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'Fast-paced,' 'snakey' and 'commercial': How American student audiences make sense of representations of journalism in fictional television series

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Abstract

This study set out to understand how student audiences make sense of fictional representations of journalism in television series. To do so, we conducted five focus groups with American students. First, participants expressed a need for more diversity in representations of journalism in terms of narratives and characters as they see fiction as a complementary source of information on the profession. They relied on non-fictional reference media, normative journalistic discourses, and if applicable, experiences with working in (school) newsrooms to make sense of these representations. Second, they discussed how public opinion on journalism is influenced by fiction and consequently fear that one-sided and stereotypical representations of journalism contribute to increasing the already low levels of mistrust in U.S. news media. This fear was also found to be gendered as the participants expressed concerns about the stereotypical representation of female and minority journalists as "bitchy" and "promiscuous." This manuscript puts forward journalism fiction as a metajournalistic discourse in which non-fictional and fictional journalism blur in confounding ways.

Keywords

journalism, popular culture, audience research, women and minorities, metajournalistic discourses

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Introduction

> Jim (FG1):[1] "I would say compared to a lot of different industries; journalism seems very different from most typical jobs. Just because it's represented as such a fast-working environment. It's like fast food."

Since the beginning of film and television, journalists have been omnipresent in popular culture. In conjunction with everyday news consumption and public discourse on journalism, these fictional representations can significantly contribute to shaping the public image of journalism, especially as many people never set foot in a newsroom and have little direct encounters with journalists. In an era in which journalism is faced with corporate cutbacks, increasing charges of bias and disinformation, and diminishing trust in the news media, understanding how these representations shape the public image of journalism has become even more valuable (Cook et al., 2000; Jones, 2004; McNair, 2011; Müller, 2013; Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2022).

Research has illustrated that U.S. American fiction movies and series that represent journalism reflect a tension between a realistic, idealistic, and critical take on the democratic role of journalism: they negotiate what journalism is, used to be, and "should" be and therefore have an ideological function (Zynda, 1979; McNair, 2011b, 2014; Ehrlich and Saltzman, 2015; Ehrlich, 1997; Ghiglione and Saltzman, 2005). As such, fictional representations of journalism can be considered a form of metajournalistic discourses. According to Carlson (2016), shared understandings of journalism arise through discursive processes in which both journalistic and non-journalistic actors participate. Ferrucci (2018) expands this argument by including creators in the entertainment industry as non-journalistic actors, consequently stressing the importance of taking into account popular culture when studying how the public image of the journalism profession is shaped.

Even though a vast number of studies have looked into the representational practices of journalism in popular culture, few have considered journalism fiction as a metajournalistic process through which audiences negotiate and form opinions on journalism. Therefore, this study set out to understand how audiences – specifically students - make sense of fictional representations of journalism in television series and how they negotiate these meanings in relation to their experiences with journalism in their everyday lives (e.g., consumption of news media, participation in public debate, and possible direct encounters with journalists and newsrooms).

To do so, we conducted focus groups with U.S. journalism and non-journalism university students using audience studies as framework. Central here is the interrelation of and overlap between the concepts "realism," "idealism" and "criticism" to understand how audiences decode representations of journalism in fiction. For this manuscript, we understand realism as a constructed sense of reality rather than fidelity to empirical reality (Pouliot and Cowen, 2007; Fiske, 2010), idealism as a normative interpretation of what journalism should be (which in turn can also be considered critical if a representation deviates from this normative conception), and criticism as a critical

evaluation of what journalism is (realism) and is put forward to be (idealism in a normative sense).

More specifically, we focused on whether American students considered the representations as 'realistic' in relation to their pre-existing views on journalism and how this assessment of realism shaped how they further negotiated meanings about journalism through fiction in possibly normative idealistic and/or critical ways. In what follows, we first explain how journalism is represented in fiction, then discuss how this is related to U.S. journalism today and last elaborate on what is already known about how audiences negotiate journalism fiction.

The free press myth as a modernist discourse

Journalism fiction engages with a modernist discourse that declares the social importance of journalism for U.S. democracy (Peters, 2015). More specifically, American fiction movies and television series tend to reiterate a "free press myth" about journalism in which journalists are "defenders of society's right to know" (Vaughn and Evensen, 1991: 829; Ehrlich, 2006; McNair, 2011b) embedded in the popular belief that "for the functioning of democracy a privately owned, market-driven press is needed" (Ehrlich, 2005: 103).

