He’s a poor person’s idea of a rich person. They see him. They think, “If I were rich, I’d have a fabulous tie like that. Why are my ties not made of 400 acres of polyester?” All that stuff he shows you in his house—the gold faucets—if you won the lottery, that’s what you’d buy.

Fran Lebowitz (qtd. in Fox)

In the November 2016 issue of *Television and New Media*, with a Trump presidency looming, a special section on “The Reality Celebrity of Donald Trump” provided a collection of short and insightful commentaries that discussed various facets of the relationship between Trump and the media (Negra 646). In one of those commentaries, Laurie Ouellette makes the case that much of the media criticism surrounding Trump too easily dismisses reality television as mindless entertainment instead of recognizing how it has long played a role in the “neoliberal ‘reinvention’ of government” (648). Among other sources, she brings up Neal Gabler’s *Salon* article that essentially takes the media to task by blaming the “deeply unserious media and reality-TV culture” for the rise of Trump (Gabler; Ouellette 648). To make his point, Gabler draws on Daniel J. Boorstin’s seminal work *The Image*, first published in 1962, in which he establishes the concept of the “pseudo-event” and identifies it as a major menace to American culture in the age of mass communication. Gabler appropriates Boorstin’s terminology by calling Trump’s campaign a “pseudo campaign” and the candidate himself a “pseudo-candidate” because of the way Trump’s success seems mostly based on his status as a celebrity, or someone who is famous for being famous. “Trump is the Kardashian of politics,” he declared poignantly (Gabler; also qtd. in Ouellette 648).

Gabler’s essay reads as a provocative polemic against the media coverage of politics over the past several decades, but his evocation of Boorstin’s *The Image* is particularly astute and deserves further academic scrutiny. Despite the fact that *The Image* was published in the early 1960s and comments on the (news) media landscape of that time, this article will show how his
original concept of the pseudo-event and his related elaborations on the notion of celebrity as “human pseudo-events” can help explain one of the most consequential events of the 2010s: Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 US presidential election. The object of this analysis is not only to explore Trump’s ascent to the highest office in the United States but also to reveal the media’s complicit role in it. The central argument is twofold: First, this article will demonstrate how Trump’s cultivation of his (false) public image as self-made man and billionaire perfectly encapsulates the human pseudo-event as defined by Boorstin. By laying out how the reality TV show *The Apprentice* helped cement his persona, it will also become clear that using Boorstin’s theories does not necessarily contradict Ouellette’s plea to consider the significance of reality television. Second, it will concentrate on Trump’s outspoken role in elevating “birtherism” from a fringe talking point to a national conversation. Briefly put, birtherism is a conspiracy theory that, contrary to evidence, claims that Barack Obama, the first African-American president of the United States, was not born in the United States and is thus not a legitimate president. The reason that special consideration is given to “birtherism” is that it occupies a unique place in Trump’s lifelong staging of pseudo-events. It is the only one he actively participated in for an extended period of time that was not directly about himself and did not help his brand as successful businessman. Furthermore, while Trump had “teased” the idea of a presidential run many times throughout his adult life, mostly for the purpose of self-promotion, it was his persistent contributions to this conspiracy theory over a number of years that gained him many supporters, particularly in far-right circles. This in turn led him on a path to win the Republican nomination and eventually the presidency. A comparison of some of Trump’s media appearances related to “birtherism” to Boorstin’s criticism of Joseph McCarthy will illustrate how they constituted the staging of the ultimate pseudo-event. It will also show how these interviews already foreshadowed the problematic media coverage of his presidential campaign that helped him get elected. As with any victorious candidate, there were certainly numerous factors that contributed to Trump’s election win, many of which a growing body of academic work has addressed. Nonetheless, returning to Boorstin’s concepts helps illuminate important elements that significantly facilitated Trump’s becoming the first pseudo-candidate for president and eventually his very real election win.

BOORSTIN’S PSEUDO-EVENT AND CELEBRITY CULTURE

In *The Image*, Daniel J. Boorstin describes the ways America built “the thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life” (3). He argues that the origins of this unreality are what he coins “pseudo-events,” or, generally, news stories that are artificially created (Boorstin 11). Since the publication of *The Image* in the early 1960s, many scholars have drawn on and further developed Boorstin’s theories on pseudo-events and celebrity culture. For example, in *History of the Mass Media in the United States: An Encyclopedia*, David Cassidy’s entry on “Staged News” refers to pseudo-events and defines them (he uses the terms synonymously) as “effort to control manner of news presentation,” which can either come from people that wish to be covered or from the media itself (624). In the course of their study of pseudo-events and the Philippine press, Edson C. Tandoc Jr. and Marko M. Skoric observe that Boorstin’s elaborations have been used to analyze many different aspects of media coverage of the government and politicians, such as the military, campaigns, elections, presidents, and at least one first lady (35). Among the articles they reference is Tim Barney’s work that exposes how the 2000 US presidential election played out as a media spectacle. However, he merely evokes Boorstin’s work on the image without ever truly engaging with it (Barney 2332). In his analysis of George W. Bush’s famous jet landing aboard an aircraft carrier in 2003, an event so elaborately staged that many compared it to scenes from *Top
Gun (1986), W. Lance Bennett builds on Boorstin’s pseudo-event and defines what he calls “news reality frames,” whose distinguishing characteristic is that the media’s participation in these staged events is much more active and interventionist than with “regular” pseudo-events (Bennett 174; also referenced in Tandoc Jr. and Skoric 35). Similarly, Simon Morgan tests the usefulness of the concept of the pseudo-event for historians but argues in the process, counter to Boorstin’s contention, that celebrities and celebrity culture do not have their origin in the midtwentieth century but already existed as a phenomenon in the centuries before. Similarly, William Harpine argues that William McKinley’s “front porch campaign,” which happened already in 1896, was a series of staged events. However, Boorstin’s observations on how new technologies of his time (i.e., film, television, and glossy magazines) and their ubiquity created pseudo-events and celebrities out of thin air still have great value and can help us make sense of the 2016 presidential election. As Richard W. Waterman et al. emphasize, even though Boorstin criticized the superficiality of events of the late 1950s and early 1960s, such as the debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, presidential debates have further decreased in substance “as presidents practice jokes and one-liners with their political consultants in preparation for their debates, ever aware that these will be used as sound bites by the news media…” (17, original emphasis). Stephanie Viens, too, maintains that The Image “remains a classic example of an ‘older’ media criticism that is still pertinent” (95) and laid the groundwork for what was subsequently called and further developed as “hyperreality” (94). The present article, however, will specifically and deliberately draw on Boorstin’s elaborations and terminology because, as the following review of literature on celebrity studies will demonstrate, Trump is best defined and explained by using Boorstin’s original concepts.²

