Schlamme.

[6] Traces of the showrunner as we know them today can also be found in the even earlier *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957). Head writer and show's creator Jess Oppenheimer was the creative mind behind *I Love Lucy* and director William Asher stated that "he was the field general. Jess presided over all the meetings and ran the whole show. He was very sharp." https://www.emmys.com/bios/jess-oppenheimer
Interestingly, one of Sorkin's upcoming projects is set to take place during a production week on *I Love Lucy*, demonstrating an appreciation for this hierarchy of television to which his own work adheres.

[7] Cindy Y. Hong, 'When Did People Start Saying "Showrunner"?'. *Slate*. 14th October 2011, <https://slate.com/culture/2011/10/showrunner-meaning-and-origin-of-the-term.html> [Accessed on: 25th January 2021]

[8] Phillip Maciak, 'Old Media: On Aaron Sorkin'. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. 8th July 2012, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/old-media-on-aaron-sorkin/> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020]

the director's vision being (typically viewed as) final in film, Kevin Lincoln argues that "Sorkin matters, in a way that very few non-directing screenwriters do."[9] The fact that Sorkin was the screenwriter is evident in his films through both his recurrent themes, social issues, and signature dialogue tics, however he still had to work with a director. Sorkin has made the transition to director with his latest two films, *Molly's Game* and *The Trial of the Chicago 7* thus giving him, as Steve says in *Steve Jobs* "end to end control."[10] Of course, the next sentence in Steve's argument is also telling of Sorkin's style, in that, like the Apple ecosystem, they are both "completely incompatible with anything." Sorkin has a writing staff for his television series to help with ideas but has stated that because he himself and developed his writing as a playwright he only knows how to write by himself.[11] Three of Sorkin's four television series take place in the backstage spaces of the media, and as with the frequent setting of the Hollywood musical, there is often an emphasis on the putting on of a show. Sorkin graduated from Syracuse University with a degree in Musical Theatre, and this backstage setting of the musical has been embedded in his television writing.

There are of course differences across Sorkin's television series — *The West Wing* frequently employs the walk and talk style (something Sorkin credits his frequent collaborator director Thomas Schlamme with), the micro-zooms of *The Newsroom*, and the laugh track of *Sports Night* (an addition by ABC that Sorkin was against and was ultimately able to phase out) — however, the works are connected by strong similarities. Sorkin frequently reuses casting across his projects and this extends the scripted stories and themes that permeate in his works. Sorkin also uses similar character styles and frameworks and this contributes to the authorial quality of his work. It is in the writing that the dominant ideas of championing America's liberal restorative return to its ideal founding philosophy prevails across his shows. These similarities bring a unity that extends across Sorkin's writing, despite the aforementioned differences.

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[9] Kevin Lincoln, 'Just How Bankable Is Aaron Sorkin at the Box Office?'. *Vulture*. 13th October 2015, <https://www.vulture.com/2015/10/aaron-sorkin-box-office-bankable.html> [Accessed on: 25th January 2021]

[10] *Steve Jobs,* dir. Danny Boyle, (Universal Pictures, 2015)

[11] BAFTA Guru. "Aaron Sorkin : Behind Closed Doors | From the BAFTA Archives". 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d29Xz_FS8Is> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020].

I have critically reevaluated Sorkin's work and found that the prominence of the Liberal Genius character type functions as a beacon for his fantasy America. Sorkin's work is worthy of study because all of his series aim to educate and engage the audience, bringing issues that will affect its lives — such as explanations of the census, to the dangers of misinformation from journalists, to the importance of both foreign aid and domestic social programmes in helping the poor and disenfranchised — to its attention. Sorkin's examination of the role of politics and the media in American life spans his entire career, evidenced most throughout his television series: *The West Wing* (interrogating and reexamining political power); *The Newsroom* and *Sports Night* (concerning the news media); and *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (regarding the entertainment industry). Despite the variation in focus of Sorkin's television series and film scripts, there are numerous similarities shared across all of them. For example, his works all examine structures of power and influence, and foreground intelligence, as Sorkin is drawn to writing characters who are very good at their jobs.[12] Throughout his work, Sorkin seeks to raise the lowest common denominator; he provides narratives that demonstrate the benefits of a society that looks to, and actively encourages intellectual thought and practice. Through continued references to mythology — particularly references to Camelot and American mythologies such as America as a special nation — Sorkin presents a call to duty, and places significant emphasis on honour. This directly counters what has come to dominate the themes found in the content of Quality television shows — typically those found on HBO and other cable networks — such as violence, crime and moral ambiguity. In a Q&A session for the Aspen Institute, Sorkin stated that he is "mostly interested in honourable intentions…in the difference, not between good and evil, but between good and great" and that he has only written two anti-heroes — Mark Zuckerberg and Steve Jobs.[13] Maciak argues that "if the generic structure of complex television has come to gravitate towards moral ambivalence, violence, and the struggle between good and evil in the hearts of men, Sorkin tries to tell stories about how the world

[12] The Aspen Institute. "What's Character Got to Do with It?". 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eucVNYQNGAs> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020].

[13] Ibid

can be changed by the process of true goodness."[14] Sorkin's work rejects the trend to violent anti-heroes as his protagonists are usually heroes in the traditional narrative sense.

Aaron Sorkin is one of the most sought-after screenwriters in Hollywood, and his name has achieved recognition in a fashion that is usually a luxury afforded only to auteur directors. Earning a reported $4 million per script,[15] Sorkin is regarded as "one of the only commercially bankable *and* socially conscious screenwriters now working…he has become possibly the most sought-after screenwriter in Hollywood."[16] Such is Sorkin's power and cultural cachet as a screenwriter, he has an online screenwriting masterclass for the online education programme MasterClass. Sorkin's screenwriting masterclass appears alongside other notable figures, such as Martin Scorsese teaching directing, Helen Mirren teaching acting, Hans Zimmer teaching film scoring, and Bob Woodward teaching investigative journalism. He frequently ranks highly on lists of greatest screenwriters,[17] and is one of the only screenwriters whose name carries as much weight as the director in a film's advertising — notably with *Steve Jobs* (Boyle, 2015) after winning the Academy Award for screenwriting for *The Social Network* (Fincher, 2010).[18] He has the notoriety of screenwriters such as Joe Eszterhas and the Coen brothers, and is as well paid for his projects as David Koepp.[19] While there are similarities in salary and name recognition between Sorkin and Koepp and Eszterhas, Sorkin does not write action-adventure films or erotic thrillers, nor are his films as flashy. Instead, Sorkin predominantly focuses on procedure and human interactions — particularly in the workplace — and these are not

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[14] Phillip Maciak, 'Old Media: On Aaron Sorkin'. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. 8th July 2012. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/old-media-on-aaron-sorkin/> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020]

[15] Lacey Rose, 'Aaron Sorkin Goes Off Script: Fears, the Critics and His Private Battles Behind "Molly's Game"'. *The Hollywood Reporter*. 29th November 2017. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/aaron-sorkin-goes-script-fears-critics-his-private-battles-behind-mollys-game-1062019> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020]

[16] Phillip Maciak, 'Old Media: On Aaron Sorkin'. *Los Angeles Review of Books*. 8th July 2012. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/old-media-on-aaron-sorkin/> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020]

[17] Stacy Wilson Hunt, 'The 100 Best Screenwriters of All Time' *Vulture*. <https://www.vulture.com/2017/10/100-greatest-screenwriters-of-all-time-ranked.html. [Accessed on 28th August 2020]

[18] Danny Boyle won the Academy Award for directing for *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), and Sorkin receives the same prominence as Boyle's in the advertising for *Steve Jobs*.

[19] Columbia Pictures paid $4 million for Koepp's *Panic Room* (2002) script.
Megan Turner, 'He Gets Spec-tacular 4m for Movie Script' *New York Post*, 26th February 2000. <https://nypost.com/2000/02/26/he-gets-spec-tacular-4m-for-movie-script/> [Accessed on: 19th September 2020]

typical settings for Hollywood blockbusters. The style, and speed, of his dialogue has become recognisable and has generated monikers such as 'Sorkinian' and 'Sorkin-esque.' His signature style is wordy, fast-paced and witty, managing to communicate a vast amount of information in each scene.

By 'Sorkin-esque' and 'Sorkinian' I also refer to his ideological perspective, the importance of honour and decency, the need for the combination of intellect and civic duty, and the foregrounding of issues such as funding for public schools (a plot point in *The West Wing*) that align his work with the stances of the Democratic Party. This, however, creates a left-wing bias in his work. For the most part (though certainly not always) Democrats are shown to be smart, qualified and altruistic, while Republicans are presented largely, but not unilaterally, as unintelligent, unqualified and selfish. There is also a white male bias to his work, albeit one that has improved over time, which is reflective of the white male influence predominant in American liberalism. Despite the ideological pitfalls in his writing, Sorkin's work presents a call for intellect and decency in the institutions that have a direct influence on the lives of the citizenry (politics and the media) in a way that few other television series do. Early 21st century television — particularly cable television — has been dominated by the anti-hero with series such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Dexter* (2006-2013), and *Mad Men* (2007-2015). However, Sorkin writes stories about Quixotic heroes who seek to cure the ills of the world.

The term 'Sorkinism' has been used by both fans and critics to refer to the repeated pieces of dialogue that recur throughout his work. For example, in *The Trial of the Chicago 7*, Richard Schultz (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) asks Abbie Hoffman (Sacha Baron Cohen) if he has contempt for his government, to which Hoffman responds "I'll tell you, Mr Schultz, it's nothing compared to the contempt my government has for me."[20] This echoes the final episode of *Studio 60* in which Matt (Matthew Perry) tells Harriet (Sarah Paulson) "you think I have contempt for my government?…Harry, if I do, it's nothing to the contempt my government has for me."[21] Sometimes these Sorkinisms serve to provide a link between Sorkin's fictions, tying them together in the world that he has crafted, however in other instances such as the example from *Studio 60* and *Chicago 7* it demonstrates issues that are

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[20] *The Trial of the Chicago 7*, dir. Aaron Sorkin. (Netflix, 2020)

[21] 'What Kind of Day Has It Been', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Bradley Whitford, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

most important to Sorkin. In this case it is the problem of the silencing of left-wing voices by the government by branding them as criminal or anti-American, a method deployed by the Republican Party since the McCarthy era of the 1950s. His scripts frequently employ specialised vernacular and insider knowledge that generates a feeling of authenticity to the professions that he portrays. In doing this, Sorkin brings the audience into the inner world of these backstage spaces, making it a part of this insider group. Sorkin has contended that it is not his aim to say that 'this is how the world should be', yet his body of work has formed a version of America that values honour and intellect, running directly counter to the realities of life with the media promoting and foregrounding sniping and gossip. When presented with the notion that his work is an idealistic version of how things should be, Sorkin stated "that's not me saying 'come on you dummies, why can't you be as clever as I am?' That's just me being romantic and idealistic, and trying to be as good as Frank Capra."[22] The world that he has crafted across his body of work directly counters 21st century American society; in his America, everyone from athletes to the President can, and should, strive for intellectual achievement. Sorkin has argued that "I tend to write very romantically and idealistically, so the characters that I write are going to be kind of Quixotic, and they're going to fail a lot and fall a lot but…there's a romance in trying for honourable things."[23] It is precisely because his work offers a counternarrative to the partisan disagreements and anti-intellectualism of these institutions, including a sense of achievement and tapping into the fundamental belief that everyone can achieve their dreams of being a star athlete, a computing genius, or President, that it is so important to examine his work that has been predominantly overlooked. These particular Sorkinian attributes situate the importance of his work in terms of American values and ideals, yet despite this, his work has been paradoxically overlooked in scholarly circles. Sorkin does not shy away from the responsibilities or challenges of these positions in American culture, but continually strives to remind us that citizens can achieve it with effort, intellect, and morality. In his America, those working in politics and the media must be intelligent and civic minded in order to improve the lives of those around them. The characters in Sorkin's work continually strive for a better and more perfect union in service of their country, regardless of the industry in which they work: this taps into a distinctly

[22] The Aspen Institute. "What's Character Got to Do with It?". 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eucVNYQNGAs> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020].

[23] Ibid

American mythos, that through hard work and dedication, one can improve their own life, and the lives of those around them.

Sorkin's work presents a fantasy of American life which taps into ideas of utopianism in American mass culture. Utopias and entertainment alike both offer wish-fulfilment; this is something that Sorkin himself has expressed that he is drawn to. Richard Dyer argues that "entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes — these are stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realised."[24] Throughout his work Sorkin presents a better potential for America — his characters are deeply committed to their professions, they demonstrate the importance of intellect in the face of America's overt anti-intellectualism, and they are frequently civic-minded above all else. In *Only Entertainment*, Richard Dyer highlights social inadequacies that are responded to by utopias as scarcity, exhaustion, dreariness and fragmentation, and acknowledges that "while entertainment is responding to needs that are real, at the same time it is also defining and delimiting what constitutes the legitimate needs of people in this society."[25] The needs represented are "real needs created by real inadequacies of the society. Yet entertainment, by so orienting to them, effectively denies the legitimacy of other needs and inadequacies, and especially of class, patriarchal and sexual struggles."[26] Although Sorkin's work responds to very real issues in American life such as immigration and gun control, there is only a limited engagement with other serious issues affecting society. Factors such as sexism and racism do find purchase in Sorkin's writing, particularly in his later works such as *The Newsroom*, *Molly's Game*, *The Trial of the Chicago 7* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, however, the narratives are for the most part filtered through the familiar lens of straight, white male masculinity. This echoes the argument made by Dyer, that "class, race, and sexual caste are denied validity as problems by the dominant (bourgeois, white, male) ideology of society."[27]

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[24] Richard Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2002) p.20

[25] Dyer, p.26

[26] Dyer, p.27

[27] Ibid.

There is a sustained and admirable naivety evident in Sorkin's fictions; he leans heavily into the mythology of the Founding Fathers, along with past presidents such as Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, and in doing so he elevates their qualities yet fails to acknowledge the darker aspects of their identities. By calling back to a period in which political leaders were intelligent and qualified, there is a failure to consider the social inadequacies of the time. Despite this, it is important to consider Sorkin's work, while keeping in mind the areas in which it is lacking, because his works repeatedly highlights ways in which American can improve as a nation. Fredric Jameson argued in *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army* that social democracy is bankrupt but that social democrats should talk socialism in order to ignite interest in forgotten ideas.[28] Jameson contends that Bernie Sanders currently fulfils this role.[29] While failing to gain the Democratic nomination in the previous two presidential elections, Sanders sparked interest, particularly among young voters, and inspired the belief that positive change is possible. It is for similar reasons that Sorkin's work should be watched and studied; he too ignites the potential belief in the possibility of a better world. Characters in Sorkin's series frequently fulfil the date of the social democrat argued by Jameson. In *The West Wing*, Bartlet tells CJ (Allison Janney) that "I was never supposed to win. I got in it polling in the single digits. Hoynes had it locked up, I got in it to give some speeches and keep him honest…then you guys came along and all of a sudden I got 22% in Iowa and then South Carolina and Michigan…then Illinois."[30] Bartlet initially functioned as one of Jameson's social democrats, but in Sorkin's fantasy, these social democrats are given space to lead because they are the citizens most qualified to do so. Regardless of the potential impracticality of utopias, in theory they allow for a belief in the possibility of a better world.

Sorkin creates an America in which the most intelligent members of society have a duty to contribute to the improvement of the nation. This counters ideas that have become particularly prevalent in contemporary life — from the rise of anti-intellectualism, documented in detail by Ricard Hofstadter who argued that "it is ironic that the United States

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[28] Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia: Dual Power and the Universal Army*, (London: Verso, 2016) p.3

[29] Jameson, p.7

[30] 'Manchester Part II', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

should have been founded by intellectuals; for throughout most of our political history, the intellectual has been for the most part either an outsider, a servant, or a scapegoat"[31] to the refusal of political parties to find common ground, demonstrated by Steve Kornacki. Kornacki highlights the change that took place in the political parties during the 1990s and the move away from mutual cooperation; he argues that Republicans used to cooperate with Democrats to get things done.[32] At this time of writing, during which the United States is led by a President who has a tenuous relationship to the truth, whose campaign for the Presidency and his actions while in office are aided by the biased reporting of outlets such as Fox News, it is important to consider Sorkin's fantasy of America as a form of cultural rehabilitation. Sorkin is offering an escapist fantasy and has stated that he is magnetically drawn to wish fulfilment.[33] Through focus on the American exceptionalism mythos, his work calls out to and aims for an ideal time that never really existed, yet it keeps this ideal alive in the imagination of his audiences during times of darkness, ignorance, and hostility. The ideals expressed in Sorkin's work call back to the views expressed by the Founding Fathers, and the characters in his work strive to triumph over history's darker years and keep the core tenets of American idealism alive; in *The Newsroom* this was the rise of the Tea Party, but it has only continued to grow more antagonistic during the Trump administration. As American society declines, drifting far from its founding principles, Sorkin highlights the importance of American culture for promoting a need to strive to be better by encouraging intelligence and education, and, as best illustrated in *The Newsroom*, aiming for the ideals of Camelot, and Quixotic notions of decency. Sorkin is fascinated by the inner workings of political and entertainment industries and is highly critical of the media when it fails in its duty, particularly their duty to inform the public. This idea, that these professions should be led by the intelligent and the qualified, builds on the scholarship of, among others, Brian McNair's *Journalists in Film* and Ashley Lynn Carlson's *Genius on Television*. In order to examine how this directly counters contemporary life, I look to Geoffrey Kabaservice's *Rule and Ruin* and Kurt Andersen's *Fantasyland*, which provide detailed analysis of how far-right

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[31] Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p.146-7

[32] Steve Kornacki, *The Red and the Blue: The 1990s and the Birth of Political Tribalism*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), p.105

[33] BAFTA Guru. "Aaron Sorkin : Behind Closed Doors | From the BAFTA Archives". 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d29Xz_FS8Is> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020].

extremism took hold in America, and whose members promote their beliefs regardless of truth and often at the expense of their fellow citizens. While contemporary life has changed over the three decades in which Sorkin has worked in the industry, and thus required changes in focus — for example, the dangers of social media and the Tea Party were obviously bigger concern in *The Newsroom* than they were in *Sports Night* (1998-2000) and *The West Wing* (respectively) — the ultimate ideas of honour and integrity, and the core message that we must be more civil to one another, remains unchanged.

The most critically successful of Sorkin's works to date is *The West Wing*. During Sorkin's four-year tenure on the series, as head writer and showrunner, it was nominated for forty-seven Primetime Emmy Awards, of which it won fifteen. However, because of the success of *The West Wing*, scholarship on his work has predominately been limited to this series. Much of the current scholarship on Sorkin, such as that of Gregory Frame and Melissa Crawley, focuses on Sorkin's representation of the office of the President and, frequently, its ties it to the work of director Frank Capra. There are numerous similarities between the work of Sorkin and Capra, and these *are* most evident in *The West Wing*. Like Capra, Sorkin foregrounds the importance of hardworking citizens contributing to, and taking part in, governance for the betterment of the nation, and Frame argues that "both perpetuate the fundamental belief in the United States' ability to achieve good things if it is governed by good people."[34] While these revisited tropes in his works are considered here, a greater understanding of Sorkin's unique contribution to American culture requires further study on his entire body of work on screen to date, including his most revisited themes of journalistic responsibility, genius, trauma, and relationships. Although Fahy's edited collection *Considering Aaron Sorkin: Essays on the Politics, Poetics and Slight in the Films and Television Series* offers analysis on a wider range of Sorkin's work, it was published in 2005, meaning its scholarly enquiry examines Sorkin's early material, namely *A Few Good Men* (Reiner, 1992), *Malice* (Becker, 1993), *The American President* (Reiner, 1995), *Sports Night*, and *The West Wing*.[35] In examining Sorkin's repeated tropes and conventions, this study uniquely identifies a new recurring Sorkin dynamic, the Liberal Genius, and finds that

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[34] Gregory Frame, *The American President in Film and Television*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2014) p.111

[35] Sorkin's work has also received attention on the internet, such as the blog 'The Aaron Sorkin Rewatch Project' put together by Christopher Royce, though as of writing this, the blog is incomplete.

this character pattern appears throughout his work. Much of the scholarship on genius in popular culture has focused on how genius is marked as distinctly 'othered' in its difference in order to (intentionally or otherwise) promote ideas of anti-intellectualism that are pervasive in American life.

This thesis explores the continued prominence of trauma throughout Sorkin's work, underpinned by the theories of Cathy Caruth and Roger Luckhurst who both identify the effects of traumatic experience and its psychological scarring. Throughout Sorkin's films and television series he places great emphasis on the formation of communities — particularly the formation of workplace families. Sorkin's construction of friendships and romantic and familial relationships are an important recurring theme, and the examination of it draws both from the wide variety of scholarship on the Romantic Comedy, and on A. C. Grayling's *Friendship*, who argues that friendship is the highest form of all human relationships. The analysis in this thesis also draws from a variety of other sources, including the writings of John Stuart Mill who promoted the importance of a representative government for enabling the wisest members of a society to hold influence. It also situates Sorkin's 'Liberal Genius' as a descendant born of the writings of America's Founding Fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson with his natural aristocracy, who recognised the need for genius in the successful construction of a society. The idea of the Liberal Genius has appeared in political writing since the 18th and 19th centuries. For example, the phrase was used in an 1806 edition of *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*,[36] a weekly newspaper founded in 1802 which caused controversy for publishing debates held in parliament at a time in which it was only legal to report on their ultimate decisions. The phrase is also used again by Yoel Mitrani in reference to John Stuart Mill, and the ideas expressed by Mill find significant purchase in Sorkin's work — most notably his argument that the freedom of man is dependent on the genius[37] and the dangers that arise from the silencing of debate and discussion.[38] Although the Liberal Genius as an idea is not a new construction, having been used by Cobbett and Mitrani, it

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[36] William Cobbett, *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register vol. 9*, (London: R. Bagshaw, 1806)

[37] John Stuart Mill 'Considerations on Representative Government' in *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays* . Ed. Mark Philip and Frederick Rosen. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p.187

[38] John Stuart Mill 'On Liberty' in *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ed. Mark Philip and Frederick Rosen. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p.19

becomes evident with scholarly analysis that this is a definitive convention in Sorkin's work that has been identified in this thesis, and must be considered in order to further scholarly analysis of his writing. Throughout Sorkin's work, the Liberal Genius as an ideal comes to fore, intersecting with his themes of civic mindedness, community, and politics. These characters are highly intelligent and are compelled to action through their own moral code, however, they are also imbued with a variety of foibles and flaws that make them distinctly human and relatable. The Liberal Genius is forefront in the America that he constructs, and thus should be at the forefront of any study on his work, as Sorkin is ultimately arguing that the successful functioning of a society is reliant on the Liberal Genius. A variation of this Liberal Genius features throughout Sorkin's body of work, and in the case of his television series, there are multiple examples. These characters bleed across his work to this significant extent because they are the very embodiment of his ideal nation.

Born in Manhattan and raised in Scarsdale, Sorkin is the youngest of four children (one of whom died in infancy), and stated that everyone in his family is smarter than he is.[39] His father and siblings are all lawyers (a commonly depicted profession in his writing) and his mother was a teacher. Education was a prized asset in his family,[40] and this is something that is frequently reflected in his work. Sorkin has a BA in Musical Theatre and began his career as a playwright with *A Few Good Men* (1989) which he later adapted into a screenplay. His origins as a playwright are visible in his work, and the theatrical quality to his writing is most evident in *Steve Jobs* which is structured like a three-act play. As well as *A Few Good Men*, while under contract with Castle Rock Entertainment, Sorkin also wrote *Malice* (with screenwriter Scott Frank) and *The American President*, the latter of which became the precursor to *The West Wing*.[41] Sorkin calls it a fluke that *The West Wing* was even aired, because the aim of broadcast television is to alienate as few people as possible, and *The West Wing* identifies the party of the Bartlet administration.[42] NBC waited a year to

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[39] BAFTA Guru. "Aaron Sorkin : Behind Closed Doors | From the BAFTA Archives". 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d29Xz_FS8Is> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020]

[40] Ibid

[41] In the 1990s, Sorkin also worked as a script doctor for films such as *The Rock* (Bay, 1996), *Bulworth* (Beatty, 1998), and *Enemy of the State* (Scott, 1998).

[42] The Aspen Institute. "What's Character Got to Do with It?". 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eucVNYQNGAs> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020]

do anything with *The West Wing* because as Sorkin finished writing the pilot, the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke.[43] Sorkin, for the most part, writes his work solo, and has stated that he has struggled with the concept of a writers' room, a biographical frustration that his fictional counterpart Matt Albie has to contend with in *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*. He has said that he creates shows *so* he can write them; he is trying to earn his place in the family, and thinks that if he did not write every episode then there would be no reason to keep him around.[44] While he has stated that there is more of his father in the characters that he creates,[45] there are certain aspects of Sorkin's life that bleed through into his various fictional worlds. For example, many of his characters battle with addiction, which Sorkin has also struggled with — in 2001, he was arrested at Burbank Airport when security found drugs in his carry-on bag.[46] The structure of *Steve Jobs* bears similarities to Sorkin's career. The first act, culminating with Steve's firing from Apple, is reflective of Sorkin's career until his departure from *The West Wing*. The second act is Jobs's launch of NeXT, which itself is not very successful; after *The West Wing*, Sorkin wrote *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, the least successful of his television series (despite its autobiographical proximity to Sorkin's own struggles in that same industry). Then in the final act, Jobs makes his comeback, duly evidenced when Sorkin won the Oscar in 2010 for *The Social Network*. There are recognisable themes and ideas across his writing — civic duty, benefits of therapy, myths of Camelot, and numerous others — as well as reused dialogue, in order to construct a tangible link between otherwise unrelated pieces of writing. The reuse of dialogue, which fans have dubbed 'Sorkinisms', create a pattern, signalling just how important the listed themes are to him, as they appear time and again in his writing. Space constraints in this work and the prevalence of showcased themes required predominant focus on his television works: *Sports Night*; *The West Wing*; *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*; and *The Newsroom*, but this thesis also examines the films in which these ideas most obviously occur: *The American President*; *The*

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[43] ATXFestival. "ATX Festival Panel: "The West Wing Administration"". 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHEsMDjf1dY&t=4993s> [Accessed on: 5th September 2020]

[44] BAFTA Guru. "Aaron Sorkin : Behind Closed Doors | From the BAFTA Archives". 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d29Xz_FS8Is> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020]

[45] The Aspen Institute. "What's Character Got to Do with It?". 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eucVNYQNGAs> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020]

[46] Peter de Jonge, 'Aaron Sorkin Works His Way Through the Crisis'. *The New York Times Magazine*. 28th October 2001. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/28/magazine/aaron-sorkin-works-his-way-through-the-crisis.html> [Accessed on: 4th August 2020]

Social Network; *Steve Jobs*; and *Molly's Game* (Sorkin, 2017), and to a lesser extent in *A Few Good Men*, *Charlie Wilson's War* (Nichols, 2007), and *Moneyball* (Miller, 2011). Nonetheless, author continuities and patterns do appear across his scripts that make them readily identifiable as works inflected with Sorkin's ideals. The recurring themes and dialogue ticks, while present in his earlier films, come to full fruition in his television series and later screenplays.

Sorkin constructs an imperfect world which must be collectively improved upon; an ideal in which his characters place their sense of civic duty and their responsibility as journalists above all else — including the potential for monetary gain. This first chapter explores the way that Sorkin builds on the myths of American life that have been passed down through popular culture and influenced the way Americans see themselves. Sorkin finds much of his ideals based in Camelot (both the musical and the myth) and this is openly interrogated in his series, particularly in *The West Wing* and *The Newsroom*.

Sorkin foregrounds the importance of education and intelligence, and that for institutions to be successful, those working in them must be well-educated and intelligent. The second chapter examines the way that Sorkin consistently counters the rise of anti-intellectualism that has been particularly evident since the Reagan presidency but can be traced back throughout the history of the United States. The intelligence of his characters has opened both them, and Sorkin himself, up to accusations of elitism. However, this elitism is not always presented as a negative feature or trait; these characters frequently recognise and openly acknowledge their own elitism as an elevation of standards in an era where rigour and fact have been in evident decline in public debate.

The frequency of Sorkin's character type of the Liberal Genius demands the more extensive exploration found in chapters three and four. These characters are frequently highly intelligent white males; have a strict moral code; have successful professional lives but struggle to maintain their personal relationships; struggle with addictions; have suffered from a traumatic incident; and have poor paternal relationships. The traits of the Liberal Genius showcase both positive and negative characteristics, and given its frequency in his series in particular, it necessitates a comprehensive two-fold chapter examination to unpack its complexity for characterisation. Popular culture has a fascination with genius and this

character type in Sorkin's work is held up as model leader, possessing a vision for the greater good and the success of that industry. However, these characters have significant flaws that keep them human, and these flaws are in line with the typical differences that popular culture applies to its genius characters.

The prominence of trauma throughout his work, while certainly a feature of the Liberal Genius, extends beyond this character type, and is both individual and national. On an individual level, Sorkin presents issues such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder — something that is frequently present in contemporary popular culture — and less explored traumas such as private betrayals that stem from past instances of infidelity, abuse, or abandonment. The traumatised characters in Sorkin's work, at times, construct false narratives of the event in order to function day-to-day, and control how they are perceived by others. Chapter five examines this coping strategy in relation to Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford) in *The West Wing* and Maggie Jordan (Alison Pill) in *The Newsroom*. Sorkin also uses individuals who have been the victims of racism and sexism in order to stand in for wider social problems. The recurring horrors of these traumatic events are not wholly resolved by Sorkin but effectively dramatise personal hardships that later gained national traction with the recent Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements. On a national level, there is a recurring connection between McCarthyism and 9/11 in his work — predominantly in *Studio 60*, and chapter six examines how these two national traumas have had a lasting impact on politics, Hollywood, and American life. The connection between McCarthyism and rhetoric in the aftermath of 9/11 is not only confined to Sorkin's work — George Clooney wrote and directed *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005) about Edward R. Murrow's battle with Joseph McCarthy as a timely reminder about the dangers of silencing debate through fear — and in *Studio 60* Sorkin explores the similarities between the suppression that took place in the entertainment industries during these parallel eras.

Chapter seven examines Sorkin's construction of systems of support for his characters in order to promote a positive image of what can be achieved by intelligent and hard-working people and these support systems also work to combat the lasting effects of trauma. Sorkin acknowledges the prevalence of relationships in his works and stated that "it's okay to be alone in the big city if you can find family at work."[47] Sorkin's works function as, and build

[47] BAFTA Guru. "Aaron Sorkin : Behind Closed Doors | From the BAFTA Archives". 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d29Xz_FS8Is> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020].

upon, Romantic Comedies, but friendship is given as much, if not a greater, importance than romantic love. Sorkin taps into a common trope in contemporary television fiction: the workplace family. Due to his characters' shared traits of workaholism, and poor ability to function in the outside world beyond their jobs, they construct their families among their colleagues. However, when Sorkin does feature more traditional forms of family, he privileges fatherhood over motherhood, and despite having poor relationships with their own fathers, his Liberal Geniuses are usually good fathers themselves.

Finally, in his work, Sorkin presents counter narrative to the right-wing religious extremism that has taken hold in American life. The Republican heroes in his work, as well as being vastly outnumbered by Democrats, are moderates who embody the stances of the Republican Party before it was dominated by the rhetoric of the Christian Right. Through characters such as, among others, Will McAvoy (Jeff Daniels) in *The Newsroom*, Harriet Hayes (Sarah Paulson) in *Studio 60*, and Jed Bartlet (Martin Sheen) — a Democrat but a devout Catholic — in *The West Wing*, Sorkin presents his model for ideal Republicanism and/or religious worship.

The West Wing was a significant television text that has had a lasting impact on popular culture. Any study of Sorkin's work must extend beyond this series to foreground and affirm the importance of Sorkin's work in American culture more broadly. The recurring ideas throughout his writing combine to create a cohesive whole that counters the increasingly polarised and anti-intellectual world, and he sets out an idealised roadmap for how citizens should wish to live their lives in order to improve the functioning of American society. Throughout his works, Sorkin provides a learning tool in the form of his ideal version of America. This America challenges the institutional corruption that has taken hold and offers a counter narrative to society's new norms that foster and promote partisan division and demand uncritical discourse in order to survive. We are, frequently, encouraged to 'raise the level of debate' because that is the only way that we can improve the world around us.

Chapter One — "It's not news just because it's entertaining.":[1] Civic and Journalistic Responsibility

There is a trend in the work of Aaron Sorkin of characters who are motivated by a desire to commit themselves to professions that allow them to exercise their civic duty, whether these careers are in politics, journalism, or media. They feel a calling to these professions that overrides any desire for monetary gain or self-serving interests. The 1990s saw a change in journalism and the notion that journalism should be a public service began to fall away in favour of ratings, generated by tabloid stories and sensationalism; "The emergence of media spectacle as a dominant form of 'Breaking News!' that came to construct major news cycles arose as the central mode of news and information in the US with the development of 24/7 cable and satellite news channels which broadcast news and opinion 24 hours a day, 7 days a week."[2] Kellner argues that media spectacle[3] and partisan political talk shows still dominate cable news as a result of the development of the 24 hour news cycle, and the primary goal has moved from informing the public to generating ratings.[4] The work of journalists and politicians have often been portrayed in film and television as being occupied by those who have sinister intentions, and who prioritise their own interests over the needs of the public. Films such as *Wag the Dog* (1997) and *Ace in the Hole* (1951) depict this dark side of politics and journalism which are indicative of the broad assumptions made about these institutions. Many political films, particularly those made in the 1990s, are cynical about their institutions, however, "not all movies are fatalistic…A few optimistic films show that problems can be solved by great leaders, scrappy individuals, or by appeals to 'the people'."[5] The Sorkinian utopia is an important one to study because his

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[1] 'Let Bartlet Be Bartlet', *The West Wing,* dir. by Laura Innes, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[2] Douglas Kellner, *Media Spectacle and Insurrection 2011: From the Arab Uprisings to Occupy Everywhere* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012) p.ix

[3] Kellner lists some of these spectacles including the OJ Simpson trial, the Clinton impeachment, Hurricane Katrina, and the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill. *The Newsroom*'s (2012-14) first story is Deepwater Horizon and while the staff at ACN dedicate the whole hour to the catastrophe — which contributes to the spectacle — they make the point in following broadcasts not to report on the spill in the 'A Block,' because even though the video of the sinking oil rig is "pretty good television" (News Night 2.0), it is spectacle not news.

[4] Kellner, p.x

[5] Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc. 2005) p.279

representations of these professions descend from a tradition that can be credited to the films of Frank Capra and belong to a canon of positive representations of journalism in films such as *All The Presidents Men* (1976), *The Insider* (1999), *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005) and *Spotlight* (2015). His body of work also contrasts with contemporary representations of the political system on American television in series such as *House of Cards* (2013-2018) and *Veep* (2012-2019) which depict the darker side of politics. In this chapter I argue that particularly in *The West Wing* (1999-2006) and *The Newsroom* (2012-2014), Sorkin constructs a society that incorporates the mythology of Camelot, and most notably in *The West Wing*, he embodies the Capraesque ideals of governance. I argue that in these series he foregrounds notions of honour and decency that are aspects of his ideological perspective. I also argue that across his work, Sorkin creates an imperfect world that is continually improved upon by civic minded individuals working in politics and the media, who put aside political differences and practice responsible journalism.

Sorkin creates a version of America that plays on some of the myths of the nation, of which Nachbar and Lause contend there are ten in their taxonomy: America as a Special Nation; Anti-Intellectualism in America; Endless Abundance; Individual Freedom; Material Success; The Nuclear Family; Romantic Love; Rural Simplicity; Technology as Protector and Saviour; and Violence outside the Law to Achieve Justice.[6] Myths in popular culture have nothing to do with how true or false a claim is. A myth simply contends that the belief in it is significant to the culture and, regardless of truth or falsity, it is believed and "people make choices and take action based upon belief in the myth."[7] For example, Peter Swirski notes that "today we are living in Hamilton's utopia"[8] but that the myths associated with American capitalism are disconnected from reality despite still being widely believed. These American myths link together, often contradicting each other, to create a larger cultural identity. They transcend notions of Liberalism or Conservativism to express the wants and desires of the nation's citizens, while demonstrating the type of people the culture

[6] Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, "Songs of the Unseen Road: Myths, Beliefs and Values in Popular Culture" in *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, ed. Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992) p.82-109 (p.92-98)

[7] Nachbar and Lause. p.84

[8] Peter Swirski, *American Utopia and Social Engineering in Literature, Social Thought, and Political History*. (New York: Routledge, 2011) p.2

collectively believes themselves to be. A key feature of the myth of America as a special nation is the idea of America as 'a city upon a hill.' This notion was one that was held by the Puritans and introduced by John Winthrop, whereby America would be an example of a perfect society by which the rest of the world could, and should, model themselves upon. The myth of America as a perfect nation is also a key belief in the notion of manifest destiny. This exceptionalist mythology, Madsen argues, dictates "that the United States was divinely destined to expand and to carry the experiment in democratic government to the entire North American continent."[9] However, this manifest destiny permitted, and actively encouraged, the destruction of anything that stood in the way of the progress of American democracy. Americans' belief in their own exceptionalism came at the expense of both the life and land of the continent's inhabitants. The America that Sorkin constructs in his works builds upon — without posing any meaningful criticism to its negative aspects — the mythology of the 'city upon a hill' that was promised, a utopia; Barbara Goodwin notes that "utopias hold up a mirror to the fears and aspirations of the time in which they were written".[10] Utopias are an ideal society but impossible to achieve in reality, and Peter G. Stillman notes, "are harbingers or guides for progress or reform or transformation; they are dreams or statements of a better world; they are expressions of the desire for a better life; they are satirical or critical perspectives on the present."[11] The aim of the utopia is to offer a different perspective on society, to examine the ideals of contemporary life and evaluate whether positive change is possible; it is a place that does not exist in the now but which writers and readers of utopian fiction should want to live in.

The utopia that Sorkin creates is linked frequently to Camelot, a description *The West Wing* cinematographer Thomas Del Ruth deploys when he called the show a 'Camelot for the masses'.[12] Furthermore, Crawley noted that

> The description suggests an interaction between the presidency and myth and is indicative of the show's

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[9] Deborah L. Madsen, *American Exceptionalism*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) p.51

[10] Barbara Goodwin, "Introduction" in *The Philosophy of Utopia.* ed. Barbara Goodwin, (New York: Routledge, 2001) p.1-8 (p.2)

[11] Peter G. Stillman, "'Nothing is, but what is not': Utopias as Practical Political Philosophy" in *The Philosophy of Utopia.* ed. Barbara Goodwin, (New York: Routledge, 2001) p.9-24 (p.9)

[12] Melissa Crawley, *Mr Sorkin Goes to Washington*, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2006) p.110

> complicated relationship with reality and fiction. A signifier for specific cultural values that guide the conduct of both leaders and followers, the myth of Camelot promotes ideas about fairness, justice and equality within a framework of government.[13]

The references to Camelot in Sorkin's writing anchors his work to a wider canon of civic duty. In *The Newsroom*, news anchor Will McAvoy (Jeff Daniels), explains to his Executive Producer, MacKenzie McHale (Emily Mortimer) that at the end of the musical *Camelot* (1960) "King Arthur finds a stowaway, a young kid, and he orders the kid to run from village to village, telling everyone about Camelot and the Knights of the Round Table so that everyone will know it's possible."[14] The end of this episode sees Jenna Johnson (Riley Voelkel), the sorority girl at whom he ranted in the first episode, applying for an internship. She understands the importance of what they are trying to accomplish in returning honour to journalism and is inspired to join their quest. Jenna becomes Will's 'kid at the end of *Camelot*.' Camelot is a reference that bleeds across Sorkin's work and in *The West Wing*, Sam (Rob Lowe) and Malory (Alison Smith) discuss a speech he wrote for Bartlet (Martin Sheen) following a bombing at a college:

> Mallory: "This is the time for American heroes and we reach for the stars" I'm weak.
> Sam: Yeah, I think I stole that from *Camelot*.[15]

References to Camelot in *The West Wing* also connects the series to a greater political history by coupling it with the Kennedy administration — an administration that merged political excellence with artistic greatness to create a mythology that has far out lived the man. In the wake of Kennedy's assassination in November 1963, Jacqueline Kennedy made reference to *Camelot*. She told *Life* magazine that Kennedy's favourite line was "don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot"[16] and she stated that "there'll be great Presidents again…but there'll never be another Camelot

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[13] Crawley, p.110-111

[14] 'The Greater Fool', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 10. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[15] '20 Hours in America Part I', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

[16] Theodore H. White, 'Epilogue' *Life.* 6th December 1963. p159

again."[17] Frame discusses the continued presence of Kennedy, arguing that "he has proved an enormous influence on representation of the presidency; his benign spectre lurks at the edges of Sorkin's presidential fictions"[18] and links his work to an admired historical figure. In creating Bartlet, Sorkin drew from numerous presidents, however there are several similarities between Bartlet and Kennedy. Both are New England Democrats, both are Catholic, and both beat a senator from Texas for the nomination but then made these senators their Vice President in order to appeal to the South. Chafe argues that over four decades later it is still hard to put Kennedy's presidency into any real perspective because,

> there was something larger than life about the man, his presidency, his death, and his impact on the American people. Part of this he created himself through his extraordinary style and image. With as much artifice as conviction, the Kennedys helped to generate the myth of Camelot - the beautiful and stylish wife, the active and attractive leader, the high culture, the court entourage of brilliant and dedicated public servants - a time that belonged, by design, with the legends of chivalric courts. Americans had found - or were offered - a dashing young monarch who had succeeded in creating a link in the fantasy life of his fellow citizens between their everyday world and the glamor and glitter of the oval office.[19]

Sorkin echoes this by constructing an America, particularly in *The West Wing* and *The Newsroom*, in which his leaders are Arthurian kings, their staffers are the Knights of the Round Table, and his institutions are Camelot. Janet McCabe notes that "this version of the presidency is about creating myths of American presidential power - duty and loyalty, honorable [sic] individuals fighting for higher principles."[20] Throughout his television series, but most evidently seen in *The West Wing* and *The Newsroom*, Sorkin echoes the presidential myths and ideals of Camelot.

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[17] Ibid

[18] Gregory Frame, *The American President in Film and Television*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2014) p.34

[19] William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*. 7th Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.210

[20] Janet McCabe, *The West Wing: TV Milestones Series*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013) p.69

Mythic idealisation is not a new feature of Hollywood, as "many of the 1930s films harked back to previous, kinder, reverential eras as much as recent movies have, though granted not with the same knowing reconstruction of a cinematic tradition to play with."[21] While films of the 1930s look back to past eras, Sorkin's work specifically looks back to Capra's films; Frame notes that,

> The West Wing is heavily indebted to the Capraesque notion that the American system is inherently good, and it can achieve great things if it is maintained by honest, hardworking individuals with noble intentions.[22]

In the first season of *The West Wing* (1999-2006), Communications Director, Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff), states his belief that,

> The government can be a place where people come together and where no one gets left behind. No one gets left behind, an instrument of good.[23]

This idea is applicable not just to *The West Wing*, but also to Sorkin's wider body of work, whether the system in question is the news media, the military or even the entertainment industry.[24] While the institutions that his characters work in do not always have the same impact on the lives of citizens as those working for *The West Wing's* Bartlet Administration, most of his heroes strive to bring a sense of integrity to their professions, and in doing so present a version of America that is occupied by people who are inherently good and progress to influential positions because of this goodness. For John Dewey, an influential writer on social thought and who advocated for educational reforms, the essence of democracy was "the widespread participation and interaction of the public in social and organisational functions of the state."[25] Many of the films by Frank Capra praised the

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[21] Ian Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film*, 2nd Edition. (Edinburgh: EdinburghUniversity Press, 2011) p.30

[22] Frame, p.111

[23] 'He Shall, from Time to Time…', *The West Wing,* dir. by Arlene Sanford, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 12. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[24] In *Studio 60*, Sorkin places the same importance on running a late night comedy show as he does on running the country.

[25] Scott, p.41

democratic institutions of the United States, and his characters were "idealistic and honest, often to a fault, and used politics, or at minimum their livelihood, to battle entrenched selfish interests."[26] In *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) the protagonist, Jefferson Smith (James Stewart), goes to Washington to fill a seat in the Senate but is quickly disillusioned by the corruption that he encounters. The climax of the film sees the protagonist putting the faith he previously lost back into the system by conducting a filibuster to thwart his political adversary. Echoes of this film can be found in both 'Mr Willis of Ohio'[27] and 'The Stackhouse Filibuster'[28] episodes of *The West Wing*. In 'The Stackhouse Filibuster' Howard Stackhouse (George Coe) is a senator who is seeking funding for children with autism. While, at first, his filibuster infuriates the White House senior staff, they come to recognise the nobility in his actions and mobilise other senators to prevent him collapsing by allowing him to yield for questions. Press Secretary, CJ Cregg (Allison Janney), states that "if politics brings out the worst in people then maybe people bring out the best."[29] The staff is moved by the dedication of Stackhouse, and he serves as reminder of the ability that the individual can have in making a difference in Sorkin's ideal government.[30] The question of the filibuster has been heavily discussed in recent years, with Democrat candidates for the 2020 US Presidential election such as Senator Kamala Harris suggesting the need for it to be eradicated should the senate still have a Republican majority, in order to prevent senate republicans blocking legislation.[31]

In 'Mr Willis of Ohio,' Joe Willis (Al Fann) is a social studies teacher who is temporarily filling a seat in the House of Representatives that was previously occupied by his late wife. Willis becomes the Capra everyman who responds to the call of civic duty and makes a

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[26] Mark Sachleben and Kevan M. Yenerall, *Seeing the Bigger Picture*, 2nd Edition. (New York: Peter Lang, 2012) p.19

[27] 'Mr Willis of Ohio', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 6. First broadcast, NBC, 1999

[28] 'The Stackhouse Filibuster', *The West Wing,* dir. by Bryan Gordon, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 17. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

[29] Ibid

[30] 'The Stackhouse Filibuster' was made at the beginning of the 21st century, and this was a time of deep political divisions, particularly following the controversial outcome of the 2000 Presidential Election. The idea that an individual can unite a disagreeable political body would have undoubtedly been an appealing one.

[31] Eric Bradner and Caroline Kelly, 'Kamala Harris says she would eliminate the filibuster to pass Green New Deal' *CNN*, 4th September 2019 <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/09/04/politics/kamala-harris-eliminate-filibuster-green-new-deal-climate-town-hall/index.html> [Accessed on: 26th September 2019]

difference in government. Sachleben and Yenerall note that 'Mr Willis of Ohio' celebrates the two ideas of a participatory democracy:

> First, the notion of inclusion in a pluralistic system - that teachers and minorities can serve in the highest levels of governance - is promoted. Second, Rep. Willis uses his power not for personal gain or petty politics but for public service in the grandest sense: putting country and what is right above all tactical political considerations.[32]

Mr Willis, despite being the outsider and the everyman, shares the ideals of the senior staff. Sorkin constructs a world in which the importance of fulfilling one's civic duty is paramount to the success of a liberal democracy, and these ideas are firmly rooted in the Capra tradition. In *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* the protagonist "heroically takes to the senate floor and speaks until he collapses from exhaustion, his actions restoring the faith in a corrupt system"[33] and this idea of civic duty as a heroic virtue is one that Sorkin has repeatedly uses in his work. Capra films such as *Mr Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr Smith Goes to Washington,* and *Meet John Doe* (1941) all explore the encounter between the innocent, and at times politically inexperienced individual, and potentially corrupting force of the political system. The films' narratives then show how this individual rises to meet the challenges of government while still remaining honest.

Sorkin's writing, like a contemporary Capra, presents viewers "with plotlines that routinely celebrated diversity, pluralism, enlightened citizenship, and the finest (if quite imperfect) aspects of democratic governance."[34] This is indicative of Sorkin's romantic tendency; he imagines a better world, even when this stretches the limits of what might be possible in reality. His characters not only advocated for American citizens, but also for the rights of citizens from other nations, particularly those with the desire to live in America. One of the interwoven stories of the first episode of *The West Wing* sees 1200 Cubans sailing from Havana to Miami in hopes of a life in the United States. President Bartlet tells his staff that "with the clothes on their backs, they came through a storm. And the ones that didn't die

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[32] Sachleben and Yenerall. p.27-28

[33] Crawley, p.35

[34] Sachleben and Yenerall. p.26

want a better life and they want it here."[35] This storyline highlights that the sense of morality and responsibility this administration feels towards American citizens extends to those wishing to make a new life for themselves in America. Initially when the staff is debating what to do about the situation, Toby tells them that "they're running for their lives…you send food and you send doctors."[36] The attitude towards immigration that is displayed by this administration is indicative of the show's left-wing liberal stand point that is a dominant feature in all of Sorkin's work. The notion that America should offer shelter to those in need, and the views expressed by the characters of this White House, hail back to the sonnet 'The New Colossus' by Emma Lazarus which is inscribed on the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."[37] For this administration it is their duty to welcome those in need of a new life. Deputy Chief of Staff, Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford), suggests tipping off the D.A that the incoming Cubans are bringing drugs in to the country in order to provide them with first aid.[38] Here, honesty and doing their duty are in conflict, and the characters recognise the importance of a government that is able to exhibit its humanity.

Sorkin replicates the encounter between the innocent individual and the corrupt system most notably through Deputy Communications Director, Sam Seaborn, who of the Bartlet administration's senior staff particularly embodies the attributes of Capra's 'everyman.'[39] Sam comes from a legal background, rather than a political one, and he often has a naive belief in the inherent goodness of the political system, despite repeatedly bearing witness to events that evidence the contrary. In the first episode he sleeps with an escort, Laurie (Lisa Edelstein), who is engaging in prostitution to put herself through law school.[40] Sam is undeterred by this and, without any preconceived judgement on Laurie's profession,

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[35] 'Pilot', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, NBC, 1999

[36] Ibid

[37] Emma Lazarus,'The New Colossus' in *Emma Lazarus: Selected Poems*, ed. by John Hollander. (United States: Library of America, 2005) p.58

[38] 'Pilot', *The West Wing*

[39] When Sam is introduced he meets an escort and the potential political scandal is reflective of the Monica Lewinsky scandal that dominated the media in the late 1990s.

[40] 'Pilot', *The West Wing*

seeks out a friendship with her despite objections from his colleagues due to the political dangers this could expose the administration to:

> CJ: You work at the White House, you work fifty feet from the Oval Office, and your consorting with a—
> Sam: Consorting? I'm friendly with a woman, I like this woman. This woman poses no threat to the president. And it's very likely that owing to my friendship, this woman may start living her life in bound, ensuring for herself a greater future and isn't that exactly what we're supposed to be doing here?[41]

While Sam's intention to reform Laurie is a problematic one — she indicates that she neither wants nor needs him to save her, yet he ignores this — his belief in the goodness of the system blinds him to the political problems that his friendship with her could cause. Crawley notes that "Sam becomes an agent of the ideal administration. His faith in the government's role and his part in it is so strong that even when faced with the potential that his actions could cause damage to the president, he does not relent."[42] Furthermore, this storyline continues throughout the first season of the show as he refuses to hear the advice of his more politically experienced colleagues when they explain the dangers of this friendship. Sam is an unwaveringly hopeful character; he also has a deep faith in the duty of the government to further the progress of America through discovery. Crawley notes that "In Sam's vision, it is the Bartlet administration's obligation to support and fulfil the country's destiny, which embraces the spirit of achievement and adventure."[43] Sam believes that it is his civic duty to advocate for the progress of science and exploration, he seeks to aid a professor's attempt to fund a supercollider, and when asked what it is used for, because it has no practical applications, Sam states "it's for discovery."[44] Similarly, Sam also argues in defence of travel to Mars, despite the cost of it

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[41] 'A Proportional Response', *The West Wing,* dir. by Marc Buckland, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, NBC, 1999

[42] Crawley. p.96

[43] Crawley. p.99

[44] 'Dead Irish Writers', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 15. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

> For we came out of the cave, and we looked over the hill, and we saw fire. And we crossed the ocean, and we pioneered the West, and we took to the sky. The history of man is built on a timeline of exploration, and this is what's next.[45]

For Sam, exploration and discovery are important because progress is what America is founded upon and it is their duty as occupiers of the highest office to fulfil the promise of the nation. This promise exists only as a promise, and when it is put into action it is corrupted. These promises exist only in the space of the imaginary, yet they are constantly reworked by Sorkin in his writing because despite their corruptible nature, the mythology on which they are built still holds a powerful attraction. It is this same sense of civic duty that leads Sam to offer to become the nominee for the California 47th should the Democrats win after the death of candidate Horton Wilde. While he initially regrets his offer because it will mean leaving the White House, his choice is indicative of his inherent belief in the importance of civic responsibility.[46]

Sam's political naivety, however, also opens him up to manipulation. In 'The Black Vera Wang' he is anonymously sent a Bartlet attack advert and despite instructions not to, he returns it to the Republican Ritchie campaign out of a sense of honour. This allows the Ritchie campaign to air an attack while claiming it to be news. Sam is blinded by his own sense of honour and duty and falsely believes that those working in government, regardless of political party, shared these beliefs. Like Jefferson Smith, the end of the episode sees Sam forced to face his political disillusionment alone.[47] As with Jefferson Smith, Sam "is naive yet hopeful, antiquated yet eternally optimistic"[48] and Sam's characteristics hail back to the heroes of Capra's work, who have "an element of uninhibited boyishness about them, reflecting their innocence."[49] Sam's lack of political experience in comparison with his

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[45] 'Galileo', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin and Kevin Falls, season 2, episode 9. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[46] 'Game On', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin and Kevin Paul Redford, season 4, episode 6. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

[47] 'The Black Vera Wang', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

[48] Scott, p.61

[49] Jeffrey Richards, "Frank Capra and the Cinema of Populism" in *Movies and Methods*, ed. Bill Nichols, (California: University of California Press, 2004) p.65-77 (p.70)

colleagues opens him up to feelings of disappointment with the system, and yet it also fosters in him the fundamental belief in the importance of civic duty and his responsibility to advocate for it.

The America that Sorkin has constructed is an ideal one because it is imperfect; he has created a version of the nation which is continually supposed to be improved upon by his characters, those who have proved themselves to be honest, hard-working and civic minded individuals. In 'Six Meetings Before Lunch' Josh meets with a civil rights lawyer, Jeff Breckenridge (Carl Lumbly), who believes that African Americans are owed $1.7 trillion in slavery reparations. Josh and Jeff argue over this issue and Jeff points to the inscription on the dollar bill and explains that debating issues such as this is what they are supposed to do in order to improve the country:

> The seal, the pyramid, it's unfinished. With the eye of God looking over it. And the words 'Annuit Coepis.' He, God, favours our undertaking. The seal is meant to be unfinished, because this country's meant to be unfinished. We're meant to keep doing better. We're meant to keep discussing and debating and we're meant to read books by great historical scholars and talk about them.[50]

The success of this constructed America is reliant upon discussion of diverse ideas and the cooperation of those of differing political beliefs. The issue of reparations has been a frequent discussion point in the 2020 Democratic Primary debates, and this indicates the longevity of Sorkin's work.[51] The ideas about which he is encouraging discussion are ones that are still affecting society. In the second season Bartlet has Leo (John Spencer) hire lawyer Ainsley Hayes (Emily Procter) for the White House council despite her being a Republican. Leo tells her that "the President likes smart people who disagree with him. He wants to hear from you. The President is asking you to serve and everything else is crap."[52]

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[50] 'Six Meetings Before Lunch', *The West Wing,* dir. by Clark Johnson, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 18. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[51] Hubert Adjei-Kontoh and Oliver Laughland, 'Democrats and slavery reparations: where do 2020 candidates stand?' *The Guardian*, 21st March 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/mar/21/reparations-slavery-2020-democratic-candidates> [Accessed on: 24th January 2020]

[52] 'In This White House', *The West Wing,* dir. by Ken Olin, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 4. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

Ainsley shares the sense of civic duty that the members of the Bartlet administration exhibit, and for her this sense of duty overrides her political views, unlike in *The Newsroom,* which is more reflective of the polarising politics of the United States. In *The Federalist No. 10*, James Madison argued that:

> a zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points, as well as of speculation as of practice; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other then to cooperate for their common good.[53]

This is reflected in *The Newsroom* when attention is drawn to the lack of cooperation between Democrats and Republicans. Will — albeit a Republican himself — interviews a Congressman who lost his seat, after a career of political experience, to a dentist because he cosponsored a bill with a Democrat. "Once you're elected, you have a duty to work with other people who have been elected. My friends across the aisle have been elected."[54] Here, Sorkin shows that when people cannot overcome their political biases the country suffers through the loss of experienced individuals advocating for the rights of its citizens.

Sorkin's writing is frequently described as liberal, and ideas that are pursued by left wing politicians, such as citizen participation and reform, are in line with traditional republicanism. James A. Morone notes that "the Left pursues it, perhaps, its purest form, through neighborhood [sic] democracy, worker participation, and community organising."[55] For the original republicans of the new United States, the political ideal came from the contribution of citizens compelled by their sense of civic duty, and these are the same ideas which have been adopted by more liberal democrats of contemporary politics, which

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[53] James Madison, "The Federalist No. 10" in *American Political Thought,* ed. Kenneth M. Dolbeare and Michael S. Cummings, (Washington: CQ Press, 2010) p.93

[54] 'The 112th Congress', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin and Gideon Yago, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[55] James A. Morone, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) p.6

evidently find purchase in Sorkin's writing. For the founders, politics was driven by a sense civic duty, and not personal gain. Morone also explains that,

> Natural leaders were expected to rise up among the people, others would acknowledge their place within the natural order and contribute their own talents to the common good.[56]

Eighteenth century politician Henry St John, Viscount Bolingbrook, who was a great influence on America's Founding Fathers, wrote about the idea of the patriot king. The patriot king would be a "paragon of 'liberty and good government,' would rule above party…and make 'public virtue and real capacity'"[57] the underlying principle of government. For the most part, the founders rejected the notion of a monarchy, however Alexander Hamilton was against term limits, favouring the idea of a president for life. He was concerned about past presidents "wandering among the people like disconnected ghosts, and sighing for a place which they were destined never more to possess".[58] Hamilton's ideal leaders would be these patriot kings. A flashback sequence of the second season premiere of *The West Wing* shows Josh working for the then Senator, John Hoynes (Tim Matheson), who is running for president. Josh, however, is dissatisfied with Hoynes as a candidate and tells him "I don't know what we're for, and I don't know what we're against. Except we seem to be for winning and against somebody else winning."[59] It is this dissatisfaction that sends Josh to Bartlet's campaign. Bartlet is the real thing, the natural leader that Morone describes. Leo tells Bartlet that "They say a good man can't get elected president. I don't believe that."[60] It is because Bartlet is a good man with a strong set of beliefs that he's able to win the election. The staffers Bartlet collects along the way recognise his status as one of society's natural leaders and patriot kings; it is this that prompts them to join him, often leaving more lucrative positions in the private sector to do so. As previously discussed in this

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[56] Morone. p.16

[57] Jeff Smith, *The Presidents We Imagine: Two Centuries of White House Fictions on the Page, on the Stage, Onscreen, and Online* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009) p.16

[58] Alexander Hamilton 'The Federalist No.72' in *Alexander Hamilton: Writings*. Ed. Joanne B. Freeman. (New York: The Library of America, 2001) p.390

[59] 'In the Shadow of Two Gunmen Part I', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 1. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[60] Ibid

chapter, Sam left his job as a corporate lawyer, and in 'Night Five' Josh's assistant Donna Moss (Janel Molony) is offered a job at an internet start-up company for more money than she's currently earning but she turns it down.[61] Similarly in 'Evidence of Things Not Seen', Josh's interviewing Republican lawyer Joe Quincy (Matthew Perry), who is on his way to another interview for $225,000 a year. However, this firm is his fall back, and he states 'I like public service. I want to serve."[62] This is indicative of the attitude of all of the administration's staff, regardless of better monetary offers or political beliefs: they all recognise the value of service to their government. This theme is continued in *The Newsroom*, when financial news anchor Sloan Sabbith (Olivia Munn) declines a Wall Street position, revealing "I just turned down $4 million a year so that I can try to do some good by reporting the news."[63] In Aaron Sorkin's America civic and journalistic responsibility come before high salaries. The heroes of this America recognise the importance of civic duty and the role that they play, as evidenced when Bartlet hires Will Bailey (Joshua Malina) to replace Sam:

> Bartlet: There's a promise that I ask everyone who works here to make. Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. You know why?
> Will: It's the only thing that ever has.[64]

The idea that a small civic minded group of people can make significant changes in the institutions with which they work is a theme that recurs throughout Sorkin's writing, and presents an idealised and romantic view of the United States. Frame notes that,

> In keeping with the programme's challenge to widespread cynicism about contemporary politics, it reverts to an older attitude towards the individual and the political system established in American cinema by

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[61] 'Night Five', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christoper Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 13. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

[62] 'Evidence of Things Not Seen', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christoper Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 20. First broadcast, NBC, 2003

[63] 'The Greater Fool'

[64] 'Inauguration: Over There', *The West Wing,* dir. by Lesli Linka Glatter, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 15. First broadcast, NBC, 2003

> Frank Capra, revisiting the notion that the exceptional person…can rescue the process from media influence.[65]

While here Frame is referring to Matt Santos (Jimmy Smits) who was added to *The West Wing*'s cast of characters after Aaron Sorkin had left the series, this is also applicable to Sorkin's characters more widely — Bartlet's sense of duty is shown to be something that he had even while at school. School secretary Mrs Landingham, who then went on to become Bartlet's secretary while he was Governor of New Hampshire and then President, wants him to raise the gender pay gap issue with his father, the school's headmaster. She tells him "you know I'm right. You've known it since I brought it up, you've known it since before that."[66] The inclusion of this gives credence to the idea of Bartlet as a natural leader with an ingrained sense of civic responsibility, rather than it being a learned characteristic.