This myth both influences and is influenced by the dominant Western perspective on journalism in which journalists should function as a "watchdog" or "fourth estate." In fiction, this is expressed through recurring characteristics such as the representation of journalists in a heroes-villains dichotomy, the negotiation between both positive and negative representations of journalism, and the mediation between opposing cultural values such as objectivity versus subjectivity in news production (Zynda, 1979; Good, 1989; Ehrlich, 1997, 2006; Ghiglione and Saltzman, 2005; McNair, 2011a, 2011b; Ehrlich and Saltzman, 2015).

Research shows that positive representations portray journalism as a glorious and exciting profession in which journalists are heroes who defend democracy by chasing stories and living extraordinary lives all in favor of the people's right to know. Heroes are often journalists that struggle to maintain their ethical and fourth-estate responsibilities against commercial and other pressures. These are heroic depictions set against pragmatic realities that constrain the ideal of the free press such as in *All The President's Men* (1976), *Spotlight* (2015), and *The Post* (2017) (McNair, 2014; Ferrucci, 2018; De Wulf Helskens et al., 2023b). In addition, heroes can get away with anything including lying, cheating, bribing, betraying, and violating ethical codes as long as they do it in favor of the public good (Ghiglione and Saltzman, 2005).

Negative representations portray journalism as a ruthless business, aimed at making profit by exploiting innocent people. In these representations, journalists are villains who consider their own careers more important than the public good. Some well-known American fictional journalists that crossed ethical boundaries by chasing sensational stories, getting too involved with sources, and even fabricating entire news stories include Megan Carter (Sally Field) in *Absence of Malice* (1981), Stephen Glass

(Hayden Christensen) in *Shattered Glass* (2003), and Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara) in *House of Cards* (2013–2018).

These negative representations are not necessarily critical of journalism as an institution, but most of the time can be interpreted within the above-mentioned modernist discourse. They often engage in "paradigm repair" or "boundary maintenance" which are essential processes of metajournalistic discourses: by constructing a boundary between good and bad journalists, they reaffirm norms of professional conduct (Carlson, 2016; Ferrucci, 2018). As such, even negative representations can reinforce journalists' professional authority by punishing individual journalists who go astray so that the system can be represented as beyond reproach (Ehrlich, 2005, 2006, 2019; Ferrucci, 2018).

Journalism in crisis

Scholars have criticized representations of journalism that engage with the above-mentioned free press myth and practices such as "paradigm repair" arguing that they hide the fact that U.S. journalism does not live up to the ideal communicated by the modernist discourse. Rather the profession is restrained by having to serve the political and economic objectives of media companies (Ehrlich, 2005). This relates to the journalistic tension between serving a public or private interest (Schultz, 1998; Obijiofor and Hanusch, 2011).

In the past few decades, developments such as commercialization and sensationalism are increasingly pressuring the idea of news media as 'public service-oriented', especially for U.S. news media. Ethics scandals, charges of bias or 'fake news', corporate cutbacks, and serious declines in public trust in news media have created a dominant image of 'journalism in crisis'. Even though the overall trust score in U.S. news media (32% in 2023) has slightly recovered from a steady decline since 2017, it remains among the lowest of all countries included in the Reuters Digital News Report (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023).

Trends toward more commercial news media have brought about more sensational and infotainment news, editorial budget cuts in favor of profit, media concentration, polarization, and more commercial influence on editorial content (Obijiofor and Hanusch, 2011). According to Nechushtai (2018), the U.S. news media are adopting characteristics of Hallin and Mancini's Polarized Pluralist model turning it into a mixed Polarized Liberal model. The presidential election of 2016 has illustrated how the U.S. news media have changed including increasingly fragmented and poorly monetized news markets, the politicization of news content and funding, uneven professionalization, and increasing openness to state involvement. Especially the meltdown of the U.S. news media's advertising model (a decline of 50% in advertisement revenue since the late 1990s), fortified by digitization, has caused disruptive implications for American news markets (Nechushtai, 2018).

