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April 9, 2018

The Unholy Alliance:  
How Jeff Zucker Powered Donald Trump's Rise From Reality TV Star to US President

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## Abstract

### The Unholy Alliance: How Jeff Zucker Powered Donald Trump's Rise From Reality TV Star to US President

By Kathleen O'Keefe

This thesis will examine the past and current intersection of entertainment and politics within the television industry, and call into question where exactly cable news channels' priorities lie—with the education of the general public or with ratings? One example of the convergence of entertainment, politics and cable news today is the symbiotic relationship between Jeff Zucker and Donald Trump. In 2004, Zucker was one of the executive producers at NBC Entertainment to greenlight *The Apprentice*, thus further foraying the network into the realm of reality TV and successfully replacing their most popular show at the time, *Friends*. Zucker helped Trump transition from real estate tycoon to reality TV star, shaping *The Apprentice* into an initial massive success. Then in 2013, Zucker accepted the role of President at CNN Worldwide, and took on the daunting task of resurrecting CNN from their most severe ratings downturn ever. By successfully implementing his three pillar plan and exploiting Trump for the ratings attraction and publicity machine he knew he was from past experience, Zucker brought CNN to their most-watched year ever in 2016. However, CNN was not alone in their accomplishments. The presidential election was beneficial for all three major news channels, boosting Fox News Channel 36%, CNN 77%, and MSNBC 87% from 2015 to 2016 in total viewer ratings (Nielsen). The Trump coverage across the general media was incredibly negative in tone, heavily focused on the horserace and controversies, and always more than any other candidate. Additionally, this paper aims to dissect the relatable and intriguing personality traits that Trump continually displayed from *The Apprentice* to his presidential campaign, and also how Zucker used Trump in his production scheme to maximize entertainment within CNN's cable news television. Overall, Trump dominated the press in 2016, and as a result, greatly improved the ratings and financial success of the cable news networks. The argument finds that CNN was one of many cable news channels to benefit from the 2016 Presidential Election, and both Jeff Zucker and Donald Trump have used each other to immensely advance one another's careers over the past fifteen years.

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**ACRONYMS:**

NBC—National Broadcasting Company

NBCU—National Broadcasting Company & Universal Studios

CNN—Cable News Network

RCA—Radio Corporation of America

ABC—American Broadcasting Corporation

GE—General Electric

FCC—Communication Commission

TV—Television

US—United States

**KEY WORDS:**

NBC

CNN

RCA

Jeff Zucker

Donald Trump

*The Apprentice*

2016 Presidential Election

## INTRODUCTION

Broadcast television has been financially driven from the day it entered American homes in the late 1940s, capitalizing entirely on affiliate fees and advertising sales. Both of these monetary benefits are directly determined by the volume and persistence of the network's viewers. In other words, ratings are crucial. One of the most influential aspects of television has been the introduction of cable news channels, allowing Americans everywhere access to information about the world happening around them. Although the general intent of cable news channels has always been to elevate the nation's awareness of current events both stateside and internationally, increasingly the hunger for ratings and profit has taken priority, thus placing more importance on the entertainment value of the program rather than the educational content. Yet, entertainment has been a part of the cable news industry since the day of its conception. Entertainment is required for cable news networks to stay on air—whether it is in the form of guest politicians, network hosts and personalities, or in the way the content is presented to the viewers. News is defined by current events, and entertainment is characterized by enjoyable or amusing acts, information, or activities. News and entertainment are not mutually exclusive, but cable news is generally watched in pursuit of a higher understanding of surroundings rather than sheer entertainment. In cable news, audiences are made to feel intelligent and informed, but in reality they are simply consumers of entertainment served up by the greater television industry.

Entertainment has been deeply embedded in politics since politicians were first broadcast on television. In order to cultivate a faithful following, political leaders have to be perceived as somewhat engaging, empowering, and persuasive. Cable news channels have become one of the most widely consumed platforms over the last seventy years for Americans to view the presidential race and become familiar with the candidates.



One of the best examples of cable news blurring the distinction between entertainment and politics today is the relationship between Jeff Zucker and Donald Trump and their journey from reality TV on NBC to political campaign coverage on CNN. In 2004, Zucker was an ambitious and brilliant young television producer faced with the daunting task of replacing the NBC series *Friends*—one of the most watched comedies in TV history. Zucker ultimately went with a show focused on the billionaire real estate tycoon who was also a fixture of the New York City tabloids. *The Apprentice* captivated tens of millions of viewers on a weekly basis. This Zucker/Trump collaboration was a foreshadowing of a powerful and symbiotic relationship—one that was not coordinated or planned but ultimately benefitted both men professionally when Zucker was running CNN and Donald was running for President.

Trump learned how to engage an audience, and Zucker knew how to produce content that would attract viewers. Together their partnership on *The Apprentice* proved capable of entertaining a broad swath of the American public. During the 2016 Presidential election their synergy serendipitously powered both Trump's campaign and Zucker's television network to new heights. This was a mutually beneficial relationship even though Trump despised CNN and often mocked them for poor ratings.

It is ironic then, that CNN with its constant focus on Trump (in good times and in bad) probably played a large role in Trump's ascendancy. In turn, Zucker's nonstop coverage of Trump's unfiltered and unpredictable rants during the months leading up to the election drove CNN's ratings +77% in 2016 compared to 2015 ("2016 IS CNN'S MOST-WATCHED YEAR EVER," [cnn.com](http://cnn.com)). Zucker, from his experience a decade before, knew better than anyone how to use Donald Trump's unique personality to leverage TV ratings.

Although the relationship that progressed between Jeff Zucker and Donald Trump from reality TV to political campaign coverage is remarkable, its genesis is not a mystery. Zucker was driven by similar motives in both entertainment and broadcast news—larger viewership and a more profitable bottom line. Although CNN still finished second in total viewer ratings among new channels to Fox in 2016, CNN achieved its most watched year ever in 2016. This trend in increased ratings is a testament to where television news is going, and how increasingly intertwined the realms of entertainment, broadcast news, and politics have become.

This thesis will argue that the relationship between Jeff Zucker and Donald Trump is an example of the intersection of cable news, politics and entertainment today. Zucker successfully exploited Donald Trump’s entertaining and bombastic television personality to gain viewership, increase ratings, and revitalize his struggling networks. Inadvertently, this exploitation of Donald Trump, both on *The Apprentice* and during the CNN’s coverage throughout the 2016 election year, helped to create an international leader that eventually became the 45<sup>th</sup> American president.

The question that drives this examination is: what has driven the convergence of entertainment and politics in the case of CNN and how did it coincide with Trump’s ascendance into the presidency? To begin this conversation, we must turn to the factors that have led to the intersection of entertainment and politics in cable news in 2016. Politics and performance are inseparable, and there is no more opportune time for politicians to perform than when they are being broadcast to an audience. This convergence began long before television; in fact, radio is where the intersection of entertainment, politics, and broadcast technology began. Anthony Rudel, author of the book *Hello Everybody!: The Dawn of American Radio*, explains that the presidential election of 1930 between Al Smith and Herbert Hoover was the first time America

could become familiar with their potential president, and presidential candidates had to prepare for mass addresses. Rudel explains:

It seems hard to believe, but in 1928, radio was not only the new but the only electronic medium; it was most families' primary source of entertainment, just as later they would turn to television, and then the computer. It was also the primary source of political news. But whereas today the complex issues are boiled down to 15-second sound bites, in 1928, Americans welcomed political oratory and listened to hourlong speeches. Radio was still so new that those talks were entertaining. (Rudel, "Before TV and the Internet—When Radio Was the First Electronic Medium")

Rudel suggests that in the age of radio, the beginning of broadcast media, politics and entertainment were one in the same. Listening to political leaders address America was considered an activity or an event to look forward to, which is exactly what defines entertainment. Conversely, political leaders were also forced to become performers for audiences during the rise of radio. Candidates were forced to draft speeches for broadcast dissemination and master their radio voices and personalities. Rudel says that both Herbert Hoover and Al Smith "became capable, though different, radio orators" in order to appeal to the masses (Rudel, "Before TV and the Internet—When Radio Was the First Electronic Medium"). Moreover, throughout the introduction of television, news still had a firm place in the cable lineup, entertaining or not. Markus Prior's article in the *American Journal of Political Science* explains cable news' initial role in television saying:

Largely unexposed to entertainment competition, news had its place in the early evening and again before the late-night shows. Today, as both entertainment and news are available around the clock on numerous cable channels and web sites, people's content

preferences determine more of what those with cable or Internet access watch, read, and hear. (Prior, “News vs. Entertainment: How Increasing Media Choice Widens Gaps in Political Knowledge and Turnout”).

Now, in the presence of the internet on computers and mobile phones, the dilemma lies in too much information available to consumers, leaving them with an abundance of choices. The amount of media Americans receive throughout presidential campaigns has caused media users to personalize the information they consume, thus being less likely to encounter different points of view. This “high choice media environment,” as Prior says, is another reason why today, politicians and media outlets both feel the need to capture consumers’ attention, and also a reason for the extreme polarization between political parties. The burgeoning reach of the Internet and digital news has put tremendous pressure on cable news to offer something more than the information available online. The immediacy and never-ending capacity of the Internet has made it possible for most Americans to receive an unlimited amount of information whenever they please. Digital news is also generally free, so television watchers need to find more than information in cable news in order to justify the subscription fees. Overall, entertainment has been ingrained in politics since the dawn of radio; however, the increasing amount of available technologies overtime since radio has created a highly competitive and polarized cable news industry.

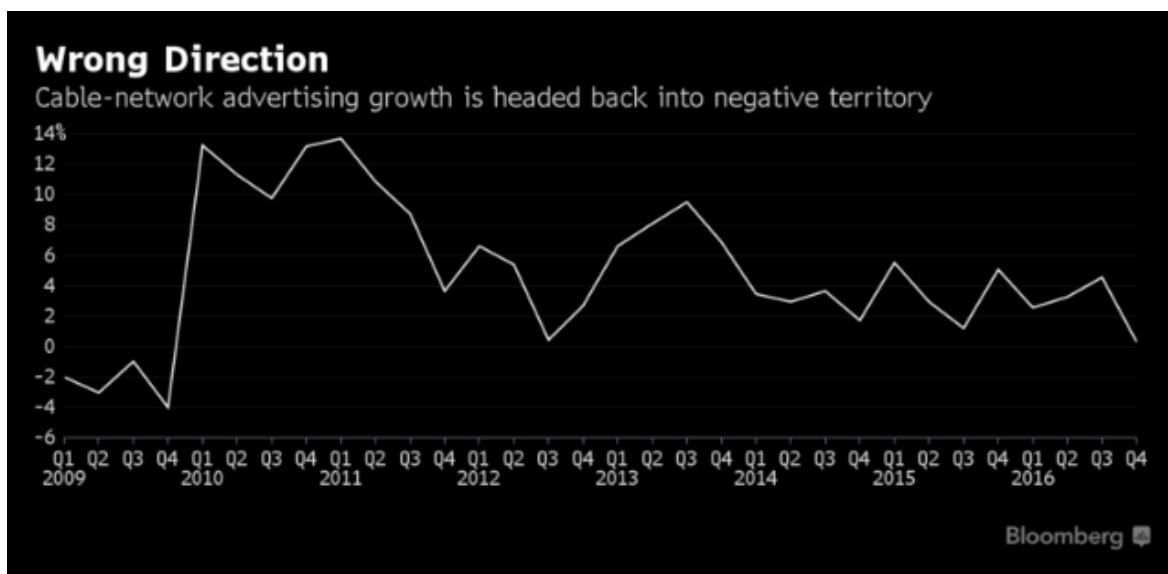
Also, another contributing factor of the convergence of entertainment and politics in cable news is decreasing television ratings in the face of competing entertainment sources such as Netflix, Amazon Video, and Hulu. Although ratings are down in cable television, TV networks have continually raised the prices of advertising even though advertisers are being

exposed to declining numbers of audiences. Gerry Smith and Lucas Shaw of Bloomberg Technology explain this trend in cable advertising saying:

Because of the slumping ratings, advertisers who want to reach a certain amount of eyeballs can't get what they need from television anymore. To make up for the shrinking audiences and keep ad sales high, TV networks have kept raising their rates, believing ad buyers will just have to spend more to reach the people they need. TV ratings have dropped 33 percent in the last four years while TV ad prices are up 20 percent. (Smith and Shaw, "Fed-Up Advertisers Stop Paying More For Smaller TV Audience")

These pernicious forces have placed cable networks under immense pressure to provide more interesting and entertaining content than ever, thus encouraging cable news to also become entertainment driven. Below is a graph from *Bloomberg Technology* mapping out the decreasing trend in cable advertisements from quarter one of 2009 until quarter four of 2016.

Figure 1: Taken from Gerry Smith and Lucas Shaw's article, "Fed-Up Advertisers Stop Paying More For Smaller TV Audience," in Bloomberg Technology.



Moreover, another contributing factor to the focus on entertainment within cable news is the shift in journalism from “event based” to “interpretational” writing, as explained by Thomas E. Patterson in his study on the media’s coverage of the 2016 presidential election. He explains that this is a shift away from reporting the events in a “who, what, where, when” fashion to reporting journalists’ own interpretations of those events (Patterson, “News Coverage of the 2016 National Conventions: Negative News, Lacking Context”). According to Patterson, this trend of shying away from objective writing began in the 1960s and has been growing ever since. One man in particular who largely defined honest and objective reporting, before the shift in journalism began in the 1960s, was Edward Murrow, head of CBS News in Europe beginning in 1937 (Olson, 22). From reporting internationally on his radio show *Hear It Now*, Murrow quickly became a voice that “dominated American foreign policy” throughout the entirety of WWII (“Edward R. Murrow: This Reporter”, pbs.org). According to the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), Murrow reported from the front lines of the war, flew over Berlin in bombing missions, and became one the first journalists ever to report the atrocities from inside the Nazi’s concentration camps (“Edward R. Murrow: This Reporter”, pbs.org). However, Murrow’s greatest contribution throughout the war was informing the American people of the struggling state of the British at the time, and encouraging the U.S. to provide more aid to Britain in order to hold out against Hitler’s rule (Olson, 98). Lynne Olson describes in her book, *Citizens of London*, the impact Murrow has on his American listeners throughout WWII by noting, “hundreds of Americans wrote him to say his broadcasts had taken them from neutral detachment to support for the British” (98). Moreover, Murrow continued his pursuit of the truth throughout the rise of television by investigating subjects such as the Senator Joseph McCarthy and his Senate Investigating Committee (“Edward R. Murrow: This Reporter”, pbs.org). From

the time Murrow was sent to Europe in 1937 to 1961 when his show came to close, Murrow was committed to objective, honest, and fearless journalism. Murrow performed the type of Journalism that Thomas Patterson of the Shorenstein Study refers to as “event-based” journalism—reporting that is driven by facts and reality rather than a point of view or bias.

Unfortunately, the climate of journalism today is vastly different than journalism in the age of Edward Murrow. A large portion of reporting today strays away from chasing the truth, and rather stems from personal bias that is meant to create more opportunities for innovative content among the sea of information available to consumers (Patterson, “News Coverage of the 2016 National Conventions: Negative News, Lacking Context”). Patterson says reporters “are on the lookout for compelling stories. That perspective leads them to favor what’s timely over what’s old, what’s novel over what’s predictable, what’s sensational over what’s drab, what’s negative over what’s positive” (Ibid). So, for instance, journalists in the 2016 election would focus more on the results of the latest poll to produce a new opinion on the candidates rather than readdressing topics that lack originality but serve greater importance to the American public such as policy stances and office qualifications. The consequences of journalism-centered reporting have caused the media “to elevate the horse race at the expense of the election’s substance” (Patterson, “News Coverage of the 2016 National Conventions: Negative News, Lacking Context”).

Journalistic-centered writing is also a contributor to the severely polarized political parties that exist in America today—consumers will read the journalism pieces that reinforce their own biases. The political landscape in America has become far more segmented than in the past. Within this mass audience of politically-interested, television-watching Americans lies a growing chasm between the conservatives and liberals: two mutually exclusive cohorts. Over

time, the cable news industry has learned to appeal to either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party, and some networks, such as MSNBC and Fox News Channel, have experienced great success with this partisan-biased strategy. Because networks have focused in on certain political parties, many American's only watch what appeals to their political views, thus reinforcing their already established perspectives. This idea of only consuming news that speaks to your preconceived political judgments greatly fosters the severe polarity in our political system today. According to Pew Research Center's study called "Political Polarization and Media Habits", "When it comes to getting news about politics and government, liberals and conservatives inhabit different worlds. There is little overlap in the news sources they turn to and trust" (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, and Matsa). The 24-hour news networks are in part responsible for generating this biased content that has changed the direction of journalism, thus resulting in news coverage lacking substance in the 2016 presidential election year. The top three most watched cable news channels in 2016, Fox, CNN, and MSNBC, are also all defined by a political stance. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, these three networks have essentially dominated the 24-hour cable news sector, and spoken to very differing audiences. These three news channels largely determined the information that audiences consumed throughout the election and shaped the perceptions and conversations of millions of Americans throughout the 2016 presidential election year.

Firstly, CNN has historically been the 24-hour cable news channel to strive for unbiased political content, striking a resonance with viewers somewhere in between the highly liberal content of MSNBC and the very conservative content on Fox News Channel. CNN is unique among its competitors in that it was the first 24-hour cable news network, founded in 1980 by Ted Turner. This was a network created with the intent of presenting only news, all the time. The



goal of CNN was to give viewers a snapshot of the world each day, and cover as many national and international stories as possible. However, similar to MSNBC, CNN faced a major decline in ratings in the early 2010s leading to their worst year in two decades in 2013. Reasons for their severe plunge are somewhat speculative, but some theorize that the network lost its voice among the heavily polarized cable news industry. Under the new leadership of Jeff Zucker in 2013, CNN strove to increase its appeal to younger audiences, grow the network's digital presence, and capitalize on entertainment—meaning fewer, more engaging stories on their cable television channel.

CNN is also accompanied in the top three most-watched cable news organizations by Fox News Channel a channel of the Fox News Network and subsidiary of 21 Century Fox. FNC was founded in 1986 by Rupert Murdoch, but its CEO, Roger Ailes, provided a practical vision that eventually defined Fox News Channel's identity. Ailes was a former media consultant for the Republican Party before he became the first CEO of Fox News Channel. Jane Hall describes Ailes role in creating the Fox News Channel by saying, "It's his vision. It's a reflection of him" (Dickinson, "How Roger Ailes Built the Fox News Fear Factory"). Fox has historically appealed to the Republican Party due to its right-leaning content, and their appeal to the white, conservative, 70-and-over viewer demographic. Although news ratings continually fluctuate, Fox has generally had a strong lead in total viewership among 24-hour cable news networks since about 2009. Fox is the conservative powerhouse in news television, and was dominating the ratings going into the 2016 presidential campaign season.

Lastly is MSNBC, one of two cable news channels owned by NBC Universal. In contrast to Fox and CNN, MSNBC has taken on the role of the liberal 24-hour news network since their founding in 1996. MSNBC was not founded with the intent to be the most liberal news channel

on basic cable, but the channel has experienced success speaking to the left audience in the 2000s. NBC is the parent company of two cable news outlets, CNBC and MSNBC. CNBC was founded in 1989 and covers national and financial news while MSNBC covers national, international, and political news and historically takes a very liberal bias. However, MSNBC was facing a ratings downturn after the turn of 2010, like the other news channels at the time CNN and Fox. In 2015 the news channel made a drastic move to eliminate many of their outright liberal shows, and gear more towards an unbiased platform in an effort to gain viewership back. At the end of 2015, MSNBC was the third most-watched cable news channel behind Fox in first place and CNN in second place (Moraes, “Cable TV Ratings 2016: Presidential Politics Fuels Ratings Gain”). They hit a severe low point at the end of 2015 with their total primetime viewership down 19% in the target demographic (ages 25-54), but were hoping their newly revamped and less liberal coverage would bode well for them in the upcoming election year (Moraes, “Cable TV Ratings 2016: Presidential Politics Fuels Ratings Gain”).

