

The West Wing Weekly  
5.18: "Access"

[Intro Music]

JOSH: Yep, it's *The West Wing Weekly*. I'm Joshua Malina

HRISHI: and I'm Hrishikesh Hirway and today we are talking about "Access." It's episode 18 from season 5.

JOSH: It was written by Lauren Schmidt, it was directed by Alex Graves, and it first aired on the last day of March in 2004.

HRISHI: Lauren Schmidt, of course, is our friend AKA Lauren Schmidt-Hissrich

JOSH: That's right, Lauren number four.

HRISHI: This episode is a documentary style, unique take on *The West Wing* where a camera crew from a PBS show is following around C.J., for one day, and the Access in the title presumably refers to the access they're given to C.J., but I think there's also some level to it about C.J.'s access to the truth and to the president and all the things she's sometimes left out of.

JOSH: Are we witnessing an impromptu hrynopsis?

HRISHI: I'm winging it.

JOSH: Damn! Nice.

HRISHI: As the episode unfolds, there is a standoff with the FBI on an island off of the coast of Washington State and it brings up flashbacks from a time before *The West Wing* series started, a crisis that happened in the early days of the Bartlet administration at Casey Creek.

JOSH: Mm-hmm.

HRISHI: This one is a weird one.

JOSH: It is a weird one and notoriously, I think, among the fandom, it vies for the title of The Worst Episode of *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: I suppose if you were going to say what is the worst flavor of ice cream, you could pick one, probably.

JOSH: It would be this flavor [laughter]. No, it is still ice cream.

HRISHI: It's true

JOSH: It's still *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: but if you go to Ben and Jerry's, do not get *Access*.

JOSH: No, exactly right. Yeah, it's not a great episode [giggles]. It's conceptually flawed, I mean, it's not that the writing is bad to me, the directing isn't bad, the acting is...it's all great as always but to me the episode doesn't really make any sense. Just conceptually as I watch it, I wonder...

HRISHI: Why?

JOSH: Why? Why? Because by definition, as fans of *The West Wing*, we have an all-access pass, so all we get with the idea of this, “Hey, we’ll do a behind the scenes look at this show that is entirely a behind the scenes look at the White House staff,” and what we get through this is: restricted access. So for one episode we get to see less than what we usually see because we are part of a film crew that doesn’t have full access. It’s just inane.

HRISHI: Perhaps in anticipation to your reaction, the first lines of this episode are

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*C.J.: Why? That’s the right question.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Wow! It’s almost too on the nose.

HRISHI: It kind of is.

JOSH: Right. She’s asking, “Why are we doing this?” [laughter] They should have ended it there!

HRISHI: [laughing]

JOSH: You know what C.J.? You’re right. There’s no reason to do this.

HRISHI: Well, I think conceptually, this episode, I don’t know this for a fact, but I’m going to speculate, that this episode actually has its roots in an *E.R.* episode, the season opener from season 4, episode 1 of season 4, is an episode called “Ambush,”

JOSH: Mm-hmm

HRISHI: In which a documentary crew...

JOSH: I feel like I’ve seen that episode and forgot about it, yeah

HRISHI: ...posts up in the hospital and they follow everyone around, and there’s an interesting set of overlaps in that [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] is it the entire, the same crew in its entirety?

HRISHI: [laughter] that would be, that would be amazing. I think both of these shows must be John Wells ideas, but some interesting tie-ins, besides just the concept. The episode guest stars Lisa Edelstein as one of the directors of the documentary, also guest stars Nick Offerman...

JOSH: Mmm Pluie.

HRISHI: ...but the biggest one for me is that the episode was directed by Tommy Schlamme.

JOSH: Interesting! Wow, so a lot of share DNA.

HRISHI: mm-hmm. That episode, whatever you might want to say about the conceptual conceit, it was a huge, huge episode for *E.R.*

JOSH: You mean a lot of press or a huge audience...?

HRISHI: Huge audience.

JOSH: Or all of that. I can understand then where the creative spark might have come for John but I would have thought after a couple minutes discussion, it would be clear that bringing a camera crew to cover C.J. and her band of aides that we've never met before would be less than illuminating. I don't understand how that idea got out of committee.

HRISHI: Hmm, yeah

JOSH: Right? I mean...

HRISHI: I think that's fair, I think what you said is exactly right. I completely agree with you about the idea that the notion that a documentary crew is there to give you an inside look at what it's like to be a staffer in the White House is like, well, we've been tuned: this is season 5.

JOSH: Right. "That's the premise of the show John."

HRISHI: But one thing that I thought was interesting is that to have an episode that exists kind of outside of the world of *The West Wing*, like we're all watching sort of within one framework of the world, where we get to go behind closed doors because we are there with the characters, we're watching this TV show in which they're the characters, but this imagines a world outside of it. I think it's interesting because it gives us a chance to see how people who are not watching *The West Wing*, get to view some of these people. Like if you didn't watch the show and you're in the world of *The West Wing*, what is your actual perspective on Toby Ziegler, it comes through things like this. So, as sort of an artifact of the world, I think it's really neat. I actually like the idea, I probably would have been one of the people to vote it out committee, in terms of the strength of the concept, if that were sort of leaned into more. This was presenting the conceit of inside access but actually what it is, is showing what people outside the White House are actually given and delivered.

