The Influential Link Between Network Television & Culture in the U.S

by

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Studies have recognized that underlying messages exist within the content of television shows. Whether it be a trending topic on social media, an assessment of the current U.S political climate, or one of the latest acts of discrimination, media and entertainment often uses socio-political topics as a means to grab viewers' attentions. In this study, an assessment of how television influences culture, or vice versa, will be conducted, as well as a further analysis of the presence of socio-political messages within the content of popular shows in broadcast television via content analysis. Some examples of socio-political topics include income inequality, LGBTQ issues, religious intolerance, immigration, unplanned parenthood, violence and bullying, education, environmental conservation, and discrimination of all sorts. While there is plenty of “mindless” television out there for viewers to become entranced in, there is television that provides a light and airy escape from reality while still being able to address the social issues. Content like that allows viewers to still be entertained and enjoy the show they’re watching, while understanding that the show knows what’s going on in the world, and the producers behind the show are making it more relatable to the viewer by putting in “real” content. For this analysis, NBC, one of the big four networks, has been selected because an overall theme of socio-political messaging can be identified within the content of its primetime scripted lineup.

Three television series have been selected from the NBC Entertainment’s primetime scripted lineup. These series will be assessed by watching various episodes throughout the seasons of each television series and taking note of each socio-political reference made within the shows content. This method is referred to as content analysis which studies document & communication artifacts. These can be texts, pictures, audio, or video. Discourse analysis will also be used to assess the impact of dialogue that uses language that is clearly socio-political. Discourse analysis is used to analyze how language enacts social and cultural perspectives. Consumer demographics and show ratings will be used to assess who is watching the shows and show success. The three shows selected for this study are *The Good*
Place, I Feel Bad and Will & Grace from NBC’s comedy lineup, which each have a 30 minute run time.

The questions to be answered from this study are

- Does television influence culture? How?
- How does this reflect in society?
- Does the network of focus insert socio-political content within the shows?

I will begin with the book *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, by Theodore Adorno, a German philosopher and sociologist, where he discusses television and the patterns of mass culture. Adorno points out that mass media always conveys a type of message, be it overt or hidden, and the hidden message may often be more important than the overt because it will almost certainly disappear into the depths of the spectators mind. Meaning, they will not consciously digest it and analyze it with intellectualism. Adorno goes on to discuss how mass media ultimately instills presumptions and stereotypes into the minds of the audience. Due to the divided “classes“ of television, or categories, that have been established in modern media, the spectator is faced with a presupposed expectation of the content before a single word is spoken in the show (pg 483). Television, as a type of mass media, also portrays stereotypes and influences the way we, the audience, identify and categorize those stereotypes in our culture. These presumptions and stereotypes play an important role in the way citizens identify within their social culture. Adorno’s discussion of overt or hidden messages, as well as presumptions and stereotypes that are derived from media, supports the idea of mass media, also known as popular culture, having an influential effect on culture because of the way it manipulates the minds of viewers (Adorno, pg 485-488).

**Popular Culture**

The term mass culture, or better translated as popular culture, studies television as an aesthetic and cultural form. “Most definitions of popular culture involve mass consumption - that is, popular culture is available to most people in a society relatively easily” (Dittmer, pg 22). Often we hear that the
fault lies with the audience, “they just don’t get good culture.” In his book, *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity*, Dittmer provide a thorough explanation of how popular culture is related to identity. “This shift from the quality of popular culture to the quality of the audience is instructive. It tells us that popular culture/ high culture/ folk culture are closely linked to identity - that of the people who produce it, the people who consume it, and the people who use it to their own ends. It is through popular culture (at least in part) that we decide who we are, who we want to be, and how we want people to understand us” (Dittmer, pg 25). Based off of this notion, I argue that whether or not television shows insert socio political content into their episodes, the way in which viewers respond to that content is what determines if it is impactful or not. As Dittmer well explains, the quality of the audience is instructive. If one wants to be associated with inclusivity and humane action, they may find the socio political content as progressive and necessary for society at large. However, if one displays bigotry, racist behavior, and values capital gain above moral code, they may find socio political content within the shows they watch as unnecessary and annoying. Television, as a form of popular culture, allows individuals to reflect on who they are, who they want to be, and how they want others to view them, through their responses to hidden and overt messaging within the content. The following sections discuss how this is possible.

