

Introduction

We live in a Golden Age of international relations programming on television.

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Born to a family of trash haulers, Wayne Huizenga died a billionaire, having sold his business in 1994 for over eight billion dollars. That business was Blockbuster, which, at its peak, operated half of its nine thousand video rental stores in the US. Many readers will recall the membership card, the hours spent perusing shelves for new and old titles, and the threat of a fine for late return or forgetting to rewind your movie. Three years after Wayne cashed in on the 'McDonald's of video', Netflix was founded, prefiguring a dramatic transformation in American television. At the turn of the millennium, huge sales of DVD players were driving the success of rental by mail, with the writing on the wall for video stores and VHS (Video Home System). In 2007, having delivered over one billion DVDs, Netflix introduced streaming. American television was about to be revolutionised by the advent of video on demand.

New technology for the delivery of television into American homes paved the way for television's most significant generator of change: an influx of money into production budgets. Like HBO (Home Box Office) before it, Netflix and other streaming services operate a business model premised upon subscriptions. This provides an impulse to create excellent and innovative original content, for which consumers are willing to pay. Greater resources help to attract leading scriptwriters, auteur directors, and star actors. Rising in line with money and talent, television's production values have begun to resemble and surpass film. No longer its poor relation, television has become Hollywood A-List, with new shows now frequently described as 'cinematic'. Quality has continued to rise, moreover, despite a huge increase in the amount being produced. In turn, this has extended television's reach

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and impact, with today's fictional shows serving as hugely important sites of political contestation. The vibrant role played by television, located at the centre of America's political debates, is certainly not entirely new, but is now more prominent and consequential than ever previously. Alongside technology, money, and talent, today's heightened influence has derived from the fact that television's ascendancy has coincided with the politics of a particularly tumultuous twenty-first century.

The new millennium did not begin smoothly. Following a contested and controversial presidential election, America's national landscape at the turn of the century was bitterly divided. The events of 11 September 2001 and the ensuing War on Terror furthered the sense that this was a difficult, disordered, and dangerous period in the life of the US. Following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, George W. Bush's tenure ended with global financial catastrophe and the election of America's first black president. Despite significant policy achievements, Barack Obama cut a divisive figure in American political, media, and public debate. Disquiet surrounding his presidency, in part, created the context in which his successor's candidacy was possible. In a few short months, the political rise of the reality TV star Donald Trump went from far-fetched speculation to omnipresent feature in the nation's media. His inauguration posed a self-acknowledged and potentially fundamental challenge to America's political norms and institutions. Controversies surrounding migration, gender equality, and race relations have been thrust front and centre. Yet Trump's election and tenure are only two of the most testing elements of a post-9/11 era that has consistently proved controversial, and which has continually played out on American television screens.

This book, therefore, explores the role that fictional television has played in the world politics of the US in the twenty-first century. It focuses on the second golden age of television, which has coincided with the presidencies of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Donald J. Trump. Indeed, Trump's reign – like his predecessors' – has been facilitated, sculpted, and resisted through the medium of America's television screens. From far-sighted imaginings in *The Simpsons*, via repeated firings on *The Apprentice*, to reportedly watching up to eight hours of television per day in the White House, Trump's presidency and the conditions that have underpinned it are tied intimately to America's relationship with the screen.² Arguably, however, it was ever thus. Under Bush, Obama, and Trump, superb television shows have helped not only to make meaning out of American politics, but moreover to shape the reality of American political life. The opening premise for the book, therefore, is very simple: fictional television matters. Perhaps you already agree with that, since you have picked it up and started reading. But, crucially, it is not a truth that is always readily accepted or understood in the academic disciplines charged with the study of America's politics. That television's influence is hard to quantify, or that research on television cannot comply with an objective regulative ideal, is a weak excuse for its

downplaying or exclusion.³ In the current era, it is plainly ludicrous to deny the centrality of the screen, located as it is at the heart of American political life, for presidents and the people.

Today, television is powerful in many senses, even – and especially – when the subject matter is fictional. Consider the affecting experience of watching key moments in your favourite show: in *Game of Thrones*, the fate of Ned Stark's neck, perhaps, or Prince Oberyn's face. Fictional television is remarkable for its narrative potential and depth of audience investment, as hooked viewers live plot twists and actually feel the fates of beloved characters. This investment impacts far beyond your living room. If you have ever had a conversation about one of this era's truly great television shows, you will know that they do not stay fixed on the screen, but instead enter our lives as they shape our thinking about the world and its politics. *Do you think Donald Trump is better or worse than Frank Underwood? How did Barack Obama compare to Jed Bartlet? If you had to, for your family, would you break the law (make crystal meth and become a drug lord) like Walter White? What does it mean to be human in a world of zombies? Are torture, pre-emption, and extra-judicial assassination warranted in a time of terrorism? Are all politicians essentially self-interested? Does everything, ultimately, always come down to a question of power? Is Brody a hero, an enemy, or both?* Perhaps some of these questions are familiar. They are all political. This book, then, is about the political interventions of fictional television in our ongoing, troubling era. Its focus is the greatest superpower the world has ever known and some of the best television shows to have ever graced our screens.

