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The West Wing and House of Cards: A Comparison of Narrative Strategies of Two Politically-themed Dramas

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Abstract
Politically-themed shows have gained popularity in recent years. This paper analyzes two politically-themed shows, The West Wing and House of Cards, in terms of their narrative strategies and episode architecture. Two key persuasive objectives of the shows’ respective producers are identified through the examination of the narrative structure and devices used. On one level, the narrative devices are used to perpetuate certain ideas about our nation’s political leaders. However, on a more fundamental level, any narrative strategy employed by the producers of the two shows is ultimately connected to the economically-based need to increase and maintain viewership. Contextual factors that inform the shows’ production and subsequent reception by audiences are also considered.

Introduction
Narrative, as Abbott (2008) observes, is present in virtually all human discourse. The communicative act of telling a story is frequently intended to achieve certain goals, and hence contains a persuasive aspect. Specific narrative strategies are employed in order to accomplish the communicator’s objectives, and what strategies are used will depend upon the objectives sought. The storyteller makes specific choices in terms of which particular events to include in telling the story, the order in which those events are presented, and the point of view from which those events are recounted (Ryan & Lenos, 2012) that will increase the likelihood that communicative aims are attained. For television narratives, these goals invariably include stimulating viewership (and thereby generating profit) and can sometimes include the promulgation of certain worldviews.

Traditionally, television dramas have followed the classic hero narrative template: The protagonist(s), who embodies qualities valued by mainstream society (i.e., the good guy), is pitted against a villain(s), someone who breaches
established rules or violates social norms (i.e., the bad guy). Disposition-based theories of audience enjoyment (e.g., Raney, 2004; Zillmann, 2000) explain why narratives employing this basic outline are popular with audiences: viewers tend to like characters who demonstrate moral correctness, that is, the viewer’s subjective sense of moral correctness, and dislike characters who exhibit moral turpitude, or morals antithetical to those of the viewer. Media enjoyment is the result of watching liked characters succeed and disliked characters defeated. Shows like The West Wing (TWW), which aired on NBC from 1999 to 2006, employed this traditional protocol, in which the protagonists are good guys who are in each episode called upon to overcome the obstacles posed by various antagonists, in the form of aggressive foreign nations, ultra-Conservative groups, natural disasters, and so on. In recent years, however, viewers have been seen to embrace non-traditional narratives like Netflix’s House of Cards (HOC) that defy conventional screenwriting wisdom by featuring morally questionable protagonists. (Although audiences in the past have occasionally found themselves captivated by particularly intriguing antiheroes, the current televi
dual landscape is evidencing a remarkable proliferation of morally ambiguous characters.)

The purpose of this paper is to examine how different narrative strategies are used by two popular politi
cally-themed shows, The West Wing and House of Cards, to achieve the dual objectives of maximizing viewership (and hence, profit) and promoting certain political beliefs and attitudes. Specifically, I examine the producers’ discourse decisions in terms of setting, characters, focalization, themes, and episode structure in order to discover how these elements function in both TWW and HOC to achieve their respective goals. Finally, the historical context surrounding the production of the two shows is discussed, which further sheds light on factors that informed the producers’ creative decisions, and also influenced how the shows were received by their respective audiences. The choice of TWW was due to its significance as the first prime-time program to successfully utilize the political-drama formula to gain accolades from critics and viewer loyalty from the public. The show’s first season, which the present paper focuses on, was awarded nine Emmys, including one for Outstanding Drama Series. HOC was selected for analysis not only because it is a more current example of politically-themed dramas, but because in several key respects it is the polar opposite of TWW, featuring a protagonist who is a far cry from the moral exemplars on TWW. Television producers who wish to embrace the opportunities offered by the apparent shift in audience reception of morally questionable characters and create potentially
popular shows of their own featuring such characters might use the insights provided by the present investigation to gauge how specific narrative strategies help to maintain audience engagement with such shows.

**Politically-themed Dramas**
Television shows with a political setting have seen a steady rise in popularity in recent years. Jones (2010) noted this trend, observing that television programs featuring political themes or settings, once a “formula for ratings death,” had gained popularity with producers with the critical and ratings success of shows like *TWW*. This network series could perhaps be seen as the show that started the trend. In its most successful season, the show ranked tenth in the Nielsion ratings, averaging 17.2 million viewers weekly (“How did your favorite show rate?” 2002). Since *TWW*, there have been other politically-themed programs that have performed well either critically or commercially, or both. Politically-themed shows currently on the air include dramas such as *Scandal*, *Homeland*, *The Americans*, and *House of Cards*, as well as the comedies *Veep* and *Alpha House*. A recent *New Republic* article commented on this phenomenon, attributing the popularity of these shows to the public’s desire to know more about what our elected public servants are really up to in Washington (Frank, 2013). Often, these programs appear to offer audiences an insider’s view into the mysterious political maneuvering and intrigue that goes on in our nation’s capital. As may be expected, the “reality of Washington” as constructed by the producers of the various politically-themed shows on television results in an inconsistent picture for the viewer who wonders what our politicians are “really like.”

Generally speaking, there are two opposing depictions of Washington that emerge from these politically-themed television programs. These two contrasting portrayals correspond to the two contradictory masterplots being simultaneously circulated in our society: the first portrays politicians as honorable people truly dedicated to the task they have been elected to do (namely, to serve the public), while the second portrays them as selfish individuals who will do or say anything to get elected, and thereafter give little thought to the needs and well-being of those who voted for them.

