

“Cicero Would Love This Show”: The Celebration of Rhetoric and Citizenship in *The West Wing*

ANNE ULRICH

Television shows, citizenship, and the display of rhetoric

“The more diverse a society becomes, the more pressing is the need for public reflection on what is best for the society as such and not just for its segments – in other words, the need for deliberation, for rhetoric.” According to Christian Kock and Lisa Villadsen (2012, p. 4), rhetoric plays a central role in defining citizenship and in connecting individuals and groups with abstract political entities like the “nation” or the “state.” In a face-to-face democracy like the ancient *polis*, the communitarian aspect was very concrete because citizens knew each other and participated together in the *ekklesia* and *dikasteria* and therefore had a clear sense of membership and affiliation. But in contemporary societies, as Dominique Leydet (2011) rightly remarks, “[c]itizens do not meet under an oak tree to formulate the laws; they are basically strangers and citizens’ involvement in the politics of representative democracies is episodic and diluted. Politics in this context cannot be expected to play a central role in most individuals’ lives; something else must generate the trust and loyalty necessary to the functioning of a political community.” But what are trust-generating factors in a fragmented and diverse society? In this paper, I argue that television can be an alternative forum for public deliberation and the formation of citizenship. Kock and Villadsen would claim that television involves citizens “at the receiving end of public deliberation” who engage themselves “in ‘inner’ deliberation.” (2012, p. 5) The authors are certainly thinking of factual television, such as electoral debates, news broadcasting, talk shows or other forms of political journalism. But I want to show that fictional television, especially the political television series, can also be interpreted as both active and passive forms of public engagement and that their depiction of the art of rhetoric is worth

investigating in the context of rhetorical citizenship. In fact, it is crucial to explore fictional forms of public engagement as a reaction to and extension of factual forms of citizenship.

There has been a renaissance of political issues in television series during the past years, for instance in series like *Borgen* (DR1, Denmark, 2010–), *The Thick of It* (BBC, UK, 2005–2012), *Veep* (HBO, USA, 2012–), or *Scandal* (ABC, USA, 2012–), to name only some of the most prominent. Their tradition goes back to UK series like *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister* (BBC Two, UK, 1980–1988; repr. Gold, UK, 2013–) or *House of Cards* which was recently re-adapted for the US (BBC, UK, 1990; repr. Netflix, USA, 2013–). Each of these series chooses politicians and their staff as the main characters and the political stage as central scenery, showing everyday political procedures like negotiations, photo-ops, press interviews, etc., as well as extraordinary situations like general elections, evolving national crises or private scandals.

Most of these series paint a rather cynical picture of politics. They use the political more as a backdrop against which a further drama or another sitcom unfolds. Thus, the plot has political connotations, but is not politically motivated – the only political purpose of such series is, at best, to question the uprightness of politics. *The West Wing*, in contrast, is more serious about politics – despite its orientation to entertainment. While other series mercilessly exaggerate the depiction of politicians and their staffers, *The West Wing* remains more realistic and therefore develops a fictional but quite plausible alternative to “real” politics. Aaron Sorkin, the creator of the series, imagined a fictional US administration that differed quite clearly from the Clinton Administration at the time. By making viewers identify with the fictional president and his staff, the series sought to activate their desire for political change; in this way, the series has a relatively strong political agenda.

Much has been already written about *The West Wing* as a political television series. But only a few studies have drawn attention to the political rhetoric of the show. I want to concentrate on the show’s diverse depictions of political rhetoric in order to crystallize the show’s own conception of deliberative rhetoric as a specific modality of public engagement. First, I will draw a sketch of the series’ general plot and cast and introduce show runner Aaron Sorkin as a political orator. Then I will focus on three different rhetorical aspects to characterize the show’s specific enhancement of rhetorical citizenship.

