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From the Control Room to the Headlines in *The Newsroom*

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The latest drama series created by Aaron Sorkin for HBO provides a behind-the-scenes glimpse into *The Newsroom*, where a team of journalists work side by side with executive producer Mackenzie McHale and news anchor Will McAvoy in constructing a nightly news broadcast (entitled *News Night*). McHale's arrival on the news team is about to change the tone of the programme, which she wishes to reclaim from tabloid television, advocating quality and integrity for the Fourth Estate. Her diegetic arguments resonate with the promotional slogan of the premium cable network that broadcasts *The Newsroom* ("It's not TV. It's HBO."), as it is characterized by its quality, integrity, and high production values, according to Sarah Cardwell.¹ The newsroom is an open space surrounded by glass doors, metonymically signifying the transparency defended by her hierarchical superior, Director of the News Division for Atlantic Cable News (ACN) Charlie Skinner.

Making sense of the continuous daily flow of news is both an individual and collective process; in the series, the workplace metonymically represents this assimilation of information by blending the personal and the professional. Discussions are all too easily overheard in the open-space newsroom, which leaves little room for privacy among the journalists, whose intimacy is infringed upon by their coworkers' physical proximity. The permeability of the personal and the professional is used as a narrative device throughout *The Newsroom*. The journalists' conversations mix personal and professional comments, illustrating the hybrid

dimension of their work: not only do they mediate the world represented in the news through personal frames, but their personal life is impacted by the emotional power of the events they witness.

Through the self-reflexive nature of the construction of a news broadcast, the series calls attention to the constraints of news production in the world of corporate media, that all too often privilege audience rates over integrity in order to attract advertisers' funding. *The Newsroom* interweaves the serial structure with the series format, using the characters' personal life stories to move the serial narrative forward whereas the process of news construction provides each episode with a specific focus. Shaky camera movements and quick editing convey the hectic atmosphere of the newsroom, increasing the pressure on the production team whenever a news alert comes out. The series plumbs the interstices between the news, presented by anchor McAvoy and illustrated by embedded images, and the background information search animating the newscast team, thus highlighting the journalists' deontological code of ethics in the face of current events. The tight relationship between the series and topical events politicizes the docudrama and articulates a critique of media framing; the fact that these events are by no means fictional but instead refer to actual news items (such as the Deepwater Horizon spill and the growing influence of the Tea Party), means that *The Newsroom* fosters a critical look back at the media's treatment of specific news items, counterbalancing the entertaining power of personal stories. It thereby fashions a metanarrative about the process of news making on television, enhancing the political discourse that undergirds media framing while downplaying the entertaining aspects of the whole docudrama. Although Will McAvoy proudly displays his affiliation to the Republican Party, arguing in favour of tax cuts and welfare reforms, he is also a fierce critic of the Tea Party, which he accuses of distorting facts in a populist attempt to win votes. His liberal comments may dismay and deter the viewers of the ultra conservative Fox channel from watching the HBO series, for his satiric tone echoes host Rachel Maddow's inquisitive and witty style on the progressive MSNBC news channel.² The focus on the fictional anchor's on-air persona creates a *mise-en-abyme* effect reflecting the blend of the political and the personal that characterizes today's news talk shows.

The series significantly shifts from personal stories to newflash items, developing a dual narrative that pits the making of the news against the characters' intimate private lives. Although love-and-hate stories deflect attention away from the political dimension of the debates the journalists organize, the reflexive construction of the drama points to the characters' professional roles in the newsroom, making them unfit fodder for soap opera stardom. This article focuses on *The Newsroom* as a series which makes the headlines a political and personal issue for the characters involved in the media business. While the repetitive format of the newscast creates a routine that downplays the entertainment of the drama series, its serial dimension allows idiosyncrasies to develop foregrounding the emotion that bonds the team of news workers. Although many media critics pin down the opposition of entertainment versus information to argue that news workers have been driven away from the ethics of their profession, *The Newsroom* claims to demonstrate that the integrity of journalism can withstand the profit-driven media industry. The executive producer lays out a statement of principles for the *News Night* programme she coordinates, expressing her commitment to objectivity, public interest, and truth when she declares that her purpose is to reclaim "journalism as an honorable profession." *The Newsroom* opposes her noble ideas to the corporate media's interests, alluding to the unavoidable compromises the contemporary media context imposes.