According to Boorstin, pseudo-events do not happen spontaneously, but are planned in advance in ways that ensure that the media can easily relate them to the public. Whether or not a pseudo-event is successful is solely determined by how widely it is reported (11). Interestingly, Boorstin’s prime example of a pseudo-event—the interview—is something that has become so normal and is so frequently used that most people could not imagine the news landscape without it. Boorstin argues that unlike, for example, a natural disaster, the interview is a clear instance where news is being made rather than merely reported (11, 14). And it is this making of news—that is, the deliberate creation of pseudo-events—that lies at the heart of what we might call society’s self-deception. The situation is made even worse by the way pseudo-events may easily drown out genuine events since they prioritize their potential dramatic effect over their actual newsworthiness and can be repeated as often as necessary in order to be more impactful (39). “Participants,” Boorstin explains, “are selected for their newsworthiness and dramatic interest” (39). What he really means is that participants are chosen according to their prospective news-making ability. An interview may be newsworthy in the sense that it is likely to draw a lot of attention but not so much in terms of how important the content of the interview truly is. News-making ability stresses performance over substance, which makes pseudo-events instantly more accessible to people than ordinary events. As Boorstin remarks: “Even if we cannot discuss intelligently the qualifications of the candidates or the complicated issues, we can at least judge the effectiveness of a television performance” (Boorstin 39–40). The fact that much of post-presidential-debate coverage on cable news does not discuss policies but focuses instead on which of the candidates “won” the debate confirms this observation.

Besides the pseudo-event, Boorstin laments the excesses of celebrity culture. Similar to the way he juxtaposes pseudo-events with spontaneous events, he contrasts celebrities with heroes by distinctly differentiating fame from greatness. He explains that for a long time, famous people were generally known for heroic actions. Now that the media and their consumers can so easily make any person famous, the general public still has the tendency to equate fame with greatness, even though
the former no longer entails the latter. Unlike most heroes, celebrities are not necessarily self-made, but are typically created by the media and by public reception. Celebrities are artificially produced in the same ways that pseudo-events are manufactured (Boorstin 46–48), and in fact, Boorstin calls celebrities “human pseudo-events” (57, 66). However, since many people hold celebrities in high regard, they frequently refuse to acknowledge the ties between celebrity and artificiality, and therefore confuse fame with heroism. As Boorstin points out, the public wants celebrities to be great even though fame cannot instill greatness (48). What Boorstin finds most troubling about this problem is that celebrities tend to eclipse heroes in ways strikingly similar to the ways pseudo-events pull public attention toward them and away from spontaneous events (66). Consequently, social attention, too, is directed to people who are famous for being famous. Boorstin pithily distills the essence of the difference between celebrity and hero as such: “The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name” (Boorstin 61).

James Monaco recognized the same development distinguishing heroes from the past with celebrities of the present: “[Heroes] have done things, acted in the world: written, thought, understood, led. Celebrities, on the other hand, needn’t have done – needn’t do – anything special. Their function isn’t to act – just to be” (Monaco 5–6, original emphasis). Nonetheless, he subsequently categorizes celebrities into three types: The hero who is famous for their actions, the star who is known for their persona, and the “quasar” who does not seek the spotlight and has (almost) no control over their fame because their status as celebrity stems from who society believes they are. Quasars are sometimes even victims of media attention (Monaco 10–12). As Graeme Turner points out in his Understanding Celebrity, the quasar is rather similar to what he, Bonner, and Marshall much later (2000) described as “accidental celebrity” (Turner 24). Turner favors the taxonomy of celebrities established by Chris Rojek that, in his opinion, provides more nuance and has also been embraced by many other scholars (Turner 24–25). Besides the three definitions of “ascribed,” “achieved,” and “attributed” celebrity, Rojek introduces additionally the terms “celetoid” and “celeactor.” He focuses his analysis largely on celebrity that is either achieved (i.e., merit-based) or attributed (i.e., almost purely media-constructed), both of which he contrasts with ascribed celebrity that depends on lineage and bloodline (Rojek 17–18). Celetoids, then, are “any form of compressed, concentrated, attributed celebrity” (Rojek 20), that is, people who are famous for a very short amount of time and then completely disappear again. A subcategory of the celetoid is the celeactor, who is essentially a fictional persona that receives celebrity status. According to Rojek, Ali G, a role played by Sacha Baron Cohen, is a prime example (23).

Besides some variants and the acknowledgment that categories are blurry and can overlap, what is noticeable in the work of these scholars is that they all include a version of Boorstin’s original distinction between hero and celebrity. In other words, it matters whether the celebrityhood is, for lack of a better word, deserved due to skills and achievements that go beyond creating fame, or whether it is meritless in the sense that fame is not just a by-product or a means to an end, but the end itself. The present analysis of Donald Trump’s ascent to the highest office in the US government is built on exactly this foundational distinction.

TRUMP AS HUMAN PSEUDO-EVENT

Donald Trump has always been a celebrity with a big name. However, given that he has spent his entire life carefully cultivating a specific image of himself in the media that lacks footing in reality, he appears to be a most deliberate human pseudo-event. In 1987, Trump published his best-selling The Art of the Deal, in which he explains
to his readers what he does to be as rich and successful as he is. One of the many recommendations in his book is to “think big”:

I like thinking big. I always have. To me it’s very simple: if you’re going to be thinking anyway, you might as well think big. Most people think small, because most people are afraid of success, afraid of making decisions, afraid of winning. And that gives people like me a great advantage.

