

# Media Circus and Mass Hysteria: The Representation of the Press in Flemish Fiction Series

## Circo mediático e histeria de massas: A Representação da Imprensa na Série de Ficção Flamenga

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### Abstract

By undertaking a textual analysis of five Flemish (Belgium) television series, this study contributes to the broader understanding of European journalism fiction. The findings underscore a prevailing negative representation of journalism, emphasizing commercial interests and portraying news outlets as disruptive forces in democratic processes. As such, the Flemish series advocate for a collaborative relationship between news media and government officials, aligning with a public service-oriented model. At the same time, a discernible pattern emerges wherein critical assessments predominantly target fictional news brands, systematically contrasted with more neutral portrayals of non-fictional news brands. Lastly, the series perpetuate gendered stereotypes thereby highlighting a lack of inclusivity.

### Keywords

journalism, fiction, television series, Flanders, textual analysis

### Resumo

Ao efetuar uma análise textual de cinco séries televisivas flamengas (Bélgica), este estudo contribui para uma compreensão mais ampla da ficção jornalística europeia. Os resultados sublinham uma representação negativa predominante do jornalismo, enfatizando os interesses comerciais e retratando os meios de comunicação social como forças perturbadoras dos processos democráticos. Como tal, a série flamenga defende uma relação de colaboração entre os meios de comunicação social e os funcionários do governo, alinhando com um modelo orientado para o serviço público. Ao mesmo tempo, surge um padrão discernível em que as avaliações críticas visam predominantemente marcas noticiosas ficcionais, contrastando sistematicamente com retratos mais neutros de marcas noticiosas não ficcionais. Por último, as séries perpetuam estereótipos de género, evidenciando assim uma falta de inclusividade.

### Palavras-chave

jornalismo, ficção, séries de televisão, flandres, análise textual

## Introduction

In the past decades, fiction has proven to be a fruitful artifact to explore various representations of journalism. These fictional journalistic representations emerged alongside the advent of cinema and have since known a steady occurrence on both larger and smaller screens. Filmmakers' enduring fascination with journalistic characters translates to academia prompting considerable research on the representational practices surrounding journalism, particularly in the Anglo-American world during the turn of the century.

Such research has identified recurring representational practices in journalism fiction, such as the establishment of a dichotomy between journalism heroes and villains and an exploration of journalistic tensions, among others the interplay between objectivity versus subjectivity. These practices are integral components of a broader narrative, reiterating a modernist journalistic discourse that underscores the imperative for independent critical watchdog journalism within the framework of the American signature media market model (Zynda, 1979; Ehrlich, 2005; Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005; Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015).

Despite the global popularity of journalism fiction, few studies have expanded this research beyond the confines of the Anglo-American liberal media system. Particularly pertinent in the contemporary landscape, characterized by widespread challenges confronting journalism, including accusations of bias, proliferation of fake news, and an unstable trust in news coverage (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023), is the need to comprehend the discourses about journalism disseminated in fiction, also in other media systems (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015).

A preceding study in the context of Flanders (Belgium) highlighted a noteworthy correlation between the country of production and how audiences evaluate representations of journalism. Specifically, journalism fiction produced in Flanders received markedly more negative assessments compared to its counterparts from the U.S. and other European - especially Scandinavian - countries (De Wulf Helskens, Van Leuven, et al., 2023a). Therefore, we posit that Flemish journalism fiction warrants further investigation, especially considering its complex media system in which these representations are embedded. Consequently, this study set out to uncover what fiction produced in Flanders (Belgium) communicates about journalism.

Based on the antecedent foundational study, a cohort of five Flemish fictional television series was selected for in-depth textual analysis including *Deadline* (2012-2014, VTM), *Cordon* (2014-2016, VTM), *De Dag* ('*The Day*', 2018, Play4), *De Twaalf* ('*The Twelve*', 2019-2023, VRT), and *Assisen* ('*Assize*', 2023, Play4)<sup>1</sup>. First, we provide a literature review that delves into research concerning the representation of journalism within non-American fiction and the media system of Flanders. Subsequently, we delve more deeply into our methodological approach before transitioning to a discussion of the results.

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<sup>1</sup> VTM (Vlaamse Televisie Maatschappij) and Play4 are Belgian commercial broadcasters owned by DPG Media and Telenet Group respectively. VRT (Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroeporganisatie) is the Flemish public broadcaster.

## On Non-American Journalism Fiction

American journalism fiction often engages with discourses of a free independent market-driven press referred to as the 'free press myth'. This materializes in distinct positive and negative representations of journalism (McNair, 2014). The few studies that have looked into non-American – specifically European – fiction have uncovered both similarities and differences to these American journalism representations.

