

**Rethinking the Informed Citizen in an Age of Hybrid Media Genres:  
*Tanner '88, K-Street, and the Fictionalization of News***

By

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ABSTRACT

A close reading of two television shows, *K-Street* and *Tanner '88*, was performed to examine how one might become informed about real-life political news by viewing entertainment programs that combine fiction with actual current political events, issues, and figures. In his book *The Good Citizen*, Michael Schudson claims that mere factual recall does not necessarily indicate that one is “informed”, but rather an “informed citizen” is one who actively *reads* the “information environment”. According to Schudson, however, “the obligation of citizens to know enough to participate intelligently in governmental affairs [should] be understood as a monitorial obligation” where one *scans* rather than reads the “information environment”.

By indexing themselves as “hybrid”, programs such as *K-Street* and *Tanner '88* might encourage skepticism and therefore scanning of the “information environment”, unlike “news programs” (i.e. “The News”) that frame themselves as accurate and complete. In addition, fictional narrative has the power to foster viewers’ personal investment in particular characters and, in this way, could provide additional incentive for active information gathering by creating narratives where characters stand to be directly affected by actual current political events and issues. Neither *Tanner '88* nor *K-Street* appear to have harnessed this potential, however.

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## Introduction

“Comedy programs are increasingly becoming regular sources of news for younger Americans, and are beginning to rival mainstream news outlets within this generation. Today, 21% of people under age 30 say they regularly learn about the campaign and the candidates from comedy shows like *Saturday Night Live* and the *Daily Show*, twice as many as said this four years ago (9%)”<sup>1</sup>

-- Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, January 2004

This past January, the “Pew Research Center for the People and the Press” released the results of a nationwide survey intended to gauge how Americans learn about political news. The results are based on phone interviews conducted between the dates of December 19, 2003 and January 4, 2004 of 1,506 adults, 18 years of age or older. Of all the findings, the above statistic is arguably the one that has most widely been considered a cause for concern and therefore garnered the most attention in the press. The results as interpreted by Pew in their “Summary of Findings” can be misleading, however. To claim that “comedy programs are increasingly becoming regular sources of news for younger Americans” and “beginning to rival mainstream news outlets” can be understood as suggesting that these individuals are turning to comedy programs *instead of* mainstream news outlets, *for* their news. This interpretation is only reinforced by the following statement, found in the very first paragraph of Pew’s summary:

“...young people...are *abandoning* mainstream sources of election news and increasingly citing alternative outlets, including comedy shows such as *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live*, as *their source* for election news.”<sup>2</sup> (My italics.)

“*Their source*”, in this case, can easily be read as “their *primary source*”, and when paired with the claim that young people are “*abandoning* mainstream sources of election

news”, this statement implies that viewers are turning to comedy shows, *instead of* mainstream sources, with the intention of learning about current political developments. Yet, while the results of this survey do indicate that more young people are learning about political news from comedy shows, the survey itself is not designed to determine whether one watches such shows with the *intention* of doing so. This is demonstrated by the actual survey question asked to respondents, which reads as follows:

“For each item that I read, please tell me how often, if ever, you LEARN SOMETHING about the PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN or the CANDIDATES from this source. Regularly, Sometimes, Hardly Ever, or Never?”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, respondents who answer positively to this question in regard to comedy shows are merely claiming that such programs serve, at times, as *a* source for election news, but by no means as *their only* source, nor one that they *intentionally* turn to for news. Despite this fact, it has not been uncommon, in my experience, for discussions regarding the results of this particular survey to focus, not on the fact that people are *learning* about news from comedy shows, but rather on concern over the notion that people are turning to such shows *for* news. Even those, such as the *New Yorker*’s Elizabeth Kolbert, who appear to correctly understand this distinction, still describe the finding that “21% of people under age 30 say they regularly learn about the campaign and the candidates from comedy shows” as “disconcerting” when paired with the decline in those citing the nightly network news and daily newspapers as a source of campaign news, not only among young people, but across all demographics.<sup>4</sup> As Jon Stewart, the host of *The Daily Show*, astutely points out, however:

“...newspapers are not the only medium. They used to be. I’m sure there was a time when they were saying, “You know, only half the people get their news from town criers that used to.” Technology has moved on and there are an incredible number of resources and avenues to get your news from...The amount of information that people are getting now is so overwhelmingly larger.”<sup>5</sup>

Sure enough, the other “non-traditional” source cited by respondents that saw a marked increase since 2000 was the Internet. Unlike comedy shows, however, Pew did think to ask respondents if they have gone online “to get news” or have simply “come across” campaign news while having gone “online for a different purpose”.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, I believe it is necessary to make a distinction between “news content” and “news programs” (or “The News”), for while a viewer might *come across* “news content” while viewing a comedy show, it does not necessarily follow that the viewer considers the show to be “The News.” On the other hand, the survey does ask whether individuals who claim they learn from shows such as Jay Leno, David Letterman, *Saturday Night Live*, or *The Daily Show*, “ever learn things about the candidates or the presidential campaign” that they “haven’t heard *before*.” According to the survey, 40 percent of those who claim they learn from comedy shows, say they have learned something new; this up from 30 percent in May 1992.<sup>7</sup> (Of course, the term “news” itself implies that the information encountered is, in fact, “new”, or “previously unheard.”<sup>8</sup> In this sense, not all information presented by “The News”, will necessarily be “news” to all viewers.)

Therefore, to be precise, an increase in the number of respondents who claim to learn about the campaign from comedy shows, coupled with a decrease in the number of respondents citing mainstream sources, does not necessarily indicate that individuals are

*abandoning* mainstream sources *for* comedy shows, but merely that more people appear to be encountering news during comedy shows! Consequently, one could interpret these findings as an indication that comedy shows are increasingly choosing to focus on current political topics and therefore it is more likely that one might learn from them. In reference to the popular music magazine *Rolling Stone*, Jon Stewart states: “Look, nobody is sitting down with *Rolling Stone* saying, you know, “I really need to learn more about what’s going on in our world, so I’ve gotta pick up a *Rolling Stone*. [But] if you don’t ground something in a certain relevance, ultimately it becomes unsatisfying to read.”<sup>9</sup> One can see how Stewart might apply this same philosophy to television and production of his *The Daily Show*. Not only might viewers find the show more “satisfying”, but according to Stewart, “it’s more fulfilling for us to do a show about things we care about, so that’s why we infuse some news and issues in there.”<sup>10</sup>

Of course, the one question that Pew doesn’t ask that would help confirm this potential trend is: “How often, if ever, do you watch comedy shows?” Based on the response to this question, one could determine whether, over time, more people who actually watch these programs are *learning* from them. Nonetheless, the notion that individuals can learn about political news from programs other than “news programs” remains an implication of Pew’s findings and is one that I plan to address in this thesis.

Pew goes on to conclude in their summary that:

“...people who regularly learn about the election from *entertainment programs* - whether young or not - are *poorly informed* about campaign developments.”<sup>11</sup> (My italics)



First of all, it's unclear how Pew defines "entertainment programs" here. Previously, they had referred only to "comedy programs", such as *Saturday Night Live* or *The Daily Show*, and to "late-night talk shows", such as Jay Leno or David Letterman. Given that the previous sentence in the summary reads: "For Americans under 30, these comedy shows are now mentioned almost as frequently as newspapers and evening network news programs as regular sources for election news," it appears as though Pew has simply substituted the term "entertainment" for "comedy".<sup>12</sup> However, "entertainment" typically refers to more than just "comedy". Does Pew intend to include "late-night talk shows" among "entertainment programs" as well? How about morning TV shows, or for that matter, TV News magazines? As I will discuss later in this paper, not only is such language unclear within Pew's "Summary of Findings", but throughout the numerous ways that media producers frame their representations of political events, issues, and figures. In particular, I plan to consider how such framing might affect viewers' interpretation of such shows.

Second, to determine how "informed" a respondent is, Pew asked the following questions:

"Now I want to ask you a few questions about some things that have been in the news about the presidential campaign recently. Not everyone will have heard of them. As I read each item, tell me if you have heard A LOT about it, SOMETHING about it, or NEVER HEARD about it.

- Al Gore's endorsement of Howard Dean
- Howard Dean's comment about wanting to win the votes of "guys with Confederate flags in their pickup trucks"

Do you happen to know which of the presidential candidates:

- Served as an Army General?
- Served as the Majority Leader in the House of Representatives?"<sup>13</sup>

As one might imagine, there exists some controversy over whether answers to such questions are a proper gauge of how “informed” an individual is about current political developments. As David Buckingham states in his book, *The Making of Citizens*:

“...recall should not be confused with comprehension; the fact that viewers may not be able to remember particular items of factual information does not necessarily mean that they did not understand, or that they did not learn from, what they saw.”<sup>14</sup>

Not only does Pew’s chosen approach privilege *recall* over *comprehension*, but it also makes assumptions about what *kind* of information is significant. It is the goal of this thesis to consider just what it means to be “informed” and whether one who obtains “news content” via an “entertainment program” can meet such criteria.

I plan to approach these questions via a close reading of two shows that have recently aired on cable television (in the midst of a presidential race). While neither are “comedy shows”, per se, both shows are certainly “entertainment programs” that, when originally aired, attempted to embed political “news content” within a fictional narrative. This, as opposed to programs such as *The Daily Show*, or *Saturday Night Live*’s “Weekend Update” which fictionalize current events and figures, but mimic the traditional “news program”. Even late-night talk-show monologues, which also contain a mixture of real and fabricated news, are essentially a variation of “reporting”. By examining how these shows are presented to viewers, comparing and contrasting them with other related programs and positioning them relative to the ongoing theoretical and popular discourse regarding citizenship and the convergence of news and entertainment, I hope to arrive at a better understanding of how “news content” might be incorporated into “entertainment programs” and just what it means to “learn” from such programs.

## The Informed Citizen and The News

“Apart from the election itself, the representative was the primary medium of communication between government and citizenry. Citizens, even voting citizens, were not expected to keep informed, to follow the news, to monitor government through a political party or an interest group, or in any other way to be in continuous communication with the government. They were to elect their representatives, go about their business, and make another judgment about their representatives at the next election...Even in the colonies, it was only after the Revolution that a second meaning of representation entered popular understanding, one that assumed legislators should keep the people informed of their work and that citizens should judge public servants on a continuing basis.”<sup>15</sup>

-- Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen*

According to Schudson, the current “ideal of the “informed citizen,” arose in the Progressive Era as part of a broad-gauge attack on the power of political parties.”<sup>16</sup> Up until this time, as he indicates above, popular understanding of political representation and citizenship in America had evolved quite dramatically from the 18<sup>th</sup> century when “politics and society operated by a practical ethic of deference and an assumption of social hierarchy.”<sup>17</sup> Even when Thomas Jefferson proposed a bill in 1778 calling for more general political education, his intention was to prevent “tyranny” by protecting “citizens against their own faulty judgments of character, but there was no suggestion that [such education] should positively induce them to greater interest or activity in public affairs.”<sup>18</sup> For Jefferson, “the whole of [ordinary citizens’] civic obligation was to recognize virtue well enough to be able to know and defeat its counterfeit.”<sup>19</sup> He “hoped schooling would achieve an “informed popular watchfulness.” But “informed” meant only informed about the character of candidates for public office.”<sup>20</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the United States saw the rise of the political party system, and with it “the highest level of citizen participation in electoral politics in our history.”<sup>21</sup>

However, to a degree, it appeared that deference had merely given way to voting based on blind party loyalty. Although parties were indeed successful in mobilizing political participation, this was largely encouraged through a “spoils system” of politics that manifested itself in practices ranging from “patronage”, where campaign workers were awarded government jobs upon a candidate’s election, to simply paying citizens for voting on election day. It was not until the end of the century that reform movements motivated to change such practices began to call for a voting citizen “more intelligent than loyal.”<sup>22</sup> “The model citizen, in the reform vision, would be disciplined enough to read” and “thinking enough to choose candidates with little or no party guidance.”<sup>23</sup>

According to Schudson, this new “informed citizen” was expected to be a “rational sifter and winnow of facts”.<sup>24</sup> The number of news sources have multiplied considerably since the Progressive Era, however, especially with the relatively recent emergence of cable television and the Internet. Instead, Schudson proposes:

“... that the obligation of citizens to know enough to participate intelligently in governmental affairs be understood as a monitorial obligation. Citizens can be monitorial rather than informed. Monitorial citizens scan (rather than read) the informational environment in a way so that they may be alerted on a very wide variety of issues for a very wide variety of ends and may be mobilized around those issues in a large variety of ways.”<sup>25</sup>

Television news typically discourages such “environmental surveillance” beyond the news program itself, however. In his essay “Attraction to Distraction: Live Television and the Public Sphere,” James Friedman explains how “the commodification of world

events and their use as lures to promote the news broadcast increasingly positions the show itself, rather than the information presented, as the product to be consumed.”<sup>26</sup> In trying to attract viewers, a news program is therefore inclined to present itself as “a complete package ready for consumption” and “capable of providing for all our information needs.”<sup>27</sup> Likewise, in *Representing Reality*, Bill Nichols describes how, “TV News shows frequently lead into commercial breaks with a teasing reference to the dramatic quality of a news item yet to come, but when the newscast concludes, effort is made to assure us that we have received all the news there is, for now, with no emotional loose ends yet to be resolved.”<sup>28</sup>

Nichols also observes that, “the news makes vicarious participation in the news *show* a higher priority than decision making and responsible action”.<sup>29</sup> According to Ian Connell, in his essay “Television News and the Social Contract”:

“television news...positions spectators as “onlookers” to a reality that is in and through this visual mode made to seem *out there*” and, in this way, addresses viewers as “uninvolved.”<sup>30</sup>  
“The implication in Connell’s model,” states Friedman, “is that, if these dominant practices were subverted through the elimination of current representational conventions, the relations between the viewer, broadcaster, and event would be significantly altered.”<sup>31</sup>

While the expressed aim of The News is to “inform” citizens, an “informed citizen”, according to Schudson, is one who engages in active “information gathering”.<sup>32</sup> However, by prioritizing the “news program”, as opposed to “news content”, and addressing the viewer as “uninvolved”, The News tends to discourage such “information gathering”, as well as the “scanning of the news environment” associated with

Schudson's "monitorial citizen". In the sections that follow, I will examine the way in which two particular "entertainment programs", *Tanner '88* and *K-Street*, present political "news content" to viewers and how such presentation might help foster viewers' fulfillment of their "monitorial" duty as citizens. Echoing David Buckingham's earlier warning regarding "factual recall", Schudson does admit that although monitorial citizens "are perhaps better informed than citizens of the past in that, somewhere in their heads, they have more bits of information...there is no assurance that they know at all what to do with what they know."<sup>33</sup> Therefore, in addition, I plan to consider how these shows might promote a better *understanding* of politics, as well.

