

Quixo-Journalism

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Over the course of three seasons at HBO (2012–2014), Aaron Sorkin’s *The Newsroom* defended journalism’s role as a pillar of democracy despite corporatization on the one hand and competition from social media on the other. As the anchor of the fictional Atlantis Cable News (ACN), Will McAvoy (Jeff Daniels), egged on by the director of ACN’s news division, Charlie Skinner (Sam Waterston) and his executive producer MacKenzie McHale (Emily Mortimer), embarks on an avowedly quixotic “mission” to restore the civic engagement of his television audience. Faced with the reality crisis provoked by the media inflation David Castillo and William Egginton (C&E) analyze in *Medialogies*, the ACN team hopes to restore faith in the news media by reviving the heroism of Edward R. Murrow in his legendary confrontation with Joseph McCarthy. Sorkin’s answer to the loss of traction against the Real that has eroded journalistic credibility is thus the raw courage of the lone newsman who goes before the camera and “tells it like it is” regardless of whose interests might be hurt, laying his integrity on the line and facing the consequences of his convictions. That this heroic figure was never anything but a simulacrum created by the medium of television itself is not acknowledged. Instead, it is underwritten, as we will see, by *Don Quixote*, thereby exploiting the aura with which our current medialogy endows the productions of the first age of inflationary media. In the wake of Trump’s electoral victory and the attendant collapse of journalism as we knew it, it is worth taking a look back at this recent attempt to shore up professional journalism’s monopoly on truthful representation. After all, one of the conditions of possibility for Trump’s success was the fact that he could presume the majority of his likely voters had no faith in the mainstream media. During what turns out to have been the pre-history of the Trump era, *The Newsroom* aspired to be “part of the solution,” even while living up to the responsibility to entertain viewers.

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Might the road to the Hell in which we now find ourselves nevertheless have been paved, precisely, with these good intentions?¹

After all, *The Newsroom*, like Trump, takes as its point of departure the decline of the United States, and prescribes a dose of tough love to restore it to greatness. As the first episode opens, Will is seated onstage at a fictional conference titled “Brave New World: Broadcast Journalism in the Internet Age” at Northwestern University’s MEDILL School of Journalism. The backdrop poster for the conference prominently features a photograph of Edward R. Murrow in CBS Studio 41. Asked by a bright-eyed, naïve college student why the United States is the greatest country in the world, Will responds caustically:

There is absolutely no evidence to support the statement that we’re the greatest country in the world. We’re seventh in literacy, twenty-seventh in math, twenty-second in science, forty-ninth in life expectancy, 178th in infant mortality, third in median household income, number four in labor force and number four in exports. We lead the world in only three categories: number of incarcerated citizens per capita, number of adults who believe angels are real, and defense spending, where we spend more than the next twenty-six countries combined, twenty-five of whom are allies . . . So when you ask what makes us the greatest country in the world, I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about. Yosemite?²

(some booing from the audience followed by an abashed silence)

We sure used to be. We stood up for what was right. We fought for moral reasons, we passed laws, struck down laws, for moral reasons. We waged wars on poverty, not poor people. We sacrificed, we cared about our neighbors, we put our money where our mouths were, and we never beat our chests. We built great big things, made ungodly technological advances, explored the universe, cured diseases, and we cultivated the world’s greatest artists *and* the world’s greatest economy. We reached for the stars. Acted like men. We aspired to intelligence, we didn’t belittle it; it didn’t make us feel inferior. We didn’t identify ourselves by who we voted for in the last election and we didn’t scare so easy. We were able to be all these things and do all these things because we were informed. By great men, men who were revered. First step in solving any problem is recognizing that there is one. America is not the greatest country in the world anymore.

The project to make the United States “great again” by reviving serious journalism sets in motion the entire plot arc that runs through the show’s three

seasons, and this project is explicitly cast as Quixotic from the beginning of the first season to the end of the last. Later in this episode we learn that it was Will's outburst that inspired Charlie Skinner to bring MacKenzie on as executive producer and redefine the show's priorities. Moreover, when Charlie made this momentous decision he had been reading *Don Quixote* and giving it to others to read, as if it were a secret, subversive manual on turning back the tide of media inflation, though this backstory will only be revealed after his death, in a flashback during the final episode of the final season. At their first meeting, MacKenzie tries to persuade Will to emulate Don Quixote:

MacKenzie: Now I'd like you to listen to these words, which were written five hundred years ago by don Miguel de Cervantes: "Hear me now, o thou bleak and unbearable world thou art based and debauched as can be. But a knight with his banners all bravely unfurled now hurls down his gauntlet to thee." That was Don Quixote.

Will: Those words were written forty-five years ago by the lyricist for *Man of La Mancha*.

MacKenzie: Didn't think you'd know that. But the point is still the same: it's time for Don Quixote!

She explains her ambitious goal to make him the catalyst of an urgently needed public discussion concerning fundamental value choices and moral orientation:

MacKenzie: Is government an instrument of good or is it every man for himself? Is there something bigger we want to reach for or is self-interest our basic resting pulse? You and I have a chance to be among the few people who can frame that debate.