An entertaining civics lesson

The West Wing aired on NBC in the United States from September 1999 to May 2006 and was created by Aaron Sorkin, an award-winning US-American screenwriter and television producer. The show sought to entertain its viewers in a specific way, by addressing them *as* citizens and by showing them the process of making political rhetoric, and not just as an ordinary TV audience interested in primetime entertainment – even if the viewers were not US citizens. Its appeal to citizenship goes beyond national borders and involves the representation of politics and political rhetoric in a plausible and skillful way – almost based on the following aphorism quoted by *The West Wing* character Sam Seaborn, “Aristotle says, a probable impossibility is preferable to an improbable possibility” (Season 4, Episode 8: *Process Stories*). In seven seasons and 155 episodes in total, the series accompanied the fictional US-American President Josiah ‘Jed’ Bartlet and his well-educated and quick-witted White House staff during his two terms of office. *The West Wing* is not only a show about politics, it is a political show. According to the taxonomy of Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas, *The West Wing* is a show with both political content and political intent and is therefore “explicitly political”, i.e. it depicts various aspects of the political system as well as delivering a political message (2005, p. 8). That’s why I consider Sorkin to be a political orator who was actively engaging in public discourse and openly performing his vision of citizenship through the show. Although a great number of people were involved in the production of the series (John Wells and Thomas Schlamme, for instance, were both important players), Sorkin had a crucial role in the creative production process and can therefore be considered to be the main author and producer of the show. From a rhetorical perspective, his name stands for the collective authorship of the show.

Who are the characters in the show, and what is their relation to rhetoric? Martin Sheen plays US President Jed Bartlet, a president that is often described as an idealized version of left-leaning presidents like Jimmy Carter or Bill Clinton (Rothöhler 2012, p. 19). The character is catholic, a Democrat, a Nobel-prize winning economist, a quick-witted, elitist wise-guy with an immense instinct for power, and a dedicated and responsible, but also very hard-to-assess, “leader of the free world”. As a bit of a political pun, the fictional President is a direct descendant of a certain Josiah Bartlet, a real-world signatory of the Declaration of Independence (Clark 2005, p. 224). Jed Bartlet is conceived as a charismatic character for a well-educated

public: he received a comprehensive education in the humanities, is well-versed in the Bible, and likes to “entertain” his staff with erudite anecdotes, preferably in Latin (Cicero would love that, too). Although he is thought to be a “good guy,” the character becomes more ambiguous over the course of the series, which increases the “reality effect” of the show. But above all, Jed Bartlet is a rhetorical talent. The Bartlet “entourage,” which consists of seven main characters, is conceived in a similar way: they are both admirable and sometimes reprehensible because of their flaws and weaknesses, in life as well as in politics – and they are depicted as masters of rhetoric in many different ways. Chief of Staff Leo McGarry (John Spencer), Bartlet’s oldest and most like-minded political companion, is something like the White House “confidant,” laying out the strategic guidelines according to which the President’s staff should act. The continuous dialogs between Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford) and his assistant Donna Moss (Janel Moloney) reveal quite a few absurdities of the Washington “political machine,” and their mutual attraction (and denial of that attraction) is responsible for a certain soap opera feeling (see also van Zoonen 2005, pp. 19–35). Communications Director Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff) and his Deputy Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe) are both speech writers and spin doctors, and therefore represent hard-working “rhetorical craftsmen.” Press Secretary C.J. Gregg (Alison Janney), another “rhetorical craftswoman,” deals with the Washington journalists and the 24/7 news cycle. Finally, the President’s personal aide Charlie Young (Dulé Hill) plays the part of an “ordinary young man” and functions as a rhetorical sidekick for the Bartlet character.