Television is able to cut across the multiple ways that people process politics. I will be discussing three of these in this section, one of which being media discourse. As explained earlier in this paper, discourse analysis is one of the methods that will be used to assess the impact of dialogue that uses clearly socio-political language. “‘Media discourse’ here means the spread of politics, and political topics, beyond its traditional home of news and documentary media” (Winston, pg. 18). Another way is through “popular wisdom” which Winston describes as “The ‘popular wisdom’ portion of this equation is the general sense of the world shared by both the fiction and the viewer’s sense of the real world. The care taken to make films and television seem like real life—using multiple consultants, language or
movement coaches, filming locations, set decoration choices, even employing former speech writers as
screenwriters—enhances our belief that what is on the screen is reflective of the real world, even if the
exact circumstances are different” (van Zoonen, 2007, p. 58). This supports a previous statement earlier in
the paper of producers putting in “real” content in the shows to, thus, make it more relatable. An
example of this is presented in the several show analyses later on in this paper. One in particular is The
Good Place season 3, episode 3, which discusses human emotion and responses. Lastly, Winston
explains ‘experiential knowledge’, which “results from the familiarity with characters and emotional
investment that people make in following a story or television show. This connection—the feeling that
we “know” a character—makes their experiences and opinions more important to us than persons met
only fleetingly” (Winston, pg. 18). The following section discusses how the media industry evolved at the
turn of the millennia in order to present television in a way that would create a “marriage” of sorts
between viewers and the series they were watching.

During the late nineties and first decade of the 21st century, older media responded to web
presented opportunities by creating hybrids and adapting old formats to new demands. This resulted in
cultural convergence, a blurring of the lines that had shaped older forms. This was done by using
television’s unique ability to spin a series not just over a few hours, but over several years by deepening
characters, twisting plots, and entangling relationships. “One way that television networks and
producers attempted to hold onto loyal viewers in the age of thousands of choices was to draw them
ever more deeply into the narrative and into identification with characters” (Hilmes, pg 400). They
brought the basic soap opera strategy into prominence in primetime by using the familiar cliff-hanger
and intricate story arcs. Serialization and Hyperdiegesis were the next steps in lengthening the lifetime
of a series. Serialization is a strategy that shapes a story to be progressive and continuous (Hilmes 400).
It forces viewers to know the backstory of the series, otherwise they’d be lost. Hyperdiegesis is also
known as “worldbuilding”, which is “the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction
of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension.” (Hilmes, pg 400) These methods have made today’s television audiences to be savvy, skeptical, involved, and most importantly active. It keeps them actively tuning in the shows world each week and encourages viewers to be more aware of the circumstance under which a program is produced, and to be critical of its social implications as well. It’s important to remember that media representations are a part of real life. This notion is supported by the previous discussion of experiential knowledge, which gives viewers the feeling that they really “know” the character and want to invest their attention to follow the character’s, or show’s, story line.

The evolution of worldbuilding and cultural convergence became necessary, as well as something that would forever change the industry of television. The network I’ve chosen to include in this study, NBC, adopted these strategies of serialization and hyperdiegesis within it’s television content upon the concepts’ inception into the industry. NBC has been and continues to be a significant player in network television, and is always keeping current with the times.

Today, NBCUniversal is one of the leading entertainment companies globally. NBCUniversal is a subsidiary company of Comcast Corporation after a joint venture with G.E in January 2011 that committed Comcast to making NBCUniversal a global leader in media and entertainment companies. NBCUniversal owns and operates a full portfolio off subsidiary companies including news and television networks, a motion picture company, television production companies, world renowned theme-parks, and a variety of internet-based businesses. NBC Entertainment, a subsidiary company of NBCUniversal within its broadcast enterprises. “NBC Entertainment develops and schedules the network’s primetime, late night and daytime programming. NBC’s quality programs and balanced lineup have earned the network critical acclaim, numerous awards and ratings success” (nbcuniversal.com/business/nbc-entertainment). NBC Entertainment has won more Emmy Awards than
any other network in television history, and remains the #1 television network for the 18-49 age demographic for the September-May television season.

