OPEN SCREENS

Ball, C. (2025) Big Blocks and Blind Spots: Power, Knowledge, and Epistemic Democracy in *The West Wing*. *Open Screens*, 7(1): pp. 1–20. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/os.17493

Open Library of Humanities

Big Blocks and Blind Spots: Power, Knowledge, and Epistemic Democracy in *The West Wing*

Caroline Ball, University of Derby, UK, c.ball@derby.ac.uk

This article examines how Aaron Sorkin's television series *The West Wing* explores epistemic democracy through its portrayal of 'Big Block of Cheese Day', an initiative where White House staff meets with marginalised groups typically excluded from corridors of power. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Haraway, Fricker, and Estlund, the analysis reveals how the series dramatises the complexities of power, knowledge, and democratic participation in the context of epistemic injustice and the 'post-truth' era. These episodes expose fundamental democratic contradictions: symbolic inclusion that maintains existing power structures, credibility assessments that delegitimise non-expert voices, and access inequalities that shape political outcomes. By examining knowledge politics in the fictional Bartlet White House, the article illuminates broader questions about whose voices are heard, whose expertise is valued, and how information control shapes democratic legitimacy in an increasingly fractured epistemic landscape. Despite being fictional, these narratives offer valuable insights into the ongoing struggle for epistemic democracy and serve as a reminder of the importance of recognising and valuing diverse perspectives in the pursuit of a more just and equitable society.

Introduction

> *"Andrew Jackson, in the main foyer of his White House, had a big block of cheese. The block of cheese was huge – over two tons. And it was there for any and all who might be hungry."* (Leo McGarry, 'The Crackpots and These Women', 1×05)

On 20th October 1999, the world was first introduced to *The West Wing*'s Big Block of Cheese Day, inspired by a historical anecdote from Andrew Jackson's populist presidency, where a massive block of cheese symbolically opened the White House to ordinary citizens. In 'The Crackpots and These Women' (1×05) and later 'Somebody's Going To Emergency, Somebody's Going To Jail' (2×16), White House Chief of Staff Leo McGarry instructs his reluctant White House staff to engage with "people who have a hard time getting our attention", ranging from cartographers and wolf highway advocates to UFO monitoring organisations. While the name suggests comic relief, the Big Block of Cheese Day episodes serve as a critical exploration of democratic participation.

With his recognition that these fringe and special interest groups ordinarily lack the influence, leverage, or visibility necessary to get themselves and their issues taken seriously, McGarry's initiative represents a radical act of epistemic inclusion that challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge. Yet his staff's dismissive attitudes (Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman's derisive "total crackpots" comment giving the first episode its name) reveal the entrenched hierarchies that undermine genuine epistemic democracy. This tension between inclusion and dismissal becomes a recurring motif throughout the series.

Through the fictional Bartlet administration, *The West Wing* presents an idealised vision of American government that simultaneously critiques and celebrates democratic institutions. The series consistently challenges viewers to consider the interaction between intellectual expertise, elite knowledge, and broad democratic participation. We see this not only in the Big Block of Cheese Day episodes but across numerous narrative arcs, from the MS (multiple sclerosis) concealment scandal to foreign policy decisions and Supreme Court nominations.

As a piece of television media, the show embodies many of the same contradictions it portrays. Despite its narrative focus on the importance of epistemic inclusion, the series often fails to represent the full spectrum of American politics and society. While championing dialogue and inclusion, the show's perspective frequently aligns with a liberal political ideology (Waxman, 2003). It generally portrays liberal characters and policies positively, while rendering conservative viewpoints less nuanced or defensible (Lehmann, 2001; Finn, 2003; Martin, 2025).

Characters like President Bartlet frequently assert moral superiority through intellectual prowess – memorably countering homophobic arguments with scriptural knowledge in 'The Midterms' (2×01) or being spurred to seek re-election by Governor Richie's simplistic "crime, boy, I don't know" in 'Posse Comitatus' (3×21). This tendency led critic Roger Savage to describe the show as a "fetishization of 'elevated discourse' regardless of its actual outcomes or conclusions" (2017), most notably seen in the special episode "Isaac and Ishmael" (3×00), where writer Aaron Sorkin leveraged the show's "role as a constructed site of presidential authority" to offer commentary on post 9/11 America (Parry-Giles, 2006, p.159).

This article applies three primary theoretical frameworks to analyse these narrative dynamics:

- **Situated knowledges** (Haraway, 1988): How the diverse perspectives of marginalised groups represent distinct knowledge systems typically excluded from institutional discourse.
- **Epistemic justice** (Fricker, 2007): How the series portrays both testimonial injustice (the dismissal of speakers based on prejudice) and hermeneutical injustice (the lack of collective interpretive resources)
- **Epistemic proceduralism** (Estlund, 2008): How democratic legitimacy requires fair knowledge-sharing processes acceptable to diverse, qualified viewpoints.

Through these frameworks, supplemented by additional critical perspectives, we will examine how Big Block of Cheese Day serves as a metaphor for epistemic democracy: messy and imperfect, yet fundamentally committed to inclusive knowledge practices. The encounters between institutional power and marginalised knowledge systems offer a critical lens through which to examine the ongoing struggle for a more inclusive democratic vision, both within the narrative and in contemporary politics.

Democratic Fragmentation in the Post-Trust Era

> *"Listening to the voices of passionate Americans is beneath no one, and surely not the people's servants".* (Leo McGarry, 'The Crackpots and These Women', 1×05)

Estlund's critique of epistocracy (rule by the knowledgeable) challenges traditional concepts of political legitimacy by arguing that political arrangements must be assessed through perspectives "acceptable to the wide range of qualified points of view" (2008, p. 39). When this diversity narrows or becomes dominated by self-interest, public rejection of expertise can trigger populist backlash and destabilise democracy (Müller, 2016; Nichols, 2017). This theoretical concern finds contemporary expression

in phenomena like rising anti-intellectualism, expert distrust, and the fracturing of shared epistemological foundations (Oliver and Rahn, 2016; Simon, 2024).