Creating a newscast

The Newsroom aims to promote reflection on the framing of the news by showing how it is being created. The drama retraces the whole process of making news into headline stories, including the usually invisible process of research and selection which constitutes the basics of journalistic work. Many episodes enhance the team dynamics behind the words of Will McAvoy's nightly newscast, using parallel editing to convey the collective energy crafting the news implies. From McAvoy's on-air readings of the teleprompter running in front of him to the technicians pushing the buttons in the control room, to the reporters traveling around the country in search of original footage to the assistants calling witnesses or experts to be interviewed, the drama points to the host as the visible face of a whole teamwork. Not only are there journalists checking out figures that need to be

inserted in the context of the anchor's interviews, to update his background information, but there are also technicians whose work consists in editing the broadcast into a smooth show.

While news anchors tend to present the reporters' footage as evidence of a situation they are commenting on, *The Newsroom* questions the indexical relationship between image and truth, pointing to the choices that inspire the way the news is framed: not only are editorial decisions made that prioritize some news items over others, but the journalists' findings may throw a different light on news items. Media scholar Doris A. Graber insists that news programmes are constructed into a continuous flow, making the manipulation of primary sources pass unnoticed: "Selecting the scenes to be used for a television story, for example, and the sequence in which they will be shown—the framing of the story—is always a deliberate choice."³ The first episode of the first season (S01E01) provides an apt example: the journalists treat the 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion as a looming environmental threat whereas most other news programmes choose to focus on the "search and rescue" operations at a time when British Petroleum is still trying to minimize the crisis. The newsroom is the site where decisions need to be made quickly; editing accelerates the pace of the episodes whenever an unexpected news item comes out that shatters the narrative order of the show. The whole set of the newsroom draws attention to the role of modern technologies in shaping the news: the Internet has become a source of information, widening the journalists' network, allowing them to obtain live news from Egypt during the Arab spring (S01E05).

In the face of such dramatic events, the news workers have to make choices that testify to their ethical beliefs, introducing self-reflexive discourse on the development of corporate news media. The traditional news broadcast has turned into infotainment, which communication scholar Daya Kishan Thussu defines as "a type of television news where style triumphs over substance, the mode of presentation becoming more important than the content."⁴ Will McAvoy delivers a six-minute address to the channel's viewers, calling for a shift away from infotainment to quality and integrity (S01E03). The film cuts from the characters standing in the newsroom, watching and listening to McAvoy's speech, to the face of the anchor appearing on television. The sequence shows him writing his speech and

the newsroom employees reading it on their cell phones, enhancing the self-conscious efforts behind all journalistic discourse. While news networks prioritize highly dramatic and emotional items that include “stirring accounts, heartfelt moments, captivating images, harrowing encounters, and compelling characters,”⁵ McAvoy argues that he refuses to comply with the rules of infotainment any longer, thus making a “declaration of independence” that resembles a political speech.⁶ The whole sequence is undergirded by a strong didactic concern for media business: McAvoy refers to such figures as Edward R. Murrow as a model of integrity to be emulated. While Murrow publicly stood up against red-baiting Joseph McCarthy, thus resisting to the cold war paranoia the Senator intensified with inflammatory statements, McAvoy himself fails to articulate a critical discourse when faced with government propaganda: “I was an accomplice to a slow and repeated and unacknowledged and unamended train wreck of failures that have brought us to now. I’m a leader in an industry that miscalculated election results, hyped up terror scares, ginned up controversy, and failed to report on tectonic shifts in our country.” Determined to return to what he considers the roots of his profession, fostering democracy by helping shape “a well-informed electorate,” McAvoy shifts his priorities. His televised address produces an initial rupture in the narrative, allowing McAvoy to be reborn as a character that attracts growing sympathy as the series unfolds.

