TV IN A COMA…I KNOW IT'S SERIOUS: *BLACK MIRROR* AND THE STRUGGLE
BETWEEN TRADITIONAL MEDIA AND DIGITAL MEDIA

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Introduction

In 2010, the BBC series *Newswipe* aired a feature titled "How to Report the News" that skewered the conventions of the news package (BBC, 2010). *Newswipe* was one of several shows hosted by British satirist Charlie Brooker that mocked television, broadcast journalism, and other types of media (Brooker, 2009). Brooker's satire situates traditional forms of media as lumbering, wheezing giants ill-equipped to face off against sleeker, more engaging forms of storytelling and technology. Brooker's work on *Newswipe* and similar shows is clearly metajournalism and metatelevision with a subversive purpose (Doyle, 2017).

Brooker is also the creator of the series *Black Mirror*. The anthology series focuses on stories involving technology (Williams, 2016). This essay examines thee specific episodes of *Black Mirror* with an eye toward their articulation of Brooker's representations of media and technology. The episodes analyzed here are the series premiere titled "The National Anthem" (Brooker & Bathurst, 2011), the second season finale titled "The Waldo Moment" (Brooker & Higgins, 2013), and the third season episode titled "San Junipero" (Brooker & Harris, 2016). These episodes do not demonstrate the entirety of the show's rhetorical agenda. They do, however, represent recurring themes in the series and reflect a particular discursive context. One element of that context is the rise of Netflix. When Netflix acquired *Black Mirror* (Cox, 2015), it marked a devastating union between two of the most important contemporary media disruptors.

This essay argues that the *Black Mirror* episodes discussed here construct a narrative about the corruption of traditional media institutions and the destruction of traditional media in the face of new technologies and storytelling forms. This rhetorical agenda blends seamlessly with the narrative Netflix constructs about itself. This essay establishes this Netflix narrative as part of a discussion about the discursive context in which *Black Mirror* exists. Various theoretical

perspectives are brought to bear in the essay's analysis. The theory section outlines these perspectives, but broadly speaking the essay draws from critical rhetoric and postmodernism. The essay then examines the three selected *Black Mirror* episodes with an emphasis on how they represent the struggle and conflict between competing technologies and storytelling forms. The essay concludes with some general thoughts on the series as a whole and discusses implications for the rhetorical construction of 21st century digital media as superior to 20th century traditional media.

Context

Netflix is viewed as a disruptor in the media business in a variety of ways (Gans, 2016). The streaming service has also turned television viewing on its ear by contributing to seismic shifts in how audiences consume television, the type of content they expect, how that content is marketed to them, and the way they pay for that content (Schweidel & Moe, 2016). Netflix's rise to prominence is a key component of this study as it contributes to the construction of a discursive context that invites a rhetorical response such as *Black Mirror*.

Specifically, particular attention must be paid to certain Netflix content acquisition strategies because these strategies begin to tell a particular story about the tensions between traditional media and digital media. Netflix has acquired a variety of properties that came with varying degrees of baggage because of prior incarnations on traditional media platforms. Some examples include *The Gilmore Girls* with its history of conflict between a broadcast network and a creator (Tucker, 2006), *Daredevil* and its previous failure as a mainstream Hollywood film (Peters, 2016), *Arrested Development* and *The Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* as refugees from networks that seemed unable to embrace the supposed progressiveness of these shows (Andreeva, 2014), and *A Series of Unfortunate Events* as an aborted film franchise that collapsed under the weight

of Hollywood excess and short-sightedness (Simpson, 2017). The overarching message, then, argues that Netflix can succeed where television networks and film studios failed. The discursive context surrounding Netflix's programming strategies constructs a broad narrative that emphasizes the redemptive, corrective power of a 21st century media platform and the failures of 20th century media platforms.

