

## Evaluating journalism through popular culture

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**EVALUATING JOURNALISM THROUGH POPULAR CULTURE:  
HBO's *The Newsroom* and Public Reflections on the State of the News Media**

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## Evaluating Journalism Through Popular Culture: HBO's *The Newsroom* and Public Reflections on the State of the News Media

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**Abstract:** While HBO's *The Newsroom* presents itself as fictional television, its narrative is clearly driven by critiquing American cable news culture and contemporary journalism ethics. This paper analyses popular reflections on the program to identify what these discourses reveal about public evaluations of the state of the US news media. Based upon 1115 lengthy audience posts and discussions, and 49 news articles, I argue the response to this supposedly 'fictional' newscast nonetheless reveals a highly politicized scepticism about the actual news media, and a corresponding – though fairly depoliticized and surprisingly uniform – nostalgic lament for the journalism of days gone by. Similarly, findings suggest that the traditional modernist discourse of journalism as a public good persists – both amongst journalists and the public – despite the evident commercial underpinnings of the American media system. The study finds audiences and journalists alike use the show as a catalyst to: 1) 'name and shame' news outlets – including the fictional *Newsroom*; 2) engage in political confrontation; and 3) employ the rhetoric and metanarratives of the Anglo-American objectivity regime to define 'good' journalism. However, it also finds that while individuals may embrace critique, they often lack critical skills to go beyond politicized accusations of bias.

**Keywords:** Journalism, Popular Culture, Audience Studies, *The Newsroom*, Cable News, Metanarratives, Objectivity

The first scene of HBO's *The Newsroom*, viewed over 8 million times on YouTube, commented upon over 25,000 times, opens as a fictional US cable news anchor, Will McAvoy, itemises how 'America is not the greatest country anymore'. Faced with a succession of self-congratulatory platitudes about the USA, our increasingly frustrated protagonist suddenly breaks rank and begins detailing global rankings and facts about American deficiencies in literacy, educational achievement, incarceration rates and defence spending. The auditorium falls silent as this character, a noted journalist we are told, laments the failings of the current antagonistic political climate before transitioning smoothly into nostalgia, noting how great the country 'sure used to be' as tropes of American exceptionalism are set forth. As McAvoy rounds up his diatribe he makes a case that in this golden age, 'We were able to be all these things and do all these things because we were informed, by Great Men – men who were revered' (*Newsroom*, 2012a). And thus the central premise for the program is established: America can become great again, but only with a form of journalism that lives up to its ideals.

In the first season of *The Newsroom*, the architect of the program, Aaron Sorkin – also the creator of *The West Wing* – kept politics at the forefront by using recent real life events such as the BP oil spill, killing of Osama Bin Laden, or rise of the Tea Party as the temporal focal point for each episode. However, rather than show how these events were covered by the actual American news media, Sorkin's fictional '*News Night*' broadcast produced by 'Atlantic Cable News' implies how these events *should* have been brought. As the show develops, it becomes clear that this strategy allows it to revisit the coverage of events and reframe them based upon modernist metanarratives of journalism, which seemingly aim to 'educate' current audiences and 'admonish' contemporary journalists simultaneously. Sorkin claims the program is his utopian romantic wish-fulfilment, a journalistic 'valentine for those people who are out there fighting the

good fight' (Levin, 2012). Accordingly, while momentous events may ground each episode's action, the show's narrative is driven by critiquing issues of commercialization, the 24/7 cable news culture, and journalism's willingness to facilitate 'truthful' debate.

This paper aims to analyse popular reflections on *The Newsroom* to identify what these discourses reveal about public evaluations of the state of the US news media. I argue that the response to this supposedly 'fictional' newscast nonetheless reveals a highly politicized scepticism about the actual news media, and a corresponding – though fairly depoliticized and surprisingly uniform – nostalgic lament for the journalism of days gone by. Similarly, this paper's findings suggest the traditional modernist discourse of journalism as a public good persists – both amongst journalists and the public – despite the evident commercial underpinnings of the American media system. In terms of how this rhetoric is crafted, when engaging with *The Newsroom* people widely embrace the terminology of media criticism and have an apparent self-belief in their ability to conduct such critique, although typically most lack the critical skills to go beyond politicized accusations of bias. It thus appears that by utilising an approach to storytelling that sets a fictional program in the world of recent non-fictional events, *The Newsroom* foregrounds contemporary discussions about 'quality' journalism (and the world of US cable news specifically), while simultaneously highlighting the public's facility to discuss and reflect upon such debates.