McGarry's Big Block of Cheese Day initiative represents a concrete example of this conceptual framework. However, the symbolic gesture simultaneously reveals the fundamental contradiction between Estlund's ideal of inclusive political legitimacy and the everyday reality of power dynamics and expert reliance within government. McGarry's performative openness, claiming to listen to "passionate Americans" and acknowledging that ordinarily these groups and individuals "have a difficult time getting our attention", risks rendering Big Block of Cheese Day an "empty ritual" (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). Confining these voices to a single tokenistic ceremonial day ultimately reinforces existing power structures rather than transforming them (Kamruzzaman, 2020).

The series regularly juxtaposes this symbolic inclusion against the administration's continued reliance on political insiders and expert advisors. This operational contradiction appears across multiple storylines, from Communications Director Toby Ziegler's contemptuous dismissal of the World Policy Studies protestors as naive and ill-informed "activist wannabes" to Deputy Communications Director Sam Seaborn's interactions with Space Command's Bob Engler and Press Secretary CJ Cregg's initial indifference toward cartographers and wolf advocates.

While the senior staff's interactions with the public are often played for comedy (Smith, 2023), these interactions highlight what Miranda Fricker (2007) terms 'testimonial injustice' – the systematic undermining of certain speakers based on preconceived credibility assessments or 'deficits'. They also highlight the existence of a hierarchy of access and knowledge that can lead to epistemic mistrust between those in government and the public they serve (Müller, 2016; Nichols, 2017). Hierarchies of knowledge like these can create the potential within expert communities for insularity and resistance to challenges to prevailing opinions (Kuhn, 1962; Turner, 2014). This perpetuates a narrow range of perspectives, hindering the pursuit of knowledge and impeding the democratic process. The staff's dismissive characterisations ("tourists," "amateurs," "lunatics," "crackpots") reveal institutional mechanisms that maintain epistemic boundaries. These mechanisms devalue non-expert knowledge before any substantive engagement occurs (Dotson, 2011).

A particularly revealing exchange occurs when Ziegler criticises the protestors' demographic composition, asking "where the hell's the Third World they claim to represent?" only to have Officer Sachs retort, "Lot of Third-Worlders in the Cabinet Room today, were there?" This moment perfectly captures what Donna Haraway (1988) calls the "god trick"—claiming objectivity while occupying unmarked positions

of power, failing to recognise how one's own knowledge is equally situated and partial. Sachs' pointed response highlights Ziegler's cognitive dissonance in demanding representational diversity from protestors while participating in an administration lacking the very inclusivity he critiques others for failing to achieve.

This "illusion of infinite vision" (Haraway, 1988) appears in multiple narrative contexts beyond the Big Block of Cheese Day episodes. In 'The War at Home' (2×14), it contributes to the deaths of American soldiers when intelligence analysts overconfidently rely on information that turns out to be wrong. During the MS concealment storyline, it manifests as an ethical blind spot that threatens the administration's legitimacy. In foreign policy debates throughout the series, it surfaces as what postcolonial theorist Syed Alatas (2000) identifies as "intellectual imperialism", the presumption of universal applicability of Western frameworks.

The show's exploration of knowledge politics anticipated many contemporary challenges. The proliferation of alternative information sources has democratised knowledge access. However, it has simultaneously created what media scholars call 'echo chambers', which reinforce existing beliefs, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between reliable and verifiable sources (Klingberg, 2009; Graf and Antoni, 2023). The erosion of trust in traditional institutions and experts, what Kavanagh and Rich (2018) term "truth decay", creates fertile ground for the spread of alternative narratives that challenge expert consensus (Nichols, 2017; Barberá, 2020).

The mistrust that Bob Engler experiences when Sam Seaborn dismisses his UFO concerns parallels what Pierre (2020) identifies as the psychological foundations of conspiracy belief – not necessarily a lack of *access* to verifiable information but a fundamental lack of *trust* in the source of that information (Brauner et al., 2023). When Engler's legitimate concern about unidentified phenomena is treated derisively by Seaborn, it reinforces the perception that only certain sources of knowledge, particularly those aligned with established institutions, are deemed credible. This "significance loss" can produce profound alienation (van Prooijen, 2022), as individuals and groups feel excluded from the mainstream discourse and decision-making processes (Abalakina-Paap et al., 1999; Kruglanski et al., 2014). This can drive individuals like Bob Engler to seek meaning and validation from alternative information sources, making them more susceptible to misinformation and conspiracy theories (Phadke, Samory and Mitra, 2021; Schnell et al., 2024).

Beyond individual exclusion, José Medina's concept of "group agential epistemic injustice" (2022) explores how entire communities can be systematically silenced within knowledge hierarchies. The physical and ideological marginalisation of the World Policy Studies protestors visually evidences the divide between their dissenting

voices and the power structures they challenge. As political scientists Junk, Crepaz, and Aizenberg observe, "extreme access barriers make diversion to more radical strategies such as protests more likely" (2024, p. 1076).

The irony becomes tangible when McGarry's first lines in 'Somebody's Going To Emergency' mention "trying to avoid the protestors" during his commute – the very groups whose marginalisation necessitates the Big Block of Cheese Day tradition he champions. This contradiction encapsulates what political philosopher Charles Mills (1997) terms an "epistemology of ignorance", a "structured blindness" that maintains power differentials even within well-intentioned liberal institutions.

