

The Image of the Sportswriter in Television

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Introduction

Most audience members will never be a part of, or even see the inner workings of, a working newsroom, so “notions of what a journalist is and does are more likely to have come from reading about journalists in novels, short stories, and comic books, and from seeing them in movies, television programs, plays, and cartoons” (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015, pg. 2).

Popular culture, therefore, can be a powerful tool for thinking about what journalism is and should be (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015). Indeed, public feelings about real-world journalists are colored by popular culture portrayals, which can affect the perception and clout of an institution in society at least as much if not more than the work done by actual journalists (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015; McNair, 2010).

This phenomenon is especially true for sports journalists because sports are such a large component of American life. Twenty-five percent of Americans say they are “avid” sports fans, while another 47 percent say they are “casual” fans (Gough, 2021). More than 96 million people watched Super Bowl 55 on CBS, while another 5.7 million online viewers per minute tuned into CBS’s All Access service (Young, 2021). Sports is ubiquitous in American society, yet there is a dearth of research into the popular culture portrayals of sports journalists. Such depictions—whether positive, negative, or neutral—could influence public opinion about real-world

journalists (Ehrlich, 1997), could influence public trust in media (Stone & Lee, 1999), and at times could provide useful insights into the actual lived experiences of journalists (Brennen, 2004, 1995).

More research is needed about television portrayals of sports journalists, and really all journalists. There has been some good work fairly recently focusing on political journalists in television—specifically *House of Cards* (Ferrucci & Painter, 2017; Painter & Ferrucci, 2017), *The Wire* (Ferrucci & Painter, 2018; Painter, 2017; Sabin, 2011; Steiner, Guo, McCaffrey, & Hills, 2013), and *The Newsroom* (Ferrucci & Painter, 2016; Painter & Ferrucci, 2015; Peterlin & Peters, 2018; Peters, 2015). The same cannot be said about depictions of sports journalists. Books by Ehrlich (2004), Ehrlich & Saltzman (2015), Good (2008), McNair (2010), and Ness (2022) have focused on movie depictions of journalism (though, again, not much in terms of sports journalism). However, less has been written about television representations of the press, although television reaches more people than movies do and may have more influence on popular perceptions (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015, pg. 4). While viewership numbers from streaming services can be suspect due to a lack of independently gathered data, there is no question that streaming television shows has enhanced their reach, especially with younger audiences—furthering the need for research into television depictions of journalists.

This essay begins the conversation by examining the image of the sportswriter in several television shows. It starts with a deep dive into *Sports Night*, a multi-layered series about sports journalists that covered all aspects of production—from anchors to writers to producers to media executives. *Sports Night* also is worthy of a deep analysis because it is one of the few (perhaps the only) television shows that focused on sports journalists almost exclusively in their professional capacity, and that featured sports journalists as primary characters. The essay then

moves to discussions about several other sports-themed television shows—*Brockmire*, *The Odd Couple*, *Everybody Loves Raymond*, and *My Boys*—before concluding with some suggestions of other television shows featuring sports journalists that researchers could focus on to further the discussion about the image of sports journalists in television.

Sports Night

Sports Night (1998-2000), Aaron Sorkin's first foray into broadcast television, is centered on the titular show, a semi-fictional and at times thinly veiled version of the Keith Olbermann-Dan Patrick-era *SportsCenter*. In all, 45 episodes aired from September 22, 1998, to May 16, 2000. Sorkin wrote that the show "didn't have the same rhythms as a typical sitcom, and audiences might be uncomfortable with the unfamiliarity of it" (2008, pg. 2). ABC certainly was uncomfortable that *Sports Night* didn't conform to the standard sitcom format. The network wanted Sorkin to use three cameras and a laugh track; however, Sorkin kept *Sports Night*'s quick-fire dialogue and extensive camera movement and gradually eliminated the laugh track throughout the first season (Sorkin, 2008).