As Fiske (1989) observes, dominant institutions such as the television industry are in a unique position to disseminate and popularize certain perspectives and ideas. Therefore, political scientists and cultural monitors often express their concern at the degree to which perspectives reflected on TV shows are being internalized by the viewing public. Taking seriously the
potential for even fictional programs to influence viewers’ political beliefs, Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger (2005) examined the depiction of terrorism-related issues on *TWW*, concluding that “Messages in fiction matter; they matter in real and political ways. The depictions of terrorism and other public issues in fictional media affect how people think about the world” (p. 100). While the argument can certainly be made that shows such as *TWW* and *HOC* have the potential to influence viewer attitudes towards our political leaders in certain ways, and that this attempt to influence viewer opinion may even be one of the goals of the show’s creators, ultimately, of course, all programming has but one end goal: to generate the most amount of profit possible.

The Functional Perspective

Bordwell (2004) advocates a functional explanation of narratives. Narratives, according to Bordwell, “are designed to fulfill certain purposes. These purposes can largely be conceived as aiming at certain effects—effects registered by a perceiver prepared to grasp a narrative” (p. 204). The author points out the deficiencies in a neo-structuralist approach that attempts merely to identify and classify narrative features without taking into account what function(s) the inclusion of such features into a text is meant to accomplish. Bordwell observes that it is inadequate to simply highlight, for instance, moments of overt narrational presence without also providing an explanation for why they were included in the discourse. The beginning of many films have employed a strategy of moving inward in the opening shot, a device that Bordwell explains serves to gradually initiate the spectator into the world of the film, as well as motivate the viewer to discover the “target of [the] narrowing field of view” (p. 209).

Events in a narrative are either major turning points—what Chatman (1980) terms *kernels*, which “drive the story forward and lead to other events”—or supplementary incidents (*satellites* in Chatman’s terminology), which help to make a narrative richer and more interesting but which do not alter the course of events in any significant way. The current paper takes a functional approach to the narratives under discussion, and seeks to explain narrative devices found in those two programs by speculating on the reactions those devices were designed to elicit from viewers. Following Rowland (2009), in examining the persuasive rhetorical function of *TWW* and *HOC*, attention is paid to the way the two shows engage and maintain audience interest, encourage audience identification with the characters, use particular settings to transport audiences
to another place and/or time, and tap into the audience’s values and needs in order to evoke emotional reactions.

**Analysis**
In terms of setting, insofar that both shows are set in the world of the politically powerful in Washington, one could group *TWW* and *HOC* under the common heading of “politically themed dramas.” Viewers familiar with both shows, however, will know that the two programs are in fact vastly different in terms of, among other things, characters and the attitudes that seem to be espoused towards those in high political office. *TWW* portrayed our nation’s highest elected official and the people working for him in a very sanguine and sympathetic light. Each week, viewers could tune in to watch the erudite and honest President Josiah Bartlet—played by Martin Sheen, an actor who possesses both the gravitas appropriate for the role and an easy-going likeability—conquer obstacles that threaten his White House and/or the American people and American values. With the help of his able executive team, who are all as good and honorable as the president himself, challenges ranging from belligerent and ornery foreign entities to natural disasters that threaten American lives are dealt with through the tireless efforts of those admirable characters.

Because of its bold (considering it is the product of a network station) discussions of touchy issues such as gays in the military, hate crimes, racist laws, racial profiling, interracial relationships, and campaign finance reform, among others, *TWW* has often been said to reflect more liberal values. However, although assessments of the show by critics ranged from the perception that it is a “product of its liberal writer Aaron Sorkin and of a left-leaning Hollywood community” (Gans-Boriskin & Tisinger, p. 100) to the conviction that it amounts to “political pornography for liberals” (Podhoretz, p. 223), several aspects of *TWW* in fact indicates a conservative worldview. In the pilot episode, for instance, an antagonist is introduced in the character of Mary Marsh and the Christian Right she represents. Even while the climax of Story A shows President Bartlet putting this ultra-conservative character in her place and kicking Marsh and her allies out of his White House, viewers are also told within this episode that Bartlet is a “deeply religious man” who urges the United States urging young women not to resort to abortion.

That *TWW* simultaneously reflects *both liberal and conservative values* is due to the show’s need to attract the most numbers of viewers possible. As a program airing on a network station, the ultimate goal of *TWW*, as is that of any
network television program, is to deliver the greatest number of viewers to advertisers: “Considered as a business, television works on a basic exchange. For a fee, television delivers audiences, measured in thousands, to advertisers. That is, the business of television is showing ads to audiences” (Browne, p. 587). Despite the fact that *TWW’s* attempts to appeal to a politically-diverse audience were mostly veiled under the guise of liberalism, an analysis of its narrative strategies reveals that, besides the objective necessitated by the business nature of all television, one major objective of *TWW* was to legitimize the hierarchy of political power in our society. While the show does acknowledge that the system is flawed, it portrays the people at the top of that system as being noble, selfless, and trustworthy individuals who certainly deserve to occupy their positions of power.

In contrast to *TWW*, the narrative strategies employed by the creators of *HOC* are even more directly related to the show’s profit-making objective. Unlike network programs, Netflix (and premium cable stations) are concerned not with delivering audiences to advertisers but with appealing to subscribers (Smith, 2011). Hence, any narrative strategy used could be seen in light of this consideration. Through the shows created exclusively for Netflix (*House of Cards, Orange is the New Black*, the new episodes of * Arrested Development*), the company tries to put its origins as a video delivery service behind itself and establish the Netflix brand as a producer of quality programming. With so many channels and shows on network stations to choose from, why would viewers pay to subscribe to Netflix? Netflix’s answer to that question would be: because their shows are strikingly different from anything one could find on regular TV channels. Netflix’s producers work hard to distance itself from regular television, and to stress that the shows they produce are not the usual, family-friendly, traditional values-affirming fare one would find on network channels, but rather, they are artistically-superior products well worth a monthly fee to enjoy. As Smith (2011) notes, a common perception among audiences and critics alike is that “only when extracted from the context of television can a series hope to obtain ‘artistic legitimacy’” (p. 37).