To appreciate these findings, it is helpful to understand both the educative, participatory and deliberative potential of popular culture texts (see: Jones, 2005; van Zoonen, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Riegert, 2007), as well as the growing prominence of public metanarratives of journalism over the past few decades (see: Bishop, 1999; Berkowitz, 2000; Frank, 2003) and their embrace by the news industry, especially on US cable news (Peters, 2010). The first section of this paper briefly considers the former, outlining the sense-making potential of 'fictional' television and the representation of fictionalized journalism. It then moves on to give an overview of broader trends towards meta-journalism and its emergence as an aspect of journalistic discourse over the past decades. This leads to the primary contribution of this research, an audience-centred case study that considers different responses to *The Newsroom*. I conduct a discourse analysis of key themes and repertoires raised in the 'HBO Talk' forums to examine what these reflections tell us about perceptions of American journalism. This is further augmented by considering journalistic reactions to the show, to see what affinity these share with popular sentiments. I conclude by questioning what such responses tell us about the state of the media in terms of broader issues surrounding trust, truth and politics. Fictional representations in film and television have long presented us with idealized versions of what is possible in the 'real world' and the degree to which the popular and real are revealed to be separate in this study is a strong marker to gauge public faith in this key social institution.

## **Popular Culture, Social Deliberation, and the Representation of Journalism**

It has been suggested for quite some time that popular accounts provide fodder for political engagement and audience sense-making. Indeed, some central claims made by many academics studying popular culture is that evaluating the discourse surrounding fictionalized accounts: reveals perceptions of the actual social institutions and issues they portray; provides insight into how such texts interact with our experiences of 'reality'; and illustrates how audiences rely upon them to shape aspects of their identity and beliefs (Radaway, 1991; Fiske, 2010). Unsurprisingly then, popular and political communication frequently converge. For instance, Van Zoonen (2007: 544) notes that not only do fictional films and television series allow audiences to describe politics, such shows 'enable people to think about the dilemmas of politics that politicians face (reflection), criticize or praise politicians for their morals and stories for their ideology (judgement), and express their hopes and ideals (fantasy).' Klein (2011) explains that while producers of UK entertainment television such as *EastEnders* are hesitant to view their role as

educative, nonetheless they research stories and present them in a way to encourage ‘savvy’ audiences to think through social issues. Television is naturalized as a visual medium, which makes the distinction between fictional and non-fictional programming blurry for audiences in terms of engaging with ‘real life’ issues, a situation reinforced by the commonality of production conventions and storytelling techniques across genres (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994). While popular culture on television may not always dig into social problems with any great depth, it gives frameworks that allow viewers to begin ‘working through’ private and public concerns, a process whereby engagement can transcend the popular to influence political perceptions and values (Ellis, 2000; Dahlgren, 2009).

Moreover, representations in popular culture not only say something about prominent social issues like race, class and gender, they also frequently go beyond this to act as a form of ‘critical intertextuality’ that provides commentary and invites reflection on other media institutions and texts (Gray, 2006). Accordingly, for many the ‘image’ of the journalist and ‘hopes’ for journalism, both now and historically, are shaped through its representation in film and television (Schudson, 1992; Ehrlich, 2006). Be it *All the President’s Men*, *Good Night and Good Luck*, or *The Wire*, popular culture has provided a consistent staple of ‘good’ journalists that closely resemble an intelligent, straight-talking, principled, intrepid, independent, unwavering ‘masculine’ archetype that goes after a story at any cost; sacrificing personal gain and often safety in the pursuit of a greater (societal) truth (Saltzman, 2002). Of course, there are also a host of journalistic ‘fabricators’, ‘fraudsters’, and ‘rogues’ who provide us with their cinematic foil, pursuing personal success and glory without empathy or ethics (McNair, 2010). This popular portrayal of journalism can accordingly be seen as part of a broader process whereby people learn to ‘know’ journalism and become literate in its techniques.

*The Newsroom* invites such reflection. The program captures the uncertainty surrounding contemporary journalism and makes these struggles visible by taking us ‘behind the scenes’; its axiom being that good journalism can also be critically and economically successful. In this respect, as *The West Wing* was to ideal politics, *The Newsroom* is to ideal news. As the show’s moral compass, the character of the executive producer in the program, MacKenzie ‘Mac’ McHale, sums up this vision near the end of the first episode when she notes that the goal of ‘*News Night*’ should be,

Reclaiming the fourth estate. Reclaiming journalism as an honourable profession. A nightly newscast that informs a debate worthy of a great nation. Civility, respect, and a return to what’s important; the death of bitchiness; the death of gossip and voyeurism; speaking truth to stupid. No demographic sweet spot; a place where we all come together (*Newsroom*, 2012a).