It is also worth considering some specifics of Netflix's impact on the media landscape. For starters, Netflix arguably killed an entire industry – home video rental (Halal, 2015). Further, the rise of "cord cutting" and the foray of numerous new providers into the network content distribution game (Strangelove, 2015) may ultimately lead to Netflix being credited with playing a major role in the death of another industry – cable. Home video rental and cable, the two specific corners of the traditional media landscape that Netflix has most obviously damaged, are relics of a particular era that defined and codified the general logic of television as the dominant cultural logic (Brummett, 2015). The crippling of those industries, of course, marks the rise of a new cultural logic – what we might colloquially refer to as the "digital age." These various contextual threads not only clarify Netflix as a key part of the discursive context in which *Black Mirror* emerges, it also demonstrates how the streaming service and the show share a common ethos.

It also worth considering the general political and social climate of the era in which *Black Mirror* was created. In an era of growing frustration with not only politicians, but also political structures in general (Levendusky & Malhorta, 2016), multiple *Black Mirror* episodes deal with perverted, twisted notions of politics and affiliated institutions. From the British Prime Minister who is coerced into bestiality to the image of a cartoon character becoming the leader of the free world, *Black Mirror* symbolically enacts extreme versions of political anxieties particular to the

discursive context in which it exists. In both of these episodes the relationship between politics and television in particular serves as the direct catalyst for the horrific outcomes of both episodes. The argument is clear: Television networks, a form of traditional media, aid and abet the damaged political system that plagues the rhetorical context in which *Black Mirror* exists.

Theory

At some level this essay is essentially an interpretive analysis of select *Black Mirror* episodes that, while informed by particular perspectives, is not heavily reliant on any specific theoretical framework. Drawing on McGee's conception of the role of the critic (1990), this essay is itself a rhetorical act. The overarching perspective that informs the analysis is critical rhetoric as conceived by McKerrow (1989) with its emphasis on how power is manifested in discourse. Further, the ideological turn in criticism (Wander, 1983) and affiliated postmodern theories of discourse and symbols as mediators of contemporary culture in various ways (Jameson, 1991; Hutcheson, 1988) also contribute to the theoretic framework of the essay. More specifically, the essay finds the Burke's notion of scapegoating (Burke, 1945) a useful model for explaining parts of the rhetorical agenda of *Black Mirror*.

At its core, this essay is about the ways in which the struggle for control between traditional media outlets and digital media outlets is rhetoricized in *Black Mirror* in a way that conflates with the general discussion of the Netflix narrative in the previous context section. As such, this essay is concerned with a particular set of topics including representations of institutions, the ways in which media forms comment upon themselves, and the ways in which certain ideas and worldviews are framed as progressive while others are framed as oppressive. Each of these broad categories fits within the terrain of critical rhetoric and ideological criticism. Scholarship in

rhetoric, media studies, and cultural studies has often treated media and popular culture texts in such ways (Brummett, 2015; Kellner, 2016). This essay fits into that theoretical tradition.

This essay is also concerned with media and technology being used to represent media and technology. As such, it is also concerned with metafiction. This focus necessitates at least some level of grounding in postmodern theory and its focus on such concepts as irony, hyperreality, and simulations (McRobbie, 1994). It is also useful to consider scholarship that focuses on the evolution of media (McLuhan, 1967), the tensions between traditional media and newer forms of media (Jenkins, 2006), and the role of Netflix in contemporary television culture (Lotz, 2014.)

There are also some studies specific to *Black Mirror* worth considering. Singh (2014) examines the show's discussion of digital culture. Ungureneau (2015) discusses the show's anesthetization of politics, with a particular focus on the series premiere from perspectives grounded in postmodern representations of hegemonic power. Troiani & Kahnn (2016) discuss the show as one of several models for interactive, bodily, and undisciplined approaches to discourse. The show's creator, Charlie Brooker, has been the subject of some academic critique as well. Brassett (2016) engages Brooker's work in useful contexts such as political economy, performing resistance, and self-critique. Brassett & Sutton (2017) then extend the discussion of Brooker to examine how his work intervenes in discussions of media forms, enacts political tragedies, and critiques political structures. All of these elements are important to this study and all are reflected to some degree or another in this critique of *Black Mirror*. These studies are certainly diverse in their topics, themes, and methods. But, with attention to topics related to politics, digital culture, and rethinking the nature of humanity, these studies seem to examine *Black Mirror* through the general theoretic lenses discussed here.