This statement of purpose is put to the test of the corporate media economic and ideological environment. While Will McAvoy and his team move in the direction of quality programming, they are also faced with concerns over audience rates as they belong to cable television. Try as they might to renew the framework of the political debates prior to the primary election—as illustrated in the setup of a mock debate with the political candidates impersonated by his staff, the *News Night* team cannot overturn the rules that have come to prevail on television. Republican primary organizers are reluctant to let them organize a political debate that will address economic issues instead of trivial questions that help their candidates appear like common citizens (S01E09). The sequence ironically evokes the low quality of the political discourse on television, illustrating media scholar Richard Davis’s view: “Instead of providing the public with useful information, politics is presented as a

game, a struggle, rivalry. Issues matter little, except as they serve as the focal point for disagreement.”⁷

The series builds on the opposition between the interests of corporate media and the journalists’ code of ethics, embodied by McAvoy as an anchor whose celebrity was fabricated by the new media industry. The man represents the “cult of personality” that has developed in the business of news making, taking advantage of his public status as a millionaire to drive change on *News Night*. Anchors have the power to influence the viewers’ response, something the series underlines through the focus on charismatic McAvoy. The host uses humour to put forward his opinions, grilling the characters he wishes to discredit on screen or expressing sympathy with the views they express when approving them. While discussing Senator Santorum’s pro-life stance with Sutton Wall, McAvoy argues that the latter’s homosexual orientation runs against the presidential candidate’s public homophobic views (S01E06). The discussion becomes too personal for the debate to unfold, enhancing the fact that the journalist resorts to the very tabloid strategies he criticizes in order to make his point. Even though executive producer McHale can communicate with him during the news broadcast, prompting him to address specific questions or to restrain his aggressive outbursts, McAvoy asserts self-determination when refusing to comply with her demands. The series demonstrates that his celebrity has institutionalized the entertainment component of the news, and so interferes with his professional commitment to serious journalistic practices. Rather than address economic concerns such as the debt ceiling which, economic scholar Sloan Slabbith explains, should be given priority (S01E06), the programme devotes time to interviewing Lisa on her memories of high school with a person suspected of infanticide (S01E09).

The Newsroom is an intertextual television drama, introducing excerpts from other programmes with celebrity anchors including Nancy Grace or Rush Limbaugh, among others. These excerpts create a media context, which the *News Night* team cannot eschew: they may endeavour to shape different news; however they most often than not are caught up by the viewers’ habits and expectations. When a scandal erupts around New York mayoral candidate Anthony Weiner’s sex messages, questioning the morality of a man who applies for public office, his ex-girlfriend

instantaneously provides a vicious testimony with voyeuristic undertones (S01E08). Although her interview goes against all the initially stated principles, the journalists have no choice but to give the woman air time, thus reluctantly ceding quality to the imperative of ratings—something McAvoy implicitly admits by introducing her as Miss Witless instead of Widdles. Faced with a dramatic loss of audience, McHale and McAvoy are bound to compromise their ideals and produce infotainment when tackling the trial of Casey Anthony, who allegedly murdered her two-year old son Caylee. The whole team of news workers is invited to take part in a class of infotainment, whose didactic aspect articulates self-reflexivity—deconstructing the process of making the news for entertainment. Don analyses Nancy Grace’s treatment of the case on Fox News in front of the journalists, associating the viewer as a collaborator into the newsroom:

These three corners are live feeds of the guest experts. [...] Is the bottom right corner where they’re playing a loop of little Caylee from a home video? [...] Now they’re not talking about the tattoo on Casey’s back, but they put it full screen. Why? Because Tess was just about to look somewhere else, so they changed the frame to anything that might keep her attention. [...] Her EP’s showing duct tape and a plastic bag, so you know you’re watching the real *CSI: Miami*. [...] Look how cute Caylee is. She deserved better than a mom with a tattoo. (S01E08)

Don underlines the biases inherent in the editing of the show, which cuts from a close-up on the mother’s tattoo to footage of the little girl, thus pinpointing two antithetical signs—the tattoo signifies the woman’s rebellious, nonconformist life whereas the girl expresses the innocence of childhood. In this episode, Don deciphers how Nancy Grace builds melodrama from the homicide case by transforming the events reported into a morality play. Not content with reporting the facts, the anchor elaborates her personal judgement by drawing supporting evidence from her field experts. This episode of *The Newsroom* aims to demonstrate the potency of the news media to influence and shape the viewers’ response, for the mother is characterized as an insensitive woman whose guilt cannot admit even the shadow of a doubt. As the ACN journalists start enquiring about the same story, the series borrows from the same melodramatic components as their competitors. The