

“For Your Information Tonight”: The Dramatization of the Television News Industry on U.S.
Primetime Television, from *Mary Tyler Moore* to *The Morning Show* (1970-Present)

by

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ABSTRACT

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Title: “For Your Information Tonight”: The Dramatization of the Television News Industry on U.S. Primetime Television, from *Mary Tyler Moore* to *The Morning Show* (1970-Present)

“‘For Your Information Tonight’: The Dramatization of the Television News Industry on U.S. Primetime Television, from *Mary Tyler Moore* to *The Morning Show* (1970-Present)” explores the fictional depiction of television news in dramatic and comedic narrative television programs. This dissertation argues that the genre, termed as television news series, manifests in narrative form the ongoing debates and anxieties that have emerged as a result of the significant shifts that have occurred in the style, format, and coverage choices of television news across the past fifty years. Through its spotlighting of particular—and often highly timely—aspects of the television news industry, the genre is a self-reflexive project that makes contributions to the ways in which the public understands the functioning of television journalism. Close textual analysis which puts programs such as *Murphy Brown*, *WIOU*, and *Great News* in conversation with one another reveals the ways that American narrative television conceives of the role that television news plays within the nation’s commercial media system. The first chapter argues that the central narrative conflict in television news series is an antagonistic relationship between television journalists and media owners. The second chapter argues that the genre depicts the importance of ratings to television news as an existential threat to substantive journalism. The third chapter explores the ways in which the genre positions journalistic professionalism as being under threat from the state, media ownership, and the pressures of ratings. The fourth chapter addresses how the genre critiques the changing role of the anchor in television news.

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INTRODUCTION

Introduction & Chapter Outline

“It all started in a small five thousand-watt radio station in Fresno, California.”

—WJM anchor Ted Baxter, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*¹

By the 1970s, broadcast television had become the main source of news for a majority of Americans.² Over the preceding decade, the expansion of network newscasts from fifteen to thirty minutes,³ along with increased investments in local news operations,⁴ had made television news a fixture of everyday life. Whereas the news broadcasts of the 1950s and 1960s had been characterized in large part by anchors who delivered hard news with an explicit sense of journalistic mission and authority, from the 1970s onward, television news underwent several upheavals, most significantly an embrace of market populism and consolidated ownership that informed its coverage and stylistic decisions.⁵ As a result, the news began to look and feel different: human interest stories took up more airtime, entertainment techniques were explicitly employed to make broadcasts more fast-paced and visually-oriented,⁶ and—even though men still dominated in the anchor chair—women started to gain more prominent on-air roles.⁷

¹ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 4, episode 21, “Ted Baxter Meets Walter Cronkite,” directed by Jay Sandrich, written by James L. Brooks, Allan Burns, and Ed. Weinberger, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Edward Asner, and Valerie Harper, aired February 9, 1974, on CBS.

² Charles L. Ponce de Leon, *That’s the Way It Is: A History of Television News in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 83.

³ Mike Conway, *The Origins of Television News in America: The Visualizers of CBS in the 1940s* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 301.

⁴ Craig M. Allen, *News is People: The Rise of Local TV News and the Fall of News from New York* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 2001).

⁵ Ponce de Leon, *That’s the Way It Is*.

⁶ Daniel C. Hallin, “We Keep America on Top of the World,” in *We Keep America on Top of the World: Television Journalism and The Public Sphere* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁷ Karen L. Ross, “Selling Women (Down the River): Gendered Relations and the Political Economy of Broadcast News,” in *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media*, ed. Eileen R. Meehan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

It was during this era that primetime television began to offer fictional representations of the television news industry. This is a genre I term *television news series*, and define as *dramatic or comedic programs that depict a protagonist or group of protagonists who are employed in the television news industry*. My aim in this dissertation is to closely examine these depictions, exploring the ways in which they construct and present certain ideas about television news to their audiences. These texts are an important object of study because they speak to the ways that television is often a self-reflexive medium which presents ideas about itself to audiences. By highlighting certain facets of the industry, the genre contributes to public perceptions of how news operates in our capitalist media system. Examining it closely can add to existing analyses of television news by scholars of both television and journalism, providing fresh layers of understanding.

The primary object of study in this dissertation is a selection of fifteen television news series, the earliest of which is *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977), with *The Morning Show* (AppleTV+, 2019-Present) being the most recent. Through a close textual analysis of these series, which span a range of televisual formats and depict a broad spectrum of different kinds of television news, I aim to tease out the ways in which they engage with ongoing debates around the changing role of news from the 1970s to the present day. I argue that *television news series serve to manifest in narrative form the anxieties that have arisen as a result of the changing shape of television news over the past half-century*. The genre does so through four major themes, each of which is the focus of a chapter of this dissertation: political economy, ratings, professionalism, and anchors. I begin each chapter with a brief overview which contextualizes the theme within the relevant trends and developments of television news. Each subsequent section of the chapter explores a specific component of the overall theme, using

specific examples from episodes. My goal is to consider the programs not in isolation, but rather as a whole, putting them in conversation with one another to discern how the genre constructs its messages and meanings.

In Chapter One I address my first research question: *How does the television news series genre represent the conditions that comprise the political economy of television news?* I argue that the genre paints a picture of an industry where two groups are pitted against one another. On one side are television journalists, who work within the capitalist media system to serve—to the greatest extent possible—the role of informing viewers, fostering democracy, and acting as a watchdog over powerful state and private actors. On the other side are media owners who seek to use television news to further their own financial or political interests—sometimes striving to promote both at the same time—by using their power to influence or outright dictate editorial and coverage decisions. The ongoing push-pull between these two groups serves as a visualization of an abstract process: the desire for journalists to uphold the public interest responsibilities of television news while being part and parcel of a commercial media industry that needs to remain financially viable.

Chapter Two addresses my next research question: *How does the television news series genre conceptualize the role that ratings play in the production of news?* I assert that the genre depicts television news' evergreen fixation on ratings numbers as a potentially dangerous preoccupation that could hinder the mission of television journalism serving the public interest. In their need to maintain and attract audiences, along with an impetus to compete with a rising tide of soft and tabloid news, journalists and leaders of television news often go too far in making changes to their broadcasts in the name of 'giving the people what they want,' trickling into infotainment and thus putting the informational mission of the news at risk. In a similar

fashion to the genre's depiction of the political economy of television news, ideological debates that otherwise exist as abstractions for television audiences are made concrete through narrative conflicts between characters over the degree to which ratings should be taken into consideration when crafting news coverage.

In Chapter Three I address the research question: *How does the television news series genre utilize ideas of journalistic professionalism as part of its narratives?* I explore how television news series highlight the importance of professionalism, portraying ethical standards and practices that are meant to be adhered to not merely as a set of rules but as an integral part of the identity of television journalists themselves, an identity that has been carefully cultivated over time. In devoting many of its narratives to characters who are faced with the choice of breaking the principles they are supposed to be upholding, the genre reinforces the crucial value of professionalism to television journalism. Stories where characters are faced with various political, professional, and physical dangers serve a dual purpose of creating narrative tension while exploring abstract ideas about how journalists should carry out their job functions. The genre depicts professionalism as potentially under threat, both due to the overall political economic pressures of the television news industry, and more specifically the need to create journalism in an environment where ratings numbers are a constant concern.

Chapter Four addresses my final research question: *How does the television news series genre engage with the concept of the anchor as a central figure of news?* I argue that through the dramatization of the working lives of anchors, television news series work to deconstruct the public face of television news operations. By playing with audience expectations of the traditional roles, appearances, and modes of address of anchors, the genre illustrates how the anchor figure has changed over time. In some cases, the loss of these traditions is lamented,

while in others it is fuel for satire that critiques why these traditions came to exist in the first place. Part and parcel of this critique is the depiction of women who work as news anchors, spotlighting the specific expectations and struggles that they have historically faced—and continue to face—in a job that is largely viewed by the public as a male domain. Through narratives about anchors, the genre explores the ways in which ideas about audience preferences, along with the orthodoxies of the television industry, continues to inform ideas about who and what an anchor should be.

Literature Review

“Our job isn’t tracking down clues, or meeting mysterious sources, it’s saying stuff on TV that people already read on the internet.”

—*The Breakdown* executive producer Greg Walsh, *Great News*⁸

In this section, I will provide a brief overview of literature by scholars of television and journalism that is relevant to my research, focusing on three main areas. The first deals with the cinematic depiction of journalists, a genre that is both forerunner and parallel to television news series. Taken together, these films depict journalism as a noble, almost mythical profession that fights against internal and external pressures to serve a crucial role in democratic society. Drawing on traditional cinematic tropes of good and evil, such movies set up a binary between heroic journalists who uphold ethical principles and villainous journalists who flout or disregard rules in the name of career advancement. Second, I focus on the depiction of institutions on television. The portrayal of professionals who work in industries which serve the public, most

⁸ *Great News*, season 1, episode 8, “Celebrity Hacking Scandal,” directed by Gail Mancuso, written by Tracey Wigfield, Dan Klein, and Ashley Wigfield, featuring Briga Heelan, Andrea Martin, and Adam Campbell, aired May 16, 2017, on NBC.

notably law enforcement and medicine, has long been a staple of television programming. Such depictions are important because they can influence the public's view of these institutions and the people who work within them. The third area composes literature specifically focused on television's portrayal of television news. In a similar fashion to medical or police dramas, through their dramatization of timely issues that are germane to the television news industry, television news series impact attitudes and perceptions of journalism as both a profession and an institution. These portrayals overlap with an increasing public desire to explore the means by which journalism is produced.

Journalism in the Cinema

Across American film, the fictionalization of the journalistic profession has been a repeated source of drama. Matthew C. Ehrlich identifies journalism movies “as a distinct genre that embodies myths colored by nostalgia and that addresses contradictions at the heart of both journalism and American culture.”⁹ These films regularly find journalism lacking in its social responsibilities, due either to an excessive focus on profit, timidity in the face of powerful interests, or a combination of both. Via the cynical pursuit of ratings and circulation, journalism is often depicted as facing a crisis of identity or, in some cases, outright extinction.¹⁰ Yet while cinematic representations of journalism repeatedly depict the profession's “failings and black eyes,” the genre ultimately portrays the press as “powerfully exciting and important,” a portrait that Ehrlich argues is “not far removed from journalism's fondest self-conceptions.”¹¹ These stories reproduce powerful myths about the centrality of the press to a functioning democratic society—it is always “at the heart of things and always makes a difference.” Even when the

⁹ Matthew C. Ehrlich, “Studying Journalism Through Movies,” in *Journalism in the Movies* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁰ Ehrlich “Studying Journalism Through Movies,” 1.

¹¹ *Ibid* 6

journalist is depicted as having lost their ability to “stick up for the little guy, uncover the truth, and serve democracy,” these abilities are portrayed as being “true once upon a time and someday could be true again.”¹² Taken together, Hollywood films about the press stress “that journalism can and should be performed well and that the press is essential to American life and democracy.”¹³

In his book on how journalists are portrayed in film, Brian McNair identifies two kinds of films about journalists: primary representations and secondary representations. In primary representations, journalists and journalism are the main subject and form the basis of the cinematic narrative. These films deal with the day-to-day work of journalists, and often engage with larger questions of the role of journalism in a democratic society. They are often dramatizations of the work of real-life journalists, such as *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula, 1976) and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Terry Gilliam, 1998). Primary representations can also deal with fictional journalists, such as *True Crime* (Clint Eastwood, 1999) and *Lions for Lambs* (Robert Redford, 2007). In secondary representations, journalists are central characters, but the work of journalism is a peripheral element of the story. In these kinds of films, journalism functions largely as a plot device that is integral to the life issues that characters face inside or outside their work environment. The journalists in secondary representations are almost always entirely fictional characters, and these films “often have insightful, humorous and thought-provoking observations to make about journalism, but they are incidental rather than core to the plot.” Examples of secondary representations include *L.A. Confidential* (Cameron Crowe, 1997) and *Dan in Real Life* (Peter Hedges, 2007).¹⁴

¹² Ibid 1.

¹³ Ibid 2.

¹⁴ Brian McNair, *Journalists in Film: Heroes and Villains* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press: 2010), 30-31, 40-41.

Movies about journalism run across a broad range of cinematic genres and formats, which influence the ways in which individual films approach their representations of the work of journalism. McNair provides a useful overview of this diversity of storytelling approaches. Dramas such as *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) deal with complex issues of journalism in a serious manner. In comedies such as *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (Adam McKay, 2004), complex issues of journalism are often present but take a backseat to the “comic interplay of the stars” of the film. Satires like *Network* (Sidney Lumet, 1976) utilize exaggeration and ironic humor to comment on complex issues of journalism. Thrillers such as *Zodiac* (David Fincher, 2007) position the journalist as a kind of detective, portraying exciting, often real-life tales of journalistic investigation, discovery, cover-up, or confrontation. Bio-pics like *Good Night, and Good Luck*. (George Clooney, 2005) are stories based on the lives of actual journalists—in these films the potency of the lead performer’s personality is the main driving force of the narrative. The final genre where journalism regularly appears in cinema is the action hero movie, most notably in the long-running *Superman* and *Spider-Man* franchises, where superheroes have day jobs in journalism.¹⁵

McNair posits that the cinema tends to portray journalists as either heroes or villains. “The balance of good and evil in journalism movies,” McNair argues, is split between “foreign correspondents and investigative reporters, good; tabloid hacks, celebrity interviewers, paparazzi and other agents of the gutter press, bad.”¹⁶ In a similar vein, Ehrlich argues that movies about journalism feature “competing myths” of two character types: the outlaw journalist and the official journalist. Both are overwhelmingly male and can exist in heroic or villainous modes. In the heroic mode, the outlaw is a renegade who shares traits of the “wanderers and loners” of

¹⁵ McNair, *Journalists in Film*, 31-35.

¹⁶ *Ibid* 51.

American popular culture. He is fiercely independent and views society as inherently corrupt and unchangeable, shunning sanctioned rules in favor of adhering to his own code of morality. By contrast, the official journalist displays heroic traits by working tirelessly within the institutional boundaries of the press as a “dedicated public servant” who believes that careful investigation and reporting of the truth can root out corruption and lead to substantive changes for the betterment of society. In their respective villainous modes, the outlaw journalist represents a threat to conventional morality and social order who is only concerned with his own career or financial advancement, while the official journalist works as an instrument of a vastly powerful and immoral media establishment.¹⁷

Professions and Institutions on Television

The medium of television has long offered fictional depictions of institutions and professions. As David Morley has argued, the meaning of any television text involves its encounters with certain sets of discourses, and these meetings can restructure both the text itself as well as the discourses with which the text interacts.¹⁸ While the meaning of a text is never wholly predetermined, texts are typically “structured in dominance,” featuring a preferred reading inscribed by its producers. Attention must be paid to the overall messaging of a program, as this can reveal the ways in which producers attempt to transmit dominant ideologies and discourses to viewers.¹⁹ This is particularly true in dramatizations of professions and industries, where character types, themes, storylines, and other elements are frequently drawn from real-world issues and themes. Indeed, as Stuart Hall asserts, while the ultimate shape of a

¹⁷ Ehrlich, “Studying Journalism Through Movies,” 8-9.

¹⁸ David Morley, *Television, Audiences & Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 80.

¹⁹ David Morley, “Audience Research: The Traditional Paradigms,” in *The Nationwide Television Studies*, David Morley and Charlotte Brunsdon (New York: Routledge, 1999), 129.

television program is determined by its producers, it draws its topics from the larger society.²⁰ In this respect, television constitutes a “cultural forum,” a concept put forth by Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch. In this paradigm, television programs engage in a “social construction and negotiation of reality,” contributing to broader discussions of norms and issues that are germane to the time period in which they are produced.²¹

The depiction of institutions is a central part of television’s programming strategy, with law enforcement and medicine the two most commonly represented. Medical dramas, such as *ER* (NBC, 1994-2009) and *Grey’s Anatomy* (ABC, 2005-Present), and police dramas, including *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987) and *The Shield* (2002-2008), comprise some of television’s most notable critical and popular successes. In these series, program producers make choices to highlight particular aspects and forms of labor within a given institution. Such choices are significant because they can have consequences for how that institution is perceived by the public. The fact that television programs favor the depiction of certain kinds of jobs over others, John Fiske and John Hartley argue, is not necessarily a distortion of reality, but rather “an accurate symbolic representation of the esteem with which a society like ours regards such positions and the people who hold them.”²² For example, medical dramas, as Joseph Turow points out in his book on television’s depictions of medicine, overwhelmingly focus on hospital-based physicians who successfully treat acute illnesses with the latest equipment and medicine, while the work of nurses, orderlies, and other healthcare professionals are less often a focal point.²³ By providing viewers with certain kinds of images and stories about the people

²⁰ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding,” in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, 2nd edition, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 138.

²¹ Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch, “Television as a Cultural Forum,” in *Television: The Critical View*, ed. Horace Newcomb (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 563, 565.

²² John Fiske & John Hartley, *Reading Television 2nd edition* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 11.

²³ Joseph Turow, *Playing Doctor: Television, Storytelling, and Medical Power*, 2nd edition (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2010): 2-3.

who work in the healthcare system—a complex institution that the public engages with regularly—medical dramas can contribute to public perceptions about how that system functions.²⁴

Likewise, in his book on television’s portrayals of law enforcement, Jonathan Nichols-Pethick argues that police dramas “play a vital role in the way we understand and engage issues that most of us otherwise experience only in such abstractions as laws and crime statistics.”²⁵ Taking their themes, topics, and generic conventions from larger cultural dialogues about crime, the series are put into conversation with current developments in policing.²⁶

Likewise, as Claudia Calhoun asserts in her book on the *Dragnet* franchise, the police procedural is “a genre of fictional, commercial media that nevertheless engages explicitly with the real-life politics of contemporary civic life.”²⁷ For example, the primary narrative concerns of 1980s police dramas, Nichols-Pethick asserts, were all drawn from contemporary issues around crime, including the economic decline of urban centers, the increased use of *Miranda* warnings, the modern victims’ rights movement, the rising popularity of community policing and the war on drugs. Television programs from this era saw their characters reacting and responding to, and working within or against these developments.²⁸ Police procedurals, Calhoun argues, serve a kind of pedagogical purpose, bringing television audiences “into the process of the investigation via privileged access to both the logical reasoning and the practical tools of professional investigators.”²⁹

²⁴ Turow, *Playing Doctor*, 1-2.

²⁵ Jonathan Nichols-Pethick, *TV Cops: The Contemporary American Police Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2012): 3.

²⁶ Nichols-Pethick 10.

²⁷ Claudia Calhoun, *Only the Names Have Been Changed: Dragnet, the Police Procedural, and Postwar Culture* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2022), 7.

²⁸ Nichols-Pethick 51.

²⁹ Calhoun, *Only the Names Have Been Changed*, 6.

Further, Turow argues that a “struggle over institutional images” is central to television’s depictions of professional environments,³⁰ as “telling stories about an institution is a way of sharing ideas about how the institution works.”³¹ Conflicts often arise between the producers of such television series and the people within the professions that are fictionalized. Leaders may be concerned that portrayals may not suit the needs of their institution, or that there was a lack of consultation with them over its depiction. Employees may dislike the way their profession is presented, or desire portrayals that are more closely aligned with the lived experiences of themselves and their colleagues.³² While institutional leaders may sometimes be consulted for input, the needs of the television industry have the greatest influence over the ultimate shape of the depictions.³³ For example, police dramas, as Nichols-Pethick points out, take timely issues around crime, filtering them through the needs of television genre and narrative to create stories based around individual characters.³⁴ In both police and medical dramas, the primary narrative thrust comes from how protagonists respond to working within the institution, not the workings of the institution itself. The former focuses on the interior lives of police and how the job interferes with or changes their personal goals, aspirations and outlooks, argues Nichols-Pethick.³⁵ The latter, Turow posits, emphasizes the angst that physicians feel as a result of making continuous personal sacrifices to maintain the well-being of their patients.³⁶

Television News Series

Television news series share many of the basic narrative conventions of police and medical dramas, adapting them to situations that are specific to television journalism. The genre

³⁰ Turow 11.

³¹ Ibid 5.

³² Ibid 9.

³³ Ibid 7.

³⁴ Nichols-Pethick 3.

³⁵ Ibid 50-51.

³⁶ Turow 341.

is durable and multifaceted, having been utilized in melodramas, multi- and single-camera sitcoms, and prestige dramas alike. These programs are a worthwhile object of study because—while hardly being mistaken by their audiences for real news—they represent one of the ways in which the public engages with journalism. As Chris Peters points out, since representations of news in popular culture help to shape public perception of journalism as an institution, the ways in which news operations are dramatized in fictional media can aid in understanding the complexities of television journalism as a social and cultural product.³⁷ In other words, in order for researchers to fully understand the ways in which journalism is conceptualized by the public, the types of media that are studied must be expanded beyond actual news texts to include fictional portrayals of journalists and news organizations. Fictional representations of television news matter because they have the potential to shape the way that people consume, think about, and engage with actual television news organizations and the people who work within them, as well as influencing attitudes and perceptions of journalism as a larger institution.

Fictional representations of news are ideal for exploring these functions of television. Such series, Michael Koliska and Stine Eckert argue, can work as “a cultural form of thinking about journalism during a time of turmoil,” wherein news outlets since the turn of the century have needed to continually justify their existence both economically and epistemologically in a rapidly shifting media environment.³⁸ Indeed, the genre dramatizes the material relations that characterize modern news production. This often involves an exploration of the limits of news divisions’ autonomy in relation to both internal forces, including station, network, or channel bureaucracies, and external forces, including the influence of sponsorship or advertising.

³⁷ Chris Peters, “Evaluating journalism through popular culture: HBO’s *The Newsroom* and public reflections on the state of news media,” *Media, Culture & Society* 37, no. 4 (2015), 605.

³⁸ Michael Koliska and Stine Eckert, “Lost in a house of mirrors: Journalists come to terms with myth and reality in *The Newsroom*,” *Journalism* 16, no. 6 (2014), 752.

In this way, the genre draws on Matt Carlson’s argument that contemporary journalism is “a sociotechnical accomplishment” that is the result of a combination of social and cultural forces and the technological capabilities of the medium in which news is gathered, produced, and presented.³⁹ In order to fully understand the ways in which journalistic authority operates, it is necessary to consider a broad vision of journalism that takes into account “the wider context in which news is produced and consumed.” This is linked to Peters’ assertion that, since representations of news in popular culture help to shape the public’s perception of the institution of journalism, it would be a mistake to treat such programs “as something separate from ‘real’ journalism.”⁴⁰ The ways in which news operations are dramatized can aid in understanding the complexities of television journalism as a social and cultural product.

A recent development within actual news organizations has been the rise of what Peters terms “metanarratives of journalism.” In this paradigm, news organizations have become more self-reflexive in presenting stories, while media audiences have gained greater awareness that the news is a product which results from a series of choices made by people, rather than being a purely objective transmission of facts. Drawing on the work of Karin Becker, Peters asserts that since the 1990s, “reflexive journalism” has become increasingly prominent in the U.S., since “part of journalistic coverage of events has become commentary on the coverage itself, which relies on metanarratives of journalism as part of these evaluations. The effect is an implicit acknowledgment to the public that the employees that comprise the news media play an active role in ‘making the news.’” In other words, there is a heightened desire on the part of audiences—and an increased willingness by news organizations—to explore the means by which

³⁹ Matt Carlson, *Journalistic Authority: Legitimizing News in the Digital Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 5-6.

⁴⁰ Peters 605.

journalism is produced. Despite this increase in reflexivity, what remains persistent is a utopian vision of the news based upon elements of the twentieth century “ideal of objectivity in Anglo-American journalism, such as balance, fairness, non-bias, independence, non-interpretation, and neutrality and detachment,” all of which are “lauded as hallmarks of professionalism.”⁴¹ Fictional programs about television news operations not only play out against this backdrop; they also make their own contributions to the metanarratives of journalism.

In the above section, I have provided a brief overview of how scholars of film, television, and journalism have articulated the significance of the fictional depiction of institutions. The literature has shown how cinematic portrayals of journalists build their narratives around conventional filmic tropes that set up clear lines of conflict, the ways in which television programs focused on the police and medical professions provide regularly updated takes on timely issues, and how series about television news are driven in part by a public desire to learn more about the production of journalism. In this dissertation, I build on this literature by looking holistically at television news series as a distinct genre of television programming that—while it is influenced by and draws on other kinds of filmic and televisual depictions—creates its own messages and meanings.

⁴¹ Peters 603, 606.

Sample & Classification

“People need to know what’s coming; news isn’t just the stuff you wanna hear.”

–*TMS* co-anchor Daniel Henderson, *The Morning Show*⁴²

While, as I have noted in the literature review, McNair identifies a two-tiered classification for films about journalists which separates the genre into primary and secondary representations, the classification of series about television news requires a more nuanced approach. In this section, I classify series about television news into three categories based on the regularity with which they deal with complex issues of the industry: primary television news representations, hybrid television news representations, and television news-adjacent representations. The characteristics that make up each category are by no means strict rules, and there are notable exceptions within each category. What follows is an explanation of each category, along with a brief synopsis of each of the programs I include in this dissertation.

⁴² *The Morning Show*, season 2, episode 3, “Laura,” directed by Lesli Linka Glatter, written by Kerry Ehrin, Jay Carson, and Brian Chamberlayne, featuring Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, and Billy Crudup, aired October 1, 2021, on AppleTV+.

Table 1: Sample of Television News Series

Series	Outlet	Years	Format	Category
<i>The Mary Tyler Moore Show</i>	CBS	1970-1977	Comedy	Hybrid
<i>Murphy Brown</i>	CBS	1988-1998, 2018	Comedy	Hybrid
<i>WIOU</i>	CBS	1990-1991	Drama	Primary
<i>Live Shot</i>	UPN	1995	Drama	Primary
<i>LateLine</i>	NBC	1998-1999	Comedy	Hybrid
<i>Sports Night</i>	ABC	1998-2000	Comedy- Drama	Primary
<i>Back to You</i>	Fox	2007-2008	Comedy	Adjacent
<i>The Newsroom</i>	HBO	2012-2014	Drama	Primary
<i>Being Mary Jane</i>	BET	2013-2019	Drama	Hybrid
<i>The Michael J. Fox Show</i>	NBC	2013-2014	Comedy	Adjacent
<i>Blunt Talk</i>	Starz	2015-2016	Comedy	Hybrid
<i>Great News</i>	NBC	2017-2018	Comedy	Hybrid
<i>The Morning Show</i>	AppleTV+	2019-Present	Drama	Primary
<i>Kenan</i>	NBC	2021-2022	Comedy	Adjacent
<i>Firefly Lane</i>	Netflix	2021-2023	Drama	Adjacent

Primary Television News Representations

In primary television news representations, nearly all episodes in the series are set within the workplaces of television news and engage in a sustained way with the industry and its issues. Occasional episodes are focused on the personal lives of the main characters outside of the

workplace, but on the whole the television news environment forms the central narrative arc of the series. When episodes do focus on the outside lives of characters, their personal problems tend to interact fairly heavily with their jobs. Involvement in the industry is central to the development of the main characters, virtually all of whom are employed in television news in one role or another. Performers typically comprise an ensemble cast, with one or two central protagonists anchoring the series. Primary representations are typically hour-long dramas, and adhere to the conventions of prestige television, including high production value and a single-camera shooting style. While they depict a variety of news formats, they are typically set in large American cities. The five primary representations I will be exploring in this dissertation are *WIOU* (CBS, 1990-1991), *Live Shot* (UPN, 1995), *Sports Night* (ABC, 1998-2000), *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012-2014), and *The Morning Show* (AppleTV+, 2019-Present).

WIOU, created by John Eisendrath and Kathryn Pratt, is set at the news division of WNDY, a struggling local television station in an unnamed American city. The series focuses on the budget shortfalls that often beset local news, how the staff deals with ethical dilemmas that arise when reporting stories, and the balance between hard and soft news. The pilot episode sees Hank Zaret (John Shea), who got his start as an intern at WNDY, returning to the station to serve as news director alongside executive producer Liz McVay (Mariette Hartley). The station's co-anchors are Neal Frazier (Harris Yulin) and Kelby Robinson (Helen Shaver).

Created by Steve Marshall and Dan Guntzelman, *Live Shot* centers on the staff at KXZX-3 Los Angeles *Re-Action News*. The series' plots often revolve around the newsroom staff negotiating the boundaries between serious reporting and tabloid news. The ensemble cast includes camera operator 'Fast' Eddie Santini (Michael Watson), audio technician Tommy Greer (Hill Harper), news director Alex Rydell (Jeff Yagher), producer Nancy Lockridge (Cheryl

Pollak), co-anchors Harry Chandler (David Birney) and Sherry Beck (Rebecca Staab), and reporters Liz Vega (Wanda De Jesus) and Ricardo Sandoval (Eddie Velez).

Created by Aaron Sorkin, *Sports Night* is set at a New York-based nightly sports news program, also called *Sports Night*,⁴³ that airs on the Continental Sports Channel (CSC). The series explores how the realities of commercial sports news—a genre often infused with entertainment value—conflict with journalistic principles. *SN* is anchored by Dan Rydell (Josh Charles) and Casey McCall (Peter Krause). The senior production staff includes managing editor Isaac Jaffe (Robert Guillaume), executive producer Dana Whitaker (Felicity Huffman), senior associate producer Natalie Hurley (Sabrina Lloyd), and associate producer and research analyst Jeremy Goodwin (Joshua Malina).

The Newsroom, also created by Sorkin, stars Jeff Daniels as Will McAvoy, the anchor and managing editor of the New York-based evening show *NewsNight with Will McAvoy* on the Atlantis Cable News (ACN) channel. The tension between public service and ratings forms the central conflict of *The Newsroom*'s narrative arc. The senior staff includes news division president Charlie Skinner (Sam Waterston), executive producer Mackenzie “Mac” McHale (Emily Mortimer), senior producer Jim Harper (John Gallagher Jr.), associate producer Maggie Jordan (Alison Pill), and ACN financial anchor and economist Sloan Sabbith (Olivia Munn).

Created by Jay Carson, *The Morning Show* stars Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon as Alex Levy and Bradley Jackson, the co-anchors of a morning news program also titled *The Morning Show*,⁴⁴ which airs on the UBA network. The series is inspired by CNN chief media correspondent Brian Stelter's 2013 book *Top of the Morning: Inside the Cutthroat World of*

⁴³ For the sake of clarity, from this point forward, I'll refer to the series itself as *Sports Night*, and the fictional news program as *SN*.

⁴⁴ For the sake of clarity, from this point forward, I'll refer to the series itself as *The Morning Show*, and the fictional news program as *TMS*.

Morning TV, which focuses on the behind-the-scenes dramas of network morning news. A major theme of the series is the tenuous relevance of broadcast news in an increasingly digital media landscape.

Hybrid Television News Representations

In hybrid television news representations, the overall story arc of the series is divided between the personal life of a central protagonist and their job in television news. As such, the setting is typically split between the television news workplace—typically the newsroom and broadcast studio—and the home of the protagonist. These kinds of series regularly engage with substantive issues of the industry, but a great deal of their episodes have little or nothing to do with television news. The personal character development and problems of the protagonist, whether inside or outside work, is a central focus. The main characters are typically composed of the protagonist’s co-workers, as well as their friends and family members who do not work in television news. There are six hybrid television news representations in my sample: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977), *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998, 2018), *LateLine* (NBC, 1998-1999), *Being Mary Jane* (BET, 2013-2019), *Blunt Talk* (Starz, 2015-2016), and *Great News* (NBC, 2017-2018).

Created by James L. Brooks and Allan Burns, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* stars Mary Tyler Moore as Mary Richards, associate producer of the six o’clock local news on WJM in Minneapolis. The series deals with the challenges that are germane to local news operations—such as repeated budget shortfalls and competition among other local stations—as well as exploring larger issues of the public interest and the constructedness of news personalities. The core staff of the six o’clock news includes producer Lou Grant (Edward

Asner), anchor Ted Baxter (Ted Knight), and head copywriter Murray Slaughter (Gavin MacLeod).

Murphy Brown, created by Diane English, stars Candice Bergen as the titular character, an investigative journalist and co-anchor of the Washington-based weekly newsmagazine *FYI*, which airs on a fictionalized version of CBS. The series often deals with the ethical and moral dilemmas of journalism, as well as portraying some of the ways in which a need for ratings can impact coverage decisions. *FYI* is run by executive producer Miles Silverberg (Grant Shaud), and Murphy is joined at the anchor desk by straight-laced television news veteran Jim Dial (Charles Kimbrough), investigative reporter Frank Fontana (Joe Regalbutto), and former Miss America Corky Sherwood (Faith Ford).

Created by Al Franken and John Markus, *LateLine* features an ensemble cast led by Franken as Al Freundlich, a correspondent for a Washington-based late night news program, also called *LateLine*, which airs on an unnamed broadcast network.⁴⁵ Highly satirical and often farcical, the series nevertheless deals with many substantive issues of television news, including the protection of sources and the industry's preoccupation with ratings and audience research. Key supporting characters include Freundlich's producer Gale Ingersoll (Megyn Price), executive producer Vic Kobb (Miguel Ferrer), and anchor Pearce McKenzie (Robert Foxworth).

Being Mary Jane, created by Mara Brock Akil, stars Gabrielle Union as Pauletta Patterson, known professionally as Mary Jane Paul,⁴⁶ the anchor of the afternoon cable show *TalkBack with Mary Jane Paul* on the Atlanta-based Satellite News Channel (SNC). The series highlights her struggles to climb the television news career ladder as a Black female anchor who

⁴⁵ For the sake of clarity, from this point forward I'll refer to the NBC series itself as *LateLine* and the fictional show-within-a-show as *LL*.

⁴⁶ The character is called Pauletta by her family, and Mary Jane by her friends and work colleagues. For the sake of clarity, from this point forward I will refer to her as Mary Jane.

wants to feature stories that are important to the Black community, and explores the tensions between her desire to build herself as a brand and her responsibilities as a journalist. Kara Lynch (Lisa Vidal) is Mary Jane's longtime producer and best friend.

Created by Jonathan Ames, *Blunt Talk* features Patrick Stewart as Walter Blunt, the anchor of an evening news and commentary show, also called *Blunt Talk*,⁴⁷ which airs on the fictional Los Angeles-based cable channel UBS. The series explores how Walter's public image of a straight-laced newsman clashes with the problems in his private life, and the ways in which television news personalities can act as advocates for social and political issues. The *BT* staff includes executive producer Rosalie Winter (Jacki Weaver), and producers Celia Havermeyer (Dolly Wells) and Jim Stone (Timm Sharp).

Created by Tracy Wigfield, *Great News* stars Briga Heelan as Katie Wendelson, a segment producer for *The Breakdown*, an afternoon news program that airs on the Secaucus, New Jersey-based MMN cable channel. The series deals with some of the major issues of contemporary television news, including the rise of digital media, ageism in the anchor chair, and the shifting balance between hard and soft news. *The Breakdown*, run by executive producer Adam Campbell (Greg Walsh), is co-anchored by veteran newsman and former network anchor Chuck Pierce (John Michael Higgins) and Portia Scott-Griffith (Nicole Richie).

Television News-Adjacent Representations

In television news-adjacent representations, the series are typically star vehicles that revolve around a central protagonist (or pair of protagonists) whose employment in television news is somewhat incidental to the series' overall narrative arc. The development and family problems of the protagonists form the central narrative concern of nearly all episodes.

⁴⁷ For the sake of clarity, from this point forward, I'll refer to the Starz series itself as *Blunt Talk*, and the fictional news program as *BT*.

Substantive engagement with issues of the television industry are rare, and when episodes do focus on these issues they mostly do so in the context of developing relationships between the characters. Friends and family are typically central characters, and play a greater role in the narrative than their counterparts in primary or hybrid representations. These series are a mixed bag of televisual formats, featuring a mix of single- and multi-camera shooting styles. There are four television news-adjacent series in my sample: *Back to You* (Fox, 2007-2008), *The Michael J. Fox Show* (NBC, 2013-2014), *Kenan* (NBC, 2021-2022), and *Firefly Lane* (Netflix, 2021-2023).

Created by Christopher Lloyd and Steven Levitan, *Back to You* is a comedy starring Kelsey Grammar and Patricia Heaton as Chuck Darling and Kelly Carr, the co-anchors of the local evening news on WURG in Pittsburgh. The series touches upon the generational differences in how television news should be approached, as well as the artifice of on-screen banter and chemistry between news anchors. WURG's news director is Ryan Church (Josh Gad), and its news team includes weather anchor Montana Diaz Herrera (Ayda Field), field reporter Gary Crezyzewski (Ty Burrell), and sports anchor Marsh McGinley (Fred Willard).

The Michael J. Fox Show, created by Will Gluck and Sam Laybourne, is a comedy starring Michael J. Fox as Mike Henry, an anchor and investigative reporter for a fictionalized version of WNBC (also known as 4 New York), a local station owned and operated by the NBC network. Despite many of its episodes being set in the newsroom and featuring Mike's boss Harris Green (Wendell Pierce) as a central character, the series only engages with substantive issues of television news on rare occasions. The main focus falls squarely on Mike's life with his wife and children as he adjusts to returning to work after a Parkinson's diagnosis, a storyline that mirrors Fox's own life.

Kenan, created by Jackie Clarke and David Caspe, is a comedy starring Kenan Thompson as Kenan Williams, the host of local morning show *Wake Up With Kenan* on WDTA Atlanta. Like other news-adjacent series, *Kenan*'s main focus is on the protagonist's family life. However, it engages issues of television news somewhat more regularly than other series in this category, including the often porous boundaries between news personalities' on-air personas and their personal lives, the divide between hard and soft news, and the significance of ratings. *Wake Up* is co-hosted by Tami Greenlake (Taylor Louderman) and run by executive producer Mika Caldwell (Kimrie Lewis).

Set in the Seattle area, the drama *Firefly Lane*, created by Maggie Friedman and based on the novel of the same name by Kristin Hannah, follows the lifelong friendship of Tully Hart (Katherine Heigl) and Kate Mularkey (Sarah Chalke). The series shifts between three eras of their lives, beginning with their teenage years in the 1970s. In the 1980s and early 1990s, they work in the newsroom of KPOC Tacoma: Tully as a reporter and later a weekend anchor, and Kate as a copywriter and producer. In the 2000s, Tully hosts *The Girlfriend Hour*, a nationally-syndicated talk show focused on conversations about women's issues, while Kate is making a return to the workforce after raising a family.

Regrettably, there were several other television news series that I could not include in my sample, due to the lack of accessibility of episodes during my research. These included *Mobile One* (ABC, 1975-1976), which focuses on an electronic news gathering unit at a Los Angeles station; *The American Girls* (CBS, 1978), which follows two reporters who travel across the U.S. for a weekly newsmagazine program; *Goodnight, Beantown* (NBC, 1983-1984), set at a local news division in Boston; *TV 101* (CBS 1988-1989), centered on a high school television news production class; and *Breaking News* (Bravo, 2002), which takes place at a 24-hour cable news

network in Milwaukee. My hope is that more of their episodes will become available for screening in the future.

Methodological Discussion

“Consultants just give advice and go home. Executive producers do the work and get the ulcers.”

–*FYI* executive producer Miles Silverberg, *Murphy Brown*⁴⁸

The primary research method I employed for this dissertation was a close qualitative textual analysis of television programming, which involves looking at specific television texts in a detailed and systematic way in order to discern both their meaning and the ways they engage with other texts and discourses. This kind of analysis of television, Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz point out, looks closely at what is inside the frame to study how meaning is created, treating everything as an intentional choice by the producers.⁴⁹ It is a method that, as John Fiske and John Hartley argue, is well-suited to understanding “what the language of television is saying to us.”⁵⁰ Likewise, Raymond Williams posits that a qualitative textual analysis can reveal how individual television programs function as communicative processes that draw from, create, contribute to, and maintain cultural patterns.⁵¹ For my purposes, it is also preferable to a quantitative content analysis, as it allows for an understanding of “the complex significance and subtleties” of television texts,⁵² and the ways in which they present “a constantly up-dated [sic]

⁴⁸ *Murphy Brown*, season 8, episode 6, “Miller’s Crossing,” directed by Joe Regalbuto, written by Diane English, Alana Sanko, and Marsha Myers, featuring Candice Bergen, Grant Shaud, and Faith Ford, aired October 23, 1995, on CBS.

⁴⁹ Jonathan Gray and Amanda Lotz, “Programs,” In *Television Studies*, 2nd ed. (Medford, MA: Polity, 2019), 33.

⁵⁰ Fiske and Hartley 7.

⁵¹ Raymond Williams, “The Analysis of Culture,” In *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader 5th edition*, ed. John Storey (New York: Routledge, 2019), 32.

⁵² Fiske and Hartley 21.

version of social relations and cultural perceptions.”⁵³ A qualitative analysis is appropriate for this project because it allows for depth, nuance, and attention to tensions and disagreements within and between texts, while quantitative analysis aims to produce higher-level generalizable claims.

This dissertation is also a work of genre analysis, which focuses on the similarities and differences within a family of programs that share certain traits or engage with similar issues. As Gray and Lotz argue, since any given program within a genre at least loosely follows a certain set of that genre’s rules and conventions, analyzing them as a group allows for making sense of “the world that those similarities and rules invoke.” They articulate that the analysis of genres at specific moments in time, and across time, can reveal “culturally ascendant, enduring, or retreating scripts, messages, or ideologies.” In the same way that series about the police suggest ways for audiences to think about criminality and law enforcement,⁵⁴ television news series invite viewers to consider certain sets of issues that exist at particular points in time within and around television journalism.

An important component of my close qualitative textual analysis of television news series is thematic analysis, which Nowell et al. articulate as a tool that identifies, analyzes, organizes, describes, and reports themes found in a given set of data.⁵⁵ In using this tool, I followed a set of six step-by-step guidelines laid out by the authors to ensure that my results were trustworthy. I first familiarized myself with my data through a detailed textual analysis of my episode sample, created a set of initial codes to provide a starting framework, searched for themes within the data,

⁵³ Ibid 5.

⁵⁴ Gray and Lotz, “Programs,” 57.

⁵⁵ Lorelli S. Nowell et al., “Thematic Analysis: Struggling to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* no. 16 (2017), 2.

reviewed the themes that I had found, defined and named those themes, and finally reported the results of my analysis in the pages of this dissertation in a transparent and detailed way.⁵⁶

As Morley points out, making sense of television's images and sounds requires an active process of decoding and interpretation.⁵⁷ While carrying out my close qualitative textual analysis of television news series, I remained cognizant of Gray and Lotz's assertion "that analysis is truly critical when it is open to exploring a wide variety of issues, when the analyst has been open to being surprised by his or her textual analysis, and hence when it leads its readers to a better understanding of the text and of how and why that text matters."⁵⁸ At the start of my textual analysis, I had no predetermined set of themes that I was looking for—rather, I allowed the themes to emerge in the process of my close reading of the texts themselves.

