

**Newspeople of the world: A transnational comparison of fictional newsrooms and female journalists in drama between Taiwan and the United States**

**Darren Chan**  
Temple University  
([Darren.chan@temple.edu](mailto:Darren.chan@temple.edu))

**Alexis Haskell**  
Temple University  
([alexis.haskell@temple.edu](mailto:alexis.haskell@temple.edu))

After breaking multiple scandals involving powerful people in the country to the public (particularly the #MeToo movement), the lives and achievements of journalists in America have once again captured the interest of media producers. The commercial success and critical acclaim of movies like *Spotlight* (2015) and *She Said* (2022) have indicated the popularity of the genre, which typically portrays journalists as the saviors of democracy and defenders of truth (Schudson, 1992). Media products featuring fictional journalists and their hard work have long been a staple of American television (e.g. *The Newsroom* (2012)), but despite their frequent appearances, these characters tend to be flattened or stereotyped, depicted in a binary of extremely trustworthy or extremely corrupt in their work (McNair, 2014).

With recent fictional portrayals of newsrooms and journalists in the US becoming more positive and multi-dimensional (e.g., Everbach, 2023; Feng, 2022), it is worth thinking about the extent they reflect the work of real journalists and operations in actual newsrooms. Particularly, as American newsrooms were dominated by men for decades, it is worth wondering how accurately female journalists were represented in movies and television dramas (see Graham, 1998). While female journalists are present in American media, they tend to be flattened to fit in

a sob sister (Good, 1998; Saltzman, 2003) or overly promiscuous stereotype. In more recent productions, the stereotypical portrayal of female journalists seems to be fading away, as more of them are depicted to be competent and professional reporters, albeit still being confined by the patriarchal power structure in the male-dominated newsroom (De Wulf Helskens et al., 2024). In addition, fictional female journalists now have a more multi-dimensional character, as the storylines no longer merely focus on their professional lives, but also their private lives and how these two intertwine. The introduction of this neoliberal feministic take on female journalists offers us a new opportunity to rethink how female journalists are depicted in fiction and to what extent these caricatures are accurate.

While existing studies on fictional journalists and newsrooms have predominantly focused on media texts produced in the US, little attention has been paid to the same genre outside of North America. In fact, fictional female journalists are hardly exclusive to Hollywood cinemas and dramas, yet current research does not reflect these dynamics.

Given the diversity of our research team, we aim to begin filling research gaps by comparing representations of female journalists in two television dramas: the American *The Morning Show* (season 1) and the Taiwanese *The World Between Us* (season 1). These programs deal with a number of similarities that renders this comparison worthwhile: First, both were released in 2019, reducing timeliness as a confounding variable to analysis. Second, the shows share a few key plot points: they both take place in a largely male newsroom and center on a female protagonist who must deal with personal and professional obstacles. Third, both are based on real-life controversies in their respective countries. *The Morning Show*'s first season is loosely based on revelations of Matt Lauer's sexual misconduct during his tenure on the *Today* show; *The World Between Us* focuses on media coverage of lone wolf attacks and "media

disorder” (「媒體亂象」) in Taiwan’s news industry (Wei, 2022). Fourth, both shows deal with journalism not being taken seriously. While *The Morning Show* eponymous broadcast airs in the mornings and *The World Between Us*’ SBC airs in the evenings, both nonetheless represent a type of journalism considered more sensational than serious. This manuscript begins with a review of past studies of real and fictional newsrooms and the value of a transnational approach in this study before offering an in-depth comparison of how each region represents both female journalists and journalism itself.

### **Media representations of newsrooms**

The present study compares popular cultural representations of journalism from two regions, an important consideration given that film and television are key contributors to public understanding of journalism. To see what is missing from or magnified by popular representations, we must first consider extant research describing the actual happenings inside newsrooms. Darnton (1975) describes the milieu, or social environment, that results from journalistic workflows. From seating arrangements to social groupings, newsrooms are extremely hierarchical. Even within specific beats, some reporters are valued more than others. Editor’s decisions, from assigning stories to providing edits, reaffirm this hierarchy and keep reporters in a state of “chronic insecurity” (Darnton, 1975, p. 179).

