**Superheroes, Bathrobe Journalists and Cowboys: How Flemish Journalists Construct their Professional Identity through Fiction**

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**Abstract**

This study extends the exploration of fiction as metajournalistic discourse beyond American contexts and general audiences by focusing on how Flemish (Belgian) journalists perceive and engage with fictional representations of journalism. It examines how these journalists interact with portrayals of their profession in fiction and whether these interactions reinforce or challenge existing discourses related to the construction and maintenance of their professional identity. To achieve this, sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted with Flemish journalists, during which they were shown excerpts from various fictional films and series depicting journalism across different cultural contexts. The findings indicate that sensemaking practices in response to journalism fiction are gendered: men journalists are more likely to engage with normative discourses and practices of paradigm repair, whereas women journalists tend to adopt more critical approaches. This ongoing discursive practice underscores how professional identity is continuously shaped, in part, through fictional portrayals. Differences in journalistic culture also emerge as significant factors in how fiction influences the construction of professional identity, with distinct cultural contexts being both differentiated and used as a basis for paradigm repair. Consequently, this study offers valuable insights into the role of fiction in shaping and sustaining journalists' professional identity within the Flemish context.

**Key words:** journalism, fiction, popular culture, metajournalistic discourse, in-depth interviews, specialized audiences

**Introduction**

From *All the President’s Men* to T*he Wire*, representations of journalism in popular culture are pervasive and span a variety of narrative forms. These portrayals often depict journalists either as heroes who hold the powerful accountable or as cunning villains who fabricate stories for personal gain, thereby engaging with the societal function of the profession (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015). As such, journalism fiction can be understood as a form of metajournalistic discourse through which the profession is socially constructed, legitimized, and/or contested (Carlson, 2016; Ferrucci, 2018).

Unlike professions such as medicine and law, which are supported by formal credentialing processes and well-established institutional and legal frameworks, journalism lacks a comparable structure (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003; Meyers et al., 2012). Consequently, the question of whether journalism constitutes a profession and who qualifies as a journalist has long been the subject of scholarly debate. This debate has intensified with developments such as digitalization and commercialization, which have further challenged journalists’ professional identity. In this context, it has become increasingly important to explore how fictional representations contribute to shaping the professional identity of journalists.

Recent studies that examine journalism fiction as metajournalistic discourse have primarily focused on how general audiences engage with these portrayals (Peters, 2015; De Wulf Helskens et al., 2023b; De Wulf Helskens, 2024a). Although highly relevant, these studies often overlook specialized audiences, such as journalists themselves. Furthermore, research that does consider how journalists interpret journalism fiction (cf. Steiner et al., 2013) tends to focus on the United States and relies on secondary sources (e.g., news content), thereby failing to provide insights into how journalists in other media systems and journalistic cultures construct their professional identity through fiction on a personal level.

To address this gap, the present study extends research beyond the American context and secondary sources by analyzing how Flemish (Belgian) journalists perceive and engage with fictional representations of journalism. Specifically, it investigates how these journalists interact with portrayals of their profession in fiction, and whether these interactions reinforce or challenge prevailing discourses related to the construction and maintenance of their professional identity. To this end, sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted with Flemish journalists, during which they were shown excerpts from various fictional films and series about journalism from different cultural contexts.

The Flemish media landscape was selected for this study due to its unique characteristics, notably the coexistence of strong public service media alongside commercially operated news organizations. Since Belgium lacks a unified national media system – with each region maintaining its own distinct journalistic culture – a regional rather than a national focus is more appropriate for this analysis (Raeymaeckers & De Dobbelaer, 2015). Moreover, Flanders has a robust fiction production industry, resulting in the widespread consumption of both American (Hollywood) content and locally produced journalism fiction (Willems, 2016). The interaction between these two sources, representing different journalistic cultures (De Wulf Helskens, 2024b), likely leads to a distinctive blend of discourses that shape the construction of journalistic identity among Flemish journalists. Before proceeding with a discussion of the study's methodology and results, the following section will present key insights into the representation of journalism in fiction as a form of metajournalistic discourse.

**Fiction as a metajournalistic discourse**

The concept of metajournalistic discourse has recently garnered increasing attention within the field of journalism studies. Rooted in various theoretical frameworks that conceptualize journalism as a cultural phenomenon – a perspective that has evolved since the latter half of the twentieth century – this concept is critically examined by Carlson (2016). A central premise of his argument is that the shared understandings of journalism are not inherently embedded in journalistic practice itself; rather, they are constructed through discursive processes.

In essence, the way journalists conduct their profession is intrinsically linked to how these practices are publicly articulated (Carlson, 2016; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). A key aspect of metajournalistic discourse is the notion that social acceptance is crucial for a profession to establish and maintain cultural authority. This is especially the case for journalism since it lacks well-established institutional and legal frameworks (Aldridge & Evetts, 2003; Meyers et al., 2012). Discourse is not naturally accepted; instead, it undergoes interpretative processes that justify and sustain journalism as a cultural practice (Carlson, 2016).

This process represents a hegemonic struggle in which the dominant paradigm is continually negotiated and, at times, contested (Reese, 1990). However, despite the potential for contestation, journalistic discourse is more often reaffirmed than challenged, both within the journalistic community and among the public. Berkowitz (2000) notably argued that shared discourse serves not only to foster unity among diverse journalistic actors but also to influence public perception and reinforce professional ideology within society. He described this as a “double duty,” wherein discourse functions as a professional ritual aimed at maintaining and reinforcing the core tenets of journalistic culture, particularly during periods of heightened scrutiny.