My research involved the screening of over 700 individual television episodes. This close qualitative textual analysis was a time-consuming process, but one that I was able to streamline through the application of an effective workflow. First, I screened each episode, compiling detailed handwritten notes in bullet-point format. These included observations such as how each episode presents certain issues and problems of television journalism, how the characters carry out their jobs within the constraints of the industry, the relationships between characters, and the overall style and production design of the series. A crucial component of the notetaking process was transcribing key quotes from characters, as well as the capturing of screen grabs, some of which are presented as visual aids throughout this dissertation.

Next, I transferred my handwritten bullet-point notes into a typed document, with each series having its own section under which notes from individual episodes were nested. This

⁵⁶ Nowell et al. 4.

⁵⁷ Morley, *Television, Audiences & Cultural Studies*, 76.

⁵⁸ Gray and Lotz 48.

allowed me to review the notes more thoroughly and systematically in one place—my handwritten notes had taken up about ten separate notebooks. Reviewing these notes, I then identified three broad themes that were present across the genre: *political economy* (the depiction of the economic and industrial conditions of the television news industry), *professionalism* (the depiction of the coverage decisions, standards, and moral and ethical values of television journalism), and *personality* (the depiction of how the on-air images of television news personalities are cultivated). Following this, I color-coded the notes: red for *political economy*, blue for *professionalism*, and purple for *personality*. I then copied and pasted the color-coded notes into a second document organizing them according to the three themes. This document was then organized into sub-themes within each of the three overall themes. Organizing the notes in this way allowed me to easily identify which episodes I need to return to for further analysis. As the process moved forward, it became clear that the political economy theme composed a larger share of content than the two other themes, and thus ultimately needed to be split into two chapters: one encompassing issues of the public interest and media ownership, and a second devoted specifically to the importance of ratings. The application of this system of note taking and categorization proved useful in streamlining not only the research process but also the subsequent drafting of the dissertation itself. In the subsequent chapters, I compile my research and analysis, demonstrating the importance of studying the genre of television news series.

CHAPTER ONE: POLITICAL ECONOMY

Introduction

“We only have to keep the stockholders happy, and that’s it.”

–TMS producer Chip Black, *The Morning Show*⁵⁹

Television news series are built on characters negotiating the shifting economic realities of the television news industry, the ground rules of which are informed by both state actors through regulations and public interest requirements, and by media owners who influence the ultimate shape of the product of news. Generally speaking, conceptions of how the news media function under capitalism fall into two paradigms: one in which journalism functions in a competitive marketplace which helps to foster democracy, and a contrasting point of view that sees journalism as an instrument of control that is wielded by powerful private interests. As television news operations have steadily shifted into becoming profit centers within the vast portfolios of media owners, they are often obliged to take into account the broader financial health of their parent companies when making coverage decisions. While media owners do not exert absolute control over the news, they have levers of power at their disposal that can guide the editorial decision-making process.

As Eileen R. Meehan articulates, in order to understand the products that television puts out, it is crucial to understand its workings as an industry. A central focus of this approach is to look at the ways in which the state, through legislation and regulation, fosters the conditions in which the television industry operates. The nature of television is informed by relationships

⁵⁹ *The Morning Show*, season 3, episode 1, “The Kármán Line,” directed by Mimi Leder, written by Kerry Ehrin Jay Carson, and Charlotte Stoudt, featuring Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, and Billy Crudup, aired September 23, 2013, on AppleTV+.

between state and corporate actors.⁶⁰ From the late twentieth century onwards, deregulatory policies have allowed for consolidated ownership to reign supreme in the television industry. Although there may be a proliferation of channels and content, true diversity is not achieved because outlets that outwardly appear to consumers as being distinct entities are owned by a very small number of companies.⁶¹ Further, there are powerful incentives for owners of television networks to work together to maintain the status quo of limited competition. Keeping a limited rivalry going means that, no matter who is winning the ratings war at any given moment, every competitor in this exclusive club stays highly profitable.⁶² Speaking specifically about television news, Meehan argues that the coverage that ultimately makes it to air is the result of industrial processes that structure how employees carry out their jobs.⁶³

As Steve McNair has outlined in his book on the sociology of journalism, there have historically been two competing paradigms that describe the ways in which commercial journalism operates in capitalist societies: the *competitive paradigm*, and the *dominance paradigm*. In the *competitive paradigm*, a diversity of media outlets engage in a free and open exchange of ideas that make possible a pluralistic society. The news media function as a “fourth estate” of independent power that serves as a watchdog over other powerful spheres. Privately-owned media gain journalistic independence by virtue of their non-reliance on the state for financial support, while the free market allows for the open competition of ideas. Commercial television news outlets are presented as being independent from the influence of

⁶⁰ Eileen R. Meehan, “Watching Television: A Political Economic Approach,” in *A Companion to Television*, edited by Janet Wasko (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 238, 240.

⁶¹ Meehan, “Watching Television,” 250.

⁶² Eileen R. Meehan, *Why TV is Not Our Fault: Television Programming, Viewers, and Who’s Really in Control* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 80-81.

⁶³ Meehan, *Why TV is Not Our Fault*, 4.

political parties, the government, and advertisers, and their avowed adherence to serving the public interest is positioned as key to maintaining a pluralistic liberal democracy.⁶⁴

By contrast, in the *dominance paradigm*, commercial journalism is conceived of as being utilized as a cultural apparatus by powerful members of a stratified society to maintain relations of subordination and domination via three mechanisms. The first is *economic control*, where a small number of wealthy individuals and groups own media institutions and thus have the power to discourage or shut down coverage that could criticize or damage their interests. Here, economic control is not limited to media owners, as anyone who has enough wealth and power can influence media through other channels such as advertising and public relations campaigns. Second is *political control*, where the legislative and regulatory structures of journalism are designed to cement the dominance of the wealthy and powerful. The third and final mechanism is *cultural control*, where, through either privileged upbringing or acculturation, a high number of journalists adhere to ideological systems that support the maintenance of dominant social and political structures.⁶⁵

McNair asserts that neither the competitive paradigm nor the dominance paradigm are sufficient to account for the complex ways that journalism operates in contemporary capitalist societies. While news media ownership remains concentrated, it is exceedingly difficult for any one ideology to remain dominant for any significant length of time. Liberal journalism is indeed biased toward capitalism, but not toward an unchanging capitalism where domination and subordination are rigidly fixed. A more accurate way to describe modern journalism, McNair argues, is a *chaotic flow* model in which ideas may “aspire to dominance but will not necessarily

⁶⁴ McNair, *The Sociology of Journalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 19-21.

⁶⁵ McNair, *The Sociology of Journalism*, 22-25.

achieve it” (emphasis in original).⁶⁶ Indeed, while media ownership and control translates into cultural power, the degree to which this occurs is challenging to precisely measure. Even though the extent of the effects that media has are unknown, the widely accepted fact that it has *some kind of effects* makes it a desirable property.⁶⁷

As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel articulate in their book, *The Elements of Journalism*, news in the twentieth century outwardly espoused a Platonic ideal of separation—a kind of “firewall between the news and the business side of news companies.” This notion was a “misguided metaphor,” encouraging a “willful ignorance” among journalists about the very industries they worked for, which often led to them being “outmaneuvered” by their corporate bosses. Further, if the two sides of this supposed firewall *are* indeed working at cross-purposes, “the journalism tends to be what gets corrupted.”⁶⁸ In the contemporary media landscape, the authors argue, it has become increasingly difficult for news to stand on its own as a viable business, and its production is synergistically bound up with a range of other products and services that make up the portfolios of new outlets’ parent companies.⁶⁹ Indeed, as Deborah L. Jaramillo points out in her book on cable news coverage of the early days of the Iraq War in 2003, television news cannot be separated from its context as part of the larger media industry.⁷⁰

Kovach and Rosenstiel point out that as economic efficiency evolved into a major concern in the wake of media competition and consolidation, news managers and producers increasingly came to be judged and compensated not based on the quality of their reporting but on how much their activities contributed to the larger well-being of the corporations of which

⁶⁶ Ibid 28-29, 31, 33.

⁶⁷ Ibid 102-03.

⁶⁸ Kovach, Bill, and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* 4th edition (New York: Crown, 2021) 85-86.

⁶⁹ Kovach and Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism*, 41.

⁷⁰ Deborah L. Jaramillo, *Ugly War, Pretty Package: How CNN and Fox News Made the Invasion of Iraq High Concept* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 22.

they are but one component.⁷¹ By the early twenty-first century, the majority of news executives worked under some form of Management by Objectives (MBO) program: a management strategy dating to the 1950s which set goals and attached rewards for achieving them as a way to coordinate and monitor productivity. This led to a kind of hierarchy of loyalty: reporters and editors were still committed to serving their audiences, but this was secondary to supporting corporate objectives.⁷² Put another way, as Jaramillo writes, “television news has transformed from a public service into a profit center that operates more or less overtly in the service of corporate parents.”⁷³

McNair asserts that there are two ways in which economic forces impact American journalism. The first is that the news is an industry with private ownership.⁷⁴ In the United States, public ownership of media is almost entirely eschewed, in part based on concerns that it could be turned into an apparatus of state power.⁷⁵ Owners are basically free to do with the news media as they wish, and their employees are subject to their power in the same way that an employee of any privately-owned company would be. Star personalities are sometimes able to use their reputations and notoriety as a currency to buy editorial autonomy. However, for the most part, media owners exercise “proprietary control” over journalistic output by appointing like-minded people in key management positions who, generally speaking, are there to carry out the will of their bosses. Even when prospective media buyers pledge that a news division will have editorial independence, these promises are hardly ever honored once a deal is closed and a new owner has officially taken the reins. The second element is the fact that journalism is a commodity for sale in a crowded information marketplace, and as such must provide a product

⁷¹ Kovach and Rosenstiel 68.

⁷² Ibid 82-83.

⁷³ Jaramillo, *Ugly War, Pretty Package*, 38.

⁷⁴ McNair, *The Sociology of Journalism*, 101.

⁷⁵ Ibid 92.

that is both useful and desirable for audiences.⁷⁶ This chapter will focus on the first element; I will be exploring the second in detail in the following chapter on the centrality of ratings numbers to television news.

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which television news series portray the political economy of television news through three major themes. First, the genre makes visible the somewhat abstract struggles around how the television news industry fulfills its responsibilities to serve the public interest while also remaining commercially viable. The genre engages with the ways in which television news media might adapt to a changing media landscape where, thanks in part to neoliberal economic policies, the concept of the public interest has become increasingly defined in terms of viewer choice in a competitive marketplace as opposed to a traditional conception of public service that puts the support of democracy front and center. Second, the genre sets up constant battles between television journalists and the owners and executives that comprise the bureaucracy of the television industry. On the whole, owners serve as the primary antagonists of the genre—they are sometimes portrayed as outright villains—who regularly make moves to compromise the quality of journalism to serve their own interests. Third, the genre deals with the anxiety that television news could potentially be taken over by large technology companies who in no way share the same values or commitment to public service that is espoused by journalists. These storylines, which are most prevalent in the respective third seasons of *The Newsroom* and *The Morning Show*, engage with the ways in which television news operations literally become saleable commodities that can be diminished or sacrificed altogether in service of profit for enormous corporations.

⁷⁶ Ibid 101-03, 107-08

Television News & The Public Interest

“There’s a difference between good television and journalism.”

–*Murphy in the Morning* co-anchor Murphy Brown, *Murphy Brown*⁷⁷

In her book on the public interest in American broadcasting, Allison Perlman identifies the public interest standard as “a discursive construction, something that is produced through social conflict over control of the airwaves rather than something that exists independent of power struggles. The public interest is not a singular, knowable thing. It is a device which reflects the interests of the person or community who invokes it.”⁷⁸ In the case of national broadcast news on television, both the definition of and execution of the public interest are informed by the organizational structures that undergird the news programs themselves. The flexibility of the standard is due in large part to its imprecise articulation by the federal government. The concept of the public interest emerged in the late 1920s and early 1930s as a vague standard against which the granting and renewal of broadcast licenses would be measured. The Radio Act of 1927 stipulated that, “If upon examination of any application for a station license or for the renewal or modification of a station license the licensing authority shall determine that *public interest, convenience, or necessity* would be served by the granting thereof, it shall authorize the issuance, renewal, or modification thereof in accordance with said finding” [emphasis added].⁷⁹ As Perlman argues, the Radio Act expressed an ideology that privileged the national and commercial over the local and noncommercial, reasoning that the public interest

⁷⁷ *Murphy Brown*, season 11, episode 1, “Fake News,” directed by Pamela Fryman, written by Diane English, Skander Halim, and Gina Ippolito, featuring Candice Bergen, Faith Ford, and Joe Regalbuto, aired September 27, 2018, on CBS.

⁷⁸ Allison Perlman, *Public Interests: Media Advocacy and Struggles Over US Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press), 7.

⁷⁹ “Radio Act of 1927,” in *Documents of American Broadcasting*, ed. Frank J. Kahn (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), 41-42.

was best served by the high technical quality that could be provided by well-resourced private stations.⁸⁰

While the Communications Act of 1934 employed slightly modified language, citing “the public interest, convenience, *and* necessity” [emphasis added],⁸¹ it left the qualifications that would fulfill the standard indistinct. These two pieces of legislation effectively placed the job of defining and executing the public interest in the hands of the broadcast industry. Such a stance would be consistently perpetuated as broadcasting developed. In 1946 the FCC published “Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees,” which stated that,

Primary responsibility for the American system of broadcasting rests with the licensees of broadcast stations, including the network organizations. It is to the stations and networks rather than to federal regulation that listeners must primarily turn for improved standards of program service. The Commission, as the licensing agency established by Congress, has a responsibility to consider overall program service in its public interest determinations, but affirmative improvement of program service must be the result primarily of other forces.⁸²

In other words, while the government held licensing authority based on a public interest standard, it fell to broadcasters to interpret what it meant to adhere to that standard.

Likewise, in a 1960 programming policy statement the FCC declared that “the principal ingredient” of the public interest obligation “consists of a diligent, positive, and continuing effort by the licensee to discover and fulfill the tastes, needs, and desires of his service area. If he has done this, he has met his public responsibility.”⁸³ Indeed, the document lays out a set of fourteen “major elements necessary to meet the public interest, needs and desires [...] as developed by the industry and recognized by the commission.” Programming types ranged broadly, from news

⁸⁰ Perlman, *Public Interests*, 15-16.

⁸¹ “Communications Act of 1934,” in *Documents of American Broadcasting*, 70

⁸² Federal Communications Commission, “Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees” (Washington: Federal Communications Commission, 1946), 54-55.

⁸³ “Report and Statement of Policy re: Commission en banc Programming Inquiry, FCC 60-970, July 29, 1960,” in *Documents of American Broadcasting*, 217.

and public affairs shows to sports coverage and entertainment. In effect, virtually any program could fulfill the public interest, as long as its airing was the result of the “honest and prudent judgments” of the licensee.⁸⁴ While the statement focuses primarily on the imperatives of individual stations, it cites network programming as constituting “an integral part of the well-rounded program service provided by the broadcast business in most communities.”⁸⁵ As in the Radio Act and Communications Act, the importance of nationally-focused broadcasting is given special consideration, lionizing commercial networks as exemplary caretakers of the public interest. This is consistent with federal policies that had given rise to a US broadcasting system that privileged high levels of latitude for commercial entities. The programming policy report illustrates how the FCC embraced its role as an instrument of soft power, arguing that an unclear public interest standard was in no way an impediment to its authority for enforcement.⁸⁶

Under the leadership of Newton Minow in the early 1960s the FCC would attempt to wield its licensing power more assertively. In May 1961 Minow, after barely two months as the commission’s chairman, addressed the National Association of Broadcasters. What would become known as the “Vast Wasteland” speech was an articulation of a more stringent definition of the public interest based on the difference between debasement and enrichment. Minnow posited that in the name of profit and ratings, television had trafficked far too heavily in the former while relegating the latter to the medium’s margins. “Your industry possesses the most powerful voice in America,” Minow argued. “It has an inescapable duty to make that voice ring with intelligence and with leadership...It is not enough to cater to the nation’s whims – you must

⁸⁴ The fourteen elements were as follows: Opportunity for Local Self-Expression, The Development and Use of Local Talent, Programs for Children, Religious Programs, Educational Programs, Public Affairs Programs, Editorialization by Licensees, Political Broadcasts, Agricultural Programs, News Programs, Weather and Market Reports, Sports Programs, Service to Minority Groups, and Entertainment Programming. “Report and Statement of Policy re: Commission en banc Programming Inquiry, FCC 60-970, July 29, 1960,” 219.

⁸⁵ Ibid 219.

⁸⁶ Ibid 215.

also serve the nation's needs." In addition to scolding broadcasters, the address treated television audiences with condescension and respect simultaneously; the majority of Americans had decidedly poor taste, yet they deserved better content, and it was up to broadcasters to provide it.⁸⁷ As Laurie Ouellette points out, the speech simply "dismissed popular genres instead of proposing creativity, diversity, and noncommercialism *within* them"; for Minow, "better television meant *upgraded* programs imbued with educated and masculine connotations, like legitimate plays and panel discussions" [emphasis in original].⁸⁸

The value of news programming to broadcast television, both in terms of serving the public interest and contributing to a network's brand image, is an important area of scholarly discourse. In his book on the early years of CBS News, Mike Conway points out that nightly newscasts were a way for networks to compete with and distinguish themselves from one another, a stance that was ramped up with the 1948 political conventions and presidential election night, which began an ongoing arms race for "more extensive coverage, technological innovations, journalistic scoops, and any other aspects that would give them bragging rights."⁸⁹ The networks would invest even more heavily in television news throughout the 1950s and 60s – with CBS and NBC expanding their nightly newscasts from 15 to 30 minutes in 1963 – burnishing their images in the wake of the quiz show scandals, which involved game show producers providing secret assistance to certain contestants.⁹⁰ While the FCC made no specific provisions requiring news on broadcast television, there was implicit pressure within its rules that such programming was key to ensuring license renewals. Since the FCC "did not investigate

⁸⁷ Newton Minow, "Television and the Public Interest: delivered 9 May 1961, National Association of Broadcasters, Washington, DC," <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/newtonminow.htm>.

⁸⁸ Laurie Ouellette, *Viewers Like You? How Public Television Failed the People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 32.

⁸⁹ Conway, *The Origins of Television News in America*, 250.

⁹⁰ *Ibid* 301.

the quality or amount of money invested” in early television news efforts, many of these programs were bare-bones affairs, produced simply to stay in the good graces of the government body.⁹¹

The FCC has sometimes made more assertive suggestions as to how the public interest can be served by news and public affairs programming. In “Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees,” news is positioned as a potentially lucrative enterprise as well as a matter of national service upon which the survival of democracy depends. The report, released shortly after World War II, cites how the genre has “achieved a popularity exceeding the popularity of any other single type of program,” and that “if broadcasters face the crucial problems of the post-war years with skill, fairness, and courage, there is no reason why broadcasting cannot play as important a role in our democracy hereafter as it has achieved during the war years.”⁹² Here, news is positioned as a marketable product that can make and keep broadcasting vital to the everyday lives of American citizens. “Probably no other type of problem in the entire broadcasting industry,” the report goes on to state, “is as important, or requires of the broadcaster a greater sense of objectivity, responsibility, and fair play.”⁹³ For networks, the establishment of national news operations emerged as a solution to meeting the public interest obligations of their affiliate stations, keeping the FCC satisfied, and generating viewership, pride and prestige.

The responsibility of television news as a means of fostering democracy by providing the public with timely and relevant information is explored by *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in “The Snow Must Go On.” The episode is set during election night in Minneapolis, for which WJM is airing special coverage from its studio. For the first time since she was hired as associate

⁹¹ Ibid 260.

⁹² “Public Service Responsibility of Broadcast Licensees” 39.

⁹³ Ibid 40.

producer, Lou Grant has decided to give Mary Richards authority over the show, which makes Mary extremely nervous. In an added bit of complexity, the city also happens to be experiencing a severe blizzard, which knocks out the telephone line that is providing the newsroom with election returns, effectively paralyzing the broadcast. The results of the mayoral contest are stuck on “Turner 85, Mitchell 23” for hours, but Lou reminds Mary that WJM still has to provide election night coverage even if it has no information coming in because this was contractually promised to sponsors. If the station were to switch to alternate programming, WJM would be in breach of that contract—the advertisements would still run but the station could not collect any fees from airing them.⁹⁴



Figure 1: In *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, Mary Richards pushes for reporting accurate election results.⁹⁵

Needing to “stay on the air until a winner is declared,” Ted Baxter is forced to vamp for hours, leaving him exhausted. His spirits are lifted during a commercial break, when he tunes

⁹⁴ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 1, episode 8, “The Snow Must Go On,” directed by Jay Sandrich, written by James L. Brooks, Allan Burns, and David Davis, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Edward Asner, and Valerie Harper, aired November 7, 1970, on CBS.

⁹⁵ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, “The Snow Must Go On.”

into competing local station Channel 3, and gleefully reports back to Mary, Murray Slaughter, and the rest of the newsroom staff:

Ted: Hey, listen, everybody! Channel 3 just predicted Turner a winner, and signed off!

All we have to do is declare Turner a winner, and we can all go home!

Mary: No, hold it, hold it just a minute.

Murray: What was that?

Mary: That was “hold it just a minute.” We can’t go on with that information. It’s not official.

Murray: It’s official enough for me.

Mary: Murray, no. We have an obligation.

Murray: Mary, all those people out there are sleeping. I feel no obligation to sleeping people.

Mary: Well, I’m sure at least Turner and Mitchell aren’t sleeping; it wouldn’t be right, it would be dishonest.

As a journalistic outlet, Mary believes that WJM has a mandate to report accurate election results that can be independently verified—simply parroting Channel 3’s projections without having any information of their own would constitute a betrayal of their audience. Her stand is rooted in the concept that the public interest is about serving news viewers first and foremost as citizens. Ted insists that he will announce Turner as the winner, assuming that his authority as lead anchor will make Mary capitulate to him. This proves to be a miscalculation, as Mary quickly responds that she will fire Ted if he does not follow her instructions; Ted quickly backs down.⁹⁶

The incident serves as a crucial means of character development—Mary had been hesitant in leading her first broadcast, but when push comes to shove she is able to assert herself to maintain the public interest. The broadcast continues to run into the wee hours of the morning until another WJM employee, Chuckles the Clown (Richard Schaal), arrives at the studio in full costume to shoot his regularly-scheduled children’s program. Chuckles shows Mary that morning’s newspaper: Turner has officially conceded and Mitchell has been elected mayor of

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Minneapolis. With Ted exhausted, Mary asks Chuckles to announce the news live on-air, ending the marathon coverage. Mary's principled stand, which she always believed was the right thing to do, turned out to save WJM from making an inaccurate election call that would have damaged the news division's credibility with the public.⁹⁷

During the 1980s and 1990s, the public interest standard became the subject of renewed debate as the FCC moved to embrace neoliberal economic policies ushered in by the administrations of Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. Perlman argues that while these policies were touted as deregulation, they can be more accurately described as an alternative model of regulation, one committed to sanctifying the property rights of corporations, preserving the previously awarded advantages to players within various economic sectors, and imagining consumer behavior as the best arbiter for determining the public good. Within this regulatory paradigm the circulation of diverse programming was imagined as something that a robust marketplace yields, not an actionable public interest goal.⁹⁸

Indeed, during this timeframe there were voices within the industry whose ideas about the public interest were informed by the conception of broadcasting primarily as a private enterprise, the rights of which should not be impeded. In this milieu, there were voices that posited that a public interest standard for broadcasting should not exist at all, as it placed limitations on commercial broadcasters' abilities to compete in the marketplace. One such opinion came in 1988 from commercial broadcasting executive Ted L. Snider, whose holdings at that time included the Arkansas Radio Network. Snider rejected the concept that the American people own the broadcast spectrum, arguing that unlike the technological infrastructure used to access them, the airwaves are a non-ownable entity that cannot be depleted and thus have no intrinsic

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Perlman 98.

worth. Within this context, Snider argued, broadcasting is subject to an unfair standard that is not applied to other industries that serve the public, which are only required to adhere to minimum technical standards of operation. The imposition of a public interest standard was thus unconstitutional, Snider posited, as it afforded the government the power to “invoke its will on” programming, limiting freedom of speech rights afforded under the First Amendment.⁹⁹ Snider’s line of reasoning was consistent with the “marketplace approach to regulation”¹⁰⁰ that became the dominant framework within which the broadcast industry continues to operate to the present day.

This philosophy became codified with the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996. As Katherine Cramer Brownell points out in her compelling book on the importance of politics to the development of cable news, while the Communications Act of 1934 had fostered the conditions for a commercial, rather than a public service broadcasting system, it had also mandated that the privately-owned media monopolies that would emerge promote the public interest. While this did give way to a flawed system that elevated a fairly narrow approach to current events skewed toward a white, male, elitist point of view, the 1996 legislation “eliminated any public interest requirements, allowing private businesses to focus merely on providing consumer choice without any expectation or incentives to create tools or programs that informed citizens.” The cultural consequence of deregulation, Brownell argues, was a television industry which served “a public appetite for entertainment and distraction,” and that treated news programming as “a market commodity, not a civic necessity.”¹⁰¹

Murphy Brown deals with the struggle to uphold journalistic standards to serve the public interest in the face of cost-cutting by its corporate parent. In “Terror on the 17th Floor,” the CBS

⁹⁹ Ted L. Snider, “Serving the Public Interest,” in *Public Interest and The Business of Broadcasting: The Broadcast Industry Looks at Itself*, ed. John T. Powell and Wally Gair (New York: Quorum Books, 1988), 88-91.

¹⁰⁰ Perlman 98.

¹⁰¹ Kathryn Cramer Brownell, *24/7 Politics: Cable Television & the Fragmenting of America from Watergate to Fox News* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023), 299-302.

network is purchased by American Industrial, a conglomerate that manufactures a range of products including home appliances, military weapons, and frozen foods. The company sends in its in-house “management specialist” Barbara Boyle (Nancy Youngblut) to study the news division and find ways to “streamline” the network. “It just means a little budget adjusting, trimming the fat,” says Boyle, insisting on a twenty-five percent cut across the board. In a move that illustrates how executives are never willing to make any real sacrifices to their own working conditions, compensation or perks, news division head Gene Kinsella (Alan Oppenheimer) proudly offers to cancel his subscription to *TV Guide*, as if giving up a seventy-five cent-per-week magazine will lift an enormous weight from the network’s balance sheet. Boyle’s list of cuts range from petty nickel-and-dime that includes forcing newsroom staff to log all personal telephone calls so they can be billed to employees, to changes that have a material impact on newsgathering and production such as a refusal to give Frank Fontana a proper disguise budget for his undercover reporting, and the firing of a camera crew.¹⁰²

Incensed that Boyle’s cuts are having a material impact on the quality of *FYI*’s journalism and the livelihoods of the people who work on the show, Murphy travels with Miles Silverberg to American Industrial headquarters in New York. They are met with a conference room full of interchangeable, thirty-something, Ivy League-educated white men, all of whom have a vice president title. These corporate lackeys suggest even more ridiculous and draconian measures than Boyle. How about *FYI* cutting expenses by travelling only on cheaper days of the week? Miles points out that news events cannot be scheduled around convenient travel days. Last year, he says, *FYI* produced an award-winning story that the public needed to know about cracks in an

¹⁰² *Murphy Brown*, season 3, episode 17, “Terror on the 17th Floor,” directed by Barnet Kellman, written by Diane English, Sy Dukane, and Denise Moss, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired February 18, 1991, on CBS.

Alaska oil pipeline, and needed to fly across the continent to report it. Nix the travel altogether, the VPs suggest: just put a reporter in a parka, stand them in front of a photo of a pipeline and add in some fake snow! “This is the news,” exclaims an exasperated Miles, “not a Steven Spielberg movie!”¹⁰³ For American Industrial, cutting corners, even if it impacts the quality of coverage, is a worthwhile undertaking. News is not a public good but just one more consumer product in the corporation’s wide-ranging portfolio that should be produced as cheaply as possible so that it can generate the maximum amount of profit. In pushing back on this philosophy, Miles is asserting that news is a necessary public service that needs proper resources in order to serve the public interest.

With Murphy and Miles’ visit to New York winding up as a futile exercise, they invite the executives to visit *FYI* in Washington to see for themselves the value of investing in the CBS news division. During the tour, Jim Dial makes an impassioned appeal, stressing that “News is a sacred obligation to serve the common good. To inform and educate, to uplift, and in some cases, shame. And the day that we’re judged solely on profit is the day the death knell sounds on the free and open exchange of ideas that we call a democracy, and I for one cannot stand on the sidelines and watch that happen.” One of the VPs seems to thoughtfully consider Jim’s argument, and asks Boyle what she makes of it. “Because of my budget cuts,” Boyle flatly replies, “we’re projecting a third-quarter profit of three million dollars.” Once the group hears that number, it is as if Jim never said anything at all—the bottom line is the only thing that matters, and they celebrate with cheers and fist pumps, exclaiming that their work is done. Yet shortly after they board the elevator to go downstairs, the car gets stuck between floors; one of Boyle’s cost-saving moves was to fire members of the building maintenance staff. Seeing a

¹⁰³ *Murphy Brown*, “Terror on the 17th Floor.”

chance to turn the tables on Boyle, Murphy yells down to the gaggle of VPs: maybe Barbara is too expensive, you think? After a quick deliberation, they fire Boyle on the spot, effectively axing the ax-woman.¹⁰⁴

Jim's earnest monologue espouses a vision of the public interest that rests on broadcasting having a responsibility to foster the democratic process through reasoned and factual reporting. His stance seems to take cues from the mission of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) which, by comparison to U.S. television, codifies a more explicit definition of the public interest that is based on the principles of "inform, educate and entertain."¹⁰⁵ Jim's monologue is a subtle reminder that the commercially-dominated U.S. broadcast industry is an outlier among Western democracies, most of which have broadcasting systems that are based primarily on public service. It also calls back to Edward R. Murrow's address at the 1958 convention of the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA), in which Murrow warned that American television, in its ever-advancing creep toward commercialism, was shirking its public service responsibilities. "This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and even it can inspire," Murrow said. "But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise, it's nothing but wires and lights in a box."¹⁰⁶ The echoing of Murrow in this episode speaks to one of the ways in which television news series yearn for an idealized, mythical past of television journalism, an idea I will explore more fully in Chapter Four. The ending of "Terror on the 17th Floor" drives home that, although Murphy and the *FYI* team may have obtained a small victory in getting Boyle canned, their work is going to keep being constrained by short-sighted financial decisions made at the corporate level.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ British Broadcasting Corporation, "Mission, values, and public purposes," About the BBC. <https://www.bbc.com/aboutthebbc/governance/mission>.

¹⁰⁶ Radio Television Digital News Association, "Murrow's Famous 'Wires and Lights in a Box,'"

¹⁰⁷ *Murphy Brown*, "Terror on the 17th Floor."

The Newsroom also engages with the limitations of producing public interest journalism within the commercial television system. In the series' first episode, "We Just Decided To," Mac McHale and Will McAvoy have a vigorous conversation about the contribution that a revamped *News Night* could make in improving the American political climate. News, Mac insists, is crucial to democracy, and providing more substantive coverage will give viewers the information they need to fully participate in civic society. Will argues that Mac is being unrealistic: for one thing, the show airs on ad-supported television; further, the political polarization that has been on the rise during the Obama era has made it virtually impossible for any television news outlet to cover politics and current events in a substantive way. If they were to produce a more thorough and comprehensive show, it would likely drive away viewers. Mac counters that she would rather be doing a good show for a hundred people than a mediocre show for millions. Even if we only reach five percent of people, she asserts, that could be enough to swing public discourse one way or another in a divided nation.¹⁰⁸

Mac's argument seems to ignore the realities of how news operates on cable. As Travis Vogan points out, as the cable industry experienced exponential growth in the 1980s, it became crucial for each cable network to develop a strong, distinctive, and recognizable brand.¹⁰⁹ For cable news this meant, as Michael Curtin and Jane Shattuc argue in their book on the U.S. television industry, "the branding of political difference," with each network setting its own brand based on liberal, middle-of-the-road, or conservative points of view.¹¹⁰ Cable news, Brownell has shown, evolved as counterprogramming to the mainstream journalistic values of network television news operations.¹¹¹ Its ability for "narrowcasting" to specific audiences could

¹⁰⁸ *The Newsroom*, season 1, episode 1, "We Just Decided To," directed by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher Jr., aired June 24, 2012, on HBO.

¹⁰⁹ Travis Vogan, *ESPN: The Making of a Sports Media Empire* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 28.

¹¹⁰ Michael Curtin and Jane Shattuc, *The American Television Industry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 145.

¹¹¹ Brownell, *24/7 Politics*, 4.

offer chances for alternative voices and points of view, while opening up room to question the values of balance, fairness, and objectivity that the broadcast networks held so dear.¹¹² In other words, cable news could serve the public interest by broadening the range of people and perspectives that had been excluded from broadcast news for decades. As cable television became popularized in the 1970s and 1980s, the deregulatory policies under the presidential administrations of Gerald R. Ford, Jimmy Carter, and Ronald Reagan led to a marketplace approach where “data and consumer demands remained supreme.”¹¹³ This logic allowed cable news to assert its public interest bona fides, asserting that “private companies could make money and serve democracy simultaneously.”¹¹⁴

Deregulatory policies that positioned the market as the best way to serve the public interest fostered the growth of one of the most significant developments in cable news in the 1990s and 2000s: the rise of primetime cable newsmagazines, including *The O’Reilly Factor* (Fox News, 1996-2017), *Anderson Cooper 360°* (CNN, 2003-Present), and *The Rachel Maddow Show* (MSNBC, 2008-Present). In his journal article on the development of cable newsmagazine programs, Chris Peters argues that a defining feature of such programs is their “willful intertwining” of truth and belief that rejects the appearance of neutrality favored by twentieth-century network newscasting.¹¹⁵ The anchors of such programs operate as “belief-driven journalist[s]”¹¹⁶ who position their “passion and involvement” front and center, employing a show of emotion as a means to persuade their audience.¹¹⁷ The programs position the consumption of journalism as a decision put into the hands of their viewers, upon whom they

¹¹² Ibid 81.

¹¹³ Ibid 152.

¹¹⁴ Ibid 152-53.

¹¹⁵ Chris Peters, “NO SPIN ZONES: The rise of the American cable news magazine and Bill O’Reilly,” *Journalism Studies* 11, no. 6 (2010), 834.

¹¹⁶ Peters, “NO SPIN ZONES,” 834.

¹¹⁷ Ibid 841.

heap “continual praise, both implicitly and explicitly, for selecting the ‘right’ brand of news.”¹¹⁸ Watching the news on television thus becomes as much a matter of consumer choice—and viewers’ political identity—as it is a means of staying informed about current events.

In *The Newsroom*, Mac’s idea for revitalizing *News Night* is to reject the tenets of cable news, making the show more akin to mid-twentieth century network evening news programs that relied on the singular voice of an authoritative anchor, and were based on information obtained from a narrow range of official sources. In “We Just Decided To,” she proclaims that her goal is to make “elite Northeastern pricks sexy again,” and stresses the importance of “speaking truth to stupid.”¹¹⁹ In the next episode, “News Night 2.0,” Mac argues that the show’s young staff is an asset, since “they don’t know how to do the news badly yet,” and are still inexperienced enough to be idealistic. “We don’t do good television,” she defiantly insists, “we do the news.”¹²⁰ Will seems to be swayed by Mac’s argument, and in “The 112th Congress” he makes an on-air statement, labeled as an editorial comment: *News Night* failed to “successfully inform and educate the American electorate,” and “we took a dive for the ratings.”¹²¹ In depicting protagonists who boldly stand up for the public interest, *The Newsroom* creates a fantasy world which disregards the fact that, as Brownell has shown, partisan political commentary was the engine that drove the growth of cable news in the first place.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Ibid 846.

¹¹⁹ *The Newsroom*, “We Just Decided To.”

¹²⁰ *The Newsroom*, season 1, episode 2, “News Night 2.0,” directed by Alex Graves, written by Aaron Sorkin, David Handelman and Ian Reichbach, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher Jr., aired July 1, 2012, on HBO.

¹²¹ *The Newsroom*, season 1, episode 3, “The 112th Congress,” directed by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, Gideon Yago, and David Handelman, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher Jr., aired July 8, 2012, on HBO.

¹²² Brownell 199.

Media Ownership

“We better have our shit together when the network jerk-offs get here today.”

—TMS co-anchor Alex Levy, *The Morning Show*¹²³

A hallmark of television news series are the often antagonistic relationships between the journalists working in newsrooms and their media owner bosses. The former are typically portrayed as working tirelessly to uphold the competitive paradigm, maintaining the news media’s watchdog role over powerful interests. The latter are positioned as doing whatever they can—even if it means resorting to underhanded tactics—to uphold the dominance paradigm, wherein a small number of interests guide the direction of the news media. As Chad Raphael articulates, television outlets are “constrained by their ties to the larger corporate community through interlocking boards of directors, financing arrangements, and increased diversification of networks into other businesses.”¹²⁴ This fact has been made even more prescient with the rise of conglomerate-controlled media in recent decades. Indeed, as McNair argues, while it is challenging to precisely measure the degree to which news media ownership translates into power, the widely accepted fact that media has *some kind of effects* makes it a desirable property. More than any other enterprise, the media interlinks culture, ideology, politics, and economics in such a way that allows owners to support their own interests and economic well-being.¹²⁵

¹²³ *The Morning Show*, “In the Dark Night of the Soul It’s Always 3:30 in the Morning.”

¹²⁴ Chad Raphael, *Investigated Reporting: Television Muckraking and Regulation* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005), 7.

¹²⁵ McNair, *The Sociology of Journalism*, 102-03.



Figure 2: Leona Lansing, CEO of ACN parent company Atlantis World Media, in *The Newsroom*.¹²⁶

In the *Newsroom* episode “The 112th Congress,” which is set in the lead-up to the 2010 midterm elections, *News Night* spends about six months making the rise of the fiscally conservative Tea Party political movement its top story. Part of the reporting indicates that the Tea Party is not entirely a grassroots phenomenon, and that it receives significant financial backing from American industrialist brothers Charles and David Koch.¹²⁷ The broadcasts focusing on the Tea Party are highly critical and often scathing—in a subsequent episode, “The Greater Fool,” Will McAvoy labels the Tea Party as the “American Taliban.”¹²⁸ Both ACN president Reese Lansing (Chris Messina) and his mother, Leona Lansing (Jane Fonda), the CEO of ACN parent company Atlantis World Media, are incensed that the reporting could have

¹²⁶ *The Newsroom*, “The 112th Congress.”

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *The Newsroom*, season 1, episode 10, “The Greater Fool,” directed by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, David Handelman, and Ian Reichbach, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher Jr., aired August 26, 2012, on HBO.

negative financial consequences. “Do not come down on the Kochs without checking upstairs,” Reese scolds Charlie Skinner.¹²⁹

After the midterms, in a meeting with Charlie and Reese in the ACN board room—a dark, wood-paneled space with a large circular conference table—Leona expresses frustration that *News Night’s* coverage decisions, which she perceives as leaning left, have rebranded ACN as “MSNBC’s more combative brother.” Charlie insists that the show is doing fact-based reporting “for the center.” Will “humiliated Congressional candidates on my air!” Leona intones, to which Charlie replies, “It’s not your air, Leona.” Later, Charlie and Leona speak privately:

Charlie: So, Will pissed off whoever you were sitting next to at dinner Saturday night. I thought you got where you are by being fearless.

Leona: No, I got where I am by *knowing* who to fear. And the Koch brothers are not playing around, if that’s what you’re talking about; they drop *Brinks trucks* on people they disagree with. *You* [points to Charlie], and *me* [points to herself].

Charlie: Leona, you can’t possibly expect us to tailor our news coverage to what best suits our corporate—

Leona: –[holds up her hand] Let’s start over. And this time, disabuse yourself of the idea that this is a conversation between equals. Where I make an argument, you make a counterargument, and we agree to disagree. Our cable news division accounts for *less than three percent* of AWM’s annual revenue; *you* don’t make money for stockholders, which I have a fiduciary responsibility to do. Well, last night, the voters ousted twenty-one percent of Congress, including seven members of the House Subcommittee on Communications and Technology. Three of those seven are AWM’s most reliable friends on the Hill. Now, the Congressmen who will be replacing them are the same people that Will has been making look like *fucking morons* for the last six months!

Charlie: They’ve done a pretty good job making themselves look like morons.

Leona: I have *business* before this Congress, Charlie; and whatever you may think of these people, which is the same thing I think of them, they hold the keys to the future of AWM. Anything more than a pack of gum, and I have to go to Congress for permission. You know, I don’t make the rules, but I *do* abide by them.

Charlie: News organizations—

Leona: –Careful with the lectures—

Charlie: –are a public trust with an ability to inform and influence the national conversation.

Leona: I know. That’s why I bought one.

¹²⁹ *The Newsroom*, “The 112th Congress.”

Charlie and Leona’s exchange speaks to the fact that, while viewership and ratings numbers are indeed important, television news outlets also gain influence and power from being a part of the political discourse. Leona is stressing the importance of coverage not upsetting key state actors who make legislative decisions that can substantially impact the direction of the company she owns.¹³⁰ Charlie’s decision to not back down and continue the critical coverage is later shown to have material consequences for ACN—in “First Thing We Do, Let’s Kill All the Lawyers,” Reese is denied entry into a meeting on media piracy being held by the U.S. House Judiciary Committee.¹³¹ The scene is a vivid illustration of Michael Schudson’s point that the profit motive in news is not always as straightforward as “get the most readers or viewers possible”—there are other ways in which news can be useful for those who own it.¹³² The very act of distributing information, Schudson asserts, always leads to some kind of consequences in the larger society. The degree of those consequences varies, but by choosing to run certain stories, the news media confer onto them legitimacy, and when certain stories are repeated over and over again over a long period of time, they become legitimate components of public discourse.¹³³ In the case of Tea Party coverage, Charlie desires the story to become a part of the public discourse in the interest of informing voters, while Leona wants it killed for the sake of the financial interest of her larger corporate holdings.