Within this hypercompetitive environment, journalists adopt normative – and often misguided – notions of “common sense” or “taken-for-grantedness” that tend to reaffirm stereotypes and produce unbalanced reporting (Tuchman, 1972). In producing the rhythm of daily life, Tuchman (1978) argues that editors use newsroom hierarchy to cast a “web of facticity” that only allows some topics to be seen as real or legitimate. Most often, these stories

concern politics, the economy, or other legitimate institutions. Reporters covering “soft news” topics such as women’s issues are valued less than “hard news,” and are effectively rendered “institutionally uninteresting” (Tuchman, 1978, p. 211). These distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate tend to reproduce the status quo (Tuchman, 1978). Continuing this research in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Usher (2014) found that, similar to Darnton’s early work, seating arrangements within *The New York Times* corresponded with a hierarchical chain of command. Like other ethnographies, Usher (2014) describes how newsrooms emphasize “routine, predictability, and order over disorder as a way to create generalizable descriptions” (Usher, 2014, p. 21) of the world around them. Outside of the Global North, newsroom studies are also used to evaluate how journalistic norms are practiced or negotiated in other nations. For example, Steyn & White (2011) explore the gendered barriers faced by female journalists in three Southeast Asian countries. They find that female journalists face unequal treatment both in their workplace and at home, and they point out that the media workplace is not immune to the political, cultural, and religious forces that dictate social and institutional logic (Steyn & White, 2011). In sum, newsroom sociology highlights how practical decision-making, a hierarchical structure, and the larger social world influence news production.

When adapted to the big screen, these processes are selectively represented. Perhaps the most famous journalism story, Watergate, lives on in memory and legacy through multiple mediated depictions of events, namely the book *All the President’s Men* (1974) by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein and the 1976 film of the same name. These mediated texts represent a mythologized version of real life, with Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman playing Woodward and Bernstein, respectively. While the book is structured as a detective story, the film effectively “ennobled investigative reporting and made of journalists modern heroes” (Schudson,

1992, p. 104). Culturally, as Schudson (1992) points out, the story reproduced in media lives on in the minds of the American public more than any “real” Watergate memory. Similarly, *Spotlight* (2015) tells the story of the *Boston Globe*’s investigation into the Catholic Church’s decades of abuse of young boys. Director Tom McCarthy frames the film as embodying the best of journalism: The *Globe*’s Spotlight team is the country’s longest-running investigative journalism unit and its reporters doggedly pursue the truth even as the church, Boston’s most significant institution, urges them to kill the story. Within the cinematic universe, no one took abuse allegations seriously until a new editor assigned the Spotlight team to the case. Former priest and sociologist Richard Sipe, a key source, is “discovered” by Mark Ruffalo’s Mike Rezendes. In real life, *Boston Globe* reporter Alison Bass writes that she herself covered a speech from Sipe about his work in 1990 – and that story made the *Globe*’s front page (Bass, 2017). Many movies “based on a true story” combine characters, skip plotlines, or otherwise modify the story for the sake of narrative coherence. However, if representations of journalism influence how the public comes to know journalism, these editing decisions significantly impact perceptions of the field.

It’s helpful to conceptualize the heroic approach to journalism in movies and television and the realistic approach in newsroom ethnographies as a Venn diagram. In some ways, the film represents journalists accurately – Anyone who has taken a journalism 101 class has been asked to conduct a “man on the street” interview not unlike the door-knocking depicted in *All the President’s Men* (1976) and *Spotlight* (2015). But while these films portray journalists speaking truth to power and as unsung heroes, the reality is if people come to know journalism from movies and television alone, they will only get part of the picture. As it happens, 78% of Americans have never spoken with a local journalist (Grieco, 2019), and the odds are that

number is even lower for national reporters. Alternatively, *All the President's Men* (1976) and *Spotlight* (2015) have grossed \$70.6 million and \$40.5 million, respectively,<sup>1</sup> indicating that popular culture is a key factor in how people come to know journalism.

### **Identity and gender in newsrooms**

If popular culture influences perceptions of journalism, it follows that this dynamic plays out with gender, an identity that impacts socialization at work. While hegemonic identities are viewed as assumed and invisible (Dyer, 1993), subordinated identities are both visible and othered. Perhaps the most apparent example of this in the context of journalism is hard news' association with men and soft news' association with women (North, 2016). In the 1950s-1970s at *The New York Times*, nearly all female reporters worked in the women's section, colloquially called the "Four F's": Food, Fashions, Family, Furnishings (Svachula, 2018). Not unlike the seating hierarchy identified by Darnton (1975), these women were kept on the ninth floor, away from the "real" journalists downstairs. These women were severely underpaid, denied paid maternity leave and childcare accommodation, and sometimes even barred from hiring their own underlings (Streitmatter, 1998). These trends have improved over time, but research shows enduring pay gaps based on both gender and race (Fu, 2022). Further, women are subject to stronger and often more sexual and verbal attacks than their male counterparts (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022).

These trends continue in representations of gender in newsrooms. Katharine Graham, the first female publisher of the *Washington Post*, is notably absent from *All the President's Men* (1976), despite her real-life involvement. In her autobiography, Graham writes of the experience:

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<sup>1</sup> These figures come from Box Office database Box Office Mojo (boxofficemojo.com).

“I was told that no one understood the role of a publisher, and it was too extraneous to explain” (Graham, 1998, p. 502). Graham herself was not depicted in cinema until 41 years later, with Meryl Streep cast in the role of Steven Spielberg’s *The Post* (2017), a retelling of the *Washington Post*’s publishing of the Pentagon Papers.

