

# **Being 'Good' Fans in 'Bad Times':**

## **Irish Fans of the US Television Drama *The West Wing* and the Reflexive Negotiation of Personal and Collective Identity at a Time of Political and Social Crisis**

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## Abstract

Much contemporary theory posits a relationship between the consumption of cultural and media artefacts and the construction and negotiation of individual and collective identities. An additional debate concerns whether political understanding and participation can be (re)invigorated by the convergence of political and media spheres. Fans – committed, reflexive consumers who ‘invest’ variously in media texts – represent a significant, yet locally under-explored research population through which to address these matters. Moreover, the current political, economic and social crisis in Ireland renders contemporary Irish fans of political television drama especially suitable for study. This study examines how fandom of political television drama interrelates with ‘real life’, situated political identity. Entailing a small-scale quantitative survey and in-depth interviews with 22 Irish fans of *The West Wing*, the study makes an original empirical contribution to these debates, extending existing scholarship, but adding a new theoretical perspective to Irish cultural and media studies.

The findings demonstrate the significance of the uncertain context - political, economic, social and cultural - in response to which respondents attempted to address ontological anxieties by the consumption of ‘good’ things – such as *The West Wing* – as a source of intellectual and emotional nourishment and replenishment. Respondents’ intense connection with the series’ themes and characters, especially with fictional US Democratic President Bartlet (Martin Sheen), was found to enable an imagined, ideal political sphere in contrast to the perceived inadequacies of Irish politics. Further, an ‘object relations’ psychoanalytic reading of respondents’ attachment to *The West Wing* suggests that the fantasy space of fandom and the fan object in question provides a psychic, as well as cultural, means of (imaginarily) transcending the flaws of ‘real’ politics. However, these were found to inter-relate to articulations of an ambiguous ‘political self’. The cultural and psychodynamic dimensions of fan respondent data were interpreted as compensatory for a sense of political powerlessness and lack of political participation. ‘Good’ fandom is concluded to be symptomatic of a cultural logic of reversion, an individualistic, fantasy ‘cure’ that represents a failure or reluctance to engage with structural causation or ‘real’ political action. The emphasis of the thesis, then, is on the affective pleasures and rewards of consumption of *The West Wing* at a time of political and social crisis and deeply challenged self-identity and integrity.

## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this material, which I now submit for assessment for the award of PhD is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my own work.

Signed:

ID:

Date:

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# Chapter One – Introduction: Mediated Politics and the Contemporary Political Imagination

## 1.1 Foundations

Research, writes Mary Bosworth, often begins with a poorly formulated question that, through struggle, helps to answer a question that could not have been properly asked at the start (1999, p. 1). My own poorly formulated question emerged out of research undertaken for my MA dissertation, which was a textual analysis of a number of political television dramas, one of which was the US television drama, *The West Wing* (1999-2006, NBC, USA).<sup>1</sup> The appeal and strength of textual analysis was, for me, its explicit emphasis on identifying the construction of what Stuart Hall called ‘preferred meaning’ (1973) within media and cultural texts through the structural interplay between formal elements of image and sound. What was beyond the scope of that dissertation, though, was to extend my research from a focus on the meaning potential of a text to the ways in which texts are variously ‘decoded’ by audiences and incorporated into their everyday lives as cultural resources with which to make sense of their experiences and understandings of the social world; that is, to make the progression from what Christine Geraghty calls ‘the realm of aesthetics’ (2003, p. 28) to examining the social dimensions of political television drama.

The rationale for the choice of *The West Wing* was initially personal: having come across a number of episodes as they were broadcast during 2002, I had become a fan myself. I was attracted to its ‘quality’ components: the smart dialogue and quality of writing, the ensemble acting, the political subject matter, and especially the way in which the show seemed to make demands of the viewer. Consequently, I purchased the DVD box sets as they became available. In this sense, my personal consumption and fandom of *The West Wing* corresponds to a number of themes relevant to the present study: not just the evident convergences between politics and media, and the stylised and highly attractive version of politics on *The West Wing*, but also rapid changes in the media and television industries, as evidenced by the rise of ‘quality’ TV drama in its ‘golden age’ and its address to audience, as well as the rise of DVD box set culture.

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<sup>1</sup>My MA dissertation ‘*Prime Time Politics: Myth, Narration and Narrative*’ (2009) was a textual analysis of three political television dramas: *The Running Mate* (2008, TG4, Ireland), *The West Wing* (1999-2006, NBC, USA) and *House of Cards* 1999, BBC, UK).

But *The West Wing* was also meaningful to me in an autobiographically situated way. Watching it at the time I did - newly married and expecting my first child, in our first 'owned' home – and in the way I did, in the evening, after work, and then watching as many episodes as I could stay awake for once I had acquired the DVD box sets – made me feel good about myself as a cultural consumer, as well as inducing a feeling of adult 'insiderness' and optimism about politics. These feelings were (and remain) firmly situated in and associated with particular periods in my life. A number of years later, my wish to investigate politics and media further, using *The West Wing* as a textual reference, implicates not just my own understanding of the text's cultural *and* academic capital but also my own culturally constructed perceptions of the importance of both.

However, it also became evident to me that this particular drama appeared to have resonated deeply with people. Anecdotally, I collected stories which revealed the political imaginary of *The West Wing* to be particularly popular and attractive to its fans. This presaged my interest in engaging with how real people as active audience members and subjects might 'read' *The West Wing* from their varied socio-cultural positions. This research would ideally involve examining what relationships there might be between audiences' consumption of political television drama and the ongoing construction and negotiation of their political self-identities.

This introduction will explain how and why the idea for a research project on Irish fans of *The West Wing* as a political drama developed and was progressively refined, leading to an account of the project aims and provisional hypotheses, and an account of, and rationale for, its final structure. Each of the conceptual themes introduced and outlined here will be elaborated at greater length in Chapter Two.

## **1.2 Fans versus audiences**

As a fan of *The West Wing*, a political drama about the fictional US Democratic President Bartlet and his team, broadcast on the US television channel NBC from 1999 to 2006, and on Irish public service broadcaster RTÉ from 2000 to 2007 I started to consider the relationship between fandom of this politically themed television drama and political identity in Ireland. What is the appeal of such an apparently culturally specific text to a 'fan audience' (including people like myself) in a small island in western Europe? This in turn led me to the growing critical literature on media and cultural 'fan' research. Examining fans – as deliberate, committed consumers of media

texts – is currently considered to be of particular significance as their various investments in their varied objects of consumption (emotional, intellectual but also financial, temporal) render them a research population that spans a number of inter-related topics in contemporary media and cultural studies. Prior to several seminal and foundational publications in the 1990s (Bacon-Smith 1992; Jenkins 1992; Lewis 1992) the ‘fan’ was somewhat dismissed as an extreme and often irrationally committed media consumer, though audience research generally had only begun to develop within media and cultural studies in the 1980s (Ang 1985; Hobson 1982; Morley 1980; Radway 1984).

In contemporary research, however, ‘fans’ (as opposed to more casual or occasional audiences) are valued as an object of research, as never before, because of their intensive investment in their specific area of interest. ‘Fandom’, defined as ‘the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text’ (Sandvoss 2005a, p. 8), is presented in late modernity as a subjective strategy of identity formation. This is evident in the legitimation and proliferation of fan scholarship within media and cultural studies (cf. Jenkins 1992; Hills 2002; Mittell 2010), and in understandings of fandom as a form of consumption through which pleasure is generated and enhanced, and cultural and social meanings are circulated, negotiated and created (Fiske 1992; Jenkins 1997, 2006). Popular cultural consumption as expressed in media fandom is positioned as a significant resource for reflexive identity construction (Jansson 2002). It is symptomatic, too, of the changed modes of address from media industries to fans (Sandvoss, 2005; Stein and Busse 2011; Hills 2002). Fans are no longer conceived of as pathological or even marginal (Jensen 1992). Rather, they are addressed (and targeted) as ‘specialized yet dedicated consumer[s]’ (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 2007, p. 2). In an age of media proliferation and audience fragmentation, indulgence of specific fan tastes is increasingly the norm, rather than the exception in modes of capital accumulation by the media and cultural industries. The tracking, prediction and courting of specific fan tastes via such electronic vendors as Amazon is indicative of this process of cultural transformation from the era of the imagined ‘mass audience’.

Although *The West Wing* was broadcast on a mainstream US television network whose means of capital accumulation involves the sale of advertising and the courting of a ‘mass audience’, it was an exemplar of what Robert Thompson (1996) hailed as a

‘second golden age’ of US television drama (following an initial flourishing in the 1950s) in its complex imagining and dramatising of the contemporary American Presidency and the political sphere. It was also an imported, ‘bought in’ television drama when broadcast by Ireland’s national public service broadcaster RTÉ (with a timeslot that varied between 10.40pm, 11pm and 11.20pm throughout its broadcast). It was a prestige, ‘quality’ drama whose budget, production values, form and style differed markedly from any Irish television drama. Hypothetically, then, these were Irish fans – not just casual audiences, but *fans* – whose love of the series was a way of exploring and thinking about their own personal and political identities, despite the obvious geographical and cultural distance from *The West Wing*’s manifest social and political context.

### 1.3 Convergence

This initial hypothetical thought led to the theme of ‘convergence’, in contemporary western societies, between the political sphere and popular media. Sonia Livingstone notes that the ‘understandings, values and identities of the public (and publics), together with the fora in which these are expressed, are increasingly mediated – technologically, materially, discursively’ (Livingstone 2005, p. 9).

The contemporary relationship between media and politics is described by John Corner and Dick Pels as one in which two versions of ‘imbalance’ persist: either a ‘politicised media’ (2003, p. 4) in which the independence of the media is to a large extent circumscribed by the controls of the political system, or a ‘mediatised politics’, where the realm of politics is in fact ‘colonised by media logics and imperatives’ (2003, p. 4), as such without its traditional or former specificity. Either understanding illuminates the shifts that have occurred in the nature of media-political relations, particularly visible in the changed nature of ‘political communication’. The US presidential election of 2008 provided a more recent symbolic zenith in the ‘restyling’ of politics (Corner and Pels 2003). Characterised by a growing requirement that politics resonate within the terms of public appetite for and toleration of an increasingly mediated political sphere, political discourse is increasingly projected, framed and discussed as narrative (Lakoff 2002; Luntz 2007; Nunberg 2007; Westen 2008), such a view suggesting that a key strategy of electoral victory is to frame language and convey narrative by means of ‘words, phrases, images and symbols’ playing on emotion rather than intellect to induce

electoral success (Westen 2008, pp. ix-xv; 15-6; 194). The increasing stylisation of politics is visible in the presence and use of language, narrativisation and rhetoric in politics that resonate with popular culture generally (as exemplified by British Conservative Party leader and current Prime Minister David Cameron's pre-election 'sound bite' remark that the then Labour Party government had 'maxed out our nation's credit card' (conservatives.com 2008). Drawn from the sphere of personal consumption, and resonating with everyday experience, this often repeated metaphor was a key rhetorical device in the justification of extensive cuts in public spending.

W. Lance Bennett describes such 'symbolic politics' as 'citizen experience in the late modern period: the construction of highly personalised forms of identity politics anchored in lifestyles and consumer choices' (2003, p. 138). Underlining this debate then is the difficulty in defining what now constitutes 'politics'. For example, Steven Fielding goes so far as to bracket off 'those who associate 'politics' exclusively with the formal institutions and practices of representation' (adding, 'and there are still some') from the view that:

politics has never simply been about political parties, parliaments and elections, important though they are. The exchange of ideas has always been central to democratic politics – and to accomplish that, politicians have relied on the technologies of communication available to them.

(Fielding 2011, p. 223).

This resonates with Peter Dahlgren's proposal that a redefinition of what is 'political' is urgently required in the contemporary context (2003). Dahlgren has devised a framework for assessing what he calls 'civic culture' (rather than politics) with the aim of more accurately examining the 'processes of becoming' – how people develop into citizens (2003, p. 152). Dahlgren's framework consists of a dynamic six point multi-dimensional circuit (consisting of values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities and discussion, and their interplay) as they impinge and impact on citizens (as multifarious social agents) (2003, p. 152). The framework centralises issues of culture, especially the increasingly salient 'evolving media milieu' (2003, p. 160). In the context of such a 'restyled' politics (Corner and Pels 2003), in which political reality is at least partly produced through narrative (Street 2003, p. 93), it has been suggested that the 'compelling narratives' of fictional television 'can carry remarkable social and political force' (Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger 2005, p. 100). And fans, as reflexive individuals and subjects of consumption in late modernity, intersect a number of these circulating

and inter-related discourses – self-reflexivity, individualism, identity formation and cultural consumption.

On this point, Steven Fielding identifies the notion of ‘imagined political capital’ when he suggests that ‘fiction reflects more than it constructs views about politics, that citizens’ *imagined political capital* is simply a mirror of political reality’ (2011, p. 231, my emphasis). Corner and Richardson have called for further research into how viewers engage with and judge political drama, especially how dramatic political subjectivities provide lines of inquiry ‘not only into the relationship of the politics to the personal but to the forms of its embedding, often in troubled and contradictory ways, within the personal’ (2009, p. 18). However, the implications of these shifting orientations, for ‘old’ and ‘new’ politics, from the standpoint of government and citizens, is uncertain. As Liesbet Van Zoonen points out, ‘there is hardly any research that investigates their effects’ (2007, p. 532). Clearly, the cultural dimension of contemporary politics is hugely significant. John Corner therefore suggests that ‘attending to’ the links between the popular culture and contemporary politics is required (2003, p. 3).

Given such ‘restyled’ contemporary politics, an exploration of political fiction and its fandom among contemporary Irish citizens might therefore provide a conduit for exploring beliefs and understandings about ‘politics’, or more accurately for exploring what Nick Randall characterises as ‘vernacular politics’ (2011), or what Susan Buck Morris identifies as the ‘political imaginary’ (2002). What is it about the ‘imagined political capital’ of *The West Wing* that is of particular ‘fan’ appeal to its Irish viewers and their political imaginations - especially when such fandom is exercised in a country geographically far removed from, but economically and politically connected with the United States, and at a time when faith in the national political process has been severely damaged since the financial and political crises of 2008 and the end of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ economic boom? What particular resonances might there be between fandom of this ‘old’ US produced political fiction and expressions and understandings about contemporary political reality for its Irish fans? The series concluded in 2006, but the research would take place following the onset of Ireland’s financial crisis in 2008. For Irish fans, how, if at all, would this context impact upon their fandom and, conversely, how might their fandom impact upon their political views and identities?

#### 1.4 The particular ‘political imaginary’ of *The West Wing*.

*The West Wing* was broadcast on NBC, an American commercial broadcasting television network<sup>2</sup> (see Appendix One for an account of its themes, characters and broadcast timelines). The series is set in the White House during the administrations of liberal Democratic President Josiah (Jed) Bartlet (played by actor Martin Sheen) and his fictional presidential administration (though, as Julie Levin Russo suggests, it is ‘palpably bred in the climate of the Clinton administration’ (2009, para. 2)).

Its first broadcast coincided with the publication of Robert J. Thompson’s *Television’s Second Golden Age*, in which Thompson argues strongly for the existence of ‘Quality TV’, which he characterises as being ‘better, more sophisticated and more artistic than the usual network fare’ and as being ‘best defined by what it is not. It is not “regular” TV’ (1996, pp. 12-13). Unlike many of its peer ‘quality’ television dramas, *The West Wing*’s ‘home’ was NBC, a commercial rather than cable network, whose dependence on advertising revenue and audience maximisation arguably limits the degree to which, if at all, such a text can offer a radical critique of political structures and discourses in American society. Nonetheless, in most other respects it corresponds to the category of ‘quality television’, ‘in terms of structure, themes and appeal to a specific audience demographic’ (Crawley 2006, p. 68)<sup>3</sup> and was popularly and critically assessed<sup>4</sup> as idealising and liberal (amongst many, by Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2006) and as exemplar of ‘quality TV’ (Crawley 2006, p. 68-69). While the drama was not without

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<sup>2</sup> Each of the seven seasons consists of 22 episodes; in addition there were a number of ‘special’ episodes, including a documentary about the similarities between the real life White House and *The West Wing*, and an unplanned episode which took the place of the planned season premiere after 9/11, making a total of 156 one hour episodes. The ‘television hour’ of NBC, a commercial station, consists of 42 minutes and 13 seconds of television drama.

<sup>3</sup> A *New York Times* review opined that: ‘[w]ith references to Shakespeare and Graham Greene, visits to rare-book stores and oblique Latin episode titles like “Post Hoc, Ergo Prompter Hoc”, the show is so achingly high end that you almost expect the warning “Quality Television” to start flashing below the picture’ (Peter De Jonge, *New York Times*, October 28<sup>th</sup> 2001 cited in Crawley 2006, p. 63). The television industry’s championing of ‘quality’ television corresponds with a shift in interest from attracting ‘audience’ to attracting a ‘demographic’ (Feuer 1984). As such, *The West Wing* is conventionally a quality show.

<sup>4</sup> At its height *The West Wing* attracted some 25 million viewers for NBC (Millman 2000), particularly the coveted 18-49 high-earner bracket (Bierbaum 1999). The series won numerous Emmy, Golden Globe and Peabody Awards. Creator, playwright and film and television writer Aaron Sorkin<sup>4</sup>, who, along with director Thomas Schlamme, wrote and executive produced the series for the first four years, left *The West Wing* after the fourth season of the series.



its detractors (John Podhoretz characterises the show as ‘political pornography for liberals’ 2003, pp. 222-223)), the programme’s ‘quality television’ status is repeatedly stressed through its formal, narrative, institutional and intertextual discourses.

In its political discourse *The West Wing*, while fictional, mimetically refers and alludes to real political events, problems and procedures. Corner and Richardson allude to the considerable variation in the ways in which political aspects and dimensions tend to be depicted in media fictions. Given this, *The West Wing* strongly corresponds to their definition of ‘political fictions’ as texts that feature politics substantively and that ‘work with politicality as a defining feature of their narrative project, making political systems and processes, and perhaps politicians themselves, the key elements of their imagined worlds’ (2008, pp. 389-390).

Its first episode was broadcast on 22nd September 1999, which as Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles point out was seven months after the acquittal of President Bill Clinton’s impeachment charges and two years before the US embarked on a global ‘war against terrorism’ following the ‘9/11’ attacks (2006, p. 7). The apparent verisimilitude of the show seemed to extend beyond its mimetic textual allusions and references in the narrative arcs of the final two seasons which engaged with the final stages of President Bartlet’s two term presidency and the presidential election campaign for his successor. A storyline which Janet McCabe suggests ‘at the time seemed awkwardly contrived and faintly implausible’ involved a ‘post racial’ non-white candidate securing the Democratic nomination to campaign for the presidency. The character of Matt Santos (played by Jimmy Smits) tells his (fictional) voters: ‘I am here to tell you that hope is real’ (*The West Wing*, Season 6, Episode 10, ‘Faith Based Initiative’, originally broadcast January 5<sup>th</sup> 2005<sup>5</sup>.) The final season, broadcast in 2006, closed with ‘the inauguration of America’s first Hispanic president - the youthful, charismatic but

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<sup>5</sup> Santos’s (Jimmy Smit) speech in the episode is as follows: ‘And I’m here to tell you that hope is real. In a life of trials, in the world of challenges, hope is real. In a country where families go without health care, where some go without food, some don’t even have a home to speak of, hope is real. In a time of global chaos and instability where our faiths collide as often as our weapons, hope is real. Hope is what gives us the courage to take on our greatest challenges, to move forward together. We live in cynical times, I know that. But hope is not up for debate. There is such a thing as false science, there is such a thing as false promises, and I am sure I will have my share of false starts. But there is no such thing as false hope. There is only hope.’ (Season 6, Episode 10, ‘Faith Based Initiative’, original broadcast date 05.01.2005).

unseasoned coalition-building newcomer who talked impassionedly of change and hope' (McCabe 2013, p. 5). In hindsight, this storyline mirrored the real life 2008 US presidential election to an uncanny degree<sup>6</sup>. As McCabe writes, '[s]omehow, *The West Wing* looked relevant again, as having something of vital importance to tell us about our political, historical and cultural epoch' (2013, p. 5). In this regard, *The West Wing* can be argued to be the product and outcome of a specific broadcasting, political, cultural and media culture, exemplifying 'quality' television as well as a convergence in political, media and popular cultural spheres.

The evident intertextuality of *The West Wing* as television drama calls heavily on Corner's notion of a 'post-documentary' culture. The show's allusions to Kennedy/Clinton, its operationalising of verisimilitude in terms of location, political world and the inner workings of politics casts it as a political fiction which is nonetheless set in a 'real' political landscape and based around 'real' political events. Despite being, ultimately, a fiction, the show's discursive strategy 'is bound up with the play of these epistemologies, with the spectator's active investment in the flexibility of these distinctions' (Levin Russo 2009, p. 16). As such it operates a self-reflexivity about American politics (with particular and repeated Irish-American resonances) which rewards its viewers as 'quality' fans, and rewards Irish viewers particularly. The intertextuality, therefore, might be argued to function as a bridge between the text and its audience. As well as the show's textual allusions to an idealised, fantasised Clinton presidency, *The West Wing's* intertextuality (if real life can be regarded as a text) extended, as already briefly discussed, to the hyperreal simulacrum of its 2006 storyline in which an ethnic minority Democratic candidate contests and ultimately wins the presidential election two years before the 2008 election in which, under remarkably similar circumstances, Barack Obama became US President. These similarities seem particularly salient in light of Jean Baudrillard's statement that '[i]t is no longer theories which adapt themselves to events, but the reverse. Events now adapt themselves to the most hostile environments, like species adaptation' (1996 [2008], p. 101).

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<sup>6</sup>The lines between the fictional political television drama and real Democratic administrations blur regularly. For example, one of the series writers, Eli Attie, served as a special assistant to Bill Clinton and is a former speechwriter for Al Gore and David Axelrod, one of President Obama's chief strategists.

*The West Wing* mobilises and operationalises a number of registers of ‘quality’, including, in its association with series creator and writer Aaron Sorkin, an ‘auteurist’ credential (Matt Hills contends that auteurism in all its forms ‘brings with it an ideology of quality’ (2002, p. 133)). A further register of quality is its version of an intellectual politicality, reinforced through the almost Socratic dialogue that takes the form of conversations and debates amongst the key staff and between the President and his key staff. This succeeds in superficially infiltrating a storyline with complex political information while simultaneously fulfilling dramatic requirements by privileging the personal over the political. Of note, though, is that this dramatic emphasis on the discursive heteroglossic nature of the episode’s dialogue effectively diverts attention away from the issue. So, while *The West Wing* is frequently portrayed as liberal and left-leaning, close examination of its political decision-making in the episodes reveals it to be broadly conservative; Chris Lehmann discusses this as ‘pseudo-politics’ and ‘symbolic posturing’ (2003, p. 216). Though liberal arguments are rehearsed discursively and often extensively in the narratives, personal beliefs and morals are consistently subjugated to a broader set of political values which can be coded as American western liberal democracy. The liberalism is played out in the debate, not necessarily in the outcome of the debate, a tendency in *The West Wing* which Samuel Chambers refers to as ‘agonistic discourse’ (2003, p. 96).

The quality register is further reinforced visually and aesthetically through a combination of stylised cinematography, editing and mise en scène. Predominantly associated with *The West Wing* and its primary director Thomas Schlamme, the ‘walk and talk’ signature style of shooting became synonymous with the series, typically involving two characters walking from one end of a large contiguous set to the other, combining story exposition (through Sorkin’s rapid fire dialogue), characterisation (emphasising the agency and activity of the characters), and visual excitement, adding dynamism to what otherwise would be static talking head shots while equally extracting maximum value from screen time. The ‘walk and talk’, operated by steadicam, is punctuated by flashing ‘hot lights’ overhead, a lighting feature designed by *The West Wing*’s cinematographer Thomas Del Ruth, which, as the characters are walking and talking, gives the impression of light bouncing off heads, further accentuating the urgency, speed and importance of the work being done, with characters speaking the trademark ‘Sorkinese’ dialogue, contributing to a sense of politicality as whip smart. In

addition to being intellectual, informed and savvy the dialogue includes frequent use of irony, sarcasm, pop culture references and especially humour, which regularly is employed to divert from inherently problematic issues.

One of *The West Wing's* predominant themes concerns a prevailing sense of politics as duty. The notion of duty conveyed is one in which leaders (and their political staff) are required to answer a call to public service. Having established Bartlet's political and personal suitability to the role of leader, this sense of civic duty has been described as 'subsuming the pursuit of power to something more ennobling' (in Paxton 2005, p 174). The motivation of President Bartlet and his core team of assistants draws on a romanticised view of duty and politics, in which the essence of duty is shown as serving the president (and in so doing, the country). The audience is frequently told through dialogue that Bartlet has 'it', a theme which is reinforced visually, aurally and through Bartlet's uncommon dialogue and speech. Furthermore, duty in *The West Wing* is predicated primarily on doing the right thing, particularly framed in terms of the dialogical interchanges surrounding the establishment of what the right thing is, even if this does not translate into political popularity or success. For example, here Chief of Staff Leo McGarry (John Spencer) urges the key political staff to pursue their political agenda, rather than political expediency:

LEO: We're gonna lose a lot of these battles, and we might even lose the White House, but we're not gonna be threatened by issues; we're gonna put them front and center. We're gonna raise the level of public debate in this country, and let that be our legacy.

(*The West Wing*, Season 1, Episode 19: 'Let Bartlet be Bartlet'; original broadcast date April 26th, 2000.)

Therefore, *The West Wing* mobilises a version of politics, a 'vernacular politics', in Nick Randall's terminology (2011), that retains American values, while offering a semiotic imprint of an America which can be both intellectual and pioneering and which, in depicting its president as 'other' (but better), unapologetically frames the president and his staff, not as the average American, but as exemplar of 'sacred' political leadership and governance. In this, President 'Jed' Bartlet symbolises singularity and difference. The individuals with whom he surrounds himself are equally depicted as special and in their collective governance the American character is styled, not as reflecting the norm, but as illustrating the possibilities of aspiration and surpassing the norm. *The West Wing* arguably establishes a case for the removal of the negative connotations about the liberal elite which were invoked by Reagan and Bush. The

reinstatement of the liberal as patriot and as nationalist (and here as exemplar of presidentiality) can therefore be read contextually as comment on the George W. Bush presidency (which coincides with *The West Wing's* initial broadcasts). Bartlet as exemplar of national character is therefore drawn in opposition to pejorative depictions of Americans and, in presidential terms, in stark contrast to the contrived 'folksy' image of George W. Bush. Bartlet is depicted as 'other', where the qualities that mark him out as different to the norm exemplify his 'betterness', his presidential and personal qualities but do not exclude him on that basis from being a patriot and nationalist.

### **1.5 The attachment of Irish fans to *The West Wing***

A number of these features combine to offer specific connections for Irish fans of *The West Wing*. In particular, I suggest that a political imaginary, but particularly an Irish-American political imaginary, is apparent. This nostalgic and even sentimental tinge corresponds to Roland Robertson's thesis that such 'wilful nostalgia' is inherent in the processes of globalisation, as both a form of cultural politics and a politics of culture (1992, p. 153). The question of how cultural and especially national identities are narrativised has been subject to discussion (Billig 1995; Barker 1999; Storey 2006), with the media positioned as powerful in the sense of its storytelling capacities, enabling a narration of nation (Bhabha 1990; Edensor 2002). The particular ways in which national discourses have been constructed in the context of a globalised television culture, and specifically the ways in which television drama might contribute to the construction of national identity are most pertinent to this research. Edensor (2002) argues that sounds, inscriptions, images and objects are highly influential elements of national identity. That *The West Wing* appeals to a tangential narration of nation via its invocation of an Irish-American relationship, both textually and intertextually, can be considered as of significance for its Irish popularity.

Traditional understandings of Irish-America can be differentiated across generations (Levitt 2009), so while for an older generation it can be argued that there is a particular appeal in the discursive imaginary of Camelot and the overt textual references to JFK's Irish-America, a younger generation can additionally claim an affinity or even an idealisation with American popular culture and representations of America ('the land of the free'). This can be argued to be especially the case, not just given their own precarious position in contemporary Ireland but also following the 'idealisation' of Irish

ethnicity in America, post 9/11 (Negra 2006). In this sense, *The West Wing* appeals to cross-generational changing, fluid, even fantasised concepts of ‘Irish-America’.

Further, given the current sense of disaffection and disillusionment with Irish politicians and the policy of ‘austerity’, Irish fans’ relationship with such a depiction of leadership can be suggested to be an implicit commentary about, or related to, the extreme disaffection with Irish political leadership. (For example, a Millward Brown poll conducted in April 2013 reports 75% dissatisfaction with the current Fine Gael/Labour government, a level of disaffection only surpassed in the final days of Brian Cowen’s Fianna Fáil government (Millward Brown for the *Irish Independent*, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013)). Patrick Finn concludes that *The West Wing*, and particularly the leadership of President Bartlet, offers a remedy for the symptoms of postmodernity based on a transcendent form of the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ that reaches beyond coaxial cable into our everyday lives (Finn 2001, p. 9). A further link could be posited between President Bartlet as leader and fan ‘readings’ of his leadership as they contrast with contemporary Irish political leadership. Finn argues that ‘Bartlet acts as a repository for desire for meaning, *any meaning*, in order to hold out against a perceived relativism in the current socio-political sphere’ (2001, p. 9) and that as such, ‘Bartlet becomes a literal instantiation of identity politics’ (2001, p. 6).

Therefore, in a globalised, ‘disembedded’ world (Giddens 1991, p. 146), the attachment of Irish fans to a US political drama makes perfect sense. The imaginary of *The West Wing* is one that textually embeds itself with Irish audiences in a variety of ways which to at least some extent complicates Bauman’s ‘liquid modernity’ (2000). Tom Inglis (following Beck 2002 and Savage et al 2005) suggests that ‘the global can never be understood except in the way in which it is manifested locally’ (2003, p. 2). Therefore, as Inglis argues, while Ronald Reagan was President of the United States, he was, for many people, a Reagan from Ballyporeen, so that while on the one hand, ‘[i]n an increasingly mobile, fluid, cosmopolitan, globalised world it may be anathema for people to see and identify themselves being from a particular place, as if it somehow represented their true self’, on the other, ‘it may be that increased globalisation has had the unintended consequence of binding people to the particular place in which they reside or grew up’ (2003, p. 13). This can be argued to be particularly the case in the context of the social, political and economical instability in which Ireland currently

finds itself. Power and Crampton suggest that the popularity of certain media texts at certain times (they discuss post 9/11 films in detail) ‘suggest[s] a hunger for *explanatory narratives* in a period of cultural and political anxiety, uneasiness and uncertainty’ (2005, p. 194). Accordingly, it can be suggested that in the current period of change and uncertainty, *The West Wing* constitutes a similar narrative for the Irish fans, offering a vision of how things might or could be, running alongside, and enabling a discursive commentary on ‘real’ and official politics and life.

On the one hand then, it might be hypothesised that such an intense attachment to the idealised, avowedly liberal politics displayed in the series is likely to correlate with expressions of political commitment of a comparable political hue to that of President Bartlet (these prognoses have been offered already in relation to *The West Wing*, in which it has been argued as a ‘pedagogical tool’ with which to examine American politics (Beavers 2003, pp. 175-202)). In this understanding, the consumption of a political fiction in a context of reconfigured, ‘symbolic’ politics in which meaning can be said to cohere around highly personalised forms of identity politics and consumer choices (Bennett 2003, pp. 138-139) could be argued to result in the translation of individual identifications into political engagement or activity.

Or, from a different perspective, fan identification and consumption of the particular vision of political issues being repeatedly resolved in such a way that satisfies a liberal conscience, even if actually quite conservative in outcome, might be argued as correlating with a widespread sense of frustration with, but resignation to the status quo. Relating this to the ‘local’ of Irish national politics, here again the results of another political poll are interesting. A Millward Brown poll (conducted in April for the *Sunday Independent*, published in that newspaper on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013) demonstrates that support for Fianna Fáil was equal to that of current senior government party Fine Gael (both at 27%).<sup>7</sup> An even more recent political poll (Red C for the *Sunday Business Post*,

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<sup>7</sup>Fianna Fáil was in government continuously from 1987 to 2011. From 1989, Fianna Fáil was the senior party in a series of coalitions with other political parties (the Progressive Democrats from 1989-1992; the Labour Party from 1992 to 1994; the Rainbow Coalition from 1994 to 1997; the Progressive Democrats from 1997 to 2007; and the Green Party from 2007 until the latter’s withdrawal from that coalition in January 2011). These Fianna Fáil led governments have been widely blamed for failing to regulate the financial sector adequately, so contributing directly to precipitating the 2008 financial crisis. After the ‘historic’ defeat of Fianna Fáil in the 2011 general election, the Government of the 31<sup>st</sup> Dáil was formed by Fine Gael and its junior coalition partner, the Labour Party.

published 30<sup>th</sup> June 2013) shows Fianna Fail’s popularity dipping slightly to 22% as opposed to Fine Gael’s at 28%, though this drop probably reflects the ‘Anglo Tapes’ scandal<sup>8</sup> which emerged in June 2013, and contradicts the very significant and consistent pattern of gains in support levels for Fianna Fáil. Overall, these polls reflect the general trend that some five years after the crashes and crises of 2008, by the early months of 2013 Fianna Fáil had reached its highest support level in opinion polls since the IMF-EU bailout in November, 2010. (Niall O’Dowd characterises this as ‘[s]hock as Fianna Fáil *zombie* back from the dead’ (irishcentral.com, February 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013).

In this reading then, it might be argued that the particular fan investment in *The West Wing* is in fact significantly shaped by a cultural, historic, economic and political specificity, informed by a sense of powerlessness within a nominally liberal democracy that has, as its citizens have been repeatedly told, 'lost its sovereignty', with the consequential political 'solution' of ‘austerity’ budgets entailing widespread, severe spending cuts that have been rigorously applied in Ireland since 2008. The context of this programme of austerity budgets is the political interpretation of neo-liberal economics, whereby the market is protected from the rigours of free market economics through the intervention of national governments: the unregulated investment and speculation that resulted in the economic failure of the Irish banks in 2008 was not proportionately punished, but rather the bondholders were protected from the banks’ economic failure through the intervention of the Fianna Fáil led coalition government that effectively nationalised private debt by guaranteeing the repayment of banking debts (see Chapter Four for further elaboration). Arguably, the political and economic disaster of weak regulation was severely compounded by this guarantee.

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<sup>8</sup> This refers to the leaking of tape recordings of conversations that took place inside now defunct Anglo Irish Bank, which were published by the *Irish Independent* newspaper in June 2013. Anglo Irish Bank was the financial institution most prominently associated with the Irish banking collapse. Its debts were nationalised in 2009. The recordings feature a number of prominent (and disgraced) Anglo Irish Bank executives discussing the 2008 Irish bank bailout, as well as Germany’s involvement in it. One of the bank’s directors can be heard on the tape saying that he picked the (vastly underestimated) initial bailout sum of €7 billion ‘out of my arse’, while another tape features a director singing a verse of ‘Deutschland Uber Alles’. Following the leaking of the tapes, one German newspaper editorialised on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2013 as follows: ‘The *Franfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* puts its traditional restraint aside in today’s edition, recommending that former Anglo executives are put in a big sack along with all shareholders, creditors, members of the last Irish government and relevant members of the Irish Central Bank and Irish and European regulatory authorities. Then one hits the sack with a club until the screams of pain are unbearable. Afterwards, all decision-makers in Europe take citizens by the hand and assure them that a debacle such as that of Anglo Irish Bank will never again be permitted’ (cited in *The Irish Times*, June 26<sup>th</sup> 2013).



Hypothetically, the imagining of a 'better' place, in which committed politicians are rendered as dutiful, patriotic public servants, is immensely appealing to Irish fans of this fictional US television drama. But, does this imply a translation or correlation of these imaginings into political commitment and activism? Or does consumption of such political fiction rather occupy a 'fantasy' space between reality and fiction?

In 2000, in the middle of the US presidential election between Republican nominee George W. Bush and Democratic nominee Al Gore, NBC ran a publicity campaign for *The West Wing*, featuring Josiah Bartlet as 'A President We Can All Agree On', while a popular car bumper sticker of the same time read 'Bartlet for President' (cited in Lehmann 2003, p. 213). In 2011, a widely reported social media campaign urged Martin Sheen to run for President of Ireland. Sheen, who as well as portraying fictional President Bartlet in *The West Wing* has portrayed both President John F. Kennedy in the miniseries *Kennedy – The Presidential Years* (1983)), and Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy in the television film *The Missiles of October* (1974) as well as fictional White House Chief of Staff AJ McInerney in the film *The American President* (1995), directed by Aaron Sorkin. Sheen also has Irish citizenship through his mother, Mary-Ann Phelan who was from Borrisokane in Co. Tipperary, which would have qualified him to contest the election<sup>9</sup>. The question raised, therefore - about the relationship between fandom and the political self – concerns how the 'use' of fandom of a political fiction might potentially constrain, inform or liberate its fans to 'think through' their own relationship to the political sphere. The political sphere in question, of course, is located in a country in 'crisis', where faith in its own political sphere is severely damaged and where uncertainty – political, economic and social - persists.

## 1.6 Research aims

Therefore, the initial overall aim of this research was to establish how consumption of a US produced, but internationally distributed political television drama, NBC's *The West Wing* (1999-2006), contributes to the construction and expression of Irish political identities by self-identified Irish 'fans' of the programme.

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<sup>9</sup> As it happened, Sheen strongly endorsed Labour Party TD Michael D. Higgins' presidential campaign and has said in interviews that Higgins had become 'a dear friend' (Ni Fhlatharta 2011) of his during a semester he spent as a student in NUIG following the completion of *The West Wing* in 2006 ('President' Sheen adds lustre to Michael D bid for Aras', *Galway City Tribune*, September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011; accessed 17.12.12 1.24pm].

Specifically, the research would aim to identify and to interview a range of committed fans of the series. Rather than simply casual or occasional audiences, respondents would be required to self-identify as devoted fans who had seen the series at least once and who were keen to share their views of it with the researcher. The research would involve a first phase involving a small-scale self-administered quantitative survey of self-identified fans of *The West Wing* with the purpose of identifying socio-economic characteristics, patterns and quantitative distributions of media consumption generally, fan consumption of *The West Wing* in particular; as well as eliciting information regarding their political histories and affiliations. Following this, a second phase of research would invite respondents to participate in individual in-depth, qualitative interviews, employed in order to situate and develop the quantitative data in their fuller social and cultural context.

Ideally, the respondents would vary according to gender and age, though there would be no way of ensuring this, given the approach of inviting self-identified fans to participate in the research (see Chapter Three below for further details of the methodology employed). The reason why some variety in age was desirable (though not predictable) was that this might enable some examination as to whether, and if so how, their mode of consumption varies according to age and ‘generation’ (‘mode of consumption’ being patterns of media use, both ‘old’ and ‘new’, including video, DVD, web downloads and interactive media to access and engage with the text). Further, the research would investigate whether or not, and if so how, generational differences correlate with distinctive, mutually exclusive or overlapping ‘fan communities’ and if such a correlation is demonstrable, examine the roles of ‘old’ and ‘new’ media consumption in accounting for these differences.

A second aim would be to establish how these viewers identify, engage with and dispute the similarities, differences and inter-relationships between this fictional text and other politically themed media they regularly consume. The increasingly mediated political sphere (Corner 2003) presents and promotes a politics that is increasingly stylised in its presentation and focused on the appeal and charisma of individual politicians as guarantors of party political integrity and service to nation, as instanced by the 2008 US Presidential election. In this regard, it is timely to examine the global, cross-generational appeal of forms of fictionalised, dramatised politics like *The West Wing*,

whose protagonist was evidently an idealised Democratic alternative to Republican President George Bush, at a time when election participation, especially by youth, was in decline. What is the specific appeal of a fictional US president and the political challenges he faces, and how does this relate to their experiences of consuming and thinking about other politically themed media, including print and electronically mediated news and current affairs?

The research would seek to situate fans' viewing of the programme within the context of autobiographical reflections on their lives and experiences (socially and familially influenced) as politically motivated subjects, focusing particularly on whether, and if so how, their 'reflexive' narratives of political self-identity as 'Irish' citizens vary generationally. It would examine (should they exist) how they interlink with other aspects of these 'reflexive' narratives, including social class, gender identity, local origin and migration history (within Ireland and abroad) and history of personal and familial political choices. In doing this, the research would seek to examine and analyse how respondents' consumption, individually and inter-subjectively variously reinforces, challenges or negotiates self-identities as Irish citizens with specific political assumptions, inclinations, prejudices and predispositions, focusing especially on the existence, or indicators of generational differences.

The theoretical observations that were initially identified as informing this project circulated around several interrelated, widely observed social, cultural and media phenomena which are currently under-researched in Ireland (these are elaborated in much greater detail in Chapter Two). Discourses of reflexive modernity, in particular Anthony Giddens' (1991) theorisation of the late modern 'reflexive project' posit an acutely self-aware, performed and monitored identity construction. A key feature of the applications of Giddens' arguments in the context of media and cultural studies is that cultural consumption, particularly the use of popular media, can be deployed to renew, refine and transform self-identity (Moore 1993).

The context for this is a mediascape in which media consumption, specifically television, is increasingly fragmented due to channel proliferation, new delivery systems, DVD and web downloads; and the corresponding rise of 'fan' communities who choose their objects of consumption selectively and exclusively, and amongst

whom consumption patterns are likely to be highly individualised. As noted above, fans are thus distinguishable from ordinary audiences ‘in terms of [their] degree of psychological investment in a particular cultural commodity or persona’ (Shepherd, Horn and Laing 2003, p. 224). An examination of fandom can be used for unpacking the relationship between individual agency and wider social structures in terms of fandom and fan practice (Dixon 2011, McKee 2007) in highly specific contexts (for example, Ireland in ‘crisis’) with Carolyn Stevens suggesting that fandom as ‘specialised consumption’ can be viewed as being particularly resonant with consumers living in ‘post-industrial, late capitalist societies’ (2010, p. 200). This allows for a reading of fandom as a type of strategy given the plethora of consumption choices in, and the exigencies of contemporary society.

Based on the foregoing, the project posits a number of initial hypotheses. Firstly, in relation to media consumption generally:

- that distinct differences in modes of consumption, time invested in consumption and patterns of usage (single or repeat viewing, use of DVD ‘extras’, online fan communication, etc.) will emerge amongst fans (based, for example, on age, gender and employment status);
- that distinct differences in how fans form inter-subjective fan communities will emerge, particularly in the significance of various communication media in these generational ‘communities’, which are likely, for example, to be visible in the generationally specific use of ‘new media’ (DVD box sets, downloading, online fan fora);
- in relation to matters of political self-identity, that these fans’ ‘reflexive’ narratives of self-identity as ‘Irish’ citizens with specific political assumptions, inclinations, prejudices and predispositions will vary according to generational differences, but that there will also be ‘internal’ differences and cross-generational continuities according to social class, gender, local origin and migration history, and history of personal and familial political choices;
- in this regard, that fans’ discursive engagement with the *The West Wing* as a mythical representation of the US presidency thereby addresses key political,

social and cultural concerns of American, global but also Irish significance, variously contributing to their negotiation of political identity and citizenship, offering the possibility of reorientation individually and collectively towards both the American and Irish political spheres.

Thematic currents in interviews would include the following:

- A discursive contrast between political credibility and idealism, and prevailing cynicism about Irish politics, particularly at the present time of ‘crisis’ in Ireland.
- Further, and in particular given the current national context, that there might hypothetically be a contrast, or at least a tension between an articulation, in interviews, of the dominant dramatic treatment of morality and faith in the series (including personal faith, but extending to faith in people, particularly charismatic politicians, and faith in the institution of politics) and contemporary, local perceptions about ‘real’ Irish politics.
- Related to this, the presentation of intellectualism in politics in the political discourse of *The West Wing* might similarly contrast with disrespect for, or at least questioning of the often noted problems with the Irish political sphere – its populism, parochialism and localism.
- Fan engagement with the text as exemplar of ‘quality TV’ may be specific to highly educated middle class fans correspondingly high in ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1984), and in both the content and form of interview discourse this might become apparent. That is, although *The West Wing* is a television drama, its status as ‘quality’ drama may make it a vehicle for the display of cultural and – implicitly – social class distinction by its fans.

## 1.7 Chapter overview

**Chapter One** has outlined the origins and motivation for this research. It has discussed a contemporary situation in which there is a convergence between political and media spheres, with a correspondingly stylised politics (Corner 2003). The instrumentality of media as a key element of political culture is now a given; its absence from the political sphere almost unimaginable. The question asked is whether, how or to what extent,

particularly given the circulating theoretical discourses pertinent to this research, a mediated political sphere, and consumption of a fictional representation of politics specifically might encourage enhanced personal investment and participation in the political and public spheres? The chapter outlined *The West Wing*'s particular resonances for Irish audiences and fandom. This suggests that cultural, historical and political specificity might also be considered in the contemporary context of media, political and social change.

**Chapter Two** examines and evaluates the theoretically diverse critical literature relating to the research aims of this project. Theories of reflexive identity in modernity posit a version of contemporary subjectivity in which the 'self' is enabled to engage with the uncertainty and fluidity of late modernity through an extended reflexivity.

Consumption, and especially cultural consumption, is figured as central to such heightened reflexive identity construction. In this conception, cultural consumption of political fictions, such as *The West Wing*, hypothetically functions as a cultural *and* political resource, through which individuals can engage with 'real' political issues, including political self-identity. However, the chapter argues that the 'idealised' self of reflexive modernity, as exemplified by Giddens' reflexive project of selfhood (1992), can be interpreted as a product of the values of neoliberal, modern western society rather than as transcending them (cf Adams 2003, p. 62.). Such a construction of self therefore warrants empirical investigation. The chapter next turns to perspectives from the audience research wing of cultural studies which suggest that the audience member is not just *subject* to the hegemonic messages of popular culture, but can potentially decode and resist them. This approach has its own interpretivist methodological paradigm which emphasises the elicitation of 'rich' qualitative data through ethnographically inspired research. 'Fan studies' is discussed as having emerged from this paradigm, though the chapter argues that the 'narrative' of fan studies (much like that of the 'active audience') has been to emphasise its active properties while downplaying its pathological or emotional qualities in a bid to rehabilitate and elevate the status of fans and fandom studies. The chapter finds that approaches to date have failed theoretically and empirically to adequately engage with certain rich dimensions of fandom, particularly its psychodynamic aspects. Therefore, existing discourses and methodological practices around the study of reflexive identity, cultural consumption and especially fandom present an opportunity, particularly in present day Ireland, for

original empirical investigation. The chapter finally discusses and suggests the approach of object-relations, emphasising the psychodynamic relationship between the consumer and the object of fandom, so that the object has a 'transitional' quality, mediating between self-identity and the social and cultural environment. It is argued that this allows for a better understanding of the creative labour of the fan imagination, albeit in the context of enduring material, structural constraints on the participation of fans in society as citizens.

**Chapter Three** discusses and outlines the methodological approach which emerged as most appropriate for this study. A rationale for a mixed methods, though 'qualitatively-led' (Mason 2006) research strategy is outlined as the approach most capable of investigating socially contextualised, heterogeneous, self-identified Irish fans of *The West Wing*. The specific research and design, consisting of two phases, is outlined. The first of these is a small-scale questionnaire survey adopted and designed because of its ability to obtain a 'snapshot' of the impact of the various changes and convergences in the lives of respondents. A second qualitative phase takes the form of in-depth interviews, employed to elicit 'rich' and textured data through individual interviews with respondents. Having rationalised the research strategy, specific design issues are engaged with, including sample population, generalisability and recruitment strategies and ethical considerations. Next, the chapter reports and comments on the two phases of research. The questionnaire survey, while the specific subject of Chapter Five, elicited data relating to the demographics of respondents, as well as information pertaining to their media consumption, political engagement and also their fandom of *The West Wing*. The chapter next engages in detail with the qualitative phase of research, outlining the approach taken to the in-depth interviews (in terms of question areas, researcher self-reflexivity and ethical issues). The chapter next outlines its approach to coding and data analysis. A primary theme that was uncovered was that of respondents' striking concern with 'goodness' in words and action, visible in respondents' general orientation to 'good' consumption and consumption practice, which is argued to be highly context specific. A key strength of the qualitatively-led approach to data collection, as well as the 'pilebuilding' approach to its analysis employed here, is that context is written 'in' (rather than out) of research; this early critical analysis of data suggests that the specificity of context is critical to the findings of this research.

Accordingly, this initial finding prompted the research and writing of **Chapter Four**, which sketches the very particular (and uncertain) landscape in which research was conducted. The period in which data were gathered extends from February 2011 to May 2012. The chapter first chronologically outlines the political and economic events of the preceding 2008 banking and political 'crisis'. In its examination of the various rhetorical and discursive narratives running through political and media representations of this period, the research finds a striking persistence of cultural, socio-historical and psychological references, all value-laden, and all of which contribute to the context in which data were gathered. Their persistence, both in general discourse but also in respondent articulations, suggests that the 'reinvention(s)' of Ireland and the tradition of elision between Ireland's cultural and economic dimensions have not in any satisfactory way accounted for the complexity of (the colonial) past in the present, representing rather a form of 'strategic amnesia' (Halsall 2008). Given the findings so far, the chapter concludes that 'good' fan engagement with a 'good' political fiction might facilitate a form of (fantasy) political engagement that demonstrates an autonomy and sovereignty that is far less straightforward in reality.

**Chapter Five** outlines the rationale for the questionnaire survey, including its survey design, recruitment methods and their implementation. The self-administered questionnaire consisted of four sections, each designed to elicit information pertaining to specific themes (demographic profile; levels and modes of general media consumption, with specific questions pertaining to political and news media consumption; levels of political engagement, including traditional or familial political allegiance; and finally fandom of *The West Wing*). In addition, a number of open-ended questions were included to facilitate individual responses on certain topics. Generally, the questionnaire elicited a number of unexpected findings. Firstly, a number of potential respondents stated that they would rather do a face to face interview than complete the survey. Further, an immediate trend was a high level of skipped answers in certain areas of the self-completion questionnaire, specifically those relating to political information. From the data elicited the following can be reported. Firstly, the respondents' demographic profile can broadly be described as 'middle class', in terms of educational participation and cultural/social capital, and access to media. Secondly, in relation to media consumption, what emerges is a relatively complex individual and domestic media environment in which consumption is accommodated the patterns of



everyday life, but one in which media consumption can be said to be increasingly private rather than public. Thirdly, responses to political engagement reveal high levels of ambiguity and uncertainty on display in relation to 'real' politics, and it was where questions asked for political information that most answers were skipped. Respondents broadly followed national trends indicating the overwhelming overturn of traditional party allegiance following the 'crisis' of 2008, though also indicating an ambiguity concerning what political 'support' subsequently and currently means. Overall, the responses indicate a very ambivalent and general engagement with 'real' politics. Further, responses suggest a significant move in politics from the public sphere towards the private, corresponding to a similar move in relation to media consumption. Fourthly, in contrast with the ambiguity on display in relation to politics, respondents presented a significantly greater degree of clarity in relation to their fandom of *The West Wing*. In general, their commitment to the politics of *The West Wing* appears more rewarding than that of contemporary Irish politics. The questionnaire data answered some questions but also produced newer, unexpected ones, which are the subject of detailed discussion in the four subsequent 'analysis' chapters of this thesis.

The purpose of **Chapter Six** was to map out and situate media and fan consumption in the lives of respondents. The chapter examines consumption in terms of its 'organisation' (how media texts and technologies are sourced and used in the home) as well as discursive articulations relating to both technologies and actual moments of consumption. Above all, Chapter Six illuminates the enduring significance of 'television', as in Raymond Williams's conceptualisation of it as both technology and cultural form (1974): respondents are found, overwhelmingly, to operate an individuated or domesticated moral economy in which 'television's capability for mobile privatisation (Williams 1974) facilitates a form of 'boundary play' where it is implicitly involved in the maintenance and negotiation of boundaries of 'good' selfhood. In this sense, despite changing landscapes of television culture, television is intimately implicated, for these respondents, with the maintenance of a sense of personal integrity and of ontological security. The chapter finds that reflexive choice around media (specifically television) consumption involves making choices that relate to a (context-dependent and socially and culturally embedded) value judgement about what will be nourishing and sustaining of selfhood.

The initial themes of ambiguity and uncertainty relating to politics (but not cultural consumption and fandom of *The West Wing*) as emerged in the quantitative, survey data are, generally, corroborated by their presence in the qualitative data. **Chapter Seven** engages with the dynamics of this dis-identification with 'real' Irish politics in its critical analysis of respondent data that are read alongside their underlying, contextualising conditions. This chapter finds that respondents' fandom constitutes a space for the negotiation of the various tensions - psychodynamic, moral, cultural, economic - that characterise and shape their political identity. Once again, the theme of these tensions being linked with Ireland's colonial past and its present state of crisis present persistently in the data. What emerges, therefore, is a highly particularised and specific political 'habitus' in which tension about politics is replaced, compensated, subsumed or transposed by a concern with the cultural (in this case the cultural, fictional rendering of politics in *The West Wing*) which, it is concluded, constitutes a form of 'tension management' facilitated by the space of fandom.

The final two analysis chapters turn further towards specificity. The first of these, **Chapter Eight**, engages in detail with a number of young male fans ('fanboys') who have in common their committed fandom, including that of *The West Wing*. But these respondents are also 'collectivised' as an unintentional cohort by their other characteristics: despite being college educated, almost all are unemployed. As such, this 'group' is highly impacted by the current recession and can be argued to exist in a state of (potentially long-term) 'liminality', between adolescence and independent adulthood. The chapter therefore examines the ways in which these respondents embed a cultural text in their lives, not just as a site of identity, but in the way that this is operationalised as such in a time of 'crisis'. The findings here correspond with those of previous chapters - cultural consumption, watching and thinking about fictional representation of politics being regarded as almost constitutive of political consumption *per se*. But further, the fandom of *The West Wing* is found to enable an almost narcissistic construction of a particular fan and taste culture that enables these young male fans to mark themselves out as untypical but essentially 'good'. This is particularly evident in their regard for 'auteur' Aaron Sorkin. This is also evident in the discursive articulations by these young men concerning the 'work' they invest in their fandom, talking about 'industrial' style consumption and 'powering through' entire series' at a time. By conceptualising their cultural consumption of a 'quality' text as a

type of 'work', they are engaging in a form of 'distinction' in the Bourdieuan sense (cf Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010), as a 'politics of recognition' (Taylor 1997; Fraser and Honneth 2003). However, this display and 'accomplishment' of goodness can also be read in the context of the industrial factors of the changing media landscape and the pervasive discourses of the 'enterprising self' of reflexive modernity. These fanboys' 'freedom' to consume and to 'be' whom they wish to be is argued to endow a sense of achievement, goodness and fulfillment, while also consolidating those conditions of dependence (on parents, on the State) that constrain them in 'real' terms.

**Chapter Nine** engages with two brief 'vignette' case studies of individual respondents, Deirdre and Michael. Their stories underscore, firstly, the significant interplay between socio-cultural, biographical and psychodynamic dimensions of fandom, and secondly, the importance of methodological, in-depth engagement with respondents so as to elicit such stories. Both cases expose issues of gender and class as they relate to the position of the 'good' self in late modernity. They also further illustrate the biographical, situated and psychodynamic dimensions of fandom, suggesting that the addition of such a turn to existing analytic approaches to contemporary fandom adds to existing research.

Finally, **Chapter Ten** discusses the findings of the research, highlighting again the significance of the study's specific context and the value of undertaking research at such a time. The concluding chapter finds that respondents attempt to address and resolve anxieties, exacerbated by the context of crisis ('bad times'), by maintaining a sense of ontological coherence and connectedness in their consistent orientation towards 'good' things. This is evident not only in their consumption of a 'quality' political fiction, but also in the manner of its consumption. Fan reflexivity is argued to be highly partial and embedded; shaped rather than free of context. The conspicuous display of 'goodness' in an overtly cultural manner is unsurprising given the prominence of discourses that link consumption to class and value. The perceived 'good' political values of *The West Wing* articulate strongly with respondent dis-identification from, and ambiguity within, real politics. Further, the reflexive identity negotiation demonstrated in the data and its analysis suggests a self-extraction from the political complexity of contemporary Ireland and a retreat into the self (corresponding with similar patterns in media consumption, and generally from the public to private sphere). In other words, fandom constitutes a psychically safe and certain place. In summary, these reflexive negotiations of personal and collective identity are argued to be a highly particularised

response to a specific context, in which political engagement in 'real' terms is transposed into a framework consisting of moral, cultural, historical and psychological dimensions. In this case, this is argued to be further enabled by the particular political imagination of *The West Wing*. In conclusion, these findings fundamentally challenge the presentation of the 'idealised', reflexive late modern self articulated in theories of modernity.

## Chapter Two – The Late Modern Self, Cultural Consumption and Fandom

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents and reviews the critical literature most relevant to the research problem. The literature relating to a study of fan consumption of a media text and its relationship to political self-identity in late modernity is theoretically diverse as it brings together elements of social, cultural and media theory. The chapter starts with a discussion of the depiction, in contemporary social theory, of a specifically modern subjectivity in which the contemporary self is enabled to engage with the ever-changing, globalised world through an individualised and heightened reflexivity. This is followed by a discussion of the positioning of consumption, and especially cultural and media consumption, as central to the reflexive exercise of identity construction, such that in a ‘cultural economy’, a text such as *The West Wing*’s ‘quality’ status endows it with even greater value. Next, an analysis of the cultural consumption of political fictions discusses their figuring as a cultural resource for an audience to think through political ideas and orientations. The chapter then investigates how this mooted relationship between cultural consumption of political fictions and engagement with ‘real’ political identity might be integrated with perspectives from the audience research wing of cultural studies (which posits popular culture as a sphere in which media can be hegemonic but also liberating, in which the audience member can be subject but also active, even resistant, decoders of media messages).

The emergence of fan studies from the audience research/cultural studies paradigm is next discussed. Fan research has illuminated fans’ status as situated, socially specific subjects and cultural consumers who are pursued increasingly by media and cultural industries as a vehicle for the accumulation of economic capital. However, while this approach offers a way of examining the relationship of social and structural issues to a phenomenon such as fandom, it does not fully address the research aim of this project, which is to investigate the local, specific and situated nature of the Irish fan of political drama. The chapter concludes that an engagement with psychodynamic approaches to fandom, particularly an object-relations approach can, along with existing approaches to fan studies, provide a far more adequate investigative lens with which to investigate the texture of intellectual and affective investment in an object of fandom. Such an

approach is suggested as a way of engaging with the role played by *The West Wing* in the political imagination of those fans who are geographically (but not economically, politically, culturally or psychically) removed from the US.

## 2.2 Narratives of the 'self' in contemporary culture

Me? "I" am everywhere. The 'self' permeates contemporary culture.

(Douglas and Meakins 2002, para. 1)

Central to a 'sociology of the self' is a radical re-conception of the individual and identity in post-traditional societies. The self as conceptualised in a Cartesian model as fixed, singular, definitive and unified (Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Potter and Weatherell 1987; Gergen 1994) has been displaced by post-structuralist understandings of identity and the self as fragmented, fractured and multiply constructed (Hall 1986, p. 4). At the core of this understanding of the self is the concept of *reflexivity* (the ability to reflect on oneself as an object), and its figuring as a central feature of 'reflexive modernity' which theorises 'the ever-increasing powers of social actors, or 'agency' in regard to structure' (Lash 1994, p. 111). In this inflection (prominently associated with Anthony Giddens (1991; 1993; 1994) and Ulrich Beck (1992; 1994)), reflexivity refers to 'the act of an individual subject directing awareness towards itself, reflecting upon its own practices, preferences and even the process of reflection itself' (Raisborough and Adams 2008, p. 1168). Further, in reflexive modernity this act of reflection is said to be transformative: the reflexive self can (in fact, *must*) engage in this in acutely self-aware, performed and monitored construction and reconstruction of identity in order to be a full participant in modern society. As such, the self is conceptualised as a 'reflexive project' (Giddens 1991, p. 32).

This landscape is characterised by the extension of reflexivity to all aspects of experience, accompanied by the dynamics of de-traditionalisation, globalisation and individualisation<sup>10</sup>. Reflexive modernity therefore enables a disembedding and detachment from context, including 'the cultural, material and affective parameters that were once conceptualized as the underpinnings of identity formation' (Raisborough and Adams 2008, p. 1169). This (theoretically) enables the liberation of individuals from traditional structures and power structures, enabling the reflexive questioning of present existence and the anticipation of future possibilities (Giddens 1991, p. 47). However,

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<sup>10</sup>Scott Lash encapsulates this as 'ever more rendered by [...] 'I am I', in which the 'I' is increasingly free from communal ties and is able to construct his or her own biographical narratives' (Lash 1994, p. 111).

the liberations that accompany modernity also induce insecurity: to live in late modernity can result in a chronic anxiety due to the freedom from structure which was constraining but also meaningful, as such involving a number of ‘dilemmas of the self’ (Giddens 1991, pp. 187-201). A challenge then, for the reflexive self, is to protect and reconstruct the narrative of self-identity as these anxieties must be resolved at some level ‘in order to preserve a coherent narrative of self-identity’ (Giddens 1991, p. 187).

The theorists of reflexive modernity resolve this tension variously. Giddens identifies the tension implicit between the ability and obligation to ‘manage’ the newly articulated self as a space which in fact *enables* rather than constrains reflexivity. In this reading, the liberation of individuals from the fixity of structural power and traditions, though inherently risky, enables them to question present existence and anticipate future possibilities (Giddens 1991, p. 47). Beck too sees the opportunity in this; for him, in the post-traditional order, in which certainty and security have largely collapsed, the individual is forced to live in the experiential world, allowing the possibility of life being a ‘dangerous adventure’ (Beck 1994, p. 59). This obligation and compulsion to make choices underpins Beck’s and Beck-Gernsheim’s conceptualisation of *individualisation*. The self in reflexive modernity is ‘responsible for performing that task and for the consequences (also the side effects) of their performance’, therefore, the individual is engaged in living a ‘life of one’s own’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. xv). However, here too it is the positive and enabling potential of individualism that is emphasised; rather than imperilling society, reflexive individualisation is posited as positively influencing it, creating ‘internalised freedom’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 157). However, the double edged nature of reflexive modernity is observed by Zygmunt Bauman (2002) and Manuel Castells (2000), both of whom are less optimistic about the ontological risks that inhere in individualised reflexivity. In the never ending, continual, reflexive process of identity construction involved in the ‘elective biography’ and ‘the do-it-yourself biography’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 3) of late modernity, it is the possibility and negotiability (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, p. 5) of choices and the compulsion to make choices that is both the ‘prize’ and the ‘danger’ (Baumann 2002, p. 64). As Lash and Friedman state, ‘in modernity, we are fated to be free’ (1992, p. 5).

A number of processes related to the ‘reflexive turn’ (Heaphy 2007) further impact on this landscape of late modern society. The first of these relates to a revised positioning

of culture in late or postmodernity, in which culture ‘has assumed an enhanced significance and explanatory weight’ in various endeavours (du Gay and Pryke 2002, pp. 1-2). Following the ‘cultural turn’, substantial significance is imputed to culture and its relationship to meaning, rendering it an analytic resource (Oakes and Price 2008, p. 411). Therefore, meaning-making is said to be elicited through a cultural framework. As Margaret Somers claims, meanings are ‘transmitted to us *via* some kind of cultural schema; they are culturally embedded – that is mediated through symbolic systems and practices, such as metaphors, ritualised codes, stories, analogies or homologies’ (Somers 1999 cited in Fielding 2011, p. 224).

The implications of such an understanding of culture and its relationship to meaning are significant for this study in two respects. Firstly, the objects of consumption are not considered purely for their utilitarian but also for their symbolic meanings. Within consumption studies, what is often called the ‘object turn’ (Baudrillard 1968; Douglas and Isherwood 1996; Miller 1987) is characterised by Ian Woodward as a ‘turn’ in which ‘[o]bjects, things and materials are the stuff of new ecologies of meaning and practice’ (2012, p. 1), and in which there is ‘a role for objects in generating cultural meanings’ (2012, p. 2). Therefore, a cultural object (for example, a media text) can be said to generate cultural meanings. Not all meanings are valued as much as others, implicating what Peter Jackson calls a ‘cultural economy’ (1991; 2000; 2002), or a re-reading of an ‘economy’ in which, Ian Woodward says:

from a cultural point of view, what we call ‘the economy’ is fundamentally a networked system of symbolic exchange, a system organised for the construction and exchange of totems, rather than merely a field of social action defined by models of instrumental rationality and commercial contact.

(Woodward 2012, p. 5).

In Lash and Urry’s related conceptualisation of ‘economies of signs’, goods can be conceived of as ‘cultural goods’ (1994, pp. 111-142). Paul du Gay and Michael Pryke accordingly suggest that ‘practitioners [...] play a pivotal role in articulating production with consumption by attempting to associate goods and services with particular cultural meanings’ (2002, p. 7).

The second important implication of this turn to culture is that the consumption of objects, including cultural objects, is figured as increasingly mattering to or even constitutive of agential reflexive identity consumption. For the disembedded, de-



traditionalised and reflexive identity ‘manager’ just described, consumption is identified as ‘the privileged site for this identity work’ (Billig 1995, cited in Raisborough and Adams 2008, p. 1166). In this somewhat utopian conception of a cultural economy, consumption choices and practices become ‘almost inescapable forms of identification’ (Adams and Raisborough 2008, p. 1167).

This ‘turn’ to the significance of the consumption of culture theorises a cultural sphere in which meaning is invested in objects of consumption and which emphasises the reflexive agency of the consumer and the construction of identity through acts of consumption. This very ‘postmodern’ approach is evident in Mike Featherstone’s notion of the ‘aestheticization of everyday life’ (1992), which stresses the reflexive adoption of a ‘lifestyle’ via cultural consumption. For Featherstone, ‘the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a life project’ (2007, p. 86) in which ‘[o]ne’s body, clothes, speech, leisure pastimes, eating and drinking preferences, home, car, choice of holidays etc. are to be regarded as indicators of the individuality of taste and sense of style of the owner/consumer’ (2007, p. 83). As Alan Warde contends, ‘the consumer has no choice but to choose and will be judged in terms of the symbolic adequacy of that choice’ (2005, p. 132). Therefore, consumption choices are deigned to be ‘deeply implicated in the process of, respectively, creating a reflexive self, constructing a narrative of self, or electing oneself to a shared form of identification (Warde 1994, p. 882-3). These discourses of reflexive modernity have been substantially and rhetorically established in contemporary social theory (Omar Lizardo writes that Giddens’ understanding of structure ‘went from being an unwieldy and unevenly used abstraction to a seemingly obligatory part of the vocabulary of contemporary sociologists’ (2010, p. 653).

However, these discourses present a *particular* ‘narrative of self’ in late modernity, an individual who, as Miller and Rose point out, ‘is imagined and acted upon by the imperative to consume’ (2008, p. 116). Further, these narratives of self extend across many spheres of social life, taking different forms depending on context. Paul du Gay’s (1996) employment of the notion of the ‘enterprising self’, stresses the importance of cultural as well as social capital. The ‘enterprising self’ is expected to be self-reflexive creator, not just of a biographical narrative and forward trajectory, but also their own work opportunities in the labour marketplace. Anthropologist Mary Douglas locates this individualist style as prominent in what she calls the ‘enterprise culture’, which she

states is ‘justified by the claim that it frees persons [driven by self-interested motives] from constraints’ imposed by bureaucratic regulation which ‘inhibit[s] the pursuit of freely-chosen objectives, and so infringes the essential liberties of the person’ (1992, p. 41). This ‘responsibilising’ of the self extends, per du Gay, to include cultural capital. Thus as Beverley Skeggs points out, work capacity and potential extends to cultural capacity and potential (1997; 2004), with the result that certain forms of conduct and consumption are ‘imposed on the self by the self’ (Skeggs 2004, p. 73). Therefore, the rhetoric of reflexive freedom entailed in discourses about consumption must be read alongside the accompanying rhetorics of responsibility and differentiated value. In this understanding, as Skeggs argues, reflexive cultural consumption also becomes a ‘judgement of culture’ (2004, p. 118).

Unsurprisingly, this theoretical rhetoric introduces several problematics suggestive of the need for a revision to the particular narrative of the self outlined so far. In this regard, Alan Warde argues that such a configuration of the late modern, consuming self, assumes incorrectly as to the nature of the individualism of the consumer and in so doing neglects the embedded dimensions of both reflexivity *and* consumption in pre-existing cultural and social frameworks, so detracting from counter-tendencies to individualisation (Warde 1994, p. 14). Further, a growing body of work within consumption studies critiques the universalising presentation of reflexive consumption, demonstrating that, in fact, ‘ethical’ or ‘reality TV’ consumption actively invokes and mobilises a partial and highly particular reflexivity in its use of affective prompts and moral registers. As an example, research in the areas of ethical consumption (Adams and Raisborough 2008; 2010) and reality television (Skeggs 2009; Skeggs and Wood 2012) shows that reflexivity is at least partially mediated by complex economies of class and morality. Therefore, this conceptualisation of the reflexive project of the self actually obscures the ‘class relations of cultural exploitation’ (Skeggs 2005, p. 91).

