

Where Have All the Manly Journalists Gone?  
Gender and Masculinity in Prestige Television Representations of  
Journalists

Jack Rooney  
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University of Notre Dame  
Department of American Studies  
Primary Advisor: Dr. Jason Ruiz  
Secondary Advisor: Dr. Darlene Hampton

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This paper is not perfect, nor do I quite feel it is complete. I don’t think I ever would. This thesis is, however, the single most challenging, enriching, and rewarding academic endeavor I have ever undertaken. I began this project to prove to myself I could do it. Well, I did it. And, to borrow a famous phrase from perhaps the most famous manly journalist, I’m Jack Rooney, and that’s the way it is.

## Introduction

### “Where Have All the Manly Journalists Gone?”

In the interest of full disclosure, a journalism convention long held sacred, I should admit my title is not entirely my own. “Where Have All the Manly Journalists Gone?” is the title of July 2015 essay by Mark Judge on *Acculturated*, a self-described “online magazine about the virtues and vices of pop culture and why pop culture matters.”<sup>1</sup> Judge invokes past “manly” journalists such as Ernest Hemingway, Jack London, and his own father, who wrote and edited at *National Geographic* for 30 years. He deems these 20th century journalists prominent, talented, and most importantly (at least to Judge) “manly.” Lamenting the loss of such adventurous, courageous, and masculine journalism, Judge asks of the contemporary age, “Whatever happened to journalism as a manly profession?”<sup>2</sup> The essay continues, “While newspapers and magazines have always attracted many types of writers, the most notable journalists often gained fame and recognition through their bravery in the face of extreme conditions,” a trait Judge apparently deems exclusively masculine.

In a critique of Judge’s essay, *New Republic* senior editor Elspeth Reeve points out that Judge sparked a widespread response because he “savvily tweeted it at many journalists,” who read and replied.<sup>3</sup> Those replies took many forms, all seeking to criticize Judge’s narrow conceptions of masculinity and journalism and simultaneously

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<sup>1</sup> *Acculturated*, 2016

<sup>2</sup> Judge, 2015

<sup>3</sup> Reed, 2015

answer the sensational question he used as his headline. Some, like Reed and Chris Gayomali of *GQ*, responded with satire. Reed, tongue-in-cheek, argues that her experiences as a female reporter made her the manliest journalist on the planet. Gayomali wrote a response entitled “Where Did All the Manly Journalists Go? An Investigation,” in which he leads the reader on an increasingly absurd search for even one of the possibly extinct breed of “manly journalists.” Gayomali writes: “*Uses his calloused hands to strangle a deer and peeks inside its freshly slaughtered corpse*]. Nope, no manly journalists in there. [*Flips through a jizz-stained copy of The Sun Also Rises*] Weird, none in there either!”<sup>4</sup> This purposefully preposterous argument works to criticize the absurdity of Judge’s entirely serious piece by describing actions that are dramatically and comically hyper masculine — like hunting and Hemingway. Others responded more seriously, including Erin Vargo, Judge’s colleague at *Acculturated*, who wrote a much less sensational and more reasoned response entitled “RIP ‘Manly’ Journalists—and Good Riddance,” less than a week after Judge’s original piece. Vargo noted that the journalistic traits Judge values are honorable, but not exclusively masculine. Her essay ends, “Virtue in journalism is a worthy goal, independent of gender. Training young journalists to seek adventure and a great story beyond the confines of their cubicles is an excellent suggestion in our devastatingly immobile, high-tech society. But having a penis is not a prerequisite for the job.”<sup>5</sup>

The number and diversity of responses to Judge’s original essay demonstrate that — whether or not you agree with him — his search for manly reporters in contemporary journalism struck a cultural chord. And whether or not Judge’s idea of a “manly

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<sup>4</sup> Gayomali, 2015

<sup>5</sup> Vargo, 2015

journalist” ever really existed, from my perspective, his titular question in the context of contemporary American popular culture can be answered as such: All the manly journalists have gone to television — not the evening news, but scripted series like HBO’s *The Wire* and *The Newsroom*, Starz’s *Boss*, and Netflix’s *House of Cards*. Each of these series confront, in some capacity, contemporary journalism and all of its challenges, shortcomings, and excitement. Some show journalism’s relationship to political power structures, either at the local or national level. Others explore journalism as its own institution, examining the economic pressures in modern newsrooms and the links between the news media and all facets of America’s instant and hyper-connected culture. All of them, though, are cultural texts that foster thought and discourse on 21st century American news media, and through it, ideas of masculinity and gender that have a long history in journalism films and television shows.

The above four series, which will serve as my primary texts, all fall within the critical category of “prestige television” and prominently feature journalist characters who both perform and complicate popular culture tropes of masculinity — the same stereotypes of toughness and daring that Judge attributes to the bygone manly journalists of the 20th century.<sup>6</sup> Prestige television is a scholarly and critical category of popular culture (rather than a distinct genre or entertainment industry convention) that fits a specific set of characteristics that make it the most intriguing and narratologically rich field of contemporary popular culture studies.

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<sup>6</sup> The term “prestige television” is not a new one. Critics and scholars for years have referred to “quality television,” which encapsulates the same idea, and in his 2013 book, *Another Steven Soderbergh Experience: Authorship and Contemporary Hollywood*, film scholar Mark Gallagher uses the term to describe and define the type of work Soderbergh does on television, described more fully below.

Prestige television blurs the line between televisual and cinematic conventions by shooting on digital video that mimics celluloid films and producing long-form episodes that tell complex stories over the course of a season typically consisting of between eight and 15 episodes. Prestige television is usually subscription-based, and actively seeks to elevate the status of television as an artistic medium. Series — and their casts and crews — take themselves seriously, and are aspirational in nature. Prestige television dramas try to capture the zeitgeist — the spirit of the moment — and, in the American context, shows like *The Wire* and *House of Cards* seek to capture something of the American moment of urban or political life, respectively. While he does not explicitly use the term, communications scholar Shawn Shimpach describes prestige television and how viewers consume it in his 2010 book *Television in Transition*. He writes, “Television in the new century looks and feels different. While it remains possible to simply ‘watch television’ ... there are increasingly more means and incentives to watch specific programs. Television has been asking for more and different kinds of attention.”<sup>7</sup> He also notes that television shows increasingly employ episodic seriality, high production values, and a wide variety of distribution platforms. I should divulge that in a thesis based entirely on television shows, I did not watch a single episode on an actual television set — every series I watched was available through at least one online streaming service. In recent years, prestige television has entered the pop culture lexicon, too. In 2013, *New York Magazine*’s pop culture website Vulture even created a listicle for “The 13 Rules for Creating a Prestige TV Drama,” poking fun at some of the tropes — such as the anti-hero

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<sup>7</sup> Shimpach, 14

main character, abundant literary references, and frequent, often surprising character deaths — that have taken hold on prestige television.<sup>8</sup>

Prestige television arose in 1999, when HBO debuted *The Sopranos*, and continues to grow and flourish today. HBO continued to pioneer the category with series like *The Wire* and continues to be one of the leading prestige television producers with current shows including *Game of Thrones* and *True Detective*. Other networks, including AMC and FX have also created numerous prestige television dramas, such as *Breaking Bad* and *Sons of Anarchy*. While these series mainly use contemporary settings to explore issues and themes ranging from power and control to drugs and urban crime, other prestige television series have succeeded as complex and in-depth portraits of earlier eras. HBO's *Boardwalk Empire* takes place in prohibition-era Atlantic City. AMC's *Mad Men* tells a gripping tale of 1960's advertising executives in New York. And, as television becomes more and more of an online medium, streaming services like Netflix have begun to create their own prestige television series, *House of Cards* being the best example.

As prestige television has become more prominent in American popular culture, it has also attracted notable film directors and actors to switch to television, an act unfathomable even a decade ago. Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson, for instance, star in HBO's *True Detective*, even though they both previously acted almost exclusively in films.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Kevin Spacey primarily made his name as a stage and film actor before taking the role of Frank Underwood in Netflix's *House of Cards* in 2013. After a 25-year career directing films including *Traffic* and the *Ocean's* trilogy, Steven Soderbergh left the film industry to instead direct a new Cinemax series, *The*

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<sup>8</sup> Hill, 2013

<sup>9</sup> Helmore, 2014



*Knick*, starring Clive Owen, who is also mostly known for his film roles. In an interview with *Esquire*, Soderbergh said he did not find the film industry fun anymore, and that directing a TV series is “a dream” because a 10-hour storyline across a television season allows directors “to go narrow and deep” into plot and characters, something not possible in a feature-length film.<sup>10</sup> David Fincher, director of films such as *The Social Network* and most recently *Gone Girl*, took a similar break from movies to direct the first season of a new HBO drama, *Utopia*. Fincher also directed the first two episodes of *House of Cards* and still works as one of the show’s executive producers. Before *House of Cards*’ debut, Netflix Chief Content Officer Ted Sarandos captured the essence of prestige television when he said, “*House of Cards* combines the best of filmmaking with the best of television. [Writer and showrunner] Beau Willimon’s compelling narrative, David Fincher’s unparalleled craftsmanship, indelible performances by Kevin Spacey and the rest of the cast unite to create a gripping story and new kind of viewing experience for Netflix members.”<sup>11</sup> In reality, though, a series like *House of Cards* is not entirely new or unique. Prestige television’s rise has attracted many film directors, producers, writers, and actors to create a more cinematic, artistic style of television.

Netflix does provide a new viewing experience with original, online-only series like *House of Cards*, but the wider prestige television medium is also reshaping the way audiences consume television, and doing something American culture has not seen before by combining two production styles to tell complex, serialized stories in a way movies cannot. In recent years, prestige television series have also featured a significant number of journalist characters, and storylines that include or revolve around the news media.

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<sup>10</sup> Ayers, 2014

<sup>11</sup> Zurawik, 2012

Since prestige television inherits many cinematic qualities, it is not surprising that it also begin to inherit some of the tropes that have developed in the film industry, including the use of journalist characters and how those characters behave. So, as prestige television continues to expand and attract attention from the entertainment industry and viewers alike, it is the most natural, and best, place to look for the most influential and compelling contemporary performances of masculinity in journalism.

Journalism has a long history in film, and journalist characters initially arose out of a practical necessity for dialogue and interesting characters once films were technologically able to include sound. Early talking films, or “talkies,” used journalist characters and set their stories in big city newsrooms because, as film scholar Howard Good puts it, “convention had it that newspapermen were fast and witty conversationalists, and with the advent of the ‘talkies,’ they came to be considered ideal characters.”<sup>12</sup> Journalist and scholar Deac Rossell argued films latched on to journalism because “it was recognized that the newspaper film allowed a range of story possibilities much more vigorous and flexible than any other genre.” Newspaper films also arose and continued to appear in American popular culture because many came to believe the press “is clothed with an aura of importance and some mystery that lends it well to the dramatic requirements of popular art.” These explanations all passively attribute the perceived excitement and drama supposedly inherent in journalism to the advent of journalist characters in early films. There is an unquestionably distinct pace and unpredictability to working in journalism, but as with essentially all pop culture portrayals of a profession, newspaper films dramatize the industry, and most professional journalists would tell you their job is nowhere near as exciting as the movies would lead you to believe. No matter

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<sup>12</sup> Good, 5

why journalists first became popular film subjects, though, they have remained integral components of American pop culture, and since the beginning, the portrayals have been gendered. The “manly” journalist characters throughout the history of journalism films have left an important, and often debated, legacy that prestige television still grapples with today.

Most scholars who study the intersection of journalism and popular culture point to Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur’s 1928 play (turned into the 1931 movie) *The Front Page* as the archetype of the American journalism film genre.<sup>13</sup> Hecht and MacArthur, both former journalists at the time they wrote the play, tell the story of reporter Hildy Johnson, who wants to quit the newspaper business to get married and start a public relations career in New York, and his editor Walter Burns, who wants to keep Johnson in Chicago and in journalism. In what perhaps functions as the template for film representations that would follow, their work at the Chicago *Examiner* happens at a breakneck pace, with wit and dialogue to match, and they become increasingly (and rather bizarrely) involved in the story of an escaped murderer. The film, considered a screwball comedy, was one of the earliest talking pictures, and took advantage of the new medium with “rapid-fire dialogue and dramatic sound effects.”<sup>14</sup> Though certainly not the first pop culture work to focus on journalism, the original version of *The Front Page* introduced mass film audiences to journalism film stereotypes such as “the callous and cynical press corps, the conniving editor who stops at nothing for a story, and the feckless

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<sup>13</sup> Ehrlich, 20

<sup>14</sup> Ehrlich, 35

newshound wildly unsuitable for matrimony or any other conventional relationship,” all of which have endured in the movies.<sup>15</sup>

A parade of screwball newspaper comedies followed *The Front Page* in the 1930's and into the 1940's. In 1934, the film industry became subject to the Production Code, which restricted what could be shown on screen, meaning overt performances of sexuality changed to more subtle sexual tension, which often took the form of a battle of wits. This ultimately led to stronger female characters in screwball comedies, especially the newspaper films of the era.<sup>16</sup> The most prominent example of a strong female journalist on the screen came in the first of three remakes of *The Front Page* — *His Girl Friday* in 1940. The remake flips Hildy's gender, making the character a woman and replicating the storyline of a conflict between the exciting life of a big city reporter and the peaceful life of a married couple. To further complicate the storyline, Walter is not only Hildy's editor, but also her ex-husband, and at the end of the film he ultimately convinces her to stay in the newspaper business and remarry him. Thus, while the screwball comedy era of newspaper films gave female characters more representation, it did not give them much agency, and the press on the big screen remained a male-dominated institution.