NBC is headquartered at 30 Rockefeller Plaza, situated in the heart of Rockefeller Center in NYC. Home to the annual 72-foot tall Christmas Tree, an abundance of tourist attractions, and Radio City Music Hall. New York City is best known for its diversity and being a home to dreamers. There is constant celebration in New York City, with empowering parades for sexuality, culture, heritage, and gender. It is forward thinking and innovative. Thus, it comes at no surprise that NBC, a media entertainment company housed in one of the most diverse cities in the world, produces television shows that address social issues and social change because it resides in a city where social change is most evident. To understand the significance of NBC in this study, we must look back at the roles it has played throughout the history of television.

History of Television

Television during 1965-1975 exhibited the same conflicted pressures as the decade itself. “The WLBT-Jackson case demonstrated how television could be used as an instrument of social oppression, yet also highlighted the way toward citizen action” (Hilmes, pg 275). The social uses of television include public policy, psychological development, and social adjustment. The revolutionary decade of the 60s depended heavily on the media, being that the push for social change was conveyed through the nation’s largely commercial system. The decades-long struggles for civil rights provided a model and an inspiration for other subordinated social groups to follow, such as the youth movement and women’s support for gender equality. A generational divide between baby boomers and their parents sparked the youth movement, and ultimately a whole new market for the big networks known as the youth market. Those who made up this market were racially and sexually conservative and more interested in overt political content, and more tolerant of frank talk and confrontation. More easily summarized as realism,
which was what they wanted above anything else. “They wanted to see people like themselves on TV; young, hip, not completely white, and exercising the freedoms that had becomes so important to them” (Hilmes, pg 264). Similar to Millennials, the youth of that time were resistant. They had experienced events which resulted in a change of their social ideology. These years (1965-75) were the peak of the Vietnam war, which made the youth at home watch their peers be sent off to fight a senseless war. As a result, a wave of resistance took place against the U.S government and anyone else who supported their decisions. If you weren’t with them (the youth), you were against them. In a time of great tragedy and struggle, the last thing the youth wanted to support was an “everything is ok” mentality. “The networks were unsure of how to approach this new market in a way that would best satisfy their interests, but they were certain that it did not include the sugar-sweet sitcoms of the fifties and early sixties. However, the networks were smart, and they new they had to balance transgression with tradition. They couldn’t go too far in a socially liberal or controversial direction, all three big networks strove to hang on to integral oligopoly” (Hilmes, pg 265). Had they not managed to balance transgression with tradition, they may have risked pushing away and upsetting the older generation, which may have been difficult to recover from. As a result of this shift in generational differences, the public received shows like *Roots* to maintain tradition, and shows like *Happy Days* to support transgression.

*Equal Representation*

Sitcoms made their comeback, after being declared dead in 1982, in the late eighties and put a new spin on the notion of family. In 1984, NBC released a new primetime sitcom that would change the race and cultural orientation of the family to African-American with *The Cosby Show*, produced by Bill Cosby for its entire run. The show addressed the strong socio political issue of how African American families were perceived by American society. However, rather than subverting or satirizing the middle-class values on which sitcoms were based, it placed them in a context that took. Cosby made the
middle-class family African American, something new not to historical experience but to the white only tradition of television sitcoms meaning from the history of television representation itself. “Cosby explicitly positioned his program as an answer to the representational stereotypes that had confined African-American characters and families on television and radio.” (Hilmes, pg 352) The status of African-American race was never discussed directly in the show. Rather, it was incorporated subtly with art on the walls, posters of significant African-American figures, music and records. The show was aired during prime time, watched by over 60 million viewers, ranked among the top 10 highest rated programs for its entire run and assisted NBC in becoming the top rated network for the first time in history. Despite the controversy involving Bill Cosby today, the show he helped create and produced for its entire run set a precedent for the types of shows the network has produced in more recent times, shows that provided more realism for the youth of the time.