Interrogating representations of female journalists extends beyond the choice to depict their existence or erase them entirely. Considering the character arc of female journalists in television and cinema, these representations have slowly evolved to become more multi-dimensional, steadily allowing fictional female journalists to break away from the stereotypes that dominated the industry for decades (Everbach, 2023). Even with this trend, renditions of fictional female journalists have often relied on the “sob sister” stereotype, where female journalists are depicted as big-hearted but small-minded reporters who aspire to deliver works that are as good as their male counterparts (Good, 1998; Saltzman, 2003). Despite their goals to be strong and independent, many of these female journalists end up having to rely on men for success at work or in their lives, which ends up leading to yet another stereotypical representation of women. As Good (1998) points out, such character designs for female journalists are liberal on the surface, but the subplot returns women to the world of stereotypical sex roles by assuming their subordinate to men. Additionally, Valencia et al. (2008) discuss how the portrayal of female journalists in fiction as “sob sisters” reproduces real-life gender barrier in three ways: 1) the split between professional and personal lives, 2) the ageist beauty standards, and 3) the vertical gender segregation that prevents women from reaching professional maturity and holding senior positions.

In a recent study by De Wulf Helskens and colleagues (2024) finds that female journalists in television dramas continue to deal with structural issues at work, particularly the hegemonic

masculinity within news organizations. Using *The Morning Show* as one of their examples, De Wulf Helskens et al. (2024) highlight how the sexist and dysfunctional work environment serves as a dramatic critique not only of the gendered barriers female journalists face but also the unethical practices in news organizations. This paper continues the work of looking at female representation in popular journalism media, this time via a comparative analysis of the first season of the American television series *The Morning Show* and the Taiwanese mini-series *The World Between Us*. We ask how these protagonists' social identities as news workers and gender identities as women are represented in each cultural context:

**RQ1:** How are the female protagonists' social identities invoked in relation to journalistic norms in Taiwan and the United States?

**RQ2:** How are the female protagonists' gender identities invoked in relation to male-dominated workplaces in Taiwan and the United States?

### **Fictional journalists and newsrooms: US and Beyond**

The portrayal of journalists in American movies and television shows has attracted considerable attention from media scholars and has been extensively used as teaching materials in journalism classes. Notably, the vast majority of this very literature review comes from American scholars studying American phenomena because academic interest in fictional newsrooms in other countries has been limited. Thus, this study highlights the need and value of a more comparative angle to understand how news media is being portrayed in fiction across the globe.

While recent examples of journalists in fiction in the US tend to frame the profession as defenders of democracy or the voice of the people (e.g., *Spotlight* (2015) and *She Said* (2022)), the binary nature of journalists in fiction continues to plague Hollywood. Ehrlich & Saltzman



(2015) suggest that journalists are either shown as heroes or scoundrels in Hollywood movies, with one group holding a strong sense of integrity and another group willing to publish an exclusive story by any means. Using *The Newsroom* and *House of Cards* as examples, McNair (2014) echoes this view as he points out that the portrayal of fictional journalists in American media is still following a binary approach, where journalists are either portrayed as heroes or villains. In addition, many fictional journalists are solely portrayed as reporters, with his or her familial and societal roles often omitted or downplayed on screen.

While fictionalized newsrooms from US media received considerable academic interest, media markets elsewhere that have picked up this “journalism genre” have received limited attention. In Khorana's (2012) article, she discusses the rise of fictional journalists in Bollywood cinema, and how that has reflected structural changes in India's society. While the rise of fictional female journalists reflects a more progressive view towards gender roles in India, Khorana (2012) remarks how the design of many characters still reflects the dominant patriarchal values that prohibited women from being independent or from achieving a higher status in the newsroom. Khorana (2012) also points out how Bollywood's journalism movies can serve as cultural artifacts that demonstrate the dominant nationalistic discourse and class differences within Indian society. Movies or television shows about journalism can not only inform us of the expected normative roles of the press but can also reveal the social, political, and economic structures that support or influence the press in real life. Studying and comparing fictional journalists and newsrooms. Looking beyond the Global North allows us to test the generalizability of observations on characteristics of media texts, as well as identify research gaps that have been missed by previous studies.

Thus far, most studies on real-life and fictional newsrooms have only focused on examples from a single region or nation. While such studies are valuable, we argue that cross-cultural comparative analysis can generate findings that highlight the unique characteristics of how women in newsrooms are portrayed in media artifacts. We contend that a transnational comparison will not only offer unique insights into the similarities and differences in the way female journalists are portrayed in fiction but also inform us of how their respective culture interprets the roles journalists play in real life. With that in mind, it would be valuable to introduce media text samples from a market that has received minimal attention, hence the selection of a Taiwanese television drama. As Yueh (2020) discusses in detail, despite Taiwan's unique history and media landscape as a result of its relatively recent democratization, it has received limited attention in the field of communication studies for the past decade. What's more, among the limited number of articles about Taiwan published through journals owned by the three major communication associations based in the US (ICA, NCA, and AEJMC), very few have comparatively analyzed Taiwan's media landscape. Through this paper, we hope to highlight the value of analyzing media texts from understudied regions.