Among all three major 24-hour news channels, one of the most widely used tactics that exists in the intersection of politics and entertainment is controversy and outrage—both attract audiences and glue them to screens for long periods of time. It can be argued that these two traits were often exploited in the 2016 presidential contest between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in order to maximize entertainment on cable news networks, thus creating high ratings. As Phil Kent of the Harvard Kennedy School states in his study on entertainment within politics:

Passionate discussion and debate can help illuminate topics for the public, but at some point it feels like an issue is being "milked" for other purposes, and the harm is that it exploits the audience's emotions and fears and often takes the focus off of explaining sometimes complicated issues to the public or presenting more consequential news

stories. (“Who uses whom?...The Co-Dependent Relationship of the Media, Politicians, and Entertainment and Special Interest Groups with Phil Kent”)

Both candidates’ campaigns were steeped in controversy and scandal, but Donald Trump especially utilized the American’s fascination with outrage to his benefit. Trump from the inception of his career in New York real estate used confrontation and showmanship to his advantage.

The relationship between Zucker and Trump is unique in that it was the first example of a reality TV star successfully achieving the American presidency. However, what has been seen before, in cases such as former actors turned political figures, Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger, is broadcast news networks capitalizing on theatrical and captivating celebrity personalities. For example, Trump’s compelling television persona enabled *The Apprentice* to garner tens of millions of viewers an episode, as mentioned earlier, and successfully replaced one of NBC’s most successful shows, *Friends*. The subsequent chapters will argue that Trump has a compelling television presence that is correlated with high television ratings, and Jeff Zucker strategically produced the election content on CNN in a manner that made Trump’s personality especially captivating. This theory comes from the fact that Zucker recognized and valued the draw that Trump could generate with a television audience as a result of his experience a decade earlier working with Trump at *The Apprentice*.

Though it would be logical to conclude that there is a radical difference between Trump/Zucker’s reality TV work on *The Apprentice* vs. the broadcast primetime news on CNN, surprisingly similar elements were ultimately responsible for both of these successes. Although they are labeled as entertainment and news respectively, Trump displays similar behavioral characteristics in both realms. He carried his brash, plainspoken, confrontational reality TV

persona to the political realm. Voters might believe they could easily distinguish between what is being broadcast for entertainment and what is presented as a political platform for a US Presidential election, but that distinction became extremely cloudy throughout the 2016 campaign. Never before had America encountered a reality TV star as a serious Presidential candidate.

Indeed, viewers of *The Apprentice* were more likely to view Trump in a more favorable light. AMG, a media analytics firm, conducted an interview measuring Trump's approval rating among viewers versus non-viewers of *The Apprentice* and/or *Celebrity Apprentice*. This poll targeted self-identified Republicans and was conducted from September 17-18, 2015 (Axelrod, "Reality TV Bites: *The Apprentice* Effect Aids Trump"). Not surprisingly, his approval ratings were far higher among *Apprentice* watchers—of whom 67% approved of Donald Trump versus only 27% who disapproved (Ibid). Among *Apprentice* non-viewers, his approval/disapproval ratings were much more neutral—37% to 34% respectively (Ibid). Although this poll sampled a fraction of American Republican voters, its methodology was sound, leading to the reasonable assumption that that Trump garnered a large following through *The Apprentice* that helped catapult him into a successful, albeit controversial, political career. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the populations favoring and non-favoring Trump, comparing cohorts of watchers and non-watchers.

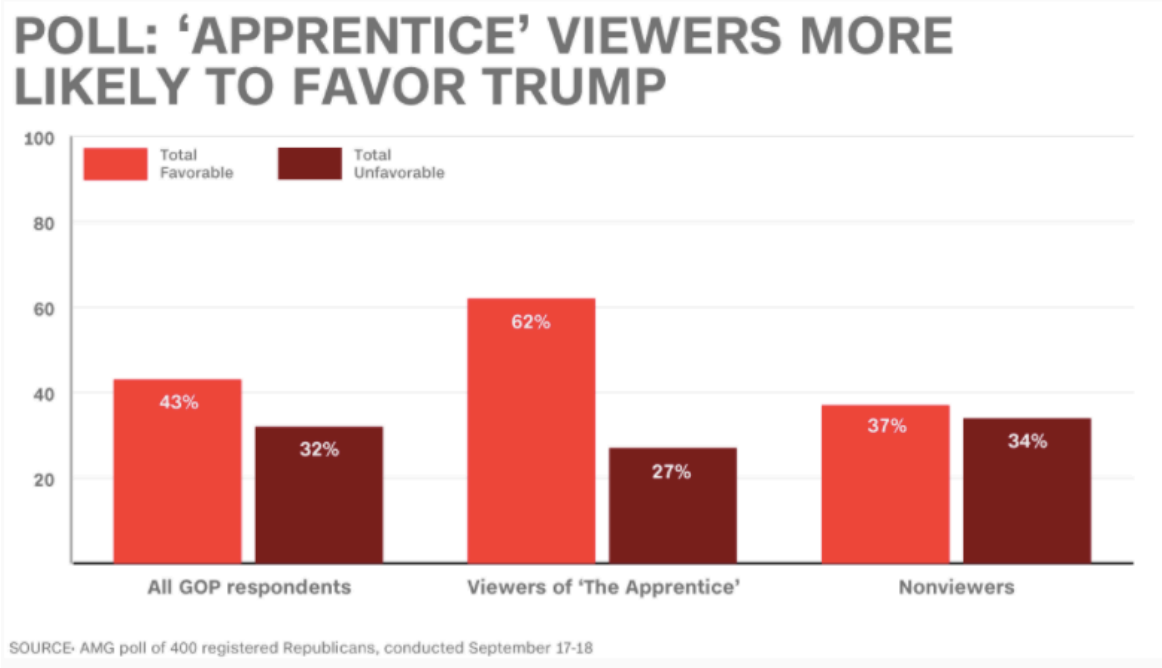
Figure 2: Taken from CNN article "Reality TV Bites: *The Apprentice* Aids Trump" by David Axelrod, referencing AMG online poll.

# Trump's lead bigger among 'Apprentice' viewers

Candidate	Total	'Apprentice' viewers	Nonviewers
Trump	24%	38%	21%
Bush	19%	15%	20%
Carson	15%	15%	15%
Fiorina	11%	11%	11%
Cruz	7%	2%	8%
Rubio	6%	11%	5%
Walker	5%	4%	6%
Paul	5%	1%	6%

AMG poll of 400 registered Republicans, conducted September 17-18

Figure 3: Taken from CNN article “Reality TV Bites: *The Apprentice* Aids Trump” by David Axelrod, referencing AMG online poll.



After a long and successful stint on *The Apprentice*, Trump arguably had a strong relationship with his army of American reality TV fans (Axelrod, “Reality TV Bites: *The Apprentice* Effect Aids Trump”). This primary fan base morphed into a solid political following, and also fueled the meteoric rise in CNN’s ratings throughout 2016. If he had been welcomed into homes for over fourteen television seasons, why wouldn’t he be now during the Presidential election campaign? To *The Apprentice* audience, Trump was a familiar and fascinating character, and his fans were mesmerized by his antics. Zucker also notes how *The Apprentice* played a pivotal role in launching Trump’s political career:

I think initially he thought it would be good for the Trump business and the Trump organization. I really don’t think early on he would think he would win the nomination. Obviously over time it became clear that he was resonating, and that he had hit a chord with the country. I think we understood early on in *The Apprentice* that he was resonating. I had seen what he was capable of doing, and how he was able to connect. (Wickenden, “Jeff Zucker Talks to David Remnick About Putting Trump on TV.”)

Zucker is highlighting the fact that he saw Trump captivate audiences once on NBC, and he believed Trump could do the same during the US Presidential election milieu. Although *The Apprentice* had far higher ratings in the beginning of its 15-season run than towards the end, it is plausible that this show in part proved to American public, to the entertainment industry, and even to Donald Trump himself just how incredibly interested people are in what he has to say or do; and how a mass media format could amplify this phenomenon. Zucker goes on to explain Trump’s stint on the reality television show on *The New Yorker: Politics and More*:

I think that *The Apprentice* certainly gave him a platform and a broader name

recognition than he ever would've had otherwise, and I do think that was incredibly important to his political aspirations. Its probably unlikely that he could've made the run for the presidency without the apprentice...he knows how to entertain. He knows how to work an audience. (Wickenden, "Jeff Zucker Talks to David Remnick About Putting Trump on TV.")

Zucker tailored content on the CNN cable news channel to maximize Trump's entertainment factor and draw consumers in for longer, thus capitalizing on big stories. So, although all networks recognized that Trump was an entertaining TV personality, Jeff Zucker aired nearly all of Trump's appearances, rallies, and scandals in great length. As a result, CNN jumped to #1 most-watched news channel among total viewers and news demographic (ages 25-54) on the 2016 presidential election night ("2016 IS CNN'S MOST-WATCHED YEAR EVER," [cnn.com](http://cnn.com)). Also, he implemented original programming which encouraged viewers to rely on CNN for not only news, but also regular entertainment. Some of CNN's most successful original programming in 2016 included *Race For the White House*, *The Wonder List with Bill Weir* (season 2), and *Anthony Bourdain Parts Unknown* (season 7). The winning combination of Trump's 'impossible-to-ignore' personality and Zucker's production expertise, both at NBC and CNN, helped to generate record-breaking years in ratings for both networks.

Zucker produced CNN following a three-pillar strategy that essentially encouraged viewer loyalty, increased the entertainment value of the network, and captured audiences for longer. Although CNN used to be renowned for providing audiences broadcast news covering a vast number of topics, Zucker's three-pillar strategy specifically focuses on only airing 2-4 major stories a day, and redirecting all of the other news stories to the CNN digital platform. CNN

digital is now found on of over twenty different online platforms; however, in 2016 some of CNN's most significant digital presences were on CNN.com, the CNN mobile App, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (CNN.com). Throughout the election, CNN used these platforms in order to disseminate stories that were of less importance than the election, but still mandated national attention. Because the network is spending longer time covering fewer topics on television, some of the footage of Trump before the primaries and throughout the primaries was uninterrupted, uncut, unedited content. These long reels of Trump appearances were most likely aired because Trump greatly appealed to mass audiences. Zucker knew this better than other TV news producers, and in fact, he acknowledged that he purposely aired excessive Trump content on CNN ("Jeff Zucker | Full Q&A | Oxford Union, youtube.com). CNN benefited in ratings from its overweighted airing of Trump content, and Trump, despite complaining bitterly about CNN's unfair treatment of him, benefited from the excessive publicity focused on him. Jonathan Mahler of *The New York Times* explains in his article "CNN Had A Problem. Donald Trump Fixed It":

It's hard to imagine that either Trump or Zucker would be where he is today without the other. Trump's foray into reality TV gave Zucker a prime-time hit when he badly needed one; now, Trump's foray into politics has given Zucker a big story when he badly needed one. It's a symbiotic relationship that could only thrive in the world of television, where the borders between news and entertainment, and even fantasy and reality, have grown increasingly murky. (Mahler, "CNN Had A Problem. Donald Trump Fixed It")

Building on this point made by Mahler, this thesis not only addresses the symbiotic relationship between Jeff Zucker and Donald Trump, giving each other boosts when the other needed it, but also how CNN was able to revive their network using the three-pillar strategy and gain viewership back through the means of strategic production focused predominantly on Trump.



Zucker and CNN were able to produce Trump in a style that appealed to audiences and put the network back in the top ten most watched television networks. *The Apprentice* also proved to be a stepping stone in Zucker's rise to become president and CEO of NBC/Universal before eventually taking the helm at CNN. Thus, Trump's entertaining television persona along with Zucker's savvy production approach likely increased the financial value and marketing gravitas of both NBC and CNN in 2004 and 2016, respectively.

Although this argument is not trying to speak globally or account for all of the factors that have gone into the convergence of entertainment and cable news, this thesis aims to dissect CNN as an example of prioritizing spectacle over objective reporting in cable news television. This cable network's recent success has come from Zucker's leadership as a former entertainment-television producer, using production tactics that favor profit over awareness.

The first chapter will outline the background of NBC and Jeff Zucker's rise to media production success over a span of twenty-five years at NBC, a year and a half at Disney-ABC, and five years at CNN. This chapter will discuss how inventive and enterprising Zucker's production changes were at NBC, and how his aggressive approach developed at NBC translated into his resurrection of CNN. Zucker's production experience with Donald Trump at *The Apprentice* gave him insight into how to approach Trump content at CNN. Then, the chapter will examine the history of reality television in America, and how *The Apprentice* both fit the mold of the 'gamedoc' reality subgenre at the time and provided NBC with a loyal and admiring audience throughout the first seasons. Next, Chapter Two will consist of two case studies—one on *The Apprentice*'s episode 1 season 1 and another on the first presidential debate of 2016. Both dissect the elements of Donald Trump's television personality that make him so alluring to his viewers. Moving into Chapter Three, the thesis will walk the reader through Harvard's

Shorenstein Study outlining the media's coverage on Trump throughout the 2016 presidential election. The Shorenstein Study describes the volume and tone of Trump's coverage across a spectrum of media platforms, allowing the reader to better understand how Trump was portrayed in the media during the election year. The Shorenstein study concluded that Trump continually received more coverage than Hillary Clinton throughout the election year, which supports the fact that Trump's television presence generated ratings across many media outlets. Finally, the last section of Chapter Three highlights how Jeff Zucker's work at CNN resulted in great success for the network. Although Trump content was ubiquitous across virtually all mass media outlets throughout 2016, Zucker had years of prior experience selling the Donald Trump persona. The interest in Trump ballooned, manifest as fascination for some, disgust for others, and at least curiosity in nearly all. Zucker both catalyzed this wave and rode it, making CNN a Trump-centric network, as detailed in the Shorenstein study. For the first time in years, CNN rejoined the top ten most watched cable network channels, and 2016 was their most watched year ever ("2016 IS CNN'S MOST-WATCHED YEAR EVER," [cnn.com](http://cnn.com)). Overall, this thesis is arguing that Trump's captivating television personality strongly drove CNN's ratings higher, and that Jeff Zucker's production techniques have highlighted the most entertaining aspects of Trump for years leading to successful programming featuring Donald Trump on both NBC and CNN.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *NBC'S FORAY INTO REALITY TV:*

#### *WHAT BROUGHT THE NETWORK TO TRUMP'S 'THE APPRENTICE'*

The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) was founded in 1926, three years after AT&T created the first radio on October 14, 1923 (Gomery, 14). From the start, NBC's purpose was to provide the best programming possible for Americans across the country (Ibid, 17). NBC was created by Radio Corporation of America (RCA) as a means of further controlling their radio patents, so every time anyone bought a television set in America, regardless of the brand, some of the proceeds would always go back to the RCA (Ibid, 15). General Electric (GE) founded RCA in 1919 as a wholly owned subsidiary that initially focused mainly on manufacturing radios, but went on to develop and market black-and-white and eventually color televisions. Just seven years later RCA in turn spawned NBC, whose first CEO, David Sarnoff, said the creation of NBC would "insure a national distribution of national programs, and wider distribution of programs of the highest quality,"; yet many insiders saw NBC as another ploy by RCA to maximize its profit from the radio industry (Ibid, 17). Jim Cox explains the intent of NBC's founding:

From a business standpoint, the National Broadcasting Company, Inc., and its counterparts were formed as money making enterprises, pure and simple. Not only recouping its investment in the high profile auxiliary it created but additionally turning it into a profitable cash cow had been among parent firm Radio Corporation of America's Chief interests since Day 1. The fact that NBC could serve as a laboratory for some of

RCA's projects—and generate sales for some of its products—added value to the franchise. (*American Radio Networks: A History*, 25)

The second half of the 1920s saw great urbanization within the United States, so by the end of the decade almost half of the households in America owned a radio (Gomery, 15). According to the U.S. census of 1940, almost every American home had a radio (Ibid, 15). According to *American Radio Networks: A History*, RCA bought lines of communication for its NBC's radio transmission from AT&T—the monopoly telephone provider in America at the time—for \$1 million in order to create their first broadcast radio station, WEAJ (Cox, 13). Although 570 individually licensed radio stations had been created by 1922, by 1930 NBC's mere 5 stations were outcompeting nearly all of the smaller radio stations (Ibid, 17). NBC's first ever broadcast aired on September 23, 1926. This broadcast took place in Philadelphia and featured a boxing match between Jack Dempsey and Tex Rickard (Ibid, 16). As soon as the first broadcast went live, it was evident that the general public's interest in radio was very strong. It was estimated that 130,000 people attended the boxing match, and celebrities from across the country came to witness the initial broadcast including Al Jolson, Will Rogers, and Charlie Chaplin (Ibid, 16).

NBC radio was an inexpensive and widely available form of entertainment throughout the Great Depression. As Douglas Gomery writes in *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, “NBC alone connected a vast and disparate nation, addressing it as a whole and using local stations across the USA as a means to create and define a national public for advertisers” (18). NBC created a platform that instantaneously united the country from coast-to-coast, whether it be for sports, or national heroes such as Charles Lindbergh, or comedians later turned television stars such as George Allan and Gracie Burns—it was truly a network for all interests and vastly different types of entertainment (Cox, 27). By 1928, NBC had gained an audience of

about 25 million and RCA was making about \$500 million a year (Gomery, 19). In 1933, RCA and NBC moved to the opulent Rockefeller Center in order to accommodate their growing corporation (Ibid, 19). Rockefeller Center was a great sign of hope and prosperity in America during the Great Depression. Gomery notes that, “Rockefeller Center’s shining lights and soaring architecture represented NBC radio’s bright promise and contrasted with the economic despair then gripping the nation” (Ibid, 19). RCA continued to grow through World War II, manufacturing the necessary radio technology for the military (Ibid, 22). And although RCA grew by 100% during WWII, by the end of the golden age of radio (about 1950) CBS was actually the more successful radio network. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) felt as if NBC has too much of a monopoly over the radio waves, so NBC was forced to sell one network of its dual network company in 1943 (Cox, 30). Even though NBC sold the weaker of its two networks, this action allowed CBS to not only compete with NBC, but eventually take the lead in radio ratings. Jack Benny, a popular radio show host on NBC, signed with CBS in 1948 and shortly thereafter American Tobacco followed him, switching their lucrative sponsorship from NBC to CBS. This was NBC’s first major loss to CBS, but many more followed. George Burns and Gracie Allen, Bing Crosby, and Red Skelton all left NBC for CBS, leaving America’s original radio network at a disadvantage at the dawning of the 1950s (Gomery, 19).

Despite its reputation of being second tier behind CBS during the first few decades of the television era, NBC developed “the first made-for-TV movie, the first free-form comedy show (*Laugh-In*), the first 90 minutes series (*The Virginian*), the first rotating dramatic series (*Name of the Game*, *Sunday Mystery Movie*), and the one-hour soap opera. It was also the first network to go all-color” (Ibid,173). However, as impressive as these accomplishments may seem, NBC always ranked second behind CBS in overall primetime television ratings. The effects of FCC’s

1941 Report on Chain Broadcasting in radio still was affecting the hierarchy of broadcast networks into the television era. NBC continued to fall behind CBS in ratings in the 1960s, and RCA struggled to convince the American people to buy color televisions due to their astronomical price of \$1,000. In the 1970s, NBC fell significantly behind CBS and also to the new popular network, American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) (Cox, 39). In the 1960s and 1970s NBC experimented with many different types of genres, and many of its shows had large and devoted fanbases—westerns like *Wagon Train (1961-1965)*, variety shows such as *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson (1962-1992)* and *Saturday Night Live (1975-present)*, detective dramas such as *Columbo (1968-1989)* and *McCloud (1970-1977)*, game shows such as *The Price is Right (1956-1963)* and science fiction shows such as *Star Trek (1966-1969)* (Gomery, 233-247).

Geosynchronous satellites, by eliminating the need for AT&T's land lines, made cable television possible for the first time in the 1970s (Ibid, 304). Fox Television Network was created in late 1980s, and quickly became fierce competition for ABC, CBS, and NBC with their aggressive vertical integration of the television industry with Hollywood production (Cox, 68 and Gomery, 300). NBC did not officially vertically integrate their television network with a Hollywood production company until they merged with Universal in 2004, leaving them slightly behind the trend (Gomery, 300). Grant Tinker, who would grow to become an iconic American television producer, came to NBC in 1981 and mandated that they take over the lead in the primetime ratings. He immediately put *The Cosby Show (1984-1992)* and *Cheers (1982-1993)* into production and reclaimed the number one spot in primetime cable network for the first time in three decades (Ibid, 321). By the mid-1980s both the president of the network, Grant Tinker, and president of entertainment, Brandon Tartikoff, were focusing NBC's revenue around ratings

on their Thursday night comedy lineups (Ibid, 321). Thursdays were the night before people went out and consumed products on the weekends, so it became the most lucrative advertising spot; thus NBC wanted the largest possible audience on Thursday evenings. In May of 1990 one of Tartikoff's last projects to be launched was *Seinfeld (1989-1998)* which did not gain traction until its third season on the air (Ibid, 324). Warren Littlefield replaced Tartikoff at NBC and further prioritized the importance of the Thursday night lineup with the releases of *Will & Grace (1998-2006)*, *Mad About You (1994-1999)*, *Friends (1994-2004)*, and *Cheers* spinoff *Frasier (1994-2004)* (Hilmes, 271). Littlefield named this Thursday night slot "Must See TV," and according to Michelle Hilmes NBC "openly branded itself as the network of more 'upscale,' college-educated, eighteen to forty-nine-year-old viewers" (Hilmes, 270).