The late 1990’s was the start of social acceptance for gays and lesbians to come out of the closet onto prime-time TV. Prior to this period, non-heterosexual identities had not been invisible on network television, but they were commonly presented as “problems” or unusual on either talk shows, single episodes, or made-for-TV movies. The first to present openly gay characters on television was pay cable, like HBO and Showtime with *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Brothers*. In the mid-1990s, the networks followed. Nearly 20 prime-time shows featured gay characters in leading or supporting roles by the 1995-96 season. NBC’s *Will & Grace* became the first prime-time sitcom to center on a gay male character in 1998. Other shows featured occasional gay characters, dealt with issues of sexuality in one or more episodes, or focused on the misrepresentational stereotypes of being gay. *Will & Grace* was, and still is, important in representing the LGBTQ+ community in the mainstream media and has been able to do so successfully. Past shows who have attempted the same mission experience failure or unpopularity amongst viewers. *Will & Grace* has been able to experience similar hurdles and still managed to be a top rated show in primetime for 11 straight seasons, as well as make a successful
comeback in 2017 after being cancelled in 2006. Despite many criticisms in its original run, the show was and still is innovative and iconic for the LGBTQ+ community in the mainstream media. *Will & Grace* is yet another example of NBC’s strive to bring forth media content that addresses sociopolitical issues and pushes boundaries without crossing the line.

A large controversy amongst the big four networks was that they constantly lacked minority representation in their fall lineups. In 1999, the Hispanic Media Coalition proposed a viewing boycott against the big four networks for their lack of hispanic representation. This lead to an increased controversy regarding underrepresentation of all minority groups. NBC’s *Homicide* was the only network show with a significant number of minority characters, but was subsequently canceled although it had respectable ratings. “Under the leadership of Kweisi Mfume, the NAACP and a coalition of national minority activists decided to take action, accusing the networks of perpetrating a virtual whitewash in programming and threatening a boycott during the important upfront advertising sales period.” (Hilmes, pg 405) The networks negotiated with the activists and NAACP (National Association of the Advancement of Colored People) and concluded with an agreement that initiate significant improvement in African-American representation both on the screen and behind it. With NBC at the forefront, the networks promised to cultivate a program that would “provide internships to minority students in the network and production industry, fund minority scholarships for the study of communications at the college level, and increase the networks’ program purchases from minority producers” (Hilmes, pg 405). NBC went a step further in offering an additional writer position to the staff of each new show for the network that made it to its second year, in hopes that it would allow a field of minority professionals to be groomed for future production management positions. In 2002 NBC acquired Telemundo as part of its strategy of cross-media expansion. “By 2005 the channel routinely
attracted 8 percent of the Latino/a prime-time audience and was producing almost all of the telenovela lineup in Miami” (Hilmes, pg 404)

To conclude this section, NBC has played a clear leadership role throughout the history and development of television. The network was at the forefront of equal minority representation and opportunity, purchased an all Latino/a network, held the highest rated primetime sitcom in the 80’s that also centered on an African-American family, and held one of the top rated sitcoms in the late 90’s/early 2000’s which centered on gay characters. NBC has constantly taken steps toward correcting social inequality within its network, and has lead the other networks during these turning points for media.

About NBC

The following explains the history of the network company, NBCUniversal. Originally founded as two separate entities, NBC and Universal merged in 2004 into one entity becoming NBCUniversal. In 1912, Carl Laemmle, a visionary for motion pictures, founded Universal Film Manufacturing Company after merging his Independent Motion Picture Company with five others. This influenced the future of motion picture entertainment. In 1926, David Sarnoff proposed the idea of a broadcast radio network, describing it as a means whereby “events of national importance can be simultaneously announced and received," and "baseball scores can be transmitted in the air" to the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) (nbc.com/who-are-we.) The proposal concluded with David Sarnoff founding the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), with RCA as its parent company. In the years that followed, NBC radio began airing shows and reports to the listening public as early as 1927, established its home at 30 Rockefeller Center in 1933, and began airing regularly programmed television service in 1939. As NBC developed its place in innovative media and entertainment. (nbc.com/who-are-we)

Following WWII, NBC took major strides forward. In 1948, NBC was the first to cover a presidential election on television. Between 1950 and 1990 they accomplished a variety of landmark
successes such as aired The Tonight Show for the first time (1954), presented Nat King Cole as the first black artist to have his own network series, brought color to television throughout the 1960’s, hosted the SNL premiere (1975), covered the Kennedy assassination and funeral (1963) and the fall of the Berlin wall (1989), possessed 13 of the top 20 shows on air (1987-88), and launched two new networks known as CNBC (1989), a rival cable news channel, and USA. In 1986, NBC was acquired by a new parent company, General Electric (G.E), which marked a change in management for the first time since the establishment of the network. The transaction went as follows.

