

# The “Relatable” and Mobilizing Student Engagement with TV Representations

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When asked to account for the popularity of celebrities, memes or TV programs, students frequently cite their “relatability.” Students, of course, are not alone in this use of the “relatable” to explain the appeal of media. The invocation of the “relatable” speaks of the desire to account for how audiences are moved connect with the images and stories on screens, trying to explain how media appeal to the audience member’s sense of self. Such a term invites us to consider how mediated pleasures reside in and are perpetuated by the personalized nature of mobile media, the attention economy and fetishization of “authenticity.” While the relatable need not be inherently a politically regressive concept, I worry that it can reflect this neoliberal moment in which postfeminist, postracial ideologies fester, and in which individuals are deemed more important than collectives. Appreciating television because it is “relatable” seems risky as this comfortable space of media engagement may merely confirm our pre-existing beliefs, locating pleasure in bodies and images that are familiar and safe rather than different or challenging.

Fake news proliferated across the same media platforms that also perpetuate personalized media; evidence to support its claims, fake news was often treated as “real” when it confirmed rather than confronted pre-existing conservative, retrograde hegemonic worldviews. As scholars argue, fake news is not a new phenomenon, so much as it pedals in the same tricks other conservative media have long deployed. Distorting statistics, presenting opinion as fact, featuring an authoritative voice that presumably articulates objectivity but actually conveys a deeply subjective position, the conservative and “fake” news media have distorted journalistic conventions in the interests of right wing politics. These appropriations of the conventions of journalism do not work in the interests of democracy and their bias hides behind the presumably relatable conventions of journalistic practices.

By unpacking and decentering the presumably authoritative voice in all kinds of TV news, we can ask students to consider how news is presented as “relatable” by depending upon ideals of objective truth. To this end, Samantha Bee’s TBS program *Full Frontal* does not hide its assumed “bias” but rather foregrounds its feminist underpinnings and commitment to diversity. As such, it can be used in classrooms to challenge students’ understandings of “fake” and “real” news. *Full Frontal* can help students explore how embracing rather than resisting subjectivity as a structuring aesthetic for TV news can actually be productive in advancing media literacy concepts as well as news content. *Full Frontal* self-consciously articulates its own ideological position, highlights polysemy, and draws upon a range of evidence, notably the voices of marginalized peoples, to decenter the authoritative voice of the program itself. In this

way, this program circulates news stories that reflect a diversity of viewpoints which may otherwise be silenced by mainstream journalism, promoting media literacy ideals. *Full Frontal* regularly invokes its own awareness of polysemy, highlighting identity politics at the level of consumption and production. While clearly a program invested in feminism, it does not presume that its audience is homogenous or implicitly white middle-upper-class viewers. Instead, Bee speaks with an awareness that audience members encounter her program from their own viewing positions. Bee recently offered an on-air apology in response to the public outcry of her use of the term “cunt” when referring to Ivanka Trump’s silence about her father’s family separation immigration “policies.” Bee speaks sympathetically to women subjected to this term in their lives before watching her show while simultaneously redirecting focus back to the issue of immigration politics. Such an awareness of polysemy reflects the grounded nature of mediated encounters. As we all engage from our own historically contingent vantagepoints Bee’s program highlights rather than sublimates these viewpoints, refusing to provide a normative viewing position. Furthermore, *Full Frontal* can be used to help students consider how news production is fraught with political perspectives. Bee underscores her own whiteness, and rather than assume it grants her hegemonic authority, students might consider how she decenters her voice. On one episode, Bee interviews the members of a Mexican feminist rescue brigade who worked to save victims of the earthquake in Mexico City. By drawing upon a range of evidence, she illustrates how government and media conspired to hide corruption exposed by the damage caused by the earthquake. Students can thus be asked to interrogate the range of journalistic documentation and the questions that Bee posed to the brigade, and in doing so they might note how *Full Frontal* constructs a narrative while positioning Bee as a storyteller with notably less knowledge than the brigade members. Therefore, this program provides students opportunities to explore how they might be moved to *relate* to content that reflects and is constructed from subjective, diverse perspectives.