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# Content Is President: The Influence of Netflix on Taste, Politics and The Future of Television

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CONTENT IS PRESIDENT: THE INFLUENCE OF NETFLIX ON TASTE, POLITICS AND  
THE FUTURE OF TELEVISION

by

ALANNA K. ESACK

Under the Direction of Ethan Tussey, PhD

ABSTRACT

The evolving television industry relies heavily on the corresponding shift in the audiences that it addresses. New practice for consumption and production, particularly the “disruptive” force of streaming services like Netflix, have been evidenced not only in the methods of the companies themselves but also in the content they have begun to offer. A milestone in the television industry, Netflix’s first original series *House of Cards* provides an innovative and meaningful installment to the genre of political melodrama, which has its own cultural significance and heritage of mapping audience relations to the media. Analyzing the text, this paper reveals how industrial strategies relate to taste cultures and produce cynical political television drama.

INDEX WORDS: Television, Taste Culture, Algorithmic Culture, Audience, Millennials, Streaming, HOUSE OF CARDS, Politics, NETFLIX, Character, Morality, President, BOURDIEU, Television Industry, Post-Television, Network, Cable, HBO, Streaming, Algorithm, CINEMATCH

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ALANNA K. ESACK

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## 1 Introduction

For much of television's history, the industry itself has acted as the determinant in formulating the cultural experience in how television is accessed and consumed: everything from program lengths, the amount of commercials, avoidance of inappropriate content, genre and episodic conventions and airing schedules has been developed around general public trends and perpetuated by the networks, channels and advertisers. The early erosion of these standards of practice was initiated by a few precipitating factors including the departure from a strictly broadcast menu to the inclusion of optional, exclusive subscription cable channels and other pay-per-view options. Having media outlets that could refine their viewership allowed for a reconfiguration of audiences a less universalized population, which, in turn, encouraged the creation of more specialized content that suited an optional subscriber basis and appealed to those who wanted something outside of the scope of what "everyone's watching." The proliferation of niche programming that fall into the general category of cable television made the pool of choice that much deeper for consumers, and, by extension, the individual choice of each viewer increased in impact.

In the midst of this critical shift, the greater role being played by younger "interlopers" in the industry have had a powerful influence on the content being created and has spurred changes in traditional form as well as the way viewers approach and consume their favorite shows. The now-popular streaming company, Netflix, is certainly not the only option for disenchanted television audiences to obtain diverse and flexible entertainment without the interruption of advertising, nor is it the cheapest choice. But it has become one of the names that tops the list of industry disruptors – first deposing brick-and-mortar media rentals before leading the charge into extensive streaming – and one of the most discussed producers of television that has proven to have a

long-standing interest in embracing its upset role in more ways than one. *House of Cards*, Netflix's inaugural series that remains controversial and compelling to many viewer and critics with each subsequent season, has come fully loaded with the implications of the derisive role of the company in a transitioning industry. Now one of the diverse offerings of original content, this series also uniquely encapsulates the internal culture of the company that created it, provides commentary on the socio-political moment in the real world as well as reflects onto the traditions of political drama. The conscious juxtapositioning of a transitioning industry, booming media-centric culture and an alternate-reality portraying the strategic implosion of the US democratic system by an unscrupulous insider delivers a unified "disruptor aesthetic" that Netflix aptly uses as cultural capital to attract press, brand-recognition and, ultimately, subscriptions. Long among the popular and provocative narrative subject matter, political television holds a uniquely referential role to the issues, fears and desires of the political reality. *House of Cards*, refashioned for American audiences by Netflix, also comes loaded with the company's promises of being made for a precisely targeted group of viewers and, in many ways, directly reflective of their values and the values of the Netflix brand. The text itself lends to and takes from this aesthetic in its intense characters, cynicism and dark, lush visuals brought to the screen thanks to the work of notable actors, particularly Kevin Spacey, and a visionary film director in David Fincher. Taking this text to task as a complex intersection of media, culture and industry is the central purpose of my discussion. Utilizing key theories that have been central to the larger area of cultural studies as well as a interrogation of major discussions about television and new media, I will establish the industrial implications detectable not only in the text of the show but also the real world narrative of Netflix as a company and, just as Netflix refers to their ability to sample audience in a way previously impossible to traditional television, I will examine the audience that *House of*

*Cards* was allegedly tailor-made for and the way that this audience has both shaped and responded to content and the experience of the medium as a whole.

### **1.1 Purpose**

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the centrality of the text, *House of Cards*, in presenting the interconnected relationship between text, producer, audience and political and sociological context. Netflix's internal emphasis on "difference" and their image as a bar-raising disruptor as well as exploring the capacity of algorithms to document taste through methods beyond the scope of traditional television industry practice facilitates a new kind of allegedly calculable risk while suggesting the ability to use their enhanced understanding of its viewership to make "better" shows. This kind of media-making expands the field for producers and creators that may be unwilling to enter the television area on its terms of content, timeslots and advertisement allocation and, also, offers an outlet to consumers seeking something other than the usual and, supposedly, the enhanced ability to find a show that feels tailored to their own taste. In the image that Netflix has crafted for itself, the claims of difference, quality and innovation can be evaluated and the sprawling availability of peripheral texts testifies to the brand that the company is seeking to cultivate: that of a disruptor. Emphasizing the evaluation of "taste" and a customized media experience provide an edge in the television industry and these claims echo through the landmark release of its first original dramatic content: *House of Cards*. This series, entering the stage embedded with the cultural implications of depicting American government and designed to represent the specified taste of Netflix's carefully measured consumer base, provides a crystalizing point of analysis as a palpable intersection of industry, culture and politics. In dissecting the text and the company, I hope to establish the both as exemplar objects that rep-

resent the entanglement between these elements and how the disruptor brand has left its mark on a transitioning industry and an ever-changing culture.

## 1.2 Theory

The intersectional quality of the following discussions require a overlapping of theoretical lenses that will allow me to key into the industrial, the analytical and the cultural and create the critical links. By implementing a wider breadth of connective concepts, the appraisal of a text that purports to be product of a classification of taste and responsiveness to change can accommodate the very factors that Netflix lays claim to in the formulation of their content and approach to reshaping the world of television. *House of Cards*, as a series, was created and marketed on some of the same principles of enhanced data collection, the understanding of audience and desire to differentiate itself from the standards of traditional television in development, styling, world-view, form and delivery. Examining a media magnate and significant examples of its products on these terms is a method of discourse well established in the scope of cultural studies. Not only are many foundational theories invoked in the process but it had also yielded successful models like Chad Raphael's "The Political Economic Origins of Reali-TV" (2009) and Derek Johnson's "Cinematic Destiny: Marvel Studios and the Trade Stories of Industrial Convergence" (2012). For this thesis, I will integrate the implications of the socio-political commentary provided by *House of Cards*' subject matter and the claims to ideological agreement with the current culture of its projected audience through the political economic analysis of both the series itself and Netflix approach to media.

Expanding the definition of television, as it has now departed from the network model and is no longer tied to a specific technological form or source, has come into the discourse of many television and media scholars. In *The Television will be Revolutionized*, Lotz provides a compre-

hensive exploration of the transformations that the media has experienced since and has been able to characterize the major shifts and identify unique eras in the lifetime of television. In particular, the digital manifestation of the relationship between the medium and the viewer becomes central to the evolution of television, transforming a top-down standard to one that now must adapt to a new, diverse range of screens, tastes and viewing patterns. The confirmed methodology of pursuing a richer discourse in the arena of television through examinations of intertextuality – the tendency of texts to be connected and to rely upon other existing texts – as well as the inescapable influence the culture is further established between Lotz and the confirmation of industry self-scrutiny suggested by Caldwell. Useful to this end, and emphasizing the privileged position of political television, Chuck Tryon's recent book addresses the points of intersection between the cultural flow of fiction, news and political tradition through the medium of television. In acknowledging the role of media texts as artifacts that can communicate the complex interplay between the industrial perspective and the cultural atmosphere, the door is opened, by Tryon, Caldwell and many others, for the use of textual analysis as a means to access both economic and political contextualization for a particular program or series. Since the groundbreaking broadcast of the 1960 inaugural presidential debates that ushered in a long and complex intertwining relationship between national politics and the then-young medium of television, the impulse to explore the often frustrating or confusing mechanisms of government in less obtuse terms – be it in direct analysis, satire or in the realm of fiction – has been one that frequently relies on television to materialize. In the case of Netflix's *House of Cards*, the melodrama shaped around a cynical political outlook and a leader that is uncannily alluring in his efficacy and his directness while remaining unwaveringly repugnant in his morals and methods provides an tantalizing foil to both

the mainstream media's packaging of the American dream and the slow uphill battle that often characterized the parallel real-world administration.

Even in discourse surrounding the finer points of genre and industry practices, it is immensely impactful to maintain an understanding of the changing dynamics of an industry that is still grappling with the growing pains of escaping network domination, embracing and expanding cable before embarking onwards into the expansive new terrain of web-based television and the growing influence of streaming and on-demand services. Significantly, the shift in television practices that was heralded by the appearance and subsequent popularity of HBO as a more exclusive and "quality" option to mass-consumed programming is paralleled in many ways by the next generation of television producers like Netflix. Thus, the economic and aesthetic analysis pertaining to the early days of HBO and the mark that the intrusion of cable has left on the industry as a whole, such as that of Avi Santo, reveals the changing identity of television producers that was instigated with the rise of HBO and that cable channel's self-designation "not-television" which has served to broaden discourse on the medium itself as well as HBO's identification through difference and "quality" (19 -20). Looking at HBO provides a frame for Netflix's expansion in that the two producers share certain values in content creation but also in their self-named positions as disruptors to industry conventions. In a sense, the progression seen from network to HBO has been mirrored in the transition of network and cable formats to streaming services and this aids in an enhanced comparison of Netflix's placement in the television industry as a whole. Very much like HBO, Netflix uses the rhetoric of distinction and of difference, which is enhanced by the progressive integration of the multi-platform streaming.

Somewhat more recent in the survey of understanding texts and industry in television is the engagement with the functions of algorithms. The mass collection and organization of data,

while not entirely a new concern in the television industry, reliably informs media companies about viewers, which then, influences the way that they perceive, market to and create text for these audiences. Algorithms, now heavily incorporated into the functioning of web-based companies, may also be a means to document culture and social information in a way that has never before been possible. Addressing the function of algorithms in the progressing sphere of the digital as well as the resulting entanglement with industry and culture, the work of Ted Striphas and Tarleton Gillespie offers useful insights. The attentions to Netflix and the changing ways that media, like television, are created, delivered and consumed are firmly ingrained in the evaluation of algorithmic culture. *House of Cards*, in many ways, provides a critical intersection in the goals of an industrial wave-maker and the reflection the changing outlook of American viewers now more accessible than ever with the unprecedented information-collection capacities of the Internet. But Gillespie in particular takes note that the data itself is as valuable without algorithms as a way to provide structure and “make sense” of the endless flow of user input, and, as algorithms themselves are product of human formulation, they are subject to the imposed values, politics and economic aims of the person – or company – that creates them. Striphas, in cooperation and independently analyzes the ability of algorithms to document culture and, in doing so, become a centerpiece for the way that Netflix functions. Perceiving the role of algorithms as being able to deliver a unique quantifiable version of cultural elements and user identity is crucial in enabling the data to be assessed as documentation of taste.

For the purposes of my evaluation, Pierre Bourdieu provides the framework that establishes the fundamental concept of “taste” that has taken a significant role in the way that scholars and media professionals alike are able to address the relationship between the producers, the texts that become popular and the consumers that continue to expand on and circulate particular

pieces of media. Assisting in the evaluation of taste the increasingly valuable currency in the form of “cultural capital” and the ingrained practice associated with consumers and television through the radically changing understanding this multi-level exchange is enhanced through the work of Paul Du Gay and the broader development of the now well-recognized “Circuit of Culture” which offers a systematic consideration of a text or cultural object through the uncovering of the way it is visualized, created, marketed and utilized and the resulting layers of connotative meaning that comes along with a full view of the text or object’s context. *House of Cards* is particularly saturated with the intersectional nature of closely-tracked viewer taste and habits, the assessments of Netflix in both an industry transformer and a content producer and the resulting political spin of the text.

Caldwell’s interrogation of the oversimplified assessment of the industrial sphere reveals the increasing involvement of industrial sources in a certain type of theoretical understandings of their own product, particularly when it comes to media makers. Previously assumed to be sole purview of academia and analytical bodies, the recursive application of a theoretical approach to media has become more obvious within the corporate sector and can be detected through the study of “deep texts” as well as creative texts. This practice of inquiry “for the media and by the media” within the industry is identified as “low theory” in Caldwell’s survey of the changing state of industrial practice. Again, exploring the texts surrounding the company and the production and analysis of *House of Cards* itself yields a particularly salient example of this concept. The discernable “self-awareness” further links the intentions of a producer to the resulting media texts and muddies the waters of authorship, whether those be for film, or more critically, television. The alluring but increasing questionable prestige of the auteur direct, Caldwell argues in his 2008 book *Production Culture*, should be recognized as much more subordinate not only to the



form that a text but also the influential nature of the industry that dictates much of the production process. Parsing the roles of creatives, executives, medium and audience delivers much more comprehensive insight into television as a text than an evaluation that is isolated to the text itself. Aligning with Caldwell's discourse, the inclusion of other "deep texts" – the embedded sense-making and industry-theorizing artifacts and rituals surrounding production, internal affairs or public discourses – that are tied to *House of Cards* as well as Netflix as a whole serve to flesh out the identity of the company (Caldwell 364). Letters to investors and industry documents speak to the way Netflix pursues the cohesive brand that it has ascribed to itself and examples of targeted marketing, website interface and published interviews illustrate how this branding is reinforced to critics, competitors and consumers alike.

Finally, in addressing the narrative itself, the lens that becomes the most useful in parsing out the function and influence of the central character, Francis Underwood as played by Kevin Spacey, are the character theories proposed by Murray Smith. The greater cultural capital that now is associated, thanks to the transition into "quality TV" and the widespread consumption of cable programming, with narratives that focus on a character that may not be overtly likeable demands an approach to assessing his or her relatability to the audience that can account for being something other than a standard, positive hero and a standard, universal audience. Murray Smith's recognition of processes he designates as *allegiance* and *alliance* supersedes the reductive presumption of "identification" that is typically named in the assessment of character-to-viewer connections. Netflix's internal narrative and "disruptor aesthetic" delivers the form and philosophy of the series that is targeted for a specific group of subscribers that have already been determined as receptive viewers. The link between the spectator and the leading man is intertwined with the exchange between the company and the individuated subscriber that Netflix has

synthesized from data. Examining the character yields a vivid picture of both the company's self-image and the proscribed audience for the show thus allowing for the critical analysis and criticism of both influential elements.

### **1.3 Literature Review**

Having the theoretical framework in place for a political economic analysis of the series *House of Cards*, the substantive interest from pop culture outlets, industrial reporting, journalists and academic has ensured that Netflix has become a focal point of television's digital transformation. A primary example of this kind of approach in media industry studies comes from Derek Johnson in his analysis of the comic-maker-cum-movie-producer Marvel. Johnson's evaluation exhibits the internal story telling through "deep texts" and the statements of executives as a means to highlight the company's ability to weave a corporate narrative and leverage increasing industrial influence (2012). The corporate narrative of Netflix provides an foundation for understanding the company's branding, economic decision and the permeation of their "disruptor aesthetic" through both practice and content like *House of Cards*.

The most relevant history of the company, from its founding to experiments with data and content creation, is thoroughly surveyed by journalist Gina Keating's book *Netflixed* (2012). The minds behind Netflix and the tumultuous and not-always-successful history are key factors in understanding internal culture that has shown a strong influence as a player in the industry and as a content financier. Keating's coverage of the lifetime of a company provides a detailed overview of the trajectory that brought Netflix to the status of household name and helps in contextualizing the progression of the company in the midst of the media industry's state of flux. Ted Sarandos, chief content officer, has been called on by many sources in regards to Netflix's original productions to the corporate practices that incite much controversy around the company. In

an interview with Jim Koblin of *The New York Times*, the complication of Netflix's now notorious secrecy with their viewership numbers that has increased within industry circles along with the younger company's recognition becomes central in highlighting Netflix's complicated relationship to the television industry as well as the internal identification as being "different" (2016). While the company may not be inclined to share much in terms of their collected data, in other interviews Sarandos has participated in details of how a show like *House of Cards* was germinated as well as the ultimate goal of maintaining Netflix's position as an agent of change in the television industry are unreservedly outlined (Rose). Emphasis often falls onto the ideology and personal styling of Netflix CEO and co-founder Reed Hastings. Keating, again, provides valuable details in Hastings' role in creating Netflix as we know it today – from inception to the radical principles of the company's internal environment. Having, himself, participated in various interviews, Hastings also, in a web-released slide show, clearly articulates his own stance on traditional corporate culture and the derisive intent to ensure Netflix does not fall into the hindering traps of standard corporate practice (Hastings, 2009). In a similar vein, the corporate methodology of Hastings is indicated in the article by Patty McCord, former chief talent officer, that not only cites her own influence in the realization of the "high performance" yet sometimes unforgiving culture within Netflix but also serves as a sharp comparison of typical corporate environments and how Netflix's ability to change many of these standards has shaped the company's narrative as it has worked its way into the television industry (Harvard Business Review, 2014). The input of individual executives and officers do not necessarily dictate the exact stance of a company made up of many, but as seen with Johnson's approach to discussing the expansion of Marvel under the directive of "paternal responsibility" for the characters proposed by CEO Avi Arad, the influence of one vision can leave a lasting mark on corporate trajectory and ideology

(17). The Netflix corporate myth, in Caldwell's terms, is one shaped from the insight of more than one story teller, and in discussing the materialization *House of Cards*, the influence of these story tellers will also be investigated in the course of this thesis.

In the shift away from broadcast to the internet, another major component is highlighted both by Netflix itself in its bold statements about “knowing” what views want while gaining a reputation for tantalizingly secretive and methodical data gathering that, as claimed, is the ruler that guides the company to its successes. This discussion requires me to expand on what can be determined about the viewership that Netflix defined for *House of Cards* but also the evolution of what I identify as “Algorithm TV.” The necessary tools for this, of course, are algorithms and the recognition of the complex relationship between data, culture, industry and audiences has become a central focus for many scholars in the field. Gillespie's insights on the cultural and thus algorithmic determination of relevance as well as the capacity of algorithms to isolate groups of users through discreet criteria that can be tailored to the individualized purposes of the algorithm's source. Strihas, independently, goes to great lengths in establishing the frame of language and practical understanding for algorithms. Additionally, the study Strihas performed with Hallinan and Blake inspected the pivotal role of algorithm specifically for Netflix as well as investigating the quest to deliver improved data, for that company's purposes, through a competition meant to yield a new, better algorithm. The scholarly and industrial interest that is bound to these mathematical functions cannot be separated from algorithms' success in providing a means of exposing what may have social worth: a currency that is inextricably tied to the ability to engineer successful programming. Testing the validity of applying data, Netflix created a series that was believed to have a proven audience waiting for it and this assessment was made not merely on shared habits but also the inference of shared values.