JOSH: Except that even in that fictional world, we're told that they're seeing this after the Bartlet administration is no more.

HRISHI: Which is also a strange conceptual thing for this.

JOSH: It is. We have this, I think, multiple super fake moments of our normally cool under fire heroes, being very thrown off because a camera crew is following them, but it's clear that they can restrict the camera crew's access at any time and, as we know, ultimately, they can keep them from releasing anything for years, for 3 more years! This is supposed to come out, this is in the first year of the second term and we are told that this thing is going to air for the first time after Bartlet's presidency is complete.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: So 1. It just seems weird, why do we want a profile of C.J. Cregg for know? And it doesn't give, that's the other thing, overall that really blows my mind about this episode. So obviously the huge thing would be, we were just going to do this profile during the first year of the second administration of C.J. Cregg and this incredible, we happened to be there when this incredible situation in the San Juans happens, but now 3 years later we're getting the kind of report that doesn't dig in to anything beyond what they found

out that day. Now they would have 3 more years [laughter] to have looked into what happened that day and it would be an incredible, in depth [crosstalk]

HRISHI: [crosstalk] That's true, yeah, the kind of yadda, yadda, yadda the whole conspiracy.

JOSH: Yeah, it's clear that this thing is whatever; they edited it the next day and then held onto it for 3 years. They didn't make it into a post mortem on this incredible national event.

HRISHI: Right, or even just saying like, as we all know...

JOSH: Right, exactly, yeah. Right, they're treating it as if we are finding out for the first time, like we're watching it as it happens: no, no, that happened 3 years ago!

HRISHI: Sorry, I just realised, it would be the equivalent of February 2017, after Trump has taken office, PBS is like, and now here's a special on Josh Earnest as President Obama's Press Secretary in 2013.

JOSH: Yeah, right.

HRISHI: And you'd think, "I guess that's interesting, but aren't there other things that we need to be..."

JOSH: Right. And that it would have happened on the day that Osama Bin Laden was killed.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly, yeah

JOSH: But then there would be only just really initial information, as much information as you had that day as if they had not done any further work on this special in the ensuing 3 years. It's ludicrous, it's not credible, it doesn't – all of sudden nothing makes sense and we'll get into the, you know, a closer look into specific scenes and stuff. On top of it all, I think, what we get is very uncharacteristic look at a C.J. that I don't recognise.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: So then this thing is supposed to super illuminating about this character we love, turns out to be just an offering up of a lesser, unrecognizable C.J.

HRISHI: Yeah. I think time is the thing that I find most confusing about this whole episode, you know, by dropping an episode in the middle of season 5 that, in the voiceover by the narrator says

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*NARRATOR: However for national security purposes, the release of the documentary was prohibited until the administration left office.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: It means that everything that we have watched and are about to watch is actually a flashback.

JOSH: [laughing] That, that is true.

HRISHI: In the context of the flow of these episodes, everything that, like the world in which we are watching these episodes is actually not concurrent with the administration. It's all over. If we're able to watch something from after the second term...

JOSH: Yeah, that's a very good point. They don't even mention that Leo's dead.

HRISHI: [awkward laugh/groan]

JOSH: Well I mean really, it could have ended at least "In Loving Memory of Leo McGarry"

HRISHI: There are, of course, things that this missed because they **did** do it in season 5 and there's some things that they end the episode with the narrator has this line, now this is **SPOILER: for anyone who has not watched passed this point, I have not watched passed this point**

JOSH: I know where you are going, but you know

HRISHI: But I do know some, as I think I have mentioned to you before, I know some of the major beats about what going to happen

JOSH: **SPOILER ALERT! SPOILER ALERT! Remove the kids from the room.**

HRISHI: **Spoiler alert for the next 30 seconds, go ahead and click your fast forward button**

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*Narrator: And C.J. Cregg who allowed us to share a day with her in the West Wing remains the only woman to have served two terms as the White House Press Secretary.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Without giving away too much, we know that that's not actually true, and of course they couldn't know that yet, so you really can't fault them for it but it's evidence of how dangerous it is to have this kind of before the story is over, we going to tell you how the story ends.

JOSH: Maybe in season 7, Bob Newhart will wake up next to Suzanne Pleshette and they'll realize that "Access" was just a dream

HRISHI: Spoiler alert!

JOSH: Oh sorry! Double spoiler. Another 30 seconds if you haven't watched all the way through to the end of *Newhart*.

HRISHI: Yeah, so that part of the timing is weird, the idea that everything now is a flashback, the next episode we're going to watch is a flashback. The other part that makes things sort of screwy time wise, is this whole idea that there was this crisis in the early days,

JOSH: Of Casey Creek now.

HRISHI: Of Casey Creek, yes.

JOSH: Also really weird.

HRISHI: Which we have never heard about and has never come up, even in previous episodes when there have been FBI stands-off. Let's just jump back for a second to "The State Dinner."

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: If you remember, Mandy's inexperience, there was a crisis for Mandy about, in terms of what the FBI might do and what they might not do when there are hostages. Casey Creek never came up in that episode. Look, we've got a new crisis that apparently haunted the Bartlet presidency, but we have not heard about it yet.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: So that's a little bit strange and then yeah, as you were saying, the episode kind of cuts into CJ's profile and her level of acumen, because we did see her sort of at the beginning of the administration, and she did quite well in flashbacks.