(Trump and Schwartz 46–47)

_The Art of the Deal_ was the first of a series of books in which Trump crafted his persona as a successful businessman, real estate mogul, and dealmaker. Despite the fact that his books mostly serve as a glorification of himself, many of them, like _The Art of the Deal_, are disguised as “how-to” books (among others Trump: _How to Get Rich, How to Build a Fortune: Your Plan for Success from the World’s Most Famous Businessman, Trump 101: The Way to Success, and Think Like a Billionaire: Everything You Need to Know about Success, Real Estate, and Life_), which helped him establish and support his narrative of the self-made man by laying out the brilliant techniques and strategies he used that (as he claims) single-handedly turned him into a billionaire. Trump biographer (and longtime Trump critic) Timothy O’Brien describes how important it was for Donald Trump to be perceived as very rich and very successful in _Trump Nation: The Art of Being the Donald_. According to O’Brien, Trump claimed he was a billionaire in a conversation with him as early as 1996 and asserted that he had increasing (albeit fluctuating) amounts of money throughout the following years (_Trump Nation_ 152–54). When he announced his candidacy for president in 2015, he claimed to be worth 8.7 billion dollars (Kranish and Fisher 293). Only one month later, however, he upped his financial disclosure report, which presidential candidates are required to file with the Federal Election Commission, to a round ten billion dollars (Mullany).

But it is not enough for Trump to have people believe he is very rich, he is also adamant about having done it by himself. During a town-hall appearance in October of the same year, he boasted: “It has not been easy for me. And you know I started off in Brooklyn, my father gave me a small loan of a million dollars” (Trump qtd. in Kessler). When he was called out by the media and other presidential candidates not only for the untruthfulness of the statement but also for considering one million dollars a small amount of money, he doubled down: “I got a very, very small loan from my father many years ago. I built that into a massive empire and I paid my father back that loan…” (Trump qtd. in Kessler). What this incident already hints at is that Trump’s image of the self-made billionaire is almost entirely grounded in performance and spectacle and not in substance. His many business failures and questionable net worth were already sporadically exposed throughout his career long before his campaign announcement, and such reports intensified somewhat once he became a serious presidential contender. However, the media coverage on this topic has only truly become extensive since he took office as president of the United States, perhaps partly fueled by Trump’s refusal to do what, according to Kertscher, all major-party candidates since Jimmy Carter had done—publicly release his tax returns.

In the aforementioned Trump biography, whose first edition was published in 2005, O’Brien lays out in great detail how the financial magazine _Forbes_ more or less randomly assessed and published Trump’s fluctuating net worth on the influential _Forbes_ 400, the magazine’s annual list of the richest people in the United States, throughout the 1980s and 1990s (_Trump Nation_ 149–52). In the new introduction to the 2016 edition of the same biography, O’Brien calls to mind that Trump was so unsettled by O’Brien’s allegation that he was not as rich as he was claiming that he filed a 5-billion-dollar lawsuit for defamation against the author and his publisher (_Trump Nation_ xv), a suit he ultimately lost in 2011 (O’Brien, “I’ve Watched Trump Testify”). In the course of this trial, O’Brien’s lawyers had the opportunity to depose Trump and he admitted a total of thirty times that he had lied over the years about various issues, his wealth and assets among them (Fahrenthold and O’Harrow Jr.). In another
unfavorable Trump biography, author David Cay Johnston, an investigative journalist specializing in tax issues and economics, quotes from the transcript of this deposition where Trump gave away his game: “My net worth fluctuates, and it goes up and down with markets and with attitudes and with feelings, even my own feelings...” (Trump qtd. in Johnston 78). When asked what he based his numbers on in public statements about his net worth, he explained: “I would say it’s my general attitude at the time that the question may be asked. And as I say, it varies” (Trump qtd. in Johnston 79). Johnston expands on how Trump inflated his net worth, how he overvalued but also undervalued his properties depending on what was more advantageous in the given situation (overstating the value to make him appear richer, understating it to avoid taxes), how time and again he was not able to pay his bills, which completely undermines his claim to be a billionaire, and how a 1987 evaluation by an independent accounting firm actually showed that Trump was 295 million dollars in debt (77–89). Johnston additionally reveals how Trump has a long and well-documented history of calling journalists under a fake name claiming to be a spokesperson of himself to try and manipulate the media into portraying him as a financially successful womanizer (Johnston 137–40; Fisher and Hobson).

The most damning and extensive reports on Trump’s finances were published when he was already president. The Washington Post reported in the spring of 2019 how throughout his career Trump often fabricated “Statements of Financial Condition” that were not based on facts when he wanted to “prove” his riches to journalists or a potential business partner. These statements even contain an “accountant’s warning” making clear that they “have not audited or reviewed the accompanying financial statement and, accordingly, do not express an opinion or provide any assurance about whether the financial statement is in accordance with accounting principles generally accepted in the United States of America” (Fahrenthold and Connell). The New York Times topped this report only two months later with an in-depth analysis of ten years of tax transcripts they had obtained covering the years from 1985 to 1994. These records document Trump’s massive annual losses including the 250 million dollars he lost in 1990 and 1991, which was, according to The New York Times, “more than double those of the nearest taxpayer... for those years” (Buettnner and Craig). Another New York Times article published the year before gave a detailed account on how Trump’s own origin story of the self-made man is nothing short of fiction. Instead of merely “a small loan of a million dollars,” his father in fact provided him with what amounted to the equivalent of 413 million dollars (adjusted for inflation) over five decades. From effectively earning a salary from his father’s real estate empire since he was three years old, over loans for his new projects, to simple cash infusions to his various failing businesses, Trump could always rely on his father’s support (Barstow, Craig, and Buettner).