Much of Sorkin's work constructs a positive image of institutions that are often presented in a negative light, resulting in "something between a morality tale and a civics lesson."[67] However, writing for *The Weekly Standard* in 2000, conservative columnist John Podhoretz accused the show of being unrealistic, as the characters were not people, but rather noble soldiers fighting for a good cause.[68] While this is intended as a criticism of the series, Sorkin regards this not as a character flaw, but proof of character and it is embraced, not just in *The West Wing*, but in much of his other works too. Elizabeth Skewes notes that "critics and scholars have debated the show's realism, with most concluding that the White House of Josiah Bartlet is an idealized one, even an overly noble one, but that with enough pragmatism and politics that the line between reality and fiction is easily blurred for most viewers."[69]

In *Studio 60*, upon hearing that the show's musicians are calling in sick to allow for New Orleans musicians, who were displaced by Hurricane Katrina the year before, a chance

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[65] Gregory Frame, '"The Real Thing": Election Campaigns and The Question of Authenticity in American Film and Television.' *Journal of American Studies.* 50:3 (2016) 755-777 (758)

[66] 'Two Cathedrals', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

[67] Dean J, DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) p.137

[68] John Podhoretz, 'The Liberal Imagination' *The Weekly Standard.* 27th March 2000. http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-liberal-imagination/article/12329 [Accessed on: 11th January 2018]

[69] Elizabeth A. Skewes, 'Presidential Candidates and the Press on *The West Wing* and in the Real World.' *Quarterly Review of Film and Video.* 26:2 (2009) 131-142 (133)

to work, writer Matt Albie (Matthew Perry) and Executive Producer Danny Tripp (Bradley Whitford) cut one of their sketches to make room for a performance by these New Orleans musicians:

> Players all over town — here, *The Tonight Show*, session players, pit bands — they're trying to do it under the radar, but they're calling in sick…They heard there were basically homeless musicians in town from New Orleans. They're sleeping on peoples couches…The LA guys are trying to get them a union card and a pay cheque so they can send some presents home.[70]

In Sorkin's America, anyone from the president to the producers and musicians of a comedy sketch show feel a sense of duty, and a moral call to do the right thing. However there are times in which his heroes attempt to shirk away from this responsibility. Donna spends the episode 'The Two Bartlets' trying to avoid jury duty, despite having already made use of her four deferrals, as it will interfere with her dating life; she tells Josh that "the trick, obviously, is appearing unsuitable not just for this, but for any jury, while avoiding a contempt citation."[71] Similarly in the season three premiere of *The Newsroom* Don Keefer (Thomas Sadoski) successfully avoids having to do jury duty.

> You don't want leaders on the jury, right? Anyone who can take charge during deliberations. I run a news broadcast five nights a week with a staff of sixty and I bend them to my will. Plus, I'm currently the defendant in two different lawsuits being brought by the same person, so even though I bought your client's bagel slicer at 3AM and it nearly took my fingers off, there is simply no way in hell that I am finding for the plaintiff.[72]

Don, unlike Donna, wishes to avoid his call to jury duty for more noble reasons, as he has just received news of the terrorist attack at the Boston Marathon and needs to return to work.

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[70] 'The Christmas Show', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Dan Attias, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 11. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[71] 'The Two Bartlets', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin and Kevin Falls, season 3, episode 12. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

[72] 'Boston', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Anthony Hemingway, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 1. First broadcast, HBO, 2014

For Don, his sense of civic duty is outweighed only by his sense of journalistic responsibility.

In *On Liberty* (1859), John Stuart Mill emphasises the importance that multiple opinions have to a functioning society and that when opinions are silenced, something vital is taken from us. He argued that:

> the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race, posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right, they are deprived of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.[73]

In *The West Wing*, Bartlet believes that for a democracy to function effectively then the citizens must be informed and engaged, and this is an idea that Sorkin reuses in *The Newsroom*. In the first episode, MacKenzie states her belief that

> There is nothing more important to a democracy than a well informed electorate…when there's no information or, much worse, wrong information, it can lead to calamitous decisions and clobber any attempts at vigorous debate.[74]

For MacKenzie, journalists have a duty to inform the electorate for the good of the democracy, and when she takes over as Executive Producer of News Night this is how she constructs the show. Brian McNair notes that "the journalist in liberal democratic societies has been expected to occupy the social and cultural space between governing elite and governed non-elite."[75] In Sorkin's works about journalism there is an importance placed upon the journalist 'doing the right thing', even if that means going against corporate

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[73] John Stuart Mill 'On Liberty' in *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays* . Ed. Mark Philip and Frederick Rosen. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p.19

[74] 'We Just Decided To', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[75] Brian McNair, *Journalists in Film*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) p.57

interests. In the *Sports Night* episode 'The Six Southern Gentlemen of Tennessee', managing editor Isaac Jaffe (Robert Guillaume) gives an on air editorial in response to college football players who are going to be expelled from school for refusing to play beneath the confederate flag.

> In the history of the south there is much to celebrate and that flag is a desecration of all of it. It's a banner of hatred and separation. It's a banner of ignorance and violence and a war that pitted brother against brother, and to ask young black men and women…to ask Americans to walk beneath its shadow is a humiliation of irreducible proportions. And we all know it.[76]

Isaac urges the company head, Luther Sachs, to threaten to pull funding from the college, despite Luther having asked the Sports Night staff to air a feature defending the college. "Sorkin suggests that all of us need to act to 'do the right thing.' In the face of racism and other social problems, we have a moral obligation to get in the game…and act on behalf of others."[77] There is a continued relevance to this episode, particularly since 2016 both with the attempted removal of Confederate statues across the United States,[78] and with athletes kneeling for the national anthem.[79] Sorkin presents the role of the journalist as a champion for the people, in much the same way that his politicians have a duty to their citizens. McNair comments that "the journalist in a democracy must, if they are doing their jobs properly, inform the people about what power is doing in their name, or to them, or to others on their behalf."[80] In 'The 112th Congress' Charlie Skinner (Sam Waterston) clashes with Leona (Jane Fonda) and Reese Lansing (Chris Messina), the CEO and President of the channel's parent company, over Will's coverage of the Tea Party. Reese asks Charlie when the newsroom became a courtroom and Charlie responds that it was when he "made the

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[76] 'The Six Southern Gentlemen of Tennessee', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, Matt Tarses, David Walpert, and Bill Wrubel, season 1, episode 11. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

[77] Thomas Fahy, "Athletes, Grammar Geeks, and Porn Stars: The Liberal Education in *Sports Night*" in *Considering Aaron Sorkin*, ed. Thomas Fahy*,* (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2005) p.61-76 (p.67)

[78] Following the shooting at an African American church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 by a white supremacist, several towns in the US removed Confederate statues and monuments.

[79] Since 2016 there have been a number of American athletes kneeling for the national anthem as a form of peaceful protest in response to the high number of deaths of African Americans at the hands of law enforcement.

[80] McNair. p.58

decision that American voters need a fucking lawyer."[81] Here, Sorkin's heroes fulfil the duty of the journalist in a democracy by acting on behalf of their audience, and the staff recognises its duty to inform the public about those seeking to gain their vote.

Mill also argued that it is hard to protect against misconduct and misinformation and that when these are exhibited it is mostly accidental; it is

> even to the most aggravated degree….so continually done is perfect good faith, by persons who are not considered, and in many respects may not deserve to be considered, ignorant or incompetent, that it is rarely possible on adequate grounds conscientiously to stamp the misrepresentation as morally culpable.[82]

This is no longer the case, as in this age of post-truth and alternative facts, misinformation is now disseminated intentionally[83] — a problem predicted in *The Newsroom*. Journalism has been accused of limiting the public discourse by obscuring "the real issues when they are inconsistent with popular beliefs, overemphasize conflict and offer unrealistic perspectives."[84] This idea is acknowledged in 'The 112th Congress', in which Will is initially reluctant to change the show's format and content that has generated high ratings, but when he does he begins his broadcast with an on air apology on behalf of the show for its contribution to this darker side of journalism:

> I was an accomplice to a slow and repeated and unacknowledged and un-amended train wreck of failures that have brought us to now. I'm a leader in an industry that miscalled election results, hyped up terror scares, ginned up controversy, and failed to report on tectonic shifts in our country. From the collapse of the financial system to the truths about how strong we are to the

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[81] 'The 112th Congress'

[82] Mill, p.52-3

[83] David Sillito, 'Donald Trump: How the media created the president' *BBC*, 14th November 2016 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-37952249> [Accessed on: 24 January 2020]

[84] Donnalyn Pompper, "Narratives Journalism Can't Tell" in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, ed. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003) p.17-31 (p.21)

> dangers we actually face…The reason we failed isn't a mystery. We took a dive for the ratings.[85]

Tabloid stories and sensationalism now dominate the news as they generate the high ratings that news channels need in order to compete with one another. There has been a significant change both in how the news is presented to us, as well as in how we consume the news, and "with growing tabloidization of corporate journalism, lines between news, information and entertainment have blurred, and politics has become a form of entertainment and spectacle."[86] In 2004, comedian Jon Stewart used his appearance on *Crossfire* (1982-2005, 2013-2014) to accuse the show of hurting America. He told Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala that "you're doing theatre, when you should be doing debate…It's not honest. What you do is partisan hackery…You're on CNN. The show that leads into me is puppets making crank phone calls. What is wrong with you?[…]You have a responsibility to the public discourse and you fail miserably."[87] The situation has only become worse over time, and television news producers realised during the 2016 presidential campaign that if they pointed their cameras at Donald Trump and let him talk, their ratings increased significantly.[88] Sorkin presents an example of an ideal, to which his characters aspire and often battle with in their responsibilities. In Sorkin's work "the inauthentic became unethical and virtue was conjoined with authenticity to define the appropriate standards of human behavior and communication."[89] *The Newsroom* presents an America in which journalists overcome the inauthentic to give honest reporting that informs the public about issues that will affect their lives and monitor the rhetoric that is expressed by those in power, and those seeking power. The second season episode 'Willie Pete' covers an incident that took place at a Republican primary debate in 2011. Will draws attention to the support that the Republican Candidates for the 2012 election have given US troops. He then shows the clip of soldier Stephen Synder-Hill who was booed by the audience after he asked via video link whether the

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[85] 'The 112th Congress'

[86] Kellner, p.3

[87] *Crossfire*. CNN. October 15, 2004

[88] Brad Adgate, 'The Ratings Bump of Donald Trump' *Forbes*, 18th April 2018 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/bradadgate/2018/04/18/the-ratings-bump-of-donald-trump/#5c8826a7ec13> [Accessed on: 27th February 2020]

[89] Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, Constructing Clinton: Hyperreality and Presidential Image-Making in Postmodern Politics (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), p.122

candidates would undo the progress that had been made for members of the LGBT community serving in the military. Will states:

> That was a big room full of Republican primary voters booing an American combat soldier who, as he was speaking, was in combat. The audience members who were booing were in Orlando. Soon, they'll surely be in hell, though not soon enough. Not everyone was booing…I'm sure there were even some people in the building who stood up for Captain Hill, people who had the simple strength of character to turn to the fraction of a human in the seat next to them and say, "How many different kinds of disgusting do you have to be to boo a man who volunteered to fight and die for you?" I'm sure those people were there. I'm sure there were many of them. But unfortunately, none of them were on the stage.[90]

He feels that it is his duty as a journalist to draw attention to the characters of those seeking the votes of the public. He highlights the hypocrisy of the candidates who readily support those in the military as long as those in the military adhere to their personal idea of what a soldier should be. The journalist heroes of Sorkin's works act as watchdogs for society, and this invokes a wider tradition in films about journalists — which present figures like Woodward and Bernstein, and Murrow, who monitored the actions of those in positions of authority — such as *All the President's Men* and *Good Night, and Good Luck*. Films that place importance on the role of journalist as watchdog are taken seriously by critics as,

> they can also be viewed as core teaching texts of liberal democratic ideology, promoting, warning their audiences, in popular culture idiom, why this kind of journalism is and should be important to them, how and why it is threatened, and why it must be defended.[91]

In the *Studio 60* episode 'The Christmas Show' the FCC[92] are fining NBS because a soldier swore during a live news broadcast when an rocket-propelled grenade exploded over his

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[90] 'Willie Pete', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Lesli Linka Glatter, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 3. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

[91] McNair. p.59

[92] Federal Communications Commission; they regulate radio and television broadcasts across the United States.

head. NBS president Jack Rudolph (Steven Weber) is outraged by the prospect of this fine, "you have to understand that pro-family groups support our troops in this time of war, just as long as they don't have to see or hear what our troops fighting in a war looks and sounds like."[93] Jack is given the alternative of time-delaying future news broadcasts, however, this goes against his firm belief in the integrity of journalism. Sorkin's works about journalism are "made on the shared social consensus — the belief that independent, courageous, critical and well-resourced journalism matters in modern democracies."[94]

McNair outlines the balance of good and bad journalists in film with investigative reporters and foreign correspondents being noble, and paparazzi and tabloid hacks lacking integrity,[95] and Sorkin categorises his journalists in much the same way. In *Studio 60,* NBS president of entertainment programming Jordan McDeere (Amanda Peet) shares the same contempt for gossip columnists as many of Sorkin's other characters. During an interview she tells a journalist that "I think you're reporting on what you and the guy in the cubical next to you were talking about at lunch and that makes you a hairdresser and a cockfight promoter."[96] Sorkin presents gossip as the enemy of journalism, and in *The Newsroom* frequently expresses contempt for gossip columnists, the profession embodied by columnist Nina Howard (Hope Davis) whom Will frequently rails against. "I'm just saying that what you do is a really bad form of pollution that makes us dumber and meaner and is destroying civilisation."[97] The News Night staff are positioned in contrast to Nina, in that, while she badly signifies the very worst of journalism, they embody the very best. It is because of this that Will objects to her even describing herself as a journalist, as to do so is to place herself in the same profession as his staff:

> I've got a guy on my staff go hit in the head with a glass door Thursday. His forehead wouldn't stop bleeding, but he wouldn't see a doctor cause I got a guy who got beat up covering Cairo, and the first guy wouldn't see a doctor

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93 'The Christmas Show'

94 McNair. p.74

95 McNair. p.51

96 'B-12', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Bryan Gordon, written by Aaron Sorkin and Eli Attie, season 1, episode 10. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

97 'I'll Try to Fix You', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 4. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

> until the second guy saw a doctor. I've got a producer who ran into a locked door cause he felt responsible for the second guy. I've got an eighteen year old kid risking his life halfway around the world and the AP who sent him there hasn't slept in three days. I've got twenty-somethings who care about teachers in Wisconsin. I've got a grown woman who has to subtract on her fingers staying up all night trying to learn economics from a PhD who could be making twenty times the money three miles downtown. They're journalists.[98]

Nina falls somewhere between McNair's 'Reptile' and 'Repentant Sinner.'[99] In 'The Greater Fool' Nina feels guilty about the articles she has written about MacKenzie and Will, so in order to try and help them, she approaches MacKenzie and warns her that she has a source for a story about Will being high on air. She states that "there's no such thing as a little girl who dreams of being a gossip columnist one day"[100] showing that she is aware of the responsibilities of the journalist in this liberal democracy.

The Newsroom also explores the violation of journalism ethics because for Sorkin, these ethics are intrinsically linked to his belief in the goodness and potential of the America he has constructed across his body of work. In the second season, the staff pursue a story about a military black op in which the United States used sarin gas on civilians. Not only is the story false, but the interview that they air is doctored by new staff member, Jerry Dantana (Hamish Linklater). McNair notes that "the crime which puts its perpetrators firmly in the category of villain, occurs when a story which has been invented, wholly or in part, is presented to their reader as true, in a context where the audience is entitled and likely to

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[98] 'Amen', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Daniel Minahan, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[99] McNair's taxonomy of the Villainous journalist reads as follows: The lovable rogue: "In this category the villainy is the kind we can live with, may indeed be attracted to; the charming fellow (and such villains are usually men) who is, with the best will in the world, not to be trusted; the cad, or 'bad boy' whom women love, but would never dream of marrying. He is often played by the leading men of the time — Clark Gable, Cary Grant, Richard Gere, George Clooney." The reptile: "This is the figure with few, if any redeeming qualities, who embodies without apology or hesitation the very worst of what journalism can be in a market-driven media culture. He or she (and there are some memorable female reptiles in cinema) is wholly loathsome." The repentant sinner (or reformed rogue): "This is the category of celluloid hack who knows that he or she is violating the normative principles of liberal journalism, for whatever reason (usually professional advancement) and feels guilty about it. Such a representation will tend to involve a struggle between heroism and villainy, or between good and evil — between the conscience of the journalist and the pragmatic realities within which he or she works." (p.139)

[100] 'The Greater Fool'

believe the truth claim."[101] The Genoa storyline of the second season echoes the CBS *60 Minutes* scandal of 2004 in which Dan Rather anchored a report which used unauthenticated documents relating to a story concerning George W. Bush's National Guard service. Sorkin also presents the idea that his heroes can be susceptible to violating the ethics of journalism or can be victimised by, or fall prey to, bad practice. Sloan receives information from a source off the record about the seriousness of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, however while on the air with him she realises that he is being mistranslated and converses directly with him in Japanese to ascertain the truth for herself. Charlie suspends her for this, asking, "I, along with most people who don't live in Japan, am not fluent in Japanese, so I have to ask, did you just make up statements for somebody we had live on our air?…About a deadly radiation leak?"[102] Sloan is aware that she has violated the standards of journalism that are expected of her, "I know we were on sketchy ground ethically and linguistically", and that while her intentions were good, her methods were wrong. Similarly, in the second season Don becomes so invested in the appeal of death row inmate, Troy Davis, that he suggests threatening to expose the identity and address of the swing vote — someone who has the power to sway the decision in either direction — on the case.[103] In both cases the journalist heroes are willing to suspend their ethics for what they believe to be a greater cause.

In *Sports Night* anchor Casey McCall (Peter Krause) and producer Dana Whitaker (Felicity Huffman) also argue about journalistic integrity.

> Dana: I'd like to announce that Casey's adolescent hero worship of professional athletes has reached the point where he's willing to compromise journalistic integrity.
> Casey: Oh, please. Journalistic integrity? Like we're Edward R. Murrow.[104]

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[101] McNair. p.160

[102] 'Bullies', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Jeremy Podeswa, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 6. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[103] 'The Genoa Tip', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Jeremy Podeswa, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 2. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

[104] 'Shane', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Kevin Falls, Matt Tarses, and Bill Wrubel, season 2, episode 6. First broadcast, ABC, 1999

In this episode Casey wants to fix an interview in which his friend insults New York City after being signed to play for the Yankees but Dana will not allow this. The positions they take in this second season episode are the direct opposite of a position they take in the first season episode 'Mary Pat Shelby'. The staff secures an interview with footballer Christian Patrick but they are not permitted to ask him about the girlfriend that he attacked. Dana is willing to give into these demands but Casey disagrees:

> Casey: We get to show Mary Pat Shelby that unless she can catch eighty passes in a season the world could honestly give a damn about her concussion and broken jaw.
> Dana: I don't need a civics lesson from you, Casey.
> Casey: Well I think you need one from somebody, Dana, cause you're doing a big thing badly.[105]

While Casey is against caving to the demands that they not ask Christian Patrick about the assault, his co-anchor Dan Rydell (Josh Charles) favours suspending his moral integrity. "Once in a while when I consider the effort it takes to diligently adhere to a moral compass, I take myself out of the lineup and rest for the next game."[106] The idea of protagonists suspending their moral philosophy is reused in *The Newsroom*. Charlie and Will suspend their beliefs of what their show should be in order to try and improve ratings by reporting on the Casey Anthony trial. Their motivations here are to be in a better position to host one of the Republican debates and introduce a new debate format that will force candidates to answer questions that will present the electorate with information they will need when voting. MacKenzie objects to this as she feels that the trial doesn't constitute news "it's entertainment, and it's just, just this side of a snuff film."[107] This episode of *The Newsroom* also sees them forced to cover the Anthony Weiner Twitter scandal,[108] and neither of these

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[105] 'Mary Pat Shelby', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Tracey Stern and Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

[106] Ibid

[107] 'The Blackout Part I: Tragedy Porn', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Lesli Linka Glatter, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 8. First broadcast, HBO, 2012.

The episode also reuses ideas from 'Mary Pat Shelby', MacKenzie says "God, please give me a sign I'm not doing a big thing badly", echoing what Casey accused Dana of doing.

[108] On May 27th 2011, married New York Congressman, Anthony Weiner, sent a link to a photo of his groin, using his public Twitter account, to a Seattle collage student.

stories are considered news by the staff. The narrative debates the responsibility of these journalists to report stories on McNair's 'bad' side of journalism in order to fulfil their duty in keeping the public informed about those seeking power. In *Sports Night*, Casey has become disillusioned with what they report as sports stories, and he complains that "now any atrocity, no matter how ridiculous or hideous or childish, I make it sports…let's not forget the mother of all sports stories: a double homicide in Brentwood."[109] His job as a sports anchor has gone beyond reporting on games, but the inclusion of these stories reduces them to entertainment news due to the nature of their programme.

The final villainy of journalism that is presented in Sorkin's work is the citizen journalist. The advancement of the internet has seen the rise of citizen journalism and McNair notes that "increasingly, it is the civilians who report on what is being done to them, as it is being done."[110] The third season premiere of *The Newsroom* draws attention to the dangers of citizen journalism through the situation created by Reddit users in the wake of the Boston Marathon bombing. Reddit users put out the theory that missing student Sunil Tripathi was one of the suspects in the bombing, and according to *The Newsroom* this misidentification was picked up by multiple news agencies from Buzzfeed to NBC News despite multiple law enforcement agencies denying it. Will states that "I'm not so easily surrendering to citizen journalists and citizen detectives."[111] The show positions these journalists as better than those who reported false information that had not been verified. This episode also criticises news agencies that report unverifiable tweets as sources:

> MacKenzie: We're not going based on tweets from witnesses we can't talk to. What credible news agency would do that?
> Gary: Fox is up.[112]

This jibe at Fox references the lack of accountability that Fox News displays, something that has only become worse; they seem unconcerned with presenting false information to their viewers order to aid the Republican agenda, and their viewers generally seem unconcerned

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[109] 'Pilot', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

[110] McNair, p.93

[111] 'Boston'

[112] Ibid

with hearing misinformation provided that it adheres to their world view.[113] As with tabloid journalism, citizen journalism is presented in Sorkin's work as the enemy of real journalism. This is finally fully evidenced in the second half of the final season of *The Newsroom* with the sale of the channel ACN to a corporate 'villain' who believes in the validity of the audience as sources for stories. This action leads to the explicit erosion of quality journalism in favour of cheap and dangerous tactics in order to attract an audience that are only interesting in having its beliefs and voices reflected back at it.

In Sorkin's work there is an importance placed on the idea that a society can only prosper through the work of honourable and civic minded individuals who value and advocate for those who are unable to help themselves. There is a mythic idealisation in Sorkin's work, and although this is not new to television fiction, it nonetheless contributes to the ideal that he is trying to create. The most evident example of this mythology is in the links that he creates to Camelot and the Kennedy administration. This, Coyne states according to mythology, was "the last time…that 'perfect world' was possible."[114] Of course, the reverence given to Kennedy, through Bartlet's coupling to him, does ignore the deficiencies — that have often been ignored following his assassination — in his character. Holland calls Sorkin's work an "altruistic fantasy"[115] and this is the case for his work as a screenwriter and showrunner as a whole. In this fantasy that he has created, his leaders are men and women of character, something that has become increasingly infrequent in reality, because "after the 1960s, truth was relative, and critcizing became equal to victimizing… everyone was permitted to believe or disbelieve whatever they wished."[116] The standards of

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[113] Similarly, in the second episode "News Night 2.0", the staff have the following exchange when Will is proving to them all that he has learned their names — though it turns out that the staff whose names he's memorised have all left:

Will: Mohammed al Mohammed el Mohammed bin Bazir?
Don: Went to Fox.
Will: Fox hired someone with three Mohammeds in their name?

Here, the narrative pokes fun at the racism, particularly Islamophobia, frequently exhibited by Fox News.

[114] Michael Coyne, *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen* (London: Reaction, 2008) p.36

[115] Jack Holland, *Fictional Television and American Politics: From 9/11 to Donald Trump* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019) p.132

[116] Kurt Andersen, *Fantasy Land: How America Went Haywire: A 500-Year History*, (London: Ebury Press, 2018) p.237

our journalists have fallen away, but in Sorkin's works it is the intelligence and integrity of his characters that is vital to their ability to make a difference in their industries, and thus, to the nation as a whole.

Chapter Two — "Make this election about smart, and not, make it about engaged, and not. Qualified, and not.":[1] Education, Intelligence, and Elitism

Sorkin creates a fantasy of America that foregrounds the idea that intelligent and educated individuals are vital to the success of the institutions in which they work. His characters are shown to be highly accomplished in their fields and possess a significant grasp of historical, cultural and political knowledge. This is particularly worthy of study because anti-intellectualism has now become fully embedded, not just in the political system, but in American society on the whole. The way that intelligence and intellect are represented in popular culture is important because "the proliferation of certain images and the relative absence of others in fictional, reality, and fact-based television teach mass audiences, among other things, what and whom they should value and what they should expect from their lives."[2] Sorkin, for the most part, constructs intelligence in a positive way as it presents an ideal to which we, as viewers, should aspire. While Sorkin shows education to be the basis for the success of the nation, it also fosters an elitist attitude in these characters. The emphasis that is placed on the intellectual in his ideology prevents the unintelligent from accessing power and influence, however this aligns with Thomas Jefferson's belief in the "natural aristocracy among men"[3] — those who were most qualified to lead would be selected by the citizenry. In this chapter, I will examine the way that Sorkin's works contrast with the significant rise of anti-intellectualism in American society that can be traced back to the country's formation. I will consider the importance that is placed on education in Sorkin's work, the idea that his characters are inherently intelligent and how this intelligence can be used in both benevolent and malevolent ways. Finally, I will consider the way that his works field accusations of elitism - within and beyond the explored texts.

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[1] 'Hartsfield's Landing', *The West Wing,* dir. by Vincent Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 14. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

[2] Lisa Holderman, "Introduction: Intelligence on Television" in *Common Sense: Intelligence as Presented on Popular Television*, ed. Lisa Holderman*,* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008) p.1-4 (p.1)

[3] Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to John Adams (1813)" in *American Political Thought,* ed. Kenneth M. Dolbeare and Michael S. Cummings, (Washington: CQ Press, 2010) p.165

There is a trend in popular culture of anti-intellectualism, with anti-intellectual characters and ideas dominating a variety media from film to television. This idea is so pervasive, and so deeply ingrained in society, that it is one of the ten American myths explored by Nachbar and Lause. The myth of anti-intellectualism originates "from a traditional American suspicion and dislike for certain types of learning, knowledge, education, stemming from the historical fact that such traits were typically characteristic of the very European aristocratic classes."[4] Richard Hofstadter explains that there is a difference between intellect and intelligence. Intelligence adheres to limited goals, while intellect is creative and critical. Hofstadter notes that "whereas intelligence seeks to grasp, manipulate, re-order, adjust, intellect examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, imagines. Intelligence will seize the immediate meaning in a situation and evaluate it. Intellect evaluates evaluations, and looks for the meaning of situations as a whole."[5] While intelligence is often more acceptable than intellect, intelligence is still often passed over for intuition and folksy knowledge of the 'common man.' Sorkin's characters are not just intelligent, but overtly intellectual and the line between the two is frequently blurred in his work. Daniel Rigney has built on the highly influential work of Hofstadter, outlining three basic strains of anti-intellectualism in his 1991 study that extends Hofstadter's taxonomy. Rigney draws out further subcategories in the anti-intellectual paradigm and proposes the following addictions for consideration: Anti-rationalism, which expresses the belief that emotion is warm and reason is cold; anti-elitism, which demonstrates a distrust of the old-money gentlemen politicians and progressive politics in favour of men such as McCarthy; and unreflective instrumentalism, which dictates that the only value knowledge and intellect have is if the outcome is material gain.[6] Anti-intellectualism does not necessarily equal unintelligence however, "instead, anti-intellectualism is best categorized as a specific type of anti-elitism. Anti-intellectuals exhibit a distaste for the smugness and superiority they

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[4] Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, "Songs of the Unseen Road: Myths, Beliefs and Values in Popular Culture" in *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, ed. Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992) p.82-109 (p.86)

[5] Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p.25

[6] Daniel Rigney, 'Three Kinds of Anti-Intellectualism: Rethinking Hofstadter' *Sociological Inquiry.* 61:4 (1991) 434-451

believe accompanies intellectual life."[7] There is a long history of anti-intellectualism in popular television and this trend has grown increasingly evident in contemporary series, from the popularity of reality television stars who are presented as unintelligent in wider media, to the fictional television shows such as *Bones* (2005-2017) and *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019), in which the narrative positions the audience on the side of folksy intuitive characters. If the audience is positioned alongside those with folksy knowledge, then the intelligent are disregarded as strange for prioritising 'book smarts' over real life. Sorkin's work challenges the anti-intellectualism found in popular culture, crafting a world in which to be intellectual is the ultimate goal, because "anti-intellectualism limits social progress, makes culture less diverse and less interesting, and damages the self-esteem of intellectuals, who are nonetheless necessary for social progress."[8] Across all of Sorkin's works his heroes are highly educated or inherently intelligent, and his characters recognise the importance of cultivating intellect as, in this America, it is considered a heroic virtue. In *Sports Night*, Isaac (Robert Guillaume) tells sports analyst Jeremy Goodwin (Joshua Malina) that "if you're dumb, surround yourself with smart people. If you're smart, surround yourself with smart people who disagree with you."[9] Here, *Sports Night* demonstrates the emphasis that should be placed upon the development of intelligence and that even if intelligence is not inherent in a person, they should then work to increase their intelligence though association with those smarter than they are. In *The West Wing*, Bartlet (Martin Sheen) is critical of the idea that intelligence is a negative thing, and he tells Toby (Richard Schiff) that "what I can't stomach are people who are out to convince people that the educated are soft and privileged and out to make them feel like they're less…especially when we know that education can be the silver bullet, Toby! For crime, poverty, employment drugs, hate…"[10] For this administration, education and intelligence are to be prized not demeaned. Hofstadter notes that:

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[7] Colleen J. Shogan, 'Anti-Intellectualism in the Modern Presidency: A Republican Populism' *Perspectives on Politics.* 5:2 (2007) 295-303 (296)

[8] Dana S. Claussen, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Media: Magazines & Higher Education*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2004) p.17-18

[9] 'The Hungry and the Hunted', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

[10] 'Hartsfield's Landing'

> the first tradition of the American civil service, established for the Federalists by Washington and continued by both Federalists and Jeffersonians until 1928, was a tradition of government by gentlemen…He demanded competence, and he also placed much emphasis on both public repute and on the integrity of his appointees[11]

in order to reinforce the values and ensure the success of the new country. The value of intellectuals in government that was advocated by Washington is not one that has continued through to modern politics and society; the evident erosion of these educational and intellectual ideas set out by Washington is overtly addressed and fetishised by Sorkin throughout his works. In the pilot episode of *The Newsroom,* for example, Will (Jeff Daniels) laments over what America used to be, including society's attitude towards intelligence — he states that "we aspired to intelligence, we didn't belittle it. I didn't make us feel inferior."[12] In the America that Will longs to return to, intelligence was highly regarded. In the pilot episode, he rants about the state that the country is in today:

> And with a straight face you're going to tell students that America is so star-spangled awesome that we're the only ones in the world who have freedom? Canada has freedom. Japan has freedom. The U.K, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Australia. Belgium has freedom! So two hundred and seven sovereign states in the world, like a hundred and eighty of them have freedom…And yeah, you, Sorority Girl. Just in case you accidentally wander into a voting booth one day, there's some things you should know, and one of them is there is absolutely no evidence to support the statement that we're the greatest country in the world. We're seventh in literacy, twenty-seventh in math, twenty-second in science, forty-ninth in life expectancy, a hundred and seventy-eighth in infant mortality, third in median household income, number four in labour force and number four in exports. We lead the world in only three categories: Number of incarcerated citizens per capita, number of adults who believe angels are real, and defence spending where we spend more than the next twenty-six countries combined,

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[11] Hofstadter. p.168-9

[12] 'We Just Decided To', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

> twenty-five of whom are allies. Now none of this is the fault of a twenty year old college student, but you nonetheless are without a doubt a member of the worst, period, generation, period, ever, period. So when you ask what makes us the greatest country in the world, I don't know what the fuck you're talking about![13]

The issues that concern Will and his colleagues are with what American journalism has become, and this prompts the radical change they undertake in order to report the news. They aim to return to a type of journalism — led by intellect to better society — that embodies the history of the profession that was highly regarded.

Patrick Finn explains the idea of the public intellectual though discussion of the series of lectures by Michael Ignatief for broadcast on BBC and CBC.[14] Finn states that Ignatief's rules for the public intellectual are that they must be outside the system, have considerable intelligence and be hyper-informed.[15] He argues that "there is a growing desire to see the return of the public intellectual"[16] and through Bartlet, Sorkin creates a public intellectual figurehead for his America. The idea of public intellectuals connects back to the genteel reformers of the early United States, ideals which inform many of Bartlet's characteristics:

> The genteel reformers were not usually very rich, but they were almost invariably well-to-do. Hardly any were self-made men from obscure or poverty-stricken homes; they were sons of established merchants and manufacturers, lawyers, clergymen, physicians, educators, editors, business and the professions[17]

and Bartlet, as a descendent of one of the signatories of the Declaration of Independence embodies the notion of the genteel reformer, adding credence to his position as public intellectual. In *The West Wing*'s first season, Bartlet tells Leo (John Spencer) that "when I

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[13] Ibid

[14] These were a series of five lectures titled *The Illuminati*, about a key groups in the intellectual history of the 20th century.

[15] Finn. p.104

[16] Patrick Finn, "*The West Wing's* Textual President: American Constitutional Stability and the New Public Intellectual in the Age of Information" in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, ed. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003) p.101-124 (p.103)

[17] Hofstadter. p.175

sleep, I dream about a great discussion with experts and ideas and diction and energy and honesty. And when I wake up, I think, 'I can sell that.'"[18] Bartlet recognises the importance of this great discussion in the betterment of his country and through his position as the public intellectual he seeks to educate society. Finn argues that Bartlet "is hyperinformed [sic], and he works diligently to make himself intelligent. That he is also in a sense an outsider is a consistent point of the television series."[19] Bartlet also embodies the idea of the intellectual as a moral leader. Hofstadter notes that "collectively, intellectuals have often tried to serve as the moral antennae for the race, anticipating and if possible clarifying fundamental moral issues before these have forced themselves upon the public consciousness."[20] Moreover, Hofstadter posits that "the thinker feels that he ought to be the special custodian of values like reason and justice which are related to his own search for truth, and at times he strikes out passionately as a public figure because his very identity seems to be threatened by some gross abuse."[21] Bartlet is shown to be deeply religious, moral, and possesses and extraordinary intellect. His intelligence is frequently commented on, by characters on both sides of the political aisle; he is an economics professor, a Nobel Prize winner, he speaks four languages including Latin, and he has in-depth knowledge of a variety of cultural topics including ancient history and national parks — topics on which he frequently tests his staff. The characterisation of Bartlet draws upon the intellectualism of the Founding Fathers — Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams — whose intellect was vital to the construction of America. Hofstadter notes that,

> one might have expected that such men, whose political achievements where part of the very fabric of the nation, would have stood as a permanent and overwhelming testimonial to the truth that mean of learning and intellect need not be bootless and impractical as political leaders.[22]

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[18] 'Mandatory Minimums', *The West Wing,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 20. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[19] Finn. p.106

[20] Hofstadter, p.29

[21] Ibid

[22] Hofstadter, p.145

The great irony of America is that it is a country that was founded by intellectuals only for its modern leaders to express a tremendous disrespect for intellect. Sorkin's ideal president sharply contrasts the then occupants of the real Oval Office — the end of the Clinton administration with all of its scandals and the ascendency of George W. Bush, who was criticised for his overt lack of intellectual substance. Even Theodore Roosevelt, an intellectual president with a respect for intellectuals, turned on them; he favoured the innate sense of shared character possessed by Americans over intellectuality. Hofstadter notes that "he embodied the American preference for character over intellect in politics and life, and the all but universal tendency to assume that the two somehow stand in opposition to each other."[23]

There has been a rise in the anti-intellectualism of modern presidents, "due to the amplified importance of forging an intimate connection with the American public, modern presidents must adjust their political personalities and leadership. To combat allegations of elitism, recent Republican presidents adopted anti-intellectualism as a conservative form of populism."[24] Examples of contemporary anti-intellectual presidents include Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush, and Donald Trump.[25] In *The West Wing*, Sorkin has created a world in which an overtly intellectual man can still be elected president with overwhelming support to counter the anti-intellectualism that has taken root in society. For Bartlet, education and intelligence are vital and when he runs for re-election he is positioned against a candidate who does not measure up intellectually. Bartlet tells his opponent, Governor Ritchie (James Brolin), that "you've turned being unengaged into a zen-like thing, and you shouldn't enjoy it so much is all, and if it appears at times as if I don't like you, that's the reason why."[26] Bartlet's problem with Ritchie is less that he is unintelligent and more that he doesn't make any effort to improve his intellect, and yet he still seeks the presidency. The introduction of

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[23] Hofstadter. p.208

[24] Colleen J. Shogan. p.295

[25] Reagan appealed to the people by playing the underdog and hid any evidence of intellectualism in order to protect his anti-intellectual image (Shogan, p.299). Similarly, by emphasising his position of the underachiever during the 2000 presidential election campaign, Bush had to do very little to surpass the low expectations that had been placed upon him (Shogan, p.299). Not only has Trump alienated people from the intellectual media, such as *The New York Times*, by taking to twitter and referring to them as the enemy, but he has managed to convince his base that he is just like them, despite his wealth and privilege, thus counter-intuitively gaining significant working class support. (Oswald and Robertson, p.6)

[26] 'Posse Comitatus', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 21. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

Ritchie's character drew comparison with the Bush administration of the time.[27] It provided a utopian fantasy that rewrote the outcome of the 2000 Presidential Election, as well as being a utopian fantasy that counters anti-intellectualism in politics. Through his presidency, George W. Bush "implied that the presidency is no fit for intellectuals. Instead the presidency is a place for someone who knows intuitively what the American people want, and can act resolutely on their behalf."[28] In 2008, in response to the presidency of Bush, Elvin T. Lim wrote about the how the history of anti-intellectualism in the White House led to his administration. He noted that "the problem of anti-intellectualism in the White House has an institutional pedigree that precedes President George W. Bush, even if the culmination of these long term trends have made the most recent incarnation of the anti-intellectual president exemplary."[29]

Despite the folksy nature of Bush's presidency, Bush 'ascended' to office as part of a legacy, akin to monarchal rule associated with European elitism. Bush was not the first anti-intellectual president, and he wouldn't be the last, but Lim notes that likes of Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt were not nearly as anti-intellectual as their successors. Dane S. Claussen argues that "the American public's long-time anti-intellectual attitude eventually was reflected in and by a presidential candidate, and then president, who was perhaps the least intellectual occupant of the White House in more than seventy-five years and perhaps the most anti-intellectual one in about 165 years."[30] In the years since Claussen's analysis, Bush's anti-intellectualism has been overshadowed by current incarnation of the anti-intellectual president, Donald Trump. Trump has lied repeatedly, engaged in the dissemination of fake news, and abused his power — all of which disrespect the office of the president and the American people. There is an extent to which the anti-intellectualism of the Republican presidents of American History has been a pretence, constructed to appeal to the country's 'common man', however the centuries of Republican leaders' exaggeration of anti-intellectual qualities has resulted in a leader who *is* both anti-intellectual and dangerously un-informed. Vázquez notes that in his works Sorkin "would build up a fictional

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[27] Frame, p.137-8

[28] Colleen J. Shogan. p.300

[29] Elvin T. Lim, *The Anti-Intellectual Presidency: The Decline of Presidential Rhetoric from George Washington to George W. Bush.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.3

[30] Claussen. p.27

environment where mediocrity is the enemy"[31] but Sorkin's work goes beyond that; in the utopian fantasy that is created, the country cannot ever succumb to the anti-intellectualism of men like George W. Bush and *The West Wing* could never have had a president like Trump. In Sorkin's America education and intelligence are vitally important to the success of the nation as a whole, and a bias is created: the liberal hero is a public intellectual and, for the most part, the Republican opposition is unintelligent and therefore unqualified for the role of president.[32]

The characters in Sorkin's works also show their understanding of the importance of intelligence by drawing attention to the intellect of their colleagues. This helps to demonstrate a contrast to anti-intellectualism because "particularly since the second half of the twentieth century, our culture - and, thus, its mythology and prominent stories - is basically anti-intellectual. In other words, traditional intellectuality has increasingly become devalued and discouraged."[33] These characters' encouragement of their colleague's intellect directly counters the discouragement of intellect in the real world. As the way intelligence is presented in popular culture can influence the way that we view intelligence in real life, the support and admiration that the characters in Sorkin's work have for their colleagues creates a positive image of intelligence for the general audience. In the *The West Wing*, after filling in for Josh (Bradley Whitford) for the day, Sam (Rob Lowe) states that "he's a world class political mind, but until today I didn't know that he was smarter than I was."[34] Similarly, in *The Newsroom* when Will is confronted by a hallucination of his father while in prison, he

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[31] Isabel Vázquez, 'The Pursuit of Excellence: Nerds and Geeks in Aaron Sorkin's Works' *index.comunicación.* 6:2 (2016) 41-51 (p45)

[32] While Sorkin does present intellectual and honourable Republicans, he does not depict a competent Republican president or presidential candidate. Ritchie, in his candidacy, is shown to be ill-equipped for the job; In *Studio 60,* Bush is mocked by the staff; and *The Newsroom* highlights the inadequacy of the Tea Party candidates for the 2012 presidential election. After Sorkin left the show, the writers introduced the very likeable Republican candidate, Arnold Vinick (Alan Alda), to run against Democrat, Matt Santos (Jimmy Smits). In the BBC documentary, *President Hollywood*, Lawrence O'Donnell stated that although they initially intended for Santos to win, Vinick became such a likeable character that there was a real contest in the writers room. (*President Hollywood*, BBC Four, 2008). Writing for *The New York Times*, Jaques Steinberg argues that the final decision for Santos to win was made only after the death of John Spencer. (Jaques Steinberg, "'West Wing' Writers' Novel Way of Picking the President", *The New York Times*, April 10th 2006. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/10/arts/television/west-wing-writers-novel-way-of-picking-the-president.html> [accessed 04/08/2020])

[33] Sari Thomas and Lisa Holderman, "The Social Construction of Modern Intelligence" in *Common Sense: Intelligence as Presented on Popular Television*, ed. Lisa Holderman, (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008) p.7-106 (p.25)

[34] '20 Hours in America Part II', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

tells him that "my wife is smarter than I am in every way imaginable and it never makes me mad."[35] Also in *The Newsroom*, after Sloan (Olivia Munn) takes issue with reporting on stocks concerning drones without also informing the audience where the money comes from, her producer, Zane (Don McManus) confronts Don (Thomas Sadoski):

> Zane: you put shit in her head
> Don: Zane, she's got fifty IQ points on both of us. There's nothing I can put in her head.[36]

All three of these instances demonstrate the support that protagonists in Sorkin's works have for their colleagues and rather than having an intellectual rivalry, they are a cohesive force in their professions. Isabel Vázquez calls Sorkin's world of fiction a safe zone for intelligent characters,[37] and this safe zone is most evident in the way that his characters defend each other's intelligence. In *The Newsroom*, when Will ridicules Sloan with the moniker "Victoria's Secret" due to her good looks, MacKenzie (Emily Mortimer) points out that "Victoria's Secret has a PhD in economics from Duke and is an adjunct professor at Columbia."[38] In Sorkin's work intelligence should be aspired to rather than belittled.

Sorkin's heroes frequently exhibit their intelligence, and one way that *The West Wing* demonstrates this is through Bartlet testing his staffers' knowledge. In the second episode he asks "twenty-seven lawyers in the room, anybody know 'post hoc ergo propter hoc'?";[39] CJ (Allison Janney) thinks that they lost Texas because of a joke Bartlet made — when Bartlet asks when they lost Texas, CJ responds that it was when he learned to speak Latin as she believes that by demonstrating his proficiency in Latin, he alienated voters in Texas, a state known to typically eschew perceived displays off liberal elitism. Throughout the series, the quizzes that Bartlet gives range from language to general knowledge, as well as giving the staff detailed lessons on subjects varying from the National Parks to cooking Thanksgiving

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[35] 'Oh Shenandoah', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Paul Lieberstein, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 5. First broadcast, HBO, 2014

[36] 'Willie Pete', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Lesli Linka Glatter, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 3. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

[37] Vázquez. p.43

[38] 'News Night 2.0', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[39] 'Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 1999

dinner. This idea is continued in *The Newsroom*, in which Will makes the interns learn musical theatre history: "There are eight Broadway musicals that have won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. In five minutes, I need you to name them, the composer, lyricist, librettist, and source material, if any."[40] This knowledge is not implied to be particularly relevant to their internships but it does show the importance of the cultivation of cultural knowledge. In Sorkin's works his heroes display a wide range of knowledge and take pride in their ability to show it off to one another. In *Studio 60* Matt (Matthew Perry) tells Lucy (Lucy Davis) that she can get back in his good books if she can tell him the name of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's most famous poem.[41] Lucy gets the answer wrong and Matt takes the question to Danny (Bradley Whitford):

> Matt: what's the full title of 'Kubla Khan' and who wrote it?
> Danny: Gene Roddenberry.
> Matt: not *The Wrath of Kahn*![42]

Similarly in *Sports Night*, the staff debates the author of the poem 'Sea Fever',

> Dan: That was a poem by Mr Henry David Thoreau.
> Casey: It's Wordsworth.
> Dan: Or Wordsworth.
> Eliot: It might be Whitman.
> Kim: It might be Byron.
> Dan: It's not Byron.
> Casey: I think it's Whitman.[43]

While none of them correctly identify the poet as John Masefield, the scene does show their ability to name a variety of others in a show where "poetry, mythology, and allusions to

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[40] 'First Thing We Do, Let's Kill All the Lawyers', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 1. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

At the time of airing, there had only been eight Broadway musicals to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, but at the time of writing this chapter there has been nine, with Lin Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* winning in 2016. Michael R. Jackson also won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for his Off-Broadway musical *A Strange Loop* in 2020.

[41] '4 A.M. Miracle', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Laura Innes, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 16. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[42] Ibid

[43] 'The Hungry and the Hunted'

Shakespeare are tossed off as quickly and easily as sports statistics."[44] This scene is then contrasted in the same episode when Dan (Josh Charles), who doesn't think much of soccer as a sport, challenges the rest of the staff to name five MLS (Major League Soccer) teams. He believes that, like him, they will be either be unable to or wrongly name Luxembourg, however, much to his chagrin, they collectively name eleven. The inclusion of these two scenes shows the equal importance that is placed on both literary and sporting knowledge, and that the ideal of the hero in Sorkin's America is someone who can readily show off their intelligence in a wide variety of subjects. Fahy notes that "their facility with both artistic and popular culture blurs the line between high and low. It serves as a model for what is possible, for what all of us should strive for and achieve."[45] The Bartlet administration argues in support of increasing the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) budget by fifty percent and Toby clashes with congressmen over the necessity of the NEA,

> Congressman: I don't know what to tell people when they say Rogers and Hart didn't need the NEA to write *Oklahoma*, and Arthur Murray didn't need the NEA to write *Death of a Salesman*.
> Toby: I'd start by telling them that Rogers and Hammersmith wrote *Oklahoma*, and Arthur Murray taught ballroom dance, and Arthur Miller didn't need the NEA to write *Death of a Salesman*, but it wasn't called the NEA back then.[46]

Similarly, in the third season, Toby also states that "there is a connection between progress of a society and progress in the arts",[47] when a member of the Appropriations Committee complains about how much is spent on the NEA. Both episodes foreground the importance of arts and culture in the progression of society, and that those in Sorkin's America should be happy to fund programs that promote artistic progress. In contrast, in *The Newsroom*, Will

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[44] Thomas Fahy. "Athletes, Grammar Geeks, and Porn Stars: The Liberal Education in *Sports Night*" in *Considering Aaron Sorkin*, ed. Thomas Fahy, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2005) p.61-76 (p.64.)

[45] Ibid

[46] 'He Shall, from Time to Time', *The West Wing,* dir. by Ken Arlene Sanford, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 12. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[47] 'Gone Quiet', *The West Wing,* dir. by Jon Hutman, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 6. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

accuses the NEA of costing votes despite the how little it actually costs to fund it.[48] Will's concern here is not that there should not be arts funding, and nor is he against high culture, as evidenced throughout the series, but he feels that the argument over the NEA distracts from more important issues.

Sorkin constructs a version of America in which the leaders in the professions that are most influential in our lives set an example for us to live by; an example which foregrounds the cultivation of knowledge and culture, as they are vital to the progression of society. While these characters revel in overt showcases of their intelligence, their hubris can lead them to embarrassing mistakes. In *Sports Night,* Dan attends a fundraiser hosted by Hilary Clinton and later he realises that he mixed up 'secular' and 'nonsecular' while in conversation with her:

> Dan: Someone had clearly briefed her on my stuff with the public schools, and I told her about my opposition to secular programmes that are publicly financed. I really spoke up and she seemed to listen.
> Casey: You mean nonsecular.
> Dan: What do you mean?
> Casey: You don't oppose secular programmes that are publicly financed, you oppose nonsecular programmes that are publicly financed…'Nonsecular' means 'bound to religious guidelines'; 'Secular' means 'free of religion'
> Dan: Okay. I'm sure I got it right at breakfast.[49]

Dan's eagerness so show off his intelligence to the then First Lady ensures his humiliation, Dan is trying, despite his linguistic blunders, to argue for the separation of Church and State. The position that he takes is one associated with intellectualism, that education should be grounded in fact; it is a position that has been regarded as symptomatic of the intellectual elite. This comedic device is then repeated in *The West Wing*. In 'The Leadership Breakfast' Josh sends Sam to apologise to a New York Times columnist on behalf of Leo and, while he was talking to her, Sam confused Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan:

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[48] 'We Just Decided To'

[49] 'When Something Wicked This Way Comes', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 2. First broadcast, ABC, 1999

> Sam: I made some very scholarly points regarding the remains of nuclear weapons in Kyrgyzstan, and I have to believe—
> Josh: Kazakhstan.
> Sam: Hmm?
> Josh: The nuclear weapons are in Kazakhstan.
> Sam: I said Kyrgyzstan?
> Josh: Yeah.
> Sam: Well, Kyrgyzstan has no nuclear weapons… Kazakhstan is a country four times the size of Texas and has a sizeable number of former Russian missile silos… Kyrgyzstan is on the side of a hill near China and has mostly nomads and sheep.
> Donna: I'm sure you got it right last night.[50]

The scene in *The West Wing* uses the same structure and a very similar phrasing to the scene in *Sports Night*, showing that even the most intelligent of characters are capable of mistakes.[51] While these instances are played for comedic effect, it does also offer a likeable fallibility to Sorkin's characters, humanising them, and keeping them from becoming infallible in their particular arenas. McCabe notes that "humor was often used to defuse conflict and even deflate the hubris of power…Humor translated unappealing traits - Josh's arrogance, Toby's self-righteousness, the President's know-it-all-ness - into mild eccentricity and endearing foibles."[52] Comedy is used frequently in Sorkin's work to humanise his characters. While *Sports Night* is often described as sitcom and looks like one, I argue that it is less of a sitcom and more of a comedy drama in the style of his other television series. Comedy is vast, found in a range of forms and because of this "any definition of comedy based on a single criterion, is bound to be limited in application, and therefore insufficient."[53] While comedic affect is used throughout Sorkin's work, it is not the only feature, often competing equally with drama. Sorkin's shows revolve around professionals in their place of work: Michael Tueth discusses this sub-genre, the work place comedy, noting that:

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[50] 'The Leadership Breakfast', *The West Wing,* dir. by Scott Winant, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 11. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

[51] There is also a similar scene in *The Newsroom* 'Bullies', in which Maggie (Alison Pill), like Sam and his Kyrgyzstan confusion, mixes up Georgia the state and Georgia the country, believing at the time that "the Russians had invaded Atlanta."

[52] Janet McCabe, *The West Wing: TV Milestones Series*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013) p.45

[53] Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, (London: Routledge, 1990) p.10

> the genre also offers opportunities for exploring new boundaries in verbal comedy. Many of the workplace comedies take place in white-collar environments with main characters who are generally well-educated or well-trained professionals: psychologists, physicians, educators, politicians, designers, lawyers, journalists, or broadcast media professionals. The dialogue therefore can be more sophisticated and witty.[54]

The comedy in Sorkin's writing is intelligent and quippy because his characters are intelligent, and humour is used to contribute to their likability; the fast paced verbose humour demonstrates the verbal dexterity of his characters and it is a distinctive and celebrated feature of Sorkin's writing.

Intelligence in Sorkin's work can also be weaponised, and although characters are complimentary of each other's intelligence, at times they also use intelligence to demean one another. Characters frequently correct each other's grammar and use of language, for example in *Sports Night*, Casey (Peter Krause) mocks Dan's use of mixed metaphors, showing that their desire to show off their own intellect can come at the expense of the feelings of their friends.[55] In the same episode a viewer asks Casey who he thinks would win in The World Series, the 1927 or the 1998 Yankees, and Casey responds by saying,

> Get a grip, The World Series, by tradition, is contested by players of two different teams that are alive at the same time. But if you want an answer to your question, my guess is that the '27 Yankees would be confounded by the jet airplanes flying over-head.[56]

Casey can't resist using his intelligence to exert his superiority and Fahy notes that "even though *Sports Night* creates a world where everyone — grammar geeks, athletes, and porn stars — can be an intellectual, it does not always overcome the mean-spirited arrogance of its characters and content."[57] This idea is continued in *The West Wing*, in 'Gone Quite' the

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[54] Michael Tueth, *Laughter in the Living Room: Television Comedy and the American Home Audience*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2005) p.121

[55] 'Rebecca', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 14. First broadcast, ABC, 1999

[56] Ibid

[57] Fahy. p.62

majority leader is asked why he would be president and he responds, "the reason I would run, were I to run, is I have a great belief in this country as a country, and in this people as a people, that go in to making this country a nation with the greatest national resources and people, educated people."[58] The senior staff celebrate over this clumsy answer and mock the majority leader; the intellectual staff are positioned against his stupidity and thus shown to be superior. Although Sorkin's heroes display an attitude of intellectual superiority, they don't always succeed when they intend to use it to gain an edge in a conversation. For example, in *Sports Night*, when Casey tries to use his intelligence to rattle Dana's (Felicity Huffman) boyfriend Gordon (Ted McGinley), Gordon shuts him down by saying "before I decide to subpoena your whole family, why don't you go back to writing your television show and leave the smart-boy remarks to those of us with postgraduate degrees."[59] In the same way that comedic errors humanise these characters, having them fail to demonstrate their intellectual superiority challenges their hubris. Casey battles with an inferiority complex when talking to Gordon because Gordon is better educated, emphasising the importance that is placed on furthering one's education in Sorkin's work.

America has not always made education a social priority, however, with the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957, this changed educational policy to some degree. Richard Hofstadter notes that "Sputnik was more than a shock to American vanity: it brought an immense amount of attention to bear on the consequences of anti-intellectualism in the school system and in American life at large. Suddenly the national distaste for intellect appeared to be not just a disgrace but a hazard to survival."[60] Although the opening credits sequence of *The Newsroom* was changed for the second and third seasons, the credits sequence of the first season begins with a shot of Sputnik passing over earth. Sputnik signalled a new era for American education, and the inclusion of this shot in the credits creates a clear link to what the characters of *The Newsroom* are trying to do — begin a new era of journalism, one that more faithfully resembles the moral history of the profession that was discussed in the first chapter. The importance of education for the betterment of society

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[58] 'Gone Quiet'

[59] 'Dear Louise', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin and David Walpert, season 1, episode 7. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

[60] Richard Hofstadter. p.5

is frequently articulated in *The West Wing*, as education is one of the key ideas of the Bartlet administration. In 'Six Meetings Before Lunch'[61] the audience is presented with two counter positions on public education from Sam. The first is an opposition piece that he wrote, stating that:

> Public education has been a public policy disaster for forty years. Having spent around four trillion dollars on public schools since 1965, the result has been a steady and inexorable decline in every measurable standard of student performance, to say nothing of health and safety.[62]

While this view is not his own, nor the view of the administration, the inclusion of it highlights the faults and problems of public schooling. After Mallory (Allison Smith), Leo's daughter and a public school teacher, is informed that the previous opinion was just an opposition opinion, Sam tells her his actual views on public education:

> Education is the silver bullet. Education is everything. We don't need little changes, we need gigantic monumental changes. Schools should be palaces. The competition of the best teachers should be fierce. They should be making six figure salaries. Schools should be incredibly expensive for government and absolutely free of charge to its citizens, just like national defence.[63]

The attitude towards the accessibility of education that this administration holds is indicative of the left wing ideology of the series. In 'The Portland Trip' Bartlet's personal aide, Charlie Young (Dulé Hill) suggests sending teachers to college in exchange for three years working at a public school of the government's choosing, which is similar to what the armed forces do for law and medical school.[64] In both of these instances, education is given the same worth as national defence which has typically been considered more of a right wing concern.

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[61] 'Six Meetings Before Lunch', *The West Wing,* dir. by Clark Johnson, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 18. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[62] Ibid

[63] Ibid

[64] 'The Portland Trip', *The West Wing,* dir. by Paris Barclay, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1 2, episode 7. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

Furthermore, Sorkin's heroes consider it to be their duty to educate; in 'Manchester Part II' campaign advisor Doug Wegland (Evan Handler) points out that "you guys are never happier than when you're educating the public."[65] While this remark is intended as a criticism it is accurate across Sorkin's work, and not positioned as a wholly negative idea. Sorkin's works themselves function as an educational tool, albeit with a liberal bias. His works highlight issues and policies that factor in the lives of his audiences, and they are educated and informed through character interactions on screen.[66] This is also true for Sorkin's first series, *Sports Night*, wherein as Thomas Fahy notes, it "presents education as something we must strive for to better ourselves and as a necessary tool for engaging in social and political issues."[67] The necessity of education in *Sports Night* is a feature that Sorkin has reused across all of his television works.[68]

A common thread throughout Sorkin's work is the responsibility of the leaders in his chosen industries to raise the level of debate and this key phrase is reiterated in *Sports Night*, *The West Wing*, and *The Newsroom*. In the second episode of *Sports Night*, after being criticised for his opinions on the legalisation of marijuana, Dan argues that "discussion is good and for those of us fortunate enough to be the subject of magazine articles, it may be our responsibility from time to time to raise the level of debate."[69] Due to the fact that Dan is a figure in the public eye, he feels that it is his duty to draw attention to issues that go beyond his usual scope of coverage. Towards the end of the first season of *The West Wing*, after bringing Bartlet back to the left from more central political standpoints, Leo tells the rest of the senior staff that "we're going to raise the level of debate in this country and let that be

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[65] 'Manchester Part II', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

[66] A key example of this comes from the dynamic between Josh Lyman and his assistant Donna Moss: Donna acts as a proxy for the viewers and thus when Josh is explaining the inner workings of government to her, he is really explaining them to the audience.