It has often been pointed out that Jed Bartlet is not the only character modeled on real world people. Several reviews of the series claim that many of these characters are based on real members of the Clinton administrations: Communications Director Toby Ziegler is supposed to depict Gene Sperling, Deputy Communications Director Sam Seaborn parallels George Stephanopoulos, Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman is a mirror of Paul Begala, and Press Secretary C.J. Gregg is a stand-in for Dee Dee Myers (see Waxman 2003, p. 204, and Podhoretz 2003, p. 222). Former Clinton Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers also served as a consultant for the show and even as a screenwriter for several episodes – as did other former White House employees. Thus, with regard to the main characters, the setting, and the fact that the story is set in the present, there are a lot of direct references to actual political reality. This is very important in order to understand the

political nature of the show and the Aristotelian "probable impossibilities" that Sorkin wants to propose to his audience. From a rhetorical perspective, his intention was to "realize" his White House and his portrayal of the presidency in order to open up new spaces for conceivable political possibilities. His inspiration was taken from the real White House and real American politics, but his goal was to depict another, "better" White House and a "better" American politics in order to work towards it in the real world.

The West Wing also focuses on citizenship by confronting the audience with political topics and political problems, and it becomes entertainment by presenting them in a very witty and amusing way. The show's ratings averaged between 8 and 17 million viewers per season. Its audience was interested in politics, stemmed from both the Democratic and the Republican electorate, and averaged an income over \$100,000 (Finn 2003, p. 118f.; an analysis of this target demographic would be interesting, but is outside the scope of this paper). According to Jeannie Rutenburg, viewers claimed to enjoy "better looking staffers who are funnier and talk faster than real ones," (2003, p. 12) but they also enjoyed the regular "civil education" that came along with every episode. Critics such as Simon Rothöhler praised the "historically profound study of political institutions," as well as the ability to illustrate "sophisticated aspects of U.S.-American constitutional reality." (2012, p. 52) Over the course of seven seasons, the series went through almost every conceivable political scenario in both an informative and entertaining way: we witness a filibuster (Season 2, Episode 17: *The Stackhouse Filibuster*), a shutdown due to budget negotiations (Season 5, Episode 8: *Shutdown*), the nomination of judges for the Supreme Court (Season 5, Episode 17: *The Supremes*), the unfolding of a presidential electoral campaign (Seasons 6 and 7) and even a typo in the constitution (Season 7, Episode 21 *Institutional Memory*).

The show uses rhetorical *evidentia* and shows us democracy in the making. Other Sorkin TV shows like *Sports Night*, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, and, currently, *The Newsroom* are also backstage shows that cast an eye behind the scenes of television shows. The aesthetic concept of the backstage as the "frontstage" (Goffman 1959) on *The West Wing* may, at first glance, imply that politics is nothing but another television show, and may therefore recall academic discourse on the dramatization and mediatization of politics (Meyer 2002) or the so-called television malaise thesis, which holds that television only provides entertainment and transforms serious information or debate into entertainment. Yet, Sorkin's *The West Wing* turns the tables by

overcoming the skepticism of TV through TV itself. It addresses its audience as a citizenry and *not* as an uninformed, misguided or manipulated “mass.” I agree with Liesbet van Zoonen that series like *The West Wing* “enable people to think about the dilemmas that politicians and politics face” (2005, p. 137) and confront them with new knowledge about specific aspects of politics that allow them to adjust their image of politics again and again. Simon Rothöhler has said that an important effect of the show is that “almost every episode contains a detail you want to google,” or provokes a question you want to answer (Rothöhler 2012, p. 52). By gradually getting to know both the various aspects of politics and the characters of the show, the audience is invited to engage in the process of ‘making’ politics.

The show relies on the principle of para-social interaction, a concept of television theory elaborated by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl (1956) that explains how viewers establish a virtual but vivid relationship to their favorite characters. By identifying with one or more characters, viewers take sides and therefore not only observe but also participate in their actions. This is underlined by the general “backstage” strategy. While the real President and his real staffers can only be seen by the public performing their professional roles on the “frontstage,” the fictional characters of *The West Wing* are also shown “backstage,” where viewers can see them as they “really” are. This strategy of creating authenticity was one of the main drivers of the show’s success, not least because of the way it created a professional and entertaining manner for the subject matter of presidential politics to become pop culture. In the real world, we are either denied a look behind the scenes of the President and his staff, or the images that we do receive are completely staged – we thus never have the chance to get close to these figures. With *The West Wing*, on the other hand, we are able to develop an almost intimate relationship with the protagonists, and we identify with and pick up on their problems, which could, indeed, be our own political problems because of the way that Sorkin blends fiction and reality in the writing of the show. Over the course of the series, the aversions or affections that we have for the protagonists develop into political attitudes that increase our readiness for civic engagement.