Criticism

"The National Anthem"

Bestiality is sure to get the headlines. But the cringeworthy events of the *Black Mirror* premiere are ultimately cemented via the inability of a pre-social media institution to account for and avoid the reach of web 2.0 technologies. By featuring a plot involving the British Prime Minister being coerced into having sex with a pig as conditions for release of a hostage, the episode is clearly concerned with issues of power, politics, and ideology. Examining the episode in terms of its portrayal of power dynamics fits into McKerrow's (1989) conception of critical rhetoric.

In the episode, British Prime Minister Michael Callow and his closest advisors cook up a scheme to use green screen technology to superimpose Callow's head over the body of a porn actor who would then engage in sex with a pig. It is merely one of several examples in the episode where attempts to control and circumvent the digitally savvy kidnapper go horribly awry. As the porn actor is ushered into a television studio, a random passerby recognizes him. The passerby takes a picture of the actor then tweets it. The kidnapper sees the picture and makes the public aware of Callow's attempted deception. This, in turn, shifts the public's sympathy away from Callow. After this turn of events, not only is his best chance at subterfuge blown, but he is also faced with a public that now sees him as duplicitous and dishonest. Digital media, then, is a source of power disruption in the episode.

This important plot turn in the episode is essentially a narrative of social media exposing a politician as corrupt, sneaky, and unwilling to face up to his responsibilities (however horrific they may be). And the notion of horrific responsibilities is an important point to consider. A disaffected public, after all, might see politicians as avoiding a variety of tough issues for

political reasons. Callow, as a contemporary politician, is a product of an era where a traditional media form such as television was a tool that, if marshaled effectively, could be unchallenged by any other form of public discourse. For Callow and his political cronies, a traditional media system is a tool to get out from under unwanted pressure (whether that pressure be fixing social problems or having sex with a pig). But a new media form, one born in the digital age, exposes them. It is also symbolically significant that their efforts involve a green screen. This particular form of technology, after all, is seen commonly as not only a tool of pre Web 2.0 media forms such as television and film, but it is also a type of technology that is essentially built on deception and manipulating an environment. A central plot point that pushes the narrative of "The National Anthem" past the point of no return, then, is actually a targeted and specific articulation of the idea that traditional media forms cannot as easily deceive and serve the interests of the elite in a digital era. *Black Mirror*, then, begins its run by treading the same ground as Netflix.

The episode also features other elements that support the idea that 20th century media forms, and traditional journalism in particular, are hopeless in the face of 21st century media. The episode features a variety of scenes where television producers realize that, because the kidnapper's demands have gone viral, their efforts to accommodate the government's request to sit on the story is not only pointless but is also hurting their ratings and credibility. Here we see a rhetorical jab at collusion between traditional media and politics. It is all the more dangerous a collusion, though, because it is not about media bias. Rather, "The National Anthem" portrays the backroom union between journalism and politics as institutional, systemic and (perhaps most insidiously) beyond ideology. In "The National Anthem," journalists serve the interests of politicians even at their own peril. But it is new, digital forms of technology and social media

that expose the story and force the hand of traditional media. And even then the reporters and producers fuss over such issues of restraint as wording, phrasing, and tasteful standards even as social media lays bare every lurid detail of the story. The rhetorical argument is clear. Digital media pulls no punches. It gives the public information. It presents the truth. Traditional media, meanwhile, is dragged kicking and screaming into the fray and even then tends to focus on its own concerns and neuroses and not on informing the public.

"The National Anthem" further cements Brooker as a critic of the power dynamics at play in society. Beyond establishing the tone and terrain of the series, "The National Anthem" establishes *Black Mirror* as a series with a particular focus on the push and pull dynamic between different types of media and technology. The show, then, becomes a piece of critical rhetoric itself. As such, "The National Anthem" demonstrates that *Black Mirror* offers a perspective on contemporary media that grants moral authority to 21st century media forms.

