

## Mo “Meta” Blues: How Popular Culture Can Act as Metajournalistic Discourse

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Prior research into metajournalism argues that this type of discourse holds significant influence on how the journalism industry is socially constructed. Studies of how journalism is depicted in popular culture make the same claim. This study, through a textual analysis of television dramas *The Wire* and *House of Cards*, bridges these two bodies of literature and argues that journalism studies scholars should not limit their definition of metajournalistic discourse to journalists commenting on or criticizing the industry and to audience members commenting on or criticizing actual journalism. The results of the study are then interpreted through the lens of the theory of metajournalistic discourse.

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Metajournalistic discourse provides scholars with a conduit to understanding not only how journalists view themselves, but also how society views the journalism industry (e.g., Carlson, 2016; Carlson & Usher, 2016; Craft & Thomas, 2016; De Maeyer & Holton, 2016). Nominally defined as journalism about journalism, metajournalistic discourses are “public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception” (Carlson, 2016, p. 350). This type of discourse can take the form of reporters covering their own industry, ombudsmen commenting on journalism, or trade magazines reporting on the industry. Because the foundational ideas that undergird journalism remain socially constructed, understanding how the industry is depicted to society helps us understand how those foundational ideas are then negotiated (De Maeyer & Holton, 2016; Ferrucci & Taylor, 2018).

According to a study published in 2016 by the Pew Research Center, only about 20% of people trust journalism “a lot,” a number that has decreased steadily over the last two decades (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, & Shearer, 2016). Perhaps not coincidentally, foundational technological changes to the media industry and society allow for far more outlets for publication, and far more places for journalists and citizens alike to publish criticisms, or metajournalistic discourse, about the industry (Vos, Craft, & Ashley, 2012). Therefore, journalists

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themselves have significantly less control over the discourse that helps shape the understanding of the journalism industry.

Carlson (2016) published a theoretical model for studying and understanding metajournalistic discourse with the underlying idea that this type of scholarship is vitally important because understanding how actors describe the industry "is inseparable from ways of understanding journalism" (p. 2); however, the theory proposed by Carlson categorizes the creators of metajournalistic in a binary manner: as journalists or people commenting directly on actual journalism. Yet, discourse on journalism can come in the form of more than simply audience comments on stories, media-criticism blogs, or the like. Fundamentally, categorizing an actor producing metajournalism as either a journalist or, essentially, an audience member restricts the manner in which society is introduced to commentary on the profession. For example, what about the entertainment industry skewering journalism through popular culture depictions (Ehrlich, 2006)? David Simon, a former longtime journalist, created the television drama *The Wire*, which features a fifth season depicting the journalism industry. This depiction received both critical acclaim and plaudits from critics and journalists, but also some backlash from the same groups for its "realistic" depiction of the industry, warts and all (Gordon, 2008; Kois & Sternbergh, 2008). Regardless of how journalists and critics reacted, however, the season received significant attention in mainstream press as journalists, in their own words, sought to explain to the public the journalism depicted on the show (Steiner, Guo, McCaffrey, & Hills, 2013).

This study argues for explicitly recognizing popular culture as a form of metajournalistic discourse with the same intrinsic authority of the examples Carlson (2016) provides in his theoretical framework. While metajournalism can affect society's view of journalism, Ehrlich and Saltzman (2015) argue that depictions of the industry in popular culture have the same effect, potentially stronger. Therefore, there is a natural intersection of these two types of discourse concerning the industry. This study examines the metajournalistic discourses in the television series *The Wire* and *House of Cards*, two dramas that spend considerable screen time commenting about the state of journalism in the United States. By doing so, this article builds on the conceptualization of metajournalistic discourse (Carlson, 2016), but it more importantly examines journalism industry commonalities depicted in both dramas. Essentially, metajournalism serves as a form of media criticism (Carlson, 2016), and the type of content studied here—fictional depictions of the journalism industry—also have a similar impact as metajournalistic discourse. More specifically, although we can learn a lot about how actors within and surrounding journalism think about the industry through consuming traditional metajournalistic discourse, an empirical study of this sort can provide insight into the manner in which other types of journalistic critics view the industry. For example, because the traditional definition of metajournalistic discourse limits itself to content surrounding journalism's real-life happenings, it does not capture the content of fictional depictions, especially ones primarily aimed at critiquing the real industry. A study like this one provides insight on how outside actors view and critique the industry through works of popular culture.