Additionally, Jeffrey Alexander questions the extent to which the phenomenon of reflexivity can fundamentally transcend the social and cultural foundations of knowledge, asserting that reflexivity in any period ‘can be understood only within the context of cultural tradition, not outside of it (1996, p. 136). That this is often linked to the irrational and emotional informs one strand of Matthew Adams’ (2003) substantial critique of reflexivity in which he argues that the ‘burgeoning capability’ (2003, p. 223) of what he identifies as ‘extended reflexivity’ overlooks many factors crucial to identity

formation, such that it ends up as ‘a rationalist caricature’ (Adams 2002, p. 1). Further, Ian Craib writes that there is a difficulty in ‘reading’ Giddens because he employs a ‘synthesis of approaches [...] not bound together through a logical or rational system’ with the result that Giddens’ work is one of ‘drawing all positions together’ (Craib 2012, p. 3). Nonetheless, Craib does state that ‘it [is] difficult to conceive of any social theory that would not find something in his work on which to build’ and that as such Giddens’ structuration theory ‘will be the food at the center of the plate’ (2012, p. 196). Stjepan Meštrović’s scathing response is that:

after “eating” Giddens’ theory, one is left still hungry. It is like eating a frozen, processed dinner as opposed to a traditional meal made from scratch with natural ingredients. (And it is drunk with Coca-Cola, that modernist concoction, not wine, the symbol of Dionysus and emotions

(Meštrović 1998, p. 32).

Adams suggests that Giddens’ ‘picture of the world is far too tidy’, and that ‘[p]eople do not go through life choosing from and storing a range of values which they then apply methodically to their understanding of the world. What we value is bound up with [...] culture, emotion and so on’ (Adams 2003, para 5) (which also corresponds to Eva Illouz’s calls for an ‘injection’ of the notion of emotion to the sociology of consumption (2009)). As an example, Adams posits that the notion of fate is illustrative of persistent irrationality in the modern individual. He puts forward the notion of ‘fate-logic’ (2004, p. 400) and superstition as ways in which self-identity is still meaningfully culturally embedded. Citing the global success of *The Celestine Prophecy* as an example, Adams questions the co-existence of heightened reflexivity on the one hand and discourses of fate such as *The Celestine Prophecy* (Redfield 1994) which, he says, utilises a non-reflexive generation of faith in one’s self and one’s cultural context (2004, p. 402). Therefore, Adams concludes that the *culturally situated* nature of modern identity remains essential to understandings of selfhood (2004, p. 387) refuting the claim that cultural situatedness ‘has been transcended, or at least become chronically and exhaustively malleable, in the hands of post-traditional reflexive awareness’ (2003, p. 230).

A further significant criticism of this particular ‘narrative of self’ is that while reflexivity is indeed crucial in late modernity, its promotion in the guise of a heightened or extended form constitutes a profoundly normative expression of dominant neo-modern cultural traditions that ultimately upholds hegemonic social understandings (Meštrović 1998). Gilles Lipovetsky expands on this in his theory of ‘hypermodernity’

which combines the themes of individual reflexivity and individual consumption discussed here. For Lipovetsky, the phase of ‘hypermodernity’ is characterised by the hyperconsuming, hypermodern individual (2005). However, Lipovetsky argues that this has resulted in ‘paradoxical individualism’ in that people have more choice than ever before but more responsibility to deal with that choice, meaning that the hypermodern individual is more autonomous but more fragile (Charles in Lipovetsky 2005, pp. 1-28). Therefore, in its insistence on the reflexive subject’s abilities to transcend structural constraints, the discourses that circulate around the consuming, reflexive late modern self may actually obscure not just the structural, but also other dimensions that in effect constrain the subject. Stjepan Meštrovic similarly argues that the positing of an *extended* reflexivity is itself illusory and deceptive and that the ethnocentricity of these discourses may reveal more about the culture and traditions of Western, late modern society than they do about our liberation from them (1998, pp. 37-40).

What can be concluded so far is that in so radically displacing the loci of meaning and identity onto the reflexive agency of the consuming individual, these rhetorical conceptualisations of the self in late reflexive modernity in fact might be said to exemplify, underpin and even maintain neo-modern and even neo-liberal social understandings of the individual (Meštrovic 1998; O’Brien, Penna and Hay 1999). The embodiment of this particular version of subjectivity can be argued to be a western, rational masculine consumer-subject, minus the complications of either traditional identity constraints or kinship/familial attachments and related ‘obligations’. Further, this version of subjectivity is certainly culturally and historically specific, endowed with a certain lack of precariousness regarding social class comfort and security which may, given the state of many western economies, turn out to be particular to the late twentieth century. The theorisation of this reflexive ‘self’ can be argued to obscure the multiplicity of factors implicit in identity formation (for example, structural and institutional, but also emotional, cultural, psycho-social) and therefore can be concluded to work against a full account of the individual in contemporary society. This recalls Zygmunt Bauman’s statement that ‘all of us are doomed to the life of choices, but not all of us have the means to be choosers’ (1998, p. 86).

The question that arises for this study is whether this highly de-contextualised conception of the late modernist subject can adequately account for contemporary

identity formation (for example, as an interplay between gender, class and national identity). Or whether this account can satisfactorily address the subject in a period of instability, such as the present, in which identity formations are negotiated in a context of, and possibly as response to, social change? In this regard, Matthew Adams' alternative articulation, in which the role of reflexivity is considered not in overtly rational terms, but in terms of 'degrees', and as much in what it may tell us about social difference and division as of individual ability (2004, p. 234) would appear more appropriate. The individual in this latter conception is only partially reflexive (2004, p. 387). Thus, as Adams outlines it:

The alternative is to accept that reflexivity, thinking and language cannot be placed above and outside the specific cultural, historical, spatial, temporal and social context in which they are practised. Thus all these factors are still, and always will be, of crucial importance in shaping the self and the social environment.

(Adams 2003, p. 227)

Clearly, as Phillips and Western contend, these claims relating to the self of late modernity would benefit from empirical investigation (2005, p. 163).

### **2.3 'Media logic', cultural consumption and the political-public sphere**

Further, claims relating to the centrality of media claim that everyday practices, including those of identity construction, are said to be increasingly shaped by mediating technology and media organisations (Livingstone 2009, p. 5). Contemporary media scholars (including Schulz 2004; Livingstone 2009; Hjarvard 2008 and Krotz 2008) discuss a historical development from a non-mediated society to one which, in late modernity, is fundamentally mediated. Friedrich Krotz identifies 'mediatization' as a meta-process in which social relations in their entirety are constituted by mediated processes. In this understanding, what has become known as 'media logic' (Altheide and Snow 1979) becomes a *modus operandi*, extending across a number of spheres. The media's incremental reach to all aspects of our society as cited in the extension of 'media-logic' to all aspects of society is particularly visible in the convergence between political and media spheres with a correspondingly stylised politics (Corner 2003). The instrumentality of media as key element of political culture is now a given; its absence from the political sphere almost unimaginable.

In a context in which traditional political participation (voting, political awareness and interest), heretofore considered to be an indicator of healthy democracy and citizenship,

has been in decline (Dahlgren 2009; Miller & Shanks 1996), the linking of popular culture with politics suggests that media constitutes an increasingly important aspect of a contemporary cultural public sphere (Dahlgren 2003; 2009). There are clear implications here for how such a 'media logic' (Altheide and Snow 1985) can extend to the 'reflexive project' of the self, not just in terms of identity construction but also in terms of its potentially 'participatory' (Jenkins 2006) or 'democratising' (Van Zoonen 2005) dimensions. This is often discussed in the potential of media (both 'old' and 'new') to enhance democratic participation (cf Curran and Gurevitch 2005). The debate around the role of the media in this (whether TV fiction, new communication technologies, or more generally) centres on the extent to which it can attract and sustain citizens' attention to politics, which currently, Couldry, Livingstone and Markham argue, 'is a central challenge in modern democracies and a prerequisite for most political or civic action, from opinion formation or public discussion to voting or direct participation in democratic institutions' (2010, p. 23).

However, the impact of the convergence of technology, politics and culture as visible in a mediated political sphere has received a range of assessments. Pessimistic views can be found in the literature (Lippmann 1922 [2008]; Boorstin 1961; Habermas 1992; Dahlgren 2003; Putnam 2000), though as Kirsten Drotner points out, this theme of hopes and anxieties has accompanied each new medium (1992). On the other hand its transformative potential is figured as having the capacity to re-invigorate a beleaguered public sphere. Indeed *The West Wing* itself (no doubt inspired by Sorkin's own description of it as 'a valentine to public service' (Sorkin 2000)) has been extensively written about in terms of its civic and educational role in the education of the populace about understanding matters political (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2006; Beavers 2003; Rollins and O'Connor 2003; Pompper 2003). Keith Barrett, for example, talks about the elite-challenging potential of a mediated political sphere as one which has the potential to host a proliferation of divergent voices (1996, p. 519). John Street hypothesises that televisual culture may in fact be more democratic than traditional culture (similarly Liesbet Van Zoonen 2005; 2007), suggesting that popular mediated political culture is far from antithetical to democracy, though he maintains that it might be 'inhospitable to intellectuals whose cultural capital is invested in typographical culture' (Street 2003, p. 180). As such, Street invokes optimism rather than pessimism about the mix of democracy and popular culture, stating that if democracy is to flourish

it will most likely be through popular culture and mediated politics. Liesbet Van Zoonen also expounds the idea that the linkage of popular culture and the political sphere can in fact give democracy a mode of address that is more relevant and accessible (2005, pp. 5-18).

The convergence of themes typical of the ‘cultural turn’ with those of media (especially media-politico logic) have led to Janelle Ward’s claim that there is ‘a new form of citizenship: one that explicitly legitimizes consumerism’ (2011, p. 179). There are precedents for the explicit linking of ‘action’ and ethical or political consciousness to the act of consumption (often figured as ‘critical’ or ‘conscious’ consumption, seen for example in ‘boycotts’ and ‘buycotts’) (Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle 2004; Dalton 2009; Willis and Schor 2012), and even to patriotic politics (as exemplified by George W. Bush’s famous post 9/11 ‘go shopping’ speech<sup>11</sup>; and latterly, closer to ‘home’ 2013’s ‘The Gathering’, aimed at the pockets and patriotism of Irish emigrants – as discussed in Chapter Four). Frederick Webster defines this type of socially conscious consumer as one ‘who takes into account the public consequences of his or her private consumption or who attempts to use his or her purchasing power to bring about social change’ (1975 pp 188-196). Further, results of studies into such ‘conscious’ consumption indicate that income increases the probability of ‘political consumerism’ (de Zuniga, Copeland and Bimber 2013; Willis 2012; Newman and Bartels 2011).

However, a mediatised political sphere is no guarantor of enhanced democratic participation. Peter Dahlgren argues that the shift from citizenship to consumption neither replaces old, conventional forms of participation nor makes political institutions irrelevant (1991, p. 4), with the implications of such an assumption for the legitimacy of traditional parliamentary politics also questioned (Micheletti and Follesdal 2007, p. 172). But can one consume oneself into political action? For bell hooks the relationship between resistance/action and consumption is more negative; she argues that communities of resistance are replaced by communities of consumption (1992, p. 5). As Steven Miles proposes, a key question is whether ‘the mere act of consumption equates to citizenship’, and whether any impression of citizenship through acts of consumption ‘is illusory and whether it provides the sort of support that the individual

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<sup>11</sup> In his September 2001 speech, George W Bush says that ‘[o]ne of the great goals of this nation’s war is to restore public confidence in the airline industry. It’s to tell the traveling public: Get on board. Do your business around the country’ (cited in Bush 2010 pp. 443-4).

requires or whether, alternatively, it simply ties that individual to a culture of consumption over which he or she effectively has no control?’ (2012, p. 22).

So far, this chapter has presented (and queried) a presentation of a certain type of self and understandings of the role and impact of cultural consumption in a ‘cultural economy’ for that self in which consumption is increasingly equated with citizenship. In such a ‘cultural economy’ a fan text such as *The West Wing* can be argued to function as a cultural resource or ‘good’ for an audience in Ireland to think through notions of political self or to inform a political imagination. As an object of ‘good’ cultural consumption, *The West Wing* may offer a sophisticated view and potential insight into the workings of American politics. However, it may ultimately and effectively constitute a desirable commodity whose impression of offering political insight far outweighs any ‘real’ political insight, or route to the attainment of insight, understanding and political participation. In order to assess and explore further this either/or problematic, the relationship between consumption, enjoyment and display of fandom and actual, conventional and active engagement in the political sphere (though these are increasingly conflated theoretically and discursively) requires further examination, ideally through qualitative research with individuals.

#### **2.4 Cultural studies and ‘active’ audience research**

The ‘cultural turn’ and emphasis on cultural consumption focused attention on media consumption and the reception of media texts by their audiences. The legitimization of audiences as ‘active’ interpreters of cultural meaning is significantly associated with the British ‘cultural studies’ project of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) based in the University of Birmingham (often referred to as the ‘Birmingham School’). Stuart Hall (who from 1968 was the Centre’s director) claims that cultural studies emerged from a number of paradigms, including Marxism, feminism, critiques of postmodernity and psychoanalysis. These contributed to the critical impetus of cultural studies in ‘the dislodging of Enlightenment projects’ (Hall 1996, p.10). The CCCS drew on expanded conceptualisations of culture that rejected the traditional dualistic binary of mass versus elite culture (particularly influenced by Raymond Williams’ theorisation that ‘culture is ordinary’ (1958, p. 92) as well as the works of EP Thompson and Richard Hoggart). The CCCS continued the



work of these founding figures in investigating audience responses in a way that included social contextualisation and critique (Kellner 1994, p. 2).

British cultural studies held a particular interest in the interplay between the individual, cultural (especially media) consumption and issues of power. While Beck's 'individualisation' thesis is framed in a rhetoric of reflexive choice, the approach of British cultural studies was heavily influenced by the Althusserian argument that ideology is internalised implicitly through practices and structures that are taken for granted, and which thereby give instruction in how 'to be a subject'. In this view, as Graeme Turner argues, individual audience members are 'the subjects, not the author of cultural processes' (Turner 2003, pp. 20- 21). In the cultural studies view, the notion of individualism, far from producing the freedoms and liberations posited by the extended reflexivity theorists, is in fact 'a central supporting mythology for capitalism' (Turner 2003, p. 20).

However, this view is further contextualised by a shift in relation to understanding of media 'effects' on audiences, classic models of which had 'oscillate[d] between two poles' (Morley 1992, p. 296), with the nexus of power located either with the 'culture industries' or with the consumer. The shift in this power dynamic can be traced in moves away from the 1930s and 1940s Frankfurt School critique of mass culture and conceptualisation of audience passivity to a view that conceives of a very direct and unmediated impact by the media on audiences. As exemplified by the work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1977), the Frankfurt School attributed a very passive role to media consumers, claiming an ideological role for the 'culture industry'. From the 1960s, though, the 'limited effects' theories of mass communication (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch 1974) claimed a more dialectical relationship between industry and audience in relation to the extent to which individual audience members select, use, interpret and decode the media which they consume. In this view, the individual audience member is also capable of being an active, potentially even resistant interpreter of cultural texts.

The political context from which British cultural studies emerged, especially following Margaret Thatcher's election as British Prime Minister in 1979, is extremely significant. As described by David Morley, the 'cultural battles' of Margaret Thatcher (which correspond closely with the concerns of reflexive modernity) were 'about individualised responsibility, and about the free market – [that] established the hegemony of a set of

ideas which shifted the whole political terrain' (Morley cited in Jin 2011, p. 126). Therefore, in a cultural studies interpretation, while media are key players in the workings of 'hegemony', media and cultural consumption may also be sites of counter-hegemonic struggle and resistance (cf. Gramsci 1971). The cultural dimensions of politics were therefore at the core of the cultural studies project: oppression could be transformed in popular culture. The project of cultural studies was to engage with and reveal the ways in which culture 'both provided tools and forces of domination and resources for resistance and struggle' (Kellner 1994, p. 5).

In order to illuminate the complex power relations of reception, British cultural studies foregrounded popular culture as a primary sphere of analysis, with a focus on previously denigrated 'low' culture texts (Ang and Hermes 1991). Therefore, British cultural studies sought to examine the consumption practices of previously unexamined individuals, often those at the margins of society. This attention to popular culture was described by David Morley as a 'a polemical move, in a particular context, designed to show that popular culture was a field that was indeed well worth studying' (Morley cited in Jin 2011, p. 124)<sup>12</sup>. This resulted in 'the distinctive approach to culture that results when we stop thinking about culture as particular valued texts and think about it as a broader process in which each person has an equal right to be heard, and each person's voice and reflections about culture are valuable' (Couldry 2000, p. 2). The British variant of cultural studies developing out of the CCCS was therefore a fundamentally political project in that it sought to locate and identify the forces of control and resistance through an examination of culture in society and in so doing to link these locations to a political project of social transformation. This presaged new methodological approaches, particularly a move towards an interpretative research paradigm and the emergence of audience studies (sometimes referred to as 'reception studies') as a research domain in its own right (Kellner 2002). A number of theorists have identified the 'paths' that have led to audience reception studies. Livingstone (1998), for example, identifies six 'trajectories' towards reception studies' which first emerged in the late 1970s as part of a general movement towards inter-disciplinarity in

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<sup>12</sup> However, in the same interview Morley also contends that as popular culture has been largely and unproblematically accepted, 'to narrow cultural studies' focus down to only popular culture would be a very regressive move in the contemporary situation' (Morley in Jin 2011, p. 125).

the social sciences. In Livingstone's (1998) schema, these are (i) Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model (1980); (ii) the Uses and Gratifications Approach; (iii) the concept of the 'resistant audience'; (iv) the conception of text and reader as mutually defining, which broadly dismantled dominant structuralist approaches to textual analysis in a move towards post-structuralism; (v) feminist approaches emphasising the marginalised audience; (vi) growing out of the convergence of the previous five trajectories, the 'ethnographic turn' shifted focus from text to context, leading to the legitimisation of the culture of the everyday and stressing the importance of 'thick description' as providing a grounding for theory, together with an analysis of the ritual aspects of culture and communication (Carey 1975 [2009]) and the practices by which meanings are re/produced in daily life (de Certeau 1984). The rejection of a positivist paradigm in favour of one which acknowledged (even privileged) the existence of potentially active, resistant audience groups was consolidated in the view that audiences' readings of cultural texts are bound with notions of what Morley referred to as 'hegemony/subalternity, the interlacing of resistance and submission, opposition and complicity (Morley 1995, p. 310, citing Martin-Babero 1988, p. 462).

Stuart Hall's seminal essay, 'Encoding/decoding' ([1973] 1980) was 'a key moment in the defence of empirical methods against the postmodern critique' [...] and... 'present[s] us with a post-positivist way of thinking about media effects which nevertheless retains a notion of determination, allowing us to speak of actual, or perhaps more appropriately, situated, audiences' (Ruddock 2001, p. 16). Hall's essay outlines a model of communication that carries with it the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of the cultural studies project, conceptualising audiences as embedded within complex social structures but capable of interpretation and discourse about the media texts they consume rather than as just subjects of 'hypodermic' messages. Broadly, the encoding/decoding model allows for the interpretation of a variability of meanings by its active audience. Further, it links the potential for the interpretation of media messages (the possibility for meaning-making, which he identifies as 'decoding' in the model) with the manner in which the media text has been 'encoded'. In Hall's model, the 'encoding' and 'decoding' occurs within the broader social structure within which the audience member exists. This distinction between 'encoding' and 'decoding' emphasises the ability of the audience to produce their own meanings.

The assumption of Hall's model is that the decoding subject can occupy three 'reading' positions: the dominant (hegemonic) position, the negotiated position and the oppositional position. Therefore, while in Hall's articulation, meaning-making can be considered active, it 'is nevertheless a fundamentally restricted and limited activity' with preferred meanings 'ultimately determining forces' (Hills 2005b, p. 64). This limits 'the extent to which the audience member/consumer's interpretations or decodings reflect and are inflected [...], [by] the range of different decoding strategies and competencies in the audience' (Morley 1992, p. 301)<sup>13</sup>. Nonetheless, the 'encoding/decoding model', as Virginia Nightingale asserts, is an acknowledgement that media audiences are diverse 'communities' in the sense of sharing 'direct common concerns', especially socially and politically' (1996, p. 14-15).

Largely inspired by the encoding/decoding model, studies of media consumption began to look at 'the audience' anew, especially in terms of its active consumption and interpretation of texts. During this period a number of highly influential studies were carried out, including David Morley's *The Nationwide Audience* (1980a), Dorothy Hobson's *Crossroads: The Drama of a Soap Opera* (1982); Ien Ang's study of *Dallas* (1985) and Janice Radway's work on the feminine romance fiction (1984); Marie Gillespie's study of the uses of video in South Asian families in London (1989, 1995); and Liebes and Katz (1991) on the consumption of American TV fiction in other cultures. The critical significance of the findings of these ethnographic studies resulted in the recognition of the polysemy of television texts and the significance of extra-textual determinants of meaning (Turner 2003, p. 109), the importance of the situatedness of reception (Hobson 1982) and the recognition of the 'domestic economy' and the politics of spatial relations in the home (Morley 1980a).

These ethnographic studies advanced methodological approaches to and theorisations about reception and consumption of media in everyday lives. However, a slippage

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<sup>13</sup>As summarised by Morley (1992) the premises of Hall's encoding/decoding model were,:

1. The same event can be decoded in more than one way.
2. The message always contains more than one potential 'reading'. Messages propose and prefer certain readings over others, but they can never become wholly closed around one reading: they remain polysemic.
3. Understanding the message is also a problematic practice, however transparent and 'natural' it may seem. Messages encoded one way can always be read in a different way.

between these important findings and a tendency towards an ‘active audience’ orthodoxy was also be detected (Modleski 1986; Ruddock 2001; McGuigan 2009) in which the emphasis on the conceptualisation of audience as active occurs at the expense of a more complex conceptualisation of audience activity and agency. In this regard, Tania Modleski suggests that

the insight that audiences/consumers are not completely manipulated, but may appropriate mass cultural artefacts for their own purposes has been carried so far that mass culture no longer seems to be a problem at all, for some critics.

(Modleski 1986, p. xi)

The implicit danger in such a valorisation of audience activity is a fetishisation of the nature, extent and levels of productivity in the audience, ascribing to a wide and varied audience a universal and totalising semiotic agency which obscures the complex totality of how meaning is ‘decoded’. In this conception, the active audience approach runs the risk of ‘suturing’ (cf. Heath’s 1977 ‘screen theory’) the audience into a predetermined, universally active position. This emphasis on the power of reception and agency of audience is summarised by Morley as ‘a curiously Christian one, in which ‘the sins of the industry (or the message) are somehow seen to be redeemed in the ‘after-life’ of reception’ (Morley 1995, p. 312). Morley (also Corner 1991, Curran 1990) warns against underestimating the force of textual determinacy in the construction of meaning and against a ‘facile insistence’ on the polysemy of media texts and the ability of audience to resist them (1995, p. 310). In this regard, Morley clearly differentiates between having power over text and power over the agenda within which the text is produced (1995, p. 313). Similarly, Ien Ang insists that to equate ‘active’ with ‘powerful’ is utterly out of perspective (1990). As Morley summarises:

The power of viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralised media institutions to construct the texts which the viewer then interprets, and to imagine otherwise is simply foolish.

(Morley 1995, p. 313)

While the empirical gains of the ethnographic studies already mentioned offered counter-evidence to the dominant ideology thesis (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 1980; 1992), they may also, as Judith Mayne suggests, have ‘led to a peculiar reading of the reception of mass culture, whereby any and all responses are critical ones’ (2002, p. 31). Similarly, Philo and Miller accuse the ethnographically based approach of cultural studies of only looking for certain sorts of influences in certain places (2001, pp 49-58).

It can be argued, then, that in its uncritical embrace of popular culture the ‘positivist paradigm’ was replaced rather unquestioningly with what might be termed the ‘resistance paradigm’, or a universalising of the ‘potentials for resistance in oppositional subcultures’ (Kellner 2003, p. 4) to such an extent that discussions about the active and even resistant audience became rhetorically established. Nick Couldry extends this critique further, arguing that in its bias towards ‘the popular’, ‘the marginal’, ‘the deviant’, some of the claims that circulated around cultural studies and the active audience tradition, especially what Nick Couldry identifies as ‘a crude adoption’ of a ‘celebratory mode towards popular consumption’ (2000, p. 85), became obscuring and problematic.

## **2.5 Perspectives on fans and fandom**

As Matt Hills writes, fans were put ‘on the agenda of audience theory’ (2005, p. 35) through their prominent position in a number of the influential empirical ethnographic studies of television fandom in the 1980s mentioned above. As committed, reflexive cultural consumers, fans intersect a number of the discourses already discussed (and indeed tendencies in ‘fan studies’ reflect a number of the problematics already discussed in connections to discourses of self and consumption). An attempt at definition illuminates this. John Fiske characterises fandom as ‘an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet significantly different from, the culture of more ‘normal’ popular audiences’ (1992, p. 30). Cornell Sandvoss offers, as a definition, ‘the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text’ (2005a, p. 8) (though he later concedes that this is not entirely satisfactory (2007, pp. 24-43)). The possibility of intertextual transformativity is introduced by Henry Jenkins when he describes fans as ‘readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture’ (1992, p. 23). For Carolyn Stevens, fandom is ‘a kind of specialised consumption, a hyper-consumption of a strongly branded product’ (2010, p. 208). Further, within the context of broader social theoretical paradigms, the emergence of fandom can be historicised as part of a ‘period [that] has witnessed an epochal shift from manufacturing to service-based economies and the unconstrained growth of consumer society, with the latter contributing significantly to what has been termed the ‘endless quest for authenticity’ (Dixon 2011, p. 279-280).

Fandom is therefore an extremely apt prism through which to examine the overarching transformations of our time, 'including the dialectic between the global and the local' (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 2007. p. 8-9). The rise of spectacle and performance in fan consumption (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998) is indexical of developments in cultural consumption generally. It is surprising that empirical research in this domain seems to be so limited.

If one of the defining aims of cultural studies was to give voice to marginalised populations (Hall 1980; 1992) through a validation and examination (though perhaps, as suggested above, also an obscuring fetishisation) of the consumption of popular cultural media texts, then this critical review finds that early fan studies had two similarly defining aims. The first of these can be described as the efforts to redeem, rehabilitate and de-pathologise the status of the fan. Fandom, in its original etymology ('fan' deriving from 'fanaticus' - Jenkins 1992, p. 12) as well as in its popular cultural construction, was framed, Joli Jensen argues, around images of social and psychological deviance: 'obsessed individuals' or the 'hysterical crowd' (Jensen 1992, pp. 11-12). While fandom was certainly marginalised and isolated in academic and popular discourse (Gray et al 2007), early 'fandom studies' offered a critical rejoinder to this marginalisation (Bacon Smith 1992; Jensen 1992; Jenkins 1992). Jensen notes that these early conceptualisations of fans are 'haunted by images of deviance' (1992, p. 9) which, ironically, were frequently conveyed in mainstream media. Henry Jenkins' early 'seminal' fan study, *Textual Poachers* (1992), similarly notes that fandom was connoted with 'religious and political zealotry, false beliefs, orgiastic excess, possession and madness' (1992, p. 12).

The second implicit and related aim was to claim the active, even resistant properties of fandom, emphasising fan studies' emergence out of the cultural studies/active audience paradigm, even the vocabulary reminiscent of the language of the active audience approach. As an example, John Fiske claims that fandom is 'associated with the cultural tastes of subordinated formations of the people, particularly those disempowered by any combination of gender, age, class and race' (1992, p. 30). The defensive tone of early fan studies is characterised by a concerted identification of fandom as active and political in its capacity to illuminate 'distinction between the strategies of the powerful and the tactics of the disempowered, the consumption of

popular mass media [as] a site of power and fandom [as] guerrilla style tactics of those with lesser resources' (Gray et al 2007, p. 1).

These themes of early fandom studies are underpinned by the work of a number of scholars. Michel de Certeau, a French historian and literary theorist, posited in his *Practices of Everyday Life* (1984) that the individual makes sense of this everyday space through use of 'tactics', thereby actively making the space habitable rather than being governed by it. De Certeau therefore conceives of consumers as 'unrecognized producers, poets of their own affairs, trailblazers in the jungles of functionalist rationality' (1984, p. 34). Influenced by de Certeau's focus on active consumption practices and the uses of goods and services by consumers, John Fiske's notion of a 'semiotic democracy' (1987) allows the production of meanings and pleasures to reside with the viewer who might interpret meaningfully and pleasurably in a way different from the intended meaning of the author (1987, pp. 236-239). Building on these conceptualisations, Henry Jenkins' early work emphasises the semiotic capability and activity of audiences while articulating the subject of fandom from an 'insider perspective' (1992). Jenkins later integrated the fundamental notion of semiotic fan productivity with the concept of media convergence, highlighting what in his view is 'the increasingly central role that digitally empowered consumers play in shaping the production, distribution and reception of media content' (2006b, p. 155). In this regard, Jenkins characterises the contemporary media and fan environment as a 'participatory culture' (2006).

Accordingly, the cultural and academic stock of fandom rose significantly in the mid and late 1990s. Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington contend that fandom went from 'Other' and excluded from 'systematic academic study' to 'a worthy cause' (2007, p. 2-4). However, a critique similar to that made about reflexive modernity's narrative of the self can be extended here. The ideal fan 'subject' can be said to be western, often male, with the appropriate resources required to exercise fandom. Therefore, the efforts to de-pathologise and rehabilitate fandom, can be argued to have effected a similar totalising and universalising 'logic' or 'narrative of fan self'. Indeed, Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington caution that 'the rhetorical defense of fans by some first-generation fan scholars left media and cultural scholars with considerable baggage' (2007, p. 4).



More sophisticated and nuanced perspectives on fandom followed. Matt Hills critiques the dualistic tendency of early fan studies ('them vs. us', 'good vs. bad') as reductive and as obscuring the 'essentially contradictory' nature of fan consumption (2002, p. 33). Instead, Hills identifies what he calls a 'suspensionist' position for fandom in which fandom exists between these dualisms and therefore operates 'simultaneously inside and outside processes of commodification' (2002, p. 44). Similarly, Cornel Sandvoss argues for a non-totalising account of fandom, stressing its emotional and personal, situated dimensions of fandom while also locating fandom within social structures (2005). This 'use' of fan research as a means of unpacking the relationship between individual agency and wider social structures in terms of fandom and fan practice has been an important and fruitful strand of investigation (Sandvoss 2005; Dixon 2011; McKee 2007). These approaches are heavily influenced by Bourdieu's identification of a critical relationship between capital as a symbolic structure and as a social structure (Simons 2006, p. 223), and his conceptualisation of capitals (1986) and theory of taste (as Bourdieu points out 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (1984, p. 6)). Therefore, 'divisions and subdivisions based on tastes, aesthetic judgement, social hierarchy and methods of discernment act in powerful ways as mechanisms of social classification' (Simons 2006, p. 223). These approaches regard fandom as situated in and reflective of social structures, which according to Gray et al

highlighted the replication of social and cultural hierarchies within fan and subcultures, as the choice of fan objects and practices of fan consumption are structured through our habitus as a reflection and further manifestation of our social, cultural and economic capital.

(Gray et al 2007, p. 6).

From this far more critical perspective, fans do not *de facto* subvert and resist, but potentially act as 'agents of maintaining social and cultural systems of classification and thus existing hierarchies' and therefore are 'embedded in the existing, social, and cultural status quo' (Gray et al 2007, p. 6). The performative dimension of the 'textual productivity' of fandom therefore also communicates something more. As Sandvoss says:

our consumption choices articulate our complex class position, and as identity building, in that this communication is as much directed inwards as outwards, forming a sense of who we are and believe ourselves to be.

(Sandvoss 2005, p. 3).

So, while John Fiske argues that fandom is characterised by productivity, he equally allows that its twin characteristic is ‘discrimination’ (1992, pp. 146-148). Therefore, while privileging the ability of the fan to produce and circulate fan texts amongst themselves with ‘values as high as any in the official culture’ (Fiske 1992, p. 39), there is also a more pernicious and class based reading, in the sense that fans can also employ their fandom and choice of fan texts to ‘produce’ themselves as ‘quality fans’. Fiske recognises this, writing that ‘these textual discriminations are often homologous of social discrimination. Choosing texts is choosing social allegiances... the links between social allegiance and cultural taste are active and explicit in fandom’ (1989, p. 147).

Such allegiances and distinctions are active and explicit *within* fandom too. Cornell Sandvoss notes that fans differ from regular audiences by nature of their emotional investment in a text indicated by ‘its regular, repeated consumption’ (Sandvoss 2005, p. 7-8), stating that a baseline definition of fandom accordingly is ‘the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text’ (2005, p. 7-8). Implicit in this is a conceptualisation of distinctions within and between different fan groups. These distinctions suggest internal fan cultural hierarchies, evaluated not only within the fan hierarchy but also by external’ forces (other fans, media industries, the academy). These distinctions become visible in conceptual demarcations between ‘casual’, ‘hardcore’ or ‘cult’ fans.

Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst’s early attempt to demarcate the general ‘fan’ from the ‘cultist’ positioned audiences along a five point continuum (ranging from the general ‘consumer’ to the materially productive ‘petty producer’ (1998, p. 141)), with the ‘cultist’ at the upper end of the continuum, defined as possessing a specialised interest (pp. 138-139). However, this general (and by now dated) approach was quickly supplanted by an emphasis on cult fandom characterised by its challenge to the mainstream. A review of the more recent literature indicates a demarcation between the ‘cultist’ and the ‘general’ fan along two lines: operating firstly in relation to the exercise of fandom which has a specific (often performative) *nature* and secondly in relation to tendencies concerning the particular *object* of fandom. Both are unified by the extent to which they can be conceptualised as challenging mainstream consumption norms, and can as such be said to operate as a practice of distinction. In relation to the nature of ‘cult’ (as opposed to general) fandom, Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton incorporate a public and performative element into their discussion of ‘cultist’ fan practice as

including, for example, ‘attending midnight screenings and repertory sessions, and repeatedly attending screenings of a single title’ (2012, p. 59). Greg Taylor distinguishes a ‘cultist’ from a fan, saying that a cultist is more resistant than a fan, appropriating – in a highly active fashion - elements from commercial culture in order to mark out an individualised space within that culture (1999, p. 161). Therefore, the cult fan is often, as Mathijs and Sexton propose, less solely preoccupied with the ‘rhetoric of the text’ and more preoccupied with making their arguments performatively, ‘through bricolage and illustration instead of through academic reasoning’ (2012, p. 59).

In relation to tendencies in the properties of the ‘cult’ fan *object*, Jancovich argues that ‘cultishness’ is predicated upon a ‘sense of distinction from “mainstream, commercial”’ (2002, p. 317). Similarly, Sconce defines cult (cinema) in terms of ‘paracinema’ – marginal films that exist outside critical and cultural acceptance (Sconce 1995, 2003); the ‘cult’ fan object being frequently characterised by a subcultural ideology and an opposition to mainstream tastes (cf. Klinger 1998; Jancovich 2003; Jancovich and Hunt 2004; Egan and Thompson 2012). Also, Mathijs and Sexton note that fandom of cult texts ‘can be distinguished through the manner by which such texts embody alternative values for many of their fans’ (2012, p. 59). Kate Egan and Sarah Thomas conjoin both these tendencies when they argue that ‘cult texts and practices seem to connote an overt counter-position [...] conveying ideas of the marginal and the subcultural, where texts are rare, undiscovered or commercially unsuccessful, celebrated by niche audiences, and/or signify messages about the value of the abnormal, the transgressive, the excessive and the extreme’ (2013, p. 2).

Further, Mathijs and Sexton’s understanding of a ‘cult connoisseurship’ of a particular object distinguishes ‘cult’ fandom from other forms of fandom because, they say, it is instantiated in ‘a form of criticism that has a strong emphasis on closeness with the object of scrutiny, an alignment with its receptions, and an intensification of the commitment that has the cultist see pretty much all the world through the lens of their object of fascination’ (2012, p.57). Michael Koven goes even further when he defines a cult object (in his case a film) as one that must: ‘draw to it a group of dedicated followers who *behave* in extraordinary ways beyond the norm of regular film going, whether dressing up or consciously seeking out screenings, but [that] often only lasts for a measurable period of time’ (2008).

*The West Wing* – as a commercially successful, long running television drama, whose narrative and subject matter are largely mainstream – does not appear to neatly correspond (as object or practice) to the category of ‘cult’, despite its retention of a group of dedicated, committed fans. Moreover, assessing *The West Wing* on those terms in fact identifies a problematic in contemporary discussions of ‘cult’ versus ‘regular’ fandom. This is that such distinctions can be strongly contested by both the rapidly changing media landscape and the changed status of the fan within such a landscape. Indeed, Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton’s critique of Abercrombie and Longhurst’s early continuum, that it is ‘too neat in light of the need to be aware of the importance of context’ (2012, p. 60), could now easily be applied to the entire fan versus cult debate. Similarly, while Matt Hills uses the term ‘cult fan’ to delimit ‘a particular (more enduring) form of affective fan relationship’ (2002, p.xi), he also argues strongly against fixing such terms of place in order to isolate ‘an object of study’. Therefore, fandom, for Hills, is ‘never a ‘neutral’ expression or a single ‘referent’; its status and its performance shift across cultural sites’ (p. xii). Accordingly, and in an even more heightened sense, any contemporary debate of ‘fan’ versus ‘cult’ must account for the new landscape in which such arguments are rehearsed. Of note is Jeffrey Sconce’s argument that ‘cult cinema’ is something that ‘was very specific to a finite window in the history of cinephilia and exhibition’ (2008). This applies to the practice of cult fandom too, as Sconce argues, ‘in its original form, ‘cultism’ evoked an esoteric sense of social, cultural and esthetic exile, a type of distinction difficult to maintain once every film became available to every viewer and once domestic viewing replaced theatrical screenings as the privileged form of spectatorship’ (2008).

These considerations would tend to consolidate a view that it is impossible to conceptualise contemporary considerations of mainstream versus cult fandom purely in terms of resistance or subcultural ideology. This is due not only to difficulties in categorising contemporary subjective practices and forms of fandom, but also because of the increasing valorisation of the dedicated fan by media industries (which extends to the ‘cultivation’ of the ‘cult’ fan by the television industry and the corresponding sense of ‘distinction’ that it bestows on fans). Along these lines, Jancovich and Hunt argue that ‘cult TV fandom’ is in fact be argued to be ‘not the product of an opposition to either the cultural industries or the academy but the product of a series of economic and intellectual developments that have produced a series of niche television markets’

(2004, p. 41). Therefore, in relation to question of the fans under study here – committed and self-identified fans of a ‘quality’ television drama (though also perhaps fans in general) - the stronger case might be made that the somewhat historically specific binaries and distinctions implicit in a discussion of ‘cult’ versus ‘regular’ fandom are less rather than more operable or helpful and that ‘cult’ as originally understood (in terms of that esoteric ‘spirit’ referred to by Sconce) is increasingly less salient.

Clearly, then, even in the most benevolent of readings, fan activity/consumption cannot be regarded, or examined, as a fixed entity that occurs outside of commodity, class relations and subjective concerns. Furthermore, the elevation of ‘the fan’ has been accompanied by the falling fortunes of the media and television industries. Therefore, that fans ‘are now wooed and championed by cultural industries’ is accompanied by the caveat that this persists ‘at least as long as their activities do not divert from principles of capitalist exchange and recognize industries’ legal ownership of the object of fandom’ (Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington 2007, p. 4). The courting and appropriation of the fan by an increasingly beleaguered television industry gives fans a prominent position and role in the transforming media-scape. Efforts by the media and especially television industries to offer new strategies for selling in globalised and post-convergence times are illustrative of the changed mode of address between media industries and fans. The identification of the ‘quality fan’ - loyal, emotionally invested, affluent or potentially affluent and engaged niche audience - must be read against a backdrop of global media fragmentation (McCabe 2007; Thompson 1996).

Sue Brower points out that the story of the quality viewer or fan is intertwined with the history of quality television (1992, p. 164). Brower outlines the history of US quality TV, summarising that by the early 1980s (and particularly the 1983 television season in which *Hill Street Blues* had garnered a record breaking twenty-one Emmy nominations) a ‘young affluent audience’ had come to symbolise a new concept: ‘quality television’ (1992, p. 166). And, in opposition to the Adornian dulling or deceptive effect, ‘quality television’ in fact resulted in ‘the stimulation of viewers’ (Brower 1992, p. 166). ‘Quality’ television, David Lavery writes is, ‘presumably, television that not only gives us what we want but what we didn’t know we want’ (2004, p. 2). Brower succinctly implicates the commercial dimensions of this new form of television when she states

that 'quality was the stepchild of commercial television, the brave rebel against mediocrity, a moral force in a money-hungry industry' (1992, p. 166).

Jane Feuer identifies television as both text and commodity, describing an inter-relationship between 'television production and commodity production' (1984, p. 34). The textual characteristics of quality TV have been addressed by Robert Thompson whose profile of 'quality television' commences with the statement that '[q]uality TV is best defined by what it is not' (1996, p. 13). Thompson goes on to identify twelve characteristics of quality television. A number of these articulate a 'quality' pedigree (authorial style, key creatives and ensemble cast, self-consciousness, realist tendency and hybridity of genres). These in turn relate to its 'desirable demographics' by virtue of its attraction to the sought after 'upscale' television audience (1996, pp. 13-16). In fact, Thompson allows that given these characteristics, 'quality television' has become a genre in itself' (1996, p. 16). While there is no direct equivalent of the 'quality' discourse in film (though links to 'art cinema' and 'independent cinema' can be related), the rhetoric around 'quality' also delivered a message to its audience 'that they have sufficient cultural capital to appreciate the Q-Word [quality]' (Mittell 2008, p. xi); from a textual perspective, then, 'quality television' parades what Avi Santo calls 'discourses of distinction' (2008, pp. 19-45)

The rise of 'quality television', as Feuer argued, was also a response to certain industrial factors. The positioning of certain prestige dramas in such a way as to 'tout... creativity, quality and the auteur' (Jaramillo 2002, p. 60) was also about the need to attract specific demographics, which itself was informed by 'declining network audiences and the almost desperate attempt to lure them back' (Weinraub 1999, para. 6). The concept of 'quality' in television is quite specific to the networks' increasing catering to middle class, high income audiences (the 'desirable demographic') in the fragmented US television market in the 1980s. The subscription channels, particularly HBO, but later others, led the way with riskier, more complex programming, targetting and capturing the 'quality' audience (Jaramillo 2002, pp. 61-62). Therefore television, in its 'post-network' era (as outlined by Amanda Lotz 2007) needs, recruits, even 'woos' the quality fan segment (Lotz 2007; Gray 2010). Further, as Matt Hills argues, the 'dialectic of value' (2002, p. 133) of the fan is increasingly valuable. The 'superfan' or 'superuser' (Sternbergh 2012; Vardeman-Winter and Tindall 2011) is 'branded' as such by industry, media and academia. For the fan, from a subjective perspective, this

changed mode of address from industry to consumer invokes a feeling of belonging and cultural legitimacy which has been fully consolidated by academia. Matt Hills describes how:

texts aimed at upscale audiences, favouring reflexive sophistication or postmodern playfulness with genre, or enacting a 'cult' anti-commercial and anti-mainstream ideology, are all thus more likely to meet with academic fervor and canonisation.

(2007, p. 40).

Therefore, as Sue Brower writes, fans 'as tastemakers', by 'their activity in relation to the cultural form [...] refine and enhance its social image while, as fans, claiming it as symbolic of their identity' (1992, p. 163). With 'quality television' established in cultural and academic discourse (Thompson 1997; McCabe 2007), television broadcasting becomes a site for the display of distinction; the discourses around 'quality' correspond significantly to Bourdieu's definition of cultural capital as 'consumption of specific cultural forms that mark people as members of specific classes' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 6). Here, the dynamics of the relationship between the 'quality fan' and the 'quality text' examined in specific circumstances constitute a unique opportunity to examine the nature of the reflexive 'project' of identity work. Moreover, this is appropriate for a contemporary project informed by cultural studies, offering redress to 'the downplaying of the 'middlebrow' or of any cultural experience which is not 'spectacular' or 'resistant', which are amongst the 'exclusions which cultural studies itself has entrenched over the past thirty years' (Couldry 2000, p. 3).

## 2.6 Psychodynamic approaches

The particular resonances of *The West Wing* for its Irish audiences were posited in the previous chapter as those that elicit cultural and socio-historic connections for its Irish fan audience. These indicate the significance of the *intrapersonal* qualities of the programme as an object in the fan imagination, suggesting that a psychodynamic approach may be an appropriate additional exploratory lens. While a number of theorists have approached the inter-relationship between fandom and questions of class and social structures (Fiske 1992; Thornton 1995; Sandvoss 2005; Hills 2002), approaches to fan psychology remain underexplored, suggesting the necessity of looking beyond the more regularly employed analytic framework to 'get [...] near real media experiences' (Ruddock 2000, p. 117), which as Ien Ang acknowledges 'should be seen as a complex and dynamic cultural process, fully integrated in the messiness of

everyday life, and always specific in its meanings and impacts' (Ang 1991, p. 161). To date, a number of psychodynamically inspired approaches have been employed in audience and fan studies (for example, Elliot 2004; Harrington and Bielby 1995a; Hills 2002; 2005a; Sandvoss 2005a;). Both Hills (2002) and Sandvoss (2005) have explored the applications of psychoanalytic approaches in making sense of the pleasures and desires of the 'inner fan', as well as the relationship between fan and object (Hills has said that it 'seems impossible to take fandom seriously without taking fan psychology seriously' (2002, p. 22)). However, that this promising avenue of research has not been more vigorously pursued might be explained by the emphasis of fan studies on de-pathologising fans, which can be argued to have resulted in a tendency to look away from the complexity of internal, unconscious psychodynamic factors and avoid slippage towards the impression of a return to a rhetoric of deviance and pathology. Therefore it is suggested that the 'narrative tendency' of early fan studies was to downplay a focus on fandom as either 'just' pleasure (Harrington and Bielby 1995, p. 13), or as 'pathological' (Jensen 1992) in a bid to rehabilitate fan status as active and productive. However, this has failed to accommodate an adequate engagement with the internalisation of reflexive fandom and the psychological dimensions of fan experience.

In support of this latter view, John Postill argues that 'people use a range of media partly to maintain – not always with success – a sense of ontological security in a modern world in which biological certainties and the predictable cycles of clock-and-calendar time are among the only certainties' (2010, p. 18). Therefore, a significant and underemployed opportunity presents itself in using psychodynamic perspectives as a means of examining the interplay between conscious and unconscious in fandom. This 'way in' to exploring the particular dynamic of fandom as contemporary, reflexive act of consumption implicates an engagement with internal *and* external factors but without the pathologising of earlier work. This approach is also compatible with a cultural studies approach, while not making presumptions about the centrality of media or cultural consumption (Warde 2005, p. 145) for its fan audience. Moreover, this approach allows that there might be a psychic connection between fan and fan object which motivates its specific and particular consumption, but also allows for issues of socio-cultural history and complexity and the relationship between people (fans) and objects (fan objects). As thus articulated, this interplay between self, the object of fandom, its consumption and politics positions respondents' fandom as a site of



significant deliberation, enjoyment, imagination and even play as a potentially rich platform from which to adequately investigate this study's research aims.

The object-relations approach follows a conceptualisation of humans as 'object-seeking', and of their engagements with these objects as assisting in 'bridging psychological and cultural imperatives which productively move forward or 'transition' embodied feelings of personal efficacy, control and individuality' (Woodward 2011, p. 8). As a psychoanalytic movement, it emerged from a post-Freudian approach that was established in the interwar years in England. In its focus on 'the embodied intersubjective formation of the psyche in relation to 'objects' (Duncan, Johnson and Schein 2004, p. 115), this approach posits that meaning emerges from object-centred, emotional engagement, a central understanding of an object-relations approach is that objects are 'cathectic', in other words, that they are invested with emotion and meaning; an approach that is conceptually compatible with the findings of this research so far.

In particular, the object-relations model of British psychoanalyst and paediatrician Donald Winnicott (1953, 1971) offers a valuable perspective from which to consider aspects of these respondents' fan consumption as it relates to their fan-object relationship. It is important to note that Winnicott's theorisations relate to his work in paediatric psychoanalysis, though they have latterly been applied to the cultural sphere (Silverstone 1994; Harrington and Bielby 1995; Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005). Most recently, the application of Winnicott's approach to object relations psychoanalysis for contemporary culture has been explored in Annette Kuhn's *Little Madnesses* (2013), whose title derives from Winnicott's description of our deep attachments and investments in the sphere of culture which are played out in a 'space' between inner and outer worlds as 'little madnesses' (Winnicott 1953; 2005).

Winnicott's model suggests that 'object consumption is located in an emergent space bridging inner and outer worlds, human and non-human, that is 'made' from play, invention and engagement with objects in one's environment' (Woodward 2012, p. 4). This 'space' (often called 'potential' or 'transitional' space) is an intermediate space somewhere between subject and object, or as Wendelin Kupers describes it, 'between the imagination and the realisation' from which 'creative experiences emerge that include parts of both' (2011, p. 46). This space unites the human subject with the external environment. In Winnicott's thinking this is achieved through a concept he

identifies as the 'transitional object' (1974), which functions in such a way as to connect the internal and external worlds of the individual (Woodward 2011, p. 375).

The concept of the 'transitional object' derives from Winnicott's hypothesis that in the initial formation of the relationship between a mother and child, the mother constitutes an object and the infant develops through its relationship to external, symbolic objects (initially the mother's breast, then, following the separation of infant from mother and breast, in the form of attachments to comforting, 'transitional' objects, such as thumb sucking, blankets, toys and dolls (Winnicott 1974, p. 4-5)). These objects are 'transitional' because they are neither the child nor the mother and are often accompanied by what Winnicott calls 'transitional phenomena' (rocking, repetitive action, etc.) that serve a similarly comforting function. In Winnicottian terms, the development of a pattern in which the infant is capable of recognising the object as 'not-me' 'permits the infant to recognize the boundaries or borders of their self' (Woodward 2011, p. 375) through use of the object.

'Play' or 'playing' in such a 'transitional' space (i.e. one that bridges the inner and outer worlds) for Winnicott, is a form of living well (Winnicott 2005b) and enables the development of a mature ability to distinguish fantasy, reality, past and present (Caldwell 2013, p. xviii). Given the conceptual significance of the consumption of objects for this study, Woodward's (2011) exploratory advancement of a Winnicottian object-relations theory of consumerism is extremely helpful. As Woodward states, such an approach 'focuses on the practices, but seeks to make strong links between embodied practices, imagination and emotion through the deployment of Winnicott's ideas' (p. 367). Therefore, in Woodward's reading, the object-relations approach centralises practice but also focuses on the embedded, emotional and affective aspects of practice (already identified as a significant conceptual aspect of this fan study). The potential applications of this approach for the sphere of media and particularly reception studies are significant.

Roger Silverstone's understanding that 'any analysis of culture must take into account unconscious processes, both individual and collective' (1988, p. 41) resulted in his engagement with Winnicott's object-relations approach and application of it to television (1994). Silverstone theorised that television (as both mundane everyday form of consumption and symbolically significant) could be regarded as transitional object

(1999), and media consumption thereby considered to be a form of 'play', following Winnicott's conceptualisation of play as a site of cultural as well as identity formation. Silverstone's interpretation of Winnicott's approach is that '[i]n play we have license to explore, both our selves and our society. In play we investigate culture, but we also create it' (Silverstone 1999, p. 64). The almost contemporaneous research of Harrington and Bielby applies a slightly different Winnicottian perspective in its understanding of media *texts* as transitional objects, visible in the intense engagement of fan audiences with their chosen fan texts (1995). The potential relevance and application of such theorisations for this study is underscored by Matt Hills' suggestion that 'it has potentially been fan studies where Winnicottian theories of play have found the most ready home' (2007, p. 43). Hills states that:

Winnicott suggests that our emotional attachments within culture, or 'little madnesses', continue throughout our lives as a way of maintaining mental/psychical health. In this reading, fandom is neither pathologised nor viewed as deficient, instead it can be theorised as a form of good health.

(Hills 2002, p. 112))

Of particular use is Hills' distinction between original or primary transitional objects (those employed in Winnicott's original intention vis a vis their application in childhood psychoanalysis) and what he calls 'secondary' transitional objects (2002, p. 107). Hills' understanding of 'secondary' transitional objects and their use by fan audiences is that they are 'intensely cathected though more culturally intersubjective and are also acquired - I would argue - non-regressively in adulthood rather than childhood' (2007, p. 44). Similarly Sandvoss identifies a 'second order transitional object' (2005, p. 90) that employs a modification of Winnicott's approach to discuss fan objects. Bainbridge and Yates therefore contend that '[w]hat we can learn from an eclectic object relations psychoanalytic approach is that the spaces of tension are often the sources of the greatest potential development, and thus, critically and politically, such an approach creates new spaces for what we might understand as 'working through' (2011, p. v). A Winnicottian object-relations approach to Irish fandom of *The West Wing*, employing the concepts of the transitional objects, transitional phenomena and transitional space, allows an engagement with the question of what role such a text (and fandom of it) might play in the political imagination of its Irish fans. This is particularly the case as for its contemporary Irish fans, *The West Wing* is received in a 'space' which is shaped by a highly specific political context in which faith in the national political process has

been severely damaged since the various crises of 2008 and the end of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ period.

Therefore, Winnicott’s object-relations theory, especially his conceptualisation of the ‘transitional object’ enables an investigation of the links between individual, object and culture in a way that encompasses both material practices and emotional, psychodynamic aspects. As also discussed, in fan studies psychodynamic experiences have been largely relativised and marginalised. Matt Hills, one of the proponents of a Winnicottian object-relations approach to fandom, has allowed that, despite exceptions (Harrington and Bielby 1995; Hills 2002; Sandvoss 2005), work in this area ‘has hardly continued apace’ (Hills 2007, p. 43).

## 2.7 Conclusion

In presenting and reviewing the critical literature, this chapter has identified an approach which includes psychodynamic and particularly object-relations dimensions and that can expand on existing work while address the gap in existing theorisations. This expansive approach allows for a collective consideration of psychodynamics, practices of consumption and structural considerations rather than a reductive focus on one of these elements. The object-relations approach is also consistent with a consideration of the immaterial as well as the material, such as the cultural implications of fan-object relationship, embodied practices of fandom, or the analysis of emotion as central to consumption (cf. Ilouz 2009).

Adopting such an approach accords with Couldry’s identification of a cultural studies approach as ‘an expanding space for sustained, rigorous and self-reflexive empirical research into the massive, power-laden complexity of contemporary culture’ (Couldry 2000, p. 4). This approach is compatible with and, I suggest, can add to the original spirit of cultural studies as identified by Lawrence Grossberg’s ‘cultural studies in a future tense’ (2010). ‘In each case we must ask, ‘what relationship does this ... complex text have to the imaginative life of the individuals who make up its audience?’’ (Hoggart 1969, p. 18 cited in Grossberg 2010, p. 13). Grossberg goes on to say that: ‘[c]ulture gives us access to the texture of life as it is lived, as it develops in a particular historical and moral context; it tells us what it felt like to be alive at a certain time and place’ (2010, p. 13.). Accessing the discursive imaginary empirically with the conceptual resource of a psychodynamic and object-relations approach (as well as

existing approaches to investigating fandom) is concluded to be appropriate. The next chapter outlines the methodological approach of this study.

## Chapter Three – A Critical Research Methodology for Investigating Irish Fan Audiences.

### 3.1 Introduction

There is no route forward other than through what Williams called ‘the pressure of experience’: opening up our experiences of living inside contemporary, mediated, commodified cultures to reflection and dialogue, on terms that match both our need as individuals to speak and our collective obligation to listen. The result is that we cannot see culture – the space of a possible ‘common culture’ as anything other than complex. Method is the route to making that complexity manageable.

(Couldry 2000, p. 42)

The research examines issues of identity, and particularly those of political identity, as mediated through the fandom of Irish fans of a political television drama, in a context of transforming social, political, media and cultural structures. The purpose of conducting such research is to illuminate an understanding of the contemporary ‘fan’ self in late modern society and the relationship between fandom of political fiction and political self-identity. Further, this research aims to conduct its investigations in a way that challenges, complicates and therefore extends the presentations of the late modern self that were discussed and problematised in the previous chapter. This chapter outlines and discusses the research methodology that was adopted for this study of situated Irish fans of an old, ‘quality’, political drama in contemporary Ireland in order to more fully and adequately account for the specificity, complexity and nuance of such a fan individual.

Because there is no methodological precedent to follow, the research has been guided by Hine’s contention that it is necessary to formulate a research ‘strategy’, rather than rely on a specific or existing analytical method (2005, p. 71), in order to best address and investigate the specificity of the research questions. Therefore, the chapter firstly presents a rationale for the employment of a mixed methods, though ‘qualitatively led’ research strategy. The methodological approach employed here is motivated by a desire to investigate a socially contextualised individual and does not perceive quantitative and qualitative approaches as mutually exclusive but as a necessary combination, given the limited scope of this study, of engaging with the research questions at this time.

The chapter proceeds to outline the specific research strategy and design, consisting of two phases. The first of these elicited quantitative data by way of a small-scale questionnaire survey while a second, qualitative phase of data-gathering consisted of in-

depth interviews with research participants. The particular strategies that were employed to recruit cross-generational fans of the series are presented, as well as a discussion of ethical issues and of researcher self-reflexivity as a fellow fan with comparable emotional and intellectual investment in this text. Next, the chapter outlines the critical approach that was employed in the interview encounters and in the data analysis. The chapter concludes with a commentary on the process, as well as outlining the limitations of the study.

### **3.2 Rationale for a mixed methods, ‘qualitatively led’ research strategy**

Decisions about research methods involve making reductive choices. Existing investigations into the spheres of politics and media have tended to do certain things. Couldry, Livingstone and Markham point out that little attention has been paid, in political science, to ‘media related activity/consumption when assessing habits of public/political participation’, particularly the narratives of consumers themselves (2010, p. 45). In the case of this study, these narratives are argued to be central to illuminating the embeddedness of both politics and media within ‘the textures of everyday life’ (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2010, p. 43). In this respect, the political science perspective has lacked the benefits of qualitative research, especially its capacity to illuminate and acknowledge ‘multiple viewpoints, the role of values, and the subjectivities of both the researcher and those researched’ (Creswell et al 2007, p. 7). Of particular relevance, given the uncertainty and precarious context of this research, is Gillies and Edwards’ argument that

qualitative, empirical research tends to expose the contradictory, tangled complexity of real life experience, which often stands in stark contrast to neatly packaged theoretical accounts of social change.

(Gillies and Edwards 2005, p. 13).

Conversely, from a media consumption and audience reception perspective in the field of cultural studies, the rejection of a positivist epistemology in favour of a conception of the active audience, and an acceptance that understandings of media and politics alike are not necessarily consistent and coherent have resulted in the consolidation of an interpretative methodological paradigm as the norm for audience research. The results of this are apparent in the ethnographic audience studies of British cultural studies discussed in the previous chapter, including the critique that audience studies has overly

privileged audience activity (as stridently expressed by Philo and Miller 2001, pp. 50-61). Nonetheless, this study is strongly inflected by a cultural studies approach and epistemology and its aim of empirically investigating fans in their specific, situated context suggest the necessity for a strong qualitative dimension in order to elicit 'rich' narrative data.

However, traditional 'either/or' approaches risk consolidating rather than challenging the production of an inadequate account of the 'reflexive' individual, as identified in the literature review. Political culture is more accurately conceived of in terms of Peter Dahlgren's model of a 'civic culture' that in reality comprises multiple dimensions in which issues of culture and media are increasingly salient (Dahlgren 2001; 2003). This requires a methodological approach that acknowledges and can account for such multi-dimensionality and complexity in the converging and rapidly changing media and political landscapes inhabited by these fans. In this regard, Andreas Hepp engages specifically with the theoretical and practical problems inherent in 'researching 'mediatised worlds' (Hepp 2010). Hepp argues firstly for the importance of conducting empirical research in a manner which makes no prior assumptions about the position of media in the lives of contemporary subjects. Hepp identifies a position in which 'we increasingly find research implying a general mediation of the social through technical media' which consequently presents media and communication studies with a paradox: 'on the one hand, they gain an increasing relevance as questions of media communication are part of researching (nearly) 'everything' (2010, p. 2) while on the other hand, they (media and communication studies) lose their specificity if their focus is no longer on mass communication as a separated field but rather on the 'mediation of everything' (similar theorisations and conceptualisations can be found in Livingstone 2009; Thompson 1995; Martin-Barbero, 1993 and Silverstone 1994).

Hepp refines and qualifies the concept of the 'moulding forces' of the media, stating that when researching change, research must consider that 'specificities of different media are produced in human acting and without indicating 'one trajectory' or 'logic' of the media' (2010, p. 4). This enables an investigation of media use that includes 'how the spreading of certain media is related to the specificity of cultural change' (2010, p. 3), a view that is theoretically sympathetic with the aims of this study. Hepp's specific approach therefore incorporates a quantitative and qualitative aspect. The quantitative perspective enables engagement with the quantitative aspects (the 'more' of



mediatization) and measurement of the increase of aspects of media and mediated communication in our life, in a way that does not assume the centrality of media to life. Hepp suggests the addition of a qualitative dimension, so that the quantitative findings can be incorporated into an overall interpretative framework, as the quantitative aspect of research automatically implies qualitative changes that might be open to investigation and analysis.

As a way of engaging with the fluidity and complexity of individuals living in a mediated world (but which, following Hepp, makes no deterministic assumptions about its nature) a 'mixed methods' approach therefore offers a number of strengths. Mixed methods research refers to the employment of a pluralism of methods and research techniques in order to gain access to different facets of the same social phenomenon (Olsen 2004, p. 6; Bryman 2001). The combination of different approaches (classically quantitative and qualitative) is described by Tashakkori and Teddlie as 'a third methodological movement in the social and behavioral sciences [that] began during the 1980s' (2003, p. 697), though John Creswell argues that in fact mixed methods research has been employed for a significantly longer period of time (citing a 1959 study by Campbell and Fiske that utilises a 'multitrait/multimethod' approach (Creswell 2007, p. 1)).

Creswell's discussion of the particular strengths of mixed methods indicates the appropriateness of this approach for this study. Firstly, he argues that the employment of both quantitative and qualitative approaches can help to answer a wider array of questions (2009, pp. 213-214). As the breadth of this study is quite broad (asking questions about fan media consumption but also political engagement and identity issues) the employment of both quantitative and qualitative aspects can more adequately deal with the broad and multiple dimensions of the landscape under investigation here. Particularly, I suggest that this provides a way of engaging with the public/private world of the citizen/consumer while acknowledging the particularity of everyday spatio-temporal life. In this regard, the approach adopted here follows Ann Oakley's argument that combining quantitative and qualitative research is better conceived of as conducting research on a continuum rather than as a dichotomy (1998). This, according to Oakley, allows the researcher to pay 'iterative attention' and to employ 'thinking from caring' to the details of what is said in a way that at least partially redresses what Oakley describes as the 'use of numbers' in quantitative research to create artificially controlled realities

(Oakley 1998, p. 713). Similarly, Creswell et al (2006, p. 6) and Hepp (2010, pp. 2-4) allow that in mixed methods research, qualitative data can be used to expand and elaborate on quantitative findings.

However, while, as Jennifer Mason argues, mixed methods ‘can be a very good thing indeed [...] it is not inevitably or by definition so’ (2006, p. 10). Some critical commentaries on a mixed methods approach have argued that it implies an ‘auxiliary’ role for qualitative research and a privileged role for quantitative research (Howe 2004 and Denzin and Lincoln, cited in Creswell et al 2006, p. 2). However, Mason refutes and overcomes this by arguing strongly for a mixing of methods that is ‘*qualitatively driven*’, especially when ‘researching questions about social experience and lived realities’ (2006, p. 10). Mason argues that ‘if we are going to improve our capacity to explain and to ask and answer rigorous and useful questions in our complex social environment, we need to understand how contexts relate to social life, and factor this understanding into our explanations’ (Mason 2006, p. 19). In other words, she points out that social science research methods need to correspond to the complexity of multidimensional experience.

For Mason, the multidimensionality of lived experience is ‘lived, experienced and enacted simultaneously on macro and micro scales’ (2006, p. 11-12). Therefore a ‘qualitatively driven’ mixed methods approach can help ‘to theorize beyond the micro-macro divide, and to enhance and extend the logic of qualitative explanation’ (2006, p. 9). Significantly, then, Mason’s approach ‘allows the focus of the research to be upon how social experience and ‘real lives’ are simultaneously or connectedly ‘big and little’, global and local, public and private’ (2006, p. 15).

A significant strength of Mason’s approach and argument for this particular research is that eliciting both quantitative and qualitative data allows for a logic of comparison that seeks to ‘understand the distinctive dynamics, mechanics and particularity of each case *holistically*’ in a way that emphasises the significance of *context* (Mason 2006, pp. 16-17). For Mason, context (or the ‘particular constellations and groupings of (multi-dimensional) relevancies [that] have meaning for a specific research problem or process under scrutiny’, (2006, p. 17) is *centralised* rather than controlled for or edited out (Mason 2006, p. 17). The adoption of this approach allows for an examination of fandom which is situated within, rather than extracted from, respondents’ everyday life

– thereby acknowledging an understanding of media practice which ‘brings into view activities which are situated, corporeal, and shaped by habits without reflection’ (Thevenot 2001, p. 56 cited in Peterson 2010, p. 134). Accordingly, the adoption of a mixed methods but qualitatively led approach situates these respondents contextually; in other words it accounts for, and even emphasises, the political, social, cultural and psychodynamic world of respondents.

Finally, in outlining the rationale for this specific research it is important to note that as this is original research in Irish media/cultural studies, there has been no theoretical or methodological precedent. This was therefore ‘learning on the job’, and a ‘first step’ into these areas.

### **3.3 Specific research strategy and design**

So far, this chapter has outlined a rationale for a mixed methods, qualitatively led methodology. The chapter next outlines the specific research strategy and design of this study. This section will therefore engage with issues relating to the sample population, to do with the generalisability of data results, the recruitment strategy and phases, and ethical considerations.

#### **3.3.1 Sample population and generalisability**

The ‘sample population’ required for this research was self-identified fans of *The West Wing*. Therefore, the ‘sample’ is purposive and non-general, the research being primarily ‘text’ specific. The research participants required for this study therefore constitute those identified by Michael Patton as ‘information-rich’ (2002, p. 230). Fans, as Gray et al contend, can range ‘from regular, emotionally uninvolved audience members to petty producers’ (2007, p. 8). This follows from Abercrombie and Longhurst’s typology of fandom that describes a continuum starting with consumers, then extending to fans, cultists, enthusiasts and finally to the ‘petty producer’ (1998, p. 28). This typology in itself invokes John Fiske’s tripartite conceptualisation of the enunciative, semiotic and textual productivity of fandom (1992, pp. 37-39). For the purposes of this study, the research requires self-identified Irish committed fans of *The West Wing*, understanding committed fans to be those who might be said to more heavily ‘invest’ in their fandom (Smith and Steward 2007). However the understanding of this research is equally grounded in a belief that no audience or their division into categories (fan or

otherwise) is simple and straightforward, as might be implied by fan typologies (Crawford 2004, p. 25).

The research strategy rests on a purposeful, non-random recruitment of Irish fans of *The West Wing*. As the ‘target community’ being sought consists of committed fans of an ‘old’ show, a variety of strategies were employed for effective recruitment. Given the desire to recruit as wide a demographic (age, gender) as possible, a double strategy was devised, using both ‘old’ (interpersonal) and ‘new’ (Internet) modes of recruitment. Specifically, the rationale for recruiting from ‘old’ as well as ‘new’ platforms was informed by the hypothesis that different age groups are likely to be differentiated by the extent and qualitative nature of their media usage. The youngest of these, hypothetically, live in the most media saturated environment and are most likely to be ‘advanced’ ICT users<sup>14</sup>, using ‘old’ media differently or more selectively than the older groups, who might hypothetically be more reliant on television schedules and broadcast television, or to selectively mix and match their media usage.

In relation to issues of generalisability, and as a population-based sample was not in this case necessary, the rationale follows Robin Means Coleman’s summation that ‘qualitative sampling techniques need not be random, as generalizability is not the goal’ (Means Coleman, 2001). Curtis et al (2000) and Creswell and Plano Clark (2010, p. 232) suggest that such non-random methods can be particularly effective when followed up with an intense method such as the in-depth interview, as is the case in this study. Further, as this study explores individual and collective negotiations of identity via a quantitative and qualitative small scale research project, it makes no claims to represent a ‘truth’ of an entire fan community which is by definition diverse, rather than homogenous, refuting ‘dominant constructions of fandom [that] paint a picture of monolithic spaces in which all fans are engaging in the same behaviors’ (Zubernis and Larsen 2012, p. 9).

### **3.3.2 Recruitment strategy and sites**

Given that recruitment methodologies can dictate the potential participants for a study, attention to these techniques is important. However, relatively little formal attention

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<sup>14</sup>For a European wide typology of media usage from ‘non-’ to ‘advanced users’, see Heim and Brandtzaeg 2010).

(particularly in the field of audience analysis) is paid to the subject of the significance of recruitment methodologies in media and audience research<sup>15</sup>. For this study, respondents were recruited from two primary ‘field locations’: Internet websites and via the interpersonal recruitment methods of ‘snowball sampling’ and ‘friendship pyramiding’.

The huge growth in participant recruitment via the Internet can be attributed in large part to the efficiencies attaching to Internet-based recruitment strategies such as those relating to time and money (Eysenback and Wyatt 2002), its potential reach in terms of its ability to transcend space and time issues (Bowen, Williams and Horvath 2004), and its ability to access hidden or hard to reach populations (Alessi and Martin 2010). For this study, a significant benefit is that Internet fan forums were more likely to yield committed (rather than casual) fans and current fans.