[67] Thomas Fahy. p.67

[68] *Sports Night* contradicts the stereotype that sports is for the uneducated; the characters of *Sports Night* are highly educated and both enjoy sport and are able to comment intelligently on most major sports. The role of intelligence in sports in Sorkin's work is continued in *Moneyball*, which dramatises the Oakland Athletics baseball team's use of sabermetrics in the 2002 Major League Baseball season which led to their twenty game winning streak. Their success came because of education and intelligence.

[69] 'The Apology', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

our legacy."[70] Bartlet, encouraged by Leo, recognises that voicing his true opinions is more important that getting re-elected and that generating intelligent debate has its own value. Finally, in *The Newsroom* after the staff fail to secure a new format for the Republican debate that would force candidates to answer questions that voters should hear responses to before election day, Maggie states "if every network said 'we're not playing by your rules, you're playing by ours, we'd raise the level of debate overnight."[71] Here Maggie imagines a world in which news organisations, if they unite in a civic minded desire, have the power to reform the process of political campaigning. The examples from *Sports Night* and *The Newsroom* are in contrast with the loss of nobility and responsibility in contemporary journalism, but *The West Wing* example came in the lead up to the 2000 presidential election which would see the intellectual candidate (Al Gore) pitted against the anti-intellectual candidate (George W. Bush). While *The West Wing* is the most obvious example of a political utopia that has been created by Sorkin, *The Newsroom* is set in our reality and therefore despite its fostering of utopian ideas and exploring the characters' desire to create a such ideals, it cannot ever fully realise those goals. For example, the staff wants to use a groundbreaking new debate format in order to subject the Republican candidates to more challenging questioning, however we know that this never happened — their plan could only ever have ended in failure. In all three examples, Sorkin demonstrates that in his version of America that those who standout, as leaders in their particular fields, have the ability and duty to encourage more articulate and meaningful dialogue among citizens for the betterment of society. Christopher Bigsby notes that "what will emerge as one of the central tactics of a series in which this group of highly educated individuals deal with some of the more arcane aspects of the American political system, as life in the White House emerges as a drama in which issues must be transformed into the right action."[72] This idea however extends beyond *The West Wing* to include Sorkin's other television series: In *Sports Night* the staff at CSC use their platform to advocate for issues such as racial equality; in *Studio 60* the characters use their show to question the actions of the Bush administration; and in *The*

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[70] 'Let Bartlet Be Bartlet', *The West Wing,* dir. by Laura Innes, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[71] 'The Blackout Part II: Mock Debate', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 9. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[72] Christopher Bigsby, *Viewing America: Twenty-First-Century Television Drama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p.41

Newsroom the journalists work to bring integrity back to the profession. His characters are highly educated and use this education to navigate and overcome the challenges that arise in their respective professional fields. It is a result of this explicit positioning that the airs of superiority Sorkin's heroes exude opens his shows up to accusations of intellectual elitism.

Elitism is a belief that a society should be ruled by an elite, a group of people with relevant experience, extraordinary intellect, and an inherent *quality* — an adeptness to leadership that inspires trust in the individual and their abilities — because these elites would be most adept at governing a constructive society, and thus most deserving of influence. The desire for America to be run by elites demonstrates its citizens wanting the country to live up to its potential and this is a prominent feature throughout Sorkin's television. Conservatives have been wary of intellectual elites in government but Sorkin "maintains that government's institutions would function better if they were led by intelligent people thoughtful enough to understand the tough choices."[73] Sorkin's characters do not try to hide their elitism, instead they openly acknowledge it as a positive characteristic — for example in *The West Wing* Josh states "I am an elitist, but I have respect for people who don't measure up"[74] and the Bartlet administration is positioned as being better than their political rivals. In both *Studio 60* and *The Newsroom*, characters take an elitist attitude towards the media, referencing the media elite, in order to mark themselves as superior and present a position that they seek to live up to in all their reporting — one that they feel contemporary journalism has failed to embody. In *The Newsroom*, when explaining the new path the show is going to take, Will says that "we're the media elite"[75] and in *Studio 60* when discussing a quote in the New York Times, Tom Jeter (Nate Corddry) says that "the New York Times is going to quote Bernadette so that the people can be heard and the Times can demonstrate that they're not the media elite. I prefer when they were elite. I'm a fan of

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[73] Spencer Downing, "Handling the Truth: Sorkin's Liberal Vision" in *Considering Aaron Sorkin*, ed. Thomas Fahy, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2005) p.127-145 (p.130)

[74] 'The U.S. Poet Laureate', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 16. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

[75] 'The 112th Congress', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

credentials."[76] Both of these scenes demonstrate the idea that elitism isn't always a negative quality and that journalists should try to live up to a certain ideal in order to do their job in a way that contributes to society rather than being motivated by popularity, and therefore financially motivated.

The 21st century has seen a significant increase in reality television when networks and producers realised that not only was it cheaper to make than scripted television, but that it would most likely be more profitable. TV series such as *Survivor* (2000-present), *American Idol* (2002-present), and *Dancing with the Stars* (2005-present) have continually garnered high ratings, even as television viewership as fallen. June Deery notes that "some individual programs are of high quality, are well conceived, or are provocative in important ways; most, on the other hand are not."[77] Deery also comments that news programming sometimes shares similarities with reality TV, however, "the main contrast with reality TV would have to be that professional and reputable journalism eschews manipulation of material: whether it be staging, paying for contributions, or distortive editing - though it may be that the rise of reality TV problematizes and weakens the claims to objectivity of both documentary and news programming."[78] In the 1980s, Reality TV was known as infotainment and in the 1990s it was called factual entertainment, with programs such as *Cops* (1989-2020) and *The Real World* (1992-present); Annette Hill notes that "these programmes generally offered different kinds of information and entertainment about ordinary people."[79] This all changed with the birth of *Big Brother* (1999-present) and the surge in reality TV, and yet, as the genre became more successful, more prolific, and less ethical, the more heavily it was criticised. While the first season of *The Real World* was praised for being original, this wasn't reflected in the ratings. Laurie Rupert and Sayanti Ganguly Puckett note that

> episodes that included the possibility of either romance or serious conflict were popular. Late into the first season the producers realized that the viewing public wanted

[76] 'The Cold Open', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[77] June Deery, *Reality TV*, (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2014) p.13

[78] Deery. p.22

[79] Annette Hill, *Reality TV*, (Routledge: New York, 2015) p.24-5

> drama, so the next cast was more provocative; as the series progressed, it began showcasing more highly controversial individuals and issues. AIDS activism, gay rights, abortion…all found their forum on MTV. *The Real World* has gradually evolved into a series concerned with sex. Perhaps this change was inevitable, or perhaps the series creators…realized that drama is more effective than documentary when it comes to attracting the public.[80]

This change in, and continued popularity of, reality television has not only considerably changed popular culture, but it has altered American political life. Donald Trump is the Reality TV President;[81] Gabler argues that "reality TV has made this horror inevitable"[82] in that Trump is a "celebrity that stands for very little besides his celebrity."[83] For Holland, "we have, since 20 January 2017, been watching the reality TV presidency as we live and breathe the daily excitement of controversy, revelations, insults, gossip, and firings."[84] Trump presents a rhetoric and style that is more suited to his reality TV ventures than to the Oval Office. In Sorkin's work, many of the characters criticise reality television and the effect that they perceive it to have on culture, and they do so with a tone of superiority. At the beginning of *Studio 60*, show creator Wes Mendel (Judd Hirsch) interrupts the show's live broadcast with a tirade against the state of television,

> There has always been a struggle between art and commerce, and now I'm telling you art is getting its ass kicked. And it's making us mean, and it's making us bitchy. It's making us cheap punks. That's not who we

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[80] Laurie Rupert and Sayanti Ganguly Puckett, "Disillusionment, Divorce, and the Destruction of the American Drama: *An American Family* and the Rise of Reality TV" in *The Tube Has Spoken: Reality TV & History*, ed. Julie Anne Taddeo and Ken Dvorak, (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010) p.83-97 (p.94-5)

[81] From 2004 until 2015, Trump starred as the boss figure in *The Apprentice* (2004-2017).

[82] Neal Gabler, 'We all enabled Donald Trump: Our deeply unserious media and reality-TV culture made this horror inevitable' *Salon*, 14th March 2016 <https://www.salon.com/2016/03/14/we_all_enabled_donald_trump_our_deeply_unserious_media_and_reality_tv_culture_made_this_horror_inevitable/> [Accessed on: 26th September 2019]

[83] Ibid

[84] Jack Holland, *Fictional Television and American Politics: From 9/11 to Donald Trump* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019) p.48

> are! People are having contests to see how much they can be like Donald Trump.[85]

This, of course, takes on a whole new context when viewed after the 2016 Presidential Election, making this elitism politicised; the electoral victory of a reality television star is evidence of just how anti-intellectual the United States has become. The scene in *Studio 60* mirrors Howard Beale (Peter Finch) in *Network* (1976) and when a series of journalists within the episode are reporting the incident, one references the film's title and another states that Wes "was mad as hell and he wasn't going to take it anymore."[86] In an article for the *New York Times*, Dave Itzkoff notes that "Aaron Sorkin, who cited Chayefsky when he accepted his Oscar for the screenplay of *The Social Network*,' wrote in an email that 'no predictor of the future - not even Orwell - has ever been as right as Chayefsky was when he wrote *Network*.'"[87] In this scene Wes continues his rant, declaring that television has descended into, and is made by, "pornographers! It's not even good pornography. They're just this side of snuff films. And friends, that's what's next because that's all that's left."[88] The idea that all that is left for television is snuff films places a moral layer on Wes's elitism. The scene is then echoed in *The Newsroom* in which MacKenzie objects to their coverage of the Casey Anthony trial, as discussed in chapter one, referring to it as "just this side of a snuff film"[89] and later in that episode suggesting "we could, ourselves, commit murder on our air. In your face Nancy Grace!"[90] This Casey Anthony coverage is regarded with the same attitude that reality television is given in Sorkin's work, stemming from the trial of O.J. Simpson, which led to a rise in the popularity of televised trials and contributing to the

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[85] 'Pilot', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[86] 'Pilot' *Studio 60*

[87] David Itzkoff, 'Notes of a Screenwriter, Mad as Hell', *New York Times*, 19th May 2011. Online at: https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/22/movies/paddy-chayefskys-notes-for-network-film.html [Accessed on: 25th March 2018]

[88] 'Pilot' *Studio 60*

[89] 'The Blackout Part I: Tragedy Porn', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Lesli Linka Glatter, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 8. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[90] Ibid

spectacle of these moments.[91] The negative attitude towards reality television is also emphasised in the *Studio 60* episode 'The Long Lead Story.' Jordan (Amanda Peet) listens to a pitch for a reality show about breaking up engaged couples but she passes on it, declaring that the show "is toxic. It's bad crack in the school yard. And we're just three weeks removed from Wes Mendell taking fifty-three seconds and destroying an unparalleled legacy in television to tell us so."[92] When she has to take the issue to Wilson White (Edward Asner), the head of the company that owns the network, she states that "it's disgusting. It appeals to the very worst in our nature and whoever airs it will play a measurable role in subverting our national culture."[93] Both of these scenes present a scathing indictment of reality television, with it being presented as a genre that their television network should avoid in order to market themselves as superior. Eventually, in *Studio 60*, Jordan is forced to hire a head of 'alternative programming' in order to strengthen the network's reality line up, however she continually refers to her as the head of "illiterate programming."[94] There is a similar attitude to reality television in both *The Newsroom* and *The West Wing* too. In *The Newsroom*, Will criticises *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* (2009-present) because "human cockfighting makes us mean."[95] In *The West Wing*, Bartlet describes watching a *Jerry Springer* style show to Toby thusly:

> You know, I was watching a television programme before with a sort of roving moderator who spoke to a seated panel of young women who are having some sort of problems with their boyfriends. Apparently, because the boyfriends have all slept with the girlfriends' mothers. Then they brought all the boyfriends out and they fought

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[91] The hyper-coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial has had lasting effects on contemporary news. A quarter of all American's watched most of the trial and Alderman argues that "hyper-coverage is perhaps seen as an avenue by which television news programmes can increase ratings. Evidence from the Simpson case appears to substantiate this belief. CNN's viewership increased 700 percent during the opening statements of the Simpson trial." This broke downs the barriers between news and commercial television.
Derek H. Alderman, 'TV News Hyper-Coverage and the Representation of Place: Observations on the O.J Simpson Case' *Geografiska Annaler. 79*:2 (1997) 83-95

[92] 'The Long Lead Story', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by David Petrarca, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[93] 'The Long Lead Story'

[94] 'Monday', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Lawrence Trilling, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 12. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[95] 'I'll Try to Fix You', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 4. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

> right there on television. Toby, tell me these people don't vote, do they?[96]

The attitude he takes is elitist. Bartlet doesn't feel that those who would appear on this show have the intelligence to vote in a meaningful way, and thus would be unlikely to vote for him.

Instead of a reality show, Jordan wishes to purchase a drama about the UN which is being optioned to HBO. Dean J. DeFino has argued that HBO, and pay TV (also known as subscription television) in general, has been accused of cultural elitism as well as its opponents having "long insisted it excluded the poor."[97] The accusation of cultural elitism came from the channel's content of lectures, opera, ballet and art house films, which favoured high culture over low culture. The landscape of HBO has changed since its formation, with its dramas having gained popularity because of their quality, earning an international audience for its original programming such as *The Sopranos (1999-2007), The Wire* (2002-2008) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019). The accusation of elitism is also raised against PBS, which has long been thought of less as entertainment but instead as an instructional institution for broadcasting shows such as *Sesame Street* (1969-present). Due to the educational nature of PBS it frequently comes under attacks from anti-intellectuals as being elitist, failing to cater to the interests of average American's while still requiring the government to fund it. In *The West Wing*, both Democrats and Republicans have been holding up Bartlet's appointments to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The congressional aides that Toby meets with call PBS "television for rich people."[98] Toby vehemently disputes this claim:

> It's not television for rich people. In fact, the public television audience is a fairly accurate reflection of the social and economic make-up of the United States. One quarter of the PBS audience is in households with incomes lower than $20,000 a year. Blacks comprise eleven percent of the public television audience and blacks comprise eleven percent of the commercial

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[96] 'He Shall, from Time to Time'

[97] Dean J. DeFino, *The HBO Effect*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014) p.41

[98] 'Take out the Trash Day', *The West Wing,* dir. by Ken Olin, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 13. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

> television audience. Forty seven percent of PBS viewers have a high school education or less, which is one percent better than the commercial TV audience.[99]

Toby's defence of PBS presents the channel as an important institution that contributes positively to the betterment of the national culture, and, while it should not replace commercial television it should be freely available for those who wish to watch it.

Occasionally, the elitism of Sorkin's heroes is questioned by other characters in the narratives. In *Studio 60*, for example, Danny accuses Jack (Steven Weber) of elitism for believing that their show must not be too intelligent for the average American; Danny tells him, "you call me an elitist, but I'm not the one who thinks shows need to be dumber to work central and mountain time."[100] While Danny doesn't deny that he, or their show, is elitist, he does question Jack's belief that he's not an elitist. In *Sports Night*, Natalie (Sabrina Lloyd) criticises Jeremy for his intellectual superiority and tells him to "allow for the possibility that from time to time other people might be at least as smart as you are."[101] Similarly in *The West Wing*, CJ takes a negative attitude to voters,

> CJ: Everybody's stupid in an election year, Charlie.
> Charlie: No, everybody gets treated stupid in an election year.[102]

Charlie has more faith in voters than CJ does and her attitude is indicative of the intellectual elitism that is consistently emphasised throughout Sorkin's writing. The charge of elitism is also brought against Bartlet by Governor Ritchie who tells him "you're an academic elitist and a snob."[103] However, because Bartlet is accused of being elitist by the Republican nominee who has been shown to be intellectually inferior to him, the scene presents this idea in a positive light. Ritchie is also a stand in George W. Bush and thus, although he levels this accusation of elitism against Bartlet, the narrative is positioned with Bartlet as the liberal

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[99] 'Take out the Trash Day'

[100] 'Nevada Day, Part 2', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 8. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[101] 'Small Town', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin and Paul Redford, season 1, episode 13. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

[102] 'Galileo', *The West Wing*, dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin and Kevin Falls, season 2, episode 9. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[103] 'Posse Comitatus'

hero, a counter representation of what the presidency could be while under a sitting president who represents and embodies anti-intellectualism as a means to appeal to the 'average American'. Similarly in *The Newsroom*, Will is confronted by his cellmate, who is later revealed to be a hallucination of his father, and accused of being an elitist:

> Cellmate: You were just saying that to the fatheads there's no difference between Yale and Harvard. But to the refined palate of the eastern elite the subtle nuance—
> Will: Jesus, I'm from Nebraska!
> Cellmate: You still got that northeastern air of superiority.
> Will: I'm in jail!
> Cellmate: And even in here you still think you're better than me.
> Will: You hit a woman, man. You don't set the bar very high.[104]

As the elitism here is pointed out by someone who is positioned as morally and intellectually inferior to Will, the narrative encourages us to admire Will's elitism by reinforcing the stereotype of the wife-beating redneck. The two men, father and son, stand as polar opposites, with Will clearly presented as more moral. Conversely in *Sports Night*, Jeremy and Natalie argue about Jeremy's elitism and elitism is occasionally used to demean others:

> Natalie: You sit there feeling superior only you don't feel superior 'cause no one in there gives a damn that you're a sports expert.
> Jeremy: No, actually, in that environment, I do feel superior for a good many reasons, none of which has anything to do with my sports expertise, nor do I feel superior 'cause I got to walk by two bouncers with a clipboard. I don't get the same thrill you get from being on the list.[105]

Here, Jeremy doesn't deny his elitism, but because Natalie is the accuser of the elitism, and the one whom he is using said elitism to be cruel to in the scene, it isn't as clear as to whether he *should* be quite so proud of this particular character trait.

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[104] 'Oh Shenandoah'

[105] 'Small Town'

Sorkin has created a version of America in which the education of its citizens is crucial to the success of the nation as a whole, and a difference can only be made by those intelligent enough to affect change. The elitism that the inhabitants of his America display is presented as an unavoidable side effect of trying to better oneself, and therefore should not necessarily be disregarded. The increase of anti-intellectualism and reality television has had unprecedented effects on 21st century political life, and the standards and expectations to which we used to hold our leaders to account has given way to derogatory insults and alternative facts. Science and reason have become easier to simply ignore or be classed as 'fake news' when they disprove or disparage the rhetoric and conduct of politicians.[106] The Sorkinian ideology warns against this, presenting a variety of intelligent and well-educated heroes who are prepared to fight to prove that these attributes are vital to society. Despite the variety to these heroes, they are weighted towards the Democratic Party, demonstrating a bias in his writing to left-wing policies. While it is remarkable for so many characters in a work of fiction to be as intelligent as they are here, remarkable intelligence within Sorkin's work is rendered unremarkable by its ubiquity. All of his characters are highly intelligent, however, the following two chapters will explore a specific type of intelligent character that features significantly in his works: The Liberal Genius.

[106] Andersen, p.425

Chapter Three — "You have a once in a generation mind.":[1] The Liberal Genius: Part One

There is an ongoing fascination with both real and fictional representations of the genius in popular culture. In his work Sorkin creates a series of characters that embody the ideas of classic Liberalism — such as can be found in the work of John Stuart Mill — that interconnect notions of genius with Liberalism. In this chapter, I will examine the multiple variations of liberalism in American life, and outline the history of representations of genius and how it has evolved to become a feature that is increasingly common-place in popular culture. Focusing on the positive aspects of the Liberal Genius — a term I am applying to a selection of characters that reoccur in Sorkin's texts and come to prominence as a feature in his writing which foregrounds a recurring set of Sorkin's characters who are marked out by their high intellect and strict moral code across his works — I argue that Sorkin creates beacons to lead his fantasy of an idealised version of America set against a conservative reality that sneers at knowledge and champions anti-intellectualism. The presence of the Liberal Genius in Sorkin's writing makes his work particularly worthy of study because of the prevalence of right-wing conservatism and anti-intellectualism that has dominated the media in the 21st century. Numerous representations of genius, particularly on television, have greatly influenced how we view intelligence. Carlson unpacks the definition of genius as "innate intellectual or creative power of an exceptional or exalted type, such is attributed to those people considered the greatest in any area of art, science, etc.; [they have an] instinctive and extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation, original thought, invention, or discovery."[2] This is a fairly inclusive definition of genius that also considers creativity alongside traditional intelligence. The genius figure in Sorkin's work fits this particular definition, especially in regard to intellectualism and original thought. Sorkin is preoccupied with, and fascinated by, genius in his own works and one of his most frequent reoccurring character types is the Liberal Genius. Across his body of work to date, these are characters

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[1] 'Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 1999

[2] Ashley Lynn Carlson, "The Human Hard Drive: Memory, Intelligence and the Internet Age" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) pp.49-58 (p.50)

that stand apart from their already intelligent colleagues as particularly gifted and exceptional. Although the phrase 'liberal genius' has been used as early as eighteenth-century political writing, here I use it to describe a very specific character type and revisited set of characteristics in Sorkin's work. There are six main features of Sorkin's taxonomy of the Liberal Genius:

1) They are highly intelligent and typically, but not exclusively, white males
2) They have their own strict moral code
3) They struggle with addiction
4) They have or had a difficult relationship with their father
5) They are highly successful in their professional lives but struggle to maintain their personal lives
6) They have suffered a traumatic event

Sorkin's Liberal Geniuses all display these outlined traits to varying degrees of severity, some of these characters have less of a moral code or are affected less by personal trauma, while others have more pressing addictions or are deeply affected by poor paternal relationships. In other words, the Liberal Geniuses do not have every one of these qualities, but rather they each display their own combination of these characteristics. As the majority of the Liberal Geniuses in this Sorkinian America are white males, it unfortunately adheres to the white male bias of American liberalism. The Liberal Geniuses in Sorkin's television works are as follows: President Bartlet (Martin Sheen), Leo McGarry (John Spencer), and Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford) from *The West Wing*; Sloan Sabbith (Olivia Munn), Will McAvoy (Jeff Daniels), and Charlie Skinner (Sam Waterston) from *The Newsroom*; Danny Tripp (Bradley Whitford) and Matt Albie (Matthew Perry) from *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*; and Dan Rydell (Josh Charles) and Dana Whittaker (Felicity Huffman) in *Sports Night*. In Sorkin's television series there are multiple Liberal Geniuses, however, in his films these characters tend to be the singular subject of the film: Molly Bloom (Jessica Chastain) from *Molly's Game*, Steve Jobs (Michael Fassbender) from *Steve Jobs*, Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) from *The Social Network*, Charlie Wilson (Tom Hanks) from *Charlie Wilson's War*, President Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas) from *The American President*, Daniel Kaffee (Tom Cruise) from *A Few Good Men*, and Billy Beane (Brad Pitt) from *Moneyball*. Part of the reason for the singular Liberal Genius in his films, as opposed to the

multiple Liberal Geniuses in his television works, is indicative both of the time constraint of a film narrative and the biographical nature of these stories; the Liberal Genius is *the focus* of the each film.[3]

In 'Three Variations on American Liberalism', Peter Kuryla notes that "liberalism in the United States refers to a politico-cultural persuasion that has advocates almost exclusively in the American Democratic Party."[4] Sorkin's work, which connects the beliefs of liberalism with the notions of genius, presents a varied group of characters that indicate that liberalism and genius defy partisan politics. Liberalism, such as that found in the work of John Stuart Mill (who advocated for Representative Government), dictates that citizens must have an active role in their government through the election of more qualified individuals to represent their interests in order for a government to be successful. In accordance with this liberalism, the best governments are the ones which promote the intelligence of its citizens: "a representative constitution is a means of bringing the general standard of intelligence and honesty existing in the community, and the individual intellect and virtue of its wisest members, more directly to bear on the government, and investing them with greater influence in it, than they would in general have under any other mode of organisation."[5] Mill argued for individual liberty, provided there is no infringement upon the rights and well-being of others; while individualism is an important factor for liberals, "the individualism that underlies liberalism isn't valued at the expense of our social nature or our shared community. It is an individualism that accords with, rather than opposes, the undeniable importance to us of our shared social world."[6] Dating back to its founding, American society follows the thinking of classic liberalism, in that, Americans are distinct individuals, rational and self-interested, with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of

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[3] The outliers to this theory are *A Few Good* Men, The *American President*, and *Moneyball*, however, the story of *A Few Good Men* was inspired by a military case that Sorkin's sister was working on, *The American President* and its unused pages became the basis for *The West Wing*, and while much of the narrative of *Moneyball* centres around Beane, the focus of the story is the Oakland Athletics' use of sabermetrics. These films have a broader subject matter than the singular Liberal Genius.

[4] Peter Kuryla, "'Three Variations on American Liberalism" in *American Thought and Culture in the 21st Century*, ed. Martin Halliwell and Catherine Morley, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) pp.65-79 (p.65)

[5] John Stuart Mill 'Considerations on Representative Government' in *On Liberty, Utilitarianism and Other Essays*. ed. Mark Philip and Frederick Rosen. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) p.201

[6] Will Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community and Culture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp.2-3

happiness (the latter, under classic liberal thinking, being property). Liberalism gained such popularity in this post-Revolutionary America because it appealed to financiers, entrepreneurs and merchants. Liberalism was not initially democratic, as many citizens were not allowed to vote. Voting rights were slowly extended to the poor (1792-1856), to women (the nineteenth amendment in 1919), and to African Americans (the fifteenth amendment in 1870) and these improvements to society were also encouraged by socialists. It was in the early 20th century, Dolbare and Cummings argue, that there was "a basic change in liberalism from strict laissez-fair (with exceptions) to governmental intervention in the economy and society."[7] Furthermore, they convincingly argue that Hebert Croly is the father of this modern liberalism. He

> shared Hamilton's willingness to assume responsibility for achieving specific goals through the use of government, and he converted Hamilton's purposes into the broader one of a prosperous economy managed by an intelligent and public spirited government. But he also endorsed Jefferson's concern for the individual's attainment and for the general social and economic betterment of all members of the society.[8]

The combination of Hamilton's nationalist vision and Jefferson's democratic commitments has created liberalism as it is understood today: government intervention to promote democracy and social harmony. Kuryla argues that liberalism in the twenty-first century has three distinct variations: pragmatic/pluralist; polemical/radical; and Rawlsian/rights-based.[9] He explains that pragmatic/pluralist liberalism often focuses on tolerance and cultural pluralism, with pragmatic liberals drawing from thinkers such as William James and John Dewey. More recently, pragmatic liberals have included politicians like Senator Edward Kennedy and this type of practical liberalism has seen a revival in the wake of 9/11. Polemical/radical liberalism combines humour and cynicism and is best embodied by comedians such as Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. Finally, Rawlsian/rights-based liberalism embraces both liberal and communitarian ideas; these rights-based liberals take

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[7] Kenneth M. Dolbeare and Michael S. Cummings, "The Rise of the Positive State: 1900-1945" in *American Political Thought,* ed. Kenneth M. Dolbeare and Michael S. Cummings, (Washington: CQ Press, 2010) pp.365

[8] Dolbeare and Cummings, pp.370-1

[9] Kuryla. p.65

their cues from John Rawls, and have included, among their numbers, activists such as Martin Luther King Jr.[10] The importance of society and community to the protagonists of Sorkin's America (as explored in my previous chapters) is also one of the chief concerns of his Liberal Geniuses. Sorkin's Liberal Geniuses represent different strands of American liberalism and "nearly every variation on liberalism in the US draws lines of descent from the historic creation of the limited American welfare state, starting with the New Deal of the 1930s and proceeding through the Great Society of the 1960s".[11] The America that Sorkin constructs, particularly in *The West Wing*, draws ideas from the liberalism that Franklin D. Roosevelt in the 1930s and John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson in the 1960s, embraced with their public works projects and domestic programs with such aims as reducing poverty and increasing equality.

The term 'genius' has a long and complex history that has seen the word defined, meanings conflated, and then redefined by writers and thinkers as understandings of intelligence developed. Historically there has been an ambiguity to the word and

> [A]t the start of the eighteenth century it meant the special and unique talents that all (or most) individuals possess. By the end of the century, it had come to be closely linked to human creativity, it was creativity, not reason or talent, that made man resemble a god…made him more than an animal, and made some men superhuman and superior to others. This special spark of divinity was confined to *some few* individuals.[12]

In mid-eighteenth century Britain and Europe, there was a rise in the interest in the idea of genius. These developments included the move from the artist as being understood to be 'mimetic' to the artist as a 'legislator'. These developments continued into the nineteenth century and Yoel Mitrani notes that during the Romantic period "no longer was he understood to be someone who merely aimed to mirror and so reproduce nature; he became a man-of-genius who created original and expressive art from his subjective feelings and

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[10] Kuryla. pp.69-75

[11] Kuryla. p.66

[12] Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetic*, (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1989) p.3

imagination."[13] John Stuart Mill, whose writings on liberalism were highly influential, also explored ideas of genius in relation to expressions of art, science, ethics, politics, and education. Mitrani outlines three distinct ways that Mill departs from a Romantic interpretation of genius: firstly, there is a rejection of mystical notions of genius, because even though geniuses have exceptional qualities "all men, including men of genius, are subject to the same laws of nature."[14] Secondly, Mill places genius in an empiricist theory of knowledge, as "all knowledge of the world comes through empirical observation, which includes the knowledge gathered by men of genius."[15] Finally, Mill proposes the belief that genius is egalitarian in nature because "genius…might differ in degree, but not in kind, between individuals."[16] Mill's use of a naturalist framework and empirical method "shows that genius does not entail momentary sparks of exceptional insight but is a product of personality, environment, and hard work."[17] Mill's view of genius is tied to his understanding of liberalism, insisting "emphatically on the importance of genius, and the necessity of allowing it to unfold freely both in thought and in practice."[18] The benefits of genius can only be felt in a free society and "not only does genius require political freedom, but the freedom of society is dependent on men of genius."[19] This idea was also advocated by the Founding Fathers; Thomas Jefferson believed in a natural aristocracy and "this notion recalled the classical Greek idea of rule by the best rather than an 'artificial' aristocracy that had simply inherited its status and position. Jefferson, a great proponent of education, used the term 'genius' as a synonym for his natural aristocracy."[20] In a letter to John Adams, he wrote "there is a natural aristocracy among men…There is also an artificial aristocracy,

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[13] Yoel Mitrani, "John Stuart Mill and the Liberal Genius" in *Subjectivity and the Political: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Gavin Rae and Emma Ingala, (New York: Routledge, 2018) p.175-196 (p.175)

[14] Mitrani. p.176

[15] Ibid

[16] Ibid

[17] Ibid

[18] Mill, p.64

[19] Mitrani, p.187

[20] Bruce Baum, *The Post-Liberal Imagination: Political Sciences from the American Cultural Landscape*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016) p.105

founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents".[21] He went on to argue that citizens would elect the members of the natural aristocracy over those of artificial aristocracy, and that while some may be deceived by wealth and birth, it would not be enough to corrupt the system.

There are two ways of thinking about genius in the modern context of the word: the first is genius as being dependent on culture and environment, and the second is genius being an innate attribute. Carlson uses Einstein as an example to interrogate contrast between these two ideas of genius. She questions whether Einstein would still be a genius if he was born in the Dark Ages, and thus unable to make the scientific contributions that he did, or whether Einstein would still have been a genius, if only an unsuccessful one.[22] Ideas of innate genius are tied to attempts to measure intelligence such as the IQ test and while scientists avoid using IQ,[23] it is often referenced as a narrative shorthand to indicate a character's genius on television. Carlson notes that "science recognizes the spectrum and complexity of individual differences, whereas popular culture has tended toward a more simplistic genius-or-not dichotomy."[24] Genius is not easily defined, but a frequent interpretation is of someone who has extraordinary accomplishments, meaning that authors, composers, scientists, and artists alike are considered geniuses. It is, however, debatable whether or not this designation comes from their contributions to a particular field or an innate ability; in Sorkin's work there is little difference between genius and gifted. Television often prefers representation of innate genius, for example, Malcolm (Frankie Muniz) of *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000-2006) is presented as a genius despite the environment in which he grows up not stereotypically being conducive to genius (in fact all of the brothers in the family demonstrate traits of various types of genius as the series progresses, just to a far lesser degree than Malcolm

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[21] Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to John Adams (1813)" in *American Political Thought,* ed. Kenneth M. Dolbeare and Michael S. Cummings, (Washington: CQ Press, 2010) p.165

[22] Ashley Lynn Carlson, "Introduction" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) p.1-10 (p.2-3)

[23] Science has treated IQ with a hesitancy because measuring intelligence in such a way implies that intelligence is a stable trait that has the ability to be quantified. The extent to which IQ is useful is limited because humans are too complex to be quantified by a number. (Carlson, pp.3-4)

[24] Carlson. p.4

does).[25] Television is full of "surprisingly competent and hyper-articulate characters. In order to stand out as truly different, geniuses must be off the scale extraordinary"[26] and narratives of genius in television provide a far more detailed commentary on popular culture than they do on intelligence. While genius is a rare quality, it has increased significantly in contemporary popular culture, and in Sorkin's work this level of intelligence is both highly visible and normalised. Signifiers of genius on television range from deductive reasoning to incredible feats memory to extraordinary technological ability.[27] However, the political genius of Sorkin's work is less common overall, possibly because the positive effects are less overt — his geniuses do not solve crimes or perform medical miracles, instead they use their intelligence to craft policy.

There is a close connection between the Liberal Genius and Sorkin's more general representations of the intellectual and it is a line that is, at times, blurred. Julien Benda's definition of the intellectual shares many commonalities with the definition of Liberal Genius at play in this thesis: collectively, they comprise of "a tiny band of super-gifted and morally endowed philosopher kings who constitute the conscience of mankind."[28] While all of Sorkin's heroes are hyper-articulate, there are a few central characters in each of his works that stand out as the Liberal Genius and these particular geniuses are set apart from their colleagues as the moral demi-gods that lead Sorkin's America forward into the future. Carlson notes that "contemporary television has provided two overarching narratives of genius, one in which geniuses carry out seemingly superhuman tasks, and one in which geniuses struggle with some of the most basic aspects of everyday human existence".[29] The

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[25] Malcolm is overtly highly intelligent, fluent in artistic and cultural knowledge, history, maths and science. However Francis (Christopher Masterson) is shown to be exceptionally talented at rule breaking; Reece (Justin Berfield) is revealed to be a master chef; and Dewey (Erik Per Sullivan) is a musical prodigy.

[26] David Sidore, "'Spectacularly Ignorant: The Conflated Representation of Genius" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) p.12-31 (p.16)

[27] Characters that exhibit the traits of genius in contemporary popular television include (but are by no means limited to) the various incarnations of Sherlock Holmes — *Elementary* (2012-2019), to *Sherlock* (2010-2017), to *House* (2004-2012). Spencer Reid in *Criminal Minds* (2005-2020), Alec Hardison in *Leverage* (2008-2012), and Felicity Smoak in *Arrow* (2012-2020). What this indicates is that despite the anti-intellectualism that plagues reality and popular culture, the genius trope persists in popular television.

[28] Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, (London: Vintage, 1994) p.4

[29] Carlson. p.1

implications of characters falling into these two extremes present the genius as fictional, unattainable, or a trait that should be avoided at all costs. In this, and the following chapter, I will demonstrate how Sorkin's geniuses fall in-between these two narrative pillars rather than adhering to one in particular, and prove that he subscribes to a combination of nature/ nurture.

Mitrani notes that "since men of genius were regarded as privileged in their ability to apprehend truth, many of the Romantics stressed the social role of poets as moral educators. Some, going even further, advanced the view that men of genius are most fit for political leadership and deserve the worship of less capable individuals."[30] Sorkin's Liberal Geniuses are often leaders in their particular fields and this is most explicitly embodied by President Bartlet. The Bartlet administration echoes the Clinton administration, or rather, the hope that liberals had for Clinton — the promise of Clinton — after twelve years of Republican administrations.[31] The gulf between the promise and the reality of Clinton was repackaged in *The West Wing* as a liberal ideal of what the American presidency can and should strive to be. Clinton's "brand of 'third-way' politics, which prioritised electability over ideology, soon alienated the left just as much as his style of government antagonised the right."[32] However, despite this, and despite the numerous political scandals, Clinton remained popular with high job approval ratings.[33] Clinton had a talent for creating "a powerful affective relationship between people and the presidential office, cultivating intimacy as an element of his public authority as few presidents had managed to do before him."[34] There are a number of comparisons that can be made between Bartlet and Clinton, and in an interview with *Radio Times* Martin Sheen commented that "[Bartlet] is bright, astute, and filled with all the

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[30] Mitrani. p.178

[31] Hopes for Clinton were high among Democrats; he was well-spoken and intelligent, and he used popular platforms such as *The Arsenio Hall Show* (1989-1994) to appeal to young and minority voters. However Clinton never lived up to the hopes of his Democratic supporters, as he signed into law many programmes that disproportionately disenfranchised the poor and minorities.

[32] Colin Harrison, *American Culture in the 1990s*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) p.4

[33] In fact, the Gallup poll showed that in December 1998 (a few months after his impeachment), Clinton had his highest job approval rating while in office at 73%.
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/116584/presidential-approval-rating-bill-clinton.aspx>

[34] Harrison, p.5

negative foibles that make him very human."[35] While Sorkin's president is not as youthful as Clinton when in office, the majority of Bartlet's staff is young, giving this fictional White House the same youthful energy that was exhibited by Clinton himself. There are, of course, negative similarities shared between the two administrations: for example, both presidents come under investigation while in office — Clinton for both the Whitewater and Monica Lewinsky scandals, and Bartlet for the cover up of his private struggle with Multiple Sclerosis (MS), perceived attempt to defraud the public, and the assassination of Qumari defence minister Abdul Shareef (Qaid Al-Nomani). Dominic Sandbrook notes that Clinton "was a very different kind of Democrat: cautious, fiscally prudent, always keen to blur the ideological boundaries between himself and his opponents".[36] While Bartlet began as a cautious president, he came to benefit from the distance between his political opponents and himself. Rather than blurring the boundaries between the president and his rivals, the Bartlet administration emphasised the distance between their genius president and his less intelligent rivals in order to secure reelection. Furthermore, Howard Zinn notes that:

> despite his lofty rhetoric, Clinton showed, in his eight years in office, that he, like other politicians, was more interested in electoral victory than in social change. To get more votes, he decided that he must move the party closer to the center. This meant doing just enough for blacks, women, and working people to keep their support, while trying to win over white conservative voters with a program of toughness on crime, stern measures on welfare, and a strong military.[37]

The compromises made by Clinton in order to appeal to conservatives came at a cost: his crime bill and welfare reform, for instance, unfairly impacted low income families. Like Clinton, Bartlet also drifts to the political centre while in office, however Leo soon calls him out on this strategy, which is privately causing Bartlet unease:

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[35] Christopher Bigsby, *Viewing America: Twenty-First-Century Television Drama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p.32

[36] Dominic Sandbrook, "'American Politics in the 1990s and 2000s" in *American Thought and Culture in the 21st Century*, ed. Martin Halliwell and Catherine Morley, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) p.21-34 (p.27)

[37] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), p.644

> Leo: Everyone's waiting for you. I don't know for how much longer.
> Bartlet: I don't want to feel like this anymore.
> Leo: You don't have to.
> Bartlet: I don't what to go to sleep like this.
> Leo: You don't have to.
> Bartlet: I want to speak.
> Leo: Say it out loud. Say it to me.
> Bartlet: This is more important than re-election. I want to speak now.[38]

Leo's efforts to pull Bartlet back to the left results in the above exchange, and the refrain "this is more important than re-election. I want to speak now", as well as his intellect and liberal vision, must have come as a pleasant reprieve (or perhaps wish fulfilment) for liberals from the continual disappointment of Clinton's centrist position which saw, in their view, too many concessions to the Right on explosive, divisive issues.

The representation of genius on television has tended to be negative because, as Sidore notes, "if these geniuses were altruistic philosopher kings having us do things for our own good and making the world a better place, that would be one thing. But despite solving crimes and curing patients, most of them are selfish, motivated far more by personal goals and a desire not to be bored than by concern for lesser beings and the common good."[39] However, of Sorkin's Liberal Geniuses, Bartlet in particular is the model of Plato's Philosopher King. Similar to the Patriot King discussed in the first chapter, Bartlet's love of knowledge and cultivation of intelligence is coupled with his desire to improve the lives of others. In the final episode of the second season of *The West Wing*, during a flashback to their younger years, Mrs Landingham (Kirsten Nelson) tells the adolescent Bartlet (Jason Widener) that "you're a boy king, you're a foot smarter than the smartest kid in class. You're blessed with inspiration. You must know this by now, you must have sensed it."[40] Here the explicit reference to kingship links Bartlet's destiny to the idea of the philosopher king. Sorkin himself acknowledges the connection between *The West Wing* and ideas about kingship, stating "there's a great tradition in storytelling that's thousands of years old, telling

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[38] 'Let Bartlet Be Bartlet', *The West Wing,* dir. by Laura Innes, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[39] Sidore. p.24

[40] 'Two Cathedrals', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

stories about kings and their palaces, and that's really what I wanted to do."[41] American aristocracy is not the same as European aristocracy with its ideas of inherited status and wealth and Bartlet, in particular, is indicative of this American (natural) aristocracy advocated by Jefferson. The Founding Fathers believed that the president should be more than a man, possessing exceptional talents in diplomacy and oratory, and Hamilton "subscribed to the view that the office of the presidency would embody the ideals of the nation, imagining the position to be held by ordinary men with extraordinary abilities."[42]

Sorkin presents genius as aspirational and these characters are the ideal for humanity in his vision of America. It is the job of the Liberal Genius to be the leaders of a society; to articulate their philosophy to, and for the benefit of, the public. In *The Newsroom*, after Will has ranted about the current state of the country, he gives a rousing speech about how he feels America used to be:

> We stood up for what was right. We fought for moral reasons. We passed laws, struck down laws, for moral reasons. We waged wars on poverty, not poor people. We sacrificed. We cared about our neighbours. We put our money where our mouths were and we never beat our chests. We built great big things, made ungodly technological advances, explored the universe, cured diseases, and we cultivated the world's greatest artists and the world's greatest economy. We reached for the stars, acted like men. We aspired to intelligence. We didn't belittle it, it didn't make us feel inferior. We didn't identify ourselves by who we voted for in the last election and we didn't— we didn't scare so easy. We were able to be all these things and do all these things because we were informed. By great men, men who were revered. The first step in solving any problem is recognising that there is one.[43]

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[41] Heather Richardson Hayton, "The King's Two Bodies: Identity and Office in Sorkin's West Wing" in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, ed. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003) p.63-79 (p.65)

[42] Gregory Frame, *The American President in Film and Television: Myth, Politics and Representation*. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014) p.27

[43] 'We Just Decided To', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

In this moment, Sorkin engages with a potent nostalgia for an idea of the way things were, however this speech glosses over the darker aspects of American history. By focusing on the great accomplishments achieved by America since its formation, Sorkin fails to acknowledge serious deficiencies in the moral character of the nation. The most evident example of this is the predominance of slavery and the subsequent failure to move fully move past, acknowledge and heal the difficult race relations that still plague American society. The problem of America's failure to acknowledge their darker history is articulated in Langston Hughes's poem 'Let America Be America Again'. In the poem, Hughes responds to the call to "let America be America again. Let it be the dream it used to be"[44] with "(it was never America to me.)"[45] Hughes is speaking for the poor, women, and minorities, for whom the American Dream was not accessible. Although the dream of America and its great history has never existed for these people, he believes that it can one day be great:

> O, yes,
> I say it plain,
> America was never America to me,
> And yet I swear this oath —
> America will be![46]

Through Will's speech, Sorkin is guilty of myth making, and his Liberal Geniuses intend to lead his fantasy nation into a shining future that is based upon a nostalgic ideal of a less problematic history and for a time that never really existed. These Liberal Geniuses seek to embody the leaders of American history who, in *The Newsroom*, Sorkin refers to as The Greater Fools.

The greater fool is an economic theory that sees investors buying something not worth the price they pay because they believe that they can sell it on to a 'greater fool' and make a profit. In the season one finale of *The Newsroom*, Will quotes from an article that calls him The Greater Fool, demonstrating this prevailing attitude that society, and his peers, have towards intellectuals and, in particular, the Liberal Genius:

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[44] Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again" in *American Political Thought,* ed. Kenneth M. Dolbeare and Michael S. Cummings, (Washington: CQ Press, 2010) p.468

[45] Ibid.

[46] Hughes, p.470

> Will: 'One CNN producer remarked "it's as though McAvoy is unaware of how ridiculous he looks doing what he thinks passes as a Murrow impersonation."'
> MacKenzie: Will, I know what it says.
> Will: 'A senior VP at parent company AWM laughed as he said "Will wants to change the world and hates that the world has changed."'
> MacKenzie: You know it by heart?
> Will: "It's not is much that Will McAvoy is old—"
> MacKenzie: Okay, this is really weird.
> Will: "It's that he's antiquated. His premise is irrelevant and pompous."[47]

After Will is called a greater fool, Sloan explains this economic theory to him, stating that "the greater fool is someone with the perfect blend of self-delusion and ego to think that he can succeed where others have failed. This whole country was made by greater fools."[48] She constructs it in a positive light; an idea that is vital to be able to create something valuable and this idea is readdressed at the end of this episode. Jenna, the sorority girl — who began the series by asking Will "[W]hat makes America the greatest country in the world?" at an open Q&A discussion at Northwestern University — is interviewing for an internship at the network. Transformed by the experience she had as the target of Will's tirade about the erosion of America as a nation worth championing, she tells Will that "I watch the show, and I read the *New York* magazine article and know what a greater fool is. And I want to be one."[49] For Sorkin — like Sloan claims the Founding Fathers were — the Liberal Genius is a greater fool. Their genius, in part, leads them to believe that they can succeed where others have failed, and we, the viewers, should want to be greater fools as well. Sidore notes that topics such as politics, current events, popular culture and social conventions are discarded by television's geniuses,[50] however this is not the case for most of Sorkin's Liberal Geniuses, particularly in relation to politics. His geniuses *are* political and cultural geniuses. As argued in the previous chapter, there is an attitude of elitism that runs through Sorkin's work, and these Liberal Geniuses are only compatible with an elitist democracy invested in such a

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[47] 'The Greater Fool', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 10. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[48] Ibid

[49] Ibid

[50] Sidore. p.15

vision. Baum outlines political economist Joseph Schumpeter's advocacy for an elitist democracy; that everyday citizens are not capable of getting involved in law and policy making but, rather than violating democracy, this presents an idealised, if naive version of democracy. Baum notes that according to Schumpeter "democracy should be understood modestly as the process in which ordinary citizens, through periodic elections, choose lawmakers to govern them from among competing elites."[51] This is indicative of Mill's argument for a representative government, in which citizens elect others to act on their behalf: "The meaning of representative government is, that the whole people, or some numerous portion of them, exercise through deputies periodically elected by themselves, the ultimate controlling power, which, in every constitution, must reside somewhere."[52] Representative government, as Mill saw it, also allows for the wisest members of society to affect the running of the state, as well as the improvement of participation, and thus intellectual debate.

Popular culture's favouring of inherent genius is key in the construction of the Liberal Genius. All of Sorkin's heroes are intelligent, but those elevated to the position of Liberal Genius possess extraordinary intellect. Bartlet's genius comes naturally, although he still advocates for education; as I have already explored in the previous chapter, when he runs for re-election, Bartlet is positioned against a far less intelligent Republican nominee. The debate between the two men showcases Bartlet's genius:

> Richie: Let the states decide. Let the communities decide on health care, on education, on lower taxes not higher taxes. Now he's going to throw a big word at you 'unfunded mandate.' If Washington lets the states do it, it's an unfunded mandate. But what he doesn't like is the federal government losing power. But I call it the ingenuity of the American people…
>
> Bartlet: Well, first of all, let's clear up a couple of things. 'Unfunded mandate' is two words not one 'big word'… There are times when we're fifty states and there are times when we're one country, and have national needs.

[51] Baum. p.107

[52] Mill, p.253

> And the way I know this is that Florida didn't fight Germany in World War II, or establish civil rights. You think states should do the governing wall-to-wall. That's a perfectly valid opinion. But your state of Florida got $12.6 billion in federal money last year — from Nebraskans, and Virginians, and New Yorkers, and Alaskans…12.6 out of a state budget of $50 billion, and I'm supposed to be using this time for a question, so here it is: Can we have it back please?[53]

The ideas that Bartlet expresses during the debate are in line with contemporary liberalism. Theorist G.A. Cohen claims that these practitioners should be called social democrats. Bartlet's genius is linked to his liberalism and he is able to further prove his genius in a televised debate, demonstrating that he is intelligent enough to be re-elected president of the United States. Sorkin uses a variety of shortcuts to indicate Bartlet's genius: he is a Nobel Prize winner (in Economics), possesses a vast knowledge of art and culture, and has a fascination with law and history. There is also an importance placed upon academia in Sorkin's work, with his characters having usually attended Ivy League universities. Even in his works in which his geniuses have dropped out of college there is an emphasis placed on the idea of 'better' schools. One such example is striking in *Steve Jobs* when, talking about Bill Gates, Steve states that "he dropped out of a better school than I dropped out of."[54] What is demonstrated in films such as *Steve Jobs*, *The Social Network*, and *Molly Bloom* is that the Liberal Genius is not reliant on a prestigious education. These geniuses are set apart from Sorkin's intelligent characters because their genius and talent are inherent, and education only fosters ability they naturally possess. There is a similar emphasis placed on talent, and in Sorkin's works inherent talent and inherent genius are one and the same. In *Studio 60*, Matt Albie is praised by actress Harriet Hayes (Sarah Paulson) as a talented writer who "writes to get people to like him"[55] which is contrasted with Will in *The Newsroom* who is described by producer Don (Thomas Sadoski) as being "a smart, talented guy who isn't very nice."[56] Will's lack of concern with the negative opinion his colleagues have of him

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[53] 'Game On', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin and Paul Redford, season 4, episode 6. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

[54] *Steve Jobs,* dir. Danny Boyle, (Universal Pictures, 2015)

[55] 'Breaking News', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Andrew Bernstein, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 18. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[56] 'We Just Decided To'

demonstrates his desire to keep them at a distance, while in fact Will only seems concerned with what MacKenzie (Emily Mortimer) thinks of him — which I explore closer in chapters five and seven. It also demonstrates a confidence in his own brilliance; he feels less inclined to concern himself with being nice because he is aware of his own intelligence. Matt and Will present two examples of rare talent, and therefore genius, that is linked with how they treat the people in their lives. The contrast in their behaviours show that while Sorkin's Liberal Geniuses adhere to a set of standard character traits, there is still variety in their particular characterisations.

Despite its apparent irrelevance in the scientific world,[57] Sorkin places significant emphasis on IQ in having his characters frequently reference it. For example, in the first episode of *The Newsroom*, MacKenzie tells Will that "I've come here to take your IQ, and your talent and put it to some patriotic fucking use",[58] employing a general shortcut that is used in television to indicate genius for the audience. The opening of *The Social Network* features a conversation between Zuckerberg and his girlfriend Erica about IQ. Zuckerberg flits between conversation topics, showing off his intellectual capacity and attempting to demonstrate his intellectual superiority, informing her that he got a 1600 on his SATs and telling her that she doesn't need to study because she goes to Boston University. She is ultimately able to triumph over him in their verbal war with her iconic line "you're going to go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a nerd. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole."[59] Sorkin includes signifiers of genius throughout his characters' interactions in order to demonstrate their knowledge in a variety of areas. Intelligence, or rather the way that intelligence is used, varies across the Liberal Geniuses. When the Liberal Genius manipulates their colleagues, it is often presented as a necessity for the pursuit of a better world. In Sorkin's work there is a type of Liberal Genius that 'plays the orchestra'. These geniuses conduct the people around them, much like a music conductor, in order to realise an idea or control a situation. In doing so, they frequently use deceit to manipulate those closest to them but this is presented as justified for the greater good. This was a phrase that he used in *Steve Jobs*:

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[57] Carlson p.3-4

[58] 'We Just Decided To'

[59] *The Social Network,* dir. David Fincher, (Columbia Pictures, 2010)

> Wozniak: How come ten times a day I read 'Steve Jobs is a genius'? What do you do?
> Jobs: I play the orchestra.[60]

While this idea is specifically stated in *Steve Jobs*, it has appeared in Sorkin's scripts long before that. In *The Newsroom*, Will is faxed polling data that shows the increasing popularity of the Tea Party and he makes it his mission to shed light on their conduct. Charlie later reveals to MacKenzie that it was he had who sent the polling data in order to provoke Will into action.[61] Charlie also put the show together, the final episode reveals, after he hired MacKenzie he sent her a copy of *Don Quixote*, which became central to their philosophy.[62] In *Studio 60*, Danny becomes concerned that Matt is afraid to make fun of George W. Bush in the sketches that he writes and so he has a question concerning the show's patriotism put to the focus group as a way of manipulating him.[63] Similarly, in a later episode Danny pretends to have spoken to Standards and Practices about blasphemy:

> Matt: If Jesus was the head of Standards and Practices he would pimp slap the whole lot of us and not because we used his name in— Jesus as the head of Standards and Practices!
> Danny: And there's your Monday morning sketch
> Matt: I'll try to have the first draft in a couple of hours and pages before the dinner break.
> Danny: I'm the puppet master.
> Matt: You didn't even have a conversation with Standards did you?
> Danny: No.[64]

Here Danny's description of himself as a puppet master is comparable to Steve Jobs saying that he plays the orchestra. In their mission to do just that, these characters manipulate those

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[60] *Steve Jobs*

[61] 'The 112th Congress', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[62] 'What Kind of Day Has It Been', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 6. First broadcast, HBO, 2014

[63] 'The Focus Group', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[64] 'Nevada Day, Part 1', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Lesli Linka Glatter and Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 7. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

around them for both selfish and altruistic reasons while disregarding the feelings of those in their lives. Charlie knows that Will is not living up to his potential, and he also believes in the importance of journalism in the functioning of a democracy, while Jobs is shown to treat the people in his life terribly in his pursuit for perfection. The poor treatment of those in the lives of these characters is presented as a side effect of their genius necessary for greatness, which I will explore in more detail in chapter four. Similar to these Liberal Geniuses, is Billy Beane in *Moneyball*. While General Manager of the Oakland Athletics he goes against the wishes of the more experienced scouts and implements a new strategy that boils baseball down to sabermetric theory. He hires a Yale economics graduate, and three 'defective' players to replace the star players the team just lost. With this strategy, he leads the Oakland Athletics to a twenty game winning streak. Beane is later approached by the owner of the Boston Red Sox, but he turns down $12.5 million salary — a salary that would have made him the highest paid General Manager in the history of professional sports — in order to remain with the Oakland Athletics.[65]

Historically, women have been excluded from representations of genius due to prevailing out-dated ideas that biology renders women incapable of it. Women were believed to be incapable of such intellectual and artistic originality simply due to their gender. Sorkin constructs his characters around historical notions of genius. For the Renaissance thinkers women lacked genius: "women, apparently, were fated to lack wit, judgement, and skill… Hence, unsurprisingly, cultural inferiority became linked with a lack of *genius* as such…a lack of that aspect of maleness that made men divine."[66] This thinking continued into the Romantic period, a time in which the genius encompassed "all sorts of men; but he is always a 'Hero' and never a heroine. He cannot be a woman."[67] Much of the cultural shorthand used to talk about genius today comes from the historical thinking of genius and "our present criteria for artistic excellence have their origins in theories that specifically and explicitly

[65] Although Sorkin was brought on to rewrite the screenplay, while light on 'Sorkinisms', areas of Beane's life that the film focuses on include the trauma of his past and the relationship he has with this daughter, both of which are typical of Sorkin's liberal geniuses.

[66] Battersby, p.40

[67] Battersby, p.19

denied women genius."[68] The image of the genius in popular culture — both traditionally and on television — has typically been male and Carlson notes that "with but few exceptions, the classic examples of genius are male and the belief that men are more intellectually capable than women has prevailed."[69] As the protagonists in Sorkin's works are all highly intelligent, regardless of their gender, he avoids succumbing to the erroneous stereotype and challenges this outdated falsehood that men are more intelligent than women. Sherrie A. Inness notes that "according to the common cultural stereotype, women are not supposed to be too smart and, in particular, are not supposed to be as intelligent as their husbands or boyfriends."[70] In popular culture, in general, there are far fewer brilliant women than there are brilliant men, and when they do appear their intelligence is often understated in order to be more acceptable to a mainstream audience. These brilliant women may put romance before their careers, or give up careers to have children, however in Sorkin's work women either put their careers before everything else or are able to 'have it all'. For the Romantics, such as Jean-Jaques Rousseau, the artist was a male genius and "women, by contrast, became 'other'. The occasional female creator could be countenanced; but being a creator and a truly feminine female were deemed to be in conflict."[71] Of Sorkin's female protagonists, a few stand out as Liberal Geniuses, on par with their male counterparts. The most notable example of this is *The Newsroom*'s Sloan Sabbith, a financial news anchor and professor at Columbia University with two PhD's in economics, who describes herself as making "nerds look good."[72] Sloan subverts the stereotype of, and visually contrasts with the more common image of the nerd; she is portrayed by a beautiful actress and initially dismissively described by Will as 'Victoria's Secret' due to her distinctive beauty and figure. Jennifer Kirby notes that "women are generally only allowed to inhabit one persona and are recognised more for their beauty than their intelligence, suggesting that if one is feminine

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[68] Battersby, p.32

[69] Carlson. p.4

[70] Sherrie A. Inness, "Who Remembers Sabrina? Intelligence, Gender, and the Media" in *Geek Chic: Smart Women in Popular Culture*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p.1-9 (p.2)

[71] Battersby, p.9

[72] 'First Thing We Do, Let's Kill All the Lawyers', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 1. First broadcast, HBO, 2013.

then one cannot inhabit the masculine role of geek";[73] Sloan, however, inhabits seemingly incompatible and enviable domains by being both intelligent and beautiful. Although Sloan, and Sorkin's other intellectually gifted female characters, subvert the stereotype of the nerd, they still conform to the idea that brilliant women must be beautiful, thus they still adhere to some gender norms. This demonstrates a limitation in Sorkin's work, and his representation of the Liberal Genius, that is reflective of the limitations in popular culture's representation of women on a whole. It shows an adherence to the belief that audiences will not be interested in watching women who fail to conform to the western beauty standards, regardless of their intellect, because their value is derived from their appearance. Karen E. Westman notes this limitation also as "to be recognized and as intellectually brilliant frequently depends on a physical brilliance, a beauty underwritten by cultural norms of western aesthetics."[74] In most works of contemporary popular culture that features characters of extraordinary intelligence, including Sorkin's work, the brilliance of these female geniuses is reliant on them also being beautiful. In other words, the female Liberal Genius must be beautiful in order to possess such extraordinary intelligence. Frequently, in popular culture, female geniuses "are either robbed of their femininity and sexuality or ridiculed for it,"[75] however Sloan is able to succeed in her professional life both because of her intelligence and her physical appearance. MacKenzie even tells Sloan that this is the reason she is hiring her:

> Sloan: There are people more qualified than I am. I can put you in touch with some of the professors that I studied under.
> MacKenzie: Yeah, the thing is they're not going to have your legs. I'm sorry, but if I'm going to get people to listen to an economics lesson I've got to find someone

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[73] Jennifer Kirby, "Gladiators in Dresses: *Scandal*, Femininity and Emotional Genius" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) p.124-137 (p.126)

[74] Karan E. Westman, "Beauty and the Geek: Changing Gender Stereotypes on the *Gilmore Girls*" in *Geek Chic: Smart Women in Popular Culture*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p.11-30 (p.11)

[75] Jessica Stanley Neterer, "*Ich Bin Ein Nerd!*: Geek Identity in Insider and Outsider Media" in *Age of the Geek: Depictions of Nerds and Geeks in Popular Media*, ed. Kathryn E. Lane, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p.113-128 (p.119)

> who doesn't look George Bernard Shaw. I would not ask you if I didn't think you were qualified.[76]

MacKenzie chooses Sloan for News Night's economics segment not just because of her intelligence, but because her physical appearance can be used to ensure the attention of the viewers. This is indicative of what Jeffrey A. Sartain has highlighted as an increasingly common portrayal of brilliant women; the female character "who is fully embodied and empowered by her own sexuality, but her beauty and sexuality are always contained within the male gaze as an object of sexual desire."[77] Furthermore, in writing about *The West Wing*, Beth Berila notes that "*The West Wing* reveals a crisis of insecurity about smart women as they enter and shape patriarchal positions of power, and while the show troubles the constraints facing those women, and also ultimately re-inscribes them, altering the status quo only slightly."[78] The stereotype of the nerd is one that is well established in popular culture: as Cynthia W. Walker and Amy H. Sturgis note, "nerds are introverted, shy, emotionally repressed, and socially awkward. Alienated loners, they are either boring conversationalists or nearly mute. They smile weirdly or seldom at all, enjoy little romantic success, and possess no social life to speak of."[79] While Some of Walker and Sturgis' description applies to Sloan, and Sorkin's other geniuses, particularly the remarks about little romantic success — which I will explore later — none of his protagonists can be accused of being 'nearly mute'; on the contrary, they rarely stop talking. There is a distinctive smugness to the male Liberal Geniuses that Sloan also exhibits. In the second season Sloan has to apologise to a representative of Occupy Wall Street on behalf of Will, however, when questioned about Will's response to the demanded apology, she says "I wasn't in the room, but I'm sure he said 'hell no, and who the fuck is Shelly Wexler?'" Sloan can't resist the urge to be rude to

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[76] 'News Night 2.0', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, HBO, 2012.