The book's background, structure, and arguments

Presidents and politicians draw on popular culture in a variety of ways. It could not be otherwise. But this is only part of the story. Popular culture saturates all of our lives with meaning, helping us to understand the world and its politics. Reading, theatre, music, fashion, sports, film, and television influence the general public as much as the President of the United States. In part, this is because popular culture does not need to be explicitly about politics in order to be political. As a growing body of work has shown, numerous seemingly apolitical films and television shows are deeply political.⁴ They help to make up the discursive battlefield that is world politics, competing ferociously and effectively to produce politically consequential meaning. This discursive battle encompasses all Americans, not just the President of the United States. This book, therefore, is as much about everyday power relations – the political – as it is about the formal politics of the White House, the Capitol, or the Supreme Court. Throughout, I argue that popular culture generally, and fictional television specifically, perform a fundamental political function, helping us to make sense of who we are, our place in the world, and how to interact with others. In short, fictional

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television helps to enable, shape, and constrain the possibility or impossibility of political action.

Over the past two decades, television has excelled, revelling in a ‘golden age’. This phrase, however, requires a little qualification. Previously, it has been used to refer to an era of (live) television beginning in the late 1940s and lasting until the early 1960s. Perhaps, therefore, it is more accurate to speak of a second golden age of television. This period is broadly understood to have commenced around the turn of the millennium, intensifying through the early years of the new century, and we remain within it. Of course, this period’s roots extend back through the shows of the 1990s and 1980s, with this era’s auteur directors and showrunners taking direct inspiration from shows such as *Twin Peaks* that encouraged a rethinking of television’s scope. Today, however, the intertwining of creativity, funding, and technology has helped to propel and define a televisual era which is qualitatively and quantitatively distinct – in volume and viewership, as well as quality – to the extent that ‘the idea that we are living through ... a second period of key creativity is fairly non-controversial’.⁵ This has been enabled by the generation of space for television shows to explore narrow topics deeply – taking greater risks and challenging audiences – primarily as a result of new funding models at major US players, such as HBO, Showtime, and AMC (originally, American Movie Channel). In combination with the new technology of streaming – allowing market entrants such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon to release entire television series to an audience in one go – the way we watch television has been revolutionised during the small screen’s second golden age. Narrative and thematic depth, enabled by extended duration and the decreased necessity for stand-alone episodes, has helped this era’s television to stand out from film and achieve heightened political significance.

To assess the political implications of this televisual revolution, the book is structured in three parts. Part I considers what is at stake in rethinking the act of watching television as a political and academic enterprise. Chapter 1 begins by considering the US’s relationship with the screen, with a particular focus on the *idea* of America and the history of Hollywood, in order to contextualise and theorise television’s second golden age. Chapter 2 considers the political importance of America’s relationship with television in the twenty-first century, assessing the screening of the US under three very different presidents. Despite this centrality, Chapter 3 is obliged to assess the historical and sociological reasons for the exclusion of popular culture from much of the study of world politics, as well as the impact of this arbitrary omission. Drawing on research that has taken popular culture seriously, the book makes the case for the inclusion of fictional television in political research, conceptualising its role and outlining a methodological approach that normalises its analysis as an important site of political contestation. In Chapter 4, the book advances an understanding of American politics as a ‘discursive battlefield’, on which arguments are won and lost. Television’s ‘weapons’ – targeting linguistic, aesthetic, and emotional resonance – make

it formidable in this contest to produce meaning. This framework guides the empirical analysis of the relationship between fictional television and American politics in Parts II and III, which explore the ways in which popular culture sculpts the contours of political life.