## **Case Studies**

The first show I will look at is entitled *Tanner '88*, and originally aired on HBO during the 1988 Democratic presidential primary race. The show follows the campaign of a fictional candidate named Jack Tanner, from the announcement of his candidacy to the 1988 Democratic national convention. Directed by Robert Altman and written by "Doonesbury" creator, Garry Trudeau, *Tanner '88* was filmed, edited, and aired within mere days of each other in order to maintain its relevance to viewers. The show was unique in that Altman had actor Michael Murphy, who played Tanner, "campaign" literally right alongside the actual candidates, increasing the show's ability to feature actual politicians and events to various degrees. According to Altman, the fictional Tanner even succeeded in receiving 20, 000 votes in the actual 1988 election.<sup>34</sup> Since February 2004, the Sundance Channel has been re-airing the series, no doubt due, in part,

to the similarities between the current race and the one that took place in '88 (i.e. numerous Democratic candidates and a Bush in the White House.)

The second show I plan to focus on is entitled *K-Street* and originally aired in the Fall of 2003, also on HBO. The ten episode series was intended to provide a behind-the-scenes look at lobbying and political consulting in Washington D.C., via what the official *K-Street* website describes as an “experimental fusion of reality and fiction.”<sup>35</sup> *K-Street* stars real-life political consultants (and spouses) James Carville and Mary Matalin, as heads of a fictional political consulting firm called Bergstrom-Lowell.<sup>1</sup> In real life, Carville is credited with guiding Bill Clinton to the White House and was featured, along with George Stephanopoulos, in the documentary film *The War Room*, which chronicles Clinton’s 1992 presidential race. His wife, Matalin, formerly served as assistant to President George W. Bush and counselor to Vice President Dick Cheney. Filmed in and around Washington D.C., *K-Street*, like *Tanner* '88, incorporated current political issues and appearances by actual beltway insiders into a fictional narrative. According to director Steven Soderbergh, “*Tanner* was something we all watched when we started discussing the possibility of doing this show. All of us felt it was a terrific show and it was time to do something similar.”<sup>36</sup> Unlike *Tanner*, however, *K-Street* was reportedly largely improvised and featured fictional storylines that were not only aired soon after they were shot, but also *conceived* on a weekly basis. According to co-executive

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<sup>1</sup> “The name of the imaginary lobbying/consulting firm is Bergstrom-Lowell, which is clearly a reference to muckraking former *60 Minutes* producer (and occasional *Times* investigative pinch-hitter) Lowell Bergman, memorably portrayed by an over-the-top Al Pacino in *The Insider*.”(lowculture, September 30, 2003: <http://www.lowculture.com/archives/000048.html>.)

producer Henry Bean, once the topic was chosen, the writers “put together a loose structure and some dialogue for the actors, and the next two-and-a-half days [were] spent shooting mostly improvised scenes.”<sup>37</sup> Soderbergh refers to this approach as “real-time fiction.”<sup>38</sup>

In the next few pages, I will look at how these shows are framed, or “indexed”, for the viewer and how such framing might influence a viewer’s understanding of the show’s relationship to the historical, or “pro-filmic” world. Secondly, I will examine how *Tanner ’88* and *K-Street* combine “news content” and *fictional narrative* and how this might affect one’s understanding of current political developments. And lastly, I will consider factors that could potentially increase or decrease the likelihood that shows such as these might “inform” viewers about politics.

## INDEXING

“[Noel] Carroll writes that viewers usually know if the film they see is fiction or non-fiction because producers, writers, directors, distributors, and exhibitors index the film; they publicly identify it as fiction or nonfiction. The spectator’s response to the film generally depends on this indexing.”<sup>39</sup>

-- Carl Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*

In Gerard Genette’s book of the same name, *paratexts* are described as “those liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book, that form the complex mediation between book, author, publisher, and reader.”<sup>2</sup> Those cues located *within* the

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<sup>2</sup> Ironically, this description occurs within a summary paragraph located on the very first page of the copy of Genette’s *Paratexts* that I am currently using, with no indication as to who wrote it. I can only deduce from the fact that both Gerard Genette and Richard



book he refers to as “peritexts” and include such elements as the title, table of contents, and preface, as well as those “inserted into the interstices of the text”, such as chapter titles or notes. “Epitexts”, on the other hand, he describes as those cues “located outside the book, generally with the help of the media”, such as interviews and conversations printed in newspaper and magazine articles.<sup>40</sup> This notion of “paratexts” is one that I believe can also prove useful when considering how television shows are framed, or as Carl Plantinga states above, “indexed” for viewers.

Before I begin to examine the “peritexts” provided by *Tanner* '88 and *K-Street*, I must acknowledge that the only manner in which I have viewed *Tanner* '88 is on VHS tape as dubbed from a Laserdisc compilation of the series. Therefore, when I describe the show's peritexts, it is as provided in this format. I can only assume that when *Tanner* originally aired in 1988 it was accompanied by the same cues that I have encountered in my own viewing. As Genette points out, however, different editions of the same book can be framed differently and this certainly applies to when television shows are re-aired or compiled onto videotape or DVD. For example, the episodes of *Tanner* '88 currently being re-aired on the Sundance Channel are now accompanied by a one- to two-minute prelude, also directed by Altman and written by Trudeau. During these short segments, “the series’ three principals (Michael Murphy as Tanner, Pamela Reed as T.J. Cavanaugh, and *Sex and the City*'s Cynthia Nixon as Tanner's college-age daughter, Alex) reflect, in character, on the '88 campaign from the perspective of the present

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Macksey, who wrote the foreword included in this edition, are referred to within this paragraph in the third person, that the author of this paragraph is likely the translator, Jane E. Lewin.

day.”<sup>41</sup> Of course, this could potentially influence a viewer’s interpretation of the text. However, because I am speculating here on how *Tanner* may have been understood by viewers when it was originally aired, I will not be taking these new preludes into account. On the other hand, for *K-Street*, I am basing my evaluation on dubbed copies of the show as it was originally aired on HBO.

I must also acknowledge the fact that, unlike a book where peritexts occupy a *physical* location relative to the main body of the text, television shows are presented to viewers over *time*. When aired, television shows occupy particular “time slots” within what, for the most part, is now a non-stop schedule of programs on a particular channel. Therefore, one could claim that the shows or advertisements that precede or follow an airing of *Tanner*, for example, also serve as peritexts to any one particular episode. Genette, however, specifies that, “by definition, something is not a paratext unless the author or one of his associates accepts responsibility for it.”<sup>42</sup> Therefore, while it is valid to say that those programs that frame a particular show might affect one’s reading, my goal here is only to consider how viewers might read the show based on how it is indexed by its creators.

Also, I recognize that, just as a reader is not obligated to read the preface of a book, neither is a viewer obligated to watch the credits of a television show. In addition, unlike books, because television is broadcast, one is more likely to begin “reading” a television show partway through an episode, or partway through a series, with no way of learning what came before (that is, unless they succeed in catching re-aired episodes, obtain a

recorded copy, or happen to own a Digital Video Recorder.) For the sake of this study, however, I will follow Genette's example by choosing to approach these shows as if each episode has been viewed from beginning to end, in totality.<sup>43</sup>

### **PERITEXTS**

With all that said, I will now begin to look at how *Tanner* is indexed for viewers by first focusing on its "peritexts". The very first episode of *Tanner '88*, as I viewed it, begins with a card that reads "Voyager presents". (I can only assume that the standard HBO introduction accompanied the original airing, identifying the name of the show to follow and its rating.) We are then presented with a shot of the inside of a television control room where it appears a talk show is being produced. We can read on one of the monitors the title "Newsnine New Hampshire Close-Up", and see in another monitor, a man in a suit. Meanwhile, we hear a technician counting down as an announcer says: "This is WMUR-TV's *Newsnine New Hampshire Close-Up*, a weekly discussion of news and political events that affect New Hampshire." At this point, the camera begins to zoom in on a monitor as the man in a suit introduces himself as the host, Jack Heath, while a subtitle simultaneously appears on the monitor that reads: "Jack Heath; Newsnine". The camera then moves to an adjacent monitor where we are introduced to Jack Tanner, both on account of Heath's introduction and a similar subtitle that says: "Jack Tanner; Presidential Candidate." We are then presented with Heath's interview of Tanner via alternating shots of the control room, where we can see the talk show being screened on the monitors, and the very shots present on those monitors as if we're actually watching an episode of *Newsnine New Hampshire Close-Up* (which was, in fact, an actual program produced for WMUR and hosted by Jack Heath in 1988). The latter

shots include the typical news talk show conventions such as subtitles and reaction shots of the studio audience. (This tactic of switching between the primary camera responsible for capturing the overall narrative, and the shot as (would be) captured by a news camera that exists within this narrative is used throughout *Tanner '88* and is something that I will address later on.)

After Tanner fields a few questions from host, Heath, we suddenly begin to hear non-diegetic music (what will become the recurrent Tanner theme) and the scene changes to a shot outside the “New Hampshire Highway Hotel”. Only after the shot changes once again to what we can only assume is a room within that same hotel, are we presented with the title: “Tanner ’88: The Dark Horse”, followed by a list of names.<sup>3</sup> As the names are presented, the camera proceeds to wander around the room to reveal “Jack Tanner” campaign buttons and fast-food containers, among other things. We also overhear a number of people discussing campaign strategy for Tanner while, separately, a woman is talking on the phone to someone named “Jack”. Finally, after a number of names have gone by, we are presented with two credits that read: “Written by: Garry B. Trudeau” and “Directed by: Robert Altman”. Until this moment it would not have been inconceivable for viewers to think they were watching a documentary film.

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<sup>3</sup> Apparently, some versions of *Tanner '88* carry the alternate title: “*Tanner: “A political fable”*” which might affect one’s interpretation of the show considering, while the term fable can be understood to indicate mere fiction, it is not uncommon to use the term to describe a fictional story that someone can *learn* from, in the sense that it contains a “moral”.

As a comparison, I examined *The War Room*, the documentary film produced by R.J. Cutler that followed James Carville and George Stephanopoulos as they worked behind-the-scenes to guide Bill Clinton to the presidency in 1992. Again, although I viewed a DVD copy of this film and the case indicates that it is a documentary, this is information that would not be available to a viewer if the movie had aired on HBO, for example. Therefore, at this point, I am only taking into consideration what I see once I press “play” in the DVD menu.

The very first thing one sees is a number countdown with a man’s voiceover that says: “*The War Room*, Reel One, Print Master. Now.” The screen then cuts to credits that read as follows:

Pennebaker Associates, Inc. and  
Mc. Ettinger Films present

This is the equivalent of “Voyager presents” in *Tanner*, and in *K-Street*: “HBO presents”.

We then hear and see a fireworks display, over which it reads:

*The War Room*  
By Chris Hegedus / DA Pennebaker

The screen then cuts to a shot of a snowy field and we begin to hear non-diegetic music. The next shot is of a sign that reads: “Manchester, NH/ Home of the Presidential Primary”. This serves the purpose of placing the narrative in New Hampshire, as does the shot of the hotel sign in *Tanner*, not to mention the *Newsline New Hampshire Close-Up* show where Jack Heath and Tanner speak about the primary race. What follows are shots of various campaign signs in windows, on buildings, and in the hands of supporters, while the music continues to play and we are presented with the following credits:

With  
James Carville and George Stephanopoulos

Producers  
R.J. Cutler / Wendy Ettinger / Frazer Pennebaker

Associate Producer  
Cyclone Films

At this point the film cuts to a number of people discussing campaign strategy for Bill Clinton, not unlike the hotel room scene in *Tanner '88* where people are discussing campaign strategy for Tanner.

The first noticeable difference between *Tanner '88*, *K-Street*, and *The War Room*, is that *Tanner* makes use of what is called a “cold open”, a scene or scenes that occur before the main credits, while *The War Room* offers the main credits right at the beginning. *K-Street*, on the other hand, is quite unconventional in that it offers no main credits at all other than “HBO presents: *K-Street*.” Therefore, unlike *Tanner* which offers “Directed by” and “Written by” credits early on, it is not until the end of the first episode of *K-Street* that one receives any indication that the show is fictional. (As I will discuss later on, however, as the series progresses *K-Street* begins to feature more scenes and techniques that might signal to viewers that the show is fictional.) The following credits and disclaimer provided at the end are the most telling:

Directed by Steven Soderbergh

Starring  
Mary McCormack as Maggie Morris  
John Slattery as Tommy Flannegan  
Roger Guenveur Smith as Francisco Dupré

Script Supervisor: Jane Burke

The events and characters depicted in this motion picture are fictional, excluding only those persons portraying themselves. Any similarity of fictional characters depicted herein to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

One might compare *K-Street*'s unconventional credits and delayed claim of fictionality to that in Mitchell Block's 1975 faux-verité short film *No Lies*. As Bill Nichols states:

“Some feel cheated by the revelation. They have tendered a belief in the reality of a representation they should have treated as fiction, but this violation of trust is precisely the point. *No Lies* reflexively heightens our apprehension of the dynamic of trust that documentaries invite, and of the betrayals – of subjects, and of viewers – made possible by this very trust.”<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, the first episode of *K-Street* might have been interpreted as a documentary and provoked a similar reaction. I will discuss later how the hybrid presentation characteristic of both *Tanner* and *K-Street* might also promote a healthy skepticism of not only documentary, but *The News* as well.