In capturing the attention of critics, scholars, industry leadership and popular news, Netflix has managed to combine the allure of their secretiveness around their data and their signature “disruptor aesthetic” and thus solidify the role of the company in the public eye. Interviews with Sarandos and Hastings have yielding a great deal of the company’s mentality but, beyond that, the interviews with integral personalities like Kevin Spacey with his professed belief in “disruption” serve to perpetuate the internal ideology to the execution of the show (Campbell). As confirmation of the political fantasy, *The Washington Post* among other sources have documented the responses of Washington officials to the dangerous allure of Underwood’s brand of efficacy in the series which both allows the governmental reality to acknowledge the fiction but, also, illustrates a group of tastemakers that are otherwise rather difficult to tap outside of this specific genre (Blake). Demonstrating the algorithmically-derived interpretation of taste through this particular series demands an inquiry into the proscribed audience. Providing external means to describe the values of this carefully targeted viewership is essential, particularly with the propensity for Netflix itself to refuse disclosure of the exact data they prioritized in the decision to green light *House of Cards*. In the younger generation that has been steadily seeking alternatives in entertainment, the desire for access and customization in conjunction with a dramatically changed world outlook are the foundations of what Netflix has determined about its American subscriber base. The PEW Research center performed a study seeking to demonstrate the moral and ideological shifts across generational lines that have also become manifest in the types of media that rely so heavily on assessing the taste of their audiences. The study, “Millennials in Adulthood,” highlights some of the biggest deviations between the generations, many of which are often intrinsically tied to how the generational groups relate to and participate in politics as well as media (2014). Acknowledging the various attempts of Netflix to distance itself from using common

demographic terminology, including recognizing generational designations, the discourse surrounding media usage is often heavily reliant on such categorizations and the designation of a public that is defined by shared values, taste and baseline technological fluency is a useful umbrella and will be utilized in the course of my discussion (Steel). This usage of generational designation is primarily seen in across other research but also remains a significant usage in industry reporting – a residue of Nielsen monopoly on television audience tracking – and in the way that technological and cultural trends are articulated in other resources like Michael Strangelove’s discussion of cord cutting trends. The PEW study aligns with the group that broadly encompasses Netflix’s most likely subscriber and, as such, also includes the viewers designated within that population who taste and values have led the company to the consummation in the release of *House of Cards*. The sampling of a changing outlook and moral alignment, when coupled with the now widely discussed technological transition away from the classic format and universality of network television, to exclusive cable programming and now on to the diversity of on-demand viewing have opened the door to an entirely new approach to television consumption. Strangelove highlights both the label of “cord cutters” and the more radical population of “cord nevers” that increasingly characterize the younger generations and also addresses many of the industry-disrupting shifts in audience demand that have helped shape the current media landscape.

Ultimately, the choice to enter the controversial realm of political television is one that emboldens Netflix’s first thrust into original content and makes a stark statement about the company and its estimation of its audience. The information provided by and about subscribers, intentional or otherwise, helped shape *House of Cards* into the anti-institutional, cynical show that traditional television could never deliver under the drive to appeal of general audiences and FCC oversight. As a dramatic contrast from within the same illustrious genre, Melissa Crawley’s in-

depth exploration of a noble but deeply humanized depiction of the White House in the much acclaimed series by Aaron Sorkin, *The West Wing*, provides a thorough point of reference for discourse surrounding a idealized yet complex character that still “serves” the American people on the educational and cathartic terms best suited to network television. Each is a product, in many ways, of their source and socio-political context: the ideology and political portrayals are inextricable from the more family-friendly outlet of network television in comparison to the less restricted Netflix platform. The contrasting perspectives on the world of Washington’s political elites facilitates more than a direct presentation of mood deviation – the overbearing optimism of Bartlet’s administration aids the interrogation of recurrent tropes that are so often applied to the depiction of the president and processes of the American governmental system. As a “classic” example of the genre coming from the very standard of television that Netflix claims to subvert, *The West Wing* is an invaluable foil in terms of ideology, audience and production culture. The Parry-Giles’ exploration of context within the cultural ambivalence towards contemporary politics and, perhaps more significantly, the ways that this cultivated though the fictional presidency of Bartlet in *The West Wing* serves as a form to help address the concepts of presidentiality (2002). Read as comparative presentation of the “ideological rhetoric that helps shape and order the cultural meaning” of the presidency, the type of presidentiality captured in *The West Wing* compared to the presidentiality in *House of Cards* speaks to entirely different intentions and audiences as well as highlighting the cultural presumptions that are tied to the institution (Parry-Giles 210). Similar to the efforts of this paper, but also a valuable comparison, Parry-Giles’ textual analysis of *The West Wing* serves to articulate the modeling of a presidential figure and situate the character in terms of historical, ideological and coexistent social context. Also suggested is the unique inter-relation of reality and fiction in the scope of “alternative history” and political

drama that attempts to fit into the “here and now” without committing to representing the existing establishment to a man (or woman). In further demonstration of *The West Wing*’s acute brand of relevancy and political critique is found in Lehmann’s article for *The Atlantic* “Feel Good Presidency” which addresses more directly the discernable presence of the idealized version of the Clinton presidency that surfaces in both the character of Bartlet and key events within the series. Translating the reality of political communication to fiction continues garner acute interest in the genre as the overlapping discourse it encourages is a unique one in the sphere of media studies. Along with the program-specific discussion provided by voices like Lehmann and Crawley, examination of real-world trends in political depiction also reflect into the world of political drama. The 2015 study by Moses and Gonzales highlights familiar coding of political candidates according to party affiliation that is easily recognizable in fictional Presidents, particularly in the case of Bartlet in *The West Wing*. Integrating this study of real-world campaign advertisements also demonstrates the unique ability of political melodrama to be linked to the rigors of real political context.

The movement of television away from its historical designation of “entertainment for the masses” and onward to more targeted and elusive audiences, notably the ones that are not regular television viewers, has been evidenced in these “quality” programs that have surpassed the normal expectations of the medium thus gaining a certain prestige and appeal that is not associated with typical television and its typical viewership. These changes have reinforced the potential of television in becoming a reliable source for complex and innovative narratives that do not suffer the confines of feature-length time and, as Mittell establishes in his work on narrative in television, is then able to push boundaries in visual storytelling in ways that Hollywood filmmaking may not be able to access (2006). In turn, this links into the exploration of the complex narra-



tives that have gone on to characterize the genre that Chuck Tryon recognizes as political melodrama in his book *Political TV* (2016). Tryon is also a foundational resource in being able to address identifiers of the genre as well as how political fiction nods to the broader interrelated history of politics and television while providing the context for both a series like *House of Cards* and its foil *The West Wing* in terms of moralized extremes. Intentions to blur the lines between political reality and fiction and fracture the barrier between character and viewer, Klarer's study on the use of the aside provides a valuable precedent for the technique as well as outlining some significant implications introduced by combining Underwood's fluid characterization and role in the narrative with the explicit disruption of direct address (2014). Indeed the reflexivity invites the revelation of more of Underwood's personality as well as elevating, in a deeply self-serving way, his position as liaison for "his" spectator and the secretive orchestrator for events to come (Klarer 212). This technique not only services the enrichment of the character but the inclusion of the spectator, which, as a reflexive nod and a business method, is a key aspect of the Netflix brand. A sense of agency demonstrated in this character provides compelling force to his personality but it is also the directness of his contact with the viewer that invokes the "involvement" of his spectator which, when tied to political drama, helps to echo the socio-political relationship between citizen and government. The intended sum of an analysis of the series, the audience and the company will be to deliver a picture of how *House of Cards* presents itself as an intersectional product that is made possible by the materialization of Netflix's brand of "Algorithm TV."

## 2 Dawn of The Post Television Era

Netflix found itself entering the tides of an industry that has been experiencing some transitions but, by the early 2000s, was starting to transform under the pressure of a new generation of media consumption practices. While the desire for distinction is the foundation of most marketing campaigns, in the realm of television, one of the first, most iconic claims in the post-network landscape to distinction came from HBO. Despite one of their most familiar slogans claiming “It’s not TV,” HBO strikes a chord between the familiar network formula and something other and becomes something he defines as “para-television” that “purposely relies on mimicking and tweaking existing and recognizable TV forms” (Santo 19). In a sense, then, HBO cannot escape being considered part of the industry it attempted to differentiate itself from but the statement that was being made towards a preference for “quality” and specific taste that surpassed all previous standards of universalized network television is a critical first thrust that Internet media providers could benefit from and continue. Landmark shows like *Oz*, *The Wire* and *The Sopranos* have been able to garner attention and critical acclaim in ways that have perpetuated the mark HBO has made on serial entertainment. Fulfilling that promise of difference, these dramas have routinely pushed into territory uncharted for television with morally questionable heroes, graphic depictions of sexuality, deviance and violence, explorations of criminality and unprecedented liberality with “killing off” popular characters in the middle of many arching plotlines (Santo 29).

Addressing the multi-threaded style of television narrative, the single-episode arcs like the classic monster-of-the-week approach seen in serials like *Buffy* and *The X-Files* are used to enhance and even lengthen multi-episode developments like character relationships and are certainly product of television’s interval release format (Mittell 33). The practice of intertwined, multi-threaded narratives has become the measure of quality television in many ways and with it fol-

lows an increased incentive for viewers to revisit past seasons to discover previously-missed foreshadowing and develop theories for later events. Popular television series have long been fodder for social exchange and “water-cooler conversation” and this tendency has seen greater prevalence in recent years with the help of widely used platforms of convergence like social media, online discussion threads and dedicated topical forums. Accruing cultural capital through vocal, widespread consumption is the ultimate goal of television which, in turn, ensures critical appraisal, the extension of a series run, the interest of advertisers and, depending on the show, the expansion of marketable goods like DVD releases and merchandise. Yet, with the entrance of “quality” options from limiting outlets like cable and subscription services, the pursuit of universal audience will take a back seat to the capturing of prestige and a dedicated viewership that may not normally turn to television for their main entertainment resource.

There is a desire for television that is more aesthetically and narratively charged and that pushes the boundaries of what can be possible for the medium. A certain amount of synchronicity and familiarity was going to be beneficial in appealing to a customer base and this was not lost on HBO, Santo notes, as their further iterations of original programming started to resemble network more and more (26). Differentiating from the broadcast practices was only beneficial to a point, despite the marketing efforts that appeared to claim otherwise, and retuning to networks as a mode of expanding viewership provided an point of contact to people who may still be drawn into a subscription or could create outside interest in DVD collections and merchandise. The desire to maintain a sense of exclusivity and prestige tied to the efforts of cable to self-brand as something other than standard television paled to a degree in the appealing face of increase income through syndication (Santo 26). Not only did producers at HBO see the value of being able to toe the line of network palatability and often shoot “clean” versions of episodes of particularly

popular series in hopes of using network television as an additional profit source rather than functioning solely as direct competition (Santo 30). Efforts to divorce HBO from network ancestors remain a meaningful approach to assessing the television industry in transition, but recognizing the relationship that cable and broadcast have carefully maintained is likewise significant. In the battle for America's watchers, the movement towards niche programming and pushing new frontiers of style and "quality" is still performed with the desire to cast a large enough net to please more than a meager handful of viewers. Perhaps universality was no longer in vogue, but until viewers could determine their own viewing patterns, airing series and designated prime-time hours depended on viewership numbers to measure their level success.

### ***2.1 Adding Netflix to the Mix***

The discourse surrounding Netflix in the academic sphere and the realm of news media and has gone through several transitions during the company's rise to the level of home entertainment headliner. For this section, I will highlight the key claims about the company's role and fundamental "difference" that are central to the Netflix corporate myth. Applying the insights of Caldwell, I will draw from the internal documents and other "deep texts" that are formulated to communicate the company's values and practices. In the most recent period, beyond the Internet neutrality discussion, Netflix is primarily assessed as the possible harbinger for the end of cable as the standard of domestic media consumption. The warnings against an upcoming generation of "cord cutters" who have abandoned their bulky, expensive cable subscriptions in favor of on-demand streaming services that promise that the power of time, place and program is conferred to the consumer rather than dictated by the producer. Standard broadcast and cable are still in the midst of the television identity crisis and, even as late in the game as 2010, they somewhat complacently termed Netflix as a service that is "complementary" to cable (Keating 240). In many

cases, Netflix is still held as part of a user-selected “package” of subscriptions to multiple streaming or broadcast outlets but the threat of outright replacement remains well documented, particularly among younger consumers. Promoting a customizable and personalized experience becomes the variation that Netflix builds its foundations, aligning itself with the consumer for whom channel surfing has lost its novelty. In the battle for viewer’s attention, Hastings has not failed to see the resemblance to the movements that had come before the streaming era. In stating that “we [Netflix] are to cable networks as cable networks were to broadcast” the self-aware comparison to the prior adjustments the industry made with the addition of non-advertiser driven subscription cable channels like HBO (Auletta). The allusion to the cable transition, particularly considering HBO, reveals more of a similarity than even Hastings would freely admit to. That company’s historic role in defining that there was market space for television that stepped out of the bounds of network familiarity in order to reach viewers and the resulting branding that HBO developed – one of difference, quality and being “not TV” – had entirely altered the practices of an industry that previously seemed unshakeable (Leverette 13-14). Netflix’s brand is not confined to the user experience and the style of content it has subsequently produced, instead, the corporate values espoused and the organization of the company have further illustrated a desire to disrupt the standards of industrial practice that, in the vision of CEO Hastings, has only come to hamper the growth and adaptability of other media companies struggling to keep up with rapid technological advancement. In recognizing the position that his company embodies, Hastings demonstrates a degree of critical consciousness that, in the perspective of Caldwell’s low theory, is indicative of the trend towards industrial self-analysis. When it comes to Netflix, then, to assess intentions, internal philosophy and image as being intertwined with company practice and the choice of original content is far from unreasonable or without precedent.

Elaborating on the atypical business environment, Patty McCord speaks of her own experience in her time with the company as Chief Talent Officer in a detail that demonstrates the level of commitment that Hastings and Netflix has set for their team. This is a culture that merits talent and creativity over standardized industry hierarchy and customary employee roles. “Netflix’s talent philosophy: the best thing you can do for employees – a perk better than foosball or free sushi – is hire only ‘A’ players to work alongside them... the other vital element of our talent philosophy: If we wanted only ‘A’ players on our team, we have to be willing to let go of people whose skills no longer fit, no matter how valuable their contributions had once been” (McCord). CEO Reed Hastings’ corporate philosophy that surfaced along with his transition in to leadership and Netflix’s expansion into streaming media frontrunner perpetuates the “all star team” metaphor and seamlessly integrates it into the rhetoric of excellence that characterizes the company’s internal culture: “we are a team, not a family. We are like a pro sports team, not a kid’s recreational team. Netflix leaders hire, develop and cut smartly so we have stars in every position” (Hastings 23). The intended ideology of the company is not difficult to discern, particularly with the 2009 release of a power point presentation wherein CEO Hastings himself outlines the ideals, expectations and practices that allows Netflix to remain talent oriented and flexible. In no uncertain terms, Hastings cites many common modes of corporate organization and regulation that become dangerously counterproductive for innovators. Traditional values of loyalty and security are finite in their usefulness when the ultimate interest is to maintain a team of elites. Substantiated by similar claims in McCord’s account of her experiences during her years at Netflix, average workers are not sustained regardless of their previous vital contributions and time invested along the way or, in the words of Hastings again, “adequate performance gets a generous severance package” (Hastings 22). On that sports team, only the best players are desired and

those who do not maintain top performance become the replaceable by players who can and, even more significantly, a team of greats tend to inspire each other to improve further. The sentiment spurs high achievement, certainly, but also is tinged with a possibility of what the character Frank Underwood terms “ruthless pragmatism” which perpetuates a reputation for a high-pressure atmosphere.

Another key feature of the Netflix culture is the demand for responsibility over procedure. As the main mission of “Freedom and Responsibility” indicates, these two qualities are critical and inextricable in an employee that would truly fit into the methods that keep Netflix ahead of their competitors. Through his long career of igniting start-ups and cultivating young companies, Hastings sees many instances where the usual methods of coping with growth and success push up-and-comers into the same tangled webs of inefficiency that larger companies often find themselves in later. Emergent enterprises desiring to increase their impact inevitably expand, increasing burdensome internal complexity at the same rate (Hastings 45-6). In response, the emphasis on individual responsibility and high performance is intended to spare Netflix from following the same road as other industry giants. The person able to reliably follow the central maxim of “acting in Netflix’s best interest” at all times does not require the same amount of regulation and oversight as an employee focusing on self-interest therefore allowing the company to continue to function with the higher levels of independent freedom necessary for creative, quick action (Hastings 40,75). By fostering an environment that does not require adherence to standard practice on everything from hierarchical approval systems to vacation policy, Netflix can spare itself time-sucking processes and even whole departments of people focused not on increasing profits but simply administering to personnel organization and affairs. These measures, in Hastings mind, also empower Netflix to react quickly and effectively to major in-

dustrial shifts down the road in ways that the entrenched network and cable leaders have been hazardously slow to address in the face of game-changing advancements like internet streaming. The disruption of typical corporate internal affairs is embedded directly into how Netflix is intended to run, down to the day-to-day, and it presents a more cohesive idea of where Netflix places itself in the spectrum of the industry: it is young, fast, keeps the talent and doesn't need to play by all the tired rules that television has previously been governed by, inside and out.

This environment that touts deference for the creative is the same one that Beau Willimon and David Fincher were ushered into when talks over the political series *House of Cards* began. Signing on to a 100 million dollar deal for two seasons without requiring as much as a pilot was unprecedented for a TV show but Netflix was confident that, with their data and with cutting-edge creators, the production would provide a note-worthy and stylish promise for maintaining viewers that would also be glossy bait to critics, awards and new subscribers alike. A gamble on this scale would still cause many media companies to balk but the favorable reception ultimately affirms that the Netflix model is as competitive as any other and, further, suggestive of the direction that television as an industry will be heading.