This quote, and the entirety of the first season, raises the interconnected issues of shifting experiences of public trust in media and a growing public understanding of media techniques and performance. While the modernist discourse surrounding the normative goals of good journalism is well-established, the widespread ability to recognize this is a contested ground upon which many news organizations increasingly spend much time and energy trying to brand and signal their superiority (Peters, 2011). This program encapsulates these challenges and the tension between profitability and professional ideals. Intentionally or not, it invites its audience to reflect upon these ‘real world’ dilemmas. In this regard, treating this popular culture representation as something separate from ‘real’ journalism, in terms of how it shapes meaning and reflection on journalism as a social institution, seems erroneous.<sup>1</sup>

## **Metanarratives of Journalism and Their Deployment in Cable News**

The declared societal importance of journalism – or at least the basic discourse surrounding its social role – is incredibly well-established through education, the industry and broader culture in which it is practiced. Indeed the frequent surveys on trust and performance of the news media

assume this knowledge and rely upon its relatively ubiquity. Nevertheless, despite this pervasive rhetoric, the day-to-day craft of journalism until recent decades rarely warranted publication as a news story in-and-of itself (Frank, 2003). As Overholser (2000) notes, the news industry is historically one of its own worst covered beats and for the greater part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American journalism only commented upon itself publicly in response to perceived scandal. While in the US, exposés of ‘unprofessional’ practices began to appear in trade magazines in the 1960s, journalism has historically tended to act as its own interpretive community (Zelizer, 1993), wherein the industry avoided publicly questioning the profession or acknowledging its role in constructing stories (Schudson 1995).

Yet various studies indicate this trend is changing. Accordingly, if we want to appreciate how audiences react to *The Newsroom*, it is crucial to take this development into account. Since the late 1990s, the rise of a sort of ‘reflexive journalism’ has seen journalists increasingly turn the pen (or camera) on themselves (cf. Becker, 1996). Part of journalistic coverage of events has become commentary on the coverage itself, which relies on metanarratives of journalism as part of these evaluations. The effect is an implicit acknowledgement to the public that the news media play an active role in ‘making the news’. At the turn of the new millennium, Bishop (1999) observed that instances of journalistic boundary-maintenance being aired in public were on the rise; Berkowitz (2000) similarly found forms of paradigm repair increasing; and Frank (2003) noted the emergence of public practices of image-maintenance. Within these moments, traditional tropes and aspects of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ideal of objectivity in Anglo-American journalism, such as balance, fairness, non-bias, independence, non-interpretation, and neutrality and detachment (Ward, 2005) tended to be lauded as hallmarks of professionalism.

In this respect, the national context of these developments is important. Whereas calls for a renewed emphasis on the modernist aspects of objectivity make sense in an American context, the same could not be said for the journalistic culture of many other countries. For instance, France has traditionally embraced a political/literacy paradigm as opposed to a fact-based objective form (Chalaby, 1996; Benson & Hallin, 2007), which means liberal ideals of the fourth estate are far less cherished and pronounced in public discourse. In this regard, the problems outlined in *The Newsroom*’s narrative probably resonate far less resoundingly for international viewers than Americans. Yet within the US context they are decidedly prominent. The late 1990s and 2000s were a time when metanarratives on journalism moved from being mostly scandal-driven moments of engagement (although these still happen, the *New York Post* misidentification of suspects during the Boston Marathon Bombings being a recent example) to becoming a part of contemporary news discourse.

This parallels another important development for this research in terms of *The Newsroom*’s distinctly US context. In the American cable news culture, rather than shying away from press criticism, at the start of the 2000s programs increasingly began to engage with metanarratives of journalism as part of their brand, trumpeting their performance and ‘unwavering’ pursuit of journalism’s ideals in an effort to distinguish themselves from competitors (Peters, 2010). This growing tendency to look at other outlets and criticize may have been little more than the result of cutthroat competition. However, it led to a landscape wherein explicit claims of journalistic superiority became closely tied to the promise of ‘recapturing’ its endangered ideals. Put another way, the cable news world that *The Newsroom* fictionalizes found much success by trying to claim ownership over the modernist rhetoric of journalism – nowhere more obvious than in Fox News’ ‘Fair and Balanced’ slogan – while claiming its competitors had sacrificed this noble pursuit for reasons of political bias (Peters, 2011).

The rise of such programs in the early 2000s, such as Fox News’ *O’Reilly Factor* or MSNBC’s *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, which engaged in everyday meta-journalism talk, was followed closely by the emergence of internet-based media watchdogs, such as the left-leaning [mediamatters.org](http://mediamatters.org), launched in 2004, or the right-leaning [newsbusters.org](http://newsbusters.org), in 2005, which relied upon similar rhetoric. As a result, while it would probably overstate the case to say that we are

witnessing an epistemological shift, I have argued elsewhere (Peters, 2012) that many contemporary publics no longer view journalism just as an institutional provider of informational content but as a process of knowledge production as well, though probably not in these terms. Potentially this leads to more critical forms of engagement with journalism (mirroring the steady decline in measures of trust, see Barnhurst, 2012), and with popular representations of it, such as *The Newsroom*.