On the other hand, while *The War Room* presents its credits in a conventional manner, nothing contained within them ever explicitly indicates that the film is non-fiction. While there is certainly an absence of “written by” or “directed by” credits, as well as any sign that those individuals who appeared were playing characters other than themselves, there also exists no claim that any of the dialogue or action captured on film is in fact a document of historical reality. The only way one might suspect that *The War Room* is a documentary on account of its credits would be if the viewer was already aware that DA Pennebaker is a documentary filmmaker, or that the other people listed are associated with documentaries. However, similarly, if one were aware already that “Michael Murphy” or “Pamela Reed”, two of the names listed after the title in *Tanner*, were in fact

the names of *actors*, this would have indicated to that viewer, prior to seeing the “Directed by” and “Written by” credits, that *Tanner ’88* could be fictional. In fact, if they also knew what Michael Murphy looked like, they may have suspected *Tanner* was fictional as soon as they saw him on screen. On the other hand, if a viewer was aware that WMUR, Channel Nine, is in fact a real channel in New Hampshire that, even today, airs a news talk show entitled *New Hampshire Close-Up*, that viewer may have been more likely to interpret what they were seeing as, perhaps, a behind-the-scenes documentary of a presidential candidate a la *The War Room*.

Genette refers to this kind of information as a “factual paratext”. Because such cues originate outside the central text, however, I will discuss these further when I consider those “epitexts” that I have observed for *Tanner* and *K-Street*. Before I do this, I first want to briefly address a second significant point of difference between the three works I have examined above, and that is “filming style.” In particular, I am referring to the use of the realist “shaky-camera” style that tends to signal the use of a handheld camera, which is often associated with cinema vérité (a sub-genre of “documentary” that, for some, has come to characterize “documentary” as a whole.)<sup>45</sup> According to Genette, “paratextual value may be vested in other types of manifestation” such as “the sometimes very significant typographical choices that go into the making of a book.”<sup>46</sup> “Filming style”, I believe, is an example of just such a significant “paratextual manifestation”, precisely because one might associate it with “documentary”. (Just *what* the term “documentary” might denote to a viewer is a different question, and one that I will soon consider.) All three works use the “shaky-camera” style to different degrees, whether



intentionally or not. *The War Room* does so for what appears to be the entire film. Much of *K-Street* is filmed in this style as well, but at times, and increasingly as the series progresses, we see shots that appear more traditional and smooth, like a typical fictional show. *Tanner*, on the other hand, is consistently filmed like traditional fiction, cutting to the “shaky-camera” style only on occasion. As Bill Nichols states:

“...just as the indexical quality of the image is no guarantee of its historical authenticity (only of the bond between image and what was present before the camera), so realist style may be less a guarantee of historical reality – that which always exists *elsewhere* – than of the historically real recording of a situation or event, whatever its status. Signs of presence – of recognizable people, places, and things, of familiar sounds and images; signs of incomplete control over what occurs or how it unfolds – imperfect framing, missing elements of action, loud background noises – such signs may be less evidence of the historical world than of the real recording of a world whose status as a representation remains open to question and debate.”<sup>47</sup>

All in all, one might interpret the hybrid use of “filming style” in *K-Street* and *Tanner* ’88 as an indication of their variable relationship to historical reality.

## EPITEXTS

“Status is a comparative concept; things don’t have status as a body has mass, but only by comparison with other things. One classic method of comparative analysis (inherited from classical times) is binary thought; sorting things out into polar opposites, black and white. Binaries include... in the analysis of texts, between reality and illusion...Such binarism ‘forgets’, however, that while physical objects are real enough, their reality is a product of knowledge...there’s a widespread belief that knowledge and ideas are merely representations or reflections of a reality located somewhere else; discourses, media, and the meanings they carry belong to the domain of non-material, untrustworthy illusion...Discursive knowledge is precisely what is real for our species, and reality is what we imagine (make into an image).”<sup>48</sup>

-- John Hartley, *The Politics of Pictures*

As I mentioned earlier, Genette points out that the “temporal situation” of a paratext relative to the date of the text’s original appearance can influence one’s reading of the

text.<sup>49</sup> I then discussed how this might be demonstrated by differences between the “peritexts” present in my Laserdisc copy of *Tanner*, for example, and the version originally aired on HBO. However, the effect of temporal distance on “epitexts” can be even more pronounced since the likelihood of encountering articles or publicity relating to a text is, for the most part, inversely related to the temporal vicinity of one’s “reading” to that text’s original appearance.

Because *K-Street* aired just this past Fall, I was able to examine a considerable amount of the interviews and publicity that a viewer may have been exposed to around the time of the show’s original airing. *Tanner* ’88, however, is an interesting case in terms of this study. Of course, the show originally aired in 1988, therefore I have unfortunately been unable to observe very much, if any, of the publicity that may have accompanied the show at that time. However, as I mentioned earlier, the Sundance Channel has been re-airing episodes of *Tanner* ’88 a number of times each week since February 2004.

Therefore, due to this re-airing, as well as *K-Street*’s many similarities to *Tanner*, there have, in fact, been a number of recent articles dealing with the show that have provided me with information I would have otherwise not had access to. For the sake of this study, I have chosen to assume that the producers’ comments printed in more recent articles (regarding how the show was made and how *Tanner* was intended to be read) are similar to those that would have been found in articles printed around the time of the show’s original airing.

There are a number of different labels that producers use when “indexing” films or television shows as either fiction or non-fiction. Just how one should respond to certain labels, however, can be complicated to determine, especially when one encounters terms with disputed definitions, such as “documentary” or “reality”. The term “documentary” is widely believed to have been coined by John Grierson in 1926, in referring to the film *Moana* by Robert Flaherty. Grierson described the form as “the creative treatment of actuality.”<sup>50</sup> However, with the increased production of “journalistic documentaries” which “maintain the serious social purpose, but emphasize a rhetoric of objectivity and the requirements of evidence over the creative presentation favored by Grierson”, the term documentary came to be associated with objectivity more and more.<sup>51</sup> This trend culminated in the 1960’s with the influence of observational film, or “cinema verité”, leading viewers to be “less likely to accept reenactment and staging as nonfiction techniques.”<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, well known cinema verité filmmaker, “[Frederick] Wiseman, in reference to the act of editing, has claimed that “reality-fictions” is a more accurate word for his films than “documentaries,” and that what he is doing is similar to the novelist’s reporting on events.”<sup>53</sup> However, the terms “reality”, “reality TV” or “reality programming”, are commonly used to refer to everything from cinema verité to game shows. It is beyond the scope of this study to adequately cover the range of views regarding how to define the different terms used above. (See Carl Plantinga, *Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film* for more on this.) Suffice it to say that, “the categories and boundaries surrounding documentary and reality, fact and fiction, defy hard and fast definition.”<sup>54</sup>

According to Gerard Genette:

“A paratextual element can make known an *intention*, or an *interpretation* by the author and/or the publisher: this is the chief function of most prefaces, and also of the genre indications on some book covers or title pages (a novel does not signify “This book is a novel,” a defining assertion that hardly lies within anyone’s power, but rather “Please look on this book as a novel”).”<sup>55</sup>

Likewise, as Plantinga explains: “indexing is a social phenomenon, as much determined by what audiences will accept as nonfiction or fiction as by the intentions of those who handle the film.”<sup>56</sup> Or, as Hartley succinctly puts it, “status is a comparative concept” and “discursive knowledge is precisely what is real.” In the case of television, this means that one’s reading of a show will depend not only on their personal understanding of what the “truth status” of the text is, but also just what that status denotes. In addition, “[Allan] Casebier claims that other factors are essential in describing indexing, including our independent knowledge of the subject of the nonfiction and our common sense beliefs about the world.”<sup>57</sup> “Although a text may be indexed as fiction globally,” states Plantinga, “its setting and the timeliness of its political concerns, for example, may cue us to take its representations to make reference to the actual world.”<sup>58</sup>

In labeling *K-Street* as “real-time fiction”, Steven Soderbergh makes sure to specify the immediacy of the show’s presentation. “We’re jumping out of the airplane every day,” said the *K-Street* director. “You have an airdate Sunday night. Monday morning the creative group and the actors get into a room and decide on the spot what our show’s going to be about. We shoot for 2 1/2 days, we edit for two days and we air that Sunday. So it’s happening, it’s being written, it’s being performed spontaneously.”<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Altman also aimed to air *Tanner* quickly to maintain a particular relevance to current

events. “‘When we ran it in ‘88 we didn’t even have a (scheduled) night,’ he said. ‘It floated. We would finish those (episodes) and they’d be on the air the next day or two days later. We were running a real shotgun operation. In fact, the HBO people didn’t even get to see them. When we shipped the negative, or whatever the term was, whack, it was on the air then.’”<sup>60</sup>

Therefore, if upon viewing these shows one had already encountered in “The News” some of the political events, issues, or figures presented within an episode, this would likely influence their understanding of the show and its political content. This returns me to Genette’s notion of a “factual paratext”, which he defines as:

“a fact whose existence alone, if known to the public, provides some commentary on the text and influences how the text is received. Two examples are the age and sex of the author...Another example is the date of the work...it is indisputable that historical awareness of the period in which a work is written is rarely immaterial to one’s reading of the work.”<sup>61</sup>

For example, if one were at all aware that a presidential race was going on at the time he or she viewed either show, then that viewer may have been more likely to read that show as non-fictional in some respects. (Especially if they could recognize Bob Dole or Gary Hart in *Tanner* ’88, or Howard Dean in *K-Street*, as actual presidential candidates.) Meanwhile, as I demonstrated earlier, the credits in both *Tanner* ’88 and *K-Street* explicitly indicate a degree of fictionality by the end of their respective first episodes.

For both shows, this “hybrid” truth status is only further confirmed by their “epitexts”. When describing *Tanner* ’88, Robert Altman recalled that, “We were always looking for a way to hook reality into our fictional situations.”<sup>62</sup> Similarly, *K-Street* is described,

both on their official website and in a number of newspaper and magazine articles, as an “experimental fusion of reality and fiction”. Each one of these epitexts suggest an intentional mixing of fiction and non-fiction. In fact, the producers of *K-Street* claimed that they *intended* for the truth status of the show to be ambiguous. “We like the fact that you can’t always tell what’s real and what’s been staged,” explained executive producer Mark Sennet.<sup>63</sup> As Soderbergh stated, their aim was to leave people “asking whether it’s a documentary or fiction.”<sup>64</sup>

According to John Hartley, “the dynamics that produce *change*, both physical and cultural, occur precisely at the moment of the ambiguation of the binaries.”<sup>65</sup> With this in mind, I’d like to suggest that, by indexing themselves as “hybrid”, *K-Street*, and *Tanner ’88* might encourage a more critical reading on the part of the viewer. For example, one who understands NBC’s *The West Wing* to be fiction may understand such status as merely indicating that the events and characters are not real, or in other words, that “Martin Sheen is not actually president”. However, they might still assume that the political process, as portrayed, remains accurate. Only those already knowledgeable about political process may be able to recognize what is realistic and what isn’t. On the other hand, *K-Street*’s disclaimer explicitly states that the “The events and characters depicted in this motion picture are fictional, excluding only those persons portraying themselves.” Because the show’s indexing stresses a hybrid “truth status”, however, one may be less inclined to assume that other aspects of the show, beyond events and characters, are accurate.

In this way, one could see how “entertainment programs” such as *K-Street* or *Tanner ’88* might encourage “scanning of the news environment”, or “active information gathering”, in order to determine just where the shows remain true to historical reality. (Assuming, of course, that the shows provide enough incentive for the viewer to do so. I will discuss this further later on.) According to James Friedman:

“The news in the form of (re)presentation does nothing to encourage the gathering of further information outside the viewing of the next news segment and instead presents its accounts as adequate and complete. This can be contrasted with the “unscripted event,” which by virtue of its unknown resolution and temporal simultaneity seems to encourage the search and acquisition of extratextual information so as to prepare the viewer for the potential events.”<sup>66</sup>

If this is true, perhaps the timeliness of these two shows might trigger a similar response.

In the following section, I plan to consider just what it means for an “entertainment program” to contain “news content” and then take a closer look at how this might occur in *Tanner ’88* and *K-Street*.

