

Myth Creation and Audience Building from Davy Crockett to Chuck Norris: the Thin Line between Fact and Fiction

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In 1835, Halley's Comet re-approached the Earth after its seventy-year orbit. The whole world was anxious to find out what was going to happen, and if they were in any danger. According to a story from an 1837 almanac, Andrew Jackson, the President of the United States, found the best person to solve the comet question: Davy Crockett. Crockett was hired to “wring the tail off the comet before it could scorch the planet” (Hutton xxv). Apparently, he managed to do the job quite well. This is how he recounts the event:

I did so, but got my hands most shockingly burnt, and the hair singed off my head, so that I was as bald as a trencher. I dived right into the Waybosh river, and thus saved my best stone blue coat and grass green small clothes. With the help of Bear's grease, I have brought out a new crop, but the hair grows in bights and tuffs, like hussuck grass in a meadow, and it keeps in such a snarl, that all the teeth will instantly snap out of an ivory comb when brought within ten feet of it. (qtd. in Hutton xxvi)

Such tall-tales like the one about Crockett and the comet have a long tradition in American culture and they usually pertain to the local folklore of an already existing community. Often the invented stories build up a legend that becomes powerful enough to broaden a particular audience or call new ones into existence. Almost as a side effect, the established myth influences the life of its heroes, merging reality with fiction. My study examines the dichotomy of the real and invented personalities of two cultural icons from different eras: David Crockett and Chuck Norris. It also analyzes the dynamics of the relationship between these iconic figures and their established audience, along with the consequences of their unexpected—and to some extent unwanted—reputation.

While the Earth escaped its fate at the 1835 incident, it is quite certain that despite all efforts, the planet will come to a tragic end in 2012 through numerous geological disasters and various explosions, leaving only a small number of survivors, if any, on the planet. At least, that was what the blockbuster with the same year in its title suggested. As part of the promotion, large posters advertised the movie with a scene that depicted a huge American metropolis cracking and splitting open in order to disappear in the vast sea forever. However, it did not take long for an anonymous artist with some sense of humor and available free time to tamper with this dramatic picture. He suggested that that there was definitely going to be at least one survivor

who simply could not be destroyed. He added a subtitle to the poster, “Only one man is going to survive,” and a photo of a stern-looking Chuck Norris. This ridiculously vandalized picture is just one manifestation of the “Norris-craze” that is circulating the Internet. Despite the fact that Crockett and Norris were born approximately two hundred years apart, they share a number of similar characteristics.

David Crockett from Tennessee is regarded as a prominent national hero in the United States. He became famous because his public image masterly combined the admired qualities of the pioneer Daniel Boone and the strong-willed, self-made man and leader, President Andrew Jackson (1829-1837). Crockett’s career started as a hunter who handled the rifle skillfully, but he achieved real fame through his verbal skills. He always had a few anecdotes handy, which entertained his audience and enhanced his popularity among the people in his immediate vicinity.

Sometimes his talents in hunting and bragging intertwined, resulting in such claims as killing 105 bears in a single season (Hutton ix). Politically, he made use of his speaking skills first as a local magistrate, then as a member of Congress in the 1830s. There, the “gentleman from the cane,” as he was often referred to, became a real celebrity, inspiring a host of anecdotes and tall tales and at least one playwright during his lifetime. The leading character in James Kirke Paulding’s 1831 play *The Lion of the West* bore strong resemblance to Crockett. The protagonist’s telling name, Nimrod Wildfire, suggested some rough, unschooled hunter. The audience could immediately recognize who the character was modeled on. In addition to his rough demeanor, Wildfire was very outspoken and could fashion a traditional frontier tall-tale out of any kind of situation. Wildfire boasted about being “half horse, half alligator, a touch of the airth-quake, with a sprinkling of the steamboat” (Paulding 22). The conspicuous likeness initially seemed to annoy Crockett. Paulding even wrote Crockett a letter, clearing himself from any accusations of disrespect, claiming that any similarities between Nimrod Wildfire and the former Congressman were purely accidental. However, upon seeing the positive feedback the play generated from the audience, Crockett changed his attitude and welcomed his stage alias:

When, in December 1833, Hackett appeared in Washington for a benefit performance of *The Lion of the West*, Crockett had a specially reserved box seat. When the buck-skin-clad, fur-cap-bedecked Hackett appeared on stage he turned and studiously bowed toward Crockett. The Colonel rose and bowed right back. The audience went wild. (Hutton xix)

Crockett was so satisfied with the outcome that he even incorporated the catchy phrase “half horse, half alligator” into his speech. He also started to wear the famous raccoon tail cap, which was initially worn by actor James Hackett as Nimrod Wildfire on the stage.

The Lion of the West popularized Crockett to the extent that the public demanded to learn more about him. (However, some would rightly claim that Crockett’s political

aspirations also had their share in developing public interest.) The biographies written on his behalf and his own ghost-written autobiography turned him into a well-known figure. Two major works assisted the conscious creation of the Crockett myth: the anonymously published *Sketches and Eccentricities of Colonel David Crockett of West Tennessee* (1833), and Crockett's own autobiography, *A Narrative of the Life of David Crockett of the State of Tennessee* (1834).

Through telling picturesque, sometimes overstretched stories of Crockett's life, these works popularized frontier attitude, language, humor and local folklore. Eventually, they served as a basis for the emergence of his new persona who spelled his name Davy instead of David, and addressed his readers in his coarse vernacular on the pages of various almanacs. The first stories that exaggerated Crockett's abilities were published in his lifetime and right after his heroic death at the Alamo in 1836. These almanacs started to tell increasingly wild stories as their anonymous authors masquerading as Davy Crockett himself let their imagination loose. According to Richard Slotkin, "the various joke books and almanacs attributed to him are filled with tall tales that have a folkloric flavor and structure, and which are . . . traceable to folkloric traditions of the districts in which Crockett lived" (165). Thus, one can assume that these various anecdotes were united through Crockett's figure and his name served as a means to legitimize any tall tale.

The fictitious frontiersman of the storybooks started to develop and live an independent life. Besides possessing the admirable skills of the historical person, he started to acquire superhuman qualities. The stories in the almanacs contained more and more violent episodes. As a starter, once Davy found "a bear and an alligator in deadly combat, he killed both, salted and ate them" (qtd. in Smith-Rosenberg 96). Next, probably as a side effect of his repast, he crossed the boundaries between human and animal, bragging with a growing self-confidence: "I can . . . run like a fox, swim like an eel, yell like an Indian, fight like a devil, and spout like an earthquake, make love like a mad bull, and swallow a nigger whole without choking if you butter his head and pin his ears back" (97). This fictional version of Crockett had no respect for anybody, not even women. On one occasion a lady from New York, who was very keen on the opera, visited the frontier. She missed the concerts so much that Davy, who had overheard her lamenting, promised to accompany her to a performance in Kansas. Needless to say, the concert took place in a neighboring forest, the musicians included all the wild beasts of the woods. It featured "Signor Wolfini" the wolf and "Signor Bearini" the bear singing bass, and a panther named "Signor Painterini" singing tenor. After all the creatures started screaming together and a bear with an Indian child in its paws popped up, Davy had mercy on the poor frightened woman and took her home (Lofaro 118).

As Michael A. Lofaro observes, various mutations of Davy evolved from the historical Crockett. He had become a "comic superman," an "ardent warrior in the cause of territorial expansionism," and most often a "harsh, crude, sexual, and racial protagonist" (116). Crockett, with all his eccentricity and notoriety, proved to

be a real motivation for storytellers who went on churning out wild stories of the rough frontiersman. However, without the real person playing along and authorizing this comically exaggerated image of himself, these stories might have centered on a different hero. David Crockett recognized and took advantage of the possibilities inherent in the Davy Crockett character, and performed accordingly. Although he did not wring the tail off the comet because by that time he had abandoned Jackson and his politics, reporters did ask him about the celestial mission the President had entrusted him with. At that time Crockett was busy campaigning, so he waved away the question with a quick remark: “I’ll be damned if I had a commission, if I didn’t wring his tail off” (qtd. in Hutton xxvi).