JOSH: Right. We thought she had hit the ground running.

HRISHI: Yeah, but now they're saying, oh actually, she was a little bit slow to figure things out.

JOSH: Right, and even worse is the knock to her reputation that the contemporaneous CJ takes, which is that she's really off her games because of this camera crew. She clearly, by both her actions and her behaviour as we have observed them and by definition as the press secretary, is the most press savvy member of the entire staff. And she seems really thrown that people happen to be covering her this day. There are all these weird moments.

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*DONNA: They need you in Leo's now.*

*C.J.: All of us?*

*DONNA: They didn't say.*

*C.J.: Ok, no big deal. Ok.*

*DONNA: I'm so sorry*

*C.J.: It's all right.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: And they're all very badly covering that something is up and you'd think C.J. would say, "Hey guys, you got to turn off the camera for a minute" or "I have to go to Leo's office but you can't follow me". It's just sort of, where's her aplomb and her élan, why is she so thrown because this camera crew's following her as a crisis develops.

HRISHI: Yeah, but just for a second, back to the Casey Creek part, here's what our narrator said about that incident.

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*NARRATOR: Casey Creek also haunted President Bartlet's young Press Secretary. C.J. Cregg's naiveté about the power of her podium led many to question her abilities to*

*deliver the news of the nation. It would be months before she regained the confidence of the White House press corps and the Bartlet administration.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Well that didn't happen.

HRISHI: I feel like that was a crisis that we didn't see, it just feels like this,

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Through exposition, they're just saying this thing happened and these were the consequences. We've never see those consequences but we're just supposed to take for granted that this happened and these were the emotional stakes, but it was never earned. There's nothing in this episode to earn it, you know we get some footage of a bumbling, young C.J.

JOSH: Right, if you're going to retcon.

HRISHI: Yes.

JOSH: It should be something that, "oh I now understand this aspect of C.J., I never knew this thing happened, but it makes sense" instead it's just this thing. I'm telling you this,

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: She was terrible at her job in the early days, and her hair looked like this.

HRISHI: Yeah. There's one bit of past history that we get that I think fits exactly what you're talking about. The correct way, the appropriate way, which is we find out from Toby that the way that they first started working together was, he was working on a senatorial race and he discovered CJ at a PR firm, and that's great because we've kind of wondered, how did they first meet?

JOSH: Right. Exactly. That scratches a little itch we might have had. It's good know, and actually it's a great little piece of writing and acting, I love when he said,

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*TOBY: We were probably 36 points behind when we got C.J., and, uh, with her help, I think we gained two or three point before we lost.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Which I thought was very funny.

HRISHI: I want to mention something that I really like in this episode, while still being kind of [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] The End?!

HRISHI: I guess, kind of [laughing]

JOSH: The closing credits?

HRISHI: No, there were lots of little things that I did [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] I agree

HRISHI: like throughout this episode but they were, unfortunately, kind of wrapped in the prosciutto of the thing I didn't like, so it's hard to separate out. So, Wilson Cruz.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Wilson Cruz, who is terrific, people know him from *My So-Called Life*, they might know him from any number of things, most recently he was in *Star Trek: Discovery* and he was also in *13 Reasons Why*. I really like this character and I thought he played the character really well, like that first interview that he give on camera talking about he he'd got the position, I instantly, this is an interesting character. He was criticising the White House and then he got a job, sort of like an Ainsley style story, and then he says, [West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*JACK: I think my job really is to protect her – to help her protect the president.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I just, I wanted more from this character and I thought, we get to go round and round and round and round with Ryan Pierce,

JOSH: Right

HRISHI: and even Rina. Is there no room for Jack Sosa to be a recurring character, and I think unfortunately he's only in this episode and one more episode.

JOSH: Yeah, no, I even liked the little sort of gang of young helpers that Carol helps corral for C.J. in that little meeting they have, and they have some laughs and like the whole vibe, and I thought, you don't need the episode "Access" to meet these people.

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: Why haven't we've seen them before? It's a shame and I'd like to see them in the future. So I liked that aspect as well. And also, you bring up the interviews, I thought something, one nice aspect of this episode is seeing characters with whom we are very familiar and we're familiar with the linguistic tics, and how they express themselves, they all sound a little bit different when they're interviewed

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: as indeed people tend to

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: and I thought it was very good writing and good acting and I suspect there is a little bit of the, some sort of lifting of the word for word rule that always existed under Aaron Sorkin, and I suspect they were give a little leeway to kind of come up of the words on their own, or to approximate a little bit because they felt like real interviews rather than scripted moments. I thought that was done well.

HRISHI: I agree. That's exactly what I was thinking of when I mentioned Jack's first interview on camera. He says,

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]



*JACK: I actually went to Howard University, here in DC. I wrote for the paper, the student paper there, um and I was writing articles basically um...criticizing the administration, really, about their issues on gay issues and racial issues.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: and I thought in a really well written script, a character wouldn't use 'issues' three times in one sentence with two different meanings

JOSH: I noticed the same moment, that's the way people actually speak

HRISHI: That *is* the way that people actually speak and I was wondering, how, how did they make that part so right on? Josh, you aren't in this episode.

JOSH: Correct.