First, De la Rosa (2021) conducted a quantitative analysis of 135 Spanish movies (1942-2012) revealing a conspicuous dichotomy between heroes and villains in 72 percent of the cases, with a relatively even distribution between the two (48 percent heroes and 52 percent villains). Notably, journalistic heroes predominantly feature in realistic drama films, while journalistic villains are more prevalent in comedy and non-realistic genres such as thriller and horror. An evolution is discernible over time, with the dominance of the written press and predominantly men journalists until the 1970s, giving way to increased representations of television news from the 1990s.

Whereas representations of the written press can be classified most within the hero genre, the representations of television news (mostly women journalists) are more associated with unethical practices (De la Rosa, 2021). These findings diverge from an earlier study by Stone and Lee (1990), which focused on representations of journalism in 1987 American prime-time television series. The study concluded that a considerable majority of representations conveyed a negative image of journalism, particularly in the realm of print journalism, while television journalism was portrayed more favorably.

While British and U.S. fiction are commonly grouped as Anglo-American productions, distinctions between the two have been highlighted. McNair (2010) primarily explored British fiction movies, reporting generally favorable portrayals of the press. In contrast, Niblock (2016), also investigating British cinema, presented a less positive outlook and identified a dichotomy between U.S. and European/British fiction. According to the author, British and by extension European representations are more negative as they do not uphold the American free press myth which reiterates modernist journalistic discourses.

Specifically, fictional British journalists are often portrayed as corrupt, opportunistic, alcoholics who live on the margins of society and have trouble to keep a good work-life balance. This accounts for both men and women journalists who often go too far and put their self and others in danger (Niblock, 2016). Arts (2022) supported this perspective by examining British films from the 1930s, revealing journalists fabricating news for personal gain and avoiding reporting that challenges the status quo or disrupts society, thereby inevitably complying with government orders and underlining that the free press myth as frequently disseminated in American fiction, is not necessarily disseminated outside of the U.S., especially in countries with strong public broadcasters (Arts, 2022, p. 11).

Support for these contentions is further provided by De Wulf Helskens, Van Leuven, et al. (2023a) who – as discussed in the introduction – uncovered significant disparities in audience perception between Flemish, European and American fiction with more positive assessments for the latter. Furthermore, an analysis of De Wulf Helskens and Arriaza Ibarra (2024) of the Danish television series *Borgen* (2010-2022) and the Spanish

television series *El Caso: Crónica de Sucesos* (2016), revealed that despite the many similarities with American fiction the series do not uniformly reproduce the free press myth. The series *Borgen* even subverts this myth in favor of a critical assessment of the press.

Research has not only scrutinized the general representation of journalism but has also delved into the portrayal of diversity in journalistic characters, revealing noteworthy parallels between American and non-American depictions. Studies by Stone and Lee (1990) and De la Rosa (2021) have concurred that women, and by extension, minority journalists, were notably underrepresented in 20th-century journalism fiction. However, there has been a discernible shift with the increasing representation of women journalists in both American and non-American fiction (McNair, 2011; De la Rosa, 2021; De Wulf Helskens, Dhaenens, et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, the augmented representation does not necessarily translate into nuanced portrayals, as women journalists are generally depicted with less ethical and professional conduct compared to their male counterparts. A parallel pattern emerges for minorities, who are often relegated to token roles (Valencia et al., 2008; Rossie, 2009; Painter & Ferrucci, 2012, 2015, 2017; De Wulf Helskens, Dhaenens, et al., 2023).

Audience perceptions align with these disparities. De Wulf Helskens, Van Leuven, et al. (2023a) revealed that men journalists not only assumed more prominent roles but also that representations featuring exclusively women received significantly more negative evaluations, as opposed to scenarios involving both genders. Additionally, their study underscored a pronounced underrepresentation of minority characters, also hinting at a potential correlation between minority identity and less positive assessments, even if statistical significance was not reached due to their marginalized presence.

In parallel, Niblock (2016) posited that British women journalists are frequently inserted for comic relief, a practice reflective of broader structures of sexism and typecasting that impede women's career advancement. Similarly, in the case of *Borgen* and *El Caso*, women journalists were portrayed contending with gendered obstacles. However, these challenges emanated more from the series' critical perspective than a stereotypical representation, signaling a gradual emergence of less stereotypical depictions of women journalists (Painter, 2019; De Wulf Helskens & Arriaza Ibarra, 2024).

In summation, notwithstanding apparent general parallels in the representations of American and non-American journalistic characters, particularly regarding women and minority journalists, a limited number of studies, predominantly from the United Kingdom and Spain, reveal notable distinctions in non-American productions. Specifically, discernible disparities emerge in the portrayal of journalists as heroes and villains across different countries. Moreover, countries outside the United States do not uniformly subscribe to the free press myth as conceptualized in the American context and, in some instances, overtly challenge or reject it.