"The Waldo Moment"

The themes raised in "The National Anthem" resurface and become more salient in the show's second season finale, an episode titled "The Waldo Moment." With a plot involving a cartoon character entering a political race, commentators have drawn comparisons between "The Waldo Moment" and Donald Trump's ascendancy to the White House (Doran, 2016). Brooker has stated that he does not look at "The Waldo Moment" as prophecy, but rather feels as if the show simply picked up on a general cultural mood (Taylor & Fullerton, 2017).

The episode, though, is not just about a cartoon character seemingly becoming some kind of dictator in a dystopian future. More specifically, the episode interrogates and questions who is responsible for such a rise to power. The episode essentially seems to engage in Burke's notion of fractional scapegoating (1945) as it seeks to pinpoint the target for blame in a corrupted

political system. When producers of a late night comedy show begin using a cartoon character named Waldo to disrupt and mock a local political campaign, other television outlets are eager to cover the event. The Waldo character is invited on talk shows, included in televised debates, and given all manner of what came to be termed "free media" (Pickard, 2016) during the real-life Trump campaign. In other words, the episode presents television as a kind of postmodern nightmare with its willingness to wallow in triviality, simulations of reality, and lack of serious discourse (Jameson, 1991). Who is to blame for Waldo? In large part it is the television industry.

"Television," though is a term that casts a rather large, vague net. The "Waldo Moment" puts a series of human faces and human contexts in place to provide a more accessible argument against the ideology and values of traditional media stalwarts like television and broadcast journalism. This move sharpens the episode's scapegoating agenda. Throughout the episode, we see several discussions among producers, actors, and executives about the Waldo gimmick. In none of these do any of the power brokers voice any concern, regret, or sense of social responsibility over demeaning the political process. Rather, their conversations exclusively revolve around strategy, logistics, and ratings. Television producers and executives are arguably portrayed even worse in "The Waldo Moment" than in "That National Anthem." At least in "The National Anthem" they were responding to a crisis as best they could with their outmoded tools and loyalties. In "The Waldo Moment" there are no such qualifications. They have no compunction about the political context they are potentially damaging. The argument, then, is clear. Traditional media has lost its ability to engage the public interest. It only exists to perpetuate itself and its capitalist agenda.

The two voices of reason in the episode are an actor and a politician. And through these characters' engagements with and against Waldo, we further see 20th century media scapegoated.

The character of Jamie is a B-level comedian and actor who voices Waldo. As Jamie becomes more and more aware of how Waldo is damaging the political system, he becomes increasingly uncomfortable. In a scene that is startling for its foreshadowing of the violence at Trump rallies, Jamie finally reaches his limit. He confronts the public at a rally as himself and implores them not to vote for Waldo. This attempt at reason is met with violence as another character begins manning the animatronic controls to Waldo and incites the crowd to attack Jamie.

Beyond the implications for politicizing violence, it is important that Waldo continues on even after Jamie quits. This establishes Waldo, a creation of traditional media and a kind of metaphor for all that is wrong with traditional media, as capable of being reproduced. Indeed, symbols and personifications of the television industry are seen as so brutally damaging that even politicians are afraid of them in the episode. This marks a shift since politicians and the traditional media were more like allies in "The National Anthem."

In "The Waldo Moment," the candidate who is arguably the most establishment, Liam Monroe, has several scenes in which he challenges Waldo, defends the political system, or implores the public not to be distracted by Waldo's antics. He even dispenses with a personal and humiliating dissection of Jamie's career and reputation. Such a tactic might seem cruel in a less extreme context. But, in the environment the episode presents, it is the best Monroe can do in efforts to defend against Waldo, this raging symbol of all that is wrong with television engaging politics. In a scene near the end of the episode, Monroe offers dialogue that captures how far the political system has fallen when he says: "If that thing (Waldo) is the main opposition, then the whole system looks absurd. Which it may well be. But it built these roads."