Paul Andrew Hutton assumes that the rumors about Crockett’s exceptional capabilities which made him famous indirectly caused his death at the Alamo:

Despite the fact that old Crockett had little experience as a soldier, he merited the toughest assignment in the post on the basis of his already overblown legend. For the very same reason, he could not leave San Antonio once the enemy was expected. He was trapped by his own legend and now must play out his string and trust providence to deliver him. (xxxix)

Crockett had to stick to his character, which made it impossible for him to escape his fate. *The Alamo*, a 2004 movie of the battle at the Alamo, tellingly illustrates this concept. When there is a silent moment in the siege, he ruminates: “If it was just me, simple old David from Tennessee, I might drop over that wall some night, take my chances. But that Davy Crockett feller . . . they’re all watchin’ him” (*The Alamo*).

The myth that became linked to Crockett is a fascinating, yet not an exceptional one in American culture. More recently, Chuck Norris’s name has been popping up all over the Internet among various informal groups which promote the so-called “Chuck Norris Facts.” These are short invented truths about Norris which attribute superhuman and extraordinary traits to him. Thus, the “facts” introduce a previously unknown, albeit fictional, side of the American actor. They generally place him into a bizarre context, and often mingle historical events and cultural references. The Internet community chose to make fun of Norris on purpose. A short biographic overview should explain the reasons for his exceedingly comic image.

In the 1960s, before becoming an actor, Chuck Norris was known for being a black belt World Middleweight Karate Champion. In 1972 he was asked to play the antagonist of another martial arts legend, Bruce Lee, in *The Way of the Dragon*, which inspired him to give acting a try. He starred in several war- and action movies, including *Missing in Action* (1984) and *Delta Force* (1986). In these films he was always the protagonist fighting the bad guys. In the late 1980s his career started to decline, and it was recovered only in 1993 when he started to film *Walker Texas Ranger*. The TV series about the good law officers catching the villains ran for eight seasons, ending in 2001. Chuck Norris played the character of ranger Cordell Walker

who in the final fighting scenes often made use of his martial arts skills, including his trademark roundhouse kick, which was usually spared for the chief antagonist in the episode. The series contained stock characters from crime drama and operated with a clear distinction between good and bad. The straightforward communication of positive moral values made the show popular with viewers who were tired of the ongoing meaningless violence on TV. The success of the series was further highlighted by a number of awards: in 1998 Norris received the Epiphany Award for the best Christian program, he was also inducted into the Texas Ranger Hall of Fame, and even became a Commissioned Police Officer for Terrell county, Texas (“Chuck Norris Biography”).

Beside the various forms of critical recognition, the series brought Norris unexpected notoriety, too. The same features that won numerous awards for *Walker* generated criticism in a different kind of audience. For this particular group, the original intention of the series about communicating positive ideals was considered nothing more than cheesy screen time. Eventually, the critique manifested itself in the form of short sentences overstating Norris’s skills in karate, which soon led to citing capabilities way beyond an ordinary human being’s. The anonymous Internet users treat Chuck Norris in a way similar to the manner in which the writers of the *Davy Crockett Almanacs* transformed the historical person. Due to the never-ending spread of the web, in 2005 the website chucknorrisfacts.com came into existence, which has been hosting an increasing number of fun “facts” ever since. In understanding the effect of these jokes, the keywords are exaggeration and violence. Some websites, like chucknorrisplanet.com, make an attempt to classify the “facts” according to topics. The editors of the site established categories like the ones cited below, each exemplified with a “fact”:

Fighting: Chuck Norris does not sleep. He waits.

Religion: Chuck Norris doesn’t play god. Playing is for children.

Science: There is no theory of evolution. Just a list of animals Chuck Norris allows to live.

Food: Chuck Norris ordered a Big Mac at Burger King, and got one.

Wit and Wisdom: The quickest way to a man’s heart is with Chuck Norris’ fist.