NBC and its long-time parent company RCA had been acquired by the General Electric Corporation, which in 2003 purchased Universal film and television from Vivendi, the French multi-conglomerate. The new company owned not only NBC but the USA networks, Bravo, Telemundo, MSNBC, and CNBC, along with Universal’s enormous film and television library and production subsidiaries (Hilmes, pg 385).

Throughout earlier sections of this paper, I discussed television as a mode of influencing its audience and popular culture. The following sections include content and discourse analyses of each of the three NBC television series I’ve chosen for this study - I Feel Bad, The Good Place, and Will & Grace. The content analysis explains the theme of each episode, focusing on the parts with socio political content. The discourse analysis highlights the language used in these scenes that is clearly socio political and explains how it relates to reality. The following analyses of the shows I Feel Bad, Will & Grace, and The Good Place illuminates the themes within each series and ultimately the position NBC holds in today’s television market.

I Feel Bad is a brand new series, introduced fall 2018, and among its executive producers is Amy Poehler, an American actress, comedian, director, producer, and writer known for her political satire skits on Saturday Night Live and humble “tell it like it is” personality. The series depicts the struggles of Emet, a modern day woman juggling a full time career in video game development, being a mother to
three children and loving wife, and a daughter of overbearing parents. The series carries a feminist theme, addressing female empowerment and gender inequality, which are described in the following episodes. The show ended it’s 1st season (most recent) with an average 54% of viewers in the 18-49 age demographic and 2,514,000 viewers, which aren’t the best of ratings for the NBC network.


“I Get Tired of Being Needed”, Season 1, Episode 2

In this episode Emet communicates the needs some women have for a little “me time.” The episode displays a slight feminist approach as it communicates one of the issues women face in society at large, which is needing a portion of time to themselves without being negatively judged. In this episode, Emet feels unable to communicate her needs out of the fear of being negatively judged and chastised for needing a break from her job and her family. When her husband finds her hiding out at her neighbors house, he leaps at the opportunity to join her solitude. However, this leads Emet to disclose what she’s kept hidden from him and the rest of her family. She tells him that she’s unable to communicate her needs for “me time” publicly because of the societal standards she must live up to, such as being the “perfect mother, wife, daughter, and worker.” She says that her peers and society at large shames women for taking a few moments to attend to their needs. When asked why she doesn’t simply say when she needs a break, she tells her husband “It’s not that simple. The world judges me differently. When I need a break, I’m selfish. When you need a break, you’ve earned it... You change one diaper and

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2 Advocating social, political, legal, and economic rights for women equal to those of men.
3 Emet is the perfect mom, boss, wife, friend and daughter. Okay, she’s not perfect. In fact, she’s just figuring it out like the rest of us. Sure, she feels bad when she has a sexy dream about someone other than her husband, or when she pretends not to know her kids when they misbehave in public, or when she uses her staff to help solve personal problems. But that’s okay, right? Nobody can have it all and do it perfectly. From Executive Producer Amy Poehler comes a modern comedy about being perfectly okay with being imperfect (nbc.com/i-feel-bad).
it goes viral. I change one diaper and I get shamed because, you know, the baby isn’t potty trained.” The dialogue provided makes a fair point about societal pressure and standards for women. How selfish is too selfish? Who is empowered with that decision? It is clear that Emet is annoyed by this ideology and the tone of her voice communicates exasperation. This can be interpreted as one sided, as some women may see no flaw with the way society judges them. However, it can also be viewed as representative of all women, and that all women are exasperated with societies unequal expectations of men and women. It also communicates the issue in a way that is shameful, perhaps as an attempt to influence viewers into thinking that judging women more harshly than men for the same exact actions is unfair and wrong.