There are a couple of reasons why *Sports Night* is worthy of a deep dive when thinking about the depiction of sports journalists on television. First, more than most television shows, *Sports Night* actually focuses on sports and sports broadcasting. Almost every scene is located in the television studio, newsroom, and control room. In the show, "sports becomes a metaphor for human accomplishment, drive, pain, loss, and disappointment" (Fahy, 2005, pg. 61). Sports often is a driver for exploring personal relationships and societal issues; however, sports and sports journalism remains a central focus throughout the show. Second, *Sports Night* focuses on multiple levels of newsroom culture, from the individual communication workers (the individual journalists' demographic profiles, life experiences, personal values and attitudes, and work

experiences), and news routines (practices emblematic of the field rather than of a person or organization), to the organizational level (characteristics that differentiate among communication organizations such as roles performed, the way those roles are structured, the policies flowing through that structure, and the methods used to enforce those policies) (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). Unique among shows about sports journalists, *Sports Night* is a multi-layered television series on a sports show covering everyone from the anchors to the writers to the producers (and even a prospective owner in the last two episodes of the series).

Sports Night includes a wide variety of athletics instead of just the popular football, basketball, and baseball triumvirate. For example, the first episode, simply entitled “Pilot,” features the *Sports Night* crew huddled around studio televisions to watch an African runner competing in his first race since experiencing a major leg injury. Other sports spotlighted throughout the series include hunting (“The Hungry and the Hunted”), a Mt. Everest climbing expedition (“The Quality of Mercy at 29K”), tennis (“How Are Things in Glocca Morra?”), cricket (“Ten Wickets”), and boxing (“The Cut Man Cometh”).

Of course, there are still plenty of storylines centered on the most-popular sports; however, these episodes typically use sports to tackle bigger issues. Previous researchers suggest that entertainment media often includes lessons and messages that could lead audiences to change the beliefs, attitudes, and values that are important to their overall political perspective (Gierzynski, 2018; Klein, 2011). Entertainment media does not function solely as amusement for viewers; instead, it is a site through which contemporary social issues may be considered and negotiated (Klein, 2011). *Sports Night* does include lessons and messages, tackling issues that are important and newsworthy in the world of sports, including a football player accused of sexual harassment (“Mary Pat Shelby”), the use of the Confederate flag by fans of the University

of Tennessee (“The Six Southern Gentlemen of Tennessee”), and steroids (“Kyle Whitaker’s Got Two Sacks”). Audiences typically are so wrapped up in the storyline that they are highly unlikely to question the lessons, values exhibited, or basic facts incorporated into story plots (Gierzynski, 2018). Gierzynski further argues that messages in fictional stories are more likely to be internalized than similar messages in purely political content. Ideally, these programs offer viewers material that they could incorporate into other encounters with the issue (Klein, 2011). Entertainment media, therefore, is regarded as a legitimate additional resource from which to draw in the larger discussions of social issues (Klein, 2011).

Sports is central throughout *Sports Night*. However, it’s typically used in one of two ways:

The first, as stated previously, is to discuss larger, societal topics. For example, a two-episode story arc centers on professional football player Christian Patrick assaulting Senior Associate Producer Natalie Hurley (Sabrina Lloyd). In “Mary Pat Shelby,” Patrick is under investigation for sexually assaulting his ex-girlfriend. Hurley and Patrick meet for a pre-interview in the locker room, though Patrick’s agent had only agreed to the interview on the condition that the sexual assault allegations were off-limits, and Hurley returns to the *Sports Night* newsroom with an injured wrist. Hurley only reluctantly agreed to the pre-interview, telling Executive Editor Dana Whitaker (Felicity Huffman) repeatedly that Associate Producer Jeremy Goodwin (Joshua Malina) would be better for the task. Whitaker later admits that she sent Hurley because Patrick had a bad history with female reporters in the locker room, and she felt that Hurley might be able to get a story even though Patrick’s agent conditioned the interview on the sexual assault allegation being off limits for questioning. The *Sports Night* newsroom spends the remainder of “Mary Pat Shelby” and the next episode, “The Head Coach,

Dinner and the Morning Mail,” wrestling with the aftermath of the assault—both professionally and personally. Professionally, they first have to determine how they’ll handle the news on air, and then they have to wrestle with how Hurley and other women can best cover athletes in a world that is designed for and dominated by men. Personally, they need to navigate how to interact with a co-worker and friend who has just been assaulted, and who must simultaneously cope with the aftereffects of a physical assault and concerns about continuing to be accepted as a sports journalist given reactions to similar incidents involving male athletes and female journalists (e.g., Lisa Olson, Melissa Ludtke, Lesley Visser).