## **The Case of Flanders**

Similar to other non-American fiction, Flemish fiction might exhibit unique characteristics in its engagement with journalism particularly due to the intricate media system within which it is crafted. Belgium, specifically Flanders, shares similarities with Denmark, the production context of the more critical journalism series *Borgen*

(mentioned earlier). Both countries can be positioned within a comparable media system, as outlined by Hallin and Mancini (2004), suggesting shared journalistic cultures and potentially similar representational practices. It is important to note, however, that classifying Belgium, especially in later studies on media systems (as seen in Brüggemann et al., 2014; Büchel et al., 2016), proves challenging. While these studies moved Belgium to a media system akin to the United States, a consensus has yet to be reached on this classification.

Belgium poses a unique challenge to classify because of its different language communities that lack an overarching media system. As such, each community has its own media system and accompanying journalistic culture (Raats et al., 2015; Mertens & Standaert, 2017). When focusing on Flanders, a clear demarcation between the media system of the United States and that of Flanders persists, particularly in the substantial state intervention in Flanders, characterized by a robust public broadcaster and relatively lower commercial pressures which still aligns most closely with the initially defined media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

This contrast is also reflected in trust scores for Flemish media, boasting an overall trust score of 51 percent, with public broadcasters emerging as the most trusted news brands and commercial broadcasters also exhibiting high trust scores. In general, the percentage of people who report they trust news does not dip below 60 percent over all news brands. In contrast, the United States reports an overall trust score as low as 32 percent, with trust in news brands not surpassing 50 percent, except for local television news at 61 percent (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2023). As such, Flanders is positioned between, and in closer proximity to, Denmark (with an overall trust score of 57 percent) and the United States, reinforcing our contention.

Consequently, the implications of the relatively negative evaluations of local Flemish productions remain unclear, especially as negative representations do not necessarily imply a critical perspective. American studies have shown that negative representations often represent villainous characters as individuals, as such ignoring systemic imperfections and serving an educational purpose on the good and bad functioning of the profession (Ehrlich, 2005; McNair, 2011). Such representations engage with paradigm repair, an integral process in constructing discourses on journalism by reaffirming norms of professional conduct and further supporting the free press myth (Carlson, 2016; Ferrucci, 2018).

This creates an intriguing juxtaposition between the idealized journalistic image perpetuated by fiction and the market-driven media system prevalent in the Anglo-American world (Peters, 2015). In contrast, numerous European countries including Belgium boast robust public broadcasters, resulting in a weaker market and greater public service model. Not surprisingly, the study conducted by De Wulf Helskens, Van Leuven, et al. (2023a) suggested that Flemish fiction may lean toward a critical stance on journalism rather than engaging in paradigm repair.

This observation prompts us to infer that Flemish journalism fiction may deviate from representations found in American fiction, potentially exploring or challenging the free press myth in its own distinctive manner, akin to the approach adopted in the Danish series *Borgen*. The combination of relatively high trust scores with potentially critical fictional representations of journalism necessitates further and more comprehensive research, thereby constituting the focal point of this paper.

## Method

This study set out to uncover what fiction produced in Flanders (Belgium) communicates about journalism. To do so, an in-depth textual analysis was conducted of five Flemish fictional television series including *Deadline*<sup>2</sup> (2012-2014), *Cordon* (2014-2016), *De Dag* ('*The Day*', 2018), *De Twaalf* ('*The Twelve*', 2019-2023), and *Assisen* ('*Assize*', 2023), all available on the online streaming services Streamz, VTMGo and GoPlay<sup>3</sup>. We chose a textual analysis approach, commonly used in the examination of popular culture artifacts, which consists of an in-depth reading of the series and emphasizes various narrative and audiovisual parameters (McKee, 2003; Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2023).

The process involved multiple rounds of analyzing the selected series, meticulously documenting relevant data on narrative, mise-en-scène, cinematography, and sound (cf. Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2023). Of particular focus was examining how the prevalent American free press myth (supra) is portrayed or challenged in Flemish fiction, while remaining receptive to other emergent themes identified during analysis. This approach facilitated both indicative and deductive collected data, employing open coding to systematically analyze data at both series-specific and overarching levels across all five series.

We opted for a qualitative analysis of five series as it permitted a more expansive understanding of the narratives propagated in Flemish fiction, surpassing the constraints inherent to a singular case study, while concurrently retaining the depth of analysis essential for the elucidation of latent ideologies. The rationale behind the selection of series is predicated upon their comparatively recent release dates, the centrality of journalists as (semi-) protagonists, their thematic alignment within the Drama-Thriller genre, and their substantial popularity within the region of Flanders, as evidenced by the work of De Wulf Helskens, Van Leuven, et al. (2023a). It is noteworthy that *Assisen* stands as an exception, having not been in existence during the antecedent study, nevertheless constituting a relevant object of analysis.