One year after the release of *His Girl Friday*, the screwball comedy era of newspaper films effectively ended when Orson Welles released *Citizen Kane* and forever changed the newspaper film genre. Most scholars and entertainment critics regard *Citizen Kane* as one of the most influential and best films ever made, but it is also an essential piece of the heritage of journalism in pop culture. The film focuses on Charles Foster

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<sup>15</sup> Ehrlich, 20

<sup>16</sup> Ehrlich, 47

Kane (played by Welles), a newspaper tycoon based in part on real-life media magnate William Randolph Hearst. In the film, Kane inherits a fortune and decides to purchase the *New York Inquirer*, where he begins as a principled and noble young journalist and editor and eventually slips into sensationalism, reactionary reporting, and personal demise. The film shows several masculine tropes that continue today in journalism films and television series, most notably Kane's tragic masculinity, defined by unfulfilled potential and loneliness at the top of a profession. Journalism scholar Matthew Ehrlich notes, "The young Kane seems to embody that myth: the talented editor-publisher who is both a model citizen and a model businessperson, serving democratic interests while enriching himself and his company. From that perspective, his subsequent fall from grace ... seems a tragedy."<sup>17</sup> In addition to this tragic masculinity, *Citizen Kane* also amplifies the trope of the crusading, heroic journalist, embodied, as Ehrlich argues, by a young Charles Foster Kane, who produces a "Declaration of Principles" when he first takes over the *Inquirer* and vows to "tell all the news honestly" and be "a fighting and tireless champion" for the people.<sup>18</sup>

*Citizen Kane* brought the newspaper film genre into an entirely new, and darker, era, and up until the 1970's, journalism films largely followed a noir style. These films typically featured the intrepid, impossibly dogged reporter who would do anything for a story (or a drink) and his crusty, hardened, and paternalistic editor working to uncover some great injustice and hold the powerful wrongdoers accountable for their evils. This noir style eventually gave way to what Ehrlich termed the "journalism conspiracy film," most famously represented by *All the President's Men* in 1976. Based on the true story of

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<sup>17</sup> Ehrlich, 73-74

<sup>18</sup> Ehrlich, 69

*Washington Post* investigative reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and their coverage of the Watergate scandal, the film stars Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman as Woodward and Bernstein, respectively, and has come to represent “the central myth of American journalism” — that a young and ambitious reporter (or two) could relentlessly chase a story and create such change as to end a presidency.<sup>19</sup> Along the way, Woodward and Bernstein encounter the enduring element of journalism films when they face ethical crises that, in a way, mirror greater crises in American democracy, journalism, and masculinity. Nearly all journalism films and television portrayals since *All the President’s Men* put an ethical dilemma at the heart of the story, including the 1981 film *Absence of Malice*, starring Sally Field and Paul Newman, and more recently the 2003 film *Shattered Glass*, starring Hayden Christensen. The ethical and conspiracy themes still permeate journalism films and television series today. The most recent Academy Award-winning best picture, *Spotlight* highlights the investigative team at the *Boston Globe* that uncovered the Catholic Church sex abuse scandal in the city, and it dramatizes and emphasizes the work done to expose and report the scandal and the ethical issues involved.

All of the tropes developed through the history of pop culture portrayals of journalists — the cynical and press corps pack, the crusty editor, the crusading reporter, the tragic masculine figure, the ethical and democratic crisis, and the hunt to uncover the great conspiracy — all still exist today, and have taken hold on prestige television. In *The Newsroom*, cable news anchor Will McAvoy, played by Jeff Daniels, grapples with his desire to attract a wide audience that likes him (an impulse that stems from his father’s lack of affection) and his desire to produce a good newscast that raises the level of

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<sup>19</sup> Ehrlich, 112

discourse in the country and serves a real democratic purpose. McAvoy's grappling with his masculine identity permeates the show's entire run, and his crises in masculinity and sense of democratic duty provide the groundwork for much of the show's story arc. In both *House of Cards* and *Boss*, reporters Zoe Barnes (among many others) and Sam Miller, respectively, tirelessly try to infiltrate the political machine and uncover the conspiracies and corruption that rot the American democratic system. And, in the fifth season of HBO'S *The Wire*, hardened *Baltimore Sun* city editor Gus Haynes fights an ethical and principled fight against his superiors and an overly ambitious, ultimately dishonest, reporter, who eventually overrule him and value the prospect of a Pulitzer Prize above good (and true) reporting.

Thus, to counter Mark Judge's point, the manly journalist seems to be alive and well on prestige television, if a little more nuanced than his conception. Pop culture images of journalists have done and continue to do the important ideological work of helping to construct gender roles in American culture, and on prestige television, these performances continue to perpetuate the old stereotypes inherited from cinematic portrayals — most importantly equating journalism with the defense of an ethical code and a democratic system constantly in crisis, a crisis that mirrors a supposed contemporary crisis in masculinity. These portrayals expand beyond the bounds of popular culture and begin to shape the ways in which journalists understand themselves and Americans understand journalism and gender identity. Historical and recent pop culture portrayals of journalists tell us not only how journalism works, but also how manhood works in America.

I seek, therefore, to critically analyze prestige television performances of gender and masculinity in portrayals of journalists as a means to understand and explain how pop culture and journalism collide to contribute to contemporary American conceptions of masculinity and democracy. Who, for instance, gets to do the work of defending democracy in newsrooms and on evening newscasts? How does popular culture, and its audience, construct understandings of journalism as an indispensable democratic and cultural institution in the United States? Is masculinity really in crisis, and how do popular culture images of journalists perpetuate or complicate this idea? These core questions guide my research and writing, and I ultimately argue that prestige television portrayals of journalists, especially “manly” journalists, perpetuate rigid gender norms, inherited from historical cinematic portrayals, that unduly restrict the purported noble and virtuous role the press plays in defending and strengthening American democracy.

In chapter 1, I trace the scholarly argument behind the idea of a contemporary crisis in masculinity and the reflection of this argument in journalist characters on *The Newsroom* and *The Wire*. In both series, male journalists act as main characters and their development and conflicts mirror scholarly ideas on the supposed crisis in masculinity. In chapter 2, I examine the role women journalists play on prestige television, and ultimately argue that although there are a number of women journalist characters, they are largely marginalized and/or sexualized, and their characters therefore reinforce the idea of journalism as an industry that is and naturally ought to be dominated by men. In chapter 3, I look at one of the consistent themes across prestige television portrayals of journalists — the fabricated story — and how two male journalist characters on *The Newsroom* and *The Wire*, respectively, are overcome by ambition as a means to reinforce



their fragile masculine identities and commit journalistic mortal sins when they fake stories. In chapter 4, I put these popular culture texts in conversation with the way in which journalism as an institution self-represents itself. I base this chapter on my research trip to the Newseum in Washington, D.C. — funded by a Senior Thesis Grant from Notre Dame’s Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program — and use the image of the journalist as a soldier or warrior to explore how gender and masculinity permeate popular culture and institutional representations of journalists. Finally, in my conclusion, I consider the critical and popular success of *Spotlight* and where popular culture portrayals of journalists can go from here. Throughout, I argue that prestige television series like *The Newsroom*, *The Wire*, *House of Cards*, and *Boss* and serious films like *Spotlight* help us think not only about their explicit subject matters — politics, journalism, urban life — but also about deeper academic and abstract ideas like gender and masculinity. And within these journalism-centered texts, performances of masculinity tell audiences how journalism and masculinity function in contemporary American culture.

## Chapter 1

### Brave New World? *The Newsroom*, *The Wire*, and a Contemporary Crisis in Masculinity

*The Newsroom* begins in a crisis. The opening scene of Aaron Sorkin's HBO series quickly went viral after the series premiere on June 24, 2012, and it instantly thrusts main character Will McAvoy into a crisis that continues to create the dramatic tension that drives the rest of the episode and, ultimately, the series. McAvoy, the lead anchor for "News Night" on the fictional Atlantis Cable News (ACN), sits in the center of an auditorium stage at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, flanked by two other television journalists and a Northwestern journalism professor, who is moderating a panel discussion entitled "Brave New World: Television Journalism in the Internet Age." In response to the question of what makes America the greatest country in the world, McAvoy — in a dramatic break from the answers of the other two panelists — pontificates on why America is no longer the greatest country, and laments the loss of its former glory. Throughout the sermon, McAvoy uses coded language that conflates masculinity with America's past prominence, thereby implying the loss of American exceptionalism equates with the loss of American masculinity. In the explosive first part of his answer, McAvoy insults both other panelists and the Northwestern sophomore who asked the question (who McAvoy only calls "sorority girl"). In the second part, though, he adopts a more nostalgic, tragic tone as the show's theme song begins to quietly play in the background (a common television cue that the viewer is watching an important scene)

and McAvoy explains what used to make America great, using almost exclusively masculine language.

“We built great big things, made ungodly technological advances, explored the universe, cured diseases, and we cultivated the world’s greatest artists and the world’s greatest economy,” McAvoy says. “We reached for the stars, acted like men.” And, largely mirroring Mark Judge’s nostalgia for manly journalists, McAvoy concludes his rant with, “We were able to be all these things and do all these things because we were informed, by great men, men who were revered. The first step in solving any problem is recognizing that there is one. America is not the greatest country in the world anymore.”<sup>20</sup> These words set the tone for the rest of the series and reflect the mind of a character who constantly grapples with his role in contemporary America, both as a journalist and as a man. And while McAvoy’s personal search for an honorable place in American journalism might be unique to his character, his overall presentation of a crisis in masculinity is not. Indeed, one of the prevailing debates within the field of gender studies revolves around a theory of a contemporary crisis in masculinity. This robust debate continues in gender studies scholarship, but also works to create dramatic tension in prestige television portrayals of journalists. Using two specific examples —McAvoy on *The Newsroom* and hardened, principled *Baltimore Sun* city editor Gus Haynes (Clark Johnson) on *The Wire* — I will trace the scholarly debate and arguments on masculinity in crisis and demonstrate how prestige television journalist characters help perpetuate the idea.

The scholarship on contemporary masculinity in crisis mainly emerged in the 1990’s, a time when processes of globalization drove the modernization of society. Susan

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<sup>20</sup> *The Newsroom*, Season 1, Episode 1

Faludi's 1999 book *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* makes a powerful argument that many men in the United States feel they have failed to live up to the expectations of manliness established in the post-World War II era, though not because they are insufficient in their manhood, but because society has changed since the birth of traditional understandings of masculinity that remain today. In the first chapter of the book, she also captures the opposing explanations of the cause of the contemporary crisis in masculinity. Faludi writes that feminists would argue that men are in crisis because women are "properly challenging male dominance ... [and] asking men to share the public reins and men can't bear it."<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, conservative "antifeminists," Faludi argues, believe masculinity is in crisis because, "women have gone far beyond their demands for equal treatment and now are trying to take power and control away from men." Feminists, from this point of view, are "feminazis" because "they want to command every sphere once directed by men, from deportment in the boardroom to behavior in the bedroom."

These competing analyses of the supposed, and at the very least perceived, crisis in masculinity share a common logic that Faludi also notes: men cannot be men if they cannot control every aspect of their lives. She argues that, "The man controlling his environment is today the prevailing American image of masculinity," though this notion is incorrectly "rooted in a peculiarly modern American perception" that this definition of masculinity is and always has been.<sup>22</sup> This notion of control underscores much of the masculinity crisis scholarship, including Faludi's argument, but she ultimately rejects these two contrasting dominant explanations for the crisis. Instead, Faludi argues that

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<sup>21</sup> Faludi, 9

<sup>22</sup> Faludi, 10

contemporary American society no longer functions in such a way that allows anyone — man or woman — to completely control their situation. Instead, the forces of globalization, a changing economy, and an evolving culture have made the traditional understandings of masculinity unattainable. In other words, men can no longer control their own destinies not because they lack the ability, but because the world they live in does not allow them to control everything.<sup>23</sup> But even this prevailing idea is misguided, because, as Faludi argues, the idea of control equating with masculinity stems from a misplaced nostalgia for a misremembered time.

In this way, the idea of a crisis in masculinity reflects the idea that, over the course of time, men have lost something that used to make them matter more than they currently do. Often, this idea relates back to the male body and the loss of its significance in physically making and building things as a primary means of material production. As Howard Good notes in *Girl Reporter*, when trying to explain why journalism films so often try to reinforce traditional ideas of masculinity, this idea often stems from the Industrial Revolution. “According to this theory, man’s body as the primary tool for shaping the world has been rendered obsolete by machines, and distinctions between men, and between men and women, based on differences in physical strength, have lost their significance.”<sup>24</sup> It is exactly this notion of loss that McAvoy expresses in his opening monologue in *The Newsroom*. When he says, “we built great big things,” he means that men — American men — used their hands and their tools to construct skyscrapers and monuments the likes of which the world had never seen before.

