

## BROKEN NEWS

*The artificial intelligence of "The Newsroom."*

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM

"I'm affable!" Will McAvoy yells in the pilot of "The Newsroom," Aaron Sorkin's new HBO series. McAvoy (played by Jeff Daniels) is an irascible anchor whose brand is likability, and it's a good line, delivered well. It is also a rare moment of self-mockery—and one of the last sequences I was on board for in the series. In "The Newsroom," clever people take turns admiring one another. They sing arias of facts. They aim to remake television news: "This is a new show, and there are new rules," a maverick executive producer announces, several times, in several ways. Their outrage is so inflamed that it amounts to a form of moral eczema—only it makes the viewer itch.

This is not to say that "The Newsroom" doesn't score points now and then, if you share its politics. It starts effectively enough, with an homage to "Network"'s galvanizing "I'm mad as hell" rant, as McAvoy, a blandly uncontroversial cable big shot whom everyone tauntingly calls Leno, is trapped on a journalism-school panel. When the moderator needles him into answering a question about why America is the greatest country on earth, he goes volcanic, ticking off the ways in which America is no such thing, then closing with a statement of hope, about the way things used to be. This speech goes viral, and his boss (Sam Waterston) and his producer, MacKenzie McHale (Emily Mortimer), who's also his ex-girlfriend, encourage him to create a purer news program, purged of any obsession with ratings and buzz.

Much of McAvoy's diatribe is bonafide baloney—false nostalgia for an America that never existed—but it is exciting to watch. And if you enjoyed "The West Wing," Sorkin's helpful counterprogramming to the Bush Administration, your ears will prick up. The pilot of "The Newsroom" is full of yelling and self-righteousness, but it's

got energy, just like "The West Wing," Sorkin's "Sports Night," and his hit movie "The Social Network." The second episode is more obviously stuffed with piety and syrup, although there's one amusing segment, when McAvoy mocks some right-wing idiots. After that, "The Newsroom" gets so bad so quickly that I found my jaw dropping. The third episode is lousy (and devolves into lectures that are chopped into montages). The fourth episode is the worst. There are six to go.

Sorkin is often presented as one of the auteurs of modern television, an innovator and an original voice. But he's more logically placed in a school of showrunners who favor patterspeak, point-counterpoint, and dialogue-driven tributes to the era of screwball romance. Some of this banter is intelligent; just as often, however, it's artificial intelligence, predicated on the notion that more words equals smarter. Besides Sorkin, these creators include Shonda Rhimes (whose Washington melodrama, "Scandal," employs cast members from "The West Wing"); Amy Sherman-Palladino, of "The Gilmore Girls" (and the appealing new "Bunheads"); and David E. Kelley, who created "Ally McBeal" and "Boston Legal." Sorkin is supposed to be on a different level from his peers: longer words, worldlier topics. And many viewers clearly buy into this idea: years after Sorkin's terrible, fascinating "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip" was cancelled, I still occasionally run into someone who insists that Americans were just too stupid to get it.

As Dan Rather might put it, that dog won't hunt. Sorkin's shows are the type that people who never watch TV are always claiming are better than anything else on TV. The shows' air of defiant intellectual superiority is rarely backed up by what's inside—all those Wagnerian rants, fingers poked in chests, palms slammed on desks, and so on. In

fact, "The Newsroom" treats the audience as though we were extremely stupid. Characters describe events we've just witnessed. When a cast member gets a shtick (like an obsession with Bigfoot), he delivers it over and over. In episode four, there's a flashback to episode three. In a recent interview, Sorkin spoke patronizingly of cop shows, but his Socratic flirtations are frequently just as formulaic, right down to the magical "Ask twice!" technique.

There's no denying that Sorkin's shows can be addictive: I couldn't stop watching "Studio 60," which was about the making of a "Saturday Night Live"-style sketch show, no matter how hard I tried. That thing was alive! It was lit up with payback, as well as with portraits of Sorkin's exes so glowing that they were radioactive. The show's deliriously preening heroes were so memorable that they inspired a set of fictional Twitter feeds, in which the characters live on, making remarks like "Deciding if the satire I'm about to write should be scathing or whip-smart."