Will: That's . . . uh . . . It's . . . it's . . .

MacKenzie: Quixotic?

Toward the end of this episode, Charlie admits to a skeptical Will that he indeed brought MacKenzie to ACN to fundamentally change the way they are doing the news. He, too, counters Will's anxiety over the impracticality of this new direction by referencing Don Quixote, then immediately brings up Murrow and Walter Cronkite as antecedents:

Will: She's indifferent to ratings, competition, corporate concerns, and,

generally speaking, consequences.

Charlie: Good. 'Cause you just described my job. I'm Don Quixote. You can be Sancho, she'll be Dulcinea, and everyone out there is the horse.

Will: Donkey. How did you know about that conversation?

Charlie: I know everything. Anchors having an opinion isn't a new phenomenon. Murrow had one and that was the end of McCarthy. Cronkite had one and that was the end of Vietnam.

As we will learn in the finale of Season Three, Charlie knows about MacKenzie's association of the program's reorientation with Don Quixote because he was the one who put her up to it.

In Season One, episode four, having by now internalized Charlie and MacKenzie's role for him, Will declares, "I'm Don Quixote. I'm on a mission to civilize." The phrase "mission to civilize" becomes shorthand for the entire project of *News Night with Will McAvoy*, and this phrase is associated with Don Quixote at least three more times over the life of the series (Season One, episode eight; Season Two, episode three; and Season Three, episode five). Despite its unfortunate neocolonial overtones, what is actually meant by "civilize" here is "render civil" in the sense of able to participate in public life without resorting to intimidation or insults. This use of the term recalls Murrow's own understanding of "civilized," for example, as he used it in defending his friendship with Harold Laski after McCarthy tried to smear him for associating with a known socialist: "*He* was a socialist; *I* am not. He was one of those *civilized* individuals who did not insist upon agreement with his political principles as a precondition for conversation or friendship" (*See It Now*). Essentially, this understanding of a "new civility" relies on Habermas's notion of the public sphere as a characteristic of modern societies, a condition of possibility for democracy: any member of society's access to participation in open public debate on matters of concern to all.³ Despite the fact that Cervantes's hero is an insane fanatic who often flies into a violent rage when he is contradicted, the revival of *civility* easily bleeds over into an effort to resuscitate *chivalry*, and Quixote is enlisted as the program's figurehead.

As we have seen, Will immediately calls MacKenzie on her attempt to pass off lyrics from *Man of La Mancha*'s "I, Don Quixote" as Cervantes's own words; elsewhere he ridicules her for proudly claiming to have read *Don Quixote* "in the original French." Yet subsequent concrete references to the knight's adventures by both Will and Charlie ironically refer to the Broadway musical, not the seventeenth-century novel. In episode ten, the finale of the opening season, Will tells MacKenzie that the cover article on him in *New York* magazine, "The Greater Fool," accurately depicts him as pompous and outdated, holding a mirror up to his anachronistic "Murrow impersonation":

Will: You wanted Don Quixote!

MacKenzie: Oh!

Will: This is it. And by the way, this is what brought him down.

MacKenzie: Nobody's brought you down.

Will: The Knight of the Mirrors. He holds up a mirror and shows him.

MacKenzie: Stop it.

Will: Shows him. I mean, he doesn't fight him with a sword. He shows him with a mirror what a total fool he looks like. Brian [the author of the article] was the knight of the mirrors and that's the chapter we're up to.

Of course, this is not how Cervantes wrote it, but rather the way the encounter was imagined by Dale Wasserman in his 1959 teleplay, "I, Don Quixote," and in the 1965 musical based on it. At the end of this episode, however, Will abruptly decides to fight back against his slanderers, and abandons his hospital bed calling out, "Each time he falls, he shall rise again. Woe to the wicked! Sancho, my armor, my sword!" MacKenzie asks, "What's he doing?" to which Charlie responds, "The end of *Don Quixote*." Again, this is the ending of *Man of La Mancha*, not *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. Wasserman reversed the ending in which Don Quixote recovers his sanity before he died, instead having him rise from his sickbed and call for his sword to recommence his chivalric adventures, before abruptly collapsing and dying—still believing himself to be a knight errant. Whether it is only his characters who are mixed up, or Sorkin himself who is unable to distinguish between the book and the musical, the use of the mad knight as a kind of mascot is based on merely superficial acquaintance with the novel, and much more on the Broadway popularization. Given the way the series nostalgically idealizes the Cold War as a Golden Age of journalistic integrity, the filtering of the reception of Cervantes through a musical that debuted in 1965 is not surprising; nor, as we will see, is it unproblematic. In any case, nothing in the use made of Cervantes up to that point has prepared us for the dramatic appearance of the book "in the flesh" in a flashback during the final episode of the series. Before joining the ACN team, it turns out, MacKenzie visited Jim Harper (played by John Gallagher, Jr.), with whom she had worked in Afghanistan and Iraq, to recruit him as her associate producer. This is the backstory to the entire series. She tells him, "Charlie Skinner is on some kind of mission. He's dead serious. He messengered a book to me." When Jim asks her what book it was, she pulls a copy of the Penguin edition of *Don Quixote* from her purse. The camera moves in until the book fills the entire screen, and then lingers lovingly for a moment on the cover. It's just a mass-produced paperback, after all, but in our medialogy, as C&E point out, copies are elevated to the status of things. Despite the fact that allusions to it have proliferated from the beginning of

the series, the sudden presence of a real, physical copy of Cervantes's novel comes as a powerfully staged revelation of the authenticity of Charlie's quest. One could hardly hope for a better illustration of the explanation in *Media-logies* of the special status relics from the first age of inflationary media can acquire in today's media environment:

In the new age of inflationary media, the basic media of the previous age—the book, the stage—may be refigured as a kind of redemption: the word in its pure form, uncopied; bodies on a stage offering a presence that escapes the distance of film, television, the internet. Ancient artifacts, especially old books, are often endowed with magical powers in literary and cinematic fantasies. In horror fiction, they are portals that put us in touch with the dangerous presences of our premodern past. In a world that seems increasingly artificial and senseless, however, the ancient book can be reimagined as a promise of meaning. (59)

The “promise of meaning” in the internet age is indeed what Charlie used *Don Quixote* to proselytize. The next scene after the flashback is his wake, where Will delivers this eulogy:

Charlie Skinner was crazy. He identified with Don Quixote. An old man with dementia who thought he could save the world from an epidemic of incivility simply by acting like a knight. His religion was decency. And he spent a lifetime fighting its enemies. I wish he could be here to learn the name of his successor, like I just did. Our new boss, the new president of CAN, is MacKenzie McHale. So this fight is just getting started. ‘Cause he taught the rest of us to be crazy, too. You were a man, Charlie. You were a great, big man.

Mimicking once more the ending of *Man of La Mancha*, the death of the deluded hero leaves behind two secondary characters, Sancho and Dulcinea, to carry his vision forward. Their Quixotism enables these journalists' misrecognition of themselves as “saviors” engaged in a “mission” to restore “decency.” Identification with the hopelessly outmatched knight allows them to persuade themselves that their resistance to the impact of new media and the consolidation of corporate control is a heroic defense of timeless ideals. Yet it is at least as true that they are taking refuge in an outdated model:

The show upheld representations of myths of their profession [journalism] generated in the 1960s to 1980s, which are not applicable today. The hero myth with the image of a lone (White, male) anchor informing the world defies current diverse narratives produced via social media that highlight the power of the many. This suggests that the myths *The Newsroom* represented as journalistic practice need to be more in sync with new and emerging journalistic forms to avoid criticism. (Koliska and Eckert 762)

Cervantes created something new out of something old, mockingly subverting his protagonist's avowed desire to restore a piece of the feudal order in the process. Sorokin evinces no such ironic stance toward his characters' belief in their ability to stem the tide of media inflation by retreating nostalgically into the lost world (Atlantis) of television's early heyday, when it had no competition from other audiovisual mass media in providing day-to-day news, and chain-smoking WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) males held exclusive sway over the airwaves.

The abundant allusions to Quixote in *The Newsroom* are crisscrossed by equally frequent references to Edward R. Murrow as the journalist from the early days of television that Will McAvoy aspires to emulate. Murrow's photo hovers behind him in the show's first sequence, and was used in the opening credits for the entire season. As quoted above, Charlie Skinner refers to Murrow in his concise affirmation of the mythic power of the television newscaster: "Anchors having an opinion isn't a new phenomenon. Murrow had one and that was the end of McCarthy. Cronkite had one and that was the end of Vietnam." A few episodes later, Will justifies to MacKenzie covering the sensationalized Casey Anthony trial by comparing himself with the legendary CBS newsman: "Murrow did *Person to Person*—celebrity interviews. It was a deal with Paley. One for them, one for him. He interviewed Liberace, Mac, just so he could keep going after McCarthy." At the end of the first season, Will's ego is bruised by a quote from a CNN producer in the *New York* magazine article about him: "It's as though McAvoy is unaware of how ridiculous he looks doing what he thinks passes as a Murrow impersonation."

As the repeated joining of his name with that of McCarthy indicates, it is particularly the ongoing 1953–1954 confrontation with Senator Joseph McCarthy on *See It Now* that is evoked as exemplary of the journalistic integrity and engagement that must be quixotically revived. Murrow and his producer, Fred W. Friendly, devoted five shows to McCarthyism between October 1953 and April 1954. They went after McCarthy systematically and deliberately, defending individuals such as Milo Radulovich and Annie Lee Moss, who had

been pilloried based on hearsay.⁴ They pieced together unflattering footage of McCarthy's own speeches with commentary that undermined him and questioned his methods. When they enticed "the junior senator from Wisconsin" into accepting their offer of equal time, he predictably used it to hysterically denounce Murrow as part of a communist conspiracy to overthrow the U.S. government, providing them with even better ammunition to discredit him, since it was an easy matter to demonstrate how absurd the accusations were.⁵ At the time, McCarthy was already in trouble with the Republican Party. Once Eisenhower defeated Adlai Stevenson and took office in January 1953, the Republicans were interested in dumping him. He had gone too far, attacking the Army and even his fellow senators. His anti-communism was too partisan; it undermined the Cold War consensus Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., famously dubbed "the vital center." After all, the CIA in those years courted the non-communist left, or NCL, both domestically and abroad.⁶ Despite the many articles denouncing his bullying tactics that had appeared in dozens of major newspapers across the country, it took Murrow and the fledgling medium of television to tip the scales against McCarthy. Although it is certainly an exaggeration to say that Murrow singlehandedly brought down McCarthy, it is equally certain that this was the public perception at the time.⁷ This impression was quickly acknowledged, for example, in a *Billboard* editorial on March 20, 1954, tellingly titled, "Where Others Failed":