In addition to these changing circumstances which have strengthened criticism on U.S. journalism as not fulfilling its watchdog role and charges of bias, another criticism which also supports this bias charge is that U.S. journalism is dominated by a white elite and does not reflect the sociocultural diversity in U.S. society. A comparative study by Weaver et al. (2019) pointed out that women (37.5%) and minorities (10.8%) remain underrepresented in U.S. journalism. Even though their numbers have increased over the

years, the average U.S. journalist is still a married white man of about 47 years of age. In addition, women journalists continue to be paid less than their male counterparts which can partly be explained by a steady drop in their percentages over the years as they tend to leave the workforce as they get older (Weaver et al., 2019). This is also reflected in fictional representations of journalism in which women and minority journalists are underrepresented and often framed in stereotypical and sexualized ways stressing that they do not belong in these macho male newsroom cultures (Painter and Ferrucci, 2012, 2015, 2017; De Wulf Helskens et al., 2023a).

Journalism fiction versus audiences

Fiction that represents journalism is not only of relevance for both aspiring journalists and the general public's understanding of the profession, but also of societal relevance given journalism's democratic function. However, despite an increasingly changing and polarized U.S. news media market and a continuous lack of diversity in the journalism workforce, it remains unclear how audiences reconcile and negotiate fictional representations of journalism with their everyday news media consumption and direct exposure to mediated news discourses in the public sphere.

Ferrucci and Painter (2017) drew on Cultivation Theory to hypothesize how journalism fiction might shape the public image of the profession. They highlighted how high exposure to fictional representations of journalism might contribute to shaping people's views on journalism. Specifically, they stressed how the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women journalists in fiction might also translate into comparatively fewer women journalism students entering the workforce. Moreover, Ehrlich and Saltzman (2015) wondered if depictions of journalists make the profession seem more intriguing and exciting than it really is, as such drawing prospective young journalists to the field. Or, if a 'Mean Journalist Syndrome' might exist in which popular culture cultivates the impression that journalists are 'sleazier' than they are in real life which may have a detrimental impact on audiences' understanding of and trust in journalism. The authors argued that fictional representations of journalism might have a similar, if not stronger, effect on how audiences make sense of journalism as actual news media and journalistic practices (Ehrlich and Saltzman, 2015).

Peters (2015) stressed the importance of popular culture to familiarize audiences with journalistic norms and practices and looked into discussions on online forums regarding the television series *The Newsroom*. The study pointed out that audiences lack the news literacy to critically engage with fictional representations of journalism that tend to promote a 'golden age of journalism' instead of pointing towards the commercialized nature of U.S. news media. Furthermore, Steiner et al., (2013) analyzed newspaper articles discussing the fifth season of the television series *The Wire* and found that journalists tend to counter critical representations of journalism by deferring responsibility from themselves and the institution of the press invoking a paradigm repair discourse (supra).

As previously mentioned, Ferrucci (2018) expanded these arguments by considering fictional representations of journalism a metajournalistic discourse through which audiences can make sense of and think through societal issues of the profession. This

discourse can be generative focusing on general themes (e.g., *The Wire*, 2002–2008), or reflective focusing on specific journalists, events, and media outlets (e.g., *Shattered Glass*, 2003). The author underlined that the often employed paradigm repair in these narratives provides audiences with an understanding of how journalists should or should not act and affects how society views the industry (Ferrucci, 2018). Still, despite the important contribution of these studies, they do not provide insight into how audiences actively negotiate different meanings embedded in popular culture as they either lack an empirical research component or use secondary sources.

Method

To understand how American student audiences make sense of fictional representations of journalists in television series, we conducted five focus groups with U.S. American journalism and non-journalism students at the University of Southern California (Los Angeles) during September and October 2022. Each group consisted of at least six and utmost eight participants who were initially recruited through convenience sampling at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and later also using the snowball method. As an incentive, every student who participated in the focus group received a ten-dollar gift card.

We decided to construct the focus groups based on the major of the participants in which journalism students were grouped (first three focus groups) and non-journalism students were grouped (last two focus groups). In the first place, we aimed to uncover how journalism students make sense of journalism representations as they are strongly connected to the profession but are not yet working in the field. At the moment of the focus groups, their experience with journalism was limited to working in the shielded teaching environment of high school and/or college newsrooms.

Their distinct position as both insiders and outsiders to the journalistic field differentiates them from both experienced journalists and a more general audience. As such, we expected that, on the one hand, they would lack the necessary experience to create an opinion of journalism independent of mediated journalistic representations, and, on the other, would have enough interest and involvement in the profession through their journalism education to engage with these representations.