The *Deadline* series, a collaborative production between the Flemish commercial broadcaster VTM, the regional Antwerp television broadcaster Antwerpse Televisie (ATV), and the regional Antwerp newspaper Gazet van Antwerpen (GVA), centers around journalist Marianne Smidt (played by Charlotte Vandermeersch) investigating a distressing case of a missing young girl. Similarly, *Cordon*, another VTM series, explores the events of a fictional infectious virus outbreak in Antwerp, with journalist Gryspeerts (played by Koen De Sutter) investigating the government's mismanagement during the crisis.

Commissioned by the Flemish public broadcaster VRT, *De Twaalf* revolves around twelve jury members in a murder trial, featuring a subplot involving journalist Fabrice Boks (played by Mungu Cornelis) covering the trial. *Assisen*, similarly focuses on a

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<sup>2</sup> *Deadline* consists of two seasons, originally presented as separate entities: *Deadline 14/10* (2012) and *Deadline 25/5* (2014). However, for pragmatic purposes, we designate them as a singular series herein referred to as 'Deadline'.

<sup>3</sup> Streamz is a Flemish streaming service bundling content from different Flemish broadcasters including VRT and VTM. VTMGo and GoPlay are the free streaming services of the commercial broadcasters VTM and Play4, respectively.

murder trial covered by journalist Eliza Beekmans (played by Katrin Lohmann) but was aired on the Flemish commercial broadcaster Play4. Another Play4 series, *De Dag*, centers on a hostage situation covered by journalist Kristien Delaruelle (played by Liesa Van der Aa) and her crew.

Collectively, these five series span eight seasons and encompass seventy-four episodes, with a subset of thirty episodes selected for further scrutiny. The selection criteria for the episodes are grounded in considerations of thematic relevance (i.e., episodes must depict journalistic representations), placement within the season (strategically distributed to discern developmental trends), and proportionate allocation (with greater weight given to series boasting a larger number of seasons and episodes). A comprehensive overview of the episodes subject to analysis is delineated in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Selection of Series and Episodes

| Title            | Year of release  | Number of seasons | Number of episodes | Share       | Number of selected episodes | Selected episodes                                       |
|------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|-----------------------------|---|
| <i>Deadline</i>  | 2012-2014        | 2                 | 16                 | 22%         | 7                           | <b>S1</b> (E1, E4, E6, E8) & <b>S2</b> (E1, E4, E8)     |
| <i>Cordon</i>    | 2014-2016        | 2                 | 20                 | 27%         | 8                           | <b>S1</b> (E1, E3, E6, E9) & <b>S2</b> (E4, E7, E8, E9) |
| <i>De Dag</i>    | 2018             | 1                 | 12                 | 16%         | 5                           | <b>S1</b> (E3, E5, E8, E9, E11)                         |
| <i>De Twaalf</i> | 2019-2023        | 2                 | 18                 | 24%         | 7                           | <b>S1</b> (E2, E3, E4, E5, E7, E9) & <b>S2</b> (E1)     |
| <i>Assisen</i>   | 2023             | 1                 | 8                  | 11%         | 3                           | <b>S1</b> (E2, E4, E5)                                  |
| <b>Total</b>     | <b>2012-2023</b> | <b>8</b>          | <b>74</b>          | <b>100%</b> | <b>30</b>                   | <b>30</b>   |

It is imperative to underscore that, in the case of *Assisen*, the analysis pertained not to the actual episodes but to the corresponding content available on the website [hetverdict.be](http://hetverdict.be). This departure stems from the interactive nature of the series, wherein the journalist’s role transcends the confines of the televised narrative and extends to a distinct platform integrally linked to the overarching storyline. In the case of *De Twaalf*, the analysis primarily considers the first season as, despite the presence of the journalistic character Nico Willems (played by Emilie De Roo), the second season contains little journalistic narratives. In the next sections, we present the results of our analysis according to four themes that stood out, starting with the commercial journalism trope.

## Commercial Journalism Trope

Our analysis of Flemish television series revealed a consistent exploration of the commercial nature of journalism, with a primary focus on journalists striving to obtain exclusive scoops and breaking news. This common theme persists irrespective of the ethical conduct of journalists, suggesting that the commercial aspect of news

media plays a pivotal role in shaping news narratives. This recurrent motif aligns with a broader exploration of the tension between commercial and public interests in journalism fiction and is also discernible in the common archetype of packs of anonymous journalists (cf. Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005).

An additional layer of tension is introduced through the representation of journalists frequently crossing ethical boundaries in their pursuit of information. Regardless of the series, journalists are depicted as disregarding instructions, pushing the limits, and occasionally engaging in questionable practices to uncover exclusive content. This behavior is often driven by the desire for scoops, aligning with the commercial objectives of news media and contributing to journalists' career advancement (cf. Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015).

In *De Dag*, for instance, a television news crew exhibits a relentless pursuit of exclusive information, ignoring police orders, exploiting loopholes, and pressuring sources for quotes. Their actions are characterized by a lack of ethical consideration for the consequences of their reporting on individuals, such as the victims' families. The series portrays the news crew as quick-witted but careless, with their editor endorsing their actions, emphasizing commercial priorities over public service.