McAvoy’s entire underlying sentiment in that crucial opening scene harken back to 1950s

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<sup>23</sup> Faludi, 14

<sup>24</sup> Good, 86

America, when current understandings of masculinity solidified and when men could control their destiny by providing a house, a car, food, and, ultimately, happiness for him and his family. Thus, taken at face value, McAvoy's opening monologue appears to be a liberal rallying cry, but on a deeper level it is a rather conservative lamentation, desiring to return to a time that conservatives often cite as the height of American society and culture. In reality, though, this era — from the early 1950s until the mid 1960s — only benefitted the select few who could take advantage of the conservative white, male hegemony in American culture at the time. Over the course of the Cold War, the Vietnam era, and the age of globalization at the turn of the millennium, though, Americans lost that ability to achieve the perceived “American Dream,” at least according to McAvoy's thinking. Though McAvoy never openly states it, his character development deeply reflects the same argument that Susan Faludi makes in *Stiffed*.

Take, for example, the scene that follows McAvoy's monologue after the title sequence. Three weeks after the action of the opening scene at Northwestern, McAvoy returns to his post at ACN, arriving at the office building in a dark car, wearing dark sunglasses as he walks alone into the newsroom, his domain. He closes the door to his office before he realizes that the newsroom is empty in the middle of the day, when it should be buzzing with activity. When McAvoy meets with ACN news director Charlie Skinner (Sam Waterson), he finds out that while he was gone, nearly all of his “News Night” staff decided to leave the show to follow McAvoy's former executive producer Don Keefer (Thomas Sadoski) to the 10 p.m. newscast with new anchor Elliot Hirsch (David Harbour). This revelation leads to an explosive confrontation between McAvoy, Keefer, Hirsch, and Skinner. McAvoy's anger stems from the fact that nearly his entire

staff — the people he got to control — voluntarily left his domain to go work for someone else, and it happened without him being able to control the situation. McAvoy's loss of control only grows deeper and more widespread, though. While McAvoy was gone and Keefer left as his executive producer, Skinner hired a new executive producer without McAvoy's consent or input.

In the television news industry, the relationship between anchor and executive producer is tremendously important, and often sets the tone and direction of the news coverage. So, while McAvoy was on a mandatory vacation to recover from the negative effects of his tirade at Northwestern, his boss essentially emasculated him by taking from him control of his show and hiring not just a new executive producer, but a woman — MacKenzie McHale (Emily Mortimer). Even worse, as the audience learns in later episodes, McHale, also known as “Mac,” and McAvoy were in a serious romantic relationship before McHale cheated on him with one of her former boyfriends. McAvoy initially rejects the idea of working with McHale, but when he learns his contract does not guarantee approval of executive producers, he retools McHale's new contract so that he has the ability to fire her at the end of each week in an attempt to regain some control over his professional life.

Despite this attempt, McHale agrees to stay on as executive producer and begins her time at News Night with a breaking news story: the 2010 BP oil spill. Ninety seconds before her first broadcast, which McHale organizes and produces entirely on the spot, she reclaims any control McAvoy might have captured when he altered her contract. She tells him, “You've got my contract, but the thing you have to understand is that between 8 and 9 o'clock, you are completely mine. For an hour, five nights a week, I own you. In my

case, it's for your own good and for the good of all." With those words, McHale again emasculates him and obliterates any control McAvoy had regained in his professional life, which for him is all that matters. Thus, in his loss of control, McAvoy reflects the same loss that forms the foundation of Faludi's argument for the contemporary American crisis in masculinity. In McAvoy's case, though, the ability and control he lost is not some abstract dream that may or may not have existed, as his opening soliloquy implies. Rather, McAvoy is ultimately trying to return to what he and Skinner consider the golden age of television news, when anchors like Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite powerfully and effectively delivered the news of the day.

The title of *The Newsroom's* series premiere — "We Just Decided To" — hits on this very note. The title comes from the conversation McAvoy and Skinner have at the end of the episode, right after the nightly newscast ends. Like a father imparting wisdom upon his son, Skinner joins Will on the News Night set after his first show with McHale, and as they drink whiskey that Charlie poured into ACN coffee mugs, he tells McAvoy, "You know what, kiddo? In the old days, of about 10 minutes ago, we did the news well. You know how? We just decided to." This simplistic sentiment and repeated hearkening back to "the good old days" makes it seem as if McAvoy could do the show he wanted to, with the people he wants working for him, and control his entire situation if he simply willed it to be so. But the realities of the modern mass media, the 24-hour news cycle, and media saturation make covering the news like Murrow and Cronkite did some 50 years ago nearly impossible today. Thus, the first episode of *The Newsroom* establishes the theme of Will McAvoy's loss of control over a profession he used to dominate that continues throughout the rest of the series. This theme mirrors Susan Faludi's argument



about a crisis in masculinity in the context of contemporary American journalism.

McAvoy struggles with his identity both as a man and as a journalist not because he lacks the talent or desire to be like his idols Murrow and Cronkite, but because he works in an environment and culture drastically different from those men.

And while McAvoy's character on *The Newsroom* draws a parallel to Susan Faludi's conception of a crisis in masculinity, Gus Haynes's role on the fifth season of *The Wire* features another hallmark of the masculine crisis argument: the middle-class, working man stuck within an increasingly corporatized structure and a professional atmosphere that moves quickly as technology advances and more and more people lose their jobs. As film scholar Latham Hunter notes in the collection *Performing American Masculinities*, this aspect of the masculinity crisis argument began to reveal itself in films beginning in the 1990s, reflecting the position of the "disempowered" male as "the drone of the new corporatized, managerial culture."<sup>25</sup> Films such as *Office Space*, *American Beauty*, and *Fight Club* all fit into a category Hunter calls "office movies," and that "highlight the self-estrangement and repressed anger of men lost in the alienating ranks of management and cubicle grids."

On a fairly basic level, newspapers and news organizations are workplaces — offices where people go to work. A fictionalized version of the *Baltimore Sun* and its staff plays a significant role in the fifth season of HBO's *The Wire* and much of the action takes place within the walls of the newsroom. Haynes, the city editor, acts as the main character in the newsroom, and oversees a staff of about 15 beat and general assignment reporters, rewriters, and copy editors. He ultimately reports to managing editor Thomas Klebanow (David Costabile) and executive editor James Whiting (Sam

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<sup>25</sup> Hunter, 76

Freed), both of whom came to the *Sun* after working at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and consistently let their ambition for a Pulitzer Prize drive the *Sun*'s coverage. Haynes, on the other hand, is a Baltimore native and has been at the *Sun* for years. As the city editor, he consistently places journalism ethics and professionalism above sensational coverage that might attract a wide audience or win an award. In this environment, the *Sun* also faces downsizing threats from its corporate owners, and the reporters and editors in the newsroom feel they are nearly constantly at risk of losing their jobs.

In the first scene that takes place at the *Sun*, Haynes discusses the possibility of buyouts and layoffs with a group of fellow veteran reporters and editors while smoking a cigarette on the loading dock. This theme of potential corporate buyout looms over the newsroom for the entire season, and Klebenow's mantra (which also serves as the title of the first episode of the season) becomes that the *Sun* must simply learn how to do "more with less."<sup>26</sup> In this way, the *Sun* newsroom also reflects a crisis in journalism, one felt at newspapers across the United States as older news organizations try to remain relevant in an online-driven news market. Haynes keeps a sign near his desk that reads, "Support Our Staff," but that task becomes increasingly difficult as the staff shrinks as a result of contract buyouts and layoffs.

It also becomes much more difficult for Haynes to support his staff when one staff member becomes increasingly reckless and dishonest in his reporting. Over the course of the season, general assignment reporter Scott Templeton (Tom McCarthy) repeatedly compromises journalistic integrity by fabricating quotes ultimately making up entire stories that never actually happened (a theme I return to in chapter 3). Haynes is leery of Templeton from the beginning of the season when he cannot confirm that Templeton's

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<sup>26</sup> *The Wire*, Season 5, episode 1

source for a feature story on the Baltimore Orioles' opening day actually exists. The viewer eventually learns that Templeton faked the opening day interview and subsequent stories, ultimately leading to Templeton inventing a story about his personal interaction with an alleged serial killer. This dramatic irony lasts throughout most of the season, and Haynes is never quite sure that Templeton is actually inventing stories. Haynes does not want to take his concerns to anyone else at the paper because both Whiting and Klebanow like Templeton and his reporting, mainly for the prospect that it could help the *Sun* win a Pulitzer (as it ultimately does).

When Haynes finally does gather enough evidence to prove Templeton's dishonesty, he confronts Whiting and Klebanow, who are still unconvinced that their star reporter and Pulitzer candidate could be in the wrong. As punishment for even accusing Templeton of dishonesty, the editors demote Haynes to the copy desk. Thus, even though Haynes tried to make a principled argument that the *Sun* should not print Templeton's faulty stories, he falls victim to the hierarchical structure of the modern newsroom, and he is punished for his honorable attempts. The viewer knows that Haynes is right, and I even found myself upset that good journalism lost out to the high-pressure, market-driven environment of the modern newsroom. This conclusion to the series reflects the show's creator, David Simon's cynical view of journalism (Simon said he was in college "the last time [he] ever believed journalism fixes anything").<sup>27</sup> In this way, the *Sun* newsroom behaves similarly to larger, modern corporate American settings, which also serve as the settings for the genre of "office movies" that reflect a crisis in masculinity. The *Sun* storyline on the fifth season of *The Wire* joins this genre, and Gus Haynes's character experiences firsthand the crisis in masculinity that comes along with working in a

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<sup>27</sup> Martin, 114

modern, corporate environment with little control over important decisions or the direction of his professional life.

Ultimately, then these two examples of male journalists from *The Newsroom* and *The Wire* reflect and amplify some of the main the arguments that contemporary American masculinity is in crisis by exploring these themes in televised texts. The scholarship, though, has not entirely settled the issue of masculinity in crisis, and for as many scholars like Faludi and Roger Horrocks (whose book *Masculinity in Crisis* also presents a strong argument that the crisis exists), there nearly equally as many scholars who critique the supposed crisis. In his book *Masculinities and Culture*, cultural studies scholar John Beynon critiques the theory of masculinity in crisis. He writes, “By any measure men remain the dominant and threatening sex; talk of a crisis is a way of sidelining more important issues like poverty, racism, and structural inequalities.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, much of the scholarship on masculinity in crisis focuses on white men, but the presentation of such arguments does not always rely on race (on *The Wire*, Haynes is black). Regardless, Beynon argues that a supposed crisis in masculinity is not new, but rather a cultural phenomenon that each generation experiences in different ways, as the normative definitions of gender roles and masculinity continue to shift with the culture.

Whether or not the crisis in masculinity is new, though, or whether it ultimately exists at all, the journalists on prestige television series like *The Wire* and *The Newsroom*, work through popular culture texts to feed the scholarly debate around the issue. By reflecting the scholarly arguments in popular culture intended for mass consumption, these shows help legitimize the arguments within the debate and perpetuate the idea that there is a contemporary crisis in American masculinity that leaves men vulnerable and

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<sup>28</sup> Beynon, 93

helpless in a modern and global society that has robbed them of control of their lives, especially professional lives. So, these prestige television texts reinforce two key ideas on journalism and masculinity. First, they show a crisis in American journalism. For McAvoy, this crisis begins when he loses his cool at Northwestern and continues throughout the series as he grapples with the balance between doing the news well and hosting a popular news show that draws a large audience. For Haynes, the crisis in journalism comes from economic pressures that prevent good reporters from doing their jobs well and promote bad reporters using dishonest means to manufacture sensationalist stories that garner attention and revenue. Beyond this crisis in journalism, though, these two characters also reflect the idea of a crisis in masculinity. McAvoy struggles to control his professional and personal lives and adopts a view of masculinity that never actually existed based on his news anchor idols. Haynes more closely resembles a character in an established genre of “office movies” that portray men as powerless and lacking control within massive corporate structures. And, as these male characters fall into existing molds of masculinity, I will show in the next chapter how women journalists on prestige television also fall victim to established, and often harmful, character types.

## Chapter 2

### Sob Sisters and Sex Kittens: Women Journalists on Prestige Television

On her Comedy Central show and in her stand up acts, comedian Amy Schumer has used her humor to critique a wide range of pop culture texts. From a half-hour long feminist comedic critique of the 1957 film *12 Angry Men* to a two-and-a-half-minute music video about the music industry's obsession with butts, Schumer has a history of using her humor to critique sexist pop culture performances. And in a 2014 sketch on her show, *Inside Amy Schumer*, she took aim at *The Newsroom*.