[77] Jeffrey A. Sartain, "Geeksploitation: Gender and Genius in *The Big Bang Theory*" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) p.96-112 (pp.98-99)

[78] Beth Berila, "Savvy Women, Old Boys' School Politics, and *The West Wing*" in *Geek Chic: Smart Women in Popular Culture*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) p.153-169 (p.155)

[79] Cynthia W. Walker and Amy H. Sturgis, "Sexy Nerds: Illya Kuryakin, Mr. Spock, and the Image of the Cerebral Heroin Television Drama" in *Common Sense: Intelligence as Presented on Popular Television*, ed. Lisa Holderman, (Plymouth: Lexington Book, 2008) p.201-216 (p.201-202)

Shelly (Aya Cash), thus placing her among Sorkin's other geniuses whose intelligence leaves them without the necessity for politeness.

Another of Sorkin's female geniuses can be found in his film *Molly's Game*, about the rise and fall of athlete turned 'poker princess', Molly Bloom. As common in all of Sorkin's work, Molly lists her accomplishments: "I have a BA in political science from the University of Colorado where I graduated Summa Cum Laude with a 3.9 GPA. The median L-Sat score at Harvard Law School is 169. My score: 173."[80] As a child Molly is asked by her father, Larry (Kevin Costner), who her heroes are and she tells him that "I don't have any heroes… because if I reach the goals I set out for myself, then the person I become, that'll be my hero"; this hubris is typical of the arrogance that often accompanies Sorkin's geniuses. Molly is beautiful and sexually appealing to the men that attend her poker games and she tells one that: "I'm the woman all of you have always dreamed of. I'm the anti-wife. I encourage your gambling. I have drinks served to you by models who simultaneously create the impression that you're the kind of guy who can score a dime piece anytime you want." Molly understands the power of both beauty and desirability, namely her own and that of her employees, and it is because of Molly's beauty that she is allowed to be brilliant in this male dominated arena. In the same way that MacKenzie hires Sloan because she needs to use her beauty, the Playboy Playmates that Molly hires are beautiful, intelligent, talented and well connected. Despite Molly's intelligence, she is still victimised by the men in her life, whether they be Player X (Michael Cera) stealing her Los Angeles poker game from her, or the physical violence she suffers at the hands of the mob in New York. Molly's voiceover explains that "the humiliation and depression had given way to blinding anger at my powerlessness over the unfair whims of men. It was that there weren't any rules. These power moves weren't framed by right and wrong, just ego and vanity." As powerful as Molly is, her power is not enough to protect her from the violence and egotism of masculine power. Similarly, in *The Newsroom*, Sloan cannot be demeaned for her intelligence because she is presented as the most intelligent and qualified person on the staff, however, she is still vulnerable to misogynistic attacks. This is demonstrated in the second season when her ex-boyfriend leaks topless photos of her as revenge for their break up. In popular culture genius

[80] *Molly's Game,* dir. Aaron Sorkin, (STXfilms, 2017)

women "are allowed visibility as consumer objects but not as fully enfranchised subjects"[81] while the women of Sorkin's work, particularly Sloan, possess the same intelligence as their male counterparts, they do not fully subvert existing stereotypes of brilliant women.

It is the responsibility of the intellectual to "denounce corruption, defend the weak, defy imperfect or oppressive authority"[82] and the intellectual must uphold and promote standards of justice and freedom. While Sorkin's Liberal Geniuses are, at times, abrasive, many of them exhibit a strict moral code to which they strive to adhere. This moral code manifests in a number of ways, such as their notion of civic responsibility that was explored in chapter one. However, this morality is not limited to civic duty; in *Studio 60* Jordan (Amanda Peet) wants the show to make fun of her drink driving arrest just as they made fun of Danny's cocaine relapse, but he won't allow it due to the number of drink driving related deaths — he tells her that "when I put a life in danger, it's my own."[83] Nachbar and Lause note that according to the myth of anti-intellectualism, "intellectuals are potentially dangerous characters because they are, from this myth's point-of-view, so narrow minded in their pursuit of ideas, so passionate in their love of thought, that they can easily lose sight of the 'human' aspect of life."[84] This idea is contrasted most through Sorkin's television geniuses, who are always aware of the 'human' aspects of life despite their genius. Kymlicka notes that liberals "argue for a right of moral independence not because our goals in life are fixed, nor because they are arbitrary, but precisely because our goals can be wrong, and because we can revise and improve them."[85] He also argues that there are "two preconditions for the fulfilment of our essential interest in leading a life that is good."[86] The first is that "we lead our life from the inside, in accordance with our beliefs about what gives value to life",[87] and the second is that "we be free to question those beliefs, to examine them in the

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[81] Berila. p.158

[82] Said, p.5

[83] 'The Focus Group'

[84] Nachbar and Lause. p.87

[85] Kymlicka. p.18

[86] Kymlicka. p.12-13

[87] Kymlicka. p.13

light of whatever information, and examples, and arguments our culture can provide."[88] The concern that liberals have for civil liberties and personal freedoms arise because individuals must "have the resources and liberties needed to live their lives in accordance with their beliefs about value, without being imprisoned or penalized for unorthodox religious or sexual practices etc."[89] In *Studio 60*, Matt is an atheist and yet, when Tom's (Nate Corddry) brother is kidnapped and Jordan has to undergo an emergency C-Section, he looks to the heavens implores to God "show me something,"[90] proving that he is willing to examine other views. Kymlicka notes that there is liberal concern for freedom of the press and expression, artistic freedom, and education because individuals need to be able to intelligently evaluate different views and "these liberties enable us to judge what is valuable in life the only way we can judge such things - i.e. by exploring different aspects of our collective cultural heritage."[91]

In *Studio 60*, Matt displays the strict moral code that is typical of Sorkin's Liberal Geniuses. It is indicated in the series that Matt and Harriet continually breakup and reconcile, and their most recent breakup is revealed to be because he objected to her performing on *The 700 Club*. Matt addresses this on two occasions: the first, in the 'Pilot', he tells her that "you put on a dress and you sang for a bigot,"[92] and again in 'The Harriet Dinner, Part II': "you sang for a group that throws rocks at pregnant teenagers."[93] Matt's morality leads him to question the ethics of performing for a group that terrorises innocent people simply because they hold different opinions (I will explore the representation of the Republican party and the Christian Right in Sorkin's work in closer detail in my chapter on religion and Republicanism). A similar idea is used in *The Newsroom* when Maggie's (Alison Pill) roommate Lisa (Kelen Coleman) is brought on to talk about Casey Anthony,

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[88] Ibid

[89] Ibid

[90] 'K&R, Part I', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[91] Kymlicka. p.15

[92] 'Pilot', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[93] 'The Harriet Dinner, Part II', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by John Fortenberry, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 14. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

she turns the on air conversation around to discuss abortion and later finds her workplace has been vandalised:

> Lisa: I know you're pro-life.
> Will: I'm not pro-throwing a brick through a window.[94]

Will, despite having pro-life beliefs, does not take the stereotypical attitude of a pro-lifer, and thus the morality that is emphasised by his genius allows him a more rational take on the situation. Sorkin's television presents examples of moral genius, while *The Social Network*'s Mark Zuckerberg is an example of an immoral genius. In *Studio 60*, Matt is outraged by the sexual harassment and discussion of women in Ricky (Evan Handler) and Ron's (Carlos Jacott) writer's room, telling lawyer Mary Tate (Kari Matchett) that "no conversation like that has ever or would ever go on in a room I was running."[95] Conversely, in *The Social Network*, Facebook was borne out of Mark's desire to create a quick and simple way to degrade women. Unlike the genius on display through Matt's character, the immorality of genius in *The Social Network* is emphasised through the objectification of women that Facebook was built upon. Alpert notes that in *The Social Network* "women exist solely for the pleasure of these male adolescents who feel nothing beyond themselves and who thereby are inevitably alone in the midst of their noisy crowded clubs."[96] In this film, genius is solely a male luxury and women are a commodity that these male geniuses feel that they are owed. Sorkin's Zuckerberg lacks the morality of his other genius characters, and because he does not fit the pattern of the Liberal Genius it complicates Sorkin's representation of this character type. The morality instead becomes a possibility. The geniuses of Sorkin's work either choose to be moral, using their genius for the betterment of society — or in some cases simply the lives of those closest to them — or they use it for their own gain and at the expense of others.

In *Studio 60* Matt and Danny's morality is emphasised in comparison to the show's 'villainous' members of staff - Ricky and Ron. After 9/11 Matt comes to the defence of Bill

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[94] 'The Blackout Part II: Mock Debate', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 9. First broadcast, HBO, 2012.

[95] '4 A.M. Miracle'

[96] Robert Alpert, '*The Social Network*: the contemporary pursuit of happiness through social connections', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 2011. No.53. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc53.2011/alpertSocialNetwk/index.html> [Accessed on: 18th July 2018]

Maher even though he knows that people will turn on him; Danny states that "Bill Maher. He makes a politically incorrect observation on his own show helpfully titled *Politically Incorrect*, and the sky fell down on him. Matt was one of the first guys to take up his side and so the sky fell down on him."[97] Danny's issue comes from Ricky telling the press that Matt doesn't speak for the cast and crew of 'Studio 60', rather than standing by one of his colleagues. Similarly Matt and Danny refuse to air a sketch in the weeks following the 9/11 attacks that mock Muslims, thus further positioning them away from their more immoral colleagues. Morality in Sorkin's work is flexible, and in *The West Wing*, Josh is willing to abandon his morality to defend or impress Leo. In season one he goes to Laurie (Lisa Edelstein), the call girl that Sam (Rob Lowe) has befriended, for names of her Republican clients to try and help gain leverage to suppress a brewing scandal regarding Leo's drug and alcohol addiction.[98] In season four Josh takes an idea for funding remote prayer to the president, to which Bartlet points out that "you're not willing to toss it overboard to win, you're willing to toss it overboard to avoid disappointing Leo."[99] The only thing that overrides Josh's moral code is his loyalty to his friends. While the morality of the Liberal Genius is common place in Sorkin's television works, it's much rarer in his film scripts. The main exception to this is Molly Bloom, whose morality is emphasised throughout the film. The only names that she disclosed in her book were the ones that were already listed in Bad Brad's (Brian d'Arcy James) deposition, and her lawyer Charlie (Idris Elba) notes that "she could've written a best seller and been set for life, easy. She's got the winning lottery ticket and she won't cash it."[100] Molly also will not sell her debt sheet because she cannot be sure how a buyer will choose to collect payments; it is Molly's evident personal morality that convinces Charlie to take her on as a client. Similarly, Charlie defends her in her deposition by stating that "you broke her back so she couldn't possibly afford to defend herself. And now she has an opportunity to guarantee her freedom by 'providing colour' and she still won't do it. This woman doesn't belong in a RICO indictment, she belongs on a box of

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[97] 'The Focus Group'

[98] 'In Excelsis Deo', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 10. First broadcast, NBC, 1999

[99] 'Guns Not Butter', *The West Wing,* dir. by Bill D'Elia, written by Eli Attie, Kevin Falls and Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 12. First broadcast, NBC, 2003

[100] *Molly's Game*

Wheaties." Molly has the morality of Sorkin's television heroes, and she is willing to risk her own freedom and financial security to adhere to that innate sense of morality that she feels.

The Liberal Geniuses are presented as the ideal for society to which we should all aspire, and in Sorkin's work they are the leaders and shapers of the nation, constructing a country that is forefront on the world stage. It is important to consider Sorkin's geniuses because they are presented in a far more positive light than those in other popular series. While their high intellect can foster arrogance, they should behave with a morality that calls back to Plato's notion of the Philosopher King. Unlike most representations of genius in popular culture, Sorkin's Liberal Genius is not exclusively male, and while he is still unable to avoid falling into some stereotypes of brilliant women, these female geniuses are placed on the same level as their male counterparts. The traits of the Liberal Genius that I discussed above are, for the most part, positive qualities; in chapter four, I will turn to the more negative aspects of Sorkin's Liberal Genius.

Chapter Four — "How can someone so smart and beautiful be so consistently wrong and dumb?":[1] The Liberal Genius —Part 2

In Sorkin's work, despite the Liberal Genius being held up as the model for civilisation, the more negative aspects of this character type are also evident and require scrutiny. In this chapter I will explore the perceived deficiencies of the Liberal Genius: their difficulty navigating their personal lives; their struggles with addiction; and their troubled relationships with their fathers. I argue that the way that television narratives frequently conflate genius and difference, and television's overall spectacle of difference, reinforces negative stereotypes of intellect. I will also examine the reason Sorkin features these negative traits in his Liberal Geniuses when they are supposed to be the ideal leader in his fantasy of an ideal version of America. This negative depiction of genius is not exclusive to Sorkin's work as there is a correlation between the disparagement of genius and the rise of populism, however the reason it is so noticeable here is because his Liberal Geniuses are given such narrative authority. Current depictions of genius characters rarely reflect the images of these characters as they appeared in the 1980s and 1990s,[2] and because these contemporary geniuses are physically indistinguishable from the 'regular' characters, their differences need to be marked through deficiencies and atypical behaviours. Sorkin's work counters the frequent representation in popular culture of geniuses as weaker members of society, particularly when their intellect does not have any sort of material pay off. This is evident in *The Newsroom*, with the intellectual staff having an ambivalent attitude to ratings and therefore disinterested in corporate profit. Holderman and Thomas note that "there seems to be no other identifiable group (particularly one that is overwhelmingly lawful and non-violent) depicted as more disconnected and devalued than intellectuals."[3] Sorkin subverts this idea in order to demonstrate the importance of intellect, and, by giving these

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[1] 'The Harriet Dinner, Part I', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 13. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[2] Genius characters are frequently less bespectacled white teenage boys. One notable example of this new-genius is Alec Hardison (Aldis Hodge) in *Leverage*, a young African American man in his twenties, with the physique of, as creator John Rogers phrased it in an audio commentary, 'Captain America.'

[3] Sari Thomas and Lisa Holderman, "The Social Construction of Modern Intelligence" in *Common Sense: Intelligence as Presented on Popular Television*, ed. Lisa Holderman, (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008) p.7-106 (p.31)

characters a positive platform for their genius while not claiming that these geniuses are without negative qualities, it presents genius as a trait that can be attained, through the application of ones talent and intellect, in order to benefit society.

Genius has become a spectacle in popular television and these spectacles frequently reinforce negative ideas about genius over positive traits or attainments. Dating back to the Romantic period, there has been a distinctive unconventionality to the genius. Battersby uses Byron as an example, who was considered to be "mad, bad, and dangerous to know"[4] and "this caricature of the genius has even spilled over from the arts to the figure of the mad scientist."[5] The eccentricities that have come to be associated with genius arise because "intelligence alone does not make these characters sufficiently interesting - their intellectual power must be complicated, tempered, even undercut by unconventional, atypical behavior."[6] There is an idea that is perpetuated through popular culture that there needs to be more to the genius than just their intellect, whether it be rudeness of characters like Greg House (Hugh Laurie) in *House* (2004-2011) in how he treats his colleagues and patients, or through obsessive behaviour exhibited by characters like Sheldon Cooper (Jim Parsons) in *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019) who is fixated on mundane rituals like his daily routine or spot on the sofa. In Sorkin's work, in which the genius is held up as the model for how we should wish to live our own lives, they are still susceptible to the negative traits of genius that can be found in other fiction. These foibles are evidence of their genius, and humanise these characters. Genius is not always visible so these foibles set them apart from the non-genius. Often, despite the intelligence of these fictional geniuses, they are unable to visualise the bigger picture. For example, in *Steve Jobs*, Joanna (Kate Winslet) serves to challenge Steve's (Michael Fassbender) perceptions of the world around him. She asks him "would you like me to demonstrate your capacity to be wrong when you're certain you're right?"[7] in order to challenge his intellectual certainty and hubris as a way of highlighting his lack of

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[4] Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetic*, (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1989) p.20

[5] Ibid

[6] Carol-Ann Farkas, "What's the Difference? Pathologizing Genius and Neurodiversity in Popular Television Series" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) p.156-174 (p.156)

[7] *Steve Jobs,* dir. Danny Boyle, (Universal Pictures, 2015)

social awareness. Steve is convinced that Dan Kottke lost him a coveted feature on the cover of *Time Magazine* but Joanna points out his ignorance:

> Joanna: *Time* would have had to have commissioned it months in advance. You were never in the conversation for Man of the Year. Nobody lost you anything…So what else are you sure about?
> Steve: I don't know how I could have missed that.
> Joanna: Reality distortion.[8]

Steve Jobs was regarded as an artist, and a curator of technology and design; following in the fashion of men such as Thomas Edison, Pablo Picasso, and P.T. Barnum. The Reality Distortion Field that Jobs famously radiated allowed him, through a mix of charisma, charm and exaggeration, to make people — including himself — believe anything he wanted them to believe. Sidore discusses the connection between genius and ignorance through an analysis of the way that Sherlock Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) is constructed in *Sherlock* (2010-2017). He notes that the spectacle of ignorance keeps "the genius from being too godlike in his or her ability."[9] The spectacle of ignorance to humanise the genius is found throughout popular culture. Regardless of whether the character is fictional or based on a real person, this spectacle is used to make the character more palatable to audiences. Steve is unable to see the truth about the *Time* cover because of his Reality Distortion Field. Sidore argues that:

> the spectacles - and here I include not merely gaps in formal knowledge, but also ignorance of the rules of society and social interactions, both in terms of a genius not understanding those rules and conventions as well as the reasons some geniuses have for ignoring them - serve to identify the genius as an Other, which, as we shall see, reveals a great deal about contemporary perceptions of intelligence, science, and the role of the intellectual in a modern society.[10]

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[8] *Steve Jobs*

[9] David Sidore, "'Spectacularly ignorant': The Conflicted Representation of Genius" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) p.12-31 (p.13)

[10] David Sidore, p.13

Sorkin uses this ignorance of social interactions throughout his works to set his geniuses apart from their colleagues; it can be most evidently seen with *The Newsroom*'s financial news anchor, Sloan Sabbith (Olivia Munn). When Don (Thomas Sadoski) tells her that she will be covering a show for Elliot (David Harbour) and reporting on the Fukushima nuclear disaster they have the following exchange:

> Sloan: They've been lowballing the radiation levels.
> Don: I'd take their word for it. The Japanese have some experience with radiation.
> Sloan: You think that's something—
> Don: That is not something you should mention on the air.[11]

Sloan's ignorance of social interactions means that she misses the glib nature of Don's remark. This ignorance to social niceties and expectations that frequently accompany genius in wider popular culture is present in Sorkin's works because it makes them more relatable. Sorkin's film *Charlie Willson's War* (2007) tells the story of Congressman Charlie Wilson whose covert dealings with Afghanistan helped them prevent the Soviets from invading in the early 1980s. In the film, Charlie (Tom Hanks), who describes himself as a Liberal despite this word often being regarded as a death sentence for politicians in contemporary political life, is presented as a great political genius but is also depicted, at least initially, as ignorant of other cultures. When he visits the presidential palace in Islamabad it does not occur to him that they would not have alcohol as it is prohibited by their religion.[12] Here Charlie's genius is accompanied by his ignorance of common knowledge of Muslim culture, thus revealing flaws in Charlie's intellect. There is a troubling implication when characters have limited knowledge of other cultures; it demonstrates a priority given to the western hegemony. In other words, when Sorkin uses the Middle East to show the ignorance of his characters, it establishes a preoccupation with western liberalism.

Historically the image of the genius has shown to be lacking the ability, despite their talents in other areas of their lives, to conform to societal expectations of normalcy. It is

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[11] 'Bullies', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Jeremy Podeswa, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 6. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[12] *Charlie Wilson's War,* dir. Mike Nichols, (Universal Pictures, 2007)

because they are marked as different that "the intellectual will not adjust to domesticity or humdrum routine."[13] The image that this creates of the genius is profoundly anti-intellectual, because to imply that the genius is incapable of achieving happiness, actively works to make genius a feature to be avoided. JZ Long explains that anti-intellectualism works by allowing the audience to empathise with characters by

> desiring the intelligence and reason employed by these intellectuals to solve the problems and paradoxes of their respective fields, while simultaneously disabling us, on the other hand, by representing these intellectuals in such a way as the articulation of psychological deficiencies with intellectual genius allows us to ideologically distance ourselves from these desires.[14]

In other words, while being genius is desirable, so is the ability to function in the real world, and these are frequently presented as incompatible. In Sorkin's works his geniuses often have trouble maintaining their relationships outside of the workplace. For example, in *The West Wing,* Leo (John Spencer) is so focused on his job that he allows his marriage to fall apart. He tells his wife, Jenny (Sara Botsford), that "this is the most important thing I'll ever do…it is more important than my marriage right now."[15] Leo prioritises his job as Chief of Staff, and because his wife is separate from his working life, she is unable to fully understand the sense of duty that he feels towards the President. Leo is unable, despite his incredible intelligence, to juggle both his personal and professional lives, and he cannot maintain his relationship with Jenny and perform his duties as Chief of Staff at the same time. Similarly, in *The Newsroom*, Sloan has difficulty navigating her romantic life and she tells Don that "a lot of men are intimidated by my intelligence,"[16] confiding her belief that her intelligence compromises her success at dating. Sloan also gives bad relationship advice to her colleagues, as evidenced when Will (Jeff Daniels) describes the woman she sets him

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[13] Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, (London: Vintage, 1994) p.13

[14] JZ Long, "Mediated Genius, Anti-Intellectualism and the Detachment(s) of Everyday Life" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) p.32-48 (p.41)

[15] 'Five Votes Down', *The West Wing,* dir. by Michael Lehmann, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 4. First broadcast, NBC, 1999

[16] 'The Greater Fool', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 10. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

up with as "*Fatal Attraction* with a concealed carry permit."[17] He challenges Sloan on her poor dating advice:

> Will: You're supposed to be the smartest person on the staff, you have two PhDs.
> Sloan: In Economics! This is an area where I do not excel.[18]

Sloan is presented as the most intelligent and credentialed person working at News Night but her intelligence is limited to professional endeavours and thus she is unable to successfully apply her genius to personal issues. Holderman and Thomas use *Cheers* (1982-1993), and its host of stock characters, as a culturally familiar example of anti-intellectualism, noting that "this group of credentialed intellectuals uniformly embodies the sexual repression, social awkwardness, inability to connect interpersonally, pretense, and pomposity that popular narratives commonly associates with serious academically-derived intelligence."[19] The notion that intellectualism hinders the ability to succeed socially is evidently not exclusive to Sorkin's work. Popular television that features genius characters frequently still favour anti-intellectual ideas; Sidore explores anti-intellectualism in the series *Bones* (2005-2017), which favours 'the real world' over academia — a common trait in works about genius. In *Bones*, as the series progresses, characters try to 'normalise' the socially awkward protagonist Temperance Brennan (Emily Deschanel), but this approach is successfully avoided with Sloan in *The Newsroom*. In *Bones*, Brennan's colleagues actively try to encourage her to partake in what they deem to be 'normal' activities — for example, dating and watching television. However, while Sloan's isolation from societal expectations is less pronounced than Brennan's, her colleagues not only acknowledge her differences but seek to keep her from conforming to society's expectations. Sloan's social awkwardness is not presented as a facet of her personality that needs to be fixed and "programs combine socially inappropriate and atypical behavior with the willingness of the other characters to tolerate, support, and even enable it to effectively imply just how smart the genius must really be."[20]

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[17] 'I'll Try to Fix You', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 4. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[18] 'I'll Try to Fix You'

[19] Thomas and Holderman, p.33

[20] Sidore, p.17

In the second season when she's trying to develop a camaraderie with political advisor Taylor Warren (Constance Zimmer), Elliot tells her to "be less desperate for female friends"[21] and Don insists to Sloan that "you don't have a very high opinion of yourself, and I don't get it."[22] Rather than wanting to fix Sloan, Don instead admires her for who she is, therefore elevating the traditionally negative aspects of the genius to a positive characteristic. Sidore notes that "if the message being conveyed is not that the genius is ultimately limited or 'impaired', then the message becomes that *we* are."[23] In Sorkin's works genius should be desired, and even though Sloan does not always have a high opinion of herself, her colleagues recognise her genius and praise it. The inability of the genius to navigate their personal lives can also be seen in *Sports Night*, in which Dana (Felicity Huffman) admits that she lives between eleven and midnight, the hours her show is broadcast. Jeremy (Joshua Malina) comments on the contrast between her work life and personal life, noting that she has "an irresistible combination of brilliance inside the office, and something a little less than brilliance anywhere outside of it."[24] Like Sloan, Dana struggles to maintain her social life, and often places less value on this than on her career; in the instance in which Dana does hand the show over in order to meet her boyfriend after they are delayed going on the air, she is criticised by her colleagues for it as there is an expectation to maintain their commitment in the face of personal needs. The depiction of the genius in popular culture is very similar to the depiction of the nerd in that, as Nachbar and Lause note, "the nerd is an emotional wreck who is incapable of expressing genuine feelings towards others, is obsessed with ideas and abstractions and is a typical snob whose intellect has lead him to conclude falsely that his is more 'worthy' than those with lower IQs."[25] While this description applies to Sloan to a certain extent, insofar as she obsesses over details and the individual item that

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[21] 'Election Night, Part I', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Jason Ensler, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 8. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

[22] 'News Night with Will McAvoy', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 5. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

[23] Sidore, p.12-31

[24] 'Dear Louise', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin and David Walpert, season 1, episode 7. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

[25] Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, "Songs of the Unseen Road: Myths, Beliefs and Values in Popular Culture" in *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, ed. Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992) p.82-109 (p.89)

can lead her to miss the big picture,[26] her intellect does not lead her to believe that she is more 'worthy' than her colleagues, just more intelligent. She tells Don that "you know how there are tall women who don't mind dating shorter guys? I don't mind that you're dumb."[27] Sloan recognises that she is more intelligent than Don, and while she expresses this bluntly, she is attempting to compliment him.

Unlike Sorkin's other geniuses, his incarnation of Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) in *The Social Network* does believe himself to be more worthy than those with lower IQs. After hacking the Harvard University computer network to collect the images of its female students, in order to create a website where male students can comparatively rank them, he is called before the university administration. During this meeting, Zuckerberg demands recognition for his feat:

> Mark: I've already apologised in the *Crimson* to the ABHW, to Fuerza Latina and to any women at Harvard who might have been insulted as I take it they were. As for any charges stemming from the breach of security, I believe I deserve some recognition from this board.
> Administrator: I'm sorry? I don't understand.
> Mark: Which part?
> Administrator: You deserve recognition?
> Mark: I believe I pointed out some pretty gaping holes in your system.[28]

Robert Alpert notes that even "Mark's supposed relationships are founded on his need to be acknowledged as better than anyone else, including sadly the woman whom he had dated and is still in his own mind courting."[29] While Sorkin's television geniuses are presented in a positive light despite their flaws, Sorkin presents Zuckerberg in a far more negative manner. John Belton notes that

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[26] When Sloan is given a new Bloomberg terminal she becomes so immersed in it that she misses the news about the Boston Marathon bombing and the related commotion outside her office door of her colleagues trying to gather information to report.

[27] 'Boston', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Anthony Hemingway, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 1. First broadcast, HBO, 2014

[28] *The Social Network,* dir. David Fincher, (Columbia Pictures, 2010)

[29] Robert Alpert, '*The Social Network*: the contemporary pursuit of happiness through social connections', *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*, 2011. No.53. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc53.2011/alpertSocialNetwk/index.html> [Accessed on: 18th July 2018]

> the film suggests that Mark's inability to deal with people drives him from real to virtual social relations - that Facebook is the result of his failure to behave properly toward Erica, the Winkelvi, and Eduardo. He cannot be real friends with Erica; he can only 'friend' her on Facebook. In their initial conversation, Mark tells Erica, 'I don't want to be friends.' But then he goes on to create the world's largest social network. Sorkin's screenplay suggests that this is the great irony of the film - that a character who is so socially inept that he can do nothing but lose one friend after another until he is left alone with his computer in an empty room waiting to see if one of those lost friends will respond to his 'friend' request is the genius behind Facebook.[30]

While Zuckerberg is unable to maintain friendships in *The Social Network*, in Sorkin's television series his geniuses struggle with their romantic relationships but easily form deep and meaningful friendships with their co-workers. Sorkin's geniuses are highly accomplished, but the difficulty that they have maintaining their romantic relationships is a common trait in most cultural depictions of genius due to the notion that "the genius processes information about the world differently that the rest of us do, in effect *experiencing* the world differently, leading to the representation of the genius as 'otherworldly or in his or her own world, separate from the normal world.'".[31] In *Steve Jobs*, Steve is confronted by numerous people in his professional and private life because, despite his public-facing role and reputation for creative brilliance, he treats people carelessly. Towards the end of the film Steve Wozniak (Seth Rogan) tells him that "it's not binary: you can be decent and gifted at the same time."[32] Sorkin's film does not deny Jobs' genius, however it presents a darker side to his personality that is sometimes overlooked in favour of the public narrative of his intelligence and success. One of the early scenes of the film features Steve demanding that the fire exit signs be switched off so that the room will be completely dark for his presentation. He states that "if a fire causes a stampede to the unmarked exits it will have been well worth it for those who survive. For those who don't,

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[30] John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture*, 4th Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013) p.41

[31] Sidore, p.15-16

[32] *Steve Jobs*

less so, but still pretty good".[33] Bruce Baum notes that "it is not clear that Jobs had any deep moral political ideals; his values seem to be chiefly aesthetic."[34] The film demonstrates that this pursuit for the perfect aesthetic comes at the expense of many people in Steve's life. Despite Steve's status as a visionary and obvious intelligence, he is revealed in this portrayal as having deficient levels of emotional intelligence, unable to properly process his own emotions or those of others. He sacrifices his relationships with his daughter and friends in order to embrace his genius, believing that the two — intellect and emotion — are mutually exclusive.

Sorkin's Mark Zuckerberg also comes under criticism from other characters for the way he treats people in his life. At the opening of *The Social Network*, Mark is rude to Erica (Rooney Mara) and she calls him out on this, along with the absurd idea that girls don't like nerds. This scene demonstrates that despite the elevated position these characters are granted in Sorkin's works due to their genius, they are not immune from receiving criticism from those around them. Geniuses in Sorkin's work frequently hold positions of power and the criticism that they occasionally receive from other characters demonstrates the importance of keeping power and authority in check so that it is not abused by those who hold it. Criticism of the genius by other characters is also evident in *Studio 60*, where Matt (Matthew Perry) is accused by Luke Scott (Josh Stamberg), a writer with whom he used to work, of being "an arrogant, self-destructive, egomaniacal prick."[35] This contrasts with the opinion that Harriet (Sarah Paulson) has of Matt, but both opinions are coloured by bias — Harriet is in love with Matt, and Luke is his romantic rival for Harriet's affection. Carlson notes that television geniuses "are allowed to be rude, insensitive, and sometimes downright amoral because on some level they are better than the rest of us — that is, they have more information than we do."[36] Sorkin's television geniuses, while cruel and abrasive at times, are regularly criticised when they do exhibit this cruelty. In *The Newsroom*, Will (Jeff Daniels) interviews Sutton

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[33] Ibid

[34]Bruce Baum, *The Post-Liberal Imagination: Political Sciences from the American Cultural Landscape*, (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016) p.111

[35] '4 A.M. Miracle', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Laura Innes, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 16. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[36] Ashley Lynn Carlson, "The Human Hard Drive: Memory, Intelligence and the Internet Age" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) p.49-58 (p.56)

Hall (Damon Gupton), an aide to 2012 presidential candidate Rick Santorum. Sutton Hall is both African American and gay, and Will's interrogation of him — questioning why he would choose to work for someone who has been vocally opposed to gay rights — is presented as bullying on air. MacKenzie (Emily Mortimer) calls Will out on this:

> Will: I'm asking you to explain to me why you would work for a man who believes that you're inferior? That you're damaged? That you're ill?
> MacKenzie: Stop hitting him.[37]

In this scene it is clear, even before MacKenzie tells him to stop, that Will is in the wrong and that his questioning is an aggressive, verbal attack on their guest. Will admits to his therapist, Jacob Habib (David Krumholtz) that "I could have just stopped it there" after Sutton Hall conceded that he couldn't name a way that Rick Santorum's marriage was negatively affected by gay marriage. Will didn't relent, however. He tells Hall that Santorum thinks he is "a sick deviant who's threatening the fabric of society." At this statement MacKenzie stands up in shock, and over the course of the scene the discomfort of the staff in the control room is evident through the expressions on their faces as the camera cuts to each of them. Rather than being allowed to be amoral, as Carlson puts it, the narrative ensures throughout the episode that the audience are aware that Will is acting terribly, a realisation that Will himself comes to; telling Habib at the end of the episode that "I was the bully."

Frequently, depictions of genius on television "reinforce negative stereotypes about 'difference' and 'normalcy' - namely, that intelligence and creativity must equate with instability and pathology, and that *difference* marks individuals, allowing them to contribute meaningfully to society without being able to integrate fully into it."[38] However, Sorkin's televisual geniuses are able to find a place where they belong, and are able to meaningfully contribute to the betterment of society while forming deep and lasting friendships with their colleagues. While Zuckerberg's success is driven by his isolation, the isolation of the geniuses in Sorkin's television series is, in fact, collective. The isolation of the television geniuses is shared, united even; they share in their fear of abandonment, and they are united in the knowledge that their intellect is culturally disliked in the wider worlds of media and

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[37] 'Bullies'

[38] Farkas, p.156

politics. Sorkin rehabilitates the genius trope, but in so doing he also perpetuates the stereotype of the workaholic; a stereotype that is found throughout popular television series such as *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) and *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013-present). Sorkin's rehabilitation of the genius is a response to the increasing prominence of anti-intellectualism and he uses his Liberal Geniuses to try and steer us towards the traits associated with the intellectual and moral character of these geniuses. While the Liberal Genius has numerous negative traits, it only serves to humanise these characters further.

Many of the essays in *Genius on Television* note the connection between genius and difference, and whether that difference is rooted in mental illness, addiction, or criminality. Farkas writes about this connection and explains how she defines difference, noting that

> in the context in which I use the term here, 'difference,' can potentially mean everything and nothing; it is a catch-all for the varied traits we see in many popular television characters which set them apart, strikingly, from both the other 'normal' characters on a given show, as well as from the 'typical' viewer. Difference generally encompasses some form of exceptional intellect - the encyclopaedic, the creative, the savant - made from the implied or explicit presence of mental disorders.[39]

When a spectacle is made of difference it suggests that the way the genius views the world is not better than view held by the rest of society, only different. The way that genius is presented on television often shows the counteraction of abilities with impairment, and when a spectacle is made of these impairments it presents the genius limited despite their gifts. By highlighting these impairments "the audience is positioned to view them as strange, lacking, and even mentally ill."[40] Sidore notes that "rather than embrace this difference as merely a part of human possibility, television programs tend to deploy it as a means of othering the genius, marking them off as not one of us."[41] Carlson considers the debunked work of Cesare Lombroso who theorised that criminals could be identified through physical

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[39] Farkas. p.157

[40] Jessica Stanley Neterer, "*Ich Bin Ein Nerd!*: Geek Identity in Insider and Outsider Media" in *Age of the Geek: Depictions of Nerds and Geeks in Popular Media*, ed. Kathryn E. Lane, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p.113-128 (p.118)

[41] Sidore, p.25

appearance and that there is a close connection between genius and madness. Carlson explains that Lombroso "even went so far as to suggest that in a few cases of seemingly sane geniuses the symptoms of insanity had simply been overlooked."[42] However, despite Lombroso's theories being disproven, the notion that there is a connection between genius and insanity still exists, even though much of the recent research shows that mental illness is more common among those with lower IQs.[43] Television frequently links genius and mental illness, feeding the belief, set out by the debunked Lombroso, that you cannot have one without the other. However, regardless of what popular culture would have us believe, "madness is not inherent in humanity but rather a social construction designed to encircle those individuals who did not conform to the existing structures of society."[44] The way that genius is presented in the media is particularly worthy of scrutiny in the wake of ever-growing accusations of the decline of intelligence in the world. According to Long, "the line between genius and madman is already thin, but the inherent ambiguity in these terms…is also what allows televisuality to work on those lines, blurring them even further in order to anti-intellectualize its audience against the growing debates about the conditions of the current structures of our social world."[45] Long also explains that "the notion of genius is mediated by a long running myth of anti-intellectualism which recuperates the characteristic of genius by pathologising such characters until the already fine line between genius and madness disappears altogether."[46] In this thesis I have already explored the way that anti-intellectualism has taken hold in America, and the ways that popular culture often reinforces this idea, and how Sorkin's presents a counter argument to this spread of anti-intellectualism. However, through his Liberal Geniuses, Sorkin also includes aspects of the connection between genius and madness that Long examines. In *The West Wing*, while Josh (Bradley Whitford) and CJ (Allison Janney) are listening to the song 'Ave Maria', they have the following exchange:

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[42] Ashley Lynn Carlson, "Introduction" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) p.1-10 (p.6)

[43] Erik Lykke Mortensen, Holger Jelling Sørensen, Hans Henrik Jensen, June Machover Reinisch, and Sarnoff A. Mednick, 'IQ and Mental Disorder in Young Men,' *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 187 (2005) 407-415

[44] Long, p42

[45] Ibid

[46] Long. p.21

> Josh: It's…miraculous. Schubert was crazy, you know.
> CJ: Yes
> Josh: Do you think you have to be crazy to create something powerful?[47]

Josh's reference to the quality — the genius — of the music and his equation with the composer being crazy aligns and reinforces the common association of genius and madness that is common in a lot of popular television. While mental illness can be used to question the sanity of the 'normal' world, Farkas notes that "disturbingly, not only is difference regularly cast as a pathology, it is also harmfully burdened with stigmatizing views of *madness*, deeply rooted in social and moral judgement, and highly resistant to corrective education."[48]

Kathleen M. Earnest argues that Sherlock Holmes (Jonny Lee Miller) is presented in *Elementary* (2012-2019) as being "so single minded in his intellectual pursuit for information that he rarely considers the effect he has on others."[49] However in *Elementary*, Holmes is humanised both by his ongoing battle with his heroin addiction and his deep, underlying decency.[50] These characteristics are shared by many of Sorkin's geniuses, as many of them struggle with addiction, and supports this interpretation common to their burdened intellect on television. JZ Long notes that "we celebrate as genius after genius solves impossible tasks while distancing ourselves from the various flaws (from addiction and anxiety to disability and depression) which are made to be an integral part of such intelligence."[51] In the first season of *The West Wing*, Leo is investigated due to his previous problems with drugs and alcohol. In explaining his addiction to an intern, he tells her that

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[47] 'The Crackpots and These Women', *The West Wing,* dir. by Anthony Drazan, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, NBC, 1999

[48] Farkas. p.166

[49] Kathleen M. Earnest, "Changing Faces: Exploring Depictions of Geeks in Various Texts" in *Age of the Geek: Depictions of Nerds and Geeks in Popular Media*, ed. Kathryn E. Lane*,* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2018) p.67-88 (p.77)

[50] Instances of decency in this incarnation of Sherlock Holmes include giving enough money to a homeless man so that he can get a hotel room during a blizzard, and refusing to turn away a friend in need of his help despite the risk it will pose to his own sobriety. This version of Sherlock is also interesting because he recognises the talents of the police detectives with whom he works and admits that the reason that he would rather just work with Watson (Lucy Liu) rather than them is not because they are incompetent, but because they find him irritating (an assessment he acknowledges as being fair). In *Elementary*, the genius is anti-social and frequently self-isolating, but fundamentally a good person.

[51] Long. p.33

"[t]he problem is, I don't want a drink, I want ten drinks"[52] and in the third season he admits that he relapsed during Bartlet's first campaign.[53] Leo is capable of using his genius to accomplish great political feats and engineering many of the Bartlet administrations' successes, but his struggles with sobriety keep him from running for office himself. His addictions politically compromise him, despite both Leo's upstanding character and the prevalence of addiction in both reality and popular culture. Similarly, in *Studio 60*, Danny (Bradley Whitford) is a recovering cocaine addict and at the start of the series it has been eight days since he last used drugs, after previously being clean for eleven years. It is because of this that he has to take the job at 'Studio 60', his insurance dictates that the movie he and Matt are planning to make must be put on hold until Danny has been sober for eighteen months.[54] Here it is Danny's struggles with sobriety that force him to take a job that he initially does not want to do, but he comes to realise that this job is where he belongs. The issue of addiction is also addressed in *Studio 60* through Matt's character and this also demonstrates the way that Matt functions as a fictional stand in for Sorkin, who has himself struggled with addiction and was arrested in 2001 at Burbank airport when security found drugs in his carry-on.[55] Towards the end of the series Matt develops a reliance on prescription pain medication to try and combat his increasing depression, telling his assistant Suzanne (Merritt Wever) that he is unable to write comedy while he's depressed.[56] When Danny discovers that Matt has started taking pills, he reminds Matt that "I'm a drug addict. I have to be one for the rest of my life. I will beat you to a bloody pulp before I let you—"[57] Addiction in Sorkin's work is presented as an ongoing struggle for which there is no cure. Czarnowsky and Schimmelpfenning, when writing about Sherlock Holmes (Benedict

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[52] 'Take out the Trash Day', *The West Wing,* dir. by Ken Olin, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 13. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[53] 'Bartlet for America', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 10. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

[54] 'Pilot', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[55] Peter de Jonge, 'Aaron Sorkin Works His Way Through the Crisis'. *The New York Times Magazine*. 28th October 2001. <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/28/magazine/aaron-sorkin-works-his-way-through-the-crisis.html> [Accessed on 4th August 2020]

[56] 'Breaking News', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Andrew Bernstein, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 18. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[57] Ibid

Cumberbatch) in *Sherlock* (2010-2017), observe, "he cannot fathom that the drugs destroy his brilliant mind and thus reveals the boundaries of his otherwise rational thinking."[58] This also holds true for Matt, who is initially unable to see that the drugs are a detriment to his writing. Matt, however, eventually admits that while he was high he wasn't writing the show as well as he used to. Addiction is also addressed in *Molly's Game* when, as of meeting her lawyer Charlie (Idris Elba), we are informed that Molly (Jessica Chastain) has been clean for two years. She confides that she started using drugs just to stay awake but they eventually contribute to her downfall, "I was addicted to drugs. Adderall, Ambien, Xanax, coke, alcohol, Valium, Ativan, Trazadone — anything that could keep me up for a few days and knock me out for a few hours. But I wasn't just taking them to stay awake anymore. It was dark and friendless where I was, I felt like I was in a hole so deep I could go fracking. It didn't feel like depression, it felt more violent."[59] Like Matt in *Studio 60*, Molly begins to abuse drugs in order to maintain control of her life, and soon realises that her addiction is only contributing to the loss of control that she feels. It is significant that Sorkin allows his Liberal Genius to be so easily susceptible to various addictions both because they are his beacons for a better world, and because Sorkin himself struggles with addiction. By making his Liberal Geniuses victims to addiction, he emphasises the qualities that make them so human. For the Romantics, the genius was a demi-god and this is an idea that has tracked right through to contemporary popular culture, however by adding this humanity, weakness even, to his Liberal Geniuses, Sorkin constructs a much more complex, multifaceted, and intellectual representation of genius.

The final, frequent feature that humanises the Liberal Genius is the poor relationship that they tend to have with their fathers. Popular culture has a complex and fluctuating attitude towards fatherhood as "the father can be both awesome and inept, polarities that inform, actually, much of Hollywood's attitudes to fathers."[60] While the heroes of Sorkin's

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[58] Laura-Marie von Czarnowsky and Annette Schimmelpfenning, "True Detective or Smooth Criminal? The (Dys)functional Genius in Contemporary Detective Shows" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) p.185-198 (p.187)

[59] *Molly's Game*

[60] Stella Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-War Hollywood*, (London: British Film Institute, 2005) p.vii

work are regularly shown to be good fathers, to which I will return in chapter seven, the relationship that the Liberal Genius often has with their own father is, at best, troubled. In *The West Wing,* Bartlet's father was abusive and one of the reasons several characters surmise this to be is due to Bartlet's intellect, which threatened his father's ego. Therapist Stanley Keyworth (Adam Arkin) tells Bartlet "that's why he hit you. You were smarter than he was"[61] and after Mrs Landingham (Kathryn Joosten) dies he is visited by her 'ghost' who tells him that "your father was a prick who could never get over the fact that he wasn't as smart as his brothers."[62] The inclusion of flashbacks to Bartlet's school life where his father was headmaster suggests that his rant in Latin at God while in the cathedral following Mrs Landingham's funeral also serves as a rant at his own father. The scene highlights a division between a physical and a spiritual father, aligning with Stella Bruzzi's observations that "the father's law (so strong as to have hitherto seemed unassailable) must be overturned if the younger generation is to survive."[63] Although Bartlet defies the law of his physical father, and challenges his spiritual father, he never fully renounces either of them. The two time periods are connected in two ways: The first through Mrs Landingham, her character links Bartlet's youth and his time in office. Mrs Landingham also serves to remind Bartlet of his ability to do good while keeping him grounded in reality, despite his occasional egotism. Secondly, an echo is formed through the recurring prominence of cigarette smoking in both sequences; in the flashback his father confronts him after finding one in the school chapel, and then at Mrs Landingham's funeral Bartlet lights a cigarette just to put it out on the cathedral floor. Bigsby notes that Sorkin "is concerned to underscore the classical background of this man who now challenges God and invites him to go to the cross, concerned to draw attention equally to his articulateness and his hubris…God and his father have become one."[64] Although Bartlet's father was abusive, he still defends him, telling Toby "can we talk about my father with some respect? The man's gone, can we…he's my father,

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[61] 'Night Five', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 14. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

[62] 'Two Cathedrals', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

[63] Bruzzi, p.39

[64] Christopher Bigsby, *Viewing America: Twenty-First-Century Television Drama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p.48

he wasn't a Dickens character!"[65] This exchange and lingering reverence reminds us that there is still need within Bartlet to defend his now deceased father, despite his abusive temper and shortcomings. In his therapy session, Stanley points out that a part of all his goals includes the desire to get his father to approve of him:

> Stanley: They keep moving the goal post on you, don't they? Get A's, good college, Latin honours. Get in the London School of Economics. Get a good teaching job. Ivy League school, tenure. Now you gotta publish, now you gotta go to Stockholm.
> Bartlet: It's not good for a person to keep setting goals?
> Stanley: It probably is, but it's tricky for someone who's still trying to get his father to stop hitting him.[66]

The treatment that Bartlet suffered at the hands of his father during his youth had an effect on the choices he made later on. This has directly led to an inability to be fully satisfied by his role as President of the United States, despite having achieved the highest honour in public office. As Frame observes, Bartlet is ultimately "a fallible human being who had a troubled childhood and a difficult relationship with his father, and whose formative experiences are problematically, but inevitably, brought to bear on his Presidency."[67] His father has died and Bartlet can therefore no longer prove himself to be better, thus despite his father's death, he is stuck in a cycle of trying to get his father to stop hitting him. Similarly, in *The Newsroom*, Will's father was an abusive alcoholic from whom Will had to protect his siblings — a fact that is also uncovered during a therapy session. The injustice that Will experienced at the hands of his father and the way that this treatment has influenced his belief on how the world sees him has prompted his obsession with ratings and his desire to be loved by his audience. He tells MacKenzie that "living with that much injustice from the person who was supposed to represent— He's the one who tells you what the world is going to think of you. And if he tells you you're bad— That forever…"[68] Will's need to be loved by his audience stems from deep-rooted deficiencies in his upbringing. In the penultimate

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[65] 'Hartsfield's Landing', *The West Wing,* dir. by Vincent Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 15. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

[66] 'Night Five'

[67] Frame, p.146

[68] 'News Night with Will McAvoy'

episode, as discussed in chapter two, Will hallucinates that his father is his cellmate while in prison. The hallucination tells him that "I don't want to see you get your ass kicked— that was dishonest, I badly want to see you get your ass kicked."[69] At the time of this conversation the audience is unaware that this cellmate is a hallucination of John McAvoy (Kevin Rankin), however, upon the revelation at the end of the episode, this statement, and the rest of their conversation takes on a darker tone; wrapping an immense insult into a warped form of protection. The hallucination of John McAvoy expresses a desire to see Will suffer because he is unable to tolerate his own feelings of inferiority. In *Sports Night*, Dan (Josh Charles) is also shown to have a poor relationship with his father. As with Bartlet and Will, this relationship, and the issues surrounding it, is addressed by his therapist. Dan's therapist asks him "why doesn't your father like you?"[70] And the realisation that Dan comes to is another repeated motif which is echoed throughout Sorkin's work, and directly informs the traumas of his geniuses. Dan states that "when you don't have much of a family life growing up— you become someone who relies on the love of three or four million total strangers watching you on television."[71]

This representation of the troubled relationship between father and child extends beyond Sorkin's television series to his feature films and screenplays also. In *Molly's Game*, Molly asks her father "why didn't you like me as much as my brothers?" Her father explains that this is not the case, and that it only appeared to be so because she knew about his affair and he was ashamed. Here Molly's father *is* the therapist with whom she works through her issues regarding their relationship. Sorkin's first feature film screenplay, *A Few Good Men* (1992), adapted from his play of the same name, sees Navy lawyer Daniel Kaffee (Tom Cruise) defending two marines accused of murder who were acting on the orders of their superiors. Just over a year out of law school and only nine months in the navy, Danny is considered the best litigator in the office but the talent of his dead father haunts his professional interactions. Other characters mention his father because of their shared surname and this becomes a form of haunting, instilling in a Danny a fear of failing to live

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[69] 'Oh Shenandoah', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Paul Lieberstein, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 5. First broadcast, HBO, 2014

[70] 'Kafelnikov', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Matt Tarses & Bill Wrubel, season 2, episode 5. First broadcast, ABC, 1999

[71] 'Kafelnikov'

up to such huge expectations. Fellow lawyer Jo (Demi Moore) suspects that Danny only joined the Navy because he believes it is what his father would have wanted: "Your father's Lionel Kaffee, former Attorney General of the US, died 1985. You went to Harvard Law, then joined the Navy, probably because that's what your father wanted."[72] Friend and opposing counsel Jack Ross (Kevin Bacon) openly acknowledges the power that his father's reputation has over him, telling Danny that he "got bullied into that courtroom by the memory of a dead lawyer."[73] Danny seeks his dead father's approval; he learns to value the system that was so important to Lionel Kaffee and his "unexpected legal triumph at the end of *A Few Good Men* shows him to be his father's natural successor."[74] The recurring spectre of Lionel Kaffee influences Danny's decision-making as he struggles to live up to the memory of a dead man, something that firmly underpins Sorkin's work and directly influences, if not overly haunts, the choices that his geniuses make in their lives. While most of Sorkin's Liberal Geniuses have difficult relationships with their fathers, or struggle with the impossible task of impressing the memory of a dead father, Sorkin's Steve Jobs does not even attempt to have a relationship with his biological father, despite knowing who and where he is:

> Sculley: Don't you think you should talk to him?
> Steve: He'd probably find a reason to sue me[75]

Steve's fear of being sued by his biological father keeps him from pursuing a relationship with him. If he does not form any sort of bond then, he reasons, he does not run the risk of rejection. This fear of rejection stems from the trauma of his past, (to which I will return in the chapter five), and leaves him reluctant to allow people into his life. While there is only a brief discussion of Steve and his biological father, the film explores Steve's tumultuous relationship with the Apple CEO John Sculley (Jeff Daniels) who acts as a surrogate father figure to Steve. *Steve Jobs* is structured as a play comprised of three distinct acts. It follows the rise, fall, and return of Jobs and explores the emotional toll that his genius and hubris had on him during those years. In the first of the film's three acts, Sculley tells Steve that

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[72] *A Few Good Men,* dir. Rob Reiner, (Columbia Pictures, 1992)

[73] Ibid

[74] Bruzzi, p.159

[75] *Steve Jobs*

Wozniak warned him "that being your father figure could be dangerous."[76] The second act shows the disintegration of their relationship, and the standoff between the two men that leads to Steve's firing from Apple; and the final act sees them come to an amicable relationship and emotional resolution. This shows that despite Steve's reluctance to know his biological father, he is willing to seek out a relationship, albeit a difficult one, with a father figure. The contrasting relationships that Steve is shown to have with his biological father and his surrogate father counters the tradition depictions of fatherhood in Hollywood whereby the absent father is glorified and the surrogate father must renounce his role by the film's conclusion.

The Liberal Genius presents us with a model for what we should wish to accomplish for ourselves, because they embody a pursuit for perfection. They are characters of extraordinary intelligence and talent who use these abilities to enact their strong sense of morality inline with their liberal values. Sorkin's revisiting of addiction in his works is what makes his geniuses feel real, their flaws are not only recognisably human, and reflect not only the biographical strand in Sorkin's own life, but also represent the commonality of recreational drug use throughout society. Their politics and intellect usually correspond with the broad ideals of the Democrats during the 1990s and 2000s or represent moderate conservatism. The addictions of these geniuses make them unbearably human in the face of their education, wealth, or privilege. It is what makes them so broadly relatable as characters and because of this Sorkin uses their struggles with addiction as a barometer for character growth. While they do not always succeed in this, or at times even try to, these geniuses are frequently portrayed in Sorkin's work as the ideal for society. In much of popular culture, in

> representing intelligence as inseparable from the larger, non-specific, but very definitely pathologized syndrome of 'difference,'…television programs…run the risk of teaching (because we *do* learn from our stories) some unproductive lessons about how the human mind works. Namely, these programs imply that there is some well-established 'normal'- behavior, intelligence, perception,

[76] Ibid

> cognition - wherein healthy roles are performed, transactions conducted, and ordinary problems solved.[77]

However, the numerous flaws that are possessed by Sorkin's characters humanise these geniuses and make them more accessible to the audiences. This helps to prevent them from appearing too 'othered', which is frequently used by popular culture to distance audiences from geniuses. It is the various faults in the personalities of Sorkin's geniuses that make them relatable because audiences can recognise these faults as common human qualities in society. The relatability of these geniuses allow audiences to believe in the possibility of their own ability to achieve such intellectual accomplishments, as well as encouraging a belief in a world made better by the genius. In the following chapter I will explore the final key aspect of the liberal genius: The Liberal Genius having experienced a traumatic event and what this means for the representation of genius in Sorkin's series and films.

[77] Farkas. p.170

Chapter Five — "I never remotely prepared for this scenario":[1] Individual Trauma

In the previous two chapters, I explored specific the traits that make up Sorkin's character type of the Liberal Genius. The final feature of this character type is the relationship that these geniuses have to trauma; in all of Sorkin's narratives they are characters who are exposed to, or have been exposed to in their past, a traumatic event. While the exposure to trauma is a feature of the Liberal Genius, trauma in Sorkin's work is not limited to the Liberal Genius because trauma is not limited to a certain type of person. In film and television more generally, "past emotions are brought into our present, and trauma, which we have not experienced first hand [sic], is part of our lived present, historical events and personal memories come together in time and audio-visual productions. Audio visual productions can have a cathartic effect on the viewer."[2] The trauma I identify in (and throughout) Sorkin's writing can be divided into two categories: individual trauma, that is the trauma experienced by individual characters, and national trauma, in which his texts explore traumas that are felt by cultures or groups.[3] In this chapter I will focus on Sorkin's representation of individual trauma and, furthermore, argue that these traumatic events simultaneously humanise the characters of Sorkin's work and open up dialogues surrounding wider trauma theory. In turn, this exposure to fictionalised traumatic events attempts to offer a sense of catharsis for audiences through shared personal experience, and because Sorkin's narratives focus on outsiders it permits and normalises a feeling of dislocation from the outside world. I consider the increasing interest in trauma cinema, the repeated use of therapy in Sorkin's television works, the representation of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the evolving discussions of traumas that do not fit so neatly into the standard definition of PTSD, such as betrayal trauma and instances of racism and sexism. By addressing instances of racism and sexism, Sorkin begins to challenge the deficiencies in his writing surrounding issues of race and gender. It is important to consider the portrayal of trauma in

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[1] 'News Night with Will McAvoy', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 5. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

[2] Claudia Wassmann, "An Introduction" in *Therapy and Emotions in Film and Television: The Pulse of Our Times*, ed. Claudia Wassmann, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p.1-16 (p.3)

[3] At times, the line between individual and national trauma is blurred, with individual characters functioning as a stand in for collective group responses. Their own personal traumas are indicative of wider systemic traumas that impact society and I will explore this in more detail later in the chapter.

Sorkin's work because it is such a frequent trope and one that is reflective of the autobiographical quality of his writing; it reflects the commonality and variety of trauma in real life and demonstrates the possibility of healing. Bruzzi argues that "revisiting the emotions and pain of the past via their re-enactment offers many different levels of therapy and therapeutic engagement with the moving image…Frequently, the identification that ensues makes for a morally and imaginatively ambivalent viewing experience, but it still draws us closer to the emotions and pain of others."[4] When traumatic events are viewed in popular culture they are brought into the present both emotionally and psychologically. In Sorkin's narratives trauma precedes moments of change — leading to the achievement of greatness — as well as the private healing of these characters, and thus generating a satisfying ending.