Of course, it is not only within journalism that metanarratives on its purpose have gained visibility. The expansion of research institutes dedicated to journalism such as Pew's Project for Excellence in Journalism, are also quite recent phenomena. The success of satirical news programs like *The Daily Show* and *Colbert Report* should also be considered part of an emergent critical public awareness on the performance of the news media (Jones & Baym, 2010). When these various influences are considered together, we can say that in the United States, where the cable news culture of *The Newsroom* is set, a process of increasing public emphasis on journalistic metanarratives has been slowly developing over the past three decades.

While this development is noteworthy, it does demand one crucial caveat. Although there is now a high degree of awareness in terms of the discourse surrounding the societal function of the news media, the understanding of how media systems work appears far less developed (Ashley et. al, 2013). This sort of 'middle ground' literacy is quite intriguing in terms of the way public understandings of journalism are developing. An ever-increasing public emphasis on media performance progressively familiarizes the public with metanarratives of journalism, allowing news organizations to rely upon them as part of their positioning and strategy. Yet the lack of deeper literacy means the rhetoric and techniques of journalistic storytelling are not necessarily critically evaluated.

This is important, as the cable news channels upon which *The Newsroom* is based are not merely sites of politicized information but should be viewed as involved in projects that try to 'teach' a particular way to 'read' journalism. Irrespective of whether or not one empathizes with their lessons, they have been effective in developing a discourse centred on making people feel like they have made an 'educated' news choice. Accordingly, the most important takeaways from all these trends in American journalism from the late 1990s to the debut of *The Newsroom* in 2012 are really threefold:

- 1) the period witnessed a (re)-emergence or non-erasure of the journalist;
- 2) discussion about journalistic performance increasingly became *de rigueur* within journalism, especially on cable news; but
- 3) despite this the positivist metanarratives of journalistic role and purpose remained relatively stable.

American journalism at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century thus parallels broader trends witnessed across many established institutions during late/reflexive modernity. One key observation of this period is that 'trust' moved from being a given to something that needed to be won over and actively sustained, and public divisions began to appear in the formal institutions of expert knowledge (Giddens, 1994).<sup>2</sup> As the following section demonstrates, this mistrust is evident in the public evaluation *The Newsroom* begets.

### ***The Newsroom* – Catalyst for Journalism Evaluation and Nostalgia**

Premiering on HBO on June 24, 2012, the first season of *The Newsroom* introduced viewers to the fast-paced realm of cable news. Its website notes the show is a 'behind-the-scenes look at the people who make a nightly cable-news program. [...] the series tracks their quixotic mission to do the news well in the face of corporate and commercial obstacles' (*Newsroom*, 2012b). Upon its debut and throughout its first-season, the program was beset by mixed critical reviews.

Nonetheless, it was popular enough that after the second episode the network renewed the program for a second season. The remainder of this paper looks at how the discourses surrounding the program engaged with it not just as a work of fiction, but as a (semi)fictional parallel and avenue to evaluate the role, perception, and performance of the contemporary news media.

### Methodology

The data set considered for this investigation was generated through different research sites. For the popular engagement, the ‘Talk’ Forums for the show on its HBO website were consulted. This was compared with the journalistic reaction, collected via a LexisNexis search of major American news media over the duration of the program’s first season.<sup>3</sup> The rationale for using an internet site dedicated to *The Newsroom* to gauge audience perceptions of journalism arising from the show mirrors the logic noted by van Zoonen (2007), who references Dahlgren (1985) on sense-making and news consumption. Simply put, the mundane contexts of everyday life – be it conversations, emails or internet postings – potentially provide a ‘natural’ glimpse into people’s routine discussions, common understandings and dominant interpretive frameworks.

The 1115 postings and 49 articles that constitute the data set were analysed over two phases of reading after the data set was generated, printed out, and initially examined.

HBO Talk: Topic Forum	Posts	News Articles	Number of Articles
The Newsroom: A New Original Series	267	National Outlets (i.e. <i>USA Today</i> , CNN, AP)	26
Ep. 10: The Greater Fool	194	Regional Papers (i.e. <i>San Jose Mercury News</i> , <i>Tampa Bay Times</i> )	23
Ep. 1: We Just Decided To	122		
Ep. 4: I’ll Try to Fix You	97		
Ep. 3: The 112 <sup>th</sup> Congress	90		
Ep. 7: 5/1	86		
Ep. 6: Bullies	72		
Why is everyone hating this show?	72		
Ep. 5: Amen	59		
The Greatest Country in the World	56		