The sketch, titled "The Foodroom" begins with an opening montage set to uplifting, triumphant music and uses a title sequence similar to *The Newsroom*'s. The sketch takes place in a fictional fast food restaurant, "McDalmond's," and features Schumer playing a co-manager named Amy opposite guest star Josh Charles portraying the other manager, J.J. The two argue about the company forcing the franchise to add apple slices to its menu, and J.J. expresses his displeasure with the new "healthy option" in a self-inflating manner brilliantly reminiscent of Sorkin's style. With the apple slices plotline as the foundation of the roughly four-and-a-half minute story, they also quickly establish that the two characters have a romantic history. When they begin to discuss this history, Amy strikes at the heart of how prestige television portrays women journalists with a line that is equally insightful and hilarious. When J.J. asks Amy where she had been (after the characters establish that this is her first day back working), she tells him,

“I worked my way up to being a GM at a Sbarro in Tel Aviv. Then one day I’m stuffing couscous into a calzone and I realize a woman’s life is worth nothing unless she’s making a great man greater.”<sup>29</sup>

The rest of the sketch parodies some of the hallmarks of Aaron Sorkin’s writing and directing — fast-paced dialogue, a dramatic and emotional soundtrack, and a tense moment that climaxes in a physical outburst before easing into a sentimental monologue — but with those two sentences, Schumer sharply and effectively critiques the gender roles in Sorkin’s shows, which also appear in prestige television portrayals of women journalists beyond *The Newsroom*. Women on *The Wire*, *House of Cards*, and *Boss* all hold significant roles in their respective newsrooms, but they always remain subordinate to their male counterparts. Furthermore, the women journalists on several of these shows become romantically involved with their male colleagues, thus further demeaning their value as a reporter by making them even more subservient to the men in their newsrooms and bedrooms. In response to the Amy Schumer sketch, and specifically the gender-based critique, Sorkin told the entertainment news website HitFix, “I think it’s a funny line that [Schumer] wrote,” but defended his portrayal of women on *The Newsroom* by invoking the show’s female lead, MacKenzie McHale.<sup>30</sup> Sorkin emphasizes McHale’s centrality and importance to the series when he cites the pilot episode in which McHale tells Will McAvoy, “it’s time for Don Quixote again,” and informs him that she is Don Quixote and he is simply the donkey, who will deliver her noble message.

In his brief answer, though, Sorkin fails to address the heart of the criticism of portrayals of women journalists on *The Newsroom*: Despite the representation of

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<sup>29</sup> “Inside Amy Schumer – ‘The Foodroom’”

<sup>30</sup> Virtel, 2015

powerful, capable, and intelligent female characters, these characters always work within a male-dominated environment in which they are submissive to male bosses and consistently fall into stereotypically weak feminine roles. This critique also holds for women journalists on other prestige television series, specifically *The Wire*, *Boss*, and *House of Cards*. Using examples (and counterexamples) from each of these shows, I argue popular culture harmfully portrays female journalists as inferior to their male counterparts, conflating the image of the manly journalist and diminishing the role of the woman reporter.

### **Strong women, weak characters on *The Newsroom***

In their article in the Fall 2015 volume of the *Image of the Journalist in Pop Culture (IJPC) Journal*, communications and journalism scholars Chad Painter and Patrick Ferrucci critically analyze gender portrayal in the first season of *The Newsroom*.

They argue:

The *Newsroom* continuously depicts its female characters in a decidedly less positive manner than their male counterparts. The women of *The Newsroom* consistently behave unprofessionally in the workplace, stereotypically act motherly and put their emotions on display, and, when actually doing their jobs, succeed less than their male counterparts.<sup>31</sup>

They note, as Sorkin tries to use as evidence to defend himself, that every woman *Newsroom* character boasts impressive credentials and serious experience, but they still fail to gain the same level of respect and importance as their male colleagues.

Throughout the first season, the show depicts female characters as inferior to the male characters in a variety of different ways. In an example Painter and Ferrucci do not cite, associate producer Maggie Jordan (Alison Pill) takes on more responsibility

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<sup>31</sup> Painter and Ferrucci, 10



throughout the course of the season and the series, but she remains almost completely reliant on one of her male co-workers, senior producer Jim Harper (John Gallagher Jr.) and she makes frequent mistakes in the newsroom. In episode 2, for example, Jordan fails to disclose a past relationship with a source and loses a key interview for that night's broadcast. Harper comes to the rescue, taking the fall for losing the interview, the first of many times he covers for Jordan, with whom he eventually falls in love. Sloan Sabbith (Olivia Munn) is a brilliant economist who holds two PhDs and works as a financial reporter for ACN instead of making substantially more working on Wall Street. Still, despite her impressive intellect and noble commitment to journalism, she is still portrayed as a beautiful woman more than a reporter or anchor. In her first appearance on the show, McHale recruits Sabbith to join *News Night* and cover the economy in primetime. Sloan tells Mac she does not feel qualified and offers to put her in touch with economics professors she studied with, but Mac tells her, "Yeah the thing is they're not going to have your legs. I'm sorry, but if I'm going to get people to listen to an economics lesson, I've got to find someone who doesn't look like George Bernard Shaw."<sup>32</sup> As Sloan's first appearance, this interaction sets the tone for her portrayal as a sexual object first and foremost throughout the rest of the series.

Beyond this sexual objectification, Sabbith, like Jordan, commits a serious professional ethics breach in season 1 when she broadcasts information that a source gave to her off the record while covering the Fukushima nuclear crisis.<sup>33</sup> In the aftermath of this journalistic mortal sin, Skinner and Sabbith get into an explosive argument, and he eventually suspends her, yelling, "Don't front off to me, girl" to which she quickly

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<sup>32</sup> *The Newsroom* Season 1, Episode 2

<sup>33</sup> *The Newsroom* Season 1, Episode 6

retorts, “Don’t call me girl, sir.” So, even in her defiance, Sabbith is deferential to her male boss.

These examples — and plenty more — lead both Painter and Ferrucci and me to conclude that, throughout season 1, “The four main female journalists in *The Newsroom* were depicted as being unprofessional in the workplace, being inadequate at their jobs, and being motherly and weak.”<sup>34</sup> Beyond their portrayal as bad at their jobs and weak in the workplace, I also argue that the main female characters on the *Newsroom* are shown as capable of success, though unendingly doomed to failure, thus robbing their characters of any agency in the male-dominated environment. Sloan has the talent to be an all-star journalist, but her femininity always holds her back from reaching her full potential. Jordan undergoes tremendous personal and professional growth throughout the first season and the entire series, but she is never able to establish herself as an indispensable part of the news team and always remains at least somewhat reliant on Harper, her boss and love interest.

The news does not get better for the women of *The Newsroom* in seasons 2 or 3, though. The final two seasons continue to show the women of ACN as clumsy, weak, and generally unprofessional, but also add a sexual dimension when all three of the main women journalist characters become romantically involved with men they work with. Sloan Sabbith, who after dating a financial analyst who posts nude photos of her online, begins to seriously date Keefer, who oversees Sabbith when she hosts the 10 p.m. news. Maggie Jordan, who used to date Don, finally gets together with her direct superior, Jim Harper, after three full seasons of sexual tension between the two. And, after a long and

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<sup>34</sup> Painter and Ferrucci, 21

complex romantic history, MacKenzie McHale marries Will McAvoy and, it is revealed in the final episode, is pregnant.

*The Newsroom* uses these relationships to generate personal drama to supplement the drama of the news, but this tension between personal and professional lives for women journalists is nothing new for women journalists in popular culture. In an essay for the IJPC, one of the institute's directors, Joe Saltzman, writes that the dominant historical role of the female journalist in popular culture is that of the "sob sister," a role that continues in popular culture today and forces women reporters to choose between a successful professional career and a "traditional" home life of domesticity and child rearing. Saltzman writes, "The female journalist faces an ongoing dilemma: How to incorporate the masculine traits of journalism essential for success — being aggressive, self-reliant, curious, tough, ambitious, cynical, cocky, unsympathetic — while still being the woman society would like her to be — compassionate, caring, loving, maternal, sympathetic."<sup>35</sup> And, in his book with IJPC co-director Matthew C. Ehrlich, Saltzman argues this "sob sister" trope continues in many popular culture representations of women journalists today. Saltzman traces the term from its origin as an actual term to describe early female journalist who wrote sympathetic and emotional stories into the popular culture trope that early journalism films popularized and still exists today and "sum[s] up the dichotomy of the movie female reporter," a dichotomy that forces women journalists to be tough at work, but feminine in their personal and romantic lives, often with the same men with whom they work.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Saltzman, 1

<sup>36</sup> Saltzman, 4

*The Newsroom* appears to inherit this cliché to some extent, though it does provide challenges to the dominant historical role of “sob sisters” in the newsroom. Although Sabbith and Keefer are dating, Sloan remains deeply committed to her job above all else. Don recognizes this fact, and when a pesky human resources supervisor confronts the two of them about whether or not they are a couple, he tells the supervisor, “Please don’t transfer one of us. We don’t work together enough, but the little we do works. And if you ask Sloan to choose between me and her job, you wouldn’t even be able to get that sentence out before she said her job, and I *really* like her. And I’m trying to be good enough, and this here is the best thing I do.”<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in the series finale, after Jim is promoted to executive producer of *News Night*, he initially tries to hire Maggie as his new senior producer, but she insists on interviewing for her dream job as a field producer in Washington, D.C., a job for which he recommended her. Still, they promise to make their long-distance relationship work, illustrated in the following back and forth at the end of the final episode:

Jim: I’ll take the last plane every Friday night after the show and then the first plane back on Mondays

Maggie: Or sometimes I could come to New York.

Jim: Or meet in the middle in New Jersey.

Maggie: That’s right.

Jim: Yeah.

Maggie: Have you had a lot of long-distance relationships?

Jim (after a long sigh): Yes.

Maggie: Have any of them worked?

Jim (as he begins to walk away): No.

Maggie (smiling): Then why is this going to be different?

Jim (as he walks out the door): I wasn’t in love with them.

Maggie (turning around, surprised): Wait, what?<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *The Newsroom* Season 3, Episode 4

<sup>38</sup> *The Newsroom* Season 3, Episode 6

This exchange exemplifies a challenge to the traditional “sob sister” character, but because it comes in the season finale, it also leaves the question unanswered: Can Jim and Maggie continue to dedicate themselves wholly to each other and to their jobs? Can they really “have it all”? The series leaves similar questions lingering for Will and MacKenzie. After (spoiler alert) news director Charlie Skinner dies, Will announces at the reception following the funeral that Mac will take over for Skinner, making her Will’s boss after three years of working for him. But she is still pregnant, and as the show concludes, the viewer has to wonder if MacKenzie will be able to balance running a major cable news station, a marriage to her network’s lead anchor, and a newborn baby at home.

Overall, *The Newsroom* both inherits and challenges the tropes historically assigned to women journalists in earlier pop culture texts. Oftentimes, as Painter and Ferrucci argue, the women of *The Newsroom* are shown as weak and unprofessional as compared to their male counterparts. As the show progresses, the three main women journalists act more and more like the “sob sisters” of early pop culture portrayals of journalists, facing a decision between personal and professional lives. Though Mac, Maggie, and Sloan do work to combat this trope, it is ultimately left up to the audience to interpret where the female characters will go from here.

### **Where have all the women journalists gone? Underrepresentation on *The Wire* and *Boss***

The role of women journalists on both *The Wire* and *Boss* has less to do with how they are portrayed and more to do with how many are portrayed. Of the handful of fictional *Baltimore Sun* reporters and editors on the fifth season of *The Wire*, only one

woman has an even somewhat significant role. Alma Gutierrez (Michelle Parness) is a young, hardworking city reporter who works under Gus Haynes and alongside Scott Templeton. Despite the fact that the show consistently shows her as dedicated and good at her job, she never advances at the paper nor takes on any real significance in the show's plot. She is, on occasion, used as a source of some comic relief in the show's newsroom scenes, and her learning process as a reporter is a source of some semi-regular humor, and a way to suppress her character development by infantilizing her. In the season five premiere, for example, Haynes is editing a story alongside copy editor Jay Spry, when they teach her the correct usage of "evacuate."

Haynes: Gutierrez. (louder as he shouts across the busy newsroom) Gutierrez! Get your ass over here.

Gutierrez: (walking over to the copy desk) Yeah?

Haynes: You say that 120 people were evacuated.

Gutierrez: Yeah, they were.

Haynes: You can't evacuate people. I mean you can if you want, but that's not what you want to say here.

Spry: (with a tight shot of Gutierrez with a confused look on her face) A building can be evacuated. To evacuate a person is to give that person an enema. The details, Ms. Gutierrez — at the *Baltimore Sun*, God still resides in the details.

Haynes: You teach 'em, Spry.

Spry: (as Gutierrez turns and walks back to her desk) What are we going to do with these children today?<sup>39</sup>

When Alma returns to her desk, she checks her dictionary and realizes her older, more experienced colleagues are right. Overall, the scene is a growing experience for Gutierrez, but one that comes at the expense of her identity as a professional woman. Haynes and Spry adopt an almost fatherly tone as they explain the error to the young reporter, and Spry makes his status as a superior writer more explicit when he directly

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<sup>39</sup> *The Wire* Season 5, Episode 1

refers to Gutierrez as a child, grouping her in with the younger reporters in the Newsroom as “these children.”