## **2.2 *Making More of "Quality TV"***

As the digital world came of age, the added flexibility of streaming suggested to producers and viewers alike that media access could no longer be confined to a time and place in the method of traditional television. By increasing the opportunities for customization and accessibility, the refinement of the viewing public according to what and how people choose to watch became increasingly noticeable and also could be a powerful tool in the hands of a media maker that could effectively monitor and conform content and delivery to these changing desires and expectations. The allure of difference for the regular consumer that, hypothetically, may be no longer



dazzled by the shows that “everyone” is watching becomes an emphasis when generating material that deviates enough from standard television to satisfy that desire and maintains enough familiarity to benefit from broader availability and the positives of the episodic narrative format that comes along with this approach to in-home entertainment. The claim of “difference” becomes pivotal to each permutation of television yet, at the same time, resemblance from network to cable to streaming ensures an entanglement that helps to interlock the roles and impacts of each as the industry forges ahead. HBO, when it entered the market, carved out a placement and branding that is markedly similar to the progression seen with the Netflix and, as a matter of tracking industry change I will strive to explore the parallel in these shifts and the internal narratives of the two companies.

Unlike its advertising-reliant network predecessors, HBO did not trade as much on the perceived value of certain demographic groups because the interest for a cable company is to attract whoever will pay for the subscription. The method of drawing these consumers is heavily framed around HBO’s self-identification as offering materials with increased production quality and, perhaps more significantly, the exclusivity of having access to programming that not everyone may be watching: essentially driving up the cultural capital available to HBO subscribers (Santo 32-3). The combination of the exclusivity and the quality that have become embedded into the HBO image for themselves but also the evaluation of the programming they produce. Consumers and competitors, similarly, have come to expect a different standard of material from pay cable and, in turn, the assumption has circulated back to the consumer of HBO who seem to have a different tolerance for provocative presentations of sex, violence and graphic language that is out of the depth of catch-all network programming as well as the presumption of an accessible, yet complex long-running narrative (Santo 29). Thus the statement that the cable channel

strives to associate with their brand – of distinction and quality – can culturally transfer some of this identification to their viewers. The effort of differentiation in cable programming and universalized network shows is embedded in the way that HBO portrays itself in the industry and also becomes a particular commodity that, while available to anyone with the money to pay for the subscription, comes with a kind of exclusivity that is elevated by the offering of acclaimed, challenging materials on an accessible but not universal basis. The value that comes along with limited access and a degree of prestige, however superficial that the limitations may be, is the cultural capital. Derived from the work of Bourdieu, the concept of cultural capital – which in the objectified state becomes a symbolic form of social currency – is applicable to the way that both HBO and Netflix approach formulating an industrial identity, marketing methods and developing programming (Bourdieu 1986, 51). As pay channels before them, on-demand viewing and streaming services prioritize the value of immediate access to numerous shows and films that may or may not be available through other avenues whether in terms of new, limited or independent releases or by virtue of being off-air or a short run. When it comes to original programming, content created by subscription services have the added benefit, in terms of this cultural capital, of delineating a mainstream viewer of standard release films and network TV and a viewer that chooses to seek out particular services that offer exclusive content to expand, or even, to replace the most common entertainment sources.

Continuing with Bourdieu, this kind of exclusivity relies on the assertion of *taste* that marks these particular offerings and their producers as “beyond the norm” and even, with their perceived edginess and greater authorial rigor, the “high” art compared with the mediocre “low” of network TV. Allen and Anderson, in a reexamination of Bourdieu and the implications for consumer taste formation, describe taste as “a ‘social weapon’ that defines and marks of the high

from the low, the sacred from the profane and the ‘legitimate’ from the ‘illegitimate’” in all manner of fashion, art and product (70). This weapon, keen in the hands of many media makers, has been appropriated by Netflix in ways that embrace and then exceed the typical usage by being able to quantify and organize consumers by taste. By suiting many aspects of corporate growth, business practice and subsequent content production to taste as well as the rapid internet-inspired change in what consumers find appealing when it comes to viewing habits, Netflix embraces the responsive role industry has in informing current cultural trends. The awareness that the producer-consumer cultural flow is not entirely dictatorial and one-sided evidenced in the mode of data gathering that has become so important to the Netflix media model but, beyond this, the fashioning of an internal corporate culture that prioritizes a system that reduces the hindrance of hierarchical approval and rigid inner structure in favor of innovation, the ability to adapt and talent. Unabashed willingness to change has proven to be alternately very profitable for the company and painfully risky and, even at the peak of subscriptions and viewership, the numbers were in the black but not without rising competition and increasing need to contribute to the field of content rather than acting purely as aggregator (Knee 38). In the effort to remain a viable business, Netflix’s movements towards becoming a large-scale media producer depends heavily on the idea that the data they have available from the digital interactions with their subscribers can accurately inform content decisions enough to mitigate some of the risk in content creation. Based on this equation, data is an invaluable factor that can, if the company is able to perfect a method to analyze and categorize the information in a way that can be implemented in practical terms, forecast the presence of a “targetable” audience amongst Netflix’s subscribership before a series or movie is even released.

Caldwell's speculation on what he terms as "low theory" centers on the idea that industry denizens and media makers are fully immersed in their own methods of theoretical and critical practice that are in fact comparable to outside practitioners like analysts and scholars but with intent towards more targeted and pragmatic ends (Caldwell 105). The process of "making sense" of the vast amounts of collectable data that web-based companies are privy to is a crucial step in being able to utilize that information to better their product, maintain ongoing consumers and attract new ones. Netflix's status as a popular entertainment source has been solidified after key original productions, including *House of Cards*, earned critical praise and won industry awards: confirming their ability to generate enviable "buzz" around their shows and, indeed, the industry-disrupting brand that translates into much desired cultural capital. Such a vote of confidence in the collective eye lends momentum for Netflix to continue to invest in creation of series that are formulated around their selected viewership and the cultural tastes in order to spark the interests of diverse publics that now face the sea of choice when it comes to digital media access. With more ways to collect data and more public venues for expressing opinions and desires, the company that refuses to listen and to respond is the company that loses a consumer-base. A media corporation that was born on the Internet is even more accountable to negotiation and, with this atmosphere of interactiveness and rapid change, Netflix's evolution from direct-mail DVD rental to predominantly a streaming service is a clear testament to its environment and the progression of the Internet's ubiquity and user-gearred inclinations. Tightening the exchange loop from producer to consumer highlights the inherent overlap between the functionality of two spheres is highlighted and, indeed, the notion of multi-directional influence is approaching full naturalization into the creation and reception processes of media. In expressing a consciousness of cultural impact "producers (encoders) also inevitably function as audiences (decoders) that are rewarded

for successfully deploying interpretive competencies...” and in an era wherein the user is more often engaged on a more direct and personalized level with their preferred media sources the “industrial-theoretical competencies have emerged as a recurrent public benchmark of corporate performance” wherein the perceived responsiveness of the industrial culture to consumer taste and consumption habits is not only encouraged but, these days, expected (Caldwell 123). Of course, the traditional sensibilities that are acute enough to change or eliminate a show that is unpopular have always been present, but the ability to track individual taste and then assemble a viable potential audience on that basis testifies to a more nuanced and self-aware approach among content creators than was possible before the access to such precise, targeted data-gathering. Articulated for its own website, Netflix assures that “by personalizing promotion of the right content to the right member, we have a large opportunity to promote our original content, one that is effectively unlimited in duration” (“Long Term View,” [ir.netflix.com](http://ir.netflix.com)). This ability returns to the foundational claims that drive the brand, and is frequently invoked in Netflix’s own marketing, investor relations and is mentioned time and time again in public interviews: knowing what the consumer wants and being able to deliver it from a deep library of licensed materials or directly from tailored original content. Having a distinctive identity that is bound in content that touts its “difference” from the other readily available options for television is part of its vision of its role in the industry. Streaming alternatives like Hulu that began as a consolidation of network programming for the TV junkie and Amazon, which has long been a veritable digital department store for movies, music, books and other media forms, also joined the internet viewing pool and later the content creation sphere but the Netflix brand is one that has continuously tried to present a cohesive and self-conscious image of the disruptor.

This line of discussion is further informed by the more recent positioning of textualism as more closely tied to industrial than formal occurrence particularly in a way that validates the industry's display of "cultural competence and critical-theoretical engagement" in its created texts and, further, that many of these texts express the larger industrial understanding of social and cultural context (Caldwell 105). The combined evaluation of "deep texts" like trailers, employee information and published materials with the choices made when funding creatives for original productions exposes the unified self-conscious construction of the company's image. Beyond having an internal ideology that dictates the kinds of media that are pursued, the supposition that content is shaped by the industry's grasp of current context is more transparent the venue of alternate-reality often associated with contemporary political drama: it's a surrogate "here-and-now" that replaces and/or reflects the current environment without fully entering the realm of non-fiction. The argument that surfaces in Caldwell's discussion links fluidly into the conception of the cycle of production and consumption as a significant factor in the creation of shared culture that falls into Du Gay's Circuit of Culture. The bridge between the two is the necessary understanding that the created text itself will manifest features and values that are indicative of all stages of the circuit, from the identity of the creator to the technological, social and even political context to the tastes and reception of the consumers.

### **2.3 *Algorithmic Culture***

The basis for Netflix's professed acuity in understanding audience comes from another talismanic development in the way that modern culture is measured and described, both in the industry and in the area of study: that of the use of algorithms. While a consensus has already been struck in the fluidity of discussing "culture" as encompassing a group of people based on identifiable, shared understandings, beliefs, practices or patterns of interest or consumption, the appli-

cation of algorithm in deriving and defining a culture has been gaining importance alongside the rapid rate of digitalization. In the industrial perspective, any means by which to solidify and even more efficiently quantify attributes and patterns within the customer base are in extremely high demand and, for that purpose, the increased ability to interface with consumers granted by the Internet has been invaluable to this end. There has been no shortage of young web-based companies eager to tap into the onslaught of collectable data that the medium provides and many established companies, in media as well as countless other industries, have seen fit to engage in a similar way. Ushering in the age of algorithms has been essential in the quest to create metrics and structure for the concepts of a culture that, in turn, can then be drawn upon to guide the future of digital industries. For Netflix, “Algorithm TV” characterizes both the way that that the company determines acquisition and project-backing and the mode by which it determines the targeted taste of its viewership. This section addresses the concrete practice, the use of algorithm, that forms the basis on which Netflix stakes many of its claims of personalization and audience forecasting that is tied to its branding and was instrumental in delivering *House of Cards* to its viewers.

The sphere of media and entertainment has been historically intertwined with the concept of taste. Producers of media, of course, shape the entertainment environment with what they create but the returning force of consumer taste – what objects become suddenly widely popular, what texts might develop a smaller “cult” following that has greater longevity – becomes just as formative of subsequent texts whether by the demand inspires producers to follow a certain trend or by the ability of consumers to contribute to the text themselves in different ways. Netflix has consistently engaged in the pursuit of understanding taste cultures and niche markets as part of their path to commercial eminence long before it began the foray into original programming.

Adding to the list, another prime model of this interest is seen in the choice to pick up a reboot of *Arrested Development*: an offbeat comedy series that, despite a notable cult following, was cancelled by Fox (Rose). With limited options of access for existing fans and a whole new population of subscribers who might be receptive to the series, *Arrested Development* was an obvious choice for streaming and, in addition to the existing seasons, was also perhaps the more eagerly awaited of Netflix's initial in-house productions along with *House of Cards* and *Hemlock Grove* (Rose). Historically, ratings data for television shows has been accepted as a valuable overview of viewership trends but, in the light of changing industry sentiment, ratings standards too heavily rely on certain demographic categorizations: age, class, gender etc. (Hallinan 123). Nielsen Media Research has long been the standard source of quantifying viewership of individual channels and programs via the ubiquitous "Nielsen ratings" that typically track demographic information along with the numbers of people tuning in for the benefit of advertisers (Lotz 194). The centrality of Nielsen ratings in the practices of network has limited the necessity for competing systems of measuring audiences but, in the movement towards post-network television, the definition of viewer groups according to purchasing power and product appeal has become irrelevant (Lotz 195). Netflix, like HBO before it, is not beholden to advertising to fund production and licensing thus excising the need to categorize their shows and subscribers into subsets based on what other companies want to try to sell to them. All that Netflix needs you to buy is a subscription and the ability to determine, not your ethnic background or age, but your viewing preferences enables the company to sell that subscription and maintain ongoing consumers. Even under the conventional wisdom of Bourdieu's notion of taste culture traveling down the ladder of class, the objection persists in entertainment media that even the likeness of age, class and gender does not guarantee the agreement of two similar individuals' taste. Of two young women who live on



the same suburban street, attend the same high school and are otherwise apparently a match in most characteristics, it would still not be all that shocking to find that one girl absolutely despises horror films of any kind while her classmate might be a fanatic for classic 1980s teen-geared slasher films. The “problem” presented by the complexity of taste, is one that some media companies have attempted to confront through a different approach to ratings: one where the possible preference of the viewer is measured not by their corresponding demographics but, instead, by what the individual viewer chooses to watch themselves. In interviews, Ted Sarandos returns again and again to the priority system built into the company’s financial gains that emphasize aspects of growth and viewership in a way that contrasts with conventional TV practices. Recently, in a New York Times article, he notes that to compare ratings and viewership numbers with cable would be impractical citing the dramatic variation in content release wherein networks and advertisers rely on an episodic airing system that is spread over a few months whereas Netflix encourages the build up a binge viewership that may diminish rapidly over a few weeks from the batch release of an complete season (Koblin 2016). The cable model promises longer and repeated exposure for their sponsors and advertised products but, with Netflix’s profits driven by luring and keeping viewership the imperative to spread out a season diminishes and the influx of new material becomes a more meaningful way to incur business. Netflix may track what a viewer skips, binges on, rewatches, adds to their queue and, of course, where their personal ratings fall but as for the rest? “The methodology and the measurement and the data itself don’t reflect any sense of reality of anything that we keep track of... That could be because 18- to 49-year-old viewing is so insignificant to us... We don’t track it” (Sarandos, a al Koblin). Sarandos, as one of the leading public voices of Netflix in the media, is a valid basis on which to assess the aspirations of the company and a definitive liaison in expressing this information in

the terms that Netflix seeks to be recognized by: particularly the dismissiveness towards traditional methods of audience tracking practiced within the television industry and the dispensing of the “old way” of piloting a TV series before commissioning longer runs. This is not to dispute that Netflix holds the means, through its almost entirely digital interface, to gather information that would be inaccessible to broadcast providers and thus this, along with the variation in needs that comes with being a different kind of entertainment provider, would yield a model that is markedly different from the previous standards of practice. Yet, while obvious in an industrial perspective, is still a position of “difference” on which Netflix stakes its identity and its value to a class of customer that may not be attracted to cable packages or weekly television schedules.

In the quest for better recommendations and “smarter” search engines that can supply results that reflect an increasing understanding of intent and relevancy the development of algorithms that are formulated around users as well as the aims of the industry has become a key goal for companies with digital offerings. There is considerable information that can be gleaned about both Netflix and the media provider’s conception of its subscribers and the kind of materials that would have a positive, lucrative reception through the form and implementation of algorithm that acts as a microcosmic demonstration of the Circuit of Culture. Furthermore, to the degree that Netflix’s aims in data-driven content creation can be understood as an effort to map and apply the tastes of certain audience segments in a way that could provide a more calculated basis for the monumental risk that comes along with the creation of original content, the ultimate outcome, in the form of series like *House of Cards*, would come ingrained with a reading of current social perspectives and a snapshot of the mood of a target slice of culture. While etymology designates algorithms as a “set of mathematical procedures whose purpose is to expose some truth or tendency about the world” and to create an accessible framework for large pools of data, the

assigned purpose of meaning-making in that data – in “truth” and “tendency” – clearly establishes a multithreaded relationship between an algorithm, its creator that fashioned its purpose and the specific populations that use it (Striphas 404). Such categorizations can also be aptly termed as “calculated publics,” which Tarleton Gillespie designates for the purpose of exploring the cyclical entanglement between user and provider (188). While an algorithm is both a data collector and a mode of structuring information for a specific purpose, it also becomes a source of defining a previously unclassified group that exists within the parameters of what a service – be it shopping, research or entertainment – provides but with a structure of inclusion that is known only to the service (Gillespie 188-89). For Netflix, the “calculated public” is not a wide net cast across a homogeneous audience but a more fragmentary subset for which a single series can be ordered, cast and marketed with great precision. The more exacting parameters that help define these publics in detail, still broadly indicative of Netflix’s general subscriber base, remain part of the clandestine proprietary practices of the company. For the industry as a whole, recognizing and organizing a group around taste and habitus is a definitive step away from the outmoded reliance on understanding audiences purely along demographic divisions. As with many other analyses of culture, digital and otherwise, Gillespie notes “it is important that we conceive of this entanglement not as a one-directional influence but as a recursive look between the calculations of the algorithms and the ‘calculations of the people’ (183). The convergence of these two calculations invites the use of a text like *House of Cards* for encapsulating the intersection between the production culture of Netflix and the taste culture of the show’s prospective audience. Progressing the concept of algorithmic determination, Striphas returns to the linkage between this practice of data gathering and the meaning that can be rendered from the endless flood of digital information, namely that the specific remainder of the algorithmic processing can be interpreted

as a documentation of a culture and thus these processes are key to the capability of “assembling the social” (406). Gathering data is the obvious goal, but, the result of this data also points to an enriched conception of a specific viewership for Netflix’s brand of Algorithm TV. For the new media challengers like Netflix, implementing algorithms is not simply geared towards the grouping of users by their age, gender or economic background but, instead, embeds classification of users related to what they watch, what they’ve watched several times over, the show they started and didn’t finish, the scenes that make them rewind to view again and the movies they voluntarily rated whether they watched them through the streaming service or elsewhere. These indications of taste, as they can be targeted and directed through algorithmic interaction, naturally communicate much more about the kind of content that Netflix should be investing in than a subscriber’s average age or income bracket. The paradigm of big data that believes that “more information is always better” is accurate to a degree but the need to structure that data around intent and purpose, the necessity for users to be able to interact in a way that allows for desirable results and to deliberately suss out *relevancy* – a significance that is only attainable through the lens of culture – is what had driven the progression of raw data into something that can inform the decisions of a company (Gillespie 168-69). This sums up, at least, one of the core ideals that fuels the Netflix philosophy towards producer-consumer interrelations and content creation and the necessity of the development of algorithms as a means to facilitate these goals.