However, Internet mediated recruitment also presents certain difficulties (for example, issues relating to sampling practices, ethical practice and issues of validity (Whitehead 2007)). Frankel and Siang caution that online research implicates a number of complex methodological issues including those of ‘netiquette’ (1999, pp. 17-18). Given what Frankel and Siang identify as ‘the ease of anonymity and pseudonymity of Internet communications’ (1999), the research remained conscious of the following issues specifically relating to my research which I identified as potentially problematic in online participant recruitment. Firstly, participants can participate in the same web-based or web-instigated research more than once (as described in Duffy 2002, p. 86). Participants may also give misleading information concerning nationality, gender, location and age. Frankel and Siang point out that sampling participants on the internet therefore increases questions about the validity and reliability of data collected (1999, p. 3).

The second mode of recruitment was more informal, involving interpersonal methods. Certainly, there are strong precedents for more informal recruitment methods in a number of audience studies. Helen Wood’s 2009 research explores the interactions

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<sup>15</sup>By contrast, for example with the focus this receives in health related disciplines such as social work and specialised nursing research). An inference, then, based on the notable absence of discussion of recruitment strategies, is that there is a strong likelihood that participants in many small-scale and individual researcher-led projects are frequently drawn, on a reasonably informal basis, from personal, local or group/community contacts and contexts.

between female viewers and the daytime talk-show genre. Her respondents were all selected from the same area (a village), were all members of an established community (the local Catholic Church) and were all identified through a connection with Woods (her mother, who is also one of the respondents) (Woods, 2009). Joke Hermes (1995) outlines in detail her experiences of conducting research as a process in her analysis of reception of women's magazines (1995). At the basis of Hermes's work is the in-depth interview. She outlines how she recruited informants for her research using 'snowballing' or 'friendship pyramiding' methods (following Kitzinger 1987). Friendship pyramiding refers to the recruitment of participants through personal contacts. Hermes's use of her mother as key informant for the snowballing process led to interviews with three of her mother's friends (Hermes 1995, p. 181). Snowball sampling is a technique for recruiting a research sample where existing networks (in Hermes's case, her mother) are asked to recruit potential future subjects from their interpersonal contacts. The sample group 'snowballs' in this manner. This method has been used where a specialist interest is the focus of the study. For example, in Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance*, informants were identified and recruited by local bookstore owner 'Dot' from her shop patrons.

Of significance for this study are Hermes's observations that these more personal methods actually worked very effectively while her later use of paid participants in the study did not. As Hermes outlines it, as the phases of her research progressed and more specifically stratified respondents were required, she supplemented her initial informal purposive approach with lists of potential respondents identified and supplied by a respondent agency and research firm (Hermes 1995, p. 185). In the case of these respondents, either they directly, or the agency employed were paid a fee for their services. Hermes notes that the (paid) respondents were highly experienced marketing focus group subjects and while 'very enthusiastic about the interviews', these interviews were not as productive as those generated by the informal snowballing or friendship pyramiding methods she used in the initial research phase (p. 186). Hermes went on to employ a variation on this 'snowballing' method in later (2005) research. In this case a central informant was selected, who ran a specialist thriller bookshop and whose clients (identified by the central informant) comprised half the interviewees. The other interviewees were sourced from 'personal networks' and Internet discussion groups (Hermes 2005, p.77-78).

However, a significant criticism levelled at using informal and purposive recruitment methods such as snowballing and pyramid friendship is that the non-random sourcing of a potentially narrow field of participants based on using interpersonal and community/group contacts may affect the research results. On this important subject of the impact recruitment methods have on the outcomes of social research, McLean and Campbell (2003) conclude that qualitatively different outcomes to recruitment attempts are produced from different methods of recruitment. Therefore, they suggest that detailed formative research be carried out into the respective target community before deciding on a recruitment methodology, following which a range of recruitment methodologies might be employed depending on the nuances and complexities of each project. Therefore, for the specific purposes of this study, it was decided to employ a recruitment strategy that combined newer and more traditional recruitment methods in order to identify and interview as wide a range of fans as possible.

### **3.3.3 Ethical considerations**

It was a requirement of this research that clearance be obtained from Mary Immaculate College Ethics Committee (MIREC). The conditions of ethical clearance stipulated the production of a participant information sheet and consent form which outlined the aims of the project, as well as the approach to participant confidentiality, data retention and the rights of respondents to withdraw from the study at any time. Ethical clearance was obtained and all documents were circulated to and talked through with each participant prior to interview (see Appendix Two for these documents). From an ethical perspective, I was particularly conscious of the increased complexity in obtaining permissions in an online space. These concerns guided my advances to a number of fan forums and websites, from which I sought permission to post a link asking fans of *The West Wing* to participate in my questionnaire. A full description of the results of these recruitment strategies is discussed in Chapter Five which engages with the quantitative survey and data.

While the interview encounter was planned to be as loosely structured as possible in order to enable a participant-led rather than researcher-led approach, in reality it inevitably charts a course between this aspiration and practicalities. To the extent that the information sheet outlines the intent and research aims of the project, it might be said to have what Haggerty refers to as ‘political dimensions’ (2004, p. 69), which in

explicitly outlining the project's research aims might potentially influence respondents to say what they feel they should say. Contra this, the credibility of qualitative data is significantly dependent on the rapport between researcher and participants and the resulting openness of informants to disclose potentially sensitive information and opinion (Mattingly and Lawlor, 2001). To that extent, confirmation of ethical clearance and information can assist in establishing credibility and trust between researcher and researched.

### **3.4 Phase one of research: quantitative survey**

The first phase of data-gathering consisted of a quantitative survey of self-identified fans of *The West Wing*. As already discussed, in order to appeal to as wide a demographic group of Irish fans of *The West Wing* as possible, recruitment was conducted via traditional interpersonal methods as well as 'new' media, specifically Internet websites. Specifically, in relation to the latter, recruitment was targeted from specialist media fandom sub-forums on the Irish based Internet websites boards.ie and magicmum.com (these will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five). From a pragmatic perspective, it was hoped that respondents to the first, quantitative phase of research might then be recruited for the second phase of data-collection, the in-depth interview (following Creswell's identification of the 'practical' strength of mixed methods research, particularly the opportunity of a mixed methods researcher in deploying all methods possible to address a research problem (2007, p. 9)). The purpose of the questionnaire was therefore twofold: primarily, to elicit quantitative data in accordance with my mixed methods strategy, but additionally, to make contact with fans of *The West Wing* who were then invited, having completed the survey, to maintain contact with the researcher and asked if they would be interested in participating in subsequent in-depth interviews.

The questionnaire was designed to consist of structured question and answer scales. The survey consists of four pages of predominantly single click question-and-answers; additionally, a number of open-ended questions were included to facilitate individual responses on certain topics. The survey is structured in four sections, each designed to elicit information pertaining to specific themes. The first section seeks to determine a broad demographic profile of the respondents. A second section is themed around levels and modes of media consumption generally, with specific questions posed to



establish respondents' consumption of political and news media. A third section is concerned with respondents' levels of political engagement and interest and finally, a fourth section engages with respondents' fandom of *The West Wing*. The survey and its analysis is engaged with in detail in Chapter Five, though it is important to note at this point that (following the 'qualitatively led' logic of this research) the questionnaire was devised in order to generate basic statistics rather than to perform detailed statistical work.

Further, while the questionnaire, its design, results and their analysis is the subject of its own chapter (Chapter Five) what is of note in this first phase was that the recruitment process did not transpire as straightforwardly as first expected. In this study, an immediate finding was that the planned 'progress' of recruitment turned out to be more complex than imagined originally. In the two figures below, the first depicts the recruitment strategy as originally conceptualised, with a straightforward progression from initial recruitment (either via Internet or interpersonally) to the questionnaire, following which it was assumed that some respondents would drop out of the study, but that others might continue to the qualitative in-depth interview phase.

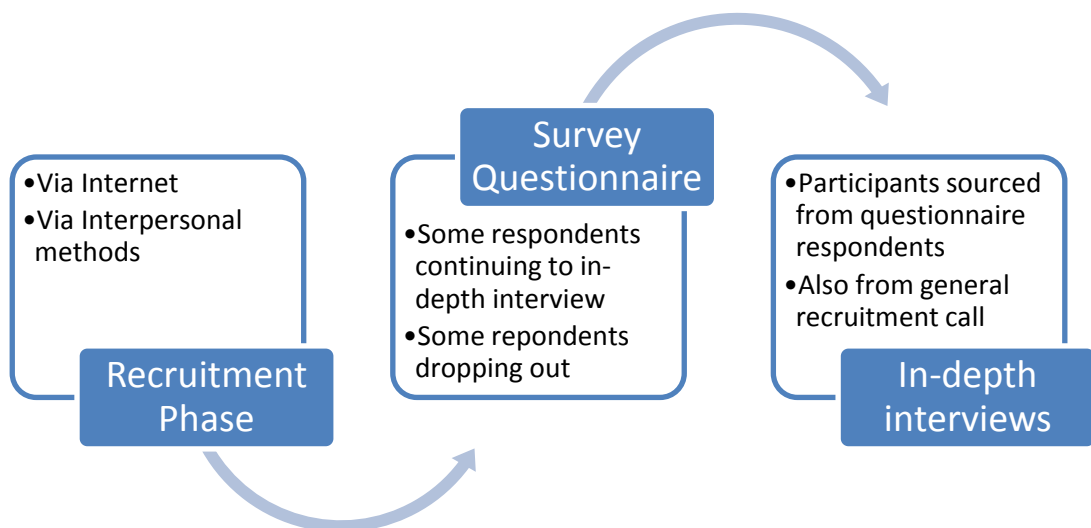


Figure 1: 'Planned' Flow of Recruitment Strategy

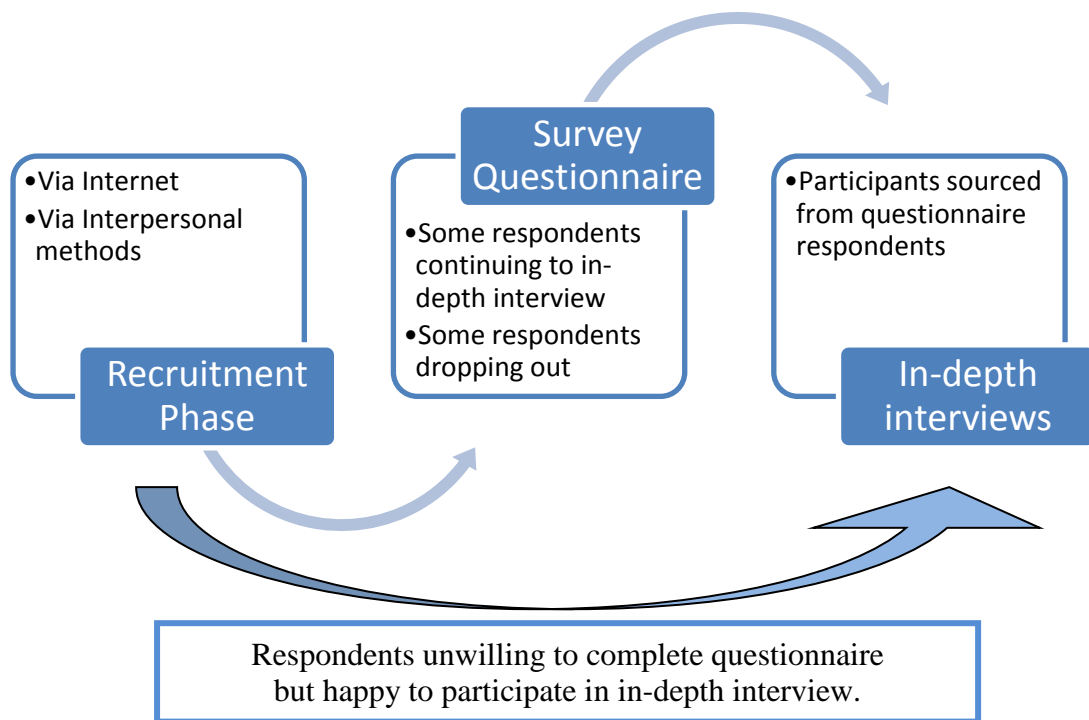


Figure 2: 'Actual' Flow of Recruitment Strategy

As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, while it was expected that not all questionnaire respondents would agree to an in-depth interview, what was not predicted was that a number of respondents agreed to a full interview but were not prepared to complete the brief survey questionnaire. The explanation most frequently offered by these respondents was that they simply did not like doing questionnaires. This of course demonstrates the requirement for flexibility but also indicates even at an early stage the requirement for a methodological strategy which can account for such specificities and be flexible in identifying and accommodating unknown variables including the needs of participants.

### 3.5 Phase two of research: qualitative in-depth interviews

Highlighting the 'politics of research', Skeggs, Wood and Thumim have shown that methods do not simply 'capture' results, they make them (2008, p. 5). In research, a complicated relationship develops between researcher and respondents, data, and even imaginings of the project itself. Lynne Pearce and Jackie Stacey suggest that negotiating a position within this complexity is a key methodological concern (1995 p. 81). Researcher self-reflexivity has been dealt with intensively in feminist writing (such as Elspeth Probyn 1993), while its inclusion in media and particularly fan scholarship is more recent, though increasingly common. The so-called 'first generation' of fan

studies (e.g. Fiske 1989, Radway 1991) wrote in a depersonalised and distanced way in an attempt to be objective and distanced in pursuit of analysing the active audience (Monaco 2008). More recent fan scholars (Jenkins 1995, Hills 2002, and Couldry 2007) make ‘declarations’ about their ‘positionality’ in a way that has become almost rhetorically fashionable in fandom scholarship (Monaco 2010), typifying what Adkins identifies as a general ‘turn to reflexivity’ (2002, p. 332). The relationship between the researcher and researched is also a factor; Krefting, for example, notes that the researcher’s background, views, and interests may influence the research (1991). Jarvinen suggests that if interviews are treated ‘not as question-and-answer sequences but as interactive sites for meaning-making [then] interviewers can no longer be regarded as passive listeners and neutral recorders’ (2001, p. 280). In this regard, my own positionality as researcher, female, mother and worker undoubtedly impacted on the interview encounter and research process.

Therefore, this study considers subjectivity and positionality as unavoidably inscribed; as Clifford states, ‘every version of an other... is also the construction of a “self” (1998). Similarly, Lincoln and Guba acknowledge the subjectivity of the researcher in qualitative research, requiring that the ‘biases, motivations, interests or perspectives of the inquirer’ be made explicit throughout the study (1985 p. 290). Moreover, Hammersley and Atkinson draw a line between ethnography or ethnographically inspired research and colonialist history, contending that ‘ethnography has classically inscribed a radical distinction between the Observer and the Observed, who became Author and the Other’ (2007, p. 253), though for Madison (2012), in ethnographic studies this is not negative as dialogue is ‘the quintessential encounter with the Other’ (p. 9) and, following Bakhtin (1984, p. 287) ‘communion with an Other brings the self more fully into being and, in so doing, opens you to know the Other more fully’.

As mentioned, my presence as both researcher and identified fan has a bearing on the study. Valerie Walkerdine suggests it is impossible to avoid the power differential in a relationship that might be defined in terms of expert and non-expert (1990) (or in terms of interviewer as agenda-setter (Hoffman 2007)). However, I suggest that the common ‘fan’ relationship in these interview encounters enabled an emphasis on respondents’ ‘cultural insider’ status which, while not negating the existence of a power dynamic in the interview encounter, constituted a positive hermeneutic and highlighted the more interactionist features of the interview as encounter. As an example, I found that many

respondents launched an offensive establishment of their own ‘fan expert’ credentials as opening salvo in the interviews. Typical of this, one interviewee told me how he had been on Wikipedia the night before to make sure he ‘was in the ballpark’ with his responses. The respondent’s admission of ‘backstage’ preparation (as well as my own recognition of it) recalls Goffman’s (1969 [1990]) conceptualisation of performative encounter in which the ‘performer’ can follow a script and fall back on set roles. This strand has been developed subsequently by theorists who argue that interviews are best conceived as performative collaborations (Atkinson and Delamont 2006; Plummer 1995) between researcher and researched.

However, an acknowledgment of both the power differential and performativity of the interview encounter, as well as the positionality of researcher and researched, should not, I argue, understate the agency and activity of respondents. Therefore, and following Blumer’s argument, the encounter cannot be predetermined by a script and the meanings of each encounter are produced during the interaction of the encounter itself (1969). To consolidate this view, which recognises both the power dimensions of the interview encounter but also acknowledges the agency of respondents, attempts were made to give as much power as possible back to respondents, for example in allowing the respondents to select the meeting venue as an acknowledgement of the bearing that socio-spatial dimensions have on the dialogic exercise of the interview (Sin 2003).

Sensitivity to context, as Bryman argues, entails ‘allow[ing] the context of people’s behaviour to be mapped out fully’ (2012, p. 494). The context of uncertainty and crisis certainly informs the way the interviews flowed. The practical aspects of undertaking a research project of this nature are relevant here too and these issues were constantly negotiated during the process, during which I strove to adopt what Hines calls an ‘adaptive’ position (2000, p. 154). For example, while interviews were conducted according to participants’ schedules, I had to arrive at a balance between accommodating potential respondents’ requests to change times, dates and venues of interviews, and accepting that at a certain point some potential respondents were not going to follow through with an interview.

The second (and primary) qualitative phase of research consisted of 22 in-depth semi- or unstructured interviews. The analysis of data gathered from these qualitative

interviews forms the basis of Chapters Six, Seven, Eight and Nine. The in-depth interview was employed because of its capacity to add individual specificity to general results (following Barnhurst, 1997). As Grant McCracken writes:

Without these understandings, our vision of social scientific data is monocular when it could be binocular. Without a qualitative understanding of how culture mediates human action, we can know only what the numbers tell us.

(McCracken 1998, p. 9)

While any interview event is unpredictable, the desire to facilitate a large degree of flexibility in the interview encounter while also to engage with specific topic areas informed the choice of a semi- or un-structured approach to interviews. In this regard the semi-structured approach considers key themes and sub-questions in advance in terms of how they can give the researcher a sense of order (David and Sutton 2004, p. 87), but beyond that, elements such as the order, wording, structure of questions, flexibility of topic navigation and style of conversation can vary according to the interviewer's discretion (Corbetta 2003, p. 270). This open-ended style of questioning can be followed up by inductive probing, which Gray suggests can provide a way to explore new paths in the interview that may not initially have been envisaged (2009, p. 217).

Notwithstanding this, in early interviews I employed the use of a very rudimentary interview guide which consisted of memory prompts and topic areas to be covered should they be required. Where a respondent had also completed a questionnaire, this often provided the means to a 'kick off' question for the in-depth interview, though I strove to retain flexibility at all times. However, as the interview process went on, I found the interviews becoming naturally less and less 'semi-structured' and more unstructured. Undoubtedly this was in part related to my developing experience and confidence as an interviewer, but also related to the very particular context in which interviewing took place. In this respect, there was a general tendency in respondents to be talk expansively, broadly and even circuitously. Arguably this was due, at least partly, to the broad-ranging nature of the uncertainty facing participants. Given the uncertain context of 'crisis', the conversation tended to flow across subjects; from fandom to media to politics and to everyday life. This corresponds with a view as expressed by Couldry, Livingstone and Markham in their 2007 account of their involvement with the 'Public Connection' project (which investigated the relationship

between media consumption and public engagement), that it can be easier to discuss a complex concept (such as contemporary politics) through a mediating subject (2007, pp. 4-5); in the case of this research, media fandom.

Influenced by Kvale's (1996) criteria for successful interviewing, as the interviews progressed I attempted to be responsive in keeping them as 'open' as possible in order to engage with what was significant to the interviewees rather than any advance 'agenda'. Nonetheless, because of the significant, though limited potential to elicit data in the interview encounter, I formulated a broad and flexible 'gameplan' concerning the topics and question areas that would ideally be covered. This included a tentative ordering of questions which was hoped to both elicit information and put respondents at ease. For example, a common opening question would ask respondents to explain how and why they had become fans as opposed to casual viewers of *The West Wing*. Inevitably, this 'led' the interview in a particular direction based on the (unpredictable) nature of the response provided.

Further, the in-depth interviews were particularly envisaged as a platform from which to investigate the relationships between respondents and their fan objects (the incorporation of a psychodynamic/object-relations approach already discussed in detail in Chapter Two). As such, while wishing to retain as open-ended a dynamic as possible, certain areas were identified as being most appropriate in nature and scope to strategically probe the 'space' between person, object and culture. These gave rise to the identification of a number of question areas, as follows.

Firstly, there were questions relating to the consumption of the fan text, particularly those that relate to an engagement with the media 'objects' used to view *The West Wing* (e.g. television screens, laptops, etc.), which in this understanding might potentially have their own 'trajectories' in respondents' lives which could be brought out during interviews. Relatedly, there were questions relating to more 'mundane' aspects like the organisation and planning of the viewing, as influenced by Silverstone's (1994) work on television as a transitional object which is intimately related to a domestic moral economy that includes rituals, routines, temporal and spatial factors. Further, questions that would attend to embodied action and articulations of emotion or feeling in consumption settings were identified as potentially rich. These areas are dealt with in detail in Chapter Six, which engages with how and why respondents 'do' consumption.

Secondly, there were questions relating to the process of fandom itself, particularly in Harrington and Bielby's emphasis on the 'pleasure' of fandom, and particularly their emphasis on 'the *process* by which pleasure is created by fans' (1995, p. 133) as a form of 'boundary crossing', in which fan objects (i.e. the media text itself) can be regarded as functioning as a transitional object (Harrington and Bielby 1995, pp. 133-135). Conceptually, this topic area was perceived as enabling a move on to a further, more oblique area of questioning, particularly, probing how respondents' fandom of *The West Wing* might relate to notions of their 'real' political identity. In this case, potentially between fan consumption of political fiction and real political engagement. This conceptualises the fan object as epistemic, engaging with Woodward's contention that '[e]pistemic objects thus end up reiterating lack or emptiness, rather than eliminating it, and in the process they call forth the need for further objects' (Woodward 2011, p. 381). This area of questioning forms the subject matter for Chapter Seven, which engages with the relationship between these respondents' fandom and their political identities.

As a comment, experiential 'on the job learning' certainly resulted in the acquisition of practical lessons. For example, while Weinberg suggests that in order to establish a rapport in interviews, prudence dictates moving from the easier questions to the difficult ones (1996 p. 85), it became evident that there is an optimum interview 'window' of between forty-five and sixty minutes, after which respondents began to tire when speaking intensively. Therefore, while rapport can be established in the early more 'social' part of the interview, this stage of the interview has to be managed carefully to ensure adequate time is spent on the core topic areas. In this regard, I followed McCracken's suggestion of the use of 'informal prompts' (1988, p. 35) to attempt to steer the flow of conversation back to the subject matter where necessary.

The interviews, conducted between May 2011 and May 2012, and held in various locations, were recorded using a tape recorder and then transcribed. In an initial period of data-gathering, fourteen interviews were conducted. In order to ensure that 'saturation' had appeared to occur, a further eight interviews were subsequently conducted. The notion of theoretical saturation derives from Glaser and Strauss's (1967) influential account of grounded theory in which theoretical saturation is described as a process in which the researcher continues to sample relevant cases until there is repetition of data themes and no new theoretical insights are being gleaned from

the data. Accordingly, the saturation of themes in interviews signifies that sufficient data had been collected to reflect the salient themes and patterns.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed as they occurred, which meant that transcription and interviews were concurrent. This meant that a rudimentary and preliminary form of analysis was taking place as interviews were being conducted. Lofland and Lofland advise commencing engaging in early and ongoing analysis, not just because of the significant labour involved in bulk transcription, but also because the researcher can become aware of emerging themes that may inform interview topics (2006, p. 194). Further, while all interviews were tape recorded, in a number of instances, participants continued to talk after the tape recorder was switched off. Quite frequently, these ‘unsolicited accounts’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) elicited interesting, reflective material. In this regard, as well as a recording of the primary interview, these ‘post-interview’, unrecorded conversations were recorded in my observational notes as soon as possible after the interview encounter. In these cases, and generally, where appropriate, I invited respondents to maintain contact with me. A number of respondents maintained a more longitudinal contact with me via email after interviews, often offering subsequent reflections or asides following the principal interview, while others were not interested in doing so.

An unexpected dimension of the fan researcher/researched dynamic emerged in the realisation that mutual fandom enabled a type of shorthand in relation to the textual and extra-textual specificities of *The West Wing*, allowing for knowing allusions and references to be made. This not only had a practical benefit in saving ‘interview’ time and energy, but also indicated the equal reflexivity of the researched as well as the researcher and the role of both in shaping the flow of the interview. This, I suggest, indirectly corresponds to Becker and Geer’s argument that there is a benefit in the social anthropologist learning or knowing the ‘native language’ (1970) of the subject or object being researched. In this sense, as Bryman argues, ‘it is very often the “argot” – the special use of words and slang that are important to penetrate that culture’ (2012, p. 494). Nigel Fielding similarly refers to this as a technique of ethnographic study which is ‘to learn the language in use; this not only means jargon and dialect, but special meanings and unfamiliar uses of familiar words’ (1993, p. 148). In this sense, mutual fandom was an enabling factor in this research.



### 3.6 Approach to critical data analysis

As Paul Ricoeur argues ‘[i]nterpretation... is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning’ (1974, p. xiv). In general, approaches to coding in qualitative research vary from Layder’s identification of ‘precoding’ as the annotation of significant quotes or passages (1998, p. 54) to Coffey’s and Atkinson’s insistence on ‘data complication... breaking the data apart in analytically relevant ways in order to lead toward further questions about the data’ (1996, pp. 29-31). Clearly, these approaches to research must acknowledge Sipe’s and Ghiso’s suggestion that as we bring ‘our subjectivities, our personalities, our predispositions, [and] our quirks’ to the process, ‘all coding is a judgement call’ (2004, pp. 482-3). Adler and Adler point out that even at the earliest and most peripheral stages, e.g. as a participant observer, personal involvement filters how one perceives, documents and codes data (1987). Similarly, the types of questions asked (Rubin and Rubin 2012, pp. 131-148), the gender, race and ethnicity of participants (Behar and Gordon, 1995), as well as the analysis and interpretation (Merriam 1998) – in other words every aspect of every approach – impacts subjectively on qualitative research from coding to analysis. In this regard, Silverman (1985, p. 140) identifies a fundamental defect concerning the validity of qualitative research, which is the question of whether the researcher has selectively chosen data excerpts in support of the argument. However, a number of mixed methods researchers have questioned the production of ‘consistency’ and corroborative findings as the function (and strength) of triangulation. Patton similarly resists conceptions of triangulation that posit as its goal the discovery of consistency across data sources. He states that inconsistencies might in fact be more rather than less likely, depending on factors and should be viewed as an opportunity to uncover deeper meanings in data rather than as illustrating a weakening of the evidence, as ‘[t]he purpose of reflexivity is not to produce an objective or value-free account of the phenomenon, because qualitative research of this kind does not yield standardised results’ (2002, p.266).

The approach to coding and analysis adopted in this project has been influenced by the approach of Nigel Fielding (1993; 1996) because of its practical dimension and because it enables a flexible approach to coding, particularly in the identification of consistent themes. As Fielding observes, despite the many approaches to analysis, the ‘mechanical

procedures are straightforward and readily summarised' (1993, p. 154). Fielding outlines the basic 'analysis procedure' as follows:



Figure 3: 'Analysis procedure' from Fielding (1993, p. 163)

This is similar to Howard Becker's (1971) notion of 'sequential analysis' but also compatible with Lee Harvey's (1990; 1993) 'pilebuilding' approach, which has frequently been associated with critical ethnographies (Wainwright 1997, para. 39). As Supski argues, this approach is both efficient and adheres to the meaning of what respondents say (2007, p. 62). In the 'pilebuilding' approach, consistent themes are read, at first, 'horizontally', guided by recurrent themes as they appear in the data. Accordingly, once an interview had been transcribed, close and intensive reading of the transcript as well as accompanying field notes and observations enabled the identification of initial broad themes occurring in the data. The material relating to themes was ordered in a way that was practical and efficient. This consisted of the generation of a document for each key theme, in which was included interview extracts that related to that theme along with comments from field notes where appropriate and, where possible, cross-references with data from the questionnaire survey. In the case of the latter point, this was not possible in a systematic way due to the already discussed situation in which not every respondent who completed the survey went on to do an in-depth interview (and vice versa). As the number of interview transcripts accumulated, consistent close reading allowed for the refinement of these initial themes into key, critical themes, following Harvey's notion of a thematic, 'horizontal' reading (1990; 1993).

The primary broad theme that emerged from data was respondents' striking concern with 'goodness', noticeable in the particular ways in which these fan respondents appeared to perform identities as 'good' people (both as fans and potentially as citizens) through their fandom of *The West Wing*. Susan Fournier's (1991) 'meaning-based'

framework for the study of consumer object-relations was helpful in engaging analytically with the concept of ‘goodness’, which though a slippery and somewhat nebulous concept was abundantly evident in the embodied actions and articulations of respondents, especially in their consumption practices and their spatial and temporal ordering; in the particular objects of fan consumption; in their articulations around political engagement and even in their performative ‘goodness’ in agreeing to the interview encounter. Fournier explicates three ‘dimensions of meaning’ relating to consumer-object relations (1991). The first of these she identifies as ‘tangibility’, or the extent to which the primary centre of meaning in an object is objective (tangible and verifiable through the senses) or subjective (experience and association dependent) (Fournier 1991, paras 17-18). In this regard, both the subjective and objective components of *The West Wing* as fan object are, in the views of respondents, ‘good’. Subjectively, it is a ‘quality’, worthy drama whose fans, as discussed in Chapter Two, are increasingly wooed as a ‘quality’ audience. Objectively, the collection of symbolic objects around fandom (the DVD box set, for example) is also conspicuously ‘good’.

The second of Fournier’s dimensions is the ‘emotional dimension of product meaning’, referring to the affective and emotional components of consumer-object interaction which Fournier argues are vital and integral to the object’s meaning (paras 19-21). In this regard, as a consumption experience, *The West Wing*’s textual ‘good’ themes and intent might be said to have a transformative capacity for its fans’ imaginations, making them ‘feel’ ‘good’, not just in terms of its dramatic and pleasurable narrative but also in terms of its liberal, idealistic politicality. Fournier’s third dimension of meaning relates to ‘commonality’, in other words, the degree to which meaning possesses a shared rather than individualised character (para 22). In this regard she argues that the various rituals of interaction with products of culture grant meaning a potentially unique and individual character. Accordingly, for these ‘consumers’ (or here, fans) ‘the equally-valued function of differentiation from society is performed’ (Fournier 1991, para 21). Critically, in each of Fournier’s dimensions, the object of this research (*The West Wing*) and these respondents’ fandom of it, can be said to function as objects of transition in the sense that these fan respondents are provided with a security (another sense of ‘goodness’) in their particular relationship to their object and practice of fandom in a psychodynamic sense.

The approach to analysis outlined above presaged and informed the development of a critical analytic research perspective. The data-gathering process itself, as well as the coding, analysis and writing up of analysis manifested some critical questions, specifically how to give the data its 'voice' while locating this voice in a critical framework. In this final section, the issue of developing and sustaining a critical perspective in regard to the research project - particularly the importance of inscribing critique into the analysis so that respondent testimony might be related to structural and historical analysis - is discussed and reflectively engaged with.

As the interview process and concurrent rudimentary analysis progressed, the necessity of separating the interview encounter, including its rapport and relationship elements, from the analysis of the interview data, in short of negotiating a position *as critic*, became imperative. Wainwright refers to this even more forcefully, saying that the reflexive practice of the researcher demands 'a sceptical approach to the testimony of respondents (i.e. are they telling me what I want to hear?), and to the development of theoretical schema (i.e. am I seeing what I want to see?)' (Wainwright 1997). Pearce states that '[b]y recognising both our 'situatedness' as readers and the dialogic nature of any textual encounter (the text positions us even as we position it), it may actually become easier to give voice. 'Knowing our place' as readers means *finding* a place from which to write' (Pearce 1995, p. 93). Les Back identifies this 'compound of dialogue and critique' as 'the hallmark' of a sociological imagination (2008, para 1.2).

Referring to the anthropological antecedents of the ethnographic approach to qualitative research, Wainwright describes how 'the primary imperative for such research is to catalogue and describe a particular worldview without imposing external theoretical schema' (1997). This approach, as Wainwright suggests, is of huge value from a descriptive perspective, but less so from a critical perspective. This implied an attempt to separate my socially constructed self from myself as researcher and critical analyst, requiring an examination of many values I prioritise in my life. As I considered this, I recalled a framed typographic print that hangs in my home and reads: 'work hard and be nice to people', a task Finlay refers to this as 'negotiating the swamp' of interviews (2002). This critical necessity to step back from my socially constructed desire to 'be nice' and to 'resist domestication' (Thomas 1993, p. 1) was a loaded realisation for a researcher who is also a working mother, mature student and wife. From this stance, a 'value free sociology' approach that implies any objectivity or neutrality uncritically

divorces not just the responses of respondents but also the researcher from either historical and structural considerations or evaluation. Skeggs, Wood and Thumim call on 'research subjects to account for themselves' (2008, p. 4); in exactly the same context I had to account for myself too in formulating a critical research position.

Fiske and Dawson have stated that in conducting research one must always be prepared 'to be surprised, must always expect, indeed desire, their theoretical preconceptions to be challenged and to require modification' (1996, p. 313). A further unexpected theme was the recurrence of particular tropes, terminology, allusions and references from the qualitative data, acknowledging the significance of Cresswell's call to listen to 'what strikes you' (2007, p.153) when conducting qualitative research. The discursive quality of the data and the performative nature of the discourse emerged as a very significant feature of the data. Grant McCracken refers to this as the 'felicitous phrase' which is not just surveyed, but *mined* by qualitative data (McCracken 1988, p. 17). Here again, certain dimensions appeared to be consistently significant. For example, the consistent use of corporeal references and metaphors in the data was striking, suggesting from quite early in preliminary analysis that the body as image and metaphor was a vehicle for the articulation of themes of postcolonial shame and of the idealisation of the American political sphere in the 'transitional space' opened up by fandom of this text. These broad referential frameworks emerged as highly significant to the analysis and re-emerged throughout interviews. As well as the identification of the primary theme of 'goodness', the 'pilebuilding' approach allows for a 'vertical' reading of data in order to allow for a more critical reading against sets of structural and contextual relations that can be said to 'bear' on the study. When the initial themes were read in this way, the particular discourses around 'goodness' already alluded to were consistently and intimately linked to a set of contextual dynamics that included political, economic, historic, socio-cultural and psychodynamic dimensions.

As an early comment, while my rapport with the text in question and thereafter with the respondents who were interviewed in many ways underscored my approach to the research question, a striking lack of a critical political worldview was evident amongst many respondents. A critical view, then, in which I try to objectify my respondents as social subjects and political subjects, would indicate that for most respondents, despite their rich discourse, there is a repeated articulation of a political *sensibility* rather than *subjectivity*. Viewed in this way, their 'consumption' of dramatised politics, along with

their consumption of other good things in life – is as cultural rather than political capital.

Jim Thomas notes that critical thinking implies freedom because it recognises that social existence and our knowledge of it ‘is not simply a “given”, imposed on us by powerful and mysterious forces’ (2002, para 7). In the context of a re-styled politics (Corner and Pels, 2003) and fandom, a critical perspective has to subject fandom of a political television drama (as badge of style) to a similarly critical interrogation. A critical reading of this, though, which re-locates these tendencies back into the structural, historical and psychodynamic framework from which they emerge, neither betrays nor celebrates these respondents, but sees their responses as indicative (though not representative) of a broader picture. This ‘vertical’ reading prompted the research and writing of the next chapter, the subject of which is those ‘bearings’ that emerged as central to the articulations and reflections of the respondents for this study.

### **3.6.1 Limitations of the study**

As a researcher I am aware of the limitations of the research. The sample size for the questionnaire survey (67 respondents) and the qualitative interviews (22 participants) is reasonably small, though as Ritchie, Lewis and Elam contend, sample sizes for qualitative studies are generally smaller than those for quantitative studies due to the diminishing return of interviewing larger numbers as data themes reach saturation (2003). Michael G. Pratt agrees, saying that there is no ‘boilerplate’: ‘what is “enough” depends on what question a researcher seeks to answer’ (2009, p. 856). Therefore, Pratt contends that ‘[u]nlike quantitative findings, qualitative findings lack an agreed-upon ‘significance level’ (2009, p.856), though Daniel Bertaux suggests that as a rule of thumb, 15 is the smallest number of participants for a qualitative study, irrespective of methodology (1981, p. 35).

Similarly, neither was there a ‘boilerplate’ model for the research population for this study; it was impossible to predict in advance what the characteristics of participants might be. As size, boundaries and demographic profile of a research population consisting of contemporary Irish fans of the US TV drama *The West Wing* were unknown, no sampling frame or ‘target population’ existed against which I could measure respondents who volunteered to participate in this study. Given this, the techniques employed in recruitment aimed to reach as diverse a group as possible of

self-identified fans of *The West Wing* as possible. The sample was as such driven by the respondents' fandom of *The West Wing* and a viable assumption is that given the various efforts made by respondents to participate in either the questionnaire survey or/and the in-depth interviews, they represented a rich source of data relative to the phenomenon being studied.

Nonetheless, a number of comments can be made. The first of these relates to low responses and participation by certain sectors, particularly older (60+) respondents, both male and female. I was aware of this non response bias from early in data collection and once again it became a judgment call: whether to attempt to specifically recruit or target respondents deliberately so as to provide a 'complete' (yet naturally non-presenting) population, or whether to attempt to engage with the reasons underlying their low response rate. It might be of course that there are fewer self-identified 'fans' in the 60+ category, this possibly speaking to the general transformation of the status of fandom itself from the subcultural to the mainstream (Hills 2002; 2006) as such respondents might be said to historicise themselves relative to television and fandom culture. Further, respondents from an older age group might be hypothesised to be less comfortable with the self-disclosure increasingly normalised in the current 'confessional' (Foucault 1978) or 'therapeutic' (Furedi 2004) culture. These issues are methodologically significant for current work in fan studies, for example that of Harrington and Bielby, who insightfully argue that 'fan identities, practices and interpretive capacities have more age-related structure than has previously been addressed' (2010, para 1.1), and suggest that fan studies needs to find 'concrete ways' to more fully account for such fandom. In defence of the recruitment strategy employed for this study, it was not attempting to be representative of an entire population. However, the findings of this research would suggest that the 'concrete ways' of recruiting older populations alluded to by Harrington and Bielby might include paying particular attention to appropriate tools and methods for recruiting and engaging with older, less forthcoming populations in order to gain access to such respondents and attend to their narratives.

A second comment concerns younger respondents to the survey. Here, there was a very strong response rate from young males in their twenties who, though interviewed separately, displayed a number of quite specific common elements (their age, college education, unemployed or underemployed status). The emergence of this group of

‘fanboys’ (who are the subject of Chapter Eight) contrasts with a much lower response rate for young women of the same age range.

Accordingly, as the study of a reasonably small group of self-identified Irish fans of a particular political television drama, this study cannot claim to produce an unbiased or consistent sample. Neither does it make a claim for generalisability. However this is not to say that this research does not contain value. In this, the effort to re-integrate this social research into a critical framework, in the context of broader social, historic, cultural and even, as is argued in this study, psychodynamic dimensions – in other words, to subject these non-generalisable findings to critical enquiry – establishes an inter-disciplinary research strategy that is methodologically innovative and therefore a start rather than a finished article. Finally, the methodology employed here has attempted, given the scope of this study, to most appropriately facilitate an engagement with the research questions.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined a rationale for a mixed methods but qualitatively-led conceptual and methodological framework which attempts to capture the ‘messiness’ of contemporary Irish media and fan consumption, and the various landscapes that such fans occupy, in a non-reductive way. There is little precedent for empirical work of this type in Ireland. The research accordingly adopts an inter-disciplinary and mixed methods approach, applying both quantitative and qualitative techniques and informed by the conceptual resource of an ‘object-relations’ approach. Further, this research is interested specifically in Irish fans, and accordingly in their specificity. This research took place during an extremely eventful period in Irish political and social history and the data-gathering period was contextualised by a number of historic and highly significant dates and events. These and related events, as evidenced by the discursive articulations of the participants in this study, impact on and contextualise the data-gathering period as well as its subsequent analysis. Accordingly, the next chapter outlines these ‘bearings’ in detail, providing an overview of the political, economic, cultural and psycho-social dimensions in order to contextualise the research period.



## Chapter Four - Contextualising the Research Period: Ghosts in the Narrative

### 4.1 Introduction

Every word and every sentence is... surrounded by 'fringes' connecting them with past and future elements of the universe of discourse to which they pertain and surrounding them [is] a halo of emotional values and irrational implications which themselves remain ineffable.

(George H.Mead [1934] 1967, p. 504.)

Walk the streets at night and, through restaurant windows, you see important looking men in suits, dining alone, studying important-looking papers. In some new and strange way Dublin is now an occupied city: Hanoi, circa 1950.

(Michael Lewis, *Vanity Fair*, March 2011.)

This chapter provides an exploratory sketch of the 'universe of discourse' that underpins the research context. The Irish 'crash' in 2008 was accompanied by profound and historic banking, financial and political crises. Its severity is striking relative to the immense levels of growth experienced in Ireland between 1995 and 2008, a period colloquially referred to as the 'Celtic Tiger'. In this period, the Irish economy expanded at an average rate of 9.4% between 1995 and 2000, with strong annual growth continuing until 2008 (when the ESRI forecast the possibility of marginal 'negative growth' in 2008, for the first time since 1983, though predicting a recovery in 2009/2010 (ESRI 2008)). Peadar Kirby ascribes the achievement of such economic growth to a combination of elements which he collectively refers to as 'the Irish model' (2010b). This model was characterised by high levels of foreign direct investment in certain key sectors, particularly ICT (Information, Communication and Technology), financial services, pharmaceuticals and medical devices. Additionally, a very keen corporate tax rate (12.5%) co-existed with 'light touch' regulation and a generally low tax model in which income and capital gains taxes were steadily reduced (Kirby 2012). However, if the speed and scale of the Celtic Tiger's ascent seemed spectacular, then its 2008 collapse was equally acute, Kirby identifying it as 'one of the most severe faced by any country amid the current global financial and economic crisis' (2010, p. 43). The expansion reversed drastically, and from 2008, GDP contracted by 14% and unemployment levels rose to 14% by 2011 (ESRI, 2012).

A number of analyses of the ‘Celtic Tiger’ period centre on the projection of a mutually determining, synergistic relationship between the political economy on the one hand and the cultural on the other (e.g., Fagan 2002; Kirby et al 2010; Ging, Cronin and Kirby 2010, amongst others). Such a narrative is clearly illustrated in commentaries such as this from ESRI economist John FitzGerald in which he describes the self-confident outward projection and gains of the Celtic Tiger as an ‘Irish [economic] renaissance’ (2000, p. 55). In keeping with this, a similarly intended evaluation of the intersecting dimensions of the economic, political and cultural in the context of the crash (rather than boom) is timely, some five years after the economic collapse. Data gathering for this study took place between February 2011 and May 2012. While empirical sociological studies of this period of transformation in Ireland are emerging (for example, Caitriona Coen’s and Mark Maguire’s 2012 ethnographic research in a West Dublin housing estate and Lee Monahan’s 2011 online research into post-crash financial activism) the particular conceptual lens being applied here marks this study out as original and timely. The study of ‘fans’ within such a specific social and historic context corresponds with Gray et al’s call for reception studies of fan audiences that ‘explore some of the key mechanisms through which we interact with the mediated world at the heart of our social, political, and cultural realities and identities’ (2007, p. 10).

Initial concerns that the ‘old text’ status of *The West Wing* might prove detrimental to the recruitment of participants proved unfounded. No doubt the fraught political context of the fieldwork period (as well as *The West Wing*’s enduring ‘quality’ status) was a factor in recruitment. This underscores a defining aspect of the study, the persistence of the ‘Celtic Tiger’, albeit in its guise now as spectre, or complicating legacy. Peadar Kirby and Padraig Carmody have suggested that an analysis of the Irish crash from the narrow lens of neo-classical economics and modernisation theory risks neglecting the related particular and distinctive structural characteristics of Irish society and its economy (Kirby and Carmody 2009). Therefore, this chapter firstly provides a chronological overview of the political and economic elements of the economic collapse. It then turns to an examination of the various rhetorical and discursive narratives, particularly the cultural and even psychological themes as they presented in public and cultural discourse, as each of these intersecting dimensions has contributed to the context in which subjective respondents engaged with this research.

## 4.2 Economic and political Dimensions

In summary, since 2008, ‘Ireland has experienced a severe financial crisis characterised by a systemic banking crisis and a significant adjustment’ (Woods and O’Connell 2012, p. 98). The ‘banking crisis’ refers to the dramatic collapse in September 2008 of the Irish banking system, in which the financial imbalances of a number of Irish banks were exposed as unsustainable. In broad terms, the ‘imbalance’ amounted to a huge financial gap between money banks had lent, largely to property developers, during the Celtic Tiger and deposits subsequently taken in. Before the crash, this gap had been bridged by borrowing in international markets, but access to these markets had diminished, leading to a significant ‘outflow’ of deposits from banks. On the morning of September 30<sup>th</sup> 2008, the Irish public awoke to the news that following a (now infamous) all night crisis meeting between the government and key Irish bankers, a ‘bank guarantee’ had been put in place in order to avert the collapse of the entire Irish banking system. The guarantee, as described by then Fianna Fáil Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan, was a commitment on behalf of the Irish state to cover customer deposits and banks’ borrowings. At the time of its announcement, Minister Lenihan referred to the solution of the bank guarantee as one which would be the cheapest bailout in history. However, while Anglo Irish Bank was the bank identified as most exposed to the property market, an increasing number of banks declared themselves in need of assistance in the days and weeks that followed. The amount required to honour the guarantee was increasing, with no sense of a final figure, which contributed to the air of uncertainty (Kirby 2012). In 2012, based on data up to 2011, Luc Laeven and Fabian Valencia estimated that the Irish banking crisis ranks as one of the most expensive in an advanced economy since the 1970s (2012). This view was reiterated by Patrick Honohan, Governor of the Central Bank of Ireland, who has described the Irish banking crisis as ‘one of the costliest banking crises in history’ (quoted in Burke-Kennedy 2011). In a 2012 ESRI report, Karl Whelan summarises that ‘[t]he Irish state has committed an extraordinary €64 billion – about 40 per cent of GDP towards bailing out its banking sector’ (ESRI 2012).

The crisis in the banks had wider implications, though. In the months between September and November 2008, a general financial crisis (also called the ‘sovereign debt crisis’) was emerging. This was framed by general global economic uncertainty but exacerbated by the increasing loss of Irish economic and political credibility as continued efforts to arrive at a ‘bottom line’ figure to save the Irish banking system

failed. Concerns about the ‘fiscal shocks’ (Benetrix and Lane 2009) to the Irish banking system became linked to perceptions about the credibility of the Irish state itself, a sense of general decline that was consolidated in the country’s increased reliance on the European Central Bank for day to day financial support. The tone from Europe (specifically, the EU, the ECB and the IMF) was that Ireland would require a financial ‘bailout package’, this against widespread fears about the risk of ‘contagion’ spreading from the Irish crisis to the Eurozone, itself operating in the wake of global financial crisis. Over a number of days in November 2010, the then Irish Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, and his senior government ministers, continued to exercise repeated denials about the necessity of a bailout from the EU and the IMF in their communications with the Irish public, citing themselves as ‘fully funded’ into 2011. The period of denial ended on 21st November 2010, when Brian Cowen yielded to various pressures and announced that the Irish state would seek a financial ‘bailout’ from the EU, the IMF and from other European countries, via the European Financial Stability Fund (ESFS).

A practical outcome of the ‘bailout package’ was the adoption by the Irish state of a four year austerity plan (*The National Recovery Plan 2011-2014*) to deal with what the IMF has described as equal to ‘episodes of the most severe economic distress in post-World War II history’ (IMF 2009). The austerity measures include cuts in public spending, tax increases, and the introduction of various charges to householders and have been accompanied by increasing emigration and a weakening domestic economy. ‘NAMA’ (The National Asset Management Agency) was established by the state in order to relieve the exposure of the Irish banking sector to residential and commercial real estate by taking over their large loans in order to enable their speedier return to normal liquidity and their assistance with national economic recovery. Meanwhile, despite concerns about the growing issue of household mortgage arrears and mortgage ‘delinquency’, a property tax will be imposed from 2013. These practical budgetary measures as part of the terms of the bailout package has seen the embedding of the EU into the day to day management of Irish financial affairs.

Further, a number of significant political events frame this period. The first of these was the Irish general election of February 25th, 2011, which resulted in ‘defeat on a historic scale’ (Ferriter, 2011a) for the government party Fianna Fáil. Not since the formation of the state in 1922 had a sitting government suffered a similar electoral

defeat. Diarmaid Ferriter characterises the unprecedented and decisive rejection of Fianna Fáil as ‘the Irish people’s act of revenge’, stating:

The reasons are obvious: the collapse of the economy, mass unemployment and the emigration of a thousand people a week along with austerity budgets, pay cuts and new taxes have left Irish people reeling and angry.

(Ferriter 2011b).

This was followed by another election campaign, this time for the seventh Presidency of Ireland. Here, the theme established in the general election continued, where it appeared that those with even a former or marginal connection to Fianna Fáil, were out by association<sup>16</sup>. Labour Party candidate Michael D. Higgins ultimately prevailed with 39.6% of the first preference vote. In his inaugural speech, in November 2011, Irish President Michael D. Higgins announced his intention to ‘close the chapter on that which has failed, that which was not the best version of ourselves as a people, and to open a new chapter based on a different version of our Irishness’, promising to ‘serve as a symbol of Irishness of which we can all be proud’ (November 11, 2011). A final contextualising event, occurring at the very final stages of the data collection period, was the publication of the Mahon Report<sup>17</sup> in March 2012. This tribunal was a public inquiry established to investigate allegations of corrupt payments to politicians regarding political decisions that related to planning permissions and land rezoning issues in the 1990s. The report’s author, Judge Alan Mahon, concluded that corruption in public life in Ireland had been ‘transformed into an acknowledged way of doing business’. While the broad findings about corruption had been widely anticipated,

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<sup>16</sup>While a Fianna Fáil presidential candidate had won five out of the six prior presidential elections to date, no FF candidate was fielded in this presidential election. However, Independent candidate Sean Gallagher had formerly been a member of Fianna Fail (though his campaign was notable for its attempts to distance himself from Fianna Fáil). Gallagher had been frontrunner in the race until a controversy arose over his collecting €5,000 cheque for a Fianna Fail fundraiser a number of years previously. As a direct result of the resulting controversy, his campaign collapsed and Labour candidate Michael D. Higgins won the election.

<sup>17</sup>The official title was ‘The Tribunal of Inquiry Into Certain Planning Matters and Payments’ but it became known as the Mahon Tribunal following its author, Judge Alan Mahon. This was a public inquiry established to investigate allegations of corrupt payments to politicians regarding political decisions that related to planning permissions and land rezoning issues in the 1990s. The tribunal, the longest running and most expensive public inquiry in the Republic’s history, ran from November 1997 to 22nd March 2012 when its final report was published. The report made particular findings against a number of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael councillors and their receipt of corrupt payments. More seriously, it found that former Taoiseach Bertie Ahern had failed to ‘truthfully’ explain his sources of money (which he had described in evidence as ‘dig-outs’ from friends). It also found that Fianna Fail politician and former EU Commissioner Padraig Flynn had ‘wrongly and corruptly’ sought donations.

Judge Mahon's commentary on the extent of its entrenchment led to his conclusion that: 'specifically, because corruption affected every level of Irish life, those with the power to stop it were frequently implicated' (Mahon 2012).

In sum, then, the Irish banking crisis can be said to have preceded and at least partially led to a general financial crisis in Ireland in 2008. As a result of this, firstly, numbers of financial institutions required government and tax-payer assistance, but secondly, the requirement for a financial bailout from the EMU/IMF was precipitated, resulting in the loss of financial sovereignty for Ireland in late 2010. The general election of February 2011 resulted in massive defeat for the Fianna Fáil political party, whose 'version of Irishness' was rejected. The equation of this 'version' of Irish politics with corruption, as explicated in the Mahon Report of March 2012 also impacted on the Presidential election of 2011. These events punctuate a period in which Ireland was plunged into a severe political and economic crisis, and which frame the research context for this study.

### 4.3 Cultural and discursive dimensions

Amongst a number of phenomena that arose during the Celtic Tiger, the 'city break' was one of the most popular. Of these, the pre-Christmas shopping holiday to NYC, fuelled by low air fares and the weak dollar, was particularly fashionable. *The Irish Voice* (a US newspaper aimed at the Irish-American diaspora) quoted one such tourist, PJ, who explained that while the shopping was of no interest to him, the reunion was, '[t]here are fellas living here five years who never get to come home. It's great to see them all, spend the weekend catching up, and the women get the Christmas buying out of the way. It means no running around on Christmas Eve!' Ann, also quoted, said '[m]y sister lives here in the Bronx. We came to see her after September 11, and though it was fantastic seeing her, it was amazing seeing the prices and the range of goods here.' Since then, Ann explained that she travelled to NYC every year, early in November: '[I]ast year with workmates, we just died when we saw some of the prices. A sales girl in Macy's this year told me about Woodbury Common where the designer discount stores are, and I thought my arms would break, the amount of clothes I bought.' The phenomenon was having a positive impact on other businesses too. Ciaran Staunton, owner of O'Neill's Bar and Restaurant on Third Street described how his premises was filled with Irish visitors over on a 'shopping holiday': '[a]nd they all

have the same agenda — Century 21, Woodbury Common, Chinatown and dinner. It has been a great boost for us and New York.’ (Brennan 2009).

Post Celtic Tiger, in 2013, and ‘The Gathering’, an Irish tourist initiative aimed at mobilising the Irish diaspora to return ‘home’ during 2013, is hoping to elicit some return traffic. Its official website describes the event as ‘the perfect excuse to reach out to those who have moved away, their relatives, friends and descendants, and invite them home’; its target, the ‘over 70 million people worldwide who claim Irish ancestry’. Aimed at the ‘global community’, its advertising campaign<sup>18</sup> is heavily encoded with traditional renderings of Ireland. Its rhetoric announces that Ireland is ‘opening its arms’ to ‘friends and family’, ‘calling them home’. While ‘The Gathering’ is billed as ‘the people’s party’<sup>19</sup> its marketing campaign actively blurs lines between a nostalgic, Celtic imaginary and the promotion of commerce, but also, in a recuperation of the ‘Fighting Irish’ trope, a projection of the pugilistic character of the Irish, in ‘recovery’ mode. The participating ‘communities’ will therefore, according to the website, be ‘showcasing the very best of Irish culture, tradition, business, sport, fighting spirit, and the uniquely Irish sense of fun.’

G. Honor Fagan notes that Ireland has always been ‘a floating signifier’ (2002, p. 141), a country that has constantly reconstructed itself<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, Ireland has traded on a combination of what Luke Gibbons calls its enclosure ‘within a circuit of myth and romanticism’ (2003, p. 194) on the one hand, and the economic and social benefits that might accrue from such a relationship (as identified by Rory O’Donnell, 1998) on the other; a concept G. Honor Fagan refers to as the ‘cultural circuits of capital’ (2002, p.

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<sup>18</sup>[www.thegatheringireland.com](http://www.thegatheringireland.com) (suggested themes for ‘gatherings’ include ‘Riverdance Packages’, ‘What It Means to be Irish’, and ‘Tracing Your Roots’.)

<sup>19</sup>This phrasing is striking in its similarity to Tony Blair’s infamous soundbite ‘The People’s Princess’ (referring to the late Diana, Princess of Wales). It was also Tony Blair in 1998 who said ‘[w]e must write the arts into new Labour’s core script’, an approach to the ‘value’ of culture as not just conceptual but also economic. ‘The Gathering’ is a remarkably similar illustration of the political management of culture as ‘cultural policy’.

<sup>20</sup>G. Honor Fagan claims that there can be traced an ‘Ireland of the 1920s, the 1960s, the 1990s’ (2002, p. 140); Keohane and Kuhling similarly claim three distinct phases of embodiment, ‘colonial Ireland’, ‘parochial Ireland’ and ‘global Ireland’ (2008). Ging, Cronin and Kirby also identify the transformations that took place in this period as the displacement of older discourses of Irishness (concerning themes such as nationalism, national identity, self-sacrifice and family) with newer ones, such as a newly prioritised individualism, mobility, flexibility, entrepreneurship, competition (2010).

134). As an example, Ellen Hazelkorn and Colm Murphy wrote in 2002 about the identification of cultural and creative activity as economically beneficial, particularly the emphasis on the growing intersection between software, content and cultural products and their potential as mechanism of national economic generation (2002). Brian Conway notes that ‘[l]ike other advanced European nations, Ireland has drawn upon certain cultural resources such as myths, symbols and narratives to construct its collective identity in the face of rapid and unexpected social and demographic change’ (2008, p. 77). ‘The Gathering’, as latest manifestation of this, implicates the diasporic audience via an imaginary that follows what Stephanie Rains calls ‘the noticeable filmic positioning of Ireland as “home”, with all the connotations of the familiar, the hospitable and the specific, which that implies’ (2003, p. 196). During the Celtic Tiger, discourse about these transformations, the economy (‘vibrant’, ‘flourishing’) came to be emblematic of the Irish nation itself, or as Kirby et al argue, Irish culture became the ‘handmaiden of a particular type of economy’ (2002, p. 2), leading to a particular ‘constructed sense of self’ and ‘particular ‘imagined community’’ of Celtic Tiger Ireland (2009). The particular emphases of the Celtic Tiger though, produced new, quite specific discourses, displacing previous ones, which, as Kirby et al describe, are broadly neo-liberal in outlook:

[T]he emergence of informational capitalism and Ireland’s semi-peripheral integration into it bring to the fore a cultural discourse prioritising individualism, entrepreneurship, mobility, flexibility, innovation, competitiveness both as personal attributes to be cultivated by the individual [...] and as dominant social values. These displace earlier discourses prioritising national development, national identity, family, self-sacrifice, self-sufficiency and nationalism.

(Kirby et al 2002a: 13)

In reference to this notion, in which both the economic and the cultural coalesce to position a nation, Gavan Titley argues that ‘an important aspect of the Celtic Tiger as a collective representation of transformation was its reliance on notions of Irish exceptionalism’ (2010, p. 158). The demonstration of not just economic but also cultural ‘distinction’ strongly adheres to Bourdieu’s notion of the utilisation and display of resources (cultural as well as economic) as capital (1986). For Bourdieu, symbolic cultural and social practices are deployed to produce or reproduce positions of power or a distinct identity (including, one might suggest, identity as ‘exceptional’). Therefore, through an examination of the cultural dimensions, particularly the rhetorical and discursive strategies used to express these, insights into the intersections between the



economy and national/cultural identity may be discernible. Michael Casey's comment on the perceived 'capital' Ireland had accrued during the boom is therefore insightful:

When Ireland was booming we had a more important voice in international fora. At meetings in the EU whenever structural reform was being discussed, the Irish delegation would usually be asked to explain the flexibility of our labour market or the beneficial effects of low taxation. How had we done what the rest of Europe – still in the throes of Eurosclerosis – could not do?... It was heady stuff. Instead of being ignored as we were in the 1970s and 1980s, we were now the talking point and an oracle to be consulted.

(Casey 2009 cited in Kirby 2010, p. 45).

The tone of Casey's statement is striking in its personalisation of national identity and the significance placed on the importance of being (newly) perceived as credible, as worthy of consultation, as having an 'important voice'. Consider this alongside Fintan O'Toole's commentary that the Celtic Tiger had, in his words, one strong point which was:

[T]he evaporation of this little reservoir of colonial self-loathing. The rest of the world didn't just reflect back to us our own rising self-esteem: it magnified it. The message was not just that the Irish were fit for self-government but that they were models to be emulated. The pall of fatalism, the sense that sooner or later we would screw up, was banished, seemingly forever.

(O'Toole, 2010)

A sense of the legacy of colonisation in each of these commentaries is striking; the significance of the *sense* of autonomy and of recognition of the right to such autonomy from external as well as internal authorities. At the height of the boom, future British Conservative Party Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne (who, as it happens, is of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, being the heir to the Osborne baronetcy of Ballentaylor, Co. Tipperary and Ballylemon in Co. Waterford), writing about the 'Irish model' said 'they [the Irish] have much to teach us, if only we are willing to learn' (2006, *The London Times*). The sense of reflected rising stock, of righteous postcolonial autonomy is almost palpable, although Luke Gibbons had already hinted at the constructed and perhaps deceptive nature of 'Ireland Inc.' when he wrote that '[t]he IDA image of Ireland as the silicon valley of Europe may not be so far removed after all from the valley of the squinting windows' (1998, p. 218). While the 'end' when it came might have been shocking in terms of its speed and depth, the extent to which it was discussed as inevitable and fitting (ironic given the role played by Irish media in inflating the Celtic Tiger, largely echoing political discourse which spoke in terms of how 'soft' the

‘landing’ would be<sup>21</sup>) corresponds to O’Toole’s ‘pall of fatalism’. O’Toole again echoes that sense of inevitability when he described the arrival of the ‘bogeymen’ as inevitable and anti-climactic, mirroring the TS Eliot line from *The Hollow Men*: ‘this is how the world ends: not with a bang, but with a whimper’. O’Toole says ‘our little apocalypse was played out against the background noise of the Taoiseach and Minister for Finance murmuring evasive and technical denials’ (2010). When ‘the troika’<sup>22</sup> did eventually arrive, it was ‘a case of long threatening come at last’ (2010).

In commentary, the framing of the crash in affective, evaluative terms is striking. For example, Justin O’Brien, writing in *The Irish Times* describes the crash as a fitting end to Ireland’s ‘hubris’, stating: ‘Ireland has gone from poster child of globalisation to the symbol of corporate, regulatory and political failure. It is a fitting epitaph for the Celtic Tiger’ (O’Brien 2009, cited in Kirby 2010, p. 50). Originally from the Greek, hubris is understood to induce shame, an emotion that is brought on the enemy because of its hubristic arrogance and pride; Aristotle says that ‘shame is what we feel when we are disgraceful to those who care for us’ (quoted in Smedes 1993, p. 53). Stating that ‘Irish history makes the loss of that sense of choice all the more shameful’, an editorial on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2010 in *The Irish Times* asked:

[W]hether this is what the men of 1916 died for: a bailout from the German chancellor with a few shillings of sympathy from the British chancellor on the side. There is the shame of it all. Having obtained our political independence from Britain to be the masters of our own affairs, we have now surrendered our sovereignty to the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund.

(‘Was it for this?’, *The Irish Times*, 18th November, 2010).

This explicitly links the ‘extraordinary, tumultuous and shameful set of events’ to ‘in essence the end of the first Irish republic’ (Fintan O’Toole, 2011). As if to overload what might be described as a postcolonial pathology of inadequacy, the concession of

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<sup>21</sup> Following Conor Brady’s 2010 article titled ‘Did the Media Fail to Sound Alarm Bells Before the Financial Crisis?’ (*Irish Times* 6<sup>th</sup> March), Declan Fahy, Mark O’Brien and Valerio Poti’s paper (2010) examines the norms, values and roles of Irish financial journalists and investigate the relationship between these and their reporting of the collapse of the Irish economy, finding the persistence of tensions particularly to the extent that financial reporters have been ‘captured’ by their sources.

<sup>22</sup> ‘The troika’, a widely used and slightly pejorative term to describe the presence of a representative team from the European Monetary Union (EMU); the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the European Central Bank (ECB) who oversee the administration of the financial terms of the Irish ‘bailout’ package.

sovereignty and acceptance of an EU/IMF financial bailout was also accompanied by a loan from Great Britain of £7bn, with Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne now stating that ‘Britain stands ready to support Ireland to bring stability’. The contrast between the ‘adulatory and uncritical’ tone adopted during the Celtic Tiger years (Kirby, Gibbons and Cronin 2002, p. 1) and the inevitability of the tone of defeat is reminiscent of Fanon’s thesis on the effects of colonial control and subservience (1968). The turn in public discourse was to explicate the emotion of shame<sup>23</sup>: ‘can a country die of shame?’ Fintan O’Toole asked in 2012, continuing ‘probably not – but Ireland is making a good effort’.

Further, the release in 2010 of the Regling and Watson report (2009)<sup>24</sup> on the Irish financial crises signalled another turn in the narrative, in which the trajectory of shame and blame notably turned inwards. Despite the persistent attribution by politicians of the causes of the Irish crash to global rather than indigenous factors, Regling and Watson states explicitly that while ‘Ireland’s banking crisis bears the clear imprint of global influences, it was in crucial ways ‘home-made’ (Regling and Watson 2009, p. 5). The stark fall from grace was economically and metaphorically evident in the downgrading of Irish credit rating to that of ‘junk’ status (Moody’s, July 2011). The turn inward was matched by another subtle shift in which the ‘crisis’ shifted from a crisis of political economy into a crisis of blame and morality. Beesley discussed the ‘frightening lack of morality’ within Anglo Irish Bank (*The Irish Times* 13<sup>th</sup> April, 2009) while Lucey criticised the ‘immorality and unfairness of NAMA’ (*The Irish*

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<sup>23</sup>Of note, David McIlroy contrasts the contemporary Western understanding of shame with a biblical version, suggesting that shame rarely appears in contemporary discourse, that it is not fashionable, except, he argues, in the media where it appears as a theatre of grotesque (he references Channel 4’s *Shameless*) (McIlroy 2005). The ‘theatrics’ of the miscommunication leading up to the announcement of the bailout were frequently referred to as a theatre of the absurd, while Taoiseach Brian Cowen was himself, controversially, framed in terms of the grotesque as when two oil paintings depicting him in the nude were surreptitiously hung in two prominent Dublin art galleries as an act of ‘guerilla’ art. The caption underneath the painting in the National Gallery is stated to have read: ‘Brian Cowen, Politician 1960–2008. This portrait, acquired uncommissioned by the National Gallery, celebrates one of the finest politicians produced by Ireland since the foundation of the state. Following a spell at the helm of the Department of Finance during a period of unprecedented prosperity, Brian Cowen inherited the office of Taoiseach in 2008. Balancing a public image that ranges from fantastically intelligent analytical thinker to Big Ignorant Fucker from Offaly, the Taoiseach proves to be a challenging subject to represent’ (David Sharrock ‘Brian Cowen Is exposed to ridicule by art gallery guerilla’, *The Times* (London), 25th March, 2009.)

<sup>24</sup>The Regling and Watson Report had been commissioned by the Irish state to investigate the causes of the Irish crisis, and was released in 2010, some two years after the global crash.

*Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2009). This concern with morality in general discourse is visible in the adoption of certain related phrases: ‘bad banks’ and ‘bad bankers’, ‘debt forgiveness’, ‘moral hazard’. Here too, the spotlight relating to morality shifts from a discursive figuring of bankers and politicians as immoral towards an examination of the Irish public themselves within a moral framework. While the late Brian Lenihan Jr’s allegation that ‘we all partied’ as an explanation for the crash (*Prime Time*, RTE 1, 24th November, 2010) was highly criticised, the problematic shifting of blame onto the Irish public and presentation of the crisis in moral terms is even more recently exemplified by highly conflicting statements by current Taoiseach, Enda Kenny. While on the one hand in December 2011, Kenny opened an address to the nation by stating, ‘[l]et me say this to you all: you are not responsible for the crisis’, on the other at a global economic summit in Davos in January 2012 he said that ‘[w]hat happened in our country was that people simply went mad borrowing’ (January 26, 2012).

Chris Barker maintains that identity processes entail ‘a form of emotional investment in the discursive descriptions of our self and others that are available to us’ (2004, p. 93). Accordingly, identity is at least partially contingent on the available subject positions that are made available in the discourses as discussed here. Multiple allusions are made to a national sense of inferiority, incapability and of the inevitability of heteronomy; for example, ‘Ireland isn’t even capable of having a proper crisis’ (Fintan O’Toole, 2011). In the article, O’Toole discusses the etymology of the term ‘crisis’ which, he states, is “a moment of suffering and confusion, a time when everything that seemed to be fixed becomes suddenly unstable’. Yet, O’Toole continues, ‘the point of crisis in Greek tragedy is that it leads to catharsis, a sense of things being purged’. However, the inward turn of these evaluative motifs of crisis (for example, shame, inferiority and self-reproach) leaves little space for an examination of underlying, rather than personal, causes. Michael Lewis alludes to the outcomes of such inward trajectories of shame/anger when he writes:

Given that anger is substituted for unacknowledged shame, the anger has to be retroflexed so that it now becomes anger at self. The process starts with unacknowledged shame leading to anger, and continues with anger leading to depression.