Unlike women journalists on *The Newsroom*, though, at least Gutierrez is shown as an honest, fair, and capable reporter, earning the trust and even admiration of her boss, Haynes. However, her integrity does not benefit her in the long run. In fact, it does just the opposite. Throughout the season, Gutierrez shares Haynes’s suspicion that fellow reporter Scott Templeton is not entirely truthful in his reporting. Alma and Scott are always shown as peers and essentially equals in the newsroom, but they proceed down polar opposite paths. Templeton fakes a series of stories that land him the praise of his editors and even a Pulitzer Prize while Alma joins Haynes in presenting evidence to their superiors that Templeton is actually fabricating his stories. In the series finale, both Haynes and Gutierrez are demoted for their attempts to uncover Templeton’s fraud — Gus to a copy editor and Alma to a small county bureau, far away from the big news of Baltimore. In Alma’s last scene in the series finale, she leaves the Baltimore newsroom, dressed all in black and lugging a box of materials from her desk. She gives Scott the cold shoulder as she walks out to the elevator, knowing that his dishonesty led to his advancement and her demotion. Walking with her head down, she runs into Haynes as he gets off the elevator. She avoids eye contact with him, but eventually begins a conversation with her now former boss. In the course of their discussion, set against the backdrop of an H.L. Mencken quote adorning the lobby wall, Alma naively struggles to understand why her and Haynes’s noble efforts were met with such hostility. Haynes, once again acting as the older, wiser, fatherly figure, explains to her with an air of cynicism, “The pond is shrinking, the fish are nervous. Get some profile, win an award,

maybe find a bigger pond somewhere.”<sup>40</sup> These words and this scene cast a sense of doom over Alma’s future, essentially telling her that journalism is not for her. Ultimately, then *The Wire* shows woman journalists as, first and foremost, almost non-existent. Beyond that, the show tells viewers that even if a woman reporter is good at her job, like Alma is, the male-dominated environment of a newsroom will stunt her growth and give white men plenty of more opportunities than any woman ever receives.

On *Boss*, the women journalists at the fictional *Chicago Sentinel* — or, more accurately, the one woman journalist — face a similar problem as Alma does on *The Wire*, namely a lack of representation. Worse than *The Wire*, though, Starz’s political drama *Boss* — which focuses on Chicago Mayor Tom Kane’s (Kelsey Grammer) declining health and political machine — only features one woman journalist who barely makes any impact on the show’s plot. Overall, *Boss* focuses more on the City Hall politics and personal relationships than it does on the journalism aspect, but *Sentinel* reporter and editor Sam Miller (Troy Garity) plays a significant recurring role as a dogged and obsessively crusading journalist determined to uncover Kane’s corruption. Meanwhile, reporter Jackie Shope works with and later for Miller, though never in any meaningful way. To be completely honest and transparent about my own research, the first time I watched *Boss*, it took me almost the entire first season to realize that Jackie was actually a reporter and not just Sam’s assistant. It took me almost just as long to find out her character’s name. I would choose an example to illustrate Jackie’s lack of impact on the show and the journalism subplot, but she appears so little that I could not even find an appropriate example.

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<sup>40</sup> *The Wire* Season 5, Episode 10



All of this, coupled with *The Wire*'s underrepresentation of women journalists, goes to show how prestige television largely excludes women from its fictional newsrooms. This observation, though, finds some legitimacy in a rather unfortunate reality in real-world journalism. According to the Women's Media Center 2015 annual report, women remain drastically underrepresented in American newsrooms. The report found that, overall men generated 62.1 percent of news while women generated 37.3 percent. On broadcast news, male journalists were on screen, either as anchors or correspondents, 68 percent of the time while women reporters appeared 32 percent of the time. In a sample of the ten most widely circulated newspapers, women wrote only 37 percent of the content while men wrote 62 percent. And, on the most gender equal news media platform — the internet — women still only contribute 42 percent of written content compared to men's 58, based on a survey of four online news sites.<sup>41</sup> As the Huffington Post reported in 2013, women accounted for only 38 percent of American newsroom staffs, a figure that has not changed in the past 14 years and one that is only four points higher than the percentage of women in journalism 30 years ago.<sup>42</sup> So, although *Boss* and *The Wire* belittle the role of the woman journalist, these shows are not patently wrong in portraying the newsroom as a still male-dominated environment in which women often struggle to advance.

### **Sexualization and sketchy ethics on *House of Cards***

The Netflix original series *House of Cards* does feature a slate of powerful and effective female journalists, but the show's portrayals are still not without their problems.

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<sup>41</sup> WMC Divided 2015: The Media Gender Gap

<sup>42</sup> Zeilinger, 2013

As a 2013 *Slate* headline proclaims, “*House of Cards* Thinks All Female Political Reporters Are Mean Sluts.”<sup>43</sup> And, as the piece’s author Alyssa Rosenberg argues, “If the depiction of Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara) and Janine Skorsky (Constance Zimmer) is meant to be a trenchant critique of Washington journalism, or of sexism in Washington journalism, it falls very, very short of that mark. Instead, it’s grotesquely insulting to the women who do serious policy and political reporting in Washington every day.” Indeed, overt sexuality is perhaps the defining characteristic of the women journalists on *House of Cards*. Perhaps worse than that, though, all of the journalists on the show — regardless of gender — are ultimately portrayed as nothing more than powerless pawns in the powerful game of Washington politics (largely controlled by Kevin Spacey’s character Frank Underwood). In the pilot episode, Barnes — the show’s main journalist character — makes her entrance into Underwood’s complex political world when the congressman notices her wearing a revealing, tight-fitting dress at an opera. So even before Zoe’s character begins to develop as a journalist, she is first shown as a sexual object. Barnes rather quickly begins a relationship with Underwood in which he gives her exclusive information and juicy scoops and the two regularly engage in explicit sexual acts, not only objectifying her but also placing her in an ethically questionable relationship with a powerful source.

In a particularly denigrating scene from the show’s first season, Barnes is on the phone with her father while Underwood is in her dark, disheveled apartment. Zoe tells her father that she is not seeing anyone at the moment while she undresses Underwood, unbuttoning his shirt, loosening his belt, and putting her hand down his pants. While she begins the scene in control of the increasingly erotic situation, Underwood quickly takes

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<sup>43</sup> Rosenberg, 2013

control, laying Barnes on her bed and lifting up her dress. Barnes says to her father, “Don’t be worried about me, I’m fine,” though the viewer can clearly see her relationship with Underwood (and with journalism ethics) is anything but. And as Underwood begins to perform oral sex on her while she is still on the phone with her father, she begins to breathe heavily and tries to stifle her moans. Underwood continues and Zoe abruptly ends her conversation by telling her dad, “Happy Father’s Day,” and then lets out a loud moan after hanging up. Underwood then looks up and replies, “Aren’t you going to wish me a Happy Father’s Day?” Barnes tells him, “You don’t have any children,” to which Underwood asks, “Don’t I?”<sup>44</sup> This devastating twist of words in a compromising situation immediately infantilizes Zoe and further establishes Underwood as the dominant, controlling figure in the relationship. And although Zoe eventually ends her sexual relationship with Underwood, she goes on to date fellow journalists and former boss, Lucas Goodwin (Sebastian Arcelus). Ultimately, Barnes falls victim to her role as a pawn in Underwood’s twisted power structure when he kills her in the season 2 premiere by pushing her in front of an oncoming subway train. Barnes’s death not only provided one of the most memorable moments of the immensely popular Netflix series, but also illustrates how powerless and ineffective journalists, especially women journalists, are in the show’s view.

And while Barnes is the main journalist character on the show, several other strong (or not-so-strong) female journalists appear on the show. Notably, though, they still mainly work in male-dominated newsroom and political environments. At the fictional *Washington Herald*, where both Barnes and her colleague Janine Skorsky work at the beginning of the series, two male editors — Goodwin and Tom Hammerschmidt

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<sup>44</sup> *House of Cards* Season 1, Episode 7

(portrayed by Boris McGiver, and whose very name screams manliness and toughness) — run the newsroom. And though the more seasoned Skorsky initially criticizes Zoe for her youthful ambition and perceived unprofessionalism, Skorsky still admits she used to use sex as a tool to elicit information from sources. Janine eventually tells Zoe that she “used to suck, screw, and jerk just about anything that moved to get a story.”<sup>45</sup> So, even the seemingly more professional female journalist used her sexuality to get stories, a decidedly unprofessional tactic. And, much like Zoe, Janine ultimately falls victim to the ruthless and unrelenting political game. After Zoe’s death, Janine, who had been working on the same story that got Zoe killed, becomes so scared for her safety that she quits journalism altogether and leaves to teach at a college in Ithaca, New York. This environment of fear that forces Skorsky to quit her job not only demonstrates how the show views Underwood’s boundless power, but also shows how female reporters inevitably succumb to that power.

In seasons 2 and 3, two other female journalists make an impact on the show, but do not really add any new elements to the show. *Wall Street Telegraph* investigative reporter Ayla Sayyad (Mozhan Marnò) follows breadcrumbs from Underwood and eventually reports a story that causes the sitting president to resign from office, elevating Underwood to the presidency. Sayyad then joins the White House press corps, but when she pursues what the administration deems an inappropriate line of questioning at a press briefing, the press secretary suspends her credentials, effectively ending her time covering presidential politics. Her replacement, Kate Baldwin (Kim Dickens) is portrayed as competent, effective, and just as ruthless as male politicians, but she also falls into the now well established *House of Cards* trope of the over sexualized woman journalist when

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<sup>45</sup> *House of Cards* Season 1, Episode 9

she begins sleeping with writer Thomas Yates (Paul Sparks), who Underwood has hired to write a biography about him. Ultimately, then, even these two seemingly effective and talented women journalists cannot accomplish any more than their series predecessors, Barnes and Skorsky. Beyond these individual character storylines, *House of Cards* shows female journalists collectively as sexually promiscuous, ethically devoid, and altogether powerless in the male-dominated worlds of politics and journalism.

### **Marginalization, sexualization, and where to go from here**

So, on prestige television, women journalists are, by and large, either marginalized or sexualized. On *The Newsroom*, capable and seemingly strong women fail to live up to their credentials and potential, and are shown as weak women in a man's job. MacKenzie McHale, Maggie Jordan, and Sloan Sabbith all perpetuate, and in some instances challenge, the old pop culture trope of the female journalist as a "sob sister" forced to choose between a career that requires typically masculine qualities and a romantic and personal life that demands of them domesticity and rigid conceptions of femininity. On both *The Wire* and *Boss*, women journalists are almost nonexistent, and when they do appear, they are largely powerless in their male-dominated newsroom environments. This underrepresentation, though, reflects a difficult truth that women are in fact underrepresented in actual newsrooms across the United States and across the news media. Finally, on *House of Cards*, the abundance of women reporters are still shown as mostly powerless in political and journalistic system that favors strong, assertive men. Furthermore, the women journalist on *House of Cards* are almost all somehow sexually involved with male characters on the show, leading to ethical lapses and their hyper sexualization and infantilization. These examples do important, and quite

damaging, cultural work, simultaneously telling women that they are not fit for a noble profession like journalism and signaling to men that it is their place to both take control over women in the workplace and to possess women in romantic and sexual relationships. These prestige television portrayals of women journalists act as a way for both men and women to think about contemporary gender norms and roles as they relate to both personal and professional lives. These portrayals, though, present regressive ideas about gender and masculinity even though their groundbreaking television category could allow them to explore progressive and equally groundbreaking portrayals of gender. I argue, then, as a postscript, that prestige television is ripe for a contemporary female journalist show or character that breaks down traditional gender roles and asserts her independence and power both as a woman and as a reporter. Prestige television needs a Murphy Brown for the 21st century, a reinterpretation of Rory Gilmore, a strong woman journalist who possesses the strength and independence to be a successful reporter and the self-confidence and self-acceptance to lead happy and healthy romantic life. These prestige television series could be texts that challenge the real-world lack of women in journalism and instead show lots of women reporters doing their jobs well, because for now, their portrayals on series like *The Newsroom*, *Boss*, *The Wire*, and *House of Cards* still play into Amy Schumer's comedic notion that women journalists exist only to serve — both professionally and sexually — their male superiors and make them better men.

## Chapter 3

### Ethics, Ambition, and the Gender Politics of the Fabricated Story

Every few years or so, a journalist makes news by faking the news. Despite the high value the news industry places on ethics and truth, story fabrication has a long history in the United States. *New York World* reporter Louis Seibold won a Pulitzer Prize for reporting in 1921 for an interview he didn't actually conduct with President Woodrow Wilson, who had recently suffered a stroke.<sup>46</sup> In 1981, *Washington Post* reporter Janet Cooke returned her Pulitzer for feature writing after she admitted fabricating her award-winning story, "Jimmy's World," about an eight-year-old heroin addict who did not actually exist.<sup>47</sup> More recently, journalists Jayson Blair of the *New York Times* and Stephen Glass at *The New Republic* were fired or forced to resign from their respective publications when editors discovered the reporters had fabricated quotes and even entire stories. According to a *Times* story after the Blair scandal broke in 2003, he had fabricated all or parts of nearly half of his stories for the paper, making up sources and quotes and filing stories from places he had never been by stealing material from wire services.<sup>48</sup> Glass, who like Blair was a rising star in journalism before he got caught, was eventually fired from his position as associate editor of *The New Republic* in 1998 after reporters at *Forbes* magazine discovered his fabrications.<sup>49</sup> Most recently, NBC Nightly News Anchor Brian Williams was suspended and ultimately removed from his role after

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<sup>46</sup> Robillard, 2012

<sup>47</sup> Maraniss, 1981

<sup>48</sup> Barry, et. al, 2003

<sup>49</sup> Noer, 2014

it came to light that he had “made a number of inaccurate statements” about his reporting experience during events including Hurricane Katrina and the Iraq War.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to periodically highlighting the role of ethics in journalism, this seedy side of the news media appeals popular culture producers, too. The 2003 film *Shattered Glass*, starring Hayden Christensen as Stephen Glass, tells a dramatized version of his journalistic demise. A 2013 documentary, *A Fragile Trust: Plagiarism, Power, and Jayson Blair at The New York Times*, explores Blair’s deceptions. And, two of my primary prestige television texts — *The Newsroom* and *The Wire* — feature storylines in which a journalist fabricates a story or a series of stories. In a thesis exploring prestige television portrayals of journalists, I could not ignore this trend. Both of the characters — Scott Templeton on season 5 of *The Wire* and Jerry Dantana (Hamish Linklater) on season 2 of *The Newsroom* — are young white men, and, as I argue, both driven to lie by their desire for acclaim and recognition in order to affirm their manliness and value in their respective newsrooms.