Understanding the formula of the ideal subscriber not only informs format and the way the Netflix does business but, also, extends into the way the company crafts content. As a flagship release, *House of Cards* and the central character of Francis Underwood, expresses an explicit appeal to this formula and to the perceived usefulness of viewership data. The oversimplified conclusion that this audience would have much in common with those who enjoyed the orig-

inal series by the BBC aired more than two decades previous is easily dismissed, particularly in the face of Netflix's own claim to revolutionary data-wielding that allowed them to more precisely "forecast" the audience that Willimon's version would attract based on multiple factors: none of which demanded that all of the watchers held very much else in common at all. This iteration of an existing narrative framework – most closely the BBC series from 1991 inspired by a novel written 1989 both of which have been associated with the arch and style of Shakespearean the works *Macbeth* and *Richard III* – overtly connect to the previous installments but the transformative power of cultural context and habitus cannot be omitted from a serious examination (Youngs 2007). Relying both of the sociological insight of Pierre Bourdieu and more recent theorist Paul Du Gay, to consider a piece of media that offers a fantasy that maintains a selective distance from reality is to also consider the various influencing contexts ingrained by that reality. Netflix's reputation and methods invoke the classifying power of both the content consumed and the *mode of consumption* that Bourdieu distinguishes in his definition of "habitus" – a "system of dispositions" that is itself imbued through social classification that further helps to classify the person that uses it – and simultaneously relies on and helps perpetuate the measured "taste" of their subscribers (Bourdieu 6). The now well recognized Circuit of Culture helps to extend the idea of habitus and taste by enhancing the understanding of the flow of culture that is increasingly, particularly with the sharp peak in user-generated media and internet culture, a two-way street wherein the decisions made by the producer is not meekly and unswervingly accepted by a consumer as receiver without the necessity of altering products offered based on what consumers have and already like as well as what consumers might be calling for and not yet have (Du Gay xxx – xxxi). The implementations of algorithms, as a means of creating new forms of identification and classification in consumer data that encourages a step away from traditional de-

mographics markers, also enables the more content-specific, nuanced integration of user input (Hallinan 123). Netflix, an early outlet for independent films, does not provide a platform for user-created media like Youtube or Vimeo but it does invoke user desires directly by championing their data collection methods focusing on the preferences and habits of individual consumers. Commodifying taste data over timeslots and advertising interests has allowed streaming services like Netflix to become instrumental in the upheaval of the usual patterns of media consumption, which, in turn has been a catalyst for the changing patterns in production and distribution of television. They may not be alone but Netflix has been the identity most often invoked with the tangible changes in the mode and expectation of film and television consumption that is instrumental in the burgeoning population of “cord cutters” who now create a broad swathe of TV audiences seeking to circumvent the limitations of traditional industry. The resulting data-driven relationship between producer and consumer that Netflix has helped to pioneer crystallized in many ways in the creation of *House of Cards*, the first release of their foray into original content, that was characterized and marketed, in part, on the assertion about the ability to discern a viable and specific audience before the show was even made.

Beyond selecting and funding original content, Netflix, as a business, utilizes the data from its rating system for more than the altruistic impulse of connecting people to good movies they would enjoy. One of the key drivers behind the development of Netflix’s proprietary rating system, Cinematch, was to redirect consumer interest beyond popular, newer films to older, less circulated films that they likely would enjoy just as much and, in this way, the pressure on Netflix’s DVD inventory would be distributed a little more evenly and people would appear to have more immediately available options to placate them while they might have to wait longer to see high-demand films. This, of course, also extends user subscriptions since they are able to get re-

liable and pleasing recommendations on seemingly endless films that they might have never heard of and now feel that they would like to see instead of running through the handful of titles they may recognize before terminating their subscription (Keating 61). This allows Netflix to both better utilize their existing inventory that can include older, independent or obscure films that a mainstream audience may not be familiar with and, further, aids in optimizing the selection of what new films and shows will be added or created down the line (Keating 61). Noting that common ways to recommend a film - by genre, director, lead actor etc. - has its own threshold for fallibility, Cinematch was designed to take this process a few steps further. For the sake of example, perhaps a viewer loves David Fincher's style and general filmography but strongly dislikes detective or police procedural narratives. This leaves two fairly popular Fincher films, *Zodiac* and *Seven*, as recommendations that would likely fail to meet this viewer's taste despite the connection of a favorite directorial style and recognizable name. So, instead of simply trying to link directly corresponding features in one film to another, the algorithm that evolved under Hastings' supervision was geared towards creating "customer clusters" that formulated recommendations based on grouping viewers that had rated films similarly to each other (Keating 61-2). While anonymous, these clusters very much like Gillespie's "calculated publics," are formed effectively as a smaller taste community that then is able to provide more precise film picks based not on what the viewers have in common demographically but rather what films they all liked or disliked and rated accordingly.

This kind of personalized viewer data has also been used to allegedly track convergences of taste that Netflix could later draw from when taking the plunge into producing original content. In an interview, Ted Sarandos, the chief content officer for Netflix, broke down the signifi-

cance of Netflix's rating data and how that helped them determine that there would be a receptive audience for the first original Netflix undertaking:

Sometimes it's explicit ratings: I watch this, then I rated it five stars because I loved it. Then there are implicit ratings: Even if somebody who watches 13 hours of a show in 24 hours doesn't rate it, we've got a pretty good sense of how they felt. Or if they watch 20 minutes of the first episode and never came back, they don't have to rate it zero for us to know they're not interested... With *House of Cards*, it was identifying not just somebody who saw *The Social Network* or liked David Fincher but trying to figure out what everybody who liked *Benjamin Button*, *Seven*, *Fight Club* and *Social Network* have in common. It's that they love David Fincher's style of storytelling... You look at Kevin Spacey fans, and then you say, "How about people who love political thrillers?" We went back and pulled all the political thrillers people have watched and rated highly. So you've got all these populations, and right where they overlap in the middle is the low-hanging fruit.

(Rose)

Finding that "middle ground" between the overlapping taste of viewers created a previously inscrutable space where the resulting show - a Fincher-backed political drama starring Kevin Spacey - would have an interested group of viewers before they even closed the deal on *House of Cards*. The appeal of turning the audience forecasting over to detailed data collection is further supported by the acknowledgement that the audience needed to sustain and financially justify a series isn't solely measured in quantity in the age of broad programming choice: a faithful, interactive "cult" viewership can lend longevity and viability to a series that did not necessarily garner immediate popularity when it hit the in-home screen (Mittell 31). By diversifying the understanding of audience and the methods to attract one, Mittell suggests that producers are more free



than ever to explore creating programming for a “boutique audience of more upscale educated viewers who typically avoid television” which in turn invites innovation in the standard television format and genre conventions as much as it captures a viewership that escapes other marketing interests (31). Attracting a recognized director with the established iconic style that, conveniently, agrees with Netflix’s own disruptor aesthetic lends yet another marker of quality and disparity from network television: that of the auteur. While the theoretics of auteurism, made popular in the 1960s and 70s and associated with particular prestige in film but only more recently surfaced in television discourses with considerable controversy. First and foremost, the industrial deviation places a great deal more influence on the “look and life of a series” in the hands of executive producers and more control over vision for writer-directors which disorders the immediate equation of director to “auteur” (Caldwell 199). David Fincher entering the world of television comes along with a narrative of hands-on authorship and the unending battle for unhampered creative control. Film studios and television networks, in providing the means to create, both act as influential forces on the production process and, in television in particular, the budgetary and medium limitations along with intensive executive oversight can be a deterrent for creative that prefer to maintain central authority over their project. Auteurism is, despite its ongoing appeal and ease of use in Hollywood and to audiences, further mediated by the unavoidable impact of the means by which a film or series is produced (Caldwell 199). Even more so, for a creative like Fincher who have already thoroughly demarcated their visual aesthetic and identity as well as a clear relationship to a specific fan base. The acknowledgment of this seems particularly tailored to the image of Netflix, which trades on its “difference” from conventional television as much as it touts the increased value of choice in content as and the ability of the consumer themselves to determine their own viewing patterns. Netflix, purely by the nature of its functionality,

simply absorbs the commonly outsourced processes of syndication and season-to-DVD releases that have long been used by network and cable producers to extend the financial lifespan of series and to attract viewership that may have missed the original airing of a series. For original content and long-term licensed series, Netflix can be the sole source for discovering something new, catching up on old seasons and re-watching favorite shows on the individual consumer's preferred schedule and all encompassed under the comparatively small cost of the monthly subscription price. Obviously this is not an all-access pass to anything a viewer may want to watch and the ebb and flow of media deals ensures that even some of the most popular material will eventually disappear from the Netflix library if it is anything other than original content, but the sea of choice combined with more accurate recommendations safeguard against having nothing to watch.

The development and implementation of Cinematch, constructed as it is around consumer taste above other more common variables, as well as other indicators in responsive marketing forms that adapts the ad for a show to the recorded preferences of the subscriber exhibits a heightened consciousness of the exchange between the producer and consumer that falls under the suggestion made by multiple theorists that industry has adapted critical and theoretical practices for economic reasons that resemble the academic equivalents. The increasing role of algorithms and their ability to be strategic in both the collection and meaningful categorization of data is perhaps a real world materialization of what Caldwell considers "low theory" and a further example of the capability of the changing television industry to exercise a reflexive self-analysis in actionable and profitable ways (Caldwell 25). Not only does this demonstrate an unparalleled level of critical-theoretical engagement but it is also a display of cultural competence in the way

that Netflix has seemingly structured their media model and original offerings around the measured habits and derived interpretation of a specific “Netflix taste.”

### 3 Building a House of Cards

Economically, capturing “taste” in a concrete, marketable way is massive advantage made possible through algorithms and the modern media landscape. The promotion of a certain impression of a “Netflix taste” is an effort to blur the lines between the brand and the culture. Tracking the way that these concepts are cycled from consumer data to industry practice provides insight into how the far Algorithm TV has come but this data also offers the unparalleled ability to capture an image of the audiences that Netflix defines as their prime market. The deepest segment in this market pool has been established in various resources with the central characteristics being youth and Internet accessibility. While this is not easily gathered into a single taste culture the awareness, recognizing that the lion’s share of subscribers (81%) fall under the age of thirty-five and are more open to a variety of non-traditional entertainment outlets while their older cable-faithful counterparts often utilize streaming services as supplemental rather than central media delivery if they use them at all provides critical understanding of the basics (Steel 2016). According to Strangelove in his evaluation of the “cord cutting” phenomenon of television consumers beginning to forsake traditional cable and network packages all together, the actual rate of subscribers aged 25 to 34 who maintain a Netflix membership while having no form of conventional pay-television subscription is as much as 35% (153). Examining how the company directly and indirectly communicate this image to their subscribers as well as exploring alternate means to characterize the viewers themselves are the critical steps down the road that ultimately helped deliver *House of Cards* to American audiences. In this chapter, I argue that the compa-

ny's assessment of their viewers and the disruptor aesthetic that Netflix has cultivated are driving forces behind choice to run the show *House of Cards* as the first of Netflix's now diverse catalogue of original series. I will fortify the company's sense of changing values in a key population of subscribers and I will also explore the validity of turning to political melodrama to address and appeal to this shift in values and outlook more directly. Various texts are crafted to speak to Netflix's audience in one manner or another and, by extension, they can also be invoked to expand the image of its ideal viewer and the formula behind the "Netflix taste."

A cursory introduction to Netflix through their website, their primary customer interface, yields an precise picture of the target public for this service and provides an example of Caldwell's "deep text" that facilitates the direct interaction between the company and its consumers. When navigating to the Netflix home page and looking at the slide-show style presentation of the company's offerings rather than immediately signing in for a personalized listing of recently watched and recommended materials expresses the Netflix "type" to the possibly unsubscribed American viewer. A page refresh begins the cycle with the closely clustered bodies that fit into the paradigm of "traditional" American family as easily as they fit onto their couch: white mother, white father, son and daughter. They are reclined and they are close. Perhaps there is even a white picket fence surrounding the yard that must be beyond the curtained window behind them to complete this overt appeal to the American dream. This is certainly the domestic goal of togetherness that can be inspired by a favorite family program or popular film. Brought to your TV set by Netflix of course. The following image is of two entranced children, indoors, staring into a tablet. The contented siblings are again close, comfortably sharing a smaller screen and they are engrossed. After this, a young non-white woman with natural curls and a wide smile is enjoying Netflix on her own couch. She is alone, perhaps relishing a quiet Sunday afternoon. The last im-

age in the looped sequence takes the suggestion of mobility even further as it features a young black man also grinning into the screen of his mobile phone. He enjoys his program of choice outdoors and maintains his connection to the entertainment through his gaze and the headphone cord that is plugged into his phone. Breaking down this sequence exposes certain common themes that may help characterize some of the basic qualities of the Netflix user. First point of interest is that, while Netflix unquestionable started as a purely web-driven endeavor the images seem to be touting the platform capabilities beyond the obvious computer connection: internet-enabled TVs, tablets and smart phones are the main mode of consumption for these viewers. Every individual presented is barely pushing middle age - fairly young, and, most likely savvy enough in multi-platform utilities that Netflix's friendly user interface is appealing and practical. Their lives express a time and space for luxury but for the featured mobile user, the fact that viewing is done outside the confines of the couch alludes to the reality that leisure time is not longer sequestered to a regular set of hours after the traditional 9 to 5 work day. TV time, and indeed most other media consumption, tends to happen more sporadically throughout the day: between meetings, on commute or killing time in the doctor's office. The pair of children sharing the tablet may not have to worry about finding free time but they subject of choice and multi-screen viewing is highlighted. The whole family need not engage with children's programming and, in the next room, mom or dad could be keeping themselves busy with their own selection. While not explicitly stated throughout the introductory images, the presumption of a degree of technological competency combined with the pitch oriented towards multi-platform, mobile immediate access paints a detailed picture of the prototypical subscriber that Netflix envisions. Also offered through the website, although requiring some navigation beyond the Netflix home page, are copies of letters to investors and further elaboration the brand and its future. Conspicuously

absent are details revealing the specifics of the all-important data that Netflix uses to fuel the entrance into an age of Algorithm TV but what is present are promises of technological innovation and “creative storytelling” that will ensure Netflix’s role persisting into the brave new world of streaming (“Long Term View,” [ir.netflix.com](http://ir.netflix.com)). Citing the flagship for the company’s original content to demonstrate the longevity of on-demand appeal, the page asserts, that “long after the premier of season one of *House of Cards*, large numbers of members are still starting the series” (“Long Term View,” [ir.netflix.com](http://ir.netflix.com)). In this address from Netflix to investors, both current and prospective, argues a solid and, even more importantly, ongoing position for the company in the television industry. Maintaining balance on the cutting edge, staying competitive with other “quality” media sources like HBO and striving though gratifying personalization and appealing content are all outlined as means through which Netflix plans to not only gain subscribers but also to maintain them as indefinite consumers.

### ***3.1 TV on the Viewer’s Terms***

Streaming may open the door to format experimentations and the freedom to release full seasons instead of competing with timeslot television, but, as with HBO and other cable giants before, adherence to some of the classic form of network television has not been altogether abandoned. Despite affiliating the brand with “difference” and styling itself as a disruptor, many of Netflix’s original series are still formulated along familiar lines, following an episodic structure with compelling hooks from one episode to another even as the viewer can now often decide to watch the next episode immediately or “binging” an entire season instead having to be lured into returning to the same channel at the same time the following week. Leading in an episode with a recap of the last one is unnecessary if viewers can be counted on to watch two or three or more episodes in a row but the reassurance of a optional – now often skip-able – refresher still

encourages the freedom to put down a show where convenient to the viewer knowing that the recap can make it that much easier to pick up for another binge session this weekend or in two weeks. For creators, though, the boon that television offers over the uninterrupted compressed body of a film is the extension and multiplying of the narrative flow: a story can follow more than one plotline in depth and a character can be complicated by multiple arcs and developed in the viewer's mind with a longer, thus more established relationship. This feature in particular is one that helped both David Fincher and Kevin Spacey, veterans of film and, for Spacey, theater but with little previous involvement with television, decide to make the leap into the medium (Campbell). Incentivized by the capability of Netflix to offer a different kind of production experience as well as the assurance of creative freedom, respected talents are beginning to reconsider the medium and are willing to test the boundaries of what the public and the critical community identify as "television." As noted with HBO's self-described offering of "not TV" and Avi Santo's identification of para-television, the movement away from conventional television in even aspect - from production to delivery to reception - has become a recognizable theme in the discourse surrounding contemporary media. While the taxonomy is still diverse, the recognition that, as a culture, technology and as an industry, television is entering the "next stage" of development is consistent. Of course, there are limitations on speaking for broad viewership and, for streaming leaders like Netflix, significant parameters are imposed by access to broadband internet and technological competency, thus confining the major increases in subscribership to younger (under 35 years of age) consumers that have steady disposable income (Steel). The trends that characterize modern audience is not only their youth and internet-savviness but also their unwillingness to let an industry dictate their schedule and wrest the control of their time and viewing habits away from them.

The literal wide net of “broadcasting” has transitioned more towards targeted and, as identified by Lotz, fragmented viewership. This change is one in particular that with the introduction of prestige viewing subscription channels like HBO and Showtime enabled the targeting of audience groups that network television could not previously isolate in a particular timeslot or genre of consumption; namely those with greater disposable income (Lotz 76). Streaming expands on this to embrace viewers that may not have the degree of disposable finances to pay for bloated cable packages and this is an intersection where ‘quality’ becomes a factor of customization rather than strictly a premium addition to a bulky service. Even with the persisting argument of streaming services and on-demand outlets providing complementary entertainment to existing, more traditional television, the small but consistent movement of some consumers, particularly of the younger generation, towards cutting cable services and relying solely on streaming options accommodates a broader range of access and financial options. The challenge to traditional television in maintaining cable subscribers and network viewers has only continued to increase among these consumers who have had more experience with adaptable and customizable media sources: “The habits of the post-television generation are highly disruptive to an industry that is based on forcing audiences to watch advertisements, controlling when shows are available and profiting from the creation of artificial scarcity in an age of digital plentitude” (Strange-love 143). Allowing consumers to dictate their own media consumption has forcibly shifted the conception of an audience from a homogenized mass to a grouping of individuals with overlapping habits and interests and, thus, becomes less about targeting a demographic – collection based on similar traits - and more about detecting the *shared taste* that can be present even in larger assemblies of dissimilar viewers. Removing the relationship between television sponsorship and advertising and casting off the restrictions of place and time for viewing have been ma-



major factors in elevating the influence of consumer choice. The appeal of niche or boutique programming was confirmed, in part, by the rise of “quality” television associated with HBO and, due to this, the call for choice only became louder. Shows suited to a particular taste group could be a means for financial success and critical prestige and, thus proven, became a maxim for a company offering “difference” and styling itself a disruptor could incorporate into its business choices and its image: a “passion brand” not a “do-everything brand” (“Long Term View,” [ir.netflix.com](http://ir.netflix.com)). The other early Netflix originals released following *House of Cards* in 2013, *Hemlock Grove* and *Orange is the New Black*, both cater to tastes that are neither fully mainstream but nor are they necessarily similar to what *House of Cards* has to offer. *Hemlock Grove*, horror series, gained less critical attention but *Orange is the New Black*, a narrative surrounding the diverse characters brought together in a women’s prison, was well received and espouses a counter-culture, morally ambivalent mentality. Further, by reviving cult favorites like *Arrested Development* and opening access to the older niche classic *Twin Peaks* among numerous other examples, Netflix establishes a record of prioritizing both choice but also the variety that welcomes smaller but fervent taste groups into the fold of subscribership.