Where the strongest conservative newspapers such as The New York Times and The New York Herald Tribune had failed to arouse any mass public indignation over the Senator's method of investigation, a single thirty-minute TV show may well go down as the lance that pricked and completely deflated the McCarthy balloon.

It may only have taken that one lance-prick to deflate the balloon, it still took a lance to do it, and nerve to wield that lance. The idea of Murrow as the "lone knight" who slew the "dragon" McCarthy, captured in a brush drawing by Ben Shahn in 1955 (see. fig. 1), quickly caught on, and has been repeated frequently since.⁸ What was really revealed, though, in the *See It Now* broadcasts, was the power of the medium of television itself to create simulacra of integrity, buffoonery, good intentions, and dubious motives, pretty much at will. This revelation was concealed beneath the cult of hero worship that grew up around Murrow and extended to his heirs, the "great men who were revered" of Will McAvoy's rant: Cronkite, Brinkley, Rather, and Jennings. No matter how many times this image of the newscaster as heroic knight has been debunked, it remains lodged in our collective *psyche*, serving as an emblem

of the excesses of anti-communist zeal during the Cold War. We conveniently heap all the evils of red-baiting on McCarthy, and just as conveniently imagine the courageous Murrow felling him at a single blow. Surely *The Newsroom* was in large part inspired by the depiction, a few years earlier, of their mythic encounter in *Good Night, and Good Luck.*, directed by George Clooney and co-written by him and Grant Heslov, with Jeff Daniels, who in fact would go on to play Will McAvoy, appearing as Sig Mickelson, the director of the news division at CBS. This revival of the Murrow myth in the middle of the Bush era was a would-be wake-up call to a nation sliding into another Cold War (this time against “Islamofascism”) and once again justifying the suspension of civil liberties in the name of national security. *The Newsroom* is an attempt at putting into practice in the present the lessons of *Good Night, and Good Luck.* Inadvertently, though, what it succeeds at doing is revealing how outdated the nostalgia over Murrow and the early days of television has become. Like Quixote anachronistically reviving knight errantry in an era when it no longer serves any purpose other than drawing attention to the hypocrisy of the existing social order, Sorkin and his cast engage in resuscitating a lost model of gritty journalistic integrity when it has long since lost its relevance as anything but a foil to the current breakdown in credibility.

What bears emphasizing in this context is that Murrow and Friendly, in 1954, were innovative media experimenters testing the limits of a new medium. When they began their inaugural broadcast of *See It Now* with the trick of projecting side-by-side screens of the Brooklyn Bridge and the Golden Gate in the control room simultaneously, they were using cutting-edge technology to put the images immediately before viewers (Edwards 106). In March and April of 1954, Murrow and Friendly brilliantly strung together a series of broadcasts in which they placed McCarthy center-stage, while Murrow remained outside the frame and commented on the representation. He thus reduced his opponent to the object of his own more authoritative discourse, literally making him look small. In these broadcasts, Murrow is not simply a “talking head,” but a master of intermediality, fluidly shifting from one medium to another, running segments of film and commenting on them, playing a bit of reel-to-reel audio tape, then turning to a pile of newspapers and reading from various stories against McCarthy.⁹ In other words, it is more apt to compare Murrow, not to a knight errant, be it Lancelot or Quixote, but to Cervantes himself, debunking McCarthy’s ridiculous pretension to hero status. The equivalent today of this inventiveness is not to be found in broadcast or cable news, but online outlets like *BuzzFeed*, *Upworthy*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Slate*, which compete with social media sites by bringing together large numbers of freelance journalists and unpaid amateur commentators alongside their regular staff writers. *The Newsroom*, however, in the episodes where it deals with Occupy Wall Street and the crowd-sourcing of news in the Boston Marathon bombing (Season Two, episode four, and Sea-



Fig. 1. Ben Shahn, Ed Murrow Slaying the Dragon of McCarthy, 1955. Brush drawing.

son Three, episode one), sides resolutely with traditional approaches to vetting stories within a hierarchal, corporate structure. Though making a pretense of advocating civic engagement, Sorkin, like his characters, is leery of the lack of expertise or accountability of the masses of smartphone users who are shaking up established channels for sourcing news. Fascination with the Murrow versus McCarthy “clash of titans” fuels an underlying individualist bias that cuts

across political and ideological differences to unite us *against* unity and *for* individuation and fragmentation, no matter what our political persuasion. In what amounts to an impassioned plea to preserve the person-to-person connection with the anchor-man, that is, the man who anchors our imaginations to the world, *The Newsroom* reinforced for millions of simultaneous viewers the paradoxical fantasy C&E term the “radicalization of individual possession”: “Our mediology promises the world to you personally, neatly wrapped in an individualized version of reality: Your World, Your Resource, Your Reality!” (219).