One aspect that adds to bewilderment about Trump getting away with portraying himself as a masterful dealmaker and singular businessman for so long is that it does not really require investigative journalism to pierce that façade. He bankrupted casinos in Atlantic City and, according to Johnston, actually suffered a total of six bankruptcies throughout his career (94). Additionally, by merely reviewing the many products and business opportunities that Trump has touted over the years, the smokescreen all but disappears. Mitt Romney, who had accepted Trump’s endorsement when he was the likely Republican presidential nominee in 2012 (Allin 221), changed his tune in 2016 when he called Trump a “con man, a fake” during a speech denouncing Trump’s candidacy (qtd. in Beckwith; also qtd. in Allin 222). Among others, he attempted to dismantle Trump’s perceived business acumen:

But wait, you say, isn’t he a huge business success that knows what he’s talking about? No he isn’t. His bankruptcies have crushed small businesses and the men and women who worked for them. He inherited his business, he didn’t create it. And what ever happened to Trump Airlines? How about Trump University? And then there’s Trump Magazine and Trump Vodka and Trump Steaks, and Trump Mortgage?

(Romney qtd. in Beckwith)
In fact, the list of businesses and products that bore Trump’s name but are no more goes on. In no particular order, there also once was a board game called *Trump: The Game* (Johnston 134), the men’s fragrance “Donald Trump: The Fragrance,” men’s suits from “Donald J. Trump Signature Collection” (O’Brien, *Trump Nation* 1 and 3), and the bottled water “Trump Ice” (Holodny). From 2009 to 2011, Trump Network, which was essentially a “thinly disguised pyramid scheme,” sold vitamin supplements whose composition was supposedly based on the buyer’s urine test (Kranish and Fisher 236–37). Not long after Romney gave his speech about Trump’s business failures, Trump set out to disprove him during a campaign event that featured a bizarre display of supposed Trump products. Katy Tur, the NBC correspondent who was tasked to follow Trump on the campaign trail, described the scene as such:

It looks like piles of raw steaks, bottles of wine, pallets of water, and a propped-up magazine. The Secret Service is guarding it like a table of ancient artifacts, which in a sense it is. The wine is from Trump Winery in Virginia. The water is wrapped in baby-blue Trump logos. The magazine, called *The Jewel of Palm Beach*, has a Trump property cover. And the steaks? They appear to be Trump Steaks.

(Tur 152)

On closer inspection, however, Tur and her fellow reporters quickly realized that none of those items were actually Trump products but were made by other companies (152–53). Once again, it was all just for show, a made-for-TV production that included actual props.

One thing that was not included in the display was any reference to Trump University. When Romney gave his speech, it was already deeply entangled in a class action lawsuit in which former students accused Trump and the university of fraud. In a 2005 promotional video, Trump had claimed: “At Trump University, we teach success . . . We’re going to teach you better than the business schools are going to teach you, and I went to the best business school” (Trump qtd. in Johnston 119, 121). According to the plaintiffs, none of this was true. Despite Trump’s repeated claims that he would fight this to the end and be ultimately victorious at trial, two months after Trump’s inauguration, the judge approved a 25-million-dollar settlement that would reimburse the over 3,700 students for about 90 percent of what they had spent at the sham educational facility (Eder and Medina).

In the latest setback to the Trump empire, Donald J. Trump Foundation, the purported charitable organization of the Trump family, was forced to dissolve under court supervision in December 2018. This was the result of a lawsuit brought by the New York attorney general, who claimed that the foundation was “little more than a checkbook to serve Mr. Trump’s business and political interests” (qtd. in Goldmacher). Trump Foundation was not the only time Trump’s generosity, or lack thereof, became the topic of controversy. Many journalists who tried to confirm his many public claims of charitable donations found that they were never followed through (see, for instance, Kranish and Fisher 133–35; Fahrenthold; Fahrenthold and Crites).

Despite all these failures and uncovered lies, Trump’s image as business tycoon remained largely intact. Of course, he would not call them lies but “truthful hyperbole.” To lift another piece of advice from *The Art of the Deal*:

> 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.

(Trump and Schwartz 58)

Not surprisingly, Trump did not actually write this book (or any subsequent books) himself, but the actual author is Tony Schwartz, who has since become an outspoken critic of him. In early 2019, he tweeted: “The ‘Art of the Deal’ was a phrase that came out of my mouth 30 years ago as a way for Trump to write an autobiography he didn’t have. It was a fake marketing idea, not a reality. I regret it every day of my life” (@tonyschwartz). Even the book’s best-selling status, at least around the time of publication, is questionable. John R. O’Donnell, a former employee of Trump’s who helped him run Trump Plaza Hotel and Casino for three years, revealed that Trump Plaza and Trump Castle (two of Trump’s failed casinos)
were ordered to purchase thousands of copies to boost sales and make them appear more popular. However, they were unable to sell them to their customers and so eventually simply gave them away for free (O’Donnell 24–25; see also Kranish and Fisher 134).

As this brief survey of Trump’s life as a businessman illustrates, there is ample evidence that Trump is not, in fact, a billionaire (or at least not as rich as he claims). He is not a particularly masterful dealmaker either, and as for his image as a real estate mogul, while he certainly did have some success in that area, he has not built anything in a long time. In fact, he does not even own many of the buildings that carry his name. He merely licensed his name for a fee (Clarke; Fleishman; Kranish and Fisher; Swanson 241). As Boorstin stated, “the celebrity is a big name.”

Boorstin also declared that a “celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness” (57). This seems certainly true for the Kardashians, which probably prompted Gabler’s comparison between them and Trump. However, unlike Gabler’s contention that “Trump is the Kardashian of politics,” one could argue that Trump is (or was before becoming president) actually not just “known for his well-knownness.” While many may reasonably ask what the Kardashians actually do and why they are famous, these questions are rather easily answered when it comes to Trump. His image was actually very specific. He was known for being a self-made billionaire, an unmatched dealmaker, and a real estate mogul. The only problem is that, as evidenced, none of these are grounded in reality. Therefore, in a way, he is really only known for being known for being a self-made billionaire, unmatched dealmaker, and real estate mogul.