Many mainstream television providers have begun in earnest to stake a claim in the world of online viewership with certain perimeters of subscription, advertising and availability of top shows yet, as with most major cultural transitions, being late to the game can have considerable consequences. The genesis of on demand viewing can be found in the liberal access to non-commercial, user-generated video sharing and the illicit downloading of mainstream film and television, and, in many ways, the expansion of streaming services have enabled the increasing ubiquity of user-determined media experience that also accommodates a wide range of content on a legal basis for access of rates that, particularly in the face of cable bills that run up to and

sometimes beyond \$100 a month for a single household, seem nominal for the amount of consumer control that they offer (Strangelove 13). Removing the necessity of a bundled “package” of channels or even the standard television set itself contributes to the era of media that is more responsive to the choice of the individual consumer than the previous top-down approach to media consumption.

*House of Cards* proves to be a piece of media that encapsulates the various factors of the post-TV era and supports a narrative of technical and ideological disruption within both an industry and cultural atmosphere. Interrogating the efficacy of a system, a format and a cultural experience becomes possible from within and surrounding the show in way that makes this particular series a crystalizing point in the larger exploration of the intersection of media, industry and society. Underwood, a character that in many way succeeds in this desire to disrupt and manipulate a system that he deems misdirected and too entangled in its own slow processes and too dependent on maintaining appearances, changes the game by being a player that is better than the rules that are in place. Though the lifetime of Netflix, the company has styled itself as the “disruptor:” providing options for viewing that compete directly with the preexisting system of rental options and broadcast with a vast and varied streaming library. Making new rules for how customers can access their preferred shows and movies may not have entirely shut out network and cable giants like NBC, ABC, HBO and Showtime but what it has done is allowed for the shift in viewing habits that, in turn, changed consumer expectations for what, when and where television should be available.

### 3.2 *Knowing the Audience*

So who is this audience? Netflix anticipates certain types of users, of course, but how might *House of Cards* itself be read to offer a much more elaborate picture of the intended audience than simply all and any subscribers they can attract? Established through textual analysis, Underwood, repugnant and aloof as he might be, has been fashioned with precision to both involve the spectator but also to maintain a level of allure that is not altogether expelled by his viciousness and single-minded ambition. Hardly approachable or “a guy you would want to get a beer with” for most people, there remains a calculated framework within the character to keep him tied to his viewer. These ties that bind are crucial in the appeal and relative success of the show as well as a form of testing for Netflix’s approach to qualifying user taste and context in a way that can be used as a part of their industrial model. Returning to Underwood as a character that communicates with his audience and is himself a product of their perceived modern habitus and current values, the way he is presented not only captures facets of the producer but also reflects vital trends that typify the consuming population. The culture of the “Netflix taste” has delivered a figure that addresses the values of an ambivalent public experiencing radical change in both world-view and technological practice with a one-on-one directness that mirrors the Netflix internal brand of consumer responsiveness. This section serves to set the stage of socio-political mood and the consumption trends on which *House of Cards* makes its entrance by using research beyond the scope of Netflix’s own data.

For a series set ostensibly in the heart of American democracy, there is very little visualization of the voting public, predominantly due to the plot focus on the inner-circle players but this is also suggestive of other cynical angles on the current generation’s relation to the government in the United States. The consistent expression of a legislative body that is constantly pres-

sured by factors that are contrary to the concern of public interest, particularly as Underwood muscles through policy that meets his needs and finally ascends to the highest office without having to court the public vote. This is a government where the citizen remains conspicuously absent in both physical presence and in the professed desire for their elected officials to protect collective interest over their own personal aspirations. “The public” is a looming entity but one that experiences little specified representation beyond recurrent characters like Freddie, journalists like Zoe and occasional bit-parts in the series and it lacks an impactful relationship with the leadership. In real terms, this can speak directly to the feeling of disconnect that is frequently referenced between the leaders and the people, particularly in terms of the growing value-gap between generations as the country finds itself on the brink of having the largest section of the voting public constituted of the Millennials while a majority of the leadership remains comprised of the Baby Boomers and early Generation X (Fry 2016). In contrast of a depiction of Washington that seems so disinterested in the public except as handful of cards to be played in a larger game of stakes and ambition or purely as a hypothetical mass, the measurement of individualized tastes is exactly the measure that Netflix claims the to have developed the show around. By shifting the deciding metric onto taste as opposed to demographic or time slot, the extension of the popularity of *House of Cards* confirms it to be more reflective of viewer sensibilities in its conception than the a show that is subject to the form of trial-and-error testing that is inherent in the typical pilot system. Having a proscribed audience before the release of the series is not only indicative of Netflix’s innovative emphasis on alternative data but also cites the presumption that Netflix “knows” that audience in ways that traditional television cannot compete with. Therefore, in the creation of *House of Cards*, everything from the selection of the source material, to commissioning Willimon, to the involvement of Fincher and Spacey to the styling and political at-

mosphere of the show can be determined to be “read” by Netflix as being desirable to that set of viewers. It is the show they did not yet know they wanted. The desire for precision marketing, of course, cannot be confined to hearsay or outside publicity, thus, part of Fincher’s work for series included to cutting multiple trailers that, again thanks to Netflix’s viewer-tracking, could be aligned with individual accounts depending on their perceived inclination to consume media with strong female figures like Robin Wright’s Claire Underwood or their history of seeking political subject matter (Rose). With all of these implications tangled up in the creation of the series, the reverse-engineering of Netflix’s assumptions as well as those of the creative team paints a very clear picture of the public that *House of Cards* was made for: their tastes are transformed into the possible interpretation of their values, ideology and political outlook as well as their relationship to television and the changing media landscape.

While we are still in the midst of the streaming and digital media transition, there has been broadening interest in both the industrial and academic spheres in the demonstrated impact of greater investment in digital and internet-grounded services. While Netflix’s notoriously tight-lipped approach to their complex data collection, the previously stated claim that they are a supplemental media service to traditional entertainment forms has been perhaps unexpectedly refuted by an increasing trend towards “cutting the cord” (Koblin 2016). Neither trade publications, public interviews nor investor information has opened the vault on the exact nature of Netflix’s data, only that it is the secret ingredient that the company credits for their disruptive capabilities and their successes with popular reception. Cord cutting has become the industry and academic short-hand for the spreading practice of abandoning cable TV packages in favor of streaming subscriptions as a consumer’s sole source of television and movies while the existence of “cord-nevers”, that is consumers that have never had a paid television package, represents a expanding

pool of media consumers (Strangelove XX). For these groups in particular, the unifying qualifications very often include higher levels of computer and Internet literacy as well as a lack of an ingrained cable TV habit. Even more so the younger Millennial population have also been the origin of what Ad Age magazine named “TV’s Scariest Generation:” the “cord nevers” (Strangelove 105). As of November 2012, the percent of American households that have eschewed traditional TV bundles entirely had crept up to 13% with trends pointing to a continued climb and perhaps even more revealing, this group was found to be “disproportionately millennial with 29% of the “cord nevers” being part of the 18 to 34-year-old generation (105). Netflix as a industry shaping force has historically been very responsive to technological trends and the consumers that have been quick to adopt them – most often young and likely to maintain a certain amount of disposable income – creating within the company an emphasis on a younger more adaptable consumer-base and this trend has been confirmed in more recent survey of Netflix consumers (Steel 2016). Netflix itself proves responsive of this particular scope of audience in the way it is visually articulated as well as its embrace of online accessibility and versatility of format. Much like the careful articulation of the Sony Walkman in form and functionality and the lifestyle it was designed to compliment, Netflix has evolved into a streaming system available across platforms – from a computer to gaming console to mobile phone – meant for those who may be jumping screens and indulging in viewing on the go as much as those people who delegate TV time to their own home living room. Confinement to these groups is certainly not the end of Netflix’s aspiration but it is certainly the greatest buying force sought after in the expansion of streaming. Thus by the nature of what Netflix has become, the significance of this dominant consumer demographic, while it may not be the purported main metric by which content is decided, persists as a driving force behind the success of the service as well as the foundation of the audience that

was determined to be waiting to receive *House of Cards*. The speculations about viewership critical to content creation, or course, are far from entirely new to the world of television but by Netflix's estimation of a "guaranteed" viewership for a show like *House of Cards* shifted the weight of production away from formula and proof through testing on to other parameters of name-appeal, aesthetics and faith in creative vision to deliver.

Taking stock of the shifts in cultural values and the subtle transformations that have morphed the American dream into a reality without the same degree of optimism is critical element in the appraisal of Netflix's claims to having a receptive audience waiting for a show like *House of Cards*. PEW Research Center's 2014 report on the current generation and their leanings both political and social proves very revealing in these terms as well as in relation to the prior generations. At the time of the poll, in 2014, the favorable numbers were the lowest of anytime in the previous two decades across all documented age groups. The lowest sentiment comes from the Baby Boomers (those born 1946-64) at just 18% positive but even the highest opinion rates from Millennials top out the chart at a very unflattering 30% which, notably, has come down 38% in the past decade (29). In a stark contrast, at the time that viewers were entranced by the idealistic administration of Josiah Bartlet on NBC in *The West Wing*, the period of 1999 into the early 2000s was perhaps the pinnacle of Congress' popularity with most generational groups reporting favorable views in over 50% of respondents (29). Another sensitive topic in the face of American political presentation is the heavy representation of Christian morality and the recurring battles relating to the proscribed role that religious ideology should or should not be integrated into government on any level from municipal to federal. Meeting this topic head on, Underwood has been depicted as adroit in his affectation of Christian manner and religious elocution, a deftness that is born of a familiarity that is undoubtedly necessitated by his Southern heritage but also his

long political career. For all his familiarity, he lacks deference to and even reviles the relationship that persists in governmental leadership between Christian ideology and alignment with ideal American values. Despite the often-sensationalized contention of religion and politics in the national eye, PEW data suggests that, while many people across all generations cite a belief in God, there is a meaningful increase in the numbers of people who will outwardly admit that they do not (13). Additionally, even with the percentage of Millennial non-believers remaining fairly low at 11%, there is a greater likelihood that this generation will not be affiliated with a particular religious institution and are drastically less bothered by the conjectural social impact of having more and more non-religious people within American society (PEW 4, 43). The up and coming generation and their disinterest in institutional alignment extends beyond religion, with the highest rates of Millennial voters describing themselves as Independent but with the largest number of their votes still cast in favor of the Democratic party overall (PEW 4). Millennials also have begun to express more willingness to support lifestyles beyond the traditional family and, in fact, much of the societal dread over mixed race households, same sex families, non-married cohabitation, late marriage and the viability of single parenthood has diminished with the greatest tolerance and even embrace of some of these shifts evidenced in the younger generation (PEW 4,5, 42-3). Much of this, when taken in a broader scope, serves to formulate a coherent picture with data points in agreement for the characterizing of the incoming generation: specifically the people that Netflix expects as the qualifying majority of their intended consumer base. With presumably many of their subscribers falling into this category, these consumers serve as the population that has become the primary receivers for Underwood's caustic asides. By invoking his appeal, albeit a dark and dangerous one, this character is in no small part responsible for keeping the spectator linked to the narrative. Thus, Underwood may not be qualified as likeable but it is



important that he maintains beliefs or inclinations that tie him to his audience. Most would not kill to ensure a promotion, no, but in the sense that Underwood is cast as a Liberal for a generally liberal-leaning audience establishes an effort to keep the viewer aligned to formative aspects of Underwood's ideological model.

Less obvious, perhaps, but an interesting finding all the same the inclination of the targeted Millennial generation to be drastically less trusting than any other generation even in the most general terms: registering agreement with the statement that "most people can be trusted" at only 19% (7). Willimon and Fincher's efforts in fabricating the inside glimpse of Washington in *House of Cards* could double as a fable to teach that very lesson: trust no one. In a period that constituents regularly have concerns that their interests may be neglected for the interests of corporations and the financially influential, Underwood's character both toys with this fear and escalates it, charting a course of ambition that carves through the due process and limitations that are meant to balance power all for the sake of personal advancement and a dash of classic Shakespearean vengeance. This Washington is one where the disingenuous is endemic of the political body as a whole thus confirming the fears in a generation that is less trusting than ever who also happens to comprise a vast, profitable section of Netflix's subscribership. The series provides a tantalizing vantage point from which to spectate the milieu of corruption and strategizing from the safety of the viewer's couch in an American where this grimmer version of government has not actually materialized. Political melodrama has long been endowed with the ability to test "worst case scenarios" under the comforting blanket of fiction but, in this case, the dark allure of Underwood's composure and craftiness coupled with a gratifying subtext of revenge and demonstrations of harsh efficacy tempts the viewers inclined to cynicism to indulge.

### 3.3 *Politics of the People*

From an industrial perspective, *House of Cards* falls into the category of one of the most “tried and true” genres in American television: political melodrama. Its predecessors, from across all sources of television media, include *VEEP*, *Scandal*, *Commander in Chief*, *Madam Secretary* and *The West Wing*. The broader range melodrama has long provided rich texts for exploration through a variety of mediums, the clout of the political themes and procedural illustrations feels all the heavier when they are addressed as a mode of what TV scholar John Ellis recognizes as “working through” issues in the public consciousness that otherwise may be too complex or discouraging to approach in the scope of real world events (Tryon 11). The depiction of a government that is a clearly echoing the operation and ideations of the real world draws attention to the relationship between the two and also spurs assessments of realism or topical relevance that is not always tied to the discourse surrounding fiction. The resulting spin of *House of Cards* in its presentation of American government is not simply a result of the source material or the production culture of Netflix itself, but is instead the culmination of these factors and the ability to quantify the values of the carefully targeted audiences.

Political television might also provide scenarios that not only serve to illustrate or explain topics – *The West Wing* in particular often transformed narrative into pedagogical exercise but even less idealized outlooks like those in *House of Cards* have made an effort to illustrate or, through Frank’s own address to the viewers, clearly explain the processes and players that are part American government – but also to humor different outcomes or to test hypothetical extremes. Clearly the formula for *House of Cards*, handed down by the BBC series, evidences much in terms of this kind of function in television (Tryon 11). Underwood’s character alone is a personification of political brutality that yet exhibits a desirable level of efficacy, which juxta-

poses starkly with the recent congressional slowdowns witnessed in the Obama and Trump administrations. This implementation of television for means of political communication through news and fiction alike has earned this function of the medium a certain degree of influence from an early stage. The broadcast of Nixon vs Kennedy both initiated the regular use of debates as part of the presidential race and also elevated television as an outlet for broad public access to politics on a national level. This occasion also pointed to the swaying power of televised presentation in the minds of the public as Nixon's unhealthy physical appearance, lacking charisma and weaker performance in the debates is often noted in his later loss to the tan, young and appealing Kennedy. The widespread reliance on a visual medium took politics one step further into a world where image can truly mean everything. Consistent news coverage of the goings-on in Washington would continue and begin to spawn a more ideologically-charged and bipartisan market for political commentary and talk shows which themselves would serve to inspire comedic mirroring in personalities and show formulas in satirical late night programs. Yet this slice of American entertainment culture is not catch-all of political consciousness by any means, and the proliferation of news programming, fictional procedurals and the unglamorous real-time coverage provided by CSPAN have further expanded on the purpose of bringing the inscrutable halls of government to the level of the people.

The Netflix contribution, though, seems to frame the experience of the nation's political system in a way that doesn't really gel with prior fictional depictions of the inner workings of the nation's Capital city. Of course, the source material serves as a basis for setting the tone for version of Washington Underwood would inhabit and the series would continue to share the name and essential plotline with the 1990 British political thriller broadcast by the BBC. In a similar Shakesperian frame, the BBC version portrays Conservative Whip Francis Urquhart manipulating

and murdering his way to the seat of Prime Minister, and this, in simplest terms, transparently establishes the position of Francis Underwood at the beginning of his ascent to the Presidency. While the relationship between the two is indisputable, the shaping force of the respective political systems, reflections of current events and socio-political atmosphere and the emphasis shift within the series from touting the evils of partisanship in Urquhart's Britain to the pervasive cynicism and manifestation of how easily power can twist Underwood's American government sets each rendition of the series in very different camps of critical analysis (Tryon 152). The examination of these individual texts cannot be performed without consideration of the source and, as such, Netflix provide radically different standpoint as media producers than publically funded programming courtesy of the BBC or private widely broadcasted networks. As discussed in the previous chapter, Netflix, much like HBO before it, trades on the idea that the TV it produces is unable to be found elsewhere. The depiction of American life, values and government may not always be rosy but network TV series, particularly when looking portraying the hallowed ground of the American capital, are still more likely to maintain a kernel of good intentions and moral justification even when casting flawed characters in prestigious roles. *Scandal's* president Grant from ABC only takes his true turn for the worst in demanding divorce from his wife after a life-altering assassination attempt leaves him with brain damage that triggers a rather convenient personality change (Season 2). Netflix's Underwood adheres to a less defensible, more perfectly amoral position. He boldly present what is identified as the "Dark Trifecta" of classically evil traits including narcissism, Machiavellianism and psychopathy which often surface in pop culture as part of the antihero paradigm that has increased in popularity with top television series since groundbreaking figures like HBO's Tony Soprano (Joanson 195). The more dubious figures that darken our screens also tend to be associated with the more complex, challenging and

cynical narratives that used to be one of the dividing lines that network television would be hesitant to cross. Paying premium for more access to less family-friendly material risks narrowing an audience but, among the expanding field of entertainment sources, specializing and fragmenting the viewership is not necessarily the detriment it would be for public access networks driven by deals with mass advertising.