Rhetoric behind the scenes

If we consider *The West Wing* to essentially be a show about rhetoric, the aesthetic concept of the backstage becoming the frontstage indicates an important deviation from the common display of rhetoric in film and television.

When political rhetoric is featured in film or television it is usually depicted by an actor delivering a speech accompanied by the "shot–reverse shot" technique, which shows the reaction of the audience. In such cases, the character rises to speak during some substantial crisis and becomes an "orator" through some kind of fundamental rhetorical speech act that resonates well in the represented audience. We can think of Marlon Brando as Mark Antony in the 1953 film adaption of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, for example, or of Denzel Washington as Malcolm X in the Spike Lee movie (for further examples see the section "Movie Speeches" on www.americanrhetoric.com). These depictions of political orators are best described as the perfect combination of the Aristotelian *zōon politikon* and *zōon logon echōn*: a person that gains his (or, more rarely, her) status only through the power of speech that nature has given him or her. The speech is performed at its best and it is successful and effective beyond any doubt. In these depictions, only the frontstage is shown, and the orator doesn't show up on stage until he's already perfect.

The West Wing, on the other hand, isn't afraid of disenchanting us of this artificial image of rhetoric. In fact, it shows the manufacturing of speeches and other rhetorical forms by shifting the emphasis from the frontstage to the backstage and from the product to the production process (according to ancient rhetoric, the five canons of rhetoric). This reversal and its aesthetic appeal are implicitly referred to by *West Wing* character Leo McGarry in one of the first episodes when he remarks, "there are two things in the world you never want to let people see how you make 'em: laws and sausages." (Season 1, Episode 4: *Five Votes Down*) "And speeches," the rhetorician would add, for if the audience "sees how you make 'em," they would instantly lose their persuasiveness. This phenomenon was described by the ancient rhetorical notion of *dissimulatio artis*, the dissimulation of the rhetorical technique in order to inspire the confidence of the audience. Aaron Sorkin deliberately ignored this suggestion by showing and explicitly celebrating "how you make 'em." By analyzing crucial scenes in the activities of the White House orators, I want to show how Sorkin conceives of "rhetoric" and how we can understand the series itself as, literally speaking, *epideictic rhetoric*, i.e., a demonstration of rhetoric.

The collective fabrication of speeches

In *The West Wing*, speeches are perfectly delivered, but they are also shown as hard-earned achievements. The most important speech that the series

centers on is the annual State of the Union, but there are also speeches at fundraising events, in front of lobbyist organizations or during electoral campaigns. The third of the five canons of rhetoric, the *elocutio*, is reflected upon in several episodes, for instance in Season 2, Episode 13 (*Bartlet's Third State of the Union*). In this episode, Communications Director Toby Ziegler discusses the concrete wording of the speech with another speechwriter and the president:

TOBY: Delete “vigorously” from the first sentence.

[...]

SPEECHWRITER 2: We're not going to vigorously pursue campaign finance reform?

TOBY: No, we're just gonna pursue it regularly.

SPEECHWRITER 2: Not vigorously.

TOBY: Not tonight. [to Leo] McGowan says we're fine. He feels the word “vigorously”'s inflammatory.

[...]

BARTLET: Bob Novak just said this was the speech of my political life. You know how many times I've heard that?