## Literature Review

### ***Depictions of Journalism in Popular Culture***

Only four years after the first motion picture with sound arrived in American movie theaters, moviegoers in 1931 encountered *The Front Page*, a comedy predominantly about journalists, an adaptation

so successful it earned numerous Academy Award nominations (Ehrlich, 2006). Only a mere decade after, the film widely considered the greatest American picture of all time, *Citizen Kane*, arrived in theaters. Through both *The Front Page* and *Citizen Kane*, among other films, even early movie fans could start to see popular culture's fascination with journalism. Many films released from the 1930s through the 2010s concern the inner workings of the journalism industry, providing the audience a glimpse into how the industry operates (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015).

But depictions of journalism in popular culture do not limit themselves to just film, as television, over the years, became another viable medium where audiences could get a clearer understanding of journalism (McNair, 2014). Both sitcoms such as *Lou Grant* or *Sports Night* or dramas such as *The Newsroom* and *The Wire* have used the world of journalism as a catalyst for entertainment. And both film and television writers have not relegated themselves to just fiction. For example, in recent years, 2015's *Spotlight*, about the *Boston Globe's* uncovering of systematic child sex abuse at the hands of the Catholic Church in Boston, won the Academy Award for best picture, and 2017's *The Post* about the publishing of the Pentagon Papers was nominated for best picture at the Academy Awards. Or, potentially the most famous depiction of journalism remains *All the President's Men*, the 1976 drama concerning Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's quest to uncover the truth surrounding the Watergate scandal; the film made such an impact that it significantly affected, in a positive manner, the public's opinion of journalism (Schudson, 1992). Decades of scholarly studies concerning how popular culture depicts journalists illustrate a clear heroes-and-villains dichotomy (McNair, 2010). And these fictional depictions affect how society views the news industry (Brennen, 2000; Good, 2007). In fact, "journalists have been ubiquitous characters in popular culture, and those characters are likely to shape people's impressions of the news media at least as much if not more than the actual press does" (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015, p. 1).

As fiction writers often compose about what they know, it is not surprising that the screenwriters of *The Front Page*, Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, both spent time working as newspaper reporters (Ehrlich, 2006). In fact, many depictions of journalism in popular culture have come from the minds of former journalists (Good, 2007). In the last decade, two of the most prominent depictions of journalism have originated as television dramas: HBO's *The Wire* and Netflix's *House of Cards* both received significant attention for their representations of journalists trying to produce news while also navigating all the shifting fortunes of the industry (McNair, 2014).

Popular culture often exerts a codependent influence on society as it is influenced by contemporary society and influences society (Mastro, 2003). Because popular culture often serves as a mirror for a particular time period, it often depicts what is happening in the world, a slightly skewed version of that, or often provides critical commentary on those happenings (Levine, 1992). But, as previously noted, popular culture also impacts how society views the world around itself as most members of society actually experience very little of what happens in the world and rely on all forms of media for understanding (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015). This dual-pronged relationship can be seen in how scholars study popular culture depictions.

Dow (1990) argues that although the television comedy *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* often received plaudits for its, at the time, progressive depiction of a single woman navigating corporate life, a more in-

depth reading of the program reveals that beneath the overt feminist messages, it still communicates a message focused on a hegemonic view of womanhood. Essentially, although the show did depict what was a progressive woman for the 1970s, its underlying message was that a happy and successful woman must still submit to patriarchal standards. Dow argues that such depictions kept American women from truly embracing independence. To Dow, popular culture represented a type of content that creators and society could use to negotiate definitions of feminism. In another instance, van Zoonen (2007) illustrates a connection between the viewing of popular culture depicting politics and how people present themselves politically. Essentially, the audience for fictional political television often comments on content as a manner to comment on the real-life institution of politics. In a theoretical essay, van Zoonen (2000) explicitly argues that popular culture depictions of politics are a form of political communication. In this article, I do the same. Like the term *political communication* at the time, metajournalistic discourse currently means a very specific form of content, one that does not include fictional popular culture depictions of the industry. Similarly, and more germane to this research, Peters (2015) studied how viewers commented on *The Newsroom*, a fictional HBO drama concerning cable news. He argues that the audience used the show as a mechanism for not only commenting on characters and the fictional network ACN, but also on the journalism industry as a whole.