Since the creation of such “facts” is only limited by the creativity of enthusiastic Net surfers, the reinvention of “Chuck Norris” seems to be an endless procedure. Thus, the bulk of the jokes offer classification along several highlighted principles. An eye-catching selection can be based on linguistic inventiveness, which includes reversing collocations or phrases, such as “Once death had a near Chuck Norris experience,” and inventing new words, for instance “Contrary to popular belief, America is not a democracy, it is a Chucktatorship.” The “facts” also contain a plethora of references to pop culture: for example, “Chuck Norris can touch MC Hammer.” However, one of the broadest umbrella categories of these classifications could be the often meaningless

violence which permeates the majority of the “facts.” These short one-liners heavily rely on some cruelty or brutality, but their ridiculous improbability indicates that they should not be taken seriously:

“Chuck Norris grinds his coffee with his teeth and boils the water with his own rage.”

“The chief export of Chuck Norris is pain.”

“Love does not hurt. Chuck Norris does.”

The Chuck Norris “facts” aim at a visceral humor similar to that of the Davy Crockett almanacs, although there is a significant difference between their forms of publication. For obvious technical reasons, Davy’s adventures had the limitations of the book format, but the jokes about Chuck Norris have no real boundaries as more and more people have access to the Internet. This also influences authorship, since practically anybody can invent a new “fact” and publish it on the web. As a result of their simplicity, the jokes have attracted a lot of people, starting an avalanche and embedding the new comic superhero into Internet culture.

It shows both Norris’s good sense of humor and self-irony that when he became aware of the existence of the websites he reacted positively to them. First, he chose from the “facts” the ones that he liked best, and made appearances in TV shows that dealt with these. He also published a comment on his own website in which he embraces his unauthorized but powerful Internet image. Actually, he took advantage of this concept to promote himself and his work much in the manner in which Crockett made use of his fictitious persona:

I’m aware of the made up declarations about me that have recently begun to appear on the Internet and in emails as “Chuck Norris facts.” I’ve seen some of them. Some are funny. Some are pretty far out . . . Who knows, maybe these made up one-liners will prompt young people to seek out the real facts as found in my recent autobiographical book . . . They may even be interested enough to check out my novels set in the Old West, “The Justice Riders,” released this month. I’m very proud of these literary efforts. (Norris, “In Response”)

However, in October 2006 Norris wrote a column about the Internet jokes for the website *World Net Daily* in which he tried to distance himself from the alleged “facts.” At the same time, through the apparently humble rhetoric of his piece of writing, he also made an effort to communicate positive moral values. His logic might have been that if the audience was so enthralled by his invented double they might as well listen to the real person’s thoughts and follow in his footsteps:

While I have as much fun as anyone else reading and quoting them, let’s face it, most “Chuck Norris Facts” describe someone with supernatural, superhuman

powers. They're describing a superman character. And in the history of this planet, there has only been one real Superman. It's not me . . . Again, I'm flattered and amazed by the way I've become a fascinating public figure for a whole new generation of young people around the world. But I am not the characters I play. And even the toughest characters I have played could never measure up to the real power in this universe. (Norris, "On Chuck Norris 'Mania'")

Besides Norris himself, former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee also realized the potential of the Chuck Norris "facts" and asked the actor to endorse his presidential campaign in 2008. Their collaboration resulted in a short political advertisement in which Huckabee introduced Norris to the camera, and then they traded some facts about each other. Huckabee used an efficient strategy to capture his viewers. It turned out that his presidential campaign proposals were "Chuck Norris Approved," meaning that no one should question them, and (being familiar with the infamous capabilities of Chuck Norris) cleverly ensuring that nobody would dare to. Interestingly enough, this video featured the real Norris blended with the superhuman qualities familiar from the "facts."

The soft drink manufacturer Mountain Dew also hired Chuck Norris to play himself in a commercial. The plot is very simple and the scenes evoke action movies from the eighties: Chuck Norris rings the doorbell of the computer nerds who created chucknorrisfacts.com. When looking out the window and finding the real Norris waiting for them, the nerds immediately flee their room, desperately jump over rooftops and rush through deserted alleys only to find themselves face to face with him in a dark alley. Norris then takes a picture of their terrified expressions to use as a screen saver while drinking his Mountain Dew. This particular commercial follows the trend set by Huckabee, and the audience is left to decide how much of the real or imaginary Chuck Norris the character contains.