Carlson (2016) emphasizes that much of the research on metajournalistic discourse has traditionally focused on journalists as the primary agents responsible for constructing journalistic definitions, engaging in boundary work, and legitimizing the role of journalism in society. However, the author contends that journalists are not the only actors capable of shaping journalistic discourses. He argues that these discourses exist within a broader network of social relationships. Thus, the construction of journalistic discourse can occur in both journalistic and non-journalistic settings, involving a variety of actors.

To fully understand journalism's cultural authority, researchers must examine the sites where discursive struggles occur, particularly because institutionalized practices, like journalism, are entangled in a web of overlapping and often conflicting discourses. For journalists to assert and maintain their cultural authority, they must collaborate with actors outside the journalistic field. This is especially pertinent in the digital age, where the distinction between journalistic and non-journalistic actors has become increasingly blurred, making journalists just one of many actors with influence over metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016). Building on Ferrucci's (2018) argument that popular culture should also be taken into account as a non-journalistic site where journalistic discourses are contested and negotiated, this paper focuses on fictional television series and movies about journalism.

The entertainment industry represents a significant site of struggle over journalistic discourses, particularly since many content producers in this industry are former journalists with extensive experience (Ferrucci, 2018). Consequently, journalism fiction should be recognized as a form of metajournalistic discourse, potentially exerting an influence on how audiences, including journalists themselves, perceive journalism as a profession. This influence may be as strong as, if not stronger than, that of ‘traditional’ journalistic sites, especially given the pervasive presence of journalism in popular culture (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015).

Several scholars, including Ferrucci and Painter (2017), have applied Cultivation Theory to hypothesize how fictional portrayals of journalism might shape the public's perception of the profession. They suggested that extensive exposure to fictional representations of journalism could significantly influence people's views on the field. Additionally, Ehrlich and Saltzman (2015) questioned whether these depictions might make the profession appear more intriguing and exciting than it actually is, or conversely, portray journalists as more unscrupulous than they are in reality. Such portrayals could have a detrimental impact on the audience's understanding of and trust in journalism.

Peters (2015) underscored the importance of popular culture in familiarizing audiences with journalistic norms and practices. His research included an analysis of online discussions regarding the television series *The Newsroom*. The study revealed that audiences often lack the news literacy necessary to critically engage with fictional representations of journalism, which frequently promote an idealized “golden age of journalism” rather than highlighting the commercialized nature of the U.S. news media.

Further exploring this theme, De Wulf Helskens et al. (2023b) and De Wulf Helskens (2024a) utilized focus groups and diary-interview methods to examine how American journalism students and general Flemish audiences interpret fictional representations of journalism. The first study echoed findings of Peters (2015), demonstrating that American students tend to interpret journalistic narratives through a modernist lens, favoring normative portrayals of journalists as watchdogs over more critical and realistic ones. In contrast, general Flemish audiences showed an appreciation for more nuanced and realistic representations, which they associated more with North-Western European fiction.

Focusing on a more specialized audience, Steiner et al. (2013) analyzed newspaper articles discussing the fifth season of the television series *The Wire*. Their study found that journalists often respond to critical portrayals of journalism by engaging in paradigm repair. This involves deflecting responsibility from themselves and the institution of the press, thereby countering the negative representations and reinforcing traditional journalistic ideals. While the study offers valuable insights into how journalists publicly respond to representations that challenge their cultural authority, it falls short in exploring how journalists personally interpret these representations in relation to their own professional identity which might be more nuanced than what is publicly articulated.

**From Superman to Citizen Kane**

The omnipresence of journalists in fiction has prompted a significant amount of research into the subject, providing valuable insights into the recurring, and at times stereotypical, representations of journalism. These fictional portrayals serve not merely as entertainment but as powerful myth-making vehicles in society. As a metajournalistic discourse, popular culture articulates, explores, and sometimes critiques shared journalistic values (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015; Carlson, 2016; Ferrucci, 2018). Consequently, popular culture offers a (critical) exploration of the cultural tensions inherent in this evolving profession (McNair, 2010).

As a result, popular culture representing journalism frequently engages with contemporary debates, addressing issues such as journalistic ethics, political bias, commercialization, competition, and the influence of new technologies on journalism (Ghiglione, 1991; McNair, 2010). Although these representations evolve with the times and vary by location, certain myths, narratives, and character archetypes have persisted since the inception of journalism fiction. Fictional representations of journalism typically fall into two categories: positive and negative. Positive representations depict journalism as a noble and thrilling pursuit where journalists are heroes fighting for democracy and the public’s right to know, despite facing commercial pressures and ethical dilemmas (McNair, 2014). Negative representations, conversely, portray journalism as a profit-driven enterprise, with journalists depicted as villains who prioritize personal gain over public service, and the public as desiring sensational news (Zynda, 1979).

Interestingly, both positive and negative portrayals can reinforce the “free press myth”. This myth, pervasive in Hollywood, engages with the modernist role of journalism in a democratic society, often portraying journalists as defenders of the public’s right to know (Vaughn & Evensen, 1991; Ehrlich, 2006; McNair, 2011). It represents an ideological framework that posits a privately-owned, market-driven press as essential to the functioning of American democracy and the preservation of a free society (Ehrlich, 2005). Rooted in the social responsibility model of journalism that emerged in the early 20th century, this framework emphasizes the press’s role in holding those in power accountable, underpinned by core values such as press freedom, independence, and objectivity (Siebert et al., 1956; Ehrlich, 1997; Schultz, 1998; Ehrlich, 2005, 2006).