Television news series regularly spotlight ownership through storylines of blatant self-dealing by media owners who desire that coverage serve their own financial or political interests. One of the earliest and most humorous examples of this comes in *The Mary Tyler*

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ *The Newsroom*, season 2, episode 1, “First Thing We Do, Let’s Kill All the Lawyers,” directed by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, Ian Reichbach, and Brendan Fehily, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher Jr., aired July 14, 2013, on HBO.

¹³² Michael Schudson, *The Sociology of News* second edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 110.

¹³³ Schudson, *The Sociology of News*, 20, 22.

Moore Show episode “Support Your Local Mother,” when the WJM six o’clock news is about to air a special segment titled “Is Air Pollution Really So Bad?” Puzzled, Mary Richards asks Murray Slaughter, “*What* kind of a television station does a special *favoring* air pollution?” “Well, one where the chairman of the board owns a smelting plant,” Murray replies. While this is a one-off laugh line—the bulk of the episode focuses on the mother of Mary’s friend Rhoda Morganstern visiting Minneapolis—it succinctly comments on media owners’ power to engage in self-dealing. This episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* sees station ownership flexing its power to provide the public with a positive image of an enterprise in which they have a vested interest.¹³⁴

This theme is also prevalent in *Blunt Talk*. Throughout the series’ second season Walter Blunt has been investigating a story on a company that is profiteering from an ongoing drought in California. The company is pushing against legislation that would increase water recycling, instead favoring desalination,¹³⁵ a technology in which it has a significant financial stake. In the course of his reporting, Walter finds out that UBS network head Arthur Bronson (Stacy Keach) is an investor in the company. Through a series of convoluted plot devices that come to a head in the episode “Walter Has to Look After Walter,” Walter is framed for the murder of a private investigator, an incident orchestrated as a pretext to suspend him from *BT* to spike the water story.¹³⁶

In a scene that is reminiscent of the film *Network*, Walter visits Bronson in the dimly lit UBS boardroom, where he implores to be reinstated. “What do you think you’re doing with the

¹³⁴ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 1, episode 6, “Support Your Local Mother,” directed by Alan Rafkin, written by James L. Brooks and Allan Burns, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Edward Asner, and Valerie Harper, aired October 24, 1970, on CBS.

¹³⁵ The process is incorrectly referred to as “desalinization” in *Blunt Talk*.

¹³⁶ *Blunt Talk*, season 2, episode 9, “Walter Needs to Look After Walter,” directed by Tristram Shapeero, written by Kristen Kearse, Jonathan Ames, and Robbie Macdonald, featuring Patrick Stewart, Adrian Scarborough, and Timm Sharp, aired December 4, 2016, on Starz.

broadcast I gave you?” Bronson asks. “I do what I think is right!” Walter replies. “You’re a shill for a corrupt machine, Blunt,” says Bronson, “so how can you possibly say you do what is right when you’re part of everything that’s wrong?”¹³⁷ Here, Bronson is asserting that Walter is only on air because the network allows him to be, and that his work as a journalist has little impact or meaning because the job exists within the confines of the commercial media industry. In the subsequent episode, the series finale “Is This All Because I Didn't Call You,” Walter, still suspended from the network, enlists the help of his colleagues to broadcast the story, leading to the arrest of the head of the desalination company and the resignation of Bronson from UBS.¹³⁸ This ideal, fantasy ending draws a clear delineation between good and bad—Walter asserts his ability to serve the public interest as a journalist, while the bad actors are punished. The story arc is an excellent example of how television news series often use extreme circumstances to make larger points about the media industry.

A similar dynamic comes into play in *Great News*. In the episode “Celebrity Hacking Scandal,” Katie Wendelson is working on a story about a criminal network that is facilitating data breaches of celebrities’ personal phones. The source of the breaches turns out to be a popular mobile game called *Biscuit Blitz*, which has been designed with malicious code to illegally siphon data from its users.¹³⁹ In “Carol’s Eleven,” Katie discovers that MMN owner Mildred Marlock (Christina Pickles) also owns *Biscuit Blitz* and is directly responsible for launching the hacks. Marlock insists that *The Breakdown* run a sanitized version of the story: the game did hack celebrity phones but without my knowledge, she says, and I heroically discovered and put a stop to it. If the show deviates from that explanation, she will shut it down and fire its

¹³⁷ *Blunt Talk*, “Walter Needs to Look After Walter.”

¹³⁸ *Blunt Talk*, season 2, episode 10, “Is This All Because I Didn’t Call You,” directed by Tristram Shapeero, written by Jonathan Ames, Kristen Kearse, and Robbie Macdonald, featuring Patrick Stewart, Adrian Scarborough, and Timm Sharp, aired December 11, 2016, on Starz.

¹³⁹ *Great News*, “Celebrity Hacking Scandal.”

entire staff. To circumvent these demands, *The Breakdown* simultaneously runs two stories: one exposing the truth on the show's actual broadcast, and a phony feed visible only to Marlock which tricks her to confessing live on-air, leading to her being fired by MMN's board of directors.¹⁴⁰ As in *Blunt Talk*, this incident projects a fantasy of journalists holding their powerful bosses to account.

Murphy Brown also portrays the struggle that television journalists face in standing up for their principles in the face of interference from network management. A two-episode story arc sees the legal department of CBS directly tampering with coverage decisions. The narrative is based on two overlapping incidents in the 1990s in which network news programs were affected by the financial sway of Big Tobacco. The first involved a documentary aired in 1994 by the ABC newsmagazine *Day One* which contended that Philip Morris and R.J. Reynolds intentionally manipulated the nicotine content of their cigarettes to make them more addictive to smokers. In the face of a lawsuit by the two tobacco companies, in 1995 ABC News issued an on-air apology that initially aired during the halftime report of a *Monday Night Football* broadcast. In the second, CBS newsmagazine *60 Minutes* complied with orders from the network's legal department not to air an interview with tobacco industry whistleblower Jeffrey Wigand, the former head of research for Brown & Williamson, as part of a 1995 report on the tobacco industry.¹⁴¹ Both incidents constituted an embarrassing black eye for television news, damaging the public image of autonomy that network news divisions had carefully cultivated.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ *Great News*, season 1, episode 10, "Carol's Eleven," directed by Beth McCarthy-Miller, written by Tracy Wigfield, Dan Klein, and Ashley Wigfield, featuring Briga Heelan, Andrea Martin, and Adam Campbell, aired May 23, 2017, on NBC.

¹⁴¹ *Frontline*, season 14, episode 12, "Smoke in the Eye," written by Linden MacIntyre and Daniel Schorr, aired April 2, 1996, on PBS.

¹⁴² The *60 Minutes* incident would become the basis for the feature film *The Insider* (Michael Mann, 1999), which was adapted from a 1996 *Vanity Fair* article on Wigand by journalist Marie Brenner.

The *Murphy Brown* story arc begins with the episode “Up in Smoke,” where former *FYI* co-anchor Stuart Best (Wallace Shawn)—a man so foolish, aloof, and annoying that Murphy, Jim Dial, and Frank Fontana had conspired to get him fired from the show—has returned to Washington as a lobbyist for Big Tobacco. Visiting the *FYI* newsroom, he expresses doubts about his new job, where he has witnessed a litany of legal, ethical, and moral lapses. Murphy encourages him to become a confidential whistleblower, and in a meeting with the news division’s legal counsel, he is assured that he cannot be sued by his employer unless he is under a non-disclosure agreement. Best reveals that he did in fact sign an NDA, so the attorneys advise *FYI* not to run the story, pointing out that Big Tobacco could bring legal action against Best and the network by arguing that he was induced by CBS to break the contract. The lawyers specifically mention the ABC-Philip Morris incident, stressing that they do not want the network to find itself in a similar position. Network president Stan Lansing (Garry Marshall) agrees with the decision to kill the story, despite Murphy pleading that doing so will set a terrible precedent.¹⁴³

Miles Silverberg considers slipping the story to another network, an idea that he and the *FYI* team quickly dismiss. Murphy is so demoralized by the incident that she considers quitting the show and leaving CBS altogether, but Jim reassures her that the best thing to do is to stay on and keep fighting. Murphy agrees, and during the next *FYI* broadcast she directly addresses the killing of the story. We had planned to report a story critical of Big Tobacco, she says, “but our lawyers told us we couldn’t for fear of being sued, even though the report was accurate. I promise you, however, that we here at *FYI* will not be intimidated by this experience, but rather inspired by it, to fight even harder to report on corporate crime and duplicity.” Murphy throws

¹⁴³ *Murphy Brown*, season 8, episode 16, “Up in Smoke,” directed by Peter Bonerz, written by Diane English and Michael Saltzman, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Grant Shaud, aired February 12, 1996, on CBS.

the broadcast to Jim, who has a daydream of being hauled off the set by network security. Snapping back to reality, he tells viewers that, instead of moving on to another topic, he is compelled to address the issue of the tobacco story:

Jim: I have served at this network for forty years. And I have been proud of my tenure. But what happened this week, killing a truthful news story for fear of a lawsuit, is something quite frankly that I am ashamed of. It's *not* journalism, it is *not* what I have devoted my life to, and I will *not* let it go *unanswered*. So, with that in mind, I officially announce my resignation from this show [Murphy gasps] and this network. This has been my final edition of *FYI*. Good night. [Jim removes his lavalier microphone, stands up, and walks off the *FYI* studio.]¹⁴⁴

Jim's resignation is a close-up shot of him looking into the camera, a stylistic choice that breaks the fourth wall. Here, Jim is not only addressing the *FYI* audience, but also *Murphy Brown* viewers in the real world, directly confronting them with the fact that both the fictional and real CBS network failed to report important stories on the tobacco industry because of dictates from ownership.

In the next episode, "Aftermath," Jim will consider coming back to *FYI* only if substantive changes are made regarding the relationship between management and the show. In a confrontation with Lansing in front of the newsroom staff, Jim demands a guarantee that the network will never pressure *FYI* to scrub or shelve a story. Lansing insists that it would not be possible for him to abide by such a promise since he cannot predict the future. "I see, so we will continue to expose corruption wherever we find it, so long as corruption doesn't have a lawyer," Jim says. "I was faced with a fifteen billion dollar lawsuit," Lansing fumes, "what was I supposed to do?" "You were supposed to have the courage of your convictions," Jim replies. Lansing insists that anyone can do Jim's job, so he will hire the buffoonish anchor Miller Redfield (Christopher Rich), a recurring *Murphy Brown* character, to fill the vacant seat.

¹⁴⁴ *Murphy Brown*, "Up in Smoke."

Insulted by Lansing's decision, Jim decides to accept an offer to head up the launch of a news division at ICN, a fictional upstart broadcast network. An enraged Lansing screams at Jim, "You're dead in my eyes! *Dead, dead, dead!*"¹⁴⁵ The dramatic confrontation between these two men is an excellent example of how the television news series genre often establishes an antagonistic relationship between newsroom staff and network management.

Tech Acquisitions

"We're all gonna get bought out by *tech*, unless we start making changes."

—UBA news division head Cory Ellison, *The Morning Show*¹⁴⁶

In their respective third seasons, *The Newsroom* and *The Morning Show* explore the potential consequences that could result from Big Tech taking an ownership role in television news. While these storylines do not reflect any existing reality—as of this writing, none of the Big Five American tech companies of Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, and Microsoft own a major television news outlet—they are significant for the ways in which they articulate an anxiety that any such takeover of television news would constitute an existential crisis, one that is chiefly fueled by the dissonance between the goals and business models of legacy media companies and tech companies. As Kovach and Rosenstiel point out, throughout the twentieth century, news companies, which focused on gathering and verifying news, were the dominant source of public information. By the turn of the century, however, they had ceded much of their

¹⁴⁵ *Murphy Brown*, season 8, episode 17, "Aftermath," directed by Peter Bonerz, written by Diane English, Joshua Sternin, and Jennifer Ventimilia, featuring Candice Bergen, Grant Shaud, and Faith Ford, aired February 19, 1996, on CBS.

¹⁴⁶ *The Morning Show*, season 1, episode 1, "In The Dark Night of the Soul It's Always 3:30 in the Morning," directed by Mimi Leder, written by Kerry Ehrin, Jay Carson, and Jeff Augustin, featuring Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, and Billy Crudup, aired November 1, 2019, on AppleTV+.

informational power to tech platform companies who, by and large, resisted the principles of editing, review, and verification.¹⁴⁷

In the early episodes of the third season of *The Newsroom*, Leona and Reese Lansing are in a fight to keep control over Atlantis World Media, the parent company of ACN. The episode “Run” sees Reese’s half-siblings on the verge of selling their shares in the company to a private equity firm that will subsequently execute a hostile takeover. To keep control over AWM, Leona offers to buy out the siblings at a two-dollar-per-share premium over the firm’s offer, a move that would cost \$4 billion.¹⁴⁸ In “Main Justice,” the Lansings calculate that to raise capital for the buyout they must either liquidate ACN or find a buyer for the network. Leona chooses the latter option, and even though she displays mixed feelings about giving up what she views as her most prized asset, she ultimately sees the situation as a win-win: the sale will generate tax benefits for her and be a trophy acquisition for the buyer.¹⁴⁹

One of the suitors for ACN is Lucas Pruit (B.J. Novak), a fortysomething tech billionaire who made his fortune in wireless internet extender devices. If his bid is successful, Pruit plans to bring “disruption” to ACN by turning it into a platform for fully crowdsourced news, bringing down the cost of content to effectively zero. Instead of one news channel, he excitedly proclaims, ACN can be a collection of five hundred individual channels, each of which has a hyper-specific subject. The newsroom staff is aghast at the prospect of these changes, which are illustrative of how, as Kovach and Rosenstiel argue, platform companies create almost none of their own content, have little commitment to the public service values that traditional news

¹⁴⁷ Kovach and Rosenstiel xx.

¹⁴⁸ *The Newsroom*, season 3, episode 2, “Run,” directed by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, Alena Smith, and John Musero, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher, Jr., aired November 16, 2014, on HBO.

¹⁴⁹ *The Newsroom*, season 3, episode 3, “Main Justice,” directed by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, Jon Lovett, and Alena Smith, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher, Jr., aired November 23, 2014, on HBO.

outlets have claimed as their hallmark,¹⁵⁰ and focus their business models around separating audiences by specific demographics and characteristics.¹⁵¹

Unlike in *The Morning Show*'s acquisition storyline, which I will discuss shortly, Pruitt is fairly far down the list of the world's wealthiest people—he sits at number 1,398.¹⁵² Based on the *Forbes* rankings of billionaires from 2013, the year in which *The Newsroom*'s third season is set, this would place Pruitt's net worth at approximately \$1 billion, in a similar range with figures such as Washington Redskins owner Dan Snyder, Spanx founder Sara Blakely, and Hallmark Cards chairman and president Donald Hall.¹⁵³ Certainly not pennies, but also a far cry from the upper echelons of the super rich—those in the top ten for 2013 all had net worths between \$29-73 billion.¹⁵⁴ In the episode “Contempt,” the ACN news staff seek out alternatives to Pruitt, with three other real-life billionaires briefly mentioned as potential buyers: Larry Ellison (#5, \$43 billion), Michael Bloomberg (#13, \$27 billion), and Elon Musk (#527, \$2.7 billion).¹⁵⁵ Bloomberg, having leadership experience in journalism, is a somewhat logical choice, though it seems curious that the protagonists of *The Newsroom* would consider Ellison or Musk, both tech moguls, as better choices than Pruitt.¹⁵⁶ With the benefit of hindsight, the notion of Musk in particular being an effective steward of old-school journalistic values is preposterous.

¹⁵⁰ Kovach and Rosenstiel 39-40.

¹⁵¹ Ibid xx.

¹⁵² *The Newsroom*, “Main Justice.”

¹⁵³ Erin Carlyle, “Full List: U.S. Billionaires of 2013,” *Forbes*, March 6, 2013.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/erincarlyle/2013/03/06/full-list-u-s-billionaires-of-2013/>.

¹⁵⁴ Forbes Press Releases, “A Record 1426 Billionaires Make the 2013 List of the World's Richest People,” *Forbes*, March 4, 2013.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbespr/2013/03/04/a-record-1426-billionaires-make-the-2013-list-of-the-worlds-richest-people/>.

¹⁵⁵ Carlyle, “Full List.”

¹⁵⁶ *The Newsroom*, season 3, episode 4, “Contempt,” directed by Anthony Hemmingway, written by Aaron Sorkin, Deborah Schoenemen, and Alena Smith, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher, Jr., aired November 30, 2014, on HBO.

In order to serve *The Newsroom*'s dramatic narrative, the negotiations and ultimate acquisition of ACN by Pruitt are depicted as taking place over the course of several weeks. This is a highly accelerated timeline—in the real world, mergers and acquisitions of major companies typically take several months, and it is not uncommon for them to stretch several years before being finalized.¹⁵⁷ This decision was perhaps one of expediency for the production: whereas the first and second seasons of *The Newsroom* contain nine and ten episodes, respectively, its third season comprises only six episodes. Pruitt's purchase of ACN becomes official at the end of "Contempt,"¹⁵⁸ and over the next few weeks he takes an immediate hands-on role in the newsroom.

In "Oh Shenandoah," Pruitt institutes a new hashtag for the network's digital news operation: #uracn (read as 'You Are ACN'), which reflects Pruitt's strategy to encourage user-generated content. Mac McHale complains to Charlie Skinner that Pruitt's actions are devaluing and patronizing the news staff, but Charlie pushes back on this, pointing out that, since the acquisition, ACN has risen from fourth to third place in overall ratings among cable news channels, a move that has bought the news division more freedom to cover important stories.¹⁵⁹ While under the previous ownership Charlie often served as the middleman between the Lansings and the news staff, this role is amplified once Pruitt takes control of ACN. With the change in this relationship, *The Newsroom* makes a clear and bright delineation between two types of media owners. On one side are legacy media owners like the Lansings who—while often critical of decisions made by news divisions and certainly concerned with profit—at the

¹⁵⁷ Chris Gallant, "How Long Does It Take for a Merger to Go Through?," *Investopedia*, updated March 16, 2025. <https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/08/merger-completion-time.asp>.

¹⁵⁸ *The Newsroom*, "Contempt."

¹⁵⁹ *The Newsroom*, season 3, episode 5, "Oh Shenandoah," directed by Paul Lieberstein, written by Aaron Sorkin, Alena Smith, and John Musero, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher, Jr., aired December 7, 2014, on HBO.

end of the day have a belief in producing a news product based on journalistic principles. On the other side are the Silicon Valley tech moguls such as Pruitt who are *only* concerned with profit and see almost no value in adhering to the tenets of journalism, viewing legacy media as something to be disrupted or outright destroyed.

While *The Newsroom* espouses the point of view that there is no way to completely root out interference from ownership—as shown previously in this chapter, Leona and Reese Lansing were hardly hands-off owners—the often forceful suggestions made by the Lansings are portrayed as no match for Pruitt’s relentless day-to-day micromanaging of the ACN newsroom. “Oh Shenandoah” sees Charlie, at Pruitt’s orders, telling Mac McHale that *News Night* needs to block out time to cover tweets made by the musical artist Lady Gaga about the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) being declared unconstitutional, an angle that will spur young viewership and generate engagement on ACN’s website and social media presence. Mac ultimately acquiesces, but asserts that this means cutting time for other stories as well as leaving less room for a substantive exploration of the DOMA story itself.¹⁶⁰

Later in the episode, Sloan Sabbith is concerned that ACNgage—a geolocation app launched at the behest of Pruitt which provides crowdsourced data for tracking the whereabouts of celebrities—will fuel stalking and harassment. To promote the app, Pruitt insists that its lead engineer Bree Dorrit (Jon Bass), a young man who can only be described as a doofus, be interviewed by Sloan on *News Night*. But instead of leading the friendly exchange that Pruitt desired, Sloan forcefully asserts that ACNgage is dangerous and gives Dorrit an embarrassing dressing-down. After the broadcast, Charlie is livid that Sloan disobeyed Pruitt, who storms into the newsroom screaming for the firing of Sloan and Mac. A heated exchange ensues that ends

¹⁶⁰ *The Newsroom*, “Oh Shenandoah.”

with Charlie collapsing to the floor, suffering a fatal heart attack.¹⁶¹ The metaphor of a veteran television news executive dropping dead over the stress of carrying out the dictates of a new owner from the tech sector is one that is hard to miss—Charlie literally sacrifices his life attempting to hold the line between Pruitt and the ACN news staff.



Figure 3: Tech mogul Paul Marks and UBA CEO Cory Ellison negotiate a deal in *The Morning Show*.¹⁶²

Season three of *The Morning Show*, which is set in 2022, features its own tech acquisition storyline that portrays many of the same anxieties as *The Newsroom*, although with significantly higher financial and cultural stakes. In the third season premiere, “The Kármán Line,” UBA is facing a financial crisis. For nearly two years, Cory Ellison—who in the second season of *The Morning Show* was promoted from UBA’s news division head to CEO of the network—had been in secret talks with Paul Marks (Jon Hamm), the owner of the fictional technology company Hyperion, to purchase the network.¹⁶³ While his net worth is never explicitly stated, Marks is

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² *The Morning Show*, season 3, episode 8, “DNF,” directed by Millicent Shelton, written by Kerry Ehrin, Jay Carson, and Selina Fillinger, featuring Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, and Billy Crudup, aired October 25, 2023, on Apple TV+.

¹⁶³ *The Morning Show*, “The Kármán Line.”

portrayed as being among the three wealthiest people in the world—based on the 2022 *Forbes* ranking, this would equate to at least \$158 billion.¹⁶⁴ The most prominent of his ventures is the Hyperion Aerospace Division, a private space company akin to Elon Musk’s SpaceX and Jeff Bezos’ Blue Origin. The Marks character is an amalgam of contemporary tech billionaires, but shares the most in common with Musk and Bezos—middle-aged white men who initially amassed their fortunes in internet technology companies and subsequently expanded their holdings into various media properties.

When Alex Levy gets word of the secret negotiations, she is upset with Cory; as the network’s biggest star personality she felt that she should have been kept apprised of such an important development. She also expresses worry that Marks’ tech background makes him a poor fit to take over a broadcast television network, but Cory defends the prospect by arguing that, if UBA is going to compete into the future, it needs “someone with more money than God,” and Marks can be that person.¹⁶⁵ In “Ghost in the Machine,” network board chair Cybil Richards also shows concern about a potential takeover by Marks: billionaire men care little for legacy media, she tells Alex, and to someone like him this kind of deal is purely a cash-grab. Paul will probably “fold the news division into an algorithm,” Alex concurs, or turn it into a mouthpiece that will promote the interests of Hyperion.¹⁶⁶ Alex’s and Cybil’s respective misgivings are informed by their long backgrounds in broadcast television—they view Marks as a threat to what they have helped to build over decades at UBA.

Their reservations stand in sharp contrast to that of Stella Bak (Greta Lee), who replaced Cory as UBA news division head after Cory’s promotion. Stella, who had a background in the

¹⁶⁴ Kerry A. Dolan and Chase Peterson-Withorn, editors, “Forbes Billionaires 2022: The Richest People in the World,” *Forbes*, March 11, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires-2022/>.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *The Morning Show*, “Ghost in the Machine.”

tech industry before joining the network—for a time she worked for Hyperion—wants to use digital technology to reshape the way that UBA approaches news. “I want more political coverage,” she tells Marks in a one-on-one meeting in the episode “The Stanford Student.” With the U.S. political climate becoming increasingly explosive, she points out, “even Gen Z is watching network TV when democracy is a cliffhanger.” She argues that this moment provides a unique opportunity for UBA to massively expand its digital market share and compete in the online landscape in a way that it never has before. The news division can piggyback on Hyperion’s search engine technology, Stella enthusiastically suggests, to create algorithmically curated headlines tailored to the search histories of individual users.¹⁶⁷

Stella’s strategy to provide everyone with their own headlines and content based on their internet history and political leanings recalls the ways in which, as Brownell has shown, cable news promised to tear down the system of gatekeeping that network news operations had built. This wound up being just a “different political filter,” Brownell argues, that “entertained rather than informed,” and stressed divisions rather than finding common ground.¹⁶⁸ It also speaks to Kovach and Rosenstiel’s point that legacy news companies have been slow to understand that they were not losing audiences because people were abandoning news altogether, but “simply were abandoning traditional formats in favor of newer, more convenient ones.”¹⁶⁹ For Stella, expanding the news division’s footprint more fully into the digital realm means that UBA can meet audiences where they already are, strengthening the network’s brand and keeping it relevant in a rapidly shifting news landscape. Marks is amenable to her ideas, so much that he secretly

¹⁶⁷ *The Morning Show*, season 3, episode 6, “The Stanford Student,” directed by Mimi Leder, written by Kerry Ehrin, Jay Carson, and Micah Schraft, featuring Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, and Billy Crudup, aired October 11, 2023, on AppleTV+.

¹⁶⁸ Brownell 3-4.

¹⁶⁹ Kovach & Rosenstiel xxvi.

promises her that if the deal goes through, he will fire Cory and install Stella as CEO of the network.¹⁷⁰

In the midst of the negotiations, Alex tapes an interview with Marks for *Alex Unfiltered*, a show on the UBA+ streaming service. Marks claims that while television news is struggling at the moment, it can be fixed, and “I’d like to give it a try before it’s too late.” Alex pushes Marks on some potentially damaging information that has come to light about Hyperion, including the company’s facial recognition software being accused of aiding racial profiling by the police, a scandal that could pose a conflict of interest for the prospective owner of a major news outlet. Desperate to finalize the sale to Marks, Cory moves to shelve the interview footage; it will run in a heavily edited form, and only if it works to promote the deal.¹⁷¹

In “Update Your Priors,” Marks and UBA ultimately reach an agreement on a \$40 billion sale. The deal is put in jeopardy when a limited liability corporation, backed by Cybil Richards, is quietly amassing UBA stock so that it will have a voting majority large enough to veto the Marks acquisition. Cybil had discovered that Marks’ only interest in acquiring UBA is to immediately break up the company and sell it for parts at a profit—because of high cash burn at its space division, Hyperion is actually in a financially precarious position and in need of an enormous injection of capital to stay afloat.¹⁷² This plot twist speaks to Kovach and Rosenstiel’s assertion that, for contemporary media and technology companies, news outlets are often “viewed as declining commodities” whose assets hold value only insofar as they can be stripped and resold as component parts. The new media economy, the authors argue, rests on financial

¹⁷⁰ *The Morning Show*, “The Stanford Student.”

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *The Morning Show*, season 3, episode 9, “Update Your Priors,” directed by Stacie Passon, written by Kerry Ehrin, Jay Carson, and Laura Wexler, featuring Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, and Billy Crudup, aired November 1, 2023, on AppleTV+.

transactions and share prices—corporate responsibility and journalistic values are often viewed as antiquated or irrelevant.¹⁷³

Cybil’s LLC maneuver proves unsuccessful, leading to a cavalcade of further narrative gymnastics in the third season finale, “The Overview Effect.” Cory, who now opposes the Marks deal because he believes it will likely mean the end of UBA’s existence, tries and fails to get an angel investor to give the network an \$8 billion loan with an equity stake to stop Paul’s deal. Chip Black appears on *TMS*, where he gives an impassioned off-the-cuff statement defending the values of network news. At literally the last minute before the sale to Marks is finalized, Alex presents the board with a deal for a “merger of equals” between UBA and rival network NBN, reminding them that they have a fiduciary responsibility to entertain any offer that is comparable or better than that of Marks. Meanwhile, at the urging of Bradley Jackson, Stella, and Chip, a Hyperion Aerospace Division employee blows the whistle on safety issues with the company’s spacecraft designs. Paul subsequently pulls out from the deal, and the season closes with a pending deal between UBA and NBN that will combine the two into a single network.¹⁷⁴ As of this writing, the fourth season of *The Morning Show* is several months away from being released, so the ultimate shape and impact of the merger—which is not a foregone conclusion based on the wild plot twists that characterize the series—remains to be seen. If successful, the UBA-NBN merger will bring an entirely different corporate hierarchy, which will certainly make for an interesting addition to my analysis of this series in the future.

¹⁷³ Kovach and Rosenstiel 40–41.

¹⁷⁴ *The Morning Show*, season 3, episode 10, “The Overview Effect,” directed by Mimi Leder, written by Kerry Ehrin, Jay Carson, and Anya Leta, featuring Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, and Billy Crudup, aired November 8, 2023, on AppleTV+.

Conclusion

“They’re vicious, greedy, miserable swine, and believe me, I know, I’ve been one of ‘em for forty years.”

–CBS news division head Gene Kinsella, *Murphy Brown*¹⁷⁵

In this chapter, I have examined the ways in which the political economy of the television news industry is portrayed in television news series. By employing abstract ideas about how the public interest should best be fulfilled and the role that owners play in guiding coverage decisions as narrative fuel, the genre holds up television journalists as protagonists who find themselves at odds with industry executives and media owners. Television journalists fight to maintain the competitive paradigm—where the press carries out a watchdog role over powerful interests—while under constant pressure from media owners, who are portrayed as antagonists who use their wealth and power to uphold the financial and cultural control that characterizes the dominance paradigm. These narratives manifest anxieties that television news—through either the actions of existing ownership or the threat of acquisition by new media companies whose values are far removed from those of journalists—is constantly at risk of losing its ability to serve the public. In the next chapter, I will explore how television news series dramatize a crucial element of the industry: the persistent necessity to both maintain and lift ratings numbers.

¹⁷⁵ *Murphy Brown*, season 5, episode 4, “Black, White & Brown,” directed by Peter Bonerz, written by Diane English and Michael Patrick King, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired October 5, 1992, on CBS.

CHAPTER TWO: RATINGS

Introduction

“Excuse me? The same network that put on *He’s Not My Monkey* is suddenly worried about integrity?”

—*FYI* co-anchor Murphy Brown, *Murphy Brown*¹⁷⁶

The fixation on ratings numbers is a regularly repeating element of television news series. Although news is often held up as a prestige genre, like any program type it is subject to the mandate of commercial television to attract audiences and advertisers. The penetration of television across the United States in the mid-twentieth century fostered a symbiotic relationship between the medium and the emergence of the American consumer economy. While, for a time, early television news was somewhat insulated from the ratings pressures that characterized entertainment programming, it did not take long for news and public affairs shows to be viewed by the industry as a profit center that was obliged to make ratings numbers a key strategic focus. This shift was informed by changes in the regulatory environment as well as new industrial imperatives, both of which positioned ratings numbers as crucial to fostering a competitive news marketplace.

Indeed, the theme of ratings appears across the television news series genre. In an early episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* titled “Keep Your Guard Up,” Lou Grant bursts into the newsroom, telling Mary to “get a camera crew downtown right away!” Mary quickly tells him

¹⁷⁶ *Murphy Brown*, season 6, episode 24, “My Movie with Louis,” directed by John Rich, written by Diane English, Bill Diamond, and Michael Saltzman, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired May 9, 1994, on CBS.

that both their crews are not available: one is covering an ongoing prison riot, and she can't locate the other. Lou is not happy:

Lou: The biggest story of the week breaks and we're doin' a prison riot?

Mary: Uh, what's the story?

Lou: There's a major traffic jam!

Mary: A major traffic ja-uh, Mr. Grant, *why* is the traffic jam more important than the prison riot?

Lou: You are so lucky. I am going to tell you everything I know about news. It's worth taking notes.

Mary: Oh. [moves to get a pencil and pad from her desk.]

Lou: Don't take notes. Why is a traffic jam more important than a prison riot? Hm? How

many people would you say are in a prison riot?

Mary: Uh, offhand-

Lou: -How many?

Mary: Uh, fifty.

Lou: How many in a traffic jam?

Mary: Oh, I see.

Lou: No, you don't. A lot of those people in that traffic jam are gonna go home and watch the news, right?

Mary: Right.

Lou: Those guys in the prison riot aren't gonna be watchin' the news. They're either gonna be over the wall or in solitary.

Indeed, a traffic jam becomes more important than a prison riot because drivers contribute to ratings numbers while inmates do not.¹⁷⁷

In "Respect," the premiere episode of *Murphy Brown*, one of the first things that Murphy does when she returns to *FYI* from alcoholism treatment at the Betty Ford Center is to discuss ratings with Frank Fontana. She is shocked to learn that viewership did not decline while she was away, in fact, Frank says, "we *killed* the competition." This leaves Murphy somewhat dejected, as she had hoped that her absence would have had a negative impact on ratings, thus proving her indispensability as anchor. The episode also establishes Miles Silverberg's own preoccupation with ratings shares and audience research numbers—he is keeping Corky

¹⁷⁷ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 1, episode 5, "Keep Your Guard Up," directed by Alan Rafkin, written by James L. Brooks, Allan Burns, and Steven Pritzker, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Edward Asner, and Valerie Harper, aired October 17, 1970, on CBS.

Sherwood on as a permanent co-anchor based on her “through the roof” testing with young audiences.¹⁷⁸ In the episode “Bad Girls,” Miles is desperate for *FYI* to cover a story that will provide a ratings boost during February sweeps week. Frank believes he has the perfect scoop: an oil company that is using prostitutes at lobbying events to bribe government land commissioners into granting drilling rights. To catch the officials in the act, Murphy and Corky go undercover as sex workers at one of the events. Their plan is quickly foiled when they discover that everyone attending the event—both the prostitutes and the land commissioners—are *all* undercover reporters who are just as desperate to cover the story for sweeps.¹⁷⁹

LateLine satirizes television news’ preoccupation with audience research in “Pearce’s New Best Friend.” The episode sees *LL* producer Gale Ingersoll, who has long had ambitions of appearing on-air, apply for a position as a correspondent at MFNSN, a twenty-four hour cable news network. She reports a story about a local school with severe funding problems, sending the tape as part of her application package. Gale is quickly offered the position, and invited by CEO Dick Obermeyer (Michael McKean) to meet the network’s leadership in a packed conference room. Obermeyer and Gale stand as he introduces her to the people in the room:

Obermeyer: Okay, over here we have the heartbeat of MFNSN, our promo department.

On-air promo, on-air promo weekends, promo design, promo graphics which is a lot like promo design only different, ah, print outdoor, that’s billboards; wait’ll you see yourself fifty feet high. Moving on: testing; we showed your tape to some test audiences, and they gave us some very interesting feedback on your look—

Gale: —Oh, What about the story?

Obermeyer: [Looks at Gale with confusion] Story?

¹⁷⁸ *Murphy Brown*, season 1, episode 1, “Respect,” directed by Barnet Kelman, written by Diane English, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired November 14, 1988, on CBS.

¹⁷⁹ *Murphy Brown*, season 2, episode 19, “Bad Girls,” directed by Barnet Kelman, written by Diane English, Gary Dontzig, and Steven Peterman, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired February 19, 1990.

Gale: You know, about the kids in the school?

Obermeyer: Oh, oh, wasn't on the questionnaire.

Gale: Oh, well, um, it's, it's the kind of story I like to do, actually, um, I brought some other ideas too [hands him a sheaf of papers].

Obermeyer: [chuckles] How 'bout that. She brought her own stories. Ah [holds the stories up] who gets stories? Stories? [Everyone at the table looks at one another with confusion; Obermeyer puts the papers in his pocket] I'll take care of these. Let's get back to your look. Our test audiences had some very interesting ideas about how they'd like to see you, ah [points across the room] makeup, hair, wardrobe. They can't wait to get their hands on you.

Nowhere in the scene does Obermeyer articulate any sense of journalistic mission: the network is laser-focused on promotion, advertising, and the physical appearance of its on-air talent. Gale quickly realizes she was not hired for her reporting but rather for her attractiveness, deciding to turn the offer down.¹⁸⁰

These examples illustrate the fact that, as Michael Curtin and Jane Shattuc argue in their book on the U.S. television industry, while news has long been viewed as a prestige product,¹⁸¹ it is not immune from the pressures of ratings which, as Meehan has shown in her excellent work on the political economy of television, forms the paramount concern of the industry.¹⁸² Meehan has identified three interrelated markets involved in television. The first is the *market for ratings*, wherein the ratings provider constantly adjusts its measurement techniques to balance its own interests with those of broadcasters and advertisers. In other words, ratings numbers are not merely a neutral arbiter, but a carefully constructed product designed to suit overlapping and competing business interests. Second is the *market for audiences*, in which broadcasters decide which portion of the audience to sell to advertisers. And third is the *market for programs*, where the most important element in deciding on content is how well that content fits with the content

¹⁸⁰ *LateLine*, season 1, episode 5, "Pearce's New Best Friend," directed by Ken Levine, written by Al Franken, John Markus, and Earl Pomerantz, featuring Al Franken, Megyn Price, and Miguel Ferrer, aired April 14, 1998, on NBC.

¹⁸¹ Curtin and Shattuc, *The American Television Industry*, 146.

¹⁸² Meehan, "Watching Television," 245-46.

that has achieved past ratings success. Meehan argues that, across its history, the television industry has been dominated by the *market for ratings*, which broadcasters and advertisers have allowed to be monopolized by a single firm, Nielsen Media Research. She identifies four key elements of this monopoly. First is *shared demand*, as broadcasters and advertisers both desire measurements of consumers. Second is *discontinuity in demand* between broadcasters and advertisers, which obliges the ratings provider to continually perform a delicate balancing act between these two stakeholders. On the one hand, broadcasters want measurement to indicate higher viewership to demand higher prices to advertise during their programming. On the other, advertisers want measurement to show lower viewership to pay less for that airtime. Third, *the commodity audience only becomes knowable through the ratings system*. And fourth, *the commodity audience has nothing to do with the actual television audience itself*. The third and fourth elements illustrate that the commodity audience is purely a construction designed to serve the needs of the market for ratings.¹⁸³ Outwardly, the television industry positions viewers as the source of demand, and that television programming is a result of giving the people what they want to see.¹⁸⁴ In reality, Meehan points out, television viewers have no way to exert demand, since the television marketplace is neither fully free nor fully competitive.¹⁸⁵

Television and its system of ratings became intertwined with the growth of the post-World War II consumption society. As Charles Ponce de Leon points out in his historical survey of the history of U.S. television news, by the late 1950s over two-thirds of U.S. households owned a television. This included a rising number of lower-middle- and working-class people, many of whom had been unable to afford a set a decade earlier. However,

¹⁸³ Eileen R. Meehan, "Gendering the Commodity Audience: Critical Media Research, Feminism, and Political Economy," in *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords* second edition, edited by Meenkashi Durha, and Douglas M. Kellner (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 243-45.

¹⁸⁴ Meehan, *Why TV is Not Our Fault*, 28.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid* 22-23.

with rising wages and lower prices, more Americans had increased disposable personal income which they could now spend on consumer goods. Further, as the decade progressed, television broadcasting had come to many areas of the South, rural Midwest, and Rocky Mountain regions, expanding its reach beyond the urban and suburban audiences of the Northeast, Great Lakes, and coastal California. These new viewers came from a broader range of social classes, along with holding more traditional values and sensibilities than the coastal viewers television had primarily served in its early years. With television now serving a larger number and broader range of Americans, the medium truly began to cater its programming slate to a mass audience which was more lucrative for advertisers than ever before. This strategy was backed up by ratings numbers which showed that a majority of Americans preferred entertainment programs.¹⁸⁶ As William Boddy argues in his history of the television industry in the 1950s, in that decade ratings became extremely important, with little network tolerance for specialized or goodwill programming that would provide prestige but low viewership.¹⁸⁷ There was little ideological distinction between how sponsors, producers, advertising agencies, and networks viewed television programming: as a means to sell products to consumers.¹⁸⁸

As Stuart Ewen argues in his book on the use of style in popular culture, the television's industry's fixation on ratings numbers forces television news to constantly weigh its informational responsibilities against a commercial mandate to attract audiences and advertising revenue.¹⁸⁹ The need to maintain high ratings is a crucial component in what McNair identifies as the two main market-driven constraints of journalism: the need for a journalistic text to acquire an economic exchange-value from which profit can be derived, and the need to deliver

¹⁸⁶ Ponce de Leon, *That's the Way It Is*, 35-36.

¹⁸⁷ William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 205.

¹⁸⁸ Boddy, *Fifties Television*, 249

¹⁸⁹ Stuart Ewen, "The Political Elements of Style," in *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 264.

an audience of sufficient quality and quantity to advertisers.¹⁹⁰ Steve Barkin, in his book on U.S. television news, points out that one of the major arguments about the failings of the industry is that journalistic standards have been lowered as a result of pursuing ratings at all costs.¹⁹¹ The constant battle for ratings, this line of thinking posits, has led alternatively to either the definition of news being expanded or a dilution of the product with soft news and tabloid journalism.¹⁹²

Indeed, as former CBS News president Sig Mickelson argues, the early development of television news in the 1950s, particularly at the network level, was informed by a corporate structure which viewed news divisions as providing intangible benefits of prestige and recognition. In other words, the news was seen as a kind of loss leader which would prove that television was operating in the public interest.¹⁹³ Over the coming decades, television news would come to be under ratings pressures that were similar to and in some cases exceeded those of entertainment programming.¹⁹⁴ While news was certainly a prestige product that bolstered a network's standing, advertisers could frequently be skittish about supporting programs that they believed could hurt their own financial interests. For their part, television executives became increasingly concerned with the "obvious value" that a news division could provide in bolstering a network's bottom line.¹⁹⁵ With the passage of the FCC's Financial Interest and Syndication Rules in 1971, networks could only own fifteen hours a week of primetime non-news programming.¹⁹⁶ Since news, along with sports, was a genre from which networks did not need to divest, it took on a heightened financial importance and was obliged to adopt more

¹⁹⁰ McNair, *The Sociology of Journalism*, 109-110.

¹⁹¹ Steve Barkin, *American Television News: The Media Marketplace and the Public Interest* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 13.

¹⁹² Barkin, *American Television News*, 87.

¹⁹³ Sig Mickelson, *The Decade that Shaped Television News: CBS in the 1950s* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998), 8, 195.

¹⁹⁴ Mickelson, *The Decade that Shaped Television News*, 30.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid* 197.

¹⁹⁶ Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* fourth edition (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014), 258-259.

ratings-friendly approaches. This was part and parcel of a larger shift, identified by Kovach and Rosenstiel, that the press was undergoing in the 1970s and 1980s, the press advanced an early kind of civic fragmentation” by focusing more heavily on targeting content at specific demographics.¹⁹⁷

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which television news series engage with the need to maintain ratings through two major themes. First, the genre explores the ongoing tension between hard news and soft news. This debate plays out in the genre via ideological debates among characters who take divergent views on the degree to which television news should balance its responsibilities to inform against the need to maintain high ratings. I explore portrayals of news divisions that must slide into tabloid-style coverage in service of boosting ratings numbers. In these instances, journalists are forced to come to terms with the limits of their own idealism. The subsequent part of this chapter explores storylines that feature a network or station making changes to the style and format of its news broadcast in an effort to attract increased viewership. Key to many of these changes are outside ratings consultants, with whom characters often have complex working relationships.