HRISHI: There is no Will Bailey in this episode...do you have any idea? Did you remember the making of this episode at all?

JOSH: No.

HRISHI: Or is this just one week where you weren't there?

JOSH: Yeah, this was probably 3 and half weeks that I was not there between "Access" and "The Supremes."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: That was probably Josh with a month off. And I can't remember, cause I'm in the credits, I'm in the opening credits, so maybe I was still, maybe at this point I was getting paid for episodes I wasn't in which means, that it was a fantastic month! [laughing] Cause nobody likes getting paid for not working more than I.

HRISHI: Well that's great except for now you can't answer my questions.

JOSH: That's true. Although, in fairness, had I been in the episode, probably would have had the same recall and ability to answer your questions.

HRISHI: [laughing] Well I like that, I also watched a couple of times just to try and figure out the performance of it, the part where Donna speaks.

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*DONNA: Her wit and her charm and I think that people – the press really respect her, and, um, and so that she can keep a very strong but friendly, um, relationship with the press. And I think that that's important.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: she says 'um' a few times on camera, and I was thinking, you know, when Donna speaks, even in high pressure moments, she usually very composed. She doesn't say 'um' and I was wondering, is this the camera causing some level of insecurity on her part or are they like, really trying to layer that in so that we really feel it – I don't know. What did you think? Do you buy those 'ums' as this is just Donna being nervous.

JOSH: As scripted 'ums'?

HRISHI: Yeah, as scripted 'ums'.

JOSH: I took it as Donna being a little on edge.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: A little nervous about being interviewed for TV.

HRISHI: One of the things that I liked so much it, is at the end of Donna's speech there, when she says,

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*DONNA: ... that that's important. I mean, what do I know, but this is my opinion. You are interviewing me. [laughs]*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: The way that she trails off and kind of laughs about it, having interviewed Janel Moloney, I thought that seemed really like her, that felt very much like

JOSH: genuine.

HRISHI: Yeah, and then I started to wonder if maybe they had just sort of outlined stuff and let the actors improvise some parts.

JOSH: It seems possible to me too.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: That here's the gist of what you need to say, say it how you like.

HRISHI: Yeah, not just the way she said it but that idea, "I mean, what do I know, but this is my opinion. You are interviewing me."

JOSH: Right, that's very Janel, that's true.

HRISHI: [laughing] It could have been from one of our episodes. The first time it watched it, it was only the second time that I started to really zoom in on it. The first time I was like, "wow, this seems great. It feels like they're really made it feel like, yeah, this is a different way of seeing these people."

JOSH: Which actually hints at the potential that was there in this kind of setup. In other words, I attack the entire premise, I imagine there could have been something interesting about seeing how these people act given the camera crews presence, but I just felt that was missed, we didn't really get anything extra, we got a little bit less than we normally get. We get some moments, that I don't find particularly credible, of people being really thrown, like "uh-oh, I gotta tell C.J. that Leo wants her but there's a camera crew here."

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: Which I don't find highly illuminating, in fact I don't even buy it, I think they'd say "Hey C.J., you gotta, Leo needs to talk to you" and she would say, "you guys can't come with me."

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: But that there could have been something, it could have been somehow more interesting to have this camera crew there.

HRISHI: I actually found the mechanics of the plot really kind of hard to follow. We often talk about the show being ahead of us, this didn't feel like either it was ahead of us or anything like that, I just didn't really get everything that was going on, beat by beat, or rather, my attention wandered, which is very unusual. You know, I'd be thinking about the mechanics of the show, and then they'd say "oh, the FBI something or other" and I'm like, wait, where are we at in terms of who knows what about the thing and where are we going with it, to an extent where, I think that that plotline which is really supposed to be, it's kind of a B plotline but in a normal episode it would be the A plotline.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: The A plotline in this one is really this documentary crew is filming C.J., which relegates what would be the actual A plotline to a B plotline and I think that that story suffers from having that sort of secondary position.

JOSH: I agree. I had a similar thought, like, wow, they burned this off in what could have been a decent episode, maybe they should have just realized this is the episode that wants to be made and the camera crew thing just doesn't really work.

HRISHI: It didn't feel like there was so much story there that we weren't able to get to in the standoff story.

JOSH: No, they just, they could have built out that storyline though.

HRISHI: Yeah.

JOSH: And it could have carried an entire episode.

HRISHI: I think that the way that this manifested for me most poignantly was, I was so happy that Mike Casper was in this episode, oh Clark Gregg, great!

JOSH: Yes, always happy to Clark. Now they very explicitly make my point, of earlier, which is that, he's waiting for her at one point, in C.J.'s office, he needs to talk to her, and he says I don't want that camera crew in here, and so the door is shut in the camera crew's face and normally, we'd get to go into that room with them, but because we're, we have the point of view of this camera crew with restricted access, we now just have a scene that we don't get to see.

HRISHI: Right, yeah.

JOSH: Like, thanks guys! [sarcasm]

HRISHI: Yeah

JOSH: If you weren't here filming today, we'd be able to see what they're, and listen to what they're talking about.

HRISHI: Also, as you were mentioning, we have these scenes with CJ and her staff, her aides, and her assistant/deputies press secretary.