The second way sports is used throughout the series is as a driver for the personal relationships among the show’s major characters. *Sports Night* featured an ensemble cast, though most of the major plotlines tended to focus on Dan Rydell (Josh Charles) and Casey McCall (Peter Krause), the two lead anchors, as well as Managing Editor Isaac Jaffe (Robert Guillaume), Executive Editor Dana Whitaker, Senior Associate Producer Natalie Hurley, Associate Producer Jeremy Goodwin, and sister show *West Coast Update* Producer Sally Sasser (Brenda Strong). Those plotlines often revolved around the characters’ personal relationships and interactions with sports and athletes. In “Shane,” McCall wants to edit a tape to avoid embarrassing his friend, baseball player Shane McArnold, who just made bigoted comments toward New York City—his new home—in an exclusive interview with McCall. When Executive Editor Whitaker says no, McCall goes over her head to Jaffe, the managing editor.

McCall: McArnold committed a Big Apple faux pas, and Dana won’t let me cut it.

Jaffe: Well, I guess since it’s news, and it’s good television, I wouldn’t feel very good about it. How do you think Dana would feel about it?

McCall (as Whitaker walks into Jaffe’s office behind him): Dana...who knows with Dana? One day she’s up, another day she’s down. That girl’s nuttier than a squirrel’s cheeks in October. The point is...she’s standing right behind me, right?

Whitaker: I cannot believe you.

McCall: Wait.

Whitaker: You went over my head.

McCall: I can explain this. I went over your head.

Here, McCall violates the newsroom chain of command. He also questions Whitaker's authority and—probably inadvertently—her ability to do her job.

Sports Night was not exclusively *about* sports. Storylines often revolved strictly around the personal relationships—both romantic and platonic—among characters. For example, a rivalry turned borderline hostile relationship develops between Whitaker and Sasser. They are shown in nearly constant competition for power in the newsroom, though they do not directly work together, as well as for the romantic interests of lead anchor Casey McCall. It's clear that Whitaker treats Sasser badly because of her budding relationship with McCall midway through the first season. Kirstin Ringelberg describes the competition as the equivalent of a “sophisticated cat fight” (2005, pg. 97). Sasser's first appearance on the show is when she's tapped to produce an episode of *Sports Night* in “Shoe Money Tonight.” Whitaker starts a fight with McCall in the newsroom about why he approved Sasser's script without major rewrites. As the executive producer of *West Coast Update*, Sasser is presumably very capable of writing an appropriate script, but Sasser's credentials and talents do not seem to matter to Whitaker. Instead, what matters is that McCall is not being strictly loyal to Whitaker in her catty competition with Sasser.

Whitaker also mixes her personal and professional life when she begins inviting her boyfriend, who does not work for the show or its parent company, to the set. In “How Are Things in Glocca Morra?,” a late tennis match forces Whitaker to either produce the show or hand it off to the *West Coast Update* team. Everyone, including Whitaker, says that they would never pass off the show; however, she does exactly that after her boyfriend castigates her for

putting her professional life above her personal life. McCall and Whitaker, in “Eli’s Coming,” specifically fight about Whitaker allowing her personal life to affect her professional judgment. Such decisions, however, are par for the course, as the women in *Sports Night* routinely were depicted as acting unprofessionally, displaying motherly qualities, choosing their personal lives over work, being deferential to men for ethical decisions, and showing a lack of sports knowledge compared to the male counterparts (Painter & Ferrucci, 2012). These depictions in Aaron Sorkin’s work have been criticized both by academics (see, for example, Ringelberg, 2005) and in the popular press (see Killoran, 2013).

Hurley and Goodwin have an on-again/off-again relationship throughout the show, often bringing their ups and downs into the *Sports Night* newsroom. In “Special Powers,” the first episode in season two, a key subplot involves Hurley believing she has “female intuition” about Goodwin’s thoughts and motives. Hurley had been offered a job in Galveston, Texas, but Goodwin balks at leaving *Sports Night* to move to Texas. Hurley’s “female intuition” is that Goodwin is upset that she was offered a job instead of him; that his male ego is hurt even though she’s a more experienced and higher-ranking producer. Goodwin, however, asserts that “female intuition” isn’t real, and that Hurley is wrong—he didn’t want to move because he was going to have to give up his dream job covering sports and probably would have to give up a career in broadcasting to move to Galveston. Goodwin further says that he would be willing to do that because he loves Hurley, but that this job wasn’t worth that sacrifice because she would just be a “weather girl” even though she was promised a chance to do local sports and human-interest stories. Regardless, it’s a major step down in the broadcasting world from her role at *Sports Night*, even though she would be on-air instead of in the control room.