Though created decades ago, *The West Wing* anticipates many of the elements of our current epistemological fragmentation. Its exploration of knowledge politics – how information becomes validated, who controls access, and which voices receive institutional recognition – has become even more relevant in our era of deepening polarisation and expert contestation. By dramatising these dynamics, the series reveals the subtle mechanisms through which democratic spaces either expand or contract, a struggle that has only intensified in contemporary governance.

Hierarchies of Knowledge and the Politics of Expertise

> *"It's 'Throw Open Our Office Doors to People Who Want to Discuss Things That We Could Care Less About Day."* (Toby Ziegler, 'The Crackpots and These Women', 1×05)

The dichotomy between specialised expertise and democratic participation is a consistent theme of *The West Wing*, with the Big Block of Cheese Day episodes offering particularly rich scope for examining these dynamics. The initiative is presented to the real-world audience, and the fictional White House staffers and the invited groups and individuals, as an attempt to democratise access and promote open dialogue. However, the surrounding narrative reveals how entrenched hierarchies of knowledge and access persist, despite such symbolic gestures. These hierarchies manifest through systematic patterns of credibility assessment that privilege certain knowledge forms while marginalising others, thereby establishing and maintaining what Catala (2015) calls a 'hermeneutical monopoly'. The opinions of experts and officials are often prioritised; the credibility of others dismissed as "lunatic[s]," an "unruly mob," and "total crackpots"; access to information is restricted; and gatekeepers control who gets to participate in the decision-making process.

Similarly, when Toby Ziegler characterises the day as "Throw Open Our Office Doors to People Who Want to Discuss Things That We Could Care Less About Day," he

reveals the institutional mechanisms through which certain voices are systematically devalued. These dismissals occur before any substantive engagement with the visitors' actual issues or arguments, demonstrating both the pre-emptive nature of epistemic injustice in institutional settings (Dotson, 2011) and how, as Lupia and Norton so memorably put it, "inequality is always in the room" (2017).

The Bartlet administration displays striking inconsistency in its respect for different knowledge systems and expertise. It simultaneously celebrates intellectual authority while selectively discounting it when politically expedient. This ambivalence creates what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would recognise as a "field of power" (1989) where different forms of cultural and intellectual capital compete for legitimacy.

In 'The Crackpots and These Women' (1×05) President Bartlet demonstrates immense respect for academic expertise when discussing budget allocations with his economic advisors. His in-depth engagement with statistical models and economic projections stands in stark contrast to the dismissive attitude shown toward the advocacy groups. Even Leo McGarry, his closest advisor, faces intellectual marginalisation when Bartlet notes that "Leo's not talking about the portion being accounted for as off budget", highlighting how hierarchies of knowledge operate even within the inner circle.

Scientific expertise receives particularly ambivalent treatment throughout the series. Technical specialists are frequently characterised as socially awkward 'geeks' "clothed in texts that speak of their place", who have "been read before [they] can write" (Lupia and Norton, 2017, p. 68). We see this in Seaborn's judgement about Engler's clothing, his dismissal of NASA's public affairs writer in 'Galileo' (2×09), and Lyman's confrontational approach with NASA representatives in 'The Warfare of Genghis Khan' (5×15). This characterisation creates a telling paradox: while championing rational decision-making in principle, the administration often exhibits Goldman's "novice/expert problem" (2001), when non-experts make judgments about which experts to trust based on non-epistemic factors.

This tension becomes explicit in "Lies, Damn Lies and Statistics" (1×21), when polling expert Joey Lucas presents data challenging the administration's assumptions about public opinion on foreign aid. The staff's initial resistance represents what Gieryn calls "boundary-work" (1999): the processes through which institutions determine what counts as legitimate knowledge, particularly when confronted with competing epistemologies (Jasanoff, 2004). Their reluctance to accept Lucas's findings demonstrates how organisational positions can create epistemic blind spots even when confronted with methodologically sound evidence (Rayner, 2012), often referred to as 'groupthink' (Janis, 1972).

Haraway's critique of disembodied objectivity resonates throughout the series' portrayal of policy expertise in the Big Block of Cheese Day episodes. The groups involved, primarily representing social justice causes, are openly and unashamedly partisan. They are arguing from positions of situated knowledges which are rooted in specific contexts, experiences, and perspectives. When CJ Cregg dismissively states she "won't really be listening" to the Organization of Cartographers for Social Equality, she exemplifies the institutional rejection of this situated knowledge that Haraway critiques.

Yet the show also portrays moments of epistemic growth, as when Cregg's encounter with wolf advocates transforms her understanding of environmental policy. By the episode's end, President Bartlet jokes that CJ will "be up all night writing a position paper for the interior department on the necessity of wildlife protection," signalling her shift toward including previously marginalised perspectives.

The Mercator map projection discussion serves as one of the show's most powerful metaphors for competing knowledge frameworks. The cartographers' argument that "when Third World countries are misrepresented, they're likely to be valued less" resonates with similar moments throughout the series, such as when Donna Moss, Senior Assistant to Josh Lyman, advocates for Puerto Rican statehood in 'Galileo' (2×09), challenging established territorial assumptions. These narratives echo Haraway's point that representational systems, whether maps or policy frameworks, are never neutral but a product of "limited location and situated knowledge" (1988, p. 583), reflecting and reinforcing power hierarchies.

Gaile Pohlhaus Jr.'s concept of "willful hermeneutical ignorance" (2012) helps explain how institutions maintain epistemic boundaries despite exposure to alternative viewpoints. The Big Block of Cheese Day initiative itself represents what she later termed "pernicious inclusion" (2020): marginalised groups gain physical access to the White House but remain epistemically marginalised, their presence a performative gesture serving to maintain the illusion of openness and democracy while effectively silencing dissenting voices (Kamruzzaman, 2020).