“My Kid Has to Grow Up”; Season 1, Episode 3:

As Emet decides it time to encourage her son to grow up, she and her husband use money as a motivator for him to accomplish tasks that are part of that growth. After learning of the monetary incentive, her daughter complains “I didn’t get paid to grow up.” and Emet responds “The gender pay gap starts young. Welcome to my world sunshine.” A direct reference to a common issue debated regarding unequal pay between men and women. Gender pay gap “most commonly refers to the median annual pay of all women who work full time and year-round, compared to the pay of a similar cohort of men.” (Miller, Kevin). It is no secret that women the average compensation for women is less than men. Statistically, women earn about 80 percent of men’s salaries for the same job (Miller, Kevin). As with many socio-political issues, this can be a sensitive topic of discussion as there are many points of view on the matter. This is an example of how the series intends to push boundaries by having dialogue that makes bold, unapologetic statements, such as one which clearly refers to the unequal compensation between men and women. Later on in the episode, Emet and her husband discover that their son is in fact growing up and exploring his sexuality and observing women. Emet states “I can mold Louie before society gets to him. I’m gonna make sure we raise a woke son. I’m gonna take him to work tomorrow and I’m gonna show him that women are smart, creative, and more than something to just
put a bra on.” In this statement the show is communicating that society plays a crucial role in shaping the mentality of our youth, and places a sense of urgency on the matter as though there is a race between society and parents to influence the mentality of their children. By implying this invisible race, it suggests that the way society at large depicts women is flawed, and that parents need to do more to disrupt the development of that ideology amongst children. The show sets a clear tone for the series in support of female empowerment and communicating the characteristics of a modern, forward-thinking, and empowered female individual in modern society. In conjunction with its mission to support gender equality, NBC Entertainment extend its support of equality into the LGBTQ community. The next series of discussion is *Will & Grace*, which centers around LGBTQ individuals residing in upper Manhattan.

*Will & Grace* originally aired for eight seasons from 1998-2006, assembling one of the finest comedic casts on television. The scripts were groundbreaking and hilarious and embarked on the beginnings of a media movement where LGBTQ individuals could carry lead roles in primetime television. Ending it’s 10th season (most recent) with an average 74% of viewers in the 18-49 age demographic and 3,018,000 viewers, the series’ revival provides a significant message within modern society, the importance to remind ourselves of human equality. With the outcome of the 2016 Presidential election, the majority conservative American government, civilian demonstrations of nationalism and racism, and the overall divisive atmosphere of the United States, a show like *Will & Grace* is exactly what the world needs.


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4 Behold once again, from the minds of Max Mutchnick and David Kohan, TV’s wittiest ensemble ever. The legendary James Burrows, director of every original “Will & Grace” episode, has returned with a slew of razor-sharp jabs and dirty martinis. “Will & Grace” returned to NBC on September 28, 2017, and stands as the network’s most-watched comedy in seven years. Best friends Will, a meticulous corporate lawyer, and Grace, a neurotic interior decorator, share a New York apartment after Grace leaves her fiancé at the altar. Will and Grace, along with their pals Karen, an outspoken socialite, and Jack, a free-spirited actor, face the highs and lows of life in
“Where in the world is Karen Walker?”; Season 2, Episode 2:

Early on in the episode, there is a scene where Grace is being interviewed about her campaign for President of “ “ and she states “There are so many issues that we, as a nation, are facing right now. healthcare, immigration... bees. The bees are dying. No one knows why.” The interviewer responds “Well, pesticides and climate change.” “No one knows” Grace continues “I realized it was time to stop complaining and get involved. So I decided to run for mayor.” The interviewer corrects her, as she is not running for mayor, and Grace responds “well, I realized I was not qualified, so I decided to run for president.” This is meant to be a satirical reference to the current political issues faced within the United States, including the liberal opposition of the current sitting President, Donald J. Trump. This reference, while maintaining a light and witty atmosphere of the show, communicates an opposition to the conservative U.S president. Inserts like this allow viewers, whose political views could aline with the shows, the ability to cope with the state of our current political climate while having a laugh or two on the matter. The episode continue with its satire as later on in the episode a reference to Cambridge Analytica is made by a character made out to be Karen’s lover. In March 2018, The New York Times obtained documents from inside Cambridge Analytica, the data firm owned by a right-wing donor. The documents proved that the firm used data that was improperly obtained from Facebook to build voter profiles. The show consistently takes an liberal approach in its screenwriting, with its witty political jokes, mockery of conservative ideas and policies, and messages that support overall inclusivity rather than exclusivity. Some may view that as resistant simply because it’s in opposition of the politically right wing administration.