Zynda (1979) identifies four aspects of the press that are depicted in visual media about journalists and the news industry: 1) the character of the journalist, 2) the nature of the news organization, 3) the social role of the press, and 4) the society in which the press functions. Based on these aspects, our study evaluates how the two samples we selected can help us understand not just the identities of the fictional female journalists, but also the social roles of the press they work in and the broader world the story is situated in. Since the two dramas analyzed here are based on real-life events, we argue that these shows also allow us to take a glimpse into the different journalistic fields they represent, in addition to the current issues surrounding the

respective news industry in Taiwan and the US. Based on the above, our research aims to answer the following questions:

**RQ3:** How do journalism dramas represent the social roles of news programs in Taiwan and the United States and offer insight into unique journalism issues for each region?

### **Objects of study**

Based on the discussion and research questions above, this study will compare and analyze two drama shows from the US and Taiwan. While the nature of these shows varies, their extensive portrayal of newsroom practices and female journalists provides us the opportunity to conduct a transnational analysis and examine the research questions we raised above. To maintain a comparable and sizeable sample, this study focuses on the first season of both shows, which were both released in 2019 and contain 10 episodes each.

### ***The World Between Us***

Jointly produced by Taiwan's Public Television Service and HBO Asia, *The World Between Us* (original name in Chinese: 我們與惡的距離) is a television drama first broadcast in 2019. Based on multiple lone-wolf terrorist attacks in Taiwan in the 2010s, the series follows the aftermath of a mass shooting and the lives of the people who are affected by it. Beyond covering personal stories, the drama offers a broader critique of different aspects of society, including justice, mental health, stigma, and journalistic practices. The 10-episode series is based on heavy research, with the scriptwriters conducting over 40 hours of interviews with members of the profession being portrayed in the show to fine-tune the storyline and character arc (Huang, 2019). For the storyline involving journalistic practices, the producer explicitly cited American television dramas like *The Newsroom* as the thematic and stylistic inspirations of the show (Huang, 2019).

Among the themes covered in the drama, we will particularly focus on its discussions on media ethics and sensationalism in broadcast news. One of the protagonists of the drama is Sung Chiao-an (Alyssa Chia), the deputy head of the news division at Sense Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). After losing her son in the mass shooting, Chiao-an indulges herself at work, and her take on journalistic values and news ethics has led to her having conflicts with her colleagues and family. Throughout the series, Chiao-an's decisions in the newsroom evolve as she reflects on her identity and values. Beyond personal matters, Chiao-an also attempts to protect the independence of her newsroom, as the management attempts to intervene for different reasons. The multi-faceted design of Chiao-an's character allows us to explore how fictional female journalists operate as they face challenges in both their personal and work lives. In addition, we can learn about power dynamics through Chiao-an's experience, as she navigates through a newsroom and power structure dominated by men. Other relevant characters from *The World Between Us* include Liao Niu-Shih (Honduras), Chiao-an's direct underling, Chiao-an's husband Liu Chiao-kuo (Sheng-hao Wen), and Li Ta-chih (Yuu Chen), a newsroom employee with a secret: her brother was the shooter who killed Chiao-an's son.

### ***The Morning Show***

*The Morning Show* is an American drama produced and released by Apple TV+ as part of its inaugural program (DeSantis & Young, 2019). Influenced by the #MeToo movement and the Matt Lauer scandal at *The Today Show*, the first season follows Alex Levy (Jennifer Aniston), co-host of *The Morning Show*, navigating the aftermath of the dismissal of her on-air partner Mitch (Steve Carrell) due to his sexual misconduct. Hoping to leverage the situation, Alex attempts to gain more power in the newsroom during the chaos. Meanwhile, Mitch's misconduct has drawn the media's attention to Alex's personal life, a matter which she barely discusses at

work but is falling apart in real life. Other relevant characters from *The Morning Show* include Bradley Jackson (Reese Witherspoon), a scandal-plagued television journalist whom Alex recruits to be her new co-host, Alex's nearly estranged daughter Lizzy (Oona Roche), and Fred Micklen (Tom Irwin), the television network's president.