(1995, p. 143)

#### 4.4 Legacies of colonialism and crash: shame and narcissism.

Shame has already been identified as a prominent motif in the cultural discursive narrative of Ireland's economic collapse. A psycho-social approach to the concept of shame, suggest David Gadd and Tony Jefferson, is capable of engaging with 'the deep-rooted nature of shame – within individual biographies and across relationships of interdependency' (2007, p. 166). Therefore, particular manifestations of shame can be context dependent. In the narratives discussed so far in this chapter, the legacy of colonialism is highly visible in the discourse surrounding Ireland's economic 'crash'. This appears to correspond with Stephen Frosh's identification of a critical psycho-social approach which accounts for 'the interpenetration of external experience with internal psychological structure' (Frosh 2003, p.72). The linking of articulations of shame with a sense of the inevitability of the loss of autonomy corresponds to the second of Erik Erikson's stages of child psycho-social development in children, which he postulates as 'autonomy versus shame and doubt' (1963). This second stage of development was centred around the tension between gaining control (or autonomy) over certain events (such as toilet training, food choices, toy selection, clothes selection), the success of which Erikson deemed a hugely important step towards independence. For Erikson, children who successfully complete this stage of development are confident, secure, those who do not are left with feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. For example, Philip Slee notes that 'shame during toddlerhood may often be associated with toileting functions, so that children may come to believe that their body and wishes are evil and dirty' (2002, p. 288). For Erikson (like Lewis's 'retroflexed' anger), shame is 'rage turned against the self' (1963, p. 227).

A sense of Irish autonomy as illusion (or even delusion) is invoked by Desmond Fennell who refers to the 'slave soul' condition of the Irish and writes that '[t]he underlying great illusion of the Celtic Tiger was to believe that we had broken free from our history!' (Fennell 2011). Again, linking this to shame, Fennell cites Dr. Garret O'Connor's identification of the 'malignant shame' which our nation has inherited from its centuries-long mental colonisation' (O'Connor 2011, cited in Fennell 2011). Lucy Cotter suggests that the discourse around the Celtic Tiger version of Irish identity is a continuation of an Irish trend in 'forgetting' difficult pasts in order to facilitate economic improvement that dates back to post-Famine times (2004). These highly

embedded inward trajectories suggest that the Celtic Tiger discourses of exceptionality and superiority operated only at a surface level, covering over deeper concerns.

An assessment might be made then that, as illustrated by the discursive representations outlined here, the contemporary Irish psyche is linked with the psychological aspects of colonisation. Christopher Lasch argues that it is possible to trace ‘the origins of intrapsychic conflict to the conditions under which social authority recreates itself in the unconscious mind’ (Lasch 1981, p. 24 cited in Adams 2007, p. 106). In keeping with this, Vincent Kenny (1985) identifies a ‘post-colonial personality’, aspects of which include dependency and ambivalence, suppression of anger and rage, the loss or restriction of identity, amongst others (1985). Following Kenny, Geraldine Moane, in her psychological analysis of colonialism in the context of Ireland, writes about ‘constrictions’ that result from the continuance, in psychological terms, of domination:

[I]n the face of continuing domination, several types of constriction occur, of which four involve social withdrawal and three involve personal withdrawal. The types of social withdrawal are: elaboration of secret worlds, superficial compliance, indirect communication and lack of self-revelation. These are patterns which are exhibited in the social world. They can result in behaviours such as passive aggression, evasiveness, understatement, backbiting and avoidance of competition or self-exhibition. Personal withdrawal involves elaboration of the inner world, helplessness, passivity and elaboration of the negative self. A focus on the inner world is associated with fantasy, magical thinking, superstition, and creativity. Helplessness, passivity, and elaboration of the negative self are associated with loss of pride and self confidence, shame, worthlessness, and self-hatred.

(1994, p. 259)

Several of Moane’s identified constrictions as social withdrawal bear resemblance to the motifs discerned thus far in this exploratory analysis – indirect communication, evasiveness, passivity. The lack of self-revelation and the negative self referred to above are obliquely referenced by Gadd and Jefferson who discuss the significance of *responses* to ‘shame’, which they say to a large extent can be ‘construed as unconscious defences against the anxiety that we know shame is capable of inducing’ (2007, p. 171). According to Gadd and Jefferson, this provides ‘a simple answer to why shame is so often ‘bypassed’: because it is an attack not just on what we have done but on who we are’ (2007, p. 171).

Psychologist Elaine Martin identifies the Irish response to crisis as ‘covert narcissism’ (2012), drawing upon an understanding of the concept which (unlike ‘grandiose narcissism’) manifests itself in low self-esteem, though both, she points out, are characterised by self-obsession (2012). For Gayatri Spivak, the myth of Narcissus and

the theory of narcissism provides ‘an apposite metaphor for the power inequalities of identity-work within the colonial memory space’ (1993). Moane suggests that ‘healthy expression of anger is an important part of decolonisation, or liberation’ (1995, p. 261), therefore a persistent narcissism in fact removes or strongly limits the likelihood for liberation; perhaps even permanent infantilisation (in the poem *Personal Helicon*, Seamus Heaney writes that ‘to stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring is beneath all adult dignity’ (Heaney 1966)).

Matthew Adams also argues for a reinstatement of narcissism in the contemporary self of late modernity (2007). Ireland’s hybridity (as both post-colonial and late modern) makes Adams’ views pertinent. Adams refers to secondary (or pathological) narcissism in which the ‘self-aggrandizement’ normally associated with narcissism functions as ‘a defence against an otherwise overwhelming fear of engulfment’ (2007, p. 110).

Paradoxically then, the pathological narcissist is dependent on the confirmation (by others) of his omnipotence; as Karen Horney summarises, ‘the twin essences’ of narcissism are ‘appearing unduly significant to oneself and craving undue admiration from others (Horney 1939 cited in Adams 2007, p. 111). Self-aggrandisement therefore co-exists with a sense of inferiority. In his analysis, Adams draws heavily on Christopher Lasch’s argument in which the ‘losses’ as conditions of ‘late capitalism’ encourage psychological responses which might be read as resembling those of ‘pathological narcissism’ (Lasch 1979, 1991 cited in Adams 2007, p. 113). Further, clearly linking a psychological diagnosis of narcissism with the culture in which it is made, Joel Kovel writes that:

different historical epochs will select different pathologies wherein their characteristic form of domination may be reproduced on intrapsychic soil. And pathological narcissism is a leading candidate for the archetypal emotional disorder of late capitalism.

(Kovel 1982, p. 104 cited in Adams 2007, p. 114).

Separately, then, Lasch (and, following him, Adams) describes narcissism as a realistic way of coping with the tension and anxiety of late capitalism, while Moane refers to sets of constrictions, involving shame and narcissism, that occur in the post-colonial personality. Of particular note for this study is Moane’s constriction involving personal withdrawal, which she states includes a ‘focus on the inner world [that] is associated with fantasy, magical thinking, superstition and creativity’ (1995, p. 259). Therefore, I

suggest that as well as public discourse, we can also discern culturally contingent anxieties in the symbolic, even otherworldly references in cultural discourse. Notable here are certain repetitions: the zombie, the ghost estate, the cannibal (for example, Peadar Kirby's 2010 article title 'When Banks Cannibalise a State'). Mathias Clasen suggests that like other imaginative constructs 'monsters come into being in a complex relation between psychological machinery, environmental conditions, and cultural narratives (2012, p. 224). The material legacy of cannibalised state is visible too in the 'zombie' or ghost estates<sup>25</sup> of recent times. Clasen describes the zombie as doubly dangerous as it is 'a physically dangerous agent that is riddled with pathogens. It wants to eat you, and it is extremely infectious' (2012, p. 224). The persistence of the Celtic Tiger, albeit in spectral or other-worldly guise, continues as a rhetorical device in commentary; for example, an editorial titled 'Celtic Tiger's remains – Economy still haunted by excess' specifies its twin spectres as 'the hundreds of unfinished ghost estates up and down the country — many of them built in the middle of nowhere — and the timebomb of mortgage arrears' (*Cork Examiner*, November 29, 2012). Ghost stories, which Clasen states are contextualised by 'the mental machinery that produces and entertains ghosts and the cultural context in which the ghost floats around' (2012, p. 226), thrive in popular cultural discourse during times of upheaval and liminality. Michael Saler argues that modernity constitutes '[a] specifically modern enchantment [that] might be defined as one that enchants and disenchants simultaneously, one in which both the awesome and the dreadful co-exist' (2006, p. 702). Kieran Keohane employs a similar approach in his depiction of post Celtic Tiger Ireland, which he refers to as 'the tragi-comic and absurd barren desert landscape' (2009, p 1) and in which he suggests the contemporary empty housing estates are contemporary renderings ('*memento mori*') of the empty 'big' house of an older Ireland, functioning as symbolic and permanent reminder of mortality in contemporary 'global Ireland', but delivered in the 'specific and peculiar idiom and accent of modern Irish consumers, a form more

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<sup>25</sup> 'Zombie' or 'ghost' estates refer to the incomplete residential and commercial developments, many of which have been left abandoned. In the Irish Times, Conor O'Clery wrote that "From afar, many of these ghost estates look as if they are finished, but up close you find no cars in the driveways, no curtains in the windows and no sound but the wind stirring the weeds in the yards. [On] closer inspection you will find it is an illusion, a giant illustrated canvas draped over another empty concrete block like a shroud (O'Clery 2010, p. 1).



generally represented in late 20<sup>th</sup> century civilisation-devolved-to-mass-consumerism by the zombie in the night of the living dead' (2009, p. 8).

#### 4.5 Conclusion

The presence of certain 'ghosts' in the narratives at a time of crisis might then accord with Lucy Cotter's suggestion that 'the Republic of Ireland has yet to develop a national cultural identity which is not in contradiction with its colonial past' (2004). While a repeated pattern of 'forgetting' the difficult past to facilitate the pursuit of economic improvement' (Cotter 2004, para 1) has been deployed, the persistence of these complex context- and history- specific 'ghosts in the narrative' point to Luke Gibbons' view that it is in fact 'the absence of a historical closure' that has characterised national narratives (Gibbons 1996, pp. 56-57 cited in Cotter 2004, para 11). This 'forgetting' - described by Francis Halsall as 'strategic amnesia', or 'amnesiac neutrality' (2008, pp. 17-18), in which 'ghosts' are decontextualised and dehistoricised (and rendered in some theories of reflexive modernity as liberation from embedding constraints) is critiqued strongly by Kirby who argues that contemporary Irish identity has been 'sanitised and made remarkably accommodating to the dominant elitist project of subservient assimilation into multinational capitalism; robbed of reference points from a rich and subversive history' (2002, pp. 21-37).

A similar 'strategic amnesia' is reflected in the logic of consumption as path to self 'redemption' both during and post-boom, exemplified in this chapter in the grandiose narcissism apparent in the extravagant consumption of the Christmas shopping trips to New York, but also apparent in 'The Gathering' as an expression and symptom of enduring fragile narcissism which co-exists with the motif of shame: the duty of the emigrant to come 'home' and consume, in the national interest. This itself suggests that the invented discourses have not facilitated the exorcising of certain demons, either rhetorically or symbolically; complexity, ambiguity and embeddedness are still highly apparent in the universe of discourse that frames the data gathering period.

Given the political and economic context, the presentation of respondents for both quantitative and qualitative phases of research might not, after all, be so surprising. However, given the cultural and psycho-cultural dimensions also sketched here, perhaps some further conclusions can be drawn concerning not only the fan text in question but moreover the act of fandom itself. Fandom of *The West Wing* (itself described as

‘morality play’ (Crawley 2006)) denotes cultural capital, but further, these fans’ exercising of ‘good’ (not shameful) fandom demonstrates an autonomy and sovereignty that is less straightforward in reality. A television drama might, as Robin Nelson indicates, permit an engagement with the intimate through fictional terms (1997, p. 43). Moreover, in a psycho-social sense, following Gadd and Jefferson, this fandom might enable the opposite of ‘bypassing’; this good fandom and its good practice suggesting goodness and autonomy rather than shame and lack of control. But of course, a television drama is not real, it is fictional, even fantasy, an illusion, with its own ‘universe of discourse’; though the ‘ghosts’ of *The West Wing* are awesome rather than dreadful.

For Moane, the weaknesses implicit in the legacies of colonialism put Irish society at risk of domination by hegemonic discourses such as neoliberalism (2006, p. 293). Similarly, Adams, following Lasch, argues that ‘[n]arcissism is further encouraged by the *nature* of the fantasies individuals are encouraged to consume (2007, p. 118). This produces a relationship which both undermines a sense of self and defensively creates a grandiose self. Adams states that in this ‘the individual is susceptible to the oscillations of omnipotence and fearful dependency’ and that ‘[i]t is along these critical lines that reflexivity as perpetual self-scrutiny [i.e. a form of narcissism, my comment] might be transformed from harbinger of choice to emblem of pathology’ (2007, pp.119-120). The larger question that opens up is the extent to which, as Matthew Adams suggests, ‘reflexivity from this standpoint does not bring choice, just a painful awareness of the lack of it’ (2007, p. 158).

The overarching processes of globalisation, reflexive modernity and the discourses of the self that were outlined in Chapter Two claim that ‘[t]he individual is no longer painting by numbers, so to speak, but is creating their own work of art’ (Adams 2007, p. 49). And yet, the landscape uncovered in this chapter is one of far deeper texture and complexity. The commentaries, discursive and thematic trends and symbolic allusions described in this chapter appear to be deeply embedded in understandings, imaginaries, complexity, pasts and presents. The highly embedded and bounded identity on display in the ‘universe of discourse’ sketched in this chapter is saturated with a multiplicity of ‘ghosts’: material, cultural, psychological and symbolic. Having contextualised the research period that pertains to the data-gathering and analysis period, the next chapter presents and discusses data elicited during the first, quantitative phase of research,

which is demonstrated to be significantly shaped by the contextual factors outlined in this chapter.

## Chapter Five - Quantitative Survey and Results

### 5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this quantitative survey was primarily to elicit ‘hard’ data about a number of key themes relating to the changing landscapes and contexts of Irish media fans, thereby addressing a specific gap in the research. A further (pragmatic) purpose was to establish contact with potential participants for the qualitative phase of research. As such, both the quantitative phase of fieldwork and its analysis, as well as the chapter’s reporting of these, function as a platform for the remaining analytic chapters of this thesis.

This chapter firstly outlines issues relating to survey design, recruitment methods and implementation, then presents the findings and identifies a number of emergent overarching themes. While the questionnaire’s strategic purpose was to elicit a ‘snapshot’ of respondents’ everyday media environment as well as a sense of their political and fan identities, what emerges is a far less conclusive picture. As such, expressions of clarity in some areas contrast strongly with expressions of ambiguity in others. Accordingly, the profile of survey respondents and data presented here is underpinned by this complexity, which is argued to be highly situated and context-specific, as was discussed in the previous chapter. While the ambiguities were unanticipated, their significance deepened during analysis of the qualitative data, during which it became clear that similar uncertainty persisted in the qualitative data, in fact emerging as a significant critical ‘voice’ of the research findings. As such, this research both validates and responds to an evident necessity for local and highly specific studies concerning the impact of global phenomena. The chapter engages with the limitations of the quantitative research while noting the significance of the relationship between the specificity of the research context and the survey’s findings. The particular ambiguity on display in the data is discussed as indicating a potentially far more ambiguous experience of political selfhood. This in itself complicates the contemporary self as hypothesised by the extended reflexivity theorists, being far closer to Matthew Adams’ description of the reflexive self as ‘characterised as much by a lack of definition and precision as it is by a calculable boundary and trajectory’ (2002, para.3). The overall theme of ambiguity that emerges from the findings invokes Matthew Adams’ call for accounts of contemporary self-identity that relate it to social change (2007). Therefore,

this chapter confirms the significant relationship between knowledge (as evidenced by these responses) and the society and context in which such knowledge is produced and reproduced, as evidenced in the results of this quantitative survey.

## 5.2 Survey design and implementation.

The questionnaire was designed to be self-administered and intended to elicit information concerning respondents' consumption practices as they engage with forms of access to media and fan content, spatio-temporal economies of consumption, issues of political identity and fandom of *The West Wing*. The questionnaire consists of four pages of predominantly single click question-and-answers, though a number of open-ended questions were included to facilitate individual responses on certain topics. The survey is structured in four sections, each designed to elicit information pertaining to specific themes. The first section seeks to determine a broad demographic profile of the respondents. A second section is themed around levels and modes of media consumption generally, with specific questions posed to establish respondents' consumption of political and news media. A third section is concerned with respondents' levels of political engagement and interest and finally, a fourth section engages with respondents' fandom of *The West Wing*.

As outlined in Chapter Three, questionnaire recruitment was conducted both via Internet and by interpersonal methods such as snowballing and friendship. This was in order to recruit men and women across as wide a range of ages as possible, following Harrington's and Bielby's observation that most, though not all, fan scholarship 'treats age and aging a-theoretically' (2010, para. 1), in so doing ignoring other bodies of scholarship such as gerontology, sociology, psychology and human development. The research question seeks to analyse Irish fans specifically. An initial task of recruitment via non-interpersonal (i.e. Internet) methods was to identify appropriate Internet 'fieldwork' sites. Related to this were a number of factors. Firstly, the research question seeks to analyse Irish fans specifically. Therefore, while questions of nationality in computer mediated communication have long been problematised (e.g. Mark Poster's 1998 discussion of 'tribal' identity in an age of global communications), recruitment attempts were restricted to Irish based Internet forums with active sub-forums dedicated to media and media fandoms.

Secondly, the research would engage with Irish fans of a specific political television drama, *The West Wing*. As discussed in Chapter Three, as a research population this community would be something of an unknown quantity. These factors resulted in my limiting potential fieldwork sites to those Irish based Internet forums with active sub-forums dedicated to media and media fandoms. A further factor was practical: as I was hoping to simultaneously ‘go live’ with recruitment for the questionnaire by both Internet and interpersonal means (and then to work towards recruiting respondents for the in-depth, qualitative interviews), time was a practical consideration. Accordingly, I devised what I considered to be a realistic recruitment timeline and ultimately made a judgement call which involved being flexible but also pragmatic about discounting a number of potential sites that did not revert to me in a reasonably timely fashion. This necessity to balance flexibility with pragmatism, particularly concerning the impact and potential disruption that problems with recruitment might have on the schedule for this research project, was an underlying theme of this research, which serves to illustrate the practical dimensions that impinge on research and also to illuminate the ‘hands on’ knowledge acquired in conducting original empirical research. A further unforeseen factor was that some websites require payment of a registration fee to participate in specific forums. I discounted these as I felt that a requirement to pay a participation fee constituted a barrier to participation for potential respondents, and as I hypothesised that the research population itself was probably limited.

From this phase of recruitment via Internet, two primary ‘fieldwork’ sites emerged. The first of these is [boards.ie](http://boards.ie), a large Irish based Internet forum which enables individuals (‘posters’) to hold conversations in the form of posted messages that are then archived, at least temporarily). As of February 2013, boards.ie had 613,742 registered accounts, over 2.2 million threads and in excess of 36 million posts (boards.ie, 2013). The site covers an extensive range of topics, frequently from an Irish perspective, with a number of active sub-fora dedicated to media. One of these, ‘old TV shows’, was dedicated to shows no longer being broadcast and had featured *The West Wing* prominently. Following initial contact with the principal moderators, I was instructed to contact the individual moderators of the ‘TV and Media’ sub-forum in order to request permission to recruit participants. In all communications, an information package about the research project was attached, which comprised a project information sheet, proof of approval from the college ethics committee, along with researcher and contact details

(attached as Appendix One). The sub-moderators approved my request to start a 'thread' (a single conversation) which I entitled 'Calling fans of *The West Wing*'. As I had not been a registered poster prior to my research request, the moderators asked me not to 'pm' (private message) board members directly, unless invited to by interested members. Therefore, interested fans were asked to contact me by 'pm', following which they were sent a web-link to the survey. On occasion, the moderator 'bumped' my topic back up to the top of the thread, demonstrating moderation to be reasonably rigorous on the sub-forum but also, I suggest, a tacit acknowledgement that I had observed the rules of the game. The second Internet 'fieldwork' site to emerge was [magicmum.com](http://magicmum.com). This is a website and message board aimed principally at Irish women and mothers. In existence since 2004, it has in excess of 21,000 registered members with over 4 million posts. Initially aimed at pregnant women and dealing with parenthood related issues, babies and children, the website has significantly extended its topic range to cover non-parenthood and pregnancy related subjects. The website is owned, administered and moderated by 'Mary B' who gave me permission to post on the 'Media' forum. While the 'rules' on this site were far less formal than on [boards.ie](http://boards.ie), identical 'netiquette' was followed in engagement with both websites.

Additionally and concurrently, an interpersonal recruitment strategy was employed. Using snowballing and pyramid friendship techniques, potential respondents were invited to self-complete the survey either by accessing the online web-survey or by completing and returning a hard copy version. While the on-line approach had an advantage in appealing to large numbers of fans, one of its limitations is in the difficulty of tracking retention from expressed commitment to actual completion of the questionnaire. Interpersonal contact allowed for a degree of tracking retention rates but more significantly it yielded an unexpected observation which was a noticeable trend in respondents stating that they would rather do a face to face in-depth interview than complete a questionnaire survey. This seemed initially puzzling, though as Phellas, Bloch and Seale observe, 'in general, being asked questions by a sympathetic listener is experienced as more rewarding by respondents than the chore of filling in a form for some anonymous researcher' (2012, p. 182). This has a number of implications in relation to these findings, as it means that not everybody who completed the survey was interviewed, and not everybody who was interviewed consented to complete the survey. As already indicated respondents, when asked why they did not want to complete the

survey, most commonly indicated a general antipathy towards completing questionnaires.

Attempting to account for this involves consideration of a number of potential factors. Mediated society confers a high degree of legitimacy on reflexive discourse, visible in the general tendency towards the ‘confessional’ (e.g. Meryl Aldridge’s 2001 notion of a contemporary ‘confessional culture’) which itself has arguably impacted on other spheres, such as the ‘confessional politics’ (Kaylor, 2012) of political culture, and popular culture’s ‘reality television’ (e.g. Wood and Skeggs, 2011). Therefore, a critical reading of respondent antipathy towards questionnaires might view respondents’ reaction in light of the increasing attribution of legitimacy to the discursive reflexive abilities of an autonomous, subjective self. I suggest that one explanation is that for some respondents, there is an inscription of value in the potentially confessional discursive space of the in-depth interview that does not exist in the questionnaire experience. If use of culture is central to the display of the self (Skeggs 2009), a willingness to ‘tell the self’ in a way predicated on expert knowledge of a quality television drama is perhaps not so surprising. This constitutes the cultural equivalent of respondents demonstrating not just their ability to acquire and accumulate culture as value, but also their capacity to reflexively articulate it. This notion finds correspondence in the fact that a number of interview participants mentioned that they undertook some preparation for interviews, and further that being asked to talk about a subject that was related to PhD research was a factor in their willingness to being interviewed.

The first survey was completed by a respondent on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2011 and the final survey was completed on April 17<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Key quantitative findings were generated by the survey software’s analytics and open ended questions were transcribed and analysed for repetitions. A total of 67 respondents started and completed the survey (see Appendix Three for survey questions and responses summary), the data from which is discussed next.

### **5.3 Survey data, respondents and response counts**

An immediate trend observed in the data was a high level of skipped answers in certain areas of the self-completion questionnaire. The significance of this will be discussed in



some detail but the overall findings of the quantitative survey based on the data presented are first outlined.

### **5.3.1 Demographic information and broad profile of respondents**

The 67 respondents comprise 44 females and 23 males. Respondents are predominantly in the 18-34 age group (42 respondents, or 63%), with the next highest in the 35-44 age group (22 respondents, or 33%) and only three respondents in the 45+ age group, indicating a general difficulty in recruiting older respondents for the questionnaire. Educationally, the majority of respondents identify themselves as third level college graduates (47 respondents, 74.6%). The majority of respondents (63%) are employed with eight respondents (all female) stating that they are looking after home/family. Of note is the reasonably large cohort of respondents who identify as students (13 respondents, or 19.4%), following a national trend which shows a marked increase over the past six years in educational participation. The proportion of 15-24 year olds in the Irish education system rose from 30.1% in 2006 to 60.5% in 2011, suggesting that a large number of youths are staying in education rather than enter a depressed labour market. In relation to religion, a high number (49 respondents, or 75%) identify as Roman Catholic, while 15 (23%) identify as having no religion. Again, this corresponds with national trends; the most recent national census of 2011 records 84.2% of the population self-identifying as Roman Catholic. This also corresponds with Tom Inglis's contention that a symbolically rather than institutionally strong Catholic 'habitus' persists in contemporary Ireland (2004).

The survey did not ask respondents about details of employment, which might have been a useful indicator of class, although the recent 'Great British Class Survey' conducted by BBC LabUK and the London School of Economics and led by Mike Savage, Fiona Devine and a team of sociologists, demonstrates the difficulties in establishing class on the basis of employment alone, acknowledging the necessity for a more multidimensional way of registering social class differentiation in order to examine how economic, social and cultural capitals are implicated in the persistence, but also the remaking, of contemporary class divisions. Savage et al's study builds on a number of influential feminist critiques (such as those of Beverley Skeggs 1997; 2004 and Crompton 2008) which argue that 'a focus on occupations as the sole measure of class occludes the more complex ways that class operates symbolically and culturally,

through forms of stigmatisation and marking of personhood and value' (Savage et al 2013, p. 22). Accordingly, the survey acknowledges that a more 'culturally sensitive mode of analysis' (Savage et al 2013, p. 223) is necessary. The study (conducted in 2011 with its results released in 2013), identifies seven categories of class, explicating two new class groupings, the 'elite' and the 'precariat' (Savage et al 2013, pp. 219-250). While the 'elite' are, on all dimensions, the most advantaged and privileged group in the UK, per the survey, the 'precariat' score lowest on all dimensions (Savage et al p. 243). Guy Standing refers to the precariat as 'a class-in-the-making', saying that they have 'no occupational identity, and do not belong to any occupational community with a long-established social memory giving an anchor of ethical norms. Being urged to be 'flexible' and 'employable', they act opportunistically. They are denizens, not citizens, in that they have fewer rights than citizens' (Standing 2011, p. 2). Savage et al's analysis reveals a distinct polarisation of social inequality (in the form of an elite and a precariat) alongside a fragmentation of traditional sociological middle and working-class divisions into more segmented forms. (2013, p. 246).

### **5.3.2 Politics – allegiances, interest and levels of involvement**

The broad area of 'politics' is the subject of two distinct areas of the questionnaire. In the first of these (survey questions 7-11) information concerning the political 'demographic' of respondents was sought – the level of traditional political family or individual allegiances – as well as their general feelings about politics. Most respondents describe themselves as 'liberal' (27 responses, or 42%), or 'moderate' (21 responses, 32%), with a further 8 respondents (12%) describing themselves as 'ambivalent about politics'. This rather non-committal response might be argued to reflect the apparently inconclusive ideological position of mainstream Irish political parties, who historically occupy a broad middle ground. Michael Gallagher summarises the particularity of Irish political parties when he writes of the 'apparent similarity between the main parties, Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael, and the apparent difference between these parties and parties to be found anywhere else in the world' (1985, p. 1). However, a more critical perspective argues that the claimed ideological invisibility or interchangeability of Irish party politics serves in fact to cloak an implicit ideology, identified by Sean O'Riain who observes that internationally (if not domestically)

Ireland during the Celtic Tiger 1990s and 2000s was perceived as a ‘a shining star of neoliberal orthodoxy’ (2004, p. 4)<sup>26</sup>.

In terms of traditional versus current political allegiance, respondents appear to follow recent national trends in which historic allegiances to the major political parties have been dramatically overturned. As such, 50% of respondents reported that there had been a traditional family allegiance to Fianna Fáil, followed by 23% citing a family allegiance for Fine Gael, with a large number (25 respondents) skipping this question. However, when asked about which parties they supported at the time of survey, most (32.5%) reported support for Labour, followed by 22.5% citing support for Independents, 20% supporting Fine Gael, and only 15% citing Fianna Fáil. The specific political and social context in which the survey was undertaken is significant and these statistics follow broad national trends at the time of survey. Once again, though, this question was skipped by a significant number (27) of respondents, and a pattern of skipped responses in relation to political allegiances and support suggests an ambiguity or even discomfort relating to such questions.

Responses to an open-ended question (survey question 11, which asks ‘If you wish to elaborate on your current support (or not) for Irish political parties, please do so here) suggest that the skipped responses do not equate to the respondents having ‘no opinion’. 15 respondents replied and overall an absence of specific political allegiance was clear. The historic personalised and localised Irish political culture (which is electorally reinforced by the Single Transferable Vote system where candidate is given preference over party) is evident in this respondent who writes: ‘[i]n general, I have no specific allegiance to any of the above parties and will generally vote on the combination of an individual and the party policy.’ The trend for personalised political support is also apparent in this respondent’s continued support of their local TD, the late Brian Lenihan, stating that ‘I don’t suggest that everything he did was correct, but every action he took was based on the best information available to him at the time.’ Overall, the strongest themes to emerge from this open-ended question are feelings of disillusionment and lack of belief in Irish political parties. Another respondent writes: ‘I am disappointed with the current parties in Ireland – they lack ideas and I am not confident in their ability to face the future’. The lack of faith and belief translates into

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<sup>26</sup> This is thematically echoed, as it happens, in *The West Wing* with the ‘agonistic discourse’ of liberalism frequently resulting in a conservative or moderate outcome.

a general lack of support for all Irish politics, as exemplified by this respondent who states: ‘traditionally I’ve been Fianna Fáil... if I was English I’d be Labour... American a Democrat... but have lost faith and interest in politics and turned to rewatching *The West Wing* for solace’.

Responses also indicate an ambiguity concerning what constitutes ‘support’ for a party (e.g. one respondent writes, ‘I have never ‘supported’ any political party. I have, however, voted for almost all of them, for various reasons’). The absence of strong party political affiliation (individual policy and local issues being more often cited as reasons to vote) is visible in respondent reports of support for the ‘least worst’ political parties by a ‘process of elimination’ (e.g., this respondent states that ‘I have no political allegiances – I regard myself as equally ill-disposed towards them all! I voted Labour this time round as I think they’re the best of a bad bunch’). Another respondent touches on the notion of a national and even trans-national government by stating that ‘[h]owever with the basis of the economic policy for the next four years already decided by the previous government, the EU and the IMF, I didn’t think the slight differences in fiscal policy between the parties were of much importance. Socially, it appears Labour are more liberal than Fine Gael, thus they would have gotten my vote.’ This corresponds to Tom Garvin’s suggestion that while there is little explicit socially based ideological division between Irish political parties, there may be sub-cultural differences: historically, Fianna Fáil was ‘populist’, while Fine Gael was ‘moralist’ (1977). However, it might be argued that ‘post-crisis’, an appetite for more explicit division was mobilised in Labour’s pre-election rhetorical displays of an ideological ‘message’ (such as Eamon Gilmore’s ‘it’s Frankfurt’s way or Labour’s way’ (February 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2011)) which would account for the strong support for Labour in the general election of February 2011 and at the time of the survey.

Politics was engaged with on a second occasion in survey questions 20 – 25. Here, the survey sought to engage with levels of political interest, involvement and activity. Overall, most respondents indicated that they were ‘somewhat’ interested in politics (33 respondents, or 62%), with 16 respondents (or 30%) reporting that they were ‘very’ interested. While 50% of respondents say they follow government and public affairs ‘most of the time’, a reasonably high number (15) skipped this question. Overall, these responses indicate a very ‘general’ rather than specific interest in political activity. Question 22, which engaged with levels of political activity amongst respondents,

indicates that the most cited level of activity was voting (67%), indicating that actual political activity for most respondents does not extend far beyond this.

Table 1 relates to survey question 23, which asked respondents to agree or disagree with a number of statements in order to engage with issues of trust and feeling about Irish politics and politicians. What is striking about the findings is that while respondents indicate that they 'know' reasonably well how to go about finding information and feel reasonably strongly that they can affect things by getting involved, they don't 'trust' the politicians or government to tell the truth (40% disagree with that statement), or to deal with things that matter (37% disagree with that statement).

Table 1: Survey Question 23 - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Average Rating
You feel that you can influence decisions in your area.	13.46% 7	42.31% 22	26.92% 14	17.31% 9	0% 0	52	2.48
You know where to go to find out information that you need.	0% 0	5.77% 3	13.46% 7	65.38% 34	15.38% 8	52	3.90
People like us have no say in what the government does.	5.88% 3	54.90% 28	7.84% 4	27.45% 14	3.92% 2	51	2.69
You trust politicians to tell the truth.	34.62% 18	40.38% 21	23.08% 12	1.92% 1	0% 0	52	1.92
You trust politicians to deal with the things that matter.	19.23% 10	36.54% 19	28.85% 15	15.38% 8	0% 0	52	2.40
You can affect things by getting involved in issues you care about.	3.85% 2	15.38% 8	26.92% 14	50% 26	3.85% 2	52	3.35
You trust the government to do what is right.	19.23% 10	28.85% 15	46.15% 24	5.77% 3	0% 0	52	2.38
Sometimes you feel strongly about an issue, but don't know what to do about it.	4% 2	22% 11	12% 6	50% 25	12% 6	50	3.44

Yet, a majority (55%) disagree that ‘people like us have no say in what the government does’. Also, a majority (42%) disagreed with the statement that ‘you feel you can influence decisions in your area’ while a majority (50%) agree with the statement that ‘sometimes you feel strongly about an issue, but don’t know what to do about it’. Overall, then, there appears to be a fundamental disconnection between individuals and their relationship with the major political parties which informs a sense of disillusionment with politics. This might be argued to be specific to the context of political and economic crisis that characterised the data-gathering period.

A second ‘political’ open-ended question (survey question 24) asks ‘[w]hat public issue has been particularly important to you over the past 3 months? – this needn’t be an issue covered in the media, but can be any issue you think is of general importance’. This question elicited a high number of responses (44). Unsurprisingly, given the context of economic collapse, financial and money issues emerge as most preoccupying, as exemplified by this respondent: ‘[s]imple answer, Money. Specifically interest rates, banks etc. Same as everyone else. Most important thing to me is family and my home, being crippled with bank interest rates is a noose around my neck’. Another respondent notes: ‘Banks. Negative Equity. Tax’. Financial worries were elsewhere manifested by this respondent who said ‘the removal of certain welfare provisions/assistance for students. Further cuts in this area will force me to emigrate.’) A further concern about finances related to public rather than individual finances. For example, ‘govt spending, govt expenses, civil servants, lack of accountability for any mistakes made by state body employees.’ Here, concerns are articulated in terms of how mismanagement of public monies would impact on education, health, and the repayment of the national debt.

Survey question 25 seeks to connect the public issues of concern to respondents with their levels of activity in relation to them. The question asks ‘[i]n relation to the issue you have just mentioned, have you done any of these things in relation to it? A high number of people skipped this question (22) but the highest ‘action’ cited by respondents at 93% was that they ‘discussed with family/friends/colleagues. Of note, the next most cited was that respondents had ‘contributed to an online discussion’ (28 respondents, or 62%), followed by a reported 53% who had ‘researched the topic’. By contrast, a notably lower 12 respondents, or 27% had ‘contacted a politician, councillor, etc.’ while 16% reported that they had ‘gone on public protest’.

These responses suggest a significant move in politics from the public sphere towards the private, in which deliberation and even ‘action’ takes place privately and/or in online spaces. As Zizi Papacharissi observes, while the Internet and digital technologies provide a public space, this does not necessarily equate to a public sphere, in that greater access enabled by online media does not directly relate to political participation or trust in political process (2009, pp. 8-9). The retreat to the private sphere indicated by these respondents corresponds with broader debates about the communicative changes in postmodern mediated culture, in which expression becomes conflated with action, as already alluded to in Chapter Two. Papacharissi argues that social, economic and cultural changes in postmodernity have impacted on a number of value and belief systems (2009, p. 13), including politics. She cites Inglehart and Welzel’s 2005 political science study which concludes that ‘post-industrialisation has ratified a transition from existential to self-expression values’ (cited in Papacharissi 2009, p. 13). This theme is taken up in more detail in Chapter Seven which engages with articulations of political identity by respondents during the qualitative phase of data gathering.

### **5.3.3 Fandom of *The West Wing***

Survey questions 26 to 44 engage with respondents’ fandom of *The West Wing* and the inter-relationship between respondents’ fandom and political identities. An overall observation is that in contrast with the ambiguity on display in relation to politics, a much greater degree of clarity in engagement with their fandom of *The West Wing* is presented. 35% of respondents report that they initially heard about *The West Wing* through a recommendation, indicating the significance of the social influence of opinion leaders (akin to Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet’s ‘two step flow’ model of communication (1944)). This also follows social science research that indicates that individuals are more likely to seek out media products that conform to existing ideological preconceptions (Mutz 2006; Meyrowitz 2008). Further, while 41% of respondents report that they watched a broadcast version of the show, 59% did not, indicating not only the drama’s longevity as fan text but also illuminating how the ‘life span’ of such dramas extends beyond their initial broadcast run.

This theme is further developed in open-ended questions (survey questions 28 and 33). The first of these asks how respondents watched *The West Wing* if not during its



broadcast run. Overwhelmingly, respondents report that they first watched *The West Wing* on box set (whether purchased, loaned or gifted), suggesting the significance of this format for fandom, as well as its flexibility in adapting to the constraints of everyday life. One respondent encapsulates a number of themes when she writes: 'I bought a box set as a gift for my husband – it sat on the shelf for a year before we watched the first one'. The purchase or acquisition of the DVD box set appears to mark a transition from 'liker' of a series to 'committed fan', as indicated by numerous responses similar to the following: 'I saw the occasional episode. Then bought the box set'; '[s]tarted watching Series 7 on More 4 & then bought a Box Set of Series 6 – and then bought a box set of all series'. Generally, responses point to the persistent significance of the DVD box set for most respondents, although this is in contrast with general trends. UK sales of DVD players has fallen from their peak in 2007 of £7.3 million to £5.7 million in 2009 and a projected £4.5 million in 2014. In tandem with this is the rise in popularity of Sky Plus, online viewing, broadcaster interventions such as 'iPlayers' and similar sites, and the embeddedness of 'download culture' (Mintel 2011).

As self-reported, the respondents are loyal fans. 65% per cent have watched all seven seasons of the show (156 episodes in total) 'frequently/more than once' and 56% per cent of all respondents continue to watch. Again, the box set was cited as key to continued consumption (e.g. 'DVD boxset, although not continuously watching it, will maybe watch once a year though'; 'I watch the DVD box set, usually around Christmas each year'). While almost 30% of respondents report that they had participated in fan online discussion boards to discuss the show, 52% have read books or articles about the show. In relation to their engagement with links between *The West Wing* and real life politics, the majority (77%) indicate that watching a political television drama like *The West Wing* makes them think more about real-life politics, with 80% answering 'yes' when asked if a television show such as *The West Wing* is relevant to contemporary politics.

A number of open-ended questions (survey questions 40, 42, 44) asked respondents to identify the themes of *The West Wing* they felt to be most significant. The continuing relevance of key political topics was most referenced (e.g. 'War is still war and it's still the economy stupid!') along with references to the inner workings of the political process and political structures, but also continued reference to the 'general' application

of the show's themes to life. One respondent writes that: '[m]any of the issues dealt with in the show are issues which are not rooted to a particular moment in time, but are larger issues which are generally relevant.' And, 'WW [*The West Wing*] gave a good smattering of all aspects likely to affect pretty much any part of the world during any political term; terrorism, military, domestic issues, financial problems, legislation.' One respondent noted that: 'The basic themes of the series – the improvement of people's lives through government action - is perpetually relevant to those on the 'left' of the political spectrum' with another saying that to compare *The West Wing* with real life politics "is like a child comparing his father to superman. When asked to elaborate about themes of *The West Wing's* continued relevance, the themes of political optimism, duty and of faith in the political process were mentioned. One respondent says:

[t]his can be summed up from these lines from [the episode] 'Inauguration: Part 2 – Over There': President Josiah Bartlet: There's a promise I ask everyone who works here to make: Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Do you know why? Will Bailey: Because it's the only thing that ever has. The show shows how a group of hard working individuals can make such a difference & have such influence on the President.

When asked to identify key themes of *The West Wing* (survey question 41, see Table 2), most (71%) cite 'revealing the inner workings of politics', but 60% identify 'political optimism' as a key theme. This is echoed in survey question 43 (see Table 3) in which respondents similarly identify the 'good' key themes of 'political optimism', 'faith in the political process' and 'political duty to the electorate'. In general, respondents' commitment to and familiarity with aspects of *The West Wing* (for example, the above respondent who quotes from the show) contrasts strongly with a sense of ambiguity and lack of belief in real politics. In many respects, *The West Wing* appears more rewarding than contemporary Irish politics. This is reiterated in respondents' emphasis on the charisma of its characters, particularly President Bartlet (idealised as 'superman' by the respondent above).

**Table 2: Which, if any, of the following would you say are key themes in *The West Wing*?**

Answer Choices	Responses	
Political optimism	60%	27
Political duty to the electorate	53.33%	24
Faith in the political process	53.33%	24
Revealing the inner workings of politics	71.11%	32
Detailed treatment of political issues	37.78%	17
Total Respondents: 45		

**Table 3: Which, if any, of the following would you say are key themes in *The West Wing*? Please rank them 1, 2, 3, etc., in order of significance, leaving out any that you don't think apply.**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total	Average Rating
Political optimism	17.95% 7	28.21% 11	23.08% 9	15.38% 6	12.82% 5	2.56% 1	39	2.85
Political duty to the electorate	18.42% 7	26.32% 10	23.68% 9	21.05% 8	5.26% 2	5.26% 2	38	2.84
Faith in the political process	25% 10	20% 8	20% 8	15% 6	15% 6	5% 2	40	2.90
Revealing the inner workings of politics	35% 14	22.50% 9	15% 6	15% 6	5% 2	7.50% 3	40	2.55
Detailed treatment of political issues	13.89% 5	16.67% 6	16.67% 6	22.22% 8	25% 9	5.56% 2	36	3.44
Other	33.33% 3	11.11% 1	0% 0	22.22% 2	11.11% 1	22.22% 2	9	3.33

### 5.3.4 Media consumption

Some of the more interesting findings to emerge from the quantitative data relate to media ownership and trends in consumption. Media ownership amongst respondents is generally high, as can be seen from Table 4 relating to survey question 12:

**Table 4: Do you own/have access to any of the following? (Please choose all that apply to you).**

Answer Choices	Responses	
Television set	96.67%	58
VCR/DVD	93.33%	56
Cable TV subscription	65%	39
Sky Plus	58.33%	35
Radio	91.67%	55
Computer	98.33%	59
Internet access	98.33%	59
Mobile phone	98.33%	59
MP3 player (e.g. ipod)	85%	51
Total Respondents: 60		

The table demonstrates the embeddedness of ‘new’ media alongside ‘traditional’ media. Further, as the ‘screen’ is increasingly the interface for television and Internet, respondents could be watching ‘TV’ on their personal computers via Iplayer, downloads, etc., though in survey question 13, respondents indicate that they spend almost as much time on the Internet as they do watching television, pointing to the persistence of television in these respondents’ lives, but also to the increasingly embedded presence of the Internet in daily life. The extremely high result for downloading (survey question 16) shows that 88% of respondents have downloaded music, films or shows to watch. Further, survey question 17 shows that a very high number (73%) of respondents read or contribute to Internet forums. This suggests that while television remains significant for these respondents, the definition of television as a medium in flux follows global trends in terms of its disruption of television as a ‘flow medium’ (Kompare 2006), and also suggest that the PC as central screen may be displacing the television as central screen in the home. Recent research suggests that video downloading was expected to account for approximately one-third of the downloading market by 2011 (verdict.co.uk). Given respondents’ self-identified fandom of an ‘old’ television drama, it might be concluded that for these respondents, fandom and digital technology converge to facilitate their ongoing consumption of *The West Wing* as well as their day to day media consumption. Again, this could be framed in terms of the continuing narrative of privatised life. In this regard, Sonia Livingstone argues that privatisation is visible in the changing place and location of television in

contemporary family life, which itself is profoundly shaped by the long-term underlying trends of individualisation, globalisation and consumerism (2009).

**Table 5: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the media? 0 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree. (By media, I mean television, newspapers, radio, internet, etc.)**

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Average Rating
The things the media cover have little to do with your life.	22.03% 13	52.54% 31	18.64% 11	6.78% 4	0% 0	59	2.10
Different sources of news tend to give different accounts of what's going on.	0% 0	5.08% 3	6.78% 4	64.41% 38	23.73% 14	59	4.07
You trust the television to report the news fairly.	1.69% 1	23.73% 14	27.12% 16	44.07% 26	3.39% 2	59	3.24
You trust the press to report the news fairly.	3.39% 2	32.20% 19	28.81% 17	35.59% 21	0% 0	59	2.97
You trust the internet to report the news fairly.	3.45% 2	31.03% 18	34.48% 20	31.03% 18	0% 0	58	2.93
You trust the radio to report the news fairly.	1.69% 1	22.03% 13	25.42% 15	45.76% 27	5.08% 3	59	3.31
You trust the media to cover the things that matter to you.	1.69% 1	32.20% 19	23.73% 14	37.29% 22	5.08% 3	59	3.12
You generally compare the news on different channels, newspapers or websites.	3.39% 2	10.17% 6	18.64% 11	52.54% 31	15.25% 9	59	3.66

Table 5 (relating to survey question 15) illustrates that respondents feel that the media is relevant to their lives and generally appear to trust media, especially when they consume media from a variety of sources. Question 14 deals with the extent of respondents' engagement with various forms of news media, demonstrating the embedding of the Internet as most cited source of news, followed by the traditional television, radio and newspaper sources. This, along with the already mentioned high rate of downloading and the almost equivalent place of Internet use with television viewing, suggests a move away from the simultaneity of traditional broadcast media. Questions 18 and 19 engage with respondents' consumption of 'the news'. 'The news' as John Hartley has written, is 'a social and cultural institution' which 'enjoys a privileged and prestigious position in our culture's hierarchy of values' and which 'comes to us as the pre-existing discourse of an impersonal social institution which is also an industry' (Hartley 1982, pp. 4-5). Respondents here follow global trends in that news is increasingly sourced not just from traditional sources (here, 89% get their news from television but a very significant 86% of respondents get their news from the Internet). The Pew Institute reports that currently, 36% of Americans under the age of thirty get their 'news' on social networking sites, such as Facebook feeds. The open-ended question (survey question 19) asks '[i]f you don't watch the news, can you explain why?'). The news and our relationship with it is being transformed in a number of directions, as indicated by this respondent:

I feel traditional news sources (tv, newspaper) are afraid to tackle certain issues or take certain standpoints with the issues that they do cover. The internet can provide sites that share similar world views to myself and can say exactly how they feel without repercussions.

In this statement, the respondent obliquely refers to a key characteristic and operative feature of online media which is the ability to 'personalise' information. This is defined by Papacharissi as 'the ability to organize information based on a subjective order of importance determined by the self' (2009, p. 12). Moreover, this subjective personalisation is increasingly employed as a strategy by digital industries in response to the fragmentation of audiences (Pariser 2012). Reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan's argument that 'we shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us' (1962, p. 87), as well as similarly sceptical arguments about the digital age and public sphere voiced by Nicholas Negroponte (1996) and more recently by Cass Sunstein (2009),

personalisation as industrial digital strategy extends far beyond consumption choices and into flows of information that concern many aspects of our lives (such as the news). Eli Pariser defines the ‘code’ of personalisation at the heart of the ‘new Internet’ as follows:

The new generation of Internet filters looks at the things you seem to like – the actual things you’ve done, or the things people like you like – and tries to extrapolate. They are prediction engines, constantly creating and refining a theory of who you are and what you’ll do and want next. Together these engines create a unique universe of information for each of us – what I’ve come to call a filter bubble – which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information.

(2012, p. 3).

Overall then, what emerges is a sketch of these respondents’ interaction and engagement through various aspects of their consumption practices (political and cultural) in the context of the changing landscapes alluded to at the start of this chapter and explicated in detail in the previous chapter. The picture shows a reasonably complex contemporary domestic or individual media environment which follows Kerr, Kucklich and Brereton’s finding that media consumption is ‘dipped in and out’ of (2006, p. 25) according to the patterns of negotiation of daily life. The fragmentation of media consumption corresponds to the trends of increasingly privatised, targeted forms of media consumption as opposed to the collective, more social traditional forms of media consumption. From the data, however it is more difficult to assess how these individuals might actively use new technologies in a variety of ways, to correspond with individual lives, including their gender, age and social structures (though this is the substantive focus of Chapter Eight). In relation to political identity and engagement (the focus of Chapter Seven), the picture that emerges is one of disillusion and relative ambiguity, though as has been discussed already, ambiguity does not equate with disinterest and the context of uncertainty and crisis undoubtedly informs these findings. A larger question that emerges from these findings is whether there might be a correlation between the increasingly privatised media and political consumption, and respondents’ disillusionment with the public sphere.

#### **5.4 Reflections, limitations and emergent contingent concepts.**

Commentary on the quantitative phase must engage with both the data presented as well as the other patterns and trends identified in this chapter. Therefore, the following comments can be made. Generally, the questionnaire survey succeeded in its purpose of eliciting data (even if partial) and recruiting participants for in-depth interviews.

However, the limitations of the quantitative research must also be noted. In this regard, my inexperience as a researcher was reflected in the selection of a self-completion questionnaire to address a number of very complex issues. In retrospect, I agree with Phellas, Bloch and Seale's conclusion that self-administered surveys 'are more suited to issues where there are only a few questions that are relatively clear and simple in their meaning' (2012, p. 183). This is further complicated with Internet based research where the absence of an embodied presence removes the possibility of 'reading' body language as an additional dimension of the communicative process, which as Arndt and Pesch state 'may be intentional or unintentional, may involve conventional or unconventional signals, may take linguistic or non-linguistic forms, and may occur through spoken or other modes' (1984). A self-administered survey, whether Internet based or not, makes assumptions about the respondent's unproblematic ability to complete the survey (although equally, the presence of the researcher while the survey is being completed might be said to introduce the possibility of researcher bias). However, the mixed methods approach was valuable: the sketch discerned from this limited survey was subsequently corroborated by findings in the qualitative phase, an observation would not have been possible had a single method been used. Further, as I was seeking self-identified fans of *The West Wing*, there was not a realistic alternative to this method.

The overall findings of inconclusivity and ambiguity that emerge from some aspects of the data are in fact identified as positive by a number of mixed methods researchers who question the production of 'consistency' and corroboration as the function and strength of triangulation. Erzerberger and Prein contend that the purpose of triangulation in the social sciences is not just to uncover complementarity, but also convergence and dissonance (1997). Similarly, Andrea Nightingale claims that mixed methods research can yield rich insights by examining the discrepancies (rather than consistencies) between results, as such providing opportunities to examine the partiality and situatedness of knowledge. Nightingale is particularly interested in:

[T]he silences and incompatibilities that become evident when data sets produced by diverse methodologies are brought together. This form of triangulation, or "mixing methods," allows for the notion that such knowledges are partial and that different vantage points – for example interview participants' perspectives versus researchers' results from observation – will produce different views of particular processes and events...

(Nightingale 2003, p. 79.)



In this sense, both the silences *and* data are significant and inform this analysis. Thomas Huckin states that 'textual silence' can be described as 'the omission of some piece of information that is pertinent to the topic at hand' (2002, p. 348). Similarly, Norman Fairclough argues that engaging with silences (or absences) in texts is as important as textual presences (1995, p. 5 and 210). The patterns of disclosure and non-disclosure as evidenced in skipped responses, as well as the relative ambiguity in relation to certain responses, are accordingly considered to be significant. In one reading the silences and ambiguity could be argued as evidence of political disinterest amongst respondents, corresponding to recent research into political engagement which outlines the decline in democratic engagement in the context of global socio-cultural changes (Dahlgren 2009). However, of note for this research is Jeannette Monaco's observation in her doctoral research into online fan communities that '[a]bsences or silences are often created in interpretative communities, including the ones that comprise the academic canon, when sensitive or difficult subject matter arise' (2007, p. 138). Accordingly, the silences and ambiguities that can be found in this data might be read not as a lack of interest in or relationship with politics, but rather as Fairclough states, a 'classic defence mechanism' (1992, p. 157), or what Monaco identifies as 'defensive discursive strategies' (2007, p. 138). Moreover, disarticulation as a discursive strategy can be theorised as exemplifying the neo-liberal promotion of individualisation. For example, Christina Scharff's research into the rejection of feminism by a group of Muslim women posits a correlation between a distancing from feminism and the promotion of individualisation (2011). Scharff argues that 'political struggle is unpopular because a responsible and autonomous subject navigates inequalities and opportunities individually and without the help of collectives' (2011, p. 14). Therefore, the specific ambiguity on display here potentially indicates a far more ambiguous (political) selfhood based on a range of contextual factors. This itself corresponds with Matthew Adams' criticism of extended reflexivity in that it 'neglects many areas of experience relevant to the contemporary self' including the idea that contemporary self-identity 'is characterised as much by a lack of definition and precision as it is by a calculable boundary and trajectory' (2002, para 3.).

The small scale and context-specificity of this research means that no claims are made for the generalisability of these findings, while also understanding that 'every instance of social interaction, if thickly described, represents a slice from the life world' (Denzin

1983, p. 133). Accordingly, this research challenges some theoretical positions relating to the contemporary reflexive self as outlined and critiqued in the literature review. Also, Creswell observes that small scale analysis can be linked to a bigger picture by way of ‘stating the larger meaning of the findings’ (2005, p. 48). The response count on open-ended questions indicates that respondents were sufficiently exercised by the political climate to expand their views beyond single click answers. This is also reflected in the retention of respondents from questionnaire to in-depth interview which is reasonably high. The final open-ended question was reserved to ask respondents to indicate if they were willing to be contacted about participating in an interview. Of all 67 survey respondents, 22 respondents left their contact details in a final open ended question which asked ‘would you be willing to follow up this survey with an in-depth interview?’ All of these respondents were contacted, and of the 22 respondents who left contact information 7 ultimately participated in an in-depth interview (the remainder being recruited from ‘snowballing’ and interpersonal methods). A total of 22 respondents participated in in-depth interviews for this research. In advance of the following four chapters which present and analyse the qualitative interview data, the following table gives (anonymised) respondent details:

**Table 6: Respondent Details (Anonymised)**

<b>Name (Anonymised)</b>	<b>Given age (at time of interview)</b>	<b>M/F</b>
Anthony	49	M
Ciaran	23	M
Dan	52	M
Dara	31	M
Deirdre	38	F
Grace	42	F
Hannah	30s	F
Jennifer	39	F
John	75	M
Julie	40	F
Leon	43	M
Mairead	71	F
Michael	26	M
Niall	23	M
Patrick	39	M
Paula	49	F
Rosie	39	F
Sadhbh	18	F
Sean	24	M
Steven	24	M
Tom	34	M
Una	36	F

## 5.5 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined, analysed and reflectively commented on the quantitative data. The survey's context, characterised by huge political and economic uncertainty, is likely to have been very significant to this data. A further comment is that the responses relating to politics in the quantitative survey are validated also by the qualitative data, which echoes a similarly strong level of disillusionment with the Irish political system but which seems to be expressed, at least partially, in terms of ambiguity or inconclusivity. Examining all of these elements, the chapter has identified a number of emergent themes in the quantitative data but which are visible also in the qualitative data, and which are examined comprehensively in the remaining analysis chapters. Skeggs, Thumim and Wood have discussed the politics of methodology (in 2008), and Skeggs notes that each form of research produces new questions, often when the project is over and the analysis begins (2008). That was certainly the case with this chapter as the questionnaire data answered some questions but also produced newer, unexpected ones. As such, the willingness to 'be surprised' and to 'let the data speak' has led to a conclusion where, as Drotner says it might well be 'the discrepancies that are most significant and revealing' (1994, p. 98). The chapter concludes that the questionnaire responses mediate a complex and uncertain social and political reality which requires further examination.

The following four chapters of this thesis engage in detail with analysis of the qualitative data, taking up a number of themes presented here. The next chapter engages specifically with the way that these respondents 'do' consumption.

## Chapter Six – ‘Doing’ Consumption: Organisation, Objects and Moments

### 6.1 Introduction

Implicit in any audience or reception study are assumptions concerning the presence and significance of media in the lives of those being researched. As argued, a lack of specific empirical research into what Elizabeth Bird calls ‘media-related practices’ (2003) has resulted in a rather flat conception of the consumption practices of the reflexive late modern individual. This situation was advanced by the more refined theories of reception that emerged from the media ‘ethnographies’ and audience reception studies of the 1980s (discussed in Chapter Two) which focused on the appropriation of meaning from the text by the audience (such as those by Hobson 1982; Morley 1980; Moores 1996). These largely illuminated how consumption and technology became embedded and domesticated *amongst* the existing activities and structures of households and communities. As such, this research illuminated the plethora of factors that impact on decisions, all of which result in the actual act of media consumption, such that ‘meaning-making’ might be characterised far more adequately as a dynamic interplay between all of those factors.

Building from this, the purpose of this chapter is, primarily, to map out and situate media consumption in the lives of these respondents by asking ‘what [...] are people *doing* in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?’ (Couldry 2004, p. 119). In other words, the chapter attempts to scrutinise the nature of the choices, practices and processes these respondents make, that ends up in their reflexive consumption and reception of media (and especially *The West Wing*) to more fully get a sense of the nature of their reflexive consumption. To make its approach to the now ubiquitous concept ‘consumption’ more manageable, the chapter takes its lead from Alan Warde’s contention that the key focal points of consumption are ‘the *organization of the practice* and the *moments of consumption* enjoined’ (2005, p. 146; my emphases). However, these first two dimensions, while accounting for the *organisation* and *moments* (following Warde) that comprise consumption, inadequately account for an understanding of the significance of the particular *objects* of consumption, their potency

as 'cathectic' objects, i.e. objects with which we form attachments and which become invested with meaning - for example, the screens on which television is viewed, DVD box sets, mobile phone 'apps'. With this dimension

the term 'object' [is perceived as] more broadly inclusive of an understanding of how humans form and preserve a sense of self, as well as relationships with others, through forging and maintaining relationships with a variety of material, non-human things.

(Woodward 2011, p. 374).

Based on the data, these 'attachments', as they relate to television and its consumption, are strikingly incorporated into respondents' sense of self, or deployed as resources for contributing to and securing the boundaries of self. While these respondents' 'use' of television varies substantially (especially generationally) what is evident here is that the emotional, experiential and symbolic dimensions of their use of television is hugely significant to each. Existing theorisation and empirical research, while illuminating sets of practices and tendencies in these practices, lacks an ability to account for the emotional, experiential and symbolic dimensions of such use of television, the inclusion of which, this chapter argues, can enrich such theorisations.

Therefore, this chapter engages with consumption as follows. It firstly engages with the 'organisation of the practice' in which the significance of a ritualised 'flow' becomes apparent. Next, the chapter outlines articulations and concerns about the 'objects' for and of consumption which emerged strongly from the data, indicating the strength of attachments, feelings and values identified by respondents for such 'objects'. Finally, with respect to the reported 'moments' of consumption, it is found that respondents employ various levels of self-applied 'gate-keeping' to their consumption based on a complex of individual and situational factors. The findings demonstrate that in a changing media, and especially television landscape, respondents' media consumption is highly naturalised and individuated against a context of multi-layered personal and structural factors.

Above all, this chapter illuminates the enduring significance of 'television' (still strikingly correspondent with Raymond Williams's (1974) conceptualisation of it as both technology and cultural form) and its key role as such an object in affording a sense of personal integrity and ontological security against various contextual aspects of respondents' lives. Therefore, respondents' relationship with the television 'object'

remains a critically important prism through which to examine their feelings about the changing media, political and personal landscapes.

## 6.2 The organisation of consumption

Another of Raymond Williams' key theorisations, that of 'mobile privatisation' (1974) refers to two paradoxical and interconnected tendencies of late modern living: the increased mobility of late modern individuals, along with the tendency to spend most non-working time within the confines of the increasingly self-sufficient home. Accordingly, the television facilitates an expanded, 'virtual' imaginary, which is, however, consumed in increasingly private, restricted, usually domestic settings. Newer approaches to addressing individuals' media consumption engage with mobile privatisation and the generally blurry operational boundaries between what constitutes 'public' and 'private'. Consolidated by 'privatizing technologies' (Morley 2003, p. 451), the increasingly private sphere of consumption is accompanied by a number of innovations which have fundamentally disrupted what John Hartley calls the 'infantilising' paedocratic regime of the traditional television broadcast schedule (Hartley 1987). This assessment implies a passive audience but also suggests the decreasing redundancy of 'flow', a concept that has been prominent in cultural and television studies.

Most prominently associated with Raymond Williams' use of 'flow' to describe the distinctive nature of television broadcasting (1974), 'flow' in its classical understanding refers to the ways that television channels and networks retain their audience within a schedule, from element to element, programme to programme, and which conceived of television not just as technology but also as cultural form and bearer of symbolic meaning (Williams 1974, p. 80). Of course, the classic meaning of flow has changed due to the significant changes in broadcast television, modes of consumption and the media landscape itself<sup>27</sup>, to a redefined or 'revolutionized' (Lotz 2007)

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<sup>27</sup> For Williams, the concept of flow applies to television broadcasting on a number of levels: flow as 'the characteristic organisation' of television as textual system; flow as 'the characteristic experience' of television viewing; and flow as linked to broadcasting institutional prerogatives which he terms the 'phenomenon of planned flow' (p. 80). While Williams' 'flow' remains highly influential and associated with television theory, the concept has been criticised, refined and even rejected (Caldwell 1995) since Williams' original articulation. As examples, Ellis's proposition that television, in its offering of discrete segments which are organised into groups, either cumulatively or sequentially, should be reconsidered as segmentation rather than flow (1992); Corner's account of flow as both cultural and critical form (1999). Feuer considers

conceptualisation of television as an even more complex entity whose definition extends to a range of technological forms (broadcast, ‘free to air’, cable or satellite subscription, DVD/post broadcast sales, online downloads).

However, as Sonia Livingstone observes, the nature of contemporary media consumption can be a source of ‘moral anxieties’ (2004). In this respect, respondents demonstrate the importance of the dynamic of flow as meaningful ritual, resonating with Nick Couldry’s emphasis on the persistence of ritualistic media practices in the contemporary media landscape particularly: ‘the links between ritual actions and wider social space, and in particular the practices and beliefs, found right across social life, that make specific ritual action possible’ (2003, p. 12)<sup>28</sup>. The comfort and security that inheres in the ‘schedule’ for some (generally older) respondents indicates a generational differentiation in this regard. For example, Mairead (70 years old) describes how she follows a predetermined broadcast schedule:

On a Saturday I highlight programmes in the *Irish Times* Magazine to be watched for the coming week. I might check out schedules for some other channels on the Internet, like on ITV3 and Gold... I like structure, I’m not a random tuner.

The significance of television, including the structuring of its viewing, is less to do with liberation from infantilising schedules given its integration into Mairead’s everyday life and more connected with Roger Silverstone’s emphasis on its other properties, such as:

its emotional significance, both as disturber and comforter; its cognitive significance, both as an informer and misinformer; its spatial and temporal significance, ingrained as it is into the routines of everyday life; its visibility, not just as an object, the box in the corner, but in a multitude of texts [...]; its impact, both remembered and forgotten; its political significance as a core institution of the modern state.

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television more accurately described as ‘constituted by a dialectic of segmentation and flow’ which she calls ‘segmentation without closure’ (1983, p. 15). Thus reconsidered, Feuer emphasises flow as integral to television’s commercial form and ‘therefore central to the commodity logic of the medium, rendering flow a historically specific outcome of television network practice. Of flow applied to the viewing situation she says ‘the set is in the home, as part of the furniture of one’s daily life; it is always available; one may intercept the flow at any point’ (p. 15).

<sup>28</sup> Couldry (2003) suggests that anthropological concepts might be applied to media practice, firstly outlining these anthropological approaches to ritual as: ‘(1) habitual action (any habit or repeated pattern, whether or not it has a particular meaning); (2) formalised action (for example, the regular and meaningful pattern by which a table is laid for food in a particular culture); (3) action involving transcendent values (such as the Holy Communion, which in Christian contexts is understood as embodying a sense of direct contact with the ultimate value, God)’ (Couldry 2003, p. 3).

The complexity of this is further illuminated by Dan (aged 50). Dan is faithful to the notion of broadcast television, and as he outlines it he has received great satisfaction from recent scheduling innovations in broadcast media (he mentions particularly the 'plus one' and 'player' channels) that mean he no longer has to rely on DVD box sets. He can now go back to watching television on 'the telly', in a form of flow he is comfortable with. As he says:

you don't have to actually spend anything to see it, because if you wait three months you'll find that it'll be back on one of the stations.

For Dan, these technological and broadcasting innovations are enabling a (happy) return to 'the telly' in its understanding as both cultural form and symbolic bearer of meaning (following Williams 1974). Dan feels in control again. So despite a general trend to define the television landscape in terms of its current state of 'flux' (cf. Derek Kompare (2006), an understanding that relates more adequately to Mairead and Dan can be found in Bolter and Grusin's suggestion that the 'new media' landscape actually consists of a 'remediation' of much of the content and other aspects of old media (2000, p. 15). In other words, the very act of conscious negotiation represents an individualised and re-ritualised response to what is seen as the pervasive character of digital culture. Rather than flow being rendered redundant, what emerges is a version of 'flow' individualised or modified to existing routines, beliefs, traditions, responsibilities (or lack of all these things) in ways that appear to function as a mode of sustaining ontological security, or at least its illusion. Dan and Mairead therefore consciously negotiate and navigate their way through an increasingly mediated culture in ways that make them feel secure and in control, a process David Morley refers to as naturalising the array of technology (2007). Dan illustrates this 'naturalisation' of these 'technologies of newness' (Morley 2007): to maintain and sustain his sense of control *over* technology (presumably, rather, than vice versa):

one of the things that has changed is, I have an app on my phone now which allows me to know what's on all the various channels, including all the satellite channels, so I can decide what I want to watch and see when there's repeats of things on.

If, perhaps predictably, the older cohort of respondents relies to a greater degree on scheduled broadcasting and DVD box sets, an iteration of flow nonetheless persists for



the significantly younger 43 year old, Leon, who watches television ‘as it comes on, and I think because that’s the way to see it, it’s to see it in the stream of things rather than in a block.’ Watching in the ‘stream of things’ then, is associated, for this respondent, with remaining true to the intrinsic formal qualities of television. For Leon (43), consuming media according to its broadcast schedule is ‘the way to see it’: in other words, Leon views his way of viewing as authentic. He describes how this ritualistic adherence to the broadcast schedule is intrinsically important to his sense of identity, to the point that it shapes much of his evening leisure time:

[E]ven to the extent that I will put other things off. If I have something on that’s my Thursday night, or my Wednesday night at 9 o’clock, I’ll move heaven and earth to have it not interfered with.

For Leon, this pattern of watching appears to be about control and autonomy; the way he watches means that he ‘owns’ that night: ‘my Thursday night, my Wednesday night’. Silverstone refers to this capability of television to mark out, within the pattern of daily life, certain times and programmes as special and protected, thereby shifting what might be considered as the profane into the realm of the sacred (1994, pp. 20-21). Further, Leon also identifies this as being ‘a generational thing as well’, differentiating himself from the younger generation ‘because they have been fed the three minute soundbite. And it’s all about snippets now, rather than anything else. It’s the Wikipedia thing.’ He thereby effectively identifies himself as being of the ‘original’ television culture generation (and implicitly, as ‘not’ of the Wikipedia generation’). He elaborates:

I mean, I’m 43, so I was of the generation that things unfolded on telly through series and there wasn’t that level of magazines and stuff like that, that would tell you. I mean, with your Coronation Streets and your Eastenders, you know now before you look at it in advance what the plotline’s going to be. But you didn’t in the old days, and because it was pre-DVD, and the video thing was very bulky, that people didn’t get into that sort of thing. So, you actually... it was an event. It’s the Top of the Pops thing, it’s Gaybo on a Friday night sort of thing, you know what I mean?

What emerges as significant, then, is that rather than a complete rejection of flow and ritual, these respondents point to its meaningful retention. Paddy Scannell suggests that ‘as fast as particular ceremonies and symbols lose their resonance and are relegated to the lumber-room of history, others replace them’ (1988, p. 16). This also problematises the notion of ‘de-traditionalisation’, a characterisation of late modernity in which the

embeddedness of tradition upon behaviour is diminished (Beck 1994, Giddens 1994, Heelas 1996), with an accompanying ‘diminution of established institutions, structures and practices in the sense that they no longer shape our behaviour and influence us as once they did’ (Hopper 2003, p. 29).

Further ritualistic aspects emerged in terms of the ‘flowed’ organisation of consumption, particularly evident in an affective and nostalgic articulation of a link between television and its ritualistic flow in the context of the journey of the week (a flow within a flow). 49 year old female respondent, Paula, singles out Sunday nights as being the only night of the week when she still sits down to watch broadcast television. She says, ‘when the kids went to bed, it was like the breathing before the week ahead, and you know I might have a glass of wine and be nodding off’. For Paula, as well as providing a moment of ‘breathing’, it also evokes memories:

It’s funny, it reminds me of school. I was at boarding school and we only got to watch TV at the weekends, and it was *Little House on the Prairie*, but you know there was that kind of set time of the week and it set you up really, it either finished something off or started another thing. And I would still get that feeling when I see *Little House on the Prairie*, that weekend, Sunday kind of feeling.