In an interview with Advocate, the cast of Will & Grace discusses the revival of the NBC sitcom and its impact in modern society. The show focuses on “the friendship between a two gay men, a

Manhattan together. From sex, dating and divorce to cutting cultural commentary, nothing's off limits - and all is fair game - in this Emmy-winning comedy. (nbc.com/will-and-grace)
biological woman, and an ally.” The cast felt it was important, given societal circumstances, for the show to come back to open a line of communication between the LGBTQ community and the general public. In addition the show’s LGBTQ representation, the dialogue addresses some other social issues such as racism, inequality between men and women in the workforce, barriers between social classes, as well as smaller scale issues like family differences, identifying self worth, and learning to appreciate what’s around you. The article compares and contrasts the similarities as well as the differences of the show’s original run and the revival. In the transcript of the cast interview, many of the cast members describe the challenges they’ve faced as individuals off-screen during the original run and the time that has passed since then. They discuss how they want the show to be a platform and a voice for the LGBTQ community and that this time around, there is no shame, no fear, and no caution. The chairman of NBC Entertainment, the show’s creators, producers, and cast members are all ready to launch an unapologetic voice for the LGBTQ community. When taking a stand in support of equality, the network must display intent. Their intention channels good moral standing and human kindness, which is also the premise of the next series of discussion, The Good Place.

The recurring theme of The Good Place focuses on human ethics and moral decision making. It constantly visits the question “what makes a good person?” The premise of the show centers around four main characters who have all died and gone to an afterlife referred to as “the bad place”. However, it is masked as “the good place” on the surface so that their “torture” is obscured. Thus, the characters think they are in “the good place” despite the fact that they were not good people on earth. For two of the characters, Eleanor and Jason, it is evident that they are not good people, but the other two characters, Chidi and Tahani, each show characteristics of a good person, as Chidi is a moral philosophy professor and Tahani a philanthropist. However, the point that the series slowly unveils throughout the episodes, is that being a good person is not constituted by the things you do, but how you affect those around you. This series most recently ranked in the top 10 scripted NBC TV series (was previously in the top
five), finishing it’s third season with an average 85% of viewers in the 18-49 age demographic and 2,746,000 viewers.

The Good Place (2016), Michael Schur, Creator and Executive Producer, Drew Goddard, Executive Producer, David Minor, Executive Producer, Morgan Sackett, Executive Producer. Series description

“Everything is Bonzer!”; Season 3, Episode 1:

In this episode, main characters Eleanor, Chidi, Tahani, and Jason are given a second chance at life. After the four characters have died and spent some time in the afterlife, the immortal beings responsible for deciding their eternal fate, Michael and The Judge, realize that their system for making such a decision may be flawed. They send the four humans back to earth to see whether or not humans make better ethical decisions, thus becoming a good person, after having a near death experience and given a second chance at life. They wipe their memories of their time spent in the after life because, Michael argues, “it’s the best way for bad people to become good without knowing anything about what’s waiting for them in the afterlife.” The four of them are placed right back to where they were just a few seconds before their original death. After being guided in the right direction, Eleanor reviews a college lecture online in moral philosophy that happens to be conducted by Chidi. In his lecture, Chidi states “What do we owe to each other? Why choose to be good? I argue that we chose to be good because of our bonds with other people. Simply put, we are not in this alone.” If one cannot establish strong bonds with other people, then it becomes far more difficult for individuals to progress in life. We establish relationships of all kind, in all aspects of our life. Professional, romantic, amicable, platonic, and nurturing. The statement “we chose to be good because of our bonds with other people” implies that

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5 From creator Michael Schur ("Brooklyn Nine-Nine," "Parks and Recreation" and "Master of None") comes a unique comedy about what makes a good person. The show follows Eleanor Shellstrop (Kristen Bell, "House of Lies," "Veronica Mars"), an ordinary woman who enters the afterlife, and thanks to some kind of error, is sent to the Good Place instead of the Bad Place (which is definitely where she belongs). While hiding in plain sight from Good Place Architect Michael (Ted Danson - "Cheers," "CSI" - in an Emmy Award-nominated performance), she’s determined to shed her old way of living and earn her spot. (nbc.com/the-good-place)
bad people are unable to establish strong relationships. Thus, it can be argued that their achievements amount to less than those of a “good person.” This is a question people face everyday, as they chose whether or not to make selfish decisions, lose their temperment, or remain ignorant to the world around them.