While negative representations as described above seem to counter such principles by exposing the flaws within journalism, they often serve to reinforce the status quo by portraying the press as a self-correcting institution. As such, they contribute to practices central to metajournalistic discourse such as “paradigm repair” and “boundary work,” wherein individual journalists who deviate from the ideal are portrayed as exceptions who ultimately face consequences, thereby affirming the integrity of the journalistic system as a whole. The cultural factors that may contribute to journalistic failures, such as the broader media environment, are downplayed, thereby deflecting criticism from the system itself (Ehrlich, 2005).

This practice has been critiqued by scholars who argue that the “free press myth” and accompanying paradigm repair as seen in many American fiction movies and series obscures the reality that journalism often serves the political and economic interests of media owners and advertisers. Moreover, journalists have sometimes undermined their own image as principled truth-seekers through instances of fabricated news and other professional failures (Ehrlich, 2005). In light of ethics scandals, accusations of bias or “fake news,” corporate cutbacks, and a significant decline in public trust, journalism is often considered as being in crisis. In such an unstable context, fiction can play a crucial role in reflecting on the challenges facing journalism, both now and in the future (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015).

When considering fictional representations of journalism produced outside the United States, particularly in Europe, it becomes evident that the “free press myth” and practices of paradigm repair are less pronounced, reflecting significant discourse-based differences between these regions. While European journalism fiction shares certain similarities with its American counterparts – such as the portrayal of both heroic and flawed journalists and the press as a watchdog – European narratives often adopt a more critical stance from the outset (De Wulf Helskens, 2024b).

For example, the Danish series *Borgen* directly challenges and critiques the American “free press myth,” offering a more pessimistic view of the press contextualized within the framework of a subsidized public broadcaster. Similarly, the Spanish series *El Caso: Crónica de Sucesos* presents a heroic press but juxtaposes it with a media landscape that is deeply commercialized and politically biased (De Wulf Helskens & Arriaza Ibarra, 2024). Furthermore, a study of five Flemish journalism fiction series (*Deadline 14/10 & 25/5*, *Cordon*, *De Dag*, *De Twaalf*, and *Assisen*), aligned with the context of this research, reveals a consistently pessimistic and critical narrative approach, reinforcing the critical stance often seen in European fiction (De Wulf Helskens, 2024b). Notably, these Flemish series advocate for a more collaborative relationship between government actors and journalists, rather than the independent or even adversarial dynamic commonly depicted in American fiction. This trend echoes similar sentiments observed in British fiction from the 1930s (Arts, 2022).

These discourse-based differences are unsurprising when considering the distinct media systems and journalistic contexts from which they originate. The cases discussed emerge from a democratic-corporatist, and to a lesser extent polarized pluralist, media system as defined by Hallin and Mancini (2004), which contrasts with the liberal media system of the United States (De Wulf Helskens, 2024a). In Spain, for instance, there is a tradition of a politically oriented journalistic paradigm, whereas Flanders and Denmark adhere more explicitly to a social responsibility paradigm characterized by strong public broadcasters and significant press subsidies (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). These differences in normative assumptions are also reflected in the narrative structures of journalism fiction, explaining the often-critical engagement with the liberal “free press myth” as conceptualized in American fiction (De Wulf Helskens, 2024b; De Wulf Helskens & Arriaza Ibarra, 2024) and might converge in unique ways in the professional identity of Flemish journalists.

**Method**

This study investigates how Flemish journalists interpret fictional portrayals of journalism, exploring whether these representations reinforce or challenge prevailing discourses. To achieve this, we conducted sixteen in-depth, one-on-one interviews with Flemish journalists, each lasting approximately one hour. Participants were given the choice between offline and online interviews, with the majority (twelve out of sixteen) opting for the online format. The study received ethical approval from the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences at Ghent University under approval number EC2023-14. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Only pseudonymized data is utilized in this paper.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, using a topic guide to steer the conversation while allowing flexibility to explore topics as they arose naturally. Participants were not exposed to existing literature on the representation of journalism in fiction. Instead, discussions were stimulated using selected fragments from fictional films and television series about journalism. These fragments, comprising a mix of American and European (specifically Scandinavian and Flemish) productions, were chosen based on a preliminary study that identified journalism-related fiction with notable popularity in Flanders (cf. De Wulf Helskens et al., 2023). A detailed overview of the screened fragments is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Fragments Screened During Interviews

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **N°** | **Title** | **Season/**  **Episode** | **Country or region** | **Focus** | **Gender** | **Minority** | **Type** | **Genre** |
| **1** | Borgen | S1E1 | Denmark | Positive | Men & women | No | Broadcast | (Political) Drama |
| **2** | Cordon | S1E8 | Flanders | Negative | Men | No | Print | Drama |
| **3** | De Dag | S1E3 | Flanders | Negative | Men & women | No | Broadcast | Thriller |
| **4** | De Twaalf | S1E5 | Flanders | Negative | Men | Yes | Broadcast | Thriller |
| **5** | Deadline 14/10 | S1E4 | Flanders | Mix | Men & women | No | Print | Drama |
| **6** | Deadline 25/5 | S2E8 | Flanders | Positive | Men & women | No | Print | Drama |
| **7** | Gilmore Girls | S4E8 | U.S.A. | Negative | Women | No | Print | Comedy-Drama |
| **8** | Supergirl | S2E1 | U.S.A. | Positive | Women | No | Print | Action |
| **9** | The French Dispatch | 0:49:05 (movie) | U.S.A. | Mix | Women | No | Print | Comedy-Drama |
| **10** | The Morning Show | S1E4 | U.S.A. | Mix | Women | Yes | Broadcast | Drama |