At the beginning of the 2000s, NBC saw a dramatic drop in success. Although *Friends* was still the most-watched comedy on television, the show was still not enough to stay ahead of CBS (Hilmes, 272). NBC lost their two-decade lead in Thursday night primetime ratings to CBS in 2000, marking the end of NBC's second wave of success, the first wave being the golden age of radio (Hilmes, 272). NBC struggled the next five years to secure their hold on Thursday night ratings, constantly going back and forth with CBS for the #1 spot. Michele Hilmes explains NBC's fall from Thursday night glory by saying, "NBC's ignominious fall from glory in the early years of the twenty-first century was possible only because of the extraordinary accomplishment of the network over the preceding two decades" (Hilmes, 273).

With the massive success of *Survivor* on CBS in 2001, NBC sitcom lineup started to look dated. When Zucker became president of NBC Universal Television Group in 2000, he developed NBC's first reality TV show, *Fear Factor*, which was released in 2001 (Hirschberg, "The Stunt Man"). The show initially did well, but ratings declined quickly and the network

needed a show to replace the ominous and looming departure of *Friends* (Hirschberg, “The Stunt Man”). Thus, the network bought *The Apprentice* in 2003 from Mark Burnett, and slotted what would be an immensely successful television series to air on Thursday nights and compete with CBS’s *Survivor* (Carter, 317).

*The Apprentice* was one of NBC’s first reality television shows, but it was far from network television’s first foray into the genre. The reality-programming format had been evolving for decades as a blend of popular culture, entertainment, a glimpse into the real world. Reality TV is grounded in an audience’s fascination with observing ordinary people coping with real-life obstacles on camera. The genre, despite its tendency to come off as shallow and unintellectual, is often wildly popular with the target demographic of ages 18-49. Reality TV is primarily concerned with the discussions and behaviors of real personalities interacting in interesting surroundings/situations (Murray and Ouellette, 2). Early television and film heavily influenced reality TV. For example, the quiz shows of the 1950s were an “early incarnation of highly profitable TV programming that hinged on the popular appeal of real people placed in dramatic situations with unpredictable outcomes,” explains Louie Ouellette and Susan Murray in *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (2). The quiz shows introduced America to the notion that television could be produced with programming that was largely unscripted, often resulting in unpredictable and generally entertaining scenarios. This same concept ultimately morphed into reality TV (Ibid, 3). One of the most notable early quiz shows, *Twenty-One*, was produced by Albert Freedman and premiered in 1956 (Sandomir, “Albert Freedman, Producer of Rigged 1950s Quiz Show, Dies at 95”). *Twenty-One* was one of many programs that was discovered to have rigged the results of the show in the investigations led by Frank Hogan, the New York State district attorney at the time (Sandomir, “Albert Freedman, Producer of Rigged 1950s Quiz Show,



Dies at 95”). Freedman had given contestants the questions before the live show, so the show would ultimately be more engaging for viewers (Ibid). *Twenty-One* was canceled in 1958 and proved to be only one of many game shows that had not been honest with its audiences (Ibid).

Although startling, the quiz show scandals were pivotal in American television. These shows demonstrated to US audiences that what you watch on TV is produced, scripted, and usually not what it seems. The mentality that resulted from the quiz show scandals is one that bleeds into the realm of reality TV. Because of the history of real people on television facing challenges with unpredictable outcomes, audiences know that part of the content that is put on reality TV is real, and part of it is highly produced (Murray and Ouellette, 5). Ouellette and Murray note, “much of our engagement with such texts paradoxically hinges on our awareness that what we are watching is constructed and contains ‘fictional’ elements” (Murray and Ouellette, 5). There is a combination of ‘real’ and ‘fake’ with reality television. The ‘real’ aspect allows viewers to relate and understand the television subjects are real people. The ‘fake’ aspect often comes with the challenge that is put into place by the producers, but how the ‘real’ people deal with the obstacles is relatable, and erratic, and often uncertain.

What some call ‘the first reality TV show’ was *An American Family* which showcased the popularity among audiences and the affordability for producers of reality TV. Produced by Craig Gilbert and released in 1973, *An American Family* featured non-actors, unprofessional production, and low budget filming (Ibid, 3). The show was filmed in a cinéma vérité style where the camera almost acted as a fly on the wall (Ibid, 7). The 1980s and 1990s introduced more fly on the wall type filming, but these shows were “dependent on availability and portability” of the film technology (Ibid, 7). Shows that came out of this era of candidly shot television are *Cops* and *America’s Funniest Home Videos*, which required cameras to be

accessible at unpredictable moments providing raw and real entertainment (Ibid, 7). The production value of these shows is a reflection of the hand-held video camera technology that had developed in the 1980s which allowed for more widespread organic filming (Ibid, 7). Ouellette and Murray explain that reality television saw a shift to “gamedocs” with the turn of the century (Ibid, 57). Gamedocs developed from television vérité such as *An American Family*, docusoaps, such as *Cops*, and 1950s game shows (Ibid, 57). The gamedoc subgenre of reality television took audiences into situations where contestants are competing for an ultimate prize. Both the relationships between the contestants and the challenges presented by the competition itself provide dramatic subplots within the show (Ibid, 3-4). Viewers see more “private moments” caught on microphones attached to the characters’ clothing and hidden cameras placed around the characters’ settings (Ibid, 7). These shows are often filled in with confessionals where the characters have a chance to narrate the events based on their individual points of view. Again, the advancement of technology is what allowed for this wave of reality programming to come to fruition—real life can be more accurately filmed on accessible and unnoticeable camera equipment (Ibid, 7). Shows that have developed from unobtrusive cameras, attachable microphones, and confessionals are *Big Brother*, *The Real World*, *Survivor*, and *The Apprentice* (Ibid, 7).

Released in 2004, *The Apprentice* was yet another gamedoc reality television show introduced to primetime lineups in the early 2000’s. *The Apprentice* was heavily inspired by hit reality TV shows that had been released prior to its debut on NBC—*Survivor* being the most influential. In 2003 when Zucker was president of NBC Entertainment News and Cable Group, Mark Burnett, a British TV and film producer, came to him with an idea. At the time, Burnett had just experienced great success with his smash hit show, *Survivor*, airing on CBS’s Thursday

night lineup (Carter, 199). However, Burnett was looking for a new project. As Zucker explains, “His idea was to pitch *Survivor* in a different jungle, and that jungle was the boardroom” (McEvers, *NPR:Embedded*). NPR’s Kelly McEvers explained that *The Apprentice* came about because Burnett started to miss his home and young children in New York while filming *Survivor* in obscure and remote places (Ibid). Burnett wanted to create a job where he could be in New York. McEvers explains, “He started thinking about the concrete jungle that is Manhattan. He wondered ‘what if we made a survivor style show, where people compete to work for a billionaire’” (Ibid). McEvers notes that Burnett had recently seen Trump at a live event, and immediately attached him to this budding reality television idea (Ibid). Burnett subsequently called Trump, to float the idea by him. Trump responded, “come see me right now”, and according to Mark Burnett, he did immediately go over to Trump’s office to discuss the concept further in person (Ibid).

Burnett recounts that Trump loved the idea of people competing to work for him (Ibid). There was a sense of *needing* Trump’s expertise, experience, and business savvy to reach the ultimate success that was enormously appealing to Donald Trump. Indeed, Zucker and his production team instilled this perception of Trump as having unmatched business acumen into the bones of the show, and eventually into the viewers’ minds as well. Trump was the prize, and everyone competed for an opportunity to work under him. Burnett quotes Trump saying, “I love this. I want to do this” (McEvers, *NPR:Embedded*). Although Trump’s agent thought it was a terrible idea, Trump was quick to ignore the advice and signed onto the reality show anyway. Burnett told the story at The National Prayer Breakfast in 2017 saying:

Mr. Trump stood up from behind his desk. He walked around and said,  
‘correct me if I’m wrong but didn’t I just give you my word? Didn’t I say we

were making this? We are going to make it. We're going to make a deal right now, just you and me. And by the way, Norma! Get in touch with the agent and tell him 'you're fired.' (McEvers, *NPR:Embedded*)

Mark Burnett's next challenge was to find the right network. According to Bill Carter, there were three major networks interested in Mark Burnett's pitch; however, Burnett ended up going with NBC because Zucker was the only executive to really acknowledge the entertainment power of Donald Trump (Carter, 265). The other television corporations were not convinced that Trump had the ability to excel in entertainment (Carter, 265).

2003, the year of *The Apprentice's* initial development, was a difficult year for NBC. It was Zucker's first year at NBC entertainment, and his initial performance as president of the network had not been an auspicious debut (Carter, 153). Season 9 of *Friends* was set to air in 2003, and NBC announced it would be the hit sitcom's last season (Carter, 263). NBC's *Friends* and CBS's *Survivor* had been these two networks' biggest successes for generating ratings and revenues despite being aired in the same slot on Thursday nights (Carter, 263-264). NBC was frantically looking for a smash success to replace *Friends*, and compete with *Survivor*. In an attempt to find that next hit, Zucker greenlit three new comedies that year, *Emeril*, *Inside Schwartz*, and *Scrubs* (Carter, 155). *Emeril* and *Inside Schwartz* did poorly, and *Scrubs* had average ratings, but was certainly not considered a hit series (Carter, 155). Zucker couldn't afford to cede Thursday nights to CBS, but he was without another show to replace *Friends* in that slot. So, in a desperate effort to keep the network afloat, he offered each cast member of *Friends* \$1 million an episode to do a tenth season, one additional season beyond what the network initially expected (Carter, 220-221). The cast accepted, and *Friends* tenth season was set

to end on May 6, 2004. Zucker, more than ever now, felt the pressure to find the next big hit for the network in the post-*Friends* era. “We were in desperate need of a reality TV hit program...when he pitched it, I was immediately taken” says Zucker (Wickenden, “Jeff Zucker Talks to David Remnick About Putting Trump on TV”).

For the producer, Burnett, and the president of the entertainment network, Zucker, Trump seemed to be the perfect blend of businessman, celebrity, and television host. Zucker explained their choice by saying “the idea of a hit reality TV program from somebody like Mark Burnett, coupled with a PR and publicity machine like Donald Trump, I thought had the possible makings of a real success” (Wickenden, “Jeff Zucker Talks to David Remnick About Putting Trump on TV”).

Although the idea seemed promising, moving away from sitcoms was extremely risky for NBC. Lloyd Braun, once a re-occurring character on *Seinfeld* and now a media executive, explains that, “If there was ever a watershed moment in the business, this is it. This is NBC walking away from its greatest strength, from the thing that made its name for twenty years” (Carter 285). Fortunately, Burnett and Zucker created a small screen sensation. The first couple of seasons of *The Apprentice* were a huge success for the network (Wickenden, “Jeff Zucker Talks to David Remnick About Putting Trump on TV”). Season 1 aired in January of 2004 and ranked seventh on Nielsen’s average weekly television ratings (Nielsen). Additionally, the premiere season averaged twenty million viewers an episode with outstanding percentages of young adults, the most desired market for advertisers (Carter, 266). Despite enduring countless flops, *Emeril* and *Inside Schwartz* to name a few, NBC finally found the show to successfully replace *Friends* (Carter, 280-281). The ratings on NBC immediately rebounded after *The Apprentice* aired, and according to Kelly McEvers of NPR, “Zucker started introducing Trump

as ‘the man who saved NBC’” (McEvers, NPR: Embedded). His intuition about the real estate tycoon could not have been more correct. In some respects, the reality show starring Trump was a concession from NBC, as they followed the footsteps of CBS, PBS, and MTV who had already succeeded by airing reality TV. Zucker talked to *The Washington Post’s* Louis Romano At Harvard in 2016 about why he knew Trump would be television’s newest obsession:

Being from New York, I understood what a publicity magnate Donald Trump was. So my thinking was, if nothing else, it would generate a tremendous amount of publicity ... Because if you came out of New York, especially in that era, you knew that he was the front page of tabloids all the time. And that would be good for a new show that needed publicity. It turned out to be right. It turned out to be a huge phenomenon. (“A Conversation with CNN President Jeff Zucker,” youtube.com)

Carter described Zucker as was very proud when *The Apprentice* turned out to be a hit (Carter, 280). *The Washington Post* also reflects on this moment saying that Zucker came out on top “because while the other networks liked Burnett, no one had faith that Trump would be the draw. But Zucker knew he could be a true TV star” (Yahr, Emily. “Donald Trump's 'Apprentice' may never end: The odd story behind the reality show that will not be stopped”).

At least for the time being in 2004, NBC had successfully implemented a strategy to maintain the Thursday night television audience they had acquired over the last twenty years. Trump’s realty TV triumph made him a star across America, and his unmistakable tag line, “you’re fired,” became a pop-culture trend (Carter, 264). Zucker explains to David Remnick of *Politics and More: The New Yorker* that they didn’t have to mold him into television host, “he was an actor,” says Zucker (Wickenden, Dorothy. “Jeff Zucker Talks to David Remnick About

Putting Trump on TV”). He was the major appeal to the show; however, his hosting was not perfect. The producers had to edit out moments of profanity, racism, and sexism (McEvers, NPR: Embedded). Additionally, the producers did not just edit out Trump’s inappropriate moments, they also excluded certain thoughts and reactions from the contestants as well. For example, Heidi Bressler, a contestant on *The Apprentice* season 1, said she was “horrified” by Trump’s ostentatious all-gold penthouse. The extravagant home was not to her liking, but the producers told her not to be honest about her disgust on camera (McEvers, NPR: Embedded). According to NPR, the show’s producers told her, “you have to pretend like you love it, so the millions of people watching will love it too” (McEvers, NPR: Embedded). As mentioned earlier, thanks to the quiz show scandals of the 1950s, audiences knew to some degree that the content they were consuming was produced to manipulate the perception of situations and individuals. Yet, without question the consistent repetition of these highly edited and flattering caricatures of Donald Trump as the shrewd and successful CEO instilled in the American public an over-inflated opinion of this imperfect individual.

The image of Trump was meticulously crafted by NBC, and audiences were mildly aware of it. *The Real World* had been on MTV for twelve years, *Big Brother* had been on CBS for four years, and *Survivor* had been on CBS four years, so the American public was comfortable with the structure, and familiar with level of production involved in the ‘real’ situations (Murray and Ouellette, 179, 325, 134). Additionally, as the aforementioned AMG study shows, audiences did not seem to care about semi-scripted format. Kelly McEvers says “they cut out bad stuff, and played up the good stuff” (NPR: Embedded). Eventually, creating a fabricated Donald Trump, per se—a persona that wasn’t actually Donald Trump (Ibid). Trump’s impulsive behavior, dry

humor, and risky business deals were partially fake, but the uncertainty of who was going to win his mentorship, guidance and connections had viewers committed from the beginning.

Rob LaPlant was the casting director for the first season of *The Apprentice*. He gathered contestants through ads on television and in newspapers. LaPlant looks back on that day in *Embedded* saying:

The first thing that I noticed that morning, which blew my mind, was the line. Wrapped around Trump Tower on fifth avenue and then all the way down 56<sup>th</sup> street, for blocks there were people in line to try out for a show that no one had ever even known or heard of to this point. And that was my first introduction to the fact that this guy, Donald Trump, was something more than just a celebrity and businessman. He is this hero. I've cast reality shows and TV shows for years and most of the motivation for people wanting to be on them, even if it's a dating show, even if whatever it is... they want to be on TV, they want to get the fame. Rarely had I ever seen people so legitimately just wanting to meet Donald, be like Donald, it was like a cult. (McEvers, NPR: Embedded)

According to *The Apprentice*, 215,000 people auditioned for the broadcast, thirteen week-long, job interview with Donald Trump ("The Apprentice: Meet The Billionaire"). The turnout for tryouts was incredibly encouraging to the network. McEvers says it made them think it was going to be huge hit (NPR: Embedded). If the contestants wanted to be him, why wouldn't a huge portion of American watchers want to be him too? It was the first sure fire sign that Trump was an icon across America. It appealed to people who like drama, reality TV, and "people who thought they were learning business lessons" says Zucker to David Remnick of *Politics and*



*More: The New Yorker* (Wickenden, “Jeff Zucker Talks to David Remnick About Putting Trump on TV”).

Bill Pruitt, an executive producer on *The Apprentice* candidly explains that it wasn't always easy to promote Trump's businesses, because in actuality, a lot of his ventures were failing (McEvers, NPR: Embedded). For instance, he reflects on the Taj Mahal Resort and Casino in Atlantic City by saying that “the carpets were already rotting and it stank to high heavens... the jet you know, questionable whether it would fly that week. The helicopter was up for sale. We didn't know if we were going to have it the next week” (Ibid). Pruitt says “everything we said about him was truthful. It's what we didn't say about him... it was a convenient vacation of the truth” (Ibid). The billionaire they constructed of Trump on *The Apprentice* was not the real billionaire. They made him seem invincible to millions of viewers at home, which could ultimately be concerning due to the fact that Trump on television was only an edited and highly produced version of himself. Pruitt admitted to saying that during his time on *The Apprentice* he was “a good con artist,” suggesting that the viewers were being fooled by an edited version of Donald Trump's life, businesses, and behavior (Ibid). Ultimately, they perfected and reinforced the pop-culture notion that Donald Trump is the epitome of fame, success, and fortune. Pruitt goes on to say to McEvers:

We told a story, we went with beginnings and middles and ends and villains and protagonists and we went about the business of putting music and picture and sound together the things we thought we wanted to get up in the morning and do with our lives and now all of a sudden were here. A cultural icon emerged because we weren't necessarily truthful about our portrayal (NPR: Embedded).

McEvers replied, “Now in 2017 America is facing a president who has an unconventional past littered with reality television, real estate, scandal, and publicity rather than public service, government leadership, international affairs, or even public policy” (NPR:Embedded). When David Remnick asked Zucker if he ever thought of Trump in a political setting, Zucker responded “not at all. Not at all. Never” (Wickenden, “Jeff Zucker Talks to David Remnick About Putting Trump on TV”). So as Zucker moved into the political sphere of television and away from entertainment in 2013, he probably never imagined that he would be dealing with Trump as the star of his programming again.

*A HISTORY OF JEFF ZUCKER:*

*FROM NBC TO CNN*

“The one thing you can say about Donald Trump, is that he’s made American journalism great again,” says Zucker in an interview at Oxford University (“Jeff Zucker | Full Q&A | Oxford Union, youtube.com). Many media executives, such as the CEO of The New York Times, Mark Thompson, doubted the future of print journalism in the twenty-first century as digital media rose in presence and popularity. Thompson was quoted on his predictions of print journalism saying, “I believe at least 10 years is what we can see in the U.S. for our print products” (Eil, “New York Times CEO: Print journalism has maybe another 10 years”). However, the 2016 election between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump proved that broadcast and digital journalism have never been more essential in order to provide honest and truthful information to the American voters. The latest election positioned a tension between informative news reporting and entertainment in the realm of cable news. “Why do we need to be boring?” questions Zucker at an interview at Oxford (“Jeff Zucker | Full Q&A | Oxford Union, youtube.com). With CNN

being a for-profit cable news network, some may question where the responsibilities of this news network lies—the education of American’s public or ratings.