TOBY: Sir, Senator McGowan say's we're fine if we cut “vigorously.” (All quotes from *The West Wing* episodes are taken from <http://www.westwingtranscripts.com>)

In this scene, the quite vigorous claim that this is the “speech of my political life” is contrasted with the petty reservations of a powerful senator in regard to the adverb “vigorously.” Besides being a nice joke, the scene shows how arduous the fabrication of a presidential speech is – especially in light of the annotations and reservations of countless powerful senators and other important government functionaries that have to be considered and incorporated up to five minutes before the speech is to be delivered. But this example also shows the love and the feeling for language that Sor-kin puts in the mouths of the speechwriters. In Season 4, Episode 14 (*Inauguration*), speechwriter Will Bailey (played by Joshua Malina), says to the President, “there's a ... partnership, sir, that can develop between someone and his speechwriter. It happens over time. You get to know just where he likes his commas and why he says self-government instead of government. Why he doesn't like the word ‘implement’ but does like the word ‘obfuscate’. Like jazz musicians ...” Additionally, Season 1, Episode 2 (*Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*) features speechwriter Sam Seaborn formally proclaiming:

"I'm a lawyer and a speechwriter. I argue for a living, and I'm sought after because I'm good at it."

But elocution and argumentation are not the only rhetorically relevant issues in the fabrication of speeches in *The West Wing*. In the previously mentioned episode *Five Votes Down*, President Bartlet gives a dinner speech promoting a bill on gun control that is supposed to pass Congress a few days later. We see him performing the final paragraphs of the speech, interrupted by several cuts to the President's staff backstage. At the same time, Toby Ziegler is watching the speech on a monitor and orchestrating the President like a conductor with a baton, "take a beat. [pause] There you go," – and the President is obviously "following" these instructions. But towards the end of the speech, Bartlet begins to extemporize for just a few moments. Toby – who has a penchant for skepticism and pessimism – complains to his deputy Sam about how the President high-handedly, "blew the D section," – while Sam clearly finds the speech "outstanding". Further on, Toby tells Press Secretary C.J. Gregg that, "Sam wrote two and a half paragraphs and I wrote thirty-seven pages." This makes it clear that the speech had at least three authors, and that there is a possible conflict between those who wrote it and the person who actually delivers it. This conflict results in an ironic exchange between the President and his Communications Director:

BARTLET: What'd you think?

TOBY: I thought my work was outstanding, Mr. President. [...] Couldn't help but notice you got a little extemporaneous there in the D section.

BARTLET: Oh, you noticed that, did you? [...] Yes. I did a little polish right up there on my feet.

TOBY: Yes indeed.

BARTLET: Right in front of everybody. I looked to the side at one point, you know. I half expected to see you coming at me with a salad fork.

There is no doubt that Toby is none too happy with the President improvising and changing the speech deliberately before his eyes. We thus have to deal with a fragmented and collective oratorship, which is made even more difficult by the despicable "political machine" in Washington, as is shown, for example, in Season 1, Episode 12 (*He Shall, From Time to Time*).

In this episode, the speechwriting process is widely obstructed by characters other than the speechwriting team or the President – and their

reservations are not merely concerned with elocutionary aspects. As the title indicates, the episode focuses once again on the annual State of the Union. *The West Wing* shows us how many people are involved in the shaping of both content and form of the speech. Drafts circulate weeks before the date (see also Schlesinger 2008), and Toby has to sit down with interest groups, party members, members of Congress and Cabinet Members that have their own agenda to write or change certain paragraphs. Thus, the speech is shown more as an object of diplomatic political negotiations than as a result of the best oratorical craft. In another episode, *The Portland Trip* (Season 2, Episode 7), the staff is working on a speech on education at the last minute while on a flight to Portland. Toby complains about how great oratory is being sacrificed to tactical decisions and political compromise.

SAM: Toby, you're the one for the last six months who's been saying we need a radical approach...

TOBY: [raising his voice] Yes, yes I have, and I got shouted down in every meeting! I'd love to write a speech about a radical new approach to education, but we don't have one! So unless we can come up with an idea and implement it before land in Portland, I'd prefer not to paint a picture in the interest of great oratory.