This pattern recurs throughout the series. In 'The Short List' (1×09), the administration seeks diversity credentials from Roberto Mendoza's potential Supreme Court nomination, while struggling to accommodate his independent voice and opinions. The retiring Chief Justice explicitly challenges this tokenism, telling President Bartlet, "Mendoza was on the short list so you can show you had a Hispanic on the short list".

The show's treatment of specialised knowledge raises questions about Elvio Baccarini's argument for a 'sophisticated epistocracy' (2021). The series repeatedly portrays situations where technical expertise seems essential for governance, such as military briefings in the Situation Room, economic projections from the Council of

Economic Advisors, or scientific assessments from the Surgeon General. In 'Let Bartlet Be Bartlet' (1×19), the President's extensive knowledge of economics and statistics gives him an edge in policy discussions that supports aspects of Baccarini's position that certain technical matters might justifiably be delegated to experts.

However, such expert knowledge can also come into conflict with and be subordinated to political priorities. When the Surgeon General comments on marijuana's relative safety in 'Ellie' (2×15), her scientific assessment collides with policy considerations. The administration's response in distancing themselves from scientifically sound but politically inconvenient information demonstrates the dynamic between different knowledge systems in governance.

The series also challenges epistocratic tendencies through characters like Charlie Young, Personal Aide to President Bartlet, whose practical knowledge and common sense is often depicted in positive contrast to the more credentialed but often hapless White House staffers. In 'Mr. Willis of Ohio' (1×06), a social studies teacher elevated to Congress upon the death of his wife, offers a perspective on the census that proves valuable, illustrating Estlund's point that epistemic authority must be acceptable from diverse qualified points of view.

The narrative device of Big Block of Cheese Day serves as the show's most sustained examination of knowledge hierarchies and of the possibility of epistemic transformation. Despite the eye-rolling and jokes at the expense of "crackpots," several staff members experience genuine perspective shifts through these encounters – CJ Cregg's newfound environmental awareness, Sam Seaborn's re-evaluation of UFO monitoring after meeting Bob Engler, and Toby Ziegler's grudging recognition of the protesters' concerns. These transformations suggest what Fricker might recognise as moments of epistemic justice, where the credibility deficit is overcome, and marginalised knowledge is legitimately incorporated into institutional understanding.

The Power of Influence

> *"In that spirit, Leo McGarry designates one day for certain senior staff members to take appointments with people or groups that wouldn't ordinarily be able to get the ear of the White House".* (Donna Moss, 'Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail', 2×16)

The Big Block of Cheese Day episodes serve as a microcosm of *The West Wing*'s broader examination of democratic access and political influence. The very existence of this symbolic gesture embodies one of the fundamental paradoxes of American democracy

(Dahl, 1989): while President Bartlet frequently invokes the rhetoric of representing all the American people, the daily operations of his administration are largely shaped by interactions with those constituent groups that possess established channels of access and influence.

When Leo McGarry tells his reluctant senior staff that they will meet with "people who have a hard time getting our attention," he implicitly acknowledges what political scientist William Nester describes as the "iron triangle" of "politicians, bureaucrats and corporate interests, largely independent of prevailing public opinion" (1997, p.8), that typically dominate policy formation. CJ Cregg's initial opposition to a wolves-only highway reflects the perspectives of powerful interest groups like ranchers and hunters, demonstrating how such interests become internalised within governance structures (Rocheleau, 2019; Heister, 2022).

This friction between democratic ideals and practical governance is given frequent form in *The West Wing*. In 'Take This Sabbath Day' (1×14), religious leaders secure extraordinary access to the President as he wrestles with a death penalty case. In 'The Indians in the Lobby' (3×07), Native American representatives, faced with the cancellation of their scheduled meeting, must literally occupy a government building to have their grievances acknowledged. In 'The Stackhouse Filibuster' (2×17), an elderly senator resorts to extraordinary measures because his autism-related amendment cannot get proper consideration through normal channels. These episodes collectively underscore how even in the idealised Bartlet White House, influence remains profoundly unequal.

The Big Block of Cheese Day episodes make this inequality visually explicit by juxtaposing marginalised groups like the Organization of Cartographers for Social Equality against the administration's usual lobbyists and representatives. Their passionate advocacy for causes deemed impractical stands in stark contrast to the pragmatic influence wielded by established stakeholders. Yet, as Estlund's theory of epistemic proceduralism argues, each individual brings unique experiences and insights that can contribute to collective knowledge. *The West Wing* dramatises this theory when CJ Cregg, initially dismissive of the wolf advocates, becomes convinced of their cause's legitimacy.

The series frequently contrasts these marginalised voices against the privileged access of wealthy donors and powerful lobbyists, and the tendency within democratic systems to prioritise the concerns of economic elites and organised business (Coleridge, 2013; Gilens, 2012). In 'The Crackpots and These Women', while staff reluctantly meet with "crackpots," they simultaneously debate whether President Bartlet should attend a fundraiser hosted by Larry Posner, a wealthy Hollywood producer and major donor, despite having scheduled a speech criticising media violence.

Similarly, in ‘Enemies Foreign and Domestic’ (3×18), Leo McGarry tries to persuade Bartlet to support government-backed loans to a corporate manufacturer whose CEO contributed to Bartlet’s campaign. In ‘The Short List’ (1×09), powerful legal interests shape Supreme Court nomination debates in ways ordinary citizens could never match. These episodes reinforce Domhoff’s (1967, 2013, 2021) analysis of how elites, whether Hollywood, corporate, or political, enjoy disproportionate influence in the political landscape.