Eventually deciding to collaborate with the police in their intervention, the crew is forced to ignore orders from their editor, who is unwilling to take risks that might compromise the news organization he represents. Moreover, despite their willingness to collaborate, it is a police officer who ultimately assumes responsibility for their actions, safeguarding the journalists' positions. Consequently, while the journalists may experience a shift in perspective, the representation of journalism as an institution remains largely unfavorable.

A similar trope is evident in *Cordon*, where a journalist is primarily motivated by ambition, seeking to prove himself and advance his career. The journalist spreads sensational footage, creating a blog that gains success but raises concerns about crossing ethical boundaries. It is underscored that the journalist has a rocky history when it comes to verifying information for accuracy and considering the implications of unethical journalistic practices. The tension between revealing the truth and potential harm to those involved reflects the journalistic dilemmas, with the journalist eventually succumbing to government pressure and ceasing his pursuit.

This decision does not sit well with a police officer he had collaborated with, prompting the officer to take matters into his own hands. By contrasting the journalist with the police officer, the journalist is represented as a coward unwilling to defend the public interest at the expense of safeguarding his career. It is only upon the death of the officer in the second season, and the late officer's girlfriend compelling the journalist to investigate his passing, that the journalist fulfills his watchdog role. However, this is counteracted by the persistent emphasis on ratings by newspaper he works for, dismissing the journalist's unwillingness to cross certain ethical and legal boundaries as incompatible with becoming a 'great journalist.'

In *De Twaalf*, the focus shifts to a journalist intent on advancing his own news site, engaging in unethical practices such as paying sources and threatening them. Unlike other series, this journalist does not undergo a change of heart, exemplifying a steadfast commitment to a commercial-focused news agenda, despite criticism for disturbing societal processes such as the trial he is covering. Another series focusing on a journalist reporting on a murder trial for a seemingly independent web-



site is *Assisen*. In contrast to the journalist in *De Twaalf*, she refrains from paying or threatening sources for information but positions herself in an ethical gray area by ambushing her sources or explicitly being accused of ‘fabricating news’.

This recurring theme of journalists crossing boundaries and prioritizing commercial interests persists even in the more positive case of *Deadline*. The series features investigative journalism but simultaneously underscores the newsroom’s emphasis on content that sells in newspapers and obtaining exclusive scoops. The central journalist, while driven by the pursuit of truth, operates within a career-focused perspective, emphasizing the intersection between commercial success and journalistic integrity.

Ultimately, the focal journalist exits journalism as her ideals do not align with those of the industry and the sectors she is covering, such as politics. Moreover, other journalists in the series are represented as outright villains and contrast her integrity, such as the journalist from the broadcaster ATV who is not only arrogant and competitive but also threatens to destroy the career of the focal investigative journalist if she does not provide him with a scoop.

Across all five series, the portrayal of the press consistently leans towards a negative and critical perspective. Despite the presence of some good (investigative) journalists or instances of character development, the overarching institution of the media is represented as prioritizing commercial interests over ethical considerations. The portrayal reflects a skepticism towards the media, often labeling them as a “circus” that creates “mass hysteria” and calling into question their commitment to uncovering the truth navigating the intersection of commerce and journalistic responsibility.

## **Conflict and Censorship Trope**

Closely related to the theme of commercial journalism is the recurring conflict and censorship trope which underscores tensions primarily between journalists and government officials, as well as intra-journalistic conflicts. This narrative trope, far from being novel in the realm of journalism fiction, manifests as a love-hate relationship, where journalists and government officials find themselves in a symbiotic yet conflicting association (cf. Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015). The conflicts unfold in various scenarios, such as clashes with police officers and/or politicians in *De Dag*, *Deadline* and *Cordon* and legal proceedings in *De Twaalf*.

Government officials in these series are depicted as obstructing journalists in their pursuit of scoops or information, employing methods ranging from confiscating materials and lecturing to making deals and even arresting journalists. The narrative surrounding censorship is intricate, as journalists frequently transgress ethical boundaries in their quest for truth, thereby reflecting the watchdog principle. Simultaneously, however, they may neglect to contemplate the profound consequences of uncovering the truth, thereby raising questions about whether their actions genuinely serve public interests rather than commercial imperatives.

As previously discussed, the overarching inclination of most series towards commercial interests somewhat rationalizes the censorship practices enacted by government officials. In *De Twaalf*, for example, the journalist desperately attempts to retrieve classified information on the trial from jury members. The subsequent publication

of this information jeopardizes the trial, imposing an emotional toll on those involved. Similarly, in *De Dag* the journalists' pursuit for a scoop results in family members of the victims being confronted with traumatizing footage in addition to exacerbating the situation and impeding police negotiations.