To be able to compare the results of these focus groups with a more general but still comparable audience, we also decided to conduct focus groups with students not majoring in journalism. We expected that their different majors would also lead to different levels and sorts of prior knowledge which in turn would also result in different negotiations of journalism representations. As we initially recruited all students through Annenberg, the majority of these non-journalism students majored in communication and public relations. However, because we chose to add the snowball method to the recruitment process, we also were able to include students not affiliated with Annenberg majoring in Cinema and International Relations. Including different majors allowed us to look into how students fall back on possibly different discourses to make sense of representations of journalism.

Strikingly, both the journalism and non-journalism students stated that although they did not know many fiction movies or series that represent journalists, encounters with

"non-fictional" journalists are even more rare. This implies that even though journalism students – in contrast to non-journalism students - are taking their first steps in the field, these representations might shape their opinion and view on journalism more than unmediated encounters with non-fictional journalists and newsrooms. Maybe even in similar ways to how they shape non-journalism students' opinions as, in contrast to what we expected, both groups appeared to have more or less similar readings.

Our 33 participants were between 18 and 22 years old and represented all years of the undergraduate program (although the majority – twenty-six – was 19 or younger and either a freshman or sophomore). Twenty-three participants identified as women (of which one as a transgender woman), eight as men, and two as non-binary. All described their political views as liberal except two participants who reported moderate political views. 20 identified as heterosexual, nine as bisexual, two as homosexual, and two as having another sexual orientation. Furthermore, they represented a wide diversity of racialized identities including 11 participants who described themselves as white, nine as Asian, three as Black or African-American, two as other, and eight as a mix of different racialized identities.[2]

Each focus group took place in person and lasted two hours including a ten-minute break. All participants signed informed consent forms. We used a semi-structured interview format with open questions and the screening of different short fragments to instigate discussions. The questions were the same for each focus group and centered around which representational practices stood out for the participants, whether they considered those realistic in relation to their pre-existing views on journalism, and how they negotiated those with non-fictional journalistic discourses. Participants were allowed to deviate from the questions depending on the course of the discussion.

We did not theoretically introduce the participants to the fictional representation of journalism but did encourage them to actively read and discuss the fragments and associatively link these representations to journalism in fiction in general constituting an 'active reading'. The screening of fragments aided them in making associative connections with other representations of journalism and reflecting on such representations on a general level that transcended the representational practices in the fragments at hand.

In every focus group, five to six short fragments were screened which included a variety of representations of journalism ranging from more positive to more negative (supra) from *The Newsroom* (2012), *Supergirl* (2015), *House of Cards* (2013), *The Morning Show* (2019), *Borgen* ('*The Castle'*, 2010), and *De Dag* ('*The Day*,' 2018). The last two series are respectively Danish and Belgian as we were interested in comparing how the participants decoded American versus non-American journalism representations. Especially as different countries and regions also produce different representations of journalism (De Wulf Helskens et al., 2023b).

We deliberately chose to only include fragments from fiction television series focusing on women and minority journalists to subtly nudge the discussion into this less researched subtheme of the study of journalism in popular culture. As most of the participants identified as women and/or with diverse racialized and sexual identities, this also provided interesting insights into the representation of specifically women and minority journalists. A more detailed list with information on the screened fragments can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Fragments screened during focus groups.

Nr.	Series	Season/ episode	Keywords	Genre	Focus groups
1	The newsroom	S2/E1	Newsroom, journalistic errors, fast-paced environment.	Drama	FG 1
2	Supergirl	S2/E1	Critical watchdog, journalism as a calling.	Action	FG 2 & 3
3	House of cards	S1/E1	Unethical behavior, conflict of interest, deals with politicians.	(Political) drama	FG 3 & 4
4	The morning show	S1/E4	Tension between commercial and public interest, distinction between commercial and editorial content.	Drama	FG 1, 2, 4 & 5
5	Supergirl	S6/E9	Tension between commercial and public interest, obsession with clicks.	Action	FG 1 & 5
6	The morning show	S2/E4	Bisexual woman journalist, minority identity as obstacle and/or advantage.	Drama	FG 1, 2, 4 & 5
7	The morning show	S1/E7	Black woman journalist, scrutinized for sexual behavior, sexual misconduct toward black women.	Drama	FG 3 & 5
8	Borgen ("the castle")	S1/E1	Defending public interest against commercial and political interest, competition in the newsroom.	(Political) drama	FG 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5
9	De dag ("the day")	S1/E3	Unethical behavior, tension between commercial and public interest.	Thriller	FG 1, 2, 3, 4 & 5

Each focus group conversation was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. These transcripts were thematically analyzed using open coding. First, each quote was summarized, given thematic labels, and sorted together accordingly. The summaries for each group were then analyzed again creating a thematic analysis that transcended the quotes of the individual participants. In the next paragraphs, we first discuss which recurring tropes stood out for the participants and how they assessed the level of realism of those tropes. Then we elaborate on how they made sense of these tropes by using and/or questioning modernist journalistic discourses. Last, we explore how they made sense of the often-stereotypical representations of women and minority journalists in relation to their own identity characteristics.