Despite the differences in the nature of these two shows, Alex and Chiao-an share a lot of commonalities: they are both female journalists in a male-dominated workplace, and they are simultaneously dealing with workplace matters and personal issues, the latter which are significantly impacting the way they perceive their profession and identity. As mentioned in the literature review, transnational comparisons of fictional characters on television have been a rarity, and little is known about how journalists are depicted outside of the US. Through a transnational approach, this study hopes to fill this knowledge gap while providing new insights into how stereotypes about fictional female journalists are being challenged across the globe.

## **Methods**

To systematically analyze these two shows, this study employs a two-step qualitative analysis to engage with the sample. The researchers commence by conducting a thematic analysis that helps categorize the content for further study. Described as both a standalone and supplementary research method, thematic analysis is regularly employed to analyze media texts (Boyatzis, 1998; Nowell et al., 2017). One of the biggest strengths of thematic analysis is that it can help summarize key features of a sizable dataset, allowing researchers to develop a systematic approach to handling the data (King, 2004). In this study, the researchers first analyzed the twenty episodes in the sample and isolated scenes that involved the two main characters mentioned above and their professional identities. Themes and subthemes are then

identified and coded individually by each researcher, followed by further refinement based on the discrepancies between the researchers (Nowell et al., 2017).

Once the relevant scenes are identified and categorized, a textual analysis is conducted to scrutinize the media texts further. Treating texts as complex sets of discursive strategies that are situated in a specific cultural context, textual analysis focuses on drawing out the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text (Fürsich, 2009). In other words, textual analysis allows us to explore latent messages that reflect broader cultural or power structures that are embedded in the texts. As our interest is not merely in the portrayal of female journalists in drama, but the different perceptions towards real-life female journalists and the news industry in the nations, textual analysis is the appropriate tool for our study and for the research questions we established. While textual analysis has been criticized as a subjective method that fails to provide a holistic view of the production of media texts (see Philo, 2007), we refer to Phillipov's (2013) argument that text-based approaches allow us to gain a deeper understanding of the connection between media and cultures, an area that is difficult to gauge with quantitative methods. Further, the researchers selected these shows due to their own positionality; Since one is from Hong Kong and the other is from the United States, they were able to draw on their own embedded cultural experiences when comparing the Asian and American depictions of newsrooms.

Using the three-step approach proposed by Emerson et al. (2011) and applied in Ferrucci & Painter's (2018) study, the researchers started separately by looking at the isolated scenes and taking notes on the portrayal of the two journalists. In the subsequent viewing, the researchers rewatched the scenes and made notes on the broader issues connected to the dialogs or actions of the journalists. Particular attention is paid to how the two journalists describe their roles in the

newsroom and their perceptions of journalistic norms. Finally, the researchers reconvened and watched the shows together as they compared notes and discussed the patterns or themes that emerged in the sample. This nuanced approach ensures no fine details were omitted in the data collection process, and the researchers will not be biased by each other's observations. In total, the researchers watched the 20 sampled episodes thrice to ensure the rigorousness of the study and the validity of the observations.

## **Findings**

Based on our thematic and textual analysis, we identified four common themes in our comparison between *The Morning Show* and *The World Between Us*. These observations reveal many differences in how female journalists are portrayed in television dramas. In addition, with these two shows being based on real-life events, the transnational approach helps us better understand the media environment in which these shows are situated and the issues in their respective journalistic fields.

### Journalist and a Mother: Prioritizing Professional and Familial Identities

The first research question asked how the female protagonists' social identity is invoked in relation to journalistic norms. Both women endure personal crises in their respective shows – *The Morning Show's* Alex dealing with divorce and *The World Between Us's* Chiao-an dealing with the loss of her son to a mass shooting. However, the American show depicts Alex's drama separate from her work. Her personal life is something she has been forced to sacrifice to be a journalist, and with a divorce on the horizon, her goal is strictly personal: to avoid creating a media scandal. Meanwhile, Chiao-an's personal life is directly related to her work as a news worker. Her goal is strictly journalistic: to cover these ongoing attacks with appropriate empathy and tact.

*The Morning Show* episode seven centers around Alex and her husband Jason's divorce announcement, and its fallout both at work and at home. At work, Alex meets with her lawyers who are figuring out the best way to navigate this decision. If she were a man, they tell Alex, this would be easier. Instead, the fact that Alex's now-spurned co-host Mitch's wife also just filed for divorce will inevitably lead to rumors that the former co-hosts are having an affair. Further, the lawyers worry about who – Alex or Jason – should file for the divorce. If the man files, the lawyers say, the public will think the woman is either high maintenance or a cheater; If the woman files, she will be called heartless. To reiterate, Alex's marriage falling apart has nothing to do with her professional role on *The Morning Show*, yet she must take time away from her workday to manage it. Considering her personal life, Alex and her daughter Lizzy are effectively estranged since Lizzy feels her mother was a workaholic who didn't prioritize her family enough. The two exist in a state of tense avoidance until Alex visits Lizzy's dorm room and the floodgates open. Lamenting the double standard between her and Jason, Alex tells Lizzy:

“I want happiness. I earned happiness. I'm a human being, Lizzy. And you know what else? Don't you dare bitch at me about my career, little Miss I'm-So-Progressive. Yes, I worked my ass off to get where I am. And I wanted it. I wanted to be something. I wanted to mean something in this world. I didn't know that was a fucking crime.”