Of course, reality matters very little when reality television comes into play. All of Trump’s self-marketing culminated in 2004 when The Apprentice premiered. While Boorstin wrote about the media landscape of his time and could not have foreseen this new format of television, Douglass Rushkoff asserts that Boorstin had “at least a vague premonition of most of today’s ‘reality’ television where any sort of talent is not only superfluous, but actually a hindrance” (266). Rushkoff specifically mentions only MTV’s Real World but calls it and “any other reality show” a pseudo-event in itself (266). The simple premise of The Apprentice is that a group of contestants compete by doing business-related tasks. At the end of each episode one of them is eliminated, which gave Trump his very own catchphrase, namely “You’re fired!” While many may look down on this show and reality television generally as one of the lowest forms of entertainment, it should not be underestimated just how much of an impact The Apprentice had on Trump’s image and subsequent successful presidential candidacy. There were many factors that contributed to Donald Trump’s election victory, but as Lisa W. Kelly argued, the role television in general and The Apprentice in particular played in transforming Trump into a viable presidential candidate is still underappreciated. This awareness or acknowledgment is “absent from much journalistic and academic discourse, which tends to be concerned with print and social media through a focus on ‘fake news’ and Trump’s late-night tweets” (Kelly 88). Alison Hearn, too, emphasizes how Trump’s many seasons on The Apprentice helped cultivate his “potent, pre-existing brand value proposition as a ‘wealthy’ ‘winner’” (656). While he had been somewhat of a celebrity before that, The Apprentice turned him into a big television star. Right from the start, the show had high ratings, was broadcast for several seasons, and helped cement his image as world-class businessman, real estate mogul, and billionaire—wrong as it may be. In Laurie Ouellette and James Hay’s analysis of The Apprentice, in which they also briefly mention how the show’s presentation of Trump’s career path excludes any mention of his inherited wealth (ch. 5), they use a critical verb in their description of Trump’s role in the show: “At the center of the series (as judge, boss, manager, series-owner, and exemplar) is Donald Trump, which the series casts as arguably the most recognizable US entrepreneur and mogul of the late twentieth century” (ch. 5, my emphasis). The importance of this phrasing can hardly be overstated. Donald Trump was cast in The Apprentice
and did not create it. He merely played the role of a highly successful businessman. The show made him look powerful, assertive, decisive, and always in charge. It was all about money and how to become rich. In many ways, it was the television version of The Art of the Deal. The pilot episode, tellingly called “Meet the Billionaire,” opens with several shots of Manhattan complementing Donald Trump’s voice-over: “New York. My city. Where the wheels of the global economy never stop turning. . . . If you’re not careful, it [Manhattan] can chew you up and spit you out. But if you work hard, you can really hit it big, and I mean really big” (“Meet the Billionaire” 00:35–01:05). The camera then cuts briefly to a medium close-up of Trump in the backseat of a limousine as he continues: “My name is Donald Trump, and I’m the largest real-estate developer in New York” (“Meet the Billionaire” 01:13–01:16). The camera then cuts to a low-angle shot of a Trump building and then continues the montage of images supporting Trump’s monologue, at times cutting back to him inside the limousine:

I own buildings all over the place, model agencies, the Miss Universe pageant, jet liners, golf courses, casinos, and private resorts like Mar-a-Lago . . . But it wasn’t always so easy. About thirteen years ago, I was seriously in trouble. . . . But I fought back. . . . I used my brain. I used my negotiating skills. . . . I’ve mastered the art of the deal, and I’ve turned the name Trump into the highest-quality brand. And as the master, I wanna pass along my knowledge to somebody else. I’m looking for the apprentice. (“Meet the Billionaire” 01:16–02:10)

As Trump briefly explains the premise of the show, we see him get out of the limousine and into a Trump helicopter. As the helicopter takes off, the opening credits start rolling. In this opening sequence, Trump seems to be taking his own advice of “thinking big” and using “truthful hyperbole,” portraying himself as the most powerful magnate who also benevolently wants to share his wealth of knowledge with others. The show was an instant hit. The first season, according to Joshua Green, averaged 20 million viewers per episode (94).

Besides the striking opening sequence, the most important scenes of the show were the ones that were said to take place in the boardroom of Trump Organization, high up in the famous Trump Tower on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. But, according to Misha Kavka, in her article on Trump and reality television, The Apprentice featured a studio version of Trump’s boardroom (152). According to O’Brien, this was neither the actual boardroom nor did it in any way approximate the real office space of the Trump Organization that he describes as “a tad run-down and worn, surprisingly vacant” (18). O’Brien furthermore and perhaps more importantly points out that, despite its reputation, the Trump Organization is in essence a fairly small operation with only a few employees (83). In other words, in real life, Trump was not a CEO of a huge company with board members and shareholders to answer and report to but instead was the head of what was essentially a family business. So, Trump’s persona as powerful CEO, like the boardroom, was a deception made for television. To appropriate Boorstin’s terminology, he was a pseudo-CEO in a pseudo-boardroom. Joshua Green also revealed that the TV boardroom was not even located high up in Trump Tower, as the television show suggests, but situated on the lower levels. This, too, was an illusion that was created thanks to editing (Green 94).