As well as its flow, it is the medium of television here, for Paula that corresponds to Christopher Bollas’s understanding that an object can be experienced as not just as object but as a process (1987). For Paula, the earlier experiences of her object-engagement with television in boarding school are remembered and have carried through into her adult life. This story is similarly articulated by Rosie (age 39). Rosie articulated significant anger at the way, in her view, current television scheduling is deliberately ‘disrespectful to the viewer’, employing what she feels is a strategy of constant advertisement breaks and changes to published schedules in order to push viewers into purchasing a cable subscription. She says: ‘even [live sports] gets quite annoying with all the ads. As I said, I feel this is really pushing you to get cable television’. However, Rosie also singles out Sunday nights when she describes wanting ‘to watch television, like *real life* television, you know? Where you can hear ads...’ When asked why, she responds: ‘because it gives you that sense of connection, I think, to what else is happening.’ When asked why this is particularly so on a Sunday night, Rosie (39) responds:

Because I'm getting ready to go back to work, so I reconnect with the rest of the world... it's bizarre [laughs] and it just feels like, weekends, I go out a lot, I have a big social life, I have a big training life, and I have a lot of work, and at the weekends I tend to do my own thing. But Sunday nights... I guess it goes back to being in school and watching a big television show on a Sunday night as the wind-down, and I still kind of subconsciously on Sunday nights, I like to watch television. Not a box set, it just feels wrong.

For these respondents, their particular articulations about 'Sunday night' television suggest that their younger object-engagement experiences with television become the basis for similar object-seeking in later life. For them, media consumption is both reflexively 'modern' but also demonstrates a nostalgia for the security and tradition of youth that is again remarkably based around affect and feeling, intermingled with an autobiographical nostalgia for the Sunday night family TV show. Therefore, a box set 'just feels wrong'. It does not facilitate the same engagement and feeling. The articulations here illustrate that these respondents use media in a way that undoubtedly displays reflexivity, but a reflexivity that is highly bounded by affect, nostalgia, feeling. In other words, these respondents do not use media to 'transcend' ritual or tradition, but to strategically re-insert a ritualistic flow into their lives, in order to make themselves feel better. It is unsurprising, then, that many respondents articulated the view that if they were going to sit down and watch television, they were going to watch something 'good' (for them, *The West Wing*).

In their articulations, many respondents associate ritual consumption in a manner evocative of Annette Kuhn's 'memory work' (2002). While for Kuhn it is the images that make meanings, here the entire process of consumption surrounding those images (their context in remembered flow, the act of consumption as ritual, as breathing space, the reflexive modification and individualisation by way of re-ritualisation) that provides a memory connection between past and present, work and leisure, on and off time. Kuhn writes that '[m]emory is an account, always discursive, always textual. At the same time, memory can assume expression through a wide variety of media and contexts' (2002, p. 160). Following Kuhn, consumption as some sort of 'flow' appears to enable the act of remembering (or, forgetting). These Sunday night rituals appear highly culturally and historically situated for these respondents, providing a return, if only for one night a week, to the comfort and good memories, associated with the ritualised 'flow' of scheduled television. Freedom from broadcast schedules might

therefore be considered as emancipation from the tyranny of schedules, which itself implies a conception of viewers as passive, reliant and disempowered that is not borne out here. It also implies a view of the schedule as neutral, when in fact for these respondents it is the ‘feeling’ engendered by the comfort of the schedule (even if in partial and modified form, giving the ‘Sunday night feeling’) that emerges as significant. This itself suggests that the ‘flow’ and ritual aspects of consumption are frequently tinged with memory, nostalgia, aspiration, hope. Rather than functioning as a liberation from essentially unreflexive life narratives and routines (as suggested by Giddens, for example), it is in fact the partiality of the reflexivity on display here that provides the comfort.

### 6.3 Objects for and of consumption

The decentralisation of the television ‘box’ in the sitting room as sole or primary source of domestic television viewing has introduced a diversity of viewing choices as well as fundamentally disrupting the traditional domestic spatial arrangements of television consumption, resulting in entirely changed understandings of ‘the TV set’.<sup>29</sup> Though for the younger respondents in this study, such spatial restrictions are now historic, the memory of such constraints (historic for most young male respondents in this study) is referenced. 24 year old male respondent, Sean, recalls how it negatively impacted on his desire to watch *The West Wing* during its initial broadcast run:

Well, I wanted to watch it when it was first on, but it was on late. But also, there were other things on, you know? ... So it was like, ‘I can’t, the parents want to watch TV later, I can’t be overdoing it’ [laughs], cause we only had the one [television set], so I missed out on it for the whole time...

Kuhn refers to ‘memory boxes’ as the containers for the particular traces of past we lovingly (and maybe not so lovingly) preserve (2002, p. 158). Accordingly, for some younger respondents, the static and power-laden spatial position of the ‘telly’ as ‘memory box’ conjures up memories of a time in their lives when they had less autonomy and were living at home with parents. Screen based mobile technology has displaced those types of constraints and domestic politics. The ‘ritual space’ of viewing

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<sup>29</sup> The politics of the ordering of the domestic context of television viewing and its constitutive impact on the media consumption of all household members was, as mentioned in Chapter Two, advanced by Charlotte Brunson and David Morley’s influential Nationwide Study (1995, p. 321).

can be established anywhere, and is predicated on access to screen as interface rather than requiring access to room and remote control. Here Niall, a 23 year old, who shares a house in Dublin with a number of friends, reveals a different spatial ordering.

Yeah, we'll all just be watching off our laptops, we'll all be watching something completely different. But the new house I'm moving into will have a television. I'm looking forward to going back to, at least just sitting down and watching the news, and if I don't want to watch the news, I'll know that my laptop is up there, waiting for me to come back to her! [laughs] But yeah, I do live online and it's been that way for quite some time now.

In the post-adolescent world, Niall has in one sense achieved liberty and emancipation in shared online space, in a form of autonomous adulthood mediated via his laptop, though there are still nostalgic references to 'sitting down and watching the news'. Also, of note is Niall's personalised object-engagement with his laptop (it's a 'her'!). This tension between an imagined, post-adolescent world, in which respondent as consumer and adult has the liberty to exercise media consumption as he wishes contrasts strongly with other (older) respondents who express their concern with the intrusion of technology in their lives. This intimates a guardedness and consciously fraught relationship in which an acknowledgement of the benefits of technology is accompanied by a degree of mistrust. Accordingly, for some respondents, technological advancement, as exemplified by the mobility and multiplicity of screens in the home, invoke feelings of discomfort, even fear, the articulations concerning technology signifying feelings about, for example, 'proper parenting', as here where Paula (49) explains her unwillingness to have television screens in bedrooms:

Oh no, no way, absolutely no way will I allow television in the bedrooms. It's like, they [the children] need a switch off time.

Paula's fear evokes one of John B. Thompson's identified 'consequences' of 'de-localisation', in which he suggests that the rootedness of tradition within people's everyday spatial locales will be displaced by development of the media. This, he argues will result in an at least partial and gradual 'de-localisation' of traditions as generations become increasingly dependent on mediated forms of communication (1995, p. 197). Respondents here articulate strong feelings about changes to their ritual space of media consumption. For some it is liberation, while for others these changes provoke anxiety: they are not neutral. Relationships between media and technologies, as Silverstone,

Hirsch and Morley argue, occupy a particular position by virtue of their status as objects that are not just technologies but that impact on the social and economic order of the household and are 'doubly articulated into private and public cultures' (1994, p. 13). Changes in the location of screen also change the social dynamics that occur around the television, disembedding it from its traditional position in what Silverstone calls the 'occupied spaces' and 'complex culture of domesticity' (1994, p. 24).

These issues became quite clearly focused where conversation turned to the 'screen' of media consumption. The increased redundancy of 'the TV set' in favour of a screen 'interface' has a clear impact on the spatial and temporal ordering of media consumption, and younger respondents in particular indicate a significant change in use from computer as tool to computer as primary interface with all culture and cultural forms. Manovich suggests that the computer screen as an interface (whether desktop, laptop, mobile phone, games console, or television screen) will become the primary means of experiencing mediated culture in technologically advanced cultures (2002). Ciaran (23) discusses how the television screen in his house is 'not a broadcast ... it's not used for broadcast [television], I mean *I don't use it specifically for broadcast so it is more or less a monitor, yeah.*' He says:

I watch everything, mostly, on my hard drive. Hooked up to a TV. Like, we have Sky Digital and everything at home but I don't watch it that much. I'll have it on in the background and if everybody's sitting around watching something I'll have a look. Before I had my hard drive and stuff I'd be streaming. And I do watch stuff on my computer a good bit. Most of the time at night I'd sit down and watch stuff on TV but if it's just watching something during the day I'll just have it on my laptop or watch it on my personal computer at home.

In stark contrast to this, Dan indicates a far more troubled relationship with some aspects of televisual technology. Here, he voices his concern about 3D and 'thin' televisions.

One of the things that I find, and now this is a generational thing, you know you see all this stuff about thin tellys? I'm not into any of that, ok? And I'm not interested in having 3D sport or any of that stuff. I don't actually want the digital world to come that close to me. I want to look at it and be able to walk away from it. I don't want it right in my face. I want to be able to switch it off and give an illusion that I control it. I may not be able to control the content but I can control when I... I'm very

uncomfortable... that's why the television that we have is a ten years old and it has a huge back.

Dan's concerns seem to be based around the symbolic intrusion of 'thin' technology to his life. This corresponds with Roger Silverstone's contention that television's role is both phenomenological and ontological: its appropriation of the outside imaginary within the domestic viewing space providing a key defensive role in the maintenance and negotiation of the boundaries of selfhood (1994, p. 2). When asked to elaborate, Dan talks about how 3D television particularly makes him 'feel' uncomfortable, saying:

I would feel very uncomfortable with the idea of 3D television. That would be too close to me, and [...] what I'm trying to say to you is, it's not really the material, it's the fact that it's in your face every... that in one sense it gives you a sense of what isn't real. 3D is an illusion, you know, it's not real. I mean, when I touch that [touches mug], I know I'm touching that, I can feel it, and it worries me, you know those things that you see sometimes on television about people entering the cyber world? I find that, that really spooks me because what it's actually asking you to do... did you ever see that film *The Matrix*? Now, *The Matrix* exaggerated hugely what could happen but there was a hint of reality about it, it's asking you actually to change how you live your life, and I don't like that.

The 3D television, for Dan is 'an artefact invested with particular inseparable connotations' (Miller 1987, p. 190). Further, though, for Dan, the weightiness and materiality of technology appears to represent an antidote or implicit rejection of the sense of 'fragility' of Lipovetsky's hypermodernity (2006), allowing him to regain a sense of control. Therefore, the physical 'weightiness' of the television (and its 'huge back' – certainly not fragile) makes Dan feel comfortable as opposed to uncomfortable: it is solid, metaphorically securing him within his own domestic space and, it appears, his psychodynamic space. Dan's concerns about the materiality or not of television as object become conflated with his concerns about the appropriation of technological advancement into his life, which itself becomes linked with being asked to 'actually change how you live your life'. Silverstone refers to this as:

the particular tension at the heart of consumption [...]: that in our daily acts of consumption we express our irredeemable dependence on the material and symbolic objects of mass production, and at the same time and in the same actions, express our freedoms as creative participants in mass culture

(1994, p. 127).

For Sadhbh, alternatively, the television screen provides respite from the ‘always on’ nature of internet enabled mobile technology. As her iPhone is associated with constant access to the Internet, the television becomes about taking a break away from ‘always on internet’. She says:

I don’t know. I think the television set, it’s not real. Well, it’s obviously real but you have to kind of leave what you’re doing at the time [to sit down and watch it], whereas the Internet is so part of our lives now that it’s always there.

This corresponds very strongly to Michael Bull’s contention that ‘as users become immersed in their mobile media sound bubbles, so those spaces they habitually pass through in their daily lives may increasingly lose significance for them and progressively turn into the ‘non-spaces’ of daily lives, which they try, through the self same technologies, to transcend’ (2005, p. 353-4). Sadhbh’s mobile media sound bubble may be considerably different from Dan’s, but both articulate the importance of feeling secure and in control within their ‘bubbles’.

A similar emphasis on the significance of feeling ‘safe’ and ‘secure’ arises in relation to sourcing media objects for viewing. Mairead (71) reports that she is very conscious of her lack of technical knowledge, saying: ‘I would never download from the Internet as I don’t know how to’, though she says that she’s ‘on much safer ground with a box set’. When probed as to whether she would consider downloading, she says ‘it’s never too late to learn’ but goes on to reveal an anxiety in relation to the semantics of technology:

I don’t know how to download or understand what downloading is. It’s the language I’m not comfortable with. It’s my own fault entirely for not finding out. I understand all about working the DVD, hence safer ground. Actually, we prefer to watch regular television. I use RTÉ player often, is that downloading? Is reading the papers downloading? Getting recipes? I should have googled ‘downloading’.

Here, Mairead conflates technical and semantic understanding, which has been referred to by Lynn Spigel as anxiety around the ‘discourses of futurology’ (2004). In stark contrast, Ciaran (23) historicises himself very specifically in relation to the Internet:

I think I’m probably the last generation that knows both ways [pre and post Internet]. I grew up only seeing films in the cinema, I didn’t have an outlet to download them and stuff like that. So even like the first song I ever downloaded was off Napster when I was maybe 14, and it took [laughs] two days.



So, you couldn't stream movies, so it took until I was in college that you could do stuff like that. Before that, it was all watching stuff on TV. I mean, I had to watch stuff on TV. So, when I was 18, 19 there wasn't a box set culture that was only starting to come in. So, I had that for a few years.

For the young male cohort of respondents, however, media consumption is almost exclusively accessed via illegal downloads. The same respondent says that '[n]early all of the music, the comic books I'm reading recently, the TV and films, nearly all of them [are downloaded].' In relation to their fandom of *The West Wing*, the younger respondents are too young to have watched the programme during its original broadcast airing, hearing about it either coincidentally or through peer recommendation. However, they now watch this 'old' text in a variety of new ways. Having bypassed its original scheduled run, then (briefly) consumed it on DVD box set, they now continue their fandom through repeated watchings of the downloaded show, individually and in groups, as well as discussions on Internet and online forums. In this exchange, Ciaran (23) discusses his rejection of the DVD box set format:

Well with the box set of *The West Wing* the reason I have that is that I didn't have a hard drive at that point, I was streaming some stuff but that was before the point where I was downloading but with the likes of the books and stuff like that, I'd prefer to get them than a DVD, I think the DVD is dead anyway.

When asked why he considers the DVD to be dead, in addition to economic factors, Ciaran cites the ease of downloaded media over the material DVD box set forms:

It's the same as CDs, they're just too expensive, they're too bulky ... yeah, it's mostly an expense thing. If they were cheaper I'd have no problem with them. Like, I have a wall of DVDs at home, like, I must have probably I'd say close to two hundred DVDs just built up. I wouldn't buy any more. I wouldn't watch them. I'd rather download them and put them on my hard drive even if I have them right there, I'd rather download them again.

When asked why, Ciaran answers that: 'It's too much effort. Like, even putting the disc in and taking it out, when I can have everything in the hard drive'. However, this is highly differentiated by age. For example, Tom (34), who is only eleven years older than Ciaran, though still belonging to the 'pre-Internet' generation, discusses his acquisition of media, in this instance DVD box sets, in terms of the more ritualistic and

acquisitive aspects of fandom. He discusses his reluctance to download as being influenced by:

A number of things. One... and I'm the same with music, it probably comes from years back as well ... the covers. I like to physically have something that's tangible, do you know what I mean? It looks well, it's there, you can have it on... you can feel it! It's like, I only bought, and I had the iTunes, I only bought a couple of iTunes albums recently because I was always wary of going 'well, I don't physically have the album', what would happen if it was wiped? [laughs] Do you know what I'm saying to you? You can't get it back! If it's wiped off your iTunes, like, and you've spent the money on it!

For Tom (34), 'collecting' (itself a highly ritualistic activity) is a significant expression that is centred around the comfort of materiality; the physical object being both tangible proof of fandom as well as proof of his possession of the necessary economic and cultural resources to acquire quality media texts. Tom's articulation of his sense of insecurity at the prospect of an 'album' being 'wiped' off iTunes is strikingly similar to Dan's similarly articulated concern about 'thin tellys'; both inducing a feeling of insecurity and discomfort. This relates to Kompare's identification of the DVD era as being marked by the 'shift to acquisition' (2006, p. 346). For Ciaran (23), though, the 'traditional' DVD add-ons, previously an incentive to purchase DVDs, now come with downloads so there is no longer any advantage to possessing the DVD in material form. Far more significant for these younger male respondents in their twenties is their access to hard drives that have revolutionised their downloading capacity, and therefore their access to media and fan texts. The technical ability and knowingness of these fans at least partially negates their economically constrained circumstances. There is a tension around their illegal activity which is partially mitigated by their demonstration and display of technical knowledge. Sean (24) says:

Only recently have I started downloading at a major, like almost industrial level, where it's like the computer is always downloading, because I've just gotten the space. Memory has gotten so cheap. I mean it's highly illegal and you know I would buy things if I had the money.

Economic factors are cited most frequently as the rationale for illegal downloading: 'If things were cheaper, it would be no problem whatsoever'. Economic necessity therefore drives downloading, as for this respondent who agrees that downloading:

‘would be the main source of my television ... I probably shouldn’t say that [laughs], but that’s how I consume all of my television.’

In contrast, for a number of fans, domestic and occupational responsibilities, rather than their lack, shape media consumption. Exemplifying this, Una, a 36 year old female respondent, mother of two pre-school children, discusses how her initial fandom of *The West Wing* (during its original broadcast run) had been at a time in her life which was, ‘proper singleton, pre-[children]’. Although she says that she dropped out of watching *The West Wing* for a year (‘I think that was the wedding planning year’), she refers to its release in DVD box set form as having restored her fandom. Consuming media through the form of box sets therefore shapes much of her domestic leisure time. For these respondents the continuance of fandom (and, perhaps, a claiming or reclaiming of ‘free’ adult, leisure time) is facilitated by the DVD box set. Derek Kompare discusses ‘the DVD effect’ as part of a larger conceptual shift across all media (2006, p. 336) and identifies the DVD, particularly in its season box set configuration, as ‘the video object that successfully converted broadcast flow to published text and made television tangible’ (p. 343). For Kompare, the DVD has destabilised normative relationships between viewer, advertiser and broadcaster (p. 340). Purchasing the entire series of *The West Wing* on DVD box set enabled Una to resume her fandom and she acknowledges that watching it this way (as opposed to in its broadcast schedule run) is different. She says that, with her husband she would usually watch:

A minimum of two in a row, minimum! Usually three, and if I could persuade my husband, four in a row. And I would just sit there going, ‘come on, we’ll have another one, we’ll have another one, we’ll have another one’. And kind of get addicted to it a bit. We basically didn’t watch TV, we got the whole thing, and then watched it end to end. We didn’t really watch telly until we got through it.

Significantly, from its inception, the DVD was marketed as a purchasable (rather than rentable) commodity, thereby targeting ‘quality’ consumers who possess not just good ‘taste’ but also the economic resources required to exercise its purchase. In this ‘shift to acquisition’ Kompare suggests that the DVD box set ‘materializes all the significant discourses of early twenty-first media change: high technology, corporate consolidation, user convenience, and commodity fetishism’ (2006, p. 338), a practice only feasible ‘in an era when massive, horizontally and vertically integrated corporations control the media as they can take advantage of the synergistic opportunities offered by new

technologies, new business practices, and new audience habits' (p. 351). In this regard, this cohort's consumption of a 'quality' television drama via purchased DVD box sets has facilitated a new modified form of watching and fandom. In the case of Una (36), this allows a retrospective reclamation of fandom from her 'singleton', pre-parenthood days, to an earlier, less responsible and less constrained version of herself. But this also provokes a desire to watch something of quality, so that when, for these respondents, time can be made available, it is important to watch something 'good'. In this sense, the reclamation is restrained, responsible and distinguished by adult good taste (watching a 'quality' TV drama such as *The West Wing*). The box set's ability to allow 'timeshifting' enables respondents to continue a particular fandom and media consumption in the context of the changed modes of reception, allowing the continuance of, or return to, fandom within the temporal constraints of their schedules. Certainly, following this logic, the 'objects' implicated in consumption for these respondents is positioned for them as a resource or an 'enabling' object in the creation (or recreation) of experiences which for these respondents are about what Woodward and Ellison call 'a larger human search for meaning, characterized by people seeking this type of 'matching' between subject and object that promises transformation or alteration of the self' (2010, p. 48).

#### **6.4 Moments of consumption.**

The final dimension of consumption examined in this chapter – the ways in which respondents consciously manage and order their media consumption within everyday life - elicits two significant general observations. The first was the finding that all respondents, in some form or other, spoke about their media consumptions in terms of an internally imposed style of gate-keeping which is intrinsic to their (context-dependent) sense of personal integrity<sup>30</sup>. Shoemaker notes that gatekeeping is a 'fundamental psychological process' of every human (2009, p. 130). Accordingly, respondents employ deliberate strategies which vary according to their individual

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<sup>30</sup> Original gatekeeping theory (Lewin 1947) emanated from a domestic experiment involving housewives and sweetmeats, though Lewin understood that its essence had broader applications. As he wrote, the theory of gates "holds not only for food channels but also for the traveling of a news item through certain communication channels in a group..." (Lewin, 1947, p. 145). Therefore, the gatekeeper's choices are a complex web of conventions, influences, preferences, motives and common values. This, and a number of other mass communication theories (e.g. agenda setting, framing) have been related to diversity-related content and the new media landscape (Lasorsa 2002).

context, in order to permit, limit or exclude media content and the extent of media consumption in their lives in a way that permits the attainment and maintenance of personal integrity. The second observation is the striking extent to which the acts of consumption were persistently described in terms of metaphorical references to food and nourishment, and acknowledgements of excess and restraint. In reference to anthropological and archaeological practice, Dietler employs the ritualistic notion of feast as ‘an analytical rubric used to describe forms of ritual activity that involve the communal consumption of food and drink’ (2001, p. 65), which reinforce notions of the ritualistic dimensions of consumptions discussed earlier in the chapter. Amongst older and more middle-aged respondents, there was a distinct self-imposed gatekeeping of media content and consumption on a daily basis. For these respondents, media consumption and fandom is a discriminatory ingestion rather than a binge. For example, Mairead (age 70) discusses the consciously self-imposed ‘flow’ of her media day, an internally imposed gatekeeping:

I turn on the radio in the kitchen when I come down for breakfast at 8am, RTÉ 1, Morning Ireland. Then Lyric at 9am upstairs till I go out at around half past eleven. When I get back I switch on Lyric again until 4.30pm and Mary Wilson on RTÉ 1. Lyric at 7pm until dinner is over.

Mairead talks about how she deliberately limits her television viewing during the day, saying ‘the TV goes on at 6pm for news on RTE 1.’ When asked why television is so consciously rationed, she reports that she is ‘too busy’ to watch during daytime as she reads the newspaper (online) in the morning. The significance of very considered self-gatekeeping the media was marked in older fans and appears to be clearly linked to notions of control and of exercising power over media by rationing it to specific times, spaces and even types of programmes. This exertion of control over media (and its potentially negative influences) appears to bring about a situation where these audience members and media consumers are, to a significant extent, deliberately setting their own agenda and framing their own media consumption in ways linked to notions of what is good for them.

By contrast with the careful and disciplined rationing of media consumption discussed above, for the young male cohort of fans, media consumption was discussed in greedy terms, with variations of words associated with excess being frequently used (‘binging’, ‘blasting through’, etc.). Media consumption in the younger male respondents appears

to be framed by three factors. Firstly, largely unconstrained free time. Of the young men under thirty who were interviewed, all had been educated to third level standard but only one was in employment. Secondly, common fan sensibilities (self-identifying as highly media aware; educated and knowledgeable about media in a way superior to other fans, explicating a particular repertoire of fan texts which identified them as telephiles and ironic popular culture consumers). The third defining characteristic is a lack of spending money (for example, though all respondents in this cohort were college graduates, most had returned to live with parents). Prior to downloading, loaned DVD box sets from the college library, from family or friends, were a mainstay of frequent and lengthy media consumption ‘binges’. For example, Niall (23) discusses how he first watched *The West Wing* ‘a few episodes at a time’, saying that once he started:

I couldn't stop, I couldn't stop. Once I started I really couldn't stop. I think I blasted through... there's seven seasons with, what, twenty two minimum episodes in each one, but I kind of got whisked away once I started on those first four episodes with the guys, my friend pretty much had to give me his box set and I just kind of blasted through them, and we'd meet up every now and again and watch them again. But I think, the turnover! [...] I think for the seven seasons I must have done it in three or four months, you know, back to back. So I just kind of shut myself in a lot of the time. And when you go home, it's not like you can watch one episode [...]so forty minutes becomes three hours very easily, when it's four episodes in and it's two o'clock in the morning and you haven't slept a wink and you realise that you just have to put your head down and start it all again the following morning.

Ciaran (23) refers to a similar ‘binge’ when he first watched *The West Wing*, saying: ‘I just fired the first DVD in and thirteen hours later I was still awake and I was half way through season one already. By the end of the week I'd nearly watched the whole thing!’ The binge style consumption of these respondents is enabled by free time (one respondent in this cohort told me ‘time is all I have on my hands’). Illegally downloading in one sense subverts media industries’ targeting of ‘quality’ fans as those with expendable income: these fans are high in cultural capital but without significant economic capital. Interestingly, the respondent above alludes in a self-aware manner to the negative aspects of over-consumption of his fan texts and the devaluing of the product when taken out of the context of their original ‘flow’ in its broadcast run. This arose in the context of a discussion about the ‘overly dramatic’ finales written by Aaron Sorkin in season one to four of *The West Wing* (Sorkin left the series after Season 4).

As the discussion developed, Ciaran expressed the view that perhaps speed-watching the season in a ‘binge’ style of viewing (i.e. against its original broadcast ‘flow’) had lessened the impact of the finale, and his enjoyment of it, making the finales seem too dramatic as he hadn’t had to ‘wait’ for them. He continues:

I think in some cases that kind of... that kind of made us harsher on the programme maybe, because ... because it was so much easier to come by that you weren’t as thankful. [...] There was kind of a distance there, when I finished off I felt like ‘oh man, I started this back in the day’ [laughs], but there was nothing... I mean, I can imagine it must have been very emotional to spend seven years with it and see that Donna got the big office and stuff! [laughs]. Or the bit with him [President Bartlet] and they’re saying, ‘what are you thinking about?’ and he’s like ‘tomorrow’ [laughs]. I mean, oh man, that would have been class, but I didn’t quite get the kind of catharsis from it, from just kind of ploughing through. But I couldn’t help myself, I was like a junkie!

That this cohort’s consumption appears to be self-identified as excessive suggests a guilt about their unmoderated and apparently unrestricted fan consumption. This guilt is perhaps rationalised internally by the fact that though their form of access to media content is illegal (and free), their repertoire of fan texts (*The West Wing* being a prime example) consists of a highly selective, fan canon of texts. In this, their fandom of certain television texts corresponds to Tim Groves’ characterisation of ‘telephilia’ as ‘a loyalty to television as an art form that parallels the intense devotion to film present in cinephilia’ (2004, para 1.), while their particular objects of fandom (particularly television drama and certain situation comedies) correspond to a particular, self-conscious cultural hierarchy; as Deborah Jermyn and Su Holmes state: ‘the telephile, like the cinephile, is ‘discerning’. Devotion to *The West Wing*, for example, connotes something very different from devotion to Big Brother (where the viewer would be more likely to attract the definition of a ‘fan’ in a dismissive sense’ (2006, p. 55). But these hierarchies, Jermyn and Holmes contend, are fluid and diverse; John Caughie (2007) similarly argues that ‘good’ in telephilia does not necessarily equal ‘quality’. In this sense, ‘good’ television for these particular fans does not necessarily equal ‘quality’ television (though it certainly includes quality television texts).

In the case of these young male fans, they knowingly ‘author’ their own media consumption in a way analagous to Kim Bjarkman’s study of video collectors, in which

she describes how through their ‘comforting sense of coherence, achievement, control and authority (even authorship)’, they fashion themselves as ‘self-styled media historians’ (2004 cited in Jermyn and Holmes 2006, p. 55). This cohort of young male ‘fanboy’ respondents are the subject of detailed discussion in Chapter Eight. For these respondents, their temporal, affective and intellectual investment in media and fan consumption becomes a structural commitment in their lives (much like an occupation) in a way not dissimilar to those other respondents whose normative occupational and domestic constraints curtail and limit media and fan consumption.

A further distinct group that emerged from respondents were those whose ability to consume media and practice fandom is highly constrained by employment or domestic constraints. In general, these respondents articulate a highly moderate, temperate approach to consumption. Una (36), as already discussed, states that her current media consumption and fandom differs entirely from her earlier fandom. For Una, it is parenthood that has changed the way she consumes media. She describes the way she now watches:

...It’s like opening a bottle of wine. You say, ‘I’m going to watch something, and it’s good!’ And I think it’s the same now with the Skybox, I’m recording stuff that I know I will like, in the hopes that I will actually get half an hour to sit down and watch it. It hasn’t happened yet! But I don’t want to erase it, so I’m going through going, ‘we can delete the Barbie and Rapunzel movies, make more room for something else!’  
[laughs].

This attests to the changed status of television as a ‘flow medium’ in Kompare’s sense, though one might equally argue that while flow has been disrupted in a traditional and historic sense, a new understanding of flow has developed which has to account for what Silverstone calls ‘the taken for granted seriality and spatiality of everyday life’ (1994, p. 20).

For these respondents, the ‘moments of consumption’ illuminate a view of the media and fan consumer for whom the interplay between reflexivity and media consumption emerges as far more personalised and individualised to the specificities of their everyday lives, but also highly bound with notions of personal integrity and ontological security. In fact, the ‘regimes’ of reception are found to be reflexively individualised against a context of multi-layered personal, structural, cultural and psychodynamic



factors. The remediated ritualisations in the reflexive process of consumption visible here appear to constitute a strategic response to threats to the particular moral and psychodynamic 'economies', played out through consumption and fandom.

## 6.5 Conclusion

Specifically, this chapter has found that, variously and despite views on 'de-ritualisation' in the age of quasi-mediated communication (Thompson 1995) and late modernity (Giddens 1991), what emerges from the data might be more appropriately considered as an individualised and remediated 're-ritualisation', shaped by internal and external factors in the context of a period of intense change. This re-ritualisation is based around the interplay between the variety of co-mingling discourses in the lives of respondents, but illuminates the continued social and cultural embeddedness of their lives in terms of media consumption. The significance of ritual is demonstrated to be strongly linked to affect and emotion, whether past memories or future hopes, seen particularly in the articulation of what might be called 'an imaginary' central to those emotions of the organisation and practice of media consumption. This is particularly visible in the ideas and feelings that emerged around the management and ordering of the flow and spaces of consumption. Respondent articulations concerning the position of forms of access (DVD versus scheduled television versus download) and even the screen (old fashioned 'telly' versus 'screen as multi-functioning monitor') emerged as a clear differentiating factor between them. This, served in one way to historicise themselves in relation to traditional 'television culture' (validating Roger Silverstone's view that 'television is no longer an isolated media technology, (if it ever was) but one increasingly embedded into a converging culture of technological and media relationships' (1994, p. xi). However, what is also clear from these respondents is that their articulations trouble assumptions that suggest a straightforward 'digital divide'. While there may be some terminological difficulties, or difficulties of articulation, what is visible is that new technologies are modified and appropriated in such a way as to either introduce or to consolidate internal security in a ritualistic manner for these respondents.

Secondly, these respondents' negotiations, compromises and approaches to consumption in terms of the day to day lives approximate strongly to forms of gate-keeping in which the gate is 'kept' according to imaginings of 'goodness' by

respondents. Mark Hobart, writing about 'media practices', has warned against the dismissal of how 'subjects of study imagine and articulate their practices' (2010, p. 62). What is especially striking is the extent to which respondents' consumption is discussed as or in reference to food and drink, (which of course in addition to satisfying hunger and thirst, and being necessary for survival, involves choices about nourishment, taste, etiquette, access; in fact, food more than ever implicating 'conscious consumption') and the instrumental consumption of such 'food'. Here too, it can be seen that the nature of the moments of consumption for respondents is highly socially and culturally embedded amongst temporal, domestic, work and technological dimensions. These reveal the significance, though expressed in a variety of ways, of moral considerations which, while not offsetting other dimensions certainly trouble them. To paraphrase, 'you are what [and when, and how] you eat [or don't eat]' applies strongly here.

An overall thematic finding running through the data presented in this chapter is the persistent significance of 'goodness'. Though ambiguous, 'goodness' is related to qualitative judgment (whether of self or others). Charles Taylor argues that human identity is deeply intertwined with an understanding of the good, particularly, he says, in 'the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand' (1989, p. 27). Ideas of goodness are socially constructed, often gendered (for example, Beverley Skeggs' (2008) investigations into 'respectability' and 'good taste' and their linking with consumption of or judgments about reality television), but are also mediated and reconfigured in the particular social contexts in which such accounts of 'goodness' are constructed. Therefore, in this chapter there are various context-dependent understandings of what it is to be a 'good' cultural consumer and fan; such as the particular understandings of a parent as opposed to those of a worker or non-worker. What can be seen from the analysis in this chapter is that fan and media consumption can performatively confirm or even substitute for 'good' behaviour. As such, the 'practice' of media consumption and fandom might be said to be highly strategic. Conceptions of what it is to be good can be seen in the establishment of various 'economies' in the lives of these respondents.

In summary then, the way that these respondents ‘do’ consumption – in its organisation and practice – is strongly linked with issues of value – being secure, being good, being restrained (or not), as for some, being an ‘industrial’ approach to consumption is good in context. Definitions of ‘good’ are not universal, therefore for some respondents goodness is linked to rationing, restraint and moderation, cautiousness. For others, ‘good’ consumption equals ‘all you can eat’. While reflexivity is clearly practiced in media consumption, it is the *nature* of reflexivity on display that is striking. For these respondents, this attempt to critically map out their reflexive media consumption reveals how it revolves around particular conceptions of ‘goodness’: firstly, in ‘good’ rituals, whether imbued with a nostalgic look backwards to youth; or an aspirational look ahead to adulthood and the perceived ‘good’ associations of both. Aspirations to goodness are also visible in the organisation of practice as well as the manner of consumption exercised by these respondents (though the capability of ‘industrially’ consuming media is good for some respondents, while for others temperance equals goodness).

However, through consumption these respondents reveal an evaluative framework in which consumption contributes to the construction of a self, but a self that is in fact highly bound by a larger, context-specific, moral grammar. In other words, the practice of media consumption, as articulated by these respondents articulates with the broader (socially constructed) practice of being ‘good’, allowing that understandings of ‘goodness’ are themselves in fact highly ‘situated’ by the specificity of respondent life trajectory and context. The following chapter moves from matters of media consumption to those relating to political identity and engagement, engaging specifically with the interplay between fandom and the political selves as articulated by respondents in the qualitative interviews. In it, there is a continuation of the theme of the persistence of television in facilitating a similar ‘mobile privatisation’, though, in the case of the next chapter, this is in terms of the maintenance and negotiation of the rather nebulous notion of political identity.

## Chapter Seven - Transitions and Transpositions: the Construction of a Particular Political Logic

### 7.1 Introduction

A theme that emerged from the quantitative data (see Chapter Five) is that many respondents articulate a dis-identification with Irish politics and political identity. This chapter explores the dynamics of such dis-identification by considering both respondents' ideational discursive articulations and the structural underlying conditions that contextualise them. In relation to the former, what emerges is that respondents' fandom constitutes a 'space' in which the psychological, cultural and moral tensions that characterise their political identifications and dis-identifications are negotiated. In relation to the latter, these tensions emerge as being intimately tied to Ireland's past (its postcolonial legacy) and its present (its transitional state of crisis). While an initial reading of data might interpret these respondents' position as apathetic, an examination of the psychodynamic dimensions reveals something more complex. What emerges is a highly particularised 'political logic' or 'habitus', the overarching characteristic of which is a transposition of the political into the moral, cultural and psychological and which functions as 'tension management'.

The specific context of Ireland's contemporary 'crisis' was discussed extensively in Chapter Four. Given this, it is hardly surprising that ambiguities of 'political identity' appear to be heightened in an environment of national 'crisis'. Niklas Luhmann's *Observations on Modernity* (1998) argues that continuity from past to future is ruptured in the present modern moment. If this is so, Ireland does not follow suit, with consistent references by respondents to the specificity of Ireland's socio-historical context and its contemporary relevance. Perspectives on Irish identity and what it means to be Irish are frequently framed as a diagnosis, such that 'the problem' of the 'Irish condition' is contradictory and ambivalent. This position is consistent with wider narratives; a widely aired view, not just by respondents, but also in public discourse, is that Ireland's varied 'troubles', whether in the North or in terms of post-Celtic Tiger exigencies, are caused by underlying conflicts and confusions of cultural identity. Luke Gibbons, for example, suggests that Ireland is a first-world country with a third-world memory

(1998, p. 27), while G. Honor Fagan refers to ‘the problematic placing’ of Ireland in the world’ (2002, p. 111).

Moreover, Simon Parker notes that the contemporary concept of ‘political identity’ can be traced to Erik Erikson’s writings about ‘personal identity’ and its crises (1996, p. 107), thereby fusing not only the political with the personal but also the very notion of identity with that of crisis. Parker goes on to observe that identification, whether passive or active, positive or negative can be usefully analysed ‘where identification *with* or *against* something is as, if not more, important than the identity *of* someone’ (1996, p. 108; emphases in original). These dynamics are engaged with in this chapter as they relate to the political via the discursive, figurative and evaluative references of respondents as a way of illuminating the interplay between fandom and politics at a time of transition.

## 7.2 Articulating the national political character

Jonathan Friedman suggests that history is a mythical construction, in that it is a representation of the past linked to the establishment of an identity in the present (1992). Similar discursive treatments of history are frequently referred to by respondents. For example, Tom, a 34 year old secondary school teacher, says:

I mean, as a historian, I always think that was the problem with Ireland. We had a problem with authority because it was British rule, and when we got to rule ourself we never really transferred that really. It was kind of ‘great, you run the country, and I’ll believe you’. And that’s enough. Now, that’s with my historian hat on.

This idea that in Ireland ‘authority was always something to mess about with’ means, for Tom, that you can ‘give two fingers to the public!’ Tom’s statement recalls Fanon’s proposition of a ‘colonial condition’ (1963) in the persistence of a colonial mentality, even after colonisation, and the adoption by the formerly oppressed of the role of the oppressor (the ‘mother country’) (1963, p.149-166). For Declan Kiberd (2005), this ‘postcolonial pathology’ (p. 14) is visible in the clientelism and dynastic families that characterise Irish politics. Niall (23) also refers to the dynasties in Irish politics, saying ‘it kind of feels like there’s a cabal’. Deirdre (aged 38) describes Irish politics as ‘very tribal, it’s almost like religion’. This, she says, is generational. She speaks about ‘one of the women who works with me, and she’d be older than me, and she said “oh you know, I was going to vote for Fine Gael but I just thought my own father would turn

over in his grave so I voted Fianna Fáil.” I just couldn’t believe it! I just couldn’t believe it!’

The over-arching theme of respondent discourse can be summarised in the articulation of an evaluative good/bad dualism in which the ‘good’ of *The West Wing* is pitted against the ‘bad’ of real life Irish politics. Overwhelmingly, respondents cite the sense of politics as duty which is a prevailing theme of *The West Wing* and which, as conveyed, is one in which American leaders (and their political staff) are required to answer a call to public service. The sense of civic duty imparted in *The West Wing* has been described as ‘subsuming the pursuit of power to something more ennobling’ (Paxton 2005, p 174). The essence of duty in *The West Wing* is one in which serving the President is equivalent to serving the nation. Further, this sense of duty in *The West Wing* is predicated primarily on doing what is morally and politically right, even if this does not translate into political popularity or success. Tom (34) contrasts the values of *The West Wing*, particularly those of public service and civic duty, with those of Irish politics, saying:

The difference with, say, something like *The West Wing* where the characters in it give public service is that The White House still stands for something. It still does, even in the world now.

For the most part, respondents reiterate that the sense of political duty seen in *The West Wing* would never exist in Ireland. Anthony echoes this when he states that he doubts ‘that you would actually have a cohort of people who would give up a job to go back to work in that civic capacity’. He goes on to say that ‘we don’t see politics as public service, we see politics as... you know, a good career move’. This respondent (Patrick, 39) says that if an Irish politician tried to engage in ‘West Wing’ style politics, ‘the people would probably raise an eyebrow, you know? What’s this lad doing? You know?’ Anthony reiterates this when he says ‘you couldn’t turn around and say, “how would that episode play out here?”, because it wouldn’t play out here, because we’d never be allowed actually see that in operation. [...]’.

As a rhetorical pattern, respondents discursively demonise and dis-identify with Irish politicians (in contrast with their idealisation of President Bartlet). Repeated references are made to ‘gombeenism’, and ‘gombeen’ or ‘sleeven politics’. Of note, the origin of ‘sleeven’ (slíbhín) is used to denote a sly person, a smooth tongued rogue, a ‘trickster’ (TP Dolan, 2006). ‘Gombeen’ is similarly pejorative in origin. Tomas de Bhaldraithe

writes that its Gaelic original, ‘gaimbín’, refers to a person willing to profit from the misfortune of others, initially associated with those shop-keepers and merchants who exploited the starving during the Irish Famine, and more contemporaneously with those willing to accept bribes and to operate corruptly (de Bhaldraithe, 1977). Sean (24) , while acknowledging *The West Wing* as ‘just writing’ says that he feels there is ‘a kind of weird dignity; in it that is absent in Irish politics, which he sees as full of ‘buffoonery and paddywhackery’. He says that when he sees Irish politicians on the international stage, ‘you’re always vaguely embarrassed and vaguely cringing!’ Sean’s distancing himself from Irish politics not only frames it as (embarrassing) ‘other’ but also allows him to rhetorically construct himself as precisely *not* that; as Christina Scharff writes, ‘[t]hrough knowing and naming its other, the [western] self gets constructed as that which is not its other’ (2011, pp. 19-20).

Given the context of political crisis, it is notable that dis-identification with Irish politics is framed quite sparingly in terms of explicitly political reasoning, but strikingly in corporeal terms, relating to body image, style, a proper ‘look’. Stephanie Lawler writes that ‘[b]odies, their appearance, their bearing and their adornment, are central in representations’ (2005, p. 431). Respondents frequently ground their discussion of politicians in terms of their corporeal attributes, rather than specific political beliefs or policies. Talking about *The West Wing*, Deirdre describes ‘these beautiful people with their great skin and their great legs and their good clothes... and their *cause!*’, not only directly linking their corporeal qualities with ‘their *cause!*’ but also defining implicitly an appropriate political ‘look’. In opposition, Deirdre says ‘then you switch over to *Prime Time* or the *RTÉ News* and you’ve got these fellas, and they’re sitting there and shuffling, their shirt is askew, or I mean now they’re there in their jeans and their pink t-shirts<sup>31</sup> [laughs] and they’re mumbling and they’re inarticulate.’ Irish politicians are then framed in terms of transgression from implicit norms. Similarly, Tom (34) refers to the fact that in Ireland, ‘politics isn’t glamorous’ and refers to what he calls the ‘physical type’ of the Irish politician:

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<sup>31</sup> A reference to independent TD Mick Wallace, who along with a number of fellow independent TDs (notably Richard Boyd Barret and Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan), elect not to conform to the implicit formal dress code in Dail Eireann. At the time of writing, the Dail Committee on Procedure and Privilege had ruled that casual dress is not acceptable attire for parliamentary business, a ruling which will be subject to a Dail vote.

I remember a friend and myself said this, it's like, you see a guy in Westminster, or a woman, and you *know* they're an MP. Like in Ireland, you know your man, Jackie Healy Rae? I mean, that's grand, he represents his constituency, but his hair's lacquered down and he's wearing a flat cap! What I'm saying is, our politicians nearly don't even *look* like politicians! And I know that people might say that's superficial but it's just something I noticed, do you know what I mean?

Sean (24) develops this further when he says 'not to sound flippant but it's also even if you think of something as simple as the photogenic cast, and you're kind of thinking [laughs], "Martin Sheen or Brian Cowen"?' These negative corporeal references towards the Irish 'body politic' paint Irish politicians as embarrassing, uncultured, unfit in many senses; the notion of alterity is strikingly persistent. Grace (age 42) says that *The West Wing*, despite it being 'a liberal fantasy and all that stuff, fills you with hope and admiration for politicians and what politics might be'. In opposition, she characterises Irish politics as 'dirty', while 'politics in *The West Wing* seems to be cleaner, if that's not a stupid thing to say'. Another female respondent, Úna (36), describes Irish politicians as 'dead faced, dead eyes, nah nah nah, bullshit'. If Grosz's statement that '[t]he body image is as much a function of the subject's psychology and sociohistorical context as of anatomy' (1994, p. 79) then these references to corporeality can be examined as far more than just rhetorical. Lawler writes strikingly that expressions of 'disgust' are intimately bound with class, in the sense that disgust at perceived violations of taste tells us much about middle class identities and identifications (2005). Here, Lawler's argument is easily extended to these respondents' corporeally based identifications and dis-identifications with Irish politics. As such, these accounts don't simply establish a concern with 'the look' of Irish politics, but what this 'look' stands for. Moreover, respondent 'disgust' (to paraphrase Lawler) with the 'look' of Irish politics further undermines their claim to self responsibility and moral autonomy, which Wendy Brown writes is 'measured by the capacity for "self care" – the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions' (Brown 2003, para. 15 cited in Scharff 2011). As such, the government are unable to govern politically, and unable to govern themselves physically.

In fact, respondents' articulations about Irish politicians resonate strongly with depictions of the trickster archetype. The trickster in mythology and anthropology is a pre-Christian figure, spirit, god, or even animal, who 'tricks' by disobeying normal rules and conventional behaviour (Hansen 2001). The trickster also figures as one of



Jung's archetypal figures, who resists conformity by challenging or defying authority, though he may appear inconsequential to those on the outside (1970). Kieran Keohane has applied the trickster archetype to the Irish politician, highlighting the trickster's qualities as 'constitutionally ambiguous and ambivalent. He is simultaneously represented as being good and evil, kindly and cruel, merry and surly, industrious and lazy, cunning and foolish' (2005, p. 286). 'The trickster politician, as broker to his clients, specializes in deals and exchanges between centers of power, circles of influence, and local theaters of action' (Keohane 2005, p. 259). Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins write, '[t]he trickster evades and disrupts all conventional categories, including those corporeal hierarchies upon which various forms of discrimination are based' (1996, p. 234). The trickster is frequently described as having a grotesque body, and while Tom's description of the 'hair lacquered down and the flat cap' is reminiscent of these trickster aspects, Anthony alludes to another. For along with grotesquerie, the trickster has 'cunning intelligence' (Koepping 1985). Anthony says Irish political culture 'is all about serving the parish pump'. 'Parish pump' politics is an idiomatic and generally pejorative description of political clientelism, a type of politics that concerns itself with petty local issues (such as the parish pump) over national ones. According to RK Carty, clientelism is 'characterized by particularistic, ascriptive and individualist orientations to action rather than by the values of universalism, achievement, and collectivism generally associated with modernity' (1981, p. 9). Carty identifies the particularity of the 'Irish case' of clientelism as 'a puzzle' (he asks, '[i]s it simply because Ireland's political development has been unique, or are the Irish just a peculiarly perverse race?' (1981, p. 11)). The 'puzzle' is that despite the Irish political party system on the one hand being 'typical of a modern system of group politics', it is also typical of 'a peasant culture' as exemplified in 'the behaviour of politicians, the conduct of electoral competition, and the structure of Irish political linkages [that] are immediately recognizable as characteristically clientelist' (1981, p. 10). Anthony (49) gives this anecdote:

Do you remember Jackie Healy Rae when he was first elected and the press went down to Heuston Station to meet him off the train? And he said, 'I represent the plain people of Ireland, the people who eat their dinner in the middle of the day'? And I'm not judging you, say, where you come from, but that is a massive rural thing where people will understand that. You ate your dinner at one o'clock, do you know what I mean? And then you ate your supper. And that one soundbite was massive,

because he defined himself, and not just within South Kerry,  
but all over the country, as one of the lads, do you know what I  
mean?

Healy Rae's call to those people 'who eat their dinner in the middle of the day' is implicitly identified as political populism by Anthony (49). Certainly, Healy Rae's speech invokes an imagined 'ordinary working man' that ties in with notions of tradition and authenticity. The working man, as different from the modern worker, requires a sustaining meal in the middle of the day. The inference Anthony makes here is that Healy Rae's 'soundbite' separates out those traditional, working, authentic men from those others who, presumably, have 'lunch' instead. The historic connotations of 'lunch' are interesting in this regard. Sherrie MacMillan traces the evolution of mealtimes, noting that where a working day was bound by labour, mealtimes adhered to a largely medieval schedule. This changed with capitalism, colonialism and industrial revolution (MacMillan 2001). MacMillan notes also that 'lunch', or 'luncheon' in its original terminology, was 'generally given by and for women', giving rise to the slightly disparaging phrase, the 'ladies who lunch'. In fact, when then Prince of Wales Edward VII stopped to eat a dainty luncheon with lady friends, he was laughed at for his effeminacy (MacMillan 2001). Jackie Healy Rae, in his speech, defines himself as 'one of the lads'; we imagine he does not eat lunch.

Stuart Hall emphasises the role culture plays in the construction of national identities, as when he describes nations not just in terms of their political construction but also as 'systems of cultural representation' (1994, p. 200). Figurative coding of the physical and mental inferiority of Irish politicians has precedent, such as the simian renderings of the Irish national character from Punch magazines of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (cf LP Curtis 1971). Respondents' rendering and then rejection of their own Irish political class as 'gombeens', 'sleveens', 'dead eyes', even 'bullshit' demonstrates their strong dis-identification with the Irish 'body politic'. Respondents' rather bleak constitution of the Irish political class, then, is in terms of lack and deficiency (moral, corporeal, intellectual, even gastronomic), suggesting that the absence of moral, physical and cultural capital is linked to the absence of 'good' (as opposed to trickster-like) political capital. Tim Edensor discusses how reflexive awareness of national identity can result from disruption, becoming a 'habituated, embodied national subject' (2002, p. 21). The respondents in their discourse effectively 'other' and therefore alienate their own democratically elected political body, but also recognise these qualities in themselves,

relating them to the discourse of postcolonialism. Here, Sean (24) appears to identify a national character (note his use of ‘we’):

I think it all comes down to, maybe it’s an inferiority complex, but it comes down to size. We’re a small country and we’re not that important in the grand scheme of things. With *The West Wing* these guys *are* dealing with the likelihood of nuclear bombs and that kind of stuff. Like here, all you’re dealing with is... well, *now* we’re dealing with a lot, but back in the time we were just dealing with builders and stuff and just letting them go hogwild. We were eejits, like! Maybe, I suppose that does seem like an inferiority thing... maybe I should feel better about myself, but I just think that... like, you *couldn’t* make a West Wing about the Dáil, basically.

Jung says that ‘anyone who belongs to a sphere of culture that seeks the perfect state somewhere in the past must feel very queerly indeed when confronted by the figure of the trickster’ (1959, p. 263). The atavistic description of the Irish political class (Anthony (49) says you couldn’t ask in an Irish context ‘how would that episode play out here?’ because it *wouldn’t* play out here’) is also a foregone rendering of ‘ourselves’ as necessary ‘other’, as ‘eejits, like!’ who went ‘hogwild’. The reiteration of the ‘eejit’ and ‘hog’ motif can be linked to the earlier characterisation of the Irish body politic as morally and physically unfit; but also the reference to ‘hog’ evokes the Irish expression ‘ar mhuin na muice’, meaning ‘on the pig’s back’, a colloquial reference to having good luck or fortune. The discourse of postcolonialism then becomes the inevitable discourse of identity. In their dis-identification with the narratives of embarrassment that constitute Irish politics the trickster is rejected but also recognised; he represents the human condition as a whole. This complex articulation of both identification and dis-identification recalls Bourdieu’s statement that ‘social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against which is closest, which represents the greatest threat’ (1984, p. 479).

### 7.3 Articulations of *The West Wing* as ‘good other’

By contrast, *The West Wing*’s President Bartlet embodies in body, mind and deed the ‘good other’ national character and object (who is also the most symbolic and powerful American in the world). Bartlet’s qualities are drawn as counter to all that is ‘standard’, but unlike the uncertain, shapeshifting trickster, he is certain of his intellect and in his faith, of his patriotism and leadership capabilities, unafraid to be singular, even superior. Bartlet’s ‘good other’ status is interesting. While repeated references are

made to his 'old stock' Democratic credentials, he is repeatedly shown as being 'outside' new politics, particularly in his repeated desire for debate and discourse in politics. Though from a Democratic family, a persistent theme is Bartlet's antagonistic relationship with his father. His 'mother figure' secretary, Mrs. Landingham, identifies his outsider status in terms of superior difference:

Look at you. You're a boy king. You're a foot smarter than the smartest kids in the class. You're blessed with inspiration. You must know this by now.

(Season 2, episode 44, 'Two Cathedrals', originally broadcast May 16<sup>th</sup> 2001).

Most acutely, though, we see in Bartlet an *embodied* outsider-ness, particularly visible in the thematic treatment of issues in which Bartlet's personal beliefs are dissonant with his duties as President. Here Bartlet positions himself as President 'outside' of himself as person: the separation of office and man and an embodiment of a highly complex outsidership. Bartlet's hyper-informed and higher than average intelligence is dealt with factually and comically on the show. We learn that not only does he hold a PhD in economics but that he is also a Nobel Laureate. However, the intellectualism is never condescending; in fact it is depicted as patriotic, even heroic as Bartlet deploys it dutifully on behalf of the American public. Rather it is treated as paternalistic (Bartlet can hold forth about classical scholarship but also holds comic 'pop' quizzes with staff), and as inseparable from his spirituality.

As depicted in *The West Wing*, and as personified in President Bartlet, this suggests a certain possible configuration of nation, in which America can be both intellectual and pioneering while retaining good moral values. In opposition to this, Tom (34) says that 'Dáil Éireann is symbolic [laughs] but not of positivity, not to me anyway!' Leon discusses the idea of an 'erudite' leader and 'that notion that a president can talk philosophy, can talk theology, that a president can talk!' Referring to criticisms of the complexity of dialogue in *The West Wing*, Steven (24) says 'that's the *whole point*, nobody *does* talk like that in real life.' For Una (36), he's 'the thinking man, he is *the* man of principle.' Another respondent equates these qualities with leadership, saying: 'he [Bartlet] is smart... which helps. Academic, but smart as well. Smart but also not afraid to be himself. A definite leader, and you can see that in the show in the way the others really want to serve him.'

This unapologetically frames the president and his staff, not as the average American, but as exemplar of ‘sacred’ political leadership and governance. Durkheim notes that the sacred often emerges when ‘collective effervescence’ – a shared sense of community and identification with that community and its collective symbols – is invoked. Durkheim’s (1915) distinction between the profane, a world of everyday and mundanity, of the commonplace and material, and the sacred realm of the communal, the moral, the spiritual is resonant with respondents’ articulations of the distinction between real Irish politics and the fictional fan object. The sacred realm is recognisable through the feelings of profound sanctity and language it employs (indeed, Bartlet is a Latin speaker), encouraging people to be both literally and figuratively ‘upright’. While John Podhoretz critiques *The West Wing* as ‘nothing more or less than political pornography for liberals’ (2003, pp. 222-3) and decries the show as the ‘ultimate Hollywood fantasy: the Clinton White House without Clinton’ 2002, (p. 222), respondents frequently cite its imaginative corrective potential. Ciaran (23) says ‘I suppose that you could say in my mind, it’s like Kennedy, Clinton, Bartlet... let’s just remove Bush! [laughs]’. Steven (24) suggests something similar when he says that *The West Wing* is ‘sentimental of an idealised America that was betrayed by Bush and betrayed by Clinton. If you look at Bartlet as a president, he’s those parts that the other presidents did not utilise, I think.’

*The West Wing*, from its very first episode (‘Pilot’, original airdate 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 1999) centralises morality as a theme, and morality as personified in President Bartlet. Throughout the episode, the President’s key political staff attempt to limit political damage from a disagreement with a group of highly influential right-wing Christian activists who have accused the Bartlet administration of holding the values of ‘Christian and family oriented organisations’ like them with hostility and contempt. President Bartlet is not seen in the episode until almost the last scene. His very entrance demonstrates his moral ‘uprightness’, his first words in the entire series being to correct one of the Christian activists who mis-identifies the First Commandment while lecturing Bartlet’s staff. Our first sound and sight of Bartlet then are to witness him authoritatively (and ironically) stating:

I am the Lord your God. Thou shalt worship no other God before me. [pause] Boy those were the days, huh?

(Season One, Episode One, ‘Pilot’, original broadcast date September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1999)

This scene was highly referenced by respondents, particularly in the sense that President Bartlet employs scripture as a weapon: as Leon (43) describes this scene, Bartlet, having come up against a fundamentalist Christian, ‘was able to argue scripture with her, he *destroyed* her.’ He is at once biblical scholar, voice of reason, family man and leader. Anthony (49) similarly describes how Bartlet dispatches the lesser political opponent by ‘laying her on the floor’ with his intelligence. Anthony identifies *The West Wing*’s morality as ‘a massive aspect’, stating that ‘there was always a moral imperative to what he [Bartlet] did in the position’. Despite Mark Banks’ contention that ‘contemporary social and cultural theory is generally antagonistic towards questions of morality and normative value’ (2006, p. 457), there is a remarkable persistence to morality and the ‘sacred’, in some iteration, not just in respondent discourse but also in critical literature. Durkheim (1915) and Eliade (1957) both centralise its position in social theory and public discourse (indeed, Chapter Four discussed how the post-crash dominant narratives in public discourse turned quickly to those of morality). Mircea Eliade refers to the significance of an ‘axis mundi’ for numerous cultures, belief systems, practices or even advanced urban centres. The ‘axis mundi’ takes the form of some symbol – a totem pole, a ladder, a church, a skyscraper, a rocket – that expresses a point of connection between heaven and earth. As Eliade states ‘[e]very Microcosm, every inhabited region, has a Centre; that is to say, a place that is sacred above all’ (1999, p. 39). Lefebvre extends a long line of sociological treatments of the sacred, particularly Durkheim’s analysis with his argument that ‘the profane [is] displacing but not replacing the sacred’ (cited in Hoover and Lundby 1997, p. 135). Lefebvre’s contention certainly ties in with respondent discourse in which the sacred, the good, exists in discourse only in contrast with its opposite, the profane, the bad.

In this regard, *The West Wing*’s moral credentials as invoked by respondents correspond closely to Charles Taylor’s concept of the ‘hypergood’ (1989), being ‘the highest good among the *strongly-valued* goods within the moral framework’, thereby functioning as ‘the standpoint’ from which all other goods must be judged and decided about. According to Taylor, the hypergood provides us with the capacity to locate ourselves, to establish an identity, and to determine the significance of various events or things for us’ (Taylor 1989, p. 63-73). A similar concept is that of the moral economy<sup>32</sup>, a

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<sup>32</sup>The ‘moral economy’ in its original economic guise is defined by Thompson as: ‘A consistent traditional view of social norms and obligations, [and] of the proper functions of several parties

concept Roger Silverstone successfully applied to the capacity of the domestic household to be ‘both an economy of meanings and a meaningful economy’ (1994, pp. 45-48). For Silverstone, the moral dimension of this economy was:

‘defined and informed by a set of cognitions, evaluations and aesthetics which are themselves defined and informed by the histories, biographies and politics of the household and its members [...] expressed in the specific and various cosmologies and rituals that define (or fail to define) the household’s integrity as a social and cultural unit’

(p. 48).

If the general morality of *The West Wing* appeals to respondents (thereby indicating its continued conceptual significance), then Bartlet’s Catholicism is also highly important. Bartlet, we learn, was accepted at Harvard, Yale and Williams but chose Notre Dame ‘cause I was thinking about becoming a priest’. He graduated Summa Cum Laude with a major in American Studies and a minor in Theology. Tom (34) also says he thinks it is very ‘important’ that Bartlet is a Catholic ‘because they only had one Catholic president and they shot him through the brain. Like, they made sure he wasn’t getting back up’. This corresponds to Hoover’s contention that ‘contemporary piety is affective more than it is intellectual’ (1997, p. 293) but also adds an inter-textual and affective dimension to the evaluative framework articulated by respondents, President Bartlet clearly affectively ‘prompts’ the mythos of the JFK legacy<sup>33</sup>. Leon (43) suggests that

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within the community ... [that] taken together, can be said to constitute the moral economy ... . This moral economy ... supposed definite, and passionately held, notions of the common weal.’ (Thompson 1971: 79). Hahn’s recognition that ‘[i]t is necessary to recognize that ‘culture’ does, and must, enter into the constitution of ‘the economy’ in all societies’ (Hahn 1992: 162) facilitated an extension of the concept from economics to other disciplines. Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley’s application of the concept to the domestic space extended it to the domain of media reception studies and extended the understanding and applicability of a moral economy as ‘part of a transactional system, dynamically involved in the public world of the production and exchange of commodities and meanings’ (1992, p. 19). The ‘moral economy approach’ has been mobilised recently in consumption studies (relating to, for example, the politics of class, morality and worth (Sayer 2002; 2005, and the politics of ‘ethical consumption’ such as the Fair Trade movement, Bryant and Goodman 2004, Adams and Raisborough 2008).

<sup>33</sup>From an aesthetic and aural perspective *The West Wing* mobilises these intertextual references consistently by evoking a sense of political heritage, patriotism and presidentiality. An opening montage introduces each character, firstly in motion and in colour with a brief series of images of the main characters in professional guise, followed by a still black and white portrait of each, this juxtaposition immediately suggesting both action and reflection as characteristics of the characters. Superimposed black and white imagery of the fictional President Bartlet, the First Lady and his senior staff collectively evince a sense of history and archive, and of the weight of the presidency (Crawley discusses the effected similarity of the opening’s visual cues to iconic framed black and white photographs of President Kennedy in 2006, p. 71). The symbolic imagery of the US flag along with images of the oval office fictionally connect the Bartlet

‘it’s no surprise that Sheen’s president was an Irish American Catholic, as was JFK. So, it rang all those bells.’ This resonates with popular Irish social history which reports the triptych of images of Pope John XXIII, the Sacred Heart of Jesus and JFK as adorning the parlour walls of many Irish homesteads in the 1960s. Anthony says:

I like the idea that they made him a Catholic, because Catholics are a minority in the States, but they’re not fundamental, as in the Christian right or the evangelical Christian right, and therefore they would have a high sense of morality.

Anthony’s (49) equation of non-fundamentalism with morality exemplifies an explicit tendency in the data in which respondents allude to a seeking out of religious morality on the one hand, but a rejection of its dogma on the other. Therefore, while a general decline in institutional religion can be observed, this has been related to a corresponding rise of individualism in faith (Hoover and Lundby 1997, p. 5). These respondents’ articulate a concern with morality and a particular moral logic which implies that it is Bartlet’s particularised morality and Catholicism that appeals to them. This type of logic is exemplified by Deirdre (38) when she says ‘you know, Bartlet had his Catholic beliefs, but not to the point where he shoved them down everybody else’s throats.’ Una again evokes this particular ‘moral logic’ when she states:

My daughter’s going to an Educate Together school. I’ve clearly no truck with religious-ness. Personal faith is completely different as far as I’m concerned but that used to be people’s moral compass and I think that in a society where that is – thank God! – gone, that people need to have reinforced that they have a civic duty.

This resonates with Tom Inglis’s articulation of a specifically Irish version of secularisation in the existence of a modified though persistent Irish moral ‘habitus’. Rates of self-identified Catholics are declining though still high (3.86m people (84.2%) of people living in Ireland defined themselves as Roman Catholic in April 2011, CSO) though as Máire Nic Ghiolla Phadraig writes, it is much harder to extrapolate the level of Catholics who ‘belong but do not believe’ (Nic Ghiolla Phadraig 2009). Jean-Christophe Penet similarly identifies the emergence of a ‘new breed of Catholic who no longer live their religion as a transcendent inheritance but as an immanent choice, and who, therefore seem to ‘connect’ to their religion more than they ‘commune’ with it’

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presidency with American presidential and political history, establishing *The West Wing*’s mimetic credentials.



(2008, p. 143). Inglis describes the decline of the Catholic Church's 'moral monopoly' (1998), a monopoly which he claims was predicated on the Church's blurring of the sacred and the secular. This meant that the good, practicing Catholic was endowed not just with greater religious capital but also greater social prestige: '[i]n other words, being a good Catholic helped get contracts and jobs, be elected, be educated, be well-known and liked' (Inglis 1998, p. 11). But in current day Ireland, being an Irish Catholic is no longer a 'badge of honour' and Irishness and Catholicism in its traditional sense are no longer mutually associated. Therefore, Inglis' newer 'Catholic habitus' is marked by an upsurge in individualism, which reflects global economics (as Inglis points out, '[l]iberal-individualism is also what holds the world capitalist system together' (2008, p. 257)). Similarly, Jean-Christophe Penet suggests that 'Catholic identity and belief [that] have become privatised, individualised and, therefore, plural' (2008, p. 150).

Bartlett's intellectualism (as well as his political and theological acumen, he has a Ph.D in economics, and is a Nobel Laureate in economics) informs rather than problematises his Catholicism. By contrast, Tom (34) refers to 'our very strong anti-intellectual streak', saying that in contemporary politics, 'the Taoiseach's nearly too common, do you know what I mean? Not common in a bad way, but maybe too accessible'. He elaborates :

If you look at the Irish system, the Christian Brothers were teaching the well-to-dos, education for education's sake, and the rest of them got taught how to dig a fucking road, do you know what I mean? And that was that. That anti-intellectual thing again, it comes from a colonial thing... that we don't want to be seen as too lofty, do you know what I mean? It's like what happened in America with Bush, it was like, 'oh well he can speak our language!' But with Sorkin I always think the idea was, is that necessarily a good thing in politics?

Thus far, what emerges is an over-arching good/bad dualism which unsurprisingly depicts feelings about Irish politics in strongly antipathetic terms; optimism for Irish politics is almost entirely absent and respondents appear to relate this problematic to Ireland's history. What is also strikingly persistent, though, is the significance of morality, which is idealised in their discussions of goodness in *The West Wing*. Respondents want to be 'good people', but this is expressed in individualised terms. The significance of good and bad, framed, as in respondent discourse, in terms of

morality and socio-history, problematises the assumption of a universal, disembedded self, freed from the underpinnings of traditional identity formation.

#### 7.4 Fandom, transitional space and transitional objects.

What also emerges is that respondents conceptualise *The West Wing* as an object that has a functional use in relation to their understanding of politics, though of note is that ‘politics’ appears to be spoken about in a very abstract sense, rather than in reference to local or specific policies, issues or political machinations. For example, Ciaran (23), despite the fact that he has ‘just no interest whatsoever’ in Irish politics, says he understood the 2008 American election because of his familiarity with *The West Wing*:

[A]nd I mean, by understood it, I understood literally how the votes were tallied and stuff like the electoral college. I remember looking at the 2004 one [election] and thinking, ‘why is Chicago more important than Iowa, or why is New England more important, or New Hampshire? And I understood parts of that after watching *The West Wing*.

A number of respondents referred reflexively to the way that *The West Wing* consolidated an already ‘political’ self-identity. Patrick (39), for example, says that it has ‘actually had a very positive effect on my understanding of the political process’ while also allowing that ‘I would consider myself to be fairly political – personally speaking – with very particular political views’ and that ‘this series played right into that’. Una (36) also refers to her ‘insider’ status. She studied politics at university and therefore ‘knew how politics, how the structures worked’. She says, ‘I was drawn to it [*The West Wing*] because I knew it was all that kind of insider stuff, *The Thick of It*, all of those, I love them. *Love* them. And they’re all kind of behind closed doors stuff.’ Leon (43) says that ‘a friend of mine who was from the States basically said ‘you gotta see this thing, this is absolutely brilliant’. Leon is ‘kind of involved in political parties here’ and the appeal of *The West Wing* for him was that ‘you get to see the nitty gritty of compromise and negotiations and how things work’.

In this sense, these fans’ articulations about *The West Wing* (as especially personified in President Bartlet) can be considered as an object invested with feelings and ‘played with’ in a space that bridges the inner imaginative world and the external real world, a space which corresponds strikingly with Winnicott’s conceptualisation of ‘potential space’ or ‘transitional space’, as discussed in Chapter Two. During interviews, respondents were at pains to acknowledge the fictional status of *The West Wing*, though

equally aware of its status as simulacrum (and even as hyper-real) given various real life/fictional correspondences. Echoing Skeggs's proposition that television programmes allow us 'to construct a spurious relationship between *cause, affect and effect*' (2009, p. 74), the respondents in this study were willing to engage with the researcher in the creation of a discursive space in which very real feelings about politics were discussed in the context of a fictional (and finished) television drama. This relationship was not unproblematic for fans, though; their awareness of the fact that *The West Wing*, ultimately, is 'just' a television show emerged consistently. I suggest that the various intertextual and hyper-real references that exist in connection with *The West Wing* served to partially mitigate these concerns; knowledge and discussion of these elements by respondents also further underscoring their cultural capital. The similarities between *The West Wing's* storyline in which fictional presidential candidate Matt Santos successfully runs for office and the real life US presidential campaign of current US President, Barack Obama were frequently noted. Tom (34) for example, says 'you probably hear this thousands of times but the Santos and Obama campaigns nearly mirrored each other. Like, anyone who watched *The West Wing*, that's all we thought of, like we were all going, "Jesus, this has come to *life!*"' Ciaran (23) refers to this too when he talks about watching 'a Latino man trying to go for the presidency' and 'then you know, seeing that kind of reflected in real life when the Obama campaign came along was just like 'Jesus'!' Tom similarly refers to the hyper-real notion of 'real life as text' when he says:

It's an interesting thing, myself and my friend would talk a little bit about this, that fiction sometimes gets us ready for what's going to come. And writers are, I always think, just a little bit ahead of us.