Long before becoming President of CNN Worldwide in 2013, Zucker was born April 6, 1965 in southern Florida, not far from Miami. Growing up his mother taught English at his high school, and his father was a cardiologist (“Jeffrey Zucker and Caryn Nathanson.” *The New York Times*). He went to Harvard University, earning an undergraduate diploma emblazoned with cum laude (“Jeffrey Zucker and Caryn Nathanson.” *The New York Times*). At age 25 Zucker was rejected from Harvard Law School, and took a position as a researcher at NBC for the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games instead (Weisman, “Jeff Zucker May Actually Be Crazy Enough To Save CNN”). Jane Pauley, then a co-anchor on *The Today Show* noted Zucker’s “enthusiasm and writing,” explains the *Business Insider* (Ibid). Pauley helped Zucker transition from researcher to full-time field producer for *The Today Show* (Ibid). Zucker advanced quickly and was named executive producer by age 26 in 1992 (Ibid). *The New York Times* describes Zucker’s fast ascent to executive producer as “almost unheard-of” for his young age and minimal experience at the network. The president of NBC News in 1992, Michael Gartner, recalled Zucker’s work on *The Today Show* as incredibly influential. Gartner says in an interview with *Fortune Magazine* in 2007, "he changed the entire atmosphere almost instantly. *The Today Show* wasn't doing well. Everyone was sour and dour. Jeff had this enthusiasm and ability to make snap decisions that made people feel, 'We can do this. We can be the best'" (Sellers, “Life Imitates TV”). Zucker completely revamped *The Today Show*, leading the morning program’s sixteen years of successful ratings. According to *Fortune Magazine*, Zucker’s strategy to revive *The Today Show* consisted of six major changes:

1. He didn’t allow commercials until after the first 22 minutes of the show

2. Added more “hard-news coverage”
3. He featured Presidential candidates on the show for interviews lasting up to an hour long
4. He introduced “viewer call-ins”
5. Introduced the summer concert series at Rockefeller Plaza
6. Focused on promoting show’s new anchor Katie Couric as “TV’s Freshest star” (Weisman, “Jeff Zucker May Actually Be Crazy Enough To Save CNN”).

The results were phenomenal, and led the show to what *The Business Insider* called “a 16-year ratings winning streak” (Weisman, “Jeff Zucker May Actually Be Crazy Enough To Save CNN”). Looking back at all of his accomplishments, Zucker notes his time at *The Today Show* as one of the highlights of his career (Carter, “NBC Chief Relishes His Long Tenure”). Zucker’s work on *The Today show* was the first time he showcased his skills as an innovator within the media and entertainment industry. He produces programming that is fresh, exciting, and engaging for audiences, which eventually translated to his work at CNN as well.

In 2000, at age 35, Zucker graduated from executive producer of *The Today Show* to the president of NBC Entertainment. Just three years later in 2003, Zucker earned the title of President of NBC Entertainment News and Cable Group, followed by President of NBC Universal Television Group, and finally in 2007 Zucker was named President and CEO of NBC Universal (Sherman, "Jeff Zucker Has Endured Cancer, Hollywood, and Being TV's Wunderkind. So Why Not Take on CNN?"). Remarkably, he advanced from entry-level researcher to President and CEO of NBC Universal, reaching NBC’s apex in just twenty-one years. *New York Magazine* states, “It was the fastest ascent up the executive ranks in television history” (Sherman, "Jeff Zucker Has Endured Cancer, Hollywood, and Being TV's Wunderkind. So Why Not Take on CNN?"). Among his most notable work at the network was completely

revamping *The Today Show*, negotiating the cast of *Friends* to do a tenth season, developing *Fear Factor*, and importantly, green lighting *The Apprentice* (Ibid).

Throughout Zucker's time at NBC, he made many colossal changes to the structure of the shows he worked on, and the types of shows he introduced to NBC Entertainment. For example, Zucker is noted for "supersizing" programs at NBC Entertainment, most notably *Friends*. Although the show had traditionally only run thirty minutes, Zucker proposed at the turn of the century that *Friends* should run for forty minutes in order to keep viewers locked into watched NBC for ten more minutes and increase advertisement profits ("Jeff Zucker | Full Q&A | Oxford Union, youtube.com). Zucker notes that initially the producers and cast of *Friends* were doubtful, but the scheme for increasing ratings worked, and NBC's most profitable show was only made more profitable after Zucker's contribution.

Not long after his rise to the top, Zucker faced a change in network ownership, and the new board did not consider him essential to the corporation anymore. General Electric had formerly been the parent company owning NBC; however, in 2010 Comcast acquired 51% of NBC, still leaving GE with some ownership, but much less (Carter, "Stepping Down, NBC Chief Relishes His Long Tenure"). Comcast had made their expectations clear from even their initial interest of acquiring NBC—Steve Burke, Chief Operating Officer of Comcast, wanted to bring in a new chief executive and start fresh after the deal was finalized (Carter, "Stepping Down, NBC Chief Relishes His Long Tenure"). Zucker described this decision by Burke as "incredibly emotional" and "gut-wrenching in the sense that you have spent your whole life here at NBC" (Ibid). But nonetheless, Zucker's relationship was strong with former owner GE's chairman Jeffrey Immelt, and the company was extremely proud of the work Zucker had done at NBC (Ibid). Immelt was quoted saying that he'd "hire Zucker again" (Ibid). Also, Brian L. Roberts,

the chairman of Comcast said Zucker directed the network to great success in his years at NBC. Roberts said Zucker led and represented NBC with “integrity and purpose” (Ibid). However, NBC’s future looked different under Comcast’s ownership. Zucker explains, “Look, I knew from the day this was announced that this was a possibility” (Ibid). Zucker furthers, “I wasn’t going to shut the door on anything. But in the last nine months it became increasingly clear that they did want to put their own team in place — and I didn’t want to end up being a guest in my own house” (Ibid). Comcast seems to have sincerely wanted to go in a different direction, and judging from the public statements the parting was civil, organized, respectful, but very disheartening for Zucker.

Zucker’s next career move was pairing up with Katie Couric, whom he knew well from *The Today Show*. Zucker was an ardent proponent of her as the new face of *The Today Show*, and he was hopeful for Katie’s spinoff daytime talk show (Weisman, “Jeff Zucker May Actually Be Crazy Enough To Save CNN”). Zucker served as the executive producer for Disney-ABC Domestic Television’s show *Katie* for a year and a half before leaving, with Couric’s approval, to be president of CNN (Weisman, “Jeff Zucker May Actually Be Crazy Enough To Save CNN”). As Zucker’s time at both NBC and ABC came to an end, his career at CNN was just beginning.

By the time Zucker came to CNN, it was #2 rated cable news network on television and had been in news broadcasting for over 33 years (Knox, “2013 Ratings: CNN Tops MSNBC in Total Day, But Hits 20-Year Low in Primetime” and Whittemore, 11). The Cable News Network was started by Ted Turner in 1980 in Atlanta, Georgia (Whittemore, 11). Turner teamed up with Reese Schonfeld, and independent television producer of a news station in New York, and they aimed to launch the Cable New Network on June 1, 1980 (Whittemore, 10-11). The concept

behind the 24-hour cable news network was to create the first 24-hour news television network, covering as much world news, sports, finance, and feature stories as possible, and give the audience a summary of the world's events on a news network (Ibid, 11-12). The main news show would air from 8-10 pm to compete with the other primetime networks and then transition into sports after the primetime slot ended (Ibid, 12). Schonfeld wanted to broadcast the news with an open newsroom behind the anchor in order to convey a sense of authenticity and urgency (Ibid, 13). In order to get the network ready in time for Turner's strict June 1, 1980 airdate, the initial developers had to scramble to get the production set built, the employees hired, and the show lineups finalized (Ibid, 14). Jim Kitchell, one of the original developers of the Cable News Network explains:

It was a challenge, to do something that nobody had ever done before, and I was intrigued by it... Every one of us said, 'We're not gonna be ready. Let's try to delay it.' And the answer from Ted was, 'No, we're gonna start on the first of June whether we're ready or not.' That was an incredible pressure, forcing us to work eighteen or twenty hours a day, but it was fun (Ibid, 14).

Additionally, Schonfeld decided the type of news CNN should produce should be national news that affects the local sphere—so viewers get a sense of world happenings but also have a way to relate it to their local spheres (Ibid, 18). Also, one of the most important pillars CNN built its network on was “reciprocal arrangement,”—meaning the network offered free airtime to local news stations across the country, if CNN could have access to their research on the current news (Ibid, 18). This agreement benefited both parties, and aided CNN in gathering information about the entire country. On June 1, 1980, David Walker and Lois Hart hosted the CNN's premiere

newscast, and by mid-1980 CNN was attracting more than 4 million viewers with projections to reach 8 million by 1981 (Ibid, 20).

Although the 1980s provided a solid start for the network, the Persian Gulf War proved to be the inflection point where CNN really gripped America's attention. CNN was finally able to break into a top three spot among American cable networks. CNN became the most watched news network at the time due to their access to live coverage of inside Iraq during the Coalition Bombing campaign (Coughlin, "The Gulf War and It's Consequences"). Peter Arnett, John Holliman, and Bernard Shaw were the CNN reporters at the time covering the live news updates, and it proved to be one of the most dramatic and influential moments in news history (Ibid). CNN from then on was renown for their efforts throughout the Gulf War and became a top cable news network that had garnered the trust of Americans across the nation. Also, CNN was also the first network to announce the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (Mann, "Zakaria Brings Brains to 'Global Public Square'"). Carol Lin was the anchor who announced the airplane attacks on the World Trade Center (Mann, "Zakaria Brings Brains to 'Global Public Square'").

By twelve years later in 2013, CNN had suffered severe erosion in ratings, hitting their lowest viewership in twenty years. According to *New York Magazine*, Jim Walton, the then current president of CNN Worldwide, "resigned under pressure" (Sherman, "Jeff Zucker Has Endured Cancer, Hollywood, and Being TV's Wunderkind. So Why Not Take on CNN?"). The network hadn't been performing very well in recent years--from the second quarter in 2011 to the second quarter of 2012, CNN saw a 35% decrease in total viewers and 41% decrease in target demographic (ages 25-54) viewers (Hinckley and Salamone, "CNN ratings slip to lowest mark since 1991").



What led to the low ratings is unclear, but David Hinckley of *The Daily News* and Gabriel Sherman of *New York Magazine* both suggest that CNN fell brandless in the face of right-leaning Fox News Channel and left-leaning MSNBC (Ibid). Historically, CNN was known for giving Americans a snapshot of the world, with little political bias. This strategy seemed to fall short with Fox News Channel, founded in 1996 and MSNBC founded in 1996, both strongly taking political sides and leaving CNN in neutral ground (Ibid). When Zucker came to CNN, he deployed his new strategies to increase viewership almost immediately, yet CNN would continue to slowly lose ground in ratings until 2015 when they began to regain traction in the year leading up to the 2016 presidential election.

In 2013 Zucker came into CNN motivated and prepared to make colossal changes. He wanted to redeem himself in the entertainment industry after his departure from NBC. *New York Magazine* reports that on his first day, he was “in CNN’s Washington control room barking orders during coverage of Obama’s second inauguration” (Sherman, "Jeff Zucker Has Endured Cancer, Hollywood, and Being TV's Wunderkind. So Why Not Take on CNN,"). Zucker had a strong background in entertainment, and he knew how to drive a business, and shape a network to produce the profitable results. Bill Carter of *Desperate Networks* writes, “not only did Zucker understand the mechanics of journalism, he also understood the game of journalism, and especially the pack mentality of most reporters. Stories could be shaped for mass consumption” (156). Constructing CNN’s network for large appeal is exactly what Zucker did—he rebuilt CNN on his three-pillar strategy (“A Conversation with CNN President Jeff Zucker,” [youtube.com](http://youtube.com)). The three elements of reconstructing the network consisted of “smothering” the most popular story of the moment, implementing more original programming, and directing certain stories to the digital platform only—all methods to encourage the viewers to tune into

CNN more, and longer (“A Conversation with CNN President Jeff Zucker,” youtube.com). According to Zucker, CNN tries to cover as much news as possible on their digital space—touching on every story possible, both American and international (“Jeff Zucker | Full Q&A | Oxford Union, youtube.com). Maximizing the amount of news was the new priority of CNN.com and their other digital platforms, and the old priority of CNN cable news channel (Ibid). CNN television now realizes that viewers have more access to news now than ever in history with Internet on mobile devices, which is why CNN television only airs the top 2-4 breaking news stories per day (Ibid). The broader consequences of this shift towards spectacle lie within the new expectations of broadcast journalism itself, and the information that consumers are receiving from the cable news networks. Because CNN is an example of a network that successfully implemented entertainment within their political coverage through limiting other pertinent national stories and only stressing the most popular content, not only will CNN continue to follow this strategy but other networks as well. Cable news is focused on the pursuit of popular content rather than important content. Broadcast news can no longer be seen as an all-encompassing source to receive national daily news.

According to *The New York Times*, a few weeks into his Presidency at CNN Zucker said that the role was far more encompassing than he expected (Steel, “How Jeff Zucker Is Seeking to Reshape CNN”). Steel writes that, “The scope, and the challenges, of CNN’s round-the-clock, live global news operation were vast and daunting” (Steel, “How Jeff Zucker Is Seeking to Reshape CNN”). One of the more surface level issues Zucker tried to tackle was the network’s brand—implementing small details into the network that encourage a loyal following and familiar environment. For example, Zucker insisted on reinstating the infamous “this is CNN” tagline (Sherman, "Jeff Zucker Has Endured Cancer, Hollywood, and Being TV's Wunderkind.

So Why Not Take on CNN?"). Zucker said, "I grew up watching CNN, and my memory of CNN is James Earl Jones saying, 'This is CNN'" (Sherman, "Jeff Zucker Has Endured Cancer, Hollywood, and Being TV's Wunderkind. So Why Not Take on CNN?"). He wanted to instill nostalgia in the network in an effort to re-engage past viewers. In addition, Zucker made a point to be heavily involved in the day-to-day operations of the network. For instance, *New York Magazine* reports that Zucker attended the daily 9 a.m. editorial meetings, discussing the stories that would be broadcast on the network that day (Steel, "How Jeff Zucker Is Seeking to Reshape CNN"). Apparently, this is a routine former CNN chief Jim Walton never participated in (Ibid). Additionally, *The New York Times* reports that Zucker is known for micromanaging small details of the daily programming (Ibid). Steel writes, "he sent missives from his BlackBerry at all hours about everything, be it the length of story segments or the graphics that appear on screen" (Ibid). Moreover, Zucker has incorporated five more hours of live news coverage a day on CNN, mostly found in the early hours of the morning (Ibid). Lastly, Jeffrey Toobin, a legal analyst at CNN who also happened to work at the *Crimson* with Zucker back at Harvard Undergrad explained how Zucker truly brought vitality back to the network (Sherman, "Jeff Zucker Has Endured Cancer, Hollywood, and Being TV's Wunderkind. So Why Not Take on CNN?"). He says, "He gave the place a jolt of energy it had never received during my tenure" (Ibid). Anderson Cooper also had encouraging words saying Zucker was "the first CNN president to actually watch CNN" (Sherman, "Jeff Zucker Has Endured Cancer, Hollywood, and Being TV's Wunderkind. So Why Not Take on CNN?").

Although Zucker did bring life back to the fading network, CNN had still not seen the worst of its decline. CNN Worldwide finished with its worst ratings in the early 2010s, 2013 being the network's ultimate low point, and also Zucker's first year as president (Knox, "2013

Ratings: CNN Tops MSNBC in Total Day, But Hits 20-Year Low in Primetime”). Now, 2013 was the year after the 2012 presidential election between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney and primetime news ratings during a presidential race are hard to match in the following year. Cable news networks typically have more viewers throughout election years due to broadcast events such as the national conventions, debates, and election night (Gold and Weprin, “Cable news’ election-Year haul could reach \$2.5 billion”). If we look closer, the overall total viewer ratings for the network were about the same as 2012, and the target demographic for television news programs, age 25-54, was down 2%, which does not seem too detrimental (Knox, “2013 Ratings: CNN Tops MSNBC in Total Day, But Hits 20-Year Low in Primetime”). However, if we narrow in on the primetime ratings, the real issue becomes clear. For 2013, CNN’s primetime total viewer ratings were down 16%, and in the target demographic (ages 25-54) the ratings were down almost 18% compared to their performance in 2012 (Knox, “2013 Ratings: CNN Tops MSNBC in Total Day, But Hits 20-Year Low in Primetime”). These primetime ratings were the

lowest numbers CNN had received since 1991, pre Persian Gulf-War coverage (Steel, “How Zucker is Seeking to Reshape CNN”). Figure 4 outlines the average proportions of viewers for the top three primetime cable news channels, Fox News Channel, MSNBC, and CNN, from 1997 to 2014. Notably, there is a decline in cable news viewers across all three major news networks from 2008-2014.

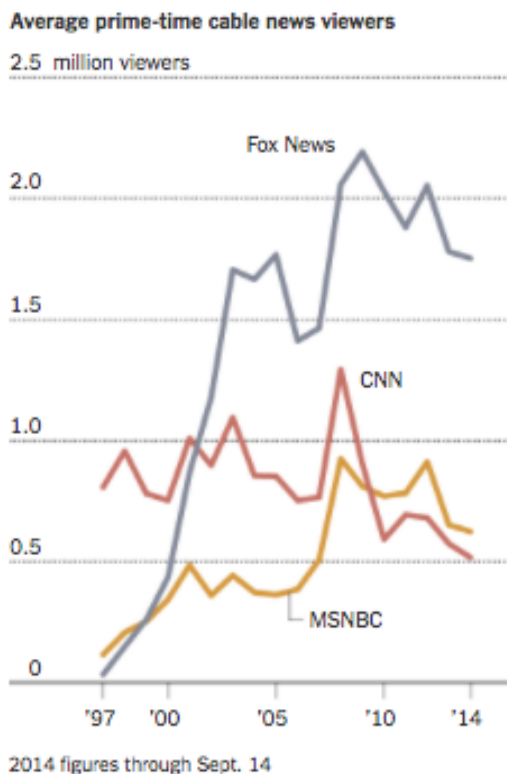


Figure 4: Taken from Emily Steel's article from the *New York Times* titled "How Zucker Is Seeking To Reshape CNN," which gathered its ratings information from Nielsen.

However, with the announcement of the Presidential candidates in 2015 and the presidential election in 2016, CNN rallied in ratings with record-breaking numbers. CNN finished out the year vaulting up 14 spots in the cable network ratings to #8. Impressively, 2016 was the network's most-watched year ever among total viewers ("2016 IS CNN'S MOST-WATCHED YEAR EVER." *CNN*). *TV Newser* sums up CNN's sky-high ratings in 2016 by saying:

CNN finished the year up +76 percent in total prime time viewers and up +8 percent in the ad-friendly 25-54 demographic vs. 2015. The network also grew +54 percent in total viewers and was up +56 percent in the news demographic. (Katz, "2016 Ratings: CNN Has Most-Watched Year Ever")

The network notes that they also tallied their second highest viewership ratings during their primetime segments, including both total viewers and in the target demographic ages 24-54 ("2016 IS CNN'S MOST-WATCHED YEAR EVER." *CNN*). The press release includes that "CNN will close out 2016 ranking #8 in ALL of cable in M-F prime time among total viewers, its highest ranking since 1995 (last year CNN ranked #24)" (Ibid). CNN's years since their significant decline in 2013 have shown slow improvement in viewership, but a 16 spot jump in cable primetime rankings is remarkable.

Arriving at CNN's lowest point in over twenty years was a pivotal moment for the network, as they have not even come close to those dreadful ratings since 2013. CNN made a

gradual rise back up in ratings in 2015, and in 2016 CNN shattered their own primetime and daytime cable news ratings records (Ibid). 2016's presidential election presented an optimal time for a cable news network to make waves in their industry. Live coverage of debates, rallies, conventions, appearances, press releases, and of course, election night, allows a network to maximize its viewers—if the content is presented in an appealing manner (Ibid). Zucker said his job at CNN is to make sure the news is delivered to the American people with an unbiased approach that wholly informs the voters so that they can make the most informed decision possible (“A Conversation with CNN President Jeff Zucker,” youtube.com). Zucker has said he values showing opposing perspectives on the network-- he is a media executive that is not trying to side with a political bias but rather emphasize the objective (“Jeff Zucker | Full Q&A | Oxford Union, youtube.com).

Overall, although Zucker structured the network to not favor any specific candidate or political party throughout the election, he did create content with the intent of attracting viewers for longer in order to increase CNN's ratings (“A Conversation with CNN President Jeff Zucker,” youtube.com). This strategy to attract viewers entailed broadcasting what was popular-- Trump's appearances, rallies, speeches, and the workings of his inner circle (*The New Yorker: Politics and More*). David Remnick of *The New Yorker* explains that there is great irony in the fact that “CNN's Jeff Zucker helped to make Donald Trump” (Wickenden, “Jeff Zucker Talks to David Remnick About Putting Trump on TV”). Zucker's ability to see potential in not only Trump but also a struggling network has turned out to be one of his greatest triumphs—a testimony to his unique combination of attributes that has made him a key figure in the American television industry for over thirty years.