**Table 1:** Data Set for *The Newsroom* (Note. Figures accurate June 10, 2013.)

This approach can be seen as loosely based upon the protocols of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), going through consecutive coding phases to sort comments into several dominant themes which are continually readjusted and refined. While the purpose of this research project was not to translate the emergent repertoires into categories for statistical comparison, as is often the endpoint of qualitative content analyses, the idea of reading in multiple stages was embraced to continually re-examine dominant themes emerging across texts. This iterative process-based approach to case studies allows for theoretical investigation to be grounded in empirical evidence, (re)considering patterns which emerge against other possible interpretations and established theoretical propositions (Kohlbacher, 2006). In this respect, this

research embraces the principle of staying close to the data by using people's own repertoires to appreciate how they construct meaning.<sup>4</sup>

However, this paper distinguishes itself from 'purist' approaches to grounded theory that request the (seemingly) impossible task of making an explicit denial of what we know, how we are positioned, and the broader context in which discourses circulate while analysing. Such notions elevate the procedures of the method over the narratives, in effect making 'mirages of some kind of reliable knowing, and this in the end makes us almost more concerned with the method than the message' (Thomas & James, 2006: 29). By departing from the perspective of the user and triangulating this with the broader journalistic context, discursive articulations are placed within a cultural-historical framework (cf. Antaki et al., 2003). This allows us to examine how cultural entities, like journalism, are constituted and expressed through language, and how such articulations develop and are challenged based upon the moment and context in which they are embedded and circulate (Potter et al., 1993).

This study indicates an explicit awareness that journalism is an area of cultural contestation, with audiences and journalists alike using this fictional program as a catalyst to:

- 1) 'name and shame' news outlets – including the fictional *Newsroom* – that are seen to be eschewing the democratic role of journalism;
- 2) engage in political confrontations; and
- 3) employ the rhetoric and metanarratives of the Anglo-American objectivity regime to define 'good' news and lament the current state of journalism as a social institution.

#### Evaluating journalism – Blurring 'real world' and fictional news outlets

The most prominent focus for many respondents was a clearly bifurcated right/left discourse often articulated by way of contrast; in other words, *The Newsroom* provided the fodder to say what Fox News, MSNBC or CNN were doing 'wrong' in terms of their journalistic performance. This occurred not only within the audience Talk forums, but was also present in the journalistic response. While many journalists were quick to dismiss the show as naïvely romantic, they simultaneously embraced such utopian idealism. For instance, a *New York Times* review entitled 'Newsroom as a Map For CNN', claimed many viewers still wanted 'updates on actual news' and that CNN should 'stick to coming up with a well-cooked, nutritious news diet. Why not ride through the news cycle with some dignity and feed a loyal, reliable audience, standing by for when the world threatens to blow apart and ratings skyrocket' (Carr, 2012). These sorts of reflections often tied the politicization of cable news to financial imperatives, implicitly critiquing the disjuncture between the ethics of journalism and its commercialized practice.

Many commenting on the HBO forums used a similar repertoire to describe the world of cable news (in opposition to the fictional cable news show they watching), and thus used *The Newsroom* as inspiration for real-world commentary. Some – hoping life would imitate art – voiced the notion that *The Newsroom* could (or already had) inspired real world change. As one commentator noted, 'I think you have affected one newsman. Wolf Blitzer says he will be more assertive in the face of lies. [...] Next season explain why no newscasts are like yours' (Forums, Ep. 10, Stephen T.405).<sup>5</sup> Another poster noted, 'The intertwining of facts of our world with the fictional characters is spot on, and pleads with real "journalists" to stop primping and feeding the public pap, and get to the truth in the news' (Forums, Ep. 10, Betti Lee). While the program's catalysing effect in terms of judging the non-fictional world is probably expected, perhaps more surprising was the overwhelming number of comments that took this reflection a step further. Many posters made comments that displayed an expectation that the show, like proper 'news', should be objective, fair and display journalistic ethics.

I seek to find the truth when I watch the news and I am discouraged that editorial comment is blended into the news like milk in a latte. The uneducated doesn't know the difference. If you write this show with bias, either liberal or conservative, you will break the trust because your premise will prove to be as duplicitous as the networks you are condemning. Please don't let us down. We ARE starving for the unbiased truth. (Forums, Ep. 3, M. Pernot).

If this show is supposed to be about integrity in news reporting, why isn't the protagonist doing stories on Obama's failure to fire the financial guys that got us in this mess [...] I want you to call both parties on the carpet. (Forums, Ep. 4, K. Bro).

These types of sentiments made little to no distinction between 'real' journalism ethics and 'fictional' news storytelling.