"The Newsroom" sounded more promising, journalism being a natural habitat for blowhards. But so far the series lacks the squirmy vigor of "Studio 60," particularly since Sorkin saps the drama with an odd structural choice. Rather than invent fictional crises, he's set the show in "the recent past," so that the plot is literally old news: the BP oil spill, the Tea Party, the Arizona immigration law. That sounds like an innovative concept, but it turns the characters into back-seat drivers, telling us how the news *should* have been delivered. (Instead of "Broadcast News," it's like a sanctimonious "Zelig.") Naturally, McAvoy slices through crises by "speaking truth to stupid," in McHale's words. But he also seizes credit for "breaking stories"—like the political shenanigans of the Koch brothers—that were broken by actual journalists, all of them working in print or online. In the fourth episode, the show injects a real-life tragedy into the mix, pouring a pop ballad over the montage, just the way "E.R." used to do whenever a busload of massacred toddlers came crashing through the door.

There are plenty of terrific actors on this show, but they can't do much with

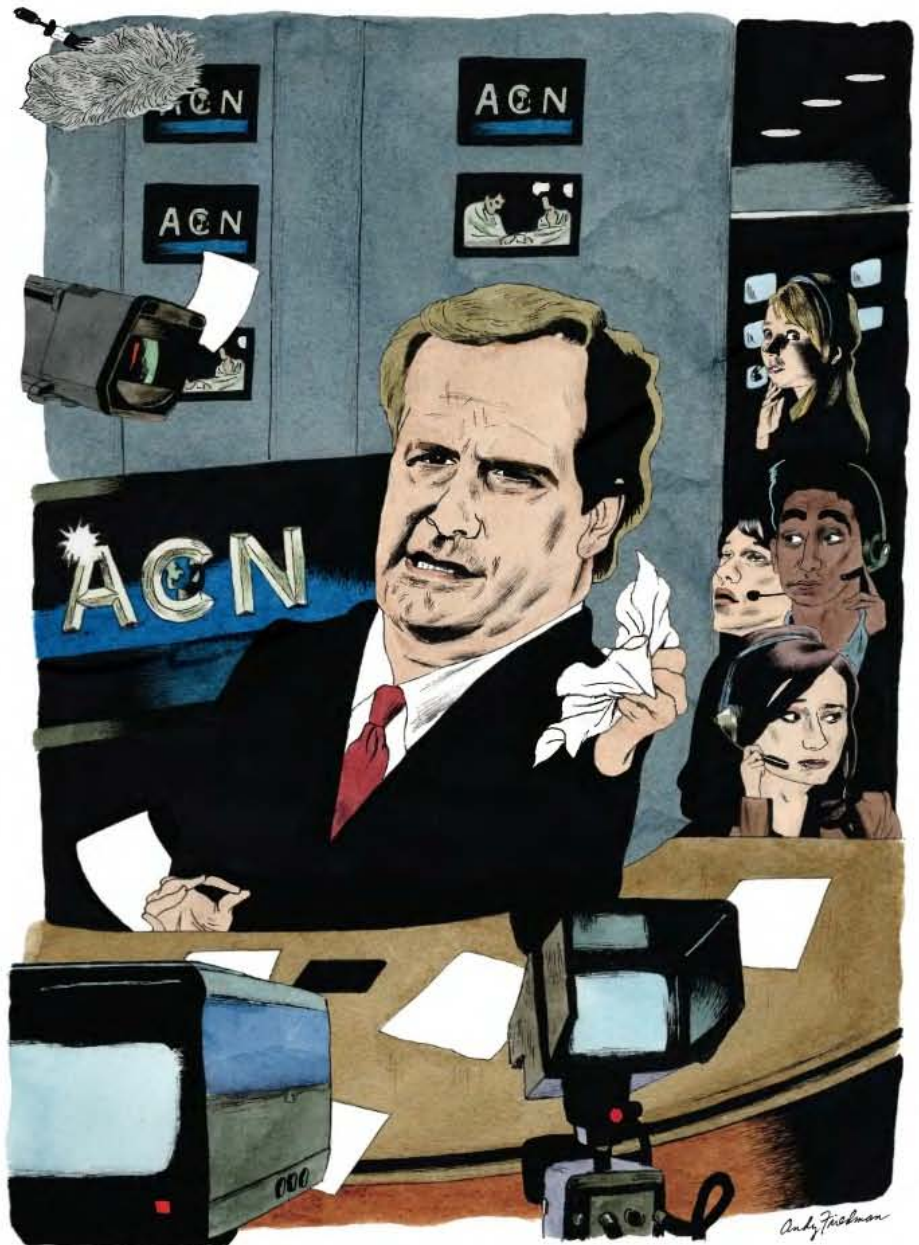


roles that amount to familiar Sorkinian archetypes. There is the Great Man, who is theoretically flawed, but really a primal truth-teller whom everyone should follow (or date). There are brilliant, accomplished women who are also irrational, high-strung lunatics—the dames and muses who pop their eyes and throw jealous fits when not urging the Great Man on. There are attractively suited young men, from cynical sharpies to idealistic sharpies, who glare and bond and say things like “This right here is always the swan song of the obsolete when they’re staring the future paradigm in the face.”

The show features three people of color. The most prominent is an Indian staffer named Neal Sampat, played by Dev Patel. The dialogue makes fun of McAvoy for calling him Punjab and referring to him as “the Indian stereotype of an I.T. guy,” but the show treats Neal with precisely that type of condescension. Neal is a WikiLeaks fan who writes the show’s blog, but he’s a cheerful cipher, a nerd who speaks nerd talk. There are also two African-American producers, who are introduced to the audience when McAvoy—who is publicly memorizing the names of his staff, having been accused of not remembering them—says, “Gary. Kendra. Gary’s a smart black guy who is not afraid to criticize Obama. Kendra got double 800s on her S.A.T.s, makes Gary crazy. I studied.”