Beyond institutional access, personal connections create privileged influence pathways throughout the series. In ‘Somebody’s Going to Emergency’, university professor Stephanie Gault leverages her college friendship with Donna Moss to secure a meeting with Sam Seaborn regarding her grandfather’s posthumous clemency case. This relationship-based access shows the advantages that personal connections and social capital can provide in gaining institutional attention (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Bertrand, Bombardini and Trebbi, 2014).

Seaborn’s contrasting treatment of Gault versus his earlier interaction with Engler reveals the credibility differentials faced by those without elite credentials. With Engler, Seaborn insists on following bureaucratic protocols, emphasising that “there are levels and an order”; yet he disregards those principles when dealing with Gault.

The series acknowledges how knowledge access and political influence create reinforcing advantages. Stephanie Gault’s position as a university professor provides her with what Bourdieu (1986) referred to as ‘cultural’ and ‘social capital’, granting her levels of informational and political access denied to most citizens. Such self-reinforcing social hierarchies “can seriously damage the legitimacy-generating potential of a decision-making procedure” (Cerovac, 2020, p.187). Similarly, Toby Ziegler fails to recognise his cognitive dissonance in criticising protestors for being predominantly white and privileged while participating in an administration sharing similar demographic limitations.

The Bartlet administration’s treatment of the diverse groups featured on Big Block of Cheese Day reveals the “democratic deficit” (Norris, 2011) that exists in the gap between the rhetoric of democratic inclusivity and the reality of political decision-making. While Leo McGarry’s initiative is intended to serve as an idealistic symbol of equal opportunity, the narrative actually exposes the stark realities of political influence, where connections often trump formal procedures, and unequal access to information and decision-makers not only undermines fairness but raises questions about the quality of democratic governance itself.

What distinguishes *The West Wing* from simple political cynicism is its recognition of both structural constraints and transformative possibilities. When CJ Cregg shifts

from dismissing the wolf advocates to becoming their champion, the series suggests the potential for marginalised groups to achieve recognition through persistent engagement with institutional structures (Fraser, 1990). Similarly, when Donna Moss argues in favour of Puerto Rican statehood in 'Galileo' (2×09), the narrative demonstrates how alternative perspectives can occasionally penetrate institutional thinking.

In this way, *The West Wing* does not merely illustrate abstract theories of epistemic justice and democratic participation; it captures both the practical limitations and the occasional 'mundane' but transformative moments when marginalised perspectives reach and influence mainstream discourse (Mansbridge, 1999), giving hope for a more inclusive democratic vision.

The Control of Information in *The West Wing*

> *"I'm not allowed to see that, and you could get into trouble for showing it to me".* (Sam Seaborn, 'Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail', 2×16)

Throughout *The West Wing*, the Bartlet administration repeatedly grapples with fundamental questions about information control – who determines who is known, who has the right to know, and how knowledge affects power dynamics. These themes are particularly evident in 'Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail' (2×16), where Sam Seaborn confronts an uncomfortable truth: that some knowledge is deliberately inaccessible, kept even from those with a personal stake in it.

Seaborn's investigation into Stephanie Gault's grandfather, Daniel Gault, whom both she and Seaborn believe was falsely accused of being a Cold War Soviet spy, brings him to National Security Advisor Nancy McNally. After learning of Seaborn's persistent inquiries, McNally reluctantly confirms that Gault was indeed a spy codenamed 'Black Water', sharing classified files that prove this beyond doubt. This subplot and the characters of Seaborn, Gault and McNally provides a vivid example of Stivers, Mondada and Steensig (2011)'s 'three dimensions of knowledge': epistemic access (who can obtain information), primacy (who has authority over information), and responsibility (the ethical and moral obligations attached to knowledge).

Nancy McNally represents all three dimensions: she possesses privileged access to classified information, holds the authority to share or withhold it, and bears the responsibility for her decision to share classified files with Seaborn. Through this latter decision, Seaborn also gains epistemic access and primacy, as he too now possesses sensitive knowledge that he can control, and he exercises epistemic responsibility when he decides to withhold the truth from Stephanie Gault. This places him in the position

described by Bullock (2018) and Watson (2021) as 'epistemic paternalism', determining what others should know, ostensibly for the benefit but without their consent.

Gault, on the other hand, represents the consequences of epistemic exclusion (Dotson, 2011) – denied both access and primacy, she is left with an incomplete and inaccurate understanding of her own family history, a form of hermeneutical injustice (Fricker, 2007). This creates what Sunstein and Vermeule term a 'crippled epistemology' (2009), where limited access to relevant information leads to potentially misguided conclusions. Bob Engler experiences similar exclusion when, lacking classified knowledge about a decaying Soviet-era satellite, he interprets radar tracking data as evidence of UFOs.

Yet the show leaves ambiguous whether Sam Seaborn's withholding of information legitimately serves national security interests or simply perpetuates a governmental culture of secrecy. By classifying information and limiting access, the government positions itself as the ultimate arbiter of truth, claiming to see everything from nowhere: Haraway's 'god trick' (1988). This call to national security to justify the control of information recurs throughout the series, from the India-Pakistan crisis in 'Lord John Marbury' (1×11) to the space shuttle leak in 'Liftoff' (6×04).

The competing and often contradictory demands between secrecy and transparency are also evident in other White House scenarios. For instance, in 'Celestial Navigation' (1×15), CJ Cregg's exclusion from discussions about troop movements on the India/Pakistan border leads to her unintentionally misleading the press. In 'The Drop-In' (2×12), Toby Ziegler's clandestine revision of Sam Seaborn's environmental speech for the President demonstrates how information hierarchies and control operate even within the White House staff.