¹⁹⁷ Kovach and Rosenstiel 35.

Hard News, Soft News, and the Allure of Tabloid Journalism

“Give them some T-and-A, is that it? Fine, why don’t I anchor the show in a tank top and bicycle pants?”

–*FYI* co-anchor Jim Dial, *Murphy Brown*¹⁹⁸

The balance between the reporting of hard and soft news stories is a concept that is repeatedly a key plot point across television news series. According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, hard news includes international, political, business, economic, health, and education topics, while soft news encompasses entertainment, celebrity, lifestyle, arts and culture, and sports news.¹⁹⁹ Ponce de Leon has shown how, in the latter decades of the twentieth century, the role of television news began to shift: serving the public interest increasingly became about “giving viewers more of what they wanted.” Before the 1960s, this sort of “market populism,” he argues, would have been anathema to most well-educated Americans; “a cynical and potentially dangerous excuse to exploit the public’s poor taste and most primitive yearnings.” This stance was due in part to the fact that the nation’s professional and managerial classes were firmly committed to television’s duty to maintain cultural “standards” and “uplift.” From the 1960s onward, however, such concepts would come to be viewed as elitist.²⁰⁰

By the 1970s, the idea that news media could contribute to an ideal public sphere where individuals could engage rationally with the concerns of the day had already been eroded. In his book on the role the media play in civic life, John Nerone posits that, as the news media grew throughout the twentieth century, the concept of everyday people engaging rationally with the

¹⁹⁸ *Murphy Brown*, season 1, episode 14, “It’s How You Play the Game,” directed by Barnet Kellman, written by Diane English and Russ Woody, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired February 27, 1989, on CBS.

¹⁹⁹ Nic Newman et al., *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2016*, (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2016), <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Digital-News-Report-2016.pdf>, 97.

²⁰⁰ Ponce de Leon, *That’s The Way It Is*, 208-210.

issues of the day was replaced by the notion that ordinary citizens had little to no involvement or impact on affairs of state. News presented itself as the solution to such problems of democracy by holding up its public affairs coverage as the gold standard of rational debate and public engagement. Yet the fanfare over this hard news segment of their business masked the fact that most of their viewership and revenue was actually derived from soft news.²⁰¹ While harder political and international stories would never outright disappear from television news, the industry devoted an increasing share of time and resources to softer lifestyle and entertainment coverage as the concept of the public interest became, as Chad Raphael points out in his book on the development of television news documentary, “rearticulated in market terms as whatever news organizations can produce cheaply enough to garner the largest or most lucrative audiences and whatever voices must be included or excluded to do so.”²⁰²

This idea becomes a key point of contention among several characters throughout *The Morning Show*. In the series’ first episode, “In the Dark Night of the Soul It’s Always 3:30 in the Morning,” Cory Ellison meets with Chip Black to discuss the future of *TMS*:

Cory: We can’t stand a blow to the news division. Broadcast networks, they can’t stand a blow to *anything* right now. You know, it’s kind of funny, you know how the entire world of broadcast could just fall off a cliff in a few years, like, *boom, pssss, bang*, lights out. Unless we reinvent it. We’re all gonna get bought out by *tech*, unless we start making changes.

Chip: I don’t know, tech or not, there will always be a need for reliable, quality journalism.

Cory: People get their horrible news delivered to the palm of their hand, twenty-four-seven, and they get it the way that they like it, colored the way that *they* want it, and news is awful. But humanity is addicted to it, and the whole world is depressed by it, that’s why what we really need on *television* right now, it’s *not news or fucking journalism*, it’s *entertainment*. This is just like during the depression, when people wanted to watch Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dance

²⁰¹ Nerone, *The Media and Public Life: A History* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2015), 148-49, 156.

²⁰² Raphael, *Investigated Reporting*, 233-35.

around on expensive sets and live in a dream world, *dream worlds* are essential, depressed people, they need escape, you know?²⁰³

Cory's logic is that, in a contemporary media landscape that is inundated with news coverage on multiple platforms, television news has a unique ability—and perhaps even a responsibility—to bring levity and relief in a way that other forms of news media are not as well-equipped to provide. Chip does offer some pushback against these notions, but he ultimately acquiesces to Cory's point of view. What remains unspoken between the two men is a disavowal of their own power to shape the news, even though they are both high-ranking decision-makers at a major broadcast network.

In the next episode, “A Seat at the Table,” Bradley Jackson confronts Chip over this, telling him derisively, “People like you are the reason broadcast news is what it is,”²⁰⁴ because under his leadership *TMS* has focused on what she views as soft news at the expense of important stories. Bradley also has a similar ongoing ideological battle with Alex Levy. In “The Pendulum Swings,” Bradley articulates her belief that television news viewers deserve the unvarnished truth, while Alex argues that part of their job as television journalists is to make their viewers feel better.²⁰⁵ All true journalists, Alex insists to Bradley in “Chaos is the New Cocaine,” always desire to report the stories that will give them the greatest possible audience, no matter how serious or unserious the story is.²⁰⁶ Bradley's definition of the public interest is

²⁰³ *The Morning Show*, “In The Dark Night of the Soul It's Always 3:30 in the Morning.”

²⁰⁴ *The Morning Show*, season 1, episode 2, “A Seat At the Table,” directed by Mimi Leder, written by Kerry Ehrin, Jay Carson, and Jeff Augustin, featuring Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, and Billy Crudup, aired November 1, 2019, on AppleTV+.

²⁰⁵ *The Morning Show*, season 1, episode 6, “The Pendulum Swings,” directed by Tucker Gates, written by Kerry Ehrin, Jay Carson, and Kristen Layden, featuring Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, and Billy Crudup, aired November 1, 2019, on AppleTV+.

²⁰⁶ *The Morning Show*, season 1, episode 3, “Chaos is the New Cocaine,” directed by David Frankel, written by Kerry Ehrin, Jay Carson, and Erica Lipez, featuring Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, and Billy Crudup, aired November 1, 2019, on AppleTV+.

rooted in traditional concepts of information and education, while Alex echoes a market-driven definition—if a high number of people are tuning in, then a public service is being provided.

This debate is also portrayed in an episode of *Kenan* titled “Hard News,” when sports anchor Pam Fox (Fortune Feimster) complains to the *Wake Up with Kenan* staff that the show is covering too much soft news. Kenan Williams sees no problem with this—they are simply giving their viewers more of what they want—and there is no need for the show to change its format when it is doing a good job of attracting high ratings. Mika Caldwell is a bit more conflicted on the subject. Before producing *Wake Up* she had a background in hard news, a “miserable life” that takes too much of a toll on those who cover it. Her argument here is more rooted in the relative difficulty of the labor involved in producing hard news rather than any notion of the best way for television news to serve the public interest. On the other hand, Mika does believe that the show may have a responsibility to educate their audience.²⁰⁷

Co-anchor Tami Greenlake openly scoffs at this notion, proclaiming that *Wake Up*’s only responsibility is to entertain, and that the world “doesn’t need more shows telling people the importance of voting or vaccines, or science or seatbelts.” Mika comes to the conclusion that “the world needs real journalism more than ever,” deciding that *Wake Up* has become too frivolous and from then on will cover “real news stories only.”²⁰⁸ Nothing seems to come of this in subsequent episodes, since *Wake Up* continues to operate as a lighthearted morning news program. This makes narrative sense given the fact that *Kenan* is an episodic sitcom where characters have little to no memory of what happened in previous episodes, with the main exception being romantic plotlines. It also fits with *Kenan*’s status as a television news-adjacent

²⁰⁷ *Kenan*, season 1, episode 2, “Hard News,” directed by Ken Whittingham, written by Jackie Clarke, David Caspe, and Matt McConkey, featuring Kenan Thompson, Chris Redd, and Kimrie Lewis, aired February 23, 2021, on NBC.

²⁰⁸ *Kenan*, “Hard News.”

series, which sometimes touch upon substantive issues of television journalism but rarely do so in a sustained way.

Both *Kenan* and *The Morning Show* portray the fact that morning programs occupy a unique role in television news. Morning news specifically, Daniel C. Hallin argues in his book on television news and the public sphere, is “first of all entertainment,” and as such is markedly different from other television news formats. First, morning news harnesses the intimacy of television: “friendly and interesting people have conversations with other friendly and interesting people, and the viewer is invited to ‘join them.’” Soft news is the focus of the format, with consumer and medical reporting, tales of ordinary people thrown into odd circumstances and the relatability of celebrity guests being some of the most frequent topics. Because morning news is not usually considered “serious journalism,” it is freed from many journalistic conventions. For example, while evening news is typically tightly edited and packaged, morning news has a more free-flowing structure that allows more room for on-air discussion among its anchors. Whereas evening news programs take a technical or strategic approach to political coverage, morning news treats such topics as a discussion of social values framed in terms of how they will impact viewers’ everyday lives.²⁰⁹

Further, the morning hours are when one gets ready for the day of work ahead, and hence any news program that airs during that time cannot cause too much distraction from these preparations to participate in capitalism. This sentiment is not unique to television news, nor for that matter commercial news. In his book on the history of National Public Radio, Steve Oney quotes former NPR president Frank Mankiewicz as saying that, when *Morning Edition* (1979-Present) was in development, it was considered that “the dominant emotion when you

²⁰⁹Hallin, “We Keep America on Top of the World,” 88, 91-93.

wake up is relief. You're alive. Life is beginning to set into an ordinary pattern. Another day is starting. By late afternoon, people are willing to think about anything, but as the day starts you want routine."²¹⁰ Morning news fills the role of easing its viewers into their day.

While television news series give at least some credence to both sides of the hard news-soft news debate, the genre has very little tolerance for the practitioners of tabloid news. This falls in line with what McNair has found about cinematic representations of journalism, wherein “The balance of good and evil [...] can be summarised [sic] therefore, as: foreign correspondents and investigative reporters, good; tabloid hacks, celebrity interviewers, paparazzi and other agents of the gutter press, bad.”²¹¹ In any television series depicting professionals at work, Turow argues, certain areas of the institution will be treated as more legitimate than others.²¹² In the case of television news series, tabloid journalism is delegitimized, and the people who work within that section of the industry are often set up as broadly unprincipled straw characters to be knocked down by the righteousness of the protagonists.

Another way that the genre engages with the hard news-soft news debate is by portraying television news' impetus to slide into sensationalism in the face of the rise of syndicated tabloid television in the 1980s and 1990s. Tabloid news programs such as *A Current Affair* (Syndication, 1986-1996, 2005) and *Hard Copy* (Syndication, 1989-1999) adopted much of the stylistic language of television news while focusing primarily on shock value. Tabloid talk shows—often pejoratively referred to as ‘trash TV’—like *Jerry Springer* (Syndication, 1991-2018), and *Maury* (Syndication, 1991-2022) also became television staples during this era. Taped before live studio audiences who were openly encouraged to interact with guests, these

²¹⁰ Steve Oney, *On Air: The Triumph and Tumult of NPR* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2025), 109.

²¹¹ McNair, *Journalists in Film*, 51.

²¹² Turow 6.

programs centered on lurid or outrageous subject matter and were often intentionally designed by their producers to elicit wild shouting matches and physical confrontations to make for more compelling and exciting television that would draw in viewers.

One of the pioneering figures in the tabloid television genre was Geraldo Rivera, who had first gained national attention as an investigative reporter at New York's WABC-TV, where he produced a Peabody-Award winning series exposing the abuse of patients with intellectual disabilities at two state-run medical institutions. This story, along with subsequent appearances on ABC's *20/20* (1978-Present) and *Nightline* (1979-Present), cemented Rivera as what Barkin terms the quintessential "action reporter," showing intense involvement in his stories and a penchant for public advocacy.²¹³ Leveraging this reputation, Rivera launched *Geraldo* (Syndication, 1987-1998), where he refashioned himself as a tabloid talk show host who was unafraid to tackle controversial issues head-on, even if they resulted in violent confrontations.

For example, during the taping of a 1988 episode on young members of hate groups, White Aryan Resistance representative John Metzger, sitting alongside two other white supremacists, launched slurs at Congress of Racial Equity President Tom Innis and anti-racist activist Rabbi A. Bruce Goldman. Innis—who earlier that year had shoved civil rights leader Reverend Al Sharpton during an appearance on another tabloid program, *The Morton Downey Jr. Show* (WWOR, 1987-1988; Syndication, 1988-1989)—rose from his chair, crossed the stage to have words with Metzger, and soon had both of his hands around Metzger's neck. The studio then exploded into a roughly minute-long melee involving guests, audience members, stagehands, and Rivera himself. In the midst of the brawl, Rivera sustained injuries including

²¹³ Barkin 129.

facial lacerations and a nasal fracture after being hit with a chair and punched in the face by a white supremacist.²¹⁴

After the commercial break, his face visibly bloodied as he looks directly into the camera Rivera says through nervous laughter, “only slightly the worse for the wear, we’re back.” When the episode aired, it was prefaced by a brief scene of Rivera in his office, wearing a nasal splint and flanked by three Emmy awards over his right shoulder, explaining that, while the episode contains an outburst of violence, it is important television because it functions as an exposé of racist and antisemitic groups.²¹⁵ This introduction is designed to bring a sheen of journalistic legitimacy to the episode which, in the tradition of tabloid television, intentionally courted the very mayhem it scorns and scolds by goading guests with histories of violent outbursts into conflict with one another.

The opening of the *Murphy Brown* episode “It’s How You Play the Game,” which aired about three months after the Geraldo melee, sees Murphy chiding her colleagues for their recent obsession over audience numbers, arguing that producing quality journalism is what matters and that ratings are meaningless. She changes her tune somewhat after learning that the show’s ratings have dropped significantly in recent weeks; what is worse, they are losing their time slot by a wide margin to a tabloid news program that Murphy finds particularly abhorrent. Reporting back from a meeting, Miles Silverberg tells the *FYI* team that network executives have suggested the program can make some stories “more intellectually accessible to a broader spectrum of viewers.” Jim Dial is angered by this directive to take the low road, while Frank Fontana is skeptical, pointing out that it would be hard to find the lighter side in his current reporting, an

²¹⁴ “Geraldo Rivera’s Nose Broken in Scuffle on His Talk show,” *New York Times* (1923-), Nov 04, 1988, <https://uoregon.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/geraldo-riveras-nose-broke-n-scuffle-on-his-talk/docview/110442833/se-2>.

²¹⁵ “Geraldo’s Broken Nose!!,” posted October 25, 2021, by MyTVcollection, YouTube, 44 min., 26 sec., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RpxPu3PCeLY>.

undercover story on widespread homelessness in Washington. Yet Frank does struggle with the notion that while his reporting could be powerful enough to effect real change in addressing the crisis, few people will even see the story if they are not tuning into *FYI* in the first place.²¹⁶

After ruling out asking the network for better promotion, the team considers running a single tabloid-style segment to grab viewer attention as a lead-in to Frank's homelessness report, reasoning that doing so once would not damage the integrity of the show. Tellingly, Corky Sherwood, who was hired primarily as a reporter of soft news, is the most vocal opponent of this idea. The fact of Corky's distaste for this strategy illuminates *Murphy Brown*'s point of view on the hard news-soft news debate: while the human interest stories that Corky regularly reports serve the purpose of a balanced slate of coverage, tabloid stories are pure sensationalism that at best add nothing substantive to *FYI* and at worst damage its credibility as a legitimate news program. In spite of Corky's strong objections, the team decides to invite representatives from two women's groups, Homemakers Against Gratuitous Sex and Hookers' Organization for American Rights, for a debate segment titled "Sex for Sale." The studio adopts elements of a tabloid talk show, with Murphy holding a wireless microphone while standing. To the team's surprise, while the two groups disagree with each other they are nevertheless engaging in a mostly calm and substantive discussion focused on the issues at hand. Quickly recognizing that this is not the ratings bait the show had aimed for, Murphy moves to cut off this reasoned discourse, and eventually goads the guests into a shouting match that escalates into a physical rumble. In trying to break up the fight, Jim takes a punch in the face from one of the homemakers, breaking his nose. At the next day's morning meeting, the *FYI* team has mixed feelings about the broadcast. While they won their slot in every major market with a combined

²¹⁶ *Murphy Brown*, "It's How You Play the Game."

47 share, giving Frank’s homelessness report a huge audience, Murphy worries that they attracted viewers in the same way that a car wreck makes people slow down to take a closer look. Right before the episode fades to black, Miles reluctantly utters, “We got what we want [sic], didn’t we?”²¹⁷ The impression that we are left with is that tabloid-style journalism is good for one thing only: ginning up ratings by appealing to the baser instincts of television viewers.



Figure 4: In *WIOU*, Neal Frazier and Hank Zaert argue over the running of a sensationalized story.²¹⁸

The characters of *WIOU* also get into heated discussions regarding the need to occasionally slide into tabloid-style coverage for the sake of ratings. In the episode “Pair o’ Guys Lost,” which is set during ratings sweeps week, Neal Frazier wants to do an investigative report on a career criminal named Charlie Hamlin who repeatedly convinces the FBI “that he has the inside track on some corrupt public officials and he offers to run the sting to catch them,” and as such has never faced prosecution for his own crimes. The report, Neal argues, will serve the public interest because it will highlight an ongoing story that is highly relevant to the people who

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ *WIOU*, season 1, episode 12, “Pair o’ Guys Lost,” directed by Edwin Sherin, written by John Eisendrath, Kathryn Pratt, and Gardner Stern, featuring John Shea, Helen Shaver, and Harris Yulin, aired March 13, 1991, on CBS.

live in WNDY's viewing area. Hank Zaret insists that Neal instead do a series on strippers, exotic dancers and prostitutes working in the metro area that is likely to attract higher viewership than the Hamlin story. For Hank, serving the public interest in this case means running enough stories that garner high ratings so that the news division can live another day. The two men argue over the situation in Hank's office:

Hank: One, we don't know that there is a sting operation; two, we don't have the time and

the resources for this type of investigation. Now, I need you doing this series.

Neal: 'Sex for Sale.'

Hank: Right, it's sweeps! Every ratings point means another million dollars in advertising.

Neal: I didn't know you were a bean-counter as well as a bad journalist.

Hank: Hey, second-highest-rated *Nightline*: an interview with Madonna.²¹⁹

Neal: [sarcastically] Ohh.

Hank: Yeah, the highest-rated: a tear-jerker with Jim and Tammy Bakker.²²⁰

Neal: Pap.

Hank: Yeah, that pap pays for a lot of yawners about FBI sting operations.

Neal: Look, we don't do stories because people want them, we give 'em what they need.

Hank: Yeah, the latest numbers show they don't need you. The research shows people think you're boring. I'm trying to help that.

Neal: I don't need your help. [...] This runs, public interest news waits, that's unbelievable.

Hank: Yeah, all right, all right, let's say that there is a sting operation, all right. Your story could jeopardize a legitimate police investigation; now what, *that's* in the public interest?

Neal: Compared with clocking the velocity of spinning tassels, you tell me.²²¹

In this scene, Hank is arguing that, for local news specifically, the very existence of hard news depends on the success of soft news. The ratings bump that will arise from covering this

²¹⁹ This refers to Forrest Sawyer's December 3, 1990 *Nightline* interview with Madonna, in which the pop music superstar defended the controversial music video for her song "Justify My Love," which had been banned from airing on MTV for its sexually explicit content.

²²⁰ This refers to Ted Koppel's May 27, 1987 *Nightline* interview with televangelist couple Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, the former co-hosts of the religious talk show *The PTL Club*. The interview aired in the midst of a scandal involving overlapping sexual and financial impropriety by Jim Bakker.

²²¹ *WIOU*, "Pair o' Guys Lost."

sensational and visually-striking story will ultimately translate into more revenue that can subsequently be used for in-depth investigative reports. Indeed, as Craig M. Allen points out in his book on the development of local television news, during the 1980s and 1990s in major U.S. media markets—a club to which the unnamed city depicted in *WIOU* most likely belongs—an increase or decrease of a single ratings point could translate into over one million dollars of advertising income for a local news operation.²²² Neal ultimately persuades Hank to let him proceed with the Hamlin story, but their argument is an excellent illustration of how the television news series genre utilizes abstract concepts about how television journalism should fulfill the public interest as a narrative device to create dramatic tension between characters.

For example, in the *Murphy Brown* episode “Operation: Murphy Brown,” when Murphy is about to undergo a lumpectomy to remove a cancerous tumor, she wants to keep the surgery a secret because she has not made her diagnosis public, nor has she yet told her own son. Rudy Grasso (Don McManus), a tabloid photographer, gets wind that Murphy is in the hospital and endeavors to take photographs of her there. Murphy’s *FYI* colleagues spend the bulk of the episode scurrying around the hospital in an attempt to foil Grasso “You’re news, I’m just reporting it,” Grasso tells Jim Dial. “Isn’t that what journalists do?” “How dare you,” Jim angrily replies, “you’re no more a journalist than you are a gentleman. Your ethics are despicable, you wrap yourself in the cloak of public service, yet you’re nothing more than a street hoodlum selling drugs in a schoolyard, so why don’t you just shove off?”²²³ Here, the tabloid press is positioned as being actively harmful to journalism as an institution.

²²² Allen, *News is People*, 189.

²²³ *Murphy Brown*, season 10, episode 4, “Operation: Murphy Brown,” directed by Joe Regalbuto, written by Diane English, Norm Gunzenhauser, and Eric Peterkofsky, featuring Candice Bergen, Faith Ford, and Charles Kimbrough, aired October 22, 1997, on CBS.

The Newsroom takes a similarly negative view on tabloid reporters. In an ongoing first-season subplot, the staff of *News Night* find out that AWM-owned tabloid magazine *TMI* has been hacking the private mobile phones of celebrities, including those of ACN anchors, soliciting protection money from their targets in exchange for keeping embarrassing stories out of print. In “Amen,” Will McAvoy goes to a bar to meet with *TMI* gossip columnist Nina Howard (Hope Davis) in an attempt to persuade her not to run a story suggesting that Will only agreed to keep Mac McHale on as executive producer of *News Night* because they had previously been romantically involved with each other. Howard says that she will keep quiet in exchange for a fifty thousand dollar investment into a new restaurant she is planning to open, to which Will reluctantly agrees²²⁴.

As Will is writing out a check, Howard remarks that, “Hey, well, we’re journalists.” Incensed by what he views as an insult to the profession, Will voids the check, launching into a monologue where he tells Howard that the people on his staff who risk life and limb to cover meaningful news, “*they’re* journalists. Come after me all you want, Nina. Come after me every day, look through my garbage, invent things out of thin air, that’s what you’re paid for. But you touch my staff and you’re walking into a world of hurt. I have an hour of primetime every night and I will *rededicate* my life to ruining yours.”²²⁵ Will’s monologue serves two functions. First, it draws a clear and sharp delineation between those who cover meaningful hard news and those who cover meaningless frivolity. For Will, only the former can actually serve the public interest. Second, it is a means for Will to assert his power as a member of the legitimated news

²²⁴ *The Newsroom*, season 1, episode 5, “Amen,” directed by Daniel Minahan, written by Aaron Sorkin, David Handelman, and Ian Reichbach, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher Jr., aired July 22, 2012, on HBO.

²²⁵ *The Newsroom*, “Amen.”

media—hosting a regularly scheduled evening cable newscast affords a sizable amount of power and influence.

The idealistic approach to television journalism portrayed by *The Newsroom* faces limitations in the face of an explosive tabloid story. In “The Blackout, Part I: Tragedy Porn,” an episode set between May 27 and June 1, 2011, Reese Lansing is furious that *News Night* has not been covering the trial of Casey Anthony, a young woman charged with the murder in the 2008 death of her daughter, Caylee. The real-life story drew comparisons to the O.J. Simpson murder trial, becoming an all but unavoidable media sensation. In eschewing coverage of the trial in favor of in-depth reporting on the 2011 debt-ceiling crisis, *News Night*’s viewership has fallen dramatically. Mac McHale insists to Reese that the show has no obligation to garner high ratings, since it is network management and ownership who have the relationships with advertisers. Her argument imagines that the news division is not only *editorially independent* from the network, but somehow *entirely separate* from the network and thus should be unconcerned with financial or viewership considerations. When the issue is brought to Charlie Skinner, he agrees with Reese that *News Night* needs to cover the trial—the ratings plunge speaks for itself. Will McAvoy agrees, seeing the story as a bargaining chip that can allow *News Night* more leeway with the network to cover more hard news in the future—“Rename the show *Casey Anthony Night with Casey Anthony*,” he says, if that is what it will take to bring viewers back. He points out that Edward R. Murrow hosted the celebrity interview show *Person to Person* (CBS, 1953-1959) in part as a concession to ensure that the more serious newsmagazine *See It Now* would remain on the air.²²⁶

²²⁶ *The Newsroom*, season 1, episode 8, “The Blackout, Part I: Tragedy Porn,” directed by Lesli Linka Glatter, written by Aaron Sorkin, David Handelman, and Ian Reichbach, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher Jr., aired August 12, 2012, on HBO.

To prepare for covering the Casey Anthony story, the staff meets to review clips from real-life episodes of *Nancy Grace* (HLN, 2005-2016). Don Keefer points out that the broadcast is designed to constantly grab viewers' attention with fast-moving visuals, including a corner of the screen that nearly constantly shows home movies of Caylee. He shows how a two-second clip of Ms. Anthony walking across the courtroom while looking at her lawyer becomes the focus of exhaustive analysis, replayed in slow motion and from multiple angles in a style similar to an instant replay from a sporting match. Throughout the meeting, the *News Night* staff have resigned or disgusted facial expressions, and at several points Mac and Will give each other knowing looks of disdain. The tactics used by *Nancy Grace* are "all based on an emotional appeal," Don argues, "the way she would with a jury if there was no judge there to stop her." Later, he articulates why these constant visual barrages are so effective at keeping viewers watching:

Don: And that's exactly why she's showing it to you so many times. So you have the chance to draw your own thoroughly uninformed opinion on an innocuous exchange. "She looks pissed. I wonder if she's sleeping with her lawyer, I bet she is, I wonder if that's what she looked like when she killed Caylee, this is the best TV ever, I gotta go on my Casey Anthony Facebook page and see if my Casey Anthony Facebook friends just saw Casey Anthony make a Casey Anthony face at her Casey Anthony lawyer"—

Mac: —All right, enough. Will is a former criminal prosecutor; maybe he can talk about how our justice system wasn't built to lock up guilty people, it was built to keep innocent people *free*, which is something Americans should be *proud* of and fiercely protect.

Don: Nooo. He can't *ever* imply that the viewer doesn't already know everything and that she might be innocent.

Mac: If we're going to *cover* this we're going to cover it our way.

Will: What's the point in *covering* it at all unless we do it in a way that gets our *audience* back.

Mac: A modest proposal: we could *ourselves* commit murder on our air; in your *face*, Nancy Grace!

While Don has a kind of begrudging admiration for *Nancy Grace*'s skilled command of tabloid television, his sarcastic tone indicates that he shares the same disgust for it as the rest of the *News Night* team.²²⁷

Both Mac and Will find it distasteful to be covering the Casey Anthony story, but where Mac views this focus on high ratings as kowtowing to prurience and frivolity, Will sees the ratings bump that will result from the coverage as a valuable currency which can buy more journalistic freedom from the network. Will also realizes that presenting the larger context of the trial will likely not draw audiences back—they need to approach the story as a tabloid television program would. After several nights of wall-to-wall coverage, Reese ecstatically reports that ratings numbers have started to rebound. “We promo’d the hell out of it,” he says. “We got a hundred-fifty thousand viewers back. Twenty-five to fifty-four, almost all women. That’s toasters, furniture, food, clothes, kid’s clothes, vacation plans. Our heads are above water now, so do not stop.” In other words, Reese is happy when the advertisers are happy. To drive home the point that *The Newsroom* finds all of this distasteful, the episode includes a scene where Will discusses with his therapist the guilt he feels over making the *News Night* staff sacrifice the principles of the show for the sake of ratings.²²⁸ Ratings are positioned as a necessary evil that, under certain circumstances where a sensational story dominates the news cycle, even high-minded television journalists must reluctantly debase themselves to pander to.

²²⁷ *The Newsroom*, “The Blackout, Part I: Tragedy Porn.”

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

Format Changes

“Unfortunately, elderly people who complain about things are our key demographic.”

—*The Breakdown* executive producer Greg Walsh, *Great News*²²⁹

Television news series often feature narratives where news programs, usually under pressure from executives, make significant changes to the format of their broadcasts in an effort to boost ratings numbers. This is a recurring concern in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, starting with the third-season premiere episode “The Good-Time News,” in which WJM’s newly hired general manager decides to make the six o’clock news broadcast more informal and entertaining. Emulating the approach of a highly-rated local competitor, the updated format will focus more heavily on feature stories and soft news, present hard news in a more lighthearted manner, and include more on-air banter among the news team to give the appearance that they are friends outside of work. The broadcast switches to a two-anchor format, with Ted Baxter now joined by weatherman Gordy Howard (John Amos). Their pairing is intended to evoke a comedic double act, with Ted as the straight man providing gravitas and Gordy as the funny man lending personality. Whereas the previous format had Ted delivering the news while standing behind a solid podium in front of a backdrop of a world map, the updated set introduces a more vibrant, colorful, talk show-like design where Ted and Gordy are seated in chairs that are angled toward each other, with a low coffee table in front of them. The two anchors are also provided with a new wardrobe, ditching the traditional suit-and-tie look in favor of warmer and more friendly white turtleneck sweaters underneath bright-red corduroy blazers.²³⁰

²²⁹ *Great News*, season 1, episode 6, “Serial Arsonist,” directed by Ken Whittingham, written by Tracey Wigfield, Ben Dougan, and Dan Klein, featuring Briga Heelan, Andrea Martin, and Adam Campbell, aired May 9, 2017, on NBC.

²³⁰ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 3, episode 1, “The Good-Time News,” directed by Hal Cooper, written by James L. Brooks and Allan Burns, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Edward Asner, and Valerie Harper, aired September 16, 1975, on CBS.

Consistent with their relationship across the series, Lou Grant and Mary Richards have opposing views on the change of format. Lou is vehemently against the alterations, complaining that the changes amount to nothing more than executives who know nothing about journalism making a short-sighted grab for ratings that will harm the newsroom by dumbing down its coverage. Mary takes a more positive stance, arguing that this more congenial approach to covering the news could attract viewers who would not otherwise tune into the show—or even watch television news at all—and that the subsequent ratings lift could very well be a net positive for the WJM newsroom.²³¹ The refresh seemingly does not last long, and there is little or no discussion among the characters about how the short-lived changes of “The Good-Time News” impacted viewership. Yet this episode is significant for the ways in which it illustrates several of the trends that were beginning to take root in local television news across the 1960s and 1970s. As Allen argues, during this time, network news programs appealed to the sensibilities of upper-middle-class viewers, who were drawn to its “no nonsense” format that was “rich in words and substance,” and appreciated its focus on national and international affairs.²³² Thanks in part to limited competition, Ponce de Leon points out, the networks could “stick mostly to the high road and produce a relatively serious journalism.”²³³ Crafting weighty newscasts, Conway asserts, was viewed by the networks as “an expensive public service” that generated prestige and influence.²³⁴

Storylines that deal with tweaks to television news studios speak to their importance as a means to keep audiences engaged in news broadcast over the long term. Robert Stam has argued that television news, “on some levels, has the predictable and renewable charm of the genre film.

²³¹ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, “The Good-Time News.”

²³² Allen, *News is People*, 58.

²³³ Ponce de Leon 128.

²³⁴ Conway 268.

Informational material, neatly fashioned with beginnings, middles, and ends, is poured into predictable narrative moulds [sic] provided by the surrounding televisual and cinematic intertext.”²³⁵ In other words, part of the pleasure that audiences derive from watching the news derives from its predictability. The studio contributes to this by providing a consistent visual space from which to disseminate the news—the stories may change, but the studio is always there. As Matt Carlson points out in his book on the ways in which journalism constructs authority, since the news is a symbolic system that generates shared meaning, “the repetition of form is meaningful in itself.”²³⁶ As one of the “repetitive story structures”²³⁷ of television news, the studio is a highly significant space and a component of viewers’ daily news consumption rituals.

In *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* episode “Son of ‘But Seriously, Folks,’” WJM decides to set a broadcast of the six o’clock news in the newsroom itself. Shortly before the broadcast, Lou remarks “I like it, it’s gonna have the feel of a *newsroom*.” Ted, a sheaf of papers in hand, is seated at Murray Slaughter’s desk, with Mary seated at the desk directly to his right. Before heading into the control room (which we don’t see), the director reminds everyone “to just relax and be natural; just pretend we’re not even here, right?” The idea is to give the appearance to viewers that the broadcast has not been planned or staged, and that Ted and the newsroom staff are interacting the same way they would off-camera. “Ted Baxter here, six o’clock news. If our set looks a little different tonight,” Ted says to open the show, “it’s ‘cause we’re trying something a little different. We thought we’d bring you the show right from the newsroom, to

²³⁵ Robert Stam, “Television News and its Spectator,” in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches – An Anthology*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1983), 33.

²³⁶ Carlson, *Journalistic Authority*, 69-70.

²³⁷ *Ibid* 52-53.

bring you the excitement of the news as it happens.” He proceeds to walk slowly around the newsroom, introducing Mary and other members of the staff to the audience.²³⁸

After Ted returns to the desk to read the evening’s stories, Murray slowly walks across the newsroom, moving stiffly and smiling strangely into the camera, handing Ted a news bulletin before leaving just as awkwardly as he appeared. “That’s the way we do things around here,” Ted says proudly, “bulletins right off the wire. Murray reads them to me so you get the news when we get the news.” He then authoritatively slaps the sheet of paper onto the desk without reading it, and is moving to the next topic until Mary not-so-subtly reminds him that he has skipped the bulletin entirely. The story is about an American diplomat who has just been released after being held hostage in Indonesia, to which Ted turns to the staff and asks enthusiastically, “Well, that’s certainly good news, isn’t it, gang?” When they don’t respond, Ted asks more forcefully in his newsman voice, “*Isn’t it, gang?*” The staff then chime in to murmur their assent. In keeping with his character, by the end of the broadcast Ted is the only one who believes the show was a success, while his colleagues realize that it was a worthwhile experiment that simply didn’t work as well as planned.²³⁹ This episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* draws humor from traditional production practices and studio design bumping up against trends that would soon emerge in television news, including active newsrooms becoming a key visual component of broadcasts. The failure of WJM’s experiment lies not only in the incompetence of the easily-distracted Ted Baxter, but also because it merely drops him into an existing newsroom that has not been designed as a space from which news can be broadcast to an audience.

²³⁸ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 4, episode 7, “Son of ‘But Seriously, Folks,’” directed by Jay Sandrich, written by James L. Brooks, Allan Burns, and Phil Mishkin, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Edward Asner, and Valerie Harper, aired October 27, 1973, on CBS.

²³⁹ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, “Son of ‘But Seriously, Folks.’”

Local news' experimentations with style, content and presentation deviated significantly from network news programs, which in the 1960s, as Ponce de Leon points out, were dominated by "a preponderance of hard news," partly because of the tumultuous events of the decade, but also because the networks had a specific vision of the public service they could provide.²⁴⁰ Network television journalists "assumed that if viewers were better informed" about matters of national importance, "they were more likely to be engaged and responsible citizens." Yet in working to establish a national perspective, the networks relied on a relatively narrow range of official sources. The voices and opinions of politicians, diplomats, and spokespeople from elite organizations and institutions dominated network news broadcasts.²⁴¹

Allen posits that, in contrast to network news, local television news operated in a more fiercely competitive environment in which a greater emphasis was placed on generating ratings and profits.²⁴² At the local level, news was not targeted to elite viewers but rather designed to meet the "imperative of communicating the news to middle and lower status groups."²⁴³ This approach was defined by an emphasis on sports and weather alongside news coverage. Broadcasts were typically headlined by a two-person anchor team, supported by weather and sports anchors, all of whom chit-chatted with each other to build a kind of televisual friendship with audiences. Stylistically, local news emphasized "exhaustive visualization," including on-location reporters who used pictures to communicate stories. Short interview clips, also known as soundbites, were favored, along with "eye-catching studio sets, mood-changing music and soft-sell promotion." Stories were heavily weighted toward investigative exposés, medical

²⁴⁰ Ponce de Leon 63.

²⁴¹ Ibid 67-68.

²⁴² Allen xii.

²⁴³ Ibid 125.

and consumer affairs, and lifestyle news. “Put all together,” Allen writes, these elements were designed to make local news feel like “an electronic extension of a viewer’s family.”²⁴⁴

The stylistic and content choices of local television news were heavily influenced by the rise of audience research carried out by news consultants: specialists from outside firms hired by station management to address the strengths and weaknesses of news programs with regard to ratings numbers.²⁴⁵ While Nielsen ratings—which could tell *how many people* watched—were still the yardstick by which all television programs were ultimately measured, they could not indicate the reasons *why people* tuned in or out. Beginning in the 1960s, consultants sold their services to local television newsrooms to address this missing ‘why’ through the use of qualitative social science and market research techniques.²⁴⁶ Newsroom leaders, Allen points out, were initially ambivalent about consultants, often viewing their recommendations as unnecessary or obvious.²⁴⁷ Yet eventually, “local newsrooms had become so conditioned to what was in the research that they responded by rote.”²⁴⁸

WJM’s abysmal audience numbers are frequently mentioned across the run of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, and are the focal point for the fifth-season episode “The Outsider,” wherein a young news consultant named Bob Larsen (Richard Masur), who has recently graduated from college, is hired to identify problems with the show and recommend changes to lift its ratings. By this point, Lou and Mary have switched their perspectives: Lou now embraces the changes as a means for their small news operation to earn more revenue, while Mary now feels that the show has become too ratings-focused. Aside from Lou, the newsroom greets Larsen’s arrival with suspicion and hostility, fretting that he will disrupt the chain of command or advise firing

²⁴⁴ Ibid 69.

²⁴⁵ Ibid xii.

²⁴⁶ Ibid 41.

²⁴⁷ Ibid 82.

²⁴⁸ Ibid 216.

employees to cut costs, and resenting a constant stream of memos he distributes to the staff. Murray is particularly irked by such an inexperienced consultant providing advice to television news veterans about how to run their show.²⁴⁹

One of the major recommendations Larsen makes is to replace a story on recent riots in India with coverage of a string of local purse-snatching incidents. He makes this suggestion based on audience research which indicates that local news viewers have little interest in international news, and that the best way the show can raise its ratings is by putting its focus squarely on local stories. By the time Larsen is there for two weeks, the newsroom staff have come to value his input and like him personally, in no small part because at that point the show's ratings have risen by one full point. Though they implore him to stay, Larsen decides to bring his consulting for the station to a close, as he believes that a one-point bump is the best that WJM, "a nice, friendly little station" can do given its relative size and resources.²⁵⁰

"The Outsider" deals with one of the key strategies used by news consultants as they were beginning to gain real influence and power in the local news industry in the 1970s: a shift away from hard news coverage. Indeed, as Kovach and Rosenstiel point out, many of the style and coverage choices of local news were made by newsroom managers that were confirmed by the work of consultants. Chief among these was the idea that local audiences were of relatively low intelligence and needed "stimulating visuals" to keep them engaged, a line of thinking that led to an emphasis on soft news, along with crime and public safety stories. Hard news stories, including those on policy, government, and international affairs, went the conventional wisdom, would drive away viewers and harm ratings. Yet in later decades, the authors argue, more

²⁴⁹ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 5, episode 5, "The Outsider," directed by Peter Bonerz, written by James L. Brooks, Allan Burns, and Jack Winter, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Edward Asner, and Gavin McLeod, aired October 12, 1974.

²⁵⁰ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, "The Outsider."

rigorous research revealed that audiences were not disinterested in hard news altogether—they were simply turned off by poor hard news coverage. This became a kind of vicious circle for local television news: because newsrooms believed that local viewers would not tune in for hard news, they devoted fewer resources to it, leading to a mediocre product that audiences did not like, which reaffirmed the original belief in viewers’ distaste for hard news.²⁵¹

Over the next three decades, consultants would move beyond working with management and news directors to be “allowed working contacts with reporters, producers, and assignment editors, and, thus, they had occasions directly to impart research-guided news values.”²⁵² In other words, while a consultant would not explicitly dictate a newsroom’s choice of stories or how to structure coverage, they influenced television journalists through an *overall mindset* which put considerations around audience response front and center. An inside joke within the consulting industry was that if an anchor sneezed, “the color of the Kleenex would show up in somebody’s research.”²⁵³ While the networks were initially disinterested and often looked down upon audience research,²⁵⁴ by the end of the twentieth century consulting had made its way into virtually all forms of the news media, including network news.²⁵⁵

Murphy Brown takes a decidedly dimmer view than *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* on the rising influence of consultants. In the third-season premiere, “The 390th Broadcast,” *FYI*’s ratings numbers are slipping, which leads Miles Silverberg to ponder whether the show should make changes to attract new viewers. In a scene that satirizes the fickle nature of television audiences, he organizes a focus group to gauge viewers’ perceptions of the show, inviting all four anchors to watch from behind a two-way mirror. Corky Sherwood receives the only positive

²⁵¹ Kovach and Rosenstiel 297.

²⁵² Allen 217.

²⁵³ Ibid 245.

²⁵⁴ Ibid 57.

²⁵⁵ Ibid 245.

response, with the group expressing how much they like her happy, caring on-screen demeanor. Jim Dial is criticized as being too stiff, while Frank Fontana is so unmemorable that some members don't even realize he is a part of the show. Murphy is subject to the most severe criticism: the consensus is that she wears clothing that is too harsh and is impolite toward her interview subjects—one woman specifically dislikes how hard she was on Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega. On the whole, the anchors are incensed by the results of the focus group. They are even more upset when Miles decides to hire a consultant named Chris Bishop (Harry Shearer) to broaden the show's appeal, resolving to push back on any of Bishop's recommendations before they even hear what he has to say.²⁵⁶



Figure 5: Frank Fontana, Jim Dial, and Corky Sherwood in *FYI*'s new studio on *Murphy Brown*.²⁵⁷

The refreshed format begins with opening titles that are akin to the opening of a 1990s-era family sitcom, with charming, treacly shots of Jim, Murphy, and Corky. Frank is shown skydiving and bungee-jumping, as Bishop wants to explicitly emphasize the danger and

²⁵⁶ *Murphy Brown*, "The 390th Broadcast."