We see this attempt to achieve artistic legitimacy driving the narrative decisions in Netflix’s shows, such as *HOC*. In essence, Netflix is attempting to establish itself as an auteur. Thompson (1996) enumerates a list of possible traits that “quality TV” often exhibit. The first of these features is that shows worthy of the descriptor “quality” is conspicuously unlike “regular” TV. “In a medium long considered artless, the only artful TV is that which isn’t like all the rest of it. Quality TV breaks rules” (Thompson, p. 13). This clear distinction from
regular TV is exactly what Netflix and its programs are trying to achieve. Another feature is that quality TV is usually made by directors more associated with films. Several episodes of HOC are helmed by well-known film directors, including David Fincher (Fight Club, The Social Network) and Joel Schumacher (Falling Down, A Time to Kill). The casting of the Academy Award-winning Kevin Spacey, an actor previously associated with films and not television, also adds to the show’s impression of prestige. One other criteria of quality TV that HOC meets is that it “aspires toward ‘realism’” (Thompson, p. 15). Of course, the Sorkin-helmed TWW also presented itself as a “quality” alternative to “regular” programming, but this distinction was especially emphasized by the producers of HOC.

Underlying economic considerations aside, the storytelling techniques used on TWW are most often employed to help achieve the show’s objective of promoting certain worldviews, while narrative devices used on HOC are used to distinguish the show from “regular television” and thus to solidify the prestige of the Netflix brand. Another primary objective of the producers of HOC is to keep viewers tuned into a show in which the main character is morally reprehensible.

Setting
On TWW, characters are most often shown at their place of work, the White House. Rowland (2009) notes that setting within a story can, in addition to the particular place specified, also refer implicitly to other places relevant to the audience. In this case, viewers of TWW are encouraged to think of their own workplaces (and their own performances at those workplaces) as they watch the exemplary employees on the show model the proper spirit appropriate to the labor force. This is in keeping with one of the show’s major themes: the responsibility of every good citizen to perform the job that has been allotted to him or her to the best of his or her ability. While working to enrich oneself or to advance one’s own ambitions is frowned upon in the series, working for the collective good is one of the values privileged on TWW. In the rare instances when the action takes place away from the interior of the White House, the characters are shown as either conducting work-related business anyway despite being physically removed from their place of employment, or they are portrayed as being uncomfortable in their surroundings.

When viewers first encounter the main characters in the pilot episode, they are situated away from the office, except for Josh Lyman, the White House deputy chief of staff, who is shown sleeping on his desk. Subsequent episodes
suggest that Josh often spends his nights at his office, through such details as that he keeps spare shirts there, etc. The other members of the White House staff who viewers will come to recognize as the main characters are then introduced one by one: Toby is on a plane, arguing with a flight attendant because she has asked him to turn off his computer during landing. Though Toby is far from being portrayed as a difficult character on the show, his discomfort at being forced to stop working for even five minutes is so extreme that the normally mild-mannered Toby reacts testily to the flight attendant’s request. Viewers first encounter C.J., the White House Press Secretary, on a treadmill at her gym. She is apparently attempting to flirt with the man using the machine next to hers. She insists that despite her job, she does have time for a personal life. “Every day from 5 am to 6 am,” C.J. brags, “is my time.” However, what happens next undermines C.J.’s claim to personal time away from the cares of work: her beeper goes off, there has been an emergency at the White House, and she is needed there immediately.

In a subsequent episode, viewers are shown a rare sight when the entire staff assembles at a restaurant outside of the White House for breakfast. It was apparently the idea of Leo McGarry, the White House chief of staff. As the others arrive, they complain to Leo about his decision to take them so far away from their office:

Josh: “We couldn’t meet closer to the office?”
Leo: “I didn’t want people coming to our table.”
Josh: “We couldn’t meet in the office?”
Leo: “I was hungry.”
Josh: “We couldn’t have food sent to the office?” (Sorkin, 1999)

These objections show the characters’ annoyance at being dragged away from their place of work. Leo’s assistant deals with the inconvenience by bringing a bunch of office supplies with her to the breakfast—essentially, she manages the micro-trauma of being away from the White House by bringing her office with her. Leo, Toby, and Sam cope by discussing work issues at the restaurant. Ironically, though it was Leo’s idea to meet at the restaurant because he “was hungry,” he is so engrossed in the work-related discussion that he ignores the waitress trying to take their order. Josh and his assistant, Donnatella, are the only ones present who are engaging in non-work related dialogue—and for this, they are reprimanded by Leo. “I’m beginning to regret hiring any of you,” he
exclains in frustration, directing everyone’s attention back to the issues they are working on.

While the characters on *TWW* are usually shown in their work environment, we seldom see the protagonist of *HOC*, Francis Underwood, in his office. Some scenes find Francis inside the U.S. Capitol Building. However, Francis is most often associated with his home, an elegant environment that clearly attests to the wealth of its residents. Even when Francis is shown performing work-related activities, he is often depicted as conducting his work from the comfort of his own home, and his employees often accommodate him by going to his house to report to him. While viewers of *TWW* are meant to deduce that the characters’ earnest labors benefit and enrich the general public, the frequent use of Francis’ home as a backdrop on *HOC* suggests that everything Francis does is intended to augment his own personal wealth and power. Location on *HOC* is often used to illustrate a character’s personality. Francis and Claire’s home is tastefully decorated, the rich mahogany and clean lines of the furniture reflecting the quiet strength of their owners. Zoe’s run-down apartment reflects the reckless aspects of her personality, as well as the “messiness” of this character’s life.