Essentially, scholars of popular culture, both from a cultural studies and media effects paradigm, have found that depictions impact how society views the world. More specifically, as both cultural studies scholars such as Ehrlich and Saltzman (2015) argue with depictions of journalists and social psychologists such as Riddle (2010) found with depictions of law enforcement, or van Zoonen (2007) notes with the institution of politics, the more often popular culture depicts an institution in a similar manner, the more strongly society will see it in that light. Scholars such as Peters (2015), Klein (2011), Dalhgren and Sparks (1992), and numerous others contend that popular culture depictions allow viewers an opportunity for sensemaking; this type of content is often created as a means for audiences to better think through societal issues and understand a depicted industry or institution. This is a phenomenon that Gray (2006) labels "intertextuality," which he fundamentally describes as the manner in which popular culture allows audiences a chance to reflect on media institutions and, thus, impacts how they think about said institutions. Therefore, the theoretical model Carlson (2016) proposes concerning metajournalistic discourse does include various manners that would influence the journalism industry, and popular culture depictions of the industry would also have a similar impact.

### ***Metajournalism and the Theory of Metajournalistic Discourse***

Often, metajournalism allows an audience a view into how journalists themselves see their work; this typically comes in the form of explanation concerning "what journalists say about their capacity to do what they ought to do" (Craft & Thomas, 2016, p. 1). The reason to study metajournalism lies in how this type of discourse illustrates how the very definition of journalism is socially constructed "through both the exercise of institutionalized news practices and through explicit interpretive processes justifying or challenging these practices and their practitioners" (Carlson, 2016, p. 350). As implied by De Maeyer and Holton (2016), metajournalism is not simply public utterances about journalism communicated by journalists. People from outside the industry also produce metajournalism through actions such as commenting, rating, and reposting (Goode, 2009), and furthermore through media-centric blogs or user-generated material (Vos et al., 2012). In fact, as noted by Carlson (2016), "it is through metajournalistic

discourse that the meanings of journalism are formed and transformed by actors inside and outside of journalism" (p. 350).

Carlson's (2016) theory essentially merges numerous threads of research from the relatively recent past. In journalism studies, we often examine discourse surrounding the industry and posit what it could mean about both how the industry views itself and also how the public sees the industry (Carlson, Robinson, Lewis, & Berkowitz, 2018). This conceptualization of metajournalistic discourse not only includes studies explicitly labeled "metajournalistic discourse," but also incorporates Zelizer's (1993) idea of "interpretive communities." Therefore, when Carlson discusses metajournalistic discourse, he is including discourse studies concerning how journalists themselves, through published material, define key terms (e.g., Ferrucci & Taylor, 2018; Vos & Craft, 2017; Vos & Singer, 2016); how journalists defend and rebuild the journalistic paradigm through explicit commentary (e.g., Berkowitz, 2000; Hindman & Thomas, 2013; Vos & Moore, 2018); how journalists negotiate the appropriate practices inherent in the industry through discourse detailing the intricacies of the reporting and editing processes (e.g., Vos & Finneman, 2017); or how journalists themselves discuss their inherent roles and responsibilities (e.g., Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). But, again, not all metajournalistic discourse comes from journalists themselves; Carlson's theory allows for it to include, for example, audience comments on articles (e.g., Goode, 2009), blogs that provide media analysis (e.g., Vos et al., 2012), and how the audience might share stories on social media (e.g., De Maeyer & Holton, 2016).

But, the bulk of this type of discourse often comes in the form of media criticism (Carlson, 2016). Journalists and nonjournalists together negotiate definitions, but scholars have frequently examined metajournalistic discourse as a means of understanding how those within the industry perform paradigm repair (Ruggiero, 2004). Paradigm repair is the process by which journalists, through metajournalistic discourse, try to repair the cultural and normative boundaries of the industry, or how to provide the audience with a framework for understanding how journalists should or should not act (Carlson, 2012; Reese, 1990). Journalists also produce this type of discourse to question the legitimacy of online news, thus making sure traditional journalists protect the boundary between them and their digital counterparts (Ruggiero, 2004). In short, when journalists produce material about their own industry, it is often to label practices as legitimate or not (Craft, Vos, & Wolfgang, 2016), or as a way of defining the industry internally (Waisbord, 2013). Therefore, metajournalistic discourse produced for television could have the same effect as these "actors" label practices or emerging trends as legitimate or not.

It remains important to study metajournalistic discourse for numerous reasons, but primarily because it can "help bridge the gap between empirical and normative work" (Craft & Thomas, 2016, p. 4). Carlson (2016) argues that researchers should, however, "take seriously divisions among journalists and the blurring of boundaries between journalists and nonjournalists" (p. 357) who produce this discourse.