It's notable that Alex reserved her emotional monologue for her daughter instead of the lawyers, with whom she remained more respectful and rational.

*The World Between Us* focuses on the ways Chiao-an's professional and personal lives are intertwined *within* the newsroom. Both her husband, Chao-Kuo, and daughter, Tian-ching, regularly stop by the office, and her coworkers seem familiar with them both. When the viewers see Chiao-An and Chao-kuo fight, it relates to their differing perspectives on journalism ethics. For example, in episode 6, Chao-kuo urges Chiao-an to reconsider her view on news ethics. Later when Chiao-an talks with her family members in episode 7, she reflects on how mentally



ill people have been covered in the news. In both situations, the major ethical dilemmas Chiao-an faces relate back to her role as a journalist. While her own experiences as a parent inform these conflicts, they nonetheless remain grounded in journalism. For Alex, her conflicts are more interpersonal and relate to her identity as a woman. Put differently, Chiao-An is struggling with how to cover lone wolf knife attacks because she lost her son to such an attack, while Alex is worried about the public relations rollout of her divorce (and, earlier, the sexual harassment allegations against Mitch). The tension in *The World Between Us* lies in Chiao-An's trauma and journalistic integrity with her family as ever-present side characters. The tension in *The Morning Show* is Alex's personal life and power plays, with journalism as an ever-present side character.

#### Navigating within a male-dominated workplace

The second research question deals with how these female protagonists' gender identity is invoked in relation to their male-dominated workplaces in Taiwan and the United States. Faced with bullying and power plays, Alex leverages her own social and cultural capital to assert dominance. Facing similar challenges, Chiao-an turns inward. She reflects upon why she became a journalist in the first place and avows to be more ethical.

In the third episode of *The Morning Show*, the network tries – and fails – to fire Alex for subordination. Fred, the network president, is frustrated that Alex has announced without approval that Bradley Jackson will be her new co-host. In a wood-walled room, Alex sits at the end of a primarily male conference table. The camera in this scene shifts between a wide shot of the primarily male suits and a close-up of Alex alone. Fred says he could (and should) fire Alex, flexing his power over her. Condescendingly, he says he may not fire her if she apologizes. As the camera zeroes in on her, Alex retorts:

“The part you guys never seem to realize is that you don't have the power anymore. The news division is held up by my show. And the only thing keeping us afloat is me. Because guess what? America loves me. And therefore, I own America.”

Defending her journalistic job, Alex calls upon the power imbued to her by the audience. News or journalistic integrity is never mentioned; instead, Alex offers a strong, curt grab for power. This tactic seemingly works, and Alex is not fired.

In the next scene, Alex sits down with Bradley. Emboldened by her previous power play, Alex again offers Bradley the co-host job. When Bradley hesitates, Alex replies:

**Alex:** I'm giving you the biggest news platform you could ever have. If you're a true journalist, you won't say no to this.

**Bradley:** I'm not convinced this is true journalism.

**Alex:** And how many current or former presidents have you interviewed?

In the conversation between two women, journalism is finally invoked, but only as a gateway to power. When Bradley directly questions whether *The Morning Show* is “true journalism,” Alex responds that she has interviewed presidents and Bradley – despite her history as a “real” broadcast journalist – has not.

Compared to Alex, Chiao-an's conversations with her male colleagues tend to focus on work decisions even if she is subliminally overshadowed by the men around her. A central conflict in *The World Between Us* is Chiao-an's relationship with journalistic integrity. Episode 5 opens with a disciplinary hearing from a majority male advisory board about viewer complaints over SBC's sensational coverage of a celebrity suicide. Faced with these critiques, Chiao-an responds:

**Chiao-an:** You're taking the cheap opinion of keyboard warriors as facts? We're in the digital age. The internet has changed the fundamental values of journalism. Viewers who want international news will go to CNN, BBC, NHK, or tune into [SBC's] Global News at 10. They won't be watching our evening news.

After a heated exchange, Chiao-an leaves the meeting and one of the executives jokes: “I guess that’s your first run-in with the tough-as-nails vice director of our News department. You’ll get used to her ways, right?” Aside from this sexism-laden comment about Chiao-an, this conversation showcases Chiao-an's exasperation with her work. Unlike *The Morning Show*, however, which cinematically pits Alex alone versus a group of executives, *The World Between Us* shoots this scene with two medium shots: one of the suits, and one of Chiao-an and Niu-shih. While Chiao-an may be defending her network’s sensational coverage, she nonetheless responds to criticism with an awareness of how media dynamics have changed. Once again, her role as a journalist rather than her relationship to power is the object of conversation.