The prevalence of trauma in Sorkin's work is indicative of the rise in the preoccupation with trauma and therapeutic intervention in popular culture, particularly since the 1990s. Sorkin's characters experience a variety of traumatic events and some of these characters are shown to be more susceptible to symptoms of trauma than others. While the representation of trauma in popular culture encourages dialogues about these issues, it has also turned trauma into a spectacle. In these past few decades there has been a rise in what Janet Walker labels as 'trauma cinema', a selection of films which deal with events that shatter the psyche of a person or collective. The films that are included in her taxonomy of trauma cinema find their

> best description - not coincidentally - in the entry for 'post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)' in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, PTSD may be caused by experiencing or *witnessing* military combat, violent personal assault (sexual assault, physical attack, robbery, mugging), being kidnapped, being taken hostage, terrorist attack, torture, incarceration as a prisoner of war or a concentration camp, natural or manmade disasters,

[4] Stella Bruzzi, "Re-enacting Trauma in Film and Television: Restaging History, Revisiting Pain" in *Therapy and Emotions in Film and Television: The Pulse of Our Times*, ed. Claudia Wassmann, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p.89-98 (p.98)

> severe automobile accidents, or being diagnosed with a life threatening illness.[5]

Trauma theory has developed considerably in both cultural studies and psychological discourse over the 20th and 21st centuries, however "trauma today is probably not the trauma of twenty years ago and certainly not the trauma of the early twentieth century. Yet, the way we talk about trauma today and tomorrow will certainly bare the traces of those earlier layers of accretion."[6] Trauma can be defined as an event that is so shocking to the subject that it breaks suddenly through their defences, leaving them unable to process it. Kai Erikson notes that "trauma is generally taken to mean a blow to the tissues of the body - or more frequently now, the tissues of the mind - that result in injury or some other disturbance."[7] According to Roger Luckhurst, there are generally three sets of symptoms of that need to be considered in the understanding of how trauma affects people:

> 1) the traumatic event is persistently re-experienced… intrusive flashbacks, recurring dreams, or later situations that repeat or echo the original
> 2) the persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma that can range from avoidance of thoughts or feelings related to the event to a general sense of emotional numbing to the total absence of recall of the significant event.
> 3) loss of temper control, hyper-vigilance or exaggerated startle response.[8]

Luckhurst's definition is based on the American Psychiatric Association's description of PTSD and is applicable to the way that trauma is presented in popular culture. This variety of symptoms relating to the experience of trauma is frequently employed by the creators of fiction to demonstrate the lasting impact that an event has had upon their characters. To list all examples of the representation of trauma in film and television would be an impossible

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[5] Janet Walker, 'Trauma cinema: false memories and true experience' *Screen.* 42:2 (Summer 2001) 211-216 (214)

[6] Michael Rothberg, "Preface: beyond Tancred and Clorinda - trauma studies for implicated subjects" in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary literary and cultural criticism*, ed. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone, (London: Routledge, 2014) p.xi-xviii (p.xi)

[7] Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community " in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth, (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) p.183-199 (p.183)

[8] Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p.1

task as the rise in depictions of trauma in popular culture mirrors the increase in therapeutic intervention that has been encouraged in the medical community since the 1980s. Examples are so numerous and span a variety of genres, from sitcoms to the superhero movie, but the sheer expanse of these narratives bring trauma — its symptoms and treatments — into popular imagination and discourses. This, in turn, then contributes to the destigmatisation of the effects of trauma. Furthermore, the discussion of trauma can create a ripple effect, as evidenced by the 'Weinstein Effect',[9] the more a trauma is discussed by the wider population, the easier it becomes for other victims to voice their own experiences. However, the 1990s saw a rise in trauma television which made spectacle out of peoples' experiences; from televised trials such as those of OJ Simpson, Lorena Bobbitt, and the Menendez brothers, to talk shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986-2011) in which victims of trauma from abuse to addiction are paraded before a studio audience[10] — this has led to an increase in the use of the trauma of others as a source of entertainment. Edmundson situates this growth in

> television's technical development from cool to potentially hot medium, which enhances its power to convey violent situations, as well as the expansion of channels concomitant lowering of an already modest sense of the lowest-common-denominator audience. There is an erosion, abetted by TV, of a shared conception of inviolable private life, such that the horrors of an individual or family now qualify as common property. We have the right to know the worst about anyone, and immediately.[11]

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[9] The 'Weinstein Effect' has become the name for a global movement in which people speak up and accuse powerful, and often famous, men of sexual harassment or assault. Beginning in late 2017, the allegations of sexual misconduct against film producer Harvey Weinstein created a watershed moment in the battle against sexual harassment. The effect and the resulting Me Too movement has lead the the firing of numerous actors, directors, politicians and executives.

[10] This is not just an American problem, and it is one that has continued into the 21st century. Other examples of this trauma talk show include Spain's *De tú a tú* (1990-1993) which generated considerable controversy for an episode where the host interviewed the parents of three murdered teenagers known as the Alcàsser Girls, broadcasting their grief across Spain for the entertainment of the viewing audience. Similarly, British talk show *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (2005-2019) often made entertainment out of traumas in the the lives of members of British working class under the guise of helping them. In 2019 the series was cancelled in the wake of the suicide of a guest.

[11] Mark Edmundson, *Nightmare on Main Street*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.66

Consuming these events to feed our appetite for trauma has exploded far beyond television, with the rise of social media there is now an unending amount of misfortune, public shaming, and celebrity scandals for us to pursue at our pleasure. Sorkin addresses this in the penultimate episode of *The Newsroom*, in which Sloan (Olivia Munn) confronts the creator of a celebrity stalking app — which she refers to as "Human Flesh Hunter" — on air. She tells him that "my concern isn't for the celebrities, even though sure as we're sitting here someone's gonna get hurt. My concern is for the rest of us who you're turning into a wild pack of prideless punks."[12] The app developer believes that the general public have a right to know what a celebrity is doing every moment of the day, thus completely stripping them of any right to a private life. Here, Sorkin addresses the toxicity of making entertainment out of the lives of real people.

There is an autobiographical nature to Sorkin's work and this also manifests in the traumatic experiences encountered by his characters. In a letter to his daughter, Roxy, published in *Time Magazine*, Sorkin wrote about the older brother that she was supposed to have:

> In the eighth month of the pregnancy, Charlie turned the wrong way in the womb and accidentally strangled himself on the umbilical cord and died. You and I have that in common. Grandma and Grandpa planned on having three kids — first your Aunt Debbie, then Uncle Noah and then my brother Daniel. But Daniel died at birth, and that's why I'm here. I'm the understudy. (You might notice a lot of character named Charlie and Danny in the stories I write — now you know why).[13]

The reuse of the names Charlie and Danny indicate this autobiographical nature, he continually reuses them as though trying to write the real Charlie and Danny back to life. In Sorkin's work, both Dan (Josh Charles) in *Sports Night* and Josh (Bradley Whitfird) in *The West Wing* have deceased siblings. In the second episode of *Sports Night* Dan reveals how

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[12] 'Oh Shenandoah', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Paul Lieberstein, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 5. First broadcast, HBO, 2014

[13] Aaron Sorkin, 'Letters from Dad'. *Time.* <https://ideas.time.com/letters-from-dad/#aaron-sorkin>

his brother died and when trauma occurs during childhood or younger years it can have a belated effect on the victim, or influence the way that they grow up:

> I have a younger brother named Sam. Sam's a genius. I mean literally. As a kid, he tested off the charts. The first computer I ever had, he built from a kit he bought earning money tutoring other kids math. He's energetic and articulate, curious and funny. A great source of pride to our parents. And there's no doubt that he'd be living a great life right now, except for that he's dead. 'Cause when you're fourteen years old all you ever really wanna be when you grow up is your sixteen year old brother, and in my case that meant smoking a lot of dope. The day I went off to college was the day that Sam got his driver's licence and he celebrated by taking a drive with some friends…drunk and high as a paper kite. He never saw the red light that he ran, and he probably never saw the eighteen-wheel truck that put him in the side of a brick bank either. That was eleven years ago tonight, and I just wanted to say, I'm sorry Sam. You deserved better in my hands.[14]

The complicity that Dan feels in his brother's death, and the poor relationship this has generated with his parents are addressed in his therapy sessions. For Herman, "trauma impels people to both withdraw from close relationships and to seek them desperately"[15] and Dan tells his therapist that since Sam's death he has trouble being around people for any significant length of time; because of this his friends started referred to him as "Hit and Run Danny."[16] Dan actively pursues romantic relationships and forms close platonic relationships, but then frequently isolates himself from these people. Sam's death causes Dan to suffer from anxiety attacks, which he tells his therapist have been getting worse.[17] The loss of a loved one is so traumatic to Dan because he, however irrationally, feels as though it is his fault — Sam mimicked behaviour that he had learned from Dan and it lead to his

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[14] 'The Apology', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

[15] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, (London: Pandora, 1994), p.56

[16] 'Shane', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 6. First broadcast, ABC, 1999

[17] Ibid

death. The apology implies that Dan regards himself to be the inferior brother, similar to Sorkin's description of himself as the understudy, and this also contributes to Dan's sense of guilt, echoing the familiar refrain of survivors — 'it should have been me.' Dan's guilt and anxiety have followed him into adulthood, influencing his decisions and, at times, damaging his social connections. Trauma can return to haunt the victim long after the event has happened and "small seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event."[18] In the first season of *The West Wing*, Josh is the only member of the senior staff to be given an NSC card that will grant him safety in the event of a catastrophic incident. In a therapy session, he relays to his therapist Stanley (Guy Boyd) how his sister died:

> Stanley: The house caught on fire?
> Josh: Yeah.
> Stanley: While your sister Joanie was babysitting you?
> Josh: Yeah.
> Stanley: Why aren't you dead?
> Josh: I ran out of the house.[19]

The NSC card triggers the feeling that he abandoned his sister and the memory of her death — just as Josh left his sister and ran to safety, he feels as though the possession of this NSC card means that he is running to safety and away from the colleagues he cares for. Josh tells Stanley that he can't get the song 'Ave Maria' out of his head as his sister used to listen to it over and over, and when he explains to CJ (Allison Janney) what has been bothering him he is again listening to this song — further linking the two events. Trauma tends to repeat itself and can be triggered by seemingly unrelated events beyond the subject's control or thought pattern. As Cathy Caruth notes on its repetitive nature: "these repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individuals own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control."[20] At different points throughout the series both Leo (John Spencer) and Donna (Janel Moloney) attempt to

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[18] Herman, p.37

[19] 'The Crackpots and These Women', *The West Wing,* dir. by Anthony Drazan, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, NBC, 1999

[20] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) p.2

explain Josh's actions and the effect that trauma has had on his personality. Both characters highlight Josh's sense of survivor's guilt, and in the fourth season, Donna explains that "his sister died in a fire while she was babysitting him. She tried to put it out, he ran outside. He went off campaigning, his father died. He wakes up in a hospital and discovers the President's been shot. He goes through every day worried that somebody he likes is going to die, and it's going to be his fault."[21] Michael Rothberg notes that "trauma is not a category that encompasses death directly, but rather draws our attention to the *survival* of subjects in and beyond the sites of violence and in *proximity* to death."[22] Much of Josh's trauma comes from this proximity to death, and the traumas in his life — the deaths of the people he loves — repeat themselves. This demonstrates a particular susceptibility to trauma in his character, as though the death of his sister opened up this vulnerability to repetitious events, fating him to be continually traumatised. Trauma in Sorkin's work is frequently a catalyst for change, driving his characters to address the horrors in their past and work towards self-improvement. While Josh's past traumas are numerous they allow him to continually better both his life and the lives of those around him.

Josh shows many symptoms of survivor's guilt, as explained by his colleagues, and "feelings of guilt are especially severe when the survivor has been a witness to the suffering or death of other people. To be spared oneself, in the knowledge that others have met a worse fate, creates a severe burden of conscience";[23] *The West Wing* also addresses trauma, and the guilt of survival, through Charlie (Dulé Hill). The shooting at the end of the first season in which white supremacists, who were aiming at him, shot the President and Josh, reminds Charlie of the shooting that killed his mother. In both instances Charlie blames himself, and of his mother's death he states that "she was shot and killed in the line a year ago, June. Ironically, she wasn't supposed to be on shift. She switched shifts that day 'cause I asked her to."[24] While not exclusive to Sorkin's work, the traumatised male is nonetheless a prevalent character type in his narratives. Like Josh, Charlie is haunted by the death of a

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[21] 'Commencement', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2003

[22] Rothberg, p.xiv

[23] Herman, p.54

[24] 'The Midterms', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 3. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

relative and this trauma is brought to the surface when the life of their substitute paternal figure — President Bartlet — is threatened.

When an atrocity or violation happens, the typical response it to shut it out, however burying these events in the psyche does not work in the long term; as scholars such as Caruth and Luckhurst argue, these disturbances often lead to emotional paralysis and volatile eruptions. The event returns to the victim through a variety of symptoms that have come to make up the symptoms for PTSD, and in the season two episode of *The West Wing*, 'Noel', the narrative explores the delayed nature of Josh's PTSD.[25] Luckhurst notes that "symptoms can come on acutely, persist chronically, or another strange effect, appear belatedly, months or years after the precipitating event."[26] Caruth explains that PTSD "describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena."[27] This episode shows Josh's delayed response to the shooting that occurred in the season one finale. 'Noel' is told through flashbacks prompted by questions Josh is asked by therapist Stanley Keyworth (Adam Arkin). The first flashback shows that Josh's symptoms came on three weeks before the therapy session, when Toby organises a brass quintet to play daily in the White House lobby. This music begins before the episode cuts from Stanley and Josh to the flashback scene, showing from the beginning the importance that music has on Josh's psychological state. Many of the flashbacks, especially those towards the beginning of the episode are narratively controlled by Josh, wishing to manage how he is perceived by Stanley. This echo is trigged by the repetitive nature of the match on action and sound, and thus produces a flashback to the traumatic event. This method of signalling the recall of a traumatic event is not exclusive to Sorkin's work as "recent cinema signals traumatic disturbance with the sudden flashback, unsignalled by either voice-over or transitional dissolve, and which is prompted analogically by a graphic (or auditory) match image that throws off the linear temporality of the story."[28] By this

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[25] 'Noel', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 10. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[26] Luckhurst, p.1

[27] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience,* p.59

[28] Luckhurst, p.180

method of signalling a traumatic event, Sorkin connects his work to the wider body of trauma fiction, which is reflective of the vast expansion of trauma in popular culture in the 1990s.[29] Caruth notes that "the flashback, it seems, provides a form of recall that survives at the cost of willed memory or of the very continuity of conscious thought."[30] Throughout the episode Stanley asks Josh how he cut his hand and initial flashbacks concur with Josh's repeated insistence that he cut it on a glass that smashed when he put it on the table. This however is revealed to be false, when Stanley finally pushes him for the truth, a flashback shows that he cut his hand when he put it through his apartment window.[31] Music once again becomes a trigger for Josh, as it did in the first season. When complaining to Toby about the music playing in the lobby, he shouts "I can hear the damn sirens all over the building!…The bagpipes." In Josh's mind, sirens and music have become the same and he is unable to separate the two. In the episode, Yo-Yo Ma performs at the White House Christmas party and this performance is more than Josh's psyche can handle. Within the flashback to this moment there are flashbacks to the shooting, and the three scenes — the therapy session, the Christmas party, and the shooting — are edited together with Bach's 'Suite No.1 in G Major' diegetically and extradiegetically soundtracking the montage. The events of 'Noel', and Josh's PTSD are readdressed in season four when a random shooter opens fire at the White House and Joe (Matthew Perry) asks Josh if he heard the shots. Josh tells him that "I heard a brass quintet playing The First Noel, so I just assumed that somebody somewhere was locked and loaded." This episode gives a longevity to trauma, showing that there is no easy fix and the glib response that Josh gives is indicative of trying to mask his trauma with humour and other verbal coping strategies.

The controlling of flashbacks through storytelling is also used in *The Newsroom's* 'Unintended Consequences'. In the episode Maggie is being interviewed by the company's legal team, led by lawyer Rebecca Halliday (Marcia Gay Harden). As Maggie tells her story, flashbacks show that she and cameraman Gary Cooper (Chris Chalk) went to an orphanage

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[29] The expansion of courtroom and talk show television, racial unrest, the new awareness of sexual harassment all helped contribute to the potential for audiences to be entertained by the trauma of others.

[30] Cathy Caruth, "Introduction" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth, (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) p.151-157 (p.152)

[31] During the episode Josh also becomes obsessed with a military pilot who kills himself after being shot down on a previous mission, beginning to focus on their shared similarities, and eventually it contributes to his loss of stability.

in Uganda. There, Maggie (Alison Pill) bonded with a little boy called Daniel (Demoze Talbot), whom she reads to and this is the first instance of the story that Maggie is telling contradicting the montage the audience is being shown. This sets up the narrative pattern of distancing for survival and compartmentalisation between the version of a story shared with others (such as Rebecca) and the private pain felt (and visually revealed to us) that cannot be fully verbalised for fear of breaking down. She tells Rebecca that she read a book to him three times but it is shown that she read to him on many more occasions. During the night, a group of Cattle Raiders arrive and the inhabitants of the orphanage escape onto their bus. A head count reveals that Daniel is missing, so Maggie and Gary go back inside to get him. They pull Daniel out from under Maggie's bed where he had been hiding, and at first, they are shown to be successful in their attempt to rescue him, with Maggie reading to him as they drive away. This flashback is interrupted by Rebecca:

> Rebecca: He died right away?
> Maggie: Yeah.

This is followed by a flashback which depicts what really happened: Maggie was carrying Daniel on her back, they were shot at as they were returning to the bus, and a bullet hit Daniel. Maggie finally admits to Rebecca that "his spine ended up stopping a bullet that was plainly gonna hit me." Derek Paget notes that "the stories we tell ourselves - and, when necessary, others - seek to fix who we are against the flux of time, the inroads of age and forgetfulness, and the (mis)understandings of others. Constructed for its (your/my) operational plausibility day to day, such narratives are subject to continual revision, but some events retain the capacity to trigger that fuller memory lived in body as well as mind."[32] Maggie, as previously seen with Josh, constructs a story to tell others about the events that happened in an attempt to combat the effects of trauma and present herself as less traumatised than she actually is. Kaplan contends that "the idea that a traumatic event overwhelms the cortex and thus is not cognitively processed would mean that the event is completely unavailable to memory. This does not seem to be verified by how people experience trauma; frequently the subject does have memories, or partial memories, of what

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[32] Derek Paget, "Ways of Showing, Ways of Telling: Television and 9/11" in *The 'War on Terror': Post-9/11 Television Drama, Docudrama and Documentary*, ed. Stephen Lacey and Derek Paget, (Hampshire: University of Wales Press, 2015) p.11-32 (p.12)

happened. But at the same time, what one remembers may be influenced by fantasies and desires, or by a wish that things had been different."[33] Maggie not only seeks to limit the reaction of her colleagues by downplaying the trauma, but also wishes that Daniel were alive, and thus constructs a narrative in which he is.[34]

As in *The West Wing*, *The Newsroom* uses the narrative structure of a flashback within a flashback to layer the trauma that is experienced by the characters. A flashback shows Maggie cutting off her hair, and within this flashback there is a flashback to her in Uganda; here Daniel is playing with her hair and Pastor Moses (Ntare Guma Mbaho Mwine) tells him "that colour's called blonde, Daniel, and it's nothing but trouble."[35] The inclusion of this smaller flashback explicitly demonstrates that this moment, and Daniel's subsequent death, leads Maggie to cut off and dye her hair, in an attempt to distance herself from the trauma that she experienced. Maggie initially denies that she is deeply affected and traumatised, by her experience in Uganda, however when she returns back to the U.S, she begins to drink heavily and her performance at work slips:

> Jim: You need to switch to vodka. It's not as easy to smell, and you're wearing the same clothes as you were yesterday.
> Maggie: You think I'm drunk right now?
> Jim: Last night. Most nights.[36]

While Maggie is, at this point, unable to acknowledge her trauma, it causes her to engage in self-destructive behaviour to block out all visual and emotional signifiers that trigger a return to the memories of Daniel's death. Caruth notes that "in its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena. Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent

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[33] Ann E. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006) p.42

[34] 'Unintended Consequences', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Carl Franklin, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 4. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

[35] Ibid

[36] 'News Night with Will McAvoy', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 5. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

event may occur as an absolute inability to know it, that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness."[37] The full effects of the traumas experienced by Josh and Maggie return to them later, negatively impacting their working and social lives.

The symptoms of trauma are not always as overt as they are depicted with Josh and Maggie's story arcs. At the beginning of *The Newsroom*, MacKenzie (Emily Mortimer) has just returned from reporting in a war zone during which time she was stabbed, and the effects of this are more subtle than Sorkin's other representations of trauma. Charlie (Sam Waterston) describes to Will (Jeff Daniels) the condition that she's in:

> she was in Peshawar…for four months. The Green Zone for a year before that. Her guys were filing stories from caves, she comes home, she wants to be an EP again, have a normal life, and there's nothing for her at CNN. Nothing for her at ABC…she's exhausted. Not like at the end of a long day, she's mentally and physically exhausted. She hasn't had four hours sleep in two years, she's been shot at in three different countries, and she's been to way too many funerals for a girl her age.[38]

Despite all this however, over the course of the show MacKenzie is shown to have processed her experiences far better than some of Sorkin's other characters. The final episode of the series, however, does indicate that MacKenzie initially had some trouble readjusting to her life back in America. The episode uses flashbacks to show how Charlie brought the staff together, and when he goes to hire her, he finds her at bowling alley, drinking in the middle of the day:

> Charlie: You like to drink in the middle of the day?
> MacKenzie: I'm still on Afghanistan time, I'm unemployed, and I'm in sweatpants at a bowling alley.
> Charlie: I heard you had some trouble in Fallujah?
> MacKenzie: That was a long time ago.
> Charlie: Five months.

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[37] Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience.* pp.91-2

[38] 'We Just Decided To', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

> MacKenzie: I got stabbed in the abdomen. They sewed me up.[39]

MacKenzie is casual in the way that she discusses her experiences, which correlates with Herrman's observation that occasionally the "traumatised person may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion."[40] MacKenzie is unemotional in the discussion of the incident in Fallujah, but because she was unable to find work upon her return home she is unable to return to any sense of normalcy, or reacclimatise to society. She tells Charlie that "I think the reason I've been drinking lately is to numb the feeling of despair."[41] For Luckhurst, "individuals who experience wars, disasters, accidents, or other extreme 'stressor' events seem to provide certain identifiable somatic and psychosomatic disturbances. Aside from myriad physical symptoms, trauma disrupts memory, and therefore identity, in peculiar ways."[42] The lack of overt symptoms on display lead to the potential to forget that MacKenzie's trauma runs throughout the narrative. MacKenzie's response to her trauma is displaced, she appears unaffected, but she has substituted professional risk for personal emotional isolation.

The development of the definition of PTSD has seen the expansion of victim types and one evident example of this within Sorkin's work occurs in *Sports Night*. Natalie (Sabrina Lloyd) is attacked by a football player while conducting an interview, however Jeremy (Joshua Malina) is shown to be more affected by the incident than she is. Luckhurst argues that "at first PTSD was only attributable to those directly involved, but 'secondary' victim status now includes witnesses, bystanders, rescue workers, relatives caught up in immediate aftermath, a proximity now extended to include receiving news of the death or injury of a relative."[43] Although we see Natalie's trauma displayed through a faltering in her work performance, more emphasis is placed on Jeremy's reaction. He is unable to sleep and obsessively intercepts Natalie's emails to keep her from seeing the death threats that are being sent to her. It is Jeremy who is shown to be the primary sufferer of the trauma, despite

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[39] 'What Kind of Day Has It Been', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 6. First broadcast, HBO, 2014

[40] Herman, p.34

[41] 'What Kind of Day Has It Been' *The Newsroom*

[42] Luckhurst. pp.1

[43] Luckhurst. pp.1

his status as one of Luckhurst's secondary victims. This behaviour is troubling, as even though Jeremy's motives are good, Natalie never asked for him to interfere; instead he makes decisions about Natalie's life without consulting her. The narrative fails to highlight the problematic nature of this incident and instead presents it as a romantic overture, leading to Jeremy and Natalie revealing their romantic feelings for one another. By failing to acknowledge that Jeremy's actions are questionable in order to present him as heroic, there is the troubling implication that women are unable to deal with their own trauma without the help and protection of a man. When PTSD first came to be defined the events that caused it were thought to be uncommon. However, "rape, battery, and other forms of sexual and domestic violence are so common a part of women's lives that they can hardly be described as outside the range of ordinary experience."[44] Natalie's assault echoes the harassment of sports journalist, Lisa Olson, in 1990[45] and when talking to Dan, Natalie makes reference to this:

> Natalie: You're not gonna tell me to be strong?
> Dan: Hasn't been my experience that you need to be told that.
> Natalie: We all remember a *Boston Globe* reporter who was strong, Danny. There isn't a female sports journalist that didn't learn their lesson from it.
> Dan: I would imagine.
> Natalie: She had death threats. The FBI had to open her mail. Every loser who knew how to dial a phone was calling talk radio saying 'she was a bitch who shouldn't have been there in the first place.' And when it was all said and done, she had to pack up her life and more to the other side of the planet.[46]

[44] Herman, p.33

[45] In September 1990, while working for the *Boston Herald*, sports journalist Lisa Olson suffered sexual harassment in the Boston Patriots locker room. After she complained and the incident became public knowledge, Olson was subjected to threats and intimidation from Patriots fans and subsequently transferred to the *Sydney Herald* in Australia.

[46] 'Mary Pat Shelby', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Tracey Stern and Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

Public discourse surrounding sexual harassment saw an increased rise in the 1990s,[47] especially after the testimony of Anita Hill regarding the sexual harassment she experienced from Supreme Court nominee, Clarence Thomas. It has since gained renewed attention in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein allegations and the subsequent Me Too Movement, as well as the confirmation of Supreme Court Judge Brett Kavanaugh despite sexual assault allegations and the controversial remarks made about women by Donald Trump. Jack Holland argues that "'Me Too' has highlighted historical violations at the same time as it has made the widespread contemporary reality of ongoing abuse plainly visible. By bringing to light the range of indiscretions faced by American women — sexual aggression ranging from unwanted advances to rape — 'Me Too' has changed the landscape of gender debates in the US…'Me Too' has shown that male sexual aggression is cultural and systematic."[48] This form of trauma is similarly addressed in *The Newsroom* when Sloan's ex-boyfriend leaks topless photographs of her. In her humiliation Sloan goes to hide in Don's (Thomas Sadoski) office and asks him to take her off the evening show. Don assures her that her humiliation will turn in to rage:

> Sloan: I'd give anything to feel rage. It'd trump the humiliation and I'd be able to get up. I think I live here now.
> Don: What if I were able to promise you that humiliation always turns into rage?
> Sloan: How long does that conversion take? How long is the evolution? How long does it take to get from the larva stage—
> Don: I fully understand what you're asking.
> Sloan: How long does it take?
> Don: I guess it depends. Like with Germany it was fifteen or twenty years—
> Sloan: Forget it.
> Don: But Wile E. Coyote, you know, he has a fast turnaround.
> Sloan: I want to die.

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[47] David Crary, 'Before the 1990s, there was little recourse for sexual-harrasment victims' *Seattle Times*, 27th December 2017, <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/before-the-1990s-little-recourse-for-harassment-victims/> [Accessed on: 1st June 2020]

[48] Jack Holland, *Fictional Television and American Politics: From 9/11 to Donald Trump* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019) p.207

Don: I know.[49]

The memory of a traumatic experience is often mirrored by a fantasy for revenge and this reverses the position of the victim/perpetrator dynamic as "the revenge fantasy is one form of wish catharsis. The victim imagines that she can get rid of the terror, shame, and pain of the trauma by retaliating against the perpetrator."[50] In this episode Sloan and Don go to her ex's office and Sloan interrupts his meeting to hit him. Here, Sloan is able to live out her fantasy of revenge and in the fictional space of the show revenge *is* the catharsis that it is consistently said not to be in reality.[51]

There have been frequent suggestions to expand the definition of trauma in order to help with the understanding of the impact of factors such as sexism, racism and other types of systematic oppression. Despite its increased prevalence on our film and TV screens, "much criticism has in fact been levelled at the dominant formulation of PTSD…for its perceived failures of inclusiveness. Particularly contentious is the definition of what constitutes a traumatic stressor."[52] There are a variety of different types of traumatic experience that are explored in Sorkin's work and many of these extend beyond the manifestations of symptoms associated with PTSD. In *Studio 60*, Simon (D.L Hughley) wants Matt (Matthew Perry) to meet with an African American comedian, Willy Wilz (Mystro Clark), who could potentially be hired as a show writer as Simon is annoyed by the whiteness of the writers' room. During the episode, Simon recounts the story of how he witnessed a murder when he was a teenager, and how, if not for one of his friends, he would have been sentenced to life in prison:

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[49] 'News Night with Will McAvoy'

[50] Herman, p.189

[51] While here Sloan can achieve her wish fulfilment and catharsis, in the penultimate episode Don meets with a rape survivor in order to discourage her from accepting an invitation to confront her attacker on air. Don's primary concern — aside from the potential that the website that she has created for people to name their attackers could do harm to an innocent party — is that due to the direction the network has taken under its new ownership, her experience will be treated like sports and her trauma will become a media spectacle for the entertainment of the viewing public. Unlike Sloan, she is unable to attain the desired catharsis for her rage.

[52] Stef Craps, "Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age" in *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary literary and cultural criticism*, ed. Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eaglestone, (London: Routledge, 2014) p.45-62 (p.49)

> from my pool I can see South Central. I saw a murder up close when I was fifteen. Three guys shot a friend of ours ten times in the chest with 38s…we spent the next day planning how we were gonna kill these guys who did it. And when it was time, the leader of the guys I ran with, a guy named Darnell, turned to me and said "you're not going." I said, "like hell I'm not going." He said, "you're not going. You go, and I'll kill you first." Those guys are all doing consecutive life sentences, no chance of parole. They weren't charged as juveniles. Darnell is in a maximum security facility in Minnesota. Every month I send him the only things I'm allowed to send him: cigarettes and stamps. I can see it from my pool, Matt, and if I don't reach in there and grab as many as I can carry, every day, then I deserve to get sent right back to it.[53]

It is because of this that Simon feels duty bound to help as many African Americans to better lives as he can. Simon's guilt arises from surviving a brush with the systematic weight against African Americans while his friends ended up incarcerated. Zuleka Henderson argues that "trauma is a subjective phenomenon; in order for something to be identified as a trauma, it must be experienced as harmful, threatening or overwhelming to those who have been exposed to it."[54] Henderson goes on to explain that one of the traumas identified in the study conducted into what African American teenagers consider to be traumatic was being 'stuck in the hood.' Henderson notes that "a few teens described that adolescents from their communities suffer from having limited prospects for experiencing life outside their immediate environment. They described this as a trauma because their neighbourhood often felt stifling to their potential, and because teens become distressed trying to find a way out."[55] Bryant-Davis and Ocampo argue that there are parallels between racial trauma and the trauma of incidents such as domestic violence but that there is a limitation in the assessment and treatment of the effects of racism. They acknowledge that unlike traditional instances of trauma,[56] the perpetrators of racism in a victim's life tend to be multiple and that

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[53] 'The Wrap Party', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by David Semel, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 6. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[54] Zuleka Henderson, 'In Their Own Words: How Black Teens Define Trauma' *Journ Child Adol Trauma. 1*2 (2019) 141-151 (141)

[55] Henderson, p146

[56] Instances such as serving in combat, a violent assault, torture etc.

because of this the "world becomes unsafe because interacting with potential perpetrators is almost unavoidable. To avoid racist incidents one would have to avoid school, work, media, banks, stores, police, court systems - almost all social institutions."[57] Those who are subjected to incidents of racism may also experience survivor's guilt: "victims of racist incidents who can survive or even thrive may experience guilt because they are aware that many who share their ethnic or racial identification continue to be limited by oppression while they have managed to acquire education, wealth, status, or fame."[58] The trauma of Simon's past is both personal and national, reflecting the epidemic of the treatment of African Americans in the United States, and the institutional racism that is still prolific in society. It is this trauma that influences Simon's behaviour and motivations in his daily life and "survivors of racist incidents who utilize their resources to aid those still struggling with the institutional impact of racist incidents can replace guilt with responsible activism."[59] For Craps, "it follows that the traumatic impact of racism and other forms of ongoing oppression cannot be adequately addressed within the conceptual frameworks which trauma theory provides"[60] Simon's trauma is reflective of a wider structure of racial trauma suffered by African Americans regarding the criminal justice system and gang-related violence. However, this trauma falls outside the scope of the PTSD related definition of trauma because scholarship on trauma has tended to privilege PTSD, and racism in the US has been drastically unaddressed. Simon's disappointment with Willy Wilz comes from the fact Wilz cannot rise above the cliché jokes about African American life. Wilz is more concerned with getting the approval of a largely white audience by relegating black culture to harmful racial stereotypes than using his stage and voice to challenge the casual racism in everyday life. The series tackles this issue by having Simon reject the stereotypes presented by Wilz and have them hire another black comic who, despite performing poorly on stage, is an intelligent and promising writing talent.

What is considered to be deeply traumatic to one person may not be considered traumatic to others. In *Molly's Game*, when reflecting back on her own history, Molly

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[57] Thema Bryant-Davis and Carlota Ocampo, 'Racist Incident-Based Trauma' *The Counseling Psychologist.* 33:4 (2005) 479-500 (494)

[58] Bryant-Davis and Ocampo, pp.494-495

[59] Bryant-Davis and Ocampo, p.495

[60] Craps. pp.50

(Jessica Chastain) lists the different sports traumas that athletes think are the worst thing that can happen to someone in sports:

> a survey was taken a few years back that asked three hundred professionals one question, 'what's the worst thing that can happen in sports?' Some people answered, 'losing a game seven'[61] and other people said, 'getting swept in 4-0.' Other people said it was missing the world cup, and some Brazilians said it was losing to Argentina. Not just in the world cup, any time ever, any contest. But one person answered the worst thing that can happen in sports is fourth place at the Olympics.[62]

Molly then explains that she when she was twelve she suffered from Rapid Onset Scoliosis and that the corrective procedure required hip bone and steel rods to be fused to her spine. Molly continued to ski, and at age twenty she competed to qualify for the Olympics, however, during this event she tripped over a stick and her ski came off: "I was about to land pretty hard on my digitally remastered spinal cord which was being held together by spare parts from an erector set." Molly cannot conceive of the traumas that were listed by the three hundred professionals surveyed because she regards her own trauma[63] to be so much worse, stating that: "I wanted to say to whoever answered that the worst thing that can happen in sports was fourth place at the Olympics…seriously, fuck you." In *The Social Network*, Mark's (Jesse Eisenberg) trauma is Erica (Rooney Mara) breaking up with him. This trauma drives the narrative of the film, as he creates Facebook as a form of revenge. Mark's first interaction with Erica after they have broken up also goes poorly, and it is the failed interaction that prompts him to expand Facebook. As noted in the previous chapter, the film ends with Mark sending Erica a friend request and waiting for her to respond, demonstrating that he is still deeply affected by that initial trauma that drove him to create the platform.[64]

In *Steve Jobs,* Steve's (Michael Fassbender) trauma stems from his adoption, and this stressor creates within him a need to have complete control of the world around him. John

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[61] Final game in a Best of Seven series in baseball, basketball, and ice hockey.

[62] *Molly's Game,* dir. Aaron Sorkin, (STXfilms, 2017)

[63] I argue that Molly's trauma, while not the typical trauma presented in fiction, falls under the umbrella of Janet Walker's taxonomy outlined at the beginning of this chapter.

[64] *The Social Network,* dir. David Fincher, (Columbia Pictures, 2010)

Sculley (Jeff Daniels) asks him why people who are adopted feel rejected rather than selected and tells him that it comes from the lack of control: "it's having no control…you find out that you were out of the loop when the most crucial events in your life were set in motion. As long as you have control…I don't understand people who give it up."[65] Steve eventually tells Sculley that his original adoptive parents gave him back after a month because they had changed their minds, and that his biological mother refused to sign the adoption papers because his new adoptive parents did not meet her requirements: "there was a legal battle that went on for a while and my mother said that she refused to love me for the first year, you know, in case they had to give me back." These events in his life, and discovering his own history, is shown to strongly influence both Steve's obsession with control and his deep fear of rejection. In *Sports Night* and *The West Wing*, Sorkin parallels traumas suffered by Jeremy and Sam (Rob Lowe). Both characters learn that their fathers have been having affairs that span multiple decades, and the discovery of these affairs affect their working lives. Jeremy becomes obsessed with trying to find out more about a boat that went off course in a sailboat race, telling Natalie that "it's worth it, I think, to figure out exactly how this boat, that was supposed to win, met with this kind of disaster"[66] but when he's talking about the boat he's really talking about his parent's marriage. Similarly, when Sam discovers that the grandfather of one of Donna's friends was a spy — a man whose innocence Sam had argued in his thesis at Princeton — he tells Donna that "this girl's going to find out who her father was."[67] The discovery of his father's affair causes Sam to project this anger onto Donna's friend, demonstrated by the slip in him saying father instead of grandfather. As I argued in my previous chapter, the Liberal Genius often has a poor relationship with his or her father; Jeremy and Sam, who fall outside of this character type, have good relationships with their fathers and it is the disintegration of this relationship that is distinctly traumatic to them both. The trauma's experienced by Simon, Molly, Mark, Steve, Jeremy and Sam do not fit into the traditional formulation of the PTSD symptoms,

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[65] *Steve Jobs,* dir. Danny Boyle, (Universal Pictures, 2015)

[66] 'The Sword of Orion ', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by David Handelman, Mark McKinney and Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 18. First broadcast, ABC, 1999

[67] 'Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail', *The West Wing,* dir. by Jessica Yu, written by Paul Redford and Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 16. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

thus Sorkin is expanding the definition of trauma to provide a more inclusive representation of the affects and burdens of private trauma on the individual in their every day lives.

The trauma that Steve experienced is a form of betrayal trauma, in that, he feels abandoned by his biological mother and first adoptive parents, thus he takes measures to avoid this happening again. The idea of betrayal trauma — which can encompass a variety of events from romantic betrayal to child abuse — occurs when the perpetrator violates the trust or wellbeing of the victim in a relationship in which trust or protection should be counted upon. Couch et al argue that the "experience of romantic betrayal can take many forms, from infidelity to physical abuse to abandonment, but regardless of the form, there is considerable evidence that betrayal can lead to considerable negative consequences."[68] These negative consequences include, but are by no means limited to, depression, chronic pain, substance abuse, and inexplicable somatic symptoms. Despite this, "historically betrayal has not been included in diagnostic nosology, empirical evidence suggests that betrayal also plays an important role in the etiology [sic] of posttraumatic sequelae."[69] The idea of romantic betrayal is explored frequently in *The Newsroom.* In the first episode, it is explained that Will and MacKenzie broke up because she cheated on him with her ex-boyfriend, Brian (Paul Schneider). MacKenzie believes that she's joining News Night on a three-year contract, but Will gets this changed:

> Will: It's not a three-year contract anymore. It's a 156 week contract that gives me the opportunity to fire you 155 times at the end of each week…
> MacKenzie: How did you get my contract changed?
> Will: I gave the network back some money off my salary.
> MacKenzie: How much money?
> Will: A million dollars a year.
> MacKenzie: You gave back a million dollars a year?
> Will: Yeah
> MacKenzie: You paid a million dollars to be able to fire me anytime you want?

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[68] Laurie L. Couch, Kiersten R. Baughman and Melissa R. Derow, 'The Aftermath of Romantic Betrayal: What's Love Got to Do with It?' *Curr Psychol. 36* (2017) 504-515 (504)

[69] P.J. Birrell, R.E. Bernstein and J.J. Freyd, "With the Fierce and Loving Embrace of Another Soul: Finding Connection and Meaning After the Profound Disconnection of Betrayal Trauma" in *Reconstructing Meaning After Trauma*, ed. Elizabeth M. Altmaier (London: Academic Press, 2017) p.29-43 (p.31)

> Will: $3 million. And not any time I want, just the end of each week.[70]

Will does this so that he does not have to be tied to MacKenzie for the next three years, thus limiting the potential for her to hurt him once more; the need to protect himself from any further betrayal is so vital to him that he is willing to pay $3 million for this sense of security. Couch et al argue that "when betrayals are discovered, degradations of trust can follow, as well as lessened connection of support between partners."[71] At the beginning of the series, Will has lost a lot of the trust that he once had in MacKenzie and therefore being able to fire her at the end of each week allows him to maintain some sense of control. This loss of trust also manifests in verbal outbursts; when MacKenzie asks him to keep the staff that she brought with her from DC he shouts that "they fucked up, Mac! They trusted you!"[72] and here, it becomes obvious that 'they' and 'I' could be easily interchanged. Trauma can create a complex conflict in how a victim interacts with others. On the one hand they can feel a strong need to protect those around them and regard the harming of others to be unacceptable, yet still be prone to fits of anger directed at the very people they wish to protect. Will's outbursts throughout the series contrasts the uneasy relationship that America has with anger; "there is a long popular culture tradition, going back to the classic western, of valuing heroes who keep careful control over their emotions, who respond firmly but rationally to any provocation."[73] Will, however, is the hero in *The Newsroom* despite his frequent outbursts of temper. He spends much of the first season alternating between pushing MacKenzie away and shouting at her, though he does reluctantly allow the reparation of their relationship. In episode four of the first season, Charlie criticises the choice of women that Will has started to date as they are not women with whom he would want to embark on a committed relationship with, and therefore unlikely to be as affected if they cheat on him:

> Charlie: These are all women who, in a million years, you would not want to spend any daylight hours with.

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[70] 'We Just Decided To'

[71] Couch et al, p.504

[72] 'We Just Decided To'

[73] Peter N. Stearns, "American Anger Control and the Role of Popular Culture" in *Therapy and Emotions in Film and Television: The Pulse of Our Times*, ed. Claudia Wassmann, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) p.34-51 (p.34)

> Will: What do you make of that?
> Charlie: You're asking out the wrong women.[74]

Throughout the episode, Charlie and Will continue to bicker over Will's dating choices and when Charlie asks why it is taking him so long to get over MacKenzie, Will tells him that "it doesn't work like in the movies."[75] Birrell et al argue that "research has repeatedly shown that those who have experienced betrayal trauma are more likely to reexperience interpersonal trauma, a phenomenon known as revictimization."[76] MacKenzie's betrayal *is* Will's revictimisation, the first betrayal trauma coming at the hands of his father, as observed by his therapist Habib: "if you have a physically abusive father who abandons you and your family, you're going to be a thousand times more sensitive to betrayal than the average person who's already extremely sensitive to betrayal."[77] Will questions why cannot forgive MacKenzie when he knows that she deserves to be forgiven and acknowledges that he has been, in fact, punishing her:

> Will: Intellectually, in my brain, I know that MacKenzie deserves to be forgiven. I understood everything you said. I understand she's taken every punishment I've given her, including having Brian hang around the office and write his story. I understand all of that. So why can't I forgive her?
> Habib: Because you weren't rejected, you were betrayed.[78]

Due to the severity with which Will feels betrayal he frequently lashes out at MacKenzie, particularly in the first season; he tells Maggie, who criticises him for this, that "I've got the image of MacKenzie with that— with her ex boy— It won't come out. I need the team from *Inception* to come and remove the image from…Look, I'm not doing it on purpose. I'm not rubbing her face in anything. I'm simply not considering her feelings at all. Yeah, I just

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[74] 'I'll Try to Fix You', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 4. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[75] Ibid

[76] Birrell et al, p.32

[77] 'The Blackout Part II: Mock Debate', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 9. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[78] Ibid

heard myself say that."[79] This admission leaves Will, who is usually so articulate, linguistically awkward; he is aware that he is acting poorly towards MacKenzie and this knowledge manifests itself through his stumbling justifications. While Will and MacKenzie are able to repair their relationship, it is a slow process, and at the end of the second season she calls him out on deliberately hurting her as a punishment: "I brutally hurt you and that's a fact and facts don't change. But in my lifetime I've never done it intentionally."[80] As with any potentially traumatic event, people react in different ways but when betrayal is experienced by a person who is already highly susceptible to this trauma, it can cause a variety of symptoms similar to those associated with more traditional traumatic experiences.

Sorkin's work engages with a variety of different types of trauma, and while trauma is not limited to his Liberal Geniuses, the trauma experienced by his characters deeply humanises them. Although many instances of trauma in his work subscribe to the traditional PTSD definition of the condition, he does explore effects that are less visible to the audience. This engagement through his work demonstrates the commonality of trauma and normalises the attempt at recovery through therapeutic intervention. While numerous characters in Sorkin's work experience trauma, for the most part they can overcome it, reflecting a lot of similar narrative devices in American popular culture texts.[81] Cantor argues that "[g]enuinely tragic narratives rarely appear in American popular culture because, generally speaking, Americans do not have a tragic view of life…Americans love success stories, and that is another way of saying that they love happy endings."[82] In popular culture, therapy is often mocked "for intruding arbitrarily in the life of the individual,"[83] however in Sorkin's works therapy finds vindication, with his characters benefiting distinctly from therapeutic intervention. At times therapy *is* treated lightly in Sorkin's work but its repeated use as a site

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[79] 'The 112th Congress', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin and Gideon Yago, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[80] 'Election Night, Part II', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 9. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

[81] Other popular culture examples of the relationship between trauma and therapy include *Big Little Lies* (2017-2019), *Lucifer* (2016-present), *One Day at a Time* (2017-present), and *House* (2004-2012). Although, in *House*, Greg House ultimately falls back into his old patterns of destructive and self-destructive behaviour.

[82] Paul A. Cantor, *Pop Culture and the Dark Side of the American Dream: Con Men, Gangsters, Drug Lords and Zombies*, (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2019), p.7

[83] Stearns, p.49

of healing and necessary articulations on trauma nevertheless evidence its distinctive importance in his writing. In *Studio 60*, Matt is obsessing over having written a bad show:

> Jordan: What if you did tank tonight? What do you think would happen?
> Matt: Strangers wouldn't like me, friends wouldn't like me, the network wouldn't like me, the press wouldn't like me, women in general wouldn't like me, and Harriet wouldn't like me.
> Jordan: Is he in therapy?
> Danny: Nah, he's got me.[84]

While both Matt and Danny would probably benefit from therapy, in *Studio 60* it is used simply as part of the humour of the show[85] and plays on the tragi-comedic joke that all comedy writers are actually depressed. This contrasts the serious tone with which therapy is treated in the rest of Sorkin's television shows; it is more typically posited as a genuine tool for self-improvement and better mental health. The focus of this chapter has been how instances of trauma impact the lives of individual characters in Sorkin's works, however the traumas that are suffered by Simon, Natalie and Sloan are indicative of collective and relatable traumas that impact on large sections of society. In addressing these wider traumas, Sorkin begins to challenge the dominant white male ideology of American society. These traumas — racism, sexism, the dissolution of intimate trust and sexual harassment — are still pervasive problems that can only benefit from continued discussion and analysis in popular culture. In the following chapter, I will examine the way that Sorkin presents national trauma — specifically McCarthyism and 9/11 in his work. This builds on chapter five, as Sorkin frequently uses individual stories to stand in for national traumas.

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[84] 'The Option Period', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by John Fortenberry, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 9. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[85] The use of therapy as a source of humour is also shown in *Studio 60* with the recurring sketch in which Alex Dwyer (Simon Helberg) plays Nicholas Cage as a couples therapist.

Chapter Six — "This thing's gonna be over by dinner.":[1] National Trauma

National trauma can be recognised as occurring when "members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways."[2] In tandem with the numerous instances of individual traumas that are explored in Sorkin's work, he also addresses a variety of national traumas, tragedies and domestic crises. In particular *The Newsroom* dramatises a wide selection of real life events ranging from national crises to events that leave a lasting impact on the lives of many Americans — from the BP Oil Spill and the Boston Marathon bombing to the shooting of Trayvon Martin[3] — and how they are responded to by the media in the series' fictional 'News Night with Will McAvoy' programme. The national traumas that most frequently become touchstone references for revisited themes in Sorkin's work are McCarthyism and 9/11. The reason for this, particularly the continual presence of 9/11 is because, as Stephen Prince explains:

> terrorism has furnished a defining experience for our time, encompassing policy, politics, emotion, perception, insurgent strategy, aesthetics, and violence in ways that seem insurmountable. Like the Cold War during its heyday, there seems to be no way out of, beyond, or past the psychological and political spaces that terrorism has established for the modern period. In part, this is because terrorism has challenged the thinking of the leaders of the western democracies, who rightly fear the likelihood of new attacks and who find it difficult to defend against

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[1] 'K&R, Part 1', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[2] Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Towards a Theory of Cultural Trauma" in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. by Jeffery C. Alexander *et al.,* (California: University of California Press, 2004) pp.1-30 (p.1)

[3] For example this shooting, followed by George Zimmerman's acquittal for the crime, led to the Black Lives Matter movement causing a ripple across American culture and society. This was dramatised on *The Newsroom* in 2013, however, as of writing this there has been little done to improve race relations in the US. The murder of unarmed George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020 has since led to international protests.

> these without doing violence to parliamentary traditions and democratic institutions.[4]

I refer to McCarthyism as a national trauma, because while it affected a particular group of Americans, it also represented a failure on a national level to uphold the Constitutional rights all of American citizens, a failure that fuelled an all-encompassing state of paranoia that embedded itself deep within the consciousness of the nation. In this chapter I argue that the coupling of McCarthyism with 9/11, particularly prevalent in *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, draws attention to the reoccurring rhetoric of McCarthyism that resurfaced in the wake of the 9/11 attacks;[5] as with the McCarthy era (1940s and 1950s), 9/11 generated a national state of anxiety. While the trauma of McCarthyism came from within and trauma of 9/11 came from without, both sources unleashed an unimaginable amount of cultural devastation that rippled though society for years after. While 9/11 has received much attention in American popular culture, there is considerably less evidence in film and television that the McCarthy hearings and accompanying blacklist — which had a different kind of impact on America than 9/11, but nonetheless destroyed the lives of many Americans — ever existed at all. Sorkin's coupling of 9/11 and McCarthyism highlights the similarities that did exist between the two traumas and the danger that came from the silencing of, particularly left-wing, voices. Sorkin uses these traumas to measure the character of his protagonists, and through them he demonstrates the importance of standing up to political repression. I also argue that the overt spectre of 9/11 that haunts Sorkin's work is reflective of a wide rift in the space and time of popular culture which permanently altered the content and context of television and film — there is a palpable shift in popular culture before and after the attacks.

Kai Erikson outlines the difference between individual and collective trauma effectively, which informs my taxonomy of the terms applied to Sorkin's series. Erikson states that "by individual trauma I mean a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defences so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively…By collective trauma, on the other hand, I mean a blow to the basic tissues of social life that

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[4] Stephen Prince, *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) p.3

[5] Aside from it's treatment in *Studio 60*, McCarthyism is addressed in films such as *Good Night and Good Luck* and *Trumbo* (Roach, 2015)

damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community."[6] This description of collective trauma speaks to the effects of McCarthyism; the encouragement to name names, to turn on friends and family, generated a culture of fear that fractured the personal attachments and communality that Americans had with one another.[7] It is precisely because of the damage to the sense of community that McCarthyism was so traumatic beyond the immediate and obvious trauma caused to those who were blacklisted. The trauma of McCarthyism, and the Hollywood blacklist, has faded considerably from the public discourse in comparison with other national traumas as "only a rare artistic vindication…and an occasional treatment of the subject in film and television, reminds most observers that a blacklist once existed at all."[8] In 1947 the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began its sustained attack on Hollywood, and while Senator Joseph McCarthy had nothing to do with the first round of hearings, his name became synonymous with the political repression of the time as he came to lead the attack on any cultural artefact that seemed to be un-American. These attacks came as an attempt to weed out communism and manipulate the population into conformity through paranoia; they were not limited to the film industry as "the American intellectual of the 1930s identified him/herself with the communist movement, which, after all, is 'still the intellectual climate that was first established by the communist-liberal-New Deal moment of the 30s'"[9] One of the most harmful outcomes of McCarthy's attacks on political and social life was to mark the support for social reform as subversive and un-American. The move towards an overtly anti-communist public discourse sought to effectively criminalise the New Deal policies. While attitudes reminiscent of the McCarthy era saw a resurgence in the wake of 9/11 echoing the censorious movement to be patriotic, a new wave of discourse that mirrors McCarthyism has emerged since the election of Donald Trump. Personal attacks against other Americans by President Trump over Twitter recall the public smears made by McCarthy against those he charged — often absent of fact — of being communists. History, it seems, is repeating itself;

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[6] Kai Erikson, *Everything in Its Path*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976) pp.153-54

[7] The damage to the personal attachments lasted long after McCarthyism came to an end. Elia Kazan, for example, spent the rest of his life being vilified by members of the film industry because he cooperated with House Un-American Activities Committee.

[8] Paul Buhle, 'The Hollywood Left: Aesthetics and Politics' *New Left Review.* Issue 212 (1995) 101-119 (101)

[9] Mile Klindo, *The Hollywood Left and McCarthyism: The political and aesthetic legacy of the Red Scare*. (Germany: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2013) pp.10-11

the aim of McCarthyism was to criminalise the New Deal policies and this is reflected today by the attempts to undo any progress made by President Obama, particularly surrounding health care reform, and the social destruction and character assassination of anyone who opposes President Trump.

The blacklist "is generally understood as a form of political censorship designed to silence radical leftists and liberals, both of whom had hoped to use the cinema as a means of exploring social issues during the immediate postwar period."[10] For writer/director Hal Kanter, there was not a "more contemptible, more despicable irony than was the House Un-American Activities Committee. There was no interlude in American History that was more anti-American than the House Un-American Activities Committee."[11] The events of the hearings violated the rights of hundreds of American citizens as there was no due process for those called before the HUAC; witnesses could have a lawyer but these lawyers could not object, and they could not call witnesses of their own. The McCarthy witch hunts created a palpable climate of fear, and while the country did not quite mimic a fictional police state, the paranoia was profound and had, for most, a chilling effect to express alternative viewpoints. Chafe argues that "by the time he had finished his four-year tirade, McCarthy had succeeded in terrorising Washington and had pinned the Democrats with being responsible for 'twenty-years of treasons'."[12] One contribution to the downfall of McCarthy came from journalist Edward R. Murrow and his team at CBS News. Murrow and his team used "a compilation of footage from McCarthy's own statements, they allowed the TV audiences to see how the junior senator from Wisconsin recklessly assaulted people's integrity, destroyed careers, and used character assassination to seize control of the political process."[13] Murrow ended his broadcast emphasising the need to speak out against McCarthy's methods:

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[10] Jeff Smith, "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been a Christian: The Strange History of *The Robe* as Political Allegory" in '*Un-American' Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, ed. by Frank Krutnik *et al.,* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007) pp.19-38 (p.20)

[11] Michael Freeland, *Witch-Hunt In Hollywood: McCarthyism's War on Tinseltown*. (London: JR Books, 2009) p.4

[12] William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*. 7th Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.100

[13] Chafe, p.176-7

> This is no time for men who oppose Senator McCarthy's methods to keep silent, or for those who approve. We can deny our heritage and our history, but we cannot escape responsibility for the result. There is no way for a citizen of a republic to abdicate his responsibilities. As a nation we have come into our full inheritance at a tender age. We proclaim ourselves, as indeed we are, the defenders of freedom, wherever it continues to exist in the world, but we cannot defend freedom abroad by deserting it at home. The actions of the junior Senator from Wisconsin have caused alarm and dismay amongst our allies abroad, and given considerable comfort to our enemies. And whose fault is that? Not really his. He didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it -- and rather successfully. Cassius was right. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves." Good night, and good luck.[14]

This seismic moment would come to be regarded as one of the high points of American journalism and McCarthy's rebuttal, nothing more than an attempt to discredit the journalists at CBS News, only proved Murrow's point. Murrow's condemnation of McCarthy is the basis for George Clooney's *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005),[15] and while the film is accurately set in the 1950s it is reflective of the culture of political repression in the post-9/11 period.[16] Clooney, who directed, starred in, and co-wrote the film told audiences at the New York Film Festival premiere that he "thought it was a good time to raise the idea of using fear to stifle political debate."[17] Accusations of un-Americanism began to resurface in the wake of 9/11, frequently aimed at liberals and those who challenged the national narrative of America as an innocent victim. Krutnik et al argue that the notion of un-Americanism, "so vital to the HUAC crusade, was resoundingly revived in the emotional

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[14] David Shedden, "Today in Media History: Edward R. Murrow investigated Joe McCarthy on 'See It Now'" *Poynter,* 9th March, 2015 <https://www.poynter.org/newsletters/2015/today-in-media-history-edward-r-murrow-examined-joe-mccarthys-methods-on-see-it-now/> [Accessed on: 26th September 2019]

[15] *Good Night and Good Luck,* dir. George Clooney, (Warner Independent Pictures, 2005) Clooney's film is significant due to the thematic overlap between it and Sorkin's work.

[16] The US Patriot Act came into effect in October 2001. This increased the surveillance capabilities of law enforcement agencies and allowed for US citizens to be denied legal representation. Cultural figures were also discouraged from offering dissenting voices due to the social ramifications that they witnessed.

[17] Brian Brooks, "Clooney Speaks Out About Journalism and Filmmaking As NYFF Opens" *IndieWire*. 22nd Sept 2005. <https://www.indiewire.com/2005/09/clooney-speaks-out-about-journalism-and-filmmaking-as-nyff-opens-77919/> [Accessed on: 12th February 2019]

rhetoric that followed al-Qaeda's September 2001 attacks on the United States."[18] The Bush administration quickly gained support from Congress and the media for their post-9/11 policies and these political victories were "achieved through the amassing of social capital derived from the creation of persuasive narratives…these discourses were also coercive and silencing of potential opponents helped to drown out the possibility of even imagining alternatives."[19] The Bush administration was able to pass the Patriot Act (October 2001) that served their interests because the media were reluctant to criticise them for fear of being deemed un-patriotic or anti-American. This is effectively dramatised in *Shock and Awe* (Reiner, 2017) in which journalists at American media company Knight Ridder challenge the motives of the Bush Administration's invasion of Iraq and were later regarded as "the only ones who got it right"[20] While the *Shock and Awe* received average reviews and a poor box office performance, its timely reminder of journalists using their platform to challenge the government's motives is nonetheless an important one to tell.

McCarthyism and 9/11 are the primary national traumas that haunt Sorkin's narratives, and the connection between these two traumas is best exemplified in *Studio 60*. Network Chairman Jack Rudolph (Steven Weber) feels guilty over the role that he played in Matt (Matthew Perry) and Danny's (Bradley Whitford) departure from the show five years previous:

> Simon: The reason you've been sitting here for four hours is because you feel guilty about Matt and Danny.
> Jack: Man, that was five years ago.
> Simon: You remember the story pretty well.
> Jack: I wasn't the bad guy. I gave them every chance, I gave them every freaking chance. You know what, not everything is McCarthyism. You go back and you ask those guys that ran the networks and the studios back then. You go— You ask— You go back and you ask— You can't—

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[18] Frank Krutnik *et al.*, "Introduction" in '*Un-American' Hollywood: Politics and Film in the Blacklist Era*, ed. by Frank Krutnik *et al.,* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007) pp.3-18 (p.17)

[19] Jack Holland, *Fictional Television and American Politics: From 9/11 to Donald Trump* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019) p.78

[20] Deborah Young, ''Shock and Awe': Film Review' *The Hollywood Reporter*, 18th December 2017 <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/shock-awe-review-1068805> [Accessed on: 14th October 2019]

> Simon: Jack?
> Jack: You can't ask those guys. We don't know who they were. We know McCarthy and Cohn. We know the guys who wrote the list. We just don't know the guys who gave a damn.[21]

Jack is aware that his actions in 2001 were motivated by fear and he opens up the comparison to McCarthyism; he is visibly distressed as he realises the similarity between himself and the network and studio executives that failed to stand by the creators under their employ. For Michael Freeland, "the triumph of the climate of fear engendered by HUAC had a great deal to do with simple cowardice. If the studio heads had gathered together to say they wanted nothing to do with the committee"[22] the assault on Hollywood would have failed. Jack believes that these unknown network and studio executives cared but, like him, succumbed to their own fear. Holland argues that 9/11 "meant that Hollywood was more prepared to listen and help than would ordinarily be the case."[23] Jack insists that he was not 'the bad guy' and the climate of fear that was generated by McCarthy and 9/11 alike made Hollywood more pliable to Washington.

The effects of the blacklist are also addressed in 'The Wrap Party' when Eli Weinraub (Eli Wallach), an elderly war hero and former writer, breaks into the studio to steal an old cast photograph. He tells Cal (Timothy Busfield) that his name is Bessie Biberman, then Scott Trumbo, then Cole Lardner. Danny points out that these aren't three names, but six of the Hollywood Ten.[24] The narrative rewards, through the satisfaction of being in the know, those with enough historical knowledge to recognise the names that Eli gives to Cal before their identities and significance is pointed out by Danny. Eli reveals that he was a writer at the studio but only managed to get one sketch onto the air before he was blacklisted:

> Eli: I only had one sketch on the air before…

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[21] 'What Kind of Day Has It Been', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Bradley Whitford, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[22] Freeland. p.30

[23] Holland, p.41

[24] The ten individuals who refused to answer questions about their supposed involvement in the communist party and were thus cited for contempt of Congress were: screenwriter Alvah Bessie; screenwriter Ring Lardner Jr; screenwriter Lester Cole; screenwriter John Howard Lawson; screenwriter Samuel Ornitz; screenwriter Albert Maltz; screenwriter Dalton Trumbo; producer and screenwriter Adrian Scott; screenwriter and director Herbert Biberman; and director Edward Dymtryk. Samuel Ornitz never worked in the film industry again, and the others worked in the industry only minimally, and rarely under their real names.