The concept of information as a tool for wielding power and control is most explicitly explored in *The West Wing* through the multiple sclerosis (MS) storyline spanning the second and third seasons. When the President's multiple sclerosis is revealed, the administration faces a crisis centred on the deliberate withholding of information from the American people, not just the illness itself. As Bartlet asks the White House Counsel in 'Bad Moon Rising' (2×19), "I need you to tell me whether or not I've engaged 16 people in a massive criminal conspiracy to defraud the public in order to win a presidential election". This question underscores the ambiguous boundary between personal privacy and the public's right to information.

This narrative arc examines how the control of information shapes power relationships, not only between the government and its citizens but also among individuals within the government who possess varying degrees of access, primacy, and responsibility regarding knowledge. This imbalance has been described as 'information

asymmetrification' (Lightfoot and Wisniewski, 2014), 'monopolies of knowledge' (Innis, 1951), or 'knowledge cartels' (Drahos and Braithwaite, 2002).

The administration's handling of the MS disclosure illustrates Estlund's theory of epistemic proceduralism, which argues that democratic legitimacy depends partly on citizens having adequate information to make informed political judgments. By concealing his condition and thereby giving rise to questions regarding the fairness of the process by which he was elected and governed, Bartlet has compromised the legitimacy of his presidency.

The show's nuanced portrayal of these ethical dilemmas avoids simple resolutions. In the episode 'Access' (5×18), a documentary crew follows CJ Cregg in her day-to-day role as Press Secretary, offering viewers unprecedented 'access' to White House operations. This meta-commentary on transparency suggests that even as the administration controls some information, it simultaneously works to make other aspects of governance more visible. As Cregg remarks in 'Galileo' (2×09) about schoolchildren afraid to raise their hands in class, "I think you should say to these kids you think you get it wrong sometimes, you should come down here and see how the big boys do it."

What distinguishes *The West Wing* is its portrayal of information control as a complex ethical dilemma, not simply malicious secrecy. When Sam Seaborn tells Stephanie Gault he cannot share certain information, his conflict and regret is genuine. Repeatedly, the show presents its characters as wrestling with these decisions rather than making them lightly. In 'The Women of Qumar' (3×08), this is powerfully portrayed by CJ Cregg, whose clear anguish over the violence against women in Qumar clashes with her professional obligation to announce a new weapons deal with the same country.

The tensions around information control portrayed in *The West Wing* resonate with real-world political examples. With its frequent invocation of executive privilege to withhold documents from Congress; the selective dissemination, downplaying of unfavourable facts, or promotion of alternative narratives (for example, in the handling of information related to the COVID-19 pandemic); and the outright denial of established facts and discrediting of expert sources, labelled as 'fake news,' the current Trump administration is deliberately 'crippling epistemology' (Sunstein and Vermeule, 2009) in an effort to undermine trust in institutions and creates an environment where the administration's claims are less likely to be challenged.

Through the Bartlet administration's struggles with transparency, secrecy, and epistemic responsibility, *The West Wing* encourages its audience to consider how information access shapes democratic legitimacy. In doing so, it illustrates Haraway's call for "power-sensitive conversation" about knowledge and how its control affects the "politics of engaged, accountable positioning" (1988, p.590).

Conclusion: Epistemic Democracy and the Politics of Inclusion

Through the lens of *The West Wing*'s Big Block of Cheese Day episodes, this article has explored the interactions between power, knowledge, and epistemic democracy in both fictional politics and our contemporary world. Leo McGarry's initiative stands as a metaphor for the ongoing struggle to create genuinely inclusive democratic spaces where diverse knowledge systems can be heard and valued.

The fictional Bartlet administration's ambivalent engagement with marginalised voices, moving between dismissal and genuine transformation, reflects the broader strains in democratic institutions. As Haraway's theory of situated knowledges reminds us, all perspectives, including those of powerful institutions, are partial and positioned. The show's portrayal of expertise hierarchies, influence dynamics, and information control demonstrates how epistemic justice requires a process of continuous, active negotiation rather than mere tokenistic gestures.

These episodes, aired at the turn of the millennium, anticipated the epistemic fragmentation of subsequent decades. The erosion of institutional trust, spread of alternative knowledge communities, and increasingly contested expertise that define the current political and civic landscape find their fictional precursors in the struggles of characters like Bob Engler and the World Policy Studies protestors to have their voices legitimised.

The West Wing's exploration is particularly compelling because of its refusal to offer simple resolutions. The show acknowledges the messy realities of governance while still maintaining hope for more a more inclusive future. By critically examining whose voices are heard, whose knowledge is valued, and who controls information, *The West Wing* invites viewers to consider how institutions might better fulfil their democratic promise. In our increasingly polarised information landscape, the show's exploration of epistemic inclusion offers a reminder that democracy is not merely about voting rights or procedural fairness but about creating conditions where diverse perspectives can meaningfully contribute to collective understanding.

As we navigate our own epistemic challenges in the twenty-first century, including misinformation, expertise backlash and knowledge inequities, these fictional narratives remind us that the path toward epistemic democracy requires both institutional commitment and individual willingness to engage with perspectives beyond our own. The cheese may be served only one day a year, but the promise of more inclusive democratic conversation remains a worthy aspiration for our own political future.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

Abalakina-Paap, M., Stephan, W.G., Craig, T. and **Gregory, W.L.** (1999) 'Beliefs in Conspiracies', *Political Psychology*, 20(3), pp. 637–647. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00160.

Adler, P.S. and **Kwon, S.-W.** (2002) 'Social Capital: Prospects for a New Concept', *Academy of Management Review*, 27(1), pp. 17–40. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2002.5922314.

Alatas, S.H. (2000) 'Intellectual Imperialism: Definition, Traits, and Problems', *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 28(1), pp. 23–45. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1163/030382400X00154. (Accessed: 03 February 2025).