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: And it does make me feel like, why couldn't they have been woven in here and there. You know, it's not like it had to just be C.J. and Carol in her office, there are many examples of, sort of, characters who were part of the texture of *The West Wing* without being big parts of it. I mean, Bonnie and Ginger and, you know, Ron Ostrow. There are lots of reporters that we have seen throughout the entire series *The West Wing* and we've never had to spend too much time with any of them, we kind of know their faces

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: and we know their names and that's it. Look, there's room I think for a recurring deputy press secretary.

JOSH: Why don't we have one? Seriously.

HRISHI: Yeah, why don't have one and then we get Wilson Cruz, and a couple of others introduced here and, Wilson Cruz feels like a big name to drop in and then disappear. If we're seeing, in this episode, the daily ritual in C.J.'s office, every morning there's 30 people crammed in there, you know, doing a rundown, how's it that we've never seen that before? And we've never seen any of them ever before? It's not even...

JOSH: I agree! It's very odd

HRISHI: Yeah, but I like it and I just wish that were part of it. Speaking of CJ's support staff though, I will say, I think my favourite part of the entire episode is when Carol gets interviewed by the documentarians.

JOSH: Well, you know, I'm split on that.

HRISHI: Really?!

JOSH: I love any extra time for Carol, because I love Melissa Fitz, and she's terrific and she's terrific in this episode. But I did write down

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*DOCUMENTARIAN: Do you think she ever has to lie to the press?*

*CAROL: Gosh, that's a tough question to answer in front of the camera. [laughs nervously]*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Like, that's a rookie response [laughing] I mean that's really what Carol has to say, Carol who couldn't have C.J.'s back anymore? "Ooh does she lie?" "Uh, I don't know, that's kind of rough to answer." I mean, wow, bad answer Carol.

HRISHI: That's a good point. I think I folded that in with Toby saying "oh she withholds information", you know, with the rest of that and I was giving her the benefit there, but you're right, on its own, she's basically saying "yeah, maybe she lies".

JOSH: Yeah, I mean, I would think she'd be fired for that.

HRISHI: Right

JOSH: If the interview came out 4 years earlier, whilst C.J. still had her job and Carol did too.

HRISHI: I guess I was, I had skipped ahead to the end.

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*CAROL: She's the best boss and I couldn't have a better job. I really look at C.J. as my mentor.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: I think that, just that.

JOSH: It's sweet

HRISHI: It was really wonderful and sweet. It's the kind of thing where, like the Toby reveal that he found her for a senatorial race, this is just a piece of exposition that illuminates their relationship and in another context, we wouldn't have gotten it. There wouldn't be, necessarily a moment where Carol says to someone explicitly, C.J. is my mentor, but it completely fits and it's just nice to hear that. It give this depth to it and it doesn't feel like it's retconning or changing anything, but at the same time it enriches what we've seen before and what will come after.

JOSH: Agreed. Maybe that's why they did this stupid film crew idea/episode.

HRISHI: And now we're going to take a quick break.

[Ad break]

HRISHI: [laughs] On the heels of my praise for the moment.

JOSH: Sure.

HRISHI: I will also say one thing that bothered me is that, Carol is not in focus.

JOSH: Is that true?

HRISHI: Yeah, the focus is off on that shot and I feel like that's not an accident, that was to give some kind of, something of the run and gun [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] verisimilitude

HRISHI: quality of it but that actually strikes me as false. It's set shot, where they've like, they go to it a few times.

JOSH: Yeah lock it off and focus.

HRISHI: Yeah, exactly. Get it in focus!

JOSH: Good point.

HRISHI: That seemed crazy to me, that this documentary crew, that has, I mean the guy at the beginning, when C.J. says, when she's answering the question why, she says

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*C.J.: Why am I letting you tail me, is that what you're asking me?*

*DOCUMENTARIAN: Yeah, I mean, I pitch, but I'm always surprised when people accept.*

*C.J.: Well, I'd seen your work.*

*DOCUMENTARIAN: Well, exactly.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: and I'm thinking, there are some parts of this where it's just not great documentary work, like that: get your focus right, and then two: there are these little moments here and there that bugged me a lot. As someone works in non-fiction

JOSH: Yes.

HRISHI: story telling a little bit, I'm not a documentary filmmaker but the idea of cross cutting your narrator and your main interview subject's voices is crazy to me.

JOSH: It's odd isn't it?

HRISHI: It drives me nuts, that the narrator hasn't finished saying his sentence. It's the narrator! So you really get to choose your timing there, hasn't finished his sentence and then C.J., they start C.J. up on her sentence, which either feels like a huge editing mistake, or there saying they did it on purpose and the last word of the narrator sentence doesn't really matter.

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*NARRATOR: CNN's channel 53 offers constant coverage of the 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.*

*C.J.: [crosstalk] I don't think it was ever a laid back job [laughs]*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Wow. So who did the narration for the documentary?

HRISHI: It's a guy named Will Lyman.

JOSH: Not Josh Bailey?

HRISHI: [laughs] No, it's not Josh Bailey, it's Will Lyman whose voice also heard in the Dos Equis *Most Interesting Man in the World* commercials

JOSH: Ahh, very nice

HRISHI: He's the one who says

[Dos Equis beer commercial excerpt]

*WILL LYMAN: When in Rome, they do as he does. He is: The Most Interesting Man in the World*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: [Laughs] I think I like 30 seconds of his voiceover more than an hour. It felt a little drone-y after awhile. I was like, is anyone still watching this documentary?