Participants were recruited through the network of the Flemish Journalism Syndicate and by directly contacting Flemish newsrooms. Additionally, the snowball sampling method was employed to recruit further participants, utilizing the professional networks of the journalists themselves. Data were collected from sixteen participants, a sample size chosen to facilitate comprehensive and in-depth qualitative analysis. This approach aimed to balance the practical feasibility of data collection with the goal of achieving empirical saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Efforts were made to create a diverse sample, including journalists of varying ages, genders, minority backgrounds, and media affiliations (see Table 2).

Table 2. Demographics of Participants

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Written press**  (N=9) | **Broadcast, other or combination**  (N=7) | **Total**  (N=16) |
| **Gender** | Men | 5 | 3 | 8 |
| Women | 4 | 4 | 8 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Age** | 20 - 29 | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| 30 - 39 | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| 40 - 49 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| 50 - 59 | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| 60+ | 0 | 1 | 1 |
|  |  |  |  |
| **Minority** | Not a minority | 6 | 5 | 11 |
| Sexual minority | 3 | 0 | 3 |
| Ethnic minority | 0 | 2 | 2 |

The interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. These transcripts underwent thematic analysis using open coding. Initially, each quote was summarized, assigned thematic labels, and grouped accordingly. These summaries were then re-analyzed, allowing for a thematic analysis that synthesized the findings across individual participants. The results are presented according to four themes in the following sections.

**Modernists versus realists**

That journalists often occur in fiction is not news for participants of this study. Not only are they quite aware of these representations, but they also enjoy watching the profession they practice on the big (and smaller) screen. When asked about what representations most frequently occur, they highlight two extremes: from absolute heroes such as superheroes and war journalists to absolute villains such as power-hungry media owners and screaming editors. The examples they highlight span various genres from films such as *All the President’s Men, The Post and Civil War* to mystery and police series such as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* and *The Bridge* to romcoms such as *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Runaway Bride* and *The Bold Type* and many more. Together, the journalists listed over 40 examples of fictional representations featuring their profession.

What they enjoy seeing in fiction, is greatly determined by their own professional roles and areas of expertise. For instance, Eliza (54, W) expressed a preference for crime shows that feature journalists covering the judicial beat, which aligns with her own professional focus. Similarly, Kristien (39, W) emphasized that as a print journalist, she finds it easier to identify with fictional characters who work in print media, as opposed to those in radio or television, due to her own experiences in the field. Others pointed out that due to the prevalence of extreme characterizations in fiction, they often do not feel accurately represented. For example, Theo (28, M) noted that journalists working in online news, which reflects his own daily work, are seldom depicted in fictional narratives. Similarly, Jack (27, M) highlighted that his role as a researcher for radio, rather than as a host, is generally invisible, both in reality and in fiction.

These varied experiences within the profession also lead to different types of engagement with fictional representations of journalism. During the screening of selected fragments, two distinct responses emerged, effectively dividing the sample into two groups. The first group adhered closely to modernist conceptions of journalism, such as the ideal of a free press, which aligns with the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review. In contrast, the second group offered a more critical assessment of the fragments, which also extended to their own professional identities. Although these responses appeared to form two groups, it is important to note that they exist on a continuum, with several participants exhibiting characteristics of both perspectives.

The first group of journalists maintains a normative interpretation of their profession and its portrayal in fiction, grounded in the belief that the press is a crucial democratic institution with the responsibility to report news independently and objectively, thereby informing the public. They emphasize key journalistic principles such as impartiality, autonomy, and truthfulness, and express appreciation when these values are upheld in fictional narratives. As such they reflect the approach of many of the American journalism students included in the study by De Wulf Helskens et al. (2023b). Several journalists in this group acknowledge an essence of truth in the “extreme” representations of journalists as heroes. For instance, the fragment from *Supergirl* screened during the interviews, in which the protagonist discusses the societal role of journalism, was particularly well-received. The participants recognized that while such depictions might be idealized, they represent the standards to which all journalists should aspire.

Joe (60, M): “Superman’s alter ego is Clark Kent, a journalist, so a Superman hides in every journalist. And that is also the feeling that journalists have, that we are superhumans.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

In contrast, fragments like those from *The Morning Show*, which highlight the commercial pressures within journalism and the tension between journalistic independence and editorial control, are often dismissed as exaggerated or unrepresentative of Flemish journalism. In these cases, the journalists engage in boundary maintenance to protect their professional identity (cf. Steiner et al., 2013), framing such portrayals as “über Hollywood” – not only exaggerated for entertainment purposes but also more applicable to the American context than to Flanders. For example, Megan (28, W) pointed out that in her newsroom, there is a strict separation between marketing and journalistic content, and this distinction is rigorously maintained. She cited a case where her team faced pressure to withdraw coverage of a corruption case but ultimately stood firm, emphasizing their commitment to journalistic independence.