Anthony (49) says 'if Martin Sheen walked in here right now, people would know and refer to him almost as President Bartlet'. Levin Russo (2009) maintains that *The West Wing's* 'interfaces with reality' are consolidated by its 'quality' status. It could also be said that this awareness enables respondents to orient themselves and their self-reflexive knowledge of such issues as evidence of further 'goodness'. Tom (34) says:

I think a good writer can see it. They can see what's happening, they can hear people talking. I know a lot of writers would say they look at people. People get ready. It's nearly paving the way. *Star Trek* did it, the first interracial kiss, do you know what I mean? It's because they're looking, they're knowing, they're trying to put out an idea. It could just be mystical, and I don't

mean that in a hippie way, but it's like there's something in the ether that they're dragging on, that they can kind of feel coming on, do you know what I mean? And I think, as I said, it nearly paves the way for people to get used to it. [...] We get the fiction and then it sets us up for what's actually to come.

Leon (43), too, states that he is 'a firm believer, a firm believer, in the notion that ideas generate their own reality, right?' For him, then, the 'created ideas' are 'ideas that can have a very, very real impact on our lives'. Leon states that

There's no ontological question, further back, 'oh does it really exist, or is it just makey-uppy?' Yeah, it is makey-uppy *and* it exists. It exists because we've made it up.

For Leon *The West Wing* is 'far more than entertainment', saying 'it appealed to a generation of its time, to say that politics could be done for the good' and tapped into what he describes as 'a yearning' for 'a breath of fresh air that appealed to something' not just in America, but also in England and Ireland:

And I wouldn't discount that Obama is a product of *The West Wing*. Not just that Obama in some ways reminds us of *The West Wing*, but he's a *product* of *The West Wing*. I can see Obama sitting down and watching *The West Wing* years ago and going "that's the way I want to be president, that's the way I want my White House to work".

Woodward's suggestion that the conceptual framework of object relations (particularly, Winnicott's transitional object and 'third space' concept) might fruitfully be applied to fan consumption practices; 'conceptualizing them as a process of objectified imaginative elaboration and self-transformation, as suggested by object-relations theory' (2011, p. 367). It is this ability of transitional phenomena to enable movement out of subjectivity and into the real world, while holding onto aspects of both, that is of particular significance for this study.

Triebenbacher (1997) underscores the use of transitional objects and transitional phenomena to reduce anxiety. In the case of *The West Wing*, the space is further complexified by its hyperreal position. In American culture itself, 'the President' occupies a particularly symbolic place in the 'imaginary', with signifying functions<sup>34</sup>. This notion has occupied political and cultural scholarship variously, with notions of the

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<sup>34</sup> Martin Sheen might also be said to occupy a position in the imaginary of these Irish fans due to his multiple connections with Ireland, popular culture, social and political activism (he has described himself as a 'radical Catholic').

President as political spectacle (Edelman 1998), as rhetorically significant (Tulis, 1987) and in discussion of the semiotic function of the presidency, whose signifying forms can be linked to the practices of everyday life (Norton 1993). Diane Rubenstein also claims that there is a dialogue between president and citizen which is both representational but also operational (2008, p. 6). Rubenstein states that we can see this type of transference clearly in popular culture (certainly in the context of *The West Wing* there are clear intertextual references to JFK era politics, but also the hyper-real references to the Obama presidential election campaign in 2008). In Harrington and Bielby's Winnicottian analysis of soap opera fans, they note that the ludic 'key pleasure' of their fans is 'rooted in activities that allow individuals to challenge the boundaries between internal and external realities' (1995, p. 133). To this I would add that self-referentially 'quality' play which adds 'knowledge' to the ludic aspects must be considered for this study. Correspondingly, *The West Wing*, though fictional, can be said for various reasons to occupy a nexus between myth and reality which has fed into its status, both generally, as a quality fan text and specifically, for these fans at this particular time. As Julie Levin Russo says, *The West Wing* is 'a fictional show' with all the formal and narrative trappings of non-fiction, but one that 'thematizes the precariousness of this very border' (2009).

Promises are not necessarily actualised, though, and such limitations are alluded to by a number of respondents. Leon (43)<sup>35</sup>, for example, asks whether the 'sense of alright' imparted by *The West Wing*, might obscure a less palatable reality:

There would be times when I would be at meetings, at political party meetings, where you know, you're stuck in the most mundane and inane conversations, you know, at a local party level, you want to be thinking of lofty thoughts and the economy and stuff like that, but it generally gets down to, you know, some guy takes up an entire meeting with something on the agenda, because he got given a ticket and he's against pay parking in the town, and it's not about a larger discussion about the importance of pay parking, it's about 'I got a fucking ticket!', you know what I mean? And there are times when I get up and I say a few words and I'm thinking to myself, even as I'm saying them, "that's a fucking 'West Wing' moment", you know what I mean? [laughs]. Is it, though, in the end of the day, just sophism? Is it, in the most pejorative sense? Is it the skill of the words? Now, words are hugely important but of course

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<sup>35</sup> At the time of interview, Leon was a member of the Labour Party, though he subsequently let me know he had resigned from the party.

sophism, in its perjorative sense, denotes a silky skill with oratory that has no substance.

For Leon, that ‘sense of alright’ (which is a classically correct description of the soothing function of the transitional and transformational object) reveals ‘an extraordinarily uncomfortable truth about the nature of democracy’ which is that ‘we get the governments we deserve’. He states that:

One of the pains in the arse about democracy, a true democracy, a functioning democracy is that it demands our participation. And most people don’t want to participate. The vast majority of people don’t want to participate but are quite comfortable in taking a sense of something every four years and then saying “away ye go, you look after it”.

Anthony too identifies a difference between words and deeds when he says that ‘armchair politics’ leaves real life politics:

[I]n the doldrums, this is the sad part. The sad part is they have an expectancy and they also have a sort of idealistic image and because it doesn’t reach that high level of optimism, it’s like “screw it, just leave it there, it’s nothing to do with me”.

When this issue emerged in interview, Hannah engaged with this reflectively. Asked if she would describe herself as political, Hannah says:

Funny, I’ve actually been thinking about this a bit since you asked me to talk to you. If you asked that on the street I would say, ‘yes, I have some very strong ideas about politics’, but when I think about what that actually means... I feel a bit... hypocritical. I mean, it’s been a real effort for me to get out and vote in the last few years. As in, sometimes I haven’t bothered.

Hannah (in her thirties) goes on to identify herself as ‘a classic ‘do what I say, not what I do’ person. She calls herself ‘really hypocritical’ as on the one hand she says ‘it all feels a bit futile, and I know that’s part of the problem, people like me not caring enough to even vote sometimes’ while on the other she says, ‘I mean I watch *The West Wing* and I think I would *love* a job like that, and I can see why they are all so passionate about it, and committed, and it’s about making the best of the world rather than just all the awful things that you associate with politics.’ When asked how her awareness of this hypocrisy makes her feel about herself, Hannah replies that it makes her feel ‘guilt’. Significantly, these articulations correspond to Christopher Bollas’s (1987) extension of Winnicott’s ‘transitional object’ by associating it with the capacity for self-transformation (the ‘transformational object’). Woodward succinctly relates the

notion of the ‘transformational object’ to issues of consumption when he says that ‘consuming things – or searching for them – becomes a search for a type of promise to be transformed by engagements with objects. This search therefore becomes a search for the sacred object – for that which allows us to transcend the profane, everyday or prosaic’ (Woodward 2011, p. 377).

In this sense, *The West Wing* as fan and transformational object holds the ‘capacity for self-transformation’, or more significantly, the *promise* of self-transformation, whether achieved normatively or not. As Ian Woodward states, ‘what matters are the fundamental promises made by an object to aid self-transformation’ (2011, p. 376):

The key aspect of the transitional object which is retained is thus its association with a promise of self-transformation – a productive alteration of a person’s physical and mental state.

(Woodward 2011, p. 376/7).

As confirmation of achieved, imminent or probable self-transformation, then, the overall ‘play’ of these fans points to ‘good’ object-seeking and practice. Niall (23) says ‘you’re kind of thinking, like, if *I* was there, this is what I would do, you know? I *want* to be that person.’ Hence the key point is that *The West Wing* and more specifically these respondents’ fandom of it, becomes a signifier of intent, of capacity, or ‘promise’. In other words, it functions as transitional object. In this function, it enables the confirmation of distinction of these respondents as ‘good’; albeit variously as a display and confirmation of political/capital culture. Following Winnicott and Bollas, then, the space in which these respondents practice their fandom is one in which they can display, engage with and discursively articulate a model of political behaviour which does not in effect *have* to materialise as its ‘promise’ is enough.

## **7.5 Transposing values into political logic.**

This small scale study makes no claims to be generalisable, but, following Bassey, I would like to suggest its relatability (1981) by considering its findings against a bigger picture. In one sense, respondents’ definition of political corresponds to that of ‘inert force’ or display of ‘passive dissent’ (Clarke 1991, p. 42). I have already discussed how the political disposition that emerges appears to be connected to discourses and imaginaries about Ireland’s colonial history. Further, I suggest that this disposition is also contextualised by global forces. Nikolas Rose has argued that neoliberalism has risen alongside a conceptual shift in the way we regard modern citizenship. In this shift,

the figure of the enterprising individual and self-governing citizen dominate along with the devolution of social and political responsibilities from the state to the individual ‘consumer-citizen’. Paul Du Gay describes the existence of an ‘enterprise culture’ as ‘one in which certain enterprising qualities – such as self-reliance, personal responsibility, boldness [...] are regarded as human virtues and promoted as such’ (1996, p. 56). Given this, an individualist understanding of consumption is unsurprising. Lewis (2008) also draws attention to

[A] broader model of selfhood, an ethical or moral model emphasizing the role of personal and domestic lifestyle management as a site of pleasure and responsibility. This conflation of lifestyle choice with responsibility sees a growing connection between the self, the home, and the everyday, on the one hand, and more public, community-based concerns, on the other, with the personal aspirations of the self-improving lifestyle consumer being refigured as those of citizen

(Lewis 2008, p. 13).

Moreover, the ‘enterprising and self-governing citizen’ that Rose speaks of is also one for whom cultural individualism is prioritised and then conflated with other ‘goods’. In this, respondents’ fandom increasingly figures as cultural citizenship, the framing of such cultural/ethical/economic individualism being the logical extension of the neo-liberal idea of the primacy of the individual over the collective (O’Neill 2010). Morrison suggests that in the absence of a ‘shared moral logic’, moral appeal is replaced by appeals to taste and individual consumption preferences (p. 120). Here, what emerges is a clear sense of conflation or blurring amongst the notions of political, moral and cultural capital. Morrison suggests that in the absence of a ‘shared moral logic’, moral appeal is replaced by appeals to taste, individual preferences of consumptions (p. 120). Therefore, as Sean (24) describes it, watching his favoured programmes is almost like an achievement, ‘it’s like you get to knock it off and say, “I’ve seen this, and this, and this”’.

Where respondents do not possess ‘insider’ political knowledge or confidence, then, they are able to articulate their ‘insiderness’ as fans, as quality fans, as cultural and indeed global citizens. As Miller says, ‘the dominant interpellation is about learning to govern the self through orderly preparation, style and pleasure’ (2007, p. 143). Niall (23) underscores this when he says that ‘one of the things that turned me on to the show, you know, liberal isn’t a bad word, and neither is smart. And it’s kind of like true of television as well, you know, it’s almost like a commentary on politics *and* television at



the same time'. Increasingly, then, reflexivity itself is being marked out as a set of acquirable skills and a commodity (Wee and Brooks 2010, p. 47). This can be seen in the increasing significance of media as a form of social classification, such that Vitellone contends that the habitus is increasingly the subject of cultural production (2004). As such, the quality cultural, or 'conscious consumption' (Willis and Schor 2012) and fandom exercised by these respondents become figured as an increasingly significant aspect of what Varul refers to as 'the moral grammars of larger social contexts' (2009, p. 2)..

However, while de Certeau (1984) speaks of the tactical capabilities of people in their everyday practice, Baudrillard claims these assumptions become part of the new forms of domination, the commodities being consumed offer only an illusion of freedom (1984). Niall says that he '*never* had any interest in politics before', but that in the most recent election he 'definitely made a conscious effort, and I have to say it would have been on the part of *The West Wing*, yeah, I made a conscious effort to try and pay attention'. The contrast between his ambiguity relating to political ideology and his certainty regarding his 'West Wing' fandom is striking:

Yeah, definitely I would see myself if I lived in America, I would definitely see myself as a Democrat. And I would say that would be purely on the basis of *The West Wing*. Now, if they had brought out a Republican show, with a Republican West Wing, I don't know, maybe I'd have been a Republican. And in terms of transferring that over to my own life, I wasn't very political. This election that's just passed, I tried to keep my ear on the ground, but maybe if they summed it up in a forty minute episode with drama, I would have probably paid more attention to it [laughs]!

It is questionable whether Niall (23) has been persuaded by the politics or the dramatic form (and either way it is notable that Democrats and Republicans appear to be reduced to or equated with something akin to a brand), but his statement reflects the parameters of a debate in which some propose that cultural and communicative participation itself constitutes an ontological force (Bowman and Willis 2003; Blaug 2002; Micheletti and Stolle 2005 amongst others). Or as Michele Micheletti puts it, '[i]t is the message, the meaning, and the action all in one' 2006, p. 2. Others, however, talk about the 'unpolitical retreat to private life' (Beck 1997, p. 101) and question the relationship of 'conscious consumption' to political engagement and action (Willis and Schor 2012), asking ultimately whether individuals will end up 'translating whatever oppositional

discourses are generated from cultural consumption into effective and organised political resistance' (Gibson, 2000: 262).

Bourdieu's notion of habitus encompasses a complex of common ideas, concepts and schemes of perception. The analysis suggests that these respondents, following Inglis's notion of a persistent 'Catholic habitus', have constructed a particular and highly specific political habitus or logic to account culturally and psychologically for present (and past) circumstances. This, I suggest, enables what Fogarty refers to as 'tension management' between 'the old hegemony' and 'the emergence of liberalism' (1984, p. 102).

## **7.6 Conclusion**

The articulation of a particularised political logic or habitus in this chapter is particular to the specificity of the political and historic transitions in Ireland as well as to overarching global narratives. It also considers the cultural and psycho-dynamic elements of contemporary identity in a way not adequately accounted for by the extended reflexivity thesis. As such the political habitus here identified mobilises a hybrid of local and global discourses; the respondents are interpellated (and discursively position themselves) in identity terms with reference points that encompass both pre-modern and post-modern tropes – both pre-colonial child and post-modern cultural consumer in a time of transition. In their transposition of the cultural, moral and psychological into the political, the respondents might be said to be exercising a particular kind of subjective politicality perhaps aptly be described as 'cultural encounters with politics'.

The elisions between subjective politicality and cultural consumption, indeed the overt linkage between cultural consumption and notions of 'goodness' is examined in the next chapter through an examination of a particular cohort of respondents who have been directly impacted by the current uncertainty and 'crisis' in Ireland. The focus of the next chapter's analysis turns further towards specificity, engaging with young male fan respondents whose good cultural consumption is unconstrained by their personal circumstances but whose actions can nonetheless be said to correspond to discourses of the 'good' and enterprising self despite their current (and potentially future) adverse circumstances.

## Chapter Eight - The Work of Watching.

### 8.1 Introduction

During the qualitative phase of data-gathering, a number of young male fans who had been interviewed separately displayed a number of common elements, such that they came to be regarded, for analysis purposes, as a group. Firstly, despite their young age, they had in common a particularly devoted fandom of *The West Wing*, a reasonably old fan text, and a particular type of pop cultural fandom appeared to be a significant identity marker for them. Further, they were all in their twenties and college educated, though most, having left college, were unemployed and considering a return to the family home and/or college. Much in the accounts of these respondents, who had embarked on third level education prior to the recession of 2008, resonated with the newly identified 'squeezed middle' (which was announced as the Oxford English Dictionary's 2011 phrase of the year as interviews commenced) and to ICTU economist Paul Sweeney's observations that 'today's young may be the first post-war generation not to achieve a higher standard of living than their parents' (Paul Cullen, *The Irish Times*, 10.02.2012). While the interviews were based around the specificity of respondents' fandom, the broader context in which they existed and in which interviews were conducted continually impinged, either obliquely or directly, on their accounts. Therefore, this chapter examines the way these fans embed a cultural text in their lives in a very specific context. In this sense, the chapter seeks to examine the ways in which their fandom might function and be operationalised as a site of identity in a time frequently characterised as one of 'crisis'.

### 8.2 Liminality

These respondents exist in a state of 'in-betweenness', articulating a general sense of being betwixt and between (education and employment, adolescence and adulthood). These narratives are reminiscent of being on a threshold, or *limen*, the point 'where the old world has been left behind but we have not yet arrived at what is to come' (Franks and Meteyard 2007, p. 215). And conceptually, liminality<sup>36</sup> which Victor Turner refers

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<sup>36</sup>The idea was introduced to the field of anthropology in 1909 by, and is prominently associated with Arnold Van Gennep in what is regarded as his seminal work, *The Rites of Passage*. Van Gennep describes rites of passage as having a three-part structure: separation, liminal period, reassimilation. The initiate person undergoing the ritual is first stripped of the social status that

to as a state of ambiguity and disorientation in which an individual is on a threshold between a starting and ending point (1969, p. 95), characterises much about their lifeworlds. For Turner, in this temporary state the individual is a 'liminar', a figure 'neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification' (Turner 1974, p. 232). However, as Homans says: 'according to Turner, all liminality must eventually dissolve, for it is a state of great intensity that cannot exist very long without some sort of structure to stabilize it. [Either] the individual returns to the surrounding social structure [...] or else liminal communities develop their own internal social structure, a condition Turner calls 'normative communitas' (1969, pp. 131-140).

While some of these respondents have left college (though expressed the possibility of returning for further study), their student state has not dissipated, leaving them in, at least in some respects, a limbo state of being, neither adult nor child, and a shared sense of this in fraternity. Ireland itself has been characterised as a liminal nation. Luke Gibbons writes about 'the lack of historical closure [which] is bound up with a similar incompleteness in the culture itself' (1996, p. 179), corresponding strikingly with Land, Meyer and Baillie's suggestion that the state of liminality is equal to being in 'a suspended state of partial understanding, or 'stuck place', in which understanding approximates to a kind of 'mimicry' or lack of authenticity' (2010, pp. ix-xiii). Kieran Keohane makes even more specific references to the liminal in his characterisation of the Irish experience of globalisation which, he states, is characterised by a version of liminality, of 'betwixt and between', exemplified in the way that Ireland has courted and benefited from both US and European financial and cultural interventions (2005, p. 258). However, liminality in its classical understanding is temporary (Turner 1967), therefore a sense of un-ending or uncertain liminality can be regarded as unhealthy, even pathological.

Liminal aspects cross-cut a number of dimensions of respondents' lives. Firstly, this cohort historicise themselves as the last to know 'both ways': life pre- and post-Internet. As Ciaran (23) says, 'the Internet changed everything.' He says that when it came to 'watching independently, we grew up on the Internet, like when we got to around 15 or 16 years of age we were watching stuff by ourselves, away from the

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he or she possessed before the ritual, then inducted into the liminal period of transition, and finally given his or her new status and re-assimilated into society (Van Gennep 1960).

family. So we only grew up on the Internet and watched stuff like that.’ As a constant presence in their life, then, Internet culture is a liberating yet also comforting and familiar presence. Niall (23) (the only individual of this ‘group’ in employment and living away from home at the time of interview) explains: ‘when I moved to Dublin as well, I didn’t have that easy access to talk, but the guys are always online.’ The same respondent obliquely refers to a liminal, transitional space between the fictional and the real when he refers to his acquisition of ‘real life’ social skills from his fandom of television shows. He ascribes his being ‘a fairly good judge of character as well, I’d say I’m fairly good at ... I’d know how to read a person, you know? From ‘all of these different interpretations of people that I’ve seen on television shows.’ He goes on to elaborate:

So yeah, I guess it’s how I deconstruct people, is by viewing them from a safe point of my television screen. I would imagine it’s different if you’re in a relationship, because you’re spending time with that person and you’re kind of focused on that person, but I’m single and I think I would form my basis of how I socialise or deconstruct people based on ... [laughs] based on characters that aren’t real! [laughs].

Here, the transitional and liminal space of the television screen is a ‘safe point’. He assesses himself as being good at ‘reading’ people, but he is aware of the paradox of being able to ‘read’ people who ‘aren’t real’ in a ‘safe’ or stable space. Donald Winnicott characterises this as highly opportune ‘play’, or in his own words, ‘reality testing’ (1971), in which the ‘false self’ combats ‘emotional vulnerability in the face of social relations’ (Elliot 2002, p. 75). Most of this cohort made reference to their time in undergraduate study as one in which they exercised their fandom as identity marker but also the exercise of a social aspect, particularly an adolescent and fraternal liminality of ‘the lads’. As Ciaran (23) says:

Like none of us really had jobs or anything either. I think all of us kind of grew up watching television shows that were stereotypically college stuff where there was a lot of hanging around and stuff, I think this was our kind of version of that... it was almost our little fraternity.

It has been posited that Ireland has been historically (and currently) treated as infantilised nation (as explored by LP Curtis in 1971, Richard Haslam in 1999, and in more contemporary times in Helen Kelly Holmes and Veronica O’Regan’s critical discourse analysis of German press coverage of Ireland, ‘The spoilt children of Europe’

(2004)). While Turner's concept of liminality is predicated upon its temporary state, there are more recent reformulations, such as by Arpad Szokolczai who argues that 'modernity can be understood as the institutionalisation of a paradoxical condition of 'permanent liminality' (2000, p. 226 cited in Keohane 2005, p. 264). Turner himself identifies a further category, that of marginals, stating that 'marginals like liminars are also betwixt and between, but unlike ritual liminars they have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity' (1974, p. 233). These respondents may well be in a more permanent state of liminality. As such, given their liminal (between employment/unemployment, adulthood/adolescence) and potentially marginal state, their choice of fan text is perhaps significant. Sean (24) discusses *The West Wing's* 'good' aspirational and optimistic qualities:

You see, to go back to the cynicism [...] it's like, so many of the shows that you end of watching, and I again I suppose something like *The Wire*, where you end up, instead of saying you know, 'that's who I want to be', you're kind of going 'that's who I am', you know? This is the opinion I've had and it's confirming cynicism, and then with that [*The West Wing*] it's kind of like, it just felt motivating, I suppose.

This idea that fans 'perform' their identities through their engagement with texts (cf. Sandvoss 2005) might therefore be extended to include a safe place in which to perform potential or aspirant identity. Here, a variety of discourses co-mingle in their responses. For example, Ciaran (23) discusses his unemployed status, framing himself as having not a menial, but a cultural job:

I feel like if I wanted to get a more menial job, I would have done it but one of the reasons I haven't had a job is 'cause I feel like if I do get a job, I won't be able to go away on tour for a while, or something like that. You kind of need to be completely unattached if you want to be a musician. So I probably could get a job doing something, somewhere, I could if I applied myself, I mean I haven't applied myself at all.

In distancing himself from low-status employment, he identifies himself ('a musician') as a 'creative'. In this, Ciaran is not 'menial' but exemplifies one of the characteristics of change in the nature of late modern capitalism which has been the addition of both 'well paid and high status workers into this group of 'precarious workers'' (Gill and Pratt 2008, p. 2). In this 'new economy', cultural and creative industries have, more critically, been described as 'involved in forms of labour that are characterised by high degrees of autonomy, creativity and 'play', but also by overwork, casualisation and

precariousness’ (Hesmondhalgh 2010, p. 270). In this ‘brave new world of work’, workers have been characterised as ‘the poster boys and girls of the new “precariat”’ (Gill and Pratt 2008, p. 3). As Ciaran (23) says: ‘I’ve got nothing but time on my hands’, but this too is rationalised in terms of his fandom, because this ‘gives me more TV shows to watch. But even when I was in college it didn’t make a difference. I think even if I was working I’d still probably spend a lot of my day, spend it in my house, especially watching TV shows and stuff.’ The discourses that circulate around ‘creative work’, as Angela McRobbie observes, valorise a utopian message hidden in ‘the ideal of self-expressive work’ (McRobbie 2002, p. 101), this new precarious work in the new economy described by David Hesmondhalgh rather as ‘a labour of love and self exploitation’ (2010, p. 271). That this is, nonetheless, ‘labour’ suggests that these respondents’ particular fandom can also be construed as an ‘appropriate’ internalised, privately exercised response to and defence against the theme of ‘shame’ identified in cultural and public discourse in Chapter Four. What emerges so far is that in the face of general uncertainty and liminality, these fans create a dialectical space in which, ironically, the provider of at least some stability and certainty is the virtual (the Internet) and the fictional (*The West Wing*). With nothing but time on their hands, and a very uncertain future, this is hardly surprising.

### 8.3 A particular fan ‘disposition’

These fans correspond to Henry Jenkins’ contention that: ‘[t]he difference between watching a series and becoming a fan lies in the intensity of their emotional and intellectual involvement’ (1992, p. 56). Similarly, Grossberg argues that fandom constitutes an ‘affective sensibility’ (1992) and that through this, fans construct ‘mattering maps’ which relate to identity definition (or redefinition) and ‘divide the cultural world into Us and Them’ (Grossberg 1992, p. 60)<sup>37</sup>. These dimensions – social, emotional, affective and intellectual – are referenced by this respondent, Sean (24), who says:

Yeah, it’s kind of another one of these ‘them and us’ kind of, where you identify ‘your’ people and the rest of them are just ‘them’, and ‘we’re’ on the same level here, ‘those’ people aren’t. It’s ... you know, those people haven’t ... I’ve heard that

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<sup>37</sup>Grossberg also points out that fans rewrite what might be perceived as their marginal status (nerds, geeks) as socio-cultural superiority (for example one respondent says that his fandom of *The West Wing* ‘says first and foremost that I’m a nerd! [laughs]’). Grossberg describes how in some science fiction fandoms, non fans are known as “mundanes” (1992, p. 60).

thing about *The Wire* said, you know? The world is divided into people who like *The Wire*, and those who haven't seen it yet. It's sort of like that aspect. These people haven't seen *The West Wing*, they don't know what we're talking about. And then *West Wing* people, then, you sort of have an idea that you know them.

But further to their emotional and intellectual attachment, the respondents sketch out quite a particular fan habitus, the articulation of which appears quite important.

Bourdieu alludes to this when he writes that 'explicit aesthetic choices are in fact often constituted in opposition to the choices of groups closest in social space' (1984, p. 53).

Identifying as different appears to have been significant for Ciaran (23):

Like, I didn't really grow up going to clubs when I was 15 or 16 or anything like that, I grew up watching movies and stuff like that, and I suppose it's like anything, if you've got a group of friends who go to ... [...] I grew up, even to say when I was about 11 or 12 all of my friends would get together at Halloween and spend all day and all night watching horror movies and stuff.

Bourdieu has identified this too, writing that within cultures of distinction, certain types of knowledge become more highly valued, sanctioned and rewarded within that discrete culture (1979), and certainly levels of hierarchy are inscribed within fan cultures. In fact Matt Hills characterises fan culture as both community *and* hierarchy (2002). Sean (24) refers to a 'pecking order' of value here:

At a weird level it's sort of like, I always feel like I'm... like there's a caste system where like you know, I watched it afterwards, and I watched it all in one burst, whereas people who watched it right from the start, they're like 'no, no, you don't know what it was like to be there, you've got nothing on us, we're real fans!', you know what I mean?

So for Sean, there is an almost romanticised value that attaches to watching *The West Wing* in its original broadcast run and context (which is of note given its 'old' text status) and even a value given to the way the text is consumed. Sean continues this line, implicitly elevating his own fan-as-critic status given that he was too young to watch the original broadcast run, when he says:

Though I think in some cases that kind of ... that kind of made us harsher on the programme maybe, because... because it was so much easier to come by that you weren't as thankful.

Bourdieu's theorisations are criticised for their historical and cultural specificity and their generalisations (Fiske 1992). However, his work has been advanced by more



contemporary scholars (such as Fiske 1992; McNay 2000,; Adkins and Skeggs 2004) particularly in relation to how the processes of distinction articulate in different social spaces. So in their articulation of a particular fan habitus, these respondents demonstrate their ability to push the elasticity of what is normatively defined (and critically accepted) as ‘good taste’. Rather, they actively construct themselves instead as ironic, quality fans. In this, their definition of quality extends beyond the normal and critically endorsed parameters of a taste culture that dictates which programmes that are worthy of their fandom. For example, Ciaran (23) says:

Well I wouldn’t really call myself a quality fan, I mean I like bad stuff [laughs]. But I mean I *actively* like bad stuff. So it’s almost... some things I like ironically.

In this, there is a clear positioning against the cultural politics of elite tastemakers. However, their positioning as such is consolidated by their own definition of ‘taste’, in effect, constituting a cultural politics of its own. For these respondents, then, there is a knowingness that corresponds with Sam Friedman’s identification of a cultural currency that transcends a binary of good or bad culture, but rests in the manner in which they are appreciated (20011, p. 359). For example Steven says:

Em ... I wouldn’t say in any way I’d be elitist in what I watch. But then again I have very little patience for what I see as banal film or banal television or tripe TV. I don’t watch much modern programmes, what I watch are things like Seinfeld. For some reason I like a lot of Jewish humour! Cynical, kind of black humour.

Suzanne Scott (2011) emphasises the superficially ‘collaborationist’ approach in her study of fans, in particular fan spaces (specifically, the increasingly significant use of fan conferences by industry as promotional space) and especially identifies the ‘gendered tensions’ that underpin this approach to fans which, she suggests, has resulted in the privileging of the position of fanboys (as opposed to fan girls) within that space. Here we can see that ‘fanboyness’ has both a positive but also male connotation when Ciaran (23) says:

I don’t think it would really be the same kind of vibe if there were girls there [laughs]. [Why?]. “I don’t think we’d be watching Blaxploitation films and stuff. Especially with action movies and stuff like that. I don’t really have any girlfriends who have the attention span or fanboyness to sit down and watch something for a few hours.

For these fans, there are also good practical reasons for adopting a television fandom: television drama, unlike films, is produced to be consumed in a domestic space. Further, the relatively short duration of a television hour makes it a manageable download, potentially also free if illegally accessed. For this group of respondents, their subversion of media industries in illegal downloading is a display of their ability, but one which induces some guilt (Ciaran (23), for example, says that illegal downloading is ‘the one thing that I do have a mild conscience about as well sometimes’). However, the same respondent mitigates this guilt by emphasising the ‘good’ cultural objects in his ‘mattering map’. Here, his illegal acquisition of television programmes is rationalised because it frees up money to spend on other ‘good’ cultural objects.

I’ve found since I stopped buying DVDs that I’ve been buying books a lot more, and since I stopped buying CDs I’ve gone out and bought vinyl a lot more. I mean, I haven’t stopped spending my money on stuff, I’ve just spent it in a different way.

Sconce discusses a ‘paracinematic’ audience, largely consisting of white, male, disaffected, middle class youth, stating that ‘as the alienated faction of a social group high in cultural capital, the paracinematic audience generates distinction within its own social space by celebrating the cultural objects deemed most noxious (low-brow) to their taste culture as a whole’ (1995, p. 371). While not ‘trash’ or ‘noxious’ (in Sconce’s terminology) these respondents do display a taste culture in their fandom which emphasises an ironic knowingness. In this it corresponds to Jim Collins’ (1995) reference to a hyperconsciousness in spectators, whose interpretation contains a meta-discursive, ironic component, which I suggest can be seen in these respondents and which bestows further cultural currency. Sean (24) says:

Yeah, you see I think that was so true and that was one of the things that definitely turned me on to the show, you know, liberal isn’t a bad word, and neither is smart. And it’s kind of like true of so much television as well, you know, it’s almost like a commentary on politics and television at the same time. You’re playing to the stupid person, or you’re playing to the person who can’t follow things.

Groves refers to telephilia as ‘a loyalty to television as an art form that parallels the intense devotion to film present in cinephilia’ (2004). However, their telephilia also speaks to the fact that some television competes with, or possibly even replaces, cinema as a ‘good’ cultural object. Therefore it is associated with a range of ‘good’ fan

pleasures. As one respondent says ‘you see the thing is, I like so much television, so I mean there are very few television series that are just television series. I kind of associate a lot with them.’ The ‘goodness’ and high cultural capital of television writing and drama is further reinforced by Ciaran (23):

I think the best writing is in TV. It’s more like reading, and it’s more like, I suppose, reading a book than reading a short story, and you get more invested in the characters and that’s really what you want.

Therefore, *The West Wing* as exemplar of a quality text is one which clearly operationalises its ‘quality’ credentials in its interpellation of its fans as not just regular fans, but quality fans. The changing landscape of television, particularly as it paralleled the rise of quality TV, led to a situation in which fans were targeted, as Brower (1992) states, as ‘tastemakers: viewers for quality television’. In their specific fandom then, the particular qualities of *The West Wing* and the ability to appreciate them, mark these fans out. Note Sean’s (24) reference to its ‘auteur’ status at the end:

At the same time, though, it’s kind of like, and this is going to sound so snobby, you know when you have a person who’s like, a chef, or whatever? And like, if you’re going out with them you wouldn’t even dream of, like ‘let’s just go into McDonalds and get a burger’. Or wine snobs, they say ‘I will not drink that, there is no way I’m drinking that. I will not drink any fucking merlot!’ [laughs] It’s the same kind of thing. I won’t, I mean, I will not sit down and watch, I don’t know, *Fade Street*, or one of those kind of things. It’s just not happening, I have too much self respect to watch [laughs], or *Hollyoaks* or any of that, I’m not watching that! And so there is a kind of a snobbery there, but those shows just feel like they’re putting in time, and I feel so much that where there’s something with a meaning behind it, where the guy [Aaron Sorkin] has something to say and he’s not putting in time.

That the untypical characteristics of *The West Wing* as fan text have a cachet for these young male fans is echoed in their intense fan relationship with Aaron Sorkin, the show’s creator and chief writer for its first four seasons, as ‘auteur’ (their identification and discussion of him not just as writer but as ‘auteur’ itself a display of their distinction and discrimination as fans). The construction and valorisation of ‘writer as auteur’ in both US and British television drama culture can be traced to the frequently theatrical lineage of the early television drama writers, leading to a privileging of the authorial voice of the ‘television playwright’ (cf Brandt 1993). Sorkin also qualifies in this regard; his own background being in musical theatre. He graduated from Syracuse

University in 1983 as a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Musical Theatre and inserted frequent references to musical theatre, especially to the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, in his ‘authored’ episodes of *The West Wing*). The significance of not just the consumption of the text, but the added function of critique is discussed by Steven (24):

Cause, you know, there is a pleasure in kind of knowing what’s happening and seeing the twists again and following the full implications of it, it’s a good programme in that respect in that it’s not one linear narrative following, which is very simplistic, so you can see it’s a programme which in certain ways it’s very classical storytelling. I think Aaron Sorkin did have previous experience in playwrighting, you can *see* the theatre in there. Instead of aiming at gritty realism, which rings very, very false, I find, rings with cliches and derivative storylines, it aims at an ideal version of reality, what reality should be given the proper conditions.

Niall (23) also refers to Sorkin’s auteur status, saying, ‘I think he’s such a great writer. I think he’s such a great *auteur* as well. I mean mostly you have other film directors that have that persona, and I think Aaron Sorkin is probably the only one in television.’ Despite the fact that Sorkin did not write on the show after its first four years (and perhaps even more so as his departure was widely believed to be due to a difference of creative opinion between Sorkin and the studio), his ownership of its perspective and sensibility is emphasised by Ciaran (23):

It’s his show, they’re his characters. I think he almost has this kind of anti-hero status among screenwriters and television writers. But I do like him. I like him because he’s a dickhead. I don’t think I’d like to be around him but he has the persona of he doesn’t really care. You know, he’s doing stuff because he has to do it. Like, and he has this whole persona of being his own worst enemy at times, do you know what I mean? He is an alcoholic, he’s a drug addict, and stuff like that, but he’s got all these endearing qualities as well. Like, most guys who are alcoholics and drug addicts, they don’t write TV shows. And especially, they don’t write *brilliant* TV shows. And it’s almost like he’s the writer’s writer. And he’s the fanboy’s writer.

This enables a narcissistic self-reflective construction of a particular fan and taste culture which marks these fans out as untypical but essentially good. As discussed previously, both Sorkin and *The West Wing* (which he says he wrote as ‘a valentine to public service’ (Sorkin 2000)) have been critically revered but also criticised. As an example, referring to Sorkin, Alex Pareene writes of ‘the increasingly unpleasant superiority complex of America’s most prominent liberal screenwriter’ (Pareene 2012).

Julie Levin Russo employs a similarly dismissive tone in her assessment of *The West Wing* as:

A paragon of what's colloquially termed "quality television," it is known demographically for its liberal, educated audience; formally for its high production values and luscious, cinematic visual style, extraordinary acting by an all-star ensemble cast, and fast-paced, cerebral dialogue; and narratively for "educationally" offering "a realistic, behind-the-scenes peek" into the inner workings of government. In other words, the program's "quality" status evokes a complex of overlapping and often conflicting interfaces with reality. Its supposed "superiority" inheres in its "realistic" depiction of politics, but the fact that it goes "behind-the-scenes" marks politics itself as already spectacular rather than real. By a circular logic, it is also considered realistic because of its superiority: the didactic value of presenting intelligent, nuanced explorations of timely civic debates gives it a patina of sober authenticity.

(Levin Russo 2009, para 3.)

There is a narcissistic orientation in this fan relationship too, as this respondent says: it's almost like you're on the same level, it's like, he's talking to me! [laughs] I get this guy! Yeah!' Sean (24) says:

Well I mean you're so aware of the fact of Sorkin's involvement and it's so kind of, you know, you could read a Sorkin script almost, compared to an *ER* script, you'd almost know that back and forth, the humour, and everything that went as soon as Sorkin went. And I think that being aware of that it's sort of hard to distance it from being Sorkin's own presence, these kind of 'auteurs', I suppose, that's kind of what differentiates it.

In this sense there is a self reflexivity present in both the medium and in the fans' reception of it. The respondents identify a pleasure in their fandom, but also in their reflexive critical faculties, they are knowing fans with sufficient cultural capital to construct and identify a specific, hyperconscious, 'smart' cultural currency. There is a 'distinction' in the Bourdieuan sense of their capability to discuss Sorkin as auteur. In this sense, Sean might be said to be 'performing' class in terms of his cultural consumption, of claiming and performing cultural mobility in a way not possible now (or in the future) in terms of his economic mobility.

Fiske, referring to the productive work of fandom, identifies its semiotic and enunciative productivity (1992 pp. 37-39)<sup>38</sup>. For these respondents, this fan productivity, evidenced in the function of their critique of the programme, appears particularly significant (as one says: 'there is the watching of it, then the deconstructing of it'; another states, 'I kind of analyse everything'). In his 'against the critical grain'

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<sup>38</sup>*The West Wing* itself privileges the notion of the enunciative through its quality dialogue and 'agonistic discourse' (cf Chambers 2001).

analysis of *The West Wing*, then, this respondent demonstrates his hyperconscious, enunciative and semiotic fan productivity. Steven (24) says:

So I think in *The West Wing*, beyond Aaron Sorkin's intelligence I think that you can see the falsity of liberal capitalism altogether, you can see it as idealistic, as inherently contradictory, but it's what happens behind the scenes of it. You can see... for example, again, you have to place in the context of American politics rather than of European politics, for example in America, communism is a very dirty word, it doesn't have a history of it, it is very much a country built on a very blatant idealism. That idealism I think, almost despite itself, is lampooned in *The West Wing*.

So, an 'easy' reading of *The West Wing* is undermined here by Steven's display of his ability to exercise a critically reflexive decoding (to use Hall's terminology). In this he displays his ability to decode a negotiated or even oppositional rather than a dominant, hegemonic reading (cf. Hall 1980).

It's a programme that's a very easy programme to watch, it's only when you think about it, and I think if anything it's a testament to the depth of writing that goes on in the programme, it's structured in such a way that it allows for these double readings and that's a testament to the writing, it's a testament to the directing, it's a testament to the 'gestalt' of the programme.

These respondents operationalise a particular ('distinct') cultural hierarchy allowing them to operate as a viewer/subject who, as Levin Russo says, 'can occupy contradictory positions simultaneously (for example, the position of critical distance and that of capitalist dupe, of "irony" and "involvement"), who navigates the murky borderlands between (not definitively inside or outside) dichotomous terms' (Russo 2009, para 8). Their choice of *The West Wing* as a 'borderland' fan text, and the articulation of a somewhat 'borderland' fan habitus, is therefore not that surprising as it offers 'distinction' as fans as well as from the other fans and critics who don't 'get it'. However, of note is that despite the emphasis placed on the ability to critique, the level of criticism on display centres around the formal and critical qualities of the TV show and its auteur, rather than any allusions or links that might be made between their fandom of a political television drama and to the structural and economic, political conditions which so clearly impact their everyday lives and future prospects. This at least partially corresponds with Levin Russo's concern about 'the ways that TV's (often smug and self congratulatory) self-reflexivity serves the economic interests of the media industry – precisely by rewarding viewers with the pleasurable sensation of their own

knowingness and media savvy' (2009, para 8): the value placed on individual (and entrepreneurial) fandom as cultural currency figures highly for these respondents. Next, the industrious efforts of these respondents in the practice of their fandom will be discussed, which can aptly be described as labour, a job of work, though with few of the traditional associations of 'real' work.

#### **8.4 The labour of fandom (and the making of marginality?)**

Messerschmidt, working in the field of masculinities, contends that young men 'situationally accomplish public forms of masculinity in response to their socially structured circumstances' (1993, p. 119). While Messerschmidt's focus is on the way that deviance and crime can serve as a resource for 'doing' masculinity where other resources are unavailable, his contention finds correspondence in the articulations of these young male respondents. Note the intent in Niall's (23) statement that:

We had done all of our movies and you know movies are standalone and you can let it go with that, but we were like, "well, we'll put a long term investment in here, we'll start a series".

The idea of 'investing' in what you watch (a quality drama series) is significant too, and is framed discursively by the respondent in terms of 'moving on' from the implied simplicity of a standalone film and an engagement with a longer form, complex narrative. The phrase 'long term investment' implies that there will be, at some stage, a return of some sort. This echoes Phil Cohen's contention that 'the traditional ideology of production, the so-called work ethic which centred on the idea that a man's dignity, his manhood even, was measured by the quantity or quality of his effort in production' (1972, p. 45). This effort, as Sean explains, bestows a sense of 'achievement':

So it's that kind of... it's almost like an achievement, it's like you get to knock it off and say 'I've seen this and this and this', and it's like the way I suppose people who read a lot have a list of books that they've read, and it's kind of like, 'I'll put them up on the bookshelf' and there's a sense of achievement about it! I get a sense of achievement out of doing a series and then, you know, knowing about it.

The notion of earning through working is also located, for Sean (24), in the text itself. Sean professes himself to be very cynical as a person. When asked why such an optimistically themed show appealed to him, he says:

I don't know, I mean I think it was the way that they had it done. They did it *so*, I mean, it's not like you were watching propaganda, where it was easy. It seemed like there was thought put into it and it seemed, like, *earned*.

The use of the word 'earned' here must be framed in the fact that Sean (24) is unemployed, though college educated. If not working in the traditional understanding, then these respondents consistently apply the same principles of industriousness, of labour in their approach to fandom and the consumption of a fan text. For example, Niall (23) says that once he started watching:

I couldn't stop, I couldn't stop. Once I started I really couldn't stop. I think I blasted through... there's seven seasons with, what, twenty two minimum episodes in each one, but I kind of got whisked away once I started on those first four episodes with the guys, my friend pretty much had to give me his box set and I just kind of blasted through them, and we'd meet up every now and again and watch them again. But I think, the turnover! [...] I think for the seven seasons I must have done it in three or four months, you know, back to back. So I just kind of shut myself in a lot of the time. And when you go home, it's not like you can watch one episode [...] so forty minutes becomes three hours very easily, when it's four episodes in and it's two o'clock in the morning and you haven't slept a wink and you realise that you just have to put your head down and start it all again the following morning.

For Niall, the 'turnover' is an achievement. The 'binge' style consumption (greed is good) was discussed in the previous chapter. However, what is equally fascinating is that these respondents do articulate some level of guilt that their 'good industrious' media consumption is facilitated by illegal downloads. Ciaran (23) says, 'but you see that's one thing that I do have kind of a mild conscience about as well sometimes'. But as he says: 'if something is affordable, there's no reason not to [pay for it], but if that DVD came out released by HBO it would be 15 or 20. [...] CDs, 15 or 20? Like, 15 euros for an album? When there's 12 songs on it, or something like that. Makes no sense.' Ciaran offers an interesting rationale for his knowingly illegal actions, though. Firstly, he says that he does 'wonder where TV is going to start getting their money from. I suppose most of their money is from American advertisers anyway and it airs in America first and people there are still going to be watching it on TV over there.' However, he says it's not like here where 'we literally have a culture now of downloading your TV show and watching it, they don't have it there because it airs there first, they get to watch it as it airs.' For Ciaran, this 'culture' is just an extension



or a newer version of a ‘subversive’ tendency that has always existed in Ireland. On this note he recalls:

You have a pirate culture here, where even going back to when I was small we’d get a video tape, there’d be a guy in a red van, driving around your housing estate and giving you your video tapes. And it was the same in every housing estate, I’d say. And six months before a movie comes out in the cinema here, you’d get the video.

Further, while downloading material owned by big companies is perceived as fair game, perhaps even as a strategic expression of subversion, Ciaran says that ‘the only cds I do buy now are from local bands or independent artists or at some of the gigs or stuff like that.’

However, Ciaran’s articulations also reflect broader contemporary theorisations. As Gray, Sandvoss and Harrington point out, in the contemporary media landscape, the ‘fan’ is newly wooed (2007), or as Ryan Milner describes it: ‘producers of media texts (the organizations that create, develop and manage a media text) are fast recognizing the value of courting niche groups of productive consumers’ (2012, p. 2). On the one hand, ‘productive consumers’ implies the pleasure, agency and activity that undoubtedly exists in the practice of fandom. However, Tiziana Terranova describes such ‘free labor’ in a digital culture as ‘an important, yet unacknowledged, source of value in advanced capitalist societies’ (2004, p. 73). Milner’s research reveals how fans perceive their own labour contributions to the text; Milner concludes that ‘fans view uncompensated labor as a foregone conclusion’, and that ‘fans were more loyal to the text than the organization producing it’ (2009, p. 491).

David Hesmondhalgh refers to the ‘the variable ways in which people respond to alienation by seeking out cultural production’ (2010, p. 275). Sean (24) has been at ‘a bit of a loose end’ since finishing college. He discusses how, when he was finishing up in college:

everybody was sort of ,“what are you going to do now?” and people were talking about continuing on and doing this kind of academic stuff, and *honestly*, from watching *The West Wing*, I felt sort of sidelined. You know, my interests have always been television and film and things and I kind of felt that those were *so* inconsequential. You know, I was thinking, you know, I’d love to be Josh walking around and wittily debate things [laughs], and say things like “no, you can’t do that because congress would...” [laughs].

What is notable for these respondents is that they don't want to be deviant, they want to do something good, to do so something consequential, to paraphrase Sean. Their practice of fandom (industrious, technologically and culturally savvy) is in every way more concerned with engaging in 'good' conduct, in fact their behaviour is in fact highly connected to ideas about being 'good' (as fans, people and citizens). Obliquely, then, these respondents illuminate a very contemporary debate centred around the 'labour' of fandom. Skeggs (2005) asserts that in dominant social theory, notions of the subjective self are:

premiered around a self that can accrue value to itself, a self that can, through acquiring culture, through acquiring the right practices and through acquiring the right knowledge, make itself into a good, respectable, future orientated self.

(Skeggs, 2005, para. 5)

Further, Taylor argues that we exist in a 'politics of recognition' (1994), though Skeggs, in response, enquires, 'who can inhabit and claim an identity? Can that identity be recognised and does that identity have value?' (2005). This group of young male fans inhabit and claim an identity: the good and industrious fan. They possess the resources for telling, representing and displaying the self through their fandom, their self projected 'good' future evident in their presentation of fandom as work. This provides internal affirmation for the fans, which is also externally consolidated by media industries' reconstruction of the previously pejorative fanboy as a market to whom commodities can be sold, if not now, then (notionally) at some point in the future when they have economic resources to match their cultural resources. Here, these respondents stake out a value claim in the politics of recognition via their taste and fandom culture, and their valuing of that as work. They are aware of 'the right practices', displaying distinction in terms of the cultural objects of their fandom but also industriousness in terms of their application to the job of fandom. In their particular moral and fan economy, their autonomous labour allows them to inscribe themselves as hard-working, industrious as well as just 'different' enough.

While these respondents articulate it as an almost hubristic form of 'agency' (and of course in some highly pleasurable ways it is) there is a broader politics to the debate. The self-induced governmentality (following Foucault and his notion of 'the conduct of conduct' (1982, pp. 220-221)) demonstrated by these young males' approach to 'the work of watching' corresponds exactly to the notion of the 'enterprising self', a

development of Foucauldian thought, as espoused by Nikolas Rose and also to the discursive figuring of narratives of shame in the context of the current Irish state of 'crisis'. For Rose:

The enterprising self will make an enterprise of its life, seek to maximize its own human capital, project itself a future, and seek to shape life in order to become what it wishes to be. The enterprising self is thus both an active self and a calculating self, a self that calculates about itself and that acts upon itself in order to better itself.

(Rose, 1996:154)

These fans clearly try to be 'better' fans. For Rose, in late modernity 'freedom' becomes posited as 'a capacity for self-realisation which can be obtained only through individual activity' (Rose 1999, p. 145). Clearly, the impact of recession has redefined what 'work' is for these specific respondents, and late modern individualism and the 'politics of recognition' has certainly redefined what constitutes both 'freedom' and 'identity claims'. Of note, though is David Hesmondhalgh's observation that there is a tendency in theorisations which, while not concealing the 'general relations of exploitation' of creative labour in a digital culture, 'rather point to their inevitability, celebrating the savviness of audiences, but offering no means by which this savviness can be converted to forms of action which might meaningfully reduce inequality' (2010, p. 275). In these shifting, liminal contexts, these respondents are doing the very best that they can, by being the very 'best' fans that they can be.

## 8.5 Conclusion

In a state that can be characterised as liminal, these fans apply themselves to the work of fandom with industrious zeal. In a politics of recognition, they can then stake a value claim for themselves, facilitated by their possession of the appropriate resources for telling, representing and displaying the self (and an imagined future good self). The fandom culture they create is one which is bound by notions of goodness and value through which they attempt to disambiguate their liminal state by operationalising their fandom as achievement. For these respondents, the 'work of watching' can be framed in terms of discourses around individualism and identity politics.

It is perhaps appropriate to speculate as to whether Dallas Smythe's contention that 'while people do their work as audience members they are simultaneously reproducing their own labor power' (Smythe 2006, p. 267) applies in the case of unemployed graduates who perceive their acts of consumption as a form of work. Smythe saw

leisure as a form of unpaid, unacknowledged ‘work’ that was actually crucial to making workers fit for the industrial workplace, but what of unemployed ‘fanboys’ who represent the 21st century ‘precariat’? While their immaterial labour and cultural currency renders them in many senses model ‘enterprising selves’, this might be, as Hesmondhalgh suggests, a very complex sort of freedom (2010). Of course, as Rosalind Gill and Andy Pratt argue, ‘subjectivity is always mediated by the meanings which people give to their experience’ (2009, p. 19). Thus, they contend that an understanding of emergent subjectivities requires ‘attention to the meanings cultural workers themselves give to their life and work [...] we need to understand not only the possible becomings, but also the not-becomings’ (Gill and Pratt 2009, p. 19). If there is no material product from the fanboys’ work of consumption and interpretation, and if there are no jobs for which they are reproducing their labour power (or at least jobs that they would consider), what does their work ‘do’? Certainly it can be seen as a form of reflexive identity work, preserving and refining a sense of integrity, individuation and future orientation. But further, it can be viewed as doing the labour of reproducing the ideological construction of neo-liberal individualism and freedom. Yet it is the freedom to consume, and therefore to ‘be’ through a dialectical interpretative and affective engagement with the objects of consumption. Thus it both reproduces this ideological construction *and* enables a ‘real’ sense of integrity and fulfilment – fulfilment as a form of nourishment, filling oneself with ‘good’ things, and keeping at bay the ‘bad’ of economic and political crisis. These themes are attended to in even more detail in the following, final analysis chapter, which engages with biographical subjectivity and situatedness by way of brief case study ‘vignettes’ of two of the respondents who took part in this study.

## **Chapter Nine – ‘A clean slate and a blank canvas and none of the trappings of real life’: two vignette case studies**

### **9.1 Introduction**

In examining the stories of two individual respondents, this chapter becomes an argument for the significance of interaction between socio-cultural, biographical and psychodynamic dimensions of fandom. The chapter also underscores the importance of developing what Les Back calls ‘the art of listening’ (2007). In many ways the themes that emerge in this chapter echo those already discussed generally. However, had a different methodological approach been employed, the texture and specificity of these stories might not have emerged. The overt emphasis in much of the literature on methodology stresses the relationship between consistency in data and credibility of research (Bergman 2002; Krefting 1991; Miles and Huberman 1994, amongst many), thereby valorising thematic similarity and consistency. However, when analysing the data the biographical specificity of certain respondents’ accounts of their fandom was striking. Therefore, this final analysis chapter offers a particular and biographically situated snapshot of the embeddedness of fandom in ‘lived lives’ which illuminates both social and socio-cultural as well as psychodynamic relations in the lives of these respondents.

The approach of this chapter therefore emphasises the links between respondents’ fan experiences and their individual biographical contexts. The starting position accords with Gadd’s and Jefferson’s argument that subject positions are ‘negotiated in relation to the individual’s biography and attendant anxieties, the discursive fields available to the individual (often constrained by their class, ethnicity and gender), and intersubjectively through the responses of others’ (2007, p. 67). Applying this to the ‘fan subject’ implies an examination of social and biographical context as well as psychosocial factors in order to attempt a more adequate conceptualisation of the fan subject as internally complex and socially situated, with a tension between cultural resources and structural and biographical constraints illuminated.

### **9.2 Deirdre**

Deirdre was 38 years old at the time of interview in 2011. She had completed the online quantitative survey and had left her email details in order to arrange an interview. We

corresponded initially by email but a number of arrangements to meet were cancelled at short notice. After several such postponements, I became anxious that the meeting would not take place<sup>39</sup> until Deirdre explained apologetically that her daughter's Communion was coming up, which was a very big event in their lives, and that her schedule had become frantic. We agreed to defer the interview until after the Communion. Deirdre and I shared a number of common factors: we were the same age and both working mothers. From our initial email conversations Deirdre knew that one of my own children was the same age as her daughter so she knew that I would be aware of the particular pressure she was under at that time. These factors were significant, I feel, to Deirdre's willingness to talk in an in-depth interview. When I did meet Deirdre it was in her home, a modern complex of duplex and apartment buildings in an estate in a suburb of south-west Dublin, overlooking a main national road. In full-time work and a single parent, Deirdre had explained by email that she dropped her daughter to school on the way to work and collected her from after-school care on the way home. She explained that her daughter's bedtime was 8pm (a very strict arrangement), following which she had a few hours to herself, normally spent watching television, before going to bed. This was the window during which she could do the interview. Her daughter was already in bed when I arrived and Deirdre invited me into her kitchen-living room where I was offered a tea, coffee or orange drink.

Following Adler and Adler, when arranging interview locations I attempted to accommodate the needs of participants (2002, p. 528) who were giving their time to meet me, but also in awareness that the social space and location of interviews can have a greater significance, particularly as locus for the creation of knowledge (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). The interview location was certainly a dynamic in this case. Firstly, it was clear that Deirdre's home space was important to her and her daughter. In her conversation it was evident that private home ownership through hard work was particularly significant. But more particularly, if Deirdre had not been happy to invite me to her home the interview would not have taken place as her domestic situation

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<sup>39</sup>This was a minor theme of the data-gathering period. A number of individuals who completed the survey agreed to meet for interview but persistently postponed. The extent to which I should 'pursue' these respondents became a judgement call for me. I felt that in many cases, the individuals concerned had agreed to do an interview and then became anxious or uneasy about it, but felt badly about saying 'no', so repeatedly postponed rather than cancelled. In these cases I made a number (2-3) of polite attempts to keep lines of communication open, following which, if no communication was forthcoming I did not persist with those particular individuals.

curtailed the possibility of getting out in the evenings. In respect of both these factors I suggest that our shared experiences were influential in Deirdre's happiness to invite me to into her home.

Deirdre said that she had by chance come across an episode of *The West Wing* on television, and that it had 'really grabbed' her. In this, Deirdre's 'chance' encounter corresponds with Matt Hills' 'just-in-time fandom' (2002, p. 178) as well as Hills' employment of Christopher Bollas's psychoanalytic 'aleatory object' (Bollas 1993, p. 21; Hills 2005), particularly in the sense of the latter's demarcation of a cultural artefact 'that is initially encountered by chance and that then allows creative aspects of the 'authentic self' to be powerfully experienced and engaged with' (Hills 2005, p. 802). Once she saw it and realised that it was the show's final season, Deirdre decided to watch no further; she had been holding on to Amazon vouchers that she had received as a gift, but hadn't been sure what to spend them on. She bought the first season of *The West Wing* on DVD, recalling that 'I started watching it, and I just couldn't stop'. Deirdre explained that once she'd watched the first season on DVD box set, she subsequently bought all remaining seasons in this way and consumed all seven seasons quickly ('I watched them all, I think, in the space of about nine months, maybe a little more, but I just absolutely loved it'). Deirdre explains:

Usually I'd be somebody that when I'm watching something I'd be on the Internet, or I'm texting or something at the same time. This was the *only* thing where I would just sit down.

Like many of the other fan respondents, then, the intensity and concentration of Deirdre's viewing seems far more aligned to Ellis's 'gaze', an act he suggests is the constitutive activity of cinema viewing, rather than the 'glance' of broadcast television (Ellis 1982, p. 50). In Deirdre's case, the qualities which induced her intense gaze appear to be ones that are highly significant in terms of her own life and ethos. As was clear from Deirdre's communication, when she commits to something she does so wholeheartedly and follows through; the concepts of hard work and achievement were clearly important to her. Deirdre explained that when she starting watching *The West Wing*, she had to drop everything else. Her television is in the kitchen-livingroom space of her home, therefore she said that when she was watching:

I usen't even sometimes *eat* while I was watching it in case - the dialogue could be quite low - in case I missed out on something they were saying!

Deirdre had in fact implied the significance of ‘good’ notions earlier, in the survey, on which she had noted that ever since she was small, she had engaged with books, films or magazines that had made her ‘want to be something’, a phrase that had struck me when I came across it. When prompted about this in the interview she explained that her first consciousness of that feeling was some twenty years previously when she went to see ‘a really, really bad film about firefighters’ (this film was *Backdraft* (1991)) and came out thinking that she’d love to be a fireman. Deirdre emphasised: ‘now, not just a firefighter, a fireman!’ The insistence on being a fireman (a tough and caring occupation) is interesting. Apart from the undeniably ‘good’ and unmaligned public service dimension of the fire service in popular discourse, it also transcends or elides a masculine/feminine boundary too: in her real life it was clear that Deirdre functions as both mother and father for her child, with her own family being particularly important in her and her daughter’s life<sup>40</sup>.

Deirdre explicitly linked that feeling of wanting ‘to be something’, invoked by *Backdraft*, to her subsequent fandom of *The West Wing*; saying ‘I’d love to have that passion they seem to have.’ However, for her, the wanting to ‘be’ something did not necessarily mean aiming for the top. She explained that in the context of *The West Wing*, she would never aspire to be President, rather:

It was more the back office and I think that would be me as well, in my day to day life and in the kind of work I like to do. I suppose I like the idea of being the brains, or the power behind the throne, that sort of thing.

From our correspondences, it was clear that Deirdre’s job, her ethical approach to it, and the relationship between this hard work and her home ownership and related status was very important. In both her interview and e-mail communications, Deirdre’s framework of references prioritised aspiration and achievement, with achievement being earned through hard work. Fiske, following Bourdieu, suggests a highly functional dimension to the operation of fan ‘discrimination’ such that fan texts are selected on the basis that they provide ‘opportunities to make meanings of their social identities’ (Fiske 1992, p.

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<sup>40</sup> Of course, in terms of western consciousness, Diane Negra has outlined the symbolic reconstruction of ‘Irish’ ethnicity with particular reference to firefighters, indicating that the ‘Irish-American’ ethnicity post ‘9/11’ has become a ‘therapeutic heritage zone’ (2006, p. 358) (and in *The West Wing*, the ‘Irish-American’ mythology is consistently anchored in a similarly positive way though not in a ‘blue collar’ sense; a more recent representation of the reconstruction of the Irish-American working class public servant can be seen in CBS’s *Blue Bloods*).



34). As such, Deirdre's fandom of the show (she refers to it at one point in the interview as 'nearly a modern day fable'), particularly in its privileging of qualities she so emphasises in her own life, might be said to provide an opportunity to make meanings centred around notions of a 'good' social identity in her own life. Discussing the qualities she admires in *The West Wing*, she says:

There were all these great people, they were all attractive, both in their personality and their appearance, and they were really, you know, trying to do good.

Ironically, the idealism that Deirdre admires in *The West Wing* contrasts strongly with the disillusionment she feels about politics in real life, corresponding with the trends in recent decades for what is considered to be an increasing apathy regarding electoral politics (Dahlgren 2009). Describing herself as 'disastrously cynical' about and 'extremely disillusioned' with politics from an early age (despite living in a house in which there were 'quite strongly held political views', though, as she qualifies, not 'from a house with a [political] party'), Deirdre illustrates her early disillusionment with politics as follows:

When I was in sixth class, we went on a school tour of the Dail, and the late Seamus Brennan was the local TD, I was from Rathfarnham, and he was showing us around and he said, 'do any of you think you'd like to be politicians?' and nobody said anything. And then he said, "well is anybody good at history, because if you're good at history, now that's an important thing for a politician." And some of them said, "she is, she is..." and I remember thinking to myself, "no, I'm too honest to be a politician!" And that was at about twelve!

However, Deirdre's cynicism is accompanied by a measure of guilt. In discussing the possibility of a relationship between 'real life politics' and watching a political TV drama such as *The West Wing*, Deirdre says that she 'would have spent a good bit of time thinking about that, about what, how can you make a difference?' She elaborates:

How can you make a difference if you're sitting around and you're complaining and you're moaning, and you're saying the government is rubbish, and this doesn't work? And again when you watch something like *The West Wing* and you see people that are activists and they're devotees ... I've often said to myself, 'oh God, you know, really I should do something because you can't sit around and complain, but I couldn't sign up and join something or be part of something I don't believe in, and I don't, I don't believe in the party political system in Ireland, I don't really believe in it in any country. So, I try to reconcile that then with my day to day life, for what I do in my

life and in my work and, you know, community things and involvement with my daughter's school and that sort of thing.

Clearly, a reconciliation of the guilt at not being normatively politically active is mitigated by a rendering of politics as local and personal; a personalising of politics which is a feature of contemporary mediated politics (Corner and Pels 2003). (This can also be said to accompany a possibly related characteristic of neo-liberal policy, being the displacement of responsibility for public and social issues from the state to the individual.) Equally, though, Deirdre's substantial time constraints due to her work and domestic commitments logistically limit her ability to 'make a difference', to 'sign up and join something' in the traditional sense. Accordingly, Deirdre's dejection with formal politics is displaced by her conceptualisation of politics as personal. This is related to her day to day life, work, community and her daughter's school. She expresses that 'I suppose it's down to personal politics and personal beliefs', saying:

If you look at Ireland as a whole, and you look at all the various elements that are ... that inform our day to day lives... our roads and our schools and our workplace and the county council and all of those things ... they're all borne out of politics, and you know, that main road there is supposed to be being moved, there's an extension being built, and I was thinking 'God, it'll be great when that happens because it's so noisy.' That's political.

Of note here is that the things identified as 'political' by Deirdre are things that have material outcomes – roads are built and driven on. Politics, then, is not just personalised but also seen as something with a material outcome (a road) that also has a personal outcome (safer play for the children).

Deirdre's discursive account suggests that her fan activity reveals how personal and private struggles fundamentally inform, shape and even constrain her potential for agency and resistance. In more personal and even poignant terms, Deirdre speaks of her evolving relationship with the Internet, which she discursively frames as a counter to the atomisation of contemporary life. For her, the Internet has fulfilled a functional role in her life; enabling her to express herself as an individual, a woman, a mother, a fan, all from within 'the trappings' of her four walls. What is of note is that for Deirdre, like some of the 'fanboys' discussed in the previous chapter, the 'virtual' space of the Internet is the bridge to 'reality', differentiated again from the implicit un-reality of political promises. In this regard, Deirdre's 'use' of the Internet is linked with her personal biography. She initially completed the survey via the media forum on the

website magicmum.com. However, her relationship with the Internet is not static or unproblematic.

I think it is a window to reality ... and it's an opportunity, certainly, for me ... Less so now, as I've got older and my daughter's got older, but I'm a single mother so, you know, once she goes to bed at night, unless I have a friend over or I'm chatting to someone on the phone, that's it. So, it was a way of really having a relationship with people in similar circumstances.

However, she notes that she now uses the Internet differently, as she has 'gone through that whole cycle' and has now 'come out the other end of it'. Now, she says, she uses it to 'garner information' as opposed to 'divulging information'. This suggests a retreat to the private or even a withdrawal of some sorts. She elaborates:

Now, I would have treated it more as a social thing up to a few years ago and then I became very disillusioned with it, and now I would be more cagey. I would tend not give away very much information about myself at all, really, and I would tend to probably use it occasionally to say things that I wouldn't necessarily say face to face. So if I was sitting here with you now and you said something I thought was ridiculous, I'd probably just nod and smile, because there's a personal relationship of some sort. If you were the stranger on the Internet, I'd be more inclined to say, 'oh for God's sake, that's absolutely bloody stupid! Why are you saying such a thing?' By the same token, then, the programmes we choose to watch, or the films, or whatever, perhaps they give you an opportunity to experience things that you would never have, and you know, you get a little bit of a taste for what it would be like from the comfort of your own solid existence.

Within the 'comfort' of her own 'solid existence', then, Deirdre has worked hard in order to get 'a little bit of a taste' of those qualities that she equates with 'goodness', both materially and symbolically. Again, she rationalises this, alluding to an awareness that these gains are balanced by sacrifices (whether hard work or loneliness). She states:

I know that I watch more television than most of my friends, but then I don't have anyone to talk to, so I don't.... There was a point a few years ago when I used to beat myself up over it, but I actually think, I think I would have nearly got *more* out of *The West Wing* than had I been watching it with somebody else, because I think it's something... now someone likeminded... it wouldn't do to have somebody sitting there and tutting and not understanding it, not getting it, but think that it's that sort of thing and I'm that sort of person.

Throughout the interview and our communications, ideas about the ‘sort of person’ one should be were clearly hugely significant to Deirdre. She emphasises her position not just as ‘worker’ and ‘hard worker’ but as ‘a professional person’. These themes correspond to a number of global discourses that have emerged in recent decades, also corresponding to a critical shift in subjectivity. In a society in which a ‘politics of recognition’ (Fraser and Honneth 2003) is increasingly central, the work of the self in acquiring cultural capital as well as the (unequal) capacity of individuals to ‘tell themselves’ in terms of their cultural capital becomes hugely significant (Skeggs 2003). In this analysis, if class is made and given through culture, then ‘quality’ fandom, and more significantly, the ability to ‘tell’ it, enables a claim on an identity ‘of value’. Deirdre references this obliquely herself when she says:

I think a lot of it would probably be pretension because... you know, I’m very happy to sit down and watch *Two And A Half Men* but I’m not necessarily going to answer a question in public about it or help someone with their thesis, if such a thing ever occurs [laughs]!

Therefore, for Deirdre, *The West Wing* offers a relaxing ‘escape’ that is also a worthy reward; as she says, ‘I can say I’m going to sit down and watch this and I can pretend to myself that I’m being really intellectual while I’m doing it.’ For Deirdre, achievement is predicated on hard work. This is visible in recurring phrases which indicate the significance for her in being seen as a ‘good’ worker, mother or even citizen. In many ways, the words and actions of Deirdre demonstrate how deliberately and adamantly she works against the ‘shame’ discourse discussed in Chapter Four. Deirdre’s world is built around being, performatively, good, respectable. The economy of morality and goodness so clearly found amongst all respondents is employed as an antidote to shame (and this with clear colonial resonances given the figuring of ‘Ireland’ as both woman but as infant in need of civilising and ‘bringing into line’). Feminist theorists such as Skeggs point out that these values are closely related to citizenship. As Skeggs says, ‘respectability is not only about cleaning your house but also, literally, about existing as a citizen’ (2008). Similar themes of hard work and public service dominate *The West Wing* as text, which Deirdre frequently articulated in discussion, relating them to her own position and continuing the fantasy of ‘goodness’ through service. For example, in this interview extract (which echoes her earlier discussion of being ‘backroom’ rather

than in charge) she contrasts the recognition given to ‘the team’ in *The West Wing* with its relative lack in her own professional life:

I think that’s something you don’t really find very often in real life. Because my - well, one of my jobs in real life at the moment - is as a project manager, and I was only talking about this to someone in work the other day, someone who’s just started off in project management and they’re finding it very tough, and I said, ‘when you’re the project manager, your role is to take all the lumps when things go wrong and then to slink off unnoticed when it goes right.’ And, I think when you watch *The West Wing*, President Bartlet, he had such regard and he gave such great kudos to all his staff, which doesn’t really happen in real life!