The metonymical substitution of a strong-willed, courageous newscaster for the cumulative debunking impact of the medium itself is similarly enacted, as we saw in Charlie Skinner’s lapidary phrase, for the case of Cronkite and Vietnam.¹⁰ It’s a classic Freudian instance of declaring oneself cured while giving up only the symptom, not the neurosis. Instead of recognizing the truth, we fetishize the truth-teller, avoiding the profounder revelations that the anti-Communist witch hunts are baseless or the war in Vietnam has spiraled into chaos, which would undermine faith in America’s Messianic role in the world (“mission to civilize”). *Don Quixote* remains paradigmatic of this metonymy: a work whose ridiculous anti-hero comes to stand for the very heroism Cervantes was mocking. Although enshrined in *Man of La Mancha*, this misrecognition is hardly unique to the United States; it is actually typical of the reception of Cervantes’s satire for the last two centuries. This should help us see that American “extremism in the defense of liberty” is not the “exceptionalism” we are told, but simply an extension of the same nineteenth-century European individualism that gave rise to the Romantic approach to Don Quixote in the first place. The result in the journalistic context is the magnification of the heroic authority of the newscaster, onto whom is now directed the reverence withdrawn from the debunked heroic fighters (McCarthy, the soldiers in Vietnam). This is the source of the aura McAvoy claims was bestowed on the news anchors of the past, “men who were revered.”

The Cold War is the era he idealizes as the time when Murrow and later Cronkite were supposedly keeping the “greatest country in the world” so well informed. We were so well informed, indeed, that we were unaware of covert CIA operations in Guatemala, Iran, Chile, and Afghanistan, to name only a few of the best-known . . . now. During that same period, interestingly, a less naïve approach to Don Quixote flourished in the United States, one that positioned the mad knight more radically as an oppositional figure. It flourished, that is, until it was quashed by *Man of La Mancha*, a product of the same culture industry that has now given us the rehashing of the empty, idealist Quixotism we find in *The Newsroom*. In the 1950s and 1960s, a number of blacklisted or otherwise marginalized writers and filmmakers created satirical depictions of their cultural and political realities using Don Quixote to challenge the status quo. Orson Welles, Waldo Salt, Harold L. “Doc” Humes, and Bruce

Baillie worked on film adaptations that used Cervantine tropes and techniques to mock such social and political ills as the conventionality of the Hollywood film industry, the “inquisitorial” tactics of the House Un-American Activities Committee, the Vietnam War, the repression of the civil rights of Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans, and “sellout” cultural workers who let themselves be bribed by cushy academic jobs into collusion with the powers-that-be.¹¹ Writers including Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and, of course, John Kennedy Toole deployed quixotic imagery, allusions, and paradigmatic characters to ridicule the social conformity of the time.¹² Cervantes was ubiquitous in those years. Not one, but two literary magazines called *Quixote* were started. Between 1952 and 1954, Artist David Smith did a series of Quixote-inspired drawings and one sculpture, which have been studied by Ana Laguna. Robert Lowell recognized the literary portraits Norman Mailer penned of the two of them at the March on the Pentagon in *The Armies of the Night* as a comic reimagining of Quixote and Sancho (Lowell 166). The counterculture had half-jokingly taken up Don Quixote’s nonconformity as a mock-heroic version of its own rejection of prevailing values.¹³

In the midst of all this ferment, Dale Wasserman found a way of harnessing the energy swirling around Cervantes’s masterpiece, while taking the political edge off to make it more palatable for the skittish Cold War mainstream. In 1965, his *Man of La Mancha* debuted in Greenwich Village, popularizing a literally incurable, romantic Quixote whose abstract, empty idealism had no progressive teeth. Traction with the Real was deliberately bowdlerized, with the loss to be lamented later! But before the musical opened, a curious incident took place that with hindsight is illustrative of the whole process of co-opting and defanging a work that had served, for a decade or more, as an engine for literary and cinematic experimentation, social satire, and political parody. At the urging of his producer, Wasserman first tried working with poet W. H. Auden on the libretto for *Man of La Mancha*. The two men could not agree on anything, not least the ending, since to Auden the idea of Don Quixote dying without recovering his sanity was anathema. Beyond this, however, the tone of Auden’s proposed lyrics was all wrong. Wasserman wanted a hit, and Auden gave him a Brechtian confrontation between the literary classic and contemporary reality. He took advantage of Don Quixote’s encounter with a group of traveling players (which Wasserman was later to drop entirely) to bring the house lights up with Sin, Death, and Folly on stage, and have them directly badger and cajole the audience about the fast pace of contemporary life with its distractions: Benzedrine, TV, radio, automobiles, particle physics, psychoanalysis, juke boxes, and income tax. Though Wasserman acknowledges in his memoir *The Impossible Musical* that this work was “truly brilliant,” he also knew “it would absolutely destroy *Man of La Mancha*.” In fact, he suspected Auden of deliberately attempting to subvert the project