**Characters**

As Kozloff (1992) points out, “it is characters and their interrelationships that dominate television stories” (p. 75). This observation is echoed by Porter *et al.* (2002) who claim that, along with continuous storylines, the fact that viewers tuning in to a particular TV program can expect to encounter many of the same characters each week is what sets television narratives apart from other narrative forms (p. 23). Writing well-rounded characters who seem “real” and whom viewers come to care about is one tactic program producers use to secure loyal viewership. According to the affective disposition theory (ADT) of drama (Raney, 2004; Zillmann, 2000), enjoyment of media is contingent upon our positive affect toward the characters (i.e., the protagonists), which in turn is dependent on our moral evaluations of those characters. Simply put, drama viewers like and root for characters they perceive as morally correct, and they tend to dislike characters they see as morally incorrect (Raney, 2004). One possible explanation for the ratings success of *TWW* is that the major characters are portrayed as ethical and compassionate individuals, and are thus highly likeable characters. Furthermore, the producers take pains to make these characters “real” by giving them histories and backstories, and by hinting at their lives beyond what is shown within each episode. For example, in Season One viewers are introduced to the White House communications director Toby
Ziegler’s ex-wife, Andrea. The reason their marriage ended was not revealed in this season, but although divorced, Toby and Andrea obviously enjoy a very amicable relationship. Upon hearing that Andrea was on a date with a man who drove her home despite being drunk, Toby tells her that she could have called him to come pick her up rather than risk her life being driven home by a drunk driver. Watching their harmonious exchange, the viewer’s curiosity is piqued, and s/he is motivated to continue watching the show to discover why two people who obviously still care about each other would have gotten divorced.

Though *TWW* is told from the perspective of his White House staff, arguably the most important character on the show is that of President “Jed” Bartlet. An “honest, fair, and ethical Democratic president” (Jones, p. 10), Bartlet is the nicest and most caring boss (and, as President of the United States he is, in effect, the boss of every American) anyone could wish for, one who takes an avid interest in the well-being of everyone in his White House, from his most senior White House aide to his chauffeur. In the pilot episode, Josh makes an offensive comment to a member of the Christian Right on TV, and the only recourse, from a public relations standpoint, as another character reminds Josh (and the viewer), is for Bartlet to fire him. This, however, Bartlet refuses to do, and instead he sticks his neck out for his employee, at the risk of alienating a significant portion of religious voters. Bartlet’s protectiveness toward his employees provides ample explanation for why they in turn are so devoted to serving him. Every episode gives viewers further proof of why Bartlet deserves the loyalty and devotion of his staff. In “Mandatory Minimums,” a sleeping Bartlet is awakened by Leo, walking into the president’s bedroom at midnight. Leo is seeking a sympathetic ear to relate his internal conflicts to, and this he finds in Bartlet, who shows no irritation at being woken up from his slumber. Presently, C.J. enters the bedroom as well. She had committed a political faux pas that morning, and it had been weighing on her mind all day. Finally, C. J. had summoned the courage to confess her mistake to the president, and he readily forgives her and relieves her disquiet. Toby and Sam join the group already assembled in the president’s bedroom, to talk about work. Finally, Josh enters. It turns out that all he needed to tell the president, past midnight in the president’s bedroom, was that he had given a girl he liked a gift. It is consistent with the dominant themes of the show that Bartlet is so accessible a boss that his staff feels no qualms about waking him up in the middle of the night to relate minute developments in their love lives.

In sharp contrast to the idealized storyworld of *TWW*, the viewer of *HOC* is hard-pressed to find a decent person amid the show’s characters. The main
character, Francis Underwood (Kevin Spacey), is insatiably ambitious and irredeemably evil. He is a House Majority Whip who will stop at nothing, including cold-blooded murder, to advance his political career. The people he associates with are scarcely better equipped than himself in moral fiber: his assistant Doug shows no hesitation (indeed, he shows great initiative) in carrying out despicable deeds at his boss’ instruction, and Francis’ wife, Claire, doesn’t bat an eye as she makes her office manager fire half her staff, and then personally fires the office manager at the end of the day. Francis’ mistress, Zoe, is sleeping with him in exchange for the insider news from Washington that his position allows him to leak to her once in a while, always to his advantage. Francis uses, and ultimately destroys, the alcoholic Congressman Peter Russo, who, while not a vicious character, gets high and patronizes prostitutes, and generally conducts himself in a manner very different from how we’d like our politicians to behave.

Although the president on this show is not a well-rounded character and does not have a great deal of screen time, viewers are given indications that he is not a terribly noble character either. In this revenge drama, Francis is primarily motivated by his desire to thwart President Walker’s plans and to undermine Walker’s administration. As revealed in the first episode, however, Walker is by no means blameless, and there is ample justification for Francis’ anger, if not his extreme retaliatory measures. He had backed Walker during the latter’s presidential bid, and had been led to believe that in exchange for his support, Walker would name Francis as his Secretary of State. Walker’s betrayal was revealed soon after his election. In a kernel scene revealing the initiating event that serves as the driving force for the main plot of the entire show, Francis is told that he will not be named Secretary of State after all, and that Walker prefers he remain in Congress. A stunned Francis barely manages to protest, “Let’s be absolutely clear: You wouldn’t have won without me... Donations, endorsements... I wrote the campaign’s entire foreign policy platform. I bring years of foreign affairs committee—” before he is cut off.

The depiction of such wholly unlikeable characters may seem to be at odds with the producers’ goals of increasing Netflix subscribership. Rather than entice viewers through the depiction of likeable characters, the producers of HOC attempt to achieve that objective through other, more unorthodox, means. First, by portraying a main cast comprised almost entirely of villains or morally ambiguous characters, Netflix is again taking on the role of the hip, anti-establishment producer of unconventional narratives. (Even Walter White, another notable antihero of contemporary television, is off-set by the other
likeable characters on *Breaking Bad.*) Many of the characters on *HOC*, and their personality flaws, are based on those from the original BBC series. However, while the British version tends to provide some sort of justification, however unconvincing, for the characters’ less honorable undertakings, when the Netflix version bothers to offer any motivation for a character’s bad behavior it is often lame and indefensible. For example, while Zoe’s British prototype, Mattie Storin, engages in an affair with a married Urquhart out of (what she perceived to be) love, Zoe sleeps with Francis to further her career as a political reporter.