> Cal: Before what?
> Eli: Clifford Odets. I met him once but no one believes me now. I was at a dinner at Musso & Frank's. The night before he was going to Washington to testify. And he slammed his fist down on the table and he said 'By God, I'll show them the face of a radical." The next day he named names. That's what killed him, you know? He died from that.[25]

The era of the blacklist "was a time that was deadly both in its intent and its results. There were suicides, while others died early deaths from heart attacks and strokes. These were caused not just by the anxiety of knowing - or, even worse, *not* knowing - that their name was on some list or other but from the struggles…to make a living."[26] The tragedy of McCarthyism is not exclusive to Sorkin's work; *Good Night and Good Luck* features the suicide of news anchor Don Hollenbeck (Ray Wise) after repeated public harassment over communist connections. In the film, the journalists are celebrating the Senate's investigation of McCarthy when Fred Friendly (George Clooney) receives a call with the news of Hollenbeck's death. The actions of HUAC successfully ruined, and at times ended, the lives of many of those who were best placed to speak out against their methods — most notably those working in Hollywood and journalism.

The Hollywood blacklist overwhelmingly affected writers, evidenced by the fact that eight of the Hollywood Ten — and 58% of those film industry professionals called before the HUAC — were screenwriters.[27] It is fitting then that McCarthyism haunts *Studio 60* so prominently as Matt, and his writing, is a primary focus of the narrative, and Sorkin himself is first and foremost a writer. The autobiographical nature of *Studio 60* is addressed by Adam Sternbergh in his article for *New York Magazine*, wherein he notes that "there is one case of a high-profile writer and director being publicly exiled from their own successful show: Sorkin and Thomas Schlamme, on *The West Wing*, in 2003. The parallels are hard to ignore."[28] He argues that rather than being about a *Saturday Night Live* style sketch comedy

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[25] 'The Wrap Party', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by David Semel, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 6. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[26] Freeland. p.6

[27] Krutnik *et al.* p.4

[28] Adam Sternbergh, "The Aaron Sorkin Show*" New York Magazine*, 8th September 2006 <https://nymag.com/arts/tv/features/20321/> [Accessed on: 22nd February 2020]

show, *Studio 60* is about Sorkin's own career. As *Studio 60* is so autobiographical, the ever-present spectre of McCarthyism and the Hollywood blacklist demonstrates that this dark time still haunts the industry as one that must never be repeated. Several parallels are drawn between Matt and Eli: both are writers, Eli was blacklisted and Matt was forced off of the show in 2001 due to the 'anti-American' content of one of his sketches in the wake of 9/11, and both of their original successes came from trying to impress a girl. While talking through the importance of the taken photograph, Eli tells Matt, Danny and Cal that "this is Rosemary McCann. I don't know what happened to her. I know I remember I had a crush on her…You know, sometimes I think the only reason I got a sketch on the air was because I was trying to write well enough so that she would notice me."[29] As Eli tells them this the camera focuses on Harriet (Sarah Paulson) standing behind them in the doorway to the writers' room, the camera then pans across to Matt as he realises these similarities in their stories.

The Newsroom also makes references to McCarthyism when, in a very Murrow-esque fashion, Will (Jeff Daniels) begins his political disparagement of the Tea Party. Due to the Tea Party's presence in Congress, Chair and President of AWM Leona (Jane Fonda) and Reese Lansing (Chris Messina) find themselves shut out of decisions that will affect the wider fate of their company, and she subsequently orders Charlie (Sam Waterston) to make Will stop using the show for his political attack. Charlie points out that Leona would not have have ordered Murrow to back off from his attack on McCarthy but the hypocrisy does not immediately register:

> Charlie: If Joe McCarthy sat on the House Subcommittee for Communications and Technology would you have told Murrow to lay off?
> Leona: No.
> Charlie: Why?
> Leona: Because he was a genuinely bad guy.
> Charlie: Michele Bachmann's called for Congress to be investigated to ferret out House members who are un-American.
> Leona: Michele Bachmann is a hairdo. I'm not worried about Michele Bachmann.

[29] 'The Wrap Party'

> Charlie: I wonder how many people weren't worried about McCarthy.[30]

Michele Bachmann's call for the hunt for un-American activities[31] demonstrates how this language, and these attitudes are still pervasive in American life. However, the highlighting of this language firmly positions the News Night staff on the side of good and courageous journalists and the frequent dialogue references to Murrow are coupled with Will often smoking behind his news desk during commercial breaks. This creates a visual homage to Murrow, firmly anchoring Will to one of history's most revered journalists. McNair argues that Murrow's "authority and 'haughtiness' was crucial to puncturing the McCarthy bubble and ending an unfortunate period in American political history."[32] It is this style of journalism, from this era of industry triumph, that Sorkin seeks to emulate in his characterisation of Will McAvoy.

In *The West Wing* Toby (Richard Schiff) compares Bartlet (Martin Sheen) to McCarthy when he wants to attack Hollywood over the content of its movies:

> Toby: If I were an actor, a writer, or a director, or a producer in Hollywood and someone would start coming at me with a list of things that were American and un-American, I'd start to think that this was sounding eerily familiar.
> Bartlet: Do I look like Joe McCarthy to you, Toby?
> Toby: No sir. Nobody looks ever looks like Joe McCarthy. That's how they get in the door in the first place.[33]

Bartlet's motivation is that no one has ever lost an election by attacking Hollywood, and the comparison to McCarthy positions Bartlet firmly in the wrong. The demonstration that Bartlet is capable of errors in judgement humanises him, and, opening up the heroic Bartlet to comparisons to McCarthy also reinforces the dangers of these politics. Even those with the best of intentions can be swayed toward the degradation of free speech and civil liberties

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[30] 'The 112th Congress', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin and Gideon Yago, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[31] 'Interview with Rep. Michele Bachmann' *Hardball with Chris Matthews*. MSNBC. October 17th 2008.

[32] Brian McNair, *Journalists in Film*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010) p.70

[33] 'The Crackpots and These Women', *The West Wing,* dir. by Anthony Drazan, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, NBC, 1999

in a quest for a safer America — as evidenced by the implementation of the Patriot Act in the weeks that followed 9/11. The extensive and warrantless surveillance of American citizens by the FBI and CIA were unconstitutional and violated many of these respective departments own regulations and "FBI director Robert Mueller admitted that the Bureau had abused the authority given it under the USA Patriot Act."[34]

While the Munich Olympic attack in 1972 was the first example of terrorism on show for the American public in the late 20th century, Antonio Sánchez Escalonilla notes that 9/11 reintroduced the connection between visual spectacle and terrorism.[35] He notes that "for American and European citizens, who were only accustomed to perceiving catastrophe through the media or as a viewer of entertainment, the intrusion of terror into their everyday world broke the barriers between fiction and real life to introduce *phobos* as a fruit of tangible threat."[36] Kellner discusses previous instances of terrorism in the US but argues that 9/11 was the most extreme attack in US history. He notes that "on the day of the strikes on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the networks brought out an array of national security intellectuals, usually ranging from the right to the far right"[37] and that "broadcast television allowed dangerous and extremist zealots to vent and circulate the most aggressive, fanatic, and sometimes lunatic views, creating a consensus around the need for immediate military action and all-out war."[38] The most frequently depicted national trauma in Sorkin's work is 9/11, or more accurately, the aftermath of 9/11.[39] After the attacks, numerous shows adjusted

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[34] Prince, p.83

[35] This, however, does not take into account the Oklahoma City bombing (1995) or the Centennial Olympic Park Bombing (1996) — possibly due to the scale of the spectacle being smaller than Munich and 9/11. After 9/11 this media spectacle of terrorism, albeit to a lesser degree, was repeated with Madrid (11th March 2004) and London (7th July 2005).

[36] Antonio Sánchez Escalonilla, 'Hollywood and the Rhetoric of Panic: The Popular Genres of Action and Fantasy in the Wake of the 9/11 Attacks' *Journal of Popular Film & Television.* 38:1 (2010) 10-20 (11)

[37] Douglas Kellner, '9/11, spectacles of terror, and media manipulation' *Critical Discourse Studies.* 1:1 (2004) 41-64 (45)

[38] Kellner, p.49

[39] Episodes of Sorkin's television series that directly reference 9/11 include:
From *Studio 60*: 'The Focus Group'; 'The Wrap Party'; 'Nevada Day Part 2'; 'K&R Part 2'; 'K&R Part 3'; 'What Kind of Day Has it Been'. From *The Newsroom*: 'The 112th Congress'; '5/1'; 'First Thing We Do, Let's Kill The Lawyers'; 'The Genoa Tip'; 'Willie Pete'; 'The Red Team III'. While *The West Wing*'s 'Isaac and Ishmael' episode does not mention the attacks by name, the introduction by the cast at the start of the episode references them.

plans for their new seasons, or cut scenes from episodes already filmed or in syndication. This extra sensitivity following a tragedy is not out of the norm, however it is particularly troubling "because television plays such a significant role in narrating history more generally, such changes are significant beyond their implications for television historiography and the pleasures of fandom. They affect the construction and maintenance of popular memory, which, even when unintentional, can have political significance."[40] Jeffrey Melnick investigates the way that 9/11 has made itself felt in American culture, rather than an investigation into the ways that individual institutions responded to 9/11. He argues that "post-9/11 indexes a profound rupture in time and space. It is clear that the events of 9/11 shape not only our understanding of nearly everything in the political and cultural lives of Americans since that date, but that those events also shape our understanding of much of what came before."[41] Melnick coined the term '9/11 shout-out' to refer to brief references to 9/11 that have become common in popular culture. The effect of these shout-outs in everything from crime dramas such as *Law & Order* (1990-2010) to sitcoms such as *Becker* (1998-2004) and *One Day at a Time* (2017-present) appropriates this history and keeps it alive for discussion, evaluation, and — in the case of science fiction dramas such as *Fringe* (2008-2013) — revision.[42]

The media coverage of 9/11 focused on the victims and survivors and actively avoided historic and sociopolitical analysis. This allowed viewers of this media to think of themselves as innocent victims, and "by defining national subjects as trauma victims, rather than political beings, the media exacerbated the perception of vulnerability and made aggressive security measures appear necessary and inevitable."[43] Representations of 9/11 in

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[40] Philip Scepanski, 'Retroactive Edits: 9/11, Television's Popular Archive and Shifting Popular Memory' *Television & New Media.* 20:3 (2019) 294-310 (298)

[41] Jeffrey Melnick, *9/11 Culture: America Under Construction*. (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) p.18

[42] Hollywood was reluctant to address 9/11 or even acknowledged that the twin towers had even existed. They were digitally removed from numerous movies such as *Serendipity* (Chelsom, 2001), *Zoolander* (Stiller, 2001), and *Stuart Little 2* (Minkoff, 2002), and the *Spider-Man* (Raimi, 2002) trailer was pulled from circulation. In fact, until Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006), Hollywood held off depicting the event. More recently, films such as *The Walk* (Zemeckis, 2015) and *X-Men: Apocalypse* (Singer, 2016) digitally recreated the World Trade Center.

[43] Stacy Takacs, 'Entertaining Uncertainty: The Role of the 9/11 Shout-Out on U.S. TV' *Quarterly Review of Film and Video.* 31:2 (2014) 161-179 (163)

television dramas have been limited,[44] especially in the few years immediately following the attacks, and while *The Newsroom* and *Studio 60* deal directly with the aftermath, Sorkin takes a wholly different approach for *The West Wing*. As with the rest of the 2001/2002 television season, the season three premiere of *The West Wing* was pushed back due to the attacks; instead of its originally planned opening episode, the season was pre-empted by a disconnected play titled 'Isaac and Ishmael'.[45] Written and produced in a week, the episode addresses 9/11 without ever mentioning the event. Gregory Frame notes that "'Isaac and Ishmael' can be distinguished from many other immediate responses to the attacks in popular culture, as it sought to comprehend 9/11 in a period in which even the most astute critics refused to place the events in a political and social context from which they might be understood."[46] The primary narrative of the episode has Josh (Bradley Whitford) responsible for a group of high school students when the White House goes into lockdown. He, and in turn other characters in the show, proceed to try and explain terrorism and the attacks. One student (Jeanette Brox) wants to know why the United States is being targeted, "why is everyone trying to kill us?" She asks — and the question leans into the 'Us' verses 'Them' rhetoric that surrounded the attacks. Josh writes out a 'fill in the blank' question that equates the terrorist's relation to Islam to the KKK's relation to Christianity, and identifies the roles that Muslim Americans play within society: "Muslims defend this country in the army, navy, air force, marine corps, national guard, police and fire departments." This explicit direction towards the heroic and in some cases patriotic roles held by many Muslims in America questions the anti-Muslim sentiment that was present in the national narrative in the immediate aftermath. Josh's initial lecture leads to a series of rolling lectures from other characters as a means to educate the students — who stand in for the viewers — and the episode "was clearly an earnest attempt…to use television as a form of political and

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[44] While the series *Rescue Me* (2004-2011) provided a more sustained engagement with the attacks and *Third Watch* (1999-2005) — which like *The West Wing* was due to return to air in the weeks following — altered the direction of their new season, many shows employed a variation on the 'shout-out' with a flashback episode showing what the characters were doing on September 11th 2001: *Brothers & Sisters* (2006-2011), *CSI: NY* (2004-2013), and *One Day at a Time* (2017-present)

[45] 'Isaac and Ishmael', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 00. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

[46] Gregory Frame, *The American President in Film and Television: Myth, Politics and Representation*. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014) p.123

historical pedagogy."[47] The knowledge and behaviours that these characters exhibit do not necessarily cohere with their previous characterisation in the show's diegesis, but this is irrelevant given the disconnected nature of this play. Despite this, 'Isaac and Ishmael' has been widely criticised. For Bigsby, the episode functions only as a homily and was largely dismissed as drama, the characters "lose their individual voices in the single voice which is the liberal teacher trying simultaneously to acknowledge the nature of a risk and disavow its substance."[48] For Spigel, "The West Wing's fictional schoolroom performs this kind of social-scientific orientalism in the name of liberal enunciation that places viewers in the position of high school students - and particularly naive ones at that."[49] Spigel goes on to argue that the students become "a form of 'infantile citizenship' that allows adult viewers to comfortably confront the horrors and guilt of war by donning the cloak of childhood innocence (epitomized, of course, by the wide-eyed figure of President Bush himself, who, in his first televised speech to congress after the attacks, asked 'why do they hate us?)"[50] This is all indicative of the widely negative response that 'Isaac and Ishmael' received, however I feel that the episode succeeded in its attempts to produce a liberal response during a time of national mourning and reactionary public commentary about retaliation. 'Isaac and Ishmael' as an entity is somewhat explained in *Studio 60*. Flashbacks over the final four episodes of the series, show how the staff responded to 9/11 and the events of Matt and Danny's exit from the show. Matt and Danny are reluctant to have the show return in October 2001 for fear of being offensive as they are unable to gauge what the nation will find funny:

> Matt: The show's not going to be good this week, it can't be.
> Jack: It doesn't have to be good, it just has to be on.[51]

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[47] Lynn Spigel, 'Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11' *American Quarterly.* 56:2 (2004) 235-270 (242)

[48] Christopher Bigsby, *Viewing America: Twenty-First-Century Television Drama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p.56

[49] Spigel, p.245

[50] Ibid

[51] 'K&R, Part 1'

This exchange between Matt and Jack, and the acknowledgement that anything they put on the air that first week won't be reflective of the show's usual standard, I argue, is a performative commentary of the rapid production of 'Isaac and Ishmael' and the criticism that the episode received. Following the criticism of the episode, Sorkin conceded that it was not up to the standard of a regularly scheduled episode, but that it did not matter. Sorkin stated that "some sort of respect had to be paid to the event that just happened. We couldn't just do a regular 'West Wing'. I don't think that it was a good episode of 'The West Wing'. I don't think it was an episode of 'The West Wing'. I don't even know if it was good television. It was well intended, it was never meant to teach anything, to be preachy…"[52]

Aside from showing the events leading up to Matt and Danny's departure, the flashbacks in these final four episodes of *Studio 60* explore the challenges faced by television networks with regard to what they should air in the weeks following the attacks. One of those challenges was the suspicion that suddenly surrounded comedy. Much of the comedy that was popular at the time "relied on a mix of sarcasm, irony, and mean spiritedness to entertain audiences, and these were among the most heavily citicized characteristics of comedies that were expected to die a cultural death."[53] The networks, "worried about the apparent tastelessness of movies, sitcoms, serials, and advertising on these somber days…[and subsequently] pulled entertainment series and commercials from the airwaves."[54] Jack's insistence that they not postpone the show any longer is financially motivated. Networks had to balance the necessity for sensitivity with the need to generate revenue as they were "already besieged by declining ad revenues before the attacks, [and] the television industry lost and estimated $320 million…in the week following the attacks."[55] 'Isaac and Ishmael' sought to educate the audience about the context of 9/11 when even most political commentators avoided contextualisation; however this episode is also an example of typical business strategies in the television industry by using standalone episodes that deviate from the regular structure of the show in order to draw in more viewers. The

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[52] Jack Holland, "'When You Think of the Taliban, Think of the Nazis' Teaching American's '9/11' in NBC's *The West Wing*". *Millennium Journal of International Studies*, 40:1 (2011) p.85-106 (104)

[53] Scepanski, p.300

[54] Lynn Spigel and Max Dawson, "Television and Digital Media" in *American Thought and Culture in the 21st Century*, ed. Martin Halliwell and Catherine Morley, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) pp.275-289 (p.277)

[55] Spigel, p.237

CEO of the Motion Picture Association of America, Jack Valenti, called for Hollywood and the TV industry to go back to their creative work, and stressed the importance of unity in the entertainment industry. Spigel argued that in doing so "Valenti's message was part of a much older myth of show business - a myth that ran through countless Depression-era World War II musicals -- a myth of transcendence in which showbiz folks put aside their petty differences and join together in patriotic song."[56] *Studio 60* engages frequently with, and in, this veneer of 'the show must go on', however, in the wake of 9/11, Matt and Danny question this idea: maybe this time, for now, the show shouldn't go on — reflecting that ever common refrain when popular culture speaks to a traumatic event of 'it's too soon.' Despite the concerns of network executives — both real and fictional — "comedy did not just survive, it seemed to grow more cutting and satirical"[57] and "took aim at many of the politicians who were beyond criticism in the fall of 2001, particularly George W. Bush."[58]

The West Wing had some difficulty adjusting after 9/11[59] because "cataclysmic world events seemed more compelling than anything *The West Wing* could ever imagine post-9/11. A discernible shift from representing internal Washington politics to stories involving terrorism and foreign tensions could soon be detected."[60] The series had to create an international terrorism plot in order to make a credible claim to mimesis and the move towards this foreign terrorism is unsurprising given the events of 9/11 as they demonstrate "the importance of presidential heroism in times of national emergency or crisis."[61] Frame argues that "because 9/11 did not happen within the fictional world of the programme, *The West Wing* is able to sidestep the tendency within popular culture to constantly relive it, and thus afforded critical space to allude to its implications in various ways."[62]

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[56] Spigel, p.238

[57] Scepanski, p.300

[58] Ibid

[59] Despite this difficulty, *The West Wing* still retained its sense of idealism. There was the depiction of more international threats, where before the threats were predominantly domestic. However, the characters still retained their belief in equality, education, and social reform.

[60] Janet McCabe, *The West Wing: TV Milestones Series*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013) p.4

[61] Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry Giles, *The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U.S. Nationalism*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006) p.45

[62] Frame, p.133

Unlike *The West Wing*, *Studio 60* overtly engages with the implications of 9/11 and because of this it is relived repeatedly, haunting the text and engaging with the difficulty faced by a primetime comedy sketch show in a world that has suddenly, and irreversibly, changed.[63] *Studio 60*, and popular culture in general that directly engages with 9/11, contains traces of the uncanny "as nothing seems to be what it was and everything is what it wasn't just minutes before it happened."[64] We are introduced to *Studio 60* five years after the events of 9/11, but Jack is still cautious about references to the attacks, the war, and criticisms of Bush for fear of alienating viewers. Through the flashbacks, Sorkin addresses the initial anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. As I noted earlier, the final four episodes of the series flash back to the weeks following 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan, and these flashbacks dramatise that "in the wake of 9/11 the public's fear was turned necessarily to the exterior and showed the risks of xenophobia and entrenchment in certain sectors of the North American population."[65] Luke Scott (Josh Stamberg) who was still working as a writer on the show in 2001 suggests that they devote their entire fall premiere show to mocking Arabs:

> Matt: How do we do a show Friday night? What are we supposed to joke about?
> Luke: Them!
> Matt: Who?
> Luke: The bad guys! Screw PC, we do a whole show mercilessly skewering Arabs! You wanna talk about psychically satisfying?
> Matt: Okay.
> Luke: You like it?
> Matt: No!
> Luke: Why not?
> Matt: Well for one thing, Arabs aren't from Afghanistan, Afghans are."[66]

If Luke and the writers leaned politically left before the attack, these beliefs have since become irrelevant. In the wake of 9/11, Matt's politics have become out of place in the

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[63] *Saturday Night Live* returned to America's screens on September 29th 2001, just over two weeks after the attacks. The cold open featured Mayor Rudy Giuliani and members of the New York City Fire Department offering words of encouragement. Creator and Executive Producer Lorne Michaels joined them on stage and asked "can we be funny?" To which Giuliani responded "why start now?"

[64] Spigel, p.255

[65] Sánchez Escalonilla, p.14

[66] 'K&R, Part 1'

writers' room — his fellow writers are united with the nation in a collective sense of blind patriotism that verges on un-thinking nationalism. Jack warns Matt and Danny that they are not allowed to mock Bush or America, rather they can only make fun of Hollywood, because according to him, Hollywood isn't in the notion of 'America' of which he speaks. In November 2001, senior advisor to Bush, Karl Rove, met with the Head of the Motion Picture Association to discuss how the war on terror could be portrayed positively, and what support Hollywood would give the White House. Westwell argues that "Karl Rove's attempt to gain the ideological advantage to having the world's most powerful entertainment industry work with the grain of a neoconservative policy agenda was an attempt to actively broker hegemony"[67] and 9/11 made Hollywood more prepared to help with national morale than they normally would. In response, Matt suggests mocking this, as he believes that it circumvents Jack's rule of not mocking America:

> Danny: What are you saying?
> Matt: That it's funny!
> Danny: What is?
> Matt: Karl Rove! In a conference room with studio and network heads trying to beat the terrorists with movie pitches!
> Danny: You're talking about a sketch?
> Matt: That's all I'm talking about!
> Danny: This is what Jack told us not to do.
> Matt: No, no, he said it was okay to make fun of Hollywood, in fact he encouraged it. Look, we went over to his office and said we shouldn't be on the air yet. He says no. If we go on the air with sketches that ignore the world then we're irrelevant.[68]

Matt writes a sketch that mocks this story, however they are ordered by Jerry from Standards and Practices to cut it as it supposedly mocks patriotism — Matt is quick to clarify that "it's not mocking patriotism, it's mocking patriotism being good for business." While they refuse to cut this sketch, they do inform Standards and Practices that they are willingly cutting Luke's sketch that mocks Muslims:

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[67] Guy Westwell, *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema*, (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2014) p.15

[68] 'K&R, Part 2', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Dave Chameides, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 20. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

> Jerry: You're cutting the Muslim sketch?
> Matt: Yes we are, but I can't help but notice that that's not at the request of the network.
> Jerry: That one resonates.
> Matt: It resonates?
> Jerry: It pokes fun at the Taliban's brutal oppression of women and lets the country know why we're fighting.
> Matt: No, it's Luke Scott dumping every Muslim in the world together![69]

Standards and Practices want them to keep in Luke's sketch as they feel that it will resonate with the current mindset of the American people, regardless of how offensive it might be. Jerry suggests that they rewrite Luke's sketch slightly so that they could make it clear that they don't have a problem with Muslims, just the radical fundamentalists, and Matt dryly points out that "we have our own radical fundamentalists right here that I can write sketches about."[70] Danny makes the compromise that if the representatives from their advertisers have a problem with Matt's sketch then they will cut it. The dialogue here between Matt, Danny, and Jerry serves to further amplify the distance between Matt and Danny, with their leftist ideology, and an American polity that has suddenly veered to the Right. Writing about *The West Wing*, Bigsby notes that "when the attacks on the Twin Towers occurred in 2001, liberal politics seemed at odds with a nation whose priorities had changed. Suddenly the Right gained credence, patriotism silencing dissenting voices."[71] Although Bigsby is writing about *The West Wing*, this is what is happening to Matt, when he discovers that his liberal views are no longer welcome in this Rightward leaning America. After they air the sketch, Matt and the show are discussed on a Right-wing talk radio show, in which the host — humorously voiced by Martin Sheen[72] — accused Matt of being a "friend of Osama" and recorded a 'treason jingle.' The radio host calls for a boycott of the stores and companies that advertise on Studio 60 and Jack is also worried that people will be told that watching NBS is unpatriotic. Matt asks Jack in earnest "is true patriotism really that fragile that it can be

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[69] Ibid

[70] Ibid

[71] Bigsby, p.53-4

[72] The casting of Martin Sheen for this brief vocal cameo is interesting both because of his portrayal of the liberal President Bartlet, and Sheen's own overtly left-wing leanings.

threatened by a late-night comedy show?" To which Jack responds "excellent point, one that's worthy of an exceptionally enlightened seventh grade social studies class. You're gonna apologise or you're fired."[73] Jack does not disagree with Matt. However for Jack, the question is irrelevant as he has a business to consider. Spigel argues that "given the political divisions that have resurfaced in 2001, it seems likely that the grand narratives of national unity that sprang up after 9/11 were for many people more performative than sincere. In other words, it is likely that many viewers really did know that all the new found patriotism was really just a public performance staged by cameras."[74] Harriet goes on to pose a hypothetical circumstance to Matt — would he have a problem with the call for patriotic movies if it had been coming from President Gore:

> Harriet: If Al Gore had won the election—
> Matt: Al Gore did win the election, but go on.
> Harriet: If Al Gore had won the election, if President Gore had sent his top emissary out here, say he sent Bill Clinton out here to talk to leaders in Hollywood about how the entertainment industry could help right now, would you have had an objection?
> Matt: No.
> Harriet: And what's your smug rejoinder?
> Matt: I don't have one. I'm saying no, you're right, I wouldn't. I would flock to that meeting and so would almost everyone else I know, you wouldn't have been able to get a seat.[75]

Matt admits that he would not have had a problem with this, and this further highlights the deep divisions between Matt — and those still vocalising liberal ideas — and the rest of the country. While Matt admits to his hypocrisy, the narrative does not condemn him for this line of thinking.

The 9/11 flashbacks are prompted by the captivity of Tom's (Nathan Corddry) brother in Afghanistan and Simon (D.L. Hughley) gets into an argument with the press while trying to defend Tom, declaring that "no wonder these guys want to kill us. I live here and I

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[73] 'K&R, Part 3', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[74] Spigel, p.255

[75] 'What Kind of Day Has it Been' *Studio 60.*

want to kill us!"[76] When Tom is asked if Simon will apologise for this remark, he says that he won't because "this is all just a little bit of history repeating", referring to Jack's demand five years ago that Matt apologise for the sketch that led to him being fired. It is with this that the echoes of McCarthyism are reintroduced. Both Matt's sketch and Simon's comment are deemed un-American by a country that, five years after the attacks, is still politically leaning to the right.[77] As well as his realisation that his actions in 2001 were reminiscent of the fear that the network executives of the late 1940s and early 1950s demonstrated in face of the HUAC, Jack's decision not to make Simon apologise shows that he is no longer at the mercy of the Right or the entertainment news media who are willing to hype up controversy for the sake of a story.

The narrative of *The Newsroom* begins in 2010 and thus, the events of 9/11 do not haunt the story to the extent that can be seen with *Studio 60*. However, the shadow of 9/11 still hangs over the narrative of *The Newsroom* to a general extent and 9/11 shout-outs are still present; Will's first broadcast as an anchor was the morning of 9/11, and he is pulled off the ten year anniversary coverage due to his consistent attacks on the Tea Party for their reactionary policies and tactics. The series' most sustained reference to 9/11 is the season one episode '5/1',[78] the night that it was announced that US forces had killed bin Laden. The episode is divided into two stories; the majority of the staff in Manhattan working on a broadcast for the vague message "POTUS to address the nation at 10:30EST on matter of national security"; and Don (Thomas Sadoski), Sloan (Olivia Munn), and Eliot (David Harbour) stuck on the runway at La Guardia waiting for a gate to open up to disembark the flight. Don becomes frustrated and loses his temper at the staff. However, he stops when he notices the United Airlines pin on the uniform of the pilot. This B plot sees Don, Eliot, and

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[76] 'K&R, Part 3'

[77] By this time the Bush administration began to lose some of its popularity. This was evidenced both by the increased level of war protests and by the outrage to their response to Hurricane Katrina. Kellner argues in *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* that "the credibility of the Bush-Cheney-Rove era eroded as the costly failure in Iraq became evident, the administration showed utter incompetence in the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe, and diverse conflict emerged over Iraq, civil rights, energy policy, the environment, the economy, and a wealth of other issues" (p.1). The Bush administration's failure to act quickly to aid the Hurricane victims drew considerable criticism. Bush seemed indifferent as bodies were shown floating down the streets on international news programming and New Orleans, which was occupied predominantly by African Americans, was left to rot.

[78] '5/1', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Joshua Marston, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 7. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

Sloan trying to find a way to get removed from the plane — as it is taking them too long to get a gate — in order to go to work (not considering that they will likely be arrested, and thus unable to do their jobs anyway). Don snaps and begins ranting at the flight attendant. The flight attendant fetches the pilot and Don recognises the United Airlines insignia and that his behaviour is inappropriate; the camera lingers over the pilot's badge, demonstrating Don's moment of clarity. Don turns to Eliot and Sloan and tells them that "we reported the news." Not only are these journalists ultimately able to do their jobs despite being stuck on the plane, Don's realisation of what this moment means to the these flight staff demonstrates the lasting affect of that day. At the ACN offices, Neal (Dev Patel) brings his girlfriend Kaylee (Natalie Morales) — whose father was killed in the first tower — with him to witness them working on the story. The gravity of the situation however becomes more than she can handle:

> Kaylee: I just didn't want to be the skunk at the garden party.
> Jim: Why would you—
> Neal: You're not.
> Kaylee: I was an idiot, I thought it would make me feel better when it happened. Like an on-off switch.
> Neal: Of course it doesn't.
> Jim: You knew someone in one of the towers.
> Neal: Her father was a partner at Canto Fitzgerald.
> Jim: We've been celebrating around you all night.
> Kaylee: You should. Everybody should.

The inclusion of Kaylee's reaction to the killing of bin Laden presents the idea that trauma is an ongoing state that doesn't lend itself to an easy cure — "trauma can never be 'healed' in the sense of a return to how things were before a catastrophe took place, or before one witnessed a catastrophe; but if the wound of trauma remains open, its pain may be worked through."[79] Here, Kaylee can never return to a time when her father was alive and the news that bin Laden has been killed does not heal her trauma.

That connection between McCarthyism and 9/11 is present in Sorkin's work, particularly in *Studio 60*, is due to the similar ideologies that America found itself

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[79] Ann E. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006) p.19

susceptible to at both periods in history. The fear of enemy attacks from within is directly paralleled by the fear of attacks by an external enemy some five decades later. As in the 1940s and 1950s, studio and network executives in the wake of 9/11 succumbed to the fear of offending the nation. In the years following the 9/11 attacks, a national narrative predominated the public discourse that penalised anyone who dared to voice a dissenting opinion. This fear of speaking out echoed the treatment of anyone who voiced an opinion that was deemed un-American during the McCarthy witch-hunts. When critical voices are silenced it "renders popular culture such an important and exciting part of the discursive landscape…When political elites are silenced by the blanketing effect of accepted wisdom, those left most vulnerable by the implications of dominant discourses may have their plight articulated in popular culture."[80] Just as writers in Hollywood were blacklisted, television personalities such as Bill Maher had their programmes cancelled. It is precisely because dissenting voices are frequently silenced, that popular culture becomes an important platform for addressing trauma. Sorkin consistently argues that the silencing of left-wing voices presents a considerable danger to the freedom of society, and, as argued by Fredric Jameson, it is the duty of the social Democrat to breath life into social programmes through continued debate. In the Sorkinian world, the recovery of trauma can be aided through a sense of community — a sense of community that National Trauma often destroys. In the following chapter, I will examine the construction of these communities, and families that frequently transcend biology.

[80] Holland, p.78

Chapter Seven — "You've got friends and this is what friends gear up for.":[1] Family and Relationships

Sorkin's body of work reflects the idea that humans are social creatures. We create a variety of connections throughout our lives: We form friendships groups, start families, bond with colleagues; these connections are the basis for how we interact with the world in both reality and fiction. Emma Pattee argues that "close friendships are so important to us *because* they are so difficult to form"[2] but that experts agree that "intimacy with other people — whether it's a spouse, a family member or a friend — is one of the most profound ways to be happier, healthier and calmer."[3] Myths of romantic love, and the logically extending myth of the nuclear family, has deep roots in American culture, and these family values are at the heart of many political campaign strategies. There are three types of relationships in Sorkin's works that are vital to the wellbeing of his characters: romantic relationships, family units, and friendships. In this chapter I argue that by constructing these systems of support for his characters, Sorkin presents a world in which his heroes feel valued, and thus prompts a positive image of what can be achieved by intelligent, hard-working, and good-hearted people. To discuss all the relationships in Sorkin's work is too great a task for this chapter; instead I have selected the pairings that best exemplify the types of friendships and romantic relationships that he depicts most often, as found in *Sports Night*, *The West Wing*, *Studio 60*, and *The Newsroom*. I consider how each of Sorkin's television series have the same underlying motifs as romantic comedies; the emphasis that is placed on fatherhood throughout Sorkin's film and television; the importance of the construction of work place families, and the depiction of friendship as being as important as romantic love. Although the emphasis on personal relationships demonstrates the connection to social progress, the frequent search in his work for the perfect romantic partner (as well as these romantic pairings being limited to heterosexuality), and the priority that is placed on paternal

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[1] 'Mary Pat Shelby', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Tracey Stern and Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

[2] Emma Pattee, 'How to Have Close Friendships (and Why You Need Them)', *New York Times*, 20th November 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/20/smarter-living/how-to-have-closer-friendships.html> [Accessed on: 13th December 2019]

[3] Ibid

protection, gives an unusually conservative slant to Sorkin's writing that echos the emphasis on family values in American society from the early Puritans to Post World War II culture. While Sorkin has begun to move away from the white male bias in his writing, the emphasis that is placed on heterosexual relationships does demonstrate flaws in the Sorkinian world and the failure to address some of society's genuine inadequacies in terms of gender equality. This deficiency is not limited to Sorkin's work, while the contemporary romantic comedy has begun to be more inclusive of differing sexualities, heteronormativity is still the dominant cultural stance of these films.

For Kile, the most common myth in American popular culture is romantic love and that "succinctly stated, the myth of romantic love in western culture decrees that one only becomes fully 'self-actualized' - achieves a full, mature identity and psychic completeness - through choosing a love partner and remaining true to that partner until forces beyond ones control intervene."[4] The search for romantic love is best exemplified in the romantic comedy and this genre is resilient, with audiences returning to watch pleasurable variations of the same basic plotlines unfold. Mortimer reminds us that: "we want to see the same characters, the same situations, the same narrative trajectory, the same settings and dialogue, with new stars that speak to new generations, yet tell the same story."[5] This description is particularly indicative of Sorkin's work, with his repeated use of dialogue and situations, even stars, across multiple productions. Although the romantic comedy is frequently regarded as a 'women's film' due to the socialisation of women to enjoy Hollywood love stories, and often dismissed by male critics, the endurance of the genre could not have occurred without also attracting male viewership.[6] In 1988 the romantic comedy was deemed "an excessively obvious genre"[7] by Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger, and "this derision is of course intrinsically bound up in the cultural, critical and industrial *gendering* of the genre. A generic

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[4] Crystal Kile, "Endless Love Will Keep Us Together: The Myth of Romatic Love and Contemporary Popular Movie Love Themes" in *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, ed. Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992) p.149-166 (p.149)

[5] Claire Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), p.1

[6] Mark D. Rubinfeld, *Bound to Bond: Gender, Genre, and the Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, (Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2001), p.xiv

[7] Deborah Jermyn, "The Contemptible Realm of the Romcom Queen: Nancy Meyers, Cultural Value and Romantic Comedy" in *Women Do Genre in Film and Television*, ed. Mary Harrod and Katarzyna Paszkiewicz, (New York: Routledge, 2018) p.57-71 (p.58)

title often used interchangeably with the term 'chick-flick', the romcom — and its presumed audience, address and perspectives — is positioned as peculiarly female and, by extension, its interests configured as light-weight, predictable and invested in the contemptible realms of cliché and consumerism."[8] Sorkin's works are romantic comedies that transcend gendered audiences because the 'romcom' nature of his work is just one part of a multifaceted whole. However, the romantic comedy often promotes an image of white, heterosexual privilege,[9] and Sorkin's work, for all its emphasis on ideas such as equality and social reform, generally fails to challenge this image in any significant way. The basic elements and narrative structures of the romantic comedy are "boy meets girl, various obstacles keep them from being together, coincidences and complications ensue, ultimately leading to the couple's realisation that they were meant to be together"[10] and this formula is present throughout the history of the genre, from the Jacobean comedies of Shakespeare to the screwball comedies of the 1930s, to any number of films released each year. Indebted to the signature snappy dialogue of the 1930s screwball comedy, Sorkin's style of fast paced dialogue and office politics opens up comparisons to both the screwball comedy and the contemporary romantic comedy. The heroine of the screwball comedy "is spirited and determined, she is prepared to manipulate and deceive in order to get her man, she is fiercely independent and knows her own mind, yet she can only attain happiness through the love of a man."[11] Mortimer also argues that the

> heroine of the contemporary romcom does not seem to have moved on much from her generic antecedents. There's a sense of panic in many of the representations of women who are struggling to 'have it all,' staring into a relationship abyss as they try to reconcile career with relationships. These heroines are successful in their work and have a loyal group of friends, yet they have failed to find the ideal partner. The majority of these movies will end with the woman making significant sacrifices for a

[8] Ibid

[9] Contemporary romantic comedies have began to present a more diverse view of the world in recent years. Examples of films that challenge the white, heterosexual norm include *The Big Sick* (Showalter, 2017); *Love, Simon* (Berlanti, 2018); *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018); *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (Johnson, 2018); and *Always Be My Maybe* (Khan, 2019).

[10] Mortimer, p.5

[11] Mortimer, p.21

> traditional heterosexual partnership; she embraces the romantic dream and is whisked off her feet by the right guy, having realised that love conquers all.[12]

In *The Newsroom*, while Sloan (Olivia Munn) fits much of the description of the screwball heroine, Don (Thomas Sadoski) is under no illusion that she would choose her job over him, an opinion that he discloses to the HR Rep (Keith Powell) when their clandestine relationship is eventually discovered: "Please don't transfer one of us. We don't work together enough, but the little we do works. And if you ask Sloan to choose between me and her job, you wouldn't be able to get that sentence out before she said her job. And I really like her and I'm trying to be good enough and this here is the best thing that I do."[13] In writing about the film *IQ* (Schepsi, 1994), Rubinfeld argues that the goal of the romantic comedy is to tame the intelligent career heroine because "female brilliance, the narrative eventually argues, is not particularly desirable."[14] This is avoided in Don and Sloan's relationship, as Don has no intention of presenting Sloan with any sort of ultimatum to choose her job or a relationship with him. Her intelligence, and the fact that it far exceeds his own, is part of her appeal, and rather than wanting to contain her intelligence it makes him want to raise his own. The workplace nature of Sorkin's romantic comedies also means that his heroines don't have to choose between career and relationship success — they are able, at least in this regard, to have it all. There is an ideal representation of the post-feminist woman that drives the protagonists of the contemporary romantic comedy which, Alison Winch argues, "is achieved through a flawless body image, as well as a secured position in the post-feminist life style."[15] The women in Sorkin's series, however, do not have to work very hard for this physical representability. As I argued in chapter three, the beauty of his brilliant women is a given.

There are several varieties of the romantic comedy structure and those found in Sorkin's work include the comedy of remarriage; the foil plot; the unrequited love plot; and

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[12] Mortimer, p.30

[13] 'Contempt', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Anthony Hemingway, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 4. First broadcast, HBO, 2014

[14] Rubinfeld, p.8

[15] Alison Winch, '"We Can Have It All": The Girlfriend Flick' *Feminist Media Studies.* 12:1 (2012) 69-82 (71)

the love at first sight plot.[16] These variations all feature a quest for the same goal, the winning of the affections of another. The first of these romantic comedy structures is the comedy of remarriage, in which "the couple [are] separated in the initial stages, only to be reunited by the end of the film after discovering that they still love each other."[17] Sorkin adapts the comedy of remarriage in *The Newsroom* and *Studio 60* via its two central couples whose working life is haunted by the failure of their earlier romantic partnership. Both Will (Jeff Daniels) and MacKenzie (Emily Mortimer), and Matt (Matthew Perry) and Harriet (Sarah Paulson) dated and broke up before the start of their respective series. Much of the early humour is derived from the couples trying to navigate their working relationships after the demise of their romantic relationships. In *The Newsroom*, Sloan is under the impression that Will cheated on MacKenzie, leading to the disintegration of their relationship. MacKenzie composes an email asking if Will would be okay with her clarifying that she cheated on him in order to soften the staffs' perception of him, however, she accidentally sends it out on an all-staff email:

> MacKenzie: I want everyone to delete the email you just received. Delete it right now without reading it. Honour system. And then I need someone to sneak into Will's office and delete the email from his inbox. If it's password protected I need you to take a baseball bat and smash— You told me he was uptown.
> Jim: I guess he came back.
> Will: We stood in my office—
> MacKenzie: Will—
> Will: This morning, and I said under no circumstances do I want anyone here to know what happened and you said yes, and yes again. And it really seemed like you understood. And then you sent an email—
> MacKenzie: It was a complete—
> Will: Explaining in some detail what happened. And then you copied forty-seven reporters on it.[18]

As the series progresses the two become friends, then engaged (sidestepping the dating aspect of the typical relationship progression), then marry in the final season with a baby on

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[16] Rubinfeld, p.xv

[17] Mortimer, p.5

[18] 'News Night 2.0', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, HBO, 2012.

the way. This reaffirms and reconstructs the nuclear family that is frequently the goal of the romantic comedy, conforming to the traditional Hollywood 'happily-ever-after' ending. Similarly, in *Studio 60* there are various humorous incidents as Matt and Harriet try to negotiate their working relationship. Matt tells people that he and Harriet broke up because of what he said to her after she performed the national anthem at a Dodgers game, despite this being untrue: "She said 'I was great by the way, I got a standing ovation.' And I said very sincerely, 'Harriet, I'm sure you were great, but it was the national anthem. They were standing already.'"[19] Matt can't resist making a joke of their breakup, even though he knows that telling people this will irritate her. In a later episode, Harriet tries to gift Matt a baseball bat, not realising that the player who originally gave it to her was using it to ask her out.

> Harriet: I wanted to give you a non-romantic present; you did two great shows in a row.
> Matt: Well, it doesn't get a lot less romantic than a baseball bat.
> Harriet: It's signed by Darren Wells.
> Matt: "You're a big hit. Darren Wells." How did you get this?
> Harriet: You really wanna know?
> Matt: Yeah.
> Harriet: Ironically, I got it when I sang the national anthem at the Dodgers game.
> Matt: You asked him for it?
> Harriet: He gave it to me.
> Matt: When?
> Harriet: After I sang.
> Matt: Wait, he just gave this to you?
> Harriet: He did, and I'm giving it to you.
> Matt: "You're a big hit" He's talking about you?
> Harriet: He liked the way I sang. I'm giving it to you because I like the way you write!
> Matt: Yeah, but I think we're skipping over a part.
> Harriet: I'm passing it on.
> Matt: Harry?
> Harriet: Yeah?
> Matt: He wrote his phone number on here!
> Harriet: What do you mean?
> Matt: I mean he wrote his phone number on here. You didn't see it?

[19] 'Pilot', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

> Harriet: That's his phone number?
> Matt: What did you think it was?
> Harriet: I just thought it was his uniform number, you know, they sign their name and then write the number.
> Matt: Yeah, they do do that. You thought his uniform number was three billion, a hundred and six million eighty-six, five— He was asking you out![20]

Matt does not believe that Harriet did not notice that Darren Wells (Teddy Sears) was asking her out, and plots his own revenge, showing that two have difficulty acting professionally while working together. Despite their respective relationships ending on less than amicable terms, these characters frequently defend one another in the face of external criticism. MacKenzie insists that Sloan tell people that Will is a good man: "I need you to go from person to person and tell them that Will is an extraordinary man with the heart the size of a Range Rover."[21] This is then echoed by a scene in which Will challenges Reese (Chris Messina) when he feels he's not talking about MacKenzie with enough respect:

> Reese: You're the boss. I'll keep reminding you of that because I'm not wild about your ex.
> Will: Hey, look, her name is MacKenzie or Miss McHale, and she's reported more real news in one day than I have in my career.[22]

Despite their constant arguing, both Will and MacKenzie will not stand for other people thinking of, or treating them with, anything less than complete respect. In *Studio 60*, after Tom (Nate Corddry) spends time under arrest for pushing a man who was aggressive towards Harriet, Matt tells her that it should have been him that was defending her: "That was supposed to be me in jail! I'm the one who's supposed to be protecting you."[23] It is important for the characters in the remarriage plot to show valour, in order to demonstrate that they have grown and they are now the suitable partner that they failed to be before — valour is particularly important in Sorkin's comedies of remarriage as he places such an

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[20] 'The West Coast Delay', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Mark Goffman and Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 4. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[21] 'News Night 2.0'

[22] Ibid

[23] 'Nevada Day, Part 2', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 8. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

emphasis on knightly and chivalrous qualities. The characters of the comedies of remarriage are ultimately able to reconcile, as in this narrative and the majority of romantic comedies, love conquers all. The re-coupling of these characters demonstrates a move towards the nuclear family — to which I will return later in the chapter — which is an extension of this myth of romantic love.

A second variation of romantic comedy plot that is common in Sorkin's television series is unrequited love, when typically "one half of the couple realises the love for the other early on, but the other half is slow to recognise and return their love; often having to lose the wrong partner in order to be ready for the right love."[24] In *The Newsroom*, Sloan's initial interest in Don is shown in a flashback to the events before the series began, and her feelings for him also become apparent when he comes to her for advice about his relationship with Maggie (Alison Pill):

> Sloan: I don't know who told you you're a bad guy, but somebody did, somebody along the way. Somebody or something convinced you of it because you think you're a bad guy, and you're just not. I'm socially inept but even I know that. So because you're a bad guy, you try to do things you think a good guy would do, like committing to someone you like but maybe don't love. A sweet, smart, wholesome Midwestern girl. I could be wrong. I almost always am.
> Don: Why are you single?
> Sloan: A lot of men are intimidated by my intelligence.
> Don: No, seriously.
> Sloan: Because you never asked me out.[25]

This is also a variation of the foil plot in which the hero or heroine must choose between two contenders for their affections. Don must choose between Sloan and Maggie; conventions of the romantic comedy decree that he should choose the 'good wife' — the "wholesome Midwestern girl" — over the genius, outspoken, "Victoria's Secret"[26] because society dictates that "female sexuality detracts women from their primary role in life: being good

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[24] Mortimer, p.5

[25] 'The Greater Fool', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 10. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[26] 'News Night 2.0'

wives and good mothers."[27] By making Sloan the right choice for Don, the narrative of *The Newsroom* challenges the structure of the traditional romantic comedy. Typically, when the heroine is introduced as sexually desirable, she must be transformed by the end of the narrative into the good wife, however, *The Newsroom* resists this generic expectation, allowing Sloan to remain intelligent, driven, and sexually appealing — while still enabling her to find her romantic partner. This representation demonstrates a move towards acceptance of female sexuality in contemporary American life that is not limited to Sorkin's work.[28] The encouragement of both intellectual and sexual equality in fiction reinforces these changes in society.

In *Sports Night* Dan's (Josh Charles) attraction to Rebecca Wells (Teri Polo) is also initially unrequited and another example of the foil plot, but in this instance, it is the 'prick foil' plot.[29] In the prick foil plot the hero must compete for the affections of the woman he is attracted to with a less suitable man, one who treats her poorly. Dan must compete with Rebecca's emotionally abusive husband Steve, telling her that "he's such a bad guy…I'm sorry if that hurts you, but I know these things. I'm not so good myself."[30] Kord and Krimmer argue that to "prove his worthiness, the lover must be willing to throw his dignity to the wind and make a fool of himself. Dan must prove his affection through on-air blunders:

> Rebecca: "Neighbourhood park all covered with cheese"?
> Dan: I knew it! You've been watching the show.
> Rebecca: Cheese, Danny?
> Dan: I was distracted.
> Rebecca: How exactly did the cheese—
> Dan: You know what? I've actually heard them all. I gotta go.

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[27] Rubinfeld, p.61

[28] This issue is increasingly the focus if of romantic comedy films, notably *What's Your Number* (Mylod, 2011) The heroine, Ally (Anna Faris), worries about finding 'the one' after she reads an article in *Marie Claire* that states that women who have had twenty or more lovers have difficulty finding husbands. Her love interest, Colin (Chris Evans), later asks her "What kind of guy cares about how many people you slept with anyway?" Despite this more sexually progressive message, on the whole the film only slightly troubles the 'chaste woman' image in American society.

[29] Rubinfeld, p.33-43

[30] 'Eli's Coming', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, ABC, 1999

> Rebecca: Were you, uh, by any chance thinking about me at that moment?[31]

Dan must make a fool of himself in order to prove his worth, and in the romantic comedy it is only when the man makes himself vulnerable that he can be recognised as the ideal partner. While Rebecca does temporarily return to her husband, she comes to realise that Dan is the person whom she is supposed to be with. This storyline adheres to the frequently illustrated idea in the romantic comedy, that male characters, and the viewers themselves, know what is best for the heroine. Rubinfeld argues that this implication demonstrates that "heroines need the benevolence of heroes just as women need the benevolence of patriarchy."[32] Rebecca must return to her husband before deciding on Dan, in order for Dan to be proven right all along.

Another variation of the romantic comedy is the love at first sight narrative, in which the couple recognise their feelings immediately but factors beyond their control prevent them from being together. The love at first sight variation is often held up as the ideal, dating back to the ancient Greeks it has become one of the most common tropes in fiction. Todd argues that despite "contentions by writers in the 1970s like Laura Mulvey and John Berger, the conventions in romantic dramas continued to treat the women as images just like their predecessors."[33] This has continued in romantic comedies and romantic dramas and frequently "when the heroes see their female love interest for the first time, they are instantly smitten, bringing truth to the phrase 'love at first sight'. They see the women from afar, and therefore their love arises in the first instance in response to the heroine's physical appearance."[34] This is subverted slightly in *The West Wing* with Josh (Bradley Whitford) and Donna (Janel Moloney) — who fall somewhere between the unrequited love and love at first sight variations — Josh's smitten gaze when he and Donna first meet seems to arise more from the fact that she was hired as his assistant by pretending that she already had the job. The initial attraction is based more on her ingenuity than her physical appearance. Donna is

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[31] 'Dana and the Deep Blue Sea', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 15. First broadcast, ABC, 1999

[32] Rubinfeld, p.43

[33] Erica Todd, *Passionate Love and Popular Cineme: Romance and Film Genre*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) p.76

[34] Ibid

also presented as having feelings for Josh that go unspoken, and Joey (Marlee Matlin) tells Josh that "if you polled a hundred Donnas and asked them if they think we should go out, you'd get a high positive response. But the poll wouldn't tell you it's because she likes you, and she knows it's beginning to show and she needs to cover herself with misdirection."[35] The obstacle preventing Josh and Donna from being together is primarily that he is her boss and this presents an unequal power dynamic.[36] Despite the frequency of this variation, however, it is not used as frequently in Sorkin's works as the other variations of romantic comedy plots. Rather, characters in his works more often find romantic love develops out of pre-existing friendships.

In his portrayals of romantic relationships Sorkin frequently writes grand declarations of love for his protagonists which echo the typical ending of the romantic comedy. In *The West Wing*, Josh and Donna bicker over the flowers that he bought her for their anniversary — the anniversary of when they began working together, but even the use of the word anniversary is telling. Donna is annoyed because Josh is marking the second time that she started working for him rather than the first, and thus she believes it is an attempt to be cruel by reminding her that she once quit. Donna reveals that during the period that she stopped working for Josh to return to her boyfriend, she was in a car accident. She called her boyfriend to collect her from the hospital and he stopped on the way for a beer. Josh is outraged by this and declares his superiority, to which Donna confirms that he is a better man than her ex-boyfriend. Donna, however, manages to one-up Josh's grand declaration:

> Josh: I'm just sayin' if you were in an accident, I wouldn't stop for a beer.
> Donna: If you were in an accident I wouldn't stop for red lights.[37]

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[35] 'The War at Home', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 14. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

[36] In the majority of Sorkin's work, the unequal power dynamic is only acceptable in cases where the female half of the relationship is the boss.

[37] '17 People', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 18. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

Their mutual devotion is evident and is indicative of underlying romantic love. Kile argues that "you cannot make a rational decision to be in love. True romantic love is an irrational state into which one falls like a ton of bricks or which strikes like a bolt of lightning."[38] This idea can be seen in Will's proposal to MacKenzie at the end of *The Newsroom's* second season:

> Will: I said will you marry me? And before that, I said I'm in love with you…That's what I'm getting at. I feel like I can do this so much better if I can have a second.
> MacKenzie: What in the fuck is happening right now?
> Will: If I— I don't ever want to not be— No. I love you. I'm gonna go back to that, and will you marry me? And let me just say that I really think you should. I think you should say yes. But no matter what you say, there's no chance that I'm gonna hurt you again. And no matter what you say, I'm gonna be in love with you for the rest of my life. That's just a physical law of the universe. You own me. No matter what you say—
> MacKenzie: Yes.
> Will: I will never stop—
> MacKenzie: Yes. I'm saying yes.[39]

Will likens his love for MacKenzie to a physical law of the universe, something that is beyond his control regardless of whether or not his feelings are reciprocated. When male characters in Sorkin's works make their grand declarations of love, they often lose their articulacy. It is Sorkin's way of breaking down the performative superiority of these men. He strips away language, rather than ego, because it is their articulacy that these male characters value more.

Earnest argues that "texts are understood in relation to other information, and as other information and contexts change, meanings can also change, underscoring the interactive process of making meaning."[40] In the romantic comedy "the dynamic of the film rests on the central quest — the pursuit of love — and almost always leads to a successful

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[38] Kile, p151

[39] 'Election Night, Part II', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 9. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

[40] Kathleen M. Earnest, "Changing Faces: Exploring Depictions of Geeks in Various Texts" in *Age of the Geek: Depictions of Nerds and Geeks in Popular Media*, ed. Kathryn E. Lane, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p.67-88 (p.74)

resolution."[41] This is also applicable to Sorkin's works, in which his romantic pairings eventually find happiness. Despite this, the methods with which some of his heroes use to try to appeal to the woman they wish to bestow their affections upon is troubling. The unrequited love plot is similar to what Rubinfeld classes as the pursuit plot: this "involves a 'quest of conquest' in which a hero is attracted to a heroine; courts her; encounters resistance from her; and being a 'real man' refuses to take no for an answer…The narrative pleasures of the pursuit plot demand female submission since, simply put, these are stories of male 'wants' and more important, of males getting what they want."[42] A particularly troubling and repeated motif evident in Sorkin's work is the 'job recommendation method' which was used in both *Sports Night* and *Studio 60.* In *Sports Night*, Dan asks both Casey (Peter Krause) and Jeremy (Joshua Malina) to recommend him to Rebecca as suitable man for her to date:

> Dan: You go up there—
> Casey: No.
> Dan: You introduce yourself—
> Casey: No.
> Dan: And you recommend me.
> Casey: I recommend you?
> Dan: Yes.
> Casey: No.
> Dan: Casey, come on.
> Casey: You want me to walk into the office of a woman I don't know. A woman who has turned you down each and every one of the seventeen times that you have asked her out and recommend you?[43]

> Dan: I'd like you to go up to her office, on some excuse, and say some nice things about me.
> Jeremy: Let me tell you why I'm not gonna do that. I'll look like a jackass.
> Dan: You would look sweet.
> Jeremy: I don't think so.
> Dan: Women love this.
> Jeremy: Stalking?
> Dan: Yes.

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[41] Mortimer, p.4

[42] Rubinfeld, p.4

[43] 'Dana and the Deep Blue Sea'

Jeremy: Not as much as you may think.[44]

Casey refuses but Jeremy, despite pointing out that it is stalking, eventually agrees. The two scenes are played for comedy and the narrative fails to acknowledge, with any seriousness, the problematic nature of Dan's actions in his pursuit of Rebecca. Dan does eventually succeed in winning Rebecca over, despite her previously having rejected him seventeen times, but it is not due to the recommendations, but rather because he makes a fool of himself on national television. Rubinfeld argues that "just as the Hollywood romantic comedy plot occasionally depicts female resistance as a mistake, it also depicts male persistence - in the face of female resistance - as heroic."[45] In *Studio 60* Danny (Bradley Whitford) takes the recommendation method further, not just stopping with people that work on the show:

> Danny: I do need a letter of recommendation! Many letters of recommendation! I should inundate her with letters of recommendation.
> Matt: What are you talking about?
> Danny: Jordan. I should fax letters of recommendation from everybody. Spielberg, Clint Eastwood, Steve Jobs, Sumner Redstone, my doctor, my dentist, my accountant, my mother!
> Matt: Your dentist?
> Danny: Wilson White.
> Matt: Your mother?
> Danny: The Governor! The interns! So she knows I'm very good among the people.[46]

Jordan (Amanda Peet) reveals to Matt that she received thirty-nine recommendations including ones from "Martin Scorsese, Lauren Bacall, and Lord Dickinson, the third Earl of Kent."[47] Like Rebecca, Jordan is not impressed and she calls Danny out on this, stating that she found the situation embarrassing.

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[44] Ibid

[45] Rubinfeld, p.11

[46] 'Monday', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Lawrence Trilling, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 12. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[47] Ibid

> Jordan: You have to stop. This was embarrassing to me, Danny. Everyone you did this with now knows that— This was unprofessional. You made me look silly at the worst possible time.
> Danny: Jordan—
> Jordan: The worst possible time. Between us we have three marriages, a DUI, a cocaine addiction, and a baby by another man. And I'm your boss. You asked me out once, I said no. You asked me out again, I said no. You asked me out again, I said no.
> Danny: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you.
> Jordan: Will you please stop?
> Danny: No.[48]

With this refusal — and Danny's eventual success in winning Jordan over[49] — the narrative fails to present this behaviour as, at best, problematic, and at worst, sexual harassment in the workplace. The actions of Dan Rydell and Danny Tripp, while presented as heroic in the narrative and indicative of the male dominance that is typically found the romantic comedy, has not aged well, taking on an even darker context in the 'Me Too' era[50] — particularly given that these men both work in the entertainment industry. Numerous women in Hollywood have spoken up about the sexual abuse and harassment they have suffered during their time working in the industry, including Reese Witherspoon, Anna Paquin, Viola Davis, Gwyneth Paltrow and Olivia Munn, as well as actors such as Terry Crewes and James Van Der Beek. Some of the more high-profile men accused of sexual misconduct include Kevin Spacey, R. Kelly, and Harvey Weinstein, the latter of whom has been convicted and sentenced to twenty-three years in prison. An article in *The New York Times* highlighted 201 powerful men who have lost their jobs due to these allegations and that "at least 920 people have come forward say that one of these men subjected them to sexual misconduct"[51] demonstrating the pervasiveness of this problem.

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[48] 'The Harriet Dinner, Part I', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 13. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[49] Jordan eventually admits that her refusal was not because she didn't feel the same way about Danny, but because she thought that his interest in her was a result of his new sobriety.