(Wasserman 84–94). He gave the poet “the pink slip,” as he put it, and hired Joe Darion as lyricist instead. At that moment, the reception of *Don Quixote* in the United States swerved. The countercultural energy it had attracted was siphoned off to fuel the success of one of the most popular musicals of all time, and we were peddled a toothless Cold War version of Cervantes as a defender of freedom of thought and speech but not of action, the inventor of a harmless, isolated dreamer always available to “inspire” us with his hapless but loveable idealism. This Quixote, whose antics we watch with indulgent condescension without recognizing any consequences for our own actions, is the one Sorkin appropriates for Charlie, MacKenzie, Will, Jim, and the whole Atlantis team to model themselves on, committed as they are to a journalistic “ideal.”

Through this empty Quixotism stripped of any upshot for *praxis*, *The Newsroom* positions the spectator in an endlessly reproduced hall of mirrors between a mere succession of events on one side, and an unwavering “commitment to truth” on the other, whose only point of contact with each other is our bewildered contemplation. As Cesare Schotzko points out:

Sorkin’s *Newsroom* creates the perfect mirror for the alienated and subjected viewer by maintaining the façade of privileging the ideal over the commodity, even as that ideal presents itself, like the reality so easily re-presented and therefore re-created on the show, and like the audiences who are witnesses to it, as eminently reproducible. (152)

This corresponds to C&E’s “major strategy” of baroque *desengaño* (disillusionment), whereby we are disabused of our naïve acceptance of illusory appearances in a manner that superficially feels empowering, while a masculine presence beyond representation (God, the King) serves as the ground of our knowledge. The major strategy of the Baroque reassured early modern subjects in the first crisis of inflationary media that the King would provide human, this-worldly justice, and God would back it up with the heavenly variety. The current version of the strategy props up the credibility of a patriarchal figure (Murrow or McCarthy, Sorkin or Trump, it matters little) that reassures us that the products we joyfully consume without ceasing are justly meted out.¹⁴ In fact, this version of the major strategy pervades all of Sorkin’s work. Its trope is the “behind-the-scenes” look at power and representation, which rhetorically claims to be peeling away the mask, putting *us* where the action is, so *we* can see and feel what it is really like to be in, say, the network control room or the Oval Office. The jolt of empowerment this provides in *The Newsroom* is heightened by the use of real news stories from just one to two years before the episodes aired: the Deepwater Horizon explosion, the Gabby Giffords shooting, the cap-

ture and killing of Bin Laden, the 2012 election, the Casey Anthony trial, and so on. But these events are over and done with, so all that remains is to watch how, after the fact, it turns out the ACN team “already” reported those stories. In *The West Wing*, which arguably remains Sorkin’s greatest success, the famous “talk and walk” tracking shots gave audiences the gratifying sensation of being inside the halls of power, but their vertiginous twists and turns ultimately only mirrored the labyrinthine workings of the consumption-production cycle in which we are caught, the cycle that has become the substance of our lives. Feeding our national hero worship of the Commander-in-Chief (which *is* a fantasy of absolute power, admit it!), *The West Wing* may have done as much as Bush’s expansion of executive power or the dysfunctional Congress to make autocratic rule less unattractive to voters. Painful as it may be to admit it to ourselves, the desire to have the voice of a trustworthy white male guiding our understanding of the world is at bottom not much different from the desire to have a powerful white male making the decisions that protect “our way of life”—a way of life to which we know, in the larger scheme of things, we are not really entitled. In the last analysis, the collective yearning for a strong TV anchorman Sorkin amplifies via his Quixo-journalism is a similar yearning to the one that led nearly sixty-three million people to cast their votes for Donald J. Trump because they hoped he would be a strong leader.

In the last section of *Medialogies*, C&E proclaim the author of *Don Quixote* and *El retablo de las maravillas* (The Stage of Wonders) as one of their pantheon of “defenders of being,” that is, one of those who practice the minor strategy of drawing attention to the frame to critically explore how representation is constructed (166–168). Finally, they suggest replacing the J of WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?) with a C: What Would *Cervantes* Do? (215) In the situation in which we find ourselves today, Cervantes, despite Sorkin’s professed admiration for his work in the online interview he gave the website *America Loves Spanish*, would most assuredly not do *The Newsroom*. Where broadcast journalism is concerned, the minor strategy of interrogating the frame was brilliantly enacted decades ago under the direction of Sidney Lumet in *Network* (1976), with an Oscar-winning screenplay by Paddy Chayefsky. Like Will McAvoy, the protagonist of that film, Howard Beale (Peter Finch), is a television news anchor who becomes fed up with all the “bullshit” and transforms himself, in this case into a “Prophet of the Airways.” The mantra he teaches his audience to repeat, “I’m mad as hell and I’m not going to take this anymore” became a late twentieth-century catchphrase. When powerful media magnate Arthur Jensen (Ned Beatty) chooses Beale to proclaim his message of the ascendancy of global capital and the decline of democracy and the nation state (“The world is a business”), Beale asks, “Why me?” as if he were assuming there must be some unique quality to his individual subjectivity that renders him worthy of the honor. “Because you are on television, dummy,” Jensen explains. It is the