Second, the portrayals of these profoundly problematic political figures function to heighten the impression (at least in the minds of those who believe D.C. to be generally run by morally corrupt individuals) that *HOC* is offering viewers no less than the “truth” about our political institutions and the leaders who inhabit them. Thus, the pleasure in watching the show lies mainly in a kind of voyeuristic thrill at being allowed to witness what actually goes on behind closed doors in Washington. Early in the first episode, viewers are introduced to the character of underappreciated reporter Zoe Barnes as she is pitching a writing project to her supervisor. She proposes to undertake the task of writing exposés of political leaders in Washington. “We lift the veil,” Zoe explains, and reveal “What’s really going on.” In fact, this is what the producers of *HOC* hope their viewers will believe is the show’s function: we are encouraged to make an analogy between Zoe, a journalist (i.e., a writer) exposing the corruption of Washington, and the writers of the show, performing the same public service. Finally, the producers of the show employ various creative narrative strategies to deal with the tremendous challenge posed by the fact that the show’s protagonist is also its villain.

As mentioned above, the disposition theory of drama posits that viewers prefer characters who perform moral acts, and they tend to dislike those who commit immoral acts (Raney, 2004). Based upon these assumptions, the character of Francis Underwood should be one whom most viewers will find unlikeable. How, then, to maintain viewer engagement when the main character is such an unlikeable one? The challenge in this case is even greater given that the producers of *HOC* have so little time to get the viewer “hooked” on the show before Francis’ moral ambiguity (which turns into downright immorality in the final episodes of the first season) is revealed. The producers used their allotted time well: The pre-credit teaser of the pilot episode, which concludes at 3:40, manages not only to establish Francis as the sympathetic, even heroic protagonist of the show, but attempts to initiate a bond as well between Francis and the viewer. This scene begins with sounds rather than
images: the screeching of a car, the terrible sound of impact, followed by the plaintive howling of a dog. A door opens, and Francis walks through it, towards the viewer. He sees the dog lying hurt on the ground, and immediately recognizing it as his neighbor’s pet, he instructs his bodyguard to tell the owners what has happened. This seemingly insignificant detail is in fact calculated to provide a (misleading) clue to Francis’ character. The viewer gathers at this early point that Francis is a good neighbor, the kind who knows his neighbors’ pets on sight, and who doesn’t hesitate to help when one of them has been hurt. Less than a minute into this scene, Francis breaks the fourth wall and begins to talk directly to viewer (the show’s use of direct address will be discussed further below). He talks about pain, in a manner which leaves the viewer in no doubt that it is something he himself is intimately acquainted with. Upon examining the run-over dog and finding it fatally wounded, Francis does the most compassionate thing one could do in such instances, and yet his action is one that demands a courage few possess—he puts the poor animal out of its misery using his bare hands. This action establishes Francis as a heroic figure, someone who is capable of carrying out whatever needs to be done, no matter how unpleasant.

We next see Francis in his bathroom, where he is washing canine blood off his hands. He casts a glance right at us (i.e., into the camera), thereby situating the viewer at home inside this, the most private room in Francis’ home. These glances directly at and the asides to the viewer serve to strengthen the impression that an intimate relationship exists between this character and the viewer watching. In this same scene, the viewer is shown Francis interacting with his wife. After introducing Francis as a good neighbor, another (misleading) side of this character is presented to the viewer—that he is an affectionate husband. Through the use of such ingenious narrative strategies, the producers of HOC manage to create a positive first impression of the show’s protagonist, within a short amount of time. Although Francis’ moral ambiguity is revealed before the end of the first episode, the initial introduction of Francis as a positive character allows viewers to form a favorable judgment of this character early on. This increases the likelihood that viewers will have become invested in the show by the time they recognize their initial impressions is mistaken, and will therefore continue to watch even as the protagonist’s immorality becomes apparent.
Focalization
Abbott (2008) defines the narrative technique of focalization as “the lens through which we see characters and events in the narrative” (p. 73); essentially, it is the point of view from which the story is told. Focalization is important because it “determines whose values the audience will be invited to endorse” (Ryan & Lenos, p. 127). TWW is told from the perspective of the president’s core staff. They are: Leo, his White House chief of staff; Josh, his deputy chief of staff; C.J., the press secretary; Toby, the communications director; Sam, deputy communications director; Mandy, public relations; and Charlie, the president’s personal aide. So, why is the story told through their eyes, if the most important character in the show is actually President Bartlet? The answer lies in the fact that the staff members are surrogates for the viewer at home. Seeing and evaluating Bartlet through their perspective, viewers come to admire his character the way the staff does. The White House depicted on TWW is an ideal organization headed by a wise leader who cares about all of his employees. Perhaps viewers are meant to draw an analogy between this fictional organization and the companies they themselves work for. If Bartlet represents the ideal CEO, then surely viewers are hailed to see themselves in, or at least urged to emulate, the ideal employees depicted on TWW, that is, people who gladly labor for the good of their organization and leader, often at the expense of their own free time and personal life.

Unlike TWW, viewers watching HOC see the story unfold through the eyes of its main character, Francis. Normally, viewers are invited to empathize and identify with the protagonist of a show. This is one reason to present a story from the point of view of the protagonist, as we naturally tend to identify with the character with whom we occupy the same perspectival position. However, the character of Francis is soon revealed to be so reprehensible that any attempt to invite the audience to identify with this character is doomed to failure, and the producers are, of course, well aware of that fact. Rather than try to encourage viewer identification with their main character, then, the producers of HOC needed to resort to other tactics to maintain audience engagement with the character of Francis Underwood (and therefore with the show).