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

excitement of investigative reporting. The show now features a living room-like set that is meant to convey a homey feeling, and is more in line with the morning news and daytime talk shows of the 1990s than a primetime news program. Designed in a southwestern motif, the set features light-colored couches and armchairs with wooden frames, a brown tile floor covered by an area rug, and is decorated with pottery and cacti. The rear wall has a stucco-like appearance; inset are three monitors with a newly-designed *FYI* logo. There are also some significant wardrobe changes. Frank is dressed in a tasseled black leather jacket and pants to create a daredevil image, Jim sports a heavy gray cardigan sweater for a more relaxed appearance, while Corky wears a much shorter skirt than usual that shows off her legs for greater sex appeal. Capping off the more casual environment, all three anchors hold turquoise coffee mugs as they present the show.²⁵⁸

To combat what he labels as Murphy's "warmth problem," Bishop has Murphy conduct a live, in-studio conversation with an "average American citizen," choosing to invite a middle-aged white woman from the Midwest to share her outlook on American life. The segment is also designed to combat the appearance that network news appeals to the sensibilities of coastal populations, while rejecting points of view from the middle of the country.²⁵⁹ Murphy's guest begins by expressing how much she likes living in her hometown, but the interview quickly devolves into her making a series of disparaging remarks about other racial and ethnic groups who have recently moved into her neighborhood and changed its character for the worse. Murphy does her best to remain cordial, but eventually calls the woman out on her bigoted comments, giving her a forceful dressing-down. Murphy's inability to hold back her

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Allen 276.

instincts as a journalist to directly confront her subjects serves to break the environment of friendliness and approachability that Bishop aimed to create via the refreshed format.

Later in its run, *Murphy Brown* also explores how network news programs in the 1980s and 1990s began to leverage an image of technological superiority as a marker of distinction and legitimacy. In “Black, White & Brown,” a corporate reshuffle sees Gene Kinsella being replaced as head of the news division by Mitchell Baldwin (Julius Carry). Baldwin, a much younger man than Kinsella, believes that *FYI* needs to implement big, drastic changes to fulfill its potential and bring the show up to date. On the whole, the *FYI* team is against these changes, since they challenge the way that the show has been structured for years. A major part of Baldwin’s strategy is cutting the length of stories from twelve to ten minutes, using the extra time to create montages that will give the broadcasts “more visual impact.”²⁶⁰

Baldwin’s most controversial decision comes in the episode “Two for the Road.” At *FYI*’s morning meeting, he shows the team a scale model of a new broadcast studio that is in the works. “A two-level, state-of-the-art, high-definition, multi-monitor media environment,” Baldwin proclaims, “is a radical departure from what you’re all used to: fake wood and carpet.” Here, he is both exalting the use and display of new technologies while denigrating more traditional news studio design as staid and outmoded. The futuristic set features increased vertical space and is flanked by spiral staircases at either side leading to a catwalk-style mezzanine. The entire rear wall is covered with large video screens, replacing the small console televisions that serve as the backdrop of the current set. There is also no desk—the anchors stand at a cluster of slim,

²⁶⁰ *Murphy Brown*, “Black, White & Brown.”

silver-colored podiums arranged in a V-shaped formation, and will be expected to rove about the studio during broadcasts.²⁶¹

The team vents their frustration at the proposal, with Murphy complaining that the news studio would be more at home in an episode of *Star Trek* than on a television news program. “All this talk of a new set is ridiculous,” Jim Dial opines. “When I started out, a set was a desk, a globe, a clock, occasionally Betty Furness would walk through trying to hawk a refrigerator. Those were simpler times; times when people *sat*.” As a veteran television newsman, Jim believes that a single anchor sitting behind a desk with minimal blandishment is enough to convey authority (his aside about Furness, who became a fixture of television advertising as a spokeswoman for Westinghouse home appliances and consumer electronics, makes a subtle point about the long standing importance of advertising in television news). Ultimately, Baldwin decides to have *FYI* stick with their existing broadcast studio—floating the idea of a new design turns out to be a power play to gain concessions from Miles on budget cuts for reporting expenses.²⁶²

Even though it never comes to fruition, Baldwin’s concept for a new *FYI* set speaks to the ways in which modern television news studios make visible to their audiences the technologies that facilitate the gathering and dissemination of news. Drawing on the work of Roland Barthes, Stam has argued that news studios are spaces that employ “reality effects” that orchestrate for news spectators “authenticating details which create the optical illusion of truth,” the representational accuracy of which are “ultimately less important than the mere fact of their presence.” These effects—including physical artifacts, sounds and movements —serve as

²⁶¹ *Murphy Brown*, season 5, episode 21, “Two for the Road,” directed by Joe Regalbuto, written by Diane English, Michael Patrick King, and Peter Tolan, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired March 15, 1993, on CBS.

²⁶² *Murphy Brown*, “Two for the Road.”

“strategic details to elicit a feeling of verisimilitude,” and although there is no practical reason for their presence in a modern television newsroom, they work together to signify to audiences “work, urgency, and round-the-clock newsgathering.”²⁶³ As enduring physical structures, television news studios and the objects inside them speak to Nikki Usher’s assertion in her article on the importance of physical objects to journalism that “news buildings are material manifestations of the role that journalists play in a community—aspects of newswork and journalistic cultural identity that move beyond content.”²⁶⁴

In *Sports Night*, the influence of news consultants is explored through “outside ratings expert” Sam Donovan (William H. Macy), who becomes a recurring character in the series’ second season after he is hired by Isaac Jaffe to increase *SN*’s sluggish ratings numbers. The dread that the staff feel around Donovan is reflected in the title of the first episode in which he appears: “Something Wicked This Way Comes.” As in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Murphy Brown*, Donovan’s arrival is initially met with suspicion and hostility. Casey McCall suggests that Donovan be stonewalled so that he won’t interfere with “our show,” indicating the sense of ownership that he feels toward *SN*. When Donovan immediately begins giving orders to the staff, both in the newsroom and in the control room and studio during broadcasts, Dan Rydell threatens to organize a staff-wide walk-out in protest. Donovan responds by telling Dan that he has the backing of Isaac, who hired him to raise *SN*’s ratings share by three points—Donovan cares only about that goal and is unconcerned with who works at the show or not.²⁶⁵

²⁶³ Stam 32.

²⁶⁴ Nikki Usher, “Rethinking Trust in the News: A Material Approach Through ‘Objects of Journalism,’” *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 4, (2017), 570.

²⁶⁵ *Sports Night*, season 2, episode 2, “When Something Wicked This Way Comes,” directed by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, featuring Josh Charles, Peter Krause, and Felicity Huffman, aired October 12, 1999, on ABC.

As Donovan becomes ever more involved with day-to-day decisions at *SN*, other members of the staff also begin to chafe against his presence. In the episode titled “Cliff Gardner,” Dana Whitaker is adamant about maintaining control over the broadcast hour itself, and wants to make the control room off-limits to Donovan during that time. Natalie Hurley points out that Continental Sports Channel is the third-rated sports network overall, which is not entirely the fault of *SN*. Aside from Isaac, the senior staff view Donovan as an invader who has no right to tell them how to run their own show.²⁶⁶ However, this sentiment begins to turn when Donovan stands up for the show and its staff to an antagonist which they all share: CSC network executives. In a scene set in Isaac’s office, network adviser J.J. (Robert Mailhouse)—a recurring character who is written as such a network lackey that he does not even have a last name—meets with Isaac and Donovan regarding *SN*’s flagging ratings. He is accompanied by Director of Program Development Ray Mitchell (Tim Dekay), and Senior Vice President of Current Programming Billie Tasker (Bari Hochwald). Isaac sits at his desk, with Mitchell and Tasker seated in guest chairs facing Isaac. J.J. stands facing Isaac, while Donovan stands off to the side:

J.J.: Isaac, we know you’re busy, so we’ll cut to the chase. *Sports Night*’s been underachieving. It’s not an exaggeration to say at this point that the network’s concern is *extreme*. Now, Ray and Billy have been writing memos and sending notes to your staff for a *year*, and they have fallen on deaf ears. It is simply time for us to step in.

Isaac: I’m sorry you feel that way.

J.J.: Excuse me?

Isaac: I said I’m sorry you feel that way, that the notes have fallen on deaf ears. I’ve always felt that they were given their due consideration.

J.J.: They weren’t.

Isaac: You mean because we didn’t take them? Just because we didn’t execute *all* the

²⁶⁶ *Sports Night*, season 2, episode 3, “Cliff Gardner,” directed by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, featuring Josh Charles, Peter Krause, and Felicity Huffman, aired October 19, 1999, on ABC.

networks' suggestions [points his finger up at J.J.] doesn't mean we weren't listening. It just means we didn't agree. You didn't expect me to substitute your judgment for mine, did you, J.J.?

J.J.: Not then, no.

Isaac: But now.

J.J.: Yes.

Isaac: Will it keep everyone here from losing their jobs?

J.J.: I don't understand.

Isaac: If I allow you three to go in there and mess with my show, will it keep my staff from losing their jobs?

J.J.: I can't make promises.

Isaac: J.J.

J.J.: Yeah.

Isaac: I've never liked you

J.J.: I know.

Isaac: [Stands up, slapping the desk] We're done.

Stepping into the hallway to speak privately with Donovan, J.J. expresses that Isaac is not “recovering as fast as we hoped” from a mild stroke that had kept him out of the office for some time.²⁶⁷ J.J. suggests that Donovan take over *SN*, which will put “a more sales-oriented executive at the top of the pyramid.” From his facial expressions and tone of voice, it is clear that Donovan recognizes that the network is not in a position to fire Isaac for cause and thus plan to use his stroke as a pretext to remove him.²⁶⁸

Consistent with the television news series genre as a whole, this group of mid-level CSC executives are portrayed as sneaky, underhanded functionaries who give reams of notes and suggestions while having little to no understanding of the day-to-day work that goes into producing a live television news program. Rather than attempting to work to develop the strengths of the anchor team and senior production staff to improve the show, their suggestions

²⁶⁷ In 1999, Robert Guillaume suffered a mild stroke on the set of *Sports Night*, taking a six-episode hiatus to rest and recover. The character of Isaac Jaffe was written to have also had a stroke in the series. Michael Carson, “Robert Guillaume obituary,” *The Guardian*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/oct/25/robert-guillaume-obituary>.

²⁶⁸ *Sports Night*, “Cliff Gardner.”

are largely based on parroting elements that have garnered high ratings numbers for sports news programs on other networks. While Donovan acknowledges that he is an outsider who may not be well-liked by the *SN* staff, he is committed to making his own recommendations that are based on him being alongside them in the trenches. His experience is in sharp contrast to that of the trio of executives who constantly send down notes to the show from their own offices while rarely visiting the *SN* newsroom or broadcast studio.²⁶⁹ Donovan appears sporadically over the remainder of *Sports Night*'s second season—his character is written as having multiple clients across the country, a narrative device to explain his absences—and develops a positive, though certainly not collegial, working relationship with the show's senior staff.

Conclusion

“I don't banter, it wouldn't be pleasant for any of us.”

—*FYI* co-anchor Murphy Brown, *Murphy Brown*²⁷⁰

In this chapter, I have explored how television news series handle the integral role that ratings play in television news. In the genre, the importance of ratings is portrayed as a detrimental force that is leading to a shift in news away from a public service mentality and toward a strategy based on ‘giving the people what they want.’ The genre posits that the rise of soft news and tabloid journalism stand as major threats to the news industry, as over time audiences may be unable to distinguish these kinds of infotainment programs from serious news. Storylines dealing with news programs making significant, sometimes radical changes to their formats to attract or maintain viewership—often at the behest of outside consultants who take audience research as gospel—speak to an anxiety that, in the service of ratings, television news

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

²⁷⁰ *Murphy Brown*, “Anchors Away.”

is in danger of eroding the very elements of its ‘newsiness.’ In a similar fashion to the genre’s portrayal of the political economy of television news, which I have discussed in the previous chapter, the depiction of the fixation on ratings is presented as both a necessary evil and a potential existential threat to television news. In the next chapter, I will analyze the ways in which television news series engage with the relationship that television journalists have with the professional standards and norms of the work of journalism.

CHAPTER THREE: PROFESSIONALISM

Introduction

“I’m on a mission to civilize!”

–*News Night* anchor Will McAvoy, *The Newsroom*²⁷¹

A major focus of television news series is the ways in which television journalists go about certain aspects of their jobs. In the twentieth century, journalism worked to establish a professional identity, one that sought to create templates for best practices in the workplace and to present a certain kind of image to the general public. Professionalism would ensure that journalists would uphold ethical standards, as well as promoting an image that the press was a crucial entity in upholding and maintaining a democratic society. Television journalists have a unique relationship to this identity of professionalism, in that they must often walk a line between upholding professional standards while also remaining mindful of maintaining the commercial imperatives upon which the television industry rests.

Over roughly the past century, American journalists have constructed an identity of professionalism which informs both the ways in which they carry out their work and how they present themselves to the public. Nerone has illustrated how this process was a break from the partisanship that characterized the print press in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²⁷² The rise of partisan newspapers in the U.S. was an outgrowth of First Amendment rights, with political parties recruiting members of the news media to serve their interests during instances of political conflict or debate, while using newspapers as a means of organizing.²⁷³ As the Second

²⁷¹ *The Newsroom*, season 1, episode 4, “I’ll Try to Fix You,” directed by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, David Handelman, and Ian Riechenbach, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher Jr., aired July 15, 2012, on HBO.

²⁷² Nerone, *The Media and Public Life*, 53.

²⁷³ Nerone 84-85.

Industrial Revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the news media becoming increasingly commercialized and less partisan-oriented, the meaning of being a journalist began to shift away from functioning as a propagandist and toward a reporter.²⁷⁴ The rise of muckraking journalism, built around exposés of contemporary corruption, served a dual purpose. On the one hand, it allowed journalists to build a public reputation of standing up for the common man against the greed and excesses of capitalism. At the same time, this kind of coverage was excellent business for media owners: the stories enraged the public and spurred them to buy more copies.²⁷⁵ In other words, the criticism of industrialism was employed as a tool to make more money for newspapers, which had themselves become big business.²⁷⁶

The first half of the twentieth century, Nerone argues, saw the press become institutionalized, promoted, and seen by the public as a unified entity. During this time, journalism sought to separate itself from the rest of the media through the construction of its own professional identity, a task that proved increasingly tricky as it steadily became more commercialized. At the turn of the century, Betty Houchin Winfield argues, journalists were seeking to shake off their public image as partisan hacks, and began to evaluate themselves based on standards, educational demands, and ideals about their role in society in a similar fashion to medicine, law, the clergy, engineering, and education. The year 1908 saw two events that marked a turning point in the professionalization of journalism. The establishment of the first-in-the-nation Missouri School of Journalism at the University of Missouri would educate future journalists on principles, practices and societal obligations, and spurred the creation of other university journalism schools and programs.²⁷⁷ That year also marked the founding of the

²⁷⁴ Ibid 131.

²⁷⁵ Ibid 136.

²⁷⁶ Ibid 141.

²⁷⁷ Betty Houchin Winfield, "Introduction: Emerging Professionalism and Modernity," in *Journalism 1908: Birth of a Profession*, edited by Betty Houchin Winfield (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008), 1-4.

National Press Club, based in Washington, which aimed to “foster the ethical standards of the profession.”²⁷⁸ As Nerone argues, “the press positioned itself as a force of public reason” that could promote morality and order among the masses, as opposed to the crass, transgressive, and socially reckless nature of entertainment media. Professionalism allowed journalists to “upgrade their status,” serving as a compromise solution that reconciled two opposing forces: on one side a public that demanded accountability from the media, and on the other side internal labor struggles with ownership.²⁷⁹ In other words, the construction of a professional identity was as much about lofty goals of serving the public interest through informing and educating as it was an attempt to establish job security by positioning journalists as valuable commodities in the eyes of their media owner bosses.

Media scholars have articulated the contradictions that go along with television journalism’s adoption of a professional identity. Ponce de Leon points out that the history of television news is one of “professionals committed to public enlightenment who worked for organizations that were also forced to compete for viewers and ratings.” They are part and parcel of mass media and commercial popular culture industries that require them to respond to the whims of public taste and the market, a mandate that has inspired them to innovations as well as anxieties.²⁸⁰ Likewise, Hallin reminds us that television news “is both journalism and show business,” and that while television journalists accept professional standards, they work within a medium that “is also entertainment, carried on in an intensely competitive commercial environment.”²⁸¹ While all forms of journalism face competitive pressures to attract and maintain audiences—circulation for newspapers, clicks for digital outlets, etc.—television news

²⁷⁸ Winfield 11.

²⁷⁹ Nerone 143, 145, 157, 164.

²⁸⁰ Ponce de Leon xvi-xvii.

²⁸¹ Hallin 88.

takes this to heightened levels. As I have discussed in Chapter Two, ratings are a key part of the foundation upon which the entire system of commercial television is built. As such, television journalists face more threats to professionalism than their colleagues who work in other news media.

Journalists, McNair argues, are professional communicators whose work is structured by practices, conventions, ethical norms and production practices. Individual journalists are employees who work within a bureaucratic system to produce news, with their labor constrained by the specific formal requirements of the medium in which the news is presented to the audience.²⁸² Adhering to ethics, Kovach and Rosenstiel argue, is a challenge for any profession, but journalists face an added tension between the mission to provide a public service and the interests that finance that work.²⁸³ Professionalism, Carlson argues, helps journalists by providing a “normative prescription” for how they should carry out their jobs, creating consensus for what kinds of practices are in or out of bounds.²⁸⁴ The establishment of institutional rules and routines—and crucially, the *display* of the following of those rules and routines to the public—supports “the legitimacy of journalism as a way of producing truthful accounts of the world.”²⁸⁵

McNair posits that the main way in which journalists are accepted by the public is through their adherence to an ethical code of conduct, which functions as a guarantee that they will act with integrity and trustworthiness, and as such will be able to communicate truth. Similar to how the medical profession’s adherence to the Hippocratic Oath reinforces the public’s belief in medical science, journalistic ethics “facilitate the social construction of

²⁸² McNair, *The Sociology of Journalism*, 61-63.

²⁸³ Kovach and Rosenstiel 311.

²⁸⁴ Carlson 14.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid* 17-18.

legitimacy, to mobilise [sic] the trust of the audience.” A bedrock principle is the practice of “objective journalism,” which McNair argues consists of three characteristics: “the separation of fact from opinion, a balanced account of a debate,” and “the validation of journalistic statements by reference to authoritative others.”²⁸⁶ Journalists are expected to adhere to professional norms, but also need to also be *seen by their audience* as doing so. Highlighting the ways in which characters operate within, around, or outside of institutional norms is a key way that television series about professions create dramatic action. Television news series make professionalism a central theme precisely because it is perceived as being under the constant threat of erosion thanks to the commercial imperatives of the television industry. Indeed, Turow posits that “prime-time drama is an especially compelling vehicle for portraying an institution’s hierarchy of power and its rules of the game,” bringing “millions of viewers behind the scenes to outline vividly acceptable forms of behavior by the organizations that make up an institution.”²⁸⁷

In this chapter, I explore how television news series engage with the work carried out by television journalists through three major themes. First, the genre repeatedly reinforces the importance of journalists protecting confidential sources in the face of pressure from the state to reveal their identities. Refusing to give up a name to the extent that it lands a protagonist in jail is prized as a marker of professional integrity and a badge of honor. These storylines emphasize both how the watchdog role of journalism needs to be constantly defended from erosion by state actors and the ways in which confidential sources are crucial in upholding this function. Second, the genre features storylines where characters are faced with situations where they must come to terms with their own professional values when making decisions about how or whether to cover certain subjects. More often than not, they ultimately uphold ethical guidelines, but sometimes

²⁸⁶ McNair, *The Sociology of Journalism*, 64-68.

²⁸⁷ Turow 6

fall short for reasons including the temptation to cut corners in service of career advancement or keeping sensitive information about their own personal lives from becoming public knowledge. Since journalists—along with other public service occupations such as medicine and law enforcement—are seen by the public as needing to adhere to a high degree of professional ethics in order to properly execute their job functions, narratives built around characters facing ethical quandaries make for compelling drama. Third, television news series regularly portray television journalists as professionals who are ready and willing to risk their personal safety to report news stories to their audience. Characters stand firm against threats of violence, and for some the very prospect of danger is what attracted them to the profession in the first place. The portrayal of television journalism as a dangerous profession is a reflection of the increasing importance of international war coverage to the news, as well as the rise of the ‘action’ and ‘eyewitness’ formats in local news, where dramatic and exciting visuals are paramount. I close the chapter with a case study of a narrative arc in *The Newsroom* which portrays the failure of a television news institution to accurately report on an important story.

Shielding Confidential Sources

“Yo my name is Carol and I’m here to say; I protect my sources in an ethical way.”

—*The Breakdown* intern Carol Wendelson, *Great News*²⁸⁸

Television news series portray the protection of confidential sources as the most important element of a journalist’s job, a kind of sacred bond that must be upheld no matter the circumstance. In the United States, journalists have no universal protection which shields them

²⁸⁸ *Great News*, season 1, episode 9, “Carol Has a Bully,” directed by Nisha Ganatra, written by Tracey Wigfield, Jack Burditt, and Dan Klein, featuring Briga Heelan, Andrea Martin, and Adam Campbell, aired May 23, 2017, on NBC.

from revealing confidential sources. According to the Digital Media Law Project, about thirty states have legislative protection for journalists in the form of shield laws, which protect the work of reporters in obtaining information that the public has a right to know. In 1896, Maryland was the first state to enact a shield law, in response to a reporter from the *Baltimore Sun* being imprisoned for refusing to name a confidential source to a grand jury. Shield laws vary by state, and differ in what and who is entitled to protection, as well as the strength of any protection that may exist. At the federal level, no shield law exists, but the Privacy Protection Act of 1980 makes it unlawful to search or seize a publisher’s “work product” or “documentary materials.” Yet unlike shield laws, which allow reporters to refuse to comply with subpoenas or discovery orders, the PPA only allows reporters to file a civil lawsuit *after* a search or seizure has already taken place if they believe it has violated the law. Constitutional protections also vary. While several state and federal courts have found that the First Amendment’s free speech clause creates a “reporter’s privilege” against disclosure of sources and documents, such a privilege is not universally recognized. At the state level, some constitutions, such as California’s, list explicit constitutional privileges for journalists that are similar to shield laws, while others derive privileges from general constitutional provisions. Finally, some state and federal courts have created privileges for journalists through common law, which is based on judicial decisions determined by precedent rather than legal statutes.²⁸⁹

Television news series explore these ideas through storylines which involve the protection of sources in the face of legal pressure from the government. Standing up to the power of the state—and in particular being jailed for refusing to give up the name of a source—is consistently portrayed by the genre as a point of pride for a journalist. Such

²⁸⁹ Digital Media Law Project, “Legal Protections for Sources and Source Material,” Digital Media Law Project, January 20, 2025. <https://www.dmlp.org/legal-guide/legal-protections-sources-and-source-material>.

storylines are prevalent despite the fact that, in the United States, it is exceedingly rare for journalists to face jail time as a result of not naming a source. According to the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, between 1950 and 2019 there have only been twenty-three known instances of journalists who have been jailed for refusing to identify a confidential source. There are eighteen additional instances where journalists were only fined, and seven more where they were jailed *and* fined.²⁹⁰ Through engagement with a simplified and stylized legal system that is intended to create and enhance dramatic tension, television news series storylines about source protection are designed to illustrate the lengths that protagonists will go to in order to uphold their principles. Making use of specific and extreme examples, the genre seeks to exalt the work of journalists, portraying the profession as a courageous group of individuals standing up for freedom of the press.

For example, in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* episode “Will Mary Richards Go to Jail?” the district attorney’s office insists that the WJM news division reveal their source for a story about government corruption. The staff refuses to cooperate, with Lou Grant arguing that revealing confidential sources would destroy the freedom of the press and harm democracy. Since Mary Richards was the person who directly communicated with the source, she is sent to jail, where she wrestles with the question of whether or not she did the right thing by protecting her source’s confidentiality. Lou comes to visit Mary and, upset at seeing her in a holding cell, momentarily tries to convince her to name the source just so she can get out of jail, an idea he quickly backpedals on. Later, Mary has the standard ‘what are you in for?’ conversation with her cellmate, a woman named Sherry (Barbara Colby) who has been booked on prostitution

²⁹⁰ Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, “Journalists jailed or fined for refusing to identify confidential sources, as of 2019,” Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. <https://www.rcfp.org/jailed-fined-journalists-confidential-sources/>.

charges. Sherry is aghast after hearing Mary's explanation, remarking that, "They put you in jail just for doing your job?"²⁹¹ Her stunned reaction is notable since, based on her nonchalance with regard to her own line of work, it would be reasonable for us to assume that Sherry is a difficult person to shock or surprise.

Mary winds up being released on bail at the end of the episode, and the storyline goes unmentioned and unresolved until more than two seasons later in "Mary Gets a Lawyer," when Mary must face a grand jury that could result in a contempt charge for refusing to name her source. The case revolves around whether or not Mary's job as a television news producer classifies her as a journalist; if not, she may not be protected by the freedom of the press. Ultimately, the judge rules that there is no doubt that Mary's work as a producer classifies her as a journalist. In light of this, the prosecutor realizes that they would have no legal grounds to compel Mary to reveal the source, and subsequently move to dismiss the case, a request that the Judge grants.²⁹² The two-episode story arc not only portrays the necessity of protecting the confidentiality of sources, but also illustrates that it is not just reporters and anchors who execute journalistic labor in television news.

Murphy Brown also depicts the ramifications of protecting confidential sources, although in this case the practice backfires somewhat. The episode "Subpoena Envy" sees Murphy report a story on illegal dumping by a New Jersey chemical manufacturer. She is subsequently subpoenaed by the Department of Justice, who argue that an upcoming federal investigation into the company will collapse if she does not reveal her source. Murphy refuses, and she and the

²⁹¹ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 4, episode 1, "Will Mary Richards Go to Jail?," directed by Jay Sandrich, written by James L. Brooks, Allan Burns, and Ed. Weinberger, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Ed Asner, and Gavin MacLeod, aired September 14, 1974, on CBS.

²⁹² *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 7, episode 18, "Mary Gets a Lawyer," directed by Jay Sandrich, written by James L. Brooks, Allan Burns, and Burt Prelutsky, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Ed Asner, and Gavin MacLeod, aired November 13, 1976.

entire staff are elated at the prospect of her doing time to protect the source, since a journalist being thrown in jail functions as a potent optic to illustrate to the public the need for freedom of the press. Her source Fred Fredrickson (Dion Anderson), an employee of the chemical company, feels poorly about Murphy being penalized for information that he revealed, and offers to come forward on his own. Murphy adamantly shoots down the idea, telling Fredrickson that it is part of her job as a journalist to take the rap.²⁹³

Murphy's glee at being locked up is quickly dashed when, instead of being thrown in a dingy holding cell in a county jail, she is sent to a minimum-security women's prison that is akin to a country club. Instead of a cell she has her own private cabin, the rec room is similar to a nicely-furnished suburban living room, and the guards are polite women dressed like flight attendants. To boot, the bulk of the inmates are well-dressed ladies who have committed white collar crimes—exactly the same kind of people Murphy is used to investigating and exposing on *FYI*. When Murphy's colleagues come to visit her, Jim Dial in particular is appalled by the conditions, remarking, "How can you defend democracy in a prison that serves brie? Edward R. Murrow never ate brie." The imprisonment of a famous journalist in such a plush facility can hardly be seen by the public as a real sacrifice in the defense of press freedom. The longer Murphy holds out, the more she may be seen by the public as a wealthy and pampered member of the media elite that is treated differently by the justice system than regular people. Yet she also must avoid the clear ethical lapse of revealing her source. Desperate to end the catch-22, Murphy calls Fredrickson from prison and attempts to take him up on his offer of going public on his own, an approach that resides in its own ethical gray area. In a humorous plot twist, Fredrickson declines. He has been given a promotion and a raise since the investigation

²⁹³ *Murphy Brown*, season 2, episode 15, "Subpoena Envy," directed by Barnet Kellman, written by Diane English, Sy Dukane, and Denise Moss, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired January 8, 1990, on CBS.

began—his employer clearly has no clue that he is Murphy’s source. Ultimately, a judge rules that the prosecutor’s need for information to build a case against the chemical company is outweighed by Murphy’s first amendment rights as a journalist. As such, Murphy cannot be compelled to reveal her source, and is released from prison.²⁹⁴ The episode not only reinforces the importance that journalists place on keeping sources confidential, but also the ways in which journalists need to *perform* their professional sacrifices to the public.

A multi-episode story arc in *WIOU* is built around both the journalistic ethics and the wider moral implications of maintaining the confidentiality of a source. In “Do the Wrong Thing,” Kelby Robinson is reporting a story on a brutal crime: the attempted rape and subsequent murder of an 84-year-old woman in her own apartment. After a disturbing visit to the crime scene where Kelby sees the victim’s body being carried out, she heads to the precinct where the suspect George Lewis (Keith Gordon) is in custody. During questioning by Detective Beekler (Alyson Reed), one of Kelby’s regular police contacts, Lewis is violently slammed against the glass-paned door of the interrogation room, after which he confesses to the crime. Kelby witnesses this from the hallway and immediately confronts Beekler once she has left the room: that was an illegally obtained confession, Kelby tells her. Beekler shrugs it off, asserting that it is Kelby’s word against hers, to which Kelby replies, “A million people will hear my word on the news tonight.” Beekler is visibly upset, scoffing, “And I thought you were on our side.” From Beekler’s perspective, not only is it in the public interest for her to obtain a confession from Lewis by any means necessary, but also for the news media to fall in line with whatever official story the police provide, which in this case involves the omission of the violent brow-beating.²⁹⁵

²⁹⁴ *Murphy Brown*, “Subpoena Envy.”

²⁹⁵ *WIOU*, season 1, episode 4, “Do the Wrong Thing,” directed by Mark Tinker, written by Tammy Ader, John Eisendrath, and Kathryn Pratt, featuring John Shea, Helen Shaver, and Harris Yulin, aired November 14, 1990, on CBS.

Kelby demands to speak with Lewis privately, a request that Beekler grants. The chilling conversation that ensues leaves Kelby completely convinced that Lewis was the perpetrator and that, if released, he would likely commit similar crimes in the future. Back at the WNDY newsroom, Kelby expresses to Hank Zaret her conflictedness. She believes that Lewis deserves to be imprisoned, yet she witnessed a serious instance of police misconduct that the public should know about. If Kelby goes against her journalistic principles and doesn't reveal that she witnessed the beating firsthand, Lewis' confession will stand and he will likely be found guilty, an outcome that could be said to serve the greater good of society by getting a vicious criminal off the streets. On the other hand, sticking to her professional code of ethics would give the public necessary information about how the police operate, but could come at the cost of the confession being invalidated and Lewis being released back into the city, which is arguably a worse outcome for society.²⁹⁶

Hank agrees that this is a thorny dilemma, but points out that it's not one that a journalist has to reconcile. For him, it is the responsibility of the justice system to be given all the facts and make the final determination of guilt. "If George Lewis walks, I won't be able to sleep at night," Kelby says. "I will," Hank replies. On that night's broadcast, Kelby splits the difference: she reports Lewis' violently coerced confession at the hands of the police but labels it as coming from a confidential source.²⁹⁷ In this instance, Hank and Kelby create an ethical loophole by treating Kelby as her own source. As the criminal case against Lewis continues to unfold in "Diamond Dogs," both the judge and the prosecutor's office insist that it is Hank's obligation as

²⁹⁶ *WIOU*, "Do the Wrong Thing."

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

news director to reveal the name of the witness so that the court can investigate the claim of misconduct. Hank refuses and is subsequently arrested and jailed for contempt of court.²⁹⁸

Days (perhaps weeks, as the timeline is not explicitly stated) go by. In the episode “Mother Nature’s Son,” Hank remains silent and Kelby still can’t decide whether she should come forward or not. Another dramatic wrinkle (yes, television news series are chock-full of these) is that, if convicted, there is a strong chance that Lewis would face the death penalty, a punishment that Kelby is personally opposed to on moral grounds. Kelby seems to be ultimately swayed by advice from her co-anchor Neal Frazier, who points out that it is up to the judge, not her, to determine whether an injustice has been committed against Lewis. In court, with Hank about to be held in criminal contempt and face six months in jail, Kelby finally reveals herself as the witness, leading to Hank's excusal. The prosecutor’s office later determines that Lewis’ confession was illegally obtained and decides to drop the case, leading to Lewis being released. Hank expresses to Kelby that she did the right thing, but she remains unsure. The episode ends with Kelby receiving an intimidating message from Lewis on her home answering machine, where he promises that he will be seeing her soon.²⁹⁹ Nothing comes of this in subsequent episodes—the effect is to leave viewers to decide for themselves whether or not Kelby, or any of the characters involved for that matter, acted appropriately.

²⁹⁸ *WIOU*, season 1, episode 7, “Diamond Dogs,” directed by Jan Eliasberg, written by Tammy Ader, Matt Dearborn, and John Eisendrath, featuring John Shea, Helen Shaver, and Harris Yulin, aired December 19, 1990, on CBS.

²⁹⁹ *WIOU*, season 1, episode 8, “Mother Nature’s Son,” directed by Donna Deitch, written by Michael Cassutt, Katie Crusoe, and John Eisendrath, featuring John Shea, Helen Shaver, and Harris Yulin, aired December 26, 1990, on CBS.



Figure 6: The eponymous character of *Murphy Brown* refusing to give up a source to the U.S. Senate.³⁰⁰

Murphy Brown uses the protection of a confidential source to explore larger issues of the role that the press play in supporting a democratic society. McNair argues that, as a profession, journalism is ready to defend its watchdog role against state or governmental tendencies to restrict the flow of information at key moments in time. Modern journalism is not only rooted in liberal democracy's tenets of intellectual freedom and pluralism, but further, "a liberal democratic political system *demands* journalistic criticism of elites as a condition of its legitimacy." In liberal democracies, journalism is viewed as a mechanism that guards against a slide into authoritarianism.³⁰¹ Speaking specifically to the role of television news, Hallin argues that its ideology can be described as "reformist conservatism," in that its reporting on state activities both fights for the common person in exposing corruption and abuses of power, while simultaneously espousing a belief in the basic soundness of the American political system. In

³⁰⁰ *Murphy Brown*, season 4, episode 18, "Send in the Clowns," directed by Lee Shallat Chemel, written by Diane English and Peter Tolan, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired February 24, 1992, on CBS.

³⁰¹ McNair, *The Sociology of Journalism*, 83-84.

times of crisis, viewers are reassured that bad actors will be dealt with and normality will be restored by institutions.³⁰²

In the episode “Send in the Clowns,” *FYI* has just broadcast its highest-rated episode of the season, which featured a story reported by Murphy on several members of Congress using taxpayer money for their own personal spending. The story made public a classified Senate report which was leaked to Murphy by a source within the federal government. The day after its airing, Murphy is subpoenaed to appear at a public hearing before a nine-member Senate subcommittee to give up the name of the person who leaked the report. She refuses, which leads to a multi-day browbeating, including by Sen. Lowell Laughlin (Charles McDaniel)—a caricature of a politician from the Deep South—who questions the value of releasing the information in the first place:

Murphy: Senator, journalists release information to the public for one reason only: the public’s right to know.

Laughlin: But the public didn’t *vote* for you, Ms. Brown, they voted for *us*, and if we wanna keep a secret, you shouldn’t be runnin’ around like a junkyard dog flappin’ your jaw like a loose shutter in a hurricane.

Murphy: Without the press, Watergate, the savings and loan debacle, and Iran-Contra may never have come to light.

Laughlin: So?

Murphy’s argument rests on the classic conception of the press serving as the fourth estate—a check on the powers of a government that often seeks to obscure information which should be made public. Laughlin, on the other hand, argues that, because Murphy is an unelected private citizen she should not be the one to determine what the public needs to know or not—such judgments should fall strictly to elected officials.³⁰³

³⁰² Daniel C. Hallin, “We Keep America on Top of the World,” 102, 104.

³⁰³ *Murphy Brown*, “Send in the Clowns.”

As the hearing wears on, Sen. Adam Sampson (F.J. O’Neill) paints Murphy as part of a news media that is impeding Congress from properly carrying out its duties. “You talk about the rights of journalists, well I’m here to tell you that the hardworking taxpayers of my state are sick and tired of the press prying into every little detail and making it impossible for us to run the government,” Sampson says. “How can you claim to serve the public interest when the public is fed up with you?” The very fact that Murphy’s story was an enormous ratings success disputes Sampson’s argument—clearly it was something that many people wanted to see, or else they would have tuned out.³⁰⁴ In a sense, Murphy’s report on the spending can be said to fulfill two visions of the public interest that are typically at odds with one another: it is important information that the public needs to know as well as a story that the public is interested in consuming. In other words, it is both what the people need *and* what the people want in a single package.

The Senators leading the panel are written as straw men. We are encouraged to side with Murphy not only because she is the protagonist but also since these Senator are characters that are not that difficult for us to disdain. Further, while the Senate report was indeed classified, its leaking does not seem to reveal any sensitive matters of national security that would put American citizens or soldiers at home or abroad in any danger. Indeed, as McNair points out, in democratic systems, outside of national secrets or defamation, there are few grounds upon which journalists can be legally required *not* to report an otherwise newsworthy story.³⁰⁵ A line of questioning from Sen. Warren Thatcher (Richard Fancy) that begins with him expressing the dangers of leaks quickly devolves into an attack on Murphy’s personal character and life choices. Thatcher begins by asking Murphy that if she had gained access to a secret plan for U.S. military

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ McNair, *The Sociology of Journalism*, 97.

operations in Desert Storm, would she make that public? Murphy replies that she would not, and Thatcher continues to press:

Thatcher: Well how do you determine whether or not to release classified information?

Murphy: I use my personal judgment as a journalist.

Thatcher: Your personal judgment? Would that be the same personal judgment that led you to become an unwed mother?

The committee then proceeds to rehash a litany of Murphy's choices as a journalist, even going so far as to point out that she is an alcoholic.³⁰⁶

Murphy comes to understand that the hearing is a case of political theater with two goals. First, it is functioning as retribution against her for a career of reporting material that those in power wanted to keep secret. Second, it aims to make an example of Murphy to the rest of the news media: refusing to reveal sources could lead to journalists being publicly dragged through the mud by Congress. "After seeing what these guys put you through today," Frank Fontana tells Murphy while visiting her at home, "next time something good gets leaked my way I'm gonna have to think twice before I use it." On the final day of the hearing, Murphy, who is now prepared to name her source in order to keep her son from seeing her endure any more personal attacks, changes her mind and stays silent. "I had planned to reveal my source this morning," she tells the subcommittee. "But to keep us at heel is exactly what you want, so I'm not going to." After the hearing is adjourned, the Senators find themselves in a double bind. On the one hand, if they back off, they could be viewed by the public as incompetent and toothless bunglers. But on the other hand, if they decide to hold Murphy in contempt, they could be perceived as heartless for sending a pregnant woman to prison. They strategically decide on a five-to-four

³⁰⁶ *Murphy Brown*, "Send in the Clowns."

split decision against contempt, which gives the appearance that they took the case seriously while avoiding any blowback that could hurt their chances at reelection.³⁰⁷

Professional Ethics

“Once you lose the audience’s respect you don’t get it back.”

–*FYI* executive producer Miles Silverberg, *Murphy Brown*³⁰⁸

This section focuses on the ways in which television journalists are put into positions where they need to make decisions about whether or not to compromise their professional ethics. As Kovach and Rosenstiel argue, “ethics are woven into every element of journalism and every critical decision that journalists make.”³⁰⁹ In deciding to consume journalism from a certain outlet, audiences choose to trust “the authority, honesty, and judgment of the journalists who produce it.”³¹⁰ However, since there are no laws, regulations, licensing, or universally-applied self-policing mechanisms regarding its production, “journalism is an act of character,” and as such “a heavy burden rests on the ethics and judgment of the individual news gatherer and the organization that publishes the work.”³¹¹

This point is emphasized in the *Murphy Brown* episode “Miller’s Crossing,” wherein Miller Redfield lands an interview with a subject of a story by having sex with her. Incensed at this transgression, *Murphy Brown* angrily reminds Miller of the responsibilities they have to carry out their work in an ethical way. “You have no idea what you did, do you? Journalists have rules: you don’t make up quotes, you don’t pay for information, and you don’t use sex to

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ *Murphy Brown*, season 1, episode 11, “Off the Job Experience,” directed by Barnet Kellman, written by Diane English, Norm Gunzenhauser, and Tom Seeley, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired January 23, 1989, on CBS.

³⁰⁹ Kovach and Rosenstiel 314.

³¹⁰ Ibid 312.

³¹¹ Ibid 311.

get a story!” It takes several minutes for Murphy to convince Miller—who believes that he did the right thing because he obtained the result both he and Murphy wanted by landing the interview—that his actions were a violation of the professional ethics of journalism. When Miller finally comes to this realization, he asks, “Hey, is this stuff written down anywhere? Like, in a pamphlet or a card that I could stick in my wallet?” Exasperated, Murphy replies, “You just sort of have to know it.”³¹²

Both *Murphy Brown* and *The Morning Show* feature narratives where the protagonist is forced to come to terms with their own principles as journalists when sensitive information about their own lives could be revealed. In an episode of the former series titled “The Memo That Got Away,” Murphy is shocked when an internal network memo she wrote that criticized her fellow *FYI* anchors is found by a high school student reporter named Louis (Judd Trichter). The boy had obtained the document after hacking into the CBS News computer system, and reaches out to Murphy for comment in preparation for publishing a story about it in his school newspaper. At first, Murphy offers to trade Louis the memo for an exclusive interview about the day she decided to check into the Betty Ford Center for alcoholism treatment. Louis is unimpressed, remarking that celebrities going to Betty Ford are a dime a dozen, and that the memo will make for a more compelling story.³¹³

Murphy proceeds to butter up Louis to convince him not to run the article, taking him for visits to the Washington Redskins locker room and the White House, as well as letting him drive her Porsche. In desperation, she breaks down and asks him directly, “what’s the price to kill that memo?” Louis replies that he will hold off on publishing the story if Murphy agrees to be his

³¹² *Murphy Brown*, “Miller’s Crossing.”