Carlson (2016), in his theory, breaks down three main components of metajournalistic discourse: sites/audiences, topics, and actors. The site/audiences component concerns where the discourse occurs. The site and the audience cannot be separated, however, because the site often determines how it reaches audiences and thus how the audience perceives the message. The second component concerns the topics that spur metajournalistic discourse. Any analysis of metajournalistic discourse must examine the topic of

said discourse because it is important to understand: For example, reactive metajournalistic discourse is about a particular subject (e.g., a journalistic scandal), whereas generative metajournalistic discourse is more general discourse about the industry (Carlson, 2016). Finally, the third component of metajournalistic discourse is the actor, which refers to the people producing the discourse, and these can be either journalists or nonjournalists. Most of the current research concerning this type of discourse looks at messages produced by journalists (e.g., Carlson, 2016; Craft & Thomas, 2016; Ferrucci & Taylor, 2018; Vos & Craft, 2017; Vos & Finneman, 2017).

Thus, the theory of metajournalistic discourse essentially argues that when examining this type of content, the researcher must focus on the actors creating it, the site in which it is published, how audiences receive it, and finally, the topic that catalyzes it into being. It can be argued that both *The Wire* and *House of Cards* are forms of metajournalism as both dramas find actors (television creators) reaching audiences through a site (television) and providing generative discourse (about the current state of the industry).

### Method

To understand the metajournalistic discourse produced by the makers of *The Wire* and *House of Cards*, I conducted a textual analysis. Both text and video of the 10 episodes of Season 5 of *The Wire* and the 13 episodes of Season 1 of *House of Cards* were analyzed, providing the unit of analysis for this study. The episodes of *The Wire* originally aired on HBO between January 6 and March 8, 2008; the *House of Cards* episodes were made available all at once, via Netflix, on February 1, 2013. For this study, to uncover all meanings and critiques of the journalism industry, I focused on a narrative analysis of the text, the most suitable manner for deducing meaning in television studies (Miller, 2010).

Textual analysis is “a means of trying to learn something about people by examining what they . . . produce” (Berger, 1998, p. 23). Because meaning is socially constructed, if researchers hope to understand how receivers construct said meaning, they must analyze all context of a text and deduce possible interpretations (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Through identifying “the ideological tenor of the content,” the researcher can extrapolate all possible meanings and interpretations of the viewer, which is how meaning is constructed (Miller, 2010). When conducting a textual analysis, the researcher can choose one of two theoretical paradigms: a grounded theory approach or one using a theoretical framework (Berger, 1998). In this study, I analyzed both dramas through the theory of metajournalistic discourse introduced by Carlson (2016).

Called the most realistic depiction of a newsroom of all time, *The Wire* was created by former *Baltimore Sun* journalist David Simon (Lowry, 2007). From 1982 to 1995, Simon worked on the city desk, primarily covering the police beat, for the *Sun*. His work in this capacity became the basis for *The Wire*, a critically acclaimed drama that aired on HBO from 2002 to 2008. Although often called a crime drama, *The Wire* depicted the failings of American institutions (Williams, 2014). Each of the show’s five seasons dealt with how a different institution unsuccessfully served the American public. For the fifth and final season, Simon and his team of writers turned their eyes toward journalism. Using a fictionalized version of the *Baltimore Sun* as their focus, the writers “created a newsroom that would ultimately face many of the challenges described and studied by numerous scholars” (Ferrucci & Painter, 2013). Because professional journalists have long called the drama’s fifth season the most realistic depiction of the industry in the history of popular culture (e.g., Lowry, 2007),

numerous journalism studies scholars have examined the show. Some have studied how the fictional journalists produce news, focusing on their extensive and negative utilization of pseudoevents (Ferrucci & Painter, 2013), or how reporters cover failing institutions ethically (Painter, 2017). Others have examined the show using sociological inquiry, studying how one character and fictional coverage of said character experiment with narrative to make social commentary (Penfold-Mounce, Beer, & Burrows, 2011), or how realistic the newsroom appears (Ferrucci & Painter, 2018). Others looked to the show to get a complete overview of how each institution, including journalism, is presented (Bzdak, Crosby, & Vannatta, 2013).

Streaming-content provider Netflix released the first season of its Emmy Award-winning television series *House of Cards* on February 1, 2013. The show is adapted from a British version that aired on the BBC in 1990, which was based on a series of novels written by a British politician. Although the Netflix version primarily explores the inner workings of Washington politics, it focuses extensively on the journalists covering politics, especially in its first season (Ferrucci & Painter, 2017). Creator Beau Willimon has been criticized by mainstream media for his negative depiction of the press (Rosenberg, 2013), but Willimon argued that he tried to be as realistic as possible (Shaw, 2013). The 39-year-old television writer spent time during his career working as a journalist and around journalists. He worked at the Columbia University newspaper for four years before moving onto magazine work; he then transitioned into a role as a press officer for various politicians (Moos, 2013; Rothman, 2014). In the media, Willimon said he wanted to create a journalistic character that "wants access and influence, not necessarily the truth"; this is something he thinks is prevalent in the industry (Zakarin, 2013, para. 6). Journalists have noted how Willimon strongly criticizes today's journalism in *House of Cards*, and the creator/writer of the show admitted that is one of the main points of the first season: to understand how journalism is failing (Gould, 2013; Zakarin, 2013). Due to Willimon's depiction of the journalism industry and *House of Cards*' high profile, scholars have also examined the show to understand how it depicts the industry. McNair (2014) argues that the program continues television's pattern of depicting journalists as either heroes or villains. Moos (2013) and Ferrucci and Painter (2017) focus on the differences in how the show depicts legacy versus new media.