One unusual narrative device used in this show is that of direct address. Kozloff (1992) defines direct address as that “situation that occurs when someone on TV—a news anchor, a talk show host, a series host, a reporter—faces the camera lens and appears to speak directly to the audience at home” (p. 81). Although the American version of HOC differs quite significantly from its
British progenitor, the narrative device of the direct address is one borrowed directly from the earlier BBC series. While a few network shows have previously used unconventional narrative strategies that render a narrator’s presence more overt (e.g., The Wonder Years, Scrubs, Arrested Development), the use of a homodiegetic narrator who speaks directly to the viewer is highly unusual. Mittell (2006) lists this breaking of the fourth wall as a sign of narrative complexity, and the use of this uncommon narrative device again sets Netflix apart as a company which produces extraordinary shows that use such extraordinary storytelling techniques. However, the decision to let Francis Underwood (and Francis Urquhart in the original British series) address the viewer directly is based on the need to maximize the likelihood that audiences will be engaged with this morally bankrupt character. While we cannot be made to identify with or even to like this character, who is completely devoid of any redeeming qualities, by situating us as his confidant, we are involuntarily made complicit in this character’s affairs. Early research into parasocial relationships (non-mutual, non-dialectical relationships with mediated personalities) focused on the imaginary bond some viewers perceived between themselves and television newscasters or talk show hosts precisely because direct address was thought to encourage the formation of such relationships (e.g. Horton and Wohl, 1956; Levy, 1979). Francis’ way of talking directly to the viewer, then, may be seen as a conscious attempt on the part of the show’s producers to foster parasocial relationships with this character. Francis is like the friend whose actions we disapprove of; however much we may disapprove of Francis’ doings, we cannot disown him completely (by turning off the TV or changing the channel) because we are his accomplices.

Themes
As mentioned earlier in this paper, one dominant theme that emerges from TWW is the proper attitude toward work. Everyone in the White House, including the president himself, appears to work non-stop from morning until night, and to get by on very little sleep, not to mention very little recreational time. An oft-parodied and now clichéd narrative device, the “walk and talk,” an innovation developed by Sorkin in which characters are shown conversing about the pressing political issues of the day as they walk from one part of the White House to another, is used to demonstrate the dynamic, productive, and multitasking work lives of the characters. Rather than waste precious moments of the day by walking to one’s destinations without accomplishing any other tasks on the way, the White House staff in TWW is comprised of people who
fully devote their energies to getting the greatest number of things done during their hours at work. There may also be another reason why Sorkin continued to use, several times each episode, this very device, even after it had already become clichéd. In short, it had become one way for this auteur to sign his signature on his products. This was important as Sorkin’s name had become associated with quality TV, and therefore, the frequent reminder that “this is an Aaron Sorkin joint” is another way to “sell” the program and attract viewers.

One oppositional binary related to this theme is that of career vs. personal life. Every character is shown to have sacrificed or to be sacrificing his or her personal life in order to devote themselves more completely to their jobs. Toby is already a divorced man when we meet him in the first season, and we see Leo’s wife leaving him and contemplating a divorce because Leo places his job before his marriage. Viewers can guess that Toby’s wife divorced him for similar reasons. C.J. is being courted by the White House correspondent, Danny, and she evidently reciprocates his feelings and wishes to be with him, but she suppresses her desires because going out with a reporter would compromise her position as White House press secretary. Sam befriends a call girl, Laurie, but is unable to maintain any kind of relationship with her due to the potential scandal it might prove for the president and the White House. Another binary that can be detected in *TWW* is that of working for the collective good (which is affirmed by the show’s implied author) vs. working for personal gain or to realize selfish ambitions. In all his official decisions, Bartlet chooses the course of action that will produce the greatest good for the American people rather than for himself. The character of vice-president Hoynes is often presented as a contrast to Bartlet. Hoynes’ actions often seem to be guided by a desire to increase his viability as a contender when his turn comes to run for president, rather than from any consideration of what is best for the American public.

Another major theme in *TWW* is the idea that *America is the greatest nation*. Frequently, comparisons are made between ours and a foreign nation, and America invariably shines by the comparison. Other countries are shown to be inexplicably aggressive, appallingly dictatorial, or simply petty and ridiculous. When Syria commits an unprovoked act of aggression against the United States by shooting down an American plane, Bartlet, though furious, ultimately decides that retaliating, but limiting the retaliatory attacks to military targets who likely expect the attacks, is a “proportional, reasonable, responsible, and merciful” response. This display of American magnanimity justifies our claim to the right to oversee the affairs of other nations.
The most prominent theme that can be discerned in HOC is, of course, that most politicians are cold, calculating and corrupt individuals, and if they aren’t, they will eventually be destroyed by someone who is. When Francis is accused by another character of lying, his response is simply that it is “politics,” suggesting that lying is part of the job. The few characters on the show who are politicians yet are not explicitly portrayed as immoral are shown to be particularly vulnerable to unscrupulous men like Francis. He shows no mercy or remorse over destroying the careers of other politicians, such as Michael Kern and Donald Blythe, though those men have done nothing to provoke his ill will. The underlying suggestion is that Washington is no place for principled individuals, who will not last long in it.