Journalism and film scholar Matthew C. Ehrlich, in his analysis of *Shattered Glass*, notes this question of motivation when considering portrayals of lying journalists. He writes, “The most common criticism of *Shattered Glass* was that it provides little insight into what drove Glass to lie.”<sup>51</sup> Ehrlich writes that Glass himself said he tried to “deceive people in[to] thinking better of [him],” but that motivation did not much appeal to the film’s director, Billy Ray. In this chapter, the portrayals of Templeton and Dantana’s respective motivations to lie matter a great deal to me. And though much of my argument relies heavily on my own critical reading of *The Wire* and *The Newsroom*, I

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<sup>50</sup> Steel, 2015

<sup>51</sup> Ehrlich, 27



argue that, much like each of these series reflects the scholarly debate surrounding a contemporary crisis in masculinity, the motivation for these two specific characters to fabricate their stories at least partially stems from their need to affirm their gender identity as talented and indispensable men in the supposedly cutthroat, fast-paced world of contemporary journalism.

Even before Jerry Dantana first appears on season 2 *The Newsroom* he causes suspicion. Season 2 opens to Will McAvoy sitting across a large conference room table from a group of lawyers, beginning to describe his account of a major story that he and his team botched. This first scene frames the rest of the season, which is told largely through flashbacks as different characters tell the ACN lawyers what went wrong in the reporting process for a story on a U.S. Special Forces mission codenamed “Operation Genoa.” As the series eventually reveals to the viewer, this means the entire season is framed around Jerry Dantana’s ambition leading him to a grievous ethical breach. When his character does first appear, he comes from ACN’s Washington, D.C. bureau to join the New York office and fill in for the loveable, yet frustratingly lovelorn Jim Harper when he leaves for New Hampshire to cover Mitt Romney’s 2012 campaign in an attempt to get away from Maggie, who broke his heart at the end of season 1. But Jerry’s outsider status immediately leads his superiors to be cautious of his obvious ambition.

Dantana, a tall, lanky, and somewhat nerdy-looking man, first arrives in New York on a rainy morning, and before viewers even see his face, they see his rain-soaked satchel at his side, while MacKenzie tells him, “You could have checked into the hotel first,” revealing that he was so eager to get to the office and please his bosses that he

went directly to work, through the rain.<sup>52</sup> He proceeds to tell Mac that he can check into the hotel later that night, after work. And with an eager but naïve look on his face, he drops his bags in Mac's office while he begins to tell her about the latest American drone strike in the Middle East. He expresses his dissatisfaction that Will's show the night before did not cover the strike, and his immediate fascination with the issue shows his ambition to succeed as a producer in New York, coming from the D.C. office that is often shown as ACN's forgotten step-child. Jerry continues to push for coverage of the drone strikes when MacKenzie takes him to meet Will for the first time. During the brief meeting, Will keeps forgetting Jerry's name and acts generally disinterested in the new producer and his interest in drone strikes, thus asserting Will's dominance and emasculating Jerry by belittling his first contributions to ideas about news coverage.

When Sloan Sabbith storms into the meeting to tell Will and Mac about another drone strike, Jerry uses it as a way to push for a panel on the subject on that night's show. Jerry even lobbies to use his own military expert on the panel instead of the one Jim normally books, which Mac eventually agrees to. As the meeting breaks up, though, Will tells Sloan, "Hey, keep your eye on Jerry for me. I think he wants to win a Peabody [award]," to which Sloan confusedly nods her head and asks, "Who's Jerry?" Throughout the scene, the rain continues to fall outside Will's office window and the dark lighting implies a sense of impending trouble. The camera bounces back and forth between Will, by himself behind his desk, and Mac and Jerry standing on the other side, thus framing Jerry as just another one of Will's subordinates, with whom he will not get along. This first scene featuring Jerry thus not only belittles his importance in the New York office, but also lays the groundwork for the second season's dominant storyline: Dantana's

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<sup>52</sup> *The Newsroom* Season 2, Episode 1

dangerous ambition. For the rest of the season, Jerry must work especially hard to prove himself in the New York office, both as a journalist and as a man.

And while Jerry's ambition is a defining character trait in his 21st century newsroom setting, it is not a new trait in its relation to the study and formation of American masculine identities. In his book *American Manhood: Transitions in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era*, history and gender studies scholar E. Anthony Rotundo traces conceptions and practices of American manhood, including the role ambition plays in the way early colonial Americans and their ancestors understood masculinity. He argues that American manhood, beginning in colonial New England, has gone through three phases: communal manhood, self-made manhood, and passionate manhood. In communal manhood, which defined the colonial era, ambition was seen as a masculine passion, but one that needed to be controlled (and one that men could use their superior reason to control better than women).<sup>53</sup> In self-made manhood, Rotundo argues that passions such as ambition and assertiveness became masculine assets, so long as men could effectively and tactfully employ them in the pursuit of self-advancement.<sup>54</sup> After the phase of self-made manhood, which Rotundo dates from the early Republic until the late 19th century, passionate manhood arose, and lasts until the contemporary era. In this contemporary conception of passionate manhood, personal passions like ambition have become virtues for men as the importance of and emphasis on the self became central to personal identities.<sup>55</sup>

In an era of passionate manhood, characters like Dantana and Templeton recognize and wholly accept ambition as a virtue, and seek to act on it in an attempt to

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<sup>53</sup> Rotundo, 11

<sup>54</sup> Rotundo, 20

<sup>55</sup> Rotundo, 6

affirm their manhood. However, both of these characters over perform their ambition, and in doing so try to overcompensate for their lack of skill in their jobs and turn the supposed manly virtue of ambition into a vice. For example, later in the season 2 premiere of *The Newsroom*, after Jerry's guest tanks on the panel, his over-ambition manifests itself more clearly when his guest offers him a story that, according to the guest, "makes careers and ends presidencies." The guest, Cyrus West (Ben Koldyke) nervously waits for Dantana to emerge from the control room after the panel, and the camera lingers on his worried face before panning to Dantana, who after being scolded by Mac and told to "use Jim's guests," now finds himself in a position of power over his guest. The two men exchange rapid-fire dialogue about whether or not West performed well on the panel and whether or not he will be invited back on the show. In his nervousness, West comes off as equally, if not more ambitious than Dantana. The two men draw closer together and hush their voices when West tells Dantana that he is going to give him a story, but only if ACN uses West as a source to chase the story. When West tells Jerry that the story is the kind that makes careers and ends presidencies, Jerry initially laughs it off, but when West reiterates his earnestness, Dantana repeats the line the audience knows he is hooked on this potentially Watergate-esque story. So, immediately after Jerry disappoints his boss — a woman — on his first day in his new job, he seeks reaffirmation as a valuable member of the news team by over performing his ambition and letting it lead him down an unethical path.

Jerry eventually recruits a team of reporters and producers to help chase the Genoa story, which alleged that an American Marine Special Forces (MARSOC) unit used sarin gas on civilians in order to extract two Marines who had been captured by

Taliban fighters and would be sold to Al Qaeda for a public execution. After weeks of fruitless reporting, Charlie and Mac tell him he has to end the project and let his team get back to their real jobs. Just before this, though, Jerry and his team discover a stream of tweets from someone in the area of the attack who seemed to be describing the operation. From this point, at the end of episode 3, Dantana remains entirely convinced that the story happened and allows his ambition to guide him to attempt to prove the story he already believes to be true. His superiors, namely Charlie and Mac, remain unsatisfied with the evidence for months, telling Jerry that he has to keep reporting. At the beginning of episode 6, Jerry first briefs Don, Jim, and Sloan about his team's reporting at a meeting designed to allow the fresh eyes to ask questions and help find any holes in the story. At the meeting, which takes place in the same conference room the ACN lawyers use to interview the team who worked on Genoa after it is found to be false, Jerry fervently defends what has become his story. He becomes so fiercely defensive of the story that, despite Charlie and Mac's continued resistance to air the story, he remains convinced that Genoa happened and that the U.S. used sarin gas on civilians.

Jerry believes in the story so much that he digitally alters the raw footage of an interview with a retired 3-star Marine General who could confirm use of sarin, but does not. The general refused to acknowledge that the U.S. used sarin during Operation Genoa, but Dantana alters the footage to make it look like he did confirm it. Disgruntled and frustrated with the general's unwillingness to bend to his version of the story, Jerry returns to the ACN Washington bureau and quietly enters an editing bay. With suspenseful music, reminiscent of a spy movie, playing, Dantana quickly and deliberately edits the raw footage to make it appear as if the general confirmed the use of sarin. Tight

shots of Jerry's face reveal his knowledge that his action is wrong, but his disregard for ethics. When Mac discovers this egregious breach of ethics, she immediately fires Jerry, who emphatically tries to explain, "I wouldn't have done this on any other story and I wouldn't have done it unless I was sure."<sup>56</sup> I argue, though, that he was only sure about the story because he let his ambition blind him to the facts in front of him. Jerry's desire to act on his ambition and therefore affirm his role as a man in an era of passionate manhood prevented him from fully and properly considering the journalistic ethics of his action. Instead of maintaining the same critical eye to the story as his colleagues do, he irreversibly convinces himself that story actually happened. Thus, Jerry's ambition and craving to assert his masculinity leads him to tell the story he wants to believe, rather than the one that actually happened.

In a promotional interview with HBO, Hamish Linklater, who plays Dantana, said ambition was only his character's initial motivation. He said:

At first, Jerry may have been somewhat motivated by ambition and feelings of being neglected. But as the part grew, it seemed to me more and more that he just believed in the veracity of the story, and in the righteousness of the truth coming out. He completely believes that the [Obama] administration has gone wild in so many other ways pertaining to civil liberties — he's always going on about the drone strikes — and he wouldn't put it past them to do something like this.<sup>57</sup>

This is powerful analysis from the person who portrayed the character, someone who in a sense must become the character. But Jerry's belief in the veracity of the story derives directly and inextricably from his ambition to make a name for himself in the New York office at ACN. Throughout the course of the season, other characters consistently dismiss or otherwise diminish Dantana's work in New York, yet he still believes he is chasing a

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<sup>56</sup> *The Newsroom* Season 2, Episode 7

<sup>57</sup> Linklater, 2013

story that could make his career, end a presidency, win him an award, and earn him the respect of his colleagues and bosses. His drive to prove everyone else wrong and prove his story right stems from a need to affirm his own masculinity in a newsroom full of other manly men like Charlie, the loveable, experienced, principled (and happily drunken) boss, Will, the immensely popular, talented, intelligent, and demanding anchor and editor, and Jim and Don, who collectively represent what Jerry could be if he were a just little better at his job. All of these other men have found tremendous success over the course of their journalism careers, while Jerry is just now getting his first taste of life in the “big leagues” of New York. So, in order to position himself as “one of the guys,” Jerry fiercely chases and ultimately doctors a story that he believes would place him in the ranks of his fellow newsmen. His ambition and his masculinity are deeply connected, and his desire to break the big story clouds his journalistic ethics and leads to his demise. And when he is fired, Jerry feels as if he was used as a scapegoat, and therefore sues ACN for wrongful termination because he was the only one fired for the inaccurate Genoa report. In other words, when Jerry’s ambition doesn’t him get the story or the status he seeks, he plays the sore loser and shows his unmanly weakness by seeking reward for his misdeeds.

On *The Wire*, Scott Templeton follows a more blatantly unethical course, though he escapes unscathed, and even rewarded, at the end of the series. Despite the somewhat different circumstances and drastically different outcomes, Templeton’s motivations for lying and cheating originate from the same need to affirm masculinity and achieve acclaim within the male-dominated newsroom. Much like Dantana, Templeton shows early signs of ambition in the *Baltimore Sun* newsroom. Late in the season 5 premiere, as

Scott and his fellow general assignment reporter Alma Gutierrez are wrapping up their work for the day, Scott opines that, “[Baltimore is] a shit news town. How many stories go national out of here?”<sup>58</sup> Alma gives him one example of a recent Baltimore story that garnered national attention, but as Scott flips through that day’s paper, he reiterates his dissatisfaction with the amount of national attention Baltimore receives. This dissatisfaction is reflective of a desire to be recognized on a national stage as both a skilled journalist and a competent, secure man.