For this study, I viewed each season of both programs three times over a three-month period. Before the beginning of the three-month period, I had already viewed each season at least twice. During the first stage of the analysis, or the viewings, I took notes on how the shows depict journalists and the industry of journalism. For the second stage, I again viewed each season, this time looking for themes or patterns. Finally, for the third viewing, I jotted down notes and observances relating to the themes and patterns. These notes were then analyzed. This process closely follows the three-step qualitative data analysis method of Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995). Miller (2010) surmises that "television has become an alembic for understanding society" (p. 145), and Craft and Thomas (2016) and Carlson (2016) argue that, through textual analysis of metajournalistic discourse, we can begin to understand how the meanings of journalism are socially constructed by society. This present study combines these elements and examines television and metajournalistic discourse as a manner to better understand meanings around journalism.

### Findings

Four consistent themes implicit in both dramas emerged. Throughout the fifth season of *The Wire* and the first season of *House of Cards*, the dramas, when depicting journalism, present four clear themes through

metajournalistic discourse of the industry: fear of lost expertise, a decreasing ethical foundation, financial considerations impacting journalism considerations, and technology's negative effect on news.

### ***Fear of Lost Expertise***

Both *House of Cards* and *The Wire* spend a significant amount of screen time implicitly arguing that because of budget cuts and a significant number of veteran journalists fleeing the industry for various reasons, most organizations rely too heavily on younger reporters. Both programs comprehensively critique younger reporters' lack of knowledge of industry norms while, at the same time, extolling the positives of veteran journalists. In *House of Cards*, this criticizing discourse becomes evident early. When we first meet Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara), a main character and early-20s reporter recently hired by *The Washington Herald* (a fictional *Washington Post*), she is asking her editor, Lucas Goodwin (Sebastian Arcelus), for a first-person blog that would extol, at best, dubious ethics:

**ZOE:** I'll go underground, back rooms, the urinals. I'll win over staff members on The Hill.

They need a place to vent.

**LUCAS:** A gossip column.

**ZOE:** No, we lift the veil, what's really going on.

**LUCAS:** This is *The Washington Herald*, Zoe, not TMZ.

**ZOE:** Do you know how many people watch TMZ?

**LUCAS:** I couldn't care less.

This back-and-forth immediately lets viewers know that Zoe is attempting to negatively affect not only the quality of journalism at the *Herald*, but also focus on gossip. It takes her more experienced editor, Lucas, to say no to the project. In *The Wire*, viewers see something very similar. In a fictional version of *The Baltimore Sun*, Simon and his team of writers introduce veteran editor Gus Haynes (Clark Johnson). One of the first scenes featuring Haynes shows him going from desk to desk advising and mentoring younger reporters. When he reads a story written by reporter Alma Gutierrez (Michelle Pares), he tells her to correct something. He walks away and the camera focuses on Alma checking Gus's correction, saying, "He's right." The clear implication is that she did not know something and a veteran did.

Both dramas also implicitly criticize young reporters for being too focused on themselves. On *The Wire*, viewers meet Scott Templeton (Tom McCarthy), a young reporter depicted breaking all journalistic rules as a means of gaining publicity for his own benefit. Barnes, on *House of Cards*, is consistently depicted as caring far more about personal accolades and recognition than actually covering real news. Younger reporters, also, do not have the institutional knowledge to do their jobs proficiently. On *The Wire*, younger reporters are shown not knowing enough about a story's topic to effectively report on it. In an exemplary scene, Haynes assigns Templeton a story about a police colonel receiving a promotion. Haynes asks Templeton whether he knows anything about the officer, and the reporter says he does not. The recently laid-off veteran reporter Roger Twigg (Bruce Kirkpatrick) sits nearby and immediately rattles off a 40-second biography about the officer that includes numerous details. The implication is clear: As news organizations go younger, they lose people with the institutional knowledge that will actually uncover "the real story," as Haynes call it. With Barnes, when she starts to do what is depicted as good journalism, it only occurs



after consistently asking veterans such as Lucas and Janine Skorsky (Constance Zimmer) for advice. In one scene on *The Wire*, after the newspaper misses out on a big story concerning the police, Haynes explicitly expounds on this when he says, after being asked by an editor why they missed the story, "A veteran in the cop shop is how we get a story like this, but fuck if we didn't buy ours out."