Another dominant theme that emerges from HOC is the idea that our country is run by the powerful and/or the rich. Democracy, according to the implied author of this text, is just a veneer for the system we really have—an oligarchy. The storyworld of HOC is ruled by people like Francis, who is politically powerful, or by people like Remy Danton and the SanCorp CEOs he works for. These elite few at the top of the social pyramid do not care what the powerless people at the bottom have to say. A significant scene in the second episode involves Francis discovering that a crazed civilian was trying to enter the Capitol Building. The man was screaming and tearing off his clothing because he was denied entrance. When Francis hears about the incident, he approaches the man and tells him, “Nobody can hear you. Nobody cares about you. Nothing will come of this.” The mentally-ill man represents the regular people of America, who try to make their opinions count, but possess neither the money nor the political muscle to amplify their weak voices. A third theme in HOC is that the needs of the individual trump the needs of the group. Francis puts his own ambitions above anything else, above even the wishes and desires of his wife.

Narrative Structure
A comparison of the narrative structure of the two shows revealed a surprising fact. One episode was selected from TWW and one from HOC. The episode selected from the former, “Mandatory Minimums,” was chosen because it contained several of the themes and tropes for which the show is known. Because this episode was the third to the last episode in the series’ first season, one of the final episodes from HOC first season was also selected. The comparison revealed that TWW had a total of six storylines, while in the HOC, the number of plots was three. Somewhat surprising given these numbers, the number of scenes in the HOC episode was actually higher (32 versus TWW’s 27).
The higher number of scenes in \textit{HOC} can be attributed, first, to the greater length of the show itself (cable dramas, shown as they are without commercials, are typically 55 minutes long, compared to the approximately 40 minutes of running time for network dramas), and second, the show’s use of parallel montage in the climactic moments in the fourth act. The cutting back and forth between the three storylines heightened the connections between them, as well as offered a contrast. For example, Russo’s drunken fling with the hooker in the hotel room, which viewers realize by that point but the character himself does not (dramatic irony) will soon lead to his ruination, is juxtaposed with Zoe’s tender moments with Lucas. While the hotel scene can only lead to catastrophe and grief, Zoe’s reciprocation of the affections of an appropriate love interest promises to lead to a more hopeful future for these two characters.

\textbf{Historical Context}

On the one hand, American viewers are conceived of as persons that long for positive portrayals of our elected leaders that provide “a much-needed counter to the anti-Washington stereotyping and presidency-bashing that is so much a part of pre-9/11 American political culture” (Levine, 2003). This sentiment is echoed in a comment by Bill Press, cohost of CNN’s \textit{Crossfire}, as he sought to explain the popularity of Martin Sheen’s fictional president: “Americans still want to love their president” (qtd. In Ezell, 2003). On the other hand, Americans have time and again demonstrated a prurient obsession with political scandals, “sensational exposés of political figures and falls from grace” (Pompper, 2003). What factors determine which tendency is ascendant at a given period, resulting in the successful reception of narratives that depict American politics in either a positive or negative light? To answer this question, we must take into consideration the historical context of the a narrative’s production and consumption. Although it would be reductionist to claim that products of popular culture invariably reflect the zeitgeist of their time, one would be even more remiss to claim that no connection exists between television programming and the societal issues and concerns that form the context surrounding their production. Hence, an examination of the differential use of narrative strategies in \textit{TWW} and \textit{HOC} would be incomplete without a consideration of the historical context that formed the backdrop against which the two shows were created and consumed. More than a decade separates the premieres of the two shows, and significant historical events and global conditions informed the narrative choices made by the producers of \textit{TWW} and \textit{HOC}, as well as the reception by audiences of the resulting televisual products.
TWiW has been called America’s “fantasy of what we wished our government could be,” while HOC embodies our fears over what our government has become (Sternbergh, 2014). When TWiW debuted in September, 1999, it had been ten years since the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, which precipitated the end of the Cold War. The dissolution of the Soviet Union two years later established the United States as the world’s only super-power (Quart & Auster, 2011). Still, anxieties lingered in the collective American conscious over potential foreign enemies, anxieties which were not always unfounded, given the rise in the Middle East of Islamic fundamentalism (Quart & Auster, 2011). Long before 9/11, Osama bin Laden and his fanatic followers had already provided America good reason to worry. The 1993 bombing of New York City’s World Trade Center, and the 1998 bombing of two American embassies in Africa, were attributed to the work of Islamic fundamentalists (Quart & Auster, 2011). Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles (2006) noted America’s increasing obsession with fictional narratives of the presidency starting in the 1990s. It was a decade in which fictional presidents would feature prominently in various popular media, including film, television, and novels, a trend which reflected the “cultural preoccupation with this institution and its place in our national culture” (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, p. 2). This increasingly marked focus on the presidency may be partly explained by the need to rally behind an (perhaps the most) important symbol of our nation against external forces that threaten it.

Furthermore, in 1999, when TWiW premiered, audiences were willing to accept the plausibility of a heroic, sincere, morally upright president in the White House. After all, William Jefferson Clinton, then in his second term as president, was, despite scandals involving real estate investments and troubles involving female interns, a popular Commander-in-Chief, under whose administration the country experienced an unprecedented economic expansion (Quart & Auster, 2011). Given this context, it would perhaps not be taxing the audience’s ability to suspend disbelief too much to buy the idea of a Clintonesque president without the flaws and foibles of the real Clinton. On the other hand, some scholars have argued that TWiW was as successful as it was precisely because it presented the fantasy of an ideal president to an audience disillusioned with the one they actually had (e.g., Ezell, 2003; Finn, 2003; Sternbergh, 2014). Ezell (2003) explains that viewers disappointed with the Clinton presidency enthusiastically embraced TWiW because “Bartlet and his cadre of loyal, idealistic aides seemed the perfect antidote for a nation weary of human frailty in its ultimate leader” (p. 160).
In addition to a general anxiety over external threats to the United States, and the Clinton administration, a third factor may have contributed to why *TWW* aired when it did, and why it was then met with such devoted viewership. The years leading up to *TWW*’s premiere witnessed “the quickening pace of financial and business globalization,” (Quart & Auster, p. 165) as America exported its McDonalds and Nikes all over the world, and American corporations took over foreign companies through several highly publicized mergers (Quart & Auster, 2011). The passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by President Clinton in 1993 further facilitated the exploitation of economic opportunities in Mexican and Canadian markets by American companies. Contemporary globalization, which more often than not benefits American businesses, has its critics among many foreign markets. American advocates for global free trade pressure other nations to make their markets available for American imports, while striving to protect our own manufacturers from foreign competition (Crothers, 2013). The unchecked mass exportation of American popular culture products have similarly led to pessimism among some foreign nations (particularly Canada and France), who list cultural corruption, cultural imperialism, and cultural homogenization as potential negative effects from the global domination by American popular culture (Crothers, 2013).