³¹³ *Murphy Brown*, season 2, episode 3, “The Memo That Got Away,” directed by Barnet Kellman, written by Diane English, Sy Dukane, and Denise Moss, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired October 2, 1989, on CBS.

date to an upcoming school dance. Murphy outright refuses, resigning herself to the reality that the memo will be made public. To get ahead of the story, she shows the memo to the rest of the anchor team, an embarrassing incident that causes her to lose face. In the end, Murphy's revelation to her colleagues was all for naught—Louis' editor decided not to run the story because it was too long and boring, instead publishing a flashier story that would increase readership. Paying Murphy one last visit at her office, Louis despairs that too much infotainment is creeping into journalism, and considers resigning his position altogether. Murphy reassures Louis that he is a good journalist whom she respects, encouraging him to keep fighting to get important stories published.³¹⁴ This episode of *Murphy Brown* illustrates the ways in which the comedies in the television news series genre use humor and outlandish situations as a way to draw viewers into engaging with abstract ideas about how journalists may wrestle with adhering to their professional ethics when stories involve information about themselves. Throughout the series, Murphy is shown to be a principled journalist, one who would never take a bribe from a subject to kill a story that she herself reported. Yet, both for the sake of creating a comedic narrative and humanizing her character, the series puts her in a position where she is ready to compromise her own ideals to avoid personal humiliation.

³¹⁴ *Murphy Brown*, "The Memo That Got Away."



Figure 7: In *The Morning Show*, Bradley Jackson's brother, Hal, assaults an officer at the Jan. 6 attack.³¹⁵

The Morning Show features a third-season story arc that puts the character of Bradley Jackson in an ethically compromising position, albeit one that could have broader and more serious consequences than losing face among her co-workers. In a sequence of flashback scenes from the episode "Love Island," we learn that Bradley was reporting on location at the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol Building, when a mob of supporters of President Donald J. Trump attempted to prevent the certification of electoral college votes formalizing the victory of President-elect Joseph R. Biden. Bradley manages to get inside the building, capturing video footage of the violence, including an assault on a U.S. Capitol Police officer. While recording, she is shocked to see that the man assaulting the officer is her younger brother, Hal Jackson (Joe

³¹⁵ *The Morning Show*, season 3, episode 5, "Love Island," directed by Stacy Passon, written by Kerry Ehrin, Jay Carson, and Zander Lehmann, featuring Jennifer Aniston, Reese Witherspoon, and Billy Crudup, aired October 4, 2023, on AppleTV+.

Tippett). Hal recognizes her and runs off, and Bradley is eventually able to escape the complex unharmed.³¹⁶

Back at her hotel that evening, Bradley reviews all of her footage, deciding to delete the section that incriminates Hal. She becomes lauded for her January 6 coverage, parlaying it into a higher status at UBA, and is ultimately selected as anchor of the *UBA Evening News* after Eric Nomani (Hasan Minhaj) leaves for an offer at another network. Later, Cory Ellison is contacted by the FBI, who is requesting that Bradley turn over all of her footage from the event to help identify a specific attacker. When Cory tells Bradley the FBI's description of the incident, she knows they are referring to her brother, and reveals to Cory that she saw Hal and deleted the video. Bradley finds herself in a double bind: the very fact of deleting footage to protect a member of her own family is a clear ethical lapse, but the prospect of handing over material to law enforcement also betrays her journalistic principles. Cory, incensed that Bradley's choice has put both herself and the network at risk, decides to split the ethical difference by agreeing to provide the FBI only with the video footage that was aired by UBA, treating the unaired portions as confidential information.³¹⁷

In the subsequent episode, "The Stanford Student," Hal wants to turn himself in to the FBI, but Bradley talks him out of it, arguing that both of their lives could be ruined—he will almost certainly face prison time for the assault and she will be charged with multiple felonies for withholding information.³¹⁸ Although it is not made public, Bradley's colleagues find out about the incident, a revelation that has its own consequences. In "Update Your Priors," UBA anchor Laura Peterson (Julianna Margulies) ends her romantic relationship with Bradley,

³¹⁶ *The Morning Show*, "Love Island."

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

³¹⁸ *The Morning Show*, "The Stanford Student."

disgusted that Bradley has compromised herself both ethically and morally. Paul Marks, who at this point is about to purchase the network, makes a veiled threat that he will leak the story, leading Bradley to resign live on-air from the evening news without providing a specific reason to the public.³¹⁹ Bradley insists to Alex Levy that protecting her brother was her only choice, to which Alex replies that “you always have a choice.” In the final scene of the third season finale “The Overview Effect,” Bradley accompanies Hal as he turns himself in at the FBI’s New York field office.³²⁰

As mentioned in Chapter One, as of now the fourth season of *The Morning Show* has not yet been released, so we do not know the effects that Hal and Bradley’s decision to come forward will have, both on themselves and on the UBA news division. The situation—a clear conflict of interest—should have been one in which Bradley was fired for cause, or at the very least moved out of the high-profile position of evening news anchor. However, as we have seen elsewhere in the television news series genre, these kinds of drawn-out ethical quandaries are potent narrative fuel that can sustain a program for multiple episodes, and sometimes entire seasons. Here, it functions as a way for Bradley’s character to be faced head-on with the professional principles of journalism which she so adamantly espoused in the series’ first season.

Whereas in *The Morning Show* Bradley’s choice to go against her ethics might destroy her career, *Being Mary Jane*’s second episode, “Storm Advisory,” revolves around an ethically and morally questionable reporting decision made in service of advancing the protagonists’ careers in television news. With a hurricane about to make landfall in the Southeastern U.S., Kara Lynch tells Mary Jane Paul that they can use their coverage of the storm to take their careers to the next level, excitedly proclaiming that “Katrina was really great for Anderson

³¹⁹ *The Morning Show*, “Update Your Priors.”

³²⁰ *The Morning Show*, “The Overview Effect.”

Cooper.” Kara presses an SNC field crew to stay on location with an elderly couple who have decided not to evacuate from their home as a powerful section of the storm is about to hit their neighborhood. The reporter refuses to stay on location, as she believes the risk is too great for herself and her camera crew.³²¹

Incensed that the field correspondent won’t comply, and given a mandate by the network that *TalkBack* stay on the air as long as possible, Kara insists that the field crew leave a camera behind so Mary Jane can interview the couple remotely. Mary Jane is adamant that they convince the couple to leave their home before their window of opportunity has closed—the show is not desperate for ratings to the point where they need to “shoot a video where we watch people die.” Yet, as much as she does not want to keep going, she carries on with the interview as the storm gets progressively worse and the couple grow visibly more fearful for their lives. All the while, Kara is smiling and celebrating in the control room as the situation becomes increasingly dire, at one point joyfully exclaiming, “We just won an Emmy!” After the feed abruptly cuts off and *TalkBack* goes to commercial, Mary Jane angrily confronts Kara for putting her in this position. “These people could be dead,” she says, “and we used them for ratings.” Indeed, we never learn the couple’s fate. Later, SNC news director Greg Roberts (Michael H. Cole) expresses to Mary Jane and Kara how much he liked the way that the story was covered.³²²

Mary Jane and Kara’s willingness—begrudgingly for the former and enthusiastically for the latter—to accept reporting tactics that reside in an ethical gray area stems in part from their status as two women of color leading a daytime talk news program with middling ratings. These overlapping characteristics have already put them at a disadvantage, and as such they would not

³²¹ *Being Mary Jane*, season 1, episode 1, “Storm Advisory,” directed by Salim Akil, written by Mara Brock Akil, Jessica Mecklenburg, and Devon Gregory, featuring Gabrielle Union, Lisa Vidal, and Margaret Avery, aired January 7, 2013, on BET.

³²² *Being Mary Jane*, “Storm Advisory.”

have the leverage to substantively push back on the dictates of SNC management. In the beginning of the series, Kara is more adept at recognizing the need to take risks as a way of making *TalkBack* stand out. As I have discussed in Chapter Two, in television news series, ratings are often portrayed as a currency that television journalists wield to gain more power over coverage decisions. Over the course of the series, Mary Jane becomes more strategic in recognizing this as a useful tool to advance her own career, an aspect of her character I will discuss in further detail in Chapter Four. But in this early instance, making ethically questionable journalistic decisions as a way to garner higher ratings is primarily portrayed as a means for Mary Jane and Kara to stay afloat in a highly competitive industry that is looking for any excuse to exclude them.

Sports Night regularly engages with issues of editorial control, most notably in the episode “Shane,” where Casey McCall tapes an interview with Shane McArnold (Richard Steinmetz), a veteran baseball player who has just signed with the New York Yankees. In the interview, McArnold, who is an old friend of Casey’s, makes a series of disparaging comments about New York City and Yankee Stadium.³²³ Realizing that if his remarks make it to air they could lead to bad publicity and backlash from local fans, McArnold requests that Casey remove them from the final edit of the interview, which *SN* is set to air in a few days. Casey promises that he will, but when he speaks about the matter with his colleagues, they question whether he has put protecting his friend ahead of his responsibilities as a journalist. Isaac Jaffe urges Casey

³²³ A stunning instance of life imitating art came three weeks after this episode aired, when a profile of Atlanta Braves relief pitcher John Rocker was published in *Sports Illustrated*. Rocker launched a stream of invective, saying that he would never play for a New York team because it would mean riding the subway alongside “queer[s] with AIDS,” criminals, and teenage mothers, and that the city was overrun with “foreigners.” Jeff Pearlman, “At Full Blast Shooting Outrageously from the Lip, Braves Closer John Rocker Bangs Away at His Favorite Targets: The Mets, Their Fans, Their City and Just About Everyone In It,” *Sports Illustrated*, December 27, 1999. <https://vault.si.com/vault/1999/12/27/at-full-blast-shooting-outrageously-from-the-lip-braves-closer-john-rocker-bangs-away-at-his-favorite-targets-the-mets-their-fans-their-city-and-just-about-everyone-in-it>.

not to cut the comments, arguing that they are both relevant news and compelling television. As in other instances across the genre, Isaac's argument rests on viewing the story as fulfilling both ends of the spectrum of the public interest: McArnold's comments are newsworthy because he is a high-profile public figure, and they will make for a compelling story that will draw high viewership and subsequently lift *SN*'s ratings.³²⁴

Dana Whitaker takes a more unequivocal stance, contending that the cuts would compromise the journalistic integrity of both Casey and the show as a whole. Casey pushes back on both Isaac and Dana, arguing that "we're not Murrow." Here, Casey is attempting to use a kind of journalistic relativism to justify the edits—his logic is that compared to Edward R. Murrow's reporting, which revealed matters of national significance, the comments made by a professional athlete are of little import. This reference also speaks to the way in which the genre sets mid-twentieth century television news anchors as a benchmark, a theme that I will discuss in further detail in the next chapter. Ultimately, Casey decides to leave the insulting comments intact for the final airing, which leads to McArnold becoming the subject of a flurry of negative media attention. While the series does lead us to believe that Casey made the right choice, that righteousness is portrayed as having a cost, as McArnold vows to stonewall *SN* and *CSC* from that point forward.³²⁵

In *Live Shot*, the *Re-Action News* staff is faced with a choice of whether and how to cover a story that they believe could be true but that they cannot back up with hard evidence. In "The Forgotten Episode," while Ricardo Sandoval is on location reporting a live story on a successful high school football team, a woman named Mrs. Mathias (Christine Healy) runs into the shot,

³²⁴ *Sports Night*, season 2, episode 6, "Shane," directed by Robert Berlinger, written by Aaron Sorkin, Kevin Falls, and Matt Tarses, featuring Josh Charles, Peter Krause, and Felicity Huffman, aired December 7, 1999, on ABC.

³²⁵ *Sports Night*, "Shane."

screaming that four players on the team gang-raped her daughter, a cheerleader named Katie (an unseen character), while twelve other players looked on. Back in the control room, Alex Rydell orders that the broadcast be cut back to the studio. Later, during a production meeting, the staff discusses whether or not to pursue a story on the allegations made by Mathias. Reporting has found that she has a psychiatric history and has been fired from her last two jobs. Neither the school nor the police have substantiated her claims, and Katie herself has not come forward with any accusations. By the end of the meeting, everyone but Nancy Lockridge is convinced that this is a dead-end story that is not newsworthy.³²⁶

Alex's interest in the story is renewed when Dwight Brewer (Harry S. Murphy), the team quarterback's family attorney, visits the newsroom to express his concerns over "a woman leveling such insane accusations on the air against minors." Convinced that Brewer's presence was intended to serve as negative pressure to dissuade KXZK from pursuing the story further, Alex sends Liz Vega to interview both Mrs. Mathias and the quarterback. When Liz attempts to question the quarterback outside of his home, he avoids speaking with her and drives away.

Brewer subsequently calls Alex, claiming that Liz was harassing his client:

Brewer: I thought we had an understanding. I thought we agreed that woman was *nuts*.

Alex: I don't recall that.

Brewer: Be forewarned: my firm is very skilled in libel actions.

Alex: Well, I'm sorry, Dwight, we're just checking up on a story, you know, the way the constitution says we can.

Brewer: [slightly chuckles] Okay, okay, I get it.

Alex: Listen, if you wanna follow up on your threat to file a lawsuit, I will mention in my deposition that it was your visit that prompted my curiosity. [Brewer abruptly hangs up]

³²⁶ *Live Shot*, season 1, episode 6, "The Forgotten Episode," directed by Gilbert M. Shilton, written by Dan Guntzman and Lissa Levin, featuring Sam Anderson, David Birney, and Wanda de Jesus, aired September 26, 1995, on UPN.

Alex's interactions with Brewer illustrates McNair's concept of the ways in which "extramedia actors" such as politicians, media activists, celebrities, and public organizations work to persuade journalism to portray either themselves or their paying clients in the most favorable light possible.³²⁷

Later, one of Katie's friends, a girl named Tina (Ashlee Levitch) who is also on the cheerleading squad, tells Liz that Katie confided in her that she was indeed raped, and has since repeatedly tried to convince Katie to come forward. She adds that Katie's rape was part of an ongoing game played by the football players that awards different levels of points for various sexual acts—a game that the school's leadership had been aware of for some time. Alex, Liz, and Nancy meet to make a final determination on whether or not to run the story, and if they decide to do so, how to approach it when they have no evidence and when no one directly involved in the alleged rape will talk about it. Nancy argues that the story should be that there is something going on at the school, even if they can't conclusively prove what that something is. They decide to mention the rape allegations in the story, but make no definitive statement about whether or not the rape occurred. The reporting focuses on the culture around the football team, featuring footage of interviews with school officials that, taken together, suggest a widespread attitude of a boys-will-be-boys permissiveness toward the off-field behavior of the players.³²⁸ This approach exposes what may be a wider trend of misconduct that is being both overlooked and supported by the school, while simultaneously allowing *Re-Action News* to cover itself, since the story makes no direct claims about the rape allegation.

³²⁷ McNair, *The Sociology of Journalism*, 15.

³²⁸ *Live Shot*, season 1, "The Forgotten Episode."

The Risks and Dangers of Journalism

“I guess when you major in journalism these days, you have to minor in kickboxing.”

—*Murphy in the Morning* co-anchor Murphy Brown, *Murphy Brown*³²⁹

Television news series regularly portray the risks and dangers that are faced by journalists. On the whole, the genre depicts journalists as noble individuals who, in a thankless show of bravery, often put their own reputations and personal safety on the line in pursuit of getting important stories out to the public. For example, in the *Murphy Brown* episode “Nowhere to Run,” Miles Silverberg tells the *FYI* anchor team that he has been mailed a threatening letter insisting that the show terminate a story that Murphy is reporting about the organized crime connections of a federal prosecutor who is planning a run for U.S. Senate. Murphy gleefully strides out into the newsroom and announces, “Hey, everybody, Miles just got his first death threat!” The staff cheerfully applaud and go back to work. Like getting sent to jail for refusing to name a confidential source, a threat insisting that a story be dropped is something to be proud of. It is viewed as a sign that a journalist is doing their job of exposing corruption and misuses of power. Jim Dial and Murphy reassure Miles that they have both been in the same position—this is a time-worn scare tactic that is never followed through on. Although he is extremely nervous, Miles agrees that Murphy should carry on with reporting the story.³³⁰

Two subsequent occurrences lead Miles and his *FYI* colleagues to believe that these are not idle threats. Miles hires a professional bodyguard for protection, but the man promptly quits once Miles tells him who the story is about. Then, in an off-screen incident, a car jumps the curb and tries to run Miles down while he is walking to work. Murphy is both shocked and frustrated.

³²⁹ *Murphy Brown*, season 11, episode 10, “Beat the Press,” directed by Pamela Fryman, written by Diane English, Tom Palmer, and Skander Halim, featuring Candice Bergen, Faith Ford, and Joe Regalbuto, aired November 29, 2018, on CBS.

³³⁰ *Murphy Brown*, season 1, episode 3, “Nowhere to Run,” directed by Barnet Kellman, written by Diane English and Russ Woody, featuring Candice Bergen, Grant Shaud, and Faith Ford, aired November 28, 1988, on CBS.

“I’m this close to frying these guys,” she says—it will only take a few more key pieces of evidence to make the story ironclad. Now that an actual attempt has been made on Miles’ life, Frank argues, it may not be worth the risk to continue pursuing the story. The best course of action could be to hand over the information they’ve gathered so far to the prosecutor’s office. “I was gonna put guys in jail, it’s my favorite thing,” Murphy whines.³³¹

When the situation gets to the point where Miles is living in the studio rather than going home at night, Murphy offers to drop the story, joking that, “I can pass it on to [NBC News anchor] Jane Pauley, maybe they’ll kill her.” While he is terrified for his own safety, Miles insists that running the story is a matter of public interest—viewers need to know the truth about it “regardless of personal risk.” *FYI* airs the story on its next broadcast, after which Miles is still getting death threats. Murphy tries to raise Miles’ spirits, telling him that he did the right thing and should “hang tough.” Miles doesn’t argue that point, but is disappointed that he didn’t receive any acknowledgment or praise for standing up for his principles. That’s the job, Murphy tells him.³³²

This is not the only time that *Murphy Brown* portrays the risk of physical harm faced by journalists. Whereas the series’ original run made regular references to the political climate of the 1990s, its 2018 revival season was constructed as a considerably more overt and direct response to the first administration of President Donald J. Trump, in which the liberal order that characterized the U.S. and its press began to significantly erode. Throughout his first administration, Trump made several statements that either condoned or encouraged violence, including against journalists.³³³ For example, in 2018, Trump praised then-Congressman Greg

³³¹ *Murphy Brown*, “Nowhere to Run.”

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ Ivana Saric, “The Times Trump Has Advocated for Violence,” *Axios*, May 2, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/2022/05/02/trump-call-violence-presidency>.

Gianforte of Montana³³⁴ for assaulting *The Guardian* political reporter Ben Jacobs at a 2017 campaign event. “Any guy that can do a body slam, he is my type!” Trump said to the crowd. “I shouldn’t say that. You know, that’s nothing to be embarrassed about.”³³⁵ In a *New York Times* analysis of tweets made by Trump starting from his inauguration on January 20, 2017 through October 15, 2019, Trump “attacked someone or something” 5,889 times, “attacked news organizations” 1,308 times, and “called the news media the ‘enemy of the people’” thirty-six times.³³⁶

Trump’s denunciations constituted an extreme version of what McNair terms “informal lobbying,” whereby politicians will publicly proclaim their dissatisfaction with the news media, calculating that “the weight of their authority” can apply negative pressure to journalists to discourage them from unfavorable coverage.³³⁷ As Kovach and Rosenstiel point out, elected officials are increasingly leveraging technology to supplant journalism by directly distributing their own content. Whereas in the twentieth century public officials were highly reliant on the press to disseminate their messaging, they now make use of digital platforms to engage directly with the public. Using social media, President Trump has amplified falsehoods and conspiracy theories, discrediting and often directly attacking both individual journalists and media institutions who present facts or criticize the policies of his administration.³³⁸

In the *Murphy Brown* episode “Beat the Press,” Frank Fontana is covering one of Trump’s campaign rallies. During his speech at the rally, Trump singles out Frank, telling his supporters that they should let them know what they think about him, and “give him a good body

³³⁴ Gianforte has since been elected as governor of Montana.

³³⁵ Lauren Meier, “Trump praises Montana Republican who assaulted reporter,” *Axios*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.axios.com/2018/10/19/trump-greg-gianforte>.

³³⁶ Michael D. Shear et al., “How Trump Reshaped The Presidency in Over 11,000 Tweets,” *The New York Times*, November 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/02/us/politics/trump-twitter-presidency.html>.

³³⁷ McNair, *The Sociology of Journalism*, 97-98.

³³⁸ Kovach and Rosenstiel 9.

slam,” a direct reference to the Gianforte-Jacobs incident. In an off-camera scene, Frank gets severely assaulted by several rally attendees once he leaves the event’s press area, later telling Murphy that he was “surrounded by a sea of red hats,” a reference to the bright red ‘MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN’ caps often worn by Trump and his supporters. The assault, which puts Frank in the hospital for several days, shakes both Murphy and Frank, veteran journalists who are no strangers to risking life and limb in the pursuit of stories. Murphy becomes hesitant to push back on answers from pro-Trump interview subjects, and Frank remarks that while he has been in danger covering stories abroad, this is the first time that he has felt truly unsafe just being a journalist in the U.S. “No one would ever call [mid-century NBC news anchors Chet] Huntley or [David] Brinkley enemies of the people,” Frank tells Murphy, a comment on the heated rhetoric against the news media perpetuated by Trump.³³⁹ Indeed, as Jacobsen points out, compared to authoritarian nations, the United States has historically been a relatively safe place for journalists, and it is rare for them to be killed in connection with their work. However, over the decade preceding 2024, a “corrosive political environment,” fostered in significant part by Trump’s hostility to the bulk of the news media, has led to increased violence against American journalists, a phenomenon compounded by a rise in the online harassment of journalists.³⁴⁰

Sports Night features an early story arc that engages with the specific risk of assault and sexual harassment that female sports journalists face simply by performing their jobs. In “Mary Pat Shelby,” *SN* lands an interview with Christian Patrick (Brad William Henke), an active-roster player on an unnamed National Football League (NFL) team who is under investigation for assaulting his ex-girlfriend Mary Pat Shelby (an unseen character), including punching her in the

³³⁹ *Murphy Brown*, “Beat the Press.”

³⁴⁰ Katherine Jacobsen, “On Edge: What the US election could mean for journalists and global press freedom,” Committee to Protect Journalists, October 1, 2024.

<https://cpj.org/thematic-reports/on-edge-what-the-us-election-could-mean-for-journalists-and-global-press-freedom/>.

face and throwing her down a flight of stairs. The interview is a huge get that is expected to lead to a massive ratings boost for the show. A condition of the interview is that the assault will be an off-limits topic, which Dan Rydell and Casey McCall are upset about. Dana Whitaker feels that the restriction will be worth it: not only will the interview get *SN* out of the ratings basement, it should win the show its time slot in fourteen major television markets for the first time in its history. During an off-camera scene, Natalie Hurley goes to the locker room at Giants Stadium for a one-on-one pre-interview with Patrick in preparation for the actual interview. Patrick proceeds to expose his genitals to Natalie and then harshly grabs her wrist to prevent her from leaving.³⁴¹

As Tracy Everbach has shown in her chapter on the harassment of female sports journalists, the sports world has long been dominated by the tenets of hegemonic masculinity, a characteristic that extends to sports media. When female sports journalists began reporting from pro sports locker rooms in the 1970s and 1980s, they were met with physical attacks and verbal threats from male athletes, team owners and fans, behavior that continued as they became more established and visible in sports media in the 1990s and 2000s. This persistent debasement has run a wide gamut—women sports journalists are subjected to rumors of sexual motives for wanting the job, unwanted propositions, and vulgar sexual taunts. Female members of the sports media are caught in a double-bind, since revealing the degradations they regularly encounter will often lead to public backlash that restarts and often intensifies the cycle of abuse. This environment, Everbach has found, drives many women, particularly younger women, away from the profession, where “hegemonic masculinity maintains that women don’t belong.”³⁴²

³⁴¹ *Sports Night*, season 1, episode 5, “Mary Pat Shelby,” directed by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin and Tracey Stern, featuring Josh Charles, Peter Krause, and Felicity Huffman, aired October 20, 1998, on ABC.

³⁴² Tracy Everbach, “I Realized It Was About Them ... Not Me’: Women Sports Journalists and Harassment,” in *Mediating Misogyny Gender, Technology and Harassment*, edited by Ryan Vickery and Tracy Everbach (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

Natalie is able to escape the locker room without any further violence from Patrick, and initially tries to keep the assault a secret. When her *SN* colleagues notice the bruise on her wrist, Natalie attempts to shrug it off as insignificant, in large part because she is aware of the personal agony that women go through when they accuse men of sexual assault. From a professional standpoint, she worries that being outed as a victim could lead to the end of her career in sports journalism, as female reporters are regularly expected to interact with male athletes. Dana experiences severe emotional distress at her decision, knowing full well that there was a strong chance that Natalie would be victimized. In sending Natalie to the locker room in the first place, she risked her employee's safety in order to avoid losing an interview subject that would lead to a ratings success for the show.³⁴³

The *SN* staff struggles to come to a determination on how they should proceed with the interview. Dan strongly believes that Natalie's story should be told and that their show should be the first to break it. Yet Casey argues that if Natalie doesn't want to go public, they have to respect her decision. The idea of trading Natalie's silence on her own assault for the ability to bring up the Shelby allegations in Patrick's interview comes up, an approach that is quickly dismissed. Ultimately, Dana cancels the interview altogether, which she sees as the only decision that will allow *SN* to maintain its journalistic integrity while also protecting Natalie's privacy. The episode ends with Natalie visiting Patrick once again, telling him that she is about to make a police report of his assault against her.³⁴⁴ The following episode, "The Head Coach, Dinner and the Morning Mail," sees Natalie having to convince Dana that she is ready to assume the full responsibilities of her job after the Patrick incident.³⁴⁵

³⁴³ *Sports Night*, "Mary Pat Shelby."

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁵ *Sports Night*, season 1, episode 6, "The Head Coach, Dinner and the Morning Mail," directed by Thomas Schlamme, written by Aaron Sorkin and Matt Tarses, featuring Josh Charles, Peter Krause, and Felicity Huffman, aired October 27, 1998, on ABC.

We never learn the outcome of the charges of abuse made against Patrick, nor does *Sports Night* depict the eventual backlash that Natalie would have almost certainly received for coming forward to the police. To boot, the violence is more or less an isolated event perpetrated by an athlete with a specific history of violence, as opposed to the banal reality of abuse faced on a day-to-day basis by women in sports media. These omissions amount to a missed opportunity for a more substantive exploration of the topic, allowing *Sports Night* to engage with a few specific elements of gender-based discrimination and harassment while simultaneously avoiding a broader critique of the NFL—at the time of the episode’s airing, ABC had been broadcasting *Monday Night Football* for nearly three decades.



Figure 8: *Live Shot*'s “Fast” Eddie Santini risking life and limb to capture exciting video news footage.³⁴⁶

For certain characters in television news series, the prospect of physical danger is the primary motivation they have to keep on practicing their journalistic craft. These are typically recurring characters working as freelancers or foreign correspondents who drop in on our

³⁴⁶ *Live Shot*, season 1, episode 11, “Today is the First Day of the Rest of Your Contract,” directed by Vern Gillum, written by Dan Guntzelman and Del Shores, featuring Sam Anderson, David Birney, and Wanda De Jesus, aired November 14, 1995, on UPN.

protagonists from time to time when it suits the narrative. There is however, one crucial exception to this rule: *Live Shot*'s "Fast" Eddie Santini, the daredevil *par excellence* of the genre. Constantly pursuing the perfect shot, he seemingly thrives on putting the "action" in action news. In a two-episode story arc, "Miracle" and "Today is the First Day of the Rest of Your Contract," Eddie travels to Nicaragua with producer Nancy Lockridge and correspondent Ricardo Sandoval to report a story on an orphanage that is taking care of children during a conflict between the military and a rebel faction. When they arrive, Eddie, a cigarette dangling from the side of his mouth, chats with Ricardo as the two men unload their gear:

Eddie: Okay, Richie, this is all I'm sayin'. That orphan thing, that's fine. But while we're out here, there's a bunch of people with guns, shooting at one another, you know, we might as well grab some of that, too.

Ricardo: What, are you outta your mind? I don't go where there are bullets whippin' around, man, it's in my deal.

Eddie: You should try it, man, the rush is *incredible*. *Adrenaline*, that's my drug of choice.

Ricardo: What about alcohol and nicotine?

Eddie: Okay, those too.³⁴⁷

Later, with a group of children in tow, the group is forced to make their way across a narrow rope bridge over a gorge to evade a rebel group that is pursuing them to obtain video footage captured by Eddie of a young nun being murdered by the rebels. Even at this point, Eddie, a small boy on his back, pulls out his camera to get a good shot, leaving Ricardo and Nancy astonished. "I just figured out why he's a good news shooter," remarks Ricardo. "Why's that?," Nancy asks. "He's crazy," Ricardo replies.³⁴⁸ Eddie has a strong understanding that doing whatever it takes to capture striking visuals is a crucial element of holding down his job.

³⁴⁷ *Live Shot*, season 1, episode 10, "Miracle," directed by Kristoffer Tabori, written by Dan Guntzelman and Steve Marshall, featuring Sam Anderson, David Birney, and Wanda De Jesus, aired November 7, 1995, on UPN.

³⁴⁸ *Live Shot*, "Today is the First Day of the Rest of Your Contract."

Local news, as Allen has shown, has a history of being more visually-focused than its network counterparts. While network news often presented stories abstractly, featuring a ‘talking heads’ format with minimal or no visuals, local news used pictures to tell more easily comprehensible stories.³⁴⁹ Allen points out that these innovations were made in large part to attract “middle and lower status groups” without high levels of education—audience research indicated that people who were not news junkies and did not care for details would find visually-focused news more useful and comprehensible.³⁵⁰ In 1948, the tabloid *New York Daily News* founded WPIX, whose call sign was based on the paper’s slogan of “New York’s Picture Newspaper.” The station’s nightly news broadcast emphasized filmed coverage of day-to-day local events, such as fires and crimes.³⁵¹ Pioneered in the mid-1960s by WKY-TV in Philadelphia, the ‘eyewitness news’ concept relied on a trifecta of action, pictures, and liveness, allowing viewers to see the news for themselves as it unfolded, ratcheting up the intensity, immediacy, and drama of breaking and ongoing stories.³⁵² The next innovation in local news also came out of Philadelphia, with WFIL-TV’s developing the ‘action news’ format in the early 1970s.³⁵³ Designed to be experienced by viewers as a kind of “televised front page,” each broadcast quickly skimmed across the day’s news, similar to how readers could glance at the headlines in a newspaper.³⁵⁴ As Allen argues, over the coming decades, the ‘eyewitness’ and ‘action’ formats would merge with one another, eventually reaching a point where they became virtually indistinguishable.³⁵⁵

³⁴⁹ Allen 80-82.

³⁵⁰ Ibid 125-26.

³⁵¹ Ibid 4-7.

³⁵² Ibid 80-81.

³⁵³ Ibid 115.

³⁵⁴ Ibid 122.

³⁵⁵ Ibid 115.

The 1970s also saw local news stations leverage new technologies of electronic news gathering (ENG), including more portable and mobile television cameras, which allowed videographers to get closer to the action during dramatic events. For example, KNXT in Los Angeles used the technology to great effect for its on-location coverage of the May 17, 1974 shootout between the LAPD and members of the Symbionese Liberation Army, a far-left militant organization.³⁵⁶ Stations touted their ENG capabilities in promotional spots, using buzzwords like “fast,” “improved,” and “first” to draw in viewers.³⁵⁷ Given that truly big, dramatic events like the SLA shootout were relatively rare, the equipment was often overused by stations to justify its expense—on one occasion, WJBK Detroit sent its ENG unit to cover a cat being rescued from a tree.³⁵⁸

Case Study: Operation Genoa & Institutional Failure in *The Newsroom*

“We just stopped being good.”

—*News Night* anchor Will McAvoy, *The Newsroom*³⁵⁹

In a narrative arc that stretches across the entire second season of *The Newsroom*, ACN deals with the fallout of broadcasting a story whose claims are later proven to be entirely false. After nearly a year of reporting work, *News Night* runs a special investigative piece which claims that an illegal nerve agent was used by the US military during a black-ops mission called Operation Genoa. The Genoa story arc is a portrayal of both an ethical lapse by a single journalist as well as a series of wider institutional failures by a news organization to realize that

³⁵⁶ Ibid 156.

³⁵⁷ Ibid 159.

³⁵⁸ Ibid 165.

³⁵⁹ *The Newsroom*, season 2, episode 7, “Red Team III,” directed by Anthony Hemmingway, written by Aaron Sorkin, Cornie Kingsbury, and Brendan Fehily, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher, Jr., aired August 25, 2013, on HBO.

the key elements of a story are not accurate. It speaks to Kovach and Rosenstiel's assertion that breakdowns in verification can not only happen due to erroneous information, but also when journalists accept facts that fit into a "master narrative" based on a set of predetermined views on a subject.³⁶⁰

The Operation Genoa storyline is loosely based on the reporting and aftermath of a 1998 story titled "Valley of Death," which CNN aired in the first episode of its investigative program *NewsStand: CNN and Time*, a collaboration between the two news organizations that was intended to boost CNN's ratings.³⁶¹ The story focused on Operation Tailwind, a 1970 covert action by US Special Forces during the Vietnam War. An incursion by sixteen Americans and one hundred forty Montagnard mercenaries into Southern Laos, the mission was designed to divert North Vietnamese Army (NVA) attention from a nearby battle site where CIA-led Hmong mercenaries were carrying out another operation.³⁶² "Valley of Death" claimed that, in Tailwind, the US Army had used sarin nerve gas to attack a group of its own soldiers who had defected to the NVA.³⁶³ The story presented interviews with Tailwind veterans and former Army officials, including former Chief of Naval Operations and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Thomas Moorer, that seemed to support its claims.³⁶⁴

However, when reporters from the Reuters news agency followed up with Moorer the day after the story aired, he claimed that he had no personal knowledge of the use of nerve gas. Other elements of "Valley of Death" quickly withered under scrutiny. For example, the battle report from the operation indicated the use of tear gas and not nerve gas, while the military

³⁶⁰ Kovach and Rosenstiel 118.

³⁶¹ Jerry Lembcke, *CNN's Tailwind Tale: Inside Vietnam's Last Great Myth* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 1, 6.

³⁶² Lembcke 17.

³⁶³ Ibid ix.

³⁶⁴ Ibid 2-3, 112.

records of two of the story's sources revealed that neither had been involved with Tailwind nor had they ever served in Laos. Further, CNN's military analyst at the time, retired U.S. Air Force Major General Perry M. Smith, had not been consulted during the reporting process. Ten days after the story was broadcast and its claims began to collapse, Smith resigned from the network, stating, "I can't work for an organization that would do something like this."³⁶⁵

An internal CNN investigation into "Valley of Death" found that while its producers, April Oliver and Jack Smith, had not intentionally falsified information, the two main assertions of the story—the use of sarin nerve gas and the defection of US soldiers—were "insupportable." The report indicated problems with all "five pillars" on which the story was based. First was the unreliable memory of Adm. Moorer, who was in his mid-eighties at the time of being interviewed. As Jerry Lembcke notes in his book on the lapses and fallout of CNN's reporting, Moorer was intended to be the story's "trump card," but wound up being "the joker in Oliver's deck." Second was the shaky credibility of three confidential sources. One of them was legitimate, but was "an indirect source who had relayed information to Oliver through a third party." Another had been led to support the nerve gas claim only after being told by the producers that Moorer had thought it was true. The last had "responded positively but with ambiguity" on the matter of nerve gas. The third pillar of the story, the testimony of Tailwind veterans, was also deemed to be questionable. Although the operation's leader was filmed saying that he had never considered using lethal gas on any mission he ran, the broadcast claimed that he had told producers off-camera that it was "very possible" that nerve gas had been used. The recollections of the advance reconnaissance team leader were presented in the story as being more certain than they actually were, and another key officer was deemed to be an

³⁶⁵ Ibid 7-8.

unreliable witness. The fourth issue the investigation found was that other individuals associated with Tailwind provided information that was “often ambiguous and conflicting.” Fifth and finally, the issue of nerve gas had been oversimplified to viewers, and the conflicting judgments of weapons experts, who had been given incomplete information by the story’s producers, was glossed over in the broadcast.³⁶⁶

Faced with the internal investigation’s findings, which were released about a month after “Valley of Death” aired, Oliver and Smith stood by their story, arguing that it had been accurately reported based on information obtained from their sources. Yet Lembcke identifies this as a problematic line of defense, since many of those sources were career operatives who were well-practiced in the arts of denial, disinformation, and deception.³⁶⁷ Attempting to explain both the motivations of the producers and the allure of the story for viewers, Lembcke argues that,

By packaging the real operation Tailwind with the fictive elements of nerve gas and defectors, producers Oliver and Smith were able to construct a story that was as much about government secrecy and betrayal as it was about the fighting men of Operation Tailwind; its appeal was the feelings of suspicion and fear left over from the war, sentiments intensified in the postwar decades by the prevalence of conspiracy themes in American political culture.³⁶⁸

In other words, the claims made by the story would *feel true* to many Americans who had grown distrustful of official government narratives about the Vietnam War. CNN swiftly fired the two producers, issuing an on-air retraction and apology to its viewers. The fallout subsequently led to the resignations of CNN senior vice president and *Newsstand* supervising producer Pam Hill, along with *NewsStand* consulting producer John Lane.³⁶⁹

³⁶⁶ Ibid 8-10, 112.

³⁶⁷ Ibid 14.

³⁶⁸ Ibid 18.

³⁶⁹ Ibid x, 10.



Figure 9: In *The Newsroom*, Jerry Dantana briefs the *News Night* staff on the Operation Genoa story.³⁷⁰

The Newsroom's loose fictionalization of the CNN Tailwind scandal begins in the series' second season premiere episode, "First Thing We Do, Let's Kill All the Lawyers," when ACN Washington bureau senior producer Jerry Dantana (Hamish Linklater)—who is filling in at *News Night* while Jim Harper is covering the 2012 presidential campaign—receives a tip from a captain in the US Air Force about a story which "makes careers and ends presidencies."³⁷¹ In the next episode, "The Genoa Tip," we learn the details of the captain's claim: during Operation Genoa, a 2009 extraction mission to rescue two captured U.S. soldiers from a village in Pakistan where they faced beheading by al-Qaeda, Marine Forces Special Operation Command (MARSOC) may have used lethal sarin nerve gas.³⁷² In the episode "Willie Pete," Jerry brings the tip to Mac McHale, who is somewhat suspicious of the captain's story, in part because it contains details that are inconsistent with the type of military hardware that would have been

³⁷⁰ *The Newsroom*, "Red Team III."

³⁷¹ *The Newsroom*, "First Thing We Do, Let's Kill All the Lawyers."

³⁷² *The Newsroom*, season 2, episode 2, "The Genoa Tip," directed by Jeremy Podeswa, written by Aaron Sorkin, Dana Ledoux Miller, and Adam R. Perlman, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher Jr., aired July 21, 2013, on HBO.

used in such an operation. In spite of her own doubts, as well as Charlie Skinner advising her that the story shouldn't be believed, Mac instructs Jerry to keep reporting it, but only when Jerry has nothing else to do.³⁷³ Charlie's thinking begins to shift in the episode "News Night with Will McAvoy," when an anonymous source—whom he quickly identifies as Shep Pressman (Frank Wood), a trusted contact from within the US intelligence community—sends him a cargo manifest from Operation Genoa. While the manifest does not explicitly list any type of nerve agent, Charlie suspects that a specific line item is code for sarin.³⁷⁴

Even though Charlie now believes that sarin gas was used, in the episode "One Step Too Many," he urges that *News Night* gather more evidence, as the show is about to make an extraordinary claim about a potential war crime that needs to be backed up to a level beyond any other kind of story. The staff wrestles with what sources can or should count when, to this point, no one who witnessed or took part in Operation Genoa has come forward. Jerry subsequently tracks down another source, U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant General Stomtonovich (Stephen Root), who agrees to speak about the mission on video, provided that his face and voice be obscured. Jerry travels with Maggie Jordan to Stomtonovich's home, where they are told by Stomtonovich that he will only do the taping if Maggie leaves the room, as he had only vetted Jerry. The two producers briefly push back on this stipulation but ultimately acquiesce, and Jerry proceeds to conduct the taping on his own, a detail that neither Jerry nor Maggie reveal to anyone else. While Stomtonovich confirms that the U.S. military does hold supplies of sarin, and that he believes its use could be justified under specific circumstances, he makes no claims

³⁷³ *The Newsroom*, season 2, episode 3, "Willie Pete," directed by Lesli Linka Glatter, written by Aaron Sorkin, Michael Russell Gunn, and Elizabeth Peterson, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher, Jr., aired July 28, 2013, on HBO.

³⁷⁴ *The Newsroom*, season 2, episode 5, "News Night with Will McAvoy," directed by Alan Poul, written by Aaron Sorkin, Corrine Kingsbury, and Brendan Fehily, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher, Jr., aired August 11, 2013, on HBO.

that the nerve agent was used in Operation Genoa. “If we used sarin,” Stomtonovich says, “here’s how we would have done it,” and proceeds to explain this hypothetical. Throughout the interview, a television tuned to a men’s college basketball game can be seen and heard in the background; Stomtonovich is an avid sports fan and wants to keep close track of the ongoing NCAA tournament.³⁷⁵

Frustrated that Stomtonovich made no definitive statements about the use of nerve gas, Jerry, who strongly believes that the story is true, modifies the content of the the interview, deleting the word “if” to make it appear that the lieutenant general said “we used sarin” in response to Jerry asking a question about nerve gas in Operation Genoa. Jerry then presents his edited version to the the *News Night* team as if it were raw, unedited footage, making it seem as if a high-ranking member of the armed forces has confirmed the story. Shortly afterwards, two of the Marines who carried out Genoa tell *News Night* that they recall sarin being used during the mission.³⁷⁶ Satisfied that they now have a more than sufficient cache of evidence, Charlie gives the green light to run the story, which Will McAvoy presents as an hour-long special on *ACN Reports*, the network’s investigative journalism program.³⁷⁷

Immediately after the story airs in the episode “Red Team III,” Stomtonovich calls ACN in a fury, vehemently asserting that, during the taping of the interview, he made no claims that sarin was used. Both Charlie and Mac dismiss this, with the former holding that Stomtonovich got “cold feet” about being a part of such a consequential revelation, and the latter insisting that he has nothing to complain about since they have him on video which, at this point, she does not realize had been altered by Jerry. Many members of the newsroom staff are celebrating after the

³⁷⁵ *The Newsroom*, season 2, episode 6, “One Step Too Many,” directed by Julian Farino, written by Aaron Sorkin, Corrine Kingsbury, and Brendan Fehily, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher, Jr., aired August 18, 2013, on HBO.