Another common theme running through the series is finances and ratings—or a lack thereof. *Sports Night* airs on the fictional Continental Sports Channel (CSC), which in turn is owned by Luther Sachs's Continental Corporation. CSC is a third-place sports network, behind ESPN and Fox Sports, and loses about \$100 million per year, so Sachs is trying to sell it (and he succeeds in the series' final episode).

Several episodes revolve around decisions made either to increase ratings or to avoid financial expenditures. For example, due to network cutbacks, *Sports Night*'s Olympic coverage is drastically scaled back. It's an attempt to "do more with less," but as *Baltimore Sun* Managing Editor Gus Haynes says on *The Wire*, you cannot do more with less, you only can do less with less. Similarly, McCall is upset in "Mary Pat Shelby" when he learns that Whitaker agreed to the condition that sexual assault allegations against a football player would be off limits for an interview, saying that Whitaker was trading news and ethics for access and ratings. Whitaker's response: "I'll do anything, short of wet T-shirt contests, and these days the wet T-shirt contest isn't looking so bad to me." Later in the series, McCall and Goodwin, during a newsroom conversation in "April is the Cruellest Month," realize that Hurley's job is in danger. McCall is safe because he's "the franchise," and Goodwin is safe because he's so poorly paid, but Hurley is in danger because she's expensive and could be considered extraneous.

Network interference, and the resulting lack of journalistic independence, relates to finances and ratings. During season two, when the show is struggling for ratings, Whitaker allows the network, not her fellow journalists, to have a say in how the show is written and produced. Rydell confronts Whitaker after she tells the newsroom staff that the network is going to meet with them to give notes after a broadcast.

Rydell: The network wants to give us notes? I thought we were finished with that.
Whitaker: Apparently not.

Rydell: May I ask what you're doing about this?

Whitaker: I'm having them arrested, Danny. I'm telling their parents. I'm telling the teacher. I'm going to go to my room and lock the door.

Rydell: I'd accept any of those before I believe you'd just let these people in.

Whitaker: I'm doing the best I can.

Rydell: The fact that might be true absolutely terrifies me, Dana.

Whitaker: You've become a malcontent, Danny.

Rydell: You've become a secretary, Dana.

The relationship with the network comes to a head in “When Something Wicked Comes This Way” when a rumor goes through the newsroom that the network is bringing in a ratings consultant to reconfigure the show. Managing Editor Jaffe shocks everyone in the newsroom when he announces both that the rumor is true and that it was his idea, not the networks. Jaffe subsequently introduces ratings consultant Sam Donovan to the newsroom. Donovan initially is viewed with distrust, but he eventually earns at least some degree of respect when he shields the journalists from the network executives.

In *Sports Night*, audiences see the entirety of a sports show—from anchors, reporters, and producers to network executives and even a ratings consultant. It is a show that, to some degree, pulls back the curtain to allow viewers to see the inner workings of a sports television program. Sports journalists practicing sports journalism in a variety of roles is front and center throughout the series, making *Sports Night* distinct from other shows with sports journalist characters. However, it's far from the only television show about sportswriters.

Beyond *Sports Night*

Brian McNair (2010) argues that there are two types of films featuring journalist characters. (While McNair was writing specifically about film, his findings easily can be extended to other forms of popular culture, including television.) In the first type, the journalist is the primary, or instrumental character. These types of popular culture texts focus on

representations of journalists and journalism. The journalists in *Sports Night* clearly fit into this type. In the second type, journalists are featured, often as central characters, but journalism itself is only an incidental element of the story. Most depictions of sportswriters fall into this second type, which will become clear upon delving deeper into these depictions.