Thus, amid an environment characterized by criticism from foreign entities resentful of contemporary globalization, and uncertainty in its own citizens regarding the same phenomenon, the idealized vision of America in the form of its noble government is a welcome anodyne. As a popular American TV show that like many other hit American television series is broadcast in several other countries, *TWW* presents “the best parts of American civic culture” and spreads “its vision of American democracy in practice around the world” (Crothers, pp. 68–71). The intellectually and morally superior Bartlet and his excellent staff are certainly fitting leaders for America. However, as the text of *TWW* implies, they would serve equally well as the overseers of the entire planet. Given the United States’s interventionist style, this is, in fact, a role that we appear to have tacitly presumed to take upon ourselves. Storylines on *TWW* frequently portray foreign nations as rash or belligerent entities in need of America’s wise and peace-promoting guidance. For example, in a storyline that spans two episodes in the first season of *TWW* (“Lord John Marbury,” “He Shall from Time to Time...”), 300,000 Indian troops suddenly decide they had had enough of Pakistani “thuggery” and march into Pakistani-held territory with the intention of starting a war. Bartlet and his team are understandably alarmed, since, as
Communications director Toby Ziegler puts it, a war between those two nations, even if it starts with conventional weapons, “will not end with conventional weapons.” To prevent two such aggressive and irresponsible countries from using nuclear weapons and possibly destroying not only each other but the rest of the planet into the bargain, Bartlet and his people enlist the help of British diplomat Lord John Marbury. After careful investigation into the nuances of the situation, Marbury finally concludes that, in order to avert the unthinkable, the United States should approach India and... “buy them off.” The suggestion that India can be dissuaded from their purpose with nothing more than a check adds to the list of the country’s shortcomings: not only are the Indians reckless and combative, they are mercenary as well, willing to abandon their convictions at the first mention of money. Such narratives promote the idea of American superiority and work to legitimize American domination in terms of, among other things, a dominant share of the global free market.

As the above discussion illustrates, TWWS was a show that aired serendipitously during a political moment that was highly conducive to its successful reception. As Parry-Giles and Parry Giles (2006) suggest, TWSS offered a “cathartic rhetoric in a post-cold war global environment that simultaneously embraces the presidential and national faults yet instills a renewed and nostalgic patriotism lost in the aftermath of Vietnam, Watergate, Iran-Contra, the Clinton impeachment, and the 2000 presidential election” (p. 136).

If the show were to debut today, would it enjoy the same ratings success? Sternbergh (2014) does not think it would, claiming that the idealized fictional president would have no appeal for audiences in our “post-the-Obama-many-hoped-they’d-elected, post-hope political landscape.” On the other hand, the current moment is ripe for a culmination of the antihero trend that has distinguished quality television shows since The Sopranos, a trend that saw producers creating “a gamut of criminals whose offenses would come to include everything from adultery and polygamy to vampirism and serial murder” (Martin, 2013) and audiences nevertheless tuning in to watch these characters’ exploits. Although the success of the original BBC series in the United Kingdom must have contributed to the confidence of the producers of HOC that the formula would work here in the United States as well, the character of Francis Underwood would likely not be so irredeemably iniquitous without precedents like Tony Soprano and Walter White.
Conclusion
One insight that was revealed from this examination of the narrative strategies used in both *The West Wing* and *House of Cards* was that several of the themes extracted from each show were antithetical to themes in the other. These themes and other narrative elements that emerged from the analysis of the two shows represent the persuasive objectives of the shows’ creators on one level: to disseminate a certain view of our nation’s political leaders. On the other hand, one basic motivating force behind the narrative decisions made was found to be essentially the same: Both *TWW* and *HOC* used narrative devices in ways that maximized their potential to appeal to mass audiences. The objectives on this more fundamental, economic level were the same for both *TWW* and *HOC*: to persuade viewers to watch, and continue watching, the show. Insights gleaned from studying how particular narrative strategies are used on *HOC* hold implications for future producers of shows featuring morally exceptionable characters.

As a final note, it should be acknowledged that the contrasts between *TWW* and *HOC* are also explained in part by the differential American and British tendencies regarding political television fiction. As *HOC* is based upon an earlier British series (although it deviates from the British version significantly in characters and plotlines), certain aspects of the show reflect British political television conventions. Meanwhile, *TWW* can also be said to follow an established American tradition, i.e., it can be described as a “Capraesque” political fiction. Zoonen and Wring (2012) point out that characters and narratives on British political television shows tend to “present a rather gloomy understanding of how politics works and what individuals can achieve” (van Zoonen & Wring, p. 275), while American political television is by contrast more optimistic about the ability of committed individuals to overcome obstacles to effective and ethical government and prevail. That *HOC* is currently so popular with an American audience, however, suggests that our expectations for political fiction has undergone a transformation. Can it be that our erstwhile “Hoping for Change” collective mentality has truly declined into one that has resigned itself to “No Hope for Change”? Has it shifted from a collective faith in “Yes We Can” to “Yes, We Can... Give Up”?

References


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