“The Snowplow”; Season 3, Episode 3:

In this episode, Eleanor is faced with the first real change in her life that has to do with a group of people she truly cares about. She has been selfish her entire life as a way to avoid rejection. As she opens up to her three friends, she exposes herself as vulnerable for the first time in her life, and when they respond with kind opposition, she immediately closes herself up and puts up defenses. After doing so she is found sulking by another friend who, after a few moments, notices that Eleanor is confused by her actions. She explains to Eleanor that

“as humans evolve, the first big problem we had to overcome was ‘me versus us.’ Learning to sacrifice a little individual freedom for the benefit of a group, like sharing food and resources so we don’t starve or get eaten by tigers. Things like that... The next problem to overcome was ‘us versus them.’ Trying to see other groups different from ours as equals. That one we’re still struggling with. That’s why we have racism and nationalism.” (S3:E3, The Good Place)

This is an important lesson that translates to our current social climate. In recent times, the world at large continues to face the “us versus them” problem, where specific groups of people have not yet found a way to view other groups different from them as equals. This societal issue further supports the question of “Why choose to be good?” as it represents individuals who are willing to sacrifice bonds with some people in order to maintain the “superiority” complex of their group. We have nationalist protests, racial discrimination, hate crimes, gender inequality, etc. All due to the inability to see passed ourselves and truly observe those around us to see passed our preconceived notions of stereotypes.

Conclusion
Television has played a large role in the way we, the audience, perceives culture. The way in which we identify stereotypes, respond to politics, and value equality is derived from how we view its portrayal through media. Throughout this paper I’ve discussed the multiple ways that television enables people to process politics, the link between popular culture and identity, the presence of NBC within the evolution of television, and the discourse of socio political content within NBC television series’. Considering all of the above, I am comfortable assessing that an influential link between television and culture exist. “If a film or TV show incorporates a real-life issue or situation into its storyline, the dramatized version of reality will still be in some way “true to life.” Information that the audience may not have known before can be presented, be framed in such a way as to make it emotionally compelling for the viewer, and potentially offer solutions via individual action” (Winston, pg 19). Emotion is the key factor in the prior statement. If viewers become both educated and emotionally involved with an issue that can be reasonably affected by individuals, that person is presumably more likely to take action than someone who is educated on an issue but not emotionally impacted by it. It is the way issues are framed within the content and the nature in which their stories are told that have the ability to make us want to act (Winston, pg 20). The desire to take action is what’s most important in determining whether socio political content is successful or not in its messaging. There are two types of placements of socio political content within television, one being visual and verbal placement, and the other being plot integration. The placement that relates most to this paper is the former. “The majority of placements in television are of the first kind and are both fleeting and unobtrusive: They appear on screen for generally fewer than 5 seconds and are either visual or verbal, but not usually both... Auditory cues, on the other hand, tend to be spoken by a lead or supporting character and have direct significance as to their role in the scene.” This notion relates back to earlier in this paper when I discussed experiential knowledge, which identified the feeling that we “know” a character and the emotional investment that people make in following a story or television show. “A fictional character can function in the same manner as a real-life
representative of an issue or a normative perspective; by humanizing an abstract concept, readers or viewers may imagine themselves and their reactions to such a situation, and their emotional responses may lead to greater attachment to the political issue or actor” (Winston, pg 21). In each of the shows, *I Feel Bad*, *The Good Place*, and *Will & Grace*, the characters do exactly that. When a socio political topic comes up in their dialogue, they then function as representatives of that issue or perspective and make it relatable to the viewer through experiential knowledge. Because the viewer has developed an emotional investment into the characters, the character’s perspectives on issues humanize those concepts, thus, making them more relatable to the viewer and may prompt them to imagine themselves in the character’s perspective. Because of this, I conclude that television is able to influence culture through the emotional impacts it has on the audience.
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