HRISHI: [laughs] But it also felt like the right style for [crosstalk]

JOSH: [crosstalk] that's true

HRISHI: [crosstalk] that kind of

JOSH: [crosstalk] yes, for a bad, boring documentary.

HRISHI: [laughs] One of the things that I really admired about this episode, this is pretty nerdy, but I really like that they mixed Will Lyman voice. The EQ on his voice is kind of rounded off. It's kind of warm and it has a kind of vintage feel to it because a lot the high end is rolled off. Which means it doesn't have the same kind of treble-y quality that you would expect a modern microphone and modern narration to have. It gives it this kind of Walter Cronkite gravitas to it.

JOSH: Interesting.

HRISHI: It instantly puts it in to this world that I think gives it this credibility, I thought it was a really nice detail.

JOSH: So is there a sound editor to shout out? Is that who it would be?

HRISHI: I think it would be the re-recording mixer. There are two re-recording mixers credited. They're Dan Hiland and Gary D. Rogers, so shout out to those guys.

JOSH: All right. Well done. Why wasn't the FBI director replaced after the fictional Casey Creek?

HRISHI: There's not a lot of turnover in our West Wing.

JOSH: No, somewhere in the realm of zero, other than Mandy.

HRISHI: Exactly.

JOSH: And Mandy wasn't fired so much as she was disappeared.

HRISHI: [laughs] Right. That's how the FBI director kept his job.

JOSH: That's right.

HRISHI: [laughing] He's the only one who knows what they did with Mandy.

JOSH: Who knows which end zone she's buried in, in Giants Stadium. [laughs]

HRISHI: [laughing] Exactly. And so they keep him around for insurance. And then the other job that has a lot of turnover is White House Counsel.

JOSH: Right. Here's something I was touched by, I thought was a compelling scene, and that is C.J.'s having to take a brief phone call from her dad, in the middle of this day.

HRISHI: Interesting. Split decision on this then.

JOSH: Oh, you didn't like that?

HRISHI: I thought it felt a little bit like too much of a visible plant and payoff kind of thing. I really liked the first part where her dad gets mentioned:

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*DOCUMENTARIAN: Where's your mother now?*

*C.J.: She died.*

*DOCUMENTARIAN: Oh, I'm sorry.*

*C.J.: That's ok.*

*DOCUMENTARIAN: How about your father?*

C.J.: He's uh...he's uh-in Dayton, Ohio.

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Since we know what we know, it's really nice to see her, how she answers that. She says, "He's in Dayton". It's only when pressed that she then has to answer the question about, and reveal that he has Alzheimer's. She's originally just sort of avoiding it. Look it's the fact of her mother's death is a fact and so she can talk about it and

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: it's not private for her. But then, you can see that she has some resistance about her dad's Alzheimer's. And I thought that was really nice.

JOSH: They should have left it at that.

HRISHI: Yes!

JOSH: But, I think maybe I agree with you, I guess ultimately, I like the way she played it and I think I probably agree with you that we didn't need that extra scene, but given it, I thought it was well done.

HRISHI: Hmm. I think the other thing that bothered me about the Alzheimer's stuff is, again, it's this mixed bag. I really loved when they mixed in real images of a young Allison Janney.

JOSH: That was awesome. They should have resisted the urge to use that rollercoaster shot.

HRISHI: I thought they should have resisted using it in conjunction with her talking about her dad or talking to her dad. Look, it's one thing to be "oh, I'm the narrator, I'm telling you about C.J." and then, from her young days, and you get to see some young images.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: But then to take the audio of her call with her father, and then be like, "oh, and by the way we're going to show you some images", that felt manipulative.

JOSH: Yeah, that was laying it on a little thick. And then, super [expletive deleted] jamming on top of that, that like, what a rollercoaster this job is, and she's on a rollercoaster! This episode "Access" coming after "The Supremes" put me in mind of when my kids were much younger, and they would come home from a sleepover in which they were just absolute angels and on their best behaviour and wonderful, and then back at my house they would completely melt down and be a nightmare. That was "The Supremes" into "Access." It's like everything came together and they made an incredibly magical episode of *The West Wing* in season 5 and then it all went to [expletive deleted] in the next episode.

HRISHI: I wonder if it's because they knew that they had such a great episode in "The Supremes" that they were like, this one will cover for this one. You know, we've got a little credibility here, so if we're going to sneak one in, might as well do it right after everybody is thinking how great we are.



JOSH: [laughing] Well I would, there could be some truth to that in a sense that, having made this episode, they could have played it at any point.

HRISHI: That's what I was thinking too. It could have come at any point, in the sense that it's not part of the continuity...

JOSH: Yeah, so there may have been some reason to create this weird, time-warped episode that they could then use when they fall behind elsewhere in the schedule or something like that, but of course I'm just making that up. Maybe can ask Eli. I hesitate to reach out to anybody, because I don't want anybody we know to listen to this episode.

HRISHI: I know. But just to cover our bases a little bit with some data. So, on IMDB, users can vote on episodes and give them a rating of 1 – 10. So on IMDB, of all of *The West Wing* episodes, this one really is ranked last.