Within Underwood's vested interest in subverting or even splintering the bureaucratic maze that defines government lies a provocative affinity to the brand that Netflix has envisioned for itself. The time-constricted and commercial-ridden days of family room viewing no longer suit this ever widening spectrum of technology, access and increased responsiveness to the choices of the user/viewer. Where more traditional practices of television-making and media-delivery has fallen stagnant, Netflix styles itself as a means for its subscribers to expand their options or, increasingly among younger consumers, evade the expense and inconvenience of bloated cable packages all together. In his own words, Hastings outright rejects the "brilliant jerk" archetype citing a worker self-interested in excelling and being noticed as well as having a more-than-healthy disregard for cooperative work, regulations and, possibly, ethics is not worth even top notch talent (Slide 35). Yet Hastings' emphasis of talent and creative independence over procedure all while being quick to shed any kind of dead weight be it corporate practice or staff alludes to less forgiving priority system (Slide 39). Underwood, of course, provides brilliance but perhaps on a level that even surpasses a corporate pedigree "jerk" in his ultimate aspiration to be at the helm of a world power. There is a acknowledgement that is shared between the two men, though, that the ideals that are often embedded into a traditional system are not actually ideal but are simply "how things have been done" and there are significant reasons to change a system for a sake of modernity, technological progress or efficacy. Even President Obama was

noted in saying “I wish things were that ruthlessly efficient... He’s [Underwood] getting a lot of stuff done” and Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy extends a similar sentiment towards the fictional Whip’s methods: “If I could murder one member, I’d never have to worry about another vote (Blake, washingtonpost.com). The fantasy that *House of Cards* provides is one that brings results and, eventually, success at all cost and proves that circumventing a broken system may be a route better than trying to fix it. He is a disruptive force that punctures the traditional television-viewer relation as much as he unbalances the ivory tower of Washington elites. He, of course, sees himself as “ruthlessly pragmatic” above all and ultimately deserving of his ascension through brutality and, even more so, cunning. In its pursuit of first monopolizing on the convenience of at-home DVD rentals and then offering a subscription streaming service, Netflix’s founders conceived of a route to form a new kind of supplemental entertainment source that blossomed into media-supplier that has challenged the precepts of production and distribution laid down by Hollywood and the television industry. Netflix has cut a wide swathe and gained recognition with their chosen ‘disruptor aesthetic’ as it continues to improve upon the model of both a media company and, though its content, compelling and provocative television. It is no wonder that the inaugural series Netflix would throw its new found capital, cultural and otherwise, behind would be one with a similar aesthetic thanks to both the creative team and, of course, the disruptive and mesmerizing force that is the character of Underwood.

As explored in chapter one of this paper, the dedication to flexibility and efficiency has pushed Netflix to abandon typical values of stability, security and consistency: employees are pushed towards independent decision-making over hierarchical agreement but are also subject to termination if they are not providing competitive, top performance or if their position in the company – even by no fault of their own – shrinks in relevance or usefulness. CEO Hastings has

come to name committee-making and a rigid organization within a company as the greatest hazards to a growing industrial titan and, unquestionably, this is something that has its mirror-image in the realm of policy-making and political relations (Slide 64). Acknowledged or not, this ideological thread ties real-world workings of Netflix to the alternative-reality depiction of the Underwood era White House. As Whip, responsible for counting and delivering votes to support the party's legislative moves, Underwood grapples with a system driven less by ideology and more so by power-relations, grudges, funding concerns and corporate interests. His long-term immersion in a frustrating and faulty system coupled with his ambition eventually forces his hand when playing by the rules and making deals no longer services him in his anticipated but dashed promotion to Secretary of State. The character endlessly battles with the flawed and intensely complex system that is a large democratic government and this battle on screen proves fascinatingly similar to the battle of bringing media to the screen: one that Hastings has thoughtfully scrutinized as he has managed the rise of Netflix.

#### **4 Underwood, Our Netflix President**

When dealing with the conventions of alternative history or, more specifically, the genre of political melodrama, there is a notable impulse to maintain a certain dignity associated with the office of president. The tangibility of the values of an industry, the political reality and the closely-held sentiments of the public manifest in many instances, particularly in a type of series that harbors representations that have such a clear and ongoing relationship to the socio-political context that shapes the viewer's environment. In many instances, the presidency is preserved in its traditional iconography through a safe distance or, if the president is direct subject matter, though the reliance on the patriotic tropes intertwined with historical depiction. The fracturing of

audience groups that came along with the expansion of the cable era opened the door for the diversification of the presidential image as viewers with differing perspectives could effectively seek out the angle or portrayal that engaged them the most. In the sense of the historical, the presidency is cast in different lights through different periods but much-maligned “crooks” like Richard Nixon and ridiculed bumlbers like George W. Bush are vastly outnumbered in the near-heroics associated with founders like George Washington, emancipator Lincoln, the dashing outdoorsman Theodor Roosevelt, liberal martyr John F. Kennedy and the civic-minded Franklin D. Roosevelt. Of course none of these figures are free from fault, but the immortalizing station of Commander in Chief comes the additional mantle of icon: the office itself maintaining a reputation that cannot be bound to the victory or failing of an single individual. Thus, the office and characters created to inhabit it can rapidly become exceedingly complex to deal with, particularly when the presidential role is expanded beyond the figurehead of a stately figure in a suit.

Beyond the historical icon of presidency, the entanglements of the contemporary unquestionably shape the development of a fictional, parallel Washington in overt ways. Even the rosier lens of optimistic politics illustrated in the critically acclaimed NBC series *The West Wing* that continues to be one of the strongest and most well recognized titles in television, political drama relies on a familiar division to prevent a well-intentioned but flawed Josiah Bartlet (character played by Martin Sheen) from having his failings sully his official role. Or as succinctly put by character Heather Dunbar during her investigation of Walker’s administration as it is systematically sabotaged by Underwood in *House of Cards*: “We can prosecute presidents, but not the presidency” (Chapter 30). *The West Wing*, created by Aaron Sorkin and running from 1999 to 2006, proves to be an apt foil for the Netflix series, providing all the allure of the insider perspective and the narrative angle of experiencing the work and personalities that are employed in run-



ning this particular alternative-reality presidency. Despite the stark differences in ideology, a parallel is drawn between the two that exhibits what Chuck Tryon suggests that political melodrama is meant to do: engaging those “hoping to come to a greater understanding of the processes that often seem beyond our [the viewer and citizen] control or comprehension” (2). Upticks in political ambivalence and social or economic dissatisfaction sow the seeds for greater disparity of perspectives among the public and, responsive as ever, the creations of current media have adapted to reflect this: aided in many ways by the decline of the homogenizing power of truly universal mass media like network television of the 1960s. Increasing availability of optional outlets like subscription-based cable channels and, now, streaming services that both pull from existing channels and studios as well as providing more and more in-house original productions, have enabled a wider field of choice consumers. Cynicism and the allure of the anti-hero has become a staple of the entertainment industry and is currently a popular trope the “premium” television shows offered by subscription cable channels, which the industry’s newer inductees unsurprisingly inclined to invoke to attract these more discriminating viewers who have already demonstrated a willingness to seek and pay for specific series that interest them instead of “settling” for whatever the latest network cycle can provide. *House of Cards*, and specifically the character of Frank Underwood, is a striking culmination of cultural mood, political atmosphere and industry forces of appeal and deviation. In this chapter, I will explore the characterization of Underwood as both a comparative candidate to the network classic in President Bartlet and as a figure that has been customized to suit its algorithmically-determined audience and Netflix’s disruptor aesthetic.

#### 4.1 “Smiling Just at the Edge of the Frame”

The examination of character comes with a multitude of theoretical frameworks and ways of discussing the interaction between the viewer and the figures on screen. The endless permutations offered stem from an inexhaustible interest in the matter and the endless desire to more accurately encapsulate what happens between a real personal and a fictional one. To this end, the approach that offers a more nuanced capacity to address characters who occupy a more complicated and conflicted position than that of apparent role model comes from Murray Smith’s book *Engaging Characters*. When it comes to Kevin Spacey’s portrayal of Francis Underwood, complicated is perhaps the more reductive way to describe the figure that remains closer to villain than to anti-hero while still maintains a powerful magnetism for his audience. The character mirrors the disruptor aesthetic cultivated by Netflix and is calibrated to test the values and cynicism of the carefully targeted viewership. His placement, narratively and physically, between the spectator and the course of events sets his character up as one that we cannot easily separate from, no matter his transgressions.

The focal point of much of Smith’s argument is that the common mode for relating spectator to character – identification – is far too simplistic to functionally examine such a relationship. To combat this, he breaks down the broad notion of identification into the more specific and individually discussable features that produce the feeling and phenomenon that identification attempts to encapsulate in the term. The alternative that he offers, named the “structure of sympathy,” is broken into three key aspects: recognition, alignment and allegiance (64). These elements, when applied to *House of Cards*’ leading man allows for the holistic appraisal of a character that had been calculated to be what Netflix’s audience is looking for in a “different” political narrative. As the initial step, recognition is the process that helps a spectator define the level

of significance the character might have as well as an opportunity to supply basic but meaningful foundation for the expectations of that character. To be a protagonist, there must be a distinction from other characters that allows the audience to innately key into their on-screen presence and, beyond this, allows a character schemata to be identified and activated to fill in some basic information about the character. With many of the “quality” television dramas popularized by HBO and other cable outlets relying on anti-hero styled protagonists, the importance of this familiar schema, that is, a character that may not make the moral choice but instead is often presented with negative behavior mitigated by adherence to a personalized moral code or with the eventual goal of a noble outcome, translates into a smooth recognition process. This, in turn, allows a well-practiced viewership to embrace a dubious character and intensifies interest not only on the arch of the plot but the rationalizations and internal motivation for the deviant behavior. Recognition, then, is simply the process of having the most basic codification of the character set down the framework of expectations are either confirmed or overturned over the course of the ensuing narrative. From the opening moments and even one of the many customized trailers, it is apparent that Underwood is not the obvious good and nor does he prove to be the prototypical anti-hero, but the foundational familiarity with the trope is still helps prepare the viewer for an ambivalent relationship with their protagonist.

Television, as a primarily visual medium, transfers multi-layered information through the placement and movement of the camera. An actor’s relationship and interaction with the camera can have a potent influence over the depiction of the role that they play and connection to the audience. Alignment, for Smith’s application, is primarily the visual and narrative method through which the film grants the viewer access to a character’s thoughts and feelings (6). The cinematic closeness and the degree of narrative exposure of a character is not only considered

revealing in a literal sense but is itself crucial in the development of intimacy between the spectator and the character. Features that enhance alignment are exemplified in scenes where the viewer may be witnessing a character's emotional response when they are otherwise isolated in diegetic space or when the narration enables the spectator to have access to a character's internal dialogue or personal perspective whether it be executed through means like a diary entry, "thinking aloud," voice-over narration or, as in Underwood's case, the periodic insertion of theatrical asides. *House of Cards* supplies a two-fold insistence on where the spectator stands. The address of the asides and the bias of the camera creates as much of a physical and direct alignment with Underwood as is possible in a visual medium: we follow his moves and he speaks and performs his sinister subterfuge acknowledging that he does so under the gaze of an audience.

Alignment is not exclusive to the designated protagonist and can move from a very well established character to one that is only superficially introduced from scene to scene for purposes of furthering the plot or creating a suspenseful or ironic situation among other possible applications. The success and failures of Underwood's competitors and his pawns can increase the drama around subsequent interactions and narrative arcs despite the lack of the unique relationship that Underwood maintains with the camera and, by extension, the viewer through the device of asides. Smith also advocates for the notion of "assimilation" over "identification" to describe the relationship fostered between viewer and protagonist, positing that rather than presuming that the spectator will attempt to place themselves in the shoes of the protagonist – imagine themselves *being* the central character – it is more likely that viewers seek to share in the experiences vicariously and to connect sympathetically with the protagonist (Smith 78). Being the character is an inaccessible angle that is often trumped in favor of feeling alike and seeing the world along side the character or, perhaps more salient in the case of current popular non- and anti-heroes, the

radical contrast offered by the ultimate selfishness or asocial approach enacted by these characters is appealing purely because it is a way to experience what one would never be willing to do. In a traditional view of identification with protagonists, the notion of bonding the spectator experience to a character who behaves in such a disaffecting way would appear challenging at the least but Smith's theories recognize the true fluidity of the spectator in their willingness to maintain a relationship to a character that is interesting and well constructed even if that character is socially repugnant or without a slew of otherwise redeeming qualities. It is still possible to "identify informationally with the character with whom we are emotionally alienated" when Underwood steps further out of line than some viewers are able to stomach (Smith 95). The paralleling of car-related homicides in the beginning and end of season one, first in our introductory encounter with the fatally injured dog and lastly with the death of Russo whose fatal career plunge left him in a foundering haze of what Underwood undoubtedly assessed as "useless pain" that merited little more than putting the useless one out of his misery. Although, unlike the dog, putting Russo down has the additional benefit of sparing Underwood the hazard of later liability. The spectator would be highly unlikely to be able to "put themselves" in the shoes of the perpetrator in the case of actions like strangling a dog or leaving a man to suffocate in his car but both of these actions supply compelling information critical to the formulation of Underwood's dangerous persona and sparking shocking new movements in the plotline. The formal alliance created by the utilization camera and the unification with the proceeding events incited by Underwood carries the viewer through the more challenging moments to the gratifying peaks when we, along with Underwood, have the moment of satisfaction when he maneuvers himself into yet another checkmate.

Turning, lastly, to the concept of allegiance is not a gesture of least significance. In order to capture the experiential and specifically emotional qualities of a film, we must consider not only its moral structure but its pattern of moral orientation and this is a feature wherein Murray's application of allegiance is particularly meaningful. The overlapping patterns of alignment and allegiance are mutually influential: moral judgment about a character's actions may determine what we determine is the content of a characters' interiority, and more obviously, what we take to be the content of a character's mind which consequently influences how we evaluate him or her. Characters that push the envelope of good taste provide important examples to demonstrate that alignment alone does not result in allegiance: sympathy with an utterly unsympathetic character is not the guaranteed outcome of a close proximity with the viewer but the inevitable result of alignment will be that the audience is, at least, more informed about the moods and self-described motives of that character (Smith 222-223). This is the juncture where "identifying" falls short. The term itself and its historical connotations when addressing fiction suggest that a challenging, amoral or outright repugnant character might be extremely hard for an audience to relate to and, thus, nigh impossible to provide a compelling anchor in a work of fiction. Yet, "fiction... involves not so much the suspension of disbelief as of the values that which ordinarily guide us. The anti-egotism argument stresses the fact that character engagement encourages the reader (or viewer) to confront unfamiliar experiences, fostering our imaginative mobility" (Smith 235). Therefore, the requirement of "liking" or even wanting to perceive a resemblance in one's self to the central character is rendered irrelevant to the overall ability to embrace and enjoy the content at hand.

Returning to *House of Cards*, the illusion of access, authentic or otherwise, is critical in maintaining the link between Underwood and his privileged companions: the viewers. This feel-

ing of being on the inside is further played upon in the rising preference for on-demand and immediate release viewing as well as inside the sphere of the show, wherein the alluring access into the hallowed halls of the Capitol and the peek into the machinations of this rung-jumping schemer comes through a medium that can more than even foster an individualized experience. Subverting an industry and subverting the workings of government have similarities enough when it comes to the feeling of getting the insider's scoop: both are spaces that are usually more opaque to outsiders and function on a seemingly inscrutable set of internal values. Often informative and full of droll humor, the question remains whether Underwood's knowing asides and predictions genuinely communicate the fullness of his mental state or provide deceptive means of concealing it? It is true that we, the viewers, see him in moments when no one else does and, often, he speaks to us "alone" even as an interruption to ongoing conversation with another character still in the room with him. Yet some of the very telling moments with Underwood are not, directly at least, *with him*. An early encounter with this play on distance and intimacy is seen when, in episode one of the first season, Claire is goading Underwood into a heightened pitch of anger for being passed over for the office of Secretary of State. She pushes him to express greater rage and he seems to resist until the moment that she, along with the spectator's perspective, leave the room where Underwood continues to fume. Off screen, a crash is heard: Underwood letting loose in his anger at the perceived betrayal but all we see is the delicate satisfaction in Claire's smile as she continues her exit. The flurry of destruction and rage is merely a passing moment but certainly a telling one and, further, one we are not visually privy to in the way we might anticipate being an apparent "confidant" for Underwood.

Separating these concepts of allegiance and alliance offers reassurance that even in the moments that the spectator might be rooting for an ignoble move, they are not implicitly suggest-

ing that they would do the same or even that they feel that it is morally upright. In essence, with a more precise understanding the exchange between viewer and character, we can like Underwood without ever being considered *to be like* Underwood. “Neither recognition nor alignment nor allegiance entails that the spectator replicate the traits or experience the thoughts or emotions of a character. Recognition and alignment require only that the spectator understand that these traits and mental states make up the character. With alliance we go beyond understanding by evaluating and responding emotionally to the traits and emotions of the character in the context of the narrative situation” (Smith 85). The strength of the theory stems from acknowledging the oversimplified act of “identifying” and expanding the spectator’s ability to assess and comprehend a character without having to side with them or experience a personal similarity with that character, which, of course is supported by the ability of many different viewers and readers to connect with and insightfully explore characters that are either beyond normal experience or hold no one-to-one equivalence with the fiction character or the world they inhabit. Underwood, and indeed, *House of Cards*, is presented to the viewership on the claims of being developed according to a detectable taste culture among Netflix’s subscribers but, in understanding the complicated relationship between the viewer and the character via Smith, it also doesn’t oblige this audience to agree with him to continue to watch the series.