The shows selected for analysis in Parts II and III were chosen for a combination of popularity, critical acclaim, and subject coverage. All are ostensibly American shows (as determined by ownership), and all aired this millennium (in television's second golden age). They can all claim to be great shows, albeit in quite different ways (see Chapter 4). Part II considers fictional television shows dealing explicitly with the subject matter of formal politics. Here, three chapters consider how it is that fictional television can amplify, complicate, or open up dominant political understandings. These cases demonstrate the ways in which fictional television can make direct interventions into politics, impacting upon political possibility or impossibility in a variety of important and consequential ways. First, Chapter 5 explores discourses of realpolitik in *House of Cards* and *Game of Thrones*, arguing that the shows reinforce dominant assumptions that power and strategy inevitably trump ethical considerations. Second, Chapter 6 analyses constructions of counterterrorism in *Homeland*, *The West Wing*, and *24*, exploring the ways in which dominant narratives have been contested and reinforced since the onset of the War on Terror. Third, Chapter 7 investigates how the US president has been imagined and reimagined during television's second golden age in *The West Wing*, *24*, and *Veep*. The chapter argues that these imaginings furthered a televisual and filmic lineage which has been politically consequential in helping to pave the way for America's first black president, if not yet its first female Commander in Chief.

As well as themes dealing explicitly with politics, television's second golden age has produced a surfeit of 'unpolitical political' television.⁶ Part III therefore considers television shows dealing only implicitly with political themes. That is, they do not focus (primarily) on 'official' politics, but do deal with questions of power and meaning, which structure relationships between people and communities. These issues, such as race and gender, undergird the more formal mechanisms of politics 'proper', such as elections or legislative deliberation. This section explores three shows making profound interventions into the political underpinnings of American life. Chapter 8 investigates how *The Wire* addresses the reality, ethics, and structure of social and economic inequality. The chapter argues that television can urge viewers to confront the morality of systematic deprivation vis-à-vis their own socio-economic position. Chapter 9 analyses *The Walking Dead*, asking a fundamental philosophical and political question: what does it mean to be human, and what does that identity *do*? Chapter 10 analyses the portrayal of personal life as political life in *Breaking Bad*. We see how television can encourage viewers to consider the ethics of a character's behaviour, in the shared context of a disempowering everyday experience of late capitalism and, in particular, in light of contemporary renegotiations of

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masculinity. In each of the three shows, the audience join the show's characters in contemplating the choices they face in acutely testing circumstances.

The empirical chapters progress in a manner that broadly speaks to the chronology of American politics in the twenty-first century. After wrestling with the philosophy of realism as a dominant guiding principle of world politics in Chapter 5, Chapter 6 deals with issues of war and terrorism that were at the heart of George W. Bush's presidency. In turn, Chapter 7 assesses the political ascendancies of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, with Chapter 8 posing particularly difficult questions for Obama's America. Next and crucially, Chapters 9 and 10 begin to map out the televisual landscape that helps us to make sense of Donald Trump's rise to power, by focusing on the societal unease his tenure has stoked and relied upon. The Conclusion expands upon this analysis, exploring the legacies of *The Sopranos* and *Mad Men*, as well as the theme of resistance in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In doing so, the Conclusion reiterates the growing importance of fictional television as a key feature of American democracy. The book argues that, during this controversial era, fictional television shows have made important political interventions that help to create the conditions of possibility underpinning the reality of life in the US.⁷

Notes

- 1 D. Drezner, 'You should watch the best show about international relations on television right now', *Washington Post* (19 February 2016); see also R. Saunders, 'Small Screen IR: A Tentative Typology of Geopolitical Television', *Geopolitics* (2017), 1.
- 2 M. Haberman, G. Thrush, and P. Baker, 'Inside Trump's hour-by-hour battle for self-preservation', *New York Times* (9 December 2017).
- 3 E. Hass, T. Christensen, and P. Hass, *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films*, second edition (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), p. 22; M. Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 5; L. Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture: Telling Stories* (Abingdon: Routledge 2013), p. 2.
- 4 In *Politics and International Relations*, see, for example, K. Grayson, 'How to Read Paddington Bear: Liberalism and the Foreign Subject in *A Bear Called Paddington*', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 15:3 (2013), 378–393, as well as Hass, Christensen, and Hass, *Projecting Politics* and Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture*. In *Film, Cultural, and American Studies*, see, for example, G. Frame, *The American President in Film and Television*, second edition (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2014), and I. Scott, *American Politics in Hollywood Film*, second edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).
- 5 M. Lawson, 'Are we really in a "second golden age for television"?', *Guardian* (23 May 2013).

6 Hass, Christensen, and Hass, *Projecting Politics*, p. 14.

7 Details of the shows discussed are as follows: *24*, Fox, 2001–10, 2014 (revival); *Breaking Bad*, AMC, 2008–13; *Game of Thrones*, HBO, 2011–; *The Handmaid's Tale*, Hulu, 2017–; *House of Cards*, Netflix, 2013–; *Homeland*, Showtime, 2011–; *Mad Men*, AMC, 2007–15; *The Sopranos*, HBO, 1999–2007; *Veep*, HBO, 2012–; *The Walking Dead*, AMC, 2010–; *The West Wing*, NBC, 1999–2006; *The Wire*, HBO, 2002–08.