JOSH: Is that true? Oh, and you're able to see the order

HRISHI: Yes, the lowest ranked episode is "Access." The highest ranked episode, you might not be surprised to learn is "Two Cathedrals."

JOSH: "Two Cathedrals?" That would have been my guess.

HRISHI: But of the episodes from season 5, the highest ranked is "The Supremes."

JOSH: "The Supremes."

HRISHI: So you really do have the highest ranked episode, the most well loved season 5 episode, followed by the least loved.

JOSH: How about that? And if you throw out the highest rated and lowest rated, you get the 'Will' episodes.

HRISHI: [laughing] I think that this is a tough assignment. I'm impressed in a lot of ways by how they were able to capture, basically they had to learn how to make an entirely new show for one episode, and I think that in a lot of ways, it really succeeded in terms of the...stylistically they were able to do that. I don't like that show as much as *The West Wing*.

JOSH: Yeah, No. I absolutely agree with you and I'm sure we've torn this episode apart too much in a sense because it's still *The West Wing* and it's still enjoyable and the acting's good and the writing's fine and Alex Graves is a great director, and I agree, they really did pull off a feat and I just, too much of the time, to what end, that conceptually it's so flawed that it's a shame that the amount of effort and artistry that they put into it, was put into it for these ends.

HRISHI: But one outcome that was positive is this episode was submitted as part of Allison Janney's season 5 Best Actress win.

JOSH: That's insane. I mean, I get it, and by the way, to have a C.J. centric episode and then be like wow, that wasn't great is almost unthinkable cause she's such a star and she's so great and I love C.J. and I love AJ, it's just, you know, any average episode has a better served C.J. than this particular episode. I don't believe the C.J. of this episode.

HRISHI: Here's an interesting, maybe controversial observation, I think that as universally agreed upon how fantastic the character C.J. is and how fantastic Allison Janney is, the episodes that focus on C.J., are actually some of the weaker ones, or at least, they're all outliers.

JOSH: They're polarizing.

HRISHI: "Access" is one, "The Long Goodbye" is another.

JOSH: "The Long Goodbye." They're outliers, I mean, by design obviously, you get one written by John Robin Baitz in the midst of another 90 written by Aaron Sorkin, or something like that, and then you get this weird, time-warped, as you say, stylistically different episode so, yeah, they're odd. I mean, that's also, it's an ensemble show so, when you focus solely or largely on a single character, there's always, you're tinkering with the DNA of a show we love

HRISHI: Yeah. I think really, the end of season 3, you know with "The Black Vera Wang," that's probably my favourite C.J. centric episode, and the stuff around Simon Donovan, where she got to have the A story in kind of like really top Aaron Sorkin form.

JOSH: Yeah, you're right. That's the quintessential C.J. story. There's a great little moment here, we get a cameo, I believe an uncredited cameo, when C.J. pulls into work in the morning.

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*C.J.: How's Eden?*

*WHITE HOUSE SECURITY OFFICER: Oh, she's great.*

*C.J.: Good.*

*WHITE HOUSE SECURITY OFFICER: Thanks for asking.*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: That's Doug Ornstein who's the, was the first AD on the show.

HRISHI: Oh yeah?

JOSH: Yeah. It's sort of funny to see him be so super nice to, cause a good first AD, and Doug is one, has to, sort of, get everybody to task and on schedule and to see him, "Oh, Miss Cregg, nice to see you, oh she's great". I thought it was great, and then somebody honks and he goes "Hang on" and I was like "that's the Doug I know"

HRISHI: The first AD is often the person who has to yell "places", has to yell "quiet on the set", they're person who does a lot of yelling on set.

JOSH: To keep the trains running, yep.

HRISHI: There was, of course, the biggest ai-yi-yi of the all, in the middle of this episode when C.J. does say,

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*C.J.: Do I ever have to lie to the press? Sometimes...lots of times, I withhold information for valid reasons, but you can't lie. You run the risk of damaging your credibility in front of a bunch of really smart people, and if they stop trusting you, the system's broken.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: Guess what?!

JOSH: [laughs] It's broken!

HRISHI: [laughs] Just the fact that she would refer to the press as a bunch of really smart people.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: shows an attitude that is,

JOSH: [crosstalk] How quaint.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] Yeah, long gone. One thing that's mentioned in this episode is the press flak jacket.

JOSH: Oh yes.

HRISHI: We see the previous press secretary talk about it, and that actually is a real tradition.

JOSH: Yes, and without giving up too much of a spoiler, it will re-emerge on *The West Wing*.

HRISHI: In real life the flak jacket is not an actual flak jacket, it's a tuxedo vest, that they stick notes in the pockets of.

JOSH: There will be more dealings with the flak jacket.

HRISHI: Oh, ok. One thing I liked, again, this felt very real, was Martin Sheffield, that this former press secretary, says at one point.

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*MARTIN SHEFFIELD: It is a tough job, and it only gets tougher. Now, we have a fraternity of former press secretaries and we get together. It's like sort of a club. I think there's maybe eight or so guys still kicking.*

[end excerpt]

HRISHI: And you know, before we get to the part at the end where the narrator says "oh, she's the only woman to have served two terms as the press secretary" just that little, the fact that he calls it a fraternity, and that it's eight or so guys, it's just nice moment of underscoring how much of an anomaly CJ is.