Throughout, both dramas depict an industry consistently losing a veteran presence. If the industry relies on younger journalists, the result will be, at best, inferior quality news because of inexperience and naiveté, and, at worst, news produced by publicity-seeking young reporters who do not prioritize truth and accuracy.

### ***Decreasing Ethical Foundation***

Journalism ethics, or a lack thereof, play a major role in both series. *The Wire* does not bring up faulty ethics immediately, but *House of Cards* does. A major source of plot throughout the first season concerns the relationship between Barnes and Congressman Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey). Barnes finds out that Underwood lasciviously looked at her at an event and uses a photo of the incident to blackmail him into allowing her into his house late in the evening. When visiting, Barnes wears provocative clothing. "It's a cheap ploy," Underwood calls her attire. She responds by calling it "cheap but effective." This encounter leads to Underwood, at first, becoming an off-the-record source. The two knowingly pursue inaccurate stories. In one scene, Underwood gives Barnes a scoop:

**ZOE:** Is that true?

**FRANK:** It will be after you write it.

**ZOE:** (Looks at Frank, knowing she'd be publishing untruths).

**FRANK:** This is where we get to create.

In a different scene, the two even discuss ethics explicitly, with Zoe saying, "Wait, we're in a very gray area ethically, legally, which I'm OK with." In other instances, Barnes researches and finds important information, but does not report on it when Underwood tells her not to publish. But this source-reporter relationship with Underwood is far more ethically challenged as the season goes on. By the fourth episode, Frank and Zoe begin a sexual relationship.

In *The Wire*, more ethical breaches occur. A significant amount of the plot revolves around reporter Templeton fabricating stories. At first, his lies start small, with manufactured quotes. By the end of the season, however, Templeton wins a Pulitzer for a completely fabricated series. Throughout his unethical reporting, editor Haynes implicitly and explicitly discusses his concerns that Templeton is not ethical. At first, Haynes believes Templeton is lazy and imprecise, but soon starts to believe the reporter is fabricating complete stories. Haynes does some research and soon finds the truth. When he tells his superiors, they choose to do nothing, further exacerbating the unethical culture in the *Sun* newsroom. Near the end of the season, Haynes and Gutierrez discuss the situation, thereby elucidating a concise view on why there is a lapse of ethics in journalism:

**ALMA:** Did he make it all up?

**GUS:** Some, not all.

**ALMA:** Why?

**GUS:** Look around you. The pond is shrinking. The fish are nervous. Get some profile. Win a prize. Maybe find a bigger pond somewhere. [The editor, the managing editor], Templeton, they snatch a Pulitzer or two and they are up and gone from this place. For them, this is what it's all about. Me, I'm too fucking simpleminded for that. I just wanted to see something new every day. Write a story.

The implication from Simon and his team is very clear: Some people at the *Sun* do not care a bit about ethics and the normative goals of journalism; they are just out for themselves. But there are some good journalists still there. The writers' implication is even more negative, however, because, by the end of the season, Haynes receives a significant demotion for accurately accusing Templeton of fabricating stories. So not only, according to the show, are newsrooms lacking for ethics, but someone displaying proper journalism ethics runs the risk of punishment because those ethics potentially run counter to other goals.

### ***Financial Considerations Impacting Journalism Considerations***

One of the main critiques both dramas make about the journalism industry concerns how newsrooms are now focusing strongly on financial success to the detriment of other goals, including solid journalism. For example, when *Washington Herald* editor-in-chief Tom Hammerschmidt (Boris McGiver) wants to fire Zoe Barnes for what he deems unethical and disrespectful behavior, he cannot get publisher/owner Margaret Tilden (Kathleen Chalfant) to let him. Their conversation illustrates how Tilden thinks Barnes is good for the paper's bottom line:

**TILDEN:** The paper is operating at a loss. We need people like Zoe.

**TOM:** I'm very aware of how much we're hurting, Margaret. Staff reductions, dip in circulation, each of those faces of every subscriber we lose, they keep me up at night. Now I won't argue the business side of things. It's neither my place nor my area of expertise. But know this, Zoe Barnes, Twitter, blogs, enriched media, they're all surface. They're fads.