Even fragments that do not originate from Hollywood, such as that of *De Twaalf* portraying a journalist that bribes a source and pays for information, are labeled as adopting Hollywood-like tactics. The journalists strongly distance themselves from such practices, noting that they neither engage in nor are aware of such behaviors in Flanders. While they can imagine these practices occurring in countries with more commercialized news media, such as the U.K. and the U.S., they are skeptical of such narratives being set in more familiar contexts like Flanders. This group also believes that such negative representations should be counterbalanced. Specifically, they think it should be made explicit that unethical practices are not endorsed by the profession, often through the narrative punishment of journalists who cross ethical boundaries (cf. Ehrlich, 2005).

Thus, the concept of paradigm repair frequently surfaces in this group’s interpretation of journalism fiction. They acknowledge certain flaws within the profession, such as the commercial pressures on media, but they also argue that these influences are balanced, ensuring that the commercial focus does not impede the public service function of journalism. Some journalists within this group interpret the public service function very specifically, asserting that serving the public interest does not equate to engaging in activist journalism. In this context, the *Supergirl* fragment also drew criticism. Lex (51, M) and Megan (28, W), working for the same news brand, particularly emphasized that “researching and righting wrongs,” as the fragment suggests, is not the role of journalism. In their view, journalists should adhere to the normative ideal of independence and neutrality, rather than activism.

The second group of journalists, while similarly engaging with core tenets of journalism such as informing the public and maintaining objectivity, also critically questions these principles. Some participants, like Joyce (35, W), argue that journalists tend to overemphasize the importance of their work, suggesting that it is, at its core, simply a profession.

Joyce (35, W): “I think that sometimes we make our work more important than it is. […] Sometimes I hear colleagues going wild about a thing of which I think ‘I don't care at all’. Every day there is something that you can be outraged about and that you think should be covered in the paper. So that's a bit of an endless prayer.”

This group not only rejects the notion that journalists are heroes, as depicted in *Supergirl*, but also, in contrast to the previous group, adopts a more explicit commercial perspective on journalism. They acknowledge that while they strive to inform the public and maintain neutrality, their work is inherently situated within the commercial framework of a news organization, and ultimately, it is driven by financial considerations.

Participants of this group appreciate representations like those in *The Morning Show*, where the narrative explores alternative “truths” and the influence of media company boards on editorial decisions. They believe that fiction should serve as a critique of journalism’s shortcomings, not with the intention of undermining the profession, but to enhance it and promote self-reflection. As a result, they are less enthusiastic about representations that perpetuate normative and romanticized views of journalism. For instance, they criticize the fragment from *Deadline 25/5* for reiterating traditional notions of objectivity and 'the' truth, as well as for portraying the profession as more thrilling than it is in reality. This group, therefore, adopts a less normative and more realistic perspective on their profession, similar to what was found in the study of De Wulf Helskens (2024a) with regards to general Flemish audiences.

However, realism in their approach does not equate to pessimism. Although they demystify the hero narrative and present a more nuanced view of journalism’s public function, they still uphold certain deontological principles. For example, like the first group, they also critique the fragment from *De Twaalf* for depicting unethical practices, such as paying sources for information, which they categorically reject. As such, this group seeks to move away from extreme portrayals and instead advocates for a more balanced and realistic depiction, which they feel is often lacking in fiction. They also reinterpret the public function of journalism, challenging the myth of the free press. Rather than claiming to protect democracy by holding those in power accountable, they emphasize the importance of fact-checking and providing guidance in a media landscape saturated with information and misinformation. Instead of focusing on exposing grand conspiracies, they find value in telling human stories that can effect change on a smaller, more personal scale in the everyday lives of their audience.

**Moving away from the extremes**

When asked about their preferences and dislikes regarding the representation of journalism in fiction, most journalists expressed that fiction, by its nature, does not have an obligation to portray the profession with complete accuracy. However, they did note that what is depicted in fiction often does not reflect the reality of their work. While acknowledging that many fictional representations capture certain elements of journalism, such as the adrenaline and stress of working in a newsroom, they find these portrayals to be exaggerated, dramatized, and often romanticized. As previously mentioned, fiction tends to focus on the extremes, depicting journalists either as heroes or villains – figures they believe exist but are more the exception than the rule. These dramatic stories, chosen to create commercially viable entertainment, represent only a small, sensationalized slice of what journalism entails. As such, they feel that fiction often presents a one-dimensional view, lacking the complexity and diversity inherent in the profession, again corroborating findings of previous audience studies (De Wulf Helskens et al., 2023b; De Wulf Helskens, 2024a).

The participants expressed regret that the diversity of journalism is not adequately represented in fiction and often voiced frustration with the prevalence of stereotypical and inaccurate portrayals. Commonly mentioned stereotypes include the yelling editor, the superhero journalist, the cowboy who disregards ethical boundaries, and the disheveled, unprofessional “bathrobe” journalist (as seen in the fragment *Cordon*). Lex (51, M) highlighted his irritation with the clumsy and error-prone behavior often attributed to journalists in fiction, particularly those covering sensitive stories, such as in scenes involving a “death knock” (when journalists approach the families of victims for interviews, often without considering the emotional consequences). This frustration is particularly pronounced when journalists are portrayed as side characters, where the participants believe that their roles become overly simplistic and steeped in stereotypes.

Consequently, many participants expressed a desire for more varied representations of the profession in fiction, moving beyond stock characters and clichéd narratives. For instance, Tina (24, W), a freelance journalist for niche magazines, expressed a wish to see more freelance journalists in fiction, who also face challenges in achieving their goals. Others hoped for portrayals that highlight the collegiality and collaboration among journalists, even among competitors. Despite these preferences, the participants acknowledged that other professions, which are also societal pillars and frequently depicted in fiction, such as the police force and lawyers, likely face similar frustrations.