#### **4.2 *Character in Control***

When it comes to television, the influence of the alignment enforced through the camera itself should not be underestimated. A medium to primarily visual impact, the act of watching dominates the experience but the disruptive hint towards the audience being watched tests the normal relationship between viewer and media and the viewer and the character. The spectator, find themselves often confronted by Underwood’s gaze and this conjures up an ambiguous posi-



tion of between a mirror and a camera lens. Is he looking at “us” or himself? This is harder to determine with the lack of any other indication of the viewer’s “presence” in the show: other characters do not acknowledge a viewer and there are no visual cues that a camera exists in the narrative space. Yet the impossibility of the spectator’s concrete link to Underwood’s confidences are not restricted to spatial disagreements. As with many such interviews, Underwood’s private meeting with the leader of the Black Caucus, Terry Womack is comes with an aside relating to Womack’s willing participation in Underwood’s attempt to undermine Speaker Birch – “its so refreshing to work with someone who will throw a saddle on a gift horse rather than look it in the mouth” (Chapter 4) – while Womack remains present in the room apparently unaware of Underwood’s assessment of his complacency. This idea of a diegetic rupture that is so direct and, of course, is not addressed or noticed by anyone other than Underwood, is a uncommon suspension of the narrative that is notably unlike other forms of direct character access such as voice-over narration which manages to avoid upsetting the diegetic space by remaining internalized or entirely separate from the ensuing events. Underwood, with his satisfied smirk and verbal revelation at Womack’s uncomplicated compliance, seems to happen within the diegetic space while the other features of the diegetic present pass over it as though it had not occurred. The spectator is rendered present in the way that Underwood may speak out loud – like in a theatrical performance when the audience is sitting just off the edge of the space – that is not otherwise permitted through the medium of a screen. This is a very real disruption of the narrative space but also the normative experience of watching a show and, as such, becomes part of the Underwood and Netflix brand. This confirms *House of Cards* as being “on-brand” for Netflix, of course, but the use of the aside in this particular series, is also a rupture that addresses the audience with a directness

that is congruent with the concept of “Algorithm TV:” a new kind of media-making that fosters a direct and personalized rapport with the audience.

Perhaps the argument that we become conspirators in the deadly game of politics that Underwood leads us through is not the most effective hook that the direct address implies to the viewer. When Underwood’s eyes find us on the other side of the screen – acknowledging us beyond the screen and drawing us in – the allure is not a product of agreeing with the brutality of his politics and nor is it the belief that we are involved in his plotting as much as it is derived from the feeling that the spectator, as subject to Underwood’s diegetically undetectable musings, is the receiver of his elusive honesty. Caught up in a world where Underwood as puppet-master spins all the threads of his control through lies, omissions and manipulation of other characters who cannot be allowed access to his true intentions. The act of calling out directly to viewer also nods towards the provocative claim that Netflix, empowered by its cutting edge algorithm, was able to fabricate the series and the character explicitly *for* this audience. Underwood is not kind of man anyone would choose to helm the United State government in reality but he is, according to the summation of consumer taste, the president that a particular subset of subscribers would subscribe and stream over and over again and, perhaps, the use of aside further implicated the viewers themselves in the creation of this particular monster.

This line of discussion is not meant to discount the deeply complex emotional entanglements do not exist between Underwood and the cast of character surrounding him as part of the intrigue of the series. It is carefully established early on that, until some of the later upheavals in the season, Underwood and Claire had previously held dear a policy of transparency between the couple even in the sexual engagement of Underwood with his young “pet” reporter Zoey Barnes and Claire’s later near revival of her affair with photographer Adam Galloway. The inti-

macy between ambitious man and scheming wife that is neatly typified in his statement that he loves her “more than a shark loves blood” is initially established as unshakeable before a few cracks begin to show later on in season one (Chapter 1). Comparatively, the intimacy with the audience persists, even to the matters that Claire is selectively excluded from and this intense confirmation of the relationship between Underwood and his off-screen subjects. For a man for whom to be honest would be to destroy everything he has worked for, we at least, get to be the ones to whom he can reveal his true thoughts even in the subtle gesture of a knowing glance or a jaded eye-roll. This is the truly compelling attribute of the viewer’s relationship with our narcissistic protagonist, that we get to see the layer beyond the smooth southern democrat façade and through the multilayered web of promises, lies, strong suggestions and flattery that keep the wheels turning on his plans. Even Doug Stamper, Underwood’s unwaveringly loyal and, even more importantly, discreet right hand is given instructions that Underwood that lack transparency and is, in essence, discarded when he can no longer act for Underwood. It is clear that while some other characters know him *well* it is perhaps the viewer that knows him most completely. Even those that are depicted as having the closest understanding of Underwood and his candid goals are tactfully presented as being privy to only a strategic part of Underwood’s reality. While it is nothing new in literature, film and television that the audience is most likely to have the widest scope of the narrative events, the meaningful dichotomy of knowing and not knowing in *House of Cards* puts the audience in a position that feels especially privileged. The noble toils of the Bartlet White House staff is done “for the greater good” and an audience that may as well be a fly on the wall. For Underwood, unlike the other players in his own narrative, this performance is done under the gaze of the audience that was allegedly algorithmically selected for him: an audience he knows is present. Of course, in a return to Smith, the camera’s alliance with Under-

wood in more private scenes contributes a great deal to the experience of privileged access but, as the multiplicitous narrative threads are built and progress, the significant screen time granted to ancillary characters expands the visual relationship beyond Underwood and his most direct doings to the richer context of the series.

Within the function of the narrative itself, Klarer postulates that what we find in the purpose of the direct address is not merely to generate connection with the supposed receiver of Underwood's asides – his spectators – but it also aids in defining the role that is carved out for the character himself: that of “an author-like figure who it, paradoxically, responsible for orchestrating the plot from within the plot” (213). There are moments when his is not just informative or reactionary for the benefit of his viewer but also predictive, providing accurate assessments of other character's situations enough to anticipate their next move or seemingly put words in their mouths (Klarer 213). While this may not be narratively challenging to exhibit one character that is able to account for the actions of others but, in this particular case, the spectator and Underwood are united in the same flow of time so Underwood, while uncanny in some of his anticipation, must continue as ignorant as the viewer of how events will come fruition. His certainty manifests in a different and, possibly, more tantalizing sense: that of the engineer driving the machine that he has built to plow through ranks and gain influence. This is really the driving force that comes along with the orientation of the narrative as at least partially subject to Underwood's authorial voice, he is not only gaining power through his political maneuvering but he also expresses power over the events of the narrative by being the hand that directly and indirectly tips new courses of action in to motion: like the hand that tips the first domino in a complex pattern he was instrumental in arranging. In the exploitation of Zoey as a seditious front for some of Underwood's tactful revelations, she becomes the tool by which the congressman is able to “write”

some features of his plans in season one especially in events surrounding the Education Bill and the nomination of Catherine Durant as the Secretary of State to replace Underwood's perceived usurper Kern (Klarer 205). This is not the only tract that suggests an authorial role, but the inclusion of Zoey and the involvement of her publishing power provides a nice literal representation of the effect in the narrative created by Underwood. When meeting Zoey for their first "work" rendezvous, Underwood is found sitting in the National Gallery of Art – a recognizable space filled with artists of a different kind. In this sequence the hushed dialogue seems less an exchange of information and more the act of "drawing out" the needed inferences and articulations from Zoey so that Underwood may get by without explicitly stating anything too incriminating.

Underwood: Just before you left my house. Think back. What were we discussing?

Barnes: The president's legislative agenda.

Underwood: Specifically.

Barnes: Education. Was I right?

Underwood: Do the math, Ms. Barnes. He needs a bill.

Barnes: Sponsored by? You?

Underwood: Be smarter than that.

Barnes: Somebody with legitimacy.

Underwood: Good. And who screams "legitimacy" in Education?

Barnes: Donald Blythe?

Underwood: Correct. The problem is...

Barnes: He's an old-school tax-and-spend liberal. Walker ran as a moderate. You think Blythe would talk to me?

Underwood: He doesn't have to. (Chapter 1)

Underwood leads her to the words he needs to see make it to print and Zoey proves an able instrument in his hands, at least for a while, and it is through those words that critical conflicts in season one are later materialized.

Thus not only, through asides, is the spectator allowed a unique “in” with the mastermind behind much of the drama that plays out in the series but there is also preserved a exceptional dialogue between Underwood, however briefly, without the need for deception or obfuscation. And this fact is one that elevates the coherence of Underwood’s even with the rupture of the narrative space, here he has a captive audience that cannot speak or interfere with his world, allowing him to feed the narcissistic impulse to expound on the method of his continued successes and the condescending perspective he harbors on the system that must be bent, twisted and broken in places for him to get his way. It is a delight to show the viewers his world and, perhaps more so, to know that they can must sit as his side and do nothing more than watch. He is empowered in multiple ways and in pond with fish of varying size and voracity the spectator feels as though s/he are gliding along under the fin of the biggest, hungriest shark in there and not merely because they are invisible or have been overlooked but because the shark has, in a way, asked them to come along. There is no supposition that we must always agree with Underwood, want to be with him or want to be like him, but the narrative dictates that we are exposed to a relationship with him that is not encountered with any other character. We are inside the insider and this is a formidable, alluring position to be in. Measuring and utilizing data that captures taste in production decisions has, thus, *implicated the viewers themselves* in the making of this series. If it wasn’t for who was watching and how they were watching and what they were watching under Netflix’s supervision, the choice to pick up certain shows and license others could have lead the

company in noticeably divergent directions. The literal “wink and a nod” is a feature of the series that, while not entirely unique in television, returns to the special ability to directly acknowledge the viewer that Netflix stakes its claim. The promotion of a political disruptor who routinely addresses his audience should not be overlooked as suggestive from a company aspiring to upend the television industry that can track and proscribe for its viewers on the basis of “knowing” them so well. The confrontational approach on the corporation’s end along side Underwood’s blunt and demanding persona, unsubtly highlighted with the familiarized first name of “Frank” and alluded to in a tongue-in-cheek static shot of cufflinks sporting his initials, F.U. at the end of the inaugural episode of the series’ second season, flaunts a directness that Netflix tries to espouse with their subscribers and one that is repeatedly invoked for many of their subsequent content releases and business decisions. Confidence in being able to forecast, through algorithmic intervention, what people will watch and the funding of creators in a risky grand gesture rather than piloting is arguably rooted in the position Netflix takes as being directly tapped into their viewership. The personalization that is offered to individual subscribers is enabled by tracking the minutia of their viewing habits and, because of this, the generally positive reception of *House of Cards* can be seen as substantiation of the claims of “knowing” the subscriber population better than ever before. Underwood is, in many ways, a man of his people, whether they’d ever dare vote for him or not.

### **4.3 *Underwood’s (Im)moral Code***

When portraying American leadership, it becomes imperative to address the basic national ideology that is packaged as “American values.” *House of Cards*, a remake of an existing narrative crafted for a specific taste culture that overlaps significantly with a particular subset of subscriber arrives from these various sources at a place that attempts to be responsive to all of

them. In the remaining sections, I will emphasize the value shifts that are prevalent in current culture in association with this age and taste group that comprises much of Netflix's audience. The modifications of the American dream and sense of morality that comes embedded in the realm of political drama are represented throughout *House of Cards* but it is the character of Francis Underwood that bears the brunt of viewer contact due to his heavily accentuated role in the narrative and emblematic position as president. As a model of the genre that also represented the very different depictions and expectations of network programming, the exploration of morality will also draw heavily from the lauded Bartlet administration that appeared in NBC's hit series *The West Wing*. Key virtues and failings of the characters will be highlighted in these fictional presidencies and, from this discourse, so too will be the entanglement of media, viewers, industry, politics and ideology.

Majority and historical representation ensure that the precepts of Christianity are among those considered foundational to the conventionally recognized American way despite the admitted decline in spiritual adherence documented in this paper in the PEW study on Millennials. Rather than a means for promotion, indicating to the superficial relations that have persisted between Christianity and American ideology is useful in explicitly drawing attention to the hypocrisy of its invocation and implementation: an theme that neatly fits into the dark and doubtful aesthetic of *House of Cards*. Engaging with this designated variety of morality is a necessary gesture of the office of president and significant part of maintaining a façade congruent with Underwood's Southern roots and helps to validate his outward worthiness of being entrusted with power. Indeed, in season one, the desired appearance of taking a position in the Peachoid-induced accident that rises above local politics is achieved with the residential majority and the grieving parents partially through coopting the religious dialogue around loss and enlisting the



support of the town pastor. Punishing exposure to the reality of Underwood's agenda in Gaffney is only granted to Oren Chase, a past political opponent whom had been behind the repurposing of the tragedy to smear Underwood from the beginning. Underwood's rare ventures into a house of god are typified, as with most acts, by seeking means to a successful political end, yet, in season three, episode four the closing of the episode finds a different purpose for his presence in an empty, darkened church. "I want to know what justice is." He states, with his main interest in justice being cited in the apparent flexibility of the commandments of the Old Testament and the apparent hypocrisy of violence and vengeance illustrated in a wrathful Old Testament image of God. The bishop expresses the imperfectness of human application of "God's words" and rejects Underwood's idea of a "preferred" image of God but also turns the emphasis onto the moral transition that came along with the New Testament teachings of Christ "it's not your duty to serve this country alone and it better not be your goal to simply serve yourself. You serve the Lord. And through him you serve others. Two rules: Love God. Love each other" (Chapter 30). This pronouncement offers a conception of the presidency that Underwood cannot accept in that it requires service. Not only has he expressed preference for the Old Testament God who rules through fear and wields ultimate power, he cited this in terms of "understanding" that God, which suggests a level of personal identification not usually associated between a man and the divine. It is clear that this is the kind of power that Underwood feels a likeness to in his own methodology. The most sensational moment of this exchange occurs when Underwood is left alone "to pray." He snidely addresses the large figure of Christ on the cross "Love? That's what you're selling? Well I don't buy it," before spitting on the painted face (Chapter 30). In a seemingly fateful gesture it then falls, shattering and bringing the Meechum running back into the church. In the midst of the milieu, Underwood picks up a broken fragment, flashing it towards

the camera as he walks out, revealing it to be the side of the statue's face with the quip "Well I've got God's ear now" (Chapter 30). The sacrilegious act of non-figuratively spitting in God's face as well as the more subtle prideful self-comparison with an all-powerful figure, more so one that expresses said power gratuitously and with little reservation over the appeal to self-sacrifice and humility, vividly encapsulates the disregard for institutional authority Underwood manifests in terms of both religious morality and political ethics. As a man determined to brutally cut the shape of his own destiny, to abdicate control to a higher power would indeed appear contrary and, as the propellant behind a great deal of the narrative itself there is little room to deny him his authorial role. This illustration of the character meshes well the subtext of disruption and the desire to dispense with old practice, which, yet again, is complementary to the shift to consumer empowerment and the self-made identity that Netflix has fostered along with the growth of its presence on the industry stage. Skepticism and cynicism are featured heavily in the series and, in the foundational claims of the company, hold an increasing relevance to the trends in viewership consumption habits and, as seen in the PEW study, socio-political attitude.

By comparison a broadcast network vision of the presidency, *The West Wing* even moderates the infallible reputation of Christian ideology by tempering the standard presidential virtue of belief with intellectual reasoning. This is poignant in many moments within the series, few more so than the biblical debate Bartlet engages in with radio commentator "Doctor" Jenna Jacobs wherein he, even as a man with the prerequisite religious roots, undermines the rigid moral oversight of the Bible on homosexuality – and by extension gay rights – by citing other examples of rightfully antiquated biblical guidance including the necessity of having his chief of staff put to death for working on the Sabbath and speculation on what the fair price would be to sell his daughter into slavery (*The West Wing* S02 E03). Bartlet's efforts in revealing the failings of the

Bible as an absolute standard on how people should live and how a nation should be governed expresses his willingness to question all avenues of authority in his quest towards more just leadership while in the same speech he is able to assert his own worthiness of authority by culminating with the command “in this building, when the President stands, nobody sits” compelling his opponent to stand (*The West Wing* S02 E03). This dialogue intertwines the religious, the moral, the family and the national, creating a one-issue microcosm where the entanglement these ideas persist in the functioning of American politics and the collective conception of ideal social values.

While folksy in his language at times and often humble, Sorkin’s edition of the president belies one that still remains apart from the “common man” with his expressions of intellectualism (Parry-Giles 218). Providing a facet of intellectual superiority is fairly familiar in the romanticizing of a character, yet Bartlet is one that is also presented with a limited self-confidence that contributes to a sense of innate goodness dependent on not consciously expressing that superiority. Thus he maintains a fatherly interest for the people around him and, presumably, those he governs, but he is not truly alike with those people and this continues to feed the cultural reverence for the presidency with the idea that it requires a truly exceptional person to lead a nation. He is distinguished among the other characters by his office and the heroic elements of his persona yet Bartlet’s leadership is not one that benefits from isolation. He may be somewhat apart from his staff, other leadership and the people he governs but his presidency is one that is heavily reliant on a collective that is able to overcome the individual weaknesses and mistakes of Bartlet and his staff to produce an effectiveness and “rightness” that characterize his overall depiction (Parry-Giles 215). In a similar vein, Underwood too expresses a sense of exceptionalism but it is one that he more or less declares for himself, ascribing a superiority that he embraces and uses to

vindicate his pursuit of power. One of his recurrent self-analogies is that of a wolf among sheep which provides the allusion to a predatory drive as well as suggesting a lack of independent minds in the halls of government: allowing the rule to flow according to majority leanings – the herd – rather than the work of individual innovative talents. Underwood feels very strongly that he is not like and, indeed, exceeds most of his colleagues in intuition, cunning and ambition without the mitigating quality of humbleness and this is demonstrated time and time again in his confident asides and caustically all-knowing glances to his audience. His awareness further fuels the fires of his unscrupulous methods of bureaucratic manipulation extrapolating that, if he is smarter and hungrier than his peers then, perhaps, the system itself may not be made to contain or promote a talent like Underwood's and thus it becomes a system to subvert and exploit in order to accommodate the vision of a greater man. Superiority is not beyond the grasp of Sorkin's White House, though, with numerous examples of assuming the high ground to combat the more cynical end of politics: in the pilot, Leo McGarry, who is Bartlet's Chief of Staff as well as a redeemed drug addict and alcoholic, refuses to leverage an accidental tryst with a prostitute by one of his colleagues and, thus, from the very beginning, invoking "moral superiority" of the administration (Crawley 65). This scenario indirectly calls on the treatment of Willmon's character, Peter Russo, who presents as an alcoholic and drug user who has a dangerous familiarity with prostitutes but is allowed no such room for redemption as his public deterioration (and ultimately, his death) is critical for Underwood's schemes to move forward throughout season one. Moral rectitude buys Underwood little in the way of influence, but it remains a card to play when needed. He advances however he can: walking over those who separate him from his goals.