By this point in season, viewers already see Tom as the voice of reason, the good journalist. The viewers know Zoe is an ethical deviant. So, when the publisher does not fire Zoe and, in fact, fires Tom, it is clear to the viewers this is an economically driven choice, not one made for journalistic betterment. When Zoe does leave the *Herald* for an online site called *Slugline*, the viewers see this drive for finances more clearly. At one point, Zoe's editor chastises her for sending a story to editors before publishing. The editor notes that it is most important, more important than accuracy, to beat the competition.

On *The Wire*, numerous scenes involve the *Sun* missing stories and publishing something incomplete because of the financial decisions of the paper's parent company. It is explicitly discussed numerous times how the fictional version of the Tribune Company prioritizes finances over journalistic excellence. Editorial decisions, for example, get made because of financial decisions. In one scene, reporter

Gutierrez is upset that her story about a triple murder ran in a spot of low prominence. She asks Haynes about it:

**GUS:** Your story deserved better.

**ALMA:** Three people murdered in a house and it gets 12 inches below the fold. Explain that to me.

**GUS:** There's no explaining it. Advertising is down. We got a smaller news hole. We're not managing it well. We messed up. That's all.

Although that might seem to the viewer that the paper just made an honest mistake, when Gus leaves the scene, the drama lets the audience know the real reason: Fellow reporter Mike Fletcher (Brandon Young) immediately says to Alma, "Wrong zip code. Their dead doesn't count. If they were White, murdered in [a rich suburb], you'd have had 30 inches off the front." The implication is clear: The newspaper made an economic decision because not many readers live in the poor neighborhood where the murders occurred.

Finally, in one scene, after feeling disillusioned because many of his colleagues have been laid off and the newspaper continues to focus its resources on what he considers less important stories and substandard reporters, Gus asks out loud to all in the newsroom, "How come there are cuts in the newsroom when the company is still profitable?" Haynes is voicing an implicit criticism focused on the idea that the corporation makes choices not based on quality but simply on economics.

### ***Technology's Negative Effect on News***

In *House of Cards* and *The Wire*, the creators and writers systematically criticize current newsrooms' embrace of technology as the future of the industry, while also proselytizing about how an overreliance on all things digital negatively affects news quality, a traditional goal. In fact, one of the first depictions of journalism on *House of Cards* very clearly makes this opinion known when Zoe tells Lucas that she would like a blog. When he says no, she says, "That's why newspapers are dying." His response is, "Then we'll die with dignity." Clearly, the implication here is twofold: Blogs remain devoid of dignity and, more important, technology allows for negative changes in the industry. And the drama makes clear, even during that initial episode, that Lucas is a good journalist, whereas Zoe is an ethically challenged below-average one, implying to the audience that her view is one more characteristic of something negative for the journalism industry. The scene, although not directly about technology, subtly introduces the season-long message about technology. It allows for shifts in traditional journalistic practices that have clearly negative effects. In a different early scene, fellow reporter Janine, who viewers have been told is very good at her job, calls Zoe a "Twitter twat," again a reminder that technology negatively impacts journalism. In fact, *House of Cards* continually brings up technology and associated practices made possible through technology only as things negatively impacting journalism. In one scene, editor Tom Hammerschmidt calls extensively using technology in news "a fad." Whenever technology does become a talking point, it is invariably a vehicle to commit bad acts of journalism.

This depiction of how the industry uses and relies on technology is no different on *The Wire*. Early on, tremendously unethical reporter Templeton gets associated with technology, as a reporter willing to

embrace it. He is the only one during the whole season, and given that he is depicted so negatively, technology is also negative. During a scene when editor James Whiting (Sam Freed) delivers a speech announcing the closing of the *Sun's* bureaus, he blames an influx of technology for this decidedly negative news. So, in this case, unlike with Barnes or Templeton and technology being negatively associated with violating foundational journalistic norms, here technology is blamed for harming the industry as a whole.

### Discussion

This study argues that both *House of Cards* and *The Wire* feature generative metajournalistic discourse that consistently addresses four main foci concerning the journalism industry: a fear of lost expertise, a decreasing ethical foundation, how financial considerations are negatively impacting journalism, and technology's negative effect on the industry. In prior studies, "metajournalistic discourse has exclusively focused on journalists as the primary definers of journalism" (Carlson, 2016, p. 356). More specifically, Carlson (2016) labels metajournalism as evaluations of "news texts" (p. 350). The theory marks creators of this discourse as actors, but these actors are discussed in a binary fashion, as either journalists or, essentially, audience members commenting, in some manner, on these news texts (Carlson, 2016). But this differentiation remains too simplistic. Therefore, one contribution from this study to the scholarship surrounding metajournalistic discourse revolves around how fictional depictions should be considered metajournalistic discourse. This may seem obvious based on the vast body of literature concerning depictions of journalism in popular culture, but Carlson's conceptualization of metajournalistic discourse leaves out fictional depictions.