The degree of desired accuracy varies by genre: drama series that claim an aura of authenticity are expected to portray the profession more realistically, while comedies and satires, which do not make such claims, are appreciated for their clichés and exaggerations, as long as it is clear that these are not meant to be realistic. For the more serious genres, they expect fiction writers to research the profession thoroughly and strive for a more accurate depiction.

Most participants referenced their own professional experiences when evaluating the representations of journalism in fiction, with many encountering – or not encountering – situations similar to those depicted on screen. Several factors influenced their perspectives, including their familiarity with the specific medium (e.g., print versus broadcast), the type of news organization they worked for (commercial versus public), and the broader context (e.g., the United States versus Flanders). For instance, Jack (27, M), who aligned with a more modernist discourse, emphasized that the challenges of balancing commercial and public interests, as depicted in *The Morning Show*, do not align with his real-life experiences. However, he noted that his perspective is shaped by his work at a public broadcaster, suggesting that journalists in more commercially driven news organizations might face different realities. Similarly, participants who worked in print media were cautious about drawing conclusions about the portrayal of broadcast journalism, and vice versa.

Regarding the context of the narratives, participants distinguished between those set in liberal media systems, such as the U.K. and the U.S., and those based in democratic-corporatist media systems, such as Flanders and Denmark. They emphasized that journalistic culture and scale differ significantly between these systems, resulting in distinct fictional narratives. Hollywood-produced content was seen as having greater resources to create engaging journalistic stories, but this often came at the cost of overdramatization compared to European productions. Participants noted that the extremes often depicted in journalism fiction, such as the portrayal of journalists as either heroes or villains, are more characteristic of liberal media systems. They attributed this to the greater resources available for investigative journalism (which supports the hero narrative) and the higher levels of commercialization (which fuels the villain narrative) in such contexts.

In contrast, European, and specifically Scandinavian and Flemish fiction, was more appreciated for its realistic and "raw" portrayal of journalism. They felt a stronger connection to these representations due to the familiarity and recognizability of the context (cf. De Wulf Helskens, 2024). Consequently, they expressed greater disappointment when locally produced fiction failed to accurately portray their profession or adopted Hollywood-like characteristics. In contrast, they were more indifferent to inaccuracies in international content. For example, participants were less concerned with the portrayal of British journalists as paparazzi but were bothered when similar narratives were transposed to the Flemish context, as they did not believe such representations accurately reflected the reality in Flanders. Consistent with findings from previous studies (De Wulf Helskens et al., 2023b; De Wulf Helskens, 2024a), the Scandinavian series *Borgen* was particularly well-regarded among participants, praised for its nuanced and realistic portrayal of journalism. Flemish productions occupied a more intermediate position, with some participants, particularly those with a more realistic orientation, suggesting that Flemish fiction could benefit from greater self-reflexivity, akin to what is seen in productions like the Danish *Borgen*.

**Public (mis)trust and journalistic aspirations**

Most participants agree that there is a noticeable breach of trust between the news media and its audience, with many journalists feeling that public perceptions are rife with misconceptions. A recurring phrase mentioned by several journalists is that many people believe “the only correct information in the newspaper is the date,” highlighting a pervasive skepticism toward the accuracy of news. This distrust is compounded by widespread assumptions about unethical journalistic practices, such as the belief that journalists pay for information – a notion they believe is reinforced by fictional portrayals like those in *De Twaalf*. Participants also note that these misconceptions extend beyond unethical practices to include a distorted view of the profession as being more thrilling than it is in reality.

Jack (27, M): “You see a lot of exciting things in fiction and that's fun and also part of it. But a lot of journalism isn’t’ like that. I notice that then when I tell people that I work for the radio they assume that I’m doing really cool things. I really enjoy my job and sometimes I do cool things, but mostly, I just sit at my desk.”

Participants do not hold fiction solely responsible for spreading misleading images of journalism, nor do they believe that fictional media has a duty to provide accurate portrayals of the press. However, they do recognize that the representations in fiction contribute to reinforcing and spreading these misconceptions among audiences, particularly when those depictions involve harmful stereotypes. This is seen as especially problematic because it feeds into existing public mistrust of the media (evidenced by De Wulf Helskens, 2024). They find this particularly concerning because general audiences often have little direct experience with the profession beyond fiction.

Here again, journalists advocate for more nuanced and diverse portrayals of their profession in fiction. They believe that while extreme representations can be damaging, their negative impact may be mitigated when balanced by more nuanced depictions. Such balanced portrayals not only facilitate self-identification with journalistic characters but also offer audiences a deeper and more accurate understanding of the profession (cf. De Wulf Helskens, 2024). Rory (26, W), for instance, noted that the public often misunderstands the complexities involved in article publication, such as how journalists frequently face backlash for issues beyond their control, including editorial changes and contextual misinterpretations. This type of insight, she argues, could foster greater empathy and comprehension among news audiences.

Within the broader agreement on the need for realistic representations, two distinct approaches emerge. The first, aligned with the modernist view of journalism fiction, advocates for more positively skewed representations. This group is less concerned with heroic depictions, like those in *Supergirl*, which they see as idealistic but harmless, and more worried about villainous portrayals, such as those in *De Twaalf*, which they fear exacerbate public mistrust. They prefer normative representations that uphold journalistic ideals and caution against self-reflexive, critical portrayals that could further undermine trust in the media and damage the profession's public image. Moreover, this group is skeptical of journalists who participate as actors in fictional series, feeling that such involvement undermines the seriousness of the profession.