Nobody reacts, and I suspect we’re supposed to find his behavior charmingly blunt or un-P.C. But, again, neither Gary nor Kendra is at all developed, or given any role in the show’s wineworthy set of love triangles. It gave me flashbacks to one of the worst plots on “Studio 60,” in which the comic played by D. L. Hughley—the “smart black guy” who was always reading the newspaper—went to a comedy club to anoint the one true young black comic among the hacks and mediocrities. Sorkin’s shows overflow with liberal verities about diversity, but they reproduce a universe in which the Great Man is the natural object of worship, as martyred by gossips as any Philip Roth protagonist.

Despite a few bad bets, HBO is on a truly interesting run right now. It has built a solid Sunday lineup, with “Game of Thrones,” the excellent “Girls,” and “Veep,” a political sitcom that just ended



*Jeff Daniels as Will McAvoy, a crusading anchor, in “The Newsroom.”*

its funny, prickly, but also rather dead-hearted debut season. Julia Louis-Dreyfus, who plays the title role, is a skilled comedienne, and the cast knows how to sling the writer Armando Iannucci’s nasty zingers. And yet the series was so cynical that it somehow felt naïve. When Louis-Dreyfus’s character got pregnant, she promptly miscarried, and then had no meaningful reaction to either condition. This was disappointing, but I still have hope for the second season, when many sitcoms find their feet, as did NBC’s “Parks and Recreation,” the one excellent political series on TV.

“The Newsroom” is the inverse of “Veep”: it’s so naïve it’s cynical. Sorkin’s fantasy is of a cabal of proud, disdainful brainiacs, a “media élite” who swallow

accusations of arrogance and shoot them back as lava. But if the storytelling were more confident, it could take a breath and deliver drama, not just talking points. Instead, the deck stays stacked. Whenever McAvoy delivers a speech or slices up a right-winger, the ensemble beams at him, their eyes glowing as if they were cultists. The series turns Will McAvoy into the equivalent of the character Karen Cartwright, on “Smash,” the performer who the show keeps insisting is God’s gift to Broadway. Can you blame me for rooting for McAvoy’s enemies, all those flyover morons, venal bean-counters, sorority girls, and gun-toting bimbos? Like a political party, a TV show is nothing without a loyal opposition. ♦