[50] Julie Beck, 'When Pop Culture Sells Dangerous Myths About Romance', *The Atlantic*, 17th January 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/01/when-pop-culture-sells-dangerous-myths-about-romance/549749/> [Accessed onL 3rd April 2020]

[51] Audrey Carlsen, et al, '#MeToo Brought Down 201 Powerful Men. Nearly Half of Their Replacements Are Women.', *The New York Times*, 29th October 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/23/us/metoo-replacements.html> [Accessed on: 3rd April 2020]

Nachbar and Lause also argue that "the myth of the nuclear family is a logical extension of the myth of romantic love, and that is at the core of nearly every politician's claims that his or her legislative agenda is the preservation of 'family values'".[52] These ideas echo the Puritan privileging of family that have embedded themselves in American politics and culture, and are still frequently part of many political campaigns. The stereotype of family life in the United States, which saw another resurgence after the Second World War, was of the nuclear family — mother at home with the children in suburbia and father commuting to the city for an office job. However, both then and now it is understood by many Americans that reality is more complex.[53] The image of the nuclear family from the 1950s became the measure for future generations, but despite this "by the turn of the millennium, less than a quarter of US households consisted of nuclear families."[54] Social connections tend to be lower in cities, and Putnam argues that "as mobility, divorce, and smaller families have reduced the relative importance of kinship ties especially among the more educated, friendship may actually have gained importance in the modern metropolis. The passage in popular culture from *I Love Lucy* and *All in the Family* to *Cheers, Seinfeld* and *Friends* exalts informal social ties."[55] On the *Sports Night* DVD commentary Sorkin states that "it's ok to be alone in the city if you can find family at work…This was their house. This was where they lived"[56] but Painter and Ferrucci, criticising and directly contradiction Sorkin's own statements, argue that the 'Sports Night' offices were "not where these characters lived, and they were not a family."[57] However, I disagree with Painter and Ferrucci's assertion, as in all of Sorkin's shows his characters form their own workplace families, and non-traditional families, including families made up of unrelated adults, are

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[52] Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, "Songs of the Unseen Road: Myths, Beliefs and Values in Popular Culture" in *Popular Culture: An Introductory Text*, ed. Jack Nachbar and Kevin Lause, (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992) p.82-109 (p.91)

[53] Jim Cullen, *Democratic Empire: The United States Since 1945*, (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), p.23

[54] Cullen, p.248

[55] Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) p.96

[56] 'Quo Vadimus', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 22. First broadcast, ABC, 2000

[57] Chad Painter and Patrick Ferrucci, 'Unprofessional, Ineffective, and Weak: A Textual Analysis of the Portrayal of Female Journalists on *Sports Night*' *Journal of Mass Media Ethics.* 27 (2012) 248-262 (257-258)

increasingly becoming normalised on television;[58] it is also reflective of the change in personal priorities and financial need to work longer hours. Bigsby argues that family, as shown in *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993-1999), "is composed of a group of strangers held together by the contingencies of their work rather than family relationships, but there is the same conflict between personal needs and shared responsibilities, the same clash of loyalties, the same need for approbation and forgiveness, the potential for betrayal."[59] *Leverage* (2008-2012) also constructs its team of conmen as a family, with five unrelated adults fitting into clearly defined roles of mother, father, and three children, and "by centering [sic] the family around shared intelligence and work, *Leverage* manipulates traditional television portrayals of the public and private."[60] The workplace and the domestic sphere can become merged and "the television family and the workplace served to map out a social field, recasting the boundaries between private and public spheres and redefining the normative meanings within and between these spheres."[61] While in the first episode of *Sports Night* Isaac (Robert Guillaume) insists that they are not like a family —

> Dana: We're like a family here and I'm very much like a daughter to you.
> Isaac: No. This is a television show here and you're very much like an employee to me.[62]

— this is, however disproven over the course of the series though the characters' relational interactions. Dan, in particular, defends Isaac like he would defend a father. When Isaac admits that he is too tired to fight with the network head Dan assures him that the Sports Night staff are prepared to fight for him:

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[58] Other examples of these constructed families include *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* (2013-present), *Leverage* (2008-2012), *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), and *Friends* (1994-2004).

[59] Christopher Bigsby, *Viewing America: Twenty-First-Century Television Drama*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013) p.159

[60] Hannah Swamidoss, "'It's the age of the geek baby': The Intelligent Con Artist, Corporate America and the Construction of the Family in *Leverage*" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) p.199-137 (p.208)

[61] Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America*, (Berkley: University of California Press, 1989) p.2

[62] 'Pilot', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

> Isaac: There are days, Danny, when I'm just too tired to fight that man.
> Dan: Well you gotta tell us when it's one of those days and we'll fight him for you.[63]

This love among colleagues and need to protect one another is continued in *The West Wing*, and Bigsby notes that the characters "are loyal to one another and there are times when they circle the wagons against those who would attack them."[64] Bartlet (Martin Sheen) warns a party fundraiser not to "ever slap Josh Lyman around again."[65] When Martin Sheen asked Sorkin why Bartlet had daughters and not sons, Sorkin told him that "these guys are your sons"[66] and this is how Bartlet refers to Josh during his rant at God: "What was Josh Lyman? A warning shot? That was my son."[67] While this is an explicit reference to him regarding the senior staff as his children, in an earlier episode Bartlet has Charlie (Dulé Hill) go shopping for a new carving knife and when Charlie asks what happened to the old one Bartlet tells him that he's passing it on: "Charlie, my father gave this to me, and his father gave it to him, and now I'm giving it to you."[68] While Bartlet, as president, is a figurative father to the nation, he is also a father figure to the senior staff. This idea of the father and son dynamic in the work place is further repeated in all of Sorkin's series. In *Studio 60*, Simon (D.L. Hughley) tells Danny that Wes (the showrunner) blamed himself for not standing by him and Matt when they were forced off of the show:

> Simon: You can't be too hard on Wes. People get tired and you guys were like his sons, and he didn't stand up for you and he knew it.
> Danny: We never asked him to.

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[63] 'The Six Southern Gentlemen of Tennessee', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, Matt Tarses, David Walpert, and Bill Wrubel, season 1, episode 11. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

[64] Bigsby, p.57

[65] '20 Hours in L.A.', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alan Taylor, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 16. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[66] Christopher Bigsby, p.57

[67] 'Two Cathedrals', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

[68] 'Shibboleth', *The West Wing,* dir. by Laura Innes, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 8. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

Simon: Doesn't matter.[69]

Here it is indicated that while the primary cause of the show's decline in quality was the departure of Matt and Danny, a major contributor was the sense of paternal failure that Wes felt. While Wes failed to stand behind Matt and Danny against the network, in *The Newsroom* Charlie (Sam Waterston) frequently comes to Will's defence, "if you call Will a whore again, I'm going to take out your teeth one punch at a time."[70] Charlie Skinner ultimately fills the paternal role that Will's own father failed to meet.

The idea of familial relationships between colleagues in Sorkin's work is also reinforced through sibling dynamics. In *The West Wing*, Sam (Rob Lowe) refers to Josh as his brother[71] and a flashback shows Mrs Landingham (Kirsten Nelson) insisting that Bartlet (Jason Widener) needs an older sister, a role which she then fills:

> Bartlet: Why do you talk to me like this?
> Mrs Landingham: You've never had a big sister and you need one.[72]

Furthermore, In *Studio 60* Simon insists that Harriet is his little sister[73] and the idea is also continued in *The Newsroom*. Will tells Habib that he has come to regard Sloan as his sister:

> Habib: Are you close with Sloan?
> Will: Are we close?
> Habib: Yeah
> Will: Why?
> Habib: Just asking. You seem very protective.
> Will: We didn't used to be. But she's become, I don't know, I don't know, like a little sister to me or something.[74]

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[69] 'The Cold Open', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[70] 'News Night 2.0', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[71] '20 Hours in America', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

[72] 'Two Cathedrals'

[73] 'The Option Period', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by John Fortenberry, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 9. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[74] 'Bullies', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Jeremy Podeswa, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 6. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

Will feels the need to protect Sloan, notably when she must apologise on air for her unethical reporting of the Fukushima disaster, telling her that "if there's any fallout, I'll be standing right next to you and in front. I'll always be standing right next to you and in front."[75] Sloan also compares their relationship to that of the sibling dynamics that are often portrayed in popular culture. The familial desire to protect is noted by a journalist in *Studio 60* who is writing a story on the show, "I'll say this about you guys, you look out for each other. You're not very good at doing it, but it's nice to see the effort."[76] While this is explicitly stated in *Studio 60*, it is consistent across all of Sorkin's television shows; these constructed families prioritise protecting one another, even if at times they're not very good at it. Over the course of each of these series the working relationships of these characters become familial because all their time is spent at the office with their colleagues; their office and colleagues become their home and family and "by creating a fluid familial space for the intelligent individual, the overarching narrative posits that this placement will enrich society."[77] The characters in Sorkin's work rarely have the time to form traditional families or have a distinctive separation between their work and personal lives (they also socialise predominately with their colleagues), therefore they must create the systems of support traditionally provided by families among their colleagues.

Grayling notes that "the highest and finest of all human relationships is, arguably, friendship"[78] and it is considered a personal achievement if one is able to develop friendships with family and colleagues. In Sorkin's television series, beyond the dynamic of colleague, there is an additional bond that transcends the initial connection that they make with one another based on professional necessity. In Sorkin's work the lines between colleague, family and friendship are heavily blurred and there is an "increased emphasis on friendship in filling the void left by fragmented families and communities in the modern

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[75] Ibid

[76] 'The Long Lead Story', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by David Petrarca, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[77] Swamidoss, p.201

[78] A.C. Grayling, *Friendship*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) p.1

world."[79] For example, in *Sports Night,* Dan's actual family is fragmented, and in response he has found a new family for himself among the friends he has made at work. The friendships that Dan has formed at work are valuable because they provide support, companionship, someone to share ideas with, and aid emotional welfare. Writings on friendship date back to the ancient Greeks, and one form of thinking that has survived through all societal changes "is that it is a resource of guidance and correction. A loyal friend whom one trusts can tell us when we are going wrong, reprove us, advise us, can suggest a course of action when we are wavering in a dilemma, can stand up for is or do something for us when we need an ally."[80] Sorkin's explicit merging of work, friend, and familial relationships allows for this environment of support.

Frequently, in his series, there is a strong focus on best friends and the love and loyalty between them, recalling Montaigne's observation, building an the writing of Aristotle, that "true perfect and absolute friendship is the complete merging of two selves into one, so that there is no longer even a friendship at issue but an absolute identity beyond explanation."[81] In the friendships between Dan Rydell and Casey McCall, Jed Bartlet and Leo McGarry, and Matt Albie and Danny Tripp, these characters — as Aristotle put it — "resemble each other in excellence" and love one another because of "what the other is" which is "the truest and highest kind of friendship."[82] In *Sports Night*, when the network threatens to fire Casey, Dan assures them that if they do, he will leave: "my future is writing and anchoring a sports show with my partner Casey McCall. Now if that's here, it's here. If it's not, it's someplace else."[83] The loyalty (and potential professional sacrifice) between them is continued in the second season when, despite the disagreements that they have been having, Casey tells him that "I wouldn't trade the last ten years working with you for anything. Not for anything, Danny, I swear to God."[84] The importance of the best friend is continued in *The West Wing*, when Bartlet is talking to Secretary of Agriculture Roger

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[79] Mortimer, p.8

[80] Grayling, p.178

[81] Grayling, p.11

[82] Grayling, p.33

[83] 'Pilot', *Sports Night*

[84] 'April is the Cruelest Month', *Sports Night,* dir. by Don Scardino, written by Bill Wrubel and Matt Tarses, season 2, episode 19. First broadcast, ABC, 2000

Tribbey (Harry Groener), the designated survivor, and he advises him to make his best friend his Chief of Staff:

> Bartlet: You have a best friend?
> Roger: Yes, Sir.
> Bartlet: Is he smarter than you?
> Roger: Yes, Sir.
> Bartlet: Would you trust him with your life?
> Roger: Yes, Sir.
> Bartlet: That's your Chief of Staff [85]

In *The West Wing,* not only is the best friend an essential part of attaining one's personal happiness, but they are also vital to the successful governing of the nation. As well as being beneficial to the emotions, friendship is also beneficial to the intellect, thus, by extension, benefitting society. Grayling argues that "if friendship is integral to the good life and the good life is the ultimate aim, then friendship - individual and private thing - has at least as great a significance as civic contribution; and that really does seem to resist the claim that it is 'finer and more godlike' to advance the interests of ones city than to make another person happy."[86] In *Studio 60*, flashbacks to 2001 in the final episode show that after Matt is forced out, Danny also quits after realising that his friendship with Matt is more important to him than his job. Danny tells Jack that "he's been threatened by the network, compromised by me, browbeaten by you, gotten his heart broken by Wes and he's still standing up. Why am I quitting? Because they'll start shooting at him, I'll be standing next to him when they do."[87] The episode ends with Matt and Danny expressing their love for each other and such friendships between men in Sorkin's work is indicative of the 'bromance' sub-genre of the romantic comedy. The bromance focuses on the blurred homoerotic/homosocial relationship between two straight men and "we can see the bromance as part of this dialectical process relating to the evolution of gender and sexual identities within the narrative framework of

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[85] 'He Shall, From Time To Time…', *The West Wing,* dir. by Arlene Sanford, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 12. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[86] Grayling, p.37

[87] 'What Kind of Day Has It Been', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Bradley Whitford, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

the Hollywood romantic comedy…Specifically, the search for new constructions of masculine identities appropriate to the 'new climate of social and sexual equality.'"[88]

Although the best friend relationship is emphasised throughout Sorkin's work, this emphasis does not come at the expense of other friendships. Many previous thinkers have argued that friendships cannot exist between men and women, but throughout history, fiction, and Sorkin's work this is continually disproven. Similarly, Vera Brittain argues that "from the days of Homer the friendships of men have enjoyed much glory and acclamation, but the friendships of women…have usually been not merely unsung, but mocked, belittled and falsely interpreted."[89] In his work, however, Sorkin also presents the importance of close female friendships. In *The Newsroom* MacKenzie tells Sloan that she hopes they'll be friends because she doesn't have any; Sloan frequently acts as a sounding board for MacKenzie's relationship troubles, and MacKenzie benefits from Sloan's intelligence in economics. Boyle and Berridge note that "despite a wealth of Hollywood films dealing female friendship, the origins of female friendship are rarely depicted."[90] However, in *The Newsroom*, Sorkin builds the friendship between MacKenzie and Sloan's across multiple episodes thus adhering to Grayling's observation that"friendships between women can be and often are closer, more enduring, more confidential and supportive, more intimate, more powerful and complete, than is customary among men".[91] Sorkin's work directly counters numerous romantic comedies that are in some cases subtly, and others overtly, hostile towards women by "pitting female against female, in order to attack females."[92] The narratives of these romantic comedies dismantle the bonds between women, suggesting that it is impossible for women to work civilly together. These stories imply that "women are, by nature, predatory rivals. Without men around to separate them, they would cut one another to pieces."[93] *Sports Night* sets up this type of rivalry between Dana (Felicity Huffman) and Sally (Brenda Strong) as

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[88] John Alberti, '"I Love You, Man": Bromances, the Construction of Masculinity and the Continuing Evolution of the Romantic Comedy' *Quarterly Review of Film and Video.* 30:2 (2013) 159-172 (159-60)

[89] Vera Brittain, *Testament of friendship: The story of Winifred Holtby.* (London: Macmillan, 1947) Quoted in Grayling (p.12)

[90] Karen Boyle and Susan Berridge, 'I Love You, Man: Gendered narratives of friendship in contemporary Hollywood comedies' *Feminist Media Studies.* 14:3 (2014) 353-368 (353)

[91] Grayling, p.14

[92] Rubinfeld, p.49

[93] Rubinfeld, p.50-1

they compete for Casey's affections, however, this is somewhat subverted by Dana's realisation that she was in the wrong:

> Dana: At a time when this organization was in trouble, you—
> Sally: Dana!
> Dana: Deliberately and maliciously went out of your way-
> Sally: To sleep with you boyfriend and your anchor?
> Dana: Yes!
> Sally: Oh! First of all, I didn't have to go far out of my way to do either one. And the fact that you think my personal life is an act of aggression—
> Dana: You're right.
> Sally: Is so typically you—
> Dana: You're absolutely right.
> Sally: What?
> Dana: I'm sorry. You're absolutely right. I can't believe I just came in here and said that to you. Oh…aren't I pathetic?
> Sally: No, Dana, listen to me. You're not mad 'cause I slept with Gordon. You don't care that I slept with Gordon. You're mad that I slept with Casey.[94]

Dana and Sally are able to set aside their differences and Dana apologises for behaving unprofessionally. Characters in Sorkin's series', for the most part, work well together regardless of their gender, in order to contribute to the betterment of the world around them. The bonds of family and friendship are forged among colleagues in Sorkin's work present an environment in which intelligent individuals can find like-minded support and are thus able to fulfil their potential and contribute meaningfully to society.

After 9/11, there was a perceived desire for masculine protectors[95] and this gave rise to "a host of cinematic manifestations of such figures who…are configured in paternal terms either as fathers protecting their children, or as becoming fathers (symbolically or literally)

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[94] 'Napoleon's Battle Plan', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 22. First broadcast, ABC, 1999

[95] For more on this see *The Terror Dream* (2007) by Susan Faludi.

alongside and/or through their acts of paternal protection."[96] 9/11 generated a rise in paternal positions in popular culture, numerous films made after 9/11 foreground the idea of fatherhood including *War of the Worlds* (Spielberg, 2005), *Taken* (Morel, 2008), and *Due Date* (Phillips, 2010). Christy Ebert Vrtis discusses post-9/11 fatherhood in *24* (2001-2010) and argues that there is a renewal of traditional protective masculinity and "that the renewal of action-oriented father-heroes in post-9/11 programs like *24* is predicated on vulnerable and helpless female characters."[97] The idea of the presidency as patriarchal has also persisted in American history, popular culture, and the American imaginary. The founders of the United States are referred to as fathers and Bartlet, a descendent of one of them, is an extension of this patriarchal view. Bartlet "sees himself as a father, and rules based on his position as a father";[98] He utilises this patriarchal protection in his conduct with his own family, the staff whom he regards like his own children, and through his position as a presidential father. Since the 1970s, the Postwar image of the nuclear family, father at work, mother at home, no longer accurately reflects society. Chafe argues that "for generations, the traditional nuclear family had been the centrepiece of society. As of the 1990s, it seemed to be in freefall. The number of divorces skyrocketed, a new sexual revolution occurred, and traditional patterns of family life started to fall apart."[99] In Sorkin's work, fatherhood is given a far greater focus than motherhood, which aligns with Hamad's assertion that:

> contemporary Hollywood cinema is rife with representations of fatherhood since paternalized protagonists have become an increasingly and overwhelmingly omnipresent feature of popular film in the early twenty-first century, while the currency of fatherhood as a defining component of ideal masculinity has emerged as a dominant cultural trope of

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[96] Hannah Hamad, *Postfeminism and Paternity in Contemporary US Film: Framing Fatherhood*, (New York: Routledge, 2014) p.54

[97] Christy Ebert Vrtis, "Contemporary Crime-Fighting Dads: Negotiating Masculinity and Fathering in *24* and *Castle*" in *Pops in Pop Culture: Fatherhood, Masculinity and the New Man*, ed. Elizabeth Podnieks, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) p.141-158 (p.147)

[98] Linda Horwitz and Holly Swyers, "Why Are All The Presidents Men? Televisual Presidents and Patriarchy" in *You've Come Along Way Baby: Women, Politics, and Popular Culture*, ed. Lilly J. Goren, (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2009) p.115-134 (p.124)

[99] Chafe, p.429

> postfeminism, and a structuring paradigm of mediated masculinity.[100]

Throughout Sorkin's work, women benefit from feminism. They are able to succeed in traditionally masculine arenas, but parenthood becomes, for the most part, a masculine privilege. In *Sports Night*, Casey initially celebrates his son, Charlie McCall's (Cory Buck), talent and success at baseball and "sport is often used in Hollywood films as a metaphor for, a means of externalising the psychological conflicts between sons and their fathers, particularly fathers who are overly preoccupied with the need to prove masculinity."[101] Dan, however, works out that Charlie lied and Charlie has to admit that he didn't want to embarrass Casey with his lack of skill or interest in the sport. Casey tells Charlie that "in this lifetime, you will never embarrass me. It's not gonna happen. You play baseball if you want to play baseball, and the only thing you ever have to do to make me and your Mom happy is come home at the end of the day."[102] Casey subverts what has come to be expected of the pushy sports father in popular culture, and instead emphasises his love and support of Charlie.

Bruzzi argues that there are far more movies about fathers and sons than fathers and daughters, and that the role of the father is examined through his difficult relationship with his son. However, the majority of fathers in Sorkin's works are, like Sorkin himself, fathers of daughters. The most prominent example of this is Bartlet, who is the father of three daughters, Elizabeth (Annabeth Gish), Eleanor (Nina Siemaszko), and Zoey (Elisabeth Moss). The episode, 'Ellie',[103] demonstrates the troubled relationship that Bartlet has with Eleanor, despite the strong relationship with his two other children. In the episode, Eleanor comes to the defence of Dr Griffith (Mary Kay Place), the Surgeon General — also her godmother — after she made some public comments regarding marijuana. Bartlet accuses Eleanor of speaking to the press just to make him unhappy; she tells him that "I don't know how to make you happy, Dad! For that, you've got to talk to Zoey or Liz." Dr Griffith

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[100] Hamad, p.99

[101] Stella Bruzzi, *Bringing Up Daddy: Fatherhood and Masculinity in Post-war Hollywood*, (London: British Film Institute, 2005) p.103

[102] 'What Kind of Day Has It Been?', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 23. First broadcast, ABC, 1999

[103] 'Ellie', *The West Wing,* dir. by Michael Engler, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 15. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

challenges Bartlet over his relationship with her, revealing that his daughter is frightened of him:

> Dr Griffith: You've been the king of whatever room you've walked into her entire life.
> Bartlet: It never seemed to intimidate Zoey or Liz
> Dr Griffith: Well, kids are different, they're not the same! You would be amazed, you'd be stunned at how soon they understand that they're not their father's favourite.
> Bartlet: That's not true.
> Dr Griffith: Sir—
> Bartlet: That's not true.
> Dr Griffith: Mr President—
> Bartlet: No, no, no. I will bear with the Christian Right and the Hollywood Left and the AFL-CLO and the AARP and the Cannabis Society and Japan, but I will not stand and allow someone to tell me that I love one of my children less than the others…She's frightened of me?

The episode ends with their reconciliation and, echoing Casey's words to Charlie, Bartlet tells her that "the only thing you ever had to do to make me happy was come home at the end of the day." Bartlet's position of father of the nation is given equal importance to his position as a biological father, and his position as a family man is more important to him than his position as leader of the country. Other fathers of daughters in Sorkin's television series include Isaac Jaffee, Leo McGarry, Danny Tripp, Charlie Skinner and Eliot Hirsch, indicating that fatherhood, particularly the relationship between a father and a daughter, is an important theme that has spanned across a variety of Sorkin's works. A significant amount of narrative time in *Studio 60* is dedicated to Jordan's pregnancy and Danny's attempts to prove himself as a suitable father to her unborn daughter. He accompanies her to her doctor's appointments and bets that he can keep the practice baby 'alive' — although he fails at this when he deputises Simon and Tom in the task and they behead the doll in a prop guillotine. When Jordan is rushed to hospital, she comments on Danny's desire to be a father to her child:

> Doctor: Have anyone that you can call? Family or friends?
> Jordan: Danny Tripp.
> Doctor: The father?

> Jordan: No, but he wants to be.[104]

Throughout Sorkin's work biology is a distant second to loyalty, love and fidelity, and Danny proposes before Jordan has her c-section, claiming that biology is irrelevant to him: "Biology's just biology. This is my daughter. I want you to be my wife. I want this to be my family forever."[105] After the baby has been delivered and Jordan is still in surgery due to complications, Danny is outraged that he is initially not allowed to see the baby, declaring that "that is my daughter in the ICU. I want her to see that there is a big grown man who's gonna take care of her for the rest of her life starting now"[106] and he objects to her being called his step-daughter, "let's stop calling her my step-daughter. She's my daughter. She started being that the moment she was born."[107] At the end of the episode Danny legally adopts the baby, which he and Jordan name Rebecca Tripp, creating the appearance of the traditional nuclear family. Although Danny's position as a liberal intellectual is directly counter to the national narrative of post-9/11 society, the behaviour that he displays towards baby Rebecca embodies the idea of paternal protection. Danny's willingness to be her parent despite her not being his biological child is reused in *The Newsroom* but for comedic effect. When telling Will that she's pregnant, MacKenzie jokes about the odds of the baby being his:

> MacKenzie: I'm seven weeks pregnant and there's like a five in nine chance that it's yours.
> Will: I don't care if there's no chance it's mine. It's mine now.[108]

While MacKenzie is making a joke, Will, like Danny, is shown to consider biology irrelevant to fatherhood.

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[104] 'K&R, Part 1', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[105] Ibid

[106] 'K&R, Part 2', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Dave Chameides, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 20. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[107] Ibid

[108] 'What Kind of Day Has It Been', *The Newsroom*

Hollywood frequently portrays single parenthood as a male endeavour, particularly in the twenty-first century, as seen in films such as *The Pursuit of Happyness* (Muccino, 2006), *The Descendants* (Payne, 2011), and *Gifted* (Webb, 2016) and "fatherhood narratives allow for the privileging of masculine subjectivities, and the concomitant elision of motherhood, to be renormalised."[109] This naturally accompanying omission of the mother becomes even more sinister with the widowed father, as in these narratives, the mother is completely erased from the life of the child. With increasing frequency since the 1990s, the lone father has become

> a recurrent love object in romantic comedy…The first way in which Hollywood valorises the single father is to create out of the least likely man a love object…it is the children who desire and instigate the search for a new mother…The second way Hollywood valorises the lone father is to make him the romantic ideal, the perfect composite parent (the maternal surrogate as well) who has renounced any need for sexual attachment or a new wife because his family is all he needs.[110]

In *The American President*, written by Sorkin, President Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas) is presented as a hands-on widowed father to Lucy (Shawna Waldron), attending parent teacher conferences and encouraging her to enjoy social studies. Before he goes to dinner with Sydney (Annette Bening) he checks with Lucy to make sure that she is okay for him to start dating again:

> Shepherd: Lucy, is this okay with you? My having dinner with a woman?
> Lucy: It's totally okay.
> Shepherd: Are you sure? Because if you want to talk about it…
> Lucy: Dad, it's cool. Go for it.[111]

His willingness to cancel his date for Lucy demonstrates that he puts her happiness before his own and further indicates his status as the good father. Lucy gives advice to Shepherd

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[109] Hamad, p.102

[110] Bruzzi, p.85

[111] *The American President,* dir. Rob Reiner, (Columbia Pictures, 1995)

regarding Sydney, however she doesn't push him into the relationship, and it is Shepherd who is active in his pursuit of Sydney. While *The American President* seeks to restore the traditional family structure, Shepherd's own desire for Sydney presents a more complex take on the narrative structure in which "a widowed or divorced father is helped by his children to choose a suitable replacement mother/wife and, in Hollywood, the good father is idealised in a way the good mother never has been."[112] Shepherd, like most of Sorkin's father protagonists, is presented as unwaveringly devoted to his daughter and "the good single father is a potent and popular cinematic myth and one that counters the threat of the 'bad' single mother, one of Hollywood's favoured objects of hatred and distrust."[113] A version of this can be found in *Steve Jobs*, one of the key plots of the film being Steve's (Michael Fassbender) troubled relationship with his daughter, Lisa (Makenzie Moss, Ripley Sobo, and Perla Haney-Jardine in Acts I, II and III respectively). In the film's first act, Steve continually insists that Lisa is not his daughter and that 28% of the male population of the United States could be Lisa's father; Steve actively chooses his own denial over his confidante Joanna's insistence that "you must be able to see that she looks like you."[114] Despite his denial, he encourages Lisa to play with the Mac and has her save the picture that she creates. Similarly, the first Apple computer was called LISA and while initially Steve insists that it was just a coincidence, he later admits to her that "of course it was named after you. Local Integrated System Architecture doesn't even mean anything." Even though Steve continually denied that he was Lisa's father, she could not be erased from his conscience. Steve also worries about the fact that she is not in school; even paying for her mother, Chrisann (Katherine Waterston), to move them to a house in a better school district. In the second act Lisa visits again, and Steve takes more of a direct interest in her interests. She also reveals that she has to wake Chrisann up in the morning, indicating that although Steve is relatively absent from Lisa's life, Chrisann is the 'bad' mother from whom Lisa must be protected. In this act, Steve also threatens to have Chrisann killed if her poor treatment of Lisa continues:

> Steve: Look at me, Chrisann.
> Chrisann: What?

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[112] Bruzzi, p.xv

[113] Bruzzi, p.85

[114] *Steve Jobs,* dir. Danny Boyle, (Universal Pictures, 2015)

> Steve: You know who I am right?
> Chrisann: Yes.
> Steve: And you know I know people?
> Chrisann: What are you talking about?
> Steve: Look at me. And you know the people I know, they know people?
> Chrisann: What is this?
> Steve: If I ever hear again that you've thrown a cereal bowl at Lisa's head—
> Chrisann: What?
> Steve: My private line is gonna ring, and a voice on the other end is gonna say "we're all set." That's how I'll learn that you're dead.

Steve's threat complicates his position as the bad father, while he is absent from Lisa's day to day life, his desire to protect her runs contrary to his insistence in the previous act that she is not his child. While the narrative does not position him as a *good* father, it presents him as *better* than the mother; this is reinforced by Lisa at the end of the second act telling Steve that she wants to live with him. In the final act, at Joanna's prompting, Steve seeks to fix his relationship with Lisa — now nineteen. Joanna tells him that "when you're a father, that's supposed to be the best part of you. And it's caused me two decades of agony, Steve, that it is for you, the worst." Lisa also calls him out on not stepping in to help her when he knew what her life with her mother was like: "you know my mother might be a troubled woman, but what's your excuse? That's why I'm not impressed with your story, Dad. It's that you knew what I was going through, and you didn't do anything about it, and that makes you an unconscionable coward." When Lisa asks why he spent so many years insisting that he was not her father, he admits that it is because he's poorly made. In the final scene, Steve hands her the print out of the painting that she made on the original Mac and the final shots of the film feature cuts between Steve and Lisa looking at each other while Steve is on stage — thus indicating the reparation of their relationship. Hamad argues that in Hollywood fatherhood is frequently used to "humanize and partially redeem"[115] villains and anti-heroes. While it would be a mistake to call Steve the 'villain' of the narrative, fatherhood in the film does work this way. Steve's redemption in the final act comes with his desire to mend his relationship with Lisa, and her willingness to allow this. The promise he makes to "put a thousand songs in her pocket," i.e invent the iPod, signals that the commitment he has made

[115] Hamad, p.52

to repair their relationship will continue beyond the end of the film and personalises a significant 21st century invention by Apple.

Richard Brody argues that in the contemporary romantic comedy, as in society, "independence and self-sufficiency have become ideologies."[116] However, the priority that is placed on relationships in Sorkin's work, romantic and familial, indicates that the mutual love and support that his heroes experience is vital to both their success and wellbeing, as well as the improvement of society. Grayling argues that friendship is one of the two most significant kinds of relationship that human individuals can have with each other — the other being intimate love, itself a various and multiple phenomenon"[117] — and by placing such an emphasis on these friendships, Sorkin creates a body of fiction that joins the long tradition of dynamics that prioritise loyalty and support. Due to the lack of homosexual relationships in his writing, Sorkin does not completely move away from the conventional romantic comedy plot, however, by developing the role of women to affirm their careers over subordination to men, and by placing equal importance on friendship, family, and romance, his work does still reflect "more contemporary and often more realistic attitudes towards love."[118] While the natural extension of romantic love is still the family, Sorkin's work acknowledges the changing appearance of the family unit, and reflects its variations in society. Putnam argues that "people who have close friends and confidants, friendly neighbors and supportive co-workers are less likely to experience sadness, low self-esteem and problems with eating and sleeping."[119] Although Putnam's analysis does not account for the chemical factor or depression that exists beyond the fix of social connections, the idea that people are generally happier when they have strong support networks is one that is evident in Sorkin's work. In the DVD commentary to the *Studio 60* pilot, Sorkin states that because the characters in his work are like a family, the arguments that they have often happen in front of one another. In his work, Sorkin argues that even if one has a poor

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[116] Richard Brody, '"The Lovers" and the Limitations of the Modern Rom-Com', *The New Yorker*, 3rd May 2017. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-lovers-and-the-limitations-of-the-modern-rom-com?verso=true> [Accessed on: 13th December 2019]

[117] Grayling, p.170

[118] Eleanor Hersey, "Love and Microphones: Romantic Comedy Heroines as Public Speakers" *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 34:4 (2007) 146-159 (151)

[119] Putnam, p.332

relationship with their biological family, they can venture out into the world and form their own families. This idea posits that no one in his America needs to go through life alone and one can always find that vital connection with others that makes us human. In the following, final chapter, I will examine the way that Sorkin presents religion and Republicanism, and how he challenges the place of the Christian Right within the Republican Party.

Chapter Eight — "Lady, the God you pray to is too busy being indicted for tax fraud!":[1] Religion and Republicanism

Religion and Republicanism are both recurring themes in Sorkin's work. Particularly worthy of analysis is how these once separate entities formed the Christian Right. Sorkin's work is important to study because he uses his narratives to interrogate the extremist factions of the Republican Party, in order to examine the religious influence on the Party's political agendas, while overtly favouring a more moderate Republicanism in keeping with the Party's traditional ideology in a way that is rarely seen in other American television series. The second half of the of the 20th century saw a profound change in the Republican Party; the moderates that once dominated fell away, and ideological factions took over. The divide between the political left and right has only increased in the 21st century, and in the first episode of *The Newsroom* Will (Jeff Daniels) comments on this separation: "Social scientists have concluded that the country is more polarized in any time since the civil war."[2] The 2000 US Presidential Election fractured the nation along both cultural and geographical lines[3] and politics had come to equate lifestyle; the division is so deep and entrenched that it has become an overt part of identity formation. This Red and Blue America that came into full fruition on November 7th 2000 was a product of the 1990s fracturing along political fault lines; "The policy fight of the 90s echo where we are today: clashes in Washington over budget deficits, spending, taxes, and healthcare; and broader culture war flare-ups over gay rights, guns and political correctness."[4] The beliefs of the Christian Right have, since the 1980s, increasingly become the dominant ideology of the Republican Party, despite the party being currently led by Donald Trump, certainly "one of the least religious presidents in modern times."[5] From the latter half of the 20th century, the Christian Right "had clearly put

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[1] 'Pilot', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, NBC, 1999

[2] 'We Just Decided To', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[3] Kornacki, *The Red and the Blue: The 1990s and the Birth of Political Tribalism*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), p.5

[4] Steve Kornacki, p.6

[5] Kurt Andersen, *Fantasy Land: How America Went Haywire: A 500-Year History*, (London: Ebury Press, 2018) p.363

behind them any compunction about mixing politics and religion, seeking in sermons as well as in literature, to mobilize support for candidates who would fight abortion, defeat the Equal Rights Amendment, wage war against homosexuality and restore prayer to the schools."[6] Both Democrats and Republicans have extremist factions of their parties but "starting in the 1990s, America's unhinged right became much larger and more influential than its unhinged left. Moreover, it now has unprecedented power — as of 2016, effective control over much of the US government."[7] In this chapter I will argue that Sorkin presents an alternative to this right-wing, religious extremism that is more in line with the moderates that used to control the Republican party. In scrutinising his Republican heroes, most notably Will McAvoy, I contend that it is this moderation — and its ability to work with the Democratic Party — that is vital to cohesive functioning of Sorkin's America. I also examine the way that Sorkin presents the extremism of the Republican Party, best exemplified though the portrayal of the Tea Party[8] in *The Newsroom* in order to reject its reactionary and often ill-informed stances on issues such as gay marriage and social programmes. Sorkin interrogates what he sees as a corrupting force in the Republican Party and their utilisation of lies and propaganda that will eventually contribute to the prevalence of 'fake-news' as we know it today. I will examine the way that Sorkin portrays the Christian Right in his work and how this contrasts with his depiction of Catholicism and Judaism, both of which are presented as far more rational than Protestantism. Finally, I will consider how *Studio 60*'s Harriet Hayes (Sarah Paulson), a member of the Christian Right, offers a softer counter narrative of Right-wing Christianity to the hardened liberalism of Matt Albie (the most obvious stand in for Sorkin in his texts).

Kabaservice has argued that the Republican Party used to be controlled by moderates and that the "conservatism that now wholly controls the party did not even exist until the

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[6] William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*. 7th Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) p.424-5

[7] Andersen, p.362

[8] The Tea Party is a US conservative movement that initially focused on low taxes; taking its name from the Boston Tea Party whereby colonists rejected British taxation. (Later, numerous commentators applied the acronym 'Taxed Enough Already). The beliefs of the Tea Party run directly counter to the liberalism that is frequently foregrounded in Sorkin's work.

1950s, and remained a minority faction for many years afterward."[9] When this new Right emerged, journalists failed to take them seriously and this is indicative of what happened with the candidacy of Donald Trump; the ineffectiveness of journalists during his campaign has led to an unrecognisable transformation of the Republican Party. A survey during Eisenhower's presidency "revealed that forty-two state Republican chairmen and two-thirds of the RNC self-identified as modern Republicans"[10] and these modern Republicans were more moderate than the Republicans of today, believing in internationalism and the positive potential of the federal government. What are today known as conservatives were, in the 1960s, the smallest faction of the Republican Party but they believed they spoke for the majority: "their sense of heroic embattlement was enhanced by their opponents' tendency to view them as not merely wrong but insane."[11] The dismissal of fringe voices has only emboldened them, and allowed extremists to capitalise upon these divisions between both parties. This has only increased in the contemporary political environment. Since the new millennium, conservatism has so effectively silenced any other form of Republicanism that the phrases 'moderate Republican' and 'liberal Republican' have become oxymoronic. Will McAvoy is a liberal or moderate Republican, and "conservatives claimed that progressives were liberal democrats in Republican clothing."[12] In his television series, Sorkin celebrates a moderate Republicanism and religious belief. Despite earning the frequent labels of liberal and left-leaning, Sorkin's television series frequently feature Republican heroes who eloquently defend the reason that they are members of that party. The most noticeable examples of this are Will McAvoy and Ainsley Hayes (of *The West Wing*). Will, and to a lesser extent Ainsley (Emily Procter), are Republicans more in line with what the party was before it was taken over by religion and turned into the now de facto party of the Christian Right. Both characters represent a distinctive faction of the party but neither account for its extreme margins. Reagan presented a crucial change in the Republican Party, and Will and Ainsley represent the Party's pre-Reagan moderate history. In *The Newsroom*, Republican

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[9] Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.xvi

[10] Kabaservice, p.17

[11] Kabaservice, p.25

[12] Kabaservice, p.21

spokesperson Taylor Warren (Constance Zimmer) questions Will on why he claims to be a Republican:

> Taylor: I'm wondering, with all respect, do you call yourself a Republican so you can claim credibility when you attack the GOP?
> Will: No, I call myself a Republican 'cause I am one. I believe in market solutions and common sense realities and the necessity to defend ourselves against a dangerous world and that's about it. Problem is, now I have to be homophobic. I have to count the number of times people go to church. I have to deny facts and think that scientific research is a long con. I have to think poor people are getting a sweet ride. And I have to have such a stunning inferiority complex that I fear education and intellect in the 21st century. But most of all, the biggest new requirement, really the only requirement, is that I have to hate Democrats. And I have to hate Chris Christie for not spitting on the president when he got off Air Force One.[13]

Will challenges the social conditions of performative Republicanism that are now placed upon Republicans, that anyone who identifies with the Party must also now espouse prejudice and hatred, or risk being accused of being a traitor — something that Will is accused of. This view has become particularly relevant with the rise of the alt-right. The alt-right is a term that has evolved in the 21st century as the alternative Right, generally used as a euphemism for Neo-Nazis and against all means of political correctness, of the advances of feminism and minority rights. Churchwell argues that

> the alt-right movement has joined forces with a loose faction of the other far-right groups, including conspiracy-minded libertarians…armed militias…the Tea Party movement and its most prominent spokesperson, Sarah Palin, the right-wing politicians and pundits who deliberately stoked 9/11 xenophobia of Muslim terrorism and the rise of Islamic State; and evangelicals who had, with increasing success, driven what had recently been

[13] 'Election Night, Part II', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 9. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

> viewed as extremist agendas into the Republican mainstream.[14]

The requirement of prejudice and anti-intellectualism that Will criticises has only increased during the candidacy and then presidency of Trump. Dominic Sandbrook notes that "Liberals often liked to argue that conservatism was nothing more than rampant greed or thinly disguised racism, or that its advance was really a question of big-business sponsorship"[15] and while Sorkin's work leans predominantly to the left, his heroic Republicans complicate these political divisions. Sorkin's moderate Republicanism recalls the beliefs of Jefferson, and his fellow founders, upon which they sought to build their new nation, and throughout his work, Sorkin is highly critical of the corruption of these original Republican ideals. Mellows and Trubowitz argue that "given the seemingly insurmountable divides of recent politics, it is hard to imagine that there have been eras in American political history of bipartisan accord. Yet these periods have typically lasted for a number of years."[16] Haselby contends that "it is not hard to understand the appeal of bipartisanship: it sounds mature, suggesting a harmonious pursuit of lofty ideals. The combined crisis facing America and the world seems to require a broad marshalling of national talents, a great cooperative effort that transcends party bickering. What's needed in the bipartisan ideal, is for Democrats and Republicans to pitch in and go to work, united in moderate agreement."[17] However, despite the civic ideal of bipartisanship, Haselby argues that there is little evidence to suggest that it would make the nation better. In Sorkin's America, however, this cooperation is not only possible, but sought after in order to improve society. In *The West Wing*, Ainsley is frequently critical of Democratic policies and the attitudes and actions of the Bartlet White House:

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[14] Sarah Churchwell, *Behold, America: A History of America First and the American Dream*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p.293

[15] Dominic Sandbrook, "'American Politics in the 1990s and 2000s" in *American Thought and Culture in the 21st Century*, ed. Martin Halliwell and Catherine Morley, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) p.21-34 (p.25)

[16] Nicole Mellow and Peter Trubowitz, 'Red verses blue: American electoral geography and congressional bipartisanship, 1898-2002' *Political Geography. 2*4 (2005) 659-677 (661)

[17] Sam Haselby, 'Divided we stand: The problem with bipartisan ship', *The Boston Globe*, 22nd March 2009. <http://archive.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2009/03/22/divided_we_stand/> [Accessed on: 13th February 2020]

> This White House that feels that government is better for children than parents are. That looks at forty years of degrading and humiliating free lunches handed out in a spectacularly failed effort to level the playing field and says "Let's try forty more." This White House that says of anyone that points that out to them, that they're cold and mean and racist, and then accuses Republicans of using the politics of fear. This White House that loves the Bill of Rights, all of them except the second one.[18]

When Sam (Rob Lowe) points out that the advocates for Second Amendment Rights are so vocal simply because they like guns, Ainsley argues that Sam's problem is that he does not like people who like guns. Despite disagreeing with the policies of the Bartlet administration, Ainsley accepts a job at the White House because, as discussed in chapter one, her sense of civic duty overrides her political differences with the Democratic administration. When her friends mock the other White House staffers, she comes to their defence:

> Say they're smug and superior, say their approach to public policy makes you want to tear your hair out. Say they like high taxes and spending your money. Say they want to take your guns and open your borders, but don't call them worthless. At least don't do it in front of me. The people that I have met have been extraordinarily qualified, their intent is good. Their commitment is true, they are righteous and they are patriots. And I'm their lawyer.[19]

Ainsley demonstrates that in Sorkin's America it is possible for Republicans and Democrats to set aside political differences and work towards a common goal for the betterment of society. The cooperation between Ainsley and the Democratic administration, particularly Sam, is reflective far more of an America at the beginning of the 1990s than the beginning of the 2000s when the season aired. In the 1990s, a Democratic controlled congress was all Republican politicians of the time had ever known; "if you didn't have the votes to impose your will, then you worked something out with the other side. It was practical. It was

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[18] 'In This White House', *The West Wing,* dir. by Ken Olin, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 4. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[19] Ibid

responsible."[20] In the early 90s, Newt Gingrich changed the way the party operated and "only seventy-one Republicans stayed loyal to their president. The other 105 went with Gingrich, the renegade party whip who told them there were more important things than loyalty to the White House."[21] Loyalty to the White House seems to have returned since the 2016 election, as Republicans are now making every effort to defend Donald Trump, particularly over the impeachment, due to what is likely a toxic if effective combination of party loyalty, fear, and ambition. Ainsley is not only able to work with the administration; she is, at times, also able to sway their opinion. Sam asks her to summarise his twenty-two page memo on an amendment to a Congressional Bill concerning fraud awareness for small businesses into two pages. While Ainsley does shorten the memo, she also reverses Sam's position and is able to convince him to change his view:

> Sam: I can't believe I'm listening to a Republican tell me the government should run background checks into peak business. In fact, I can't believe I'm listening to a Republican. Could it possibly be that most of the people you want to fingerprint have darker skin than you do?
> Ainsley: Well, not to let the facts interfere with a good story, but 80% of the violators are white. Fraudulent employees are three times more likely to be married, they're four times more likely to be men, sixteen times more likely to be managers and executives, and, guess what professor, they're five times more likely to have post-graduate degrees.
> Sam: You- listen- I- you know- I can't- Alright, start from the beginning.[22]

Sam is initially reluctant to listen to what Ainsley has to say because she's a Republican, and therefore assumes that any proposals that she has will go against the interests of the Democratic administration. However, her ability to convince him otherwise demonstrates that the cooperation between these two parties can improve the nation. Throughout his work, Sorkin demonstrates a working bi-partisanship because in the America that he has created it is the only mature route to the improvement of society. This foregrounding of the greater

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[20] Kornacki, p.105

[21] Kornacki, p.111

[22] 'The Lame Duck Congress', *The West Wing,* dir. by Jeremy Kagan, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 6. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

good of bi-partisanship also responds to a tiredness with the general feeling of political division. While they are able to agree in this instance, they also argue over other Republican positions. One example of this is Ainsley's opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment:

> Sam: When I was downstairs, I made a decision. I'm gonna register with the Republican Party, and I'll tell you why, if you're curious. It's because they're a freedom-loving people.
> Ainsley: We also like beef.
> Sam: You know, you insist government is depraved for not legislating against what we can see on the newsstands, or what we can see in an art exhibit, or what we can burn in protest, or which sex we're allowed to have sex with, or a woman's right to choose, but don't you dare try to regulate this deadly weapon I have concealed on me, for that would encroach against my freedom.
> Ainsley: Yeah? And Democrats believe in free speech long as it isn't prayer while you're standing in school. You believe in the Freedom of Information Act except if you want to find out if your fourteen-year-old daughter's had an abortion.
> Sam: We believe in the ERA.
> Ainsley: Well, go get 'em.
> Sam: How can you have an objection to something that says—
> Ainsley: Because it's humiliating! A new amendment that we vote on, declaring that I am equal under the law to a man. I am mortified to discover there's reason to believe I wasn't before. I am a citizen of this country. I am not a special subset in need of your protection. I do not have to have my rights handed down to me by a bunch of old white men. The same Article 14 that protects you, protects me. And I went to law school just to make sure.[23]

Opponents to the ERA do not just include men: numerous women have been vocally opposed since the amendment was first put forward for ratification in the 1970s. These objections came mostly from Evangelical women and Cullen argues that some "saw genuine advantages in the sense of respect and protection they believed they commanded in a

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[23] '17 People', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 18. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

traditional gender paradigm."[24] Ainsley's objection to the ERA is presented as more reasonable than the Evangelical objection; she regards it as a redundant law as she feels that her rights are already protected by Article 14. While this is true, because gender discrimination is not explicitly prohibited in Article 14, it may not always be interpreted this way. Similarly, laws protecting women can also be rolled back, for example, the Violence Against Women Act expired in 2019.[25] While Ainsley's Republican views are presented as more reasonable than other Republicans depicted in *The West Wing*, there are still aspects to policy and legislation to which she is ideologically opposed in the Democratic administration. The conflict between Democrats and Republicans is understandably a common feature of *The West Wing*, but the unspoken forces that drive such divisions are also touched upon — in conversation with Republican lawyer Joe Quincy (Matthew Perry), Josh (Bradley Whitford) comments, on the animosity between the Right and Left, that "there may not be anything anymore that outpaces the hatred the Right feels for the Left or the tonnage of disrespect that the Left feels for the Right."[26] Similarly, in *Studio 60*, Matt (Matthew Perry) argues that while he holds contempt for the Republican government, it is partly due to the fact that the government feels contempt towards Hollywood:

> Matt: You think I have contempt for my government?
> Harriet: Yeah.
> Matt: Harry, if I do it's nothing to the contempt my government has for me.
> Harriet: Your government doesn't know you.
> Matt: I know. But it doesn't stop them from getting votes by calling me a lazy, pampered, anti-American, anti-family, immoral, perverted, dishonorable, weak fairy.[27]

Other subversive characters in *The West* Wing's representation of the Right include Congressman Matt Skinner (Charley Lang) in season two and Cliff Calley, Majority Counsel for the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee (Mark Feuerstein). In the

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[24] Jim Cullen, *Democratic Empire: The United States Since 1945*, (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2017) p.169

[25] The expiration of this act opens up vulnerabilities in the legal system and social services that offer support to victims of domestic violence and sexual assault.

[26] 'Evidence of Things Not Seen', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christoper Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 20. First broadcast, NBC, 2003

[27] 'What Kind of Day Has It Been', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Bradley Whitford, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

second season, Josh questions why a gay Congressman can be a member of the Republican Party when they are so vocally opposed to gay rights and Skinner explains his view, "I agree with 95% of the Republican platform. I believe in local government. I'm in favor of individual rights rather than group rights. I believe free markets lead to free people and that the country needs a strong national defense. My life doesn't have to be about being a homosexual. It doesn't have to be entirely about that."[28] Skinner feels that because the Republican Party share most of his beliefs, he is better off working with them, rather than the Democrats who, despite showing more acceptance to who he is, differ in regards to domestic and international policies. In the third season, Donna (Janel Moloney) asks Cliff, with whom she is on a date, why he's a Republican:

> Because I hate poor people, I hate them, Donna. They're all so…poor. And many of them talk funny, and don't have proper table manners. My father slaved away at the Fortune 500 company he inherited so I could go to Choate, Brown, and Harvard and see that this country isn't overrun by poor people and lesbians…No, I'm a Republican because I believe in smaller government. This country was founded on the principle of freedom, and freedom stands opposed to constraints, and the bigger the government, the more the constraints.[29]

Cliff begins by impersonating the beliefs of fundamentalist Republicans, mocking both them and how Democrats regard the party, before explaining to Donna that it is simply that he believes in small government. These Republicans are presented as reasonable, intelligent and moderate. In *The Newsroom*, Taylor is also presented as more moderate than other Republicans at the time. She gives Maggie (Alison Pill) a quote from a (fictional) Californian Congressman who earlier that day had condemned Todd Akin over his comments about 'legitimate rape' and abortion:

> Maggie: In 1990, Brody wrote in an SFA publication, "It's a sad fact, but women cry rape to avoid embarrassment, to exact revenge, or just to draw

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[28] 'The Portland Trip', *The West Wing,* dir. by Paris Barclay, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1 2, episode 7. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

[29] 'Ways and Means', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 3. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

attention. If we have rape exceptions to abortion laws, women could now cry rape to terminate an innocent life. We should be able to look past the-"
Don: Wow.
Maggie: "look past the mendacity. Children are conceived by love, not rape."
Don: He condemned Akin?
Maggie: This is what I'm saying.
Don: This morning, on election night?
Maggie: I think you're right. I think he has a pollster who looked at undecided women 18-34 and told him he had to roll the dice.
Don: How did you find this quote?
Maggie: Taylor Warren pointed me to it.
Don: She's a Republican.
Maggie: Why are you whispering that?
Don: I love her doing the right thing.[30]

Don considers her giving the quote to be her doing a noble thing, although Maggie does point out that it was also a way for Taylor to spite Jim (John Gallagher Jr.) in their ongoing feud by giving Maggie the story instead.

While Obama won the 2008 Presidential Election with a sizeable margin, securing both the popular vote and electoral college, opposition to his presidency was widespread.[31] The most notable example of this was the emergence of the Tea Party, who foregrounded beliefs that were so right-wing that even conservatives of previous decades had rejected them. They also claimed to be a grassroots movement, despite having billionaire backers like the Koch brothers. Regardless of the obvious hypocrisy surrounding the Tea Party, "conservative politicians and media outlets hailed the Tea Party movement as a gloriously unprecedented people's revolt. Moderates, however, had a distinct feeling of deja vu. The Tea Party movement was only the latest in a cycle of insurgencies on the Republican right that had shaken the GOP since the McCarthy movement of the 1950s and the Goldwater revolt in the early 1960s."[32] Cullen notes that "there was little question of the Tea Party's

[30] 'Election Night, Part I', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Jason Ensler, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 8. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

[31] Obama's election reignited racial discontent. Members of Congress sought to block any progress the White House sought to make and there were widespread demands to see his birth certificate; one notable perpetrator of the rumour that Obama was not born in the US was Donald Trump.

[32] Kabaservice, p.387

success in getting their preferred Republican candidates elected to local and state offices, and generally pulling the national party to the right."[33] In *The Newsroom*, Will spends a significant portion of the first season criticising and attempting to take down the Tea Party. He tells Charlie (Sam Waterston) that although he understood the Tea Party in the beginning, they are "being radicalized and their original organizing principles obliterated. And no one should be laughing anymore. They should be scared shitless. My party is being hijacked and it's happening in real time."[34] Between April and November 2010, Will aggressively confronts members of the Tea Party on air in order to demonstrate the ridiculous nature of their positions,[35] for example in reference to Sharon Angle he states "that was a Republican nominee for the US Senate saying she hasn't ruled out a violent overthrow of her government."[36] Will concludes this season arguing that the Tea Party are not Republicans:

> Ideological purity, compromise as weakness, a fundamentalist belief in scriptural literalism, denying science, unmoved by facts, undeterred by new information, a hostile fear of progress, a demonization of education, a need to control women's bodies, severe xenophobia, tribal mentality, intolerance of dissent, a pathological hatred of the US government. They can call themselves the Tea Party. They can call themselves conservatives. And they can call themselves Republicans, though Republicans certainly shouldn't. But we should call them what they are — The American Taliban.[37]

Despite telling the truth and confronting troubling political manoeuvres of the Tea Party on his broadcast, Will is removed as the public face of the 9/11 broadcast, because it conflicts with the financial concerns of the parent company, and because it conflicts with perceptions of taste and worry about creating offence.

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[33] Cullen, p.308

[34] 'The 112th Congress', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin and Gideon Yago, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[35] Sorkin uses a combination of actual statements, such as those from Sharon Angle, and fictionalisation of views from Tea Party candidates such as Mike Lee and Rand Paul.

[36] Ibid

[37] 'The Greater Fool', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 10. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

In 2012, the Tea Party was the embodiment of the extremist wing of the Republican Party, however with the election of Donald Trump in 2016 the party has moved even further into fact denial and lies, which pose a genuine threat to public safety.[38] The Tea Party contributed a great deal to the willingness to deny facts that are incompatible, typically, with religious belief and in 2016, "despite his nonstop lies and obvious fantasies — rather because of them — Donald Trump was elected president."[39] Trump campaigned under the slogan 'Make America Great Again' in an attempt to recall a golden age and a promise that has perceived to have been lost — he is certainly not the first President to do so, as the allure of the pursuit of happiness is a powerful one — but this idea is, in and of itself, a fantasy. Although Sorkin also presents a fantasy, and has stated that he is drawn to wish fulfilment,[40] his fantasy is grounded in founding principles and ideals, and foregrounds notions of acceptance, unity, and tolerance. Trump was able to convert more in the swing states, as well as suppress the votes of minorities, and, although he won the electoral vote he did lose the popular vote. In the first episode Will argues that "people choose the facts they want now",[41] and it is this denial of facts that has become a staple of society even from President Trump himself.[42] Similarly, CEO of their parent company, Leona, accuses them of doing the news for the left but Charlie points out that they are doing the news for the centre, because facts are the centre. He tells her that "we don't believe that certain facts are in dispute to give the appearance of fairness to people who don't believe them. Balance is irrelevant to me. It doesn't have anything to do with truth, logic, or reality. He didn't go on the air telling people to give peace a chance, but evolution? The jury's back on that one."[43] Sorkin was identifying an evident shift in the rejection of fact in public discourse that was a problem in 2010 but has since reached incredible new heights. Journalist Josh Barro argues that "the problem is that

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[38] Adam Serwer, 'Donald Trump Is a Menace to Public Health', *The Atlantic*, 20th March 2020. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/donald-trump-menace-public-health/608449/> [Accessed on: 5th August 2020]

[39] Andersen, p.8

[40] BAFTA Guru. "Aaron Sorkin : Behind Closed Doors | From the BAFTA Archives". 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d29Xz_FS8Is> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020].

[41] 'We Just Decided To'

[42] A recent, and notable, example of this is Trump's suggestion that people treat COVID-19 by injecting themselves with disinfectant.

[43] 'The 112th Congress'

Republicans have purposefully torn down the validating institutions. They have convinced voters that the media cannot be trusted; they have gotten them used to ignoring inconvenient facts about policy."[44] This ease with which facts are simply now ignored did not happen overnight, and Andersen uses the metaphor of boiling to death in gradually heating water.[45] The progression was so slow and subtle that phrases such as alternative facts and fake news were part of common vernacular before we even realised it. The rise of the Tea Party marked a significant shift in the abandonment of reality, but this was "all before we became familiar with the terms *post-factual* and *post-truth*, before we elected a president with an outstandingly open mind about conspiracy theories, what's true and what's false, the nature of reality."[46] Will's refusal to adhere to the new Republican norms of fact denial and preposterousness earns him the label of RINO (Republican In Name Only); he tells Charlie that "I'm a registered Republican. I only seem liberal because I believe that hurricanes are caused by high barometric pressure and not gay marriage."[47] The refusal to acknowledge fact at odds with one's beliefs and potentially dangerous to one's political ambitions has become a significant problem in society, and a notable example of this is climate change.[48] Andersen argues that the "Republican position is now to oppose even *studying* climate change as well as any and all proposals to reduce carbon emissions. Rational people might disagree about how governments might minimize or prepare for the effects of global warming. You are entitled to your opinion. But refusing to accept its reality is a new and acceptable posture. You are not entitled to your own facts."[49] In the second season, Will challenges remarks made by Rick Santorum regarding climate change and evolution:

> He said this in regard to President Obama's climate change agenda. "It's not about your quality of life. It's not about your jobs. It's not about some phoney ideal.

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[44] Andersen, p.367-8

[45] Andersen, p.5

[46] Andersen, p.6

[47] 'I'll Try to Fix You', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 4. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[48] Coral Davenport and Eric Lipton, 'How G.O.P. Leaders Came to View Climate Change as Fake Science', *The New York Times*, 3 June 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/03/us/politics/republican-leaders-climate-change.html> [Accessed on: 29th June 2020]

[49] Andersen, p.368

> Some phoney theology. Oh, not a theology based on the bible. A different theology." Mr Dell, one of Rick Santorum's problems with the president's plan to combat climate change is that its roots can't be found in the bible.[50]

Will challenges the threat that these Tea Party candidates, which had co-opted the Republican Party, presented to the United States through their commitment to ignore issues that have a significant impact on society simply because they are at odds with their belief system. In the first season, when Charlie is defending Will's on air statements regarding the Tea Party, he tells Leona that "America just elected the most dangerous and addle-minded Congress in my lifetime."[51] The staff at Atlantis Cable News believe that the Republican Party, as it was at that time (2010), poses an outright danger to the American people and society, and that it is their responsibility as journalists to try and call attention to this.

Sorkin's work showcases the good that can be done by moderate Republicans when they work with Democrats to improve society, Sorkin also highlights the importance of private religious belief. The Founding Fathers had balanced attitudes towards religion: Thomas Jefferson considered religions to be "all alike, founded upon fables and mythology"[52] and John Adams stated that "the government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion."[53] In his biography of Alexander Hamilton, Ron Chernow notes that "one story, perhaps apocryphal, claims that when Hamilton was asked why the framers omitted the word *God* from the constitution, he replied, 'we forgot.' One is tempted to reply that Alexander Hamilton never forgot anything important."[54] While Hamilton's response is dubious in origin, these examples demonstrate that the Founding Fathers saw no benefit to the combination of religion and the laws of their new nation, but whether religion should play a role in public life was an important question

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[50] 'One Step Too Many', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Julian Farino, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 6. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

[51] 'The 112th Congress'

[52] Andersen, p.51

[53] Usconstitution.net. Treaty Between the United States and Tripoli [online] Available at: https://www.usconstitution.net/tripoli.html [Accessed 8th January 2020].