Immediately following this opening scene, Scott and Alma’s editor, Gus Haynes, enlists them to help on a story about the City Council engaging in business with a known drug dealer. Scott expresses his eagerness to help on the story, but after Haynes assigns Alma to go to a strip club owned by the drug dealer in order to get a quote from him, Scott is left hovering around Gus’s desk, begging for something to do. Gus orders him to go through the *Sun* archives to pull together all the information possible on the drug dealer. As Gus walks away to tend to other matters, Scott angrily asks, “What, so she gets to go to strip clubs while I’m pulling clips in the morgue?” In this scene, Scott’s ambition drives him to want to be out on the street, reporting from a seedy drug front strip club, but instead the assignment goes to a woman, who handles it well. Later, when all the reporters gather at a bar to unwind after work, Gus commends Alma for the excellent quote she got from the drug dealer. Alma and Scott, sitting at the bar instead of at the table with the rest of the group, discuss their work and their futures. As Scott takes a swig of his beer and looks away, he tells Alma that she can’t go far on contributing bylines (which she received for the City Council story). She asks where else he wants to go. Swallowing his beer, Scott replies, “The *Times* or *Post*. Where else?” as if it were the

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<sup>58</sup> *The Wire* Season 5, Episode 1



most obvious answer in the world. Alma counters him, saying, “I don’t know, this is still a pretty good paper.” She then gets up to join the rest of the group, leaving Scott at the bar, smiling and shaking his head at what he considers Alma’s naiveté for not wanting more than the *Baltimore Sun*. The next day in the newsroom, Scott sits, reading through that day’s paper while Alma and veteran reporter Bill Zorzi talk about the City Council story from the night before. Zorzi calls it a “good fucking story,” at which Scott folds his newspaper, gets up, and walks across the newsroom to ask Gus if he could be the one to follow up on the story, again showing his ambition. Gus tells him that the City Hall reporter will do the react story, but recognizing his ambition, tells him, “Stay hungry like that. Good things come when they come.”

Apparently, though, Templeton doesn’t want to wait for good things. In the next episode, he begins to cozy up to the bosses, the managing and executive editors. Scott defies Gus in a meeting about a series of stories on Baltimore public schools, and gains the favor of executive editor James Whiting. Later in the episode, Gus looks up from his desk to see Scott chatting and laughing with Whiting and managing editor Thomas Klebanow. Klebanow overrules Gus and assigns Scott to write a feature piece on the Baltimore Orioles’ opening day, but when the camera follows Scott outside the ballpark and shows him fruitlessly talking with disgruntled fans and disinterested potential interview subject, it seems like the story is going nowhere. When he returns to the office, though, he tells Gus, “I got good stuff,” and begins to tell him the story of a wheelchair-bound 13-year-old black kid from West Baltimore who only gave his nickname, E-Jay. Gus feels uneasy about running a story that focuses on an essentially unidentified boy with no photo of him. But Whiting overrules Gus and allows the story to run as is. The

next morning, as Gus stands at his desk drinking his coffee, Scott is again schmoozing with Klebanow, while Gus discusses the sketchy ethics of a the opening day story, which by now the viewer knows Scott faked.<sup>59</sup>

The lies only continue, and get bigger, from there. He goes on to invent a story about a single mother of four who died of a reaction to eating blue crabs, make up a quote about drama in the police department and falsely attribute it to the City Council President, and alters the story of a homeless veteran. In the middle of his journalistic misdeeds, Templeton also suffers a deep blow to his ambition when interviews for, and is rejected from, a job at the *Washington Post*. When he arrives at the *Post*'s Virginia Bureau, he pauses as he exits the parking garage across the street, and he stands as a tiny figure against the backdrop of a large building that houses an even more massive news operation, making Scott small and powerless in comparison. Donning a tie, which he doesn't normally, Scott is escorted through the bustling newsroom and enters his interview with three editors, who, to his dismay, are not overly impressed with his work at the *Sun*. As he leaves the building, one of the editors with whom he interviewed, a woman with short, dark hair, tells him the *Post* will keep his resume on file, and perhaps he can reapply after he gets more experience. She tells him, "you can just toss that," referring to Scott's visitor's badge, and he fakes a smile and disgruntledly shakes her hand and walks out. This scene serves as a massive roadblock to Scott's ambition, and the sense of rejection cuts deep into his identity as a journalist and as a man. In order to make up for this rejection, and in pursuit of a Pulitzer Prize that would affirm his value in the newsroom, Scott begins to invent even more wild stories, of which Gus becomes

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<sup>59</sup> *The Wire* Season 5, Episode 2

skeptical but which Whiting and Klebanow love for their sensational nature and popular appeal.

The story that ultimately earns Scott a Pulitzer, but that the audience knows is entirely untrue, comes at the intersection of another lie. In order to funnel more funding to the Baltimore Police Department for serious case work that the bosses neglected, detective Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West) invents evidence to link unrelated murders and essentially create a serial killer. The plan works, and the *Sun* covers the killer, with Scott leading the way. But when Templeton makes up a story about receiving a phone call from the serial killer, McNulty knows he, too, is lying. In a climactic scene in the series finale, McNulty confronts Templeton about his lies. McNulty tells Scott how he manipulated him to get him to cover the story, and the following exchange ensues:

McNulty: You know why I can tell you all this? Because, you lying motherfucker, you're as full of shit as I am. And you're gonna live with it and play it out as long as it goes, right? We're trapped in the same lie. The only difference is I know why I did it. The fuck if I can figure out what it gets you in the end. But hey, I ain't part of your tribe.

Templeton: You're not serious. You, you can't be—

McNulty (interrupting him): No. No, I'm a fucking joke. And so are you. Now get the fuck out of here.<sup>60</sup>

This scene is a confrontation of masculinities. McNulty, who lied for honorable purposes (to receive the funding necessary to solve a string of actual murders) shames Scott, who lied for reasons devoid of any honor. Rather, Scott lies because he feels the need to affirm his own fragile masculinity by letting his ambition lead him to unethical and indefensible behavior. At the end of the scene, Scott leaves the police station, bewildered and petrified that his web of lies is about to come crashing down on top of him. Ultimately, though, he

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<sup>60</sup> *The Wire* Season 5, Episode 10

escapes unscathed, and in the final montage, he is shown arm in arm with Klebanow and Whiting, accepting his Pulitzer for his “reporting” on the homeless serial killer.

In his 1994 book *Masculinity in Crisis*, scholar Roger Horrocks writes that popular culture texts allow insight into how gender and masculinity work almost subconsciously. He writes, “Of course, a lot of work done on TV or in film is relatively unconscious. It does not set out to examine ‘masculinity’ and ‘manhood.’ Nonetheless, it provides profound insight into the male psyche...”<sup>61</sup> For these two characters — Dantana and Templeton — this insight tells a story of men lying, cheating, and allowing ambition to blind them in order to desperately try to carve out some legitimacy and approval in a competitive journalism world. Both characters constantly seek reaffirmation from their superiors, and they let their ambition drive their need to reiterate their position as valuable men in the newsroom.

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<sup>61</sup> Horrocks, 17

## Chapter 4

### The Soldier-Journalist: Journalistic Self-Representation at The Newseum and Prestige Television Parallels

The Newseum stands six stories tall on the corner of 6th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue in the heart of Washington, D.C. A few blocks in any direction will lead you to some of the most significant buildings and monuments in the country — the Capitol, the National Mall, the White House. In the middle of all the power and politics in the nation’s capital, the Newseum’s physical location is its most powerful statement of the role the press plays in the United States, or at the very least, the way the press views its own role. Quotes from influential journalists, politicians, and historical figures etched into the walls of the Newseum exhibits reinforce the idea that journalism is important — the fourth estate of the U.S. government, the window to the world, the “first rough draft of history,” as former *Washington Post* publisher Philip Graham said (a quote and a notion that appears in several instances throughout the building). And, amid monuments and museums commemorating presidents, wars, and the nation’s history and culture, the Newseum stands as a monument to journalism and its history and significance in the United States. But where does popular culture’s long history with journalism appear in this shrine to real life journalism?

As I have shown, the news media has a substantial history (and present) in American popular culture, and while these representations reflect the ways in which American culture understands and portrays journalism’s role in the country, the efforts of

self-representation, most notably the Newseum, demonstrate how those who practice journalism understands their own place in American culture. An analysis of the Newseum also reveals how the institution of American journalism, or at least the some of the most powerful people within the institution, tells its own story and carves out its own place in American culture — a place with a gendered history and powerful self-perception. This self-representation ultimately provides powerful cues to popular culture, and many of the journalistic stereotypes in popular culture derive from the history of American journalism as the institution itself relays it.

When I traveled to the Newseum in January 2016 (on a Senior Thesis Grant funded through the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program), I found that overall the Newseum presents several dominant narratives — through its choice in exhibits and the stories it chooses to tell — that apply to American journalism as a whole and highlight the largely male-dominated history of the American news media. These narratives include those of journalists as fierce defenders of the First Amendment (and American democracy as a whole), as intrepid adventurers with a front-row seat to history as it unfolds, and as central figures in the founding, shaping, and preservation of American government and culture. The most powerful, and persistent, of these narratives, though, is that of the journalist as a warrior, or soldier — a “traditionally” and overtly masculine role. Several exhibits reinforce the idea that journalists play the role of the soldier in some way: war correspondents, fighters for truth, those who run towards danger. The Newseum’s overarching war narrative begins with the introductory video, in which narrator Walter Cronkite, seeking to answer the question “What’s news?” tells the viewer, “War is always news.” The official Newseum visitor’s guide calls war “the

biggest story” and the “toughest of assignments” that draws such widespread coverage because “few stories are more significant. Human lives and the fates of cultures and nations hang in the balance.”<sup>62</sup> These are high stakes, and as the Newseum demonstrates, journalists view themselves as the people who do the vitally important work of fighting for information about war in order to inform the broader public.

Newseum exhibits offer several specific examples of the journalist as a warrior, perhaps most notably with the “Reporting Vietnam” exhibit on the museum’s top floor. Though the exhibit is temporary (it runs through September, 2016), it provides an apt point of analysis because the Newseum’s operators actively decided to include an exhibit on Vietnam War coverage to supplement the permanent displays. The exhibit offers a balance between how journalists, especially on television, covered the Vietnam War (which, as the exhibit notes, was the “first televised war”) and the stories of the journalists themselves. The focus on individual journalists most heavily argues that Vietnam War correspondents were soldiers, battling right alongside American military personnel. A series of glass display cases in the center of the exhibit feature brief biographies of notable Vietnam journalists such as Peter Arnett, Morley Safer, and Bob Schieffer, along with their tools of the trade in Vietnam — combat helmets, flack jackets, typewriters, notebooks. The exhibit offers vignettes into the lives and significance of Vietnam War reporters and photojournalists like *Life Magazine* photographer Larry Burrows, who was one of 63 journalists killed in the Vietnam War when in 1971 enemy fire shot down a helicopter carrying Burrows and three other photographers from the Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), and *Newsweek*.

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<sup>62</sup> *Newseum Official Guide*, 12

This is one of the more powerful examples of the exhibit doing the cultural work of linking journalists and soldiers, but this cultural work almost wholly excludes women (much like the Vietnam press corps itself). The exhibit only highlights one woman Vietnam correspondent, Beverly Deepe. According to the exhibit, Deepe was the first woman to work as a full-time Vietnam War correspondent, working for several news agencies including *Newsweek* and the *Christian Science Monitor* in Vietnam from 1962-1969. The Vietnam press corps, and most of the American news media at the time, was predominantly male, but Deepe's portrayal in the exhibit is not only unique because of her role as a woman journalist in a 1960's war zone. Most of the other journalists showcased in the Newseum are shown wearing fatigues, in the thick of covering a battle or returning back to their meager camp after a long and treacherous day of work. The photo of UPI photographer David Hume Kennerly shows him on the ground, covered in dirt and grasping his helmet for cover. AP Saigon Bureau chief Malcolm Browne is shown in full military fatigues, indistinguishable from a real soldier in the photo (the caption of which informs the reader that Browne was, in fact, a soldier in the Korean War). In contrast to these images, Deepe is shown sitting amongst a group of Vietnamese women and girls, wearing a headscarf and smiling, her notebook and pencil in hand. This photo implies that Deepe, unlike her male colleagues, did not really cover the war, at least not in the same way the male war correspondents did. Thus, the image of Deepe the Newseum presents is much softer, and much less heroic, than those of her male counterparts. So even though the exhibit largely frames Vietnam War correspondents as soldiers themselves, that frame essentially excludes women because the only woman reporter shown does not look the part of a soldier the same way the men do.<sup>63</sup> More

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<sup>63</sup> "Reporting Vietnam," The Newseum



broadly, this representation of Deepe excludes women reporters from the Newseum's dominant frame of the soldier-journalist, therefore implying that journalism's best and brightest must be men.

The representation issue in the Vietnam exhibit (that is, the dearth of women in the exhibit) is largely a product of historical fact, as relatively few women covered the Vietnam War. However, the exhibit is one of several that advances a narrative of journalists as warriors. More than that, the Newseum guide recommends visitors experience the museum from the top floor down, and because the Vietnam exhibit is on the top floor, it is likely the visitor's first exhibit. So, from the beginning, the Newseum visitor engages with the narrative that journalists are brave, daring, adventure-seeking warriors, and that the most heroic of these — the war correspondent — is almost always a man.