## **News Content**

“Even in countries with a much stronger tradition of public service broadcasting, such as the UK, the proportion of informational programming appears to have declined relative to entertainment programming in recent years – although the measurement of these categories is problematic, particularly with the emergence of hybrid forms of “infotainment”.<sup>67</sup>

-- David Buckingham, *The Making of Citizens*

## **TIMELINESS**

As James Friedman explains in *Reality Squared*, basing fictional shows on actual current events and issues is not a new phenomenon:

“By the 1980’s, references to lived reality were no longer limited to live performances, news, or special events...reality had become a prominent source of subject material for a number of fiction programs. In addition to made-for-TV movies, which can take topical subjects and bring them to the air faster than other media, regular prime time series such as *Law and Order*, *NYPD Blue*, *The X-Files*, and *Homicide* have routinely based their stories upon topical events.”<sup>68</sup>

However, as Jill Abramson points out, although, “like *Law and Order*, *K Street* will ‘rip its plots from the headlines’...it will do so only days after those headlines appear, while the issues in question are still live ones.”<sup>69</sup>

As I discussed earlier, both shows were assembled and aired within days of the “news” that inspired each episode. However, the fact that *Tanner* is based on a screenplay written by Garry Trudeau, while *K-Street* is supposedly largely improvised, means such “news” might influence each show in a different manner. Soderbergh refers to *K-Street* as “real-time fiction”, but it’s unclear just what he means by this. According to co-executive producer Henry Bean, once the topic is chosen, the writers “put together a loose structure and some dialogue for the actors, and the next two-and-a-half days are spent shooting mostly improvised scenes.”<sup>70</sup> This seems to imply that each episode was realized weekly, depending on current events and the improvised performances delivered by actors and real-life political figures. In the sense that current events cannot be predetermined and improvised performances are variable, it can certainly be said that both *K-Street* and *Tanner* ’88 consist of “fiction” that was created in “real-time”. However, it’s necessary to make a distinction here, between what are overarching “fictional” storylines and the individual scenes that serve to maintain them during each episode. As Soderbergh



explained, “if we’ve chosen a story that’s breaking, we can literally turn the camera on, add this new element to the story--stick it in the show.”<sup>71</sup> His wording here better suggests how “news content” was, in fact, incorporated into both *K-Street* and *Tanner ‘88*. The promotional teasers for *K-Street* that often ran on HBO this past Fall asked viewers “Where will *K-Street* take us?” followed by the tagline, “New Headlines; New Show; Politics from the inside out.” Yet, while *K-Street* may have been largely “unscripted”, as producers claimed, there were storylines present from the very first episode that sustained the entire series without ever deviating as a result of any “new headlines.” Instead, “news content” was “stuck in” or “embedded” within these fictional narratives.

For example, in the first episode of *K-Street*, we are introduced to a character named Francisco Dupré (Roger G. Smith), whom Carville has reportedly been told he must hire by the firm’s owner, Richard Bergstrom. For this reason, as well as what Carville dubs Dupré’s “bizarre” behavior, Carville and a number of other employees become suspicious of him. In the second episode, then, the firm decides they want to pitch to the Recording Industry Association of America a strategy to help them combat the illegal downloading of music from the Internet. Upon hearing this, Dupré leaves and soon returns, claiming he has already set up an appointment with the chairman and CEO of the RIAA, Mitch Bainwol. Later in the episode, Dupré pitches some ideas for a potential RIAA ad campaign, while continuing to behave oddly, and at the end of the episode he only raises more suspicion when he tells the staff that Bainwol has cancelled the very meeting he had originally claimed to have scheduled. Meanwhile, fellow Bergstrom-Lowell employee,

Maggie Morris (Mary McCormack), receives a tip that someone in the firm has been speaking with Prince Bandar from Saudi Arabia, and she suspects that it's Dupré. At the very end of the episode, another consultant, named Tommy Flannegan (John Slattery), observes Dupré as he stands under an umbrella in the pouring rain, apparently talking to someone on his cell phone. Now, as one can see, although Dupré's dialogue and actions in episode two are, in part, determined by the political issue the episode focuses on (MP3 downloading and the RIAA's response to it) the ultimate outcome of these actions (his being perceived by others as suspicious and connected to Saudi Arabia) are in no way dependent on this.

This method of "embedding" news content can also be demonstrated for the characters of Maggie and Tommy within that very same episode. In episode one, Maggie Morris is seen on the telephone with some unidentified person while Mary Matalin taunts her, chanting "Maggie has a boyfriend, Maggie has a boyfriend." During the second episode, however, she is clearly having trouble getting someone to return her phone calls. After speaking to Senator Orrin Hatch about the RIAA issue, Maggie then runs into a woman she calls "Gail" and curses her for refusing to call her back. After Maggie storms away, we hear Gail's lunch companion ask if Maggie is an ex-girlfriend, to which Gail replies, "I wouldn't say that." In later episodes we learn that "Gail" is an ex-lover of Maggie's with whom she is still in love. Tommy, on the other hand, twice sees a woman in a red dress who mysteriously appears and then disappears each time. The first time he sees her she is among a focus group that the firm has arranged to test the RIAA TV spot they produced and, the second time, he sees her in the reflection of his office window while he

watching Dupré on the phone in the rain, only to turn around and discover no one is there. Only later in the series, after additional sightings such as these, do we begin to learn who this woman actually is and how her death has indirectly affected the fate of Bergstrom-Lowell. In episode two, then, these three storylines are essentially embedded within the central narrative: Bergstrom-Lowell's effort to court the RIAA as a client. As the series progresses, however, these three storylines quickly come to the fore as central narratives, while the current "news content" included in each episode is, instead, embedded within *them* (and, as it turns out, gradually featured less and less.)

This method of embedding "news content" within fictional narrative can also be observed in *Tanner '88*. Here Altman describes one way he attempted to "hook reality" into Garry Trudeau's fictional script:

"...if we went to New Hampshire and somebody would say Gary Hart is going to be over at the so-and-so, we'd just jump in our truck with Michael [Murphy] or whatever actors were there, and we'd just shoot over there."<sup>72</sup>

In fact, Hart appeared in the first episode where he spoke briefly with Tanner after they "meet" on the campaign trail. This scene proves insignificant in the overall narrative, however. *Tanner '88* would have turned out the same whether Hart had agreed to appear or not. All that might have changed would have been any improvised dialogue referring to this encounter later on in the series. Hart's appearance remains valuable to Altman, however, in that it provides a certain *authenticity* to the fictional narrative.

This holds just as true for *K-Street*. The only difference is that the *K-Street* storylines were most likely not fully conceived at the beginning of the season, for I doubt writers

would have initially written a ten-episode arc for the first season where the firm ends up going under in the end. Certainly, if *K-Street*'s storylines were truly conceived the same week the episodes were shot and aired, the show would merit the label "real-time fiction", in this sense. However, as I demonstrated, the overall trajectory of those fictional narratives that survived for more than a single episode were generally not affected by current events. In other words, when originally aired, "new headlines" never affected where either *K-Street* or *Tanner* were "taking us", but merely *how* we got there.

## **INTERVIEWS**

Just what exactly qualifies as "news", however? A reasonable way to begin discussion on this topic would be to take a look at past rulings that have been made by the Federal Communications Commission in regard to Section 315(a) of the Communications Act of 1934, or the "equal-time" provision. Section 315(a) requires that if a broadcast station offers time to a "legally qualified candidate for public office...it must afford equal opportunities to other such candidates for that office."<sup>73</sup> The provision also states, however, "that appearances by legally qualified candidates on certain categories of *bona fide* news programming, including *bona fide* news interviews, are exempt from equal opportunities."<sup>74</sup> Although *Tanner '88* and *K-Street* both appeared on cable television and were therefore out of the FCC's jurisdiction, it remains useful to examine them in respect to the official definitions established by this piece of legislation and subsequent rulings based on it. According to the FCC:

"When adopting these exemptions in 1959, Congress indicated that, to qualify as a *bona fide* news interview program, the program must be regularly scheduled; the content, format, and participants must be determined by the licensee; and the determination must have been made

by the station “in the exercise of its bona fide news judgment and not for the political advantage of the candidate for political office. Although Congress did not specifically define the term “news” when adopting these exemptions, the Commission has stated that “it is clear that in enacting the exemptions Congress envisioned increased news coverage of the political process. It would seem elemental that Congress contemplated interviews with elected officials and candidates for elected office as newsworthy subject matter.”<sup>75</sup>

In fact, *K-Street* co-producer, Stuart Stevens, believes the appearances made by actual political figures on the show should be considered “interviews”.<sup>76</sup> “It’s putting people in situations and having them talk as if they would talk in these situations,” he states.<sup>77</sup>

Henry Bean echoes this notion, explaining, “what we do is we ask the senators questions that they might really confront in their lives and simply ask them to answer as they do in real life.”<sup>78</sup> This might be contrasted with, say, the recent appearances by N.Y. City Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s on NBC’s *Law and Order* or former California Governor Gray Davis on CBS’s *Yes, Dear*, where, although each portrays himself, they deliver scripted lines pertaining to the fictional narrative.

Some appearances on *Tanner* and *K-Street* are certainly of this kind. For example, in the second episode of *Tanner* ’88, a number of politicians are interviewed by TV news reporters outside an event to support Tanner’s candidacy, including Speaker of the House, Rep. Ed Murray, (D) Winchester, TN. When asked “Why is Jack Tanner such an important presidential candidate?”, Murray simply replies, “I’ve known Jack Tanner for many years and I feel like he can represent the views of the people of the United States better than any other candidate”. In *K-Street*, John Breaux Jr., the real-life son of Louisiana Senator John Breaux, appears as himself, but goes on a date with the fictional

character Maggie Morris and engages in conversation with her about her recent love relationship. In neither case are the political figures asked questions they might confront in real life, but rather their discussion is merely guided by the program's fictional narrative. Therefore, it's hard to say that these appearances would qualify as interviews. Instead, as in the case of Gary Hart's appearance on *Tanner*, what they offer is *authentication*.

However, simply because a real-life political figure might be speaking to a fictional character within either of these shows does not mean their discussion need only concern fictional topics. Instead, some of these appearances involve discussion of actual political events or issues and therefore might be considered akin to a "news interview", especially given the timeliness of these shows. For example, in the first episode of *Tanner '88*, Jack Tanner and his daughter cross paths with a number of politicians while on the campaign trail in New Hampshire, including Bob Dole, Gary Hart, and Pat Robertson. In the case of Dole and Hart, their encounters with Tanner merely consist of meaningless chit-chat where they essentially greet each other, ask how the other is doing and wish each other luck in the campaign. Tanner's encounter with Robertson, however, despite beginning in this same fashion, takes on added meaning when the actor portraying a *Boston Globe* reporter, named Hayes Taggard, asks Robertson to comment on the term "Christian hardball" which had come to be associated with Robertson and the religious right in real life. Since Robertson was forced to address (and, it appeared, evade) this question while on camera, his appearance in *Tanner* served not only to authenticate the narrative, such as in the case of Dole and Hart, but also, when it originally aired, as an interview with a

candidate regarding a topic relevant to the current campaign, not unlike one might find on a weekly news journal. None of these interviews play a role in developing the fictional narrative, yet, because Robertson offers his thoughts on an actual political issue, his appearance might be considered *newsworthy*. (Of course, the very fact that these politicians have chosen to appear on an “entertainment program” might be considered to be newsworthy by itself. Some may feel that such a choice attests to that individual’s personal character and/or how seriously he or she takes their elected office or candidacy. Certainly, Howard Dean’s appearance on *K-Street* and Mayor Bloomberg’s appearance on *Law and Order* made headlines at the time. This, however, is a matter of the show *making* news, rather than *presenting* it, and won’t be dealt with here.)

Of course, the concept of “newsworthiness” is one that is highly contested and, during such appearances, it is not always easy to distinguish the personal from the fictional. For example, in one of the last scenes in the final episode of *Tanner ’88*, Kitty Dukakis, the wife of the eventual 1988 Democratic presidential nominee, Michael Dukakis, speaks to Tanner’s girlfriend, Joanna Buckley, the fictional former deputy campaign manager on Dukakis’ campaign. Kitty initially offers a jumbled story about her husband and his mother when he was three years old and refers to her and her husband’s belief in “the importance of family”. These are both details one would expect to hear in an interview with Barbara Walters, for example. However, the majority of the discussion concerns the fictional relationship between Tanner and Buckley and, ultimately, whether Tanner will endorse Dukakis:

“When two people love each other, other things really aren’t that important. You have to follow your own heart and know that family is as

important than anything else. It is for us, and I know it's going to be for you. Now I have an important question for you, is Jack going to support Michael?"

Another similar example to consider from *Tanner '88* is the appearance by former Arizona governor Bruce Babbitt shortly after dropping out of the Democratic presidential primary race in February 1988. The appearance could certainly be considered newsworthy in that it was an opportunity for viewers to hear the former candidate's thoughts on the current race and politics in general, immediately after having ended his own campaign. The majority of their discussion, however, referred to fictional characters and events surrounding Tanner's campaign. In particular, Babbitt spends much time offering advice to Tanner:

“So you've got a chance now, people know you. You've got a chance now to take the next step...to say, OK, I'm going to take some risks...and talk honestly and try to make it work. Now, it may not. God knows I'm living testament to that. You can walk out there, look people in the eye and say, OK, I'm going to talk to you straight about our future and how it is Americans have get to get together and start solving problems rather than living in this kind of, silver screen stage of unreality...”

Yet, because Tanner appears to actually take his advice in later episodes, it's unclear to what extent Babbitt's appearance might be said to have affected the fictional narrative. Might Babbitt have been reciting scripted lines intended to jibe with the events in the upcoming episodes? Or did Trudeau, in fact, make considerable changes to the script on the fly? Or, perhaps, did Babbitt's advice simply happen to coincide with Trudeau's script as already written? Only those involved can answer these questions. Of course, it goes without saying that Babbitt's appearance provided considerable authenticity to the narrative, as well.