power of the medium that counts, not the self-deluded Quixote who happens to sit in front of the camera. But Beale's new prophesies so depress viewers that the show's exasperated producers finally assassinate him on air. Unlike *The Newsroom*, *Network* satirizes the entire enterprise of TV news and its blurring of the line between reality and representation. Beale is a true madman, much closer to Cervantes's Don Quixote than McAvoy could ever be. In an interesting convergence, however, Murrow is evoked repeatedly here, too. Beale and his lifelong friend, fellow newscaster-turned-TV-executive Max Schumacher (William Holden), reminisce repeatedly about their glory days at CBS when they were part of Murrow's team. Though they regard that era with nostalgia, the young producer Diana Christensen (Faye Dunaway), with her bizarre projects of paying terrorist organizations to commit criminal acts and film themselves doing it, makes it clear that the business of the News Division now is entertainment, not some old-fashioned notion of keeping the electorate informed. With its concern with articulation of viewers' rage and invention of reality TV *avant la lettre*, *Network* makes it clear there was never a time when television was not yet in the grip of inflated media; more than any other medium, more even than the internet, it was television that ushered us into our current era.

A final example of the minor strategy applied to television news is the opening sequence of Woody Allen's *Bananas*, in which real-life sportscasters Don Dunphy and Howard Cosell provide play-by-play commentary on the assassination of the president of a fictional Latin American country, San Marcos, whose death is sufficiently foretold for a camera crew to be on the scene to chronicle it:

Don Dunphy: Good Afternoon. Wide World of Sports is in the little republic of San Marcos, where we're going to bring you a live, on-the-spot assassination. They're going to kill the president of this lovely Latin American country, and replace him with a military dictatorship.

And after the shots have been fired,

Howard Cosell: This reporter is going to get to him, if he can through this mob, for one last word before he expires. [...] Would you people let me through, this is American television! American television! (*Bananas*)

The undecidability of whether the media only represent reality or constitute it is here presented in a disarmingly playful fashion few have mastered as

well as Cervantes. And the unasked, unanswered question of how the Americans know ahead of time: is it due to CIA involvement, perhaps? Nothing is spelled out, and we are left, as Cervantes would have done, to wonder. It is no coincidence that Allen and Mickey Rose adapted the screenplay for *Bananas* from a novel by Richard Powell titled *Don Quixote, U.S.A.* This wickedly destabilizing sequence is merely the prologue to a biting satire on the Cold War construction of political alignments and the manipulation of public opinion in the 1960s: the Cuban Revolution, Bay of Pigs, and the Chicago Eight. Indeed, the FBI end up accusing Allen's character Fielding Mellish of "conspiring to overthrow the U.S. government from without *and* from within," confounding the frame of the nation itself and humorously throwing into question the distinction on which all patriotism rests. Today, the satirists of our own time who practice the minor strategy continue the tradition of interrogating the journalistic construction of reality through humorous pseudo-documentary across many formats: Sasha Baron-Cohen, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, John Oliver, Michael Moore, Key and Peele, and now, Alec Baldwin, Kate McKinnon, and Melissa McCarthy, among others I am forgetting or don't know about yet. What would Cervantes do during the Trump presidency? The thing he did so very well, that gets so easily under the skin of the powerful: Mock on!

Notes

1. Good intentions are a hallmark of Sorkin's work, which can be viewed as one big civics lesson delivered to the American public in true Horatian *delectando pariterque monendo* (delighting and instructing at the same time) style. Viewed as a whole, two aspects stand out in his work for theater, film, and television over the last three decades: an interest in grappling with big themes of public life, and a consistent behind-the-scenes approach. Often the subject matter is overtly political, as in *The American President*, *The West Wing*, or *Charlie Wilson's War*; but there is also a sustained interrogation of old and new media—*The Farnsworth Invention*, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, *The Social Network*, *Steve Jobs*, *Sports Night*. In his own work, then, Sorkin has carved out for the screenwriter a public role not unlike the one his journalist alter-ego, Will McAvoy, aspires to play as a TV news anchorman.
2. Did Aaron Sorkin compile these statistics or invent them? The most recent numbers I could find online confirm the overall picture—if anything the United States now ranks lower in many areas than this. One glaring exception is infant mortality, where the United States in 2010 ranked, not 178th, but forty-third according to the United Nations Population Division's 2015 revision of *World Population Prospects* (206-215). Another area where McAvoy exaggerates is defense, where the United States in

2010, when he was supposed to have said this, was of course first, but only spent as much as the next eighteen combined, sixteen of whom are allies (<http://www.rickety.us/2011/06/2010-defense-spending-by-country/>).