Three recurring journalism tropes

After having discussed several fragments and examples, all focus groups seemed to discuss the same three recurring journalism tropes including "fast-paced journalism," "snakey-journalism," and "commercial journalism." First, the participants claimed that fiction often reduces journalism to a tense and fast-paced profession in which journalists do nothing else than sprint around a newsroom to cover breaking news and meet a deadline. They made sense of this recurring trope through entertainment conventions in

which narratives focus on exciting topics rather than slower forms of journalism such as documentary and environmental journalism. Nevertheless, they uttered that this one-sided focus misrepresents the profession, especially compared to their own experiences with media and journalism.

Cory (FG2) for example drew on the local small-town media he consumes which is often not as "exciting" and "breaking" as he sees in fiction. Vivian (FG2) confirmed his beliefs by referring to her experience in the university's media center stating that most journalistic work is just sitting behind a computer and boring. She felt misled by fiction as it made the profession seem more exciting than it really is. For many participants, this lack of diversity in representations of journalism is frustrating as they would like to see different kinds of journalism such as for example also the profession's creative side. Here, *Sex and the City* (1998–2004) was mentioned as an example of what they would like to see more of.

> Vivian (FG2): "I totally forgot about Carrie Bradshaw. I love Sex and the City. I want to be her. That's like my career goal."
>
> …
>
> Katherine (FG2): "Same!"
>
> …
>
> Vivian (FG2): "I feel like there is a big focus on like hard news, breaking news, like, you know, the crazy hectic newsroom. Where people are running in and out with papers and, you know, everything like that. So, it would be nice to see, you know, different sides of journalism because it's a very broad field."

They also regularly mentioned representations of student journalists working for high school news media such as Rory Gilmore in *Gilmore Girls* (2000–2007) and Nancy Wheeler in *Stranger Things* (2016–2024). It became apparent that participants, especially those majoring in journalism, value representations of characters that they can identify with and that provide a "look behind the scenes" at journalistic processes. This, because even though they consume news regularly and, in some cases, even have experiences with (school) newsrooms, they know little about how news is produced and by whom. As such, even though this is an unconscious rather than active process, journalism fiction can be considered as a complementary source of knowledge on the profession.

> Camille (FG2): "I'm a big fan of Gilmore Girls, I'm sure it's relatable to a lot of us as students, so it's cool to see a young woman going to journalism school when you're also going to journalism school."

Second, sparked by fragments nine (*De Dag*), eight (*Borgen*), and three (*House of Cards*), the participants brought up a "snakey-journalism-trope." They noticed that journalists are often represented as willing to cross ethical boundaries to report news, especially in "cop shows" such as *Law and Order* (1990-…) and *Criminal Minds* (2005-…).

Even though, they believe these representations are somewhat realistic as the relationship between journalists and police officers can be tense and journalists do tend to cross boundaries in real life, they feel like this is often exaggerated in fiction which makes it seem like journalists engage in such behavior continuously.

In this discussion, the modernist journalistic discourse, which they frequently engage with in their classes, played an important role. Vivian (FG2) and Mia (FG3), who study journalism, for example, highlighted that they are taught to stay away from cops and avoid any intricate relationships with the police. Their journalism education makes them believe that fiction tends to exaggerate such practices and makes journalists seem more unprofessional than they actually are. On the other hand, this normative modernist discourse was also countered by the participants' own (limited) experiences with journalism as in contrast to what they are taught, some participants admitted that they already engaged in somewhat ethically dubious journalistic practices, especially if it is hard to obtain certain information. Participants not-majoring in journalism who lack this experience, relied mostly on reference media to assess whether such representations are realistic. Several participants concluded that they are realistic when compared to tabloids such as TMZ but not when compared to quality journalism such as The Los Angeles Times.