Later, Chiao-an reflects on this criticism and realizes the error of her ways. She chastises a young reporter who uses the word “suicide” in a headline and has a heart-to-heart with Niu-shih about reforming their journalistic practices. She asks him to remember when they were young, to reflect upon why they got into journalism. The pair decides to allow their journalists more time to do good journalism, rather than rushing to fill airtime. By episode 8, they are two days into this endeavor when the studio executives – who previously encouraged journalistic integrity – call them for a meeting.

**Executive 1:** So, no more security camera footage? No more copying of news from the internet or from magazines? You’re aiming for balanced reporting. I know that’s all good. You’re setting a good example for all media outlets. But no objections from our reporters?

**Niu-shih:** They no longer need to juggle three or four stories a day. They are allowed the time to get each story done right, to do in-depth follow ups, and work on exclusives. This is every reporter’s dream come true. So what if other media outlets steal our story within the hour? We still get the same sense of achievement from breaking the story first.

**Executive 2:** I don’t think our reporters are trained for this.

**Chiao-an:** That’s why we need to give them time.

**Executive 1:** But you won't have enough news. How are you going to fill the day's slots?

**Chiao-an:** We can rerun our news like we've been doing. Anyway, I'm thinking of lengthening our feature reports. We'll cover more international news. We'll also be working with *The Herald*. That way, we'll be able to provide well-rounded coverage of current affairs.

**Niu-shih:** We've tried it for two days now. So far, the response from our staff-

**Executive 1:** The response from our viewers is what matters. Besides it's only been two days. Too early to tell how this affects our ratings. I want to make this clear: You need good ratings to back you up if you want the higher-ups to go along with this.

While Chiao-an responded to criticism by improving her news ethics, the station managers still dismiss her. Rather than praising Chiao-an for responding to criticism and adopting better ethics, they remind her that the audience and ratings are all that matters. Further, they engage more directly with Niu-shih, who is technically Chiao-an's underling. Even within these gendered dynamics, the subject of these conversations remains centered on journalism, as opposed to Alex and her station managers' conversations around power.

### Reflections of the real world: real problems in their universe

The third research question asked how journalism-related dramas from Taiwan and the US reflect the social roles of newsrooms and the unique issues in journalism from each respective region.

*The Morning Show*, as its name suggests, depicts the drama during and behind a morning news show on network television. Contrary to their prime time or evening counterparts, morning news shows are historically trivialized as soft news or infotainment lacking journalistic values (Cappuccio, 2006; Prato, 1997). That being said, these studies also recognize morning news as a highly competitive ground for network television, and the genre has been recognized for its ability in agenda-setting. In recognition of the demand for "hard" news content, morning news producers have begun to push the boundaries of the genre, attempting to find a balance between

difficult images, language, and sensationalism that might be more appealing to the morning audience (Gutsche et al., 2022; McKinley & Fahmy, 2011). However, these types of conversations are almost nonexistent in *The Morning Show*. The characters instead focus on interpersonal power plays. The season 1 climax shows Alex “hijacking” the broadcast to expose how the network effectively enabled Steve Carell’s Matt Lauer-esque character’s abuse. But her criticism and manner of conveying it have little to do with journalism. In fact, Alex’s speaking up is framed as a moment of personal clarity and revelation rather than, as journalism would assume, a public necessity.

Meanwhile, the depiction of the malpractice in SBN in *The World Between Us* is a reflection of public criticism towards what is described as “media disorder” (「媒體亂象」) in Taiwan’s news industry (Wei, 2022). The unethical practices in Taiwan’s news media became an issue following the region’s end of martial law in 1987, and the new democratized government adopted a neoliberal approach to managing the media market (Rampal, 2007). The newfound freedom of speech has created confusion among Taiwanese media, as they need to rethink the roles between themselves and the political power (Wei, 2022). The already competitive and commercialized media market only shortened the possible reaction time for these media platforms, and as a result, it forced them to succumb to sensationalism as a means to survive (Wei, 2022). This “media disorder” is central to many plot points in *The World Between Us*, with the drama both directly and indirectly critiquing its causes. For instance, in the first episode, the newsroom airs unverified breaking news for fear of being “scooped.” This is shown as the wrong decision, and the narrative thrust of the rest of the season deals with Chaio-an reflecting on her own ethics and morals as a journalist. While *The Morning Show* is essentially a drama that

happens to be set in a newsroom, *The World Between Us* serves as a commentary on the “media disorder” in Taiwan’s news industry.