In the second episode of *K-Street*, Maggie Morris speaks to Senator Orrin Hatch and John Slattery speaks to Rep. Mary Bono, each about the RIAA and the downloading of MP3's. Again, taken out of the fictional context, these encounters still stand as interviews regarding a pressing issue and therefore what the FCC and Congress would undoubtedly consider them "newsworthy". But this, of course, begs the question: Does the fact that this moment occurs within the context of a fictional narrative somehow negate its real-world significance? Here, it is again useful to look at recent FCC rulings regarding Section 315(a):

"In 1984, in determining that bona fide news interview segments on the "Donahue" show were exempt from Section 315(a), the Commission recognized *less conventional interview formats* as being consistent with Congress' intent in adopting the exemptions to increase news coverage of the political campaign process. The Commission stated that "it would be unsound to rule that a program involving a *unique or innovative approach to interviewing its guests* somehow lacks sufficient licensee control evident in traditional news interview programs like 'Meet the Press' or 'Face the Nation'" and that "to do so would discourage programming innovation by sending a message to broadcasters that to be exempt an interview program should adhere only to the format of certain programs mentioned by Congress over 25 years ago." The FCC also stated that "the fact that other 'Donahue' segments may not include discussions pertaining directly to the political arena, or even to current news events, would appear immaterial."<sup>79</sup>(My Italics)

In addition to the *Donahue* show, other "entertainment programs" have been determined to contain bona fide news interview segments by the FCC, including, in December 1999, ABC's *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, which PEW used in their January 2000 survey in place of *The Daily Show* as an example of a "comedy program". Most recently, in September 2003, the FCC ruled that the syndicated radio show, *The Howard Stern Show*, also contained bona fide news interview segments and therefore qualified for the

“equal time” exemption. Through such rulings, the FCC has essentially declared that “entertainment programs” are capable of providing “news content.”

In fact, *K-Street* producer Stuart Stevens believes that there are advantages to their “less conventional interview format”. “You create an environment where they answer questions,” he states, “That’s the conceit of the show. It’s a very unobtrusive filming style: no lighting, no makeup.”<sup>80</sup> In regard to the show’s timeliness, Soderbergh remarked, “Our hope...is that that will make it possible to get to some politicians and get them talking before this cycle of news has gone around so many times that they’ve started to be more guarded about their feelings on a certain issue or feel ‘talked-out.’”<sup>81</sup>

## **PROCESS**

“...fictional strategies in factual forms make it easier to get close to this other, deep, backstage reality.”<sup>82</sup>

-- Ib Bondebjerg, “Public Discourse/Private Fascination”

“The subjective dynamics of social engagement in documentary revolve around our confrontation with a representation of the historical world. What we see and hear ostensibly reaches beyond the frame into the world we, too, occupy. The subjectivity John Grierson exhorted the documentarist to support was one of informed citizenship – an active, well-informed engagement with pressing issues such that progressive, responsible change could be accomplished by governments.”<sup>83</sup>

-- Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality*

On the other hand, one could say that *factual strategies in fictional forms*, such as those used in *Tanner '88* and *K-Street*, might also allow for access to a “backstage reality”. By this, I’m referring to the use of actual politicians or political insiders to demonstrate political process. Fictional shows, especially procedural dramas such as *The West Wing*

or *Law and Order*, commonly use consultants to ensure the accuracy of the processes they portray. *Tanner* and *K-Street* are no exceptions here. Sidney Blumenthal, who at the time was a journalist for the *Washington Post*, was the lone political consultant for *Tanner* '88. Of course, the numerous political insiders who appeared on the show likely shared their knowledge at times, as well. *K-Street*, on the other hand, featured its political consultants as main characters.

Both programs attempt to show what goes on “behind-the-scenes” in politics. Both series feature scenes where a focus group views a potential television commercial, for example, and both portray a presidential candidate getting prepped for a debate. *K-Street* producer Henry Bean even went as far to say, “The show is really about showing the process. How deals are done, how provisions are put into bills.”<sup>84</sup> Similarly, Soderbergh stated: “The concept is to make a process piece, and show you how information moves from one sector of town to another, and how decisions get made.”<sup>85</sup>

One could say that knowledge of such processes might provide viewers with the kind of deeper *understanding* that Schudson and Buckingham warn is not necessarily demonstrated by mere “factual recall.” Awareness of the strategy that goes into preparing a candidate for a debate might help a viewer better interpret what goes on in an actual debate, just as knowledge of the process by which Pew conducted their survey allows us to better interpret the statistics that have been cited in *The News*. But what makes the portrayal of process in these two shows any different from that within other fictional shows? In the case of *Tanner* '88, not much. The debate prep scene in *Tanner*,

for example, was done quite traditionally, with fictional characters performing scripted dialogue, and could just as easily have been encountered in, say, a show like the *The West Wing*. Certainly, one can argue that the timeliness of such a portrayal (*Tanner* was aired in the midst of a presidential race, both originally in 1988 and now in 2004) and the fact that the opponents being discussed during the scene were actual candidates in 1988 might have made this scene more useful to viewers. Neither factor, however, has anything to do with how accurately the process itself was portrayed.

The debate prep scene in *K-Street*, though, proved to be anything but traditional. The first episode of the series largely focuses on the fact that Carville has agreed to help prepare the *actual* Democratic frontrunner at the time, Howard Dean, for a debate sponsored by the Congressional Black Caucus Group that was *actually* set to occur that upcoming Friday. What makes the scene itself unique is that, rather than being performed by actors according to a script, it was improvised by actual political figures portraying themselves; Dean, Carville, and real-life political consultant and co-host of CNN's *Crossfire*, Paul Begala. (Although the fictional character, Tommy Flannegan (John Slattery), is present in the room, he never says a word.) In describing the show, Mary Matalin explained, "There's no script. I just do what I would do in real life in any given scene."<sup>86</sup> If this is true, one can only assume that such a scenario would lead to a more accurate portrayal of political process than that which emerges from a script after consultants' advice has been filtered through the interpretation of writers and actors.

In this way, some feel that *K-Street* may not only have achieved an authentic portrayal of process but succeeded in gaining access to information that even The News does not have access to. “We would definitely kill to get into a debate prep,” said Kim Hume, the Washington bureau chief for Fox News, in reference to Dean’s appearance. “It’s newsworthy. And they made news.”<sup>87</sup> This raises an interesting question: Considering these were real-life consultants prepping a real-life candidate for a real-life debate, does this scene then amount to documentary footage of a real-life debate prep?

According to R.J. Cutler, producer of *The War Room*, the answer is “no”. When I interviewed him recently he rightfully pointed out that “there’s now way of knowing how many times they shot that scene.”<sup>88</sup> Here, however, Cutler is referring to the more objective cinema verité, or what Bill Nichols refers to as “observational cinema”, which, as I mentioned earlier, has come to be synonymous with “documentary” for many people. When John Grierson first used the term “documentary”, however, it was in reference to Robert Flaherty, who is well known for having arranged scenes. In his “first principles” Grierson “claimed that the documentary must be dramatic, not merely instructional” and that “the original (or native) actor, and the original (or native) scene, are better guides to the screen interpretation of the modern world [than actors and sets].”<sup>89</sup> Flaherty, indeed used “native actors” and “native scenes” in the sense that he cast non-professional actors native to the location he was shooting. For example, for *Louisiana Story*, Flaherty cast a young boy named Alexander Napoleon Ulysses Latour and had him explore a swamp near his home as he filmed. In the sense that politicians and consultants are native to Washington D.C. (granted, Dean is former Governor of Vermont), *K-Street* can also be

said to have cast “native actors” and filmed in the “native scene”. Considering that Flaherty, at times, had his “native actors” portray characters other than themselves or reenact rituals or practices that they no longer practiced at the time, *K-Street* might be considered *more* accurate in the sense that it “put people in situations and had them talk as they would talk in such situations.” (For example, the family featured in Flaherty’s *Man of Aran* was reportedly not a real family at all, but merely residents of Aran cast to play a family. In addition, the method of shark hunting demonstrated in *Man of Aran* had apparently not been used for years.)

Grierson also wrote that “the documentary must have a social purpose, educating the masses and enabling them to better understand their place in society and the public institutions that organize their lives.”<sup>90</sup> According to Bill Nichols, Grierson intended to “mobilize viewers to act in the world” and provide a greater knowledge of “historical process.”<sup>91</sup> Although he “praised Robert Flaherty and called him the “father of documentary,” he chided the explorer for making films about the past rather than the present, and for his interest in the theme of “humans versus nature” in lieu of the more pressing issues.”<sup>92</sup> *K-Street*, on the other hand, not only dealt with present pressing issues, but did so with an immediacy neither Grierson nor Flaherty could have achieved, thanks to television and the use of recent digital video technology. Considering that *K-Street* producers have expressed pedagogical goals akin to Grierson’s, one might equate the Dean debate scene to be “documentary” in the Griersonian sense.

As I stated earlier, however, there exist many different understandings of what “documentary” means, therefore debating this scene’s status as “documentary” is not particularly useful. Ultimately, we are concerned here with how a viewer might interpret these shows. For example, if one had actually watched the Democratic presidential debate that aired on FOX on Friday, September 12, 2003, that viewer may have been more likely to understand the Dean debate prep scene in *K-Street* to be “documentary”. Not only would such a factual paratext confirm for the viewer that, indeed, such a debate had occurred and that Dean had participated, but also that Dean had taken Carville’s advice. During the scene, Carville feeds Dean the following line: “If the percentage of minorities that’s in your state has anything to do with how you connect with African-American voters, then Trent Lott would be Martin Luther King.” Dean then used this line in the actual Democratic debate in Baltimore that Friday, “to laughter and applause.”<sup>93</sup> Therefore, the viewer who had already seen the actual debate would, upon viewing the episode, be made aware that Dean had prior knowledge of what, on Friday, seemed like an off-the-cuff remark. (This is true regardless of the degree to which the debate prep scene corresponds to what actually occurred the day of Dean’s appearance.)

In addition, because *K-Street* would not yet air until Sunday, producers were actually able to incorporate Dean’s use of Carville’s line into that very same episode. Therefore, even if the entire episode were scripted and performed, the fact remains that a current real-life presidential candidate has chosen to participate in a program that suggests the partial-scriptedness of televised debates. If this alone doesn’t cause a viewer to question the accuracy, and/or *actuality*, of what is portrayed in the episode, it is possible that *K-*

*Street*'s hybrid truth status might. If such a viewer then actively sought information to better understand what in the episode is "real", he or she would, in a sense, have been motivated by an "entertainment program" to "scan the news environment" for information relating to a current presidential candidate and a particular political process. In this way, one would be fulfilling their "monitorial" duty as a citizen and promoting a better understanding of The News through knowledge of *process*.

### **DOCUMENTARY MOMENTS**

While it remains unclear whether the Dean debate prep scene in *K-Street* actually occurred as it was presented, there exist other scenes in both *Tanner '88* and *K-Street* that can be said to "contain" documentary footage of an actual political event, based on the fact that The News itself covered it separately. I will refer to these scenes as "documentary moments", and they represent another way that each show succeeds in positioning the program in historical time and providing an authentic feel to the fictional narrative. A good example in *Tanner '88* occurs when, at the beginning of Episode Ten, Tanner's campaign manager, T.J., attends a Jesse Jackson rally to speak to one of his campaign staff members. We also see at the rally, a fictional journalist and cameraman whom we've met earlier in the series, apparently covering the event. Shots cut back and forth from Jackson on stage to the characters speaking to each other, while other shots deliberately pan from the characters to the stage to make clear that the characters are *actually* at the rally. Meanwhile, viewers get to hear portions of Jackson's actual speech. At no time, however, does Jackson interact with the fictional characters himself. This is reminiscent of Haskell Wexler's 1969 film *Medium Cool* which featured a scene where a



fictional character wanders through the actual riots that occurred outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

A similar example in *K-Street* is a scene where Carville attends a rally for Philadelphia Mayor John Street. In this case, however, rather than having characters merely appear at the event, Carville actually speaks at the rally in support of Street. Therefore, Carville essentially succeeds in simultaneously endorsing Street in both the filmic and pro-filmic worlds. One reason this seamless blending of actual events and fictional narrative is possible is the fact that, as Bill Nichols states:

“For the viewer, observational documentaries set up a frame of reference closely akin to that of fictional film... The viewer experiences the text as a template of life as it is lived; the attitude taken toward it proposes itself as (or derives from) the attitude appropriate for the viewers were he or she “on the spot,” as it were, placed in a position where the interaction from which the camera restrains itself were expected...One element of the viewer’s engagement, then, is less an imaginative identification with character or situation and more a practical testing of subjective responses as an eligible participant in as well as observer of the historical world represented.”<sup>94</sup>

In other words, due to the lack of “reporting” (i.e. anchor summary/voiceover and on-screen text) *Tanner* and *K-Street* allow viewers to learn about current events and issues as if they are *experiencing* them, rather than being *told* about them. This, as opposed to the television “news program” which “positions spectators as *onlookers*” and “addresses viewers as *uninvolved*.”<sup>95</sup> As Nichols states, both fiction and cinema verité invite the viewer to “see-it-yourself” rather than “see-it-my-way.”<sup>96</sup>

In an effort to make this combination of reality and fiction seamless, *K-Street* and *Tanner* are both filmed in ways that are intended to mimic the look and feel of cinema verité. As

I mentioned earlier, each, at times, make use of the realist “shaky-camera” style. In addition, in *Tanner* ’88, Robert Altman makes use of a method of filming dialogue that he has also demonstrated in a number of his other films, including *Nashville* (1975) and *Gosford Park* (2001). This method is characterized by a more realistic portrayal of *overlapping* conversations and dialogue that, at times, can be hard to hear. As Bill Nichols states:

“...observational documentary or American cinema vérité...is another mode that skirts up against fiction, as it stresses the sensation of overhearing and overlooking a world that happens to be drawn from some portion of the historical world, without making an overt argument about it. The argument is tacit, oblique, or indirect; it arises by implication.”<sup>97</sup>

The dialogue in *Tanner* can certainly induce a feeling that one is eavesdropping and contribute to a sense that he or she is voyeuristically observing “life as it is lived”.