[54] Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2004) p.235

for them. Religion's role in society posed two challenges to the founders when framing the constitution; they had to protect free expression, but also prevent religion from gaining significant influence. James Madison has been regarded as one of the greatest thinkers on the relationship between church and state. In *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* (1785), he argued that "the Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate."[55] Madison argued that religion is the true test of equality and a free republic and if the right to practice one's religion is denied, it puts all other rights at risk. Theimann notes that

> if citizens are to be free and equal in the exercise of religion, then it follows that no particular faith or creed can be the preferred of the republic. The establishment of religion denies the freedom of some and the equality of all, and thereby denies the essential freedom of conscience. Genuine freedom implies pluralism; pluralism demands equality; and equality cannot be maintained under an ecclesiastical religion.[56]

This founding ideal has not remained steadfast; the assumption that America is a Christian nation is rarely challenged, particularly since the phrase 'In God We Trust' was added to the dollar in the 1957,[57] and since the 1970s religion has played a major part in political life. Crockatt argues that this arose from the "increase in subscription to evangelical forms of Protestantism and the associated rise of political pressure groups such as the Moral Majority, which had a significant impact on the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980."[58]

Like the Founding Fathers, from one of whom he is a descendent, Bartlet (Martin Sheen) is shown to be both deeply religious and well versed in the bible, but also rational in

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[55] Ronald F. Theimann, *Religion in Public Life: A Dilemma for Democracy*, (Washington D.C: Georgetown University Press, 1996) p.20

[56] Theimann, p.21

[57] The motto in "In God We Trust" was first added to the two-cent coin in 1864, and was gradually added to all classes of currency. In 1956 Congress passed legislation, that was signed into law by President Eisenhower, declaring "In God We Trust" the official motto of the United States — replacing the de facto motto E pluribus unum (out of many, one) which had been used since 1776.

[58] Richard Crockatt, "America at the millennium" in *New Introduction to American Studies*, ed. Howard Temperley and Christopher Bigsby, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013) p.376-396 (379)

these beliefs — he demonstrates this when a Christian Right radio (Claire Yarlett) host visits the White House:

> Jenna: I don't say homosexuality is an abomination, Mr President. The Bible does.
> Bartlet: Yes, it does. Leviticus.
> Jenna: 18:22.
> Bartlet: Chapter and verse. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions while I had you here. I'm interested in selling my youngest daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She's a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, and always clears [sic] the table when it was her turn. What would be a good price for her be? While thinking about that, can I ask another? My Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry, insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly states that he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or is it okay to call the police? Here's one that's really important, 'cause we've got a lot of a lot of sports fans in this town. Touching the skin of a dead pig makes us unclean, Leviticus 11:7. If they promise to wear gloves, can the Washington Red Skins still play football? Can Notre Dame? Can West Point? Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother, John, for planting different crops side by side? Can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads?[59]

Bartlet demonstrates the problem with taking the Bible literally and the Christian Right's tendency to pick and choose the parts that suit their agenda. Here, Sorkin shows the hypocrisy of the Evangelical Right who use religion to deny others the rights that they, themselves, have; Jenna is literate and educated, and she uses this to encourage the discrimination of women, minorities, and non-heteronormative sexualities.

Bartlet's religion is significant because he is Catholic, and throughout its history America has frequently engaged in anti-Catholic sentiment. Much of the anti-Catholicism rises from the question of whether or not a person can be both a Catholic and an American; "This question has troubled American's outside the Catholic community since colonial times. Many believed that because of their loyalty to their religious leader, the Pope in

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[59] 'The Midterms', *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 3. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

Rome, Catholics could not be loyal to the republic."[60] Bartlet's Catholicism provides another connection between himself and John F. Kennedy and Kennedy "had to convince the voting public that his religious belief and political responsibilities were compatible."[61] Kennedy's election in 1960 seemed to indicate the end of this particular bias towards Catholicism in American society and this is evident with Bartlet. He does not have to convince the public that his Catholicism is compatible the presidency as this progress has already been made by a previous president.[62] Dolan argues that the "Catholic deviation from democracy in church government and the intense commitment to the authority of the Pope and his clerical representatives at the local level was not in harmony with the liberal intellectual tradition. Thus, intellectually as well as socially and religiously, Catholics stood on the margins of American society."[63] Bartlet completely contrasts with this idea, as he embodies the very notion of the liberal intellectual and is presented as the most qualified to lead the country — yet, when he is first introduced at the end of the first episode during an argument that the staff are having with representatives of the Christian Right, he enters the room quoting the First Commandment; "I am the lord your God. Thou shalt worship no other God before me."[64] This demonstrates the ease with which Bartlet is comfortably able to combine these two identities. Andersen argues that the "Roman Catholic is in every meaningful way mainline, with its stable hierarchy that shapes and enforces doctrine and practices…a big reason American Catholics are more reality-based than Protestants is because tenured grown-ups, from the Vatican on down, have consistently been in command, tamping down and pinching off undesirable offshoots."[65] It is because Bartlet is Catholic rather than Protestant that he is, as Andersen argues, 'reality-based'; in Sorkin's work far more credit is given to Catholicism than other varying forms of Christianity — while a Protestant president cannot be permitted in the White House of *The West Wing*, a Catholic President is a safe choice.

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[60] Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of an American Catholicism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p.6

[61] Ibid

[62] While in Sorkin's work Kennedy's gains means that Bartlet has nothing to prove as a Catholic, in reality there has not been a Catholic President since. John Kerry lost in 2004 to George W. Bush, and former Vice President Joe Biden is currently running against Donald Trump.

[63] Dolan, p.58-9

[64] 'Pilot', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, NBC, 1999

[65] Andersen, p.269

The rise of Jewish and Catholic communities led to a fragmentation of civic piety and during "the 1950s and early 1960s it appeared that American's civic piety would have sufficient resilience to incorporate these newly influential communities of faith."[66] The rise of the phrase 'Judeo-Christian' "to describe the common heritage of those two distinct traditions signalled a typical American confidence in the ability of the 'melting-pot' to blend even the most diverse disagreements into a bland civic mixture."[67] It has also been argued, however, that this phrase worked to assimilate Jewish belief into Christian tradition and "also encouraged Christianity's historical tendency to deny Judaism's continuing religious validity."[68] Catholics and Jews generally voted Democrat, and this parallels socioeconomic issues with Democrats being favoured by those on the margins. There was also a regional connection, with many Catholic and Jewish communities being located in the Northeast which was also a traditionally Democratic stronghold. Voting patterns have changed slightly over time with African American Protestants favouring Democrats, and an increasing number of Catholics moving towards the Republican Party over issues such as abortion. Today, "many Catholic professionals are business owners who care more about economic growth, trade, and taxes, whereas their parents and grandparents focused more on economic fairness, the minimum wage, and welfare."[69] Moreover, Catholic voters today can be grouped into two categories — the conservative 'life-issue' Catholics who are concerned with preventing abortion, divorce, and gay marriage and the liberal 'social-justice' Catholics who are supportive of social welfare and humanitarian aid, as well as being receptive to immigration and highly critical of the America's wars in the Middle East.[70] In Sorkin's work, Catholicism and Judaism are both presented as moderate in their religious positioning, and the characters who practice these religions are intelligent and articulate. For the most part this is not extended to those on the Christian Right. The main exception to this is Harriet Hayes in *Studio 60*, however Matt and Harriet frequently argue about religion and she tells

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[66] Theimann, p.35

[67] Ibid

[68] Ibid

[69] Mark J. Rozell, "The Catholic Vote in the USA" in *Catholics and US Politics After the 2016 Elections: Understanding the "Swing Vote"*, ed. Marie Gayte, Blandine Chelini-Pont, and Mark Rozell, (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) p.1-19 (p.3)

[70] Rozell, p.6-7

him that "you're a North Eastern Jewish Liberal Atheist and I'm a Southern Baptist who believes you're going to hell."[71] A montage towards the end of the series shows the argument that they have been having since the end of the 1990s has not changed; Matt points out at the conclusion of the series that "we've been having this fight in two different millennia now."[72] Despite the arguments that they consistently have throughout the series, Matt is shown to be supportive of Harriet, notably when she is asked by a religious group not to attend one of their events due to comments she makes regarding gay marriage. He encourages her to talk to them rather than seeking her revenge by agreeing to a lingerie photoshoot:

> Matt: I think if you want to put on La Perla and pose for a great photographer then it's Christmas morning for me.
> Harriet: Thank you.
> Matt: Except you don't want to. You're doing it to get back at Women United Through Faith.
> Harriet: They were wrong to disinvite me.
> Matt: You should tell them that.
> Harriet: I worked hard for them. I raised money for them, awareness…
> Matt: Tell them that.
> Harriet: You don't even like them.
> Matt: You do. And if there were more people like you in organizations like that, I would like them more. Just call them.[73]

Matt's dislike of religious organisations is overridden by his love for Harriet, and despite the fact that they disagree on the topic, he is shown to be supportive of her. Harriet's religion is often used as a point of humour and in 'The Focus Group' it is implied that God is favouring Harriet by controlling the lights in the studio while they are having electrical issues. The lights come back on during the power cut as soon as Simon (D.L Hughley) demands that Harriet prove her statement that "God loves me and hates the both of you."[74] In Sorkin's

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[71] 'The West Coast Delay', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Mark Goffman and Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 4. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[72] 'K&R, Part 1', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[73] 'The Option Period', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by John Fortenberry, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 9. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

[74] 'The Focus Group', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

work, those who believe that God favours them are considered 'quirky' and unusual, though with Harriet it is used as a form of gentle admiration.

Harriet is shown to be intelligent and reasonable despite her religion, in which she is presented as being incredibly devout. While being interviewed, Harriet is asked how she can be comfortable performing on a show that mocks the Christian Right:

> Harriet: Listen, you work in Washington and I work in Hollywood, but you'll have to take my word for it, in most other places in the world the fact that I believe in God wouldn't be noteworthy.
> Martha: Yeah, but you do work in Hollywood.
> Harriet: I'm not the only one at my church on Sunday morning and our church isn't the only church in town.
> Martha: Yeah, but you're the only one who stars in a late night sketch comedy show whose staple is attacking the religious right.
> Harriet: That's an overstatement.
> Martha: Mmm…Crazy Christians, Science Schmience, The Weather with Pat Robertson.
> Harriet: I'm sorry, Pat Robertson has taken to predicting the weather and boasting of being able to leg lift a Lincoln Navigator. That's not attacking religion, that's attacking preposterousness.
> Martha: Would you have a problem doing a sketch about premarital sex?
> Harriet: I don't have a problem *having* premarital sex. It might be the only sex I ever have and I just gave you your full quote so can I go home?[75]

By overtly referencing Pat Robertson, Harriet argues that mocking him for making nonsense claims is not the same as attacking the Christian Right. Similarly, Harriet also tells Jordan (Amanda Peet) that she is so vocal about her religion because she wants to show the young girls that look up to her that Christianity can have a nicer voice than Ann Coulter's. In his work, Sorkin makes a clear distinction between those with genuine faith, like Harriet, and those who use misogyny to trample on other women to gain power. Sorkin is critical of those who use power and control to shape the 'morality' of the nation into a patriarchal and carefully crafted set of standards that demands compliance to a faith that is not shared by all.

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[75] 'The Long Lead Story', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by David Petrarca, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

When Harriet is asked her views of gay marriage she angers both the left and right with her answer; "I said that the Bible says it's a sin, it also says 'Judge not less ye be judged.' And that it was for something for smarter people than me to decide."[76] Due to this non-committal answer, Matt criticises her for straddling the fence with her answer and points out that many of her fans and colleagues are gay. Jordan is also concerned about Harriet's upcoming appearance for the group 'Women United Through Faith' but the group ends up rescinding their invitation because of the quote: "They felt she seemed to be endorsing gay marriage and this wasn't the right time. She's also going to get slammed by *Out Magazine* for seeming to be against gay marriage, and I really think it takes a special kind of rhetorical talent to say something that draws in ammunition from both of those groups at the same time." The Christian Right is used as a source of humour in *Studio 60* more so than in any of Sorkin's other work, mainly because the basis of the series is the crafting of a comedy sketch show, with a number of their sketches, including the one Wes lost his job over, focusing on the Christian Right. Among many others, Matt writes a sketch based on the premise that Jesus, played by Tom (Nate Corddry), is the head of Standards and Practices. In the sketch the rest of the cast, as network executives, come to him and ask him to confirm that their writers aren't allowed to use his name in vain:

> Jeannie: Jesus Christ, can we get this underway?
> Tom: Sure.
> Alex: We called this meeting because a number of our writers are asking that from time to time they be allowed to take your name in vain in their scripts.
> Jeannie: As well as the name of your father.
> Alex: In their defence, it is part of the adult vernacular.
> Tom: I see.
> Jeannie: We were hoping you could speak to the writers and make it clear that it's absolutely forbidden.
> Tom: Yeah, no, I don't care.
> Jeannie: You don't care?
> Tom: No, caring for the weakest among us, that's my thing. Lend a hand, be a good neighbour, don't cast the first stone. Do those things, you can call me Betty for all I care.

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[76] 'Nevada Day, Part 1', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Lesli Linka Glatter and Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 7. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

> Dylan: Jesus, you don't care about people taking your name in vain?
> Tom: They're people, they get frustrated.
> Alex: What about your father?
> Tom: Get him.
> Simon: What?
> Tom: Get him.
> Simon: Get God?
> Tom: Get him. He sent me here to die a pretty gruesome death. He planned it. You want to hear what I call him at Sunday dinner?
> Jeannie: What?
> Tom: I call him Dad because I'm forgiving. That's why I need the rest of you to get him.
> Simon: Jesus Christ.
> Tom: Yes, sir?
> Simon: No, that's just an exclamation.[77]

The sketch works to point out the ridiculousness of the notion of blasphemy, and the offence it seems to cause members of the religious right. Flashbacks show that when Matt and Harriet first met he offended her by calling Evangelical Christians "Honey-Crusted Nut Bars" when pitching a sketch about a Christian radio host who believes that angels are real. Matt tells Luke that "I couldn't have offended her more if I re-crucified her saviour. It was stunning."[78] Despite his initial offence, Harriet has no problem performing in sketches that mock the Christian Right, both because she is able to separate her religion from her work, and because she is able to recognise the humour in fanatical religion.

Andersen argues that "in this century, more Republican leaders started cozying up to the ugliest fantasists, unapologetic racists."[79] While other Republicans were initially somewhat shocked by the shameless racism of Trump, racism in the Republican Party predates his campaign. The racism and general prejudice of the Christian Right can also be found in the rhetoric of Rush Limbaugh and Pat Buchanan, who "was a smarter, more sincere, and ideologically coherent Trump twenty years ahead of his time."[80] One way in which the racism of the Republican Party has manifested itself is through the attempted

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[77] 'Nevada Day, Part 1'

[78] 'The Friday Night Slaughter', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 15. First broadcast, NBC, 2007

[79] Andersen, p.370

[80] Andersen, p.366

restriction of minority votes. While numbers of voter fraud was roughly the equivalent to the number of Americans being struck by lightning,[81] numerous states have still imposed restrictive ID requirements to prevent this perceived problem. Goldfield argues that "the real motivation, however, was to suppress the minority (mainly African American and Hispanic) turnout. Some poor residents do not own a car and, therefore, have no drivers licence, and the process of obtaining a picture ID could be intimidating, inconvenient and/or expensive."[82] This is addressed in the season one finale of *The Newsroom*, in which Will points out that because instances of voter fraud are so small, new ID laws are a solution to a different problem; "Republicans have a hard time getting certain people to vote for them, so life would be a lot easier if certain people just weren't allowed to vote at all."[83] Trump admitted during an interview with *Fox & Friends* that if the country moved to a vote-by-mail system in response to the Coronavirus pandemic then a Republican would never be elected again. This demonstrates the reliance that Republican candidates have on voter suppression.[84] As well as addressing the inherent racism in states restricting minority voter rights, *The Newsroom* also challenges the racism and xenophobia of the Christian Right. In season one, Will interviews an Evangelical woman about an Islamic community centre being built at Ground Zero:

> Will: Ms Greer, you mentioned creeping Islam. Are you concerned about creeping Christianity?
> Greer: Only that it's not creeping fast enough.
> Will: Okay, here are somethings done on American soil in the name of Christianity. The Ku Klux Klan burned down black churches, raped women, murdered civil rights workers, murdered children, and terrorised communities for over a century. The Neo-Nazis all acted and continue to act in the name of white Christian supremacy. The Army of God fatally attacks abortion clinics and doctors across the country. The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord targets local police and

[81] David Goldfield, 'What We Can Learn About America from the 2012 Election' *American Studies Journal* 58 (2014) 1-13 (3)

[82] Ibid

[83] 'The Greater Fool'

[84] Sam Levine, 'Trump says Republicans would 'never' be elected again if it was easier to vote', *The Guardian*, 30th March 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/mar/30/trump-republican-party-voting-reform-coronavirus> [Accessed on: 4th May 2020]

> federal agents. The federal building in Oklahoma City, the attempted assassination of Ronald Reagan, and the successful assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr., John F. Kennedy, John Lennon, and Abraham Lincoln, all perpetrated by Christians. Ms Greer, we weren't attacked by Muslims, we were attacked by sociopaths. And I, for one, would join you in protesting a community centre for the criminally insane, but no one is suggesting building one.[85]

Will points out the horrors that have been committed in the name of Christianity, highlighting the hypocrisy of the argument of many of the Christian Right. Since the 1980s there has been a rise in aggressive Christian politics, with Evangelicals seeking to manipulate and warp policies to conform with their own beliefs. In 1992, after the Republican convention, "the national gathering of Evangelicals…revealed the darker side to of Christian politics, as speakers like Pat Buchanan viciously attacked homosexuals, welfare mothers, and any whose lifestyles contributed to the 'moral decay' of American culture."[86] More recently issues such as anti-black sentiment and Islamophobia have been recognised by scholars as a contributing factor to the election of Donald Trump, and this also ties into the belief that Trump's candidacy represented "a defense of America's supposed Christian heritage in the eyes of many Americans."[87] Sorkin's work demonstrably and consistently challenges the beliefs of the Christian Right ahead of this current administration but nonetheless documenting the cultural shift, as well as their role in public life, in order to demonstrate the insincerity that has come to dominate the Republican Party by calling back to of America's foundations as contrast.

Sorkin's work presents a version of Republicanism that is able to successfully work with the Democratic Party in order to improve the nation and is critical of any political belief that refuses to acknowledge other viewpoints. The Republican heroes in this Sorkinian world are shown to be reasonable and responsible, and able to distance themselves from the more

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[85] 'Bullies', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Jeremy Podeswa, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 6. First broadcast, HBO, 2012

[86] Theimann, p.2

[87] Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry and Joseph O. Baker, 'Make America Christian Again: Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election' *Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review* 79:2 (2018) 147-171 (148)

extreme fringes that have increasingly dominated Republican Party rhetoric. Similarly, rather than simply omitting religious characters from his work, Sorkin instead demonstrates a rational approach to private religious faith — frequently characterised as Catholicism or Judaism — that challenges the fundamentalism of the Christian Right which has become synonymous with the Republican Party since the 1980s. For Sorkin, being religious and a Republican have become combined in order to chase votes from a base that did not enter the political debate in any meaningful and electorally significant manner until Reagan's presidency. Reagan courted the religious community for their votes and in turn he benefitted — as have subsequent Republican presidents — from their dogmatic shaping of policy. Sorkin has included the Right as part of the fabric of his America, but demonstrates through the space and authority that he gives to his Republican heroes, such as Will McAvoy, that he cannot tolerate the bigotry that is so often espoused by members of these groups. Despite Sorkin's wish for more moderate positions by Republicans and religious believers, and more respect from Liberals, society has become so entrenched and hateful that the nation has moved even further away from his ideal middle ground of tolerance and respect. For example, Vice President Mike Pence has gained the support of grassroots activists due to his support of restricting abortion[88] and his criticism of sex education.[89] Pence has also been vocally opposed to any expansion of LGBT rights and protections.[90] In contrast to this, though equally troubling, the marriage of convenience between Trump and the Republican Party is evident through his frequently changing political positions. *Politico* has described Trump's addresses and *volte faces* as 'eclectic, improvisational, and contradictory" positions.[91] NBC News has documented over a hundred and forty shifts on more than twenty

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[88] Monica Davey and Michael Barbaro, 'How Mike Pence Became a Conservative Hero: Unwavering Opposition to Abortion', *The New York Times*, 16th July 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/17/us/politics/mike-pence-conservative-abortion.html> [Accessed on: 4th May 2020]

[89] Andrew Kaczynski, 'Mike Pence In 2002: "Condoms Are A Very, Very Poor Protection" Against STDs', *BuzzFeed News*, 21st July 2016. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/andrewkaczynski/mike-pence-in-2002-condoms-are-a-very-very-poor-protection-a> [Accessed on: 4th May 2020]

[90] Monica Davey and Michael Barbaro, 'How Mike Pence Became a Conservative Hero: Unwavering Opposition to Abortion', *The New York Times*, 16th July 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/17/us/politics/mike-pence-conservative-abortion.html> [Accessed on: 4th May 2020]

[91] Timothy Noah, 'Will the real Donald Trump please stand up?', *Politico*, 26th July 2015. <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/07/will-the-real-donald-trump-please-stand-up-120607> [Accessed on: 4th May 2020]

different issues,[92] and the *Washington Post* has noted more than five-thousand false statements made by Trump to date in office.[93] What this makes clear is that Trump doesn't really stand for anything beyond what will gain him power and attention. In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, Sorkin noted that political life has experienced a "tremendous backslide"[94] and that "we're living in a world of just crude politics, corruption in plain sight, out-and-out lying, and a staggeringly, breathtakingly dumb person in the Oval Office."[95]

Sorkin's work is worthy of study because he predicted the dumbing down of political factions, and this horror has become even more entrenched. Both political parties are further from cooperation than they ever have been before. Sorkin's hope for bi-partisanship has not yet been realised due to the poisoning of public debate for ratings, and the catering to extremest factions, however, with the election of President Joe Biden and the willingness of some Republicans to cooperate with Democrats, the bi-partisanship that Sorkin calls for is no longer a complete impossibility. Throughout his work, Sorkin continues to examine the political heartbeat of the nation and all of its complex political fissures.

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[92] Jane C. Timm, 'The 141 Stances Donald Trump Took During His White House Bid', *Politico*, 28th November 2016. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/full-list-donald-trump-s-rapidly-changing-policy-positions-n547801> [Accessed on: 4th May 2020]

[93] Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo and Meg Kelly, 'President Trump has made more than 5,000 false or misleading claims', *The Washington Post*, 13th September 2018. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/09/13/president-trump-has-made-more-than-false-or-misleading-claims/> [Accessed on: 4th May 2020]

[94] Joy Press, 'How *The West Wing* Was Won: Aaron Sorkin on the Show's Legacy', *Vanity Fair*, 17th September 2019. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/09/the-west-wing-20th-anniversary-aaron-sorkin-interview?utm_source=nl&utm_brand=vf&utm_mailing=VF_CH_09172019&utm_medium=email&bxid=5bd675a63f92a41245ddbd0c&cndid=36781141&hasha=5782db717bfe60970260c0fdb35fab4e&hashb=985cc1938d4ea1c179d018835795ac73a17d44f0&hashc=f196c3058caa9abf17e5dc05a50a7d7b1dcca174931f2e36847054ff4b3da4b6&esrc=newsletteroverlay&utm_campaign=VF_CH_09172019&utm_term=VYF_Cocktail_Hour> [Accessed on: 4th May 2020]

[95] Ibid

Conclusion — "What kind of day has it been?"[1]

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that Sorkin taps into the myths and ideas that have captured the American imagination for generations. He has built on a variety of sources, drawn from the legacies of presidents such as Kennedy in his construction of Bartlet and paid homage to iconic journalists such as Edward R. Murrow in his characterisation of Will McAvoy in *The Newsroom*. In the construction of his utopian society, Sorkin also echoes the mythic idealism of Camelot, foregrounding its core tenets of civic duty and honour. There is a romance in his characters' striving for a better world, and while they are not always successful — notably in *The Newsroom* — it is important that they try. Sorkin places value on this struggle, and on principles of duty and morality. He gives humanity to characters who occupy backstage spaces: he presents sport culture and journalism as a form of community; that entertainment television is a valuable cultural artefact; and that the work of journalists is necessary to speak truth to power. Similarly, Sorkin frequently references Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* — most notably in *The Newsroom*, informing the News Night staff's 'mission to civilise' in their approach to reporting the news. In the season one episode of *Sports Night*, 'The Head Coach, Dinner and the Morning Mail' Dana (Felicity Huffman) and Jeremy (Joshua Malina) have the following exchange:

> Dana: Don Quixote was a hero of my father's and my father would like you. You're a very quixotic character.
> Jeremy: Thank you.
> Dana: Of course, my father would also say, you're a fool.

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[1] Episodes what use this title:
'What Kind of Day Has It Been', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 23. First broadcast, ABC, 1998
'What Kind of Day Has It Been', *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
'What Kind of Day Has It Been', *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Bradley Whitford, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2007
'What Kind of Day Has It Been', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 6. First broadcast, HBO, 2014

The repeated use of this title underscores the repetition that is present throughout Sorkin's work. He returns to this title as a way of assessing the events of the series or season. For the most part the day in question was a positive one (the outlier being *The West Wing*, which ended the season with an assassination attempt, despite the smaller victories in the episode), and his characters are ultimately rewarded for their commitment to decency and their striving for a better tomorrow.

> Jeremy: That's entirely possible but in my own defence, so was Don Quixote.[2]

The romance of *Don Quixote* is that he keeps trying in the face of mockery and adversity, and this is what Sorkin frequently mirrors with his characters. Sorkin's awareness of literary tradition demonstrates who he is trying to emulate in his own writing. At the 2016 ATX Festival panel, Sorkin stated that "the best theatre in America is on television" and that anyone who is writing what can be considered good television is walking in the footsteps of Larry Gelbart with *M*A*SH* (1972-1983).[3] It is notable that Sorkin linked theatre and television because his background is in theatre with his play, *A Few Good Men*, and his degree in Musical Theatre. As with Sorkin's work, there are utopian tendencies to the musical and Sorkin frequently makes reference to musicals such as *Camelot* and *The Pirates of Penzance* in his writing. Sorkin also credits playwrights Paddy Chayefsky, Arthur Miller, and William Shakespeare as inspirations for his work.[4] In *Studio 60*, he pays homage to Chayefsky in the opening of the series when Wes (Judd Hirsch) has his *Network*-esque "I'm mad as hell!" breakdown on-air. Similarly, there is continued reference to Miller's *The Crucible* running through *Molly's Game*. *The Crucible* recurs both as the extra reading Charlie (Idris Elba) is making his daughter do and with the emphasis that is placed on reputation; in her impassioned speech to Charlie, Molly (Jessica Chastain) declares that "It's my name! And I'll never have another!" echoing Miller's play. In turn, Sorkin has been as referenced and revered as often as he has referenced the work of those who came before him. He is actively situating his works in dialogue with leading works in the English canon and influential American literature and culture.

The West Wing has had the most lasting cultural impact of his works to date, with references to the series appearing throughout popular culture;[5] these citations and callbacks appear both in series in which feature or star cast members from *The West Wing*, and in other

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[2] 'The Head Coach, Dinner and the Morning Mail', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Matt Tarses and Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 6. First broadcast, ABC, 1998

[3] ATXFestival. "ATX Festival Panel: "The West Wing Administration"". 2016. 11th June 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHEsMDjf1dY&t=4993s> [Accessed on: 5th September 2020].

[4] Ibid

[5] *A Few Good Men*'s iconic line "You can't handle the truth!" is also frequently quoted throughout popular culture.

unrelated series. In *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) — also starring Rob Lowe — when Bradley Whitford guest starred, his character, Councilman Pillner, was seated in front of a framed cocktail napkin with 'Pillner for Pawnee' written on it in reference to *The West Wing*'s framed 'Bartlet for America' napkin. Whitford's character also tells protagonist Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler) that "we play with live ammo around here",[6] a directly quoting Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe) in *The West Wing.* Similarly in *Psych* (2006-2014) — starring Dulé Hill who previously played Charlie Young in *The West Wing* — protagonists Shawn (James Roday) and Gus (Dulé Hill) have the following exchange:

> Gus: You know Shawn, I could have made it all the way to the White House.
> Shawn: Yeah, maybe as an Aide.
> Gus: Of course.
> Shawn: Say "Yes, Mr President."
> Gus: Yes, Mr President.
> Shawn: Sorry, Charlie
> Gus: Man, you don't even know.[7]

The West Wing was also referenced in a variety of unrelated shows from *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007) to *Arrow* (2012-2020). One of the most notable and contemporary references to Sorkin's work is Lin Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton*.[8] Aside from overt dialogue references such as the lyric "I'm looking for a mind at work" — which was taken from *The West Wing* when Sam tells Ainsley (Emily Procter) that "before I look for anything, I look for a mind at work" — Miranda's fast-paced and wordy lyrics echo the speed of Sorkin's fast-talking characters. Miranda is a known fan of the series, frequently tweeting about it, penning a rap about the show titled "What's Next?", and was surprised by the orchestra playing *The West Wing* theme tune as he took his final bow as Alexander Hamilton on July 9th 2016.[9] The biggest similarity, however, is evident in what both Sorkin and Miranda do in

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[6] 'Live Ammo', *Parks and Recreation,* dir. by Tristram Shapeero, written by Dave King and Chelsea Peretti, season 4, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2012

[7] 'Santa Barbarian Candidate', *Psych,* dir. by Richard Coleman, written by Tim Meltreger, season 7, episode 10. First broadcast, USA Network, 2013

[8] Rebecca Milzoff, 'Lin-Manuel Miranda on Jay Z, *The West Wing*, and 18 More Things That Influenced *Hamilton*'. *Vulture*. 15th January 2016 <https://www.vulture.com/2015/07/lin-manuel-mirandas-20-hamilton-influences.html> [Accessed on: 5th September 2020]

[9] Joshua Barone, 'Lin-Manuel Miranda's Final Bows in 'Hamilton' on Broadway'. *The New York Times*. 10th July 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/11/theater/hamilton-lin-manuel-miranda-final-show.html> [Accessed on: 5th September 2020]

their respective works; they both take hugely problematic but undoubtedly great figures in American history and culture and make them human, relatable, and aspirational. What Sorkin does with figures such as Steve Jobs, Mark Zuckerberg, and Molly Bloom, Miranda does with Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and Aaron Burr. Whether you are persuaded by these subjective interpretations or not, Sorkin's work is frequently regarded as a critical success in humanising aloof figures. *The West Wing*, specifically, has remained popular, and is a site of continuous reference as a counter-criticism to the Trump presidency and as a site of reference in the popular culture sphere. In October 2020 the cast reunited to perform a stage version of the season three episode 'Hartsfield's Landing' for the non-profit organisation When We All Vote which encourages voter turn out and works to challenge voter suppression, demonstrating the longevity and continued relevance of *The West Wing*; Leo McGarry was portrayed by Sterling K. Brown and the production included appearances from figures such as Michelle Obama, Lin Manuel Miranda, and Bill Clinton. Sorkin is often criticised for being arrogant, and in *Californication* (2007-2014) movie producer Stu Beggs (Stephen Tobolowsky) states that Sorkin is "the best in the business, just ask him."[10] However, while Sorkin is flawed, in his work he strives to make people accountable for their actions, and to disassemble the vapid coverage being passed off as journalism. Sorkin credits the American people with being smart enough to make informed decisions when presented with facts. He favours truth and fact over uninformed opinion and gossip. Sorkin's fantasy of America is about real and honourable possibilities over empty and dangerous populism, and in doing this he contrasts the representation of politics and the media that have dominated American popular culture in the 21st century in which characters are frequently power hungry, self-serving or financially motivated.

These eight chapters have traced the most frequently recurring themes in Sorkin's works: the emphasis on civic duty; the importance of journalistic responsibility; the importance of intelligence and education; the positives and negatives of elitism; the prominence of the Liberal Genius; the frequency of trauma; the importance of relationships; and a call for tolerant religious practice and moderate Republicanism. These themes bleed across Sorkin's works in order to inform 'Aaron Sorkin's America'. Sorkin favours and

[10] 'Everybody's a Fucking Critic', *Californication,* dir. by Seith Mann, written by Tom Kapinos, season 6, episode 8. First broadcast, Showtime, 2013

explicitly foregrounds intelligence, most notably through his character type the Liberal Genius. These characters appear throughout Sorkin's oeuvre and exhibit a combination of traits ranging from high intelligence; possession of a strict moral code; difficulty maintaining their personal lives despite professional success; struggle with addiction; have poor relationships with their fathers; and have suffered from a traumatic event. While these characters are his beacons for a better world, they are still susceptible to the negative foibles that make them so human, and thus, so wholly relatable to audiences. The susceptibility to trauma extends beyond the Liberal Genius and provides a marker of growth for a wider variety of characters. Despite the limitations in Sorkin's representations of race and gender, he does use trauma to address issues such as racism and sexism that are common aspects of society. To encourage overt intellectualism, Sorkin constructs a place of safety and support for his geniuses. By foregrounding the importance of friendship and family, particularly found-family, Sorkin creates a world where the genius does not have to be ostracised and 'othered'. Similarly, these networks of support aid in the recovery of trauma, and thus enable the characters to contribute meaningfully to the world around them. I have looked to a variety of scholarship to situate these recurring themes pertinent to understanding Sorkin's representation of gifted intellectuals onscreen. Particularly useful was the work of Ashley Lynn Carlson who argued that there is little evidence to suggest that those who are highly intelligent must also be mentally ill, yet, in popular culture genius is often linked to mental illness. Carlson also argues that intelligence "stands at the crossroads between our desire to believe that with hard work anything is possible and our knowledge that individual differences are real, and that not everyone has the same capabilities for success."[11] The essays in Carlson's edited collection analysed the way that genius is represented across a variety of television series.

It is vital in my study to consider the way Sorkin's work intersects with the real world. Sorkin's work is so valuable to examine because it directly counters the reality of the last three decades. These eight chapters have demonstrated the way that Sorkin constructs a world that can only be improved by the hard work of civic minded citizens and must be led by intelligent individuals from all walks of life. He is highly critical of the media,

[11] Ashley Lynn Carlson, "Introduction" in *Genius on Television: Essays on Small Screen Depictions of Big Minds*, ed. Ashley Lynn Carlson, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2015) p.1-10 (p6-7)

particularly news agencies, when it fails to fulfil their responsibility to educate and inform the public. Similarly, he is just as critical of right-wing extremism, and favours a moderate Republicanism more in line with the party's roots. Both of these issues have been brought to bear on society, particularly since the 2016 Presidential Election. Since the commencement of writing this thesis, there have been numerous seismic societal changes that required serious consideration, from the Black Lives Matter and 'Me Too' movements, to the 2020 presidential election with Donald Trump's refusal to acknowledge that he had failed to secure his re-election, and the outbreak of COVID-19. These changes to society have only proved Sorkin's continued relevance to the contemporary moment. President Trump's dishonest practice, ego-centric narcissism and tenuous grasp on the truth is everything Sorkin is critical of — he is unqualified and arrogant, lies to the American people, and panders to the lowest common denominator, and on January 6th actively encouraged the attack on the U.S Capitol Building in an attempt to overturn the election results. Trump's actions over the course of his presidency has had fatal consequences, most recently through his abysmal and negligent response to COVID-19 that he deliberately downplayed (as readily conveyed in a recorded interview with Bob Woodward for his book *Rage* [2020]), with over 400,000 deaths to date in the United States. Trump's presidency perfectly illustrates what Sorkin has made clear throughout his work: that a nation must be led by intelligent and qualified individuals and is indebted to the Founding Fathers' notion of rule by the best, exemplified by Jefferson's natural aristocracy.

Previous scholarship has focused predominately on *The West Wing*, and while the critical success of this series is undeniable, there has been an extensive gap in the scholarship on Sorkin's work. Over these eight chapters I have significantly contributed to the scholarship on Sorkin's screenwriting, his consistent tropes, themes, and core philosophies as a screenwriter and showrunner, and provided analysis on areas of his work that have been previously overlooked, neglected, or marginalised in scholarly discourse. On a thematic level, existing scholarship has focused on Sorkin's interpretation of the American presidency, and while this is an important feature in his works, and has continued relevance in demonstrating the possibilities of political life, it is only part of a multi-faceted whole.

Sorkin has become a barometer for liberal ideals in America. He provides valuable commentary on American life, what it should be — though he has denied that this is his intention — and what it can be. His work has become, intentionally or not, a litmus test for what is wrong with the nation, and areas in which it could be improved. He demonstrates that intelligence should be valued, particularly at a time when anti-intellectualism is so deeply entrenched in society. As Bartlet frequently asks, "what's next?" and this indicates that the work is never really done, to strive for a better and more perfect union is an ongoing struggle in the American imagination. Bartlet, and Sorkin himself, like us cannot do everything, but we must be emboldened to do better. The theory that Sorkin has created a fantasy version of America, foregrounding notions of honour and decency and the prizing intellect that set out in this thesis is evident across all of Sorkin's works, regardless of the variations in subject matter. Sorkin will continue to follow this tried and tested model — and expand upon the ideal version of America that he has so far constructed.

Sorkin promotes a moderate Republicanism, one that is more in line with the Party's historic roots — dating back to Thomas Jefferson and his cohort. This moderate position in Republican values has been pushed aside in contemporary politics in favour right-wing extremism. Due to the direction that the party has taken, particularly under the Trump administration, a number of Republicans have since defected, speaking at the Democratic National Convention and endorsing the 2020 Democratic nominee, Joe Biden. Addressing the DNC, Former Ohio Governor, John Kasich, stated that "I'm a lifelong Republican, but that attachment holds second place to my responsibility to my country. That's why I've chosen to appear at this convention. In normal times, something like this would probably never happen, but these are not normal times."[12] Biden's centrist politics bridges the ideological divide between more left-leaning candidates for the nomination such as Bernie Sanders, and illustrates a lingering willingness on the part of some moderate Republicans to support their colleagues across the aisle in the Democratic Party; this act of bipartisanship reflects the vision of unity that Sorkin promotes. Similarly, ten Republican Representatives voted to impeach Trump a second time following the attack on the U.S Capitol,

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12 Dartunorro Clark, 'Kasich, a Republican, addresses DNC: 'These are not normal times'', *NBC News*, 18th August 2020. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/live-blog/2020-democratic-national-convention-kicks-n1236923/ncrd1237021#blogHeader> [Accessed on: 21st August 2020]

demonstrating their readiness to rise above Party differences and move towards a bipartisan future.

Sorkin has numerous upcoming projects, including a film titled *Lucy and Desi*, with Cate Blanchet and Javier Bardem rumoured to be cast as Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, which will take place over a single production week at *I Love Lucy*[13] (similar to the structure of *Studio 60*), and *The Politician*, about John Edwards' failed 2008 presidential campaign after it was revealed in the press that he had fathered a child with his mistress.[14] Sorkin recently adapted Harper Lee's iconic novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* for Broadway, a story that is particularly timely in the Black Lives Matter era that we live in; furthermore, he has stated that he was struggling to find the voice for the play's racist villain, Bob Ewell, he read numerous comment sections on stories posted on far-right website Breitbart for contemporary instances of such abhorrent sentiments.[15] Sorkin has made significant changes in his adaptation, such as giving more of a voice to the African American characters, in order to update the story for a contemporary audience. He has stated that the play might have been different if he had written it at a different time, but that while he was writing, Charlottesville[16] happened, and that Atticus's contention in the book that there is good in everyone "suddenly started to sound too much to me like 'there were fine people on both sides'", so he wanted Atticus to pick a side.[17]

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[13] Lacey Rose, 'Aaron Sorkin Goes Off Script: Fears, the Critics and His Private Battles Behind "Molly's Game"'. *The Hollywood Reporter*. 29th November 2017, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/features/aaron-sorkin-goes-script-fears-critics-his-private-battles-behind-mollys-game-1062019> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020]

[14] CBSNews. "Aaron Sorkin: From Addict to Academy Award Nominee". 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObIfH4utYPU> [Accessed on: 3rd September 2020].

[15] New York Times Events. "TimesTalks: Aaron Sorkin and Jeff Daniels". 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKvTKieRwWw&t=920s> [Accessed on: 6th September 2020].

[16] On August 12th 2017, a white supremacist deliberately drove his car in to a crown of peaceful protestors, injuring nineteen and killing one. Trump caused outrage when he responded with the statement "I think there is blame on both sides. You look at, you look at both sides. I think there's blame on both sides, and I have no doubt about it...you also had people that were very fine people on both sides."

Politico Staff, 'Full text: Trump's comments on white supremacists, 'alt-left' in Charlottesville'. *Politico*. 15th August 2017, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/15/full-text-trump-comments-white-supremacists-alt-left-transcript-241662> [Accessed on: 6th September 2020]

[17] New York Times Events. "TimesTalks: Aaron Sorkin and Jeff Daniels". 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKvTKieRwWw&t=920s> [Accessed on: 6th September 2020].

Sorkin was concerned that Atticus would sound too much like Trump's refusal to denounce white supremacists.

Sorkin's film, *The Trial of the Chicago 7* (2020), concerns seven individuals charged with intending to incite riots at the 1968 Democratic National Convention. 1968 is widely considered to be the year the country changed, with Nixon's silent majority determined to bring the nation back from the turbulent evolution on the 1960s — a decade which saw the beginnings of Kennedy's presidency and the start of bold new ideas, bringing youth, glamour, and television to the presidency, before his assassination in 1963; Johnson's accomplishment of Civil Rights reform, alongside the rise of hippie culture, student protests, and the growing anti-war movement flowed out from Kennedy's bold re-imaging of American ideals at the turn of the decade, with mixed and flawed results. *With The Trial of the Chicago 7*, Sorkin goes back to the historical moment of the Chicago 7 in 1968 in order to address what it is like to be facing a crossroads in national history for the direction of the nation at the Republican National convention (to elect Richard Nixon); indeed, we are arguably at a similar crossroads in contemporary American history today. In his work, Sorkin is always going back to negotiate the moments that have changed the country;[18] He asks what happened and what went wrong. The most notable parallel between 1968 and 2020 is the 1960s Civil Rights protests and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr in 1968, and the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020. Sorkin understands these years as parallels, and in taking us back to 1968 he is still providing commentary on our contemporary moment. Throughout his work Sorkin promotes ideas of genius, education, and civic minded responsibility. In the America that he has constructed, it is the duty of every citizen to pull together to improve the nation. Once again, the soul of the nation is at stake, with divisions between the Left and Right remaining wide despite the apparent unity that has arisen between Democrats and some Republicans regarding the second impeachment of Donald Trump. Yet, throughout Sorkin's work there is the hope that good and decent people can unite for the betterment of society, because, as he argued (with the line he stole from *Camelot*): "this is the time for American heroes and we reach for the stars."[19]

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[18] In *Studio 60* we are shown, through the use of flashbacks, the events in the months following 9/11 and the difficulties faced by a left-wing comedy sketch show in a country that had unquestioningly embraced right-wing ideology. *The Newsroom* was set in the recent past, and addresses, particularly, the influence that the Tea Party had over the Republican Party, and its replacing of experienced and moderate Republican politicians, with people who had often never worked in the political sphere before.

[19] '20 Hours in America Part I', *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2002

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Shock and Awe, Rob Reiner. (Vertical Entertainment, 2017)
The Social Network, David Fincher. (Columbia Pictures, 2010)
Spider-Man, Sam Raimi. (Sony Pictures, 2002)
Spotlight, Tom McCarthy. (Open Road Films, 2015)
Steve Jobs, Danny Boyle. (Universal Pictures, 2015)
Stuart Little 2, Rob Minkoff. (Sony Pictures, 2002)
Taken, Pierre Morel. (20th Century Fox, 2008)
To All the Boys I've Loved Before, Susan Johnson. (Netflix, 2018)
The Trial of the Chicago 7, Aaron Sorkin. (Netflix, 2020)
Trumbo, Jay Roach. (Bleecker Street, 2015)
Wag the Dog, Barry Levinson. (New Line Cinema, 1997)
The Walk, Robert Zemeckis. (Sony Pictures, 2015)
War of the Worlds, Steven Spielberg. (Paramount Pictures, 2005)
What's Your Number?, Mark Mylod. (20th Century Fox, 2011)
The Wire, David Simon. (HBO, 2002-2008)
World Trade Center, Oliver Stone. (Paramount Pictures, 2006)
X-Men: Apocalypse, Bryan Singer. (20th Century Fox, 2016)
Zoolander, Ben Stiller. (Paramount Pictures, 2001)

Television

24, created by Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran. (Fox, 2001-2010)
All in the Family, created by Norman Lear and Bud Yorkin. (CBS, 1971-1979)
American Idol, created by Simon Fuller. (Fox and ABC, 2002-present)
Arrow, created by Greg Berlanti, Marc Guggenheim, and Andrew Kreisberg. (The CW, 2012-2020)
The Arsenio Hall Show, created by Arsenio Hall and Marla Kell Brown. (Syndicated, 1989-1994)
Becker, created by David Hackel. (CBS, 1998-2004)
The Big Bang Theory, created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady. (CBS, 2007-2019)
Big Brother, created by John de Mol Jr. (1999-present)
Big Little Lies, created by David E. Kelley. (HBO, 2017-2019)
Bones, created by Hart Hanson. (Fox, 2005-2017)
Brooklyn Nine-Nine, created by Dan Goor and Michael Schur. (Fox and NBC, 2013-present)
Brothers & Sisters, created by Jon Robin Baitz. (ABC, 2006-2011)
Californication, created by Tom Kapinos. (Showtime, 2007-2014)
- 'Everybody's a Fucking Critic', *Californication,* dir. by Seith Mann, written by Tom Kapinos, season 6, episode 8. First broadcast, Showtime, 2013

Cheers, created by Glen Charles, Les Charlies, and James Burrows. (NBC, 1982-1993)
Cops, created by John Langley and Malcolm Barbour. (Fox, Spike, and Paramount Network, 1989-2020)
Criminal Minds, created by Jeff Davis. (CBS, 2005-2020)
Crossfire (CNN, 1982-2005)
CSI: NY, created by Anthony E. Zuiker, Ann Donahue, and Carol Mendelsohn. (CBS, 2004-2013)
Dancing with the Stars (ABC, 2005-present)
De tú a tú, (Antena 3, 1900-1993)
Dexter, created by James Manos Jr. (Showtime, 2006-2013)
Elementary, created by Robert Doherty. (CBS, 2012-2019)
Friends, created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman. (NBC, 1994-2004)
Fringe, created by J.J Abrams, Alex Kurtzman, and Roberto Orci. (Fox, 2008-2013)
Game of Thrones, created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss. (HBO, 2011-2019)
Gilmore Girls, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino. (The WB and The CW, 2000-2007)
Hardball with Chris Matthews. (MSNBC, 1999-2020)
Homicide: Life on the Street, created by Paul Attanasio. (NBC, 1993-1999)
House, created by David Shore. (Fox, 2004-2012)
House of Cards, created by Beau Willimon. (Netflix, 2013-2018)

I Love Lucy, (CBS, 1951-1957)
The Jeremy Kyle Show, (ITV, 2005-2019)
Law & Order, created by Dick Wolf. (NBC, 1990-2010)
Leverage, created by John Rogers and Chris Downey. (TNT, 2008-2012)
Lucifer, created by Tom Kapinos. (Fox and Netflix, 2016-present)
Mad Men, created by Matthew Weiner. (AMC, 2007-2015)
Malcolm in the Middle, created by Linwood Boomer. (Fox, 2000-2006)
The Mary Tyler Moore Show, created by James L. Brooks and Allan Burns. (CBS, 1970-1977)
*M*A*S*H*, created by Larry Gelbart. (CBS, 1972-1983)
The Newsroom, created by Aaron Sorkin. (HBO, 2012-2014)

- 'The 112th Congress', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, HBO, 2012.
- '5/1', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Joshua Marston, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 7. First broadcast, HBO, 2012
- 'Amen', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Daniel Minahan, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, HBO, 2012
- 'The Blackout Part I: Tragedy Porn', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Lesli Linka Glatter, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 8. First broadcast, HBO, 2012.
- 'The Blackout Part II: Mock Debate', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 9. First broadcast, HBO, 2012
- 'Boston', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Anthony Hemingway, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 1. First broadcast, HBO, 2014
- 'Bullies', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Jeremy Podeswa, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 6. First broadcast, HBO, 2012
- 'Contempt', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Anthony Hemingway, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 4. First broadcast, HBO, 2014
- 'Election Night, Part I', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Jason Ensler, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 8. First broadcast, HBO, 2013
- 'Election Night, Part II', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 9. First broadcast, HBO, 2013
- 'First Thing We Do, Let's Kill All the Lawyers', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 1. First broadcast, HBO, 2013
- 'The Genoa Tip', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Jeremy Podeswa, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 2. First broadcast, HBO, 2013
- 'Greater Fool, The', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 10. First broadcast, HBO, 2012
- 'I'll Try to Fix You', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 4. First broadcast, HBO, 2012
- 'News Night 2.0', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, HBO, 2012
- News Night with Will McAvoy', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 5. First broadcast, HBO, 2013
- 'Oh Shenandoah', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Paul Lieberstein, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 5. First broadcast, HBO, 2014
- 'One Step Too Many', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Julian Farino, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 6. First broadcast, HBO, 2013
- Unintended Consequences', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Carl Franklin, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 4. First broadcast, HBO, 2013
- 'We Just Decided To', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, HBO, 2012
- 'What Kind of Day Has It Been', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 6. First broadcast, HBO, 2014

- 'Willie Pete', *The Newsroom,* dir. by Lesli Linka Glatter, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 3. First broadcast, HBO, 2013

The Oprah Winfrey Show, created by Oprah Winfrey. (Syndicated, 1986-2011)

One Day at a Time, created by Gloria Calderón Kellett and Mike Royce. (Netflix, Pop, and CBS, 2017-present)

Parks and Recreation, created by Greg Daniels and Michael Schur. (NBC, 2009-2015)

- 'Live Ammo', *Parks and Recreation,* dir. by Tristram Shapeero, written by Dave King and Chelsea Peretti, season 4, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2012

Psych, created by Steve Franks. (USA Network, 2006-2014)

- 'Santa Barbarian Candidate', *Psych,* dir. by Richard Coleman, written by Tim Meltreger, season 7, episode 10. First broadcast, USA Network, 2013

The Real World, created by Mary-Ellis Bunim and Jonathan Murray. (MTV and Facebook Watch, 1992-present)

Rescue Me, created by Denis Leary and Peter Tolan. (FX. 2004-2011)

Saturday Night Live, created by Lorne Michaels. (NBC, 1975-present)

Seinfeld, created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld. (NBC. 1989-1998)

Sesame Street, created by Joan Ganz Cooney and Lloyd Morrisett. (NET, PBS, HBO, and HBO Max, 1969-present)

Sherlock, created by Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat. (BBC, 2010-2017)

The Sopranos, created by David Chase. (HBO, 1999-2007)

Sports Night, created by Aaron Sorkin. (ABC, 1998-2000)

- 'April is the Cruelest Month', *Sports Night,* dir. by Don Scardino, written by Bill Wrubel and Matt Tarses, season 2, episode 19. First broadcast, ABC, 2000
- 'The Apology', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, ABC, 1998
- 'Dana and the Deep Blue Sea', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 15. First broadcast, ABC, 1999
- 'Dear Louise', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin and David Walpert, season 1, episode 7. First broadcast, ABC, 1998
- 'Eli's Coming', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, ABC, 1999
- 'The Hungry and the Hunted', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, ABC, 1998
- 'Kafelnikov', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Matt Tarses & Bill Wrubel, season 2, episode 5. First broadcast, ABC, 1999
- 'Mary Pat Shelby', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Tracey Stern and Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, ABC, 1998
- 'Napoleon's Battle Plan', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 22. First broadcast, ABC, 1999
- 'Pilot', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, ABC, 1998
- 'Quo Vadimus', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 22. First broadcast, ABC, 2000
- 'Rebecca', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 14. First broadcast, ABC, 1999
- 'Shane', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Kevin Falls, Matt Tarses, and Bill Wrubel, season 2, episode 6. First broadcast, ABC, 1999
- 'The Six Southern Gentlemen of Tennessee', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, Matt Tarses, David Walpert, and Bill Wrubel, season 1, episode 11. First broadcast, ABC, 1998
- 'Small Town', *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin and Paul Redford, season 1, episode 13. First broadcast, ABC, 1998
- 'The Sword of Orion ', *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by David Handelman, Mark McKinney and Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 18. First broadcast, ABC, 1999

- ‘What Kind of Day Has It Been?’, *Sports Night,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 23. First broadcast, ABC, 1999
- ‘When Something Wicked This Way Comes’, *Sports Night,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 2. First broadcast, ABC, 1999

Studio 60 on The Sunset Strip, created by Aaron Sorkin. (NBC, 2006-2007)

- ‘4 A.M. Miracle’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Laura Innes, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 16. First broadcast, NBC, 2007
- ‘B-12’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Bryan Gordon, written by Aaron Sorkin and Eli Attie, season 1, episode 10. First broadcast, NBC, 2006
- ‘Breaking News’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Andrew Bernstein, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 18. First broadcast, NBC, 2007
- ‘The Christmas Show’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Dan Attias, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 11. First broadcast, NBC, 2006
- ‘The Cold Open’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2006
- ‘The Focus Group’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, NBC, 2006
- ‘The Friday Night Slaughter’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 15. First broadcast, NBC, 2007
- ‘The Harriet Dinner, Part I’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 13. First broadcast, NBC, 2007
- ‘The Harriet Dinner, Part II’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by John Fortenberry, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 14. First broadcast, NBC, 2007
- ‘K&R, Part I’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2007
- ‘K&R, Part 2’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Dave Chameides, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 20. First broadcast, NBC, 2007
- ‘K&R, Part 3’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2007
- ‘The Long Lead Story’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by David Petrarca, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, NBC, 2006
- ‘Monday’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Lawrence Trilling, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 12. First broadcast, NBC, 2007
- ‘Nevada Day, Part 1’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Lesli Linka Glatter and Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 7. First broadcast, NBC, 2006
- ‘Nevada Day, Part 2’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 8. First broadcast, NBC, 2006
- ‘The Option Period’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by John Fortenberry, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 9. First broadcast, NBC, 2006
- ‘Pilot’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, NBC, 2006
- ‘What Kind of Day Has It Been’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Bradley Whitford, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2007
- ‘The Wrap Party’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by David Semel, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 6. First broadcast, NBC, 2006
- ‘The West Coast Delay’, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip,* dir. by Timothy Busfield, written by Mark Goffman and Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 4. First broadcast, NBC, 2006

Survivor, created by Charlie Parsons. (CBS, 2000-present)

Third Watch, created by John Wells and Edward Allen Bernero. (NBC, 1999-2005)

Veep, created by Armando Iannucci. (HBO, 2012-2019)

The West Wing, created by Aaron Sorkin. (NBC, 1999-2006)

- ‘17 People’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 18. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

- ‘20 Hours in America Part I’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2002
- ‘20 Hours in America Part II’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2002
- ‘20 Hours in L.A.’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Alan Taylor, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 16. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘A Proportional Response’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Marc Buckland, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 3. First broadcast, NBC, 1999
- ‘Bartlet for America’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 10. First broadcast, NBC, 2001
- ‘Commencement’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2003
- ‘The Crackpots and These Women’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Anthony Drazan, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 5. First broadcast, NBC, 1999
- ‘Dead Irish Writers’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 15. First broadcast, NBC, 2002
- ‘Ellie’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Michael Engler, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 15. First broadcast, NBC, 2001
- ‘Evidence of Things Not Seen’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Christoper Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 20. First broadcast, NBC, 2003
- ‘Five Votes Down’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Michael Lehmann, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 4. First broadcast, NBC, 1999
- ‘Galileo’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin and Kevin Falls, season 2, episode 9. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘Game On’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin and Kevin Paul Redford, season 4, episode 6. First broadcast, NBC, 2002
- ‘Gone Quiet’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Jon Hutman, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 6. First broadcast, NBC, 2002
- ‘Guns Not Butter’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Bill D’Elia, written by Eli Attie, Kevin Falls and Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 12. First broadcast, NBC, 2003
- ‘Hartsfield’s Landing’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Vincent Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 14. First broadcast, NBC, 2002
- ‘He Shall, from Time to Time…’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Arlene Sanford, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 12. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘Inauguration: Over There’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Lesli Linka Glatter, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 4, episode 15. First broadcast, NBC, 2003
- ‘In Excelsis Deo’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 10. First broadcast, NBC, 1999
- ‘In the Shadow of Two Gunmen Part I’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 1. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘In This White House’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Ken Olin, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 4. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘Isaac and Ishmael’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 00. First broadcast, NBC, 2001
- ‘The Lame Duck Congress’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Jeremy Kagan, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 6. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘The Leadership Breakfast’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Scott Winant, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 11. First broadcast, NBC, 2001
- ‘Let Bartlet Be Bartlet’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Laura Innes, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 19. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘Manchester Part I’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 1. First broadcast, NBC, 2001

- ‘Manchester Part II’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 2001
- ‘Mandatory Minimums’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 20. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘The Midterms’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 3. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘Mr Willis of Ohio’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 6. First broadcast, NBC, 1999
- ‘Night Five’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Christoper Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 13. First broadcast, NBC, 2002
- ‘Noel’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 10. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘Pilot’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 1. First broadcast, NBC, 1999
- ‘The Portland Trip’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Paris Barclay, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1
- 2, episode 7. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘Posse Comitatus’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 21. First broadcast, NBC, 2002
- ‘Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 2. First broadcast, NBC, 1999
- ‘Shibboleth’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Laura Innes, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 8. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘Six Meetings Before Lunch’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Clark Johnson, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 18. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Jessica Yu, written by Paul Redford and Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 16. First broadcast, NBC, 2001
- ‘The Stackhouse Filibuster’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Bryan Gordon, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 17. First broadcast, NBC, 2001
- ‘The U.S. Poet Laureate’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 16. First broadcast, NBC, 2002
- ‘Take out the Trash Day’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Ken Olin, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 13. First broadcast, NBC, 2000
- ‘The Two Bartlets’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin and Kevin Falls, season 3, episode 12. First broadcast, NBC, 2002
- ‘Two Cathedrals’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2001
- ‘The U.S. Poet Laureate’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 16. First broadcast, NBC, 2002
- ‘The War at Home’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Christopher Misiano, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 2, episode 14. First broadcast, NBC, 2001
- ‘Ways and Means’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 3, episode 3. First broadcast, NBC, 2001
- ‘What Kind of Day Has It Been’, *The West Wing,* dir. by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin, season 1, episode 22. First broadcast, NBC, 2000

Theatre

Gilbert, W.S. and Arthur Sullivan. *The Pirates of Penzance*, dir. W.S Gilbert. 1879
Lerner, Alan Jay. *Camelot*, dir. Moss Hart. 1960
Miranda, Lin Manuel. *Hamilton,* dir. Thomas Kail. 2015
Sorkin, Aaron. *A Few Good Men,* dir. Don Scardino. 1989
Sorkin, Aaron. *To Kill a Mockingbird,* dir. Bartlett Sher. 2018

Videos

The Aspen Institute. “What's Character Got to Do with It?”. 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eucVNYQNGAs> [Accessed on: 3 September 2020]

ATXFestival. “ATX Festival Panel: "The West Wing Administration"”. 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHEsMDjf1dY&t=4993s> [Accessed on: 5 September 2020]

BAFTA Guru. “Aaron Sorkin : Behind Closed Doors | From the BAFTA Archives”. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d29Xz_FS8Is> [Accessed on: 3 September 2020]

CBSNews. “Aaron Sorkin: From Addict to Academy Award Nominee”. 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ObIfH4utYPU> [Accessed on: 3 September 2020]

New York Times Events. “TimesTalks: Aaron Sorkin and Jeff Daniels”. 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKvTKieRwWw&t=920s> [Accessed on: 6 September 2020]