The second approach, aligned with the realist perspective, advocates for critical, self-reflexive representations of journalism. This group believes that journalism could benefit from self-criticism, as it would bring structural problems to light and create space for societal debate to address these issues. They see value in fictional narratives that explore the complexities and challenges of journalism, like *The French Dispatch*, which questions journalistic neutrality. While the modernist group tends to engage in paradigm repair when confronted with such critical portrayals, the realist group praises these narratives for their candid exploration of the profession's flaws. Some journalists, like Marianne (42, W), argue that the profession suffers from a lack of self-reflexivity, with professionals often reluctant to publicly discuss the industry's problems. Marianne suggests that bringing these issues into the open could invigorate the debate and that fiction, especially when locally produced and contextually relevant, could play a crucial role in this process.

Next to discussing general audiences, the participants also point to the role these representations can play for (aspiring) journalists. They believe this can be a double-edged sword: while it is important to present the profession attractively to attract new talent, there is a risk of overselling and creating unrealistic expectations. Some journalists are particularly concerned about the potential for representations to depict journalism as excessively activist (supra). They have observed many idealistic young reporters enter the field only to become disillusioned and leave due to unmet expectations about the impact they can make. One of the younger reporters even compared starting as a journalist to falling in love:

Tina (24, W): “In the beginning you only see the positive sides but as times goes on you begin to notice things that you dislike and either learn to love them or leave the profession.”

The fragment from *Gilmore Girls* was praised by many participants for its authentic portrayal of a situation that resonates with their own experiences as well as its educational value. The depiction of a journalist facing backlash after writing a negative review was seen as a realistic scenario that many young reporters are likely to encounter. They believe that this fragment effectively communicates a valuable lesson to aspiring journalists: by showing the consequences of writing a negative review, it underscores the need for young reporters to consider the ramifications of their reporting on the individuals involved. Lex (51, M) even expressed that this fragment should be included in every journalistic curriculum. Many journalism students in the study of De Wulf Helskens et al. (2023b) also drew on this example as an inspirational fictional series.

Participants highlighted that the potential for fiction to attract journalists to the field is intertwined with the representation of diversity within these fictional portrayals. Many noted that journalism remains underrepresented by women and minority journalists, which also affects the diversity of news coverage. They believe that increased diversity in journalism fiction could provide inspiration and role models for underrepresented groups. However, they also pointed out that fiction often fails to reflect this diversity, frequently reinforcing clichés, such as women journalists being portrayed as “bitches” and minority journalists as linguistically deficient. Several participants observed that much of fiction is created by men, which is evident in the dialogue and character portrayals. For example, women journalists critiqued the fragment from *Deadline 25/5* for its macho portrayal, where the only woman journalist is shouted at by her men colleagues. Similarly, the portrayal of unethical practices by a black journalist in *De Twaalf* was criticized for reinforcing harmful stereotypes in relation to minority journalists, for some even bordering on racism.

The discussion about diversity in journalism fiction extends beyond gender and minority representation to include age and appearance. Especially the overrepresentation of older editors was hackled as unrepresentative for reality as well as the recurring image of print journalists as sleazy and TV-journalists as handsome. Lucy (37, W) noted that her predominant image of journalists in fiction is shaped by the “bathrobe journalist” character from *Cordon[[2]](#footnote-2)*. Even though she does admit knowing some non-fictional journalists that fit the stereotype she underlines they are not the majority and thus finds it intriguing that this is the image that sticks regarding journalism fiction. Here again, the need for diversity is tressed to move away from such stereotypes.

**The discourse gender-divide**

Among the sixteen participants in this study, individuals exhibiting a more modernist engagement with journalism fiction were slightly more prevalent, with approximately nine participants aligning with traits characteristic of this group. Notably, the majority of participants within the modernist group identified as men (seven out of nine), whereas the realistic group predominantly comprised women journalists (six out of seven). Marianne (42, W) emphasized that, based on her experience, women journalists possess a heightened awareness of the challenges facing the field of journalism, stemming from their ongoing encounters with (gender-related) obstacles in their daily professional activities. Consequently, she posits that women journalists are more adept at challenging dominant journalistic discourses, including those depicted in fiction, compared to their men counterparts who may be less aware of the profession’s pressing issues. The gender-related divide observed in this study corroborates Marianne’s assertion that women generally adopt a distinct and more critical discourse concerning journalism fiction, thereby shaping their professional identities differently than men.

Marianne (42, W): “So, men have a uniform view on this, precisely because I think they also start from a lot of privileges. […] For women, however, it often feels very unsafe. They must deal with a lot of clichés and sexism. So, when they arrive in a newsroom it is very hard. And because of that they also become very critical and often afraid. So, you do feel that among men journalists there is much less understanding of what is going on. The criticism that is coming, it’s really coming from women. It comes from people of color. It's coming from everyone who is underrepresented in the media.”

Regarding other demographic factors, there is a noticeable predominance of journalists from the written press within the more realistic group, whereas the majority of journalists employed in radio or television belong to the modernist group. However, it is important to acknowledge that many journalists from the written press are also represented within the modernist group, primarily because most participants are employed in written media, either exclusively or in conjunction with other forms of media. Consequently, definitive conclusions regarding these demographics are limited. Similarly, no clear patterns emerged concerning age, indicating that age does not distinctly differentiate the groups.