In an interview in 1962, Robert Drew, producer of *Primary* (1960) and one of the innovators involved in the development of cinema vérité, stated the following while explaining the burgeoning form that he described as “a whole new basis for a whole new journalism”:

There are people who can sense an interesting situation and foresee what will happen... render it on film or tape with art and craft and insight and intelligence as it happens, return with this material and edit a film that will put across a feeling of what it was like to be there.<sup>98</sup>

In essence, this is what Altman was describing when he recalled quickly hauling his actors and equipment to a particular location upon hearing that Gary Hart might be present there. In addition, Mary Matalin recounted how, after filming one day, Carville mentioned to Soderbergh that he would be going to Philadelphia on Thursday to

campaign for Mayor Street. “The next thing you know,” said Matalin, “he says, ‘Let’s take the train to Philly and shoot this.’”<sup>99</sup>

Of course, as I have mentioned, both directors were undoubtedly motivated, in part, by the feeling of authenticity that such events would provide to their programs. However, by *showing* these events rather than *reporting* on them like The News, it’s possible that *K-Street* and *Tanner ’88* might make viewers feel more “involved” in current events. As James Friedman explains:

“The use of the *present tense* – not only of the enunciation but also of the event – allows for more fluid and reversible relations of power and knowledge than is the case when events are presented as *having* happened. In fact, the televising of unscripted events seems not only to allow for but to expect and encourage an active spectator, who is addressed as *participating along with others* in the completion of the unfinished narrative.”<sup>100</sup>

While *Tanner ’88* and *K-Street* were not aired “live”, their timely airing of unscripted “documentary moments” and improvised encounters with actual political figures certainly stressed to viewers that what they were witnessing was “current”.

## **NEWS FOOTAGE**

Both shows also made use of real archival news footage. For the most part, *K-Street* did this to further emphasize this feeling of “presentness”, as well as the notion that the fictional narrative was in fact taking place in the historical world (i.e. “authenticity”). In the second episode, for example, which aired on September 21, 2003, there’s news footage of Retired General Wesley Clark speaking at a podium being played on a television in the firm’s conference room while they’re brainstorming ideas for their RIAA pitch. Of course, Clark officially entered the race for the Democratic presidential

nomination on Wednesday September 17. Not all such examples are related to politics, however. For example, in the episode that aired October 19, 2003, Tommy Flanagan is seen watching an ESPN broadcast in his hotel room where commentators are discussing the recent brawl between the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox that occurred in their Major League Baseball playoff game on Saturday October 11, 2003. This tactic was also used during flashbacks to position the episode in the past. For example, in the first of two flashback episodes, Francisco Dupré is seen in his hotel room watching a newscast regarding California Governor Gray Davis and California's successful bid for a recall election. We hear the mention of an "October 7 election date" as well as a man's voice that says: "Somebody we never heard of could be Governor three months from now, there's that possibility." (Of course, in addition, the date on the issue of the *New York Times* that Dupré is reading in the very first scene of this episode also reads "July 25, 2003" and is followed by a prophetic shot of a quarter-page ad for Arnold Schwarzenegger's 2003 summer film, *Terminator 3*.)

In *Tanner*, on the other hand, such archival footage was used less to explicitly anchor the fictional narrative in historical time (although it inherently serves this function) as much as to insert Tanner himself as a participant within the events depicted. A prime example of this is the scene where Tanner appears to be participating in a debate with Jesse Jackson and Michael Dukakis. Altman constructs this scene by using footage from a real debate between Dukakis and Jackson alone. Much of the scene is shot from the perspective of journalists in the press room and therefore one views the debate largely via a monitor that is supposedly airing the "live broadcast feed". Shots of the monitor

alternate with a view of the “candidates” in the TV studio. However, Altman strategically positions the shot in such a way that, although Jack Tanner can be seen clearly, [the African-American actor posing as] Jesse Jackson has his back turned to the camera and almost completely obstructs the view of [the man posing as] Dukakis. In addition, both times Tanner speaks in this scene, it is made to appear as if he is *interrupting* Rev. Jackson and responding to his comment, instead of having him merely field his own questions from the panel. This tactic, which serves to further stress the notion that Jackson and Tanner are actually in the same room with each other and thereby smooth the transition between fiction and reality, is linked to Altman’s realist use of overlapping dialogue, as mentioned earlier.

In addition to airing actual news footage, *Tanner ’88* also offers fictional portrayals of journalists and The News. By portraying The News and journalists in a particular way, *Tanner* is thereby presenting an argument about how The News works. This, as opposed to “documentary moments”, discussed earlier, which invite viewers to “see” *actual* events or processes “for themselves”.<sup>4</sup> Again, according to Steven Soderbergh, “The

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<sup>4</sup> Bill Nichols states that documentary film “requires a representation, case or *argument* about the historical world.”(*Representing Reality*, 18) (My italics.) When I say “documentary moment”, however, I’m referring to cinema vérité. As I stated earlier, Nichols states that observational films (cinema vérité) do not make an “overt” argument but, rather, one that is “tacit” and arises by “implication”. An argument can be inferred by *any* representation, however, whether the filmmaker intended this or not. That is, one might edit raw footage in a way that supports their argument about a particular event or topic. However, even unedited footage can be said to make an “argument” about reality. As Carl Plantinga points out, fiction, then, also makes an argument, in this sense. (*Rhetoric and Representation in Nonfiction Film*, 14) The difference, however, is that in fiction, while the argument may arise implicitly, the actors have been given explicit direction on how to perform like a journalist, in the case of *Tanner ’88* for example (even general guidelines are given in the case of improvisation), while cinema vérité and

concept [of *K-Street*] is to make a process piece, and show you how information moves from one sector of town to another, and how decisions get made. And we're not trying to editorialize about that process; we're just trying to show it."<sup>101</sup> Any process portrayed by fictional characters, however, is not merely being "shown", but is inherently *interpreted* for viewers by the actors and director. Therefore, *K-Street* also makes an argument about how political consulting works. *K-Street* does not, however, attempt to portray fictional versions of journalists or The News. (There is one scene in which Carville and Tucker Carlson, co-host of CNN's *Crossfire*, are about to tape an episode of that show. However, since both are actually hosts of *Crossfire*, for the purposes of this study I consider this to be "showing" process, rather than "fictional interpretation." The same goes for the opening scene in the very first episode of *Tanner '88* where Tanner is interviewed by the actual host of *Newsline New Hampshire Close-Up*, Jack Heath, in a faux taping of the real-life show.)

In addition to portraying journalists as they follow a presidential candidate, *Tanner* also uses fictional news footage as examples while critiquing aspects of campaign strategy and process. For example, during one scene in episode five, Stringer, Tanner's media director, visits the Dukakis campaign headquarters after having had a fall out with the Tanner campaign. Here, he meets with [a fictional character, named Kippman,

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"documentary moments" might catch actual journalists in action. Therefore, a fictional portrayal of process inherently represents an argument made by the filmmaker, when the latter does not. This is what I'm referring to when I say that fictional portrayal of The News makes an argument about process, while "documentary moments" can potentially just "show it".

portraying] Dukakis' media director, who is watching news footage of Tanner when Stringer arrives. This prompts the following exchange:

**Stringer:** What's this?

**Kippman:** What, you don't recognize this? This is your greatest hits tape. It's an Easter Seal benefit where the Governor of Tennessee came out and backed Tanner.

**Stringer:** Where'd you get that?

**Kippman:** I got it from CNN. Don't you guys monitor?

**Stringer:** You compile coverage of the other candidates?

**Kippman:** How else are you going to counter the other guy's media positions? You got to know what he's up to. Where he's placing his emphasis, what he's trying to avoid. The video clip files track the evolution of the message he's trying to put across; even more important, how it's playing with the media...anyway, you ought to be glad we do, I wouldn't have known how good you were if I wasn't checking Tanner's media hits. Lot's of good stuff there! Lots of nights he shouldn't have been on network, but he was. Because you figured that angle, that picture, or that sound bite that pushed you on.

Aspects of the news footage playing on the monitor are never directly referred to in this scene, but rather, the footage merely serves to justify the conversation between Stringer and Kippman on the topic. Unlike *K-Street*, which attempts to create an environment in which process can be *simulated* (such as with the Dean debate prep) and then aims to "show" it without editorializing, *Tanner* fabricates examples precisely with the intention of editorializing.

There is one interesting case in *Tanner*, however, where the footage might be considered more of the "simulated" rather than "fabricated" kind. In another scene with Stringer, he brings to Tanner's attention a recent photo in the newspaper that shows him carrying his own suit-bag, stating:

"Carrying your own bag is the wrong symbol at the wrong time, it says that you either can't or you won't delegate...it says Jimmy Carter. People may want you to be "For Real", Jack. But that doesn't mean they want

you to be like them. They want someone who is comfortable with authority.”

Stringer then cues up a videotape containing what is apparently news footage from Tanner’s brief encounter with Bob Dole, which we saw in the previous episode. He points out the fact that, when Alex handed Dole a “Tanner ‘88” campaign button, Dole immediately handed it off to a staffer of his. Upon seeing this, Emile, the Tanner pollster exclaims, “He has a button catcher!” Tanner then proceeds to scoff at the idea, evoking Daniel Boorstin’s notion of the “pseudo event”.<sup>5</sup> Here, Trudeau provides commentary on how photo coverage of a campaign results in the need for candidates to appear “presidential”. While this conversation is initiated by a fabricated newspaper photo, it remains unclear whether Dole staged this scene for the show, or if Altman and Trudeau noticed the footage and decided to use it.

These two examples also demonstrate what David Thorburn has pointed out as *Tanner* ‘88’s tendency toward “a kind of *anthropology*”.<sup>102</sup> Not only might one liken the “documentary moments” and the fictional portrayals of process to “ethnographic film”, in that they “afford the viewer an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experience of others” (in this case, those involved in political campaigning), but Tanner, as a relative outsider to this community, also offers his own theories on the inner

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<sup>5</sup> “Pseudo-events, while hollow, keep the public entertained and pundits and press agents employed. But pseudo-events are also dangerous. “The disproportion between what an informed citizen needs to know and what he can know is ever greater,” wrote Boorstin. “The disproportion grows with the increase of the officials’ powers of concealment and contrivance.”

The danger is that the pseudo drives out the real. The press conferences, leaks, spinning, polling and all-around blather surrounding the Lewinsky affair have shoved more important issues from the stage of public debate.” (James K. Glassman. “The Scandal and the Press”. *The Washington Post*, Tuesday, August 18, 1998; Page A15.)



workings of “the other” that both he and the viewers are witnessing simultaneously.<sup>103</sup>

Another good example of this comes after Tanner’s “debate” with Jackson and Dukakis when he sits down to speak with well-known TV journalist, Linda Ellerbee, who appears as herself in the episode and acts as the moderator. When she tells Tanner that the preceding debate had “made good television”, he replies: “God damn it, it’s about making great television, isn’t it? I mean...somehow we gotta crack through that.”

Ellerbee then goes on to admit, “Television, can cover a war, television can cover a birth, it can cover a highway accident. But what television can’t cover very well is change.”

### **EDITORIAL / OPINION**

This leads me to my final example of how these programs offer “news content” to viewers, and that is through commentary on actual current events, issues and figures. Already, I’ve spoken about how *Tanner* ’88, through dialogue written by Trudeau, offers opinions regarding political process. Naturally, characters in *Tanner* discuss current developments in the 1988 campaign, as well. This should not be surprising given that Trudeau is the creator of the political comic strip *Doonesbury*, which is carried in 1,400 papers around the world, several of which actually choose to run the strip on the editorial page. However, according to David Rubien who wrote about Trudeau in *Salon*, “the subversive thing about Trudeau is that he gets his message across to all those comics page readers who couldn’t care less about the editorial page.”<sup>104</sup> *Tanner* ’88 might be seen as a similar attempt to provide awareness of politics through *entertainment*.

For example, in episode two of *Tanner*, the fictional *Boston Globe* journalist, Hayes Taggard, debates with another journalist named David Sidleman about the Gary Hart

scandal and whether they should be reporting on personal affairs. While on the campaign bus, Sidleman is reading out loud the cover story from an issue of *STAR* magazine regarding Hart committing adultery. In response, Hayes says to him: “See what you did David, people like you, took one of the best politicians of his era and turned him into a sideshow in the supermarket medium.” Later on in the same episode, the two have the following exchange:

**Taggard:** Have you ever met Andrea Hart?

**Sidleman:** No Hayes, I haven't.

**Taggard:** You should.

**Sidleman:** That's not my responsibility to think about Gary Hart's daughter, Hayes. It's Gary's. The same is true of Joe Biden and his family, the same is true of Paul Laxalt and his. These people make their own choices. All we can do is react.

**Taggard:** So where does that leave us with our choices?

**Sidleman:** Geez Hayes, I just don't understand you. You pick through other people's trash, but when you find something that genuinely stinks, you just hold your nose. You end up writing these, fuzzy, warm, “He's only human”...humanistic profiles...What does that do? Where does that get you?

**Taggard:** Sorry David, I'm more interested in understanding than condemning.

**Sidleman:** Jesus, no wonder nobody wants to sit with you...Do you want to make a difference Hayes, or don't you? These guys, each of them, want to be the most powerful man on the planet. Do you know what that means? That means right away, we're not dealing with well-adjusted here, we're dealing with obsession. And obsession cannot go ignored...not here...the stakes are too high.

In this way, *Tanner* not only provides awareness of a recent story regarding a presidential candidate, but also offers a sample of the related public discourse. This is not unlike the presentation of “news content” one would find on a political talk show such as CNN's *Crossfire* or the differing opinions one might encounter on the editorial page of the newspaper.