In terms of the broader significance of this interrelation, one might say trying to view these posters as merely audiences or fans of the show misses the deeper reality in an increasingly converged, hybrid, and immersive media landscape (cf. Gray et. al, 2007). In an age when audiences are simultaneously fans, consumers, citizens, and publics (Livingstone, 2013) what is interesting about *The Newsroom* is that it provides the infrastructure, impetus, and conditions for audiences to feel they can participate in evaluating journalism, not just in terms of the show, but as a broader social institution. The program is, in essence, an entry point to evaluative discussion and connection with other 'news consumers' and its status as a fictional entity, in this sense, is quite beside the point.

#### Contesting politics – A catalyst for political discussion

It should come as little revelation that narratives in popular culture texts not only trigger discussion but inspire critical reflection and reveal ideological conflict and social schisms (Hermes 2008). And in the viewer forums for *The Newsroom*, political discussion was a dominant practice. Frequently, the coverage of an issue in the show was the impetus for these instances of political talk, however those in the forums didn't limit themselves to only these topics and quickly delved into other issues of interest to the poster and the broader political community with which they identified.

Interaction often seemed less about deliberation and more about performing a political identity, which could then be supported or disagreed with quite passively (in the form of an interactive +/- 'rating' function available for all posts) or actively (addressing previous posts in subsequent comments, frequently using the @ symbol even though the infrastructure of the forums did not have the capacity to reply or form conversations). Themes such as 'Obamacare', gun control, Tea Party and taxation, debt ceiling, foreign policy, immigration, and voter ID were common issues appearing in multiple forums. Yet while these issues were presented, recognition of the validity of opposing viewpoints was sparse. While the act of demonstrating (cf. van Zoonen 2012) was often witnessed in *Newsroom* forums, deliberation, in terms of debate with an aim of understanding or reaching consensus, was not frequently evident. However, interaction in terms of correcting and confronting, certainly was.

Many political discussions fell along typical Democrat/Republican, talking-point dualisms which, to most Americans, are likely quite familiar. However, this should not be misconstrued to say that these postings never responded to one another, or that all political discourse stayed at the level of fact-free rhetoric. From different established political viewpoints, a process of offering 'facts' and counter-arguments to repudiate previous postings was commonplace.

The Dems pizzed away a trillion dollar stimulus, giving it to unions, to buy (save) votes during the time period of this episode. The DOJ was walking guns to the Drug Cartels [...] Unemployment reached 10% and the President was playing a lot of golf. No one on Wall Street

ever went to jail, bankers got free money they gave back to the treasury at 3%. (Forums, Ep. 3, Elliott Reed)

@DaveyJonesDetroit—The progressives and liberals are not the ones who throw the phrase Un-American around [...] that my friend is a tendency of your Limbaughs and Bachmanns, calling anyone who doesn't kowtow to the Radical Right drivel that spews from their maws like manure from a spreader Un-American. In the 1960's, Sen. Barry Goldwater warned other Conservatives about the Radical and Religious Right seizing control of the GOP and what a nightmare it would be. (Forums, Ep. 7, K.Duggan).

While the factual bases of many political claims were questionable, demonstrating that one could support their opinion with facts was a dominant practice in these forms when arguments arose. Unfortunately, evidence of moving beyond talking points and entrenched positions was scarce. Perhaps the somewhat 'preachy' style of the program lends itself to this lack of conciliatory dialogue. As Klein (2011) notes in terms of the pedagogical potential of entertainment television, audiences tend to be hostile when the content is perceived to be a sermon, rather than a discussion.

Although such political debate was uncommon in the journalistic interaction with the show, politics did appear in the form of criticising its depiction of female and minority characters, and what this revealed about stereotypes and professional roles. Many journalists and commenters perceived the characterization of female journalists in the show as patriarchal and felt minority characters amounted to tokenism.

There is the Great Man, who is theoretically flawed, but really a primal truth-teller whom everyone should follow (or date). There are brilliant, accomplished women who are also irrational, high-strung lunatics—the dames and muses who pop their eyes and throw jealous fits when not urging the Great Man on. [...] neither Gary nor Kendra [the two African-Americans] is at all developed, or given any role in the show's wince-worthy set of love triangles. [...] Sorkin's shows overflow with liberal verities about diversity, but they reproduce a universe in which the Great Man is the natural object of worship (Nussbaum, 2012).

These sorts of political discussions inspired by popular culture are certainly not new, but they reinforce the idea that engagement with such programs goes far beyond the immediate content of the show itself, and are incorporated by the broader public in terms of non-traditional forms of civic engagement. However, the willingness to engage does not always translate into complex understandings.