Trump's undeniable entertainment value is characterized by key personality traits that are largely relatable and personable. In the next chapter, the thesis will attempt to deconstruct the Donald Trump television persona, and attach logic to his effective approach to reality TV and the 2016 presidential election.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *THE TRUMP TELEVISION PERSONALITY: WHAT STAYED CONSISTENT FROM REALITY TV TO PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION*

The following case study will analyze NBC's season 1 episode 1 of *The Apprentice* and the first Presidential Debate of 2016. Both television appearances demonstrate potential aspects of the Trump's magnetic television personality that attracted millions of viewers— *The Apprentice* averaged twenty million viewers an episode and the first Presidential Debate tallied 84 million viewers. Trump's persuasive and blunt persona on *The Apprentice* garnered a loyal following, which served as a precursor for his successful Presidential campaign a decade later. Because Donald Trump consistently displayed a self-obsessive, misogynistic, and casually spoken television persona, he created a unique and recognizable personality that grabbed the attention of American audiences. After seeing the success of the Trump's television presence at *The Apprentice*, Jeff Zucker would once again harness Trump's impossible-to-ignore personality in 2016 to help him revive his faltering CNN network during the run up to the election.

#### THE APPRENTICE CASE STUDY SEASON 1 EPISODE 1: "MEET THE BILLIONAIRE"

Season 1 episode 1 of NBC's *The Apprentice* opens with panoramic shots from a helicopter soaring over New York City's inimitable skyline, passing over skyscrapers, the stock exchange, luxurious vacation properties, the Statue of Liberty, and finally landing on the helipad of the Trump Tower ("The Apprentice: Meet The Billionaire"). The expansive shots of Manhattan are accompanied by a voiceover from Trump, explaining that New York is "the real jungle," and cautioning the audience of the city's demanding atmosphere stating "if you're not



careful, it'll chew you up and spit you out" (Ibid). The theme song for the opening credits is "For The Love of Money" by The O'Jays featuring chorus lyrics of "Money, money, money, money, money" (Ibid). The song embodies Trump's brand—shrewd and unabashedly mercenary. *The Apprentice* season 1 featured sixteen candidates who were competing for a position as the president of one of Donald Trump's businesses for one year, with a "huge salary," says Trump (Ibid). The contestants came from across America with different educational levels, ranging from a high school diploma, undergraduate degrees, MBAs, PHDs, and even MDs. All sixteen contestants live in the Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, New York. The living spaces for the participants are luxurious and sprawling, once again emphasizing the Trump brand and touting an opulent lifestyle. The contestants are immediately divided into groups based on gender, men and women, with each team receiving a suite in the tower. Each week the two teams compete against one another in the given business task. Both teams are instructed to nominate a project manager to strategize and lead the team throughout the challenge. The project manager is ultimately responsible for the overall success or failure of the team. The winning team is allowed to return to their suite after the business task challenge. Meanwhile, the losing team, chosen by Trump, is summoned to the boardroom where one contestant, sometimes two, is fired at the end of each episode. "It's either the suite or the street," Trump proclaims (Ibid).

The first season of *The Apprentice* featured an array of personalities: real estate agents, mortgage brokers, stockbrokers, and even restaurant owners. This diverse group with varying educations and professional backgrounds was selected in part to convey to the viewers that anyone can achieve success if he or she is working for Trump. Although the contestants represented varying professions, pedigrees, and geographic locations, they all clearly expressed their desire for Trump's approval from the beginning of the first episode. For example, Tammy

Lee, a stockbroker from Seattle, Washington explained when she walked through the doors of the Trump Tower, “I didn’t feel the need to show any communication whatsoever with people I don’t ever really know. The only person I really need to be concerned with liking me, ostracizing me, is Donald Trump” (Ibid).

The conclusion of the first boardroom scene features Trump emphasizing how fortunate the contestants are to be competing on his show. Trump explains that “this is not a game, this is a 13 week interview,” stressing the fact that even though they are being filmed for entertainment, they have a rare opportunity to advance their careers, and potentially be more like Trump at the end of the competition (Ibid). Also, this speech from Trump is an effort from the producers to convey that this show is not scripted (even though it partially was), and is not for amateurs, but only for professionals. *The Apprentice* was roughly targeted towards college-educated, eighteen to forty-nine-year-olds. Viewers were given the impression that by watching *The Apprentice* they were learning valuable business lessons and insights into how the Trump empire was created (Hilmes, 273). Thus, it was important to the producers that this show not seem artificial to the viewers. Trump says, “Out of 215,000 job applicants, you’re the sixteen I chose to go through thirteen weeks of hell to determine who’s going to work for me in the end” (Ibid).

The first common thread throughout the show that contributes to the Trump television persona is his indestructible self-confidence and his immeasurable hubris. He does this by not acknowledging his downfalls and emphasizing his successes. For example, when Trump calls the men’s team into the boardroom for critique and elimination at the end of the episode, he asks the men to each say who they believe is the “worst leader” (Ibid). The men are encouraged to highlight each other’s weaknesses and prove to Trump who deserves to stay. Ultimately, Trump eliminates David for admitting he is not particularly savvy with sales. David was asked the

question by Trump, “if you were the team leader do you think the result would’ve been different,” David responded, “not in this case because sales is not my forte” (Ibid). Moments later when Trump is giving his reason for why David should be eliminated he says, “I don’t see that you stepped up at all. You even admitted that you wouldn’t be a good leader” (Ibid). Trump ostracized David for acknowledging his weakness in the challenge. Therefore, he is suggesting that admitting shortcomings is a downfall and an impediment to achieving success.

Also, in the introduction of *The Apprentice*, Trump talks about various issues and setbacks he had faced in his business ventures. Trump explains that he had overcome his financial troubles from thirteen years ago when he was billions of dollars in debt. The real estate tycoon says, “I fought back, and I won, big league. I used my brain. I used my negotiating skills, and I worked it all out. Now my company is bigger than it ever was” (Ibid). Unfortunately, this was an over-exaggeration. According to Kelly McEvers of NPR, Trump’s businesses were still on shaky grounds financially; he had filed for bankruptcy just a few months before he began filming *The Apprentice*. In fact, Donald Trump had filed for four corporate bankruptcies, 1991 (Trump’s Taj Majal), 1992 (two of his Atlantic City casinos), 1992 (The Plaza Hotel) (Lee, “Fact Check: Has Trump declared bankruptcy four or six times?” and O’Conner, “Fourth Time’s a Charm: How Donald Trump Made Bankruptcies Work For Him”). Trump would also file for bankruptcy two more times, 2004 and 2009, before running for President (McEvers, NPR: Embedded and Lee, “Fact Check: Has Trump declared bankruptcy four or six times?”). However, the show gave the impression that his businesses were thriving, even featuring a shot of his Atlanta City casino in *The Apprentice*’s introduction. To summarize, in the first episode of *The Apprentice*, Trump finesses the truth regarding his shortcomings and encourages others to not mention their weaknesses during business interactions with others. Furthermore, Trump

continually highlights his accomplishments and denies and hides his failures. For instance, he mentions how he is “the master,” how he is the “largest real estate developer in New York,” how he owns “model agencies, the Miss Universe Pageant, jet liners, golf courses, casinos, and private resorts,” all in the first minute of the show (“The Apprentice: Meet The Billionaire”). Trump tries to attract viewers by listing off his accomplishments and minimizing his mistakes. Moreover, Trump rewards the female team after their victory over the men in the first challenge by giving them a private tour of his Manhattan penthouse. Trump greets the women by saying, “So look, if you’re really successful, you’ll all live just like this” (Ibid). Again, Trump underscores his prosperity in front of the camera. In this scene, he is highlighting how his business acumen not only makes his professional life lucrative, but it also affords him a lavish personal lifestyle. Additionally, the female contestants inflate the topic of Trump’s success by commenting in awe on his luxurious apartment. Tammy Lee says, “this is rich. Like really rich,” while Kristi Frank says, “he gave us some advice, work hard and have fun. And I really truly believe that’s how he lives his life” (Ibid). Contestants continually idolize him and marvel at the Trump Empire, further reinforcing the idea that it is possible to attain unprecedented success simply by being associated with Donald Trump. Trump’s brand is built on making ordinary American’s believe they can emulate him. This message from Trump that anyone can be like him is disseminated through his behavior on *The Apprentice* and later in his political career. Lastly, when the contestants first enter their sprawling living quarters, suites in the Trump Tower, they are greeted with caviar and champagne and a note that says “this is a taste of the life you could lead” (Ibid). The note suggests that Trump’s life is extravagant and leisurely. Again, by bringing attention to money and success, the viewers are shielded from Trump’s obstacles, missteps, and consequences of his actions. Lastly, Trump’s power is largely emphasized by the camera work in

the first episode *The Apprentice*. The camera moves and frames Trump in a way that makes him seem large, in control, and intimidating. For example, many scenes feature up-angles of Trump such as the scene where he is addressing the contestants from the stock exchange podium, when he is walking into his apartment to greet the winning female team, and during the introduction when he is sitting in the back of limo, introducing his corporation and reflecting on his accomplishments. All of these moments in the show reinforce the idea in the viewers' minds that he is important, knowledgeable, and superior to the contestants. Overall, because Trump underestimates and avoids the truth about his financial troubles, while also accentuating his importance, wealth, and achievements, *The Apprentice*, and Trump himself, portray Trump as an unparalleled man in his business and personal lives.

In addition to an ingrained sense of hierarchy in *The Apprentice* season 1 episode 1 through Trump, the viewer also notes a strong misogynistic theme throughout the episode. There are an equal number of men and women competing for employment at Trump Enterprises; however, the women appear to be discriminated against for their gender far more than the men (Ibid). Trump makes a clear effort throughout the show to highlight women's potential inadequacies in the workplace rather than their skills, and frame successful professional women as masculine. For example, in the opening boardroom scene Trump introduces one of his employees and fellow judge on *The Apprentice*, Carolyn Kepcher, Chief Operating Officer for many of the Trump Golf Properties (Ibid). Trump concludes his introduction of Kepcher by saying, "Carolyn is a killer. There are many men buried in her wake" (Ibid). Here, Trump is alluding to the idea that women who are successful in the workplace express masculine and aggressive qualities—adopting male traits in order to be taken seriously. Another female stereotype he could be referencing is the 'man-eater' label—another type of aggressive woman

who actively uses men in order to achieve a personal gain, either sexually, professionally or otherwise. In either case, Trump is legitimizing Kepcher's extreme success as a woman in the workplace. He feels the need to introduce her attached to a stereotype in order to legitimize her achievements in Trump's corporation. In addition, Trump challenges the female contestants' abilities when he divides the contestants into two teams, men against women. The real estate tycoon announces he will be pitting the sexes against each other by saying, "women have a tougher time in the workplace, or so they say. Let's find out" (Ibid). Before the teams even begin the challenge, Trump frames being a woman as having a competitive disadvantage (Ibid). He repeatedly conveys a sexist attitude to the contestants and the audience by intimating that women don't perform as well as men in a high-stakes corporate setting. Consequently, the judges and contestants, both men and women, treat females as not only unequal business partners, but also sex objects throughout the episode. After the teams are announced, Bowie, an account executive, states, "the girls are smarter than I guess what some of the other guys are thinking... but if you pull one over on me I'm going to ten times you. I'm going to do you by ten times. My mind works like that, and I'll be able to pull something off a lot better than they will" (Ibid). Bowie is suggesting that a woman cannot fool him, and he would be able to dominate any female contestants and outdo their business strategy. Because the contestants also contribute to the mentality that women are at a disadvantage in a business environment, they affirm Trump's views and contribute to the misogynistic tone throughout the episode.

A second example of the contestants amplifying Trump's misogynistic message occurs when they begin their first challenge. The two teams, men against women, are instructed to sell lemonade on the streets of New York, and ultimately make as much money as possible by the end of the day. Immediately the men focus on location, while the women seem to solely fight

with each other for the first hour. Women on the team describe their process devising a plan as “dramatic,” and refer to their project leader as “emotional,” and “totally irrational” (Ibid). One of the ladies advises another to leave her emotions out of business. This situation, edited and aired on the show, as well as the words used to describe the women working in a group highlight Trump’s initial accusation that “women have a tougher time in the workplace” (Ibid). Moreover, the first contentious interaction arises soon after the women start selling lemonade. One of the women, Tammy Lee, stops for lunch break because her feet hurt in her heels. Tammy then confronts the group about having an issue with her lunch break. The show yet again highlights another stereotype of being a woman that could hinder business performance—women need to look feminine by wearing heels, even in the workplace, and they do not have the endurance that men do. *The Apprentice* contestants constantly serve as extensions of Trump’s overarching message—women are inherently inferior to men in a business setting.

Lastly, the women are encouraged and rewarded for using their sexuality to sell lemonade on the streets of New York. Kristi Frank, entrepreneur, successfully sells lemonade for \$5 a cup. She is shown wearing the most revealing top out the rest of the female contestants, and she also displays the first physical contact the audience sees between the contestants and the customers. Kristi is filmed kissing men on the cheek, patting them on the back, and hugging them in an attempt to sell her product. George Ross, assistant judge to Donald Trump, says, “I wouldn’t pay \$5 for a glass of lemonade, but if it was served by a very pretty girl you’d be surprised, I might. I’d pay \$1 for the lemonade and \$4 for the girl” (Ibid). Ross is suggesting that women’s prosperity can be bought, and their sexuality can be leveraged as a selling technique in order to win a competition. Kristi Frank furthers her advances beyond just physical contact when she states to a customer, “it’s \$5 for the lemonade, but the bonus is my number” (Ibid). Kristi Frank

explains in her confessional, “yeah, I did use sex to sell the lemonade” (Ibid). At this point in the episode, the show frames Kristi as the most successful contestant in selling the product. The episode displays back-to-back shots of her closing countless sales using her flirtation and physical contact as a means of persuasion. This statement emphasizes that selling sex is important, and exploiting yourself for a monetary reward and Donald Trump’s approval is a method in which women can be seen as successful in the business world. Trump not only just assumes that women need to use tools other than their knowledge and business strategy to achieve success in the workplace, but this scene exemplifies that the show also sets up the challenges so that the only way women can win is to use tools other than their brain. The women win the challenge, and it is interpreted from the show that their success is only achieved through sex appeal, which is a tactic that is celebrated by Trump. Donald Trump wrote in his book *How To Get Rich*, “It’s certainly not groundbreaking news that the early victories by the women on *The Apprentice* were, to a very large extent, dependent on their sex appeal” (158). This quote supports the idea that Trump believes women in the workplace must utilize seduction to reach their desired goals. The women’s triumph and Trump’s positive feedback on their monetary achievement suggests that *The Apprentice* and the Trump brand endorse women using their bodies in order to produce a lucrative result. Exploiting the female body was the most efficient and readily available tactic for selling the lemonade, and while the show made the women look ridiculous, they ultimately were not being reprimanded in the boardroom.

In addition to his self-assurance and misogyny, the last component of Trump’s television persona is his approachable, casual language. Despite growing up as the son of a successful real estate developer in an affluent New York family and receiving an elite education in private schools, he speaks like the common man (Miller, Schwartzman. “Confident. Incurable. Bully”



Little Donny was a lot Candidate Donald Trump”). Jennifer Sclafani, a linguist from Georgetown University and author of *Talking Donald Trump*, says Trump speaks like an average American. She continues, “President Trump creates a spectacle in the way that he speaks” (Inzaurrealde, “This Linguist Studied The Way Trump Speaks For Two Year. Here’s What She Found”). A spectacle is defined by “a widely striking performance or display,” which in Trump’s case can be identified with his bombastic personality and rash decisions combined with his very simple speech (dictionary.com). She elaborates on what linguists have learned from Trump saying, “you can use language to create a brand, and you can use language to construct an identity that is distinct, that is recognizable, and that works toward creating an authentic persona that people will pay attention to” (Inzaurrealde, “This Linguist Studied The Way Trump Speaks For Two Year. Here’s What She Found”). Although a large portion of Trump’s speech is most likely scripted on the reality television show, he has uses hyperbole, repetition, and clichés to create easy to comprehend message (Ibid). For example, in the introduction of *The Apprentice* season 1 episode 1, Trump describes the 5<sup>th</sup> avenue Trump Tower as “one of the great buildings of the world” (“The Apprentice: Meet The Billionaire”). Also, when Trump is scolding the men’s team for losing the business task challenge he exclaims, “guys, they killed you,” followed by, “they really gave you a good beating,” (Ibid). These are both examples of hyperbole, described by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “extravagant exaggeration.” Hyperbole can often make situations seem more inflated or intense than they are in reality. Trump uses hyperbole often in his speech in *The Apprentice* potentially in order to add drama to the events or exaggerate the situation. In addition, Trump can be seen using effusive non-verbal hyperbolic communication, such as hand gestures. In the first episode of *The Apprentice* alone, Trump uses either one-handed or two-

handed extravagant gestures 80 different times to dramatically emphasize his points, according to Sclafani (Ibid).

Moreover, Trump's use of linguistic repetition is also noted throughout the first episode of *The Apprentice*. Sclafani explains that Trump often uses simple syntax and repeats certain words multiple times, sometimes even within the same sentence (Inzaurrealde, "This Linguist Studied The Way Trump Speaks For Two Year. Here's What She Found"). During the boardroom elimination scene toward the end of the episode, Trump discusses who in the men's group displayed leadership. Trump uses the word 'leader' over eight times in one scene ("The Apprentice: Meet The Billionaire"). Additionally, he brands the show on the tagline "you're fired," which he says to one contestant each episode ("The Apprentice: Meet The Billionaire"). This repetition alone is a theme that he strings through all of his appearances on the show. Linguist Geroge Laskoff explains that the effect of repetition is powerful. Laskoff says in his essay "Understanding Trump," that "Words are neurally linked to the circuits that determine their meaning. The more a word is heard, the more the circuit is activated and the stronger it gets, and so the easier it is to fire again" (Laskoff, "Understanding Trump"). Neuropsychologist Donald Hebb in 1949 first proposed the phrase, "neurons that fire together, wire together" to explain this phenomenon whereby repetition is effective in forging lasting memories. The more a word or phrase is repeated, the more an audience will resonate and feel familiarized with the speech being used. By saying the same words multiple times, such as "leader" or "you're fired," Trump is strengthening the words that are associated with both himself, *The Apprentice*, and the Trump brand.

Lastly, Trump often uses clichés when speaking to the camera during confessionals, throughout the introduction, and when addressing the candidates. For example, when introducing

the first challenge to the contestants Trump says, “we’re bringing you back to basics” (“The Apprentice: Meet The Billionaire”). In addition, Trump says statements such as, “the money speaks for itself,” and “they killed you, they really gave you a good beating,” and even “kicked you around badly,” when referring to the men’s’ loss to the women in the first challenge (Ibid). George Lakoff further argues in his article “Understanding Trump,” that Trump’s language is one of his most recognizable traits— he uses familiar unsophisticated language, and this resonates with his audience, both in their conscious thoughts and subconscious perceptions.

Lakoff says:

Every idea is constituted by neural circuitry. But we have no conscious access to that circuitry. As a result, most of thought — an estimated 98 percent of thought is unconscious. Conscious thought is the tip of the iceberg. Unconscious thought works by certain basic mechanisms. Trump uses them instinctively to turn people’s brains toward what he wants: Absolute authority, money, power, celebrity. (Lakoff, “Understanding Trump”)

Trump opts not to speak in an articulate, well-educated, businessman’s vernacular, and instead uses slang and informal dialect so as to be relatable to Americans on a very basic and personal level. Thus, when he chooses to not use formal business language in a corporate setting, such as the boardroom, he sends a subconscious message to audiences that he is very experienced and comfortable even in the highest echelons of corporate America. This direct way of speaking can also be taken by audiences as authentic. In formal writing or speech, one is told to avoid hyperbole, repetition, and clichés; however because Trump uses these informal language traits regularly and repeatedly, he not only appeals to average Americans, but he also reinforces

his brand across his audiences. Teddy Wayne, in his piece called “What We Talk About When We Talk About and Exactly Like Trump,” in *The New York Times*, writes that on several media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, as well as in personal appearances Trump is increasingly using repetition and simple language.