What Kavka astutely elaborates upon in her article, though, was the importance of the setup of the boardroom scenes: Trump, usually with advisers or associates by his side, always sat at the long end of a big conference table opposite the contestants awaiting his verdict on their performance. As Kavka highlights, this is not what an actual boardroom looks like but this unrealistic depiction is of little importance. In fact, by the mere virtue of this television portrayal, this setup becomes familiar and therefore real, additionally facilitated by the fact that most people do not have access to bona fide boardrooms (Kavka 156). What is particularly interesting about this is that Trump himself may have believed all along (or ended up believing) that this is, in fact, how strong leaders talk to their subordinates, and brought this view all the way into the White House.
In *A Higher Loyalty*, James Comey, the former director of the FBI, who was fired by Trump only four months into his presidency, describes his handful of encounters with Trump in great detail. Among other things, what struck him about their meetings in the Oval Office was that President Trump always sat behind the Resolute desk and everybody else had to sit in a semicircle on the opposite side (Comey 247, 252–53). The reason Comey found this conspicuous was that this was contrary to his experience with the two other US presidents under whom he served and with whom he had meetings in the Oval Office, George W. Bush and Barack Obama. At least, whenever Comey was present, neither of those two presidents ever sat behind the desk in order to conduct a meeting, but always chose to gather in the sitting area with them, sitting in the armchair by the fireplace. Comey assumed that they did this deliberately in order to make people more comfortable, reduce the hierarchical distance that everybody automatically has with the president given the great authority of this office, and thus make it easier for them to tell the president the truth (Comey 247). Trump preferred the opposite approach. As Comey recounts, “when the president sits on a throne, protected by a large wooden obstacle, as Trump routinely did in my interactions with him, the formality of the Oval Office is magnified and the chances of getting the full truth plummet” (247). Comey’s observations were confirmed by Andrew G. McCabe, his deputy director at the FBI, who became acting Director after Comey’s firing and has since been fired himself. He describes three meetings with the president in the Oval Office, whose seating arrangement was identical to what Comey experienced (McCabe 13, 226, 249). This is how McCabe described the last meeting: “The furniture was arranged the same way it always seemed to be: little schoolboy chairs in a semicircle in front of the desk. The president behind the desk” (McCabe 249). Unlike former presidents, Trump apparently felt the constant need to heighten his power and project his authority, and he did this the only way he knew how—the way it was done on *The Apprentice*, thus turning the Oval Office into a made-for-TV boardroom even during classified meetings without any cameras.

Others in Trump’s orbit, too, have acknowledged that Trump has tried to replicate the aesthetics from *The Apprentice* for other occasions. Jonathon Braun, the editorial supervisor for the first few seasons of *The Apprentice*, explained that Trump’s now infamous campaign announcement in 2015, where he came down the escalator in Trump Tower, was a technique they frequently used on the show (Keefe). Justin McConney, who worked as a media director for the Trump Organization for several years, revealed that Trump’s number 1 instruction was always to shoot him like they did on *The Apprentice* because this was his preferred look (Nuzzi; see also Keefe). Cliff Sims, a former Trump administration official, who also worked on his campaign, observed how specific Trump was when it came to shooting campaign videos. He recounts that Trump had an opinion about everything from the background, to his exact position in the frame, to his hair, always checking everything in the monitor himself (47–48).

Clearly Trump was very concerned about his visual appearance, but how much Trump was actually part of the decisionmaking process when it came to which contestant would be fired is a subject of considerable dispute. Jonathon Braun, the editorial supervisor for the first few seasons, described how the editors were repeatedly forced to “reverse engineer” an episode because Trump made the decision to fire somebody on the spur of the moment without considering who had performed well throughout the week (Braun qtd. in Keefe). Clay Aiken, a former contestant on *The Apprentice* spin-off *Celebrity Apprentice*, on the other hand, claimed that Trump did not decide who was fired at all but that that decision was made by the producers of the show (Schmidt). Admittedly, Aiken was the only one to (publicly) make that accusation but it does seem plausible given that this is how reality shows usually work. As is well known, the name of the genre is a misnomer: Reality television is scripted to a large extent, and it would make sense if the show’s producers were to base their decisions about who to
eliminate on a variety of factors including some that are unrelated to how the contestants handled their business-related tasks, such as their popularity with viewers and how their actions and personalities helped shape an interesting narrative arc for the individual episodes and the entire season. In fact, Mark Burnett, the show’s producer and mastermind, dislikes the term “reality television” and prefers to use “dramality,” a portmanteau of drama and reality, with which he at least implicitly concedes how important he considers the manipulation of reality in order to create and enhance drama in this genre of television (Keefe).

Whichever side one believes, whether Trump made the decisions badly or not at all, they both undermine the image of Trump as brilliant decision maker. And in an ironic turn, unlike Trump, the TV CEO, who has literally become famous for firing people to their face with his catchphrase “You’re fired!” Trump, the president, has proven to be very reluctant to fire anyone—even senior officials—in person, but rather does it via letter or tweet or by ordering somebody else to do it in his stead (see, for instance, Comey 263–65; Bayoumy; Costa, Barnes, and Helderman; Vazquez). According to Kranish and Fisher, Trump’s averseness to firing people himself actually has a long history as he usually designated somebody else to fulfill the unpleasant task in his many businesses long before he became president (99–100). Only on television did he face the contestants and fire them himself.

While experienced government officials easily saw through this performative act in the Oval Office, it was all the more convincing to the viewers of The Apprentice. As Kavka stresses, the manner in which these boardroom scenes were orchestrated presented Trump as a calm and self-assured decision maker (157). The show put on a weekly display of how Trump alone, as David Frum put it, can “fix it” and also extended his appeal and celebrity far beyond the East Coast (Frum). As Kranish and Fisher additionally point out, The Apprentice also connected Trump to Middle America in ways that might not have otherwise occurred. All of a sudden, more and more people recognized him on the street and their attitude toward him was overwhelmingly positive (Kranish and Fisher 217).

“BIRTHERMISM” AS PSEUDO-EVENT

Trump’s character in The Apprentice may have contributed to giving him undue credibility and media attention when Trump helped stage a pseudo-event, which came to be known as “birtherism.” What differentiates birtherism from all the other pseudo-events Trump staged throughout his adult life is that it was not so obviously focused on himself. After all, claiming that Barack Obama was not a US citizen did not immediately seem to help Donald Trump maintain his own brand as successful businessman, portray himself as extraordinarily popular with women, or sell products. And yet, it did help catapult him onto a political path that led to his successful run at the presidency. What is often forgotten is that Trump floated the idea of running for president several times long before his official announcement in 2015. The previous times, however, all seem to have been instances of yet further pseudo-events staged by Trump to help establish his public persona. The first time he toyed with running for president was in 1987 but, as Green speculates, this may have just been a clever way to receive some free media coverage in order to boost the sales of The Art of the Deal that just happened to be published at the same time (37). Then in 1999, Trump told Larry King during an interview that he would switch from the Republican to the Reform Party and consider running as their candidate, which he never actually ended up doing because of the difficulty of winning as a third-party candidate (Kranish and Fisher 285–87). Once again, it appeared that this was nothing more than a publicity stunt. According to Green, Trump considered (or at least wanted people to think that he was considering) challenging President Bush in 2004 and again in 2008 (38) but, of course, never did. Finally, in February 2011 he
spoke for the first time at CPAC, the Conservative Political Action Conference, an annual gathering of the who’s who of the Republican party. Once more, he hinted at a presidential run, but nobody took it very seriously since it was also sweeps week and most people thought that Trump was simply trying to use this platform to increase the viewership numbers of his television show, which had been showing decreased ratings (Green 38–39).