#### Displaying basic media literacy – The modernist rhetoric and metanarratives of journalism

If the trends discussed in previous sections are any indication, commentary on *The Newsroom* demonstrates not only an awareness of the modernist discourse on journalism, it also illustrates an increasing willingness to marshal such rhetoric explicitly in discussion. If the emergence and spread of 'journalistic talk' over the past few decades has disseminated out to the broader public, this should correspond not only to an uptick in terms of discursive familiarity but also in terms of perceived news literacy. And in the journalistic reaction to the program, both amidst critique and praise, reliance upon such meta-journalistic terminology was omnipresent. That journalists should frame their discussion of the program in such terms is fairly unsurprising, journalists being well-versed on the dominant discourses surrounding the news industry. As an early review notes,

I believe anchors have, indeed, worked very hard to be and portray themselves as neutral and unbiased representatives of information. I think that's part of the journalistic oath – whether idealistic or not – that in journalism you leave your opinions at the door. However, as the show

indicates, and I believe we can all attest – that has changed dramatically in the last eight years of cable (Sneed, 2012).

While such reflection is fairly unremarkable, what is interesting is that journalistic responses implicitly presume public awareness of the challenges facing journalism, leaving such debates frequently unexplained.

What is possibly more intriguing is that in many forum topics, posters tend to try to demonstrate their media literacy as a sort of authoritative point-of-departure to criticize contemporary journalism. Many of the buzzwords and key paradigmatic concepts of news – objectivity, balance, fairness, and so forth – appear frequently within the comments sections, and these metanarratives are framed as guidelines not only to judge the program but the news industry itself. In fact, an accusation that frequently occurs from Republican or Independent commenters (as they self-describe) is that the program fails due to a perceived lack of balance. These types of comments are in turn typically responded to in two ways:

- 1) through debate and confrontation, calling upon alternative facts; or
- 2) by employing meta-journalistic principles to confront the accusation.

For instance:

No wonder the comments [in these Forums] are becoming more political, and the point of the journalistic setting is getting lost on some of the audience. Fair reporting does not mean allowing the POV of progressives and conservatives to both be stated on every issue; it does mean stating facts honestly. (Forums, Ep. 4, Steve G.649)

While this sort of engagement with the core tenets of modernist journalism is present, far more common appears to be a somewhat impoverished media literacy, which relies upon this rhetoric as an argumentative assertion rather than a notion to be deconstructed.

In essence, this repertoire takes a form that utilises the program as a catalyst to state the principles of journalism and decry instances that depart. Generally this takes the form of assertions of ‘bias’ and requests to ‘live up’ to the (proper) goals of journalism. ‘Stop campaigning for the Democratic Party and go back to fair reporting if you wanna talk about “ideal journalism”’ (Forums, Why is..., Theodore R.87). These sorts of comments, similar to those noted in the first theme, often blur the lines between the program and actual journalism. In these repertoires, one clearly witnesses the program facilitating appeals to rationality, traditional journalistic goals, and broader evaluations of the cable news landscape. Interestingly, whatever the seeming political persuasion of the commenter, a commonality was a general lament of the journalism landscape as a whole and its current performance. Posters would cite other institutions doing a ‘better job’ fulfilling the journalistic mandate, from satirical news, to different specialist blogs and media watchdogs, to – perhaps surprisingly – the fictional program of *The Newsroom* itself. Increasingly people use a variety of media and communication formats to acquire and express civic skills and the forums on HBO are one such site. An analysis of its postings indicates that *The Newsroom* acts as both a news substitute and catalyst to discuss other journalistic alternatives, although we can’t be sure for how diverse a population.<sup>6</sup> However, the level of engagement is not, on the whole, altogether in-depth or nuanced, which leads one to question the possible impact of such ‘middle ground’ literacy intersecting with ‘high confidence’ evaluations of media performance.

## **Conclusion – Media Literacy, Popular Culture, and ‘Post-Truth’ Journalism**

Fundamentally, we have moved past a point where it is intellectually sensible to view popular culture as something vastly distinct and divergent from the ‘real life’ world it typically seeks to

represent. The sense-making activities of what might have once been viewed as a simple ‘fan’ are demonstrably quite complex and intersections of popular, political and traditional media come forth in a variety of amalgamations to allow individuals to connect with others and make sense of the world around them. Studying such reflection in terms of *The Newsroom* actually tells us quite a lot about the perceptions of American news media, and specifically cable news. We can draw three fundamental conclusions in terms of the general tenor of the response to this program:

- 1) ***There is scepticism and a lament of news media*** – The notion of a ‘golden age’ of journalism, that holds the Cronkite’s and Murrow’s up as ideal types is alive-and-well within the popular imagination (images of them are integrated not only within the opening sequence to *The Newsroom* and in multiple episodes, but also in journalistic commentary on the show, and across the viewer forums). Unlike contemporary journalists or outlets, these archetypal figures are rarely politicized and act as a constitutive other against which current news performance is evaluated. They ‘stand in’ as communicative shorthand to construct narratives of decline and ethical crisis.
- 2) ***Discourse of media as a public good persists*** – Despite the seemingly self-evident reality that most American journalism is not a public good in the traditional sense, but rather is a commercial enterprise with all the drawbacks this implies, journalists and audiences alike place expectations of public service upon journalism *tout court*. It is quite intriguing to see just how ubiquitous this disconnection of media structure from the ideal is in a country without a strong public broadcaster. This finding seems evidence of the rhetorical entrenchment of the journalistic ethos and indicates that the widespread critical media literacy needed to accurately assess a commercial media system is lacking (cf. Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Curran, 2005).
- 3) ***Individuals embrace critique but often lack critical skills to go beyond politicized accusations of bias*** – While the discourse of journalism is seemingly well-known, the abilities that systematic media literacy education might promote are sparse. Understandably individuals fall back upon what they do know – its modernist tenets – and how they’ve been taught to employ them through projects of (politicized) public pedagogy, such as the media critique seen on cable news and similar accusations in the political realm. There is strong confidence that bias exists and that certain media outlets are not ‘doing good journalism’, but there is limited evidence of the critical tools and faculties needed to ground such assertions.

It seems that in the current political landscape, which van Zoonen (2012) aptly dubs an age of ‘I-pistemology’, many seem to feel they speak from a position of relative authority simply because they have personal feelings and experiences. The world of cable news strategically embraces this personal approach to truth-claims amidst a struggle over owning the terms-of-debate in a media-saturated and highly-commercialized (American) news landscape (Peters, 2010; 2011). Responses to *The Newsroom* seem further evidence that what we are witnessing is a ‘post-journalism’ era where truth is not the guiding principle but adversarial claims over the truth (cf. Hartley 1996). In this media landscape where actual news outlets and fictional representations of news in essence make the same claim that everyone else is doing journalism the wrong way and sacrificing its fundamentals, it is unsurprising that trust in the broader institution of journalism is steadily declining, while a certain ‘fandom’ of different news outlets simultaneously emerges.

It is important to note that analysing the content of these postings and articles should not be misconstrued as understanding the experience of watching the program, nor the motivations behind why people choose to go online to discuss it. However, it does give us a good insight into how they marshal dominant and oppositional discourses on the purpose and practice of journalism to engage with others, and to what extent and in what ways the (semi)fictional world

of *The Newsroom* acts as portal to evaluate contemporary journalism ethics and practice. When we go beyond simple descriptions of the storyline, what we find is that journalistic and popular responses demonstrate an awareness that news media are increasingly antagonistic in promoting their superior 'brand' of news, which seems to dovetail with a malaise many profess over the general state of the industry.

## Notes

1. Recognition of the hazy distinctions between the two fields not only works in this direction and there is a well-established literature (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1992; Conboy, 2002; Hartley 2009) which analyses journalism through the lens of popular culture. While studies of this intermingling tend to focus upon textual production and conventions, observations on this overlap can also be extended to the stated rationales and evaluations on the societal role of journalism.
2. While an extended discussion on the notions of trust and journalism is quite relevant, it exceeds the scope of this paper. However, it is important to note that observations on trust levels must be contextualized in terms of national media systems and terminological discrepancies (Barnhurst, 2012). 'The European public – socialized in broadcasting's public-service ethos and journalism's tradition of politicization – seem (still) less critical of their media than the American public' (Brants, 2012: 27). For a detailed theoretical exploration of the determinants of trust and public credibility in journalism, see: Kohring & Matthes (2007).
3. For audience reaction, 224 topics were dedicated to *The Newsroom* on HBO, containing a range of 1-267 comments per topic as of June 10, 2012. Postings vary but many responses can be lengthy; 1-2 paragraphs per comment is standard and 500-word postings aren't uncommon. This research restricted itself to the top 10 topics, containing a total of 1115 posts. Capturing the HBO posts was complicated as conventional screen capture software was unable to interact properly with the website to scroll and capture. Accordingly, individual screen captures were made manually. These images were reduced and integrated. For the most active forum this meant 267 postings took up 54 pages. In total, utilizing this approach, 246 pages of comments were generated for analysis. For the journalistic reaction, a LexisNexis search was conducted for 'The Newsroom' between June 17, 2012 (one week before debut) and September 2, 2012 (one week after the season finale). 'The Newsroom' presents challenges based on search-term logic (even capitalized within quotes, it reveals any story speaking in the generic sense of 'the newsroom'). As this search string provided 3000+ results, it was limited by the subject 'Journalism', and source 'US newspapers' and 'US publications', returning 516 results. Further sorting for relevancy and discarding results under 300 words, provided 49 articles with an average length of ~1000 words.
4. While such forums present opportunities for online deliberation (Gurevitch et al., 2009; Graham & Harju, 2011), interactions between participants were not modelled.
5. Examples in the findings are excerpts from longer posts.
6. The site does not offer demographic information on commenters.

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