If Prime Minister Callow from "The National Anthem" is somewhat of a self-serving, control the message, contemporary politician, then Monroe is arguably more of a throwback to an even

more outdated conception of political discourse (Dunmire, 2005) with his belief that if he clearly, rationally, and repeatedly explains the Waldo phenomenon to the public then they will see through it and make the right decision. The futility of Monroe's reliance on rationality frames political discourse as something itself unprepared to deal with changes in media and technology. When the episode ends with a flashforward to a world where images of Waldo cover buildings and media screens, we see the insidious, hopeless nature of the media. And this nightmarish vision is set in motion by various symbols of traditional media. Traditional media, then, is the scapegoat for all of society's problems in the episode. It is a threat that needs to be combatted if society is to be redeemed.

"San Junipero"

The third season of *Black Mirror* marked the first season of the series produced under the Netflix banner (Chitwood, 2016). As such, we see a formalizing of the union between two media disruptors who share a clear rhetorical vision. Brooker has noted that he felt a need to address concerns from some that the show might become too "Americanized" by being absorbed into the U.S. media system (Williams, 2016). But Brooker decided not to react against Netflix conventions but rather to embrace them (Hawkes, 2017). But, given the commonalities between the show and Netflix, this can be seen as Brooker "buying in" instead of "selling out."

Brooker has said that, in many ways, the third season was influenced by his interest in gaming (Mallett, 2016). This is important on two fronts. First, a game implies a contest, a struggle, or a conflict. This approach falls in line with this essay's discussion of the tensions between traditional media and digital media. Second, video games stand as a unique medium because their development and legitimization as a form of discourse is a process that straddles the line

between old and new media (Newman, 2017). Brooker, then, frames the third season of *Black Mirror* against a backdrop of the tensions between competing visions of technology and media.

 Gaming is a central motif in the third season episode "San Junipero." From numerous allusions to video games spanning two decades, to the revelation that the episode's titular town is a simulated reality, to the attempts by the main characters to "game" the legal system's euthanasia regulations, to the push and pull dynamic between the characters, we see metaphors of struggle and tension over technology manifest itself in a variety of ways in the episode. The episode also invokes a variety of concepts related to postmodern theory to further interrogate the relationship between 20the century technology and 21st century technology.

The episode relies heavily on nostalgia. But, unlike common postmodern concerns about the apolitical and ahistorical use of nostalgia (Jameson, 1991), the episode uses nostalgia as a way to redeem and correct the social and political problems associated with various symbols of traditional media. In this way it falls more in lines with Hutcheson's (1988) optimistic interpretation of the political and social potential of nostalgia. The episode revolves around two elderly women, Yorkie and Kelly, who engage in a futuristic simulated reality that elderly people can visit and, if they choose, be uploaded to permanently upon their death. In the simulated reality, Yorkie and Kelly are youthful women who interact with a variety of time periods ranging from 1980 to 2002. This temporal boundary is important because it essentially attaches the episode's virtual reality environment to a pre-digital era. The two women's cyber existence is confined to time periods associated with the primacy and power of traditional media forms. Each specific year they visit features allusions to video games, films, movie posters, television sets, music videos, and popular music mediated via disc jockeys and boom boxes. It is, on the surface, a reality ruled by traditional media.

At that level, it might seem as if the episode's argument is one of the ultimate victory of traditional media. But some specific factors demonstrate that, in fact, the episode is about technology, digital storage, and data ultimately correcting and redeeming the flaws of traditional media and its era of dominance. With a past that involves subverting attraction to women in favor of a heterosexual marriage and family life, Kelly stands as a symbol of the oppressive potential of a patriarchal structure. She makes it clear she loved her husband. But there is an element to her identity she was not able to pursue in her lifetime. Yorkie, meanwhile, opened up to her family about her homosexuality but was shunned because of it. Following the argument with her family, Yorkie was in a car accident that left her a quadriplegic.