In *Deadline* and, to a lesser extent, *Cordon*, there is a distinct investigative journalism trope, with journalists portrayed as necessary for holding officials accountable. The focal journalist in *Deadline* plays a detective role, surpassing the police and engaging in sensational narratives including kidnappings, trespassing, and stakeouts. The journalist as investigator trope is endorsed by her editor, who encourages her to withhold information from the police, despite the illegality of such actions. This places journalists in a potent position, capable of negotiating scoops with the police force by leveraging the information they have uncovered or withholding information that might cast the force in a negative light.

A similar narrative emerges in *Cordon* in which the journalist joins forces with a police officer 'gone rogue' who provides classified information. In this narrative, the importance of reinforcing an image of a strong government in times of crisis is put forward, portraying the journalist as uncooperative when not wanting to collaborate with government officials even when these are withholding information. This leans into a media spinning narrative, wherein the journalist becomes susceptible to manipulation by politicians.

In *Deadline*, the journalist gradually learns to navigate media spinning strategies under the mentorship of a more seasoned editor. In contrast, the journalist in *Cordon* is eventually persuaded by officials to cease the pursuit of information, an act subsequently characterized as substandard watchdog journalism through the discourse of the rogue officer and, following his demise, his girlfriend. As such, even in the investigative journalism narratives, commercial and career interests seem to come out on top.

The conflict trope also extends to the newsroom, where individual journalists, often portrayed as arrogant, clash with editors over reporting decisions (cf. Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005; Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015). In both *Cordon* and *Deadline*, the journalists are looked down upon by their editor and colleagues followed by being assigned articles deemed less significant. In these instances, journalists strive to report on issues that capture their attention but encounter resistance from their editors, even after expressing a 'gut feeling' that there is more to the story.

Here again, there is a prevailing negative attitude toward the press, especially when linked to the previously discussed commercial journalism trope. Journalists are often characterized as annoying and disruptive, and despite instances showcasing good investigative journalism, the overarching portrayal remains critical of the press as an institution both in the discourse of the government officials as that of journalists themselves. These narratives highlight the challenges faced by and failure of journalists in navigating ethical dilemmas, intra-journalistic conflicts, and their relationships with government officials.

## **Paradigm Repair Through Non-Fiction**

The Flemish television series under examination exhibit a distinct reliance on existing news media as a means of providing background information, contributing to

an authentic atmosphere. Television serves as the primary medium, followed by radio, reflecting the series' close connection to Flemish broadcasters. Notably, the choice of represented media aligns with the production broadcaster; for instance, VTM features prominently in *Deadline* and *Cordon*, while VRT is central to *De Twaalf*. The rivalry between VTM and VRT is mirrored in the series, with no mention of their competitors.

In contrast to the actual news media, which often serve as the backdrop for authenticity, the news media in focus within the series are predominantly fictional. These fictional representations include online news sites such as Newsbox.be in *De Twaalf*, hetverdict.be in *Assisen*, and Horseman in *Cordon*. Only *De Dag* introduces a fictional television broadcaster; Nieuws 2. *Deadline* stands out as it exclusively features non-fictional news media, having partnered with the newspaper GVA and local broadcaster ATV for filming in their newsrooms. And *Cordon* includes an implicit reference to the non-fictional newspaper Het Laatste Nieuws.

However, the characters and events depicted within the newsrooms are fictional.

The juxtaposition of fictional and non-fictional elements raises intriguing questions about the potential interplay between fiction and reality in the series. *Deadline*, in particular, faced criticism for its close association with actual events, including elections, and was accused of influencing political outcomes. All series also employ specific filming techniques to enhance authenticity, often simulating a live news broadcast with hand-held, shaky camera work. This technique, particularly emphasized in *Assisen*, aims to create an immersive experience, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. The use of non-actors in interviews further contributes to this blurred boundary.

This blurring of lines between fiction and reality prompts consideration of paradigm repair (cf. Ehrlich, 2005). While the non-fictional characters may deviate from ethical representations, the portrayal of actual news media could serve as a counterpoint, implying that real-world journalism is still reliable and effective. This strategic use of fictional news outlets allows for a critique of the press without tarnishing the reputation of actual media organizations.

In contrast to the critical portrayal of the fictional press, series that focus on non-fictional news media, such as *Cordon* and *Deadline*, engage with paradigm repair. These series depict journalists eventually doing the right thing, potentially repairing the negative portrayal of the press within the fictional narratives. There also is an inherent promotion of real news media such as explicit advertising for newspapers from the media company Mediahuis (back then Concentra) and the television news of VTM further underscoring this possible paradigm repair.