Interestingly, the participants discussed the representation of journalism as "snakey" in relation to both the American and non-American fragments and considered them relatively similar. Vivian (FG2) even stated that if the language was not different, she would not have been able to differentiate fragment nine (*De Dag*) from American cop shows. However, other participants noted that even though this trope also occurs in non-American fiction, it is less exaggerated and dramatized. They stated that there was no conflict in the non-American fragments which contrasts with what they are familiar with in American fiction. Maggie (FG4), who has a background in architecture, specified that the fragments used very monochrome colors removing all excitement. As such, the participants concluded that non-American fragments engage with different dramatic conventions in which entertainment is less prioritized. Some also related this to differences in journalistic cultures which is according to them less polarized than U.S. journalism.

Third, in relation to fragments one (*The Newsroom*), four (*The Morning Show*), and five (*Supergirl*), the participants brought up a recurring trope that focuses on the commercialized nature of news organizations. They discussed how news organizations are often represented as prioritizing profit which is according to them realistic. The participants argued that news organizations such as Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC regularly sensationalize news to attract viewers which creates a difficult situation for journalists who want to refrain from crossing ethical boundaries. The participants discussed how this conflict of interest between media owners and individual journalists is frequently narratively explored in fiction. Participants not majoring in journalism specifically focused on the relationship between journalistic and non-journalistic actors such as politicians and PR agents in which they believe that these representations regularly engage with the actors' often conflicting agendas.

Several participants applauded such representations as these encourage them to critically reflect on the business motivations of the news media they consume themselves.

Here, the participants unconsciously critically engaged with paradigm repair as they specifically hailed representations that show the media company as lacking integrity as such criticizing the institution. However, this was not always the case as in fragment nine (*De Dag*), Rita (FG2) and Andrea (FG5) noticed a line stating that the journalists in focus were the only ones not following the rules. They appreciated this nuance as it underlined that journalists who behave unethically are an exception. As such, they supported paradigm repair in favor of a "positive image" of journalism rather than critically engaging with the practice.

Questioning modernist journalistic discourses?

When asked how they make sense of these recurring journalism tropes, the participants believed that their opinions are less shaped than the average population by such representations of journalism as they are more educated, think more positively about journalism, and have more knowledge about journalism and dramatic conventions (hence making it easier to distinguish fact from fiction). Nevertheless, the focus groups pointed out that even though they were asked to actively process and decode fictional representations of journalism, these representations still (unconsciously) shaped how they think about journalism.

Both journalism and non-journalism students stated that their perspective had changed after watching only five fragments over the course of two hours. For example, some concluded that journalism is more stressful than they thought, and as we specifically screened fragments with women journalists, some even believed that journalism is a women-centric profession. Some participants acknowledged that their opinion might be shaped more by representations of journalism than they think as - despite the above-mentioned characteristics - they often consume fiction as entertainment which leads them to less critically decode the messages these representations reiterate.

> Charlie (FG4): "I don't know if that's real or not. I don't know if behind-the-scenes journalists are really like that. But like, that's what this piece of media is saying, so I'm more willing to believe it."

Therefore, the participants also worried about what these exaggerated and one-sided representations communicate to general audiences. They feared that especially in an already pessimistic and polarized media landscape such as that of the U.S., representations of journalism – which are according to them also increasingly negative - can reinforce already declining levels of trust in news media which in turn also influences how people vote and how policies are formed. As such, they linked fictional representations of journalism directly to the democratic functioning of the U.S. Furthermore, they fear that these representations are capable of scaring aspiring journalists away hence directly influencing the future of journalism. Most participants assumed that negative representations automatically result in a more negative public opinion as such nuancing the idea of paradigm repair.

Consequently, participants argued that fiction needs to represent journalism in more diverse and rounded ways as they believe these can help people understand and appreciate journalism more. They also hope that such representations can provide audiences with more insight into competing agendas in journalism and as such help them with critically assessing the news media that they consume themselves. There too is a need for more positive representations of journalism as according to the participants these could aid in changing the according to them relatively negative opinion on journalism that currently dominates the public debate.

> Vivian (FG2): "Because when you're fed information that the media is constantly lying, or that journalists are evil and out to get you, that definitely influences many people's opinion of us. So, I really would like to see more stuff where they talk about the integrity that's involved."