Brockmire

Brockmire (2017-2020) starts with one of the most memorable opening scenes of any sitcom. Hank Azaria plays Jim Brockmire, the radio play-by-play announcer of the Kansas City Royals. During a 2007 broadcast of an otherwise nondescript game, Brockmire says that “The great Vin Scully once told me that the only way to call a baseball game is to keep your eyes open and tell the truth.” He then begins to tell listeners about finding his wife in a deviant sexual orgy when he went home to surprise her with gardenias—her favorite flower—for their anniversary. “Please imagine my surprise when I opened my front door to find about a half-dozen naked folks sprawled out in my living room, engaged in what can only be described as a desperate and a hungry account of lovemaking, and right in the center of it all was my wife, Lucy. She was wearing a strap-on, and she was plowing our neighbor, Bob Greenwald, and folks, I mean right in the ass.” The show does play this scene for laughs as Brockmire, in the midst of describing his wife’s infidelity in detail, continues to call the ballgame as if he’s just telling another story. He describes his wife sodomizing his neighbor, returns to the game – “Fastball misses. Just low. Count goes full, 3 and 2” – and then right back to discussing the infidelity in descriptive detail.

Brockmire is fired by the Royals after the on-air meltdown, as well as a press conference where he tries to make things right but ends up making them worse when he begins stripping off his clothes because he “smells” his wife on them, ending the second meltdown by crying out that he smells her in his skin while being pulled away from the podium. He then spends the next

decade traveling the seediest parts of Asia and the Middle East, announcing non-traditional and often illicit sporting events such as cockfighting, having sex with virtually anything that moves, and consuming copious amounts of drugs and alcohol.

The series' first episode, "Rally Cap," finds Brockmire returning to the United States in a desperate, final attempt to restore his reputation and return to the major leagues. He finally lands in small-town Pennsylvania calling play-by-play for the independent A-ball Morristown Frackers. (He also begins a sexual and then romantic-though-dysfunctional relationship with the team's owner, Jules James.) While in Morristown, Brockmire is willing to try almost anything to regain fame and return to the majors. So, he embraces his "meme-able" past for internet clicks and develops a fairly successful podcast.

As a show, *Brockmire* starts pretty strongly; however, it quickly loses steam. The best moments are the rock-bottomness of Brockmire in Morristown. By Season 2, he has left Morristown for Atlanta's AAA affiliate, the New Orleans Crawdaddys. He eventually gets his return trip to the majors, eventually calling games for Atlanta and then Oakland.

From a scholarly standpoint, the most interesting components of *Brockmire* are that the show does focus largely, though not solely, on the job of sportscasting. There are a lot of scenes depicting Brockmire performing his role as a broadcast announcer, and he is a primary character (McNair, 2010). The other interesting aspect worthy of academic attention is appearances by real-life announcers Joe Buck and Bob Costas, as well as former baseball player George Brett, in cameo roles (though Buck appears enough in Season 1 that he is basically a recurring character).

The Odd Couple

Felix Unger and Oscar Madison, the "couple" in *The Odd Couple* have a long history; the characters have been portrayed on Broadway, in multiple films (1968, 1993, and 1998), and in

several television adaptations. In each version, the pair share a Manhattan apartment following their respective divorces. Their conflicting personalities – Unger is neat and uptight while Madison is a sloppy, grumpy caricature of a sportswriter – lead to often hilarious conflict.

The most famous and longest-running television version was *The Odd Couple* (1970-1975), which aired on ABC. Tony Randall (Unger) and Jack Klugman (Madison) both had previously played the roles on stage, and the show—at least for the first season—used the same apartment set seen in the 1968 Paramount film. Of course, there was not enough source material from the play and film (both had running times of less than two hours), so the television writers developed a host of new situations for Unger and Madison while attempting to stay true to the soul of the play.

The Odd Couple clearly fits into McNair's second categorization. While Madison, one of the central characters, is depicted as a sports journalist throughout the five-season run, his day-to-day activities as a journalist are typically only an incidental element to the story (McNair, 2010). Still, Madison's depiction is important because he's the first fictional sports journalist in television. Madison is a slovenly curmudgeon but good at his job, which sets a potential template for public perceptions of both real and fictional sports reporters to come. That's not to say that sports are a complete afterthought in the series. Sportscaster Howard Cosell and producer Boone Arledge both make cameos on the show, as do tennis stars Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King, who appeared on the season 4 episode "The Pig Who Came to Dinner" two months after their famous 1973 "Battle of the Sexes" match. The show also filmed a scene at Yankee Stadium in 1973; it harkens to a memorable scene in the 1968 movie filmed at Shea Stadium in 1967 (Rieber, 2018).