## Discussion

Both *The Morning Show* and *The World Between Us* depict some elements of real-world newsrooms – hierarchies, deadlines, recording a newscast – but the extent to which they interrogate these grounded realities varies. *The Morning Show* focuses on the interplay between individuals, power, and ambition. Personal lives may impact these central themes, but like journalists in the show, they function as pawns to obtain this status. *The World Between Us* is interested in how one can perform ethical journalism in a hyper-competitive, oversaturated media environment. Furthermore, it wrestles with how one’s personal involvement in a crisis might impact how one can do this work. Both shows also depict female protagonists and, according to real demographics, depict them as the minority gender in the newsroom. From there, the representation varies: While Alex’s personal life is a distraction from work, Chiao-an’s personal life is key to her character arc over the first season and ultimately makes her a better, more ethical reporter. Perhaps the best way to tie these diverging views of journalism together is to consider how each show deals with its protagonist blatantly eschewing journalistic norms.

In both programs, female journalists are shown to have broken journalistic norms and ethical codes to achieve personal goals. However, these actions were portrayed in a different light: while Chiao-an’s unethical actions brought criticism, Alex’s misconduct is seen as a power move against inequality and injustice. These depictions have revealed two views on how journalistic ethical norms are perceived in these virtual scenarios.

In the fifth episode of *The World Between Us*, Chiao-an realizes that Ta-chih’s brother was Li Shiao-ming, the perpetrator of the mass shooting that killed her son. To find out where Shiao-

ming is cremated following the execution and the whereabouts of his family, Chiao-an quietly asks for a camera crew to tail Ta-chih. When Niu-shih questions Chiao-an's intention, she replies, "There's a big exclusive story out there." In the following episode, it is revealed that the camera crew follows Ta-chih and her parents to the funeral parlor, and the ambush shocks all of them. In the heated argument, Ta-chih criticizes Chiao-an for abusing her power and disregarding the right of her family to start a new life. To this, Chiao-an retorts, "What about my son's right to live?" Later at home, Chao-kuo criticizes Chiao-an's lack of journalistic ethics. As he points out her unethical and unprofessional treatment towards Ta-chih, Chiao-an continues to defend her actions and blames it on the media ecology that forces them to take the sensationalistic route. The quarrel marks a turning point in the story, as Chiao-an begins to realize how her editorial decisions have brought more harm than good to society. Her blatant violation of journalistic norms and ethics is therefore framed as bad practices solely for fulfilling her personal vendetta.

Meanwhile, in the season finale of *The Morning Show*, Alex learns how Fred's attempt to silence a woman who was sexually assaulted by Mitch ultimately led to her overdose and death. Resembling a *Bonnie and Clyde*-esque duo, Alex and Bradley decide to hijack the news broadcast and "come clean" to their viewers, calling the network's internal investigation "bullshit," Alex explains the true story behind Mitch's dismissal and how the network has tried to bury the scandal. Alex admits her guilt for letting this happen under her watch, and she urges people who are victims of sexual assault to stand up and call out the perpetrators right before the network cuts the show's signal. The dramatic season finale echoes the call for action during the #MeToo movement, and more importantly, it implies that sometimes it is necessary to break the rules in order to challenge the status quo. In this context, Alex's decision to go off-script and

start a “confession” filled with colorful language is not primarily seen as related to journalistic norms, but as a moment of personal self-actualization. While Alex stands to benefit from her actions (as evidenced by events in subsequent seasons), her decision to abandon her journalistic role is framed as a selfless move that serves the greater good of society.

By positioning Chiao-an's ethical transgression as negative, *The World Between Us* illuminates the show's central thesis: it may be difficult for journalism to remain ethical in an oversaturated media environment, but it's nonetheless a worthy goal that ought to be continued for the sake of empathy, respect, and the greater good. While following Ta-chih might have shed light on a story, the show directly wrestles with whether the Chiao-an's actions may actually harm more people than they help. This thesis contrasts with *The Morning Shows*' season finale depicting Alex righting her network's wrong by forgoing ethics. However, since Alex's decision exposes corruption and helps her achieve individual self-realization, the ethical transgression is framed as heroic. These differences reflect the collectivist and individualist cultures of each region, highlighting how journalism is a context-dependent phenomenon. Certain goals may persevere across national boundaries, but popular cultural representations remain value-laden and context-specific.

To conclude, we would like to reaffirm the value of transnational studies on this topic. As we have mentioned in our literature review, the portrayal of fictional journalists, regardless of gender, is not a US-exclusive phenomenon. However, based on the literature we have identified, academic conversations about how journalists are depicted in entertainment media dominantly focus on media productions from the US. With local cultural issues in Taiwan receiving less attention due to structural issues in academia (see Wang, 2020), we wish to illuminate the significance of comparative studies and how analyzing local cultural artifacts can offer valuable



insights into the issues they critique. The comparative approach allows us to evaluate the generalizability of observations and concepts established by scholars and media productions from the Global North, and studying entertainment media can serve as a point to further investigate the media phenomenon they portray.

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