In this way, *The West Wing* explicitly reflects not only on the collective authorship inside the White House, but also on the mutual relationships between the President, his staff and the political machine that has “shouted [them] down in every meeting.” What a president can say when he rises to speak obviously depends on his respective range of power. I wouldn't go so far as to say that the other political actors are also “authors” of the President's speech, but their agendas are a constraint that cannot be denied or ignored, and thus constitute what the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984, p. 31) would call a structure of domination. Without going too far into detail, the staff's struggle for the right wording in every speech can be understood as a constant struggle for agency in a pre-structured communication environment – even if the actor is the “leader of the free world.” This is also a struggle for public engagement and citizenship that the audience can take inspiration from. When it is successful in *The West Wing*, oratory isn't “magic,” but rather a hard-won battle in a complex and challenging environment.

Another topic in *The West Wing*'s depiction of “oratory” is the kind of self-referential presentation of a speech on television and the measurement of its effects on the audience. In *100,000 Airplanes* (Season 3, Episode 12), there is another State of the Union to prepare. Once more, we participate in the production process, but this time Sorkin starts at the end, as the delivery of the speech is shown on monitors in the rooms of the “National Strategic Group.” As Sam Seaborn explains to a visiting journalist, the speech is being exposed to real-time polling. The polls are visualized as blue (Democrat), red (Republican) and green (independent) lines going up and down across a graph as the speech is being delivered. Sam predicts a peak of all three lines for the following paragraph in Bartlet's speech:

BARTLET [on T.V.] Now in a new century, when we meet and master new forms of aggression and hatred, ignorance and evil, our vigilance in the face of oppression and global terror will be unequaled by any moment of human history.

LISA [the journalist]: Now you're cooking.

BARTLET [on T.V.]: And to the enemies of freedom, the enemies of democracy, the enemies of America, the enemies of humanity itself, we say here tonight with one voice. There is no corner of this earth so remote, no cave so dark, that you will not be found and brought to light and ended.

Here, we recognize a different tone in the speech of the fictional President following the real-world 9/11 event, but this change of tone is not the focus of this essay. Instead, it is the way that Sorkin stresses the importance of public opinion and visualizes the way it shapes and affects the speech. Once again, the delivery of the speech is only a vehicle in order to show what's normally behind the screen – in this case the submission of political rhetoric to polling and public opinion. This arrangement can be just as limiting as lobbyism and opposition, and it is one that is present throughout the whole series as the audience learns that political rhetoric is about seeking attention and goodwill, about compromise and, sometimes, about compromising on your ideals. But it is also about regaining the sovereignty of interpretation of political or social reality. Thus, *The West Wing* is absolutely ambivalent: it both praises and criticizes political rhetoric, while other TV series prefer to provide a purely cynical look at politics.

The “walk and talk” and “real” debates

The series’ most significant aesthetic feature is not the monolog, but rather dialog. In the words of film scholar Thomas Morsch (2010, p. 228), “in terms of the series’ portrayal of politics, the ‘walk and talk’ is assigned the role of visually dramatizing what, in itself, fails to provide interesting images, but is essential to the series’ idea of politics: the verbal exchange of political arguments.” There are several very long shots in almost every episode that illustrate the series’ extensive depiction of dialog and debate. The characters walk through the labyrinthine corridors of the White House, talking at high speed and outperforming each other in quick-wittedness. The walks are orchestrated by Sorkin and his director Thomas Schlamme in a very sophisticated manner – the wit is not limited to one character but is the result of all characters performing the “art of argument.” Not only does this prove to be the right tactic for making agreements internally, but it is also presented as a way to conduct political negotiations between the staff and lobbyists, members of Congress, opposition politicians and others. While in the real world such debates are held behind closed doors, *The West Wing* presents them openly – and as a very dynamic form of communication. As Morsch puts it, “to speak constitutes the chief form of action.” (p. 230)