Beyond this study's argument for a reconceptualization of metajournalistic discourse, it is also important to examine how the depictions examined in seasons of *The Wire* and *House of Cards* add to our understanding of industry criticisms. Both Ehrlich and Saltzman (2015) and McNair (2010, 2014) note that depictions of popular culture in journalism often focus on individual journalists. But there is an important difference in what happens in both Season 5 of *The Wire* and Season 1 of *House of Cards*. In both cases, the creators and writers depict a morally decaying industry as opposed to a single or handful of bad actors; this is a key shift from arguing that the industry itself polices itself against these bad actors to labeling the entire industry as degenerating and moving away from traditional normative behavior. On *The Wire*, some good journalists attempt to do good work at the fictional *Baltimore Sun*, but in the end, they either lose their job, are demoted, or get stuck in unrewarding positions. On the other hand, unethical reporter Templeton wins a Pulitzer and is feted by his unethical superiors who would rather print falsities for adulation than do normative journalism. The character of Zoe Barnes on *House of Cards* is shown to be a completely unethical and immoral journalist who not only gets continuously promoted and earns better jobs, more fame, and more access, but also even helps get her editor fired when he questions her practices. These depictions are not simply one or two journalists as "villains," but rather an industry hospitable and, in fact, applauding unethical behaviors.

This slight but important difference could help explain society's increasingly negative view of journalism. Prior studies examining the depiction of journalists in popular culture explain that even when journalists are depicted villainously, they are often faced with severe consequences and, often, stopped by other virtuous journalists (Ehrlich & Saltzman, 2015). In effect, unethical behavior is not rewarded and not represented as an industry-wide problem. That is not the case in *The Wire* or *House of Cards*: The in-depth, relative for fictional television, examination of the journalism industry depicted in both dramas spotlights numerous issues

currently facing the actual journalism industry (Painter, 2017; Rosenberg, 2013). This, it stands to reason, then, would have a similar effect as the one Schudson (1992) found and thus influences the industry in a variety of ways.

Furthermore, the themes uncovered in this study illustrate an industry without much hope for revitalization. In an article for *The Nation*, Maharidge (2016) depicts the real-life journalism industry as a place unwelcoming for industry veterans and that experience is tantamount to job insecurity. Both *The Wire* and *House of Cards* delve into this very concept, taking something happening in the industry and robustly critiquing it. In both series, veteran journalists are often overruled, undervalued, and, in some cases, demoted or outright fired. Both dramas' depiction of this shift toward younger, less experienced journalists might be over the top and hyperbolic (e.g., young journalists being murdered by sources after making ethical lapses or editors simply not caring about truth but rather young reporters winning awards), but the commentary is no less timely. These fictional programs are clearly shining a light on a current problem in journalism (Maharidge, 2016). Moreover, Goode (2009) and Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) detail how technology and, more implicitly, economics are changing the very nature of newswork, primarily not for the better. Both dramas, once again, provide a blueprint for how this could eventually manifest itself in the actual journalism industry. Succinctly, although one could argue that both *The Wire* and *House of Cards* are magniloquent or overwrought in their depictions of the industry, it is important to recognize that all of the general issues presented in the dramas, as analyzed in this study, are current problems facing the industry that have also been found by researchers.

Whereas popular culture often praises and criticizes the journalism industry in a variety of ways that are not always consistent (Ehrlich, 2006), both *House of Cards* and *The Wire* depict an industry becoming more dependent on young, unprincipled journalists taking up the profession for less than admirable reasons and, because of disruptors such as technology, having the ability to break free from the industry's traditional normative values. In effect, these depictions can potentially help us understand why the public owns such a negative view of journalism (Mitchell et al., 2016).

In effect, popular culture depictions could be considered both types of "topics" of metajournalism, both reactive and about a specific issue in the industry (think of films such as *Shattered Glass* or *Spotlight*) or generative about the industry as a whole (films such as *Network* or *The Paper* or television programs such as the ones in this study). As argued by Ehrlich (2006), Brennen (2000), and numerous other scholars, popular culture also impacts perceptions of the industry. This study contends that popular culture should be explicitly added to the conceptualization of metajournalistic discourse in future studies. Therefore, when Carlson (2016) argues that metajournalism comes from both journalists and nonjournalists, included in that category of "nonjournalists" should be popular culture creators working in fictional media.

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