What received little attention at the time but is highly significant in retrospect is that Trump’s address at CPAC is also the first time Trump officially lent his voice to birtherism. According to Green’s account of the CPAC event, Trump stated: “Our current president came out of nowhere... In fact, I’ll go a step further: the people that went to school with him, they never saw him; they don’t know who he is. It’s crazy!” (Trump qtd. in Green 39). Soon, Trump would flood the media landscape with his unfounded suspicions about President Obama’s birthplace. He tweeted relentlessly on the subject and went on every television show that would have him, demanding that Obama publicly release his birth certificate. And it was not just far-right fringe websites or generally conservative media outlets that helped him spread this unfounded conspiracy theory. While Trump visited sympathetic shows such as Fox and Friends, the popular morning show on Fox News, he also went on The View, the successful all-female daytime talk show on ABC, and discussed the issue with none other than Whoopie Goldberg and Barbara Walters (Wilson 118). He also sparred with Joe Scarborough on MSNBC’s Morning Joe and with Ali Velshi, then still with CNN (Hertzberg). And this is only a small sample of his numerous television appearances. Perhaps, the most striking was the interview he gave Meredith Vieira on NBC’s Today Show, where he, once again, strung together a series of unfounded suppositions:

Meredith, he [Obama] spent $2 million in legal fees trying to get away from this issue, and if he weren’t lying why wouldn’t he just solve it? And I wish he would because if he doesn’t it’s one of the greatest scams in the history of politics and in the [sic] history, period. You are not allowed to be a president if you’re not born in this country. He may not have been born in this country, and I’ll tell you what. Three weeks ago I thought he was born in this country. Right now I have some real doubts. I have people that actually have been studying it and they cannot believe what they’re finding... I would like to have him show his birth certificate. And can I be honest with you? I hope he can. Because if he can’t – if he can’t and if he wasn’t born in this country, which is a real possibility – I’m not saying it happened, I’m saying it’s a real possibility, much greater than I thought two or three weeks ago – then he has pulled one of the great cons in the history of politics. And beyond politics. (Trump)

As mentioned earlier, for Boorstin the mere concept of the interview is in itself a pseudo-event created by the media in order to create news. However, when they are used as a platform to spread lies and conspiracy theories, this takes the notion of the pseudo-event to a whole different level. Trump’s claim in this and other interviews that he hired people to investigate Obama’s birthplace and his suggestion that their findings are damaging without elaborating any further is, in fact, reminiscent of Boorstin’s discussion of Joseph McCarthy, the US senator who became notorious in the late 1940s and early 1950s for his unsubstantiated claims of a vast communist infiltration that went all the way to the highest levels of the federal government.

According to Boorstin, McCarthy was a master manipulator of the media, skillfully creating news when there was none. One technique he used was the public announcement of a future public announcement. He would, for instance, give a press conference in the morning solely to make known that he was going to hold another one in the afternoon of the same day, which would contain an important revelation. The newspapers immediately ran with it, reporting the future announcement as breaking news. More often than not, McCarthy did not have any new information in the afternoon and instead cited some important reason that necessitated the delay of the big revelation, which again fueled speculation and created headlines (Boorstin 21–22). Thus, McCarthy managed to dominate two news cycles with no substance whatsoever. Trump did much the same with his assertions about “birtherism.” Although he has teased various investigative findings, he has never revealed them—and never will. Whether
Trump’s investigators never managed to come up with results to his liking or whether they never existed to begin with was of little importance for Trump’s purposes since a tether to the truth is not necessary to orchestrate a pseudo-event. As Boorstin wrote about McCarthy, “he was a natural genius at creating reportable happenings that had an interestingly ambiguous relation to underlying reality” (21).

While Boorstin levels plenty of criticism at the actions of McCarthy, it is the complicity of the media that he truly focuses on. Journalists are the ones who create pseudo-events so that they can report news where there actually is none: “The successful reporter is one who can find a story, even if there is no earthquake or assassination or civil war. If he cannot find a story, then he must make one…” (Boorstin 8). To be clear, Boorstin was not talking about “making stories” in the sense of making them up, inventing facts, and lying. He was not anticipating what we have come to call fake news. Again, the interview is one of his prime examples for a pseudo-event; generating news by asking public figures questions and then merely relating what they say rather than what they do. As Judith Clarke put it, “[t]he key to the success of pseudo-events is that journalists are willing to report them” (51). The same is applicable to Trump and the issue of birtherism. One has to wonder why so many mainstream news and news-adjacent shows gave him a platform to spread this conspiracy theory they already knew was untrue. Why did they keep asking him about claims that had long been repeatedly debunked (see, e.g., Henig and Miller; Farley and Holan; Gore)? He was not an expert in the field (whatever that may be), and at that time, he was not yet running for office. He had only hinted at the possibility, which, as laid out earlier, he had done numerous times before. So, why did the media give any voice to a reality television host’s opinion on Obama’s birthplace? Boorstin, of course, provides the answer—because it made news. And, importantly, it does not matter that the hosts of mainstream news and talk shows challenged him, corrected his claims, and even criticized him for them. As Boorstin explains:

Senator McCarthy’s political fortunes were promoted almost as much by newsmen who considered themselves his enemies as by those few who were his friends. Without the active help of all of them he could never have created the pseudo-events which brought him notoriety and power... Newspapers were his most potent allies, for they were his co-manufacturers of pseudo-events.