These impulses also serve the purpose of placing Underwood on a plane all his own in the narrative. This is tangibly echoed in the intrusions of the asides wherein Underwood engages

with his audience in a one-on-one manner that effectively, if only momentarily, isolates his figure in the scene. Perpetuating the isolation, he may have Claire at his side and Stamper on speed-dial but there is still a sense that Underwood serves no man other than himself and, by extension, his interests continue to be self-serving and individualistic to the end. It certainly is lonely at the top. No other sequence illustrates this more vividly than the Underwood monologue that occurs during president Walker's inauguration ceremony (Chapter 1). This space is a densely populated one with a carefully positioned crowd ringing the podium where Walker is sworn in for his ill-fated term. Underwood's lines about location and power that had begun in a close up shot come to a head with the statement "centuries from now, when people watch this footage, who will they see smiling at the edge of the frame?" in a wide shot that pulls from Walker to Underwood followed by a serene gaze in the spectator's position, accompanied by a small assured smile and deceptively demure wave. In the sea of suits made up of Washington elites and some glimpses of the more distant audience of citizenry, Underwood could easily be swallowed up by his aesthetic conformity to the crowd he is a part of yet, through small gesture and directionality of his gaze that punctures the otherwise cohesive attention on the president's now unheard dialogue making him stand out in the frame. The act of separating himself, even in this en masse gathering of his peers, suggests the impossible perspective of, in a way, seeing himself and his own position through the responsive camera lens. Although he should seamlessly blend in, for that moment, he chooses to disrupt the events that are happening around him in the immediacy of the scene and place him in a position of privileged knowledge of his audience, his projected historical significance and, last but not least, the trajectory of a narrative.

#### 4.4 *Far From a Family Man*

In her extensive exploration of *The West Wing*, Melissa Crawley, lays the framework for Bartlet's character as paternal, intellectual and moral... the character is father, scholar and moral leader" (139). Beginning with the understanding of the paternal in relation to the office of president, it is part of a much more pervasive lineage than can be perceived as unique to the Bartlet characterization. The rhetoric stemming from America's historical narrative already reverts to the patriarchal distinctions of social and political leaders with the immortalization of people like Jefferson, Washington and Franklin as "Founding Fathers" of the nation. This kind of language has become inextricably intertwined with the presidential office to this day, supported by the persisting assumption of the role by middle aged men, and the leader of the nation is often assessed in a paternal light: emphasizing fatherly concern for the nurturing of the country and the prioritization of the good of the "children" over the good of the father and other larger interests. The parental coding of politics is a key attribute of the moral currents that politicians often rely on to appeal to voters and validate legislation of various forms. A comprehensive study performed on television advertisements for presidential campaigns from 1980 to 2012 further exemplifies this approach and evidences a partisan divide in the type of paternalism expressed with Democratic candidates, as Bartlet would be, leaning towards nurturing ideology while Republicans prefer the figure of a strict father (Moses and Gonzales 2015). The idea of a parental figure translating into leadership on a national level is significant in that the relation is thus created that authority of this kind is not purely that of legal, military and judicial but also encompasses the moral. A parent, strict or nurturing, is charged with the task of providing for their children and, of course, engendering in them the basic social qualifications of "right and wrong" and, in the rhetoric of American politics, our officials are likewise tasked with the development of national morality.

Thus the metaphor is not simply a historical reference to the founding fathers but one that is active in the normative conception of the role of government and the extended responsibility of governmental officials. Returning to Bartlet, true to form in the ideal administration guided by deference to the greater good and overall nurturing impulse on the national level, viewers were given a man, while not always perfect, who offered benevolent guidance for his own daughters and his staff as much as he did for the country (Crawley 146). Being himself a father, Bartlet's complex relationships with his independent wife and each of his daughters is heavily emphasized throughout the series. He also manifests many of the documented qualities that are used to characterize a Liberal "nurturant father" in the public eye by emphasizing moral flexibility, fairness and a vested interest in the avoidance of harm (Moses and Gonzales 380). Shifting the similar application of values and characterization onto Underwood, viewers would, of course, hardly expect the same kind of altruism and nobility in leadership from an immutable kind of darker-than-antihero that Willimon's series centers around. Even more than that, a concerted effort has been made to distance Underwood's portrayal from the popular concept that has gained a notable momentum as the focus of some of the most acclaimed television dramas of the past two decades. Many of these pop-culture kings, like Tony Soprano from the Sopranos (HBO 1999) and Walter White from *Breaking Bad* (AMC 2008), immerse themselves in depravity with the humanizing investment in protecting and maintaining their families as well as placing hope for a legacy as well as the prospect of future goodness in their children (Duane 2014). Underwood, perhaps more the unrepentant scoundrel in the focus of the narrative than anything else, presents as not merely lacking in these interests but actively rejecting or selfishly appropriating the paternal role to further his Machiavellian agenda. In a vivid depiction of Underwood paternal sentiment, the shooting death of an inner-city schoolchild during the teacher's strike in season one is

met with delight as he now had the spin leverage to disparage the teachers, and when, in one of their late night reflections together, Claire questions their plans and her husband assuredly counters with an answer of immediacy, “for this house, for the presidency” that tacitly ignores the oft-preferred allusions to the future and to a legacy (Season One). Moving ahead, he “arms” Jackie in replacing him as Democratic Whip with the congressman’s secret of a disabled, illegitimate child he had been trying to keep out of the public eye in favor of maintaining his reputation in Season Two, and in Season Three he orchestrates a strategic stumble for her in the debate with Heather Dunbar by pressing Jackie to attack Dunbar’s role as mother. Although it is back in Season One that we encounter the most direct statement of his sentiments, when Underwood turns his face to the camera after a momentary loss of his collected, political face due to spilled coffee and says “I despise children” (Chapter 9). While apt at curating their otherwise well-constructed outward image of political elites with impressive reputations, Underwood and his wife Claire may be successful as the very picture of a suave, attractive, middle-aged couple of Southern democrats but the subject of their lack of children is brought up more than once over the course of the show. As part of the standard issue political couple the expectation of also having a model family seems to be one that Underwood as strategically avoided. Having the proscribed 2.5 children would certainly be a useful asset in the “family man” platform that often appears as part of a candidate’s campaign as something that can humanize, accentuate the projection of fatherly qualities and, even more so, wordlessly present him as invested in some kind of national future that would benefit his, and by extension, all American children, Underwood’s disinterest in investing in anyone beyond himself feeds this key “lack” in his political image. As the viewer, his confidant, comes to realize that childlessness is perhaps the least of all the cracks in the traditional family concept that Underwood mimics interest in only for occasional tactical applications, it is



very impactful in rendering him as “un-fatherly” as possible for a character that is dangerously seeking the penultimate office of the US government that has long been metaphorically affiliated with the benevolent leadership of a father in a family in both historical ideation and in popular culture illustration. This is a direct jab at the preset American values as well as the connotations of the role of political leadership.

Indeed, Underwood’s few and far between appeals to fatherhood cannot be ascertained through relations with his own children, as there are none, and thus must be gleaned from allusions to his own father – some being purposefully-crafted fiction and some being the disinterested to spiteful account of reality. While as with the majority of his self descriptions and explanation come through astute and witty asides, the image that ushers in Season Three of now-President Underwood urinating on his father’s grave, imposing an unmistakable understanding of his sentiment towards his father: not one of rage but one of disdain. For the benefit of his spectator he clarifies that visiting the grave was not his choice but that “I have to do these sort of things now. Makes me seem more human. And you have to be a little human when you’re the president” (Chapter 27). The last time he had been at the grave, he had been burying his father: both funding it himself and acting as the only attendee. He addresses the grave directly during the obligatory visit: “But I’ll tell you this, though, pop. When they bury me it won’t be in my backyard. And when they come to pay their respects, they’ll have to wait in line” thus rejecting both the poverty and anonymity that his father dwelt in, solidifying the distance between them as people and asserting the superiority of his own position over any of his father’s (Chapter 27). As a parental authority, his father obviously wielded a power over him that Underwood, even as a young person, found unwarranted due to his father’s mediocrity and inferiority. What he blames him most for is not cruelty or poverty but rather an absence of goals or trace of ambition. The confla-

tion of paternal authority and governmental authority is mirrored yet again with Underwood's similar disgust towards the unambitious and the power left in the hands of those he finds painfully unremarkable and incompetent. Returning to the first season, even his own use of a fictional beloved father as a means to ingratiate himself with the grief-stricken parents of the Gaffney girl killed in the car accident allegedly caused by the Peachoid (and again to "humanize" him in the eyes of the public) painted as vivacious man filled with dreams taken too soon from this earth is interrupted by expositional aside: "Truth be told I never really knew him, or what his dreams were. He was quiet, timid, almost invisible... The man never scratched the surface of life" (Chapter 3). These qualities are worthy of little – pity at best but more so disgust – as evidenced by Underwood's disinterest and his last private assertion that "maybe it's best he died so young, he wasn't doing much but taking up space" (Chapter 3). The lack of reverence for his father, the first authority in one's life, while citing his insignificance as his greatest fault as a father and a human being grounds Underwood's superiority from the most basic level of social organization – the family - on up to his unrest within the political sphere to his competitive inclination towards even divine powers. The classic significance of "family values" provides thread around which the viewer can bear witness to the way that Underwood cynically refines the art of his hypocrisy for his advancement and points the finger at the seams in patchwork of American values at large. This audience is one, according to Netflix, poised to accept the commentary being delivered and the dubious reputation that is now associated with the current political climate creates a context primed for this kind of skeptical outlook. The more literal denial of family friendliness also aligns with the now familiar interpretation of "quality" television that has been handed down from HBO to Netflix that defines itself by its darker, derisive and morally deviant themes and

aesthetic which, in turn, demonstrates the embrace of fragmented and even counter-cultural taste groups in content creation.

#### **4.5 *Making History***

Political melodrama occupies a unique place in television by being constantly representational of the very real world of American politics. However outlandish and controversial that the narrative might be, the visual cues of setting and space, historical references and the functions of government are on display and cannot effectively be evaluated in a vacuum. The reality that is echoed in many of these fictions add an element of relevancy and appeal that undoubtedly Netflix accounts for in the understanding of its *House of Cards* audience. The immovable nature of history is visually embedded into many aspects of the series as both iconic presidential images and historical references surface repeatedly. Part of this prevalence is certainly symptomatic of highlighting the much-revered spaces of Capitol Hill that have long been intertwined with power and innumerable eminent legacies. The title sequence that prefaces every episode reestablishes both the physical place and emblematic contrast of the fleeting along side the forever enshrined. It is a city that is relentlessly moving forward from dawn to dusk, accentuated by the use of time-lapse cinematography, filled with mechanical ants and lights passing in accelerated tracks by the immovable monuments and iconic buildings that designate the national capital. There are indistinct cars, movement and transforming skies but with the rate of the time-lapse, the city remains conspicuously devoid of people. People are finite while the iconography, the monuments and the seeping presence of power and history persist long past the individual. The wash of motion, light and color enhancing the passage of time suggests crashing waves of small-time doings thrown against the face of an unyielding stony history that may never reflect the daily means of a living city. Underwood has less personal interest in the questionable means that got him to the pinnacle

and much more of an active focus on attaining the untouchable, the immutable power of the presidency. Invoking the greater concepts further hints to his belief that the unsavory details will likely be lost in the shuffle of greatness as long as they remain quiet enough not to impede his progress in the present.

He, indeed, admits an interest in making history on more than one occasion but it is clear that the nature of the history he strives to be part of is the indelible brand of icon that is forged not for the sake of the needs of an era and its people but rather for Underwood's name to be added to the marble ledger of power. The writer with secrets of his own, Tom Yates, astutely sums up the desired scope of remembrance that is more suited to the Underwoods than the conventional means: "Together they rule an empire without heirs. Legacy is their only child" (Chapter 38). This harkens back to the way the Underwoods have continuously circumvented the expectation of the "All American" family Underwood's persona clashes heavily with the concepts of presidential legacy that most people are used to in discussing the historical leadership in America. While Nixon has helped to establish the archetype of the corrupted presidency in the real world, the broader reputation of that office is overwhelmingly one of nobility. It is interesting that, while Bartlet is often cited as the idealistic revisitation of the Clinton administration, Spacey himself has elaborated on his character's connection to Lyndon B. Johnson, which is supported visually through the inclusion of Johnson in photographs adorning Underwood's office as well as featuring him reading a volume of Johnson's biography in the season one finale (Campbell). Like Underwood, Johnson was not initially voted into the presidency but instead assumed the role after the assassination of President Kennedy and, as to be expected for the man that is Underwood's chosen role model, Johnson had a reputation for being "Machiavellian" and "difficult" (Stack 27). Johnson may not have the same cultural recognition that other presidents –

Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt – command so that Underwood prefers his legitimate but domineering approach to leadership over the outright infamy of figures like Nixon inject a bit more complexity to Underwood’s self-styling: he is better than a “crook,” he is worthy of the presidency no matter his means of gaining it. These connections and, often, conflicts find a significant role in the depiction of leadership, with the head office of the land serving as the embodiment of cultural and moral values, which can, in turn, aid in the exploration of extreme trends towards idealism or cynicism. Having an alternative narrative to the politics as they are can act as counterpoint, commentary or as means to address issues that are complex and troubling in a venue that offers lower stakes and, even better, entertainment value. The key difference between the presidency of Underwood and Bartlet, among many, many individual examples, is that Bartlet is a man who strives to serve to the best of his abilities, battling his own fears, failings and lack of confidence along the way while Underwood, irresistibly, is a man who seeks to have all of his moves, the government and the people round him accelerate his push into power. Bartlet serves, even with his doubts in himself believing that his can continue to pursue what is right. Underwood demands all the means to meet his ultimate end as leader of the “free world.”

The differences in their methods dovetail with the construction of the two different series, which, in turn, is related to their respective sources. Bartlet’s Washington is woven into fable-like formulas that are built around the handling of a current, controversial topic or to deliver its characters through a trial of conviction and conscience that often resolves in a clear moral dictum or at least a “lesson learned.” This functions very well in the weekly installments that deliver both a cohesive timeline as the team progresses through Bartlet’s term in office as well as self-enclosed plotlines that provide a sense of closure within the confines of the episode. For president Underwood, the dynamics of his elaborate scheming plotlines propel the series from one

episode into the next with tantalizing cliff-hangers that are smoothly resolved by simply allowing Netflix to auto-play the next episode and embracing the binging practice that is now associated with streaming viewing habits. Even beyond format, reflecting on the contrast between television leadership like Bartlet's and that of Underwood's regime suggests a relationship between their respective producers and epochs in American political outlook. In comparing media like *House of Cards* and *The West Wing*, they cannot be evaluated in a vacuum by removing the consideration of when and how they were produced. Context is crucially insightful for a genre that touches on realism as often as political melodrama. *The West Wing* hit the small screen in 1999 toward the end of the Clinton administration which was one notorious for offering a glowing, liberal ideology and some success on the fronts of the federal budget and national economy before proving itself to be less able to follow through and, worse, evidence of a corrosion of those very ideals by falling into a scandalous near-impeachment. While not providing an exact mirror to the media-friendly Clinton presidency, Bartlet's administration is often described as a regretful "should've been" for the initial aspirations of Clinton's terms in office but leaning even further towards a "liberal... wish-fulfillment fantasy" (Lehmann 3-4). *The West Wing's* take on the daily procedural experience of the White House has been credited as humanizing a presidential character while maintaining the classic heroism associated with the depiction as well as providing a certain push-back to an increasingly cynical vision of politics (Parry-Giles 223). Perceiving government as collaboration in *The West Wing* enhances the selfish disconnect of Underwood and his governing practices in *House of Cards*. Yet, for the Netflix subscriber, the intense implementation of personalization in the service, the creation of the show and also in the address from Underwood to his viewer converts the isolation and focus into an effective hook throughout the series.

The contextual-awareness that is often associated with political melodrama aligns with the Netflix brand of industrial consciousness and audience awareness. The casting of a president in the drastically divided spheres of network television and the modern streaming bubble becomes all the more relevant to both cultures of production as well as the socio-political climate beyond the hallowed, fictional halls of these two very different images of the White House. For Netflix, the unwitting consumer demand for a different kind of leader, one that none would want to see in office but still toys with the living morality play of American idealism, who manages to stand as a trial of the extreme ushers in a character that can meet this need while completing the feedback loop on the narrative of disruption. As commentary, the industrial echo of these types of presidents enriches the moral differences between the two characters and how they integrate into the taste cultures of their respective audiences.

## 5 Conclusion

A desire for difference and ever-progressing options that surpass the now dated network television standards of everything from entertainment to political communication provides a traceable thread that emerges throughout the discourse surrounding modern media. The departure from an older model and outmoded technological spectrum that Netflix strives to embody within the industry is echoed within the body of text that stands as its first submission into the sphere of original content. This series, *House of Cards*, comes to its audience, too, without the validations and processes that accompany major studio productions, and it also, within itself, attempts to subvert many of the tropes and self-affirming tendencies that are commonly implemented in the presented character types and the depiction of the American political atmosphere. Tapping into a genre like political melodrama is a move that addresses the complex relationship between a fiction that

is informed by reality and one that is inextricable to the audience's real world experiences. As *The West Wing* and many other installments before it, *House of Cards*, have entertained but also have been designated as a means of meeting the complex and often discouraging issues of government and finding a way to understand or at least see the fever dreams of conspiracy, heroism, cynicism and efficacy play out in an alternative sphere that still can look and feel like the real. While I touch upon the tendency to juxtapose the administration of political drama with its real-world counterpart with the Clinton/Bartlet administrations and the Underwood/Obama administrations, it would be interesting to pursue the arc of *House of Cards* and Underwood's character through the drastic change in regime and political mood seen through the 2016 election and the possible implications these changes would have in Season 5 being the least well received season thus far.

Designing this series, and in particular the character of President Frank Underwood, as a tangible example of the elevation of successful self-inspection and analysis that is increasingly symptomatic of media-makers that are able to adapt and thrive in the digital flux that currently faces the industry. Central both to establishing Netflix's identity and pivotal to many of the major shifts seen in media-making the entanglement of culture and the integration of algorithms across the spectrum of digitally-based industry. Necessary to giving form to the glut of collectable data, algorithms have proven to also provide means to measure and map an image of the culture and the definable publics therein. The claims made on the basis of this production being actively-tailored to its forecasted audience based upon a unique range of gathered viewership data seems to tap into the powerful tides of consumer taste in ways that exceeded the bound of traditional industry practices and also challenge, fairly successfully, the proscribed boundaries of acceptable risk for a large scale production like this slick and darkly lavish political production



peppered with acting prestige, creative headliners and no little attention to detail. Netflix may not have changed the way that every American watches TV but the company is one of the signature players in the movement away from the Network model and into the era of a new understanding of television viewing, access, delivery and consumer control.

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