Identifiable, familiar, and relatable—that is the Donald Trump who was first established on *The Apprentice*. His overbearing self-confidence, demeaning nature towards women, and plain-spoken language are attributes that are consistently found during his time on the show, thus contributing to the Donald Trump brand. *The Apprentice* was a starting point—a platform upon which he was able to build his fan base and extend his Trump image of wealth and power. It is likely that the personality traits that built the Donald Trump television star image in 2004 and brought millions of viewers to NBC were also instrumental in captivating audiences throughout the election, and boosted CNN’s ratings in 2016. In both instances, Jeff Zucker was the man behind the scene creating Trump’s public image.

#### *CNN CASE STUDY: THE FIRST PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE*

*The Apprentice* case study exemplifies how Donald Trump’s television personality was persuasive and engaging enough to boost NBC ratings in 2004, but his television presence did not end then. Trump continued hosting *The Apprentice* for 11 years, with the 14<sup>th</sup> and final season airing in January of 2015, just five months before his presidential campaign announcement on June 16, 2015. Although twelve years had elapsed between his initial hosting of *The Apprentice* and his presidential campaign, his bombastic television personality proved to

be consistent. Donald Trump demonstrated specific behavioral traits throughout both the first and second presidential debates that correlate very strongly to his demeanor on *The Apprentice*—specifically narcissism, misogyny, and very informal, redundant and direct speech—that he also used in the first presidential debate. Although there is no way to prove why people watch certain programs, aspects of his consistent television behavior could certainly be the source of entertainment. These attributes at least partially form the television personality that is Donald Trump and could contribute to his entertainment value—thus ultimately attracting large audiences to various cable networks. For the case study on Trump’s behavior throughout the 2016 election, the paper will analyze him in the first presidential debate against Hillary Clinton held on September 26, 2016—a live, broadcasted, political event.

Trump won the Republican primaries prevailing over twelve other contenders including Jeb Bush, Marco Rubio, and John Kasich. His antics throughout the primaries included brash insults towards his fellow Republican Presidential nominees, a very public feud with Fox News Channel’s Megyn Kelly, lack of preparation for the Republican debates, and another public shaming of war veteran, John McCain (Zurcher, “US Election 2016 Results: Five reasons Donald Trump won”). However, he won the primary on July 19, 2016 tallying the most votes ever for a candidate in the GOP primary election (Bump, “Trump got the most GOP votes ever — both for and against him — and other fun facts”). Strangely, during the same election Trump also set a record for most votes cast against a candidate in the history of GOP primaries—a testimony to the polarizing effect Trump seems to have on voters, thus mobilizing record numbers of supporters and detractors to the polls (Bump, “Trump got the most GOP votes ever — both for and against him — and other fun facts”).

Leading up to the first presidential debate, a national poll conducted by CNN/ORC and released on September 6, 2016 said of the likely voters, 45% are predicted to vote for Trump and 43% are predicted to vote for Clinton (Rappeport, “New National Poll Shows Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton Essentially Tied”). Rappeport also reports that Clinton was ahead in the popularity polls directly after the National Democratic Convention, but it seems that Trump had been gaining support in the weeks leading up to the first presidential debate (Rappeport, “New National Poll Shows Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton Essentially Tied”).

Firstly, Trump’s narcissism and delusion of invincibility exudes from his speech and mannerisms throughout this debate, as it did in *The Apprentice* season 1 episode 1. He seems to believe he is his own hero, which is typical of a narcissistic personality. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Marla Maples, Trump’s second wife, describes Trump’s mentality as, “He’s a king. I mean truly. He is. He's a king. He really is a ruler of the world, as he sees it” (D'Antonio, Michael. “Donald Trump believes he was born to be king”). His confidence and constant self-affirmation builds confidence in some voters and repels others. During the first presidential debate, Lester Holt, the host of the debate and anchor on *NBC Nightly News*, asked Trump how he would be able to bring back the American manufacturers that have moved off shore. Trump responds:

Well, for one thing -- and before we start on that -- my father gave me a very small loan in 1975, and I built it into a company that's worth many, many billions of dollars, with some of the greatest assets in the world, and I say that only because that's the kind of thinking that our country needs. (“First Presidential Debate: Live Coverage.” *The Wall Street Journal*).

Instead of answering the question, Trump reiterates his accomplishments—in a grossly overstated manner. He’s a salesman, and when asked a question he sells himself first and then may or may not get around to answering the question. Elizabeth Lunbeck, author and historian of *The Americanization of Narcissism* and historian at Harvard University, builds on the idea that Trump’s indestructible self-confidence impresses and inspires followers. “Trump mobilizes his narcissism, I’ll argue, to connect to his followers, thereby eliciting their willing submission and unwavering loyalty... What does he promise in return? Participation in his greatness” (Lunbeck, “The Allure of Trump's Narcissism”). She continues, “his narcissism is a resource for — not an impediment to — his electoral and political success” (Lunbeck, “The Allure of Trump's Narcissism”). We have no evidence that Trump has been given the formal psychiatric diagnosis of narcissistic personality, but his delusions of grandeur and self-affirming behavior embodies narcissistic qualities. As Lunbeck argues, these narcissistic qualities work in his favor since his time on *The Apprentice*.

Secondly, Trump has a long history of making condescending or misogynistic comments towards women. Trump was debating the first woman in American history to receive a major party’s nomination for president, Hillary Clinton. Yet, instead of showing respect, he often tweeted condescending comments about Clinton such as, “If Hillary Clinton can’t satisfy her husband what makes her think she can satisfy America #MakeAmericaGreatAgain” (Trump, Twitter.com). Trump had already had a sexist reputation preceding the first debate. In the first presidential debate his speech was not overtly demeaning towards women, but there was one comment that many people across America interpreted as misogynistic. When Trump was describing why he was more fit to be president than Clinton, he stated, "she doesn't have the look. She doesn't have the stamina, I said she doesn't have the stamina, and I don't believe she

does have the stamina” (“First Presidential Debate: Live Coverage.” *The Wall Street Journal*). Although this statement does not outright say anything about women, Roberto Ferdman, HBO and VICE correspondent and former *Washington Post* reporter tweeted, “you don't have to be a woman to understand how sexist it is for Trump to accuse Clinton of not having the stamina to be president” (Twitter.com). In addition, Bill de Blasio’s former spokeswoman Karen Hinton tweeted about Trump’s comment saying, “don't tell American women they don't have stamina” (Twitter.com). Moreover, Trump made a comment about Clinton staying at home during the campaign trail, which is again suggesting that she lacks of endurance and aggression required for a president. In response to Lester Holt question, “do you believe that police are implicitly biased against black people,” Trump responded talking about his experience with inner city police forces saying, “you look at the inner cities, I just left Detroit, I just left Philadelphia. You've seen me, I've been all over the place. You decided to stay home and that's OK” (“First Presidential Debate: Live Coverage.” *The Wall Street Journal*). Regardless of what Trump’s intentions behind the statement were, some Americans took it as a misogynistic comment that in no way supported why he is more fit to be in office than Clinton. He was being subtly sexist throughout the first presidential debate, as he often was during his appearances on *The Apprentice*.

Lastly, Trump displays yet again very relaxed speech in the first presidential debate that is reminiscent of his language on *The Apprentice*. For example, Trump used many hyperbolic words— winning, bad, sad, unbelievable, and great/greatest, to name a few. Specifically, the Republican nominee used ‘disaster’ to describe 4 situations (“First Presidential Debate: Live Coverage.” *The Wall Street Journal*). Trump said, “your regulations are disaster,” “our energy policies are disaster,” “we invested in a solar company, our country. That was a disaster,” and lastly, “[Libya] was another one of [Clinton’s] disasters” (“First Presidential Debate: Live



Coverage.” *The Wall Street Journal*). Here, as Trump emphasized in his book *The Art of The Deal*, audiences see him once again using gross exaggeration to resonate with what “people want to believe,” as Trump explains (108). In reference to Cassidy’s point about Trump’s exaggeration being mistaken for lying, ‘disaster’ is a nonspecific noun that is can connote many meanings. Republican senator Bill Cassidy explains, “This president speaks in hyperbole, and hyperbole is interpreted by some as lies, and by the president it is interpreted as just his exaggeration” (Sen. Cassidy: Trump speaks in hyperbole” *MSNBC* ). What is crucial to understand is that many of his supporters believe his misleading and vague language is factual. He talks about using hyperbole in his 1986 book *The Art of The Deal*. Trump says:

The final key to the way I promote is bravado. I play to people’s fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That’s why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole. It’s an innocent form of exaggeration—and a very effective form of promotion (108).

Because the speech is murky, undefined, and largely subjective, Trump can make these convincing claims—so he may be not overtly lying, but he’s also not being entirely truthful either.

Trump’s strategy seems to be if he emphatically repeats a statement enough, it will be perceived as true regardless of whether it is or not. George Lakoff suggests that Trump’s repetition techniques are an extension of his negotiating habits learned in business (Rossman, “Trump’s repetitive rhetoric is a trick used in advertising”). Lakoff says, “This is something taught in every marketing class” (Ibid). Lakoff furthers, “He knows how to use your brain for his advantage... Trump is always selling. He’s selling himself” (Ibid). In addition, Deborah Tannen,

a linguistics professor at Georgetown University, describes Trump's repetition as a means to keep talking. She says, "It allows you to keep speaking when you don't have anything new to say" (Ibid). Throughout the one hour and thirty-five minute first presidential debate, Donald Trump displayed his habit of repetition once again. The word "tremendous" is mentioned thirteen times. A few examples, Trumps speaks of "tremendous problems," and "tremendous income" " ("First Presidential Debate: Live Coverage." *The Wall Street Journal*). He also said he would "be reducing taxes tremendously," and that he would be able to "create tremendous numbers of new jobs" " ("First Presidential Debate: Live Coverage." *The Wall Street Journal*). Here, audiences saw Trump repeating words once again, which only reaffirms his television persona, which is rooted in routine and entertainment. Tannen notes that "It's effective when people hear things over and over, it sticks in their minds. Where did people come away with this idea that Hillary can't be trusted? We heard it over and over" (Rossman, "Trump's repetitive rhetoric is a trick used in advertising"). By not only repeating words within a single speech, but also repeating his repetition patterns from *The Apprentice*, Trump is reinforcing his image in voter's minds. Although reason for voting cannot be proven, it can be theorized that Trump's use of repetition creates a consistent and convincing television personality that bleeds into both entertainment and politics.

Overall, critics largely deemed Clinton as the clear winner of this debate due to the fact that she spent more time probing Trump with questions/accusations on his past business deals, past comments on women, and discussing his tax returns. Additionally, many critics believed that Trump did not properly prepare for this debate, and as a result, got caught in many situations where he did not have an intelligent or informed answer. For example, when Clinton broached the topic of the Justice Department's lawsuit against Trump in 1973 for not allowing African-

Americans to rent apartments in one of his properties, Trump responded, “I settled that lawsuit with no admission of guilt, but that was a lawsuit brought against many, many real estate firms, it's one of those things” (“First Presidential Debate: Live Coverage.” *The Wall Street Journal*). Trump is essentially denying any racial discrimination, without responding in a meaningful way to the allegations. Charles Blow of *The New York Times* quotes Sarah Huckabee Sanders, senior Trump campaign advisor, admitting Trump’s lack of preparation for the debate:

Donald Trump does what works best for him, and I think that is discussing the issues, studying the issues and frankly being himself. He’s not a poll-tested, scripted robot like Hillary Clinton. That’s a great contrast to have and one I think we are certainly excited to see tonight. (Blow, “Trump’s Debate Flameout”)

Blow continues, “Trump completely bombed in that debate and it’s his own fault. His staggering arrogance and breathtaking incompetence were laid bare, as he had no prepared remarks from which to read and no gaggle of other candidates behind whom he could hide” (Blow, “Trump’s Debate Flameout”). Reid J. Epstein of the Wall Street Journal also notes, “Mr. Trump showed little grasp of policy detail, taking Mrs. Clinton’s bait on a series of topics. She drew him off-topic on his own past without letting him press the case against her” (Epstein, “Postdebate Analytics: How did Trump do?”). So overall, his lack of preparation, defensive attitude towards Clinton’s accusations, and naiveté on public policy made Trump the clear loser of this first debate. However, CNN reports from Nielsen ratings that about 84 million viewers tuned into the first presidential debate of 2016, making it at the time “the most-watched debate in American history” (Stelter, Debate Breaks Record as most-watched in U.S. History). This suggests that although Trump may not have performed well, he apparently still managed to generate entertainment value for viewers. Trump lacked intelligent and concise answers throughout the

debate but managed to draw a record-breaking audience—potentially suggesting the ‘winner’ of the 2016 Presidential Debates may not have been the candidate playing the offensive with prepared statements and answers rooted in policy. Unfortunately, for many Americans the ‘winner’ may have actually been the candidate who gave the viewers the best show.

Regardless of how the candidates performed throughout 2016, television benefited from the attention this presidential election campaign garnered. In Chapter Three this thesis will argue that Jeff Zucker exploited Donald Trump, largely using his three-pillar strategy, in an effort to regain viewership and revive CNN.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### *CAPITALIZING ON THE SPECTACLE:*

#### *TRUMP'S COVERAGE ACROSS THE GENERAL MEDIA AND HOW CNN USED THE THREE-PILLAR STRATEGY*

The next part of the paper will dive into the quantity and the nature of the media coverage that Trump received throughout the 2016 election year. For this portion of the argument, the Shorenstein 2016 media coverage study will be used for data purposes. This study was a four part series analyzing the trends throughout various news media outlets during the election, including coverage on cable news, print, and digital platforms. The Shorenstein Study will serve as an analysis of the overall coverage of the campaign, before narrowing in on CNN's specific production strategies of the content in the next section. Using examples from part II, the Presidential Primaries, part III, the National Conventions, and part IV, the General Election, of the four part study on the media's coverage of the 2016 election, the argument will outline the type and amount of coverage across the general media that Trump received after he was elected the Republican Nominee. According to the study, the outlets that were used to gather data included: ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, the *Los Angeles Times*, NBC, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Washington Times*. Lastly, the agency that gathered the news coverage data for all four parts of the study was Media Tenor, a media research institute.

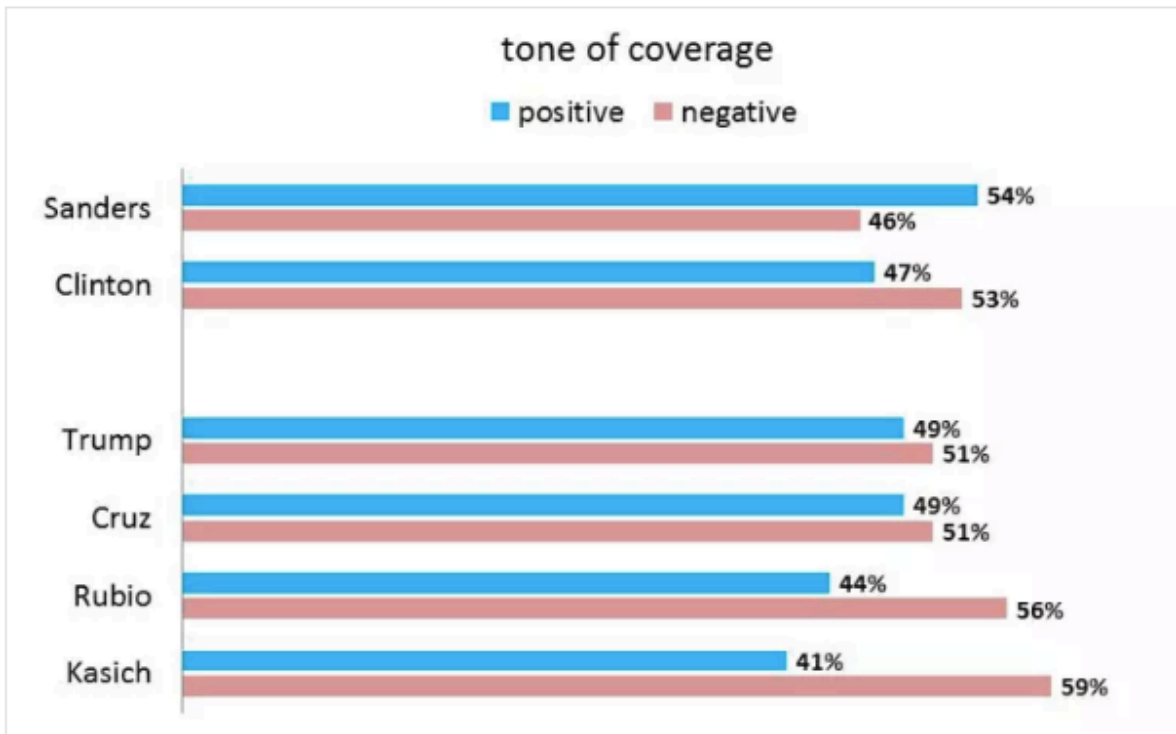
Looking back at the initial landscape of the 2016 presidential campaign year, beginning in February 2016, there were seventeen Republican candidates and six Democratic candidates that entered the presidential primaries. The primaries are unique because American constituents

don't directly vote for the candidates. Instead, citizens elect delegates who then cast their votes for the candidates. The primaries concluded in mid-July with Trump winning with over twice as many delegate votes as his runner-up, Ted Cruz; whereas Hillary Clinton won the Democratic Nominee in a much closer race against her opponent, Bernie Sanders ("2016 Election Center" [cnn.com](http://cnn.com)). Despite the incredible amount of Republican candidates running in the Republican primaries, Trump was always the most talked about candidate in the press. He dominated throughout the entire election year in his sheer amount of press, except for week 7 of the primaries when both Clinton and Sanders just barely topped him in amount of media coverage (Patterson, "News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Primaries: Horse Race Reporting Has Consequences").

Overall, all of the media outlets assessed by the Shorenstein Center followed the same trends—Trump was always the most talked about candidate, and he always received more negative press than positive press. A copious amount of negative press was a trend across all media platforms during this election, and this was a phenomenon that applied to both presidential candidates. Also, although there was a notable amount of negative Trump coverage throughout the election year, the amount of negative press increased as the election drew closer. Trump's press in primaries "was positive in tone when the Republican race was still being contested – yet it turned negative after that race had been decided" (Ibid). Below, figure 5 shows cumulatively across all analyzed platforms that Trump received more negative press throughout the primaries than positive, but percentages of positive to negative coverage were very close. Trump's coverage was 49% positive and 51% negative. In contrast, figures 6 and 7 show the tone of Trump's coverage within each platform analyzed. The wide range of news outlets generated a plethora of negative news about Trump throughout the national conventions and the general

election compared to the almost equally distributed negative to positive press shown in the primaries.

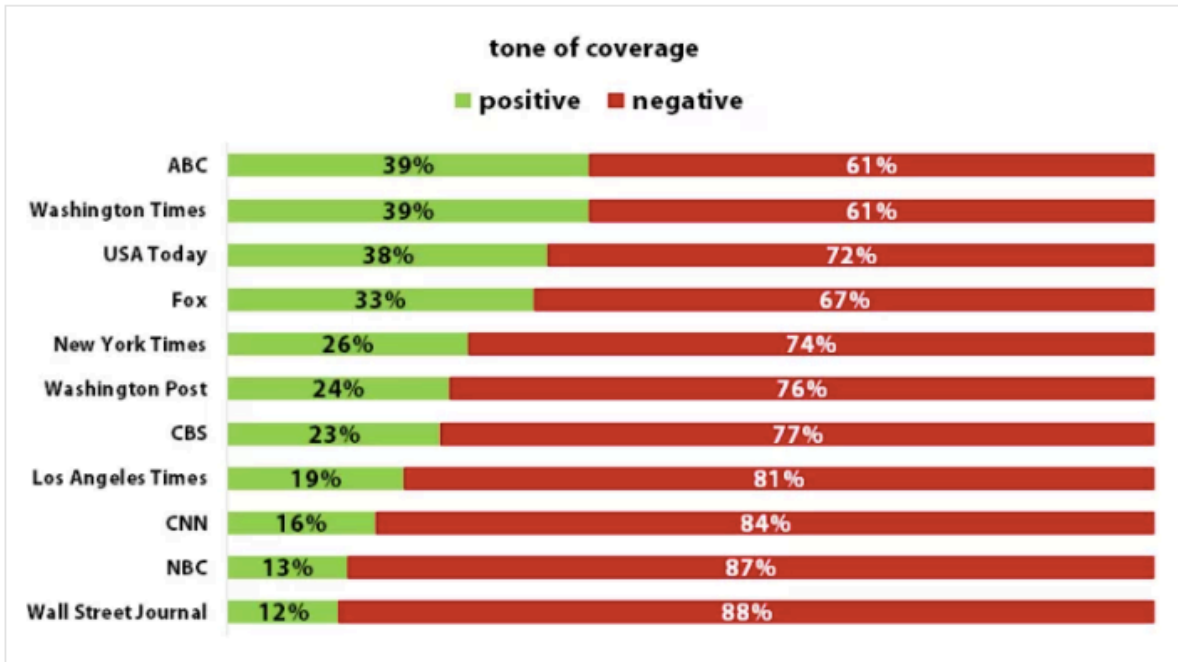
Figure 5: Taken from Part II of the Shorenstein Study “News Coverage of the 2016 Presidential Primaries: Horse Race Reporting Has Consequences”



Source: Media Tenor. Based on weekly averages, January 1-June 7, 2016. Averages for Cruz, Rubio, and Kasich based on period when they were active candidates.