The last season focuses on the presidential race as Bartlet’s second term in office comes to an end. The seventh episode, *The Debate*, features a quite remarkable rhetorical form: the two presidential candidates, Alan Alda as Arnie Vinick (Republican) and Jimmy Smits as a Latino candidate Matt Santos (Democrat), staged a live, improvised debate on television. This kind of live “improv debate” was an exceptional challenge for both actors because they were forced to debate *as if* they were real candidates. To increase the illusion of reality, the debate took place on the same set that had been used in the actual presidential debate between President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry on NBC in 2004. And as in real life, the debate was surveyed by a pollster, with the following result, according to the *Washington Post* (de Moraes 2005), “before the episode, viewers between 18 and 29 preferred Santos over Vinick, 54 percent to 37 percent. But after the debate, in which veteran Alda gutted pretty-boy Smits without him even knowing it, Vinick now leads among viewers under age 30, 56 percent to 42 percent.” Unique episode formats like this underline the show’s perspective on political reality (Skewes 2009). But even in this “realistic” debate setting, the TV show leaves enough space for political

fantasy by staging a “real debate,” as the fictional Republican candidate Arnie Vinick puts it:

VINICK: You know, I’ve watched every televised Presidential debate that this country has ever had. And every time I heard them recite the rules, I always thought that meant they’re not going to have a real debate. When the greatest hero of my party, Abraham Lincoln, debated, he didn’t need any rules. He wasn’t afraid of a real debate. Now I could do a 2-minute version of my Sensible Solution stump speech and I’m sure Congressman Santos has a memorized opening statement ready to go. And then we could go on with this ritual and let the rules decide how much you’re going to learn about the next President of the United States, or we could have a debate Lincoln would have been proud of. We could junk the rules. We could let our able and judicious moderator ask us questions. And we could forget about whether each of us has the exact same number of seconds to speak. We could have a real debate if that’s all right with you, Matt.

So, NBC has a fictional “real debate” that exceeds every “real” debate because of its spontaneity and sincerity. The actors stage an idealized, somehow adjusted debate that contains only “good” rhetoric. It reproduces, as Jeanne Rutenburg put it, “values of this civic humanism – peace, reason, freedom, and the rule of law,” and explains why “Cicero would love this show” (Rutenburg 2003, p. 14).

Conclusion

By creating a both realistic and idealistic White House, Sorkin proposes a concrete political and rhetorical message: what if the president and his staff were wittier, what if they made better decisions, what if participating in the political process was entertaining, what if constitutional history was fun, what if debates weren’t tainted by spin doctors and polls, what if a nuclear accident changed a whole election – and, last but not least: what if a Latino like Matt Santos was elected president? Sorkin suggests that this would be better than the actual White House. It is no secret that Sorkin’s team got in touch with Barack Obama’s advisor David Axelrod as early as 2004. In this way, the election of Barack Obama in 2008 somehow “imitated” the election of Matt Santos in the final season of the show in 2006, and this certainly is the strongest “political fantasy” to be found in the *The West Wing* script.

There is also no doubt that as political orators, the executive producers of the show, Sorkin and later John Wells, were very pleased that the Obama team lived out their scripts (Freedland 2008). But all political fantasies are closely linked to political reality, either by being accurate or dramatically convincing. I want to call this strategy “visionary plausibility,” and it is a sophisticated and intriguing interplay of reality and fictionality. Never one-dimensional and always ambivalent, Sorkin creates, in his own words, a, “kind of a valentine to public service” (quoted from Clark 2005, p. 226). I think the term “valentine,” as Thomas Morsch has also said, refers to the series being performative in a way that the audience cannot ignore. It demands a reaction, and at the very least a virtual sense of involvement that enhances political participation and identification – even beyond U.S. borders. Most of the problems depicted in the show resonate in other modern Western democracies as well. Even if political systems may differ slightly and non-American viewers may miss some subtle allusions, the general problems of political rhetoric in Western democracies are clearly the same. Thus, as Trevor and Shawn Parry-Giles (2002, p. 211) put it, “fictionalized representations of politics are powerful and accessible rhetorical forms, increasingly influential as they improve in technological sophistication and mimetic capacity. Such discourses play a central role in the definition and expression of political culture and political leaders” – and, if I may add – in the definition of rhetoric and citizenship.