³⁷⁶ *The Newsroom*, “One Step Too Many.”

³⁷⁷ *The Newsroom*, “Red Team III.”

broadcast, which is later estimated to have drawn an audience of 5.8 million viewers. Operation Genoa coverage is cross-promoted throughout ACN, including a live interview on *Right Now*—the program hosted by anchor Elliot Hirsch (David Harbour) that follows *News Night* every evening—with one of the Marines who went on record about the use of sarin. Watching from the control room, executive producer Don Keefer instructs Elliot to cut the interview short when the Marine reveals that he suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI)—Don is concerned that the Marine may have suffered memory loss leading to an erroneous recollection of the events during Genoa.³⁷⁸

At this point, a litany of further holes in the story—any of which could have been caught by the newsroom staff multiple times over—start becoming clear. Jerry’s initial source in the Air Force had exaggerated the events of Genoa to raise his profile in preparation for a run for elected office. Mac realizes that the second Marine’s confirmation of the use of nerve gas had not been based on his own recollections but rather were the result of leading questions she had asked him. Maggie finally reveals to her colleagues that she had not been in the room during the Stomtonovich taping. Charlie discovers that Pressman had provided him with a fabricated weapons manifest as revenge for his drug-addicted son’s suicide, a tragedy that Pressman blamed on Charlie not giving the young man a job opportunity at ACN. In a melodramatic scene, Charlie holds the document under a lamp, revealing the words “FUCK YOU CHARLIE” written by Pressman in invisible ink. Finally, Mac reviews the raw footage of the Stomtonovich interview and notices erratic jumps in the shot clock on the basketball game behind Stomtonovich, which indicates that Jerry had edited the tape in order to distort the General’s words. Jerry is quickly fired, but he subsequently sues the network for wrongful termination,

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

asserting that he was made the scapegoat for a series of wider institutional failures throughout the ACN newsroom.³⁷⁹

While Jerry's actions constituted a clear and obvious ethical lapse, multiple members of the ACN newsroom failed to meet their responsibilities as journalists to ensure the story's accuracy before reporting it to the public. Kovach and Rosenstiel outline five "intellectual principles of a science of reporting" that ensure proper verification, all of which were broken at various points during the course of the reporting of the Operation Genoa story. The first principle is that a journalist should "never add anything that was not there originally," a rule that extends to the fabrication or rearranging of events. Jerry obviously violated this when he tampered with the interview footage. But we can also argue that Mac—in asking one of the Marines leading questions that spurred him to make statements about the use of nerve gas that he otherwise may not have made—committed a transgression here as well. While it is safe to say that Jerry is probably the only person who directly broke the second principle to "never deceive the audience," the fact that Charlie, Mac, and other senior staff in the ACN newsroom did not catch Jerry's deception before the story went to air can be considered an indirect violation. Jerry also fails to uphold the third principle to "be as transparent as possible about your methods and motives," since he bases his reporting for the story in large part on preconceived notions about the U.S. military's operations. He came into his reporting so convinced that the story about the use of sarin was true that he was willing not only to accept even the most tenuous evidence to confirm it but also to *create evidence* out of whole cloth. Further, by keeping Maggie's absence from the Stomtonovich taping a secret from their colleagues, both Jerry and Maggie violated their responsibility to transparency. The fourth principle, "rely on your own original reporting,"

³⁷⁹ Ibid.

is broken by Charlie when he accepts the weapons manifest as genuine, taking the document at face value when he should have done more work to verify its authenticity. Charlie's failure here is also related to the fifth and final principle, "exercise humility," which states that journalists should not only "be skeptical of what they see and hear from others, but just as important, they should be skeptical about their own ability to know what it really means."³⁸⁰ Even though a nerve agent is never explicitly listed as a line item on the manifest, Charlie hubristically believes that his knowledge and experience allows him to read between the lines to uncover a secret code that indicates the illegal use of sarin during the mission.

By comparison to the aftermath of CNN's "Valley of Death," the personnel fallout from ACN's botched reporting on Operation Genoa is miniscule. While Charlie, Will, Mac, and other senior members of the news division submit their resignations in "Red Team III," Leona Lansing will not accept them. She argues that the blame lies squarely on Jerry's shoulders alone, and that the optics of newsroom leadership stepping down would be a black eye for both the network and her own public image. "Leona, we don't have the trust of the public anymore!" Charlie pleads. "Get it back!" Leona yells just before the episode dramatically cuts to black.³⁸¹ Leona's refusal to accept the resignations allows the protagonists to make a principled stand that is ultimately foiled by network ownership. The needs of television narrative reign supreme: *The Newsroom's* characters can make a big exhibition of wanting to leave, but at the end of the day the narrative of the series requires that they keep their jobs so that we as the audience can see their subsequent attempts to redeem themselves. While they have indeed failed to properly carry out their duties, their actions are contrasted with the malicious intent of Jerry's actions—he is a character who

³⁸⁰ Kovach and Rosenstiel 121-23, 131, 134.

³⁸¹ *The Newsroom*, "Red Team III."

exists to be discarded and shamed. The protagonists, compromised as they are, still have the privilege of being the heroes of the series.

Conclusion

“Integrity. It’s impressive. If only we could eat it for dinner or use it to pay the rent.”

–CNC network head Diana Macomber, *Murphy Brown*³⁸²

In this chapter, I have explored how television news series present the relationship that journalists have to the professional identity that journalism has constructed for itself. Through storylines that place characters in situations where they are forced to come to terms with their own principles, the genre depicts both courageous actions carried out in the service of furthering democracy, as well as ethical lapses. The importance of press freedom to a democratic society, manifested through narratives about pressures to name confidential sources, is held up as a bedrock principle of journalism that is rarely, if ever, violated by protagonists. When characters fail to uphold the ethical principles of their profession, they do so in spectacular fashion. With varying degrees of enthusiasm, television journalists are often portrayed as risking life and limb to carry out their work, a theme that reflects many of the real-life dangers that members of the press are faced with while also serving narrative needs for occasional suspense and dramatic action. In the next and final chapter, I will explore how television news series portray the changing role of the anchor in television news.

³⁸² *Murphy Brown*, season 11, episode 4, “Three Shirts to the Wind,” directed by Don Scardino, written by Diane English, Laura Krafft, and Skander Halim, featuring Candice Bergen, Faith Ford, and Joe Regalbuto, aired October 18, 2018, on CBS.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANCHORS

Introduction

“We’ll stay on the air until a winner is declared. Take off glasses, look concerned.”

—Cue cards for WJM anchor Ted Baxter, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*³⁸³

Just as the anchor is the central figure in the real world of television news, dramatizations of the industry position anchor characters, and the ways in which they adhere to or deviate from long-held expectations about the position, as integral components of their narratives. The importance of the anchor figure was not a natural occurrence, but rather developed over time based on a series of cultural and economic imperatives to make television news a central component of the everyday lives of Americans. This process ultimately led to anchors becoming highly paid local and national celebrities, often to the point that they became synonymous with the station or network on which they appeared. Cultivating anchors as authoritative and respected superstars—each with their own personalities—served a dual function of generating prestige for television as well as providing product differentiation in a competitive news marketplace.

In his chapter on nonfiction television programming, Horace Newcomb posits that, in a similar fashion to the starring performers of entertainment programs, anchors are “the defining factor” of the news—they are stars and public figures in their own right who become objects of admiration and examination.³⁸⁴ Anchors, Stam argues, sit “at the apex of the identificatory hierarchy” of television news—the very word *anchor* itself connotes heft, solidity, and stability,

³⁸³ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, “The Snow Must Go On.”

³⁸⁴ Horace Newcomb, “News, Sports, Documentary: Reality as Entertainment,” in *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1974), 188-190.

providing an assurance that this person will not let audiences go adrift on the often stormy seas of current events.³⁸⁵ However, it was not a foregone conclusion that the anchor would become such a central figure. As Barbara Matusow argues, the ascension of television news anchors to positions of respect and authority was “a gradual, evolutionary process.” The anchors of the 1940s and 1950s were “relatively humble figures,” popular with the public in a similar fashion to game show hosts.³⁸⁶ Conway has shown how in the 1940s, as television news was first emerging as a new journalistic format, anchors had relatively minimal roles, particularly by comparison to the vaulted status held by radio newscasters during that era.³⁸⁷ Early attempts at television news typically employed a “rip-and-read” format where a newscaster would simply read out loud the top stories of the day from newspapers and wire services.³⁸⁸

Apprehensions about making newscasters too prominent often hinged on whether or not they would be—in a similar fashion to Hollywood actors—judged by their physical appearance.³⁸⁹ The three major concerns about newscasters, identified by Conway, are all related to this basic anxiety. First, there was the novelty of audiences seeing human beings presenting the news on television.³⁹⁰ Indeed, as Newcomb points out, whereas there is always a sense of distance between print or radio journalists and their audiences, that distance is collapsed by television, where physical bodies are on display.³⁹¹ Second was the concern that viewers would be bored by showing one person on screen too often—for example, between 1944 and 1948,

³⁸⁵ Stam 28.

³⁸⁶ Barbara Matusow, *The Evening Stars: The Making of the Network News Anchor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1983), 2.

³⁸⁷ Conway 20.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid* 59.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid* 209.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid* 212.

³⁹¹ Newcomb, “News, Sports, Documentary,” 191.

CBS went through at least twelve newscasters.³⁹² The third concern revolved around the extent to which the individual personality of a newscaster should be emphasized.³⁹³

As Matusow has shown, through the mid-1950s the concept that anchors could be positioned as authoritative superstars never occurred to the television industry. News was largely “treated as a light, harmless, throwaway by the networks,” with anchors “seen as little more than gifted announcers.”³⁹⁴ It was not until the 1960s that television news anchors began to “assume an aura of moral and intellectual authority,” a prestige which networks aimed to harness in service of higher ratings and advertising revenues.³⁹⁵ This was part of the networks’ strategy to burnish their public images in the 1960s in the wake of FCC Chair Newton Minow’s scolding ‘Vast Wasteland’ speech, along with the quiz show scandals. In this decade, news “entered a new era, one that emphasized, above all, prestige.” Serious news and public affairs programs could “impart a glossier image” on networks and their advertisers. The networks reaped the added bonus of ingratiating themselves with both television critics and a more forceful FCC. Having anchors promote an image of “substance and seriousness” through their on-air personas was crucial to the networks’ maintenance of a prestigious public image.³⁹⁶

This “*idea* of the anchorman” as a figure of respect and authority, Barkin argues, would transform the landscape of television news.³⁹⁷ The industry cultivated its news anchors to such an extent that they often became the embodiment of a network or local station. Once television news gained more respect and increased levels of viewership, an anchor’s charisma and screen presence became valuable commodities and thus important considerations for their selection by

³⁹² Conway 6.

³⁹³ Ibid 212.

³⁹⁴ Matusow 43.

³⁹⁵ Ibid 2-3.

³⁹⁶ Ibid 83.

³⁹⁷ Barkin 41.

executives. Local news was somewhat ahead of the curve in promoting its anchors as stars. According to Allen, in the 1950s Walter Putnam of KTTV Los Angeles became the first television news personality to earn six figures: his \$150,000 salary was ten times as much as NBC's John Cameron Swayze or CBS' Douglas Edwards were earning as anchors of their respective network evening news shows. By 1960, Putnam's compensation, which increased with every subsequent contract renegotiation, had reached \$350,000.³⁹⁸ NBC was the first network to actively promote its anchors as stars—their duo of Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, co-anchors of *The Huntley-Brinkley Report* (1956-1970) were the first nightly news anchors to become genuine national celebrities.³⁹⁹

As Matusow argues, television news anchors came to be seen by the industry as so crucial that the success or failure of an entire network rested on their shoulders.⁴⁰⁰ By the 1980s, a network news anchor was a figure of such wealth, power, and influence that they were, in effect, accountable only to themselves.⁴⁰¹ For network executives, conferring status and power on anchors was a pragmatic response to challenging economic realities and anxieties about the future of television.⁴⁰² While, as Margaret Morse argues in her chapter on television news personalities, anchors, particularly those at the network level, “display a very restricted range in sartorial codes,”⁴⁰³ within these boundaries the distinct personalities of individual anchors became points of differentiation that would be marketable in a competitive media environment. “The triumph of the anchor,” Matusow points out, is a direct outgrowth of an American

³⁹⁸ Allen 9-10.

³⁹⁹ Barkin 126, 130.

⁴⁰⁰ Matusow 251-52.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid 3.

⁴⁰² Ibid 255.

⁴⁰³ Margaret Morse, “The Television News Personality and Credibility: Reflections on the News in Transition,” in *Studies in Entertainment*, edited by Tania Modleski (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), 64.

broadcasting system that is first and foremost concerned with maximizing profit.⁴⁰⁴

“Personality,” Matusow wryly notes, “turned out to be the greatest selling device ever discovered.”⁴⁰⁵

In becoming the central figures of American television news, Carlson points out that anchors also gained status as some of the nation’s most well-known celebrities.⁴⁰⁶ Indeed, as Brownell argues, it is not uncommon for network anchors to overshadow the political figures they interview on their programs.⁴⁰⁷ A paradox of the anchor position is that—despite its fame, power, and glory—it can often be, as Matusow writes, “a stiflingly dull job on a day-to-day-basis.” Anchors spend little of their time in the field, with most of their work hours devoted to staying abreast of current events, writing copy, and making editorial decisions to shape coverage that others in the news division will carry out.⁴⁰⁸ Additionally, while their on-air personas are designed to connect with everyday Americans, the lives of anchors are far removed from that of their viewers and from the world of those whom they report on. They typically lack the day-to-day contact with newsmakers that are an intimate component of the working lives of correspondents.⁴⁰⁹

In this chapter, I explore how television news series portray anchors via two themes. First, the genre employs its audience’s knowledge of the history of the anchor as a figure of respect and gravitas. By playing with the ‘Voice of God’ persona that is associated with white male network anchors of the mid-twentieth century, television news series explore the anxieties of a perceived loss that has resulted from the erosion of the single, authoritative anchor. The

⁴⁰⁴ Matusow 4.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid 51.

⁴⁰⁶ Carlson 63.

⁴⁰⁷ Brownell 204.

⁴⁰⁸ Matusow 145.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid 3.

genre alternatively—and in some programs simultaneously—satirizes and builds up the legendary status of real-world figures such as Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite, tracking how the role of the anchor, and television news as an overall product, has changed over time. Second, by often situating female anchors as central protagonists, television news series explore the barriers for women in both obtaining jobs as anchors in the first place and the struggles they face in maintaining those positions. The genre portrays industry thinking from the early days of television, which stigmatized women as unsuitable for the anchor chair, as having resonance into contemporary news. Major areas of concern within this theme include the pigeonholing of women anchors into soft news coverage, the fine line that they must walk to continue to be accepted by the industry and audiences, and the heavier scrutiny that females face by comparison to their male colleagues.

The Glorious Past of Television News

“Walter Cronkite put on a tie to clean his gutters!”

–WURG sports anchor Marsh McGinley, *Back to You*⁴¹⁰

By the time television news series began emerging in the 1970s, American audiences were already familiar enough with the conventions of television news anchors that depictions which played on those norms would make for effective comedy. There could be pleasure in humanizing television news anchors, who in the 1960s had been built up with authoritative, ‘Voice of God’ personas. As Ponce de Leon points out, the willingness of the viewing public to trust the single, authoritative voice of an evening news anchor had started to erode by the

⁴¹⁰ *Back to You*, season 1, episode 9, “Business or Pleasure,” directed by James Burrows, written by Steven Levitan, Christopher Lloyd, and Sally Bradford, featuring Kelsey Grammar, Patricia Heaton, and Ayda Field, aired February 27, 2008, on Fox.

1970s,⁴¹¹ with larger cultural shifts leading to skepticism of the “seemingly objective broadcast style cultivated by the networks.”⁴¹²

Leveraging these sentiments, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* characterizes WJM six o’clock news anchor Ted Baxter as having the outward qualities of a serious newsman while barely able to perform the functions of his job—chiefly a monumental inability to correctly read cue cards. On air, he affects a deep, resonant voice that signals authority, with his “Good night, and good news” closing for each broadcast echoing Edward R. Murrow’s well-known “Good night, and good luck” sign-off. Yet the show positions Ted’s gravitas as a mere facade: his actual voice is often high-pitched and giggly. In the series premiere, “Love is All Around,” he is introduced as an incompetent and self-important buffoon. “Welcome to my six o’clock news team,” he says in his newsman voice when first introduced to Mary Richards—to Ted, this is *his* show, even though in actuality he has little to no involvement in reporting or producing stories.⁴¹³ In “Today I Am a Ma’am,” Ted wants to expand the running time of each broadcast, not for any journalistic reason but purely to give himself more airtime. Watching Ted’s stiff on-air posture and demeanor, Mary remarks that he looks as if he is posing for a postage stamp.⁴¹⁴ The episode “Anchorman Overboard”—where Mary’s friend Phyllis Lindstrom (Cloris Leachman) invites Ted to give a speech at her social club on the topic of “The World Today”—hilariously displays

⁴¹¹ Ponce de Leon 84.

⁴¹² Ibid 126.

⁴¹³ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 1, episode 1, “Love is All Around,” directed by Jay Sandrich, written by James L. Brooks and Allan Burns, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Edward Asner, and Valerie Harper, aired September 19, 1970, on CBS.

⁴¹⁴ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 1, episode 2, “Today I Am a Ma’am,” directed by Jay Sandrich, written by James L. Brooks, Allan Burns, and Treva Silverman, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Edward Asner, and Valerie Harper, aired September 26, 1970, on CBS.

that while Ted has an on-air appearance of sophistication and authority, he is actually oblivious to most current events.⁴¹⁵

The fictional contrast to Ted Baxter is Jim Dial, the veteran *FYI* anchor in *Murphy Brown*. Whereas Ted merely attempts to put on a stoic persona for the sake of broadcasts, Jim is actually a highly competent and respected journalist who has a deep understanding of the world. In both his professional and personal life, he is a serious man who takes pride in presenting the news as such, with much of the humor across his character arc derived from this. In the series' second episode, "Devil With a Blue Dress On," executive producer Miles Silverberg tells Jim that the network wants him to adopt a less stiff, warmer on-air persona. "Dan Rather tried it," Miles says of the *CBS Evening News* anchor, "and he's getting beat up a lot less lately." During the next broadcast, Jim's attempt at smiling while anchoring is highly awkward and mechanical, and he subsequently returns to his preferred stoic broadcasting style.⁴¹⁶

In "The Last Laugh," while on air reporting a breaking story that President George H.W. Bush accidentally sat on and was stung in the buttocks by a wasp, Jim loses his composure and laughs uncontrollably. The public reaction is roundly negative—over his career, Jim has cultivated a specific public image and the outburst is viewed as childish and disrespectful. Jim is terribly embarrassed by the incident, so he decides to skip the next broadcast to collect himself, and considers retiring from journalism altogether. This leaves Frank Fontana to fill in as lead anchor, giving way to disastrous results when Frank attempts and fails to match Jim's signature gravitas. As the broadcast is ongoing, Jim is sitting down the street at Phil's Bar & Grill, where

⁴¹⁵ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 1, episode 12, "Anchorman Overboard," directed by Jay Sandrich, written by James L. Brooks, Allan Burns, and Lorenzo Music, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Edward Asner, and Gavin MacLeod, aired December 5, 1970, on CBS.

⁴¹⁶ *Murphy Brown*, season 1, episode 2, "Devil with a Blue Dress On," directed by Barnet Kellman, written by Diane English and Korby Siamis, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired November 21, 1988, on CBS.

the *FYI* team are regular customers. Afraid he will lose his composure when and if he returns to air, he shares these misgivings with Phil (Pat Corley), the restaurant's owner and bartender:

Jim: You know, in my career, I've covered a war knee-deep in Korean swamp water, I've reported men walking on the moon, I've informed America when one president was assassinated and another one *resigned*. And now, the only thing people will remember me for is that I found humor in the president's tuchus and behaved like a ninny in front of thirty million people.

Phil: What is goin' on with you, Jim? You're too tough a guy to let somethin' like this get you down!

Jim: That's what everyone thinks; that's what *I thought*. Being in *control* has always been my *strength*; keeping a *cool head* while everyone else was *losing* theirs; well, I'm no longer that rock. I can't depend on myself anymore. Frankly, it scares the *hell* out of me.

Yet Phil points out that if Jim retires now, he will guarantee that the laughing outburst will be the defining moment of his career. Buoyed by Phil's advice, Jim quickly returns to the studio to give his usual closing remarks, much to the relief of Frank. Murphy reassures him that he can keep it together, but right before *FYI* comes back from the commercial break she begins laughing uncontrollably, leading all of the anchors and crew to do the same. Jim is the only one who maintains a straight face amidst the hysterics; he delivers the sign-off as if nothing is happening, then stands up, shakes his head and remarks "You people are so unprofessional" as he confidently strides off the set as the episode fades to black.⁴¹⁷

Television news series often engage with elements of what author Louis Menand terms the "decline-of-TV-news narrative," which posits that television news was dumbed down by corporate executives in the 1980s and 1990s, moving away from substantive news coverage to become focused on infotainment. This discourse assumes that the public yearns for 'real' news, and that a return to lost principles can bring back a national community stitched together in the U.S. by Walter Cronkite and other venerated white male network news anchors of the

⁴¹⁷ *Murphy Brown*, season 3, episode 7, "The Last Laugh," directed by Barnet Kellman, written by Diane English and Tom Palmer, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired November 12, 1990, on CBS.

mid-twentieth century.⁴¹⁸ Whereas *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *Murphy Brown* each in their own way deconstruct the idea of the singular, all-knowing television news anchor, *The Newsroom* engages in a project of reasserting its value. Indeed, from the jump, the series embraces this concept as one of its central tenets. In the cold open of the first episode, “We Just Decided To,” Will McAvoy is participating in “Brave New World: Broadcast Journalism in the Internet Age,” a panel discussion at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. The *mise-en-scène* contributes to the sense of yearning for a glorious past of television news. Behind the panelists is projected a large image of broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow seated in the studio of *See It Now* (CBS, 1951-1958), the newsmagazine program which he co-created and hosted. In the popular consciousness, Murrow is perhaps best known for a 1954 episode of *See It Now* where he criticized the anticommunist crusade of Senator Joseph J. McCarthy, reporting that led indirectly to McCarthy being formally censured by the US Senate. Adjacent to the title of the Northwestern panel is the logo of Japanese auto company Honda, a subtle reference to the rise of commercial influences on journalism.⁴¹⁹

Will sits in silence with an exasperated expression as the two other panelists—television journalists clearly on opposite sides of the political spectrum from one another—have a loud, messy, finger-pointing argument about whether or not the U.S. has veered into socialism during the presidency of Barack Obama. A female student in the audience nervously asks the panelists, “Can you say why America is the greatest country in the world?” Will’s co-panelists give boilerplate answers, and he attempts to do the same, but the professor moderating the event pushes him for a “human moment” in response to the question. Looking into the audience, Will

⁴¹⁸ Ponce de Leon xi-xii.

⁴¹⁹ *The Newsroom*, season 1, episode 1, “We Just Decided To,” directed by Greg Mottola, written by Aaron Sorkin, featuring Jeff Daniels, Emily Mortimer, and John Gallagher, Jr., aired June 24, 2012, on HBO.

thinks he sees a woman (who will later be introduced to us as producer Mac McHale) holding up two handwritten signs that read “IT’S NOT,” and “BUT IT CAN BE.” Will then snaps, “It’s *not* the greatest country in the world, professor, that’s my answer,” to gasps from the crowd. The moderator tries to move on to a different topic, but Will proceeds to list a string of statistics that point to the U.S. being a nation in decline. Underlined by inspiring extradiegetic music, Will laments that America *used* to be the greatest country in the world, a nation that legislated “for moral reasons,” made scientific and technological advances, “aspired to intelligence” and didn’t suffer from extreme political polarization. “We were able to be all these things and do all these things because we were informed. By great men,” he says wistfully, “men who were revered.”⁴²⁰

Will’s diatribe, which sets the tone for the way that the series portrays the television news industry, positions the on-air presence of mid-twentieth century, authoritative anchors as a kind of silver bullet that both upholds the tenets and solves the problems of American civic life. These men were at the vanguard of a golden age of journalism and civility where people tuned their televisions to network news and were subsequently inspired to build and maintain a great nation. As Ponce de Leon points out, this is a narrative that downplays, and often entirely ignores, the larger historical contexts within which television news is situated. Entertainment has been a consistent element of television news throughout its history, because U.S. television has always been primarily an entertainment medium. Infotainment was kept at bay in the mid-twentieth century for the same reason that network news had large viewership in this era: viewers had limited options due to a relatively uncrowded broadcast dial. There were also, Ponce de Leon argues, larger political and cultural forces at play which positioned following the news as a civic obligation that would aid in fostering a more informed and responsible

⁴²⁰ *The Newsroom*, “We Just Decided To.”

citizenry.⁴²¹ *The Newsroom*'s first season opening credits make a direct connection between the characters of the series and the past glories of television news. The sequence begins with a montage of black-and-white archival clips of real-life network news productions, mostly from the 1950s and 1960s, before giving way to introducing each character at work in the ACN newsroom and studio. The implication here is that the *NewsNight* staff is earnestly attempting to recapture and carry on a tradition of television news that has been lost in contemporary times.

In contrast, *Great News* takes a more satirical approach to the decline-of-TV-news narrative. In the series' second episode, "Bear Attack," *The Breakdown* is surpassed in the ratings for the first time by a competitor, *Chip and Chet Report*, whose anchors constantly engage in contrived on-air banter. Network executives believe that this ratings slip is due to viewer perception that *Breakdown* co-anchors Chuck Pierce and Portia Scott-Griffith aren't friends with each other because they don't have on-air rapport. To remedy the slide, the network instructs Greg Walsh to have Chuck and Portia banter at the end of each broadcast. Portia is fully on board, but Chuck initially refuses, proclaiming that, "Banter is undignified and I won't do it!" After some coaxing, Chuck agrees to try it out, but the only way he's able to do so is to interrogate Portia as he would an interview subject who he is trying to get to reveal some kind of secret information.⁴²²

Later, during a production meeting, Chuck derides the concept that anchors need to show their individual personalities. "News is not the place for small talk and personal opinions," he proclaims, "that's the problem with journalism today; it's more about the personalities saying the news than the news itself," pointing to Portia. He adds, "A real newsman has no personality,"

⁴²¹ Ponce de Leon, xi-xiv.

⁴²² *Great News*, season 1, episode 2, "Bear Attack," directed by Beth McCarthy-Miller, written by Tracey Wigfield, Dan Klein, and Asley Wigfield, featuring Briga Heelan, Andrea Martin, and Adam Campbell, aired April 25, 2017, on NBC.

adding that, “Walter Cronkite said one thing at the end of his show: ‘And that’s the way it is,’ not ‘I feel *meh* today.’”⁴²³ These comments show how much Chuck values what Stam has identified as the “Network News style of acting,” whereby an anchor gives a minimalist on-air performance “built on a series of negations, a willful non-acting which simultaneously implies the presence and the denial of normal human emotions and responses.”⁴²⁴ This style favors anchors who can flatten their own personality traits while on-air to appear more neutral and objective to viewers. By and large, it dictates that no matter how light or serious the news itself may be, a proper television news anchor never deviates more than slightly, if at all, from a baseline of studied neutrality. Portia considers Chuck’s perspective on the correct way to anchor the news, telling the staff, “Chuck does have a point, except in the digital era, well-reasoned opinions are more valuable than the archaic model of so-called ‘objective journalism.’” She then asks, “Also, what’s a ‘*Walter Con-krite*’?”⁴²⁵

Indeed, as Marc Gunther points out in his book on ABC News under the leadership of Roone Arledge, the idea of a single, authoritative anchor was already being challenged by network news as early as the 1970s, most notably with the launch of ABC’s *World News Tonight* in 1978. The show employed a three-anchor team spread out across as many cities: Peter Jennings in London, Frank Reynolds in Washington and Max Robinson in Chicago, supported by commentary from Washington by Howard K. Smith and a “special coverage desk” run by Barbara Walters in New York. Alternatives “to the traditions of objective reporting, embodied on television by the all-knowing, all-seeing anchor” were beginning to emerge, with many

⁴²³ *Great News*, “Bear Attack.”

⁴²⁴ Stam 28.

⁴²⁵ *Great News*, “Bear Attack.”

journalists believing “that the best way to capture events was not with a single, omnipotent voice but through many personal points of view.”⁴²⁶

The legacy of Walter Cronkite, who anchored the *CBS Evening News* from 1962 to 1981, looms large in television news series. In the genre, he is a metonym for the highest possible levels of status, respect and success that can be achieved in television news, and often as a symbol of the longing for a bygone era of authoritative news broadcasting. As Allen argues, Cronkite’s public acclaim stemmed from his coverage of major national news events in the 1960s, where he “tempered seriousness with human displays,” winning over both coastal elites and Middle America.⁴²⁷ This, however, was not always the case. In his first years anchoring the *CBS Evening News*, audience research had shown that he was perceived by many viewers as a stiff “history teacher” rather than a relatable anchor. A turning point, Allen argues, was Cronkite’s reporting on the November 1963 assassination of President John F. Kennedy, where he came across as guiding viewers through the national tragedy less as a serious newscaster and more as a member of their own families.⁴²⁸

Matusow argues that Cronkite’s reputation as ‘The Most Trusted Man in America’ was both the product of the man himself “manipulating his own myth” and the turbulence of current events in the 1960s, the very era in which Cronkite rose to national prominence. Over the decade, an onslaught of traumatic events had led many Americans to lose confidence in the institutions and leadership of society. “Cronkite, so obviously decent and trustworthy, held a special appeal for people who had lost faith in the more traditional authority figures,” Matusow writes. He was “a constant, someone who was thoroughly professional, believable and honest

⁴²⁶ Gunther, *The House that Roone Built: The Inside Story of ABC News* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 70-71.

⁴²⁷ Allen 181.

⁴²⁸ Ibid 61, 64.

for so many years,” and as such “filled a deeply felt need.” For many, his soothing presence also made negative news somewhat more palatable.⁴²⁹ Particularly in moments of national or global importance, Cronkite was seen as an anchor that almost everyone in the United States could agree on.



Figure 10: CBS Evening News anchor Walter Cronkite with Ted Baxter in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.⁴³⁰

Cronkite is regularly referenced across the television news series genre. For example, in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, a running gag sees Ted Baxter frequently seeking higher pay and more perks. In “Anchorman Overboard,” Ted demands that a bath be installed in his office because he has heard that Cronkite has a sauna in *his* office.⁴³¹ Cronkite even makes a cameo as himself in the episode “Ted Baxter Meets Walter Cronkite,” stopping by to visit his old friend Lou Grant while reporting a story in the Twin Cities. Lou convinces Cronkite to tell Ted that he is a good anchor; Ted subsequently begs Cronkite for a job in network news, upon which

⁴²⁹ Matusow 132.

⁴³⁰ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 4, episode 21, “Ted Baxter Meets Walter Cronkite,” directed by Jay Sandrich, written by James L. Brooks, Allan Burns, and Ed. Weinberger, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Edward Asner, and Valerie Harper, aired February 9, 1974, on CBS.

⁴³¹ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, “Anchorman Overboard.”

Cronkite turns angrily to Lou and says, “I’m gonna get you for this.”⁴³² A young boy touring the newsroom in the *WIOU* episode “Appearances” asks weatherman Floyd Graham (Dick Van Patten), “Who’s Walter Cronkite?” Neal Frazier chimes in, “Walter Cronkite is the most trusted man in America.” The boy is still confused, so Floyd tells him, “You know, he’s the one who looks like Captain Kangaroo.” A look of recognition appears on the boy’s face as he exclaims, “Oh!”⁴³³ In the pilot episode of *Back to You*, Chuck Pierce is frustrated by what he perceives as the lack of substance in picking on-air personalities—he laments that networks are looking for people with youth and good hair to sit behind the desk, not someone like him who has been trying to emulate Cronkite for decades.⁴³⁴ In the *The Michael J. Fox Show* episode “Hobbies,” Susan Rodriguez-Jones (Anne Heche), an anchor who has an ongoing professional rivalry with Mike Henry at WNBC, purchases a desk that used to belong to Cronkite as a way to one-up Mike.⁴³⁵

The program that references Cronkite most often is *Murphy Brown*. “It’s How You Play the Game” opens with Murphy’s secretary giving her a phone message from Cronkite expressing how much he enjoyed her most recent *FYI* segment.⁴³⁶ In “The Awful Truth,” Stan Lansing wants Murphy to co-host a second, long-form documentary program titled *Front and Center* in addition to her anchor duties on *FYI*, he entices Murphy by telling her that Cronkite is considering coming out of retirement to serve as co-host. Based on this, Murphy agrees, but by the time the show is well into pre-production Cronkite changes his mind and drops out of the

⁴³² *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, “Ted Baxter Meets Walter Cronkite.”

⁴³³ *WIOU*, season 1, episode 2, “Appearances,” directed by Mark Tinker, written by John Eisendrath and Kathryn Pratt, featuring John Shea, Helen Shaver, and Harris Youlin, aired October 31, 1990, on CBS.

⁴³⁴ *Back to You*, season 1, episode 1, “Pilot,” directed by James Burrows, written by Steven Levitan and Christopher Lloyd, featuring Kelsey Grammar, Patricia Heaton, and Ayda Field, aired September 19, 2007, on Fox.

⁴³⁵ *The Michael J. Fox Show*, season 1, episode 4, “Hobbies,” directed by Scott Ellis, written by Will Gluck and Sam Laybourne, featuring Michael J. Fox, Betsy Brandt, and Wendell Pierce, aired October 10, 2013, on NBC.

⁴³⁶ *Murphy Brown*, season 1, episode 14, “It’s How You Play the Game,” directed by Barnet Kellman, written by Diane English and Russ Woody, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired February 27, 1989, on CBS.

project, forcing Murphy to co-host with the buffoonish Miller Redfield.⁴³⁷ Cronkite also appears as himself in the episode “And That’s the Way It Was?” In an off-camera scene, he had a conversation with Corky Sherwood at a party in which he told her his thoughts on all of the members of the *FYI* anchor team except for Murphy. Obsessed with knowing Cronkite’s opinion of her, Murphy spends the better part of the episode trying to get in touch with him. She finally tracks Cronkite down at a bookstore, where he is signing copies of his 1997 memoir *A Reporter’s Life*, and asks him point blank how he views her as a journalist. He replies that he thinks that Murphy is pushy, breaks all the rules, and is one of the best broadcast journalists in the business.⁴³⁸ Receiving a compliment from Walter Cronkite is the brass ring for a television news anchor.

Gender and the Television News Anchor

“Seventeen callers liked the interview, forty-three thought you talked to too many foreigners, and two-hundred-ninety-six called to register an opinion on your hair.”

—*FYI* executive producer Miles Silverberg, *Murphy Brown*⁴³⁹

In this section, I examine how television news series portray the challenges that female news anchors face. In the first decades of television news, the exclusion of women from the anchor desk was naturalized in a broadcasting industry that had historically been hesitant to put women in positions of on-air authority. These practices, Deborah Chambers, Linda Steiner, and Carol Fleming point out in their book *Women in Journalism*, had their origins in print journalism,

⁴³⁷ *Murphy Brown*, season 8, episode 22, “The Awful Truth,” directed by Peter Bonerz, written by Diane English and Michael Saltzman, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired September 25, 1995, on CBS.

⁴³⁸ *Murphy Brown*, season 9, episode 20, “And That’s the Way it Was?,” directed by Peter Bonerz, written by Diane English, Norm Gunzenhauser, and Tom Seely, featuring Candice Bergen, Faith Ford, and Charles Kimbrough, aired February 25, 1997, on CBS.

⁴³⁹ *Murphy Brown*, season 4, episode 21, “Rage Before Beauty,” directed by Lee Shallat Chemel, written by Diane English and Peter Tolan, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired March 16, 1992, on CBS.

where “many editors refused to believe women capable of the job, and those who were hired had to fight for the opportunity to write about the same topics as men and in the same style as men.”⁴⁴⁰ In her analysis of the role of the female voice in early radio, Michele Hilmes points to the ways in which “gender distinctions and definitions” shaped “broadcasting’s basic institutions and practices.”⁴⁴¹ The implementation of radio dayparts in the 1920s and 1930s had positioned daytime programming “as the natural terrain of women [...] projected into the private and ‘hidden’ world of feminine domestic space.” By contrast, “nighttime [...] became the territory of public, and male, authority, and its programs had a dual purpose: to sell not only the sponsor’s products but also radio as a public medium.”⁴⁴² As Hilmes argues,

By removing those forms most closely associated with women [...] from the evening schedule, and by building up the nighttime hours with prestigious commercial productions and serious sustaining programs in which women’s roles were nonexistent or marginal, the radio networks sought to improve their image of public responsibility through containment of the devalued feminine.⁴⁴³

Backed by the presumed authority of the male voice, the evening hours became the time during which broadcasters could prove that they were upholding the public interest.

This marginalization of women was reinforced by the conviction that as a gender they were ill-equipped, both mentally and vocally, to be authoritative news anchors. “Doubts about women’s suitability to speak in public about serious political and economic matters,” Chambers et al. argue, “kept many of those women working in radio confined to programs geared towards homemakers or children.”⁴⁴⁴ With few exceptions, Hilmes points out, the female voice—which station managers, who were overwhelmingly male, often contended was “physically and

⁴⁴⁰ Deborah Chambers, Linda Steiner, and Carol Fleming, *Women in Journalism* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7.

⁴⁴¹ Michele Hilmes, “Desired and Feared: Women’s Voices in Radio History,” in *Television, History, and American Culture*, eds. Mary Beth Haralovich and Lauren Rabinovitz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 17-18, 25, 22.

⁴⁴² Hilmes 18.

⁴⁴³ Ibid 29.

⁴⁴⁴ Chambers et al., *Women in Journalism*, 33.

naturally less suited” to the medium⁴⁴⁵—was deliberately excluded from nighttime schedules.⁴⁴⁶ As Chambers et al. have shown, this belief was partially a result of early broadcast microphones being designed specifically for the male vocal range, which made women “sound high-pitched and robbed them of authority.”⁴⁴⁷ Due to the inherently discriminatory properties of this technology, “some audiences and producers accepted the notion that women’s voices did not carry well by microphone.”⁴⁴⁸

These ideologies that emerged in radio broadcasting became naturalized as television developed throughout the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, as Conway points out, women “did not even merit consideration” by network television news divisions, where “the superiority of the male voice for news was an accepted part of the profession,” with network management claiming that listeners did not want or trust a woman as a newscaster. There was a widespread belief across the industry that the female voice was not authoritative enough, and that seeing a woman on screen would distract viewers from being able to focus on news stories.⁴⁴⁹ The male presence was preferable for television news because it was considered by the industry to be neutral—men would not call attention to themselves in the same fashion as women.

Interestingly, the fact that the female body was considered a distraction for viewers was a major reason that women began to appear in on-air roles in television news programs in the 1950s. Local television, Allen has shown, was the medium in which women first began to appear on television news broadcasts, where they were originally hired by stations as one of many gimmicks—which included singing, poetry, puppets, and other kinds of flashy attention-grabbers—to entice viewers to tune into weather forecasts. Actresses, models, and

⁴⁴⁵ Hilmes 25.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid 22.

⁴⁴⁷ Chambers et al. 33.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid 52.

⁴⁴⁹ Conway 216-17.

beauty pageant winners were hired as “weathergirls” under the logic that men would watch them because of their beauty, while women would tune in to see the fashions they wore on-air.⁴⁵⁰ In other words, while local news made women more visible compared to network news, their roles were not seen by executives or audiences as in any way journalistic or serious.

Firefly Lane engages with the simple sexism faced by female journalists as they emerged into more prominent on-camera roles in local television news from the 1970s onwards. In the 1980s, Tully Hart’s career is on the rise, thanks in part to her reporting from inside a convenience store robbery during which she was shot in the arm, an incident portrayed in “Total Eclipse of the Hart.”⁴⁵¹ In the episode “You Say It’s Your Birthday?!” while out to dinner to discuss an anchor position with television executive Wilson King (Martin Donovan), Tully politely turns King down after he makes a pass at her.⁴⁵² During the next episode, “Auld Lang Syne,” in a meeting at King’s office, Tully is about to sign a contract, but right before she does, King asks her to stand up and spin around, as he wants to “get a sense of what I’m paying for.” Though she is visibly ill-at-ease, Tully obliges, after which King remarks, “We could do more with the tits.” Tully tells King that she is uncomfortable with his behavior, and moves to leave the office. “Get off it, Tully,” King presses. “We both know demure is not your strong suit. You read the news like it’s *dirty*. And I like that. But we could do more with the tits. I want every male viewer in Seattle to have a hard-on while he’s watching you, like I have right now.” As Tully reaches to open the door, King blocks her way and attempts to forcibly kiss her, upon which Tully knees him in the crotch, sending him collapsing onto a couch. “What the fuck is wrong with you? You’re not

⁴⁵⁰ Allen 15-16, 136.

⁴⁵¹ *Firefly Lane*, season 1, episode 7, “Total Eclipse of the Hart,” directed by Fred Gerber, written by Maggie Friedman, Kristin Hannah, and Marissa Lee, featuring Katherine Heigl, Sarah Chalke, and Ben Lawson, aired February 3, 2021, on Netflix.

