

And another thing about *The Newsroom*

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On the subject of CNN's epic fail yesterday—[here's](#) a great Photoshop illustration of the episode—Paul Waldman [thinks](#) CNN missed a great opportunity to anticipate the problem and promise to avoid it and focus on accuracy, not on being the fastest. "Maybe," says Waldman, "they would have gained a few viewers."

Maybe a few. But it's hard to imagine such a move being transformational, given the sheer number of places standing at the ready to give you the news. I'm also not sure how much this hurts CNN—a mistake like this, while certainly embarrassing, also adds entertainment value to the whole 21st-century media-consumption experience. It's not clear that the takeaway is anything harsher than "Thanks for the lolz, news people! We'll keep watching for the next one!"

The episode brings to mind Aaron Sorkin's new show, *The Newsroom* (minor spoilers follow). Sorkin's premise is that a cable news channel could serve the public by recapturing the approach of Murrow and Cronkite in place of the present-day infotainment status quo. One of the early episodes focuses on the question of whether to report a breaking headline super-quickly vs. waiting till you're sure. CNN got that one wrong yesterday. Sorkin would like people to get it right, and he'd like to show them how.

I've only seen the show's first episode, but so far I have to echo much of the critical consensus: it's bad in every way Sorkin is so good at being bad. It's pompous and pedantic; it favors romanticism and snappy, Tracy-and-Hepburn dialogue to such a degree that it leaves behind not only realism (that much is intentional) but also distinct characters and well-developed plotlines. It's pretty damn sexist. And the basic premise is ludicrously arrogant: Prof. Sorkin backs the news up two years and shows us how it *should* have been covered, if only journalism weren't so broken...and if only journalists had two years' lead time (and hindsight) to get it right.

The main character is set up as a modern-day Murrow: an opinionated yet serious and responsible guy. But the problem isn't that news divisions can't find the right Great Man who refuses to be either a blandly stuffed suit or a blowhard. It's that the whole media landscape has dramatically changed. I think Jon Stewart gets this right: the problem with cable news is that, while it's invaluable on election day 2000 or on 9/11/2001 or on the day of a major natural disaster, pretty much every other day it's got to come up with some way to fill 24 hours of so-called news—with predictably laughable results. (Also: the internet happened, though I know we're not supposed to take that seriously when we're talking about journalism.)

So far I'm saying roughly what everyone's been saying about *The Newsroom*. Here's where the consensus leaves me cold: Sorkin's a liberal, and his shows are all liberal fantasies about how things *should* be. And making the lead character of his new show a moderate, independent Republican is just this same liberal scold fest under a different, less polarizing name.

Well, depends what you mean by "liberal." *The West Wing* was perpetually pushing not classic liberalism so much as a distinctly *neoliberal* flavor of American exceptionalism. That is: government might be not-all-bad, but unions are silly and outdated, and of course it goes without saying that America, and America's economic system and military, and the things America chooses to *do* with its economic system and its military, are beyond reproach—or at least that they should only be questioned by very serious people, with security clearance, who then inevitably determine that America's ways may not be perfect but dammit, they're the best the world's got.

Sure, it warmed my liberal heart when Toby and Sam fought passionately for a little more social spending here and there, but then there were those Bartlett lectures about how only an idiot without a Nobel Prize could be naive enough to question global free trade. Or, even worse, the plotlines focused on how sometimes a president knows what the right thing to do is—like halting a federal execution, or not assassinating a foreign leader in cold blood—but *has to do the wrong thing anyway*. That's a fairly ridiculous ethical category—unless you're committed to the belief that American leaders are above the rules.

So far *The Newsroom* looks to be just as drenched in American exceptionalism. The show begins with an homage either to *Network* or to Sorkin's last (failed) show, *Studio 60 On the Sunset Strip*: the main character has a meltdown, in front of a live

audience and some cameras, in which he speaks the hard truth about how impoverished our media culture is. He does this in response to a college sophomore's question, "What makes America the greatest country in the world?"

His shocking answer: It isn't. And he details why, based on a heap of statistical measures only an Aaron Sorkin character could have memorized. Also on the fact that people are dumb and like to be entertained, or something.

Fine—but he's inspired to do this when a woman (who might or might not be an accomplished journalist he used to be romantically involved with) holds up two cue cards: "It isn't" and "But it could be." I fear the rest of the season/series will be about one newsroom's efforts to enact "but it could be," to make America great again with better broadcast journalism.

But what if America never was as singularly special as we like to think, and what if its best days are behind it? Apparently such possibilities are outside the realm of respectable discourse for even a liberal darling like Sorkin.

Oh well. Guy writes hilarious, addictive dialogue, so I'm sure I'll watch every episode.