3. This is not the place to rehearse the details of Habermas's model of the public sphere and the critiques to which it has been subjected ever since the ink was dry on his 1962 treatise. I discuss these matters in relation to the equivalent institutional structure in seventeenth-century Spain in my essay "The Baroque Public Sphere."
4. The Milo Radulovich story first ran in October 1953. Murrow and Friendly had been looking for a story that showed McCarthyism's technique of establishing guilt by association in a negative light, and "The Case Against Lt. Milo Radulovich" was such an obvious miscarriage of justice that it fit the bill perfectly (Friendly, 13–14). As Doherty points out, this first episode avoided even mentioning the Senator by name (169). Annie Lee Moss eventually turned out to actually be a communist, but from Murrow's point of view that was beside the point—it was the McCarthy committee's railroading of her that counted (Doherty 180–184, Edwards 117).
5. Perhaps realizing he was no match for the suave Murrow on camera, McCarthy tried to send them a young William F. Buckley, Jr, as a substitute, but Murrow told him the invitation was not transferable (Bayley 197).
6. Fried emphasizes that by 1954 McCarthy was "a Republican problem" (254). His account of the Senator's political downfall barely mentions Murrow (283). As Frances Stonor Saunders makes clear in her book on the CIA's cultural operations, the eclipse of McCarthyism actually enhanced the respectability in the United States and abroad of the anti-Communist cause (190–212).
7. Some have tried to write a balanced account, while others have indulged the myth and still others tried to debunk it. Bayley insists that Murrow's attack on McCarthy came "late," when he was already vulnerable and had been criticized by many journalists both on television and in the newspapers (193–95). Campbell has rejected the myth of Murrow's single-handed defeat of McCarthy more firmly than anyone, including it as one of his ten most misreported stories in the history of American journalism (45–67). Yet Persico makes a valid point when he insists on the importance of the medium of television itself: "Murrow's contribution to the defeat of the demagogue was that he had had the courage to use television against McCarthy. He had taken a young medium, skittish over controversy, and plunged it into the hottest controversy of that era. His act demonstrated, for the first time on a grand scale, the awesome power of the medium for good or evil . . . Brave voices raised against McCarthy in the past in newspapers and over radio had faded for lack of amplification. But Murrow's presence, the voice, the demeanor, the authority, harnessed to this new phenomenon, achieved extraordinary magnification and penetration. March 9, 1954, did not mark the end of Joe McCarthy, but it can be counted the beginning of the end" (393). Kendrick also emphasizes it was the *medium* that vanquished McCarthy as much as Murrow: "His ratings had dropped. He was through" (71). Of course, all of this is tantamount to saying that Murrow's defeat of McCarthy was a real illusion, or an illusory reality, that is,

precisely what we recognize now as television's stock in trade.

8. Doherty, for example, titles the relevant chapter of *Cold War, Cool Medium*, "Edward R. Murrow Slays the Dragon of Joseph McCarthy" (161–188). Shogan's chapter on Murrow is even more pointedly titled "St. Ed and the Dragon" (88–114).
9. These broadcasts have been the subject of many discussions by Murrow's biographers, historians of television, and chroniclers of McCarthyism's rise and fall. Though Murrow received awards and recognition for his courageous stand, Bayley cites several who pointed out that his methods were, in their way, as manipulative as those of the demagogue he was attack. He quotes Jack Gould writing in the *New York Times* on March 14, 1954, describing it as "a masterly performance," but worrying in the same breath about the power the new medium had already acquired: "What if the camera and the microphone should fall into the hands of a reckless and demagogic commentator?" (Bayley 200) The Murrow-McCarthy episodes of *See It Now* are currently all available on YouTube where all may watch for themselves and judge their effectiveness.
10. That television galvanized opposition to the Vietnam War is a truism already acknowledged by LBJ in 1968 (Mandelbaum 157). Yet Mandelbaum has argued that the idea that television ended the war is a myth. Myth or no, the Pentagon believes it, and now makes every effort to control media representations of its wars.
11. All of these film projects remained unfinished except Bruce Baillie's pioneering, little-known experimental film *Quixote* (1965–1967). Baillie has uploaded *Quixote* to YouTube.
12. As he explains in a letter to Ginsberg of November 30, 1957, Kerouac was reading *Don Quixote* while writing *The Dharma Bums*. The Counter-Culture hero of that novel, Japhy Ryder, is a Quixote-figure who simultaneously wants to revive Transcendentalism and popularize Buddhism as part of his "great rucksack revolution" (73). Dozens of allusions to Cervantes are scattered across the decades in Ferlinghetti's writing, mixing with his interest in Spain and Latin America. Elsewhere I have made the case for Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces* as a book modeled first and foremost on *Don Quixote* ("Quixote Gumbo" 29–37).
13. These and other instances are the subject of my forthcoming articles "Quixo-Nation" and "Surviving the Blacklist: Waldo Salt's *Don Quixote*," as well as my current book project, tentatively titled *Counterculture Quixotes*.
14. Lest my pairing of Sorkin with Trump in this context seem unfair, read his unabashedly patriarchal open letter to his wife and daughter after Trump's electoral victory, published by *Vanity Fair*.

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