Figure 6: Taken from Part III of the Shorenstein Center’s study “News Coverage of the 2016 General Election: Negative News, Lacking Content.”

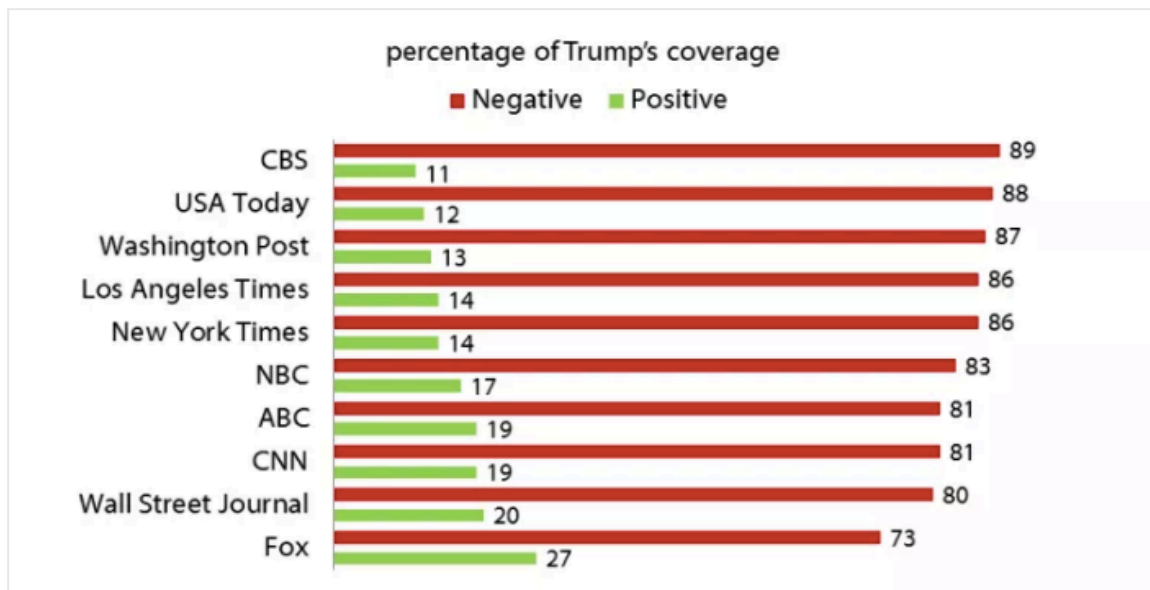
Figure 7: Tone of Trump's Coverage, by News Outlet



Source: Media Tenor. Note: Percentages based on negative and positive reports only. Neutral reports are excluded.

Figure 7: Taken from Part IV of the Shorenstein Center's study "News Coverage of the 2016 National Conventions: How The Press Failed The Voters"

Figure 9. Tone of Trump's Coverage, by News Outlet



Source: Media Tenor. Excludes neutral news reports.



As shown across figures 5, 6 and 7, Trump's negative press increased throughout the year. Patterson explains the range of negative press Trump received by saying, "during his best weeks, the coverage ran 2-to-1 negative over positive. In his worst weeks, the ratio was more than 10-to-1. If there was a silver lining for Trump, it was that his two best weeks were the ones just preceding the November balloting" (Patterson, "News Coverage of the 2016 National Conventions: How The Press Failed The Voters"). Unfavorable reporting is inherent in the process of running for president, and the idea that there is more negative press than positive press throughout a presidential campaign is not unexpected in presidential elections. One of the most negative presidential campaigns in history include Thomas Jefferson vs. John Adams in 1800, due to the rumors of how Jefferson "hated the constitution" and had fathered illegitimate children with female slaves on his plantation (Parton, 32). Additionally, the election of 1964 between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater quickly became nasty after Johnson's campaign aired the first negative advertisement on television, accusing Goldwater of being trigger-happy and ill prepared to control the nuclear bombs in America's possession. And although negative stories about Donald Trump occupied the majority of his coverage in 2016, unfavorable content is commonly seen in presidential elections and is to be expected.

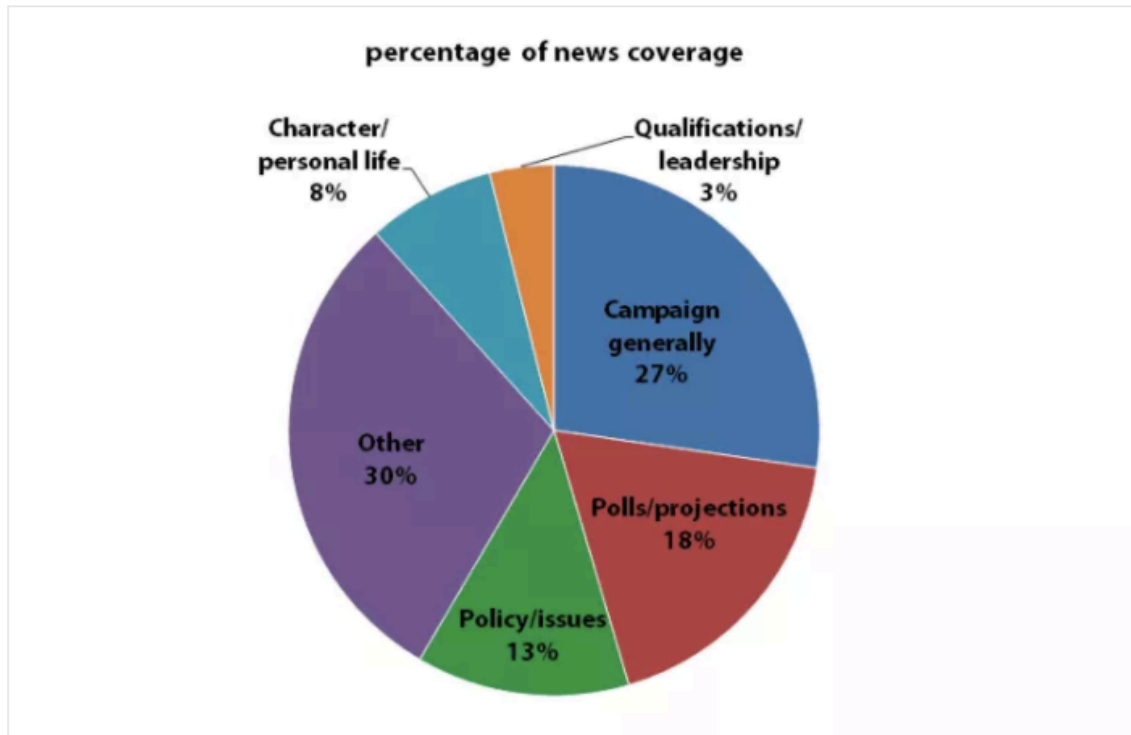
Although the Trump's negative tone was overwhelming in the 2016 election, the type of negativity is important to analyze. The unfavorable stories came largely from journalistic-centered writing, or "interpretive" journalism rather than "event-based" journalism, according to Patterson ("News Coverage of the 2016 General Election: How the Press Failed the Voters"). This type of journalism is routed in the demand for more news, and more information. However, when candidates stance on policies and overall general qualifications for office have been reported on exhaustedly journalists turn to spectacle driven reporting in order for writers to

create fresh content, and constantly reassess the candidates in new ways. An unexpected development may thrust a new issue into the campaign, but policy problems are typically longstanding.

As the election progressed from the primaries to the general election, the type of press Trump received became drastically more focused on controversy and the horse race (Ibid). According to Patterson, Trump's coverage in the general election was "overwhelmingly negative in tone and extremely light on policy" (Patterson, "News Coverage of the 2016 National Conventions: Negative News, Lacking Context"). Meaning that after the primaries had concluded, and the general election campaign had begun, Trump increasingly became the object of criticism. The general election ushered in a higher prevalence of journalist-centered writing because the American public by now was quite familiar with two remaining candidates—Trump and Clinton—and thus the reporters/writers were searching for new perspectives and angles to captivate their audiences. Figures 8 and 9 show how journalist-centered coverage led to a lack of substance in campaign coverage. Patterson explains that the subjective writing that largely dominates journalism today was evident in the news coverage of the 2016 presidential election. Patterson says, "even though the horse race was not as large a part of news reporting during the convention period as it was during the primaries, it easily outpaced reports about the candidates' issues or qualifications." Thus, the general coverage was characterized by controversies, gossip, and scandals associated with the candidates, or the horserace, largely categorized by "other" in figures 8 and 9. These graphs show the news media was not focused on who was most qualified for the office, but rather who was creating more controversy (Ibid). Scandal was prioritized over policy and qualifications, which highlights the notion that the presidential campaign turned out to

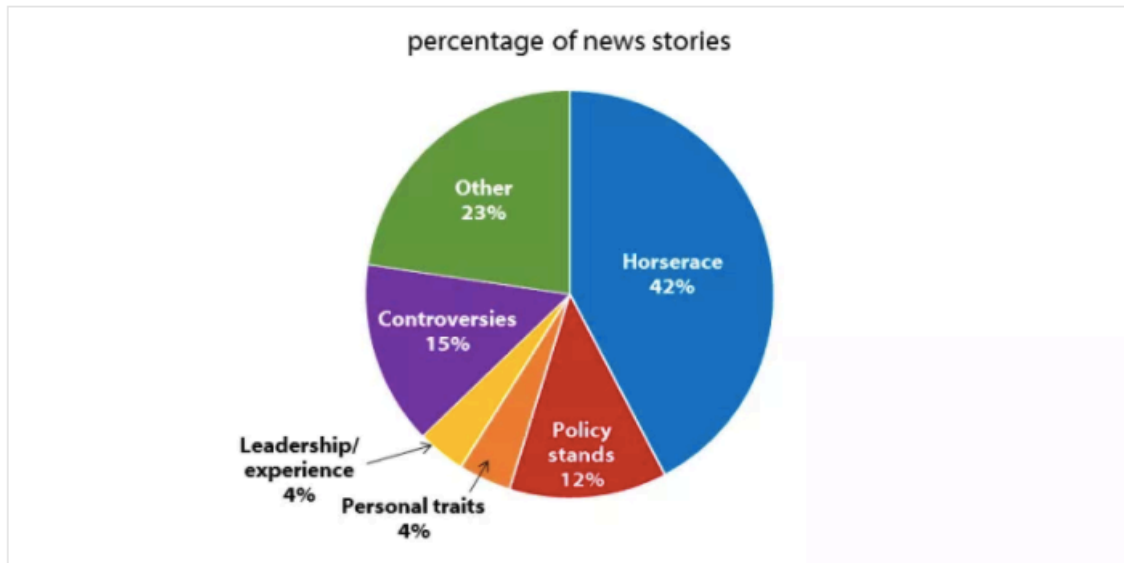
be more about entertainment and sensationalism than a serious interchange about important national issues.

Figure 8: Taken from Part III of the Shorenstein Center’s study “News Coverage of the 2016 General Election: Negative News, Lacking Content.”



Source: Media Tenor.

Figure 9: Taken from Part IV of the Shorenstein Center’s study “News Coverage of the 2016 National Conventions: How The Press Failed The Voters.”



Source: Media Tenor. The "other" category includes references to such things as upcoming events, staffing, logistics, etc.

Specifically, CNN is one example of a network platform that contributed to these trends among the media in 2016, generating copious amounts of negative and interpretive coverage on Trump on the cable news and online. CNN is also an example of a network that experienced great success from the 2016 presidential election coverage. Zucker realized this success in ratings by investing in the convergence of entertainment and politics and capitalizing on spectacle within the political race. CNN's president worked to only air the most popular stories on television, which were often Trump oriented, and to ignore or redirect many other news stories to CNN.com—thus keeping viewers entertained longer on television. This production scheme, which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter, was called his three-pillar strategy to revive the network. Overall, CNN followed the same trends as other news outlets, focusing disproportionately on Trump and broadcasting mostly negative content about him throughout the election. The network distinguished itself from the slew of negative Trump coverage in the general media by airing an ongoing compilation of Donald Trump's outrageous antics and statements. CNN finished 2016 as the second most improved network in total viewers compared

to 2015 among the top 35 most-watched cable networks, finishing only behind MSNBC. According to data collected by Nielsen, Fox News Channel jumped from 1.83 million to 2.48 million (+36%), MSNBC jumped from 0.596 million to 1.113 million (+87%), and CNN jumped from 0.732 million to 1.3 million (+77%) (Moraes, “Cable TV Ratings 2016: Presidential Politics Fuels Ratings Gain”).

It is important to note that the news media outlets were almost all reporting on the same material, but it was the way CNN reported that resulted in such a steep increase in ratings. In the next section, the argument will dive into the specific production techniques that Jeff Zucker implemented at CNN in order to rise above some of his competitors and draw viewers into CNN to not only watch but also stay tuned for longer.

“If you don’t change and adapt, then you will be left behind,” says Zucker at a Q&A at Oxford University on December 3, 2017 (Jeff Zucker | Full Q&A | Oxford Union, youtube.com). The news’ job is to inform the American public with information that is pertinent; however, broadcast news is also in the entertainment business, because they need to be entertaining in order to generate revenue. Rather than adopt a political bias in order to gain viewers, like MSNBC and Fox, Zucker pushed CNN to stay loyal to its middle-ground coverage on political parties, and instead gain ratings through increasing the entertainment value of the network. Zucker holds strong the belief that news and entertainment do not have to be mutually exclusive (Jeff Zucker | Full Q&A | Oxford Union, youtube.com).

Zucker has also believes it is crucial to hold those in power accountable. “Don’t be cowered. Don’t be bullied. Journalism is incredibly important, never more so than today” (Jeff Zucker | Full Q&A | Oxford Union, youtube.com). Allegedly, Trump sent Zucker a threatening email in the midst of his presidential campaign, calling Zucker “the most disloyal person,” and

swore “to get even” with Zucker (Ibid). The president of CNN Worldwide never confirmed the email in the interview, but he did highlight the importance of exposing the truths about any American leaders (Ibid). Zucker mentioned that Trump more or less expected CNN to frame him in a positive light during the campaign year due to their relationship from *The Apprentice* (Ibid). Unfortunately, Trump misunderstood their friendship. Zucker feels only the need to use Trump for his news and entertainment value, which also entails revealing telling information about Trump—information that he may not want to be publicized (Ibid). Zucker strictly sees Trump as a capitalistic venture. So, when Trump announced his candidacy, Zucker immediately knew to take his campaign seriously. “I had some insight about how people felt about him and what made him popular,” says Zucker (Ibid). Also, Trump knew he needed to engage in the media in order to build a following. According to Zucker, Trump always consented to CNN’s requests for interviews, unlike many other Republican candidates who typically denied offers to come onto the network offices to respond to questions (Ibid). Zucker goes on to say, “Trump understood the new media world, without question, and he took advantage of it” (Ibid). Zucker is saying that Trump valued appearances and interviews on television because he knew that would be an integral part of winning the presidential race in the digital age of 2016. This was a mutually beneficial relationship between Zucker and Trump—Zucker was able to generate content that he knew from experience would garner high ratings, and Donald was able to gain exposure through publicizing his campaign on CNN.

This symbiotic relationship only worked as well as it did because of Zucker’s ability to produce innovative television—all news networks were reporting on Trump in 2016, but Zucker’s CNN was able to stage a historic rally in viewership during the 2016 presidential campaign due to his aggressive production approach to prioritizing entertainment. CNN arguably

managed to become relevant to television consumers once again due to Zucker's production techniques that emphasized playing to viewers' interests rather than balancing the coverage across the candidates equitably.

Outlined by Steel in *The New York Times* article "How Jeff Zucker Is Seeking to Reshape CNN," and also in an interview with *The Washington Post's* Lois Romano, Zucker explains what CNN did to change production strategies to increase their viewer ratings leading up to the campaign year. Zucker's "three pillar strategy" worked to make the network a top ten primetime cable news network once again ("A Conversation with CNN President Jeff Zucker | The Institute of Politics at Harvard University" youtube.com). The three pillars were a part of Zucker's vision from the time he joined the network in 2013, but he did not start to see a rise in ratings until 2015, the year before the presidential election.

The first pillar, according to CNN Worldwide's president, was giving the popular story of the day ample coverage, and putting 100% of their resources into reporting this headliner story of the moment. Zucker says that the decision to "go all in on the news story" would allow the network to be the place for viewers to go to be fully updated on the news they want to hear (Ibid). He also says he wanted CNN to "smother that story for whatever it was" (Ibid). The first story that CNN went "all in on" was the missing Malaysian Airlines flight 370 in March of 2014 (Ibid). Zucker notes that he received an incredible amount of criticism for almost exclusively covering this story for almost a six-week time period (Ibid). As a result of the popularity of the missing Malaysian Boeing 777 story, CNN spent very little time reporting on TV about the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Ibid). Zucker said that even though they had "four reporters on the ground in Ukraine" and they aired the story on television, albeit sparsely, the missing Malaysian aircraft took priority for airtime (Ibid). Zucker did this because people *wanted* to hear about the

missing aircraft more than the Ukraine story. “That was the strategy. This is what people were interested in. If we made people watch a little bit longer, then the ratings would continue to increase,” says Zucker (Ibid). Per Zucker’s strategy to focus on the entertaining stories, the reporting of the Russian Invasion into Ukraine was more extensively reported online than on television. Thus, even the second most crucial story of the time had to be fleshed out online due to the amount of airtime that was being devoted to the biggest story of the moment. This is an example of a smaller story that CNN experimented with airing on television, but noted that it did not receive the ratings response the network wanted. The difference in television ratings between the Malaysian airliner and the invasion of Ukraine is most likely attributed to the nature of the story—mysterious plane crashes are sensational and dramatic. Nearly everyone can relate to flying on a Boeing aircraft, and then imagining a crash into the ocean with a plane full of commercial passengers. Whereas the Russia-Ukraine story involves a more abstract conflict requiring an advanced level of knowledge of international relations and politics among countries that used to be part of the former Soviet Union. This ratings success of basic news on CNN’s broadcast news channel also contributes to the idea that cable news is largely steered towards entertainment. CNN President Zucker, whose first twenty-five years in TV were spent in entertainment, noted that he sees finding the ‘big’ story as one highlights of his job—he says he loves trying to predict and identify the most popular story and then honing in on that story on cable (Ibid). Also, Zucker notes in an interview with Jordan Chariton of *The Wrap* that they’ve not only increased the length of coverage on particular popular stories, CNN has also just increased the hours in a day they are covering news (Chariton, “Jeff Zucker Strikes Back: CNN Chief Takes on Critics of Original Series, News Facelift”). According to Zucker, CNN now reports news from 12:00 P.M. to 5:00 A.M., adding five more hours of news coverage each day,



and leaving only two for original series (Chariton, “Jeff Zucker Strikes Back: CNN Chief Takes on Critics of Original Series, News Facelift”).