Several participants thought of non-American fragment eight (*Borgen*), in which a journalist critically interviewed a politician, as a prime example of such a positive representation. In their opinion, it shows how journalists should behave in a democracy which is in their opinion often lacking in American fiction. As such, they nuanced the "snakey-journalist-trope" by again drawing on a modernist journalistic discourse in which journalists should be "watchdogs." They explained this lack of representations of journalists as critical watchdogs in American fiction by pointing to the polarized and commercialized U.S. news media such as the "politically-biased" Fox News and CNN. Here they conflate reality and fiction by combining both their experience with American news media and a specific modernist journalistic discourse in which a normative representation of journalism seems to be favored over a realistic one.

This argument was further explored in relation to fragment two (*Supergirl*) which the students recognized as a normative representation of what journalism should be albeit now in an American context. Here again, they stressed that the representation was dramatized and therefore unrealistic but nevertheless communicated an important message about what journalism should be. This is not surprising as for many participants superhero fiction served as a first introduction to journalism. Sasha (FG3) for example stated that she really liked the series when she was younger which in turn inspired her to pursue journalism. And Rita (FG2) also related to the main character when she first started to learn the ropes of the profession. The participants connected this representation to the ones they grew up with such as Superman and J. Jonah Jamison (*Spider-Man*) which are for many of them their "prime examples" of respectively "good" and "bad" journalism. Furthermore, most participants expressed to really enjoy fiction that represents investigative journalism such as in the movies *Spotlight* (2015), The *Post* (2017), and *All The President's Men* (1976), especially when those engage with historical events and consequently combine fact and fiction.

However, not all participants adopted this modernist journalistic discourse. Some stressed that the fragment's glorification of the journalism profession is such an oversimplification that they interpret the representation as a satirical take on the journalism profession. Zoe (FG3) for example stressed that such representations ignore the

complexities and moral ambiguity that are inherent to journalism, especially as journalists always function within a larger corporation. To illustrate this complexity, the participants drew on their experience with writing articles for the university website and newspaper for which they are often asked to adjust the tone to make the university look better. Here, especially the perspective of the participants majoring in Public Relations was interesting as they tended to reconcile modernist journalistic discourses with these marketing-oriented discourses.

Why diversity in journalism fiction matters

Concluding from these recurring tropes, it became apparent that the participants believe that fictional representations of journalism lack diversity which not only fails to provide them with possibilities for identification with journalistic characters but also might be detrimental to public opinion on journalism including their own. This, moreover, is not only concerning recurring tropes about journalistic practices but also concerning journalistic demographics. Several participants were surprised to see so many fragments with women and minority journalists in leading roles as they do not frequently encounter representations that include such characters. However, they questioned the often-times stereotypical representations in which those characters are represented as "bitchy" (cf., the few women in positions of power are considered mean), "sexualized" (cf., women use sex instead of qualifications to succeed as a journalist), and "not in control" (cf., women are overlooked, not taken seriously and have to prove themselves to gain respect).

Similar representational practices were discussed in relation to fragments six and seven (both from *The Morning Show*) when the participants stressed that newsrooms are still very white, straight, and male environments, both in fiction and in real life. They argued this leads to women and minority journalists often being represented as tokens and diversity cards in which the above-mentioned stereotypes are even more invigorated, especially for women journalists of color. As such, they unknowingly echoed the findings of existing research into the representation of women and minority journalists (Painter and Ferrucci, 2012, 2015, 2017, 2019; Saltzman, 2003; De Wulf Helskens et al., 2023a).

Their concern about how fictional representations of journalism shape public opinion was even more invigorated concerning these stereotypical representations of women and minority journalists. The participants worried that these representations result in people making assumptions about women and minority journalists labeling them as unqualified and as engaging in unethical behavior. Camille (FG2) for example admits that she automatically assumed that there was a (former) romantic relationship between the woman journalist and male cop in fragment nine (*De Dag*) which she believes is similar for other people as this is "wired this way in our brains."

For many participants, even those not majoring in journalism, these representations felt personal as they themselves identify as sexually and racially diverse women. So, whereas they were able to slightly nuance the impact of representations of journalism on public opinion depending on the audience's demographic characteristics, they were more concerned about how stereotypical representations of women and minority journalists will impact how they will be treated, independent of whether they will work in journalism

or not. This concern is not surprising, as most participants, both journalism and non-journalism majors, have been confronted with discrimination based on their gender or minority identity.