While the 1970s series was by far the most famous television version, it was far from the only one. The versions that followed, however, typically had a spin on the original premise. *The Oddball Couple* (1975) was a cartoon version featuring roommates Fleabag (a dog) and Spiffy (a cat). In *The New Odd Couple* (1982-1983), Unger and Madison both were played by Black actors; however, the characterizations, as well as eight of the 18 scripts, remained the same. Finally, a post-*Friends* and *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* Matthew Perry played the Madison character on the CBS version of the *Odd Couple* (2015-2017), though he was a sports talk show host instead of a print sportswriter.

Everybody Loves Raymond

Comedian Ray Romano played the title role in the long-running sitcom *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005). The show focuses on the life of Ray Barone, a *Newsday* sportswriter, and his Long Island family. Ray is married with three children; his parents and brother live across the street and make frequent, unexpected, and somewhat unwelcome appearances at the family home. Much of the show's humor focuses on Ray's wife Debra's justifiable complaints about his overbearing and intrusive family. As such, *Everybody Loves Raymond* tends to focus less on sports and more on family.

However, sports do play a role throughout the series' nine-season run, though Ray's job as a sports reporter typically only is featured once or twice per season—and it's then typically used as a vehicle to discuss familial relations, usually between Ray and Debra. For example, in the season one episode "Recovering Pessimist," Debra convinces Ray to become an upbeat optimist after winning a "Sportswriter of the Year" award. When he does, however, he experiences the downside of being the only non-pessimist in his family. Similarly, in the season 5 episode "Super Bowl," *Newsday* sends Ray to cover the big game, but he agonizes over whom

to invite as his “plus one.” When he arrives onsite and finds that all of the other sportswriters brought their spouses, he flies in Debra, but realizes that he only compounded his mistake by attempting to correct it. Neither episode is necessarily about sports; instead, sports is used as a catalyst for a larger, family-focused story.

Some episodes in the series focus more specifically on sports. While Ray is a successful sports journalist—as mentioned above, he won a sports writing award and was sent by a major newspaper to cover the Super Bowl—this type of episode generally focuses on failure and disappointment. The conflict in the season three episode “The Article” centers on Ray’s despondency after his friend sells an article to *Sports Illustrated*, Ray’s dream publication. In season five’s “The Author,” Ray writes a sports book, but a publisher ultimately crushes his dreams by passing on the manuscript. Ray also attempts to expand his reach beyond newspapers, though he ultimately fails. In the season two episode “Ray’s on Television,” he appears on a sports television show but bombs because he makes awkward word and phrasing choices. After his family tries to coach him, he appears a second time, but it’s even more disastrous. He also attempts to do a guest sports radio spot in the season seven episode “Somebody Hates Raymond,” but he’s ultimately turned down because the show’s host, Jerry Musso, doesn’t like him.

Everybody Loves Raymond arguably is the most successful television show ever that prominently featured a sports reporter. It ran for nine seasons and was successful commercially—it earned consistently good ratings throughout its run—and critically. Unlike *The Odd Couple*, however, the show rarely featured real-life athletes or sports journalists. The one notable exception is the season three episode “Big Shots,” in which Ray uses his sports

credentials to jump the line at a meet-and-greet in Cooperstown with the 1969 New York Mets; eight members of that team appeared in the episode.

My Boys

My Boys (2006-2010) follows P.J. Franklin, a sportswriter and later columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, and her mostly male gang of friends. Franklin is portrayed as a tomboy who loves to play poker, watch sports, and go to the local bar with her “boys.” Those boys include Andy Franklin, her brother; Bobby Newman, a sportswriter for the *Chicago Tribune* and P.J.’s love interest throughout the series; Brando Dorff, a radio DJ who is P.J.’s on-again/off-again roommate; Kenny Moritorri, who runs a sports memorabilia shop; and Mike Callahan, who at various points in the series works in public relations for the Chicago Cubs and Chicago Bulls, as well as Kenny’s sports memorabilia store.