Arnstein, S.R. (1969) 'A Ladder Of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), pp. 216–224. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/01944366908977225. (Accessed: 19 April 2025).

Baccarini, E. (2021) 'Epistemic Democracy, Political Legitimacy, And Reasonable Pluralism', *Etica & Politica/Ethics & Politics*, XXXIII (1), pp. 375–386. Available at: https://doi.org/10.13137/1825-5167/32040 (Accessed: 10 August 2024).

Barberá, P. (2020) 'Social Media, Echo Chambers, and Political Polarization', in J.A. Tucker and N. Persily (eds) *Social Media and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (SSRC Anxieties of Democracy), pp. 34–55. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108890960 (Accessed: 13 August 2024).

Bertrand, M., Bombardini, M. and **Trebbi, F.** (2014) 'Is It Whom You Know or What You Know? An Empirical Assessment of the Lobbying Process', *American Economic Review*, 104(12), pp. 3885–3920. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.104.12.3885 (Accessed: 10 August 2024).

Bourdieu, P. (1986). 'The forms of capital', in Richardson, J. (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood Press, pp. 241–258.

Bourdieu, P. (1989). 'Social Space and Symbolic Power', *Sociological Theory*, *7*(1), pp. 14–25. Available at: https://doi.org/10.2307/202060 (Accessed: 17 April 2025.

Brauner, F., Fonagy, P., Campbell, C., Griem, J., Storck, T. and **Nolte, T.** (2023) '"Trust me, do not trust anyone": how epistemic mistrust and credulity are associated with conspiracy mentality', *Research in Psychotherapy : Psychopathology, Process, and Outcome*, 26(3), pp. 705. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4081/ripppo.2023.705 (Accessed: 10 August 2024).

Bullock, E.C. (2018) 'Knowing and Not-Knowing For Your Own Good: The Limits of Epistemic Paternalism', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 35(2), pp. 433–447. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/japp.12220 (Accessed: 10 August 2024).

Catala, A. (2015) 'Democracy, Trust, and Epistemic Justice', *The Monist*, 98(4), pp. 424–440. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/monist/onv022. (Accessed: 20 April 2025).

Cerovac, I. (2020) *Epistemic Democracy and Political Legitimacy*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.

Coleridge, G. (2013) 'The System Isn't Broken, It's Fixed: Ending Big Money and Corporations in Our Elections', *University of Toledo Law Review*, 44(3), pp. 541–568. Available at: https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/utol44&i=559 (Accessed: 29 July 2024).

Dahl, R.A. (1989) *Democracy and its critics*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Domhoff, G.W. (1967) *Who Rules America?* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Domhoff, G.W. (2013) *Who Rules America? The Triumph of the Corporate Rich*. 7th edition. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

Domhoff, G.W. (2021) *Who Rules America?: The Corporate Rich, White Nationalist Republicans, and Inclusionary Democrats in the 2020s*. 8th edition. New York, NY: Routledge.

Dotson, K. (2011) 'Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing', *Hypatia*, 26(2), pp. 236–257. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01177.x. (Accessed: 19 April 2025).

Drahos, P. and **Braithwaite, J.** (2002) *Information Feudalism: Who Owns the Knowledge Economy*. London: Taylor and Francis.

Estlund, D. (2008) *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*. Princeton University Press.

Finn, P. (2003) 'The West Wing's Textual President: American Constitutional Stability and the New Public Intellectual in the Age of Information', in Rollins, P.C. and O'Connor, J.E. (eds) *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*. Syracuse University Press, pp. 101–124.

Fricker, M. (2007) *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gieryn, T.F. (1999) *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Gilens, M. (2012) *Affluence and influence: economic inequality and political power in America*. Princeton, N.J New York: Princeton University Press.

Goldman, A.I. (2001) 'Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LXIII (1), pp. 85–110. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2001.tb00093.x (Accessed: 03 March 2025).

Graf, B. and **Antoni, C.H.** (2023) 'Drowning in the flood of information: a meta-analysis on the relation between information overload, behaviour, experience, and health and moderating factors', *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 32(2), pp. 173–198. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2022.2118051 (Accessed: 10 August 2024).

Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), pp. 575–599. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3178066 (Accessed: 10 August 2024).

Heister, A. (2022) 'The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation', in A. Heister (ed.) *Beyond the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation: From Lethal to Compassionate Conservation*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 45–75. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14149-2_3 (Accessed: 10 August 2024).

Innis, H.A. (1951) *The Bias of Communication*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Janis, I.L. (1972) *Victims of groupthink; a psychological study of foreign-policy decisions and fiascoes*. Boston, Houghton, Mifflin. Available at: http://archive.org/details/victimsofgroupth0000jani (Accessed: 20 April 2025).

Jasanoff, S. (2004) 'Ordering Knowledge, Ordering Society', in Jasanoff, S. (ed) *States of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, pp. 13–45.

Junk, W.M., Crepaz, M. and **Aizenberg, E.** (2024) 'Fight or flight: How access barriers and interest disruption affect the activities of interest organizations', *European Journal of Political Research*, 63(3), pp. 1062–1081. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12630 (Accessed: 10 August 2024).

Kamruzzaman, P. (2020) 'Exploring the Nexus Between Participation and Empowerment', *Journal of Development Policy and Practice*, 5(1), pp. 32–53. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/2455133320909926. (Accessed: 19 April 2025).

Kavanagh, J. and **Rich, M.D.** (2018) *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*. RAND Corporation. Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2314.html (Accessed: 13 August 2024).

Klingberg, T. (2009) *The Overflowing Brain: Information Overload and the Limits of Working Memory*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA.