The second step in Zucker’s CNN makeover was introducing series programming. These shows are “original programming to the network” as Zucker puts it, meaning shows that are not cable news, but rather produced and pre-recorded episodes that are released weekly (“A Conversation with CNN President Jeff Zucker | The Institute of Politics at Harvard University” youtube.com). The network moved to diversify its content beyond just news broadcasting. One example of CNN’s new series programming is Anthony Bourdain’s *Parts Unknown*, an hour-long weekend program that releases new episodes every week. According to Zucker, this show was actually greenlit before Zucker joined CNN in 2013, but he used this series as an inspiration for many more that exist today (Ibid). *Parts Unknown* follows Bourdain tasting food and experiencing cultures all over the globe. As of 2016, *Parts Unknown* had won four Emmy Awards for Outstanding Informational Series or Special, and one for cinematography (Yahr, “How Anthony Bourdain went from CNN’s biggest risk to its most unexpected star”). According to *The Washington Post*, original programming was an idea proposed in 2013 as a solution for the fluctuation of viewers throughout the day (Ibid). Yahr writes, “viewers flipped to CNN in droves for big news events, but when the story died down, the audience was gone” (Ibid). Bourdain had previously been hosting a show called “No Reservations” on The Travel Channel since 2005 also about food, but when his contract expired he agreed to *Parts Unknown* on CNN (Ibid). The article quotes Amy Entelis, CNN’s Executive VP of Talent and Content Development, explaining CNN’s approach with its first original programming show by saying, “he made you want to go on a journey with him around the world, which is really what CNN wants to do every day as well... He studiously avoids saying he’s a journalist, and we were

really looking for a different kind of storytelling on CNN” (Ibid). The show has retained a very consistent audience, “averaging 880,000 viewers on Sunday nights in the first season and 828,000 in the seventh season” (Ibid).

Other original series on CNN today include Lisa Ling’s *This is Life with Lisa Ling*, where she travels to corners of America investigating topics such as drug abuse and ‘sugarbabies,’ and *John Walsh’s The Hunt With John Walsh*, which chronicles unsolved crime stories through a series of witness interviews (CNN.com). These shows are filmed like reality TV shows, partially unscripted with non-actors, but they meant to function like short documentaries due to their educational value—thus they are named ‘docuseries.’ They are truly meant to be educational entertainment. These docuseries distinguish and elevate themselves beyond reality TV due to their investigative and informative nature, and are important to boosting CNN’s ratings because they give viewers a reason to go to CNN for both news and entertainment. The current CNN president also exclaimed that, “the old criticism of CNN was that it was spare tire, you only took it out of the trunk when you needed it. Right? So you only turned on CNN when something was going on.” Zucker says, “we wanted to create something that made people come to CNN when there wasn’t news” (A Conversation with CNN President Jeff Zucker | The Institute of Politics at Harvard University, youtube.com). Series programming is important to a network because it allows the channel to further distinguish itself from other cable news networks, and also create a viewer loyalty—something CNN desperately needed after their weak ratings performance in 2013. According to Zucker, CNN released 12 new original series in 2016, and they’ve greatly contributed to their increased ratings in 2016 (Ibid). When comparing to the other two major 24-hour news networks, MSNBC and Fox News Channel, CNN has by far the most extensive television original programming roster. MSNBC launched

*Shift* in 2014, an online platform that featured 14 original programs, but not shown on television (Hughes, “MSNBC Expanding Online With Original Programming, Streaming Video”). Fox News Channel has a few original programming series, but they far much less investigative. For example, *The Property Man with Bob Massi* where Massi reviews the trends in real estate, and *Legends and Lies: The Patriots* a 10-part scripted series about the dramas of early America. (Fox News Shows, foxnews.com).

Zucker refers to his choice of bringing series programming to CNN as broadening what the network considers news (Chariton, “Jeff Zucker Strikes Back: CNN Chief Takes on Critics of Original Series News Facelift”). Since 2013 Zucker has worked to blur the line between news and entertainment—CNN’s original programming are news-based entertainment, while CNN’s cable news shows are entrainment-based news. In total, Zucker’s daily strategy amounts to 22 hours of news coverage, and 2 hours of original series in an effort to attract viewers for longer by focusing on popular stories, and also creating loyal audiences that come weekly to CNN to watch something other than news, series programming (Chariton, “Jeff Zucker Strikes Back: CNN Chief Takes on Critics of Original Series News Facelift”).

The third, last, and arguably most important pillar in CNN’s makeover beginning in 2013 was the emphasis on and greater responsibility granted to CNN’s digital platform. Jeff Zucker decided that not all stories would be shown on CNN’s television news show, and the smaller stories would be redirected to CNN.com (Steel, “How Jeff Zucker Is Seeking to Reshape CNN” and “A Conversation with CNN President Jeff Zucker | The Institute of Politics at Harvard University”). This redistribution of content accomplished two things for the network. First, it allowed the cable news to “smother” the most popular story among viewers on television in order to draw viewers in for longer and increase ratings (“A Conversation with CNN President

Jeff Zucker | The Institute of Politics at Harvard University” youtube.com). This way, CNN would still be covering all the stories of the day, but just not all on television. Relegating smaller stories to online-only status, and limiting the television coverage to only popular stories is a colossal change in how consumers take in their news—CNN viewers who want to be apprised of the full scope of daily current events, not just the popular stories, now need to access the digital CNN platform and view the online stories in addition to cable television. The awareness that news channels are for-profit organizations that need to make money is crucial to understand how news is packaged and disseminated throughout America. The second important aspect of increasing the content on the digital platform is called “future proofing,” according to Zucker (Ibid). Online news heavily appeals to millennials. Although television generates the immediate revenue for the network, Zucker knows that CNN digital is where the future of news lies. For millennials, he expects their primary news source to be mobile devices. “everybody in this audience around the country and in the world now get their news through what’s in your pocket,” explains Zucker (Ibid). He also mentioned that CNN does not try to be the first to break the news, but they do aim to verify the news. For instance, Zucker stated, “if they want to learn more, the first network they would want to turn to would be CNN” (Ibid).

Digital updates are the most immediate way to receive information in the modern age, so it was worth investing in according to Zucker (Ibid). Digital alerts also bring younger viewers over to television. Zucker says, “when there’s a big story out 18-34 numbers spike, and we think its because they know us from this digital space and then they come over to television” (Ibid). Etan Horowitz, the senior mobile editor at CNN, explains why CNN alerts stand out among CNN’s other form of news updates such as breaking news emails, @cnnbrk tweets, or banners on the CNN.com website. Horowitz says to Harvard’s Neiman Lab, “the app alert is so different

from the others, because you have to go and get the others, but with apps it comes to you” (Lichterman, “Push it: CNN’s mobile notifications unify its various platforms, from television to telephones”). Horowitz also says that CNN tries to write the alerts in an engaging way, he says “We really take a lot of pride in not just writing them boring, wire-service style, but actually like a real person ” (Lichterman, “Push it: CNN’s mobile notifications unify its various platforms, from television to telephones”). The alerts are as succinct, witty, and timely as possible—with sports games or national events they know are approaching, the CNN mobile team writes the alerts before hand to guarantee for the best delivery possible (Ibid).

Digital content is a way to attract a younger following, and also spend longer covering what viewers *want* to hear on television. Zucker explains this reorganization of the news by saying, “we were not covering any less news, we were just putting it in different places” (“A Conversation with CNN President Jeff Zucker | The Institute of Politics at Harvard University” youtube.com). He also notes that this was a main strategy used throughout the campaign coverage (Ibid). Smaller stories that redirected to CNN.com often are presented in the form of short videos, normally not longer that two and half minutes. So, the stories are presented almost as a newsreel, but just on a digital platform. This is because Zucker says he sees the future of online content as “video” and “mobile” (Ibid). The less viewers have to think about the content they are consuming, the more likely they are to consume the content. In 2016 CNN was named “#1 source of news and digital information in the world” and “#1 source of political news for 16 months in a row” in 2016 (Ibid). CNN at that point had domestic, international, and Arabic online platforms covering the election (Ibid).

Overall, Zucker and his team at CNN strategically setup their coverage leading up to the election, and throughout the election, in a way that would maximize their viewership. Zucker

reasoned that throughout the election year the national news content would be almost identical across news channels, so he decided that the way to distinguish his network from the others was to televise what viewers wanted to watch. CNN's distinct style of maximizing airtime on the most entertaining stories is intriguing to viewers and have audiences tuning into the news shows for longer, thus increasing ratings and adding to the dollar value of the network. This strategy consisted on "smothering the story," implementing original programming, and utilizing the digital platform to both capture the millennial audience and redirect smaller stories away from their cable news lineup ("A Conversation with CNN President Jeff Zucker | The Institute of Politics at Harvard University" youtube.com). Zucker has admitted that he saw the publicity value of Donald Trump even before he worked with him in reality TV, and the phenomenal ratings from *The Apprentice's* first few seasons only validated Zucker's instincts. CNN had to stylize Trump and strategically produce their show to attract viewers.

To grasp an idea of how extensively Trump was covered and how much airtime was devoted to Trump on CNN throughout 2016, below is list of the network's top ten media stories of 2016. Zucker's focus was on airing the most entertaining story of the moment. As a result, a large portion of the stories covered on the CNN broadcast network were about Trump—an effort to capitalize on what is sensational to the audience. Five of the top ten stories were either about Trump or involving Trump, meaning roughly half of the major stories broadcasted on CNN cable news throughout the year were pertaining to Trump ("Top 10 Media Stories of 2016 - CNN Video" CNN.com). Also, listed below are the 15 most watched videos of the year on CNN.com, seven of which involve Trump ("2016 Year in Review" CNN.com). The stories that receive the most airtime on television is content decided by the producers in response to viewer ratings, whereas the most-watched videos online are a reflection of what viewers prefer to watch. In both

instances, top stories on television and online, Trump alone accounted for roughly half of the content. These lists suggest that even though the online platform encompasses far more news stories, the readers still largely gravitate towards Trump. Thus, the CNN television network is covering what their viewers want to watch, as exemplified in the most-watched CNN.com videos of 2016.

The top media stories of 2016 were:

10. “*The Washington Post* reporter freed from Iranian prison”
9. “Kelly Ripa Michael Strahan Feud”
8. “Corporate Media Maneuvers;”
  - “Viacom CEO replaced by Sheri Redstone”
  - “ATT&T seeks to buy Time Warner parent company of CNN—the deal slammed by Donald Trump”
7. “The Role of Leaks—hacked Clinton campaign emails and the Trump Hollywood Reporter video”
6. “Hulk Hogan’s Sex Tape Lawsuit”
5. “Fake News—did it tilt the election towards Trump?”
4. “Alt-Right Media—Trump made Steve Bannon his campaign manager”
3. “Downfall of Fox News’s Roger Ailes—Sexual assault accusations”
2. “Donald Trump Winning the Presidency”
1. “Running Against the Press—Donald Trump vs. the media including his feud with Megyn Kelly and declaring war against the press.”

List gathered from: (“Top 10 Media Stories of 2016 - CNN Video” CNN.com).

The 15 most-watched videos of 2016 on CNN.com:

1. “How do I explain Trump’s victory to my children?”
2. “Trump walks off interview”
3. “Stuff that makes us go aww”
4. “Teacher arrested after knocking over child”
5. “Trump gets north Korea warning”
6. “Panther sneaks up behind man and then...”
7. “Donald trump’s campaign ride”
8. “Election night twists and turns in under 2 minutes”
9. “Alligator snatches toddler wading in Disney lagoon”
10. “Gorilla drags 3 year old boy in shocking video”
11. “How police respond in “active shooter” situations”
12. “Trump’s 2005 uncensored lewd comments about women”
13. “Women streams graphic video of boyfriend shot by police”
14. “The first presidential debate in under 2 minutes”
15. “Video shows police shooting of Alton Sterling”

List gathered from: (“2016 Year in Review” CNN.com).

Additionally, a study done by the Media Research Center during the primaries shows that over a two week period CNN reported on Donald Trump “3X more than all other candidates combined”, thus accumulating to about 78% of primetime coverage on the GOP primaries (“CNN Prime Time Covers Trump 3X More Than All Others Combined”, [www.mrc.org](http://www.mrc.org)). In



total, Donald Trump coverage accounted for 580 minutes out of total 747 minutes (“CNN Prime Time Covers Trump 3X More Than All Others Combined”, [www.mrc.org](http://www.mrc.org)). Thus suggesting that CNN was aware of the public’s interest in Trump, and they were tailoring their content towards viewer entertainment from the very start of the election.

In 2017, CNN’s disproportionate focus on Trump only grew larger. According to Eric Levitz or *New York Magazine* and Michael M. Grynbaum of *The New York Times*, White House advisors have called CNN’s coverage of Trump “unbecoming,” “biased” and “arrogant” (“White House Warns CNN That Critical Coverage Could Cost Time Warner Its Merger,” and “The Network Against the Leader of the Free World”). Trump has also relentlessly shamed the network on Twitter for having low ratings and for reporting “fake news” (Trump, [twitter.com](https://twitter.com)). Grynbaum also explains that White House advisors threatened to not-approve the pending merger between CNN’s parent company Time Warner and ATT&T, with *The New York Times* article saying:

White House advisers have discussed a potential point of leverage over their adversary, a senior administration official said: a pending merger between CNN’s parent company, Time Warner, and AT&T. Mr. Trump’s Justice Department will decide whether to approve the merger, and while analysts say there is little to stop the deal from moving forward, the President’s animus toward CNN remains a wild card. (Grynbaum, “The Network Against the Leader of the Free World”)

Because the merger was a form of vertical integration, the deal was routine and expected for two major corporations (Downes, “The Government's Unraveling Antitrust Case Against AT&T-Time Warner”). Time Warner is a producer, and AT&T is a distributor, so according to *Forbes Magazine*’s Larry Downes, there should not be any unlawful practices in the act of joining the

two companies (Ibid). Similar vertically integrated mergers in the past have been Comcast/NBC, and ABC/Disney—the marriage of production and distribution is common in the entertainment business in order to reduce costs of hiring out of house. Downes says, “the two companies do not compete,” therefore there was not any opposition to the seemingly completely legal and logical merger (Ibid). However, in November of 2017 the Department of Justice blocked Time Warner’s merger with AT&T, a deal Downes says worth \$85 billion, and “with little to no legal or economic basis to support the government’s complaint” (Ibid). Although no threats from the White House were officially confirmed, the hold put on the merger is rumored to a result of malintentions from White House in order to stop the growth and support of CNN. Since the hold on the merger, CNN has continued to report Trump news as usual, and stay focused on the most popular stories of the moment. Specifically, in the past few months that popular story has been the potential collusion between the Russian government and the Trump presidential campaign/ White House administration. In total, this lawsuit reflects the fact that the entertainment and politics are increasingly becoming commingled, with the CNN television broadcast channel still directing its production strategy towards entertainment and the White House potentially trying to control which media platforms that American viewers choose to follow.

Overall, Trump prevailed despite his incredibly negative coverage throughout the general election. The tone of the content did not seem to have an effect on his success, but the amount of coverage did. Trump capitalized on this entertaining television presence, and ultimately become the most-reported candidate throughout the 2016 presidential election year, potentially aiding him winning the title of President Elect. CNN was no different from the general media in the fact they also reported very negatively on Trump, but they did, however, strategize the way in which they presented their content in order to maximize viewership. Now, CNN’s parent company

Time Warner may be facing consequences as a result of their aggressively entertainment driven content, generously based on Trump's antics. Conclusively, CNN successfully differed its content from other major cable news networks by pushing the boundaries of what the network considers 'news.' Original programming and interest based television news are modern day deviations of CNN's classic all-encompassing news channel—they still serve an educational purpose while also captivating viewers.

## CONCLUSION

The information provided in this thesis makes a strong argument that Jeff Zucker learned how to showcase Donald Trump's distinctive and supremely confident television personality to boost ratings at NBC beginning in 2004. A decade later as President and CEO of CNN—a network with an eroding market share at the time, Zucker again harnessed Trump's bombastic personality to power up lackluster ratings for CNN. This time however, the stakes were much, much higher: Trump was trying to make the quantum leap from reality TV star to become the leader of the free world. Throughout the 2016 presidential campaign, at CNN Zucker used his instincts and ingenuity for television production to highlight Trump, which elevated the network's content to be more engaging than their competitors.

Zucker and Trump were unwitting accomplices in this endeavor, and in fact, their relationship during this pivotal time in 2016 was not collaborative or even mutually respectful. Instead, it was exploitative on Zucker's part, understanding that Trump's rants were a nonstop source of controversy and spectacle. CNN delivered impressive improvements under Zucker's three-pillar strategy—leapfrogging fourteen other channels to become one Nielsen's most-watched cable networks. However, Zucker's production strategy both on *The Apprentice* and later while covering him for the 2016 presidential election CNN's, was not to glorify Trump. In fact, their general election coverage as shown in the Shorenstein Study tended to be more derogatory than flattering, only because of Trump's proclivity to generate scandal, controversy, and outrage. Thus, it was not that CNN somehow rallied Americans to support Trump, but rather their unfiltered and abundant coverage of Trump, which proved to have captivating entertainment.

CNN's Trump coverage was arguably unbiased, reporting exhaustively on both the negative and positive aspects of his presidential run, and aligned with the trends that other news outlets in 2016 were following. Even so, CNN serves as an example of one news network that greatly benefited from the 2016 election. CNN's Trump-centric focus generated one of the most dramatic increases in viewership among cable news channels in 2016. Although the coverage on CNN and all other news outlets was overwhelmingly negative, the 2016 presidential campaign coverage legitimized Trump as a viable candidate for US President--something nobody anticipated until suddenly it happened. So, although Zucker was exploiting Trump throughout *The Apprentice* and the 2016 presidential election year on CNN for his own professional and monetary benefits, he almost certainly also inadvertently contributed to Trump's success as well.

### **Future implications:**

This series of serendipitous events outlined above resulted in the election of a man who is in many respects unlike any previous American President, and the future implications of this are unknowable. Trump's election was driven largely by his entertainment factor, as showcased by Jeff Zucker and other mass media outlets. The result of the 2016 Presidential Campaign year is an inexperienced president who has an unpredictable and confrontational personality. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Trump's television persona, characterized by simplistic, misogynistic, and boastful language, is more prominent now than ever before. These unmistakable, Trump-branded behavioral traits have carried over to Twitter, where Trump obsessively voices his opinions on people and events, often causing issues with his impulsive messages. This argument suggests that Twitter and other social media platforms will only

increasingly become a way for people in power to reinforce their positions and cultivate a following.

In cable news television, the increasingly blurred boundary between entertainment and honest journalism is a trend that is likely to continue to evolve throughout political coverage in the future. Other television networks may follow suit by only airing two to four stories a day, and prioritizing entertainment value over balanced coverage of important issues. Additionally, under Zucker's leadership, the online digital content will probably continue to become more vital and central to the CNN brand in the future. Zucker says he sees CNN's digital platforms expanding in mobile and in video in the upcoming years (Jeff Zucker | Full Q&A | Oxford Union, youtube.com).

Future political candidates may try to imitate Trump's unabashed self-promotion instead of following traditional political decorum. Furthermore, in 2020 America might see other political candidates spring up from unconventional backgrounds such as technology, startup ventures, film or music. Seemingly, the barriers to entry have fallen significantly since Trump proved viable in the public's eye to take office. On the other hand, polls conducted in December of 2017 by Pew Research, and reported on CNN show that only about one in three Americans feel that he is doing a good job as US President (Tatum, "Trump's Approval Ratings at 32%"). According to CNN, presidential approval ratings normally "track very closely" to the economy at that given time (Tatum, "Trump's Approval Ratings at 32%"). This abysmally low approval rating in the context of a robust economy is a very clear indication that the American public is not pleased with President Donald Trump's leadership. (Tatum, "Trump's Approval Ratings at 32%"). Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that although Trump's unconventional

celebrity personality may have resonated in 2016, it seems unlikely that this will prove successful in the future political elections.

To summarize, the thesis argues that broadcast news channels are being increasingly tailored to be entertaining and sensational rather than informative and educational due to the convergence of many factors that have spawned onto the media scene since the 1960s. For instance, the rise of digital news has become evermore present. Also, decreasing ad sales and diminishing television audiences have demanded a drastic shift towards television that focuses on controversy and spectacle. Additionally, this emphasis on entertaining content in cable television has also been a result of journalism-centered reporting, or journalism that allows for news channels to reassess old topics with new perspectives, thus helping to fill a news channel with 24-hours of news programming while also retaining an audience. The Internet has made media and information ubiquitous, so cable news television has been forced to prioritize performing for audiences rather than informing the general public. Adding to the current emphasis on viewers' amusement, the symbiotic relationship between Jeff Zucker and Donald Trump proves that entertainment and politics are increasingly reliant on each other in today's digital age. As a result of Zucker's exploitation of Donald Trump on both *The Apprentice* and CNN, both men have risen to unprecedented levels of power and influence. However, now the American people suffer the consequences of surrendering to the spectacle throughout the 2016 presidential election year. How this plays out in the future is anyone's guess—but whatever the consequences, they are likely to be manipulated to benefit and potentially boost cable news ratings.

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