

Ideological Criticism of The Newsroom

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In HBO's *The Newsroom* there is a famous speech that takes place in the first episode, it is been most commonly referred to as "Why America isn't the greatest country in the world anymore". This long rant of the ideological fallacies and paradoxes of American culture challenges the widely held belief in American nationalism. The main argument is a combination of refuting the commonly held beliefs and buzzwords that don't support the statistical evidence of the nations characteristics. Then the argument turns to a reflection on how the culture of the United States has changed over the past decades. The creator of the show seemed to be attempting to stun the viewers by shaking the preconceived notions that go unquestioned in society, and to create an intellectual and realistic public informer who maintains his status while still speaking his mind.

Most Americans believe that the United States is at least one of the greatest countries in the world. In a Pew Research Study, their results showed that in 2011, one year before *The Newsroom* aired, 38% of Americans believed that their country stood above all others, and 53% thought America is one of the greatest (Tyson, 2014). The land of the free and the home of the brave is the mantra of the U.S. and every classroom has an American flag to pledge allegiance to each morning. One of the characters that speaks during *The Newsroom* speech, states that the reason America is the greatest country is because of one word, Freedom. That point is later dismissed when the main character, Will McAvoy, played by Jeff Daniels, lists off other countries that also have freedom and states that a majority of countries in the world have freedom. This challenge to the normative dialogue on American pride

was actually forced out of the main character. During most of the public discussion he was answering disingenuously and going with the normative flow of conversation. The question is asked, "Can you say why America is the greatest country in the world?" he replies "The New York Jets." (Sorkin, 2012). It wasn't until another character, MacKenzie McHale, played by Emily Mortimer, held up signs in the audience that stated, "It's not.... But it can be" (Sorkin, 2012). This exposes the caution that many public figures take when criticizing such a proud society. These hegemonic beliefs of the American public are constantly being reassured through media, news, and other citizens. If someone were to criticize the United States without clear evidence and strong talking points, they would probably be ridiculed without end and labeled as anti-American. In this post 9/11 society, American values like pride and protection are taken very seriously. There are radicals from around the world that are extremely anti-American, and the people of the United States take a defensive stance against those who would bash any aspect of American culture.

Will McAvoy is the whistle blower who calls out reactionaries for being ill informed and being misled into fervid pride. His speech functioned as a reminder that judgments of America should not be dismissed as anti-American, but rather alerts us to let us know when something is wrong. This stance against the norm is very defiant, especially given the setting that they are in. McAvoy is sitting between two other speakers that both go along with the prescribed norm of America being the best, while facing a crowd of listeners all expecting his response to match theirs.

The interviewer and audience is shocked by his stance, and even more shocked by his cohesive points used to support his argument.

The main components of the speech are listed off very quickly to move from one subject to the next. They focus around American education, science, culture, economics, etc. It begins with McAvoy disputing the claims of freedom that made America the greatest country in the world, and then began listing off statistical factors of American culture "...We're 7th in literacy, 27th in math, 22nd in science, 49th in life expectancy, 178th in infant mortality, 3rd in median household income, number 4 in labor force and number 4 in exports. We lead the world in only three categories: number of incarcerated citizens per capita, number of adults who believe angels are real and defense spending - where we spend more than the next 26 countries combined, 25 of whom are allies." (Sorkin, 2012). In all this data we see the hard evidence of his argument that America has fallen behind its values and does not keep up with rest of the world. On the contrary, given what America does lead the world in, incarcerated citizens, unnecessary defense spending, etc. The evidence suggests that America has taken a turn for the worst. It is also the veracity in which McAvoy list off these statistics that shocks the audience that he can recite the stats so smoothly. These mathematical factors are the initial statements to shed light on McAvoy's final statement. But the following speech is the reflection on how America has change since the times of greatness. "We stood up for what was right. We fought for moral reasons. We passed laws, struck down laws - for moral reasons. We waged wars on poverty, not on poor people. We sacrificed, we cared about our neighbors, we put our money where our mouths were and we never beat our chest."

(Sorkin, 2012). The speech continues on with further insight as to how America became the greatest country in the world to begin with. It identifies the factors that determine what exactly can make a country the best in the world, and shows the listener that those criteria are no longer being met. This section of the speech identifies problems on a cultural level rather than using a statistical approach as to why America has lost its title.

In the final act of his speech McAvoy covers a variety of issues as to why America has changed for the worst, including the tendency to belittle those with intelligence, our inability to be informed, and our increasingly paranoid nature. Although some of these points are debatable, the viewer can feel the sadness in Jeff Daniels voice as he reads these lines. His character McAvoy truly believes that the integrity of the American public has been lost to the overconfident and the unintelligent. Even during his speech his pick out the “sorority girl” who ask the initial question to inform her that “none of this is the fault of a 20-year-old college student, but you, nonetheless, are without a doubt a member of the worst period generation period ever period...” (Sorkin 2012). Obviously this is an extraordinary claim, and also very rude to the audience member. However after his compassionate impression of the new American people, he made a believer of the “sorority girl” as well (Sorkin, 2012).

The bottom line of this speech is that everyone came to agree with McAvoy’s position by the end of the speech, yet no one can to this conclusion on his or her own. Why is that? Possibly because of fear of rejection and rebellion, maybe because people actually believed that America is the greatest country. But I suspect that it is

because people have not been questioning what they've been taught. The American public is portrayed as complacent and accepting of simple answers to satisfying their questions, and it has gone too far. In order to break this repetitious spell, you need a speech that is aggressive, informed, and is spoken with passion. Those are the characteristics needed to break away from such an institutionalized idea, and Will McAvoy meets that criteria with flying colors.

