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## Aaron Sorkin's *The Newsroom*: One-Sided Politics Will Not Save Us From Politics

Trevor Burrus | 7.26.12

Aaron Sorkin's new HBO show *The Newsroom* is dishing out and [receiving](#) a lot of criticism. *The Newsroom* is Sorkin's latest attempt to cleanse the demons from our national character through fast-talking characters fighting for their principles. This time, however, rather than just obliquely commenting on the political fights of the day through thinly veiled metaphors, Sorkin's characters deal with political events of the recent past. In the pilot episode, Jeff Daniels's character, a mundane and middle-of-the-road newscaster, lets loose his spleen upon an innocent college student who asks him why America is the greatest country on Earth. Daniels [rants](#) on America's fallen status but fondly remembers its great past. In the wake of his outburst, he's rebranded as a no-nonsense truth-speaker who will confront the powers that be -- a supposed return to the glory days of Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite. In the latter half of the pilot, the newsroom accepts the challenge of "speaking truth to power" and exposes the alleged corporate malfeasance that led to the BP oil spill.

Most recently, *The Newsroom* has taken on the Tea Party, attacking the Koch brothers by name, as well as the Cato Institute, the Institute for Justice (IJ), and Heritage. In this [clip](#), the characters discuss Cato's and IJ's amicus briefs on behalf of Citizens United. Jeff Daniels's character then misstates the holding of *Citizens United* -- the case did not hold that corporations can donate directly to political candidates -- and another character badly misquotes from the Institute for Justice's [brief](#). According to her, the Institute for Justice argued that "finance laws prohibiting unlimited corporate contributions trump the First Amendment." This poorly written line not only misstates IJ's brief, it actually seems like IJ is supporting limits on campaign spending. Actual quote from the brief: "The problem lies in allowing the logic of campaign-finance laws to trump the First Amendment." Like all of his projects, Sorkin's characters are prone to flowery orations. Unfortunately, this time the Sorkin's words, including the sloppy mischaracterization of IJ's argument, were shamefully taken nearly verbatim from a ThinkProgress blog post written by the extremely partisan Lee Fang (compare the characters' words with Fang's words [here](#)).

That fact merely underscores the folly in Sorkin's obvious goals for *The Newsroom*. If he wants to lambaste the mainstream media for no longer providing hard-hitting coverage that "speaks truth to power" and to lament the fallen nature of modern, partisan journalism, then I would suggest to Mr. Sorkin that, in the future, he should not outsource his thinking and language to one politically committed blog. At the very least, he should ensure that his characters do not misstate the central holding of the case they are attacking. If he wants to portray smart, honest, hard-working people turning journalism back into an antacid for our partisan-induced ulcers, then he should make more of an effort to be a non-partisan researcher.

Sorkin is coming from a long tradition in American political thought which holds that a well-functioning republic requires virtuous citizens. Those citizens must be informed and high-minded, not prone to meaningless squabbles or the pursuit of naked self-interest. As John Adams, perhaps the foremost proponent of virtue among the Founding Fathers, said, "Liberty can no more exist without virtue and independence than the body can live and move without a soul."

Sorkin is also within a more recent tradition in American politics: A utopian pining for the days when D.C. was not deeply divided along partisan lines. There was once a time when Washington got things done, so the story goes. There was a time when parties didn't thwart the proposals of an opposition president merely because he was on the other side. There was a time when representatives, opinion-leaders, and ordinary people from both sides reached across the aisle and went to the same social functions, the same movies, and watched the same news. Those days are gone, but perhaps, *The Newsroom* tells us, the right combination of good-hearted elites could rescue our national narrative from the warring factions and give it purpose and direction.

It's all a little smug, as many have pointed out. Perhaps D.C. politics has become more divided. Perhaps we are becoming a red vs. blue country. What is never mentioned in these increasingly common lamentations, however, is the simple question, "What else would you expect?" Over the past 50 years, politics has crept into nearly every area of our lives, affecting our most personal and consequential decisions. Our political parties no longer fight over simple regulations of interstate commerce and tariffs, we fight, on a *national* level, over the nature of American health care and how we will educate our children. How could these fights not be schismatic, vicious, and underhanded?

Football teams didn't exist before the game, and fans didn't exist before the teams. The teams fight over zero-sum gains and there can only be one Super Bowl champion. Thus, the players and the fans react accordingly. If the stakes were even higher, however, if Ohio State and Michigan had more to lose than simple bragging rights, then the players and fans would certainly ramp up their partisan loyalties, their vicious name-calling, and their parking lot brawls. Put simply, increased partisanship is a direct result the increased the scope and importance of politics in our daily lives.

None of this should be surprising, yet the collective head-scratching over where our politics went awry continues. Sorkin's plea for elites to create a national narrative that brings us together is no more coherent than his plea that a brilliant, charming, Nobel-laureate, polyglot president can best fix our national crises. America doesn't need better elites, we need fewer of them.