Having to ‘take all the lumps’, then, seems to be implicitly understood as part of the equation in acquiring the capacity to make a claim on an identity of ‘value’. In Deirdre’s frame of reference, gain is accompanied by sacrifice. In discussing this, Deirdre again makes reference to *The West Wing*; their ‘cause’ (something she considers a good thing) is something that entails, possibly even insists upon, personal sacrifice:

You know, you’re looking at these characters and they’re just ... none of them had a personal life, or if they had a personal life it was blown to bits by this job. And it’s not that you want that, but sometimes, and I think at the time as well, I was in a job that I really, really didn’t like, and that tied into it as well. I was thinking, “God, you know I’m doing this and it’s so mundane and I’m achieving nothing ...”

Here, Deirdre’s emphasis (which corresponds significantly to the thesis of individualism) on her hard working ethic can be seen as a way of positioning herself against a number of discursive representations relating to her gender and social position. In this regard, Mac an Ghaill and Haywood discuss the impact of ‘fragmenting femininities and masculinities’ and their explicit linking to ‘debates about the current shape and desirable future of society’ (2007, p. 6). Deirdre is a ‘minority’. I suggest that her status as a single mother is key to Deirdre’s specific formulation of an ethos of hard work and goodness. Skeggs refers to the negative discourse about single mothers that prevailed in the political rhetoric in the 1980s and 1990s which, she says, ‘figured the single mother as the source of all national evil’ (2005, p. 965). Deirdre’s words and actions identify her as the antithesis of such a figuration and their associations with shame and with ‘milking the system’; rather she is the hard worker aspiring to better herself personally and publicly. Mac an Ghaill and Haywood say that in times of crisis

in society, there are ‘complex processes of social exclusion and psychic (unconscious) expulsion of social groups [i.e. minorities] who are represented as a threat to the maintenance of social and symbolic borders’ (2007, p. 7). As they describe it, the displacement of ‘national internal politics’ relating to gender is visible in the production by States of ‘a range of regulatory representations, such as the ‘single mother’ and more recently that of the ‘career woman’ (2007, p. 6). Ironically, though, as Stephanie Lawler points out, both are connected with moral and social breakdown (2000).

Deirdre is clearly concerned, in actions and words, with being seen as an individual who is responsible for her (substantial) achievements (house, good job, big Communion), rather than being seen as a representation of what Mac an Ghaill and Haywood characterise as ‘the ‘failing female individual’ [...] personally responsible for her own lack of achievement’ (2007, p. 6). In this context, Deirdre maintains that she did quite well out of the Celtic Tiger and in both material and cultural terms Deirdre’s hard work has resulted in the acquisition of ‘sites of display’ which confer respectability and goodness: an earned reward for hard work. However, she remarks that:

It’s backfired because most of us rashly invested and we got caught in the hamster wheel. It’s the same way I used to joke about my grandmother and her sisters because they never stopped talking about food, and they never stopped talking about spuds in particular [laughs], and it was a throwback to the famine because their grandparents would have been ... so I think, I think we’re still a very immature society.

Deirdre here applies this statement not just to herself but to ‘most of us’. Further, she also identifies Irish home ownership as being not purely about economic investment but an essential aspect of the Irish psyche induced by dispossession in famine times. (She says ‘we were dispossessed! We couldn’t have our land, that’s why we’re all, in my opinion, why we’re all obsessed with owning property’.) Her identification of a complex link between the cultural and the economic indicates, again, an understanding of ‘we’ that is highly socio-culturally situated and the use of the word ‘we’ (automatically counting in and othering from) is significant here. Deirdre also strongly distinguishes between ‘good’, earned achievement (brought about by hard work) and the more negatively framed ‘sense of entitlement’ which she feels is another aspect of the Irish psyche, saying ‘we want our problems to be solved by somebody else’ and that while we might be prepared to work hard, ‘we want an awful lot of cheerleading while we do it’. She says:

This is probably quite controversial ... I think it's something that, it's not exactly missing in the Irish psyche, but it's quite, well it's buried for whatever reason. In the line of work that I'm in I deal with a lot of people who are in financial difficulty. People can't help being in financial difficulty, but they can help how they react to it. And I think a lot of these people ... there's a sense of entitlement, which again, I don't know, maybe it is a throwback to our history, but I think there's a ... sometimes I'm not surprised that in other societies the Irish have a reputation for being lazy. I think we tend to sit around with the hand out.

The 'sense of entitlement' referred to by Deirdre is one of the most common pejorative phrases in use at the moment, heightened in this time of 'crisis' with its associations of neo-liberal, anti-welfare and anti-public service rhetoric. Of note is the difference in perspective visible in the rhetoric of 'good' fandom employed by Deirdre on the one hand, and the 'fanboys' of the previous chapter on the other. Deirdre's 'good' fandom is predicated on a responsible, careful, intense engagement with certain fan programmes she, much as her attitude towards life and work emphasises responsibility, independence and engagement with her uncertain and tough reality through hard work. The fanboys, on the other hand, orientate towards a 'goodness' predicated on operationalising their 'distinct' fandom as achievement. I had wondered, when interviewing the young male fans why there were no females of the same age as them coming forward to interview. One of the 'fanboys' said that 'all the girlfriends' had retrained in 'IT' and were in employment, albeit not employment they had expected having graduated from college. This suggests a clear gendering of male/female subject positions in their lifeworld. This anecdote, and Deirdre's story, corresponds to Anita Harris's argument that young women are at the vanguard of subjective shifts in late modernity, particularly relating to discourses around the thesis of individualisation (Beck 2004). Harris suggests that there is a gendering in the 'self-made subjectivity' thesis of reflexive modernity. Young women such as Deirdre, but also the invisible (working) girlfriends of the fanboys exemplify Harris's notion of the (highly constructed and regulated) 'can-do' or 'future girl' of neo-liberal late modernity (2004, pp. 7-8). Yet Deirdre, like the fanboys, can also be seen as doing the labour of reproducing the ideologically constructed notion of 'freedom' gained by (gendered) hard work.

As is clear, Deirdre has not sat around 'with the hand out'. However, here Deirdre's situation can be seen to reflect another instance of the inextricability of cultural and economic analysis and the necessity of examining both in tandem. As Lois McNay

argues, ‘cultural models’, though insightful in many respects, ‘disconnect questions of identity recognition from the context of access to economic resources and other types of social capital’ (2005, p. 176). Deirdre says that she did quite well and is even severe about the particularly Irish cultural disposition, she describes, towards sitting around with ‘the hand out’. It might therefore be construed that Deirdre actively constructs herself in opposition to this so that she can be recognised and ‘tell herself’ in terms of positive discourse. Anita Harris argues that while young female women are discursively positioned as being beneficiaries of the late modern economy, they are in fact of central importance to the global demands of capitalism, both as workers and consumers (2004, p. 37). Deirdre’s hard work has paid off, as Deirdre sees it, in that she has achieved the status of ‘privately’ owning her own house. The extent to which this ability to self-recognise herself as a beneficiary of the Celtic Tiger paradoxically serves to reinforce her as a ‘cog in the wheel’. Deirdre hints at a reflexive awareness about the paradoxical constraints in the gains she has worked so hard to achieve: these gains might also be regarded as constraints, when she says:

And I think that’s something that absorbs you and makes you think of what you could do ... I suppose what the possibilities of life might be, if we all had a clean slate and a blank canvas and none of the trappings of real life.

### 9.3 Michael

At the time of meeting, Michael was a 28 year old graduate of Trinity College Dublin who had by that time already published a book of poetry and a memoir. My initial contact with Michael transpired through a number of Internet articles he had written about *The West Wing* and its Irish fans. From there I had found my way to his personal website, on which he discloses his biographical details, including the fact that he suffers from a chronic illness. At Michael’s suggestion we met at the Nassau Street entrance to Trinity College Dublin. Michael had explained that he had retained a link with Trinity and used it as a base for meetings. Trinity College in Dublin is a particular ‘signifier’ in Irish life, its associations extending from academic into cultural politics (O’Sullivan 2005). If the interview location can be regarded as a social referent, then it might be suggested that Michael’s choice of Trinity as venue was an assertion of his own social and symbolic capital. I told Michael about the roundabout way I had come across him (by googling ‘Irish fans of *The West Wing*’ and following the leads) and asked how he had ended up writing for a US fansite. Michael explained that he had lodged a



complaint with the site's owner to express his dissatisfaction with her routine publishing of the American and UK broadcast dates of *The West Wing*, but not the Irish ones. As he explains:

Well, you see she used to put up the American airing dates and the UK airing dates so I was kind of annoyed about this, because Ireland was actually ahead. RTÉ was ahead of Channel 4 in terms of airing the show so I emailed her several times, giving out about this and how she was putting up all the other dates without even acknowledging that we were ahead of the British! So then she said, well if you want to write something about it, that's cool, so I just did a little bit about being a *West Wing* fan in Ireland, included some comments from Irish media, there was a big *Sunday Tribune* article just out at the time about the relationship between Bartlet and Clinton ... so I just wrote a little article.

Michael went on to write a number of articles for the site. This suggests that Michael is a highly 'active' audience and fan member. In this regard Michael's fandom rates highly on the various 'typologies' of fandom (though as discussed in Chapter Two, these typologies insufficiently acknowledge the heterogeneity and psychodynamic dimensions of the fans they discuss). Writing (correctively) about his fandom endows him with 'petty producer' status according to Abercrombie and Longhurst's typology (1998) and confirms his multiple 'productivity' in Fiske's conceptualisation of the enunciative, semiotic and textual productivity that exists in fans (1992). His corrective contributions to the US fansite suggest a performative 'distinction' in his display of specialist knowledge that marks him out as expert even within the specialised fan 'habitus' of the 'Wingnut' community. This corresponds with a hierarchical inter-fan culture; in this sense Michael is staking out his 'hyper-fandom'. He is also a meta-fan – capable of reflexively commenting on his fandom. Here Michael discusses hardcore fans as 'they', while at the same time discussing the creation of 'your own meaning' as a fan and simultaneously demonstrating what Gelder calls a 'para-academic' approach:

Hardcore fans, they want to *get* everything, they want to get all the detail and be able to really get into it and be able to create their own thing, and that's the thing you can do in fandom. In fandom you can create your own meaning and your own narratives out of other cultural products. Is it Henry Jenkins who's written a lot about this?

Fandom's internal hierarchy has been well commented on (Sjoberg 2002; Busse 2013); Francesca Coppa argues that this 'hierarchy' 'supports traditional values that privilege

the written word over the spoken one and mind over body' (2006, p. 231). Similarly, Michael's method of watching is quite self-regulated, he will 'only watch one show at a time, so I'll go through a period of re-watching *24*, then maybe a period of watching *The West Wing*'. Unless 'interest wanes after a few seasons and I move on to watching something else', he watches the shows, 'season by season, not necessarily starting with the first season, but usually watching each season in episode order.' Michael says that he likes to watch in this way, so that he can 'notice the ups and downs in the writing from episode to episode, and little inconsistencies, and get a feel for the story arc as a whole.' This corresponds to what Suzanne Scott calls the 'affirmational' fans; 'typically aligned with viewing strategies [that are] primarily invested in decoding authorial intent' (2013, p. 441).

During the interview, Michael (like most respondents) alluded to those qualities of *The West Wing* that identify it as a legitimate cultural product, as 'quality' television. For Michael, this legitimacy also relates to his own status as writer, which is another differentiating aspect. As Michael recounted, he has always written: 'I mean I set up my own magazine in primary school when I was twelve'. So, having written from a young age and as a writer, he describes himself as 'someone who really appreciated good use of words and just that snappy dialogue, it [*The West Wing*] just kind of hooked me.' The significance of difference is signalled once again here, where he discusses how these concerns informed even his young fandom.

My favourite TV show when I was a kid was *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*, which was about a superhero who rails against environmental destruction, which wasn't exactly usual fare for kids, Donald Duck or whatever!

Of note here is that Michael explicitly relates his choice of fan objects (even when younger) to a sense of 'seeking' something (saving the planet not being the 'usual fare'). This sense of cathexis, of meaning and emotion being (psychically) invested in objects, indicates again the strength of object-engagement, relating strongly to Christopher Bollas's psychoanalytic perspective in which he maintains that individuals seek 'to isolate the traces of early object-seeking patterns in the psychological structures people inhabit in later life' (Woodward 2011, p. 12). Michael (who remained in contact with me after the initial interview) brought this up again in a subsequent email in which he again relates specific fan objects to particular points of his own life narrative.

I've been a *Superman* fan for as long as I can remember, and as a kid and teenager certainly held fantasies about having superpowers and saving the world. *Smallville* fed that fantasy, and I also found myself rooting for Clark and Lana to get together, as I wished I could get it together with a girl I really liked. So, like I say, I invested my own life story in certain shows in that way. In fact, I am quite convinced that the several legal dramas I enjoyed throughout my teens were the largest contributory factor to my brief dalliance with studying to be a barrister (I lasted a week and a half!), before I decided the best use of myself lay elsewhere.

However, Michael's initial interest in the show was piqued by something a little more adolescent. He recounts that:

I just accidentally came across it! I actually told the story [laughs], it's in that article that I wrote, but basically I was just flicking through channels and you know it opens, the very first episode, opens with Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe) getting out of bed and this good looking woman beside him and I thought, oh this might be something kind of dirty! [laughs] You know, I was sixteen at the time! And it turned out to be the best TV show I've ever watched!

As well as the quality of writing (which, he says, 'even after Sorkin, tends to the stirringly inspirational'), Michael consistently highlights particular themes of *The West Wing* as of significance, especially those relating to hope and the affective themes of aspiration, inspiration and feeling. He says 'the show is about the hope of politics, the hope of change, that *The West Wing* appeals to our "better angels", and that 'I mean, I think *The West Wing* was much more about feeling than reason'. ('Better angels' being a reference to 'real' US President Lincoln's first inaugural address in 1861 when he said: '[t]he mystic chords of memory will swell when again touched, as they surely will be, by the better angels of our nature'.) Michael elaborated on this subject in a subsequent email to me in which he discusses the show's emotional appeal, echoing Grossberg's assertion that fandom constitutes an 'affective sensibility' (1992, p. 60). For Michael, who describes himself as 'someone with broadly left-wing political leanings', *The West Wing* appeals emotionally to that sensibility, these are the public servants and the policies we could have, if only...' In another email, Michael, like a number of other respondents, compared the themes and sensibility of *The West Wing* with those of *The Wire*.

Compare *The West Wing* to the reality of something like *The Wire* and its portrayal of the failures of institutional democracy. In *The Wire* individuals seeking to do good are shown

constantly to be compromised by the institutions in which they work (Carcetti as mayor etc.), whereas in *The West Wing* individuals seeking to do good make the institutions something to be proud of. The former appears much more real than the latter. For me, the effect of *The West Wing* leaning towards inspiration rather than reality, means I can get swept up in the story and see *The West Wing* as a fictional end in itself, without it really making me think (the way *The Wire* does) about the problems of American democracy and the people it fails.

For Michael, then, his discussion of his fandom of *The West Wing* enables a display of his cultural distinction as fan. In its objectified state, cultural capital is of course visible in cultural goods, particularly those (high quality) cultural goods that display distinction. Michael's access to cultural capital and his choice of fan object, of fan auteur, of his intra-fan status as commentator, displays cultural distinction and is therefore an exemplar of cultural capital in its objectified state. In turn, this contributes to his self-positioning as 'quality fan'. The particular type of entertainment that Michael enjoys speaks to his accumulated cultural capital in terms not just of his 'linguistic competences, manners, preferences and orientations' but also his 'levels of confidence, certainty and entitlement' in relation to culture (Reay, David and Ball 2005, p. 20), or what Bourdieu refers to as 'the subtle modalities in relationship to culture and language' (Bourdieu 1986, p. 243 cited in Reay, David and Ball 2005, p. 20). This can be seen here:

I think that definitely is an appeal to fans, like hardcore fans, but I also think, you know, I've a friend who's not into politics at all and does really like *The West Wing*, doesn't get it [laughs] the way that I get it, the minutiae of what they're talking about and so on ....

So having established its legitimate status as cultural product, and his own as expert-fan, it is significant that for Michael, *The West Wing* is far more 'about feeling than reason'. And though he discusses politics in broad terms, he qualifies this in conversation, implying that his interest in politics is more notional than realised in political participation when he says:

I would have certain views on certain issues... but there isn't a whole lot that I would necessarily feel very strongly about politically, and like I wouldn't be the type of person who would go out to protests or things like that.

While this view might be regarded as fairly typical of Michael's age cohort, when pressed, Michael says that 'in a way, politics was just a kind of entertainment. It was

just entertaining to me.’ In fact, for Michael, the politics in *The West Wing* was ‘almost... I mean this is a kind of facile analogy, but it was almost like a sport, you know? And obviously, the democrats were ‘my team! You know, same as Labour would have been my team in the UK’. This resonates with John Corner’s notion of a ‘restyled’ politics (in which as Corner puts it, contemporary politics in a bid to replicate ‘the level of direct engagement that characterised Athenian democracy’, is forced to react to and incorporate elements of ‘the playful interactivity which is afforded by modern mass entertainment’ (Corner and Pels 2003, p. 1). Despite this, though, Michael repeats the ambiguity that threads throughout much respondent data when he goes on to describe ‘a mentality that looks to fictional presidents rather than real life presidents’ and equates the rejection of politics with ‘a rejection of personal responsibility’, which he identifies as ‘the same phenomenon at play in this looking towards the fictional rather than what we actually have.’

Michael’s assertion, then, that politics is notional and ‘just a kind of entertainment’ would seem, for him, to be balanced by an implicit corollary that entertainment is far more than that. While Michael refers to the political aspect of the programme as being ‘a fictional end in itself’, the affective (rather than political) aspects of the show are explicitly linked to his real life. Here, Michael talks about translating fictional ideas, inspired by *The West Wing* into what happens in real life:

I mean we should look to our better angels, we should look to this is what the process *should* be like and maybe it *can* be like that but I mean it comes back to again, we can look at setting an idea and it’s about how we translate that into what happens in real life.

Once again here, Michael actively appropriates the ‘feeling’ of the show and re-contextualises it in terms of his own life:

The actual overall feeling that’s instilled in the viewer, I think, is much more just a general sense of hope that things *could* be this way and it doesn’t really need to connect with this is how it might change in the real world of politics necessarily. It’s more like this kind of vision that you see in front of you and the same time there’s all this shit that you still have to wade through if you want to make a difference.

For Michael, then, the textual themes of hope and affect in *The West Wing* are metaphorically more significant within his own conceptual system than they are to any potential translation into ‘the real world of politics’; they cross from the domain of the

fictional to the complex domain of his own real life narrative. Michael himself connects these aspects when he says:

And I think we can either, you can look at any piece of fiction that's a kind of utopic piece of fiction, you know, depicts a utopia, and you can look at it and say, 'God real life is so shit compared to this' or 'does this influence *my* better angels to make me want reality to be more like this.' So you can always have two reactions. And I think more often than not the human reaction is to say 'fuck everything' and be a cynic. I think that's the easier response, right? It's always a question of how do you choose the harder path. I think that's quite a Sorkian thing, you know?

Michael's juxtaposition of the metaphors of 'shit' and 'angels' seem to have an organising function: he counterposes the 'shit' of 'real life' with the better (though harder) path which leads to one's 'better angels'. 'Shit' is of course the metaphor of decay, frequently found in post-colonial literature of inferiority and disidentification (Nasta 2000, p. 95). Of note here is Stephanie Lawler's elaboration of 'disgust' (2005) in which she states that 'psychoanalytic and structuralist accounts alike have posited disgust, not as intrinsic to the 'disgusting' object, but as inhering in the *relationship* between the disgusted and the object of disgust' (Lawler 2005, p. 438). In this analysis, as Michael says, 'you can always have two reactions'. Michael's persistent metaphorical allusions to 'angels' (especially 'better ones') can be 'read' – in the sense that use of metaphor manifests not just cultural but also intra-psychic considerations – as being highly specific to the context of his own very complex life narrative. Throughout his life, Michael has undoubtedly had to follow 'the harder path'. He suffers from a chronic illness which, as I found out during the interview, is intimately connected to his fandom *The West Wing*. Michael describes how he:

[F]irst watched *The West Wing* as a teenager, concerned about the world, growing up with a life-threatening illness. The beautiful writing and powerfully positive vision of politics were deeply meaningful to me, if only as inspiration, making me want to write things that were good and make the best use of my own talents, 'make a difference to others', whatever that meant.

Michael's genetic illness is both chronic and extremely rare, with an incidence of one in every 350,000 births and a typical age of death in sufferers of between 22 and 30 years. Michael, at age 16, was the first Irish person with the disease to undergo a revolutionary full body bone marrow transplant, from which he was told he had a 50% chance of survival. The significance of the personal aspects of his fandom began to emerge as he

spoke about how for him, *The West Wing* was ‘kind of a personal thing as well.’ In Michael’s description:

I used to be a huge reader as a kid but after I had a bone marrow transplant – *The West Wing*, by the way, was one of the things that kept me going during the transplant, because it used to be on TV, I think it was Season Two at the time - but after the transplant, I had a psychotic break at the end of it caused by drugs, and my attention span changed and I couldn’t read.

This, again, is another case of ‘identity work’ through the reconstruction of memory as cause-effect narrative. As Michael mentions in his interview, the transplant and the treatment involved necessitated a lengthy stay in hospital and ultimately induced a psychotic breakdown, following which he was unable even to recognise his parents and doctors. While Michael’s transplant has been successful, the nature of his illness means that he is susceptible to many cancers which require continued and frequent stays in hospital<sup>41</sup>. Michael explained that since the psychotic break, he ‘find[s] it very difficult to read for pleasure now, I can read for work and scan stuff like that, but I don’t really read for pleasure anymore.’ No longer able to read books (the consumption of which traditionally affords the accumulation of high cultural capital), Michael says that ‘very good TV has become my thing.’ The cultural legitimacy of *The West Wing* as high quality is again referred to when he says that it was ‘in my opinion, really the first TV show to reach artistic heights, you know?’ He also says, ‘I just like the idea of a serial, and I really like the idea of collecting one box set after another [laughs], very nerdy!’

In a later email, I asked Michael to explain a little more about the particular significance ‘quality’ entertainment has for him. He replied:

But you are right that entertainment for me has a deeper meaning, and I do hang much of my personal development of self on shows like *The West Wing* and those you mentioned. That's not to say TV 'made me who I am', but it certainly helped me chart and identify part of that.

Reading Michael’s narrative through an awareness of his chronic condition suggests that his active and even expert fandom is at least in part what Gareth Williams refers to as ‘an imaginative enterprise’ which enables him to account for the biographical disruption a chronic illness causes (1984). Williams centralises the role and narrative

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<sup>41</sup>Michael has recently made a short film based on his memoir of his hospital stay. The film is entitled ‘Two Suitcases’. As he explains, ‘When you go into hospital you take two suitcases with you: one to carry your clothes, and another to pack away your dignity’.

accounts of biographical disruption in chronically ill subjects in order to investigate what he contends is ‘the assault on identity’ constituted by chronic illness, stating:

It seems to me that if, in some fundamental way, an individual is a social and historical agent with a biographical identity (in the fullest sense) and if the prime sociological importance of chronic illness is the ‘biographical disruption’ to which it gives rise, then an individual’s account of the origin of that illness in terms of putative causes can perhaps most profitably be read as an attempt to establish points of reference between body, self, and society and to reconstruct a sense of order from the fragmentation produced by chronic illness

(Williams 1984, p. 177).

Therefore, Michael’s fan identity, his appropriation of ‘otherness’ and ‘distinction’ in the context of his illness (he can certainly make a claim on distinction in medical terms) in terms of his fandom of a ‘quality’ television drama, whose textual themes emphasise hope and aspiration, is hugely significant for him in attempting to make more coherent the fragmentation produced by his chronic illness. His relationship with entertainment, then, is of course far more significant than ‘just entertainment’. For Michael, the genesis of his fandom of *The West Wing* is tied up with memories of being in hospital on an extended basis and undergoing radical treatment from which there was only a 50% chance of recovery. Further, the themes of *The West Wing*, as discussed by Michael, are those which emphasise hope and his ‘better angels’. Michael’s particular fan identity facilitates a way into his past and uncertain future in a textually and thematically therapeutic and satisfying way. Even his self-identification as writer could be discussed as a way of immortalising his literary work (and writing, especially as writing for the Internet has a permanence not shared by oral history). In his fandom of *The West Wing*, and in these particular ways, Michael has found a way to ‘account for the disruption disablement has wrought’ (Williams 1984, p. 177).

A deeper perspective on this has been afforded by the ongoing communication with Michael, in which the relationship of his fandom to what might be called his ‘life-course’ is illuminated. Michael wrote about the continued personal relevance of *The West Wing* for him (‘I continue to watch the show because those things are as true today as when I first started’ and ‘the significance of the show for me personally is as escapist fantasy; as a writer, I liked to imagine myself as Sam or Toby, writing for the President of the United States.’) From an object-relations perspective, Michael’s search for goodness, distinction, immortality follows Ian Woodward’s description of Bollas’s scheme whereby ‘the aesthetic moment is thus part of a larger search for meaning,



characterized by people aspiring to this type of ‘matching’ between subject and object that promises metamorphoses of the self’ (2011, p. 15). Michael says:

I find the show has affected my own personality in small but direct ways too; I’ve noticed myself using lines from the show in casual conversation from time to time. For example, Bartlet says in one episode that “at some point one option might be to get over it”, a line I’ve noticed myself using with family/friends from time to time, without crediting *The West Wing*!

Harrington and Bielby have recently applied ‘life course’ (or gerontological) approaches to fandom (2010). This perspective is grounded in the assumption that the unfolding of individual lives is shaped by both internal psychological and external social processes and that the changes which impact members of particular generations at given points come to ‘govern the manner in which members of that generation make sense of a presently remembered past, experienced present, and anticipated future’ (Cohler and Hostetler 2003, p. 557 cited in Harrington and Bielby 2010). McAdams et al contend that ‘a person’s life story is an internalized and evolving narrative of the self that selectively reconstructs the past and anticipates the future in such a way as to provide a life with an overall sense of coherence and purpose’ (2006, p. 1372 cited in Harrington and Bielby 2010, para 2.1). Therefore, Michael’s fan identity can be read through his chronic illness as an enabling and therapeutic psychosocial contingency, while his choice of fan object can be read through an object-relations approach as a ‘transitional object’ in which the engagement with the object (in this case *The West Wing*) is understood to transform both the subject and object. In one email, Michael wrote that:

The show I choose to watch is very much related to what I’m going through in my life at any particular time; I associate *The West Wing* with inspiration and times when I need a lift-up, but also with adult life and dreams of a good future. Something like *Smallville*, I very much associate with my younger years, dreams of being superman and fantasies about this one particular girl, so when I want to wallow in or for some reason remember those experiences I’ll watch my old DVDs of *Smallville*.

The evolving nature of Michael’s life course, itself not a foregone conclusion given his condition, is also the subject of this email in which he, like Deirdre, alludes to a sense of having ‘come out the other end of it’:

Today, as a 28-year-old, I probably have a different reaction to shows that I like, in that I’m obviously older, and have achieved many of my own dreams in terms of publishing books and working as a writer. So, I can look at my own life and feel

happy with what I've done and am doing, rather than investing my fantasies in TV characters and shows, as I did as a child and teenager. Which is not to say that I don't still occasionally fantasise about being a superhero or being President of the United States! But now, I still enjoy my favourite TV shows, but probably more on an aesthetic level rather than the level of personal fantasy.

## 9.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the details of two fan respondents, Deirdre and Michael, in some detail. Deirdre's case exposes the question of discourses about gender as they intersect with the position of the 'good' fan and the 'enterprising' female self in late modernity. Her story enables a revisitation of some of the themes that concern the contemporary sociology of consumption; both the symbolic use of consumption to establish difference and status (Veblen 1899 [2009] and Bourdieu 1984) and the particularly neo-modern mobilisation of consumption of, in this case symbolic cultural goods, by 'forming connections between human passions, hopes and anxieties, and very specific features of goods enmeshed in particular consumption practices' (Miller and Rose 2008). If, as Skeggs suggests, we 'tell ourselves' through a combination of culture, symbols and issues such as gender and class, then in Deirdre's case, the 'trappings' she refers to can be read as both freedom and restraint; the individualism and 'good' work ethic required to acquire these freedoms and enable Deirdre's self-narrative of goodness also embedding her within fundamental social structures. I didn't hear from Deirdre again apart from a brief email exchange of thanks after the interview. I contacted her some months after the interview but was not surprised when I got no reply. 'Listening' to this in retrospect (following Les Back's understanding of 'the art of listening' (2007)), my reading was that I had been allowed briefly into Deirdre's world and she had honoured her commitment to participate in an interview.

For Deirdre, her status as a 'working mother' (and in her case a 'working, single mother') is such that she is particularly confined to her domestic space in the evenings as a result of economic and gendered constraints. However, as her own space (and the requirement of work for its acquisition and upkeep), it becomes a form of self-extension into which only a select few are allowed conditional and temporary entry. In Deirdre's space, she selectively engages with the outside world through media, through her consumption of 'good' and nourishing media like *The West Wing* (consumption that

makes her want to *be* something), through her evolving use of the Internet as her ‘window’ to the outside world (about which she says she is more ‘cagey’ than she used to be in the past). Deirdre’s technological and textual discrimination is therefore intimately connected with the particular moral economy of her household and the boundaries of the outside world. Her home effectively constitutes a safe, transitional space (in the Winnicottian sense) where she is in complete control over what she lets in, and what she keeps out. Deirdre’s (temporary) affiliation with me, as a woman in a comparable situation to her own, in terms of her letting me conduct the interview with her, in her space, gives a valuable insight into the lived relations of gendered identity and how they connect powerfully with social structures. As Deirdre implied in her interview, letting others into her ‘solid existence’, who might sit ‘here’ in her sitting room, ‘tut-tutting’, it ‘wouldn’t do’.

As mentioned, Michael remains in contact. His transparency and openness of communication enables a valuable glimpse into the psychodynamic dimensions of fandom. For Michael these are clearly linked to his personal health issues; his fandom becoming a space of imaginative, even fantasy play. In Michael’s case, his fan consumption (and particularly his textual meta-fan productivity) can be seen as performatively substituting for the biographical disruption wrought by his chronic illness (Michael Bury says that ‘chronic illness involves a recognition of pain and suffering, possibly even death, which are normally only seen as distant possibilities or the plight of others’ (1982, p. 169)).

Additionally, in the case of Michael, there is a suggestion of his fundamentally different subject position from that of Deirdre (obliquely conforming Rosemary Hennessy’s contention that class dynamics are always present in some explicit or implicit way in daily experience (2000)).

Class, as Bourdieu (1986) argues (and as demonstrated by the more recent research of Skeggs, Lawler, Walkerdine, as well as by the Great British Class Survey (2013) referred to in Chapters Five and Eight), cannot be understood in purely economic terms. Michael’s conspicuous demonstration of cultural and symbolic capital (discernible in details such as the selection of Trinity College, Dublin as meeting venue, in Michael’s correction of the US fansite which published incorrect details about *The West Wing*’s Irish broadcast details), all facilitate what Carolyn Steedman calls ‘the telling of

oneself' (1987) in class terms. Michael's fandom might be read along gender lines too. Michael's display of knowledge and his ability to bring his subjectivity into material form through the (permanent) act of writing, particularly in light of his regard for Sorkin as auteur, can also be regarded as the demonstration of a particular and public form of masculinity. Michael's 'self' is projected outwards, though, into the public domain and into the public space of the social world, while Deirdre's is based on a retreat into her domestic space, from which she monitors the world from the 'back room', without having a public persona of her own. Michael's case study suggests that adding a psychodynamic turn to complement existing analytic frameworks can powerfully add to analyses of the dialectical relationship between socio-cultural and psychodynamic experience.

For both Deirdre and Michael, a reading of their fandom through biographical and situated factors adds empirical flesh, and emphasises the significance of psychological and biographical dimensions to the theorisations, highlighting how we 'selectively reconstruct the past and anticipate [...] the future in such a way as to provide a life with an overall sense of coherence and purpose' (McAdams et al 2006, p. 1372). In this case, rather poignantly, both use fandom as a coping strategy and a means of attaining some form of personal ontological security as response to the various exigencies contained within their own private lives.

## Chapter Ten – Findings and Conclusions: Working Hard at Being Good

Before reporting the findings of this research I would like to return briefly to the motivation for the study. This research was motivated by a desire to investigate Irish fans of *The West Wing*. In this regard, the study is fully cognisant of the heterogeneity of fans and of the pleasure and agency that is found in fandom, but is also fundamentally motivated by a scepticism about late modern theorisations of reflexive modernity, particularly the idealised image of a certain kind of ‘self’ and ‘selfhood’. While these discourses come wrapped in a rhetoric of choice, freedom and individualism, the substance of the rhetoric remains largely un-explored. Anthony Giddens, whose theorisations have been drawn on throughout this study, states that the challenge for the contemporary reflexive self is to protect and reconstruct a narrative of self-identity as anxieties must be resolved at some level ‘in order to preserve a coherent narrative of self-identity’ (Giddens 1991, p. 187). There is an implicit tension between the ability and the obligation to ‘manage’ the newly articulated self which potentially introduces uncertainty. For Giddens, though, in late modernity this tension becomes an opportunity to reflexively produce the ‘self’ in a way that transcends traditionally imposed constraints. Specifically, the thesis has explored these issues by investigating how and why a particular cultural text, *The West Wing*, has become embedded in the lives of Irish fans. And as outlined in Chapter One, *The West Wing* as fan object presents a particular imaginary which is not just popularly appealing but which has many specific resonances with Irish fans, including historical and cultural linkages, adding a further emotional and even psychological connection. Further, *The West Wing* is itself implicated in the blurring of boundaries between politics and culture, thereby offering an opportunity to explore these inter-related territories in uncertain times. This research consisted of a small scale questionnaire survey of 67 respondents and in-depth interviews with 22 Irish fans of *The West Wing* in order to empirically investigate a research question that asked how the reflexive act of contemporary Irish fan engagement with *The West Wing* as a political fiction might relate to narratives of self-identity, particularly political identity, in the context of rapid social and cultural transformations.

The late modern tensions mentioned above are further contextualised for these respondents by a climate of acute uncertainty and change. As such, the situatedness of this study is highly significant and has contributed to existing scholarship, extending existing theorisation around reflexive modernity and selfhood through a highly specific socio-historically lens. The research was undertaken at a pivotal moment in Irish political and economic history, in which the country, following the apparently unstoppable success of the Celtic Tiger period (1994-2008) has undergone a crisis so severe that it has been described as one which ‘matches episodes of the most severe economic distress in post-World War II history’ (IMF 2009, p. 28). In the highly uncertain period since 2008, Irish people have faced (and continue to face) precarious employment conditions, falling incomes and rising taxes in order to replay nationalised, private debt. The impact of ‘crisis’ Ireland was evident in responses. The uncertain social, political, cultural and economic context of the research period is evident in the findings in a variety of ways, highlighting the need to centralise the current socio-cultural and economic context in such studies.

What is also illuminated is the value of undertaking such media and cultural research at such time. Mairtin Mac an Ghail and Chris Haywood refer to these moments as ‘cultural flashpoints’: a historical juncture where a category (such as fandom, in this case) might be used as a lens through which to make sense of wider social transformations (2007, p. 4). In many ways, this has made the job of researching easier; investigating the fandom of a political television drama in a time of political crisis meant that the themes, tone and narrative of the text had a striking degree of relevance and resonance with the context of political and economic crisis in which respondents found themselves. This pivotal period contextualises this research, making it original and historically specific.

The remainder of the chapter presents and discusses the findings of this research. These illustrate that individual projects of selfhood, particularly evident in ‘good’ cultural consumption (which is also found to enable psychodynamic respite), continues to be pursued as ways of managing the personal experience of political and economic crisis. However, despite this, the ‘political self’ on display is characterised by high levels of ambivalence and uncertainty, which is argued to be a highly particularised Irish response to ‘crisis’. The chapter finally addresses the limitations and original contributions of this study.

## 10.1 Being 'good' in 'bad times'.

While broad theoretical formulations such as those of Giddens and reflexive modernity theorists outlined in Chapter Two offer valuable tools for conceptualising and framing research, engagement in empirically grounded, qualitative research such as this can generate unpredictable data. Mediating between the broad sweep of social theory and the 'messiness' of actual data gathered required a growing awareness of what Herbert Blumer identifies as a 'sensitising concept', concepts which are 'grounded on sense instead of on explicit object traits' (1954, p. 10). What I could not have predicted prior to conducting the research were the constant allusions of respondents to matters and objects of goodness. Respondents clearly attempted to address and resolve anxieties in order to construct and maintain a sense of ontological coherence and connectedness at a time of social and political dis-integration by demonstrating a consistent orientation towards 'good' things. What Paul Willis and Mats Trondman refer to as the 'aha' effect (2002, p. 399) came with the understanding that it was as if consumption, even of media texts, constituted a source of physical nourishment and a means of replenishing self-identity that was threatened by political and social uncertainty in which they found themselves. Such 'good' consumption was particularly evident in two ways - as it provided cultural and psychodynamic 'distinction'.

### 10.1.1 The cultural dimensions of 'good' politics

This is evident not only in respondents' conspicuous consumption of a 'quality' cultural text, but also in the manner of its consumption, as discussed in the Chapter Six analysis which focused on the consumption habits and rituals of respondents. These findings show that in both its organisation and practice, as well as in the actual moments of consumption, these respondents performatively achieve what they experience as 'good' fandom, thereby enhancing a sense of positive self-identity as 'good' people. This is evident, for example, in the varied ways that respondents spoke about consuming media, retaining, rejecting or modifying aspects of 'flow' depending on individual circumstance, sometimes in ways that are affectively and nostalgically linked to memory, other times determined by domestic or occupational responsibilities (or their absence). All of these factors were shown, in turn, to shape the object and nature of media and fan consumption, often facilitated by technology, enabling for some a

resumption of a modified version of fan consumption prior to domestic or other commitments. And of course, respondents' participation in this research can be interpreted as a performative and public articulation of this 'goodness'.

Fan reflexivity was found to be highly 'bound' and shaped by context rather than floating free of it. This can be seen in the 'fanboys' (the subject of Chapter Eight's analysis) whose approach to fandom within their generally 'liminal' status introduced the notion of 'fan labour'. The assiduousness of their approach to fandom (especially in the absence of paid employment) and particularised cultural discernment emphasised the affective pleasure and enunciative semiotic productivity found in their telephiliac fandom. But equally it introduced recent theoretical discourses that centre on the 'work' of fandom as both 'a labour of love and self-exploitation' (Hesmondhalgh 2010, p. 271). The particularity of the 'goodness' on display was further evidenced in the articulations and embodied actions of respondents within the context of their 'lived lives'; despite the common media fandom of all respondents, some were guarded about the intrusion of technology into their lives (Dan and his intense dislike of 'thin tellys', Paula's vehemence about not having televisions in bedrooms, Tom's mistrust of downloading) while for others such as Deirdre and Niall, the virtual world of the Internet becomes, ironically, a window to the real world. 'Doing' fandom in this way can be viewed as a way of partially compensating against insecurities.

Increasingly, cultural capital is positioned as a resource for social mobility; for example, Daniel Lerner's concept of media as 'mobility multiplier' (1958, p. 59) and, more recently, John Goldthorpe's notion of a 'mobility strategy' (2000), though the extent to which this discursive positioning of culture as a resource translates in any meaningful way into real economic or social mobility is highly problematic. This is particularly visible in the analysis of the results of the Great British Class Survey (Savage et al 2013) in which the multidimensional analysis reveals the striking polarisation of social inequality (in the form of an 'elite' at one end and a 'precariat' at another end of the class spectrum, and the fragmentation and segmentation of traditional middle and working class divisions (Savage et al 2013, p. 246). The striving for goodness found in all fan respondents corresponds significantly with Charles Taylor's thesis that subjective modern identity, far from being rational and instrumental, has its roots in ideas of being 'good', which he identified as a 'modern turn inwards' (1992). Further, though, the construction of 'goodness' can also be seen to be influenced by the



discourses of reflexive modernity and their mobilisation of the enterprising ‘good’ self, and further complicated in a specifically Irish context by a psycho-historically Catholic determination of what constitutes ‘good’. That the goodness seems especially significant in ‘bad times’ implies that being good even (and especially) when things are bad is highly significant for these respondents’ self-identification.

Further, that this ‘goodness’ is expressed in a conspicuously cultural manner is not surprising given the prevailing circulation of discourses that privilege and centralise ‘good’ cultural consumption, linking consumption, even if implicitly, to issues of class and value (see McRobbie 2004; Skeggs 1997, 2004; Raisborough and Adams 2008). These discourses present and in so doing suggest a version of a reflexive, enterprising self for whom consumption practice is conflated with civic, ethical and even political consumption (Lekakis 2013). Fans, as ‘cultural consumers’, are increasingly feted and rewarded by media industries and academics alike. Therefore, for these fans, their connection with a ‘quality’ drama fulfils a number of ‘good’ functions. It confirms them as performative, enterprising, cultural citizens and as belonging to a good ‘class’ of fan, in this according significantly with Bourdieu’s view of consumption as encompassing ‘conscious, strategic lifestyle choices made by the consumer against a backdrop of mostly unconscious tastes, characteristic of a class habitus’ (1984, p. 420). The articulation of values and cultural practices by respondents in this research, both in terms of the survey and the qualitative interviews, correspond strikingly to those associated traditionally with being ‘middle-class’. Of note, Skeggs, writing about the ‘moral economy of class relations’ in the context of the supposed ‘demise of class relations’ (2010, pp. 67-84) discusses how the values and practices associated with being ‘middle-class’ have become ‘the normative’, identified by Mike Savage as the new ‘particular-universal’ (Savage 2003 cited in Skeggs 2010, p. 70), which corresponds to Marilyn Strathern’s argument that the practices of the middle-class increasingly define the Western social itself (Strathern 1992 cited in Skeggs 2010, p. 70).

This attachment to the nebulous notion of goodness is further consolidated by respondents’ connection with the narrative themes of *The West Wing*. Respondents repeatedly referred to the idealisation of politics in *The West Wing* as representing how things ‘should’ be, even if (and though) the domestic reality in Ireland falls short politically, symbolically, even physically. This often emerges in the articulation of

*feelings*. As described by respondent Sean (aged 24), the political culture on display in *The West Wing* invoked feelings of aspiration and confidence; with Irish politicians, however, ‘you’re always ‘vaguely cringing, vaguely embarrassed’. Such responses were highly specific to the local and immediate situation of crisis facing these fans. And in this respect, respondents turned not to ‘real’ politics, but to the fictional and the cultural as a place to find the political values absent in real life, meaning that for them, *The West Wing* provided not just cultural but political succour. This corresponds with Beverley Skeggs’ view that understandings of value need ‘to move beyond (but still with) the economic... into understanding value more generally to understand how class is made through cultural values premised on morality, embodied in personhood and realized (or not) as a property value in symbolic systems of exchange’ (2005, p. 969). Michael stated in Chapter Nine that *The West Wing* appeals to ‘better angels’, the better angels being cultural but also political, reiterating the interplay between the cultural and political that has been a characteristic of Irish economic and social life, as discussed in Chapter Four. This too follows G. Honor Fagan’s argument that ‘social relations are as culturally as they are economically produced, and that rhetoric, ideology, and the articulations of a more egalitarian vision of society are as ‘real’, as ‘material’ and in certain instances may be as effective [...] as are the most material of economic changes’ (1995, p. 150).

But, as Skeggs says above, class is made through cultural value and these findings demonstrate that for these respondents, cultural consumption is a form of ‘distinction work’, following from Bourdieu’s (1984) emphasis on the processes of ‘distinction’ and their symbolic relationship to social position. A growing body of work (see Skeggs 1997, 2004; Raisborough 2011; Skeggs and Wood 2012) is concerned with how ‘distinction’ processes are deployed in contemporary media representations. Much of this work relates to the cultural representation of class in reality television. Matthew Adams and Jayne Raisborough refer to ‘spaces of enunciation, which serve, when inhabited by the middle class, particular articulations of distinction from the white, working class’ (2008, para 1). While ‘distinction’ work certainly indicates and illustrates reflexive choice, it is the particular nature of such reflexivity that is significant. Once again, these respondents’ mobilisation of reflexivity can be read against the highly specific context of crisis. These respondents ‘use’ *The West Wing*, replete as it is with cultural status, not as a way of distancing themselves from

‘badness’, but as a way of attaching themselves to ‘goodness’, both cultural and political. This is still ‘distinction’ work, and while it certainly indicates reflexivity, there is a tension between the extent to which it can be read as ‘transcending’ context or as ‘shaped’ by context. In this study however, while the respondents display a very similar ‘boundary work’ to that more normally associated with a distancing of the middle class from articulations of lower taste and class, their ‘border patrolling’ is concerned with locating, retaining and claiming goodness - with keeping the good in, and the bad out. This concern to attach to (and be seen to attach to) good can be read as a way of ‘dealing’ with political crisis and its very real material social inequalities by consuming a good product. As such it is a culturally distinct defence strategy (following Bourdieu 1984 and Skeggs 2004). Achieving this ‘distinction’ entails hard work and in the context of their currently precarious lives, these respondents work very hard at being good.

Previous ‘markers’ (a booming economy, a job for life, political credibility, solid property prices) have been discredited and rendered ambiguous. Ironically, for these respondents, what is no longer ambiguous is the ethereal ‘good’ of a fictional television text delivering aspirational, intelligent political drama. Its consumption affords comfort and a sense of incorporating into one’s life something of cultural value, thus a means of accumulating cultural capital - even if the translation of this cultural capital into social capital is in many cases specific to one’s own social network, while its potential to become more broadly, socially valued ‘symbolic capital’ is probably notional, or a matter of aspiration. A similar recognition of the uneven and often contradictory imbrication of economic, social and cultural capitals was the rationale for the recent BBC ‘Great British Class Survey Experiment’ (GBCSE) (2013), as discussed in Chapter Five. The findings of this research certainly accord with the conceptual emphasis of the GBCSE on the role of social and cultural processes in generating class (and therefore class divisions). However, these findings concur also with Danny Dorling’s identification of a limitation in the GBCSE’s confining of the notion of ‘precarity’ to its ‘precariat class’ (*LSE* April 30, 2013). For these fan respondents, while their economic and social capitals are far more precarious than their parents’ generation, their cultural capital is high, though of course this is partly explainable by the fact that the respondents for this study are committed cultural consumers. However, as noted in relation to the fans in this study, while there might be a notional value in

cultural compensation, the extent to which it actually compensates for economic, social and political precarity, or reduces marginality in any tangible way is questionable.

### **10.1.2 The psychodynamic dimensions of consuming ‘good’ political fiction**

As well as cultural ‘distinction’, respondent data demonstrates that fandom of *The West Wing* was an attachment that went beyond the cultural or political; in the articulation of their ‘fan relations’ there was an evident interchange between the external environment and the intra-psychic. The psycho-social references (apparent in the data in persistent references to colonial discourses and to personal biography) prompted the adoption of an analytic stance that included a psycho-dynamic and particularly an object-relations approach to these fans’ attachment to *The West Wing*. Specifically, data was analytically approached as illustrative of the concept of Winnicottian transitional or potential space, an ‘in-between’ or intermediate area between subject and object and between the inner and outer worlds (Winnicott 1953). In fact *The West Wing* itself, and especially the character of President Bartlet can be interpreted as ‘transitional objects’ in which respondents’ fandom is argued, in Chapter Seven, to constitute a symbolic psychic comforter in times of anxiety. The fantasy potential of this ‘space’ was referred to frequently in articulations about President Bartlet as a figure (or, in this reading, an object) who as ideal (though fictional) president transcends and overcomes the flaws of a number of real US presidents. Of course, connecting with an un-real object corresponds with respondents’ rhetorical response of ‘it could never happen in ‘real life’, figuring the idealised America of *The West Wing* as ‘other’, better place in which good things might possibly happen, a land of symbolic (and psychical) opportunity. These psychic investments in and attachments to the sphere of culture are deeply satisfying for these respondents in a way that ‘real life’ politics cannot match.

Further, the findings offer a vision of reflexive self-identity negotiation in which an attraction to political idealism and the desire for political connectedness with the ‘likeminded’ involves an imaginary self-extraction from the political complexity of contemporary Ireland, and a retreat *into* the self (mirroring the retreat in consumption from public to private spheres). This of course implicates a corresponding retreat away from ‘real’ political and social engagement, which was evident in the ambiguity and disengagement from ‘real’ politics and at least hinted at in respondent discourse. The enunciation of faith and belief in a fictional text (and corresponding denunciation of

faith and belief in the Irish body politic) might, however, be regarded as a self-fulfilling ‘guilt free’ fantasy, as it can ‘never come true’ (as the respondents point out). Therefore, the choice of fan object is not just a rhetorical but also an intra-psyche attempt to manage the uncertainty induced by the demands of living in present day Ireland as well as in late modernity. This pattern of retreat from public to private of course ties in with the process of individualisation, and the ‘enterprising self’ manifests itself in various ways in the voices of respondents. However, rather than the consumption of political popular culture revivifying a democratic public sphere (Habermas 1962; Dahlgren 2009; Van Zoonen 2004), the culture and context of these fans’ consumption perhaps corresponds more closely to Christopher Lasch’s culture of narcissism, which he describes as:

not necessarily a culture in which moral constraints on selfishness have collapsed or in which people released from the bonds of social obligation have lost themselves in a riot of hedonistic self-indulgence. What has weakened is not so much the structure of moral obligations and commandments as a belief in a world that survives its inhabitants. The fading of a durable, common, public world, we may conjecture, intensifies the fear of separation at the same time it weakens the psychological resources that make it possible to confront this fear ritualistically. It has freed the imagination from external constraints but exposed it more directly than before to the tyranny of inner compulsions and anxieties.

(Lasch 1984, p. 193).

For these respondents, respite is found psychically in the fan object – a good quality political drama. But the question remains, where does this leave these hardworking fans with regard to real politics, and what implications do the findings so far have for the kind of political self they present?

## **10.2 The presentation of a particular political self**

As evidenced in both the quantitative and qualitative data, the ‘political self’ revealed in the study is, for the most part, characterised by high levels of political ambiguity and uncertainty. This ambiguity is argued in Chapter Five to be related to strong levels of disillusionment with Irish politics, heightened especially by the present context of crisis. Respondents express politics ambiguously (in real life), though they are clear in their admiration for a fictional, if mimetically realist version of politics. These tensions are argued to emerge in a highly attenuated political ‘logic’ or ‘habitus’, discussed in detail in Chapter Seven. However (and following the approach to critical analysis outlined in Chapter Four), the presence of ambiguity does not exclude the possibility of examining it in greater detail and offering a critical interpretation based on such examination. To this extent, it can be said firstly that the demonstration by respondents of ambiguity and

uncertainty complicates the claimed ability of the extended reflexivity thesis to transcend traditional markers such as politics. In fact, respondents more clearly illustrate Matthew Adams' argument that late modern selfhood is 'a vehicle for grasping the world in relation to itself [that] is experienced far more ambiguously' (2002, para. 3), rather than following a trajectory in the Giddensian sense.

Secondly, the broad theoretical and conceptual context of the ambiguity on display warrants further discussion, particularly given respondents' consistent emphasis on goodness in all other respects, making it highly unlikely that politics is the only sphere about which they are happy to be deliberately apathetic. In this regard, research conducted by Nina Eliasoph is pertinent (1990, 1998). Eliasoph contends that 'ambiguity' and political apathy are less the language of self-interest and more the inevitable outcomes and expressions of 'individualist politics'. This is seen in respondent discourse too: Deirdre's equation, for example, of community issues, involvement with her daughter's school, campaigning to get the main road beside her house moved as 'political', further consolidated by her complete lack of faith in the political system. As such Eliasoph argues that political apathy might be said to be rooted firmly in the context of reflexive modernity. And as Eliasoph summarises, in a 'culture of political avoidance', apathy is something that in fact requires very hard work (1998, p. 605).

These findings strongly refute Ulrich Beck's proposition that in an individualised society enterprising consumer-citizens will re-route and re-energise political apathy into meaningful social engagement. Frank Furedi calls this an era of 'post-democratic disengagement', noting the paradox that individualised consumer action in fact 'coincide[s] with an unprecedented level of social disengagement' (1999, p. 8). Rather, Furedi suggests that in the absence of a real alternative to traditional politics, 'politics can have little meaning' (2005, p. 7). This also corresponds with Ingolfur Bluhdorn's identification of the 'paradoxical simultaneity of the marginalisation and the centralisation of the late-modern individual' (2009, p. 45). In other words, by discursively emphasising the capabilities and responsibilities of the reflexive, individualised 'self', the self has paradoxically little time for real democratic activity, finding itself in net terms, marginalised. As Bauman writes: '[t]he pursuit of elusive individuality leaves little time for anything else. [...] In the chase for individuality there is no moment of respite' (Bauman 2005, p. 23). Therefore, while these individuals are

doing their best to be ‘good’, the danger is that the lack of translation of political sensibility into significant action corresponds ultimately to Bluhdorn’s identification of a ‘late modern *politics of simulation*’ (2009, p. 45).

This can of course be argued as a manifestation of postmodern fragmentation and self-identity defined through cultural consumption, rather than a heightened sense of citizenship, political understanding and commitment. However, a deeper reading is also possible, which accounts for the bounded version of reflexivity found in respondents. Savage, Bagnall and Longhurst’s study of class identities in the northwest of England (2001) argues that ‘ambivalent’ respondents’ class identities are also structured and coherent in their own terms’ (2001, p. 875). This logic, I suggest, ‘fits’ the respondents in this study too. Their ambiguity and ambivalence about politics is actually quite coherent and unsurprising given the demands placed on the enterprising self in late modernity and particularly the unfolding and uncertain demands of living in present day Ireland. And here, these respondents as well as attempting to ‘class’ themselves in terms of cultural distinction, and engaging in a psychoanalytically healthy retreat into the self in their attachment to their fan object, also correspond very closely to the following summation of Bourdieu’s view on class by Savage, Warde and Devine: ‘for Bourdieu class is an effect – not a set of relationships or a structure. It is manifest through the operation of many fields: it is an *emergent effect* of the structuring of many specific fields’ (2005, p. 42).

Therefore, despite those sociological discourses, outlined in Chapter Two and referred to throughout, suggesting that the late modern subject has been freed from traditional constraints such as class and gender (following, for example, Giddens 1994), or from psychodynamic dimensions, what can be observed is that these discourses of freedom in fact obscure a re-working of class in which certain practices and discourses are perceived as more likely to result in upward mobility. Culture plays an explicit role in contemporary class relations (cf Savage 2003; Skeggs 2004; Skeggs and Woods 2009; Skeggs 2010); Stephanie Lawler arguing that understandings accruing from cultural and media representations work to produce working-class identities as ‘other’ and middle-classed identities as ‘not other’ (2005). Therefore, despite the discourses of reflexive modernity, class is a highly salient, rather than redundant, category in reflexive modernity; their operationalisation through cultural consumption constituting a reworking of classification. On this note, Ian Craib notes that while there may have

been an expansion of reflexive capabilities, the awareness of these structural constraints render the individual incapable of making use of them. As Craib says: 'reflexivity in this context does not bring choice, just the painful awareness of the lack of it' (2012, p. 150). This is certainly alluded to by the respondent Leon, in an example of 'reflecting upon reflecting', when he asks, 'is it all just sophism'?

Moreover, what emerges strikingly from the data and responses is a highly particularised and attenuated 'Irish' response to the 'crisis', in which the respondents generally transpose the political into a moral, cultural, historical and psychological framework. This 'Irish condition' is highly contradictory and ambivalent but suggests that the specificity of the Irish response to crisis are at least part due to underlying confusions of cultural identity. As argued in Chapter Seven, a mobilisation of hybrid discourses appears to inform this specificity. This is the largely unquestioned (and highly locally 'naturalised') neo-liberal inflection to cultural and media discourse (as discussed in Chapter Four) conjoined with a culturally specific but deeply ingrained Catholic culture of guilt and conception of self-denial as morally uplifting. In this regard, respondents are interpellated (and discursively position themselves) as both pre-modern colonial child and post-modern cultural consumer in a time of crisis. This suggestion of an infantilised nation is consolidated explicitly and implicitly in socially constitutive critical discourse, suggesting a particular Irish iteration of neo-liberalism; despite political inaction, respondents repeatedly articulate the centrality of cultural consumption to their critical processes. The difficulty in not questioning these circulating discourses lies, as Timothy Kubal suggests, in the tendency of research 'to neglect the historical, cultural and structural contexts in which constructions of reality occur' (1998, p. 539).

To conclude, in their articulations, in the active process of being good fans in bad times, these highly situated individuals challenge the tenets of the 'extended reflexivity' thesis. The pursuit of 'goodness' involves the pursuit of a compensatory, culturally and psychodynamically 'good' substitute, as found in *The West Wing*, but which ultimately involves the rejection of active political engagement. This suggests that the various discourses of reflexive modernity (in their emphasis on the individualist, enterprising, reflexive self) must be qualified in light of specific socio-cultural and historically specific contextual factors; in this case the contemporary Irish 'crisis'. Therefore, the significant efforts of respondents to attach to and claim 'goodness' in order to resolve



the ontological insecurity wrought by contemporary conditions might in fact be argued to result in them becoming ‘enthralled’ by the object of fandom. However, this results in a deeply satisfying but imaginary politics rather than active political engagement. The question of where this leaves politics (whether or not ‘in the doldrums’, as one of the respondents says) is addressed somewhat more optimistically by Nina Eliasoph who argues that ‘if we recognize that producing apathy take[s] a great deal of work, then we may find an unnoticed reserve of hope’ (1997, p. 605). These findings therefore also point to the richness that might arise in researching a more adequately understood self in contemporary society (and its reproduction in contemporary discourse) based around a more nuanced and textured understanding of the contemporary self.

### **10.3 Original contributions, limitations and suggestions for further work**

In drawing together lines that intersect social, cultural and media theory, this study attends in an original way to inner world issues as well as situational contingencies. The research has treated its subject matter in an inter-disciplinary manner, which is original in this field of study and as such makes a definitive contribution to knowledge. Treatment of the various discursive and theoretical assumptions informing the study more typically take place within their discrete spheres, within specific textual or reception fields, for example, or as a ‘social science’ or ‘humanities’ project. This more open approach has allowed for the mobilisation of a number of conceptual spheres to investigate fandom, such as the use of psychodynamic ideas to elucidate respondents’ use of cultural phenomena in a time of crisis. This study therefore fits with very current theoretical interest in the complementarity between the spheres of culture and psychodynamics (such as the recent *Little Madnesses* (2013), which applies a Winnicottian object-relations approach to the sphere of culture and aesthetics). Further, this study investigates these intersecting spheres by taking the perspective and experiences of the fan subject into account, examining how meaning is made for these respondents in the complex intersection between reading, text and context. To this extent, the study stakes out new and inter-disciplinary ground, adding an original empirical dimension to these intersecting theoretical spheres.

This consolidates Van Maanen, Sorensen and Mitchell’s claim that theory and methods are and should be highly inter-related in practice (2007). This was facilitated to a large

extent in this study by the adoption of a flexible approach to research which was supplemented by a mixed methods approach. If the questionnaire told its own story (with silences, elisions and skipped responses being part of its vocabulary), Eliasoph argues that ‘depth-interviews unearth much more ambivalence than surveys reveal; the interviewees sometimes even begin to question and challenge themselves – as often happens in interviews on any political topic’ (1998, p. 3). In this regard, a number of interviewees remained in contact with me after the interview event, mostly through email, often contacting me about things that had ‘struck them’ since we spoken, suggesting the benefits of qualitative longitudinal engagement with subjects.

Corner and Richardson define ‘political culture’ as ‘a resonant, if imprecise, term suggesting the broader contexts within which political structures develop and operate and formal political processes happen’ (2008, p. 387). Corner contends that political culture has had to recognise the power of popular culture, just as cultural studies has recognised the relationship between political and popular culture. Investigating these paradigms in a way that can engage with what Eliasoph calls ‘ethereal notions’ such as the public sphere or ‘citizens’ methods of communicating politics’ (1999, p. 1) is also important. This is even more the case given the rapidly changing dimensions of everyday social life – economic, cultural, political, even technological – which means finding an appropriate methodology to engage with contemporary subjects such as media fans is a challenge. Given these difficulties, the research methodology employed here has started to address such issues and might be appropriated similarly in comparable projects.

Moreover, this research confirms the critical importance of investigating theoretical claims empirically. In this regard, the empirical focus of this study is highly original and responds to calls for Irish media studies to supplement the more common institutional, textual and historical studies with empirical audience research (O’Neill and Titley 2011). While this is a limited and small-scale study, it has generated culturally distinct empirical data about Irish fans at a specific moment in Irish history, demonstrating that there is a critical impetus and opportunity to research and collect stories at ‘cultural flashpoint’ moments such as this. In this respect, the thesis has not sought to delimit the agency or pleasure of the fan, but to attend to a number of dimensions of fandom and reflexive identity that have been under explored to date.

Therefore, while the findings reported here can make no explicit claims for generalisability, the knowledge generated by this local study has a value in its own right in its original attempt to undertake a rich investigation of how global phenomena and discourses impact on the everyday lives of situated, contextualised subjects. Despite the visible trend of globalisation, Dhoest contends that 'our experiences of the global are strongly anchored in the local' (2007, p. 61). While this study has itself contributed in an original way to audience research in Irish media studies, one of its uses might therefore be in recognising how local and situated research can be relevant in explaining and analysing the culture within which it is presented. In this respect the research and its mixed methods design employed here are applicable to further work in these fields.

Finally, to again paraphrase Mary Bosworth, this study ends with the formulation of a number of additional questions and has presented a far wider range of issues than originally suggested by the scope of the topic. A number of areas therefore present themselves as suitable for further study that were beyond the scope of this particular research project (and which accordingly address some of its limitations).

While the present study attempted to sample the entirety of a potential research population, there were difficulties in targeting and recruiting certain sections of this population, particularly, in the case of this study, older respondents. Given the value of eliciting the histories and experiences of those populations or sectors of populations that present less readily, perhaps future research could focus specifically on recruiting, researching and listening to these populations. Equally, engaging in 'longitudinal' biographical studies of how fan investments in certain media change over time, and how these relate to other aspects of social, cultural or political identity would elicit rich and original data.

The inclusion of psychodynamic theories – such as object-relations theory – to the sphere of cultural consumption and cultural experiences as symbolic resources allows for an exploration of the relationships between affective psychic investments and cultural objects, as well as investigations into how transitional objects and phenomena might constitute a resource that extends far beyond childhood. These areas are ripe for further investigation. Such studies could, for example, research media texts and their material storage – such as DVD collections - involving issues of collectability, disposability and cultural value in media consumption. While these areas have been

addressed theoretically, the extension of this into empirical research is currently lacking, especially at local and specific levels.

‘We live in interestingly uncertain times’, says Jim McGuigan (2006, p. 1). This research engages with Irish subjects at a particular, pivotal moment in Irish history, underscoring the need to engage in specific and local research. Investigating the complex circulation of how economic, cultural and social capitals coalesce to form social ‘class’ presents both a timely and important opportunity for research and analysis. From an Irish perspective, given the specific of context of ‘bad times’ which has been referenced throughout this thesis, this type of research would make a hugely valuable contribution to Irish media and cultural studies. The contemporary is a pivotal moment - doing close-up research at such a moment presents challenges but also significant opportunities to hear the voices of people during times of social and cultural change.

Finally, the diverse threads that have fed into this study not only reflect its interdisciplinary nature but also indicate that there is a 'space' for cultural/media/social theory in an Irish context that has not been addressed to date. This is ripe for further study, which would allow for an extension of existing discrete studies. It is hoped that this study has started to address these issues, and highlighted the necessity for other comparable studies.

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## Appendix 1: Situating *The West Wing*

This appendix provides a general description of *The West Wing*, outlining its dramatic depiction of a particular version of politics, its characters, themes and a timeline for its broadcast in America and Ireland. It should be noted however that over the show's extensive duration (over its seven seasons and 156 episodes in total), not one but two political candidates are elected as US President and its audience encounters numerous relationships, illnesses, births and deaths of both characters and actors on the show. Therefore, this appendix is necessarily condensed. Further, the account provided here focuses primarily on the personalities and their political orientations, rather than on the narrative strands, as this mirrors how the respondents for this study related to the series. Therefore this appendix provides a context for the data as it emerged. More extensive discussion on the aspects of *The West Wing* outlined in summary here can be found in Topping (2002); Rollins and O'Connor (2003); Fahy (2005); Crawley (2006); Parry Giles and Parry Giles (2006); McCabe (2013).

*The West Wing* follows the presidency of liberal Democrat, Josiah (Jed) Bartlet, his senior staff and fictional Presidential administration. The series was created by Aaron Sorkin, who had previously dealt dramatically with the world of Presidential politics in his screenplay *The American President* (1995) and had received critical acclaim for his television series *Sports Night* (1998-2000). The series won numerous Emmy, Golden Globe and Peabody Awards. Creator, playwright and film and television writer Aaron Sorkin, who, along with director Thomas Schlamme, wrote and executive produced the series for the first four years, left *The West Wing* after the fourth season of the series.

*The West Wing* originally aired on US commercial broadcaster NBC between 1999 and 2006, broadcasting for a total of seven seasons. As discussed in detail in Chapter One, each season consists of 22 episodes. In addition there were two 'special' non-sequential episodes, including a documentary about the similarities between the real life White House and *The West Wing*, and an unplanned episode which took the place of the planned Season 3 premiere after the '9/11' attacks on the USA. This makes a total of 156 one hour episodes (the 'television hour' of NBC, a commercial station, consisting of 42 minutes and 13 seconds of television drama).

## Formal Qualities and Themes

*The West Wing* is set in the White House and, while fictional, in its mimetic discourse of political problems and procedures it both refers and alludes to real political events. The tensions between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic ideological political discourses within American society are therefore addressed within the text, though the dependence of broadcaster NBC on advertising revenue and audience maximisation arguably limits the degree to which, if at all, such a text can offer a radical critique of political structures and discourses in American society.

The politicality of *The West Wing* is constituted and narrativised within the formal qualities of the episodic television series/serial (and in this case within the formal qualities of the 'quality' TV drama, which itself emerged from a particular context of broadcasting and reception, imbuing it with particular characteristics (as discussed in Chapter Two). Dolan refers to the episodic serial as '[a] hybrid narrative form, combining the dramatically satisfying finitude of the episodic series with the linear narrative development of the continuous serial' (1995, p. 30). *The West Wing* takes advantage of this 'open' rather than 'closed narrative form' in order to assist in the establishment of 'paradigmatic complexity' (Creeber 2004, p. 4), operationalising a dramatic political world in which certain political storylines are dealt with within discrete episodes while a number of more complex storylines are expanded to form part of the narrative arc of an entire season (or seasons).

This is operationalised through the employment of 'previously on' teasers at the start of episodes and extensive use of the flashback device. Both are used as reference points and as a means of condensing plotlines for the audience, given the show's prolific lifespan. In fact, it is largely through flashback that we not only meet the principal characters of the show but that we are shown why they as individuals are motivated to 'serve' at the pleasure of the President. This not only contributes to *The West Wing's* rhetorical universe, in the sense of a Barthesian referential code, but also underlines the principal themes of the show. These emphasise a prevailing sense of politics as duty, but a duty which requires a commitment to political values rather than political expediency, itself underscored by a profound faith in the institution of politics. These themes are marshalled through the characters - their speech, image and action - all of



which are mobilised to establish and expose the ‘good’ political values of *The West Wing*.

### Reinforcing ‘Good’ Politics: Dialogue and Aesthetics

To a large extent, these values are expressed and defined by the approach of the show’s principal characters to political discourse, which is consistently framed both in terms of emotion and humanity but also intellectually. The political themes of the show are expressed dialogically through the use of particularly ‘smart’ dialogue which functions to assert a particularly discursive and democratic level of politics on the ground of the inner White House. *The West Wing* is above all associated with trademark ‘Sorkinese’ dialogue, and it is primarily through dialogue that the particular politicality of the show is portrayed. The thematic stress on duty in *The West Wing* is particularly framed in terms of the dialogical interchanges surrounding the establishment of what the right thing is, even if this does not translate into political popularity or success. For example, here Chief of Staff Leo McGarry (John Spencer) urges the key political staff to pursue their political agenda, rather than political expediency:

LEO: We're gonna lose a lot of these battles, and we might even lose the White House, but we're not gonna be threatened by issues; we're gonna put them front and center. We're gonna raise the level of public debate in this country, and let that be our legacy. That sound alright to you, Josh?

JOSH: I serve at the pleasure of the President of the United States.

(*The West Wing*, Season 1, Episode 19, ‘Let Bartlet be Bartlet’; original broadcast date April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2000.)

The dialogue contributes to the sense of ‘smart’ politics as practiced by these particular individuals. In addition to being intellectual, informed and savvy the dialogue includes frequent use of irony, sarcasm, pop culture references and especially humour, which regularly is employed to divert from inherently problematic issues. This is further reinforced by the Socratic dialogue in the form of conversations and debates amongst the key staff and between the President and his key staff, which in many instances constitutes a dialogical rehearsal of opinions and viewpoints on political subject matters, often positing the Bartlet administration’s liberal political instinct against prevailing political values, in what Chambers calls ‘agonistic discourse’ (in 2003, p. 96). Application of the Bakhtinian concept of dialogism also highlights how narratives with multiple characters and plotlines arguably enable textual dialogical interactions between competing political positions, which Flanagan discusses as ‘throw[ing] a discursive bridge between expressive positions’ (2009, p. 6). Each of the principal characters

plays a specific role in this debate, enabling a dramatically discursive airing of all sides of political debate as a prelude to actual acts of political decision making. Through such dialogue, particular notions of duty and power are established, together with a politicality in which serving the president is equated with patriotic, civic duty - both obligation and honour.