Yorkie and Kelly's lives, then, echo numerous beats that Marxist critics and others have leveled concerning the oppressive potential of media, popular culture, and capitalism (Probyn, 2016). And, as elderly women, the story should logically end with them dying unfulfilled and everything cultural critics fear coming to pass. But this is the *Black Mirror* universe and the Netflix universe. 20th century media and its ideological counterparts do not get off so easy. In the story, advances in technology, digitization, and cloud storage make it possible to live eternally in corrected, redeemed versions of the era of traditional media. Digital technology ultimately wins out and then appropriates various aspects of traditional media culture for the purpose of fixing its problems. It is essentially a science fiction take on digital curating as a way to redefine historicity (Burgess & Green, 2009). To give Yorkie and Kelly a happy ending is one thing. But to do so in 1987, against the backdrop of MTV-era pop hits and copious amounts of hairspray, is a targeted repudiation of the ideology of the traditional media era.

Despite its futuristic setting, the episode also features a variety of themes that reinforce the practical, tangible, contemporary benefits of digital technology and social media. For example,

when Kelly and Yorkie are discussing whether to meet in real life, Yorkie voices concerns that they would not be compatible. Yorkie's struggle with deciding whether or not to meet Kelly in real life echoes fears and hopes about online relationships and digital connectivity (Papacharissi, 2015). Yorkie and Kelly's meeting in real-life leads to revelations that spur Kelly to marry Yorkie. The episode presents a view of digital technology as a source of truth, a unifying force, and a resource that links two people meant to be connected.

Further, the virtual reality environment is compared and contrasted with heaven throughout the episode. On the one hand, this clearly plays with the episode's metaphysical discussion of the afterlife. But, on another level, we can consider heaven as a metaphor for permanence, which is also a trait of digital technology (Baym, 2015). By comparing permanence to heaven (a supposed paradise) the episode again casts an important real-life technological issue in a positive light. Like online relationships, the permanence of the internet and the cloud can have negative implications. But that is not the argument "San Junipero" makes. Rather, it frames a digital era technological advancement in a positive light. Through specific rhetorical choices involving both real-life technological issues and symbolic articulations of the capacity for new technology to reshape, reform, and redeem the political and social structures of the traditional media era, "San Junipero" emerges as the culmination to date of *Black Mirror* and Netflix's rhetorical argument for the triumph of digital media over traditional media.

Conclusion

This essay has examined three specific episodes of *Black Mirror* in terms of their commentary on traditional media, digital media, and the political and cultural interplay between the two. By applying various theoretic concepts related to critical rhetoric, Burke's concept of fractional scapegoating, and postmodernism, the essay has articulated an important rhetorical

agenda of *Black Mirror.* The unifying argument of the three episodes discussed here is that traditional forms of technology are corrupt, oppressive, or unequipped to evolve and that newer, digital forms of technology have usurped 20th century media platforms with superior forms of political engagement, cultural interaction, and information dissemination.

There is certainly more to *Black Mirror* than the themes discussed here. However, the analysis offered in this essay highlights an important cultural function of the show. Other episodes feature similar themes. For example, "Playtest" (Brooker & Trachtenberg, 2016) blends the "San Junipero" focus on postmodern aesthetics with the way in which "The National Anthem" represents media institutions as helpless. "Shut Up and Dance" (Brooker & Watkins, 2016) portrays hacking and surveillance as agents of vigilante justice. It is also worth noting that season three of Netflix concludes with two episodes, "Men Against Fire" (Brooker & Verbruggen, 2016) and "Hated in the Nation," (Brooker & Hawes, 2017) that feature a soldier resisting deceptive uses of technology by the military and an investigator covertly conducting unsanctioned investigations of cyber crime. These narratives suggest that institutions associated with the era of traditional media are losing their power and authority. So we see a broad recurrence of the themes associated with the three episodes analyzed in this essay.

For all the bluster about *Black Mirror* as a site to confront anxieties about technology (Garcia, 2016), the show is just as often concerned with representing various values of the digital era as paths to redemption or salvation. This approach dovetails with the ways in which Netflix portrays itself and, by extension, 21st century media platforms. Whether such a rhetorical agenda is interpreted as oppressive or liberating likely depends on one's particular attitude toward both older technology and newer technology. But such tensions clearly impact our contemporary

social world. By engaging these themes, *Black Mirror* functions alongside its current platform

and within its context as part of a larger discursive construction.

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