Although *K-Street* executive producer George Clooney claimed, “we don’t want the show to be anyone’s soapbox, but to show how things really work”, the show does provide commentary on current topics through discourse, similar to *Tanner*.<sup>105</sup> Considering Carville and Matalin’s bipartisan marriage, however, the show inherently offers both sides to a particular issue (which is more than can be said of *The News*, considering that the “Fairness Doctrine” which once required that broadcasters “operate in the public interest and afford reasonable opportunity for the discussion of conflicting views on issues of public interest”, was essentially abolished in 1987.)<sup>106</sup>

A good example of this occurs in episode seven of *K-Street* where, in one scene, Francisco Dupré reads Mary Matalin the following portion of an actual article from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* regarding Mayor John Street:

“Who would have thought that word leaking of a large scale federal investigation into allegations of corruption in city hall could boost Street’s favorability rating? But it has. The FBI probe and the continuing furor surrounding it has galvanized Street’s support.”

To this, Matalin replies:

“Let me explain this. It’s a pretty old trick. Obviously what he’s doing is playing the race card. And the biggest, easiest, fastest, most phony way to mobilize support is to say that “the man” is after me. So that’s what’s going on, and if you believe that that’s good public policy then we have to agree to disagree.”

Of course, as I mentioned earlier, Carville then later travels with Francisco to campaign for Street in Philadelphia.

As I mentioned earlier, some of the politicians and political insiders who appear also provide their opinions on particular topics. This is much more common in *K-Street*,

however, for the figures that appear are usually being consulted for information on a particular issue. In *Tanner*, on the other hand, encounters with actual political figures are more likely to involve some kind of discussion regarding Tanner's fictional candidacy. Regardless, in both shows, any arguments about current events, issues and figures are introduced through *discourse* between characters, be they real or fictional, and the comments scripted or improvised. Neither *Tanner* nor *K-Street* attempt to re-create any historical events or represent any political figures that don't portray themselves.

Except for, perhaps, "documentary moments" and cases where the show itself is considered newsworthy, I believe it's safe to say that the producers of *Tanner '88* and *K-Street* likely obtained the "news content" they eventually incorporated into the program, and had characters comment on, from The News. According to Steven Soderbergh, "Every Monday morning, the creative group and the actors get into a room, discuss what happened over the weekend, *read all the papers* for the morning and decide -- on the spot -- what our show's going to be about."<sup>107</sup> (My italics.) According to Michael Schudson, this is the case for television in general, including television "news programs":

"Newspapers are no longer the primary source of news for people directly, but they remain the primary source indirectly because they supply news to television. Television news, even the national network programs are parasites of print... Television confirms, anoints, and dramatizes news, and when it covers events live, it witnesses news. But it rarely finds the news. That remains almost entirely the task of print."<sup>108</sup>

Similarly, in reference to *The Daily Show*, CBS News anchor Dan Rather states that he feels "he reaches younger viewers through the comedians, who watch the news. "If we cover something on the evening news, then Jon Stewart may very well deal with it on his show or Letterman on his." They feed one another, says the CBS News anchor."<sup>109</sup> In the

following section, I will consider further how and why encountering the kind of “news content” I’ve discussed above within a hybrid “entertainment program”, as opposed to The News, might lead viewers to actively search for information on politics, thereby fulfilling their “monitorial” obligation as a citizen, if not becoming “informed” by Schudson’s standards.

### **Hybridity, Skepticism, and Active Information Gathering**

“There is a need...for a radically new approach...The deferential stance which is invited and encouraged by mainstream news formats needs to be abandoned in favour of an approach which invites skepticism and active engagement.”<sup>110</sup>

-- David Buckingham, *After the Death of Childhood*

“I am not trying to advocate an education based on skeptical assumptions, but I think that the first duty of the teacher is, if not to say, ‘Don’t trust me’, at least to say, ‘Only trust me within reason’. I think in fact that this attitude is one that every reasonable person takes when watching television...If television news says that an event, X, happened in Lebanon, my first reaction is that it probably happened and it may be that it happened the way the screen is showing, but I would prefer to check it from other sources.”<sup>111</sup>

-- Umberto Eco, “Can Television Teach?”

As I have demonstrated above, one can certainly find “news content” within *Tanner* ’88 and *K-Street* in the form of “interviews”, “documentary moments”, archival news footage or commentary. In addition, one can also potentially learn from the various portrayals of political and journalistic process. According to David Buckingham, however, “information cannot be seen as a given commodity that is simply contained in the text, and that is thereby transmitted or delivered to a viewer.”<sup>112</sup> This applies just as much to “news programs” as “entertainment programs.” Instead, he states, we should examine

how the “text situates the viewer in relation to ‘information’ – or perhaps more accurately... with how it defines and constructs the experience of ‘becoming informed’.”<sup>113</sup>

Unlike the typical “news program” which, according to Friedman, frames itself as “capable of providing for all our information needs”, *Tanner ’88* and *K-Street* each index themselves as reality-fiction hybrids. As a result, a viewer is more likely to be skeptical of the accuracy of “news content” embedded in these shows and has no choice but to consult other sources if he or she wants to confirm that what they’ve seen is true. This is also the very attitude that Umberto Eco believes any “reasonable person” should have toward *television news*.

Gideon Yago, a twenty-six year old reporter for MTV news who has recently gained recognition for his innovative approach to covering news and his efforts in encouraging young people to vote as the host of MTV’s *Choose or Lose*, has voiced similar thoughts:

“Young people are inundated with conventional media telling them it’s this way or that way. Nobody is saying, ‘The world is full of gray areas and simple moral dichotomies don’t help you understand things.’ If MTV could be the one voice that does that for young people, then we’ll be doing our job.”<sup>114</sup>

Like *Tanner ’88* and *K-Street*, Yago has also attempted to present current events, issues and figures, through “entertainment” as opposed to the conventional “news program”. Recently he starred in two first-person documentaries that MTV slotted into the “long-standing *Diary* series, which usually focuses on celebrities.”<sup>115</sup> According to Yago, “viewers recognize the tone and format, so they’re more inclined to watch.”<sup>116</sup> In a

prelude to the written log that accompanied the *Diary: Gideon in Iraq* television special and can still be found on the MTV.com website, Yago wrote the following:

“I know that journalists are supposed to convey the impression that their reportage is definitive and absolute, but screw it. We worked our asses off for 12 days in Iraq trying to get a clear idea of what the United States’ temporary 51st is all about. What we came back with is confusing, full of contradictions and somewhat disheartening...The “Diary” that we brought home isn’t the be all and end all of reportage on the region, but I believe it represents what it feels like and is like to be in Iraq today. I sincerely hope that after seeing what we saw, you will continue to follow what the United States is doing there and you’ll participate in the debate about Iraq that will take place in our country this year.”<sup>117</sup>

In regard to *K-Street*, Kim Hume, the Washington bureau chief for Fox News, stated “I would hate for the country to think this is news or some new form of news. It’s produced in a way that’s very confusing between what’s real and not real.”<sup>118</sup> However, as I mentioned earlier, it was the very intention of *K-Street*’s producers to blur the line between what is real and staged and to leave viewers “asking whether it’s a documentary or fiction.”<sup>119</sup> Whether they knew it or not at the time, by combining reality and fiction and making sure to index themselves as hybrid, *K-Street* and *Tanner ’88* were both essentially saying to viewers “some of this is true, but it’s up to you to figure out what.” Or, in Eco’s words: “only trust me within reason”.

In addition to the skepticism brought on due to the shows’ hybrid truth status, the lack of conventional anchors or on-screen text that explain what the viewer is seeing can also provide reason for viewers to actively “scan the news environment” in order to better understand the show. (Although, as I will discuss later, this might be seen as a deterrent if the show is too dense in political content.) For example, one of the most common

complaints posted on the “Bulletin Board” on *K-Street’s* official website was the fact that viewers were unable to recognize many of the politicians that portrayed themselves on the show. One fan wrote, “even as a D.C. area local, I do not recognize many of those appearing as themselves,” while another fan stated “I ...wish there were some immediate way to get a “who’s who” while watching the show.”<sup>120</sup>

The very fact that these comments are posted on this site, indicates that these viewers may have visited the site in hopes of learning who these individuals were. As it turns out, the site’s “Episode Guide” provides viewers with a list of all the political insiders that appear in any given episode, with occasional links to relevant websites such as personal bios or home pages. In addition, each episode has what is called an “Online Journal”, where visitors can sometimes find additional information regarding the real-life issues and figures featured in the show, as well as occasional links to articles about these topics and the show itself. Beyond this, however, there is little information present on the site to explain just why a particular individual was asked to appear. Tidbits of information and direct links to other sites are present on the official *K-Street* site only enough, in my opinion, that viewers might continue to deem the site useful, but not enough that one could come to depend solely on the site to provide them with the information they want. In this way, the *K-Street* website can serve as a convenient point of entry for viewers’ further research on the individuals and topics featured, without doing the research *for* them.



This is not to say that *K-Street*'s website is extraordinary in its design or content when compared to other sites for television shows, but rather that its mere existence, coupled with the show's unique approach to presenting current issues and demonstrating political process, appears to be well suited to fostering a viewer's "scanning of the news environment". One must consider, however, that the benefit of this cross-media combination is limited to those individuals who not only subscribe to HBO, but also have access to the World Wide Web. In addition, as Manuel Castells states in *The Rise of Network Society*, "the information about what to look for and the knowledge about how to use the message will be essential to truly experience a system different from standard customized mass media."<sup>121</sup> In other words, while the *K-Street* site itself may provide information that can help a viewer derive additional meaning from a particular episode, as well as encourage and aid further research, a viewer must first assume that the site even exists and be resourceful enough to find it. Luckily, after every episode of the show, HBO aired the following promo stating: "At *K-Street*, our constituents count. Dive into the political issues of this week's episode and let your voice be heard on K-Street at HBO.com." (Of course, as is the case with any "epitext", there is no guarantee that every viewer will be exposed to a promo such as this.)

Needless to say, when *Tanner '88* first aired sixteen years ago, such a website was not an option. A website does currently exist for Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury" (<http://www.doonesbury.com>), however, that offers considerable political news content. For example, one can find the following pages in what is called the "Media Center" on the Doonesbury website:

### **Daily Briefing**

“Every weekday, while you get showered and dressed, we pluck these dewy-fresh, breaking stories from the info-clogged byways of the datasphere. Pour yourself a cup of coffee and stoke up on everything you need to know, or at least enough to fake it.”

### **Straw Poll**

“Weekly polls that are as accurate as they are pointless”

### **Get Involved ([www.e-thepeople.org/affiliates/doonesbury](http://www.e-thepeople.org/affiliates/doonesbury))**

“the place for intelligent and diverse discussion and political action”

## **Incentive and “The Personal”**

While the Internet, in this way, could potentially serve as a springboard for viewers’ “monitoring” of the “news environment”, providing them with enough *incentive* to seek additional information in the first place poses a considerable challenge. As I discussed earlier, while those fictional storylines in *K-Street* that were maintained from episode to episode were interwoven with “news content” during each show, their overall story arcs did not depend on the news in anyway. At first, this might appear to be a prudent approach, for it theoretically means that viewers can still follow the show even if they don’t initially understand the news references or recognize the political insiders that appear. However, at the beginning of the season these storylines were not the focus of the show. Instead, the first few episodes concentrated on particular clients, such as Howard Dean (episode one) or the RIAA (episode two), and were, therefore, quite dense with political subject matter. For this reason, a viewer must have either had prior knowledge about the politicians that appeared and the issues that were raised or have been willing to endure an episode of *K-Street* without fully understanding it.

Undoubtedly, this is why producers chose to focus more on the fictional storylines as the series went on. Midway through the season, Henry Bean conceded that *K-Street* was “still trying to feel its way into a new genre as it goes along” and that the producers were “struggling to redress the balance between realism and plot.”<sup>122</sup> Indeed, there were significant changes in later episodes, although it appears they may have overshot their mark. The show moved away from its unique timeliness by making use of flashbacks and compromised its realism by bringing in well-known actor Elliot Gould, a considerably more familiar face when compared to the other actors in the cast, to play Richard Bergstrom and help develop the narrative that would become the main focus of the remainder of the season: the FBI’s investigation of Bergstrom-Lowell.

In comparison, *Tanner* '88, consistently followed a central plotline throughout the series. Again, “news content” was embedded within the narrative, but never did the show focus on a topic unrelated to the narrative central to the series (i.e. Tanner’s bid for the Democratic nomination), to the degree that *K-Street* did in its first few episodes. This might be attributed to the fact that *Tanner* was scripted from the beginning, while *K-Street* depended more on improvisation, both by actors and in the sense of Soderbergh’s “real-time fiction” approach. While improvisation might allow for a more accurate portrayal of process, as in the case of “simulation” exercises such as Dean’s debate prep, scripting is more likely to result in a consistently coherent, entertaining, and therefore engaging viewer experience.

Because *K-Street*'s overarching storylines were independent of the "news content", viewers (those who continued to watch the show) had little incentive to search for answers to questions raised due to the show's hybrid truth status or lack of TV news conventions, beyond their own desire to understand a particular episode. Although there is passing mention by a few characters during the series about the importance of building and maintaining a clientele for the fledgling firm, it is never really stressed to the viewer that a particular political event, issue, or figure might result in either favorable or adverse consequences for a character. In episode one, it was made clear that Carville was taking a risk, both as a partner in the firm and in his relationship with Matalin, by agreeing to help prep Howard Dean for his debate. However, there is no mention of any consequences of this decision for Carville, professionally or personally, beyond the first episode. Similarly, in episode two, we are left at the end with a feeling that the firm's eventual success in courting Mitch Bainwol and the RIAA as a client could solidify newcomer Francisco Dupré as either a hero or a screw-up in the eyes of the rest of the firm. Yet, we never hear the names "Mitch Bainwol" or "RIAA" muttered even once for the remainder of the series. By the time a storyline regarding a current political issue finally emerged that lasted for more than one episode (the Energy Bill), the FBI investigation plotline had since become the focus of the show. Why then should a viewer be concerned with these issues if the characters themselves don't appear to be? (One might consider the FBI's investigation of the firm to be an exception here, for we come to learn that it is related to Prince Bandar and Saudi Arabia, topics discussed as early as episode two. This connection between the investigation and Saudi Arabia, however, is not revealed until the eighth episode.)