Besides the advertisements, there is plenty of creativity crammed into unnamed web users and artists who exploit Norris's character. The wide-ranging appearances demonstrate a clear transition from the real person to the recently evolved superhuman character. The previously mentioned website chucknorrisplanet.com uses a Wikipedia-like structure to present information on Chuck Norris. It hosts the familiar fun facts but also gives a distorted biography, mixing the dates and events from Norris's life with those of invented characters. Here is the first sentence from the "Early Life" section: "Norris was born in Ryan, Oklahoma, the son of Wilma. His father was rumored to be an angel, and his birth was proceeded by three wise men and an extremely bright star" (Chuck Norris Planet). The unsuspecting reader can immediately sense a form of deviated Biblical analogy. When doing a Google search for the words "find chuck norris" and clicking on the first result, one will encounter the following message: "Google won't search for Chuck Norris because it knows you don't find Chuck Norris, he finds you." Since the search does not match anything, the page offers other solutions like "Run, before he finds you," or "Try a different person." This word play

is built upon the “facts” but takes the myth to a further level. There is no need to explain why the visitor of the site needs to run. The exchange is just pure fun where both the creator of the site and the supposed victim can wink at each other and play along.

In the final analysis, the Chuck Norris facts turn out to be a complete opposite of what the *Walker Texas Ranger* series originally aimed at. However, the fact that Norris embraced the comic image of himself has given the phenomenon an unexpected twist, and the actor has probably earned the respect of the Internet community. While seemingly distancing himself from the Norris craze, he silently started to act out the role the popular websites unexpectedly gave him. Although he has never been considered to be an “A list” star, and has been always liked more for his martial arts knowledge than for any acting skills, his present role seems to suit him quite well.

We can assume with a degree of certainty that something similar happened to Crockett almost two-hundred years ago, in the 1830s. It was impossible for a simple-minded common person arriving in Washington D.C., and allegedly aspiring for the office of presidency, to be taken seriously by the educated urban population. Thus, Crockett could have easily been turned into a target by the middle class, and depicted in the almanacs as an eccentric frontiersman. However, Crockett seized the opportunity and endowed himself with the presumed qualities of his fictitious persona, turning himself into a much-wanted attraction. He both supplied writers with raw material and learned from them.

According to Carol Smith-Rosenberg, Davy’s emergence and popularity was a response to the literature produced by eastern bourgeois Anglo-American male writers. Their purpose was to spoon-feed the younger generation in social matters—how to be obedient to their parents or how to repress their sexuality—, but Crockett’s undisciplined behavior served to let off steam accumulated in young people (Smith-Rosenberg 105). Thus, the imaginary character of the tall-tale Davy helped reduce the anxiety caused by the liminality of the frontier and by the rapid changes affecting society. A quick glance at Chuck Norris’s overtly violent alter ego can tell us that he fulfills the same role in our time.

The myth-creating process has further effects on both sides. Both the contributors—who often turn out to be the consumers themselves—and the readers are fashioned into a community. The universe of a *Davy Crockett Almanac* would unite its reader and writer who thus share a laugh and have a story to tell and re-tell. Through this act, which is both subversive and approving, they have at least one thing in common. The same is true of the Chuck Norris “facts” which fully utilize the benefits of today’s process of information-sharing and -trading. Numerous small communities mushroom around Norris’s Internet persona, encouraged by the silliness of the “facts” to create and publish new ones, inspiring creativity and bridging gaps among the members. On the other hand, the targets of the word plays themselves do not sit idly, but react to the challenges emerging around them. By silently agreeing with the iconoclastic audience and embracing their endearingly unflattering public

image, they provide fertile grounds for additional inspiration. They turn the initial tease into a continuous reciprocal relationship and are forever changed by it.

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