An intriguing trend was identified among journalists who identify as belonging to minority groups. Specifically, four out of five minority journalists exhibited traits associated with the modernist-oriented group. This pattern may be more attributable to gender, as three out of four minority journalists identified as men, rather than their minority status per se. Nonetheless, Megan (28, W), a women minority journalist, also adopted a similar discourse. Although the study did not delve deeper into the underlying reasons for this trend, it is hypothesized that minority journalists may adopt normative discourses to assimilate into predominantly white, heterosexual, and masculine newsroom cultures that prevail in the field of journalism. This hypothesis is supported by the case of Megan who aligned her discourse with that of higher-ranked non-minority journalists within the same newsroom environment. However, the reverse argument could also be made, as non-minority women also navigate similar newsroom cultures yet tend to be more critical of normative discourses. Follow-up research that incorporates an intersectional perspective, considering both gender and minority identity, is needed to clarify these dynamics.

**Conclusion**

This study employed the framework of metajournalistic discourse to explore how journalists construct and maintain their professional identity through representations in journalism fiction. Within our sample, two distinct discourses emerged, which appear to be gendered in nature. The first discourse, predominantly adopted by men journalists, was grounded in normative assumptions about the profession and its societal role. Consistent with the findings of Steiner et al. (2013), these journalists engaged in practices of paradigm and boundary work to counteract representations that deviate from the normative definitions central to their professional identity. Specifically, they distanced both themselves and the news organizations they represented from breaches of professional norms, often attributing such transgressions to different journalistic cultures, particularly those of the U.K. and U.S.

In contrast, the second discourse, primarily embraced by women journalists, adopted a more critical stance, challenging the dominant normative conception of journalism upheld by the first group. These journalists advocated for more realistic, critical, and self-reflexive journalism fiction. Although they maintained certain journalistic norms and values, they nuanced the importance of their profession and called for a departure from the extreme portrayals – such as the dichotomy of heroes versus villains – that they found prevalent in fiction. While the first group also expressed a desire to move away from extreme portrayals, their concern was primarily with the depiction of journalists as villains, which they perceived as more damaging than portrayals of journalists as heroes. Furthermore, they emphasized that negative representations should be accompanied by efforts at paradigm repair, particularly in more realistic genres that carry a stronger sense of authenticity.

Overall, both groups expressed a desire for more diverse and creative representations that better capture the wide array of journalistic roles and practices. They conveyed frustration with persistent stereotypes and narratives, believing that fiction holds greater potential for imaginative storytelling regarding journalism. They not only valued the ability to recognize themselves in fiction but also believed that locally produced content, due to its relatable nature, could play a significant role in enhancing public understanding of the profession. However, they contended that contemporary fiction tends to exacerbate misconceptions about journalism rather than improve media literacy, a concern that applies to both general audiences and journalists themselves. While they specifically noted the impact on young, aspiring journalists, they also acknowledged their own reliance on fiction for insights into unfamiliar areas of journalism.

Additionally, this study, like previous research, confirms that Flemish audiences engage differently with fiction from various journalistic cultures, with a preference for European content. Participants particularly appreciated the “rawness” of content produced in Europe, especially in Flanders and Scandinavian countries, where they find critical and nuanced representations to be more common. Scandinavian content, in particular, was well-received, while Flemish content faced some criticism for adopting overly Hollywood-like narratives or failing to be sufficiently accurate or reflexive for the local context. In contrast, content from the U.S. and U.K. elicited more indifferent responses, attributed to the perceived gap between their journalistic cultures and those of the participants.

These findings have important practical implications for journalism as a profession. They suggest that we should take representations in fiction seriously as part of journalists’ identity work and socialization. Fiction is not merely entertainment but a discursive space where norms are negotiated, challenged, and internalized. Recognizing this can support more intentional efforts in journalism education and socialization to foster critical media literacy and reflexivity, especially among new journalists entering the field with fictionalized perceptions of journalistic work. Second, the gendered nature of these discourses highlights the importance of fostering inclusive newsroom cultures that make space for critical, diverse understandings of journalistic identity, especially in regions like Flanders, where women and minority journalists remain comparatively underrepresented

Importantly, this study also raises a critical reflection on the dominant normative journalistic paradigm itself. While much professional discourse focuses on repairing or defending this paradigm, particularly in the face of negative portrayals, our findings suggest that critical engagement – especially as voiced by women journalists – should not be dismissed as merely oppositional. Rather, the realist discourse they employ opens a path for rethinking journalism’s role and values in light of contemporary challenges, including declining trust, economic pressures, and the rise of misinformation. In this context, fiction should not be seen as a threat but as a potential partner in exploring and articulating a more inclusive and reflective journalistic paradigm.

Particularly in Flanders, where participants expressed a desire for fiction that resonates with local realities, collaborations between the journalism field and the creative industries could be valuable. Such partnerships could foster narratives that are both compelling and socially responsible, helping to rebuild trust and reimagine journalism in ways that are culturally relevant, self-critical, and future-oriented. In times of heightened scrutiny, this could provide a vital space for public engagement with journalism, allowing both practitioners and audiences to re-examine what journalism means, and what it could mean, today and in the future.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest

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1. The quotes were translated from Dutch to English by the researcher. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This refers to the character of print journalist Leo Gryspeerts (played by Koen De Sutter) in *Cordon*. He is portrayed as a sleazy, disheveled figure, frequently seen in a bathrobe, with an overall unkempt appearance. His casual disregard for professionalism extends to his work, where he regularly pushes ethical boundaries and crosses several deontological lines. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)