JOSH: Yeah.

HRISHI: Again this idea of the public perception of these people, we have this love of Toby, despite his sort of kind of unfriendly, prickly outside, we know he's this tender-hearted,

JOSH: Sure.

HRSHI: guy and really thoughtful and stuff, but he doesn't come off well in this, like he seems like a prick, and I think it's really nice how they kind of underscore what we're told often, which is that people think that he's an unfriendly guy, and he comes across as unfriendly, and so for the public, they probably look at this guy and think of him as what we get past, like it ends at this level of like, yeah, he comes off as being kind of cold and maybe not so charismatic.

JOSH: That's true. I like even before he's been directly interviewed, the first shot we have of a scene in which Toby appears, that's being covered by the press secretary, his discomfiture as portrayed by Richard is funny. You can just see him sort of eyeing the camera, like Toby's not a show pony. He's not excited about being on TV and it's subtle and funny.

HRISHI: Yeah. Another person who doesn't come across so well in this episode is Charlie, surprisingly.

JOSH: I'm trying to remember now, Charlie in this episode.

HRISHI: He's trying to sort of figure out a time with Carol when

JOSH: [crosstalk] and he's got no slots.

HRISHI: [crosstalk] the title of the episode is "Access" and in a lot of ways, access goes through Charlie, and there's something about the way that he is protecting the president's time and schedule, it doesn't really jive in some ways with my image of how Charlie interacts with his co-workers. It's almost this condescending attitude, when he's talking to Carol.

[West Wing Episode 5.18 excerpt]

*CAROL: 3:00?*

*CHARLIE: Nope*

*CAROL: 3:15?*

*CHARLIE: No*

*CAROL: 3:30?*

*CHARLIE: No*

*CAROL: 3:45?*

*CHARLIE: He has a conference call*

[end excerpt]

JOSH: Yeah, it's maybe he's fronting a little bit for the camera

HRISHI: Yeah, it just...uh...

JOSH: Not how I think of Charlie.

HRISHI: Yeah, it made me feel like he was maybe fronting, maybe acting like he was more important or something that we've seen. He's always been so humble, and then he copped this attitude that was very, not humble.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: It's interesting that this episode came out when it did, soon after this, we'd get just the glut of documentary style comedy shows. We import *The Office* from the UK, and then we'd get every show that was modeled after that, *Parks and Recreation* but also, like, *Modern Family*. It became like, sort of, for awhile it seemed like it was the de rigueur mode for TV comedy, was to do this like mockumentary style show within a show kind of thing.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: I wonder if this episode could have been made after that happened, I feel like in some ways it couldn't, because it would be like, this is now the world of comedy only, you can't do it as a drama.

JOSH: Right.

HRISHI: Or maybe they'd seen, oh yeah, these are ways in which this works and you can acknowledge the camera, and take some lessons from it, because I think it's done so well in so many of those shows. This is a good time maybe to mention that, coming up later, this autumn, we're going to do a special episode of *The West Wing Weekly*, about *Parks and Recreation*,

JOSH: Ooh, that's going to be fun.

HRISHI: and how it was influenced by *The West Wing*, just like our episode with *Hamilton* with Lin-Manuel Miranda and Tommy Kail, we're going to be doing one focusing on *Parks and Rec*.

JOSH: Except that I'll be there.

HRISHI: That's right. Until then though, we'll be continuing on with season 5, although next week we're gonna be taking a break to regroup and getting ready for this last stretch of four episodes before we wrap this one up.

JOSH: Wow. We're almost half through the series.

HRISHI: [laughing] It's true, getting close to that half way mark.

JOSH: It's exciting.

HRISHI: If you'd like to leave a comment for us about this episode and tell us what you thought of *Access*, or our conversation about "Access," at [TheWestWingWeekly.com](http://TheWestWingWeekly.com) or on our Facebook page or on Twitter or on our Instagram.

JOSH: I just remember one more thing, I like that in Gail's fishbowl in this episode, there was a little TV camera, and I like to think that it wasn't a little thing was in her bowl, so much as there was a little film crew,

HRISHI: Right.

JOSH: filming Gail as well.

HRISHI: Yeah, yeah, they were just getting some B roll.

JOSH: Under the sea roll.

HRISH: Sushi roll.

JOSH: Oh boom! [laughing]. Also, in the meantime, you can listen to Hrish's award winning podcast *Song Exploder*.

HRISHI: In which, by the way, I will never overlap my narration with the interview subject's voice.

JOSH: That's right [crosstalk] why would you?

HRISHI: [crosstalk] I promise. No. Why would you?!

JOSH: You can give us money in exchange for goods at [TheWestWingWeekly.com/merch](http://TheWestWingWeekly.com/merch) or even better; you can give us money in exchange for nothing at [TheWestWingWeekly.com/donate](http://TheWestWingWeekly.com/donate)

HRISHI: [laughing] And if you'd like to look for a new podcast, check out our siblings at Radiotopia.fm, a project from PRX, a curated collection of excellent, cutting edge podcasts. Radiotopia.fm. Thanks to editors Margaret Miller and Zack McNees and our research assistant Nick Song.

JOSH: They're the salt of the earth. Ok.

HRISHI: Ok.

BOTH: What's next?

[Outro Music]