Kruglanski, A.W., Gelfand, M.J., Bélanger, J.J., Sheveland, A., Hetiarachchi, M. and **Gunaratna, R.** (2014) 'The Psychology of Radicalization and Deradicalization: How Significance Quest Impacts Violent Extremism', *Political Psychology*, 35(S1), pp. 69–93. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12163 (Accessed: 13 August 2024).

Kuhn, T.S. (1962). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Lehmann, C. (2001) 'Feel-good presidency: the pseudo-politics of The West Wing', *The Atlantic*, 287(3), pp. 93–6. Available at: https://go-gale-com.derby.idm.oclc.org/ps/i.do?p=LitRC&sw=w&issn=10727825&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA30263559&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs (Accessed: 25 March 2025).

Lightfoot, G. and **Wisniewski, T.P.** (2014) 'Information asymmetry and power in a surveillance society', *Information and Organization*, 24(4), pp. 214–235. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.infoandorg.2014.09.001 (Accessed: 13 August 2024).

Lupia, A. and **Norton, A.** (2017) 'Inequality is Always in the Room: Language & Power in Deliberative Democracy', *Daedalus*, 146(3), pp. 64–76. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00447.

Mansbridge, J. (1999) 'Everyday talk in the deliberative system', in Macedo, S. (ed.) *Deliberative politics: essays on democracy and disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 211–239.

Martin, A.F. (2025) 'Lawyers and Public Service: Duty, Faith, and the "Good Republican" in The West Wing', Manitoba Law Journal, 43(4) (forthcoming). Available at: https://digitalcommons.schulichlaw.dal.ca/scholarly_works/2020/ (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

Medina, J. (2022) 'Group agential epistemic injustice: Epistemic disempowerment and critical defanging of group epistemic agency', *Philosophical Issues*, 32(1), pp. 320–334. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/phis.12221 (Accessed: 17 August 2024).

Mills, C.W. (1997) *The Racial Contract*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Müller, J.-W. (2016) *What is populism?* Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Nester, W.R. (1997) *The war for America's natural resources*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.

Nichols, T. (2017) *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*. New York, NY: OUP USA.

Norris, P. (2011) *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Oliver, J.E. and **Rahn, W.M.** (2016) 'Rise of the Trumpenvolk: Populism in the 2016 Election', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 667(1), pp. 189–206. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716216662639. (Accessed: 20 April 2025).

Parry-Giles, S.J. (2006) *The Prime-Time Presidency: The West Wing and U. S. Nationalism*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.

Phadke, S., Samory, M. and **Mitra, T.** (2021) 'What Makes People Join Conspiracy Communities? Role of Social Factors in Conspiracy Engagement', *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.*, 4(CSCW3), pp. 1–30. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1145/3432922 (Accessed: 28 July 2024).

Pierre, J.M. (2020) 'Mistrust and Misinformation: A Two-Component, Socio-Epistemic Model of Belief in Conspiracy Theories', *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 8(2), pp. 617–641. Available at: https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v8i2.1362 (Accessed: 13 August 2024).

Pohlhaus, G. (2012) 'Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of "Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance"', *Hypatia*, 27(4), pp. 715–735. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2011.01222.x. (Accessed: 19 March 2025).

Pohlhaus Jr., G. (2020) 'Epistemic Agency Under Oppression', *Philosophical Papers*, 49(2), pp. 233–251. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/05568641.2020.1780149 (Accessed: 17 August 2024).

Prooijen, J.-W. van (2022) 'Psychological benefits of believing conspiracy theories', *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 47, p. 101352. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101352 (Accessed: 29 July 2024).

Rayner, S. (2012) 'Uncomfortable knowledge: the social construction of ignorance in science and environmental policy discourses', *Economy and Society*, 41(1), pp. 107–125. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2011.637335. (Accessed: 19 March 2025).

Rocheleau, B. (2019) 'The Politics of State Wildlife Management: Why Anti-Conservation Forces Usually Win', *Medium*, 14 August. Available at: https://medium.com/@brucerocheleau/the-politics-of-state-wildlife-management-why-anti-conservation-forces-usually-win-26bfae92bca1 (Accessed: 29 July 2024).

Savage, L. (2017) 'How Liberals Fell In Love With The West Wing', *Current Affairs*, 7 June. Available at: https://www.currentaffairs.org/news/2017/04/how-liberals-fell-in-love-with-the-west-wing (Accessed: 23 March 2025).

Schnell, T., Viviani, R., Lenz, C. and **Krampe, H.** (2024) 'When alienated from society, conspiracy theory belief gives meaning to life', *Heliyon*, 10(14). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e34557 (Accessed: 28 July 2024).

Simon, J. (2024) 'Problematizing Modern Democracy in the United States':, *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 65(2), pp. 367–394. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-023-00486-y (Accessed: 20 April 2025).

Smith, J.A. (2023) '"Just Folks?": Jack Downing, The West Wing, and the Yankee Struggle for "Real America."', in Cobb, T. and Akroyd, O. (eds) *Presidents and Place: America's Favorite Sons*. Lanham: Lexington Books, pp. 49–68.

Stivers, T., Mondada, L. and **Steensig, J.** (2011) 'Knowledge, morality and affiliation in social interaction', in Stivers, T., Mondada, L., and Steensig, J. (eds) *The Morality of Knowledge in Conversation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 3–24.

Sunstein, C.R. and **Vermeule, A.** (2009) 'Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures*', *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 17(2), pp. 202–227. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2008.00325.x (Accessed: 29 July 2024).

Turner, Stephen P. (2014) *The Politics of Expertise*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Watson, L. (2021) *The Right to Know: Epistemic Rights and Why We Need Them*. London: Routledge.

Waxman, S. (2003) 'Inside The West Wing's New World', in Rollins, P.C. and O'Connor, J.E. (eds) *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, pp. 203–212.