Carl (FG3) for example shared that during interviews people often question his expertise because of his racial identity. And Sasha (FG3) talked about being called into a high school board meeting as editor-in-chief of the school newspaper in which, despite her more senior position, the board kept addressing a male reporter instead of her. Zoe (FG3) and Sage (FG3) stressed how they are always one of the only people of color in their journalism classes and the university newsroom. According to Sage (FG3), this causes her to self-police and refrains her from voicing her opinions as loudly which might have been different if she saw herself represented in fiction.

> Sage (FG3): "I think every journalism movie I've seen, like, I think it's rare seeing a female journalist in power, much less a woman of color. So, growing up, I only saw white people. And sometimes I think to myself when I see myself not pitching certain things or not doing some things that my coworkers do: "Oh, would it have turned out differently or would I have, like the confidence to say that if I saw people like me in fiction?"

Here the participants draw on the idea of "if you can see it, you can be it," both in relation to journalists of color and LGBTQ+ journalists. Laura (FG1) for example stated that Rachel Maddow, a lesbian woman journalist working for MSNBC, made her "feel seen" and confident to pursue a career as a bisexual woman in journalism. Even though she highlighted an example of a non-fictional journalist, she believes fiction can have the same power. Others expanded on this argument by stating that real-life journalists with a minority identity can set an aspirational goal for women and minority journalists showing what is possible. But to gain insight into the struggles they faced to get where they are and how to deal with them (a look behind the scenes), fictional examples can play an important role. Here again, they stressed the importance of diversity in journalism representations both for purposes of self-identification and countering negative and stereotypical public opinions on journalism.

Discussion

This study uncovered that the narratives and stock characters found in previous studies on journalism fiction are actively present in the participants' discourse. Despite our inclusion of different study majors, the participants discussed similar journalism narratives and used similar – though often contradictory – strategies to assess the level of realism of these narratives. These strategies include using non-fictional reference media, relying on normative journalistic discourses, and if applicable, comparing to experiences with working in (school) newsrooms. Despite consuming fiction as a form of entertainment, they do see value in journalism fiction for purposes of identification and information. Even though they assumed that they are more or less capable to assess the realism of journalism fiction based on these strategies, and therefore believe that their opinion is not

much influenced by these representations, the analysis pointed out that their views and opinions of journalism are shaped more by fiction than they think.

In contrast, the participants do hold strong beliefs about how representations of journalism shape public opinion and as such reinforce the polarization of the U.S. media climate. They fear that the very one-sided representation of journalism might contribute to increasing the already low levels of mistrust in the U.S. news media. This finding was also gendered as the participants feared that these representations fortify existing sexist, racist, and homophobic beliefs about women and minority journalists which can limit their career opportunities. Therefore, the participants stressed the need for more diversity in journalism fiction in terms of both journalism practices and demographics. Stemming from the modernist journalistic perspective that they are confronted with in their university education, they favored nuanced normative representations of journalism over realistic and critical ones. As such, this study illustrates the different tensions in negotiating meanings attached to journalism fiction, especially those between realism, idealism, and criticism.

This manuscript underlines how the participants' readings of journalism fiction are shaped by a variety of influences. Rather than making an argument about limited or all-powerful media influences that shape the participants' views on journalism, we put forward how they interact with fiction in complex ways. Journalism fiction is simultaneously considered a somewhat realistic source of information on the profession and understood to be exaggerated and one-sided, and therefore unrealistic. Normative views on journalism, instilled through education and more broadly culture, shape the way participants engage with journalism in fiction in which non-fictional and fictional journalism blur in confounding ways. This underlines how fiction can be considered a metajournalistic discourse in which non-fictional journalistic experiences are used to negotiate representations of journalism in fiction which in turn also influence non-fictional journalistic experiences.

Even though this study provides valuable insights into the negotiating of meanings in journalism fiction, it acknowledges that the research setting and participant sample do not provide insight into how such fiction is negotiated by more general audiences in everyday life. However, this does not pose a problem for this study as the objective was to understand the reading of journalism fiction of American (journalism) students to form a foundation for audience research regarding journalism fiction. The key question for future research will be how these findings differ for more general audiences, especially for those residing in non-American contexts.

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Notes

1. We used pseudonyms to ensure the participants' anonymity.
2. Of the eight participants who reported having mixed racialized identities, two reported being Asian and white, two being Black/African American and white, one being white, Asian, and Native Hawaiian, one being white and Native American, one being Asian mixed with another unspecified racial identity, and one being white also mixed with another unspecified racial identity.

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