⁴⁵² *Firefly Lane*, season 1, episode 9, “You Say It’s Your Birthday?!” directed by Lee Rose, written by Maggie Friedman, Kristin Hannah, and Ilene Rosenzweig, featuring Katherine Heigl, Sarah Chalke, and Ben Lawson, aired February 3, 2021, on Netflix.

even that hot,” King sneers. “And you’re a *shitty* reporter. Your only talent was getting shot. Good luck out there. You’ll need it.” Tully quickly leaves the office, realizing that the cost of standing up to King’s aggression was a setback for her career.⁴⁵³

To King, Tully’s main value—aside from his own attraction to her—lies in her perceived ability to draw a specific demographic who will watch her anchor the news primarily because she is a conventionally attractive woman with large breasts. The fact that Tully ultimately finds long-term success not as a television news anchor—a career that she had dreamed about and worked towards since she was a child—but rather as a daytime talk show host with her program *The Girlfriend Hour* speaks to longstanding industrial practices that often position women as unsuitable for hard news roles in primetime television. Tully’s own outlook toward her career in television, which she often laments as a failure because it did not revolve around hard news, illustrates how these binary attitudes can be internalized. Tellingly, one of her former KPOC colleagues, anchor Carol Mansour (Lauren K. Robek)—who herself had been hired by the station in the 1970s for her fame as a local beauty pageant winner—provides an alternative point of view on Tully’s career in the episode “Time After Time.” At Carol’s retirement party in the 2000s, she reassures Tully that “serious journalism” is not the only thing that is important *for* people or *to* people, and that Tully’s work on *The Girlfriend Hour* is valuable because it has substantively addressed topics of importance to women and showed them that their interior lives mattered.⁴⁵⁴

⁴⁵³ *Firefly Lane*, season 1, episode 10, “Auld Lang Syne,” directed by Lee Rose, written by Maggie Friedman, Kristin Hannah, and Marissa Lee, featuring Katherine Heigl, Sarah Chalke, and Ben Lawson, aired February 3, 2021, on Netflix.

⁴⁵⁴ *Firefly Lane*, season 2, episode 12, “Time After Time,” directed by Sarah Wayne Callies, written by Maggie Friedman, Kristin Hannah, and Marissa Lee, featuring Katherine Heigl, Sarah Chalke, and Ben Lawson, aired April 27, 2023, on Netflix.

It was not until the 1970s that women began to appear as permanent television news anchors, a trend that, as Allen points out, began on local news as a result of several factors. Women's advancement into anchor positions was first and foremost a commercial imperative, with audience research indicating that local news viewers wanted to see more women. The mass movement of women into on-air positions, Allen argues, was a major consequence of the rise of professional news consultants, who at the time were beginning to gain a strong foothold in the local news industry. It was an opportunity for local news to distinguish itself from network news, as well as a means to stand out in highly competitive local markets. The hiring of female anchors also fulfilled regulatory requirements, as recently enacted FCC rules had made equal opportunity employment part of the criteria for broadcast license renewal. By and large, the influx was dominated by *white* women moving into the anchor chair. Women of color—and *any* person of color of *any* gender, for that matter—became anchors at a far slower pace.⁴⁵⁵

As Karen L. Ross argues in her article on the ways in which female journalists were sold and marketed as commodities, even as women have become more visible in contemporary television news, they are caught in a double bind of being “viewed as sexual objects even while engaged in the serious business of news reporting, and at the same time they are criticized for trivializing the news because they are too decorative and can distract from the content of their words.”⁴⁵⁶ This was a conundrum faced by journalist Barbara Walters, who, as Barkin points out, in spite of a long and distinguished career, was the subject of constant criticism that she was not serious enough to be a national news anchor.⁴⁵⁷ Walter Cronkite showed particular disdain for Walters, viewing her move in 1976 from NBC's *Today* morning program to the *ABC Evening*

⁴⁵⁵ Allen 131-32, 135-36, 141.

⁴⁵⁶Ross, “Selling Women (Down the River),” 117.

⁴⁵⁷ Barkin 126.

News as another step on an apocalyptic path toward television journalism becoming show business.⁴⁵⁸

At ABC, Matusow writes, Walters faced several criticisms, starting with resentment over her high salary that not only surpassed that of her news colleagues, but which also rivaled those of many television entertainment personalities. While male anchors like Cronkite and ABC's Harry Reasoner had long been cultivating on-air personalities that favored a low-key approach, Walters deliberately built herself into a "glittery celebrity," which rankled many television news veterans. She was perceived as demanding in both the studio and the field, where her celebrity often led to special treatment compared to other journalists. Matusow points out "that most of Walters' critics were men, none of whom would dare suggest she was unqualified to become the anchor because she was a woman. Yet sexism was still a fact of life in network news in 1976; whatever gains women made until then had been accomplished over the strong objections of the majority of their male colleagues." Indeed, as Gunther argues, Walters was the victim of a double standard, as the very qualities that made her successful—tenacity, charm, and a relentless drive—also irritated audiences and her rivals within the industry.⁴⁵⁹

The double-bind faced by female news anchors is explored in *Murphy Brown*. A former winner of the Miss America beauty pageant with no prior news experience, *FYI* co-anchor Corky Sherwood, originally from a small town in Louisiana, was initially hired as a fill-in while Murphy was on leave receiving treatment for alcoholism at the Betty Ford Center. In the series premiere, "Respect," Miles Silverberg reports that Corky has "been testing through the roof!" and decides to make her a permanent co-anchor.⁴⁶⁰ Corky's perky, cheerful personality often

⁴⁵⁸ Gunther 38-39, 42.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid 39.

⁴⁶⁰ *Murphy Brown*, "Respect."

makes her a foil to Murphy's seasoned reporting and rougher edges. Although Murphy is initially skeptical of Corky's ability to perform the job, as Corky's character arc progresses she ultimately proves herself to be a capable anchor who builds a niche by excelling at covering stories from a human interest angle.

Yet Corky is portrayed as conflicted over being pigeonholed in her television news career. In "Be Careful What You Wish For," *FYI* has been reporting a story on retail chain BowMart—a clear stand-in for the real-life Wal-Mart—labeling clothing that is manufactured in foreign sweatshops as American-made. Murphy, whose interview rules are, "Number one: Badger, badger, badger. Number two: make 'em cry, make 'em cry, make 'em cry," is set to interrogate BowMart CEO Ross Bowden (William Windom) live on air. But at the eleventh hour, Corky insists that *she* conduct interview: she is tired of being *FYI*'s "dessert" and wants for once to be the "main course." Murphy's hard-hitting interviews have associated her with "the stench of toxic waste," while Frank's undercover investigations have made him synonymous with "grainy, compromising video footage," and Corky wants to make her own mark by striking a blow against corporate malfeasance. The team reluctantly agrees, but their fear that Corky will throw softball questions is unfounded: she eviscerates Bowen, not giving him a single inch of leeway.⁴⁶¹

While she is initially proud of her work in the interview, Corky's mood quickly sours. As a result of going against the grain of the lighthearted on-air persona for which she has become famous, she receives a wave of viewers letters chiding her for being excessively mean to Bowen, the first negative audience feedback she has ever received. While Murphy, Frank, and Jim Dial reassure her that this is a good sign, since it means she is doing her job as a journalist, Corky is

⁴⁶¹ *Murphy Brown*, season 7, episode 4, "Be Careful What You Wish For," directed by Peter Bonerz, written by Diane English and Adam Belanoff, featuring Candice Bergen, Faith Ford, and Charles Kimbrough, aired October 10, 1994, on CBS.

unswayed—she has built a career on fulfilling the stereotype of the pretty, blonde-haired reporter who does not upset or challenge viewers. Audiences have become accustomed to Murphy and Corky each filling specific roles on *FYI*—having more than one female anchor who asks the tough questions leads to a kind of dissonance that is difficult for many viewers to reconcile.⁴⁶²

Desperate to reclaim her likability, Corky invites several of the letter-writers for a tour of the *FYI* newsroom and broadcast studio. Their visit picks up on a theme that runs through *Murphy Brown*: the often persnickety nature of television audiences. As in “The 390th Broadcast,” wherein *FYI* makes short-lived and drastic changes to its format based largely on audience research,⁴⁶³ the viewers rattle off a litany of complaints. “What I wanna know is,” a woman carps at Murphy, “what gives you the right to say whatever you want about whoever you want? I mean, what gives you the right?” Tellingly, Corky’s invited guests largely seem to hail from the interior of the country—their dress, manner of speaking, and wide-eyed awe at being in Washington indicate that they do not share the coastal sensibilities that typically characterize network news operations. But whereas Murphy’s long experience in network news has led her to view this segment of the *FYI* audience as *hoi polloi* whose opinions are unworthy of consideration, Corky’s career arc, along with her background as a Southerner, makes her more attuned to the tastes of Middle America.⁴⁶⁴

The difference of opinion between Murphy and Corky is as much about the contrast between the audiences they are each trying to court as it is about each of their distinct on-air personas. Further, the episode illustrates Dow’s assertion that *Murphy Brown* both validates and explores the costs of the progress that women have made in the paid workplace.⁴⁶⁵ When Corky

⁴⁶² *Murphy Brown*, “Be Careful What You Wish For.”

⁴⁶³ *Murphy Brown*, “The 390th Broadcast.”

⁴⁶⁴ *Murphy Brown*, “Be Careful What You Wish For.”

⁴⁶⁵ Bonnie J. Dow, “Murphy Brown: Postfeminism Personified,” in *Prime-Time Feminism*:

comes to Murphy's house to express her worries about the negative feedback, Murphy pointedly tells her, "Corky, you blew it! You *caved into* public opinion, you compromised your professional integrity, and worst of all, you let *total strangers touch my stuff!*" Later, Murphy succinctly lays out to Corky the binary choice that successful female news anchors face.

"You've got a decision to make. You can either be a journalist and make some people angry with you, or you can be miss homecoming queen and have everybody love you, but you can't be both."⁴⁶⁶ For these two women, career advancement has come at a price. In Murphy's case, the cost has been the adoption of an aggressive, masculine demeanor that often tamps down or disavows femininity. By contrast, in carrying on her work in those areas of journalism that are traditionally viewed as feminine, Corky misses out on the validation that comes from covering legitimated, masculine, serious news. No matter the path that female journalists choose, *Murphy Brown* posits, there is always a price to be paid.

Indeed, as Chambers et al. argue, while television news regards maleness as neutral, "women journalists are signified as *gendered*: their work is routinely judged by their femininity" (emphasis in original). The physical appearance of female news personalities are "scrutinized far more intensively by both management and viewers than those of their male counterparts,"⁴⁶⁷ as their very presence in this arena is often viewed as aberrant. While the on-air images of anchors and correspondents are always carefully cultivated regardless of gender, particular attention is paid to women television journalists, whose physical appearances are even more "precisely calibrated."⁴⁶⁸ Such heightened emphasis on "fanciability," Ross points out, "forms the focus of much public debate: the size and refractory qualities of earrings, the color and cut of suits, and

Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 137.

⁴⁶⁶ *Murphy Brown*, "Be Careful What You Wish For."

⁴⁶⁷ Chambers et al. 1

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid* 223

the length of hemlines are all deemed appropriate subjects for discussion [...] An interest in the individual ability of women to do their job has become subordinated to questions about their sartorial judgment.”⁴⁶⁹ With the norms of television news constructed to value a certain type of neutral performance which is coded as male, female news personalities face barriers to acceptance both within the industry and among audiences.



Figure 11: In *WIOU*, when Neal Frazier grabs Kelby Robinson under the desk, Kelby responds in kind.⁴⁷⁰

WIOU focuses on the various forms of gendered expectations and harassment that are faced by female news anchors. In the pilot episode, after Neal Frazier’s co-anchor collapses and dies while on air, WNDY decides that the next day’s broadcast will be a trial run for longtime correspondent Kelby Robinson. Neal introduces Kelby’s story, then surreptitiously puts his hand on Kelby’s thigh under the desk. Rather than letting the incident go unnoticed by viewers, Kelby says in a calm and measured tone, “Neal, I’ll tell you all about it, just as soon as you take your hand off my thigh...*Now*.” When Neal doesn’t do so, Kelby reaches under the table toward

⁴⁶⁹ Ross 117.

⁴⁷⁰ *WIOU*, “Pilot.”

Neal, and by Neal's wide-eyed reaction it is clear that she now has her hand on his genitals. "I'll let go when you let go," says Kelby. Neal removes his hand, then Kelby removes hers. "Thank you," Kelby says, and continues to present the story. Here, Kelby not only calls out Neal's assault, but goes one step further by turning Neal's sexist behavior against him; it is a literal power grab that she uses to both defend her own body and assert that she will not be cowed in the misogynist domain of the anchor desk. Following the broadcast, Neal furiously insists that Kelby be fired, claiming that he had intended to grab the armrest of Kelby's chair but missed. Instead, Hank Zaert suspends Neal for ten days, in large part to head off the possibility of Kelby filing a lawsuit against the station. Kelby threatens to quit WNDY altogether, since the thigh-grab was the last straw in years of disrespectful behavior that saw her continually passed over for an anchor position. The station's next step comes down to the most important currency of all—the incident led to a significant ratings bump, and Kelby is promoted to full-time co-anchor.⁴⁷¹

In the next episode, "Appearances," during Kelby's first broadcast as permanent co-anchor, Neal tells Kelby right before air that she will take the lead story. Once the broadcast begins, he proceeds to read all of her copy from the teleprompter, then tells viewers that Kelby has more, but there's no more copy to read on the story. The stunt is designed both to trip up Kelby to make her look foolish on-air, while allowing Neal to reassert his domain over the anchor desk. Later in the episode, Kelby, Hank, and Kevin meet with a research consultant named Frank (Gregg Henry) to discuss Kelby's reception among audiences. The scene begins with Frank walking around the room as he presents his findings, using a tape recording of the thigh-and-crotch grab incident as a visual aid:

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

Frank: At that moment, an anchor was born. Still, our research shows while most of the women surveyed like you, a large portion of the males find you threatening.

Kevin: Extremely well-presented, extremely—

Hank: —All right, all right, now, what do you recommend?

Frank: I work on the anchor team. Every team has a leader. And what your viewers wanna sense is that the leader of this team is Neal.

Hank: Isn't that concept just a little bit dated?

Kelby: Yeah, I'd say a little. Okay, just let me get this straight. A woman can become co-anchor, as long as she knows her place, hmm?

Frank: Becoming co-anchor is the easy part. *Staying* co-anchor, that's the challenge. And our research suggests that doing that means that *Neal* must be the dominant one, and you've got to be submissive.

Kelby: Right, and I suppose that's where you come in?

Frank: Let's look at this in a positive light. I'm here to get you in touch with your feminine side. [Slightly lifts up his pant leg to reveal that he is wearing embroidered stockings.]⁴⁷²

The fact of Frank's cross-dressing, which itself confounds the expectations of traditional gender roles, is surprising for both the characters in the scene as well as the *WIOU* audience. But crucially, it indicates that his advice to Kelby may not be based merely on the perpetuation of longstanding television news practices that put women in subordinate positions. As the episode continues, Frank emphasizes the importance of being true to one's own personality, citing his own experience of feeling strong and confident when he wears garments that are usually associated with women. Whereas Kelby's fifteen years in television news have led her to internalize femininity as a weakness, Frank encourages her to flip the script and use those qualities to her advantage. "You've equated being taken seriously with being tough. Sometimes the toughest thing you can be is soft," he advises her. Later, Frank tells Kelby that, "The first time I met you, I knew that you were someone I could trust. That's the most important quality an

⁴⁷² *WIOU*, "Appearances."

anchor can have. But you're so busy being a hard-nosed journalist that the real Kelby Robinson is hidden."⁴⁷³

To be sure, this conversation is only credible for the fact that it occurs in a local news setting, a medium in which, compared to network news, anchors have a wider latitude for expressing a broader spectrum of personality on-air. By contrast, network news anchors, Morse argues, tend toward a mode of address that is "a careful balance of patriarchal authority and middle-aged accessibility,"⁴⁷⁴ thus favoring traditional presentations of masculinity and devaluing femininity. It also must be noted that, even amidst Frank's seemingly genuine advice about Kelby letting her own femininity come through, at the end of the day his character is a consultant whose main concern is lifting WNDY's ratings numbers. His support of Kelby's femininity contrasting with Neal's masculinity speaks to Ross' point that, "Rather than seeing women news professionals as exemplifying the new (higher) status of women in public domains, it is possible to detect an altogether more cynical rationale underlying their employment, that is, that women (in television news at least) make news more human, more watchable, and they improve ratings."⁴⁷⁵ The split-gender anchor team allowed television news programs to keep hold of the authority of the male voice while attempting to capture a wider demographic through a female presence.

The impetus to scrutinize female news anchors more heavily than their male counterparts is also explored in *Murphy Brown*. In "Uh-Oh: Part 3," Murphy faces an unplanned pregnancy that resulted from sleeping with her ex-boyfriend Peter Hunt (Scott Bakula), a recurring character whose constant travel as an international television news correspondent has made him

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁴ Morse, "The Television News Personality and Credibility," 64.

⁴⁷⁵ Ross 116.

rootless. After considering an abortion, Murphy decides that she will carry the pregnancy to term and raise the child herself as a single mother while keeping her position as co-anchor at *FYI*. While her colleagues at the show are supportive of Murphy's choice to keep and raise the baby, they fear that she will suffer significant public backlash if she continues to anchor during her pregnancy. "Murphy," Jim Dial remarks, "are you saying that you're going to attempt to do your job while week after week you puff up in front of a viewing audience that includes a certain number of people still reeling from the concept of women wearing pants?"⁴⁷⁶ Here, Jim is articulating that, for many viewers, seeing a pregnant woman anchor a newscast will be a turn-off because it is a reminder *that a woman is anchoring a newscast*. The visibility of Murphy's pregnancy could be particularly vexing for her audience, as she has staked her career as a journalist on adopting more traditionally masculine codes of speaking and dress while toning down her femininity. As Dow points out, "to compete in a male culture, Murphy becomes an extreme version of it, a caricature of the consequences of liberal feminism."⁴⁷⁷ The dissonance of seeing Murphy literally becoming a mother on screen on a week-to-week basis may be too much to handle for many *FYI* viewers.

When news division head Gene Kinsella hears the news of Murphy's pregnancy in the next episode, "I'm as Much of a Man as I Ever Was," his first reaction is panic, insisting that "our first priority is getting you married as quickly as possible." For Kinsella, the optic of an unwed pregnant woman anchoring a national news program is a serious threat to the financial health of *FYI*, the news division, and CBS at large. "Gene, I'm not marrying anyone," says Murphy. "I've given this a lot of thought. I've decided to have this baby on my own. But

⁴⁷⁶ *Murphy Brown*, season 4, episode 2, "Uh-Oh: Part 3," directed by Peter Bonerz, written by Diane English and Korby Siamis, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired September 16, 1991, on CBS.

⁴⁷⁷ Dow, "Murphy Brown," 142.

frankly, after the fifteen years we've known each other, I would have expected more from you than just your typical, corporate reaction." As if to remind us of the fact that *FYI* is part of a larger institution that is subject to long standing rules, Kinsella replies, "Brownie, I am corporate. I'm responsible for a multi-million dollar operation that does not thrive on taking risks. I don't see how I have any choice but to take you off the air." Kinsella's attitude speaks to Todd Gitlin's point that, for television programming, safety is the key word, and as such a network's processes are designed to ensure that safe decisions are made at every level of the organization.⁴⁷⁸ Kinsella ultimately relents, keeping Murphy on the air but insisting that Miles, who swayed Kinsella by standing up for Murphy, take all of the responsibility if the pregnancy tanks *FYI*'s ratings numbers.⁴⁷⁹ This strategy reveals another element of the television industry highlighted by Gitlin: that, more often than not, executives will take all of the credit for a success but none of the blame for a failure.⁴⁸⁰

Murphy's pregnancy is not the only showdown she has with Kinsella over the gendered expectations of the anchor chair. In "Rage Before Beauty," Murphy realizes that her contract with CBS features a clause that she cannot drastically alter her physical appearance without first obtaining approval from the network. Incensed at what she views as a degrading stipulation after her long tenure at CBS, she and Miles pay a visit to Kinsella's office. Murphy expresses that the clause is "slightly demeaning," and "implies that how I look has something to do with how I do my job." Kinsella insists that the clause would never apply to her—she is a beautiful woman and as such has nothing to worry about. He urges Murphy to "face the facts, the news is ugly; hearing it from an attractive person is the only thing that makes it tolerable. Can you imagine

⁴⁷⁸ Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 85.

⁴⁷⁹ *Murphy Brown*, season 4, episode 3, "I'm As Much of a Man as I Ever Was," directed by Peter Bonerz, written by Diane English, Gary Dontzig, and Steven Peterman, featuring Candice Bergen, Pat Corley, and Faith Ford, aired September 23, 1991, on CBS.

⁴⁸⁰ Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*, 45.

ugly people doing the news, why our suicide rate would jump beyond Sweden.” While many people tune in to *FYI* for hard-hitting news, Kinsella points out, “whether you like it or not, a lot of people watch because Murphy Brown is a sexy woman with blonde hair and terrific legs.” He urges Murphy to “look at it from my perspective, this is the news *business*, if we lose a single ratings point, why you’re looking at millions of dollars in lost revenue.”⁴⁸¹ Kinsella’s argument speaks to three different concepts. First, although he insists that appearance has nothing to do with competence, he reaffirms the importance of the former quality, particularly in the context of maintaining ratings success—even when it comes at the cost of upsetting one of his network’s star anchors. Second, he disavows his own power and influence as a network news division head to make choices about who gets to be on the air, essentially throwing up his hands and claiming that he is defenseless to make decisions that would go against industry orthodoxy.

To challenge the appearance clause—and test whether or not she will be terminated for breaking it—Murphy decides to get a very short haircut, which leads to a flurry of panic at the network. Kinsella calls Murphy to his office, where four executives study Murphy’s hair as if she were an extraterrestrial who just landed on Earth. To a man, their faces range between panicked and apoplectic. The ratings executive worries that this will not go over well with certain segments of the *FYI* audience, citing research which shows that sixty-two percent of urban males between eighteen and thirty-six years old listed Murphy’s “trademark hair” at or near the top of qualities they like about her. “I battle every day to sell advertising during a recession,” and this will only make that job harder, laments the sales executive. The head of the legal department expresses that CBS can sue Murphy for damages, while the public relations executive nervously insists, “We can put a positive spin on this: *FYI* is like getting the news from

⁴⁸¹ *Murphy Brown*, “Rage Before Beauty.”

your brother!” Ultimately, we learn that Murphy never cut her hair at all—she was simply sporting a wig to test the network’s reaction.⁴⁸²

The intense scrutiny faced by female anchors is also explored in *The Morning Show*. After Alex Levy surprises UBA by announcing Bradley Jackson as her new *TMS* co-anchor, the network springs into action to prepare Bradley. While meeting with key *TMS* staff in the episode “Chaos is the New Cocaine,” Cory Ellison notes that, “We’ve got forty-eight hours to define the character of Bradley Jackson.”⁴⁸³ Part of the creation of Bradley’s on-air persona for *TMS* involves carefully crafting her appearance. Up until this point, the highest profile that the Southern-born Bradley had reached was as a field correspondent for Southeast News Network (SENN), a fictional regional cable network. Bradley’s work attire at SENN consisted of a flannel shirt, channel-branded vest, and dark jeans.⁴⁸⁴ While this outfit is certainly professional, it is decidedly more casual than her clothing at *TMS*, which largely consists of carefully tailored pantsuits. This contrast not only illustrates the differing expectations between how correspondents and anchors should present themselves, but also the disparity between a lower-budget regional cable outlet and a national broadcast network.

In “Chaos is the New Cocaine,” during a private after-hours visit to the high-end Barneys New York department store, Cory guides Bradley through the process of selecting an expensive on-air wardrobe that will be paid for by UBA. The scene provides insight into Cory’s plans for the persona that Bradley will adopt as co-anchor: *TMS* will highlight certain aspects of her Southern heritage to provide flavor and charm to the show, while tamping down other aspects of her identity that might be considered objectionable to some viewers. Cory feels that Bradley is

⁴⁸² Ibid.

⁴⁸³ *The Morning Show*, “Chaos is the New Cocaine.”

⁴⁸⁴ *The Morning Show*, “In the Dark Night of the Soul It’s Always 3:30 in the Morning.”

an exciting addition to the show because she is single and does not have children, which he believes reflects a broader range of contemporary women. His logic is that since housewives already watch *TMS*, the show needs to capture other kinds of women to maintain its ratings position, and that Bradley can bring in those audiences. Bradley expresses frustration at the double bind that she will face as a female anchor, telling Cory that, “I can’t wait to hear how I’m gonna alienate Americans!”⁴⁸⁵ There is a fine line that women journalists must navigate, one that is particularly narrow for those who appear on a nationally-broadcast program.

For anchor Mary Jane Paul, the protagonist of *Being Mary Jane*, walking this line is made even more perilous by the fact that she is a Black woman, an identity on which the television news industry places additional expectations and restrictions. Across her character arc, Mary Jane experiences a stream of micro- and macro-aggressions against her by network executives which are in large part based on her race. Her freedom over coverage choices and her career advancement are both dependent on navigating the boundaries of white-led power structures. In the pilot episode, Kara Lynch warns Mary Jane off from airing a *Talk Back* story on the invisibility of Black women in the media because SNC executives are hesitant about this kind of coverage. This is a protective form of pre-censorship based on the rationale that, if the show goes along with network dictates long enough, eventually it will gain more leeway to run these kinds of stories.⁴⁸⁶ The use of this tactic speaks to Kovach and Rosenstiel’s point that those members of the newsroom who are marginalized within the industry—including people of color, women, and queer people—face more of a challenge speaking freely within institutional

⁴⁸⁵ *The Morning Show*, “Chaos is the New Cocaine.”

⁴⁸⁶ *Being Mary Jane*, “Pilot.”

hierarchies and in turn have fewer opportunities to bring their own perspectives and experiences to news content.⁴⁸⁷



Figure 12: In *Being Mary Jane*, Mary Jane Paul faces unique challenges as a Black female anchor.⁴⁸⁸

Mary Jane’s interactions with network executives, all of whom are white, portray another facet of the challenges that black female anchors face. In the episode “Let’s Go Crazy,” while meeting with SNC news division head Greg Roberts (Michael H. Cole), Mary Jane expresses frustration that, despite making concessions to the network, she has not obtained a greater level of control over her show’s coverage decisions. Roberts responds to this by telling her that, in covering more issues from within the Black community, she wants to turn *TalkBack* into *Talk-Black*, and that she should be happy to have a job at all. Mary Jane pushes back on this scolding, reminding Roberts that her contract stipulates that the network only has “reasonable consideration” over editorial decisions, but that she alone has the final word over story

⁴⁸⁷ Kovach and Rosenstiel 111.

⁴⁸⁸ *Being Mary Jane*, season 1, episode 6, “Hindsight is 20/40,” directed by Salim Akil, written by Mara Brock Akil, Erica L. Anderson, and Devon Gregory, featuring Gabrielle Union, Lisa Vidal, and Margaret Avery, aired February 18, 2014, on BET.

selection.⁴⁸⁹ With her cautious, go-along-to-get-along approach clearly not bearing fruit, Mary Jane decides to take greater control over the direction of the show, which begins featuring more stories about Black experiences that are underrepresented across news media. In “Line in the Sand,” Roberts expresses concern that the advertising department is concerned that this new focus is appealing to “smaller advertisers,” a clear euphemism for Black audiences that are not seen as valuable by the network. This remark speaks to Kovach and Rosenstiel’s assertion that American journalism has a history of wilfully neglecting Black audiences, based both on advertiser perceptions of this demographic not being affluent enough to target as well as the ignorance of white newsroom managers about the lived experiences of Black communities.⁴⁹⁰ While Roberts’ reaction here is clearly informed by institutional racism, Mary Jane’s family and colleagues begin to question whether her own involvement and bias regarding these stories, as well as her desire for fame and success, are interfering with her responsibilities as a journalist. In “Princeton,” when Kara reminds Mary Jane that she needs to dig deeper than simply presenting an issue, and that good journalism is not just advocacy, Mary Jane sarcastically apologizes for not “interrogating” her guests.⁴⁹¹

When Mary Jane’s father, Paul (Richard Roundtree), expresses concern over her coverage choices in “Line in the Sand,” Mary Jane defends herself by remarking that “I’m branding myself doing stories that I actually care about.”⁴⁹² Her fixation on branding is a means of enhancing her own viability in a competitive news marketplace where Black women are more often than not at a disadvantage. In “Wake Up Call,” when Mary Jane gives a guest lecture at a

⁴⁸⁹ *Being Mary Jane*, season 2, episode 7, “Let’s Go Crazy,” directed by Regina King, written by Mara Brock Akil, featuring Gabrielle Union, Lisa Vidal, and B.J. Britt, aired March 17, 2015, on BET.

⁴⁹⁰ Kovach and Rosenstiel 287.

⁴⁹¹ *Being Mary Jane*, season 2, episode 10, “Princeton,” directed by Rob Hardy, written by Mara Brock Akil, Erika L. Johnson, and Craig Quinn, featuring Gabrielle Union, Lisa Vidal, and B.J. Britt, aired April 7, 2015, on BET.

⁴⁹² *Being Mary Jane*, season 2, episode 9, “Line in the Sand,” directed by Rob Hardy, written by Mara Brock Akil and Erika L. Johnson, featuring Gabrielle Union, Lisa Vidal, and Margaret Avery, aired March 31, 2015, on BET.

college journalism course, she stresses the importance of on-air personalities establishing a brand and public image. We are in the *TMZ* era, she proclaims, referring to the entertainment-focused tabloid media organization, arguing that while people may claim that they want in-depth reporting, soundbites are all they really care to see on television news. When a young woman from the class pushes back on this, insisting that Mary Jane has sold out by focusing on viral stories and putting her personal life on display for viewers, Mary Jane responds, “I didn’t sell out. *I bought in.*” Clickbait and sensationalism already dominate, so there is no point in fighting it, Mary Jane argues. It is better to ride this wave and be visible—and rich—than to fight against it and risk losing her career. While the journalism students are critical of her career choices, once Mary Jane steps out onto the quad she is surrounded by a gaggle of students, all of whom are eager to take selfies with her.⁴⁹³

Mary Jane’s strategy of moving outside of the established norms and practices of journalism places her character inside the ongoing debate identified by Kovach and Rosenstiel about truth-telling being stifled by a “default culture” composed of older white male journalists with a liberal elite slant. Over the past half century, Black people have been vastly underrepresented in journalism: in the early 1970s, 3.9 percent of U.S. journalists were Black; by the early 2010s, that number had barely increased to 4.1 percent. As a Black woman journalist, Mary Jane is in a unique position to transcend the “cultural homogeneity”⁴⁹⁴ that characterizes newsrooms by getting at the truth of many stories that would otherwise be misrepresented or perhaps not reported on in the first place.

⁴⁹³ *Being Mary Jane*, season 3, episode 8, “Wake Up Call,” directed by Regina King, written by Mara Brock Akil and Erika L. Johnson, featuring Gabrielle Union, Lisa Vidal, and Margaret Avery, aired December 1, 2015, on BET.

⁴⁹⁴ Kovach and Rosenstiel 111.

Although SNC leadership is wary of her story choices, they eventually move Mary Jane into a primetime slot, a decision that is in large part due to her growing social media profile as a result of picking stories based on their potential virality. She will replace Cynthia Phillips (Kelly Rutherford), a white woman who is seen by SNC executives as having aged out of an anchor position. Cynthia takes a sick day in “Princeton”—it is an open secret that she is undergoing plastic surgery in an attempt to hide her aging and prolong her career in the anchor chair.⁴⁹⁵ Here, Mary Jane’s rise comes at the demise of another woman, a situation that Mary Jane knows she will herself be in sooner or later. In “Reading the Signs,” Roberts has a meeting with SNC owner Shohreh Broomand (Kathleen Gati), a white woman, where he is told to keep Mary Jane on a short leash. “The last thing we need,” Broomand says, “is an angry black woman running wild.” Promoting Mary Jane into prime time, she says, will look good with the SNC board, bump ratings and company stock, and have the shine of a diversity hire. If they don’t like the direction she takes her show, Broomand insists, they will pull the plug quickly and find another anchor to fill the slot.⁴⁹⁶ Even before Mary Jane makes the move to primetime, SNC is preemptively planning to circumscribe her coverage choices, treating her as both a potential problem employee and an interchangeable part that can be replaced at will.

While, as shown in the examples above, Mary Jane faces consistent racist behavior from her SNC superiors, the writers of *Being Mary Jane*, as Warner argues, utilize the strategy of cultural specificity to present her as a complex, fully dimensional character who exceeds simple “boundaries of positive and negative.”⁴⁹⁷ The series repeatedly has Mary Jane making questionable choices to advance her own career, and at times is written as an unlikeable

⁴⁹⁵ *Being Mary Jane*, “Princeton.”

⁴⁹⁶ *Being Mary Jane*, season 2, episode 11, “Reading the Signs,” directed by Salim Akil, written by Mara Brock Akil and Adam Giaudrone, featuring Gabrielle Union, Lisa Vidal, and B.J. Britt, aired April 14, 2015, on BET.

⁴⁹⁷ Warner, *Being Mary Jane*, 112.

character. In the second season finale, “Signing Off,” Mary Jane gets into a car crash that was likely the result of her own distracted driving.⁴⁹⁸ While she desires to return to work as soon as possible, the network insists she is not ready, and is considering using the crash as a pretext for terminating her contract. In “Hot Seat,” Mary Jane enlists the Rainbow PUSH Coalition (RPC)—a real-world nonprofit organization formed by civil rights activist Jesse Jackson—to lobby SNC to put her back on-air within three to six weeks. She decides to donate five thousand dollars to the RPC, calculating that this will speed her return. Yet when she perceives that the organization is not working quickly enough to get her reinstated, she makes a phone call to pull back the donation, taking it upon herself to announce to the press that she will be back on the air at the start of the next week, thus forcing SNC’s hand.⁴⁹⁹ Indeed, while Mary Jane is forced to navigate a white-led network that seeks any excuse to hinder her career, her own behavior and choices move the character’s relationship with her superiors beyond a simple good-versus-bad binary.

Conclusion

“All I’ve got are looks and the voice.”

—WJM anchor Ted Baxter, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*⁵⁰⁰

In this chapter, I have examined the ways in which television news series engage with concepts of the anchor as a central figure of television news. Through the often simultaneous hagiography and satirizing of the ‘Voice of God’ persona that characterized the prominent white

⁴⁹⁸ *Being Mary Jane*, season 2, episode 12, “Signing Off,” directed by Salim Akil, written by Mara Brock Akil, featuring Gabrielle Union, Lisa Vidal, and Margaret Avery, aired April 14, 2015, on BET.

⁴⁹⁹ *Being Mary Jane*, season 3, episode 5, “Hot Seat,” directed by Neema Barnette, written by Mara Brock Akil and Erika L. Johnson, featuring Gabrielle Union, Lisa Vidal, and Margaret Avery, aired November 10, 2015, on BET.

⁵⁰⁰ *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, season 1, episode 16, “Party is Such Sweet Sorrow,” directed by Jay Sandrich, written by James L. Brooks, Allan Burns, and Martin Cohan, featuring Mary Tyler Moore, Edward Asner, and Valerie Harper, aired January 9, 1971, on CBS.

male news anchors of the twentieth century, the genre works to deconstruct viewers' expectations of the singular authority and respect which anchors are often seen to hold. These narratives offer possibilities for looking at anchors in different ways than they have traditionally been presented to the public, critiquing the history of the position and the assumptions that are frequently made about it. The genre also works to highlight the specific challenges that women face in both ascending to and staying in the anchor chair. These challenges are depicted as being derived from audience expectations about women's roles in television news—which themselves are informed both by larger societal trends and long-ingrained television industry practices—as well as from ongoing cultural norms in the television news workplace that often devalue or circumscribe women's contributions to journalism.

CONCLUSION

“Good night, and good news.”

–WJM anchor Ted Baxter, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*

In this dissertation, I have provided a close textual analysis of the television news series genre, exploring the ways in which it engages with certain key themes in order to build a picture of the television news industry for viewers. I have shown the ways in which the genre uses fictionalized narratives built around timely issues of journalism to address anxieties that have arisen over the shifting role, norms, and formats of television news over the past fifty years. First, by depicting constant battles between journalists and the executives and owners who control the parent companies of news divisions, the genre illustrates the ongoing interplay between the conception of news as public service and news as consumer product. Second, the genre positions the pervasive importance of maintaining and growing ratings as a menacing obsession which threatens to undermine television news as a journalistic endeavor in the name of supporting market populism. Third, by placing its protagonists in situations where they must come to terms with the ethics and morals of their jobs, the genre portrays journalistic professionalism as being continually threatened by political and economic forces. Fourth, the genre explores the changing role of the anchor in television news, critiquing the high levels of authority and importance that these figures have amassed within the public consciousness, and focusing on the specific challenges faced by female news anchors.

By exploring television news series, and putting individual programs in the genre in conversation with one another, we get a sense of how audiences visualize television journalism both as an institution and as a profession. Looking closely at such fictional depictions provides a fuller picture of how we make sense of television news. While these portrayals may indeed be

different from reality, they are still important for the ways in which they contribute to discourses about the role that news plays within the context of our capitalist media system. The fictional conception of abstract ideas and processes which television news series present are significant because they provide another way of thinking about the news which is layered on top of audiences' experiences with actual news texts. The research that I have presented in the preceding chapters is useful for understanding the ways that people think about and understand television news.

In the future, I would like to expand my research to include depictions of other kinds of journalists on American television. The medium has a long history of depicting the newspaper industry, including *The Big Story* (NBC, 1949-1957; Syndication 1957-1958), which dramatized the experiences of real-life reporters and originally aired as a radio program on NBC from 1947-1955, and the drama *Lou Grant* (CBS, 1977-1982), a spin-off of *The Mary Tyler Moore* show which featured the WJM producer now working as a Los Angeles newspaper editor. Programs about journalists in the magazine industry include *The Name of the Game* (NBC, 1968-1971), set at a large publishing company, and *The Naked Truth* (ABC, 1995-1996; NBC 1997-1998), focused on the staff at a tabloid magazine. Putting these shows into conversation with depictions of television news would allow for an expanded understanding of how television engages with journalism as an overall institution and profession.

I am also considering extending my research to depictions of the larger television industry, both from the U.S. and abroad, exploring how countries whose media are structured differently than the American system represent their own television institutions. These would include fictionalizations of real-life media organizations, such as the British programs *WIA* (BBC Two, 2014-2017)—which is set at and partially filmed at the actual headquarters of the

British Broadcasting Corporation—and *The Hour* (BBC Two, 2011-2012), a period piece which dramatizes the early days of the BBC’s television news operations. Another classic depiction of the U.K. television news industry is the sitcom *Drop the Dead Donkey* (Channel 4, 1990-1998), which often shot last-minute scenes in order to integrate recent topical references from actual news stories. The television industry has also been the subject of recent South Korean programs, including the television news series *Don’t Dare to Dream* (SBS, 2016) and *Argon* (tvN, 2017), along with *The Producers* (KBS2, 2015), which takes place at a fictionalized version of the Korean Broadcasting System. While the Danish political drama *Borgen* (2010-2013, DR1) is primarily focused on the nation’s parliament and prime minister’s office, television journalists are central characters, and a television news operation becomes a significant focus of the program’s third season. I am very interested in comparing and contrasting these international series with the portrayal of real-life and fictional American television outlets.

As I wrote this conclusion, a development within the world of television news reminded me that many of the themes I have explored still resonate strongly. In the fall of 2024, then-President-elect Donald J. Trump had sued CBS over a *60 Minutes* interview with then-Vice President Kamala Harris, asserting that it was deceptively edited to cast Harris in a favorable light. Amid a potential sale of CBS parent company Paramount Global to Skydance Media, controlling shareholder Shari Redstone expressed a desire to settle the lawsuit. Then, on April 22, 2025, *60 Minutes* executive producer Bill Owens announced his resignation, citing encroachment by Paramount on the program’s editorial independence.⁵⁰¹

⁵⁰¹ Michael M. Grynbaum and Benjamin Mullen, “‘60 Minutes Chastises Its Corporate Parent in Unusual On-Air Rebuke,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/27/business/media/60-minutes-scott-pelley-paramount.html>.

At the close of the next episode of *60 Minutes*, which aired on April 27, correspondent Scott Pelley—a veteran television journalist who anchored the *CBS Evening News* from 2011 to 2017—spoke directly to the recent developments in the program’s ‘Last Minute’ commentary segment:

In tonight’s Last Minute, a note on Bill Owens, who, until this past week, was executive producer of *60 Minutes*. He was our boss. Bill was with CBS News for nearly forty years; twenty-six years at *60 Minutes*. He covered the world, covered combat, the White House. His was a quest to *open* minds, not close them. If you’ve ever worked hard for a boss because you *admired* him, then you understand what we’ve enjoyed here. Bill resigned Tuesday; it was hard on him and hard on us. But he did it for us, and *you*. Stories we’ve pursued for fifty-seven years are often controversial: lately, the Israel-Gaza war, and the Trump administration. Bill made sure they were accurate and fair—he was tough that way—but our parent company, Paramount, is trying to complete a merger. The Trump administration must approve it. Paramount began to supervise our content in new ways. None of our stories has been blocked but Bill felt he lost the independence that *honest journalism* requires. No one here is happy about it. But in resigning, Bill proved one thing: he was the right person to lead *60 Minutes* all along. I’m Scott Pelley; we’ll be back next week with another edition of *60 Minutes*.⁵⁰²

Any observer could read between the lines: Pelley claimed that Paramount, in an effort to gain political favor to smooth the path for a multibillion-dollar media deal, was attempting to exert undue influence over the editorial decisions of *60 Minutes*.

Watching Pelley speak, I could not help but think that it was a real-life version of a monologue that could have been given by a character from one of the television news series I have written about in this dissertation. His statement speaks to the fact that news divisions are increasingly bound up with the interests of their corporate parents, and that the professional values of journalism can easily come under threat when they start to impact the financial bottom line. The role of television news personalities has indeed evolved from the era of Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite, and yet it is telling that Pelley articulated a sense of moral authority in defense of the editorial independence of the news program for which he works. The

⁵⁰² “Bill Owens, executive producer of *60 Minutes*, resigns,” posted April 27, 2025, by *60 Minutes*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJo1AXOYRcI>.

situation—which involves interlocking and overlapping relationships between *60 Minutes*, CBS News, the CBS network, Paramount, Skydance, federal regulators, and the Trump Administration—shows that the decades-long debate over the proper role of television news in a democratic society is still ongoing.

Will this moment of crisis—which, as of this writing, remains unresolved—become the inspiration for a storyline in an upcoming season of *The Morning Show* or another yet-to-be-created television news series? If the history of the genre is any indication, the answer is most likely yes—it is a narrative opportunity that is too good to pass up. Considering this led me to think about the future of the television news series. How will subsequent programs further extend the themes that have been staples of the genre for decades? As news continues to adapt to changing political and media landscapes, what new issues and ideas will take narrative precedence? Over the past half-century, television news series have proved to be a durable genre, and there is every indication that primetime television will continue to offer depictions of the television news industry.

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