Even though the overall negative portrayal of the news media in focus raises questions about the strength of paradigm repair within these contexts, the study from De Wulf Helskens, Van Leuven, et al. (2023a) illuminates a noteworthy observation, indicating a relatively positive evaluation of these series. On a scale from one (positive) to four (negative), *Deadline* and *Cordon* received average scores of 1.87 and 2.22 and corresponding mean scores of 2.00 and 2.33 respectively. In contrast, *De Dag* and *De Twaalf* received more negative scores with average scores of 2.78 and 2.90, accompanied by mean scores of 2.75 and 2.83, reaching individual scores as high as 3.33.

This dichotomy suggests that the paradigmatic rectification evident regarding non-fictional news brands, as exemplified by *Deadline* and *Cordon*, may effectively counteract more critical perspectives even though an audience study of De Wulf

Helskens, Van Leuven, et al. (2023b) also pointed out that audiences do not always pick up on this. Conversely, the more critical representations of fictional news media remain unmitigated, thereby substantiating our claim.

Consequently, it is discerned that the series under scrutiny uniformly present critical assessments of news media. Notably, productions by broadcaster VTM, namely *Deadline* and *Cordon*, manifest a proclivity towards paradigm repair, thus fortifying the prevailing notion of a free press. This phenomenon is arguably anticipated, given VTM's status as a major commercial news broadcaster operating within a market-driven paradigm. Another factor to consider is that these two series emphasize journalists in leading roles, allowing for more nuanced representations. In contrast, the other series primarily depict journalists as one-dimensional side characters.

As such, other series examined refrain from engaging in paradigm repair, thereby preserving their critical portrayals of news media. Framed within the context of a public broadcaster, tasked with safeguarding the public interest, and a commercial broadcaster with minimal vested interests in news media, one could posit that both play a watchdog role on journalism through fictional narratives. Intriguingly, the non-fictional news media entities depicted in these series do not undergo the same level of scrutiny as their fictional counterparts, revealing an inherent double standard in their representation.

## Gendered Narratives

The examination of Flemish television series reveals a discernible prominence of women journalists, with three out of five principal journalists being women in *De Dag*, *Assisen*, and *Deadline*. Additionally, the real-life men and women news anchors of Flemish broadcasters are depicted in non-fictional representations, reflecting a semblance of gender balance. However, this portrayal does not preclude stereotypical representations, as the narratives unfold with gendered obstacles and tropes characteristic of the representation of women journalists.

A conspicuous trope is the unprofessional entanglement in relationships with sources, evident in the narratives of women journalists in *Deadline* and *De Dag* (cf. Saltzman, 2003; De Wulf Helskens, Dhaenens et al., 2023). In these instances, women journalists engage in romantic and sexual relationships with police officers, perpetuating their portrayal as unprofessional individuals exploiting relationships for personal gain or retaliating when relationships do not transpire favorably. In *Deadline*, the central journalist employs the relationship for insider information and to evade prosecution when transgressing legal boundaries. Subsequently, upon the revelation of the relationship, she is reprimanded by her editor and is temporarily removed from the story. However, swift forgiveness follows after uncovering another scoop.

In *De Dag*, the woman journalist clashes with a police officer identified as her former partner, emphasizing their extramarital affair. After opting to pursue a relationship with his wife instead, the journalist deliberately fabricates information to disparage the officer. As such, the (former) relationships in both *Deadline* and *De Dag* negatively impact their roles as professional journalists and are kept secret as a consequence. This contrasts with a man journalist in *Deadline* who also maintains a relationship

with a police officer, earning commendation instead of punishment because of the information he can secure through that relationship. This underscores potential gender-based double standards in which relationships with sources and officials are only a liability when it involves women journalists.

This narrative aligns with a broader theme of sexualization, portraying women journalists as inherently sexual beings (cf. Painter & Ferrucci 2012, 2015, 2017). This is particularly accentuated in *Deadline*, where the central woman journalist is not only depicted in revealing attire but is explicitly positioned as a beautiful and alluring woman, with fellow journalists commenting on her appearance and engaging in flirtation. Similar instances occur in *Cordon*, where the central man journalist flirts with a woman colleague and employs sexist language towards women. Not only in this series but also in *Deadline* gendered (sexist) language such as 'stom wijf' (stupid bitch) and 'vrouw met ballen' (literally translated as a woman with balls) is not uncommon.

Such language reinforces stereotypes of women journalists and potentially contributes to a hostile work environment. Furthermore, perceptions of unprofessionalism of women journalists are further reinforced through challenges in separating private and professional lives, with family responsibilities portrayed as hindrances to professional success (cf. Ehrlich, 1997; Good, 1998; De Wulf Helskens, Dhaenens et al., 2023). In *Deadline*, the woman journalist is criticized for her family situation, facing backlash for bringing her son to work when her ex-partner unexpectedly drops him off due to work commitments.