However, while *The West Wing* is frequently portrayed as liberal and left-leaning, close examination of its political decision-making in the episodes reveals it to be broadly conservative. Though liberal arguments are rehearsed discursively and often extensively in the narratives, personal beliefs and morals are consistently subjugated to a broader set of political values which can be coded as American western liberal democracy. The liberalism is played out in the debate, not necessarily in the outcome of the debate (Lehmann discusses this as 'pseudo-politics' and 'symbolic posturing' (2003, p. 216)). The staff's performative function in such debates is as members of debate camp, individually and collectively assuming positions on issues which are often dramatically based on the personal experiences, morals or religious beliefs of the characters.

The politicality of the show is itself further consolidated by its mimetically realistic references, the particular setting and aesthetic of the White House. All of these confer a realism and dynamism. This affective picture of politics is reinforced visually and aesthetically through a combination of stylised cinematography, editing and mise en scene. Predominantly associated with *The West Wing* and its primary director Thomas Schlamme, the 'walk and talk' signature style of shooting became synonymous with *The West Wing*<sup>42</sup>, typically involving two characters walking from one end of a large contiguous set to the other, combining story exposition (through Sorkin's trademark rapid fire dialogue), characterisation (emphasising the agency and activity of the characters), and visual excitement, adding dynamism to what otherwise would be static talking head shots while equally extracting maximum value from screen time. The 'walk and talk', operated by steadicam, is punctuated by flashing 'hot lights' overhead, a lighting feature designed by *The West Wing*'s cinematographer Thomas Del Ruth,

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<sup>42</sup> Though David Bordwell has traced the walk and talk shot back to films as far back as the 1930s (Max Ophuls) contending it was consistently used in film as well as in television (St. Elsewhere, ER), characterising it as "at best [it's] a convention, at worst a cliché" (Bordwell, 'Walk the Talk', <http://www.david.bordwell.net/blog/?p=382>).

which, as the characters are walking and talking, gives the impression of light bouncing off heads, further accentuating the urgency, speed and importance of the work being done.

Aesthetically, lighting further contributes to the establishment of the politicality of Bartlet's White House; the interiors are darkly lit, evoking a bunker in which serious work is carried out and President Bartlet is frequently closely framed, lit either in soft or harsh light depending on the tone of the scene. Cinematographer Del Ruth states: 'if a scene puts the president in a heroic light, we subtly change the camera angle and lighting to reflect that. Other times, he isn't bathed in the most favorable light when elements of his personality come into conflict with those that are around him' (quoted in Fisher 2000). The effect of these visual and aesthetic devices is to depict an omnipresent politicality that, while dynamic, active and industrious also has layers of light and dark tones; a multi-layered physical space in which the work of presidentiality is undertaken.

### **Personalising the Political: Key Characters and their Uses**

As referred to by Kozloff, the hybridity of contemporary television formats enables multiple storylines that strategically diffuse viewer interest from one line of action to interest in a larger field, and a tendency to displace audience interest from the syntagmatic to the paradigmatic axis (1992, p. 93). This is clearly the case in *The West Wing*, in which political issues are diffused through a framework of personal, professional, adversarial and benign relationships. This, along with the nature and delivery of the 'Sorkinese' dialogue as well as the stylistic qualities of *The West Wing* means that throughout, 'political discussions are integrated with personal exchanges in quick flows that encourage the viewer to blur the boundary between the two' which in itself 'create[s] a highly affective narrative that consistently privileges emotions over cognitions' (Crawley 2006, p. 77). The politics of *The West Wing* are frequently (and highly satisfactorily, from an audience engagement perspective) personalised and conflated within the personal stories or identities of the characters on the show – as such removed from the abstract and given personal, often biographical context. While politically complex storylines form its basis, the individual storylines are dramatically dealt with by filtering the political through the prism of the personal. This reductive device succeeds in superficially infiltrating a storyline with complex political

information while simultaneously fulfilling dramatic requirements by privileging the personal over the political. The characters therefore play a very significant role in their dramatic personalisation of *The West Wing*'s values.

President Josiah (Jed) Bartlet (played by Martin Sheen), Seasons 1-7



President Bartlet is the fictional Democratic US President, in whose 'West Wing' of the White House this drama takes place. Allusions to Josiah Bartlet's political heritage and liberal intellectual qualities are referenced regularly in dialogical interchanges, establishing his political heritage as intrinsic to the politicality of *The West Wing*. The shooting script for the pilot episode of *The West Wing* describes Bartlet's first appearance in its stage directions thus: 'The man is President Josiah (Jed) Bartlet, Democrat of New Hampshire, and a direct descendant of one of the signers of the Declaration' (Sorkin 2002, p. 63). The audience is informed frequently through the dialogue of Bartlet and other characters that he was a tenured economics professor who has received a Nobel Laureate in economics, is devoutly Catholic, and had considered entering the priesthood before meeting his wife, Dr. Abigail Bartlet, with whom he has three adult daughters. As President, then, Bartlet is not just paternal but also embodies intellectual as well as moral qualities. Through dialogue, these qualities collectively and cumulatively establish and reinforce a picture of a man who is distinct from the norm; of Jed Bartlet the natural leader. In dialogue from a flashback scene, Bartlet's long-standing, loyal secretary Mrs. Landingham, remarks to the young Jed Bartlet:

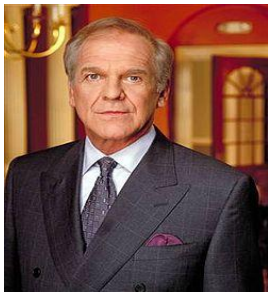
MRS. LANDINGHAM: Look at you. You're a boy king. You're a foot smarter than the smartest kid in the class, you're blessed with inspiration, you must know this by now, you must have sensed it.

(*The West Wing*, Season 2, Episode 22, 'Two Cathedrals', original broadcast date May 16th, 2001.)

As discussed by Diane Rubinstein, in the vernacular use of the American presidency the American citizenship is already primed to enter into an intimate relationship with their

President (2008, p. 1), which suggests that viewers of *The West Wing* might be *already* encouraged and disposed to accept Sorkin's depiction of an American president. This assertion is backed up by a poll conducted during the show's first season, according to which 'Jed Bartlet' would have won the 2000 US election with 75% of the vote had 'he' run (Berens 2001 originally cited in Crawley 2006, p. 138). This is consolidated by the intertextuality brought to bear on the role of President Bartlet by actor Martin Sheen, a prominent radical campaigner for social justice and peace who has been arrested over 70 times, and professes that his motivation for protest derives from his Catholic faith. The emotional power of the fictional President Bartlet is underscored by those personal and public qualities seen to be embodied by the actor (and activist) Martin Sheen. Sheen's impact as Jed Bartlet in the pilot episode displaced his character from secondary to primary status (the series was originally conceived to be centred on the relationships amongst the President's senior staff rather than with the President himself (Topping 2002, p. 571), and in fact Sheen as Bartlet only appears in the final episodes of the pilot episode). It is Bartlet's core senior staff, however – defined by their ability and desire to 'serve' at the pleasure of the President (and thereby serve the nation) - that comprise the key characters of the drama.

Chief of Staff Leo McGarry (played by John Spencer), Seasons 1-7



Chief of Staff, Leo McGarry (in his early 60s) is an affluent former US airforce veteran and a Democratic political heavyweight. A former US Secretary of Labor he is a figure of considerable power and influence within the Democratic party. McGarry, from Chicago, is a Roman Catholic with Irish ancestry. His recovery from alcoholism is part of the dramatic narrative (we learn that his father, also an alcoholic, committed suicide). In many respects McGarry, as self-made leader, 'exhibits many of the traits of culturally constructed masculinity' (Crawley 2006, p. 78). In a flashback sequence, we see that McGarry commits to then Senator and Governor of New Hampshire Jed Bartlet and

serves as his manager for his presidential campaign. McGarry does this because Bartlet, unlike the other contenders, is 'the real thing'. As such, the character of Leo McGarry sets a key tone for the politicality of the series when he states why he has decided to support Bartlet:

LEO: Because I'm tired of it. Year after year after year after year, having to choose between the lesser of *who cares*. Of trying to get myself excited about the candidate who can speak in complete sentences. Of setting the bar so low I can hardly look at it. They say a good man can't get elected president, I don't believe that, do you?

(*The West Wing*, Season 2, Episode 1, 'In The Shadow of Two Gunmen, Pt. 1, original broadcast date October 4<sup>th</sup>, 2000.)

McGarry is appointed by Bartlet as White House Chief of Staff (and the principal advisor to the president), a position he occupies during seasons 1-6. During this time, McGarry acts as hawk to Bartlet's dove, urging him to take tough political decisions rather than sit on the fence. During Season Six, Leo McGarry suffers a heart attack following a difference of opinion in negotiations with Bartlet, and is later appointed in a new role as Senior Counselor to the President for his last year in power before the end of his two term run. He is subsequently appointed by Congressman (later President) Matt Santos as his vice presidential nominee. The character of Leo McGarry dies of a heart attack during voting day, dying as vice-president elect (the character's death was written in response to the death of actor John Spencer). The character of Leo McGarry is buried in Arlington National Cemetery following a Catholic ceremony at which the President and key staff are pallbearers.

It is McGarry who is seen in early seasons to mobilise his political nous in assembling and motivating the key senior staff (mostly from their highly lucrative employments in the private sector) to serve the Senator (then President) Bartlet for a weekly government salary of \$600. McGarry and the senior staff are therefore immediately depicted as having both the personal integrity and political ability to discern Bartlet as 'the real thing'; they are seen to feel obliged and honoured (and in fact required) to answer the call to public service by serving the campaign and subsequently the presidency (and thereby the nation). This work, while of little monetary value, is framed as 'subsuming the pursuit of power to something more ennobling' (in Paxton 2005, p 174). Each character can be seen to interact with each other and particularly as foils to the President in dramatically and narratively functional ways which serve to underscore political

aspirations as well as personal weaknesses/capabilities; further blurring the personal and political. The other key political staff (and therefore characters) are:

White House Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman (played by Bradley Whitford), Seasons 1-7.



The character of Joshua Lyman is Leo McGarry's deputy (and reputed to be based on former Clinton advisor Paul Begala). Josh, in his 30s, and from Westport Connecticut, is a Fulbright Scholar and graduate of Harvard University and Yale Law School, though he mentions that he has had to work hard for these achievements, rather than them coming easily. We learn that Josh's grandfather was held in the Nazi concentration camp Birkenau during WWII and his only sibling, a sister Joanie, died in a housefire that trapped both of them. Josh, then a child, ran out of the house and survived. Josh's character is stubborn but extremely loyal, described by the actor Bradley Whitford as 'smart, oversensitive and full of rage' (Moore 2000). Josh is often depicted as a hothead (though his passionate stances are also characterised as one of his strongest political qualities) and prides himself on being a 'team player'. Mirroring his mentor Leo McGarry, Josh leaves his position in President Bartlet's White House to run the campaign for underdog Democratic hopeful Congressman Matt Santos of Texas. After Santos's victory and as of the end of *The West Wing*, Lyman is installed as new White House Chief of Staff.

White House Communications Director Toby Ziegler (played by Richard Schiff), Seasons 1-7.



The character of Toby Ziegler, a Jewish divorcé in his late 40s is in charge of directing the ‘message’ of Bartlet’s administration. Toby - like each of the key characters – embodies some aspect of the political ideals of *The West Wing*. However, Toby is much darker and more cynical, both personally and politically, and his role is that of forcing the President to look to his failings as well as his achievements. As Crawley writes, ‘Toby’s character prevents Sorkin’s ideal version of the presidency from being reduced to pure cliché because the character functions as a constant reminder of Bartlet’s failure to live up to the ideal’ (2006, p. 84). Toby is removed from his position in the White House during Season Seven when it is discovered that he has leaked classified military information concerning a secret military space shuttle to a journalist at the *New York Times*. In the show, Bartlet’s final act as President is to pardon Toby and spare him from serving a prison sentence.

White House Deputy Communications Director/Chief Speechwriter Sam Seaborn  
(played by Rob Lowe), Seasons 1-4, Season 7.



Sam Seaborn, in his thirties, is Toby Ziegler’s deputy and chief speechwriter for President Bartlet. A graduate of Princeton University (where he was the proud secretary of the Gilbert and Sullivan Society) and of Duke University School of Law, Seaborn had initially worked as a staffer for various Democratic congressman but left political life to work as a (successful) lawyer in the private sector. However, Seaborn, an idealist, and on the verge of being appointed partner in a NYC lawfirm, is shown as very uneasy about what he sees as his company’s dubious ethical practices. When Josh Lyman travels to New York to attempt to recruit him back to politics, Sam is easily swayed towards doing the ‘right thing’. Seaborn is depicted as a key member of the team that helped Bartlet to victory, first in the election, then as a key member of his



administration. As a character, Sam is seen to be committed to an idealised form of politics. His character operates within the show to humanise institutional politics and assign it a positive value system; his personal nobility and faith in the political system is therefore used to indicate how things could and should be. In the character of Sam Seaborn, as Crawley writes, Sorkin ‘articulates a vision of politics that recalls the earliest learned notions of the president and government as instruments of good’ and which ‘asks the audience to remember that their most basic conception of the presidency and government [are] as institutions that lead by example and strive to enrich the lives of all citizens’ (2006, p. 94). In the fourth season of *The West Wing* Sam’s idealism leads him to leave his position in Bartlet’s administration and run for Congress in his home district in Orange County, California. The final season sees Seaborn return as Josh Lyman’s deputy Chief of Staff.

White House Press Secretary CJ Cregg (played by Allison Janney) Seasons 1-6, 7 (as Chief of Staff)



CJ, in her 40s, had been successfully working for a PR company before being recruited to work on Bartlet’s campaign, ultimately being appointed as Press Secretary. The character of CJ Cregg (loosely based on former Clinton administration press secretary Dee Dee Myers, who also acted as a consultant to the show) is key amongst a number of women in the Bartlet administration. As asserted by Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles, the character of CJ represents a site where gender and politics play out (2006, p. 78). She is portrayed as assertive, confident and capable within the Bartlet administration’s political culture. However, like a number of other female characters on the show, her political astuteness and acumen is sometimes challenged, especially, as Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles point out, ‘during time[s] of considerable crisis when their emotions overtake their rationality in the complicated and competitive terrain of political Washington, reifying age-old stereotypes of male rationality and female emotiveness’

(2006, p. 78). As written, the character of CJ Cregg is reminiscent of the screwball heroine female lead of 1930s and 1940s films typified by the likes of Jean Arthur, Carole Lombard and Katharine Hepburn. Particularly adept at verbal wisecracks and asserting a highly capable and hardworking professionalism, the character of CJ has been described by Ringelberg as ‘Sorkin’s seemingly ideal type, the brainy, sassy, but finally dependent woman’ which enables her (and by extension, the drama itself) to continue ‘a long-standing American tradition of selling to multiple constituencies while reaffirming normative (in this case sexist) values’ (2005, p. 91). While CJ is sometimes being seen as excluded from core meetings amongst male key staffers, it is she who is appointed as Leo McGarry’s replacement as Chief of Staff following his heart attack, having been personally recommended for the job by Leo. As such, she - in the fictional universe of *The West Wing* - makes history as the only female Chief of Staff.

### ***The West Wing* and its broadcast timelines: US and Ireland**

*The West Wing* was broadcast on US network channel NBC in a ‘primetime’ slot on Wednesdays at 9pm. The first episode was aired on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1999, with a season airing each year (consisting of 22 episodes which aired annually between late September/early October and mid-May). As discussed in some detail in Chapter One, its initial broadcast was just a few months after impeachment charges were brought against President Bill Clinton by the US House of Representatives. At the time, the campaign for Clinton’s presidential successor was underway, ending in the 54<sup>th</sup> US Presidential Election of 2000, a contest between Republican candidate George W Bush and Democratic candidate Al Gore. Litigation about recounts ended in a contentious decision by the US Supreme Court on December 12<sup>th</sup>, 2000 to end the recounts (‘Bush vs. Gore’), thereby awarding Florida’s votes – and, effectively, victory – to Bush, despite Gore having won the popular vote. Ironically, an episode of *The West Wing* scheduled for broadcast on December 13<sup>th</sup> 2000 was postponed in order to air a live broadcast of the response by Vice-President Al Gore and Texas Governor George W. Bush to the Supreme Court’s decision (Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2006, p. 1).

Two years later, just before Season Three of *The West Wing*, the ‘9/11’ attacks occurred. The events were engaged with on *The West Wing* with a stand-alone non-sequential episode entitled ‘Isaac and Ishmael’ which aired on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2001. The planned episode one of Season Three aired the following week. The ‘war against terrorism’ was

subsequently engaged with in a mimetic fashion during Season 4, as will be discussed shortly. In 2005, Season 6 of *The West Wing* introduced the character of ‘Matt Santos’, a Democratic member of the House of Representatives. About to retire due to his frustration with politics, Santos is ultimately urged to put forward his presidential candidacy by Josh Lyman. Santos (whose character was based, according to producer Eli Attie on then largely unknown Illinois Senator Barack Obama), wins the election in *The West Wing*’s final season to become Jed Bartlet’s successor.

If the American broadcast timeline of *The West Wing* alludes to the convergences between media and political culture, then its Irish broadcast timelines alludes strongly to the cultural politics of scheduling for a small domestic public service broadcaster. The Irish broadcast rights to *The West Wing* were acquired by RTÉ, where it was broadcast on a Thursday night in a variable timeslot, which shifted on a seemingly ad hoc basis between 10.15pm and 11.40pm. Janet McCabe attributes the ‘erratic scheduling’ of US shows such as *The West Wing* (not just in Ireland but also on its UK broadcaster, C4) to ‘a cultural anxiety about US imperialism: a tension of dominant American/global forces against national public service broadcasting policy and ‘local’ interests’ (McCabe 2013, p. 28). In other words, that there is a tension for public broadcasters such as RTÉ to fulfil their mandate as public service broadcasters by privileging local rather than foreign acquisitions/productions in primetime slots. This remains the case, with foreign programmes which are usually broadcast in the primetime slot (between 9.30 to 11.15pm) frequently being shifted to make way for ‘in-house’ productions. *The West Wing* was broadcast earlier on RTÉ than on its UK broadcasting counterpart (Channel 4) which is also significant given that a majority of Irish audiences can readily access UK television stations. Despite the erratic scheduling, McCabe suggests that *The West Wing* ‘claimed its space’ in the RTE schedule’ on the basis that it was ‘a prestigious and important acquisition for the Irish broadcaster’ (McCabe 2013, p. 28). Significantly (and following the trend in ‘quality TV audiences’), while the ratings were not huge, they indicated that the show attracted ‘a select and desirable’ audience.

## **Brief Seasonal Overview**

### **Season One**

Largely invested in the establishment of the series’ particular political tone, the first season establishes the key characters as well as a number of thematic concerns through

its plots. Specifically, these are illuminated through a detailed look at the machinations and behind the scenes negotiation involved in a number of political issues. These issues tend to be internal (such as the wrangling involved in the nomination of a Supreme Court Justice; a conflict and its handling between the President and VP) or indicative of the global significance and positionality of US politics (such as US involvement in a political crisis between India and Pakistan; also decisions and debates about the appropriate level of response to an attack on a US military plane), as well as national/moral issues (gay rights; drug use). The dramatic cliff-hanger finale of the season depicted an assassination attempt on the president (in which key members of staff were injured).

### **Season Two**

Following from the resolution of the assassination cliffhanger, Season Two mixes a variety of international, national and morally significant political themes (ranging from tensions over 'democratic' elections in Haiti to a suit against a US tobacco company). More significantly though, the season, framed by the plot device of the assassination attempt, fleshes out the biographies and histories of many of the key players through flashbacks. In particular this, and the aftermath of the assassination attempt, facilitates the revelation that President Bartlet has multiple sclerosis, a fact that he has kept secret not only from his staff, but also from the electorate. This storyline, particularly the ramifications of the President's attempts to keep his condition secret (mirroring to a large degree the Clinton/Lewinski scandal, though transposed to an ethical/medical rather than sexual framework) build during Season Two and into Season Three.

### **Season Three**

Season Three (which aired post '9/11') is marked by two predominant threads. The first of these concerns the storyline in which President Bartlet (whose Multiple Sclerosis revelation is now public) must decide about whether he will run for a second term (while his team debate about the political and ethical expediency of doing so). The second theme that constitutes a narrative arc, not only in season three but also in subsequent seasons, is a mimetic engagement with the real 'war against terror', in which the Bartlet administration's difficulties with the fictional Middle Eastern country 'Qumar' is the dramatic site for a number of terrorism subplots. The season ends with the President's 'hawk' decision to order the assassination of a Qumar official.

## **Season Four**

This season continues with a mix of the global and local. In terms of the latter, the storyline is primarily concerned with President Bartlet's (ultimately successful) re-election campaign. This storyline is intertwined with the ramifications of the assassination on the 'Qumar' official, ending in the season's final storyline in which the President's youngest daughter is abducted on her graduation day by Qumari terrorists. President Bartlet decides that he is unable to separate his duties as father from those of President. He temporarily steps down as President, invoking the 25<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which transfers presidential authority to the Speaker of the House (Glen Allen Walken, played by John Goodman) as acting president. Both Aaron Sorkin and Thomas Schlamme left the show at the end of Season Four, following differences with NBC concerning budget cuts.

## **Season Five**

Following the departure of Sorkin, veteran ER producer John Wells was engaged as the show's chief producer. The season's early episodes engage with the international crisis that ensues following the kidnapping of the president's daughter. This storyline precipitates a longer and more internally based narrative arc which deals with the consequences of Bartlet's actions in temporarily stepping down from power and the internal machinations that are implicated in their reversal. The theme of the season concerns the substantial reduction of Bartlet's political authority. This weakness is exploited by Republicans who are seen to be pushing forward their own agenda. In its fifth season, the show's audience in the 18-49 demographic declined substantially, achieving a 16<sup>th</sup> position (Nielsen Season Ratings November 2003). The response from fans and critics was critical. What was perceived to be the decline in the show's quality was equated to Sorkin's departure and 'replacement' with John Wells - as for example, in this critique: 'the very essence of *West Wing* dialogue has been compromised to such an extent that it might now be confused with, let's say, *ER* dialogue.... *The West Wing* under new management is trying to transform a workplace drama into a slightly soap-operatic emotional one' (Archer 2003).

## **Season Six**

The penultimate season engages with the start of the winding down of the Bartlet administration as it faces into its final two years, including a re-shuffle of the fictional White House cabinet and staff. Away from the Bartlet White House, the election campaign of Matt Santos (played by Jimmy Smits) starts to wind up, co-opting a number of key figures from Bartlet's administration. The Democrats need to field a formidable opponent to run against the credible and admired Republican Candidate Arnold Vinick (played by Alan Alda), and the season thematically engages again with matters of political values, credibility and duty. The season ends with Matt Santos winning a three way race to be chosen as the Democratic Presidential Nominee, with Leo McGarry as his running mate.

## **Season Seven**

The final season of *The West Wing* saw it move from its Wednesday night primetime slot to an 8pm timeslot on Sunday nights. In this season, President Bartlet and his administration play a secondary, supporting role as the election campaigns of Democratic nominee Santos and Republican nominee Vinick take precedence. The main arc follows both nominees on the campaign trail, with both depicted as credible politicians, hardworking and well matched, interested in raising the level of debate and focusing on policies rather than personal attacks. On election night, Santos narrowly wins the election but his Vice-President and running mate Leo McGarry is discovered to have died from a heart attack (a response to the unexpected death of actor John Spencer). The remaining episodes of the season concern Leo's funeral, the aftermath of his death and the transition from the Bartlet to the Santos presidency. The final episode depicts President Santos's inauguration and the departure of President Bartlet from office.

## **Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form and Ethical Clearance**

### **Information Sheet**

Please see overleaf.

# **THE WEST WING**

AND

## **IRISH POPULAR POLITICAL IMAGINATION**

### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM**

#### **What is the project about?**

This project wants to talk to Irish fans of *The West Wing* to examine the idea that there might be a relationship between the ways in which they engage with a political television drama series and understandings of their own political identity.

#### **Who is undertaking it?**

My name is Clare Scully and I am a postgraduate student attending University of Limerick/Mary Immaculate College. I am presently completing a PhD by research in the Department of Media and Communication Studies. The current study will form part of my thesis.

#### **Why is it being undertaken?**

The objective of the study is to investigate how engagement with popular media - specifically the television drama *The West Wing* - contributes or relates to the construction and expression of political identities by its Irish fans.

#### **What are the benefits of this research?**

It is hoped that the data gathered from participants will (a) examine whether there is a relationship between media and political identity construction by looking at the ways in which fans engage with political television drama, (b) as a cross-generational audience study, look at whether generational factors are of, and (c) may provide original insight into Irish 'fan' audiences, media consumption and political identity in an era of increasing media convergence.

#### **Exactly what is involved for the participant (time, location, etc.)**

The study will ask you to answer a short **questionnaire** to identify details regarding your media consumption, as well as some biographical information. This survey will take approximately fifteen to twenty minutes to complete. Following this, you will be invited to participate in a face-to-face interview, of approximately forty-five minutes in duration, in which you will be invited to discuss *The West Wing* in more detail.

#### **Right to withdraw**

You are free to withdraw from the research at any time without giving a reason.

#### **How will the information be used?**

The data from your questionnaire and interview will be combined with that of the other participants in this study and used to form the results section of my thesis. Summary data only will appear in the thesis, individual participant data will not be shown.



**How will confidentiality be kept?**

All data is collected anonymously you are only required to give your name for consent. Data collected complies with the Freedom of Information and Data Protection act. All information gathered will remain confidential and will only be available to the principal researcher and supervisor. A random ID number will be generated for each participant and it is this number rather than the participant's name which will be held with their data to maintain their anonymity.

**What will happen to the data after research has been completed?**

In accordance with the Data Protection Act (2003) all participant data will be stored for the length of time that it is required to produce this thesis plus a period of three years, at which time it will be destroyed.

This research complies with the Mary Immaculate Research Ethics Committee and the ethical guidelines of the Psychology Society of Ireland.

**Contact details:**

If at any time you have any queries/issues with regard to this study my contact details are as follows:

Clare Scully

Clareanne.scully@gmail.com

087 2698284

**If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent,**

**you may contact:**

**MIREC Administrator  
Mary Immaculate College  
South Circular Road  
Limerick  
061-204515  
mirec@mic.ul.ie**

## **Consent Form**

Please see overleaf.

# ***THE WEST WING*** AND IRISH POPULAR POLITICAL IMAGINATION

## **CONSENT FORM**

Dear Participant,

As outlined in the **participant information sheet** the current study will investigate whether and how the ways we watch the television drama *The West Wing* contributes or relates to the construction of our political identities.

More detailed information is contained in the **participant information sheet**, which should be read fully and carefully before consenting to take part in this study.

Your anonymity is assured and you are free to withdraw from the experiment at any time. All information gathered will remain confidential and anonymous and will not be released to any third party. In accordance with the Data Protection Act (2003) all research records will be stored for the length of time that it is required to produce this thesis plus a period of 3 years following which it will be destroyed.

Please read the following statements before signing the consent form.

- I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.
- I understand what the project is about
- I know that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the project at any stage without giving any reason.
- I am aware that my results will be kept confidential.
- I have read this form completely, I am 18 years of age or older and am happy to take part in this study.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Ethical Clearance

*For Office Use Only*  
Application Reference Number:

A10-037



### Mary Immaculate Research Ethics Committee

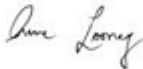
#### MIREC-6: MIREC Executive Review & Report

1 Title of Research Project
Television, Convergence Culture, Reflexive Projects of Self-Identity and the Popular Political Imagination: the Case of The West Wing and Its Irish Audiences.

2 Applicant	
<b>Name</b>	Clare Scully
<b>Department / Centre / Other</b>	Department of Media and Communication Studies, MIC
<b>Position</b>	PhD Researcher

3 Ethical Considerations Relating to this Project
All the ethical issues are addressed in the application. MIREC members commented on the clarity and coherence of the application.
One suggestion made was that the introductory material might flag that data will be collected on religious and political views.

4 Decision and Conditions on Award of MIREC Ethical Clearance
Clearance is granted. There are no conditions.

5 Declaration	
<b>Name (Print)</b>	<b>Anne Looney</b>
	<i>MIREC Chair</i>
<b>Signature</b>	
	<i>MIREC Chair</i>
<b>Date</b>	<b>9<sup>th</sup> February 2011</b>



### Appendix 3: Survey Questions and Responses Summary

<b>Q1: Gender. Are you?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Male	34.3%	23
Female	65.7%	44
<i>answered question</i>		<b>67</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>0</b>

<b>Q2: Age Are you?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
18-34	62.7%	42
35-44	32.8%	22
45+	4.5%	3
<i>answered question</i>		<b>67</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>0</b>

<b>Q3: Employment Status How would you describe your present principal status? Are you?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Working for payment or profit	62.7%	42
Looking for first regular job	3.0%	2
Unemployed	4.5%	3
Student	19.4%	13
Looking after home/family	11.9%	8
Retired from employment	0.0%	0
Unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability	1.5%	1
Other (please specify)		0
<i>answered question</i>		<b>67</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>0</b>

<b>Q4: Full time education completed (tick all that apply to you).</b>			
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Primary school education		42.9%	27
Secondary school education		50.8%	32
College Graduate		74.6%	47
Other (please specify)			6
<i>answered question</i>			<b>63</b>
<i>skipped question</i>			<b>4</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Other (please specify)</b>	<b>Categories</b>
1	May 16, 2011 10:04 AM	Professional Accountant	
2	Apr 5, 2011 9:51 PM	Post Graduate	
3	Mar 22, 2011 9:42 PM	Professional Certificates	
4	Mar 15, 2011 12:58 PM	Masters	
5	Mar 15, 2011 11:55 AM	MA Baby... Ya	
6	Mar 12, 2011 11:41 AM	Masters	

<b>Q5: Nationality. What is your nationality?</b>			
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Irish		100.0%	65
Other (please specify)			0
<i>answered question</i>			<b>65</b>
<i>skipped question</i>			<b>2</b>

<b>Q6: Religion. What is your religion?</b>			
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Roman Catholic		75.4%	49
Church of Ireland		1.5%	1
Presbyterian		0.0%	0
Methodist		0.0%	0
Islam		0.0%	0
No religion		23.1%	15
Other (please specify)			1
<i>answered question</i>			<b>65</b>
<i>skipped question</i>			<b>2</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Other (please specify)</b>	<b>Categories</b>
1	Mar 16, 2011 7:53 PM	atheist	

<b>Q7: Political leanings. Would you describe yourself as?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Very conservative	0.0%	0
Conservative	6.2%	4
Moderate	32.3%	21
Liberal	41.5%	27
Very liberal	7.7%	5
Ambivalent about politics	12.3%	8
<i>answered question</i>		<b>65</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>2</b>

<b>Q8: Party Political Allegiance Would there be a traditional political allegiance within your family/background to any of the following political parties? If so, please tick ONE.</b>			
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>		<b>Response Count</b>
Fianna Fáil	50.0%		21
Fine Gael	23.8%		10
Labour	14.3%		6
Sinn Fein	2.4%		1
Green Party	2.4%		1
Independent	7.1%		3
Other (please specify)			7
<i>answered question</i>			<b>42</b>
<i>skipped question</i>			<b>25</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Other (please specify)</b>	<b>Categories</b>
1	Jul 25, 2011 10:05 AM	Tend to vote locally, traditionally has been Fine Gael	
2	Jul 3, 2011 11:11 AM	Progressive Democrats, until they disbanded, none thereafter	
3	Mar 22, 2011 9:42 PM	No allegiance to any one party or independent	
4	Mar 15, 2011 11:55 AM	No political allies	
5	Mar 14, 2011 10:43 AM	A-political in relation to political party systems	
6	Mar 12, 2011 10:59 AM	No - it was the rule that you didn'y divulge your choice, though it was noiceable at times	
7	Mar 11, 2011 3:38 PM	None	

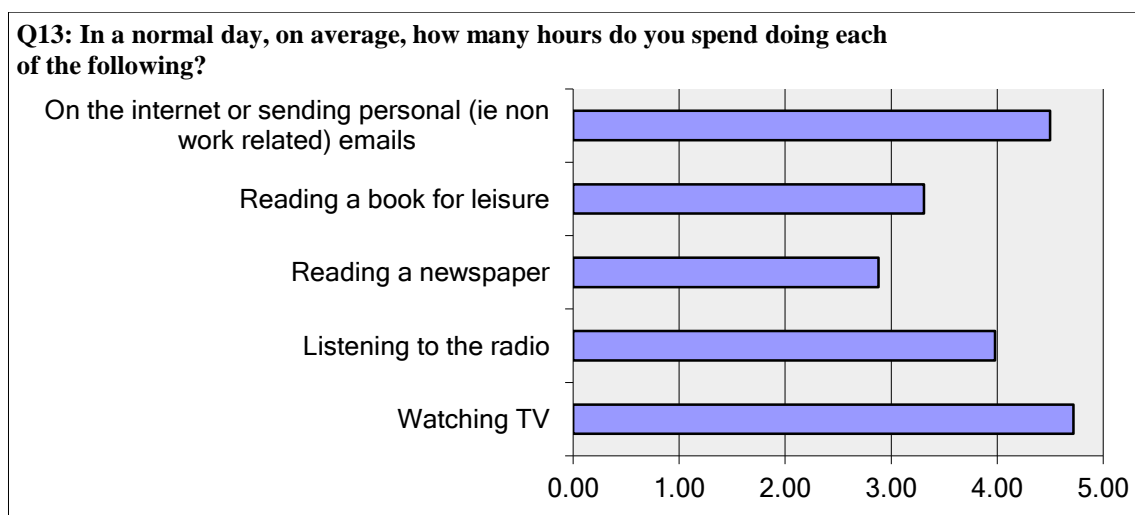


<b>Q9: Have you ever been a supporter of any of these political parties? Please tick all (if any) that have applied over the course of your life as a voter.</b>			
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>		<b>Response Count</b>
Fianna Fáil	40.9%		18
Fine Gael	43.2%		19
Labour	47.7%		21
Sinn Fein	9.1%		4
Green Party	18.2%		8
Independent	36.4%		16
Other (please specify)			7
			<i>answered question</i> <b>44</b>
			<i>skipped question</i> <b>23</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Other (please specify)</b>	<b>Categories</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>May 16, 2011 10:04 AM</b>	PD	
<b>2</b>	<b>Apr 28, 2011 4:57 PM</b>	Socialist Party	
<b>3</b>	<b>Apr 28, 2011 1:15 PM</b>	I'm not of voting age and thus haven't been able to vote in any elections. If I had had a vote in the last election, I'd have voted for Labour.	
<b>4</b>	<b>Mar 15, 2011 11:55 AM</b>	Not so much at an Irish level but international level	
<b>5</b>	<b>Mar 15, 2011 7:55 AM</b>	None	
<b>6</b>	<b>Mar 12, 2011 10:59 AM</b>	I have voted for their candidates, I would not call myself a supporter	
<b>7</b>	<b>Mar 11, 2011 3:38 PM</b>	None	

<b>Q10: Are you currently a supporter of any of these political parties? Please tick ONE.</b>			
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>		<b>Response Count</b>
Fianna Fáil	15.0%		6
Fine Gael	20.0%		8
Labour	32.5%		13
Sinn Fein	10.0%		4
Green Party	0.0%		0
Independent	22.5%		9
			<i>answered question</i> <b>40</b>
			<i>skipped question</i> <b>27</b>

<b>Q11: If you wish to elaborate on your current support (or not) for Irish political parties, please do so here.</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Count</b>
		15
<i>answered question</i>		<b>15</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>52</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Response Text</b>
1	Jul 25, 2011 10:05 AM	Traditionally i've always voted locally based on each individual candidates agenda...
2	Jul 3, 2011 11:11 AM	No real allegiance to any party
3	May 16, 2011 10:04 AM	My local TD is the former Finance Minister, Brian Lenihan, who I have supported and will continue to support. I don't suggest that everything he did was correct, but every action he took was based on the best information available to him at that time.
4	Apr 28, 2011 4:57 PM	Currently not a member of any party - but would be to the left of the political spectrum
5	Apr 28, 2011 1:15 PM	The reason I would have supported Labour in the last General Election was basically a process of elimination. I, like most of the country, wanted a change in government and thus I wouldn't have voted for Fianna Fáil or the Green Party. I didn't agree with Sinn Féin's policies. Thus, it was between Labour and Fine Gael. Ordinarily, I would prefer to vote (if I could vote!) for a party with centre right economic policies (i.e. Fine Gael.) However with the basis of the economic policy for the next four years already decided by the previous government, the EU and the IMF, I didn't think that the slight differences in fiscal policy between the parties were of much importance. Socially, it appears that Labour are more liberal than Fine Gael, thus they would have gotten my vote.
6	Apr 5, 2011 10:14 AM	Traditionally I've been fianna fail....if I was English I'd be labour...American a democrat...but have lost faith and interest in politics and turned to rewatching west wing for solace.
7	Mar 17, 2011 4:24 PM	I have never 'supported' any political party. I have, however, voted for almost all of them, for various reasons.
8	Mar 16, 2011 10:52 PM	Haven't and don't "support" any political party, other than by voting for them.
9	Mar 16, 2011 3:57 PM	I don't really have any party affiliations or loyalties.
10	Mar 15, 2011 6:35 PM	Sinn feins policies are very good for the younger and middle income workers
11	Mar 15, 2011 11:55 AM	Hard to distinguish any party from another but labour seem to be offering up something different and also their party leaders seem to have some part of their brains functioning
12	Mar 12, 2011 11:41 AM	In general, I have no specific allegiance to any of the above parties and will generally vote on the combination of an individual and the party policy.
13	Mar 12, 2011 1:11 AM	I am disappointed with the current parties in Ireland - they lack ideas and I am not confident in their ability to face the future.
14	Mar 11, 2011 7:53 PM	I have no political allegiances - I regard myself as equally ill-disposed towards them all! I voted Labour this time round as I think they're the best of a bad bunch
15	Mar 11, 2011 3:38 PM	I don't support any particular party as none would fully represent me. Furthermore I think a lot of the political parties in Ireland have very few differences between them and would like to see some amalgamations.

<b>Q12: Do you own/have access to any of the following? (Please choose all that apply to you).</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Television set	96.7%	58
VCR/DVD	93.3%	56
Cable TV subscription	65.0%	39
Sky Plus	58.3%	35
Radio	91.7%	55
Computer	98.3%	59
Internet access	98.3%	59
Mobile phone	98.3%	59
MP3 player (e.g. ipod)	85.0%	51
<i>answered question</i>		<b>60</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>7</b>



<b>Q14: How often do you do the following?</b>							
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Weekly</b>	<b>Daily</b>	<b>Many times a day</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>N/A</b>	<b>Rating Average</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Read a local newspaper	28	3	0	28	1	2.47	60
Read a national newspaper	18	27	4	11	0	2.13	60
Listen to the radio news	2	27	21	8	2	2.60	60
Watch the television news	10	37	8	4	0	2.10	59
Go onto the internet for news	2	19	30	8	0	2.75	59
<i>answered question</i>							<b>60</b>
<i>skipped question</i>							<b>7</b>

<b>Q15: what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the media? (By media, I mean television, newspapers, radio, internet, etc.)</b>							
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Rating Average</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
The things the media cover have little to do with your life.	13	31	11	4	0	2.10	59
Different sources of news tend to give different accounts of what's going on.	0	3	4	38	14	4.07	59
You trust the television to report the news fairly.	1	14	16	26	2	3.24	59
You trust the press to report the news fairly.	2	19	17	21	0	2.97	59
You trust the internet to report the news fairly.	2	18	20	18	0	2.93	58
You trust the radio to report the news fairly.	1	13	15	27	3	3.31	59
You trust the media to cover the things that matter to you.	1	19	14	22	3	3.12	59
You generally compare the news on different channels, newspapers or websites.	2	6	11	31	9	3.66	59
<i>answered question</i>							<b>59</b>
<i>skipped question</i>							<b>8</b>

<b>Q16: Do you ever download music/films/shows to watch?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
No	12.3%	7
Yes	87.7%	50
<i>answered question</i>		<b>57</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>10</b>

<b>Q17: Do you ever read or contribute to Internet forums or fansites?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
No	27.1%	16
Yes	72.9%	43
<i>answered question</i>		<b>59</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>8</b>

<b>Q18: In relation to the news, where do you watch/read it? (Choose as many as apply to you.)</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
On television	89.8%	53
On radio	74.6%	44
In newspaper	74.6%	44
On internet	86.4%	51
By chance	13.6%	8
I don't watch the news	1.7%	1
<i>answered question</i>		<b>59</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>8</b>

<b>Q19: If you don't watch the news, can you explain why briefly?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Count</b>	
	2	
<i>answered question</i>	<b>2</b>	
<i>skipped question</i>	<b>65</b>	
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Response Text</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Mar 15, 2011 2:44 PM</b>	My own personal lack of interest and scepticism about the quality of news that is out there. I would be more inclined to watch a news source that was independant. I feel traditional news sources (tv, newspaper) are afraid to tackle certain issues or take certain standpoints with the issues that they do cover. The internet can provide sites that share similar world views to myself and can say exactly how they feel without repercussions.
<b>2</b>	<b>Mar 15, 2011 11:59 AM</b>	I like to know whats going on. I also like my son to watch some items to help him understand things and grow an interest in world and current affairs.

<b>Q20: How interested are you in politics?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Not sure	0.0%	0
Not very interested	7.5%	4
Somewhat interested	62.3%	33
Very interested	30.2%	16
<i>answered question</i>		<b>53</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>14</b>

<b>Q21: Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Not at all	0.0%	0
Only now and then	11.5%	6
Some of the time	28.8%	15
Most of the time	50.0%	26
Now more than ever	9.6%	5
<i>answered question</i>		<b>52</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>15</b>

<b>Q22: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?</b>							
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Rating Average</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
I play an active role in one or more voluntary, local or political organisations.	25	19	1	4	3	1.87	52
I don't like to discuss politics with other people.	5	35	7	3	2	2.27	52
Being involved in your neighbourhood /community is important to me.	1	9	17	19	6	3.38	52
I don't get involved in political protests.	0	5	10	29	8	3.77	52
I generally vote in national elections.	1	3	1	11	33	4.47	49
I am involved in voluntary work.	8	15	6	14	8	2.98	51
I am generally interested in what's going on in politics.	0	2	9	25	16	4.06	52
<i>answered question</i>							<b>53</b>
<i>skipped question</i>							<b>14</b>

<b>Q23: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?</b>							
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Rating Average</b>	<b>Resp. Count</b>
You feel that you can influence decisions in your area.	7	22	14	9	0	2.48	52
You know where to go to find out information that you need.	0	3	7	34	8	3.90	52
People like us have no say in what the government does.	3	28	4	14	2	2.69	51
You trust politicians to tell the truth.	18	21	12	1	0	1.92	52
You trust politicians to deal with the things that matter.	10	19	15	8	0	2.40	52
You can affect things by getting involved in issues you care about.	2	8	14	26	2	3.35	52
You trust the government to do what is right.	10	15	24	3	0	2.38	52
Sometimes you feel strongly about an issue, but don't know what to do about it.	2	11	6	25	6	3.44	50
<b><i>answered question</i></b>							<b>52</b>
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>							<b>15</b>



<b>Q24: Which public issue has been particularly important to you over the past 3 months - this needn't be an issue covered in the media, but can be any issue you think is of general importance.</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Count</b>
		44
<i>answered question</i>		<b>44</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>23</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Response Text</b>
1	Jul 25, 2011 7:54 PM	The removal of certain welfare provisions/assistance for students. Further cuts in this area will force me to emigrate.
2	Jul 25, 2011 10:10 AM	Simple answer, Money. Specifically interest rates, banks etc.. Same as everyone else.. Most important thing to me is family and my home, being crippled with bank interest rates is a noose around my neck.
3	Jul 25, 2011 10:02 AM	The revelations about the News of the World.
4	Jul 3, 2011 11:16 AM	govt spending, govt expenses, civil servants, lack of accountability for any mistakes made by state body employees
5	May 16, 2011 10:09 AM	Public Finances
6	Apr 28, 2011 5:01 PM	The Shell to Sea Protest
7	Apr 28, 2011 1:21 PM	The review of the church's role in state education.
8	Apr 28, 2011 1:06 PM	Cuts in education
9	Apr 28, 2011 1:03 PM	cuts to teachers and special needs assistants
10	Apr 11, 2011 9:37 AM	Bank debt, corporation tax.
11	Apr 5, 2011 9:56 PM	Bank Crisis
12	Apr 5, 2011 6:40 PM	Education; college fees, new schools etc
13	Apr 5, 2011 2:00 PM	Just overall the General Election
14	Apr 5, 2011 10:18 AM	Banks. Negative equity. Tax.
15	Mar 22, 2011 9:53 PM	The issue of the Cystic Fibrosis clinic not being built, and the shuffling of political feet that was happening.
16	Mar 20, 2011 10:05 PM	Taxation of PAYE workers
17	Mar 17, 2011 4:30 PM	Economy
18	Mar 17, 2011 4:13 PM	Ireland's debt crisis - EU/IMF bailout etc
19	Mar 16, 2011 11:01 PM	Cost of childcare
20	Mar 16, 2011 5:10 PM	School choice
21	Mar 16, 2011 11:47 AM	Unemployment
22	Mar 15, 2011 11:34 PM	The Banks
23	Mar 15, 2011 10:40 PM	the repayment of the national debt!
24	Mar 15, 2011 7:24 PM	Teaching Posts being cut
		Equality rights for same sex couples.
		Healthcare and the state of the system, student nurses, and healthcare workers in general.
25	Mar 15, 2011 6:45 PM	Environmental issues.
26	Mar 15, 2011 2:46 PM	Crime.
27	Mar 15, 2011 1:44 PM	Student fees
		Education -jobs
		Student-fees
		TAX TAX TAX
28	Mar 15, 2011 1:25 PM	cut in minimum wage

29	Mar 15, 2011 1:09 PM	Shell to sea, childrens rights, welfare/ benefits
30	Mar 15, 2011 12:28 PM	general election
		General election Irish Debt State of the economy etc
31	Mar 15, 2011 12:16 PM	Libyan and Eygtian revolutions
32	Mar 15, 2011 12:05 PM	Education
33	Mar 15, 2011 12:05 PM	The current way in which we elect our government. I believe there should be a split in the way our government is formed. 12-24 people should be elected by the people to deal with the government departments and main areas of concern while another number of electee should look after each county etc...
34	Mar 15, 2011 12:01 PM	general election
35	Mar 15, 2011 8:06 AM	Political accountability
36	Mar 14, 2011 11:00 AM	education and the effects of out current policies on those about to enter further education and employment
37	Mar 14, 2011 8:47 AM	Rising unemployment
38	Mar 14, 2011 7:51 AM	Public sector reform as it is the sector I am employed in.
39	Mar 12, 2011 11:53 AM	How Ireland will be financed over the coming years.
		Location of new children's hospital
40	Mar 12, 2011 11:03 AM	Economic policy
41	Mar 12, 2011 1:14 AM	Ireland's economic crisis
42	Mar 11, 2011 7:57 PM	The state of the health service.
43	Mar 11, 2011 7:45 PM	children's hospital
44	Mar 11, 2011 3:42 PM	Economy

<b>Q25: In relation to the issue you have just mentioned, have you done any of these things in relation to it? Please tick all that apply.</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Joined a national interest or campaign group	15.6%	7
Joined a political party	2.2%	1
Joined a local group or organization	4.4%	2
Joined in a strike	6.7%	3
Contacted a politician, councillor, etc.	26.7%	12
Got in touch with a newspaper/TV/radio station (e.g. letter to the editor, phoned a talk show, sent an email or text to a programme)	13.3%	6
Contributed to an online discussion	62.2%	28
Gone on a public protest	15.6%	7
Contributed to/created a public message (e.g. website, newsletter, video, etc.)	13.3%	6
A personal protest (e.g. boycotted a product, worn a slogan, left a meeting)	8.9%	4
Contributed to them financially	2.2%	1
Researched the topic	53.3%	24
Discussed with family/friends/colleagues	93.3%	42
Other (please specify)		0
<b><i>answered question</i></b>		<b>45</b>
<b><i>skipped question</i></b>		<b>22</b>

<b>Q26: How did you initially hear about The West Wing? (please tick all that apply).</b>			
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
It was recommended to me		34.8%	16
I came across it on the TV schedule		32.6%	15
I read about it and thought I would like it		21.7%	10
Accidentally when channel flicking		8.7%	4
While browsing DVDs in a shop or online		2.2%	1
Other (please specify)			1
<i>answered question</i>			<b>46</b>
<i>skipped question</i>			<b>21</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Other (please specify)</b>	<b>Categories</b>
1	Mar 15, 2011 1:11 PM	Don't watch	

<b>Q27: Did you watch it on television from the time it was first broadcast?</b>			
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Yes		41.3%	19
No		58.7%	27
<i>answered question</i>			<b>46</b>
<i>skipped question</i>			<b>21</b>

<b>Q28: If you answered 'no', please explain where you watched/watch it.</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Count</b>
		27
<i>answered question</i>		<b>27</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>40</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Response Text</b>
1	Jul 25, 2011 8:10 PM	I had seen a few episodes, but watched the entire series when I bought the box-set about 5 years ago.
2	Jul 25, 2011 10:24 AM	Bought the series DVD after each series, and watch them all together
3	Jul 3, 2011 11:20 AM	bought a box set as a gift for my husband - it sat on the shelf for a year before we watched the first one.
4	Apr 28, 2011 5:10 PM	Started watching Series 7 on More 4 & then bought a Box Set of Series 6 - and then bought a box set of all series
5	Apr 28, 2011 1:32 PM	I bought a DVD boxset.
6	Apr 28, 2011 1:06 PM	Uncle gave me DVD's to watch
7	Apr 11, 2011 4:07 PM	dvd boxset loaned to me
8	Apr 11, 2011 9:43 AM	Bought the Box Sets
9	Apr 11, 2011 9:43 AM	I saw the occasional episode. Then bought the box set
10	Apr 5, 2011 6:46 PM	Series 3 on
11	Apr 5, 2011 10:24 AM	First I watched it on tapes my sister used to record it. Then I bought the box set.
12	Mar 20, 2011 10:12 PM	DVD Box Set
13	Mar 20, 2011 9:27 PM	bought the box sets
14	Mar 17, 2011 4:34 PM	Boxset
15	Mar 16, 2011 5:13 PM	~on DVD/download
16	Mar 15, 2011 10:42 PM	Season 4
17	Mar 15, 2011 7:26 PM	Internet
18	Mar 15, 2011 6:48 PM	interested in American political dramas.
19	Mar 15, 2011 12:30 PM	didnt watch it only heard of it
20	Mar 15, 2011 12:18 PM	Internet, torrents/streaming
21	Mar 15, 2011 12:11 PM	Online and after it was first broadcast, had to join the series after the first couple of episodes were broadcast...
22	Mar 15, 2011 8:42 AM	On DVD after the whole series had aired.
23	Mar 14, 2011 12:17 PM	DVD box set
24	Mar 14, 2011 8:02 AM	I watched it on the box set series
25	Mar 12, 2011 1:18 AM	I borrowed the boxset of the first season from a friend and then bought the rest.
26	Mar 11, 2011 8:07 PM	I saw one of the last episodes on TV (stumbled across it) & loved it so I decided to buy the first series on DVD. I was hooked so I ended up buying them all on DVD, when they were still full price. I've got my money's worth though, as several friends have since borrowed it & love it too.
27	Mar 11, 2011 3:55 PM	My husband asked for Box set for his birthday a few years ago and I watched it with him.

<b>Q29: Have you seen all seven seasons of The West Wing?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Yes	72.3%	34
No	27.7%	13
<i>answered question</i>		<b>47</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>20</b>

<b>Q30: Have you watched it just once, or have you watched it all (or parts of it) more than once?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Once	34.8%	16
More frequently/several times	65.2%	30
<i>answered question</i>		<b>46</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>21</b>

<b>Q31: Do you own (or do you possess i.e. via download) any or all of The West Wing on DVD?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Yes	68.1%	32
No	31.9%	15
<i>answered question</i>		<b>47</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>20</b>

<b>Q32: Do you continue to watch The West Wing?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Yes	59.6%	28
No	40.4%	19
<i>answered question</i>		<b>47</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>20</b>

<b>Q33: If yes, please give further details, (e.g. do you watch it on DVD box sets, via download, catch it on repeat, etc?).</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Count</b>
		26
<i>answered question</i>		<b>26</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>41</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Response Text</b>
1	Jul 25, 2011 8:10 PM	DVD boxset, although not continuously watching it, will watch maybe once a year through.
2	Jul 25, 2011 10:24 AM	Sometimes, if i'm flicking stations and its on i watch a little.. Nothing organised
3	Jul 25, 2011 10:07 AM	I watch the DVD box set, usually around christmas each year
4	Jul 3, 2011 11:20 AM	box set
5	May 16, 2011 2:03 PM	I have all 7 on DVD/VHS. I watch 3 - 7 from time to time. 1 and 2 are on VHS and need to be replaced/updated
6	Apr 28, 2011 5:10 PM	From my box sets
7	Apr 28, 2011 1:32 PM	I own DVD box sets of all seven seasons and recently started rewatching them.
8	Apr 28, 2011 1:06 PM	have the complete boxset which i watch through roughly once every 6 months or so
9	Apr 11, 2011 9:43 AM	DVD Box Sets
10	Apr 5, 2011 6:46 PM	DVD Boxset, start to finish and back to the start agin
11	Apr 5, 2011 2:04 PM	Watch it on boxsets and catch repeats
12	Apr 5, 2011 10:24 AM	Box set
13	Mar 22, 2011 10:02 PM	DVD box sets plus anytime it is on TV, with the exception of a few individual episodes, I would watch it.
14	Mar 20, 2011 9:27 PM	watch the dvd box sets
15	Mar 17, 2011 4:34 PM	Boxset
16	Mar 17, 2011 4:22 PM	I watch my DVD sets every now and again
17	Mar 16, 2011 11:11 PM	DVD box sets and you tube clips
18	Mar 16, 2011 5:13 PM	Download
19	Mar 15, 2011 7:26 PM	Internet
20	Mar 15, 2011 12:08 PM	DVD box sets, sometimes clips on Youtube
21	Mar 15, 2011 8:42 AM	Watch it on box sets
22	Mar 14, 2011 11:07 AM	through my DVD collection of the series
23	Mar 14, 2011 8:02 AM	I watch it as I have the box set which I bought after I had watched the whole series.
24	Mar 12, 2011 12:05 PM	DVD box sets
25	Mar 12, 2011 11:06 AM	Have the full box set
26	Mar 11, 2011 3:55 PM	DVD box sets

<b>Q34: Have you ever participated in any West Wing online discussion boards, or discussed The West Wing on any online discussion boards?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Yes	29.8%	14
No	70.2%	33
<i>answered question</i>		<b>47</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>20</b>

<b>Q35: Or read any books or articles concerning the West Wing?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Yes	51.1%	24
No	48.9%	23
<i>answered question</i>		<b>47</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>20</b>

<b>Q36: Please tick as many of the following as apply to indicate what it is you like about The West Wing</b>			
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Quality of writing		88.9%	40
Quality of acting		93.3%	42
Political storylines		77.8%	35
Revealing the inner workings of politics		77.8%	35
Other (please specify)			4
<i>answered question</i>			<b>45</b>
<i>skipped question</i>			<b>22</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Other (please specify)</b>	<b>Categories</b>
1	Jul 25, 2011 10:07 AM	The strong character development	
2	Jul 3, 2011 11:20 AM	comedy, inter office romances	
3	Mar 22, 2011 10:02 PM	The comedy.	
4	Mar 15, 2011 1:11 PM	None	

<b>Q37: If you would like to add anything further about why you think you made a connection with The West Wing, please do so here:</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Count</b>
		16
<i>answered question</i>		<b>16</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>51</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Response Text</b>
1	Jul 25, 2011 8:10 PM	The characters, and the relationships between them.
2	Jul 25, 2011 10:24 AM	Like the "snap snap" dialogue, very quick and sharp. Dare i say it but i doubt real politics anywhere in the world works like this; least of all in the Dail, but we can only hope.
3	Apr 28, 2011 5:10 PM	Enjoyed watching people who make such a obvious difference in their work & compared this to the lack of difference my present job makes. This has led me to doing a masters in politics in the hope of moving into this area of work.
4	Apr 5, 2011 10:04 PM	The fact that it presented a type of politician that really didn't exist at the time especially in Ireland. There was not the parish pump venality we face here.
5	Apr 5, 2011 2:04 PM	I studied History and Politics in University
6	Apr 5, 2011 10:24 AM	Love the humour
7	Mar 17, 2011 4:34 PM	Simply great drama
8	Mar 16, 2011 11:53 AM	I loved the characters.
9	Mar 15, 2011 12:11 PM	Belief in the characters you were watching, cared for what happened to them etc
10	Mar 15, 2011 8:42 AM	Human connection with the characters also
11	Mar 14, 2011 8:52 AM	I was living and working in DC at the time - so it held a personal resonance for me
12	Mar 14, 2011 8:02 AM	I just loved the characters and it also helped me to understand how the American political system actually worked.
13	Mar 12, 2011 11:06 AM	I like that they come from an ideological perspective, that issues aren't just 'who wins', but what is right.
14	Mar 12, 2011 1:18 AM	Good show, interesting politics, good mix of pragmatism and idealism.
15	Mar 11, 2011 8:07 PM	Since I was a child, I've loved books, films & programmes that made me want to 'be' something. The West Wing made me want to 'be' involved in a political system like the one portrayed. I admired the passion of the characters, even if I couldn't identify with it personally.
16	Mar 11, 2011 3:55 PM	Scripts and dialogue very strong and pacy, the political storylines dramatic, characters well drawn and acted, each episode can stand on its own but be part of larger storyline.

<b>Q38: Do you think watching a political television drama like The West Wing makes you think more about real-life politics?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Yes	76.6%	36
No	8.5%	4
Don't know	14.9%	7
<i>answered question</i>		<b>47</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>20</b>



<b>Q39: Do you think a television show such as The West Wing is still relevant to contemporary politics?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>	<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Yes	80.9%	38
No	19.1%	9
<i>answered question</i>		<b>47</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>20</b>

<b>Q40: Would you please elaborate on your answer here?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Count</b>
		33
<i>answered question</i>		<b>33</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>34</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Response Text</b>
1	Jul 25, 2011 8:10 PM	It humanises politicians to a certain extent. It shows that decisions are more negotiations with opposition (or public) than simple 'right' or 'wrong' decisions. It shows the kinds of concessions that have to be made, and the tug-of-war between wanting to do what's right for the country and what's best for a particular party/politician. Although I think the result may often be the reverse in real life of what happens in TWW.
2	Jul 25, 2011 10:24 AM	WW gave a good smattering of all aspects likely to affect pretty much any part of the world during any political term; terrorism, military, domestic issues, financial problems, legislation.
3	Jul 25, 2011 10:07 AM	Many of the issues dealt with in the show are Issues which are not rooted to a particular moment in time, but are larger issues which are generally relevant.
4	Jul 3, 2011 11:20 AM	A lot of the issues they discussed are still in play - eg Israel/Palistine
5	May 16, 2011 2:03 PM	It's still relevant as it portrays the fact that our political leaders cannot do everything they wish/want and must compromise in order to achieve.
6	Apr 28, 2011 5:10 PM	Because the topics raised still resonate and are important.
7	Apr 28, 2011 1:32 PM	I believe that the West Wing is very relevant to US politics, perhaps less so to Irish politics due to the differences in our political systems. The West Wing demonstrates the ideological differences between the Democratic and Republican parties in the US. In contrast to their system, the main difference between our main parties is historical, rather than ideological.
8	Apr 11, 2011 4:07 PM	influencing the people that watch it
9	Apr 11, 2011 9:43 AM	I learned some things about the inner workings of US politics that I did not know previously!
10	Apr 5, 2011 10:04 PM	The latter stages of the show when the Democrats were a minority and had to deal with a republican congress is similar to the current US situation.
11	Apr 5, 2011 6:46 PM	The topics in the series relate directly to recent issues e.g. Japanese Nuclear plant and Obamas election
12	Apr 5, 2011 2:04 PM	War is still war and it's still the economy stupid!
13	Apr 5, 2011 10:24 AM	I say no simply because I don't know enough about modern politics but what I do know makes me believe that comparing the two is like a child comparing his father to superman.
14	Mar 22, 2011 10:02 PM	It sows te inner workings. To quote the show "Two things you dont wanna let people see how you make them, laws and sausages".. If people see how decisions are made, they might be engage better with issues.
15	Mar 20, 2011 10:12 PM	Nuclear issue is very relevant e.g. Japan
16	Mar 17, 2011 4:22 PM	The basic theme of the series - the improvement of people's lives through government action - is perpetually relevant to those on the 'left' of the political spectrum

17	Mar 16, 2011 11:11 PM	It's still the same system in the USA, so it's still relevant - but not necessarily to Irish politics (but wouldn't it be great if Enda could give Bartlett-esque speeches!).
18	Mar 16, 2011 5:13 PM	it shows a definite political process
19	Mar 16, 2011 11:53 AM	Its very glossy, don't imagine its the same in the Dail.
20	Mar 15, 2011 7:26 PM	The idea of a leader who is still fundamentally moral and good - an ideal that we want to achieve
21	Mar 15, 2011 6:48 PM	I liked the programme,
22	Mar 15, 2011 12:11 PM	Interesting to see how america does it, and the bargaining involved in staying in power ect
23	Mar 15, 2011 12:08 PM	Still shows the many main principles involved in politics I think!
24	Mar 15, 2011 12:07 PM	Politics is not as straight forward as I originally thought. it is a combination of various disciplines trying to deal with economic and global issues while keeping up a certain appearance to the public and world.
25	Mar 15, 2011 8:42 AM	I think it is relevant to a viewer's appreciation of the political process.
26	Mar 14, 2011 11:07 AM	It can help define and understand political structures as the exist. It is also relevant in that there has been a broader expansion of the americanisation of international politics and TWW has shown how such influenes have come about
27	Mar 14, 2011 8:52 AM	It explained terms like fillibuster and other workings of the US government
28	Mar 14, 2011 8:02 AM	Well, obviously there were the comparisons between Santos/Obama which shows how fiction can influence reality. It also shows the way that intellectualism is not a bad thing in politics. To me it shows how substance should be more important than spin and that will always be relevant.
29	Mar 12, 2011 12:05 PM	I believe it can encourage people to be more interested and informed about the real politics in their life.
30	Mar 12, 2011 11:06 AM	The issues are still live in the main. Like Yes Minister or Yes Prime Minister - while time has passed, it's definitely a case of plus ca change, plus ca meme chose.
31	Mar 12, 2011 1:18 AM	It shows that the world of politics is complex and multi-layered.
32	Mar 11, 2011 8:07 PM	I think it is still relevant but I think the fictional element resulted in more idealism and less cynicism than we have in reality.
33	Mar 11, 2011 3:55 PM	I think it shows how political systems work, how issues get sacrificed to do deals on other issues, how much work goes into getting something like a Bill through, how interest groups have influences etc.

<b>Q41: Which, if any, of the following would you say are key themes in The West Wing?</b>			
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Political optimism		60.0%	27
Political duty to the electorate		53.3%	24
Faith in the political process		53.3%	24
Revealing the inner workings of politics		71.1%	32
Detailed treatment of political issues		37.8%	17
Other (please specify)			2
			<b><i>answered question</i></b> <b>45</b>
			<b><i>skipped question</i></b> <b>22</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Other (please specify)</b>	<b>Categories</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Apr 5, 2011 6:46 PM</b>	Personal sacrifice for the greater good	
<b>2</b>	<b>Mar 15, 2011 6:48 PM</b>	I have no idea, I don't watch it.	

<b>Q42: Of these, would you please elaborate on which themes (if any) you feel are the most significant in The West Wing?</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Count</b>
		22
<i>answered question</i>		<b>22</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>45</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Response Text</b>
1	Jul 25, 2011 8:10 PM	Revealing the inner workings of politics pretty much covers it.
2	Jul 25, 2011 10:24 AM	Duty to the electorate seems to be very prevalent; an overwhelming understanding that they are there to serve the people..
3	Jul 25, 2011 10:07 AM	The difficulty in getting anything done in american politics seems to be a large part of the story, as every piece of legislation is portrayed to be a battle.
4	Jul 3, 2011 11:20 AM	the president put his duty to the electorate ahead of his health
5	May 16, 2011 2:03 PM	WW is first and foremost about quality writing. In terms of themes, this is the first time that I have given thought to the subject. Across the series, the "inner workings" of politics are revealed. Duty, faith and optimism crop up throughout the show.
6	Apr 28, 2011 5:10 PM	This can be summed up from these lines from Inauguration: Part 2 - Over There:  President Josiah Bartlet: There's a promise that I ask everyone who works here to make: Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Do you know why?  Will Bailey: Because it's the only thing that ever has.  The show shows how a group of hard working individuals can make such a difference & have such influence on the President
7	Apr 28, 2011 1:32 PM	I think that shows like this help to challenge the jaded and cynical view that many have of politics. In addition, it demonstrates that while politicians may have very many issues that they passionately believe in, they often can't do much to implement change due to various external factors.
8	Apr 11, 2011 9:43 AM	Revealing the inner workings of politics
9	Apr 5, 2011 10:04 PM	The optimism was the biggest factor. Politics could be idealistic and about major issues rather than self interest.
10	Apr 5, 2011 2:04 PM	It showed how back room negotiations wre held, which was an eye opener
11	Apr 5, 2011 10:24 AM	Political optimism and faith in the people who represent us.
12	Mar 22, 2011 10:02 PM	As I said, the inner workings of politics.
13	Mar 20, 2011 10:12 PM	Inner workings - leadership is still important - the person at the top has the power to influence events and people
14	Mar 16, 2011 5:13 PM	~political optimism
15	Mar 15, 2011 12:08 PM	Political duty to the electorate
16	Mar 15, 2011 12:07 PM	how politics really works. who makes the decisions and why.

17	Mar 15, 2011 8:42 AM	I think faith in the political process is very important. The idea that they are all committed, giving up well paying jobs to pursue a political life due to a belief in changing things internally is very key to the show.
18	Mar 14, 2011 8:52 AM	The inner workings of politics
19	Mar 14, 2011 8:02 AM	Political optimism for it shows us what we can be and with the right people what we can achieve.
20	Mar 12, 2011 1:18 AM	Faith in the political process
21	Mar 11, 2011 8:07 PM	The faith the characters had in the system.
22	Mar 11, 2011 3:55 PM	I think that the West Wing is ultimately about how the political process needs to be worked through to make progress and how, although its not perfect, it can and does work.

<b>Q43: Which, if any, of the following would you say are key themes in The West Wing? Please rank them 1, 2, 3, etc., in order of significance, leaving out any that you don't think apply.</b>								
Answer Options	1	2	3	4	5	6	Rating Average	Response Count
Political optimism	7	11	9	6	5	1	2.85	39
Political duty to the electorate	7	10	9	8	2	2	2.84	38
Faith in the political process	10	8	8	6	6	2	2.90	40
Revealing the inner workings of politics	14	9	6	6	2	3	2.55	40
Detailed treatment of political issues	5	6	6	8	9	2	3.44	36
Other	3	1	0	2	1	2	3.33	9
<i>answered question</i>								<b>41</b>
<i>skipped question</i>								<b>26</b>

<b>Q44: If there are any other themes in The West Wing that you think are important, please mention them here:</b>		
<b>Answer Options</b>		<b>Response Count</b>
		11
<i>answered question</i>		<b>11</b>
<i>skipped question</i>		<b>56</b>
<b>Number</b>	<b>Response Date</b>	<b>Response Text</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Jul 25, 2011 8:10 PM</b>	Loyalty.
<b>2</b>	<b>Jul 3, 2011 11:20 AM</b>	friendship, loyalty
<b>3</b>	<b>Apr 28, 2011 5:10 PM</b>	Think that from the time that President Bush was elected one of the shows purposes was to serve as a counterpoint to his policies and to show what a more liberal President would do.
<b>4</b>	<b>Apr 11, 2011 9:43 AM</b>	Politicians family/private life.
<b>5</b>	<b>Apr 5, 2011 10:04 PM</b>	How obsessed people in politics get
<b>6</b>	<b>Mar 17, 2011 4:34 PM</b>	Integrity Dedication Hard work
<b>7</b>	<b>Mar 16, 2011 11:11 PM</b>	The relationships - it's only tv!
<b>8</b>	<b>Mar 14, 2011 8:52 AM</b>	In serving the public you lose a lot of your private life
<b>9</b>	<b>Mar 14, 2011 8:02 AM</b>	As I said substance over spin and also it makes the argument that liberalism can be a hawk and not just a dove.
<b>10</b>	<b>Mar 12, 2011 1:18 AM</b>	Loyalty, maintaining integrity, Americanness
<b>11</b>	<b>Mar 11, 2011 3:55 PM</b>	I think that people, their skills, abilities, imperfections etc and how they interact with each other and the effect that has on the political process is an important theme.