Two more exhibits present the same narrative that journalists are warriors. The first of these is the 9/11 gallery, which looks at how American journalists the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. A wall some 30 feet high displays dozens of oversized front pages for September 12, 2001 from newspapers around the world. A massive piece of the TV antenna that sat atop the North Tower of the World Trade Center and provided a television signal for 10 local stations occupies the largest portion of the center of the exhibit. In a video that accompanies the exhibit, local and national journalists in New York recount the hectic, terrifying, tragic story of that day.

And, on the wall as visitors exit the mini-theater, a quote from newspaper columnist Rod Dreher, who wrote, "There are three kinds of people who run toward

disaster, not away: cops, firemen, and reporters.”<sup>64</sup> In the context of the exhibit, this quote is true, and powerful. Numerous reporters tell of hearing or seeing the planes crash into the twin towers and immediately running into the smoke and soot, armed only with a notebook, pen, and camera. On another level, though, his words further pigeonhole journalism as an exclusively masculine profession. Police and fire departments are predominantly masculine professions, and Dreher’s use of “firemen” instead of “firefighter” also excludes women from the possibility of being counted among those brave enough to forsake their own safety and run toward the danger to help, either by protecting people, helping them escape, or reporting on the event itself.

The 9/11 exhibit is not the only instance of memorialization in the Newseum, though. The Journalists Memorial is a series of glass panels two stories high that lists the names of more than 2,000 journalists who died or were killed either while they were reporting a story or in relation for their coverage. Each year, the Newseum holds a rededication ceremony and adds the names of journalists killed within the past year. In a video produced for the 2013 rededication, Newseum Institute Chief Operating Officer (and *USA Today* founding editor) Gene Policinski explained the purpose of the memorial. “The Journalists Memorial at the Newseum exists to remind the world every year ... that journalism is a very dangerous profession,” he said. “Through the years, the memorial has come to mean something for the people in our profession, as well as those who visit the memorial, and our citizens at large. It’s a touchstone for people who have lost friends and colleagues — it’s a place where they can come to remember those who have given the ultimate sacrifice.”<sup>65</sup> At the inaugural dedication of the original Journalists

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<sup>64</sup> *Off the Wall*, 11

<sup>65</sup> “Journalists Memorial Overview”

Memorial, located at the original Newseum in Rosalyn, Virginia, then-first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton said, “The women and men of this memorial are truly democracy’s heroes.”<sup>66</sup> The rhetoric Policinski and Clinton use and the existence of the memorial itself directly connect the role of the journalist with the role of the soldier as a defender of freedom and democracy in the face of extreme danger. Within this frame, the Newseum’s Journalists Memorial takes its place among the memorials both in Washington, D.C. and around the country that commemorate soldiers who died defending the country and its founding principles, like freedom of speech and of the press.

Like the other instances of the journalist-as-soldier frame in the Newseum, though, the Journalists Memorial attempts to represent reality. Journalism can be a dangerous profession, especially in parts of the world that do not protect freedom of the press as vigorously as the United States. And, in the pursuit of news in war zones, drug cartel hotbeds, and politically volatile countries, journalists do face life-threatening conditions on a fairly regular basis. By and large, though, and especially in the United States, journalists do not risk life and limb in the course of their daily lives. Nonetheless, the Newseum highlights the most dangerous aspects of journalism; a display nearby the memorial includes photos of journalists running for cover in war-torn Libya, a bullet-riddled pick-up truck used by a *Time* magazine photographer covering the 1990s Yugoslavian conflict, and the damaged body armor ABC News anchor Bob Woodruff wore when his vehicle struck a roadside bomb while he was reporting on the Iraq War in 2006, among other artifacts from the frontlines of journalism and war.<sup>67</sup> Such an exhibit and artifacts constitute what Erika Doss, in her book *Memorial Mania*, terms “war porn.”

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<sup>66</sup> *Off The Wall*, 19

<sup>67</sup> “Time Warner World News Gallery,” The Newseum

She writes, “Constituting both the subjects and objects of the nation’s martial authority, war porn characterizes the contemporary lust for war, evinced not only in war movies, war games, war toys, and war memorials but in the general fetishization of war itself on every conceivable level of American society.”<sup>68</sup> In the instance of the Journalists Memorial and other wartime journalism narratives at the Newseum, war porn seeps into the journalistic level of American society, positioning journalism as yet another place of battle, a proving ground for masculinity.

As the journalist-as-soldier narrative appears throughout the Newseum, it becomes part of the official narrative of journalism in the United States. And when journalists present themselves as working in dangerous conditions in pursuit of a noble goal (namely, truth, transparency, and freedom), popular culture adopts this portion of the official narrative and further promulgates it, including through several examples of journalist characters on prestige television series acting in some variation the soldier-journalist role. Specifically, characters on *The Newsroom*, *House of Cards*, and *The Wire* encounter extraordinary danger in the course of their reporting or assume some form of the soldier role.

In season 2 of *The Newsroom*, two young Atlantis Cable News (ACN) producers, Maggie Jordan and Gary Cooper (Chris Chalk), work to convince their executive producer McHale to let them travel to Africa to report on American involvement and other issues on the continent. They finally convince McHale to let them go to Uganda by arguing that Africa is “the next place U.S. soldiers are gonna go to die.”<sup>69</sup> Jordan and Cooper are only allowed to go to Uganda after McHale deems it a safe place to travel,

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<sup>68</sup> Doss, 221

<sup>69</sup> *The Newsroom*, Season 2, episode 2

though the two young producers neglect to tell her about a deadly attack in Kampala, the supposedly safe Ugandan capital where they are set to go.

When they finally arrive in Africa, they immediately meet up with an army civil affairs battalion that was installing an addition onto an orphanage in rural Uganda. At the orphanage, Jordan and Cooper learn of the cattle raiders who plague the region. Jordan describes these militants as “heavily armed, usually with AK-47s, and they come and steal your cattle. And then rape and kill people.”<sup>70</sup> When Jordan and Cooper first enter the orphanage, the children confuse Cooper’s camera for a gun and think the two of them are cattle raiders. Jordan quickly connects with a young boy, Daniel, who is fascinated by her blonde hair, something he had never seen before. And when cattle raiders come to attack the orphanage (after learning of the American news crew that was there), they shoot and kill Daniel, who Jordan was carrying to a bus that was supposed to evacuate all the children. When Jordan returns to the U.S., she suffers from what is implied as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and chops her hair short and dyes it red as a way to somehow forget or move past her painful memories of the little boy who died in her arms. This incident is the most detailed and specific example of characters on *The Newsroom* acting within the role of a pseudo-soldier, but earlier episodes give glimpses into other journalists’ past work in war zones — McHale and her senior producer Jim Harper sustaining injuries including stabbings and shrapnel wounds and ACN News Director Charlie Skinner remarking that McHale “has been to way too many funerals for a girl her age.”<sup>71</sup> And Elliot Hirsch, ACN’s secondary anchor, travels to Egypt to report

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<sup>70</sup> *The Newsroom*, Season 2, episode 4

<sup>71</sup> *The Newsroom*, Season 1, episode 1

on the Arab Spring uprisings and is beaten and bloodied by throngs of protestors in the streets of Cairo.<sup>72</sup>

*House of Cards* does not feature a journalist character that explicitly fits within the soldier frame, but it is the only series I analyzed that portrays a journalist being killed while doing his or her job. In the much-discussed season 2 premiere of the show, newly appointed Vice President Frank Underwood needs to tie up loose ends after murdering of Congressman Peter Russo (Corey Stoll) at the end of season 1. In the process, he kills again when he throws Zoe Barnes in front of a subway train because she was investigating Russo's death as a possible homicide, though it was officially ruled a suicide due to Underwood's staging of the scene.<sup>73</sup> And while Underwood kills only Barnes, he also coerces two of her colleagues into ending their journalism careers altogether, one through fear and another through legal entrapment. So even though the journalists in *House of Cards* do not necessarily travel to a war zone, they still face a real threat in Underwood and his ruthless tactics. And, until Barnes's death makes this threat clear and present, the reporters all keep willingly pursuing the story, thus aligning them with the types of people who run towards the danger while others run away.

In a similar vein, season 5 of *The Wire* builds a storyline about an alleged serial killer who murders homeless men on the city streets. This storyline increasingly intertwines the members of the Baltimore Police Department with the journalists at the *Baltimore Sun*, almost equating their work to catch the serial killer (whom the audience knows does not actually exist). One specific scene in episode 7 strongly reinforces this parallel between police officers and reporters, both trying to get to the bottom of the

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<sup>72</sup> *The Newsroom*, Season 1, Episode 5

<sup>73</sup> *House of Cards*, Season 2, Episode 1

serial killer case. The scene takes the viewer back and forth between meetings at the police department's central command and the *Sun*'s newsroom — meetings that increasingly mirror each other. At the news meeting, Haynes gives his staff marching orders on how to cover the serial killer and who will pursue what angle. At the police meeting, deputy commissioner Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick) gives his officer their assignments for investigating the case. Both men tell their respective personnel that they need to be out in the streets, working the case/story, putting themselves in potential danger in order to uncover the truth. Both the police and the newspaper rely on one another to keep pursuing the serial killer mystery, and in the middle of financial cuts in both the newsroom and the police department, the powers that be in each institution decide this case warrants unlimited resources until it is solved.<sup>74</sup> So, the serial killer storyline functions, at least in part, as a mechanism to equate journalists and police officers, risking their safety in pursuit of a big story and the resolution of a case, respectively.

These three prestige television examples all link back to the narrative the Newseum advances of the journalist as a soldier or warrior. In this way, the official journalistic narrative, as told through the Newseum and its exhibits, provides cues for how American popular culture imagines journalists. In other words, the ways in which journalists portray themselves do not always or necessarily differ all that much from the way American culture portrays them. This, in turn, leads to the culture we live in, where people like longtime CBS Evening News anchor Dan Rather calls *The Newsroom* “terrific” and “dead on the money” in terms of portraying the day-to-day operations of a

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<sup>74</sup> *The Wire*, Season 5, episode 7

television news agency.<sup>75</sup> Others, though, including former Nightline anchor Dave Marsh bemoan series like *The Newsroom* as flights of fiction and fantasy. Marsh wrote of *The Newsroom* in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, “This is the stuff of fairy tales, and *The Newsroom*, for all its ‘real stories’ and ‘big issues,’ is as real about news as Jack and the Beanstalk.”<sup>76</sup> So while journalists and TV critics do not necessarily come to a consensus on the accuracy of pop culture representations, the fact that even some of them applaud them means that journalism’s self-representation — including the narrative of the journalist-soldier — influences how TV and movies tells stories about journalism, stories that on prestige television portray problematic gender performances.

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<sup>75</sup> “Rather on ‘Newsroom’ and the real thing”

<sup>76</sup> Marsh, 2012



## Conclusion

### *Spotlight* and the Road Ahead

You don't have to look hard to see that journalists are not leaving American popular culture anytime soon. The 2015 film *Spotlight*, which tells the story of the *Boston Globe* investigative team that broke the story of the Catholic Church sex abuse scandal, took home best picture at the 88th Academy Awards, and even before its accolades, generated a renewed discussion around journalism in pop culture spheres. The film, directed and co-written by Tom McCarthy (the same Tom McCarthy who played the lying, unethical Scott Templeton on *The Wire*), is only one of several current and upcoming pop culture texts that somehow include journalism. The fourth season of *House of Cards* (which I regrettably did not finish in time to include in this thesis) continues to portray journalists as central characters. And journalists in pop culture are perhaps returning to where it all began when *The Front Page*, starring Nathan Lane and John Slattery, hits the Broadway stage in the fall of 2016. But, as prestige television continues to push the bounds of entertainment and blur the lines between the televisual and the cinematic, I would expect portrayals of journalists continue to find a home in both feature films and serial television shows, among other cultural spaces. And, as I have shown in this thesis, these portrayals, past, present, and future, have tremendous cultural power to influence the ways in which Americans understand not only journalism as an institution, but also important issues of identity, especially gender and masculinity.

*Spotlight* itself, though at times falling into the same rigidly gendered roles as the prestige television series I have analyzed, presents a promising path forward for popular cultural portrayals of journalists. The film's basis on a true story, I believe, helps it stick close to the reality of journalism and helps it portray gender roles in a realistic way. I argue, then, that the best way forward for pop culture producers to portray journalists is to ground their work in the realities of contemporary journalism and the real-life stories that arise from it. For as much as journalism films and series can over dramatize the profession, journalism is still a relatively exciting job, especially as the news industry continues to change and grow with the technology. Surely, this real-life drama is enough to fuel popular culture representations going forward. And as I argued in chapter 2, these pop culture portrayals have the power to change perceptions, and can possibly lead the charge for a new way in which thoughtful Americans understand not only journalism, but also identity issues including race, sexuality, and, yes, gender and masculinity.

Like all popular culture texts, I know portrayals of journalists will never be perfect. They will always be problematic in some way. I could have just as easily written a thesis about how prestige television deals with race in portrayals of journalists, linking it to the fact that American journalism is still a white-dominated profession. After this project, I will always critically consume pop culture images of journalists, and I would hope others do the same. Perhaps budding American Studies scholars will read this one day and revisit my topic after more seasons of *House of Cards* and more films like *Spotlight*. Until then, I wish all of my journalists in popular culture, manly or otherwise: good night, and good luck.

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