The narrative underscores societal expectations regarding women balancing work and family, highlighting the challenges women journalists encounter through colleagues' unsympathetic reactions and her son's expressed feelings of neglect. Combined with disillusionment with her job, her son becomes a primary reason for her departure from journalism. Not unrelated, the first season of *De Twaalf* focuses on a man journalist whose wife is expecting a baby, experiencing no discernible interference of his personal life with his professional responsibilities. Conversely, the second season features a woman journalist, whose journalistic activities are conspicuously absent, and is predominantly portrayed dealing with family crises related to her son.

Representations in Flemish television series extends beyond gender to include journalists with racial or LGBTQ+ minority identities. The journalist in the first season of *De Twaalf* is a Black man, while *Deadline* and *Cordon* feature a side character of a gay and lesbian journalist, respectively. Strikingly, these representations tend to be negative, minimized, or short-lived, reinforcing tiresome stereotypes concerning the representation of minority groups. The Black journalist exhibits the least ethical representation across the five series and in *Deadline*, the side character journalist is revealed to be gay only in the last episode as a plot twist, further diminishing his role as a journalist. Similarly, the lesbian journalist in *Cordon* has a relatively brief appearance, with only a few episodes before succumbing to an infectious disease.

As such, while women journalists in Flemish television series assume roles equivalent to their male counterparts, they are not immune to sexist tropes and challenges. Additionally, the representation of minority journalists, particularly those of Black and LGBTQ+ individuals, is minimal and often marginalizes their roles in the narratives. Since there is insufficient qualitative research on the representation of diversity in Flemish fiction, it is uncertain whether this observation pertains solely to journalism

fiction or extends to Flemish fiction overall. This analysis underscores the imperative for more nuanced and diverse representations of journalists, challenging stereotypes, and advocating for a more inclusive representation of gender and minority identities in journalistic narratives.

## Conclusion

Our examination of five Flemish television series featuring journalists as (semi-) central figures has unveiled a discernible negative representation of journalism, aligning with the findings of De Wulf Helskens, Van Leuven, et al. (2023a). This negative depiction manifests in the characterization of news media as primarily driven by commercial interests, with an emphasis on obtaining exclusive stories for financial gain. Moreover, these series depict news outlets as disruptive entities, intruding into and unsettling democratic processes, rather than serving a broader public interest. This dynamic thus extends beyond individual journalists to encompass the institution of the press.

In contrast to the prevalent theme in American fiction that often upholds the concept of a free press, these Flemish series diverge, offering a critical evaluation of news media. The underlying message implies a suggestion for collaboration between news media and government officials rather than adversarial relationships. This aligns with a more public service-oriented market model, wherein fiction assumes the role of a 'fifth estate', critically assessing the functioning of the press within the broader democratic framework.

Nevertheless, a notable distinction arises between the series affiliated with the public broadcaster VRT or commercial broadcaster Play4, which exhibit a critical appraisal of news media, and VTM, a commercial broadcaster with substantial stakes in news media. The latter engages in a form of paradigm repair, albeit differently from American fiction, where criticisms of the larger institution persist but are simultaneously counteracted with positive representations of individual investigative journalists or journalists undergoing a transformation.

The relatively more positive evaluations of these series indicate a degree of success in paradigm repair, suggesting that a well-portrayed focal journalist can counterbalance overarching negative representations, particularly of non-fictional news brands in fiction. This underscores a tendency for critical assessments to predominantly emerge in relation to fictional news brands, which are then juxtaposed with more neutral portrayals of non-fictional news brands across all series. This hints at a deliberate effort to shield Flemish news media from direct criticism.

While these series shed light on distinctive dynamics within the Flemish media market, they also perpetuate gendered narratives that lack distinctiveness. Narratives portraying the professional competence of women journalists as compromised by sexualization, inappropriate relationships, an inability to separate work from private affairs, along with the marginalization and unethical representation of minority journalists, perpetuate stereotypes in an industry that remains far from inclusive in Flanders.

In conclusion, despite recurring archetypes in Flemish series reminiscent of those identified in American fiction, their manifestation is distinct, deeply rooted in the local

context of a dual media system encompassing both strong commercial and public broadcasters. These representations, akin to the classification of Flanders in media systems, fall somewhere between the less than critical stance observed in U.S. fiction and the more pronounced critique found in Scandinavian fiction. Additionally, gendered stereotypes persist, reflecting universal inequalities as also identified in studies of *Borgen* and *El Caso* (De Wulf Helskens & Arriaza Ibarra, 2024), yet Flemish fiction tends to reinforce rather than critique these obstacles.

The question persists regarding how these representations contribute to the public discourse on journalism in Flanders, particularly in light of the unclear correlation between critical portrayals of fictional news media and corresponding assessments of non-fictional news media. This uncertainty arises from the series' striking juxtaposition of the two forms of media. Therefore, further research is imperative to understand how these fictional portrayals intersect with the personal media discourse of audiences. This study bridges existing gaps in research on non-American fiction and encourages further exploration of sensemaking practices among audiences by providing insights into representational practices concerning journalism in Flemish fiction.

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