References

- Christensen, T. and P.J. Haas. (2005). *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- Clark, E. (2005). The Bartlet Administration and Contemporary Populism in NBC's *The West Wing*. In M. Hammond and L. Mazdon (eds.), *The Contemporary Television Series* (pp. 224-243). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Finn, P. (2003). *The West Wing's Textual President: American Constitutional Stability and the New Public Intellectual in the Age of Information*. In P.C. Rollins and J.E. Connor (Eds.), *The West Wing: The American Presidency As Television Drama* (pp. 101-124). Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Freedland, J. (2008). From West Wing to the Real Thing: Scriptwriters Modelled TV's Ethnic Minority Candidate on Young Barack Obama. *The Guardian*, 21 February. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/feb/21/barackobama.uselections2008>, accessed January 13, 2013.

- Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York et al.: Doubleday.
- Horton, D. and R.R. Wohl. (1956). Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction. *Observation on Intimacy at a Distance. Psychiatry* 19, 215–229.
- Kock, C. and L.S. Villadsen. (2012). Introduction: Citizenship as a Rhetorical Practice. In C. Kock and L.S. Villadsen (Eds.), *Rhetorical Citizenship and Public Deliberation* (pp. 1–10). University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Leydet, D. (2011). Citizenship. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/citizenship/>, accessed August 2, 2013.
- Meyer, T. (2002). *Media Democracy: How the Media Colonize Politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Moraes, L. de. (2005). Vinick Sways Voters, er, Viewers on “West Wing.” *The Washington Post*, November 8, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/07/AR2005110701712.html>, accessed January 13, 2013.
- Morsch, T. (2010). Representation, Allegory, Ecstasy – Fantasies of The Political In Contemporary Television Series. In C. Dreher (Ed.), *Auteur Series: The Re-Invention of Television* (pp. 200–248). Stuttgart: Merz & solitude.
- Parry-Giles, T. and S.J. Parry-Giles. (2002). The West Wing’s Prime-Time Presidentiality: Mimesis and Catharsis in a Postmodern Romance. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, 209–227.
- Podhoretz, J. (2003). The Liberal Imagination. In P.C. Rollins And J.E. Connor (Eds.), *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama* (pp. 222–231). Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- Rothöhler, S. (2012). *The West Wing*. Zurich: diaphanes.
- Rutenburg, J. (2003). Television Fantasy, Political Reality, And Pop Culture in Aaron Sorkin’s *The West Wing*. *Film International* 6, 10–15.
- Schlesinger, R. (2008). *White House Ghosts: Presidents and Their Speechwriters*. New York et al.: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.
- Skewes, E.A. (2009). Presidential Candidates and the Press on *The West Wing* and in the Real World. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 26, 131–142.
- van Zoonen, L. (2005). *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Waxman, S. (2003). Inside *The West Wing*’s New World. In P.C. Rollins And J.E. Connor (Eds.), *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama* (pp. 203–212). Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.
- The West Wing Transcripts, <http://www.westwingtranscripts.com>, accessed June 2, 2014.
- List of mentioned episodes (in chronological order):

- Season 1, Episode 2: *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, original air date September 29, 1999.
- Season 1, Episode 4: *Five Votes Down*, original air date October 13, 1999.
- Season 1, Episode 12: *He Shall, From Time to Time*, original air date January 12, 2000.
- Season 2, Episode 7 *The Portland Trip*, original air date November 15, 2000.
- Season 2, Episode 13: *Bartlet's State of the Union*, original air date February 7, 2001.
- Season 2, Episode 17: *The Stackhouse Filibuster*, original air date March 14, 2001.
- Season 3, Episode 12: *100.000 Airplanes*, original air date January 16, 2002.
- Season 4, Episode 8: *Process Stories*, original air date November 13, 2002.
- Season 4, Episode 14: *Inauguration*, original air date February 5, 2003.
- Season 5, Episode 8: *Shutdown*, original air date November 19, 2003.
- Season 5, Episode 17: *The Supremes*, original air date March 24, 2004.
- Season 7, Episode 7: *The Debate*, original air date November 6, 2005.
- Season 7, Episode 21: *Institutional Memory*, original air date May 7, 2006.