(Boorstin 22-23)

Simply by giving Trump a platform, by letting him repeat false claims and announce future shocking revelations, and by repeating these false claims and potential new allegations themselves, even in the context of disproving them, the journalists aided Trump in comanufacturing the pseudo-event that was birtherism.

Once Trump announced his candidacy in 2015, he used the same tactics and profited from the same dynamics with the media that had elevated a fringe conspiracy theory into a national controversy. Even though only very few took his presidential run seriously for many months, every one of the outrageous assertions he made on the campaign trail was reported, discussed, and replayed ad nauseam. Many networks carried Trump’s rally speeches live because they generated stellar ratings. Leslie Moonves, the former CEO of CBS, openly admitted how good Trump was for them financially: “The money’s rolling in and this is fun... I’ve never seen anything like this, and this going [sic] to be a very good year for us. Sorry. It’s a terrible thing to say. But, bring it on, Donald. Keep going” (Moonves qtd. in Bond; also qtd. in Gabler). The media profited financially and so did Trump, in a way, by saving a lot of money. According to a New York Times report, he paid very little for campaign ads in comparison with the other major presidential candidates, who outspent him by millions or even tens of millions. However, he clearly dominated when it came to the so-called “earned media,” in other words, media reports, commentaries, and mentions that are not paid for by the candidate. By March of 2016, Trump received almost 2 billion dollars’ worth of free media, while Hillary Clinton received less than 800 million dollars (Confessore and Yourish; see also Geoghegan 110).

Trump’s media coverage also underscored another central aspect of Boorstin’s description of
the pseudo-event: “Its [the pseudo-event’s] relation to the underlying reality of the situation is ambiguous... Did the statement really mean what it said?” (Boorstin 11). One dominant theme, particularly toward the end of Trump’s campaign (and well into his presidency), had to do with understanding what Trump really meant with his various unusual statements and policy proposals. The new mantra became “take Trump seriously, not literally.” This piece of advice was most likely popularized by a Salena Zito article in *The Atlantic*, in which she described the great dichotomy between how the mainstream media perceive Trump and how his supporters see him. The latter, so Zito, subscribe to this new mantra, while “the press takes him literally but not seriously.” This sentiment was echoed throughout the media by journalists and commentators in newspapers and on television and was usually used to defend Trump’s statements and his supporters and criticize the way the media covered Trump (see, for instance, Lane; McCaskill; Todd; Wong; Yarow). Accordingly, Trump’s speeches were often interpreted rather than simply reported. For example, when Trump says he wants to build a wall along the southern border, what he really means is that he intends to crack down on illegal immigration. When he calls for a Muslim ban, he is not talking about all Muslims and certainly does not propose an actual ban. He is merely championing stricter immigration laws. When he (joined by his supporters) chants “lock her up” in reference to Hillary Clinton, he does not intend to actually abuse his power as president in order to prosecute his political opponent, but to simply suggest that that nobody is above the law. What is particularly interesting about this kind of reporting, and about pseudo-events in general, is that Boorstin finds the reason for their occurrence in society’s “honest desire to be informed, to have ‘all the facts’, and even to have more facts than there really are” (34). Similarly, most members of the media drew on this “serious vs. literal” premise not in order to mislead and misinform the public or to garner support for candidate Trump, but they did so with an aspiration to truly explain him, what he stands for, and what his supporters see in him. Boorstin, in fact, juxtaposes pseudo-events with propaganda, finding stark differences between the two: “Propaganda oversimplifies experience, pseudo-events overcomplicate it” (Boorstin 35). Trump’s tenure as president has quickly shown that much of his earlier media coverage did indeed overcomplicate things by trying to read between the lines instead of taking him literally. But Trump meant what he said: He meant to build a wall; he meant to implement a ban; and he meant to prosecute his political opponents.

Donald Trump’s election victory shocked many and surprised most, even though there was nothing particularly surprising about his decade-long successful manipulation of the media to his advantage. As the ultimate human pseudo-event, Trump has spent a lifetime cultivating an image of himself as a world-class dealmaker, who, if he were president, would run the country as effectively as he claimed to run his businesses. While his career was actually much more defined by failures and bankruptcies, Trump’s manipulation of the media, not to mention the media’s complicity in shaping his image, helped build this successful persona even before it was finally cemented with *The Apprentice*. On that show, Trump played the role of the decisive boss of a large and profitable company who wants to lift other people up by sharing his expertise. The resulting celebrity status, in turn, helped him build the notion of birtherism, a pseudo-event that elicited disproportionate media attention and helped send him on the path to the White House. Now in year four of the Trump presidency, it still feels remarkable that a businessman with so many documented bankruptcies and failed products (and very little government experience) ascended to the highest office in the United States. “But,” as Boorstin said in reference to Joseph McCarthy, “it is possible to build a political career almost entirely on pseudo-events” (21). Unfortunately, celebrity status and pseudo-events do very little to prepare individuals such as Trump for the inevitable confrontations with actual spontaneous
events such as a rapidly spreading pandemic, record unemployment rates, and tens of thousands of people on the streets protesting for racial justice.

**Notes**

1. Acknowledgment: I would like to express my gratitude to my colleague and friend Sonja Bahn, whose helpful suggestions and corrections greatly improved the present article.

2. Among others, Trump and his projection of authenticity has received considerable academic attention. See, for instance, Theye and Melling; Rubrofsky; Guthey; Shane; and Higgins.

3. For a more comprehensive literature review on Boorstin’s pseudo-event, see Tandoc Jr. and Skoric (34–36) and Gleason (266–67).

4. While the origin of their fame may be perplexing, they undoubtedly have managed to monetize it. For instance, Kim Kardashian makes millions from, among others, her own beauty line, KKW Beauty; Kendall Jenner is the highest-paid model in the world; and Kylie Jenner became the youngest billionaire in the world in 2019 with her company Kylie Cosmetics (Jordan).

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