My Boys is interesting because it doesn’t neatly fall into McNair’s (2010) distinction between journalism artifacts. The show is not really about sports. It’s about relationships—whether they are familial, romantic, or platonic. So, it could be argued that sports only are an incidental element of the story, that sports are used as a way to delve into other, deeper issues. However, the central character is a sports reporter and columnist (one of the few depictions of a female sportswriter in television and films), and a secondary character also is a sports reporter. The world of sports also plays a major role in storylines throughout the series; we see both P.J. Franklin and Bobby Newman performing their job duties as sports journalists.

P.J. is promoted to a columnist position in the season three episode “Boyfriend Hat.” After a conversation with Mike, she begins questioning whether she received the promotion because of her sports credentials or because she’s an attractive woman. P.J. consults with her

Chicago Sun-Times friend and mentor Jack Briscoe, who assures her that there are plenty of prettier faces in sports reporting, so she got the job because of her chops. Still, the *Sun-Times* splashes her face across advertisements with a tagline that suggests that she got the job because she is an attractive woman in a male-dominated field.

In the season one episode “Ethics,” P.J. begins dating Chicago Cubs pitcher Matt Dougan. She later breaks off the budding romance because she thinks dating an athlete is unethical; the relationship restarts once Dougan tells her that he’s no longer on the Cubs. As stated before, P.J. also has a long-term relationship with Bobby Newman, who works for the rival cross-town newspaper.

My Boys, throughout its run, featured several athletes, some real but most of them fictional. NASCAR driver Brian Vickers appeared in “Be a Man!” while fictional athletes Hernando Garcia and Danny Finn feature prominently in the episodes “Superstar Treatment” and “When Heroes Fall from Grace,” respectively. One episode, “Baseball Myths,” included scenes at Wrigley Field, while the season three episode “Spring Training” follows the Cubs at their spring training facility and hotel in Mesa, Arizona.

Despite the occasional prominence of sports, however, it would be wrong to say that *My Boys* is a show about sports or sports journalism. It’s about the relationships between P.J. and her “boys,” as well as the entire cast’s quest for love and meaningful relationships. Throughout the series, P.J. is shown as the sports equivalent to *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*’s Mary Richards. Like Richards, she’s “bright, attractive, well liked, has a good job that she performs well, and is generally happy” (Dow, 1990, pg. 268). She’s a positive character who is relatable to audience members attempting to balance their personal and professional lives.

Future research

Based on the five shows explored here, the image of the sportswriter on television generally is positive. Each journalist depicted is successful professionally (to varying degrees), though they often are much less successful personally. The sports journalists on *Sports Night* write, anchor, and produce a cable network *SportsCenter*-type show; Jim Brockmire eventually becomes a returned-from-the-ashes big-league baseball announcer; and Madison (*The Odd Couple*), Barone (*Everybody Loves Raymond*), and Franklin (*My Boys*) are successful sports reporters and columnists, though they are at different stages of their careers. Most of these journalists, however, are less successful personally. The various members of *Sports Night* are falling in and out of love (often with each other), Brockmire and Madison have both gone through rough divorces. Viewers of *My Boys* are left with the impression that Franklin eventually will find love—likely with Newman. *Raymond*'s Barone is happily married despite occasional gripes both from and directed to his wife. If, as Ehrlich & Saltzman (2015) argue, popular culture can be a powerful tool for thinking about what journalism is and should be, then viewers of these programs ultimately will likely have a positive view of sports journalists, though that view might be colored by the idea that these journalists often have to sacrifice their personal lives for professional success.¹

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¹ Several other shows featuring sportswriter characters were not included due to space considerations; however, each could use more academic exploration. Future researchers are encouraged to examine *The Debbie Reynolds Show* (1969), *WKRP in Cincinnati* (1978-1982), *Turnabout* (1979), *Mr. Belvedere* (1985-1990), *The Slap Maxwell Story* (1987-1989), *Coach* (1989-1997), *Between Brothers* (1997-1999), *Baby Bob* (2002-2003), *8 Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter* (2002-2005), *Listen Up!* (2004-2005), *The Tony Danza Show* (2004-2006), *The Game* (2006-2008, 2011-2015, 2021-present), and *Ballers* (2015-2019).