The creator of *The Newsroom*, Aaron Sorkin truly valued characters that were not afraid to speak the truth against a popular opinion. He was the writer/screenplay behind *The West Wing*, *The Social Network*, *Moneyball*, and *Steve Jobs* (imdb, 2016). These works also feature the theme of someone who breaks everything we thought we understood about a subject. Whether it's through using mathematics to create a winning baseball team, or reinventing interpersonal communication by creating one of the largest websites in the world. Sorkin values the people who are willing to speak an unpopular truth no matter the cost in order to maintain their integrity. The character of Will McAvoy is meant to be a hero, who throws this reputation on the line in order to present the public with a sad truth. He even presents it so well and so comprehensively, that he continues to make speeches on American politics as a new anchor that is not so easily influenced by corporate or political agendas. I think the philosophy of Sorkin is that we should never be satisfied with the norm. In each of his works there is advancement in society, a new idea that makes waves but is also met with adversity. The story of Steve Jobs' career in Apple is very dramatic, and Mark Zuckerberg faced many hurdles throughout the development of Facebook. But the theme of these stories is

that intelligence combined with a relentless passion for hard work and a creative eye for talent yield results.

Will McAvoy is a character that has followed the mantra of intelligence and hard work but sees society falling from grace. Rather than remain silent and take the easy route of consistency, he takes a stand against the norm in order to inform and improve the American public. He states “First step in solving any problem is recognizing there is one. America is not the greatest country in the world anymore.” (Sorkin, 2012). The characters serve as wave makers when society becomes so compliant with the norm that they forget to think critically. Sorkin is also someone who views the public as being generally incompetent, or rather he presents them in such a way that makes the protagonist look even smarter than they are. Most of the main characters of Sorkin's works are incredibly bright but also extremely arrogant. When these characters, Zuckerberg, Jobs, and McAvoy speak their mind, they end up constantly belittling those they feel are inferior, including close friends. This is one of the tropes of Sorkin's characters, and can be considered a common flaw among all of them. But his true message is that the public does not need a superhero with a cape and a pure heart to swoop down and spoon-feed people the truth. In Sorkin's eyes the most effective leaders speak the unpopular truth to achieve higher goals, even at the cost of the feelings of the listener. The people that we need are competent and willing to tell it how it is no matter how much it hurts to admit. In the case of the Newsroom, Will McAvoy is the man who made the audience question the prescribed ideology to see the truth without any filters, and that is Aaron Sorkin's true design.

This artifact serves as a reminder that excellence is not maintained by living through the credit of others. The American public realized that they have failed to live up to the standards of their forefathers. McAvoy says it himself “our Constitution is a masterpiece. James Madison was a genius. The Declaration of Independence is, for me, the single greatest piece of American writing” (Sorkin 2012). But America cannot simply survive on history and reputation; it needs more than stories of greater men. Simply standing on the shoulders of giants does not make someone tall; that’s is something that Sorkin believes the American people have forgotten. The speech emphasizes that America has the potential for excellence and accomplishments, but it has lost its compass through ignorance and arrogance. More than that, it disrupts the steady flow of passing conversation and two-dimensional thinking. Speaking one’s mind against the popular opinion is somewhat taboo, but when someone can properly express those opinions and sway an audience, the results are that much more impressive. If someone’s cause is considered noble and just, such as doing a public service announcement to inform Americans that they are not as “star-spangled awesome” as they think (Sorkin 2012). They can understand the purpose of someone informing them that they’ve lost their position in the global ranks.

I think that the most effective aspect of this artifact is its variety of characteristics. It is arrogant, yet sympathetic, it is wordy but simple, and it is fast yet comprehensive. Every listener can follow along with his points, and there’s barely enough time to interject his statements. McAvoy doesn’t stutter, he doesn’t catch his breath, and he doesn’t pause until the crowd is so stunned that they don’t

know what to say. Speeches like this are made with such emotion and drive because they have the intention of making as much of an impact as possible. Rather than taking the common political stance and appealing to the masses, McAvoy is showing genuine concern to improve American society. This authenticity is primarily due to the realistic nature of the show itself. Although the premise is based around a fictitious news network, the ACN (Atlantic Cable News), it uses non-fictional world events throughout its content. There are frequently news reports on presidential elections, as well as a new legislature and political party commentary. The credible source material in which *The Newsroom* comments on, is precisely why the dialogue of the show is so convincing. The opening speech on “Why America isn’t the greatest country in the world anymore” is a perfect example because it used real criticisms of America at that time. If that show were to air in the year 2016, I would expect some major differences to the speech, but it would be just as informative.

HBO’s *The Newsroom* presents a perfect example of challenging the hegemonic beliefs of America through direct speaking and specific hitting points. “Why America is not the greatest country anymore” is a well-organized speech that goes through each section and carefully emphasizes each talking point. Jeff Daniels is fast when he needs to be, he’s compassionate, and he’s sincere. The themes of questioning popular belief through rationality, statistics, and character are all represented throughout the speech. He throws away the simple jargon that people have become accustomed to, and replaced it with a dynamic but factual reality. Challenging common held beliefs brings out some of the most influential ideas in history, and Americans should never forget that freedom of speech is a freedom to

challenge American values and change them for the better as we continue to grow
and reach new heights.

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