Fiction has a power to make “readers” care about characters. This is especially true in the case of television, considering its serial nature, for characters are essentially guests in one’s home every week. However, *K-Street* never really harnessed this power or took advantage of its unique timeliness in a way that might encourage active information gathering on the part of the viewer. Had the show initially focused on the character’s storylines, allowing viewers to become invested in them, and then altered these storylines each week based on current political developments, this may have provided incentive for a viewer to monitor the news in an effort to further understand the show and guess what would happen to a particular character the following week. (While the website and promos invite one to guess what topic will be covered next week, this alone provides little motivation for a viewer and is too vague to guide one’s search.) *Tanner ’88*, on the other hand, might be said to have done a better job in making certain political issues personally relevant to characters. For example, the *Globe* reporter, Hayes Taggard, argues against the role of “the personal” in reporting on and choosing political candidates; Tanner’s daughter, Alex, argues against apartheid in South Africa and, Tanner, himself, argues for the legalization of drugs in the United States. These issues are all accompanied by more or less current events: the Gary Hart scandal, protests regarding South Africa in the US, and the ongoing debate on drugs in the 1988 primary race (demonstrated by the debate footage with Jesse Jackson and Michael Dukakis) respectively. Yet, still, these are only issues that the characters have chosen to take a stand on, not necessarily ones that affect them directly. (Granted, we learn that Tanner’s

ex-wife is a recovering drug-addict, but the show never explores this further and we never actually meet her.)

If a viewer became interested in a particular political topic due to the fact that it affects a fictional character with whom they had become invested, one might equate this to what Michael Schudson calls “rights-regarding citizenship” where active information gathering and political participation is motivated by the infringement of one’s personal rights or the rights of someone they care about. According to Schudson, although “rights and rights-consciousness have become the continuous incitements to citizenship in our time,” the “vital significance of the rights-regarding model of citizenship...is not yet integrated into American collective self-understanding or civic education.”<sup>123</sup> Certainly, other kinds of shows can foster viewers’ investment in characters as well. As I mentioned, cinema verité is not unlike fiction in that it evokes a feeling of “being there” and “involvement”, therefore reality shows such as MTV’s *The Real World* might provide a similar opportunity for rights awareness. However, because “rights-regarding citizenship” implies a focus on only certain topics, it’s likely that this would not satisfy the “monitorial obligation” that Schudson considers necessary to “intelligently participate in governmental affairs.” Still, according to Schudson, “We have to recognize that the claiming of rights, though it should not be the end of a citizen’s political consciousness, is an invaluable beginning to it.”<sup>124</sup>

Recent research done by “CIRCLE”, the “foremost not-for-profit youth-and-politics think tank”, has found that a “personal approach” to encouraging political awareness and

participation is much more effective than “media and celebrity-driven campaigns” such as “Rock the Vote”.<sup>125</sup> According to Donald Green, a political science professor at Yale who has published research with CIRCLE and author of *Get Out the Vote!*, “The more personal the interaction between campaign and potential voter, the more it raises a person’s chances of voting.”<sup>126</sup> “What distinguishes this generation from previous ones, he says, is that “almost all their contact with the political sphere is through impersonal means, like direct mail, mass media, radio and TV.””<sup>127</sup>

It’s unclear just what he means by “personal”, however. The experiment Green conducted with the Youth Vote Coalition in the days before the 2000 election involved young people calling other people ages 18 to 30 “using an informal, chatty script to ask them to come out to the polls.”<sup>128</sup> While this is “personal” in the sense that it is “one-on-one”, it still isn’t “face-to-face.” In describing why such an approach is successful, Marisa DeMull, a 23-year-old working for the “New Voters Project” (a nonpartisan effort to register young voters sponsored by the state Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) and George Washington University) said, “They tell their own *personal story* about why they got involved and how voting is relevant to their own lives.”<sup>129</sup>(My italics.) While politics is typically approached on television in an “objective” or “impersonal” manner, such as in the case of “news programs” (even “human interest stories” tend to be “reported” using “news program” conventions.), I have already shown how hybrid “entertainment programs” such as *K-Street* or *Tanner ’88* can present political “news content” through the use of subjective narrative, or “personal stories”. In addition, by approaching current political topics *through* entertainment, rather than recruiting those

that *make* entertainment to lend their voices to the cause, as in the case of “Rock the Vote”, such shows can avoid the kind of direct appeal for action that can often be met by resistance.

## Conclusion

“The Mugwumps of that time and the Progressives who followed them, in their disgust with the enthusiastic party politics of the day, helped create a new model of citizenship that made it both more difficult and less interesting to be a “good citizen.”...both generations of reformers helped transform voting from a social to a civic act, rationalizing electoral behavior and depriving elections of most of what made them compelling....The outcome was a world in many respects more democratic, inclusive, and dedicated to public, collective goals, and, for all that, less politically engaging.”<sup>130</sup>

-- Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen*

As I’ve shown, *K-Street* and *Tanner* ’88 both offered “news content” to viewers in a number of ways. According to Schudson, however, an “informed citizen” is one who engages in “active information gathering”, which requires an in-depth *reading* of the “informational environment”. Therefore, in this sense, one cannot be *informed* about politics if he or she is relying on a single source for news, whether it’s a “news program” or an “entertainment program”. Even though Schudson feels a “good citizen” need only “monitor” or “scan”, as opposed to *read*, the “informational environment” in order to “participate intelligently in governmental affairs”, such “monitoring” still requires consultation of numerous sources.

The News, however, largely frames itself as “a complete package ready for consumption” and “capable of providing for all our information needs” while *K-Street* and *Tanner* make



no such claims, but instead index themselves as reality-fiction “hybrids”. As a result, one who correctly determines the truth status of such a “hybrid” show based on its paratexts will be aware that he or she must look elsewhere to better understand just how that program’s portrayal of politics corresponds to historical reality.

One must have *incentive* to engage in such active research, however. By embedding current political events, issues, and figures within fictional narratives, rather than “reporting” on them like The News, such “hybrid entertainment programs” can potentially foster a feeling of “being there” and position viewers as “involved”. In addition, if such shows were to *incorporate*, rather than simply *embed*, current political topics into characters’ “personal narratives”, viewers might be motivated to scan the “news environment”, not only in order to better understand those characters and the show overall, but also, ideally, because they have “seen-for-themselves” how certain issues can affect people and therefore why political awareness and participation is important

It is in this way that hybrid “entertainment programs” such as *K-Street* or *Tanner* ’88 might lead viewers to engage in the kind of “scanning of the news environment” that would fulfill what Schudson describes as the citizen’s “monitorial obligation”, if not the “active information gathering” that characterizes Schudson’s “informed citizen.” While, ultimately, neither show can be said to have succeeded in recapturing the public enthusiasm in political participation that resulted from the combination of politics and entertainment prior to the Progressive Era, their unique approach to combining actual

political “news content” and fictional narrative might be considered a step toward making it “easier and more interesting” to be a “monitorial”, if not “informed”, citizen.

I should acknowledge that my focus here has been on how hybrid “entertainment programs” compare to non-fiction forms, and *The News* in particular. As I mentioned, however, a number of fiction shows, such as *Law and Order* and *The West Wing*, also attempt to present actual current political topics. Therefore, just how viewers might interpret hybrid programs as opposed to those indexed as “fictional” is a topic worthy of further consideration.

In addition, I was unable to sufficiently explore the distinction between the labels “comedy” and “entertainment”. I pointed out early on that Pew seemed to substitute the latter for the former. “Humor” is usually implied by the use of the term “comedy”, and already there exists research regarding the pedagogical value of humor. However, while “entertainment” can refer to humor, it is not restricted to this. Instead, “to entertain” can be understood as “to hold the interest of and give pleasure to” someone, as in “*diversion*”. On the other hand, “entertainment” can also refer to “*thinking or considering something*”, such as when one “*entertains an idea*”.<sup>131</sup> For this reason, a closer examination of how such labels might be understood by viewers when applied to television programs could also be useful.

## **Afterword: *American Candidate***

Currently, a number of groups aimed at encouraging youth voting, including “MTV’s “Choose or Lose”, WWE’s self-dubbed “pro-social public relations campaign” “Smackdown Your Vote!”, independent nonprofit “Rock the Vote”, hip-hop culture impresario Russell Simmons’ “Hip-Hop Summit Action Network”, and sitcom mogul Norman Lear’s “Declare Yourself””, have all united in what is being called the “20 Million Loud Campaign for 2004” -- an “umbrella campaign for these voter-registration drives that also includes nonprofits like the League of Women Voters and the Youth Vote Coalition.”<sup>132</sup> In addition to the “MTV news specials, concerts and events, contests and giveaways” that will “appear under the “20 Million Loud” rubric”, the campaign will also “cross-promote with events like the Wrestlemania tour and a new reality show on Showtime (also owned by MTV parent Viacom)<sup>6</sup> called *American Candidate*” that will air this Summer.<sup>133</sup>

*American Candidate*, as it turns out, is produced by the same R.J. Cutler who also produced the 1992 Carville documentary, *The War Room*. The concept of the show is to follow contestants around the country “cinema verité style” as they attempt to get Americans to vote for them to be named the “People’s Candidate” (i.e. the *American Candidate* contestant they would most like to see run for President of the United States and winner of two-hundred thousand dollars, as well as a “nationwide media appearance”

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<sup>6</sup> Showtime Networks Inc. (SNI), is a wholly owned subsidiary of Viacom Inc., and is part owner of The Sundance Channel, along with Robert Redford and Universal Studios. The Sundance Channel is currently re-airing *Tanner ’88*. Showtime also recently aired the docudramas *D.C. 9-11: Time of Crisis* and *The Reagans*, both films that raised controversy due to their partial use of fiction in portraying real-life political events and figures.

where he or she can address the American public). During an interview on NPR, Cutler expressed many of the same goals originally expressed by the producers of *K-Street*:

“...we’re going to draw the curtain back and show how the *process really works*. We’re going to show just how challenging it is to run for president. We’re going to *show the difficult decisions that have to be made* between your convictions and what is politically expedient. We’re going to *show how polling works*. We’re going to *show how opposition research works*. We’re going to show all of those things.”<sup>134</sup>

In that same interview, Cutler also expressed intentions akin to what *Tanner ’88* offered, as opposed to *K-Street*:

“We also want to have a perspective on presidential politics. We want to be able to illuminate its more absurd qualities, and we want to be able to reflect upon the role that the media plays, and we want to ask questions about what we’re looking for in a presidential candidate.”<sup>135</sup>

Inspired by success of *American Idol* in getting individuals to “vote”, *American Candidate* was originally intended to be aired in a timely fashion like *Tanner ’88* and *K-Street*, and have viewers vote a contestant off the show on a weekly basis. However, in its current incarnation, the show will be filmed in total before the first episode airs. Still, Cutler says there will likely be appearances on the show by actual politicians and, seeing as though the premise is to have Americans choose the contestant they’d most like to see run for President, the program will inherently deal with current political events and issues.

Considering the show’s *verité* approach in following individuals on a quest that is directly related to politics, one can see how *American Candidate* could potentially succeed in harnessing the “power of the personal” where *K-Street* failed. Not only will viewers come to be acquainted with the individual “candidates” being followed, but they

will also witness these characters' personal encounters and discussions as they try to convince actual Americans to vote for them.

*American Candidate* is also making innovative use of the Internet. In addition to promotion, the *American Candidate* website already allows potential "candidates" to create their own homepages where they "can present their qualifications, platforms and visions for the country", as well as "recruit volunteers, organize events and otherwise promote their issues."<sup>136</sup> Also, since the show will not have aired yet while the contestants are trying to get the American public to vote for them, the show's web presence may ultimately play a significant role, not only as a supplement to *American Candidate*, but directly in its production as viewers' initial contact with the show.

Like *K-Street* and *Tanner '88*, *American Candidate* will be aired on a subscription cable channel, Showtime, and will therefore only reach a fraction of the American viewing public. Still, it will be worth examining how this "entertainment program" compares to *K-Street* and *Tanner* in regard to their respective treatment of current political events and issues. Such analysis will be a valuable contribution to the continued discourse surrounding the apparently increasing role of "entertainment" and fiction in providing one's understanding of current political topics. The fact that all three shows are aired on cable should not be ignored, however. While cable television does reach less viewers than broadcast networks, it also has more freedom due this smaller audience. Television critic Steve Johnson praises Jon Stewart for remaining on Comedy Central despite the lucrative offers from broadcast networks that he has undoubtedly received on account of

his increasing popularity. Johnson points out that *Daily Show* alum, Mo Rocca, who “now does for NBC’s *The Today Show* a diluted version of the satirical pieces he used to provide *The Daily Show*”, seems “neutered”.<sup>137</sup> This raises a number of questions that are worth exploring further: What, if any, changes in approach would a “hybrid entertainment program” similar to *K-Street* or *Tanner ’88* need to make in order to be aired on a broadcast network? Just what constitutes the “news environment”? Must one have access to cable television and the Internet in order to be a “monitorial citizen”? If so, what does this say about the role of media access in one’s ability to participate intelligently in political process?

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> “Cable and Internet Loom Large in Fragmented Political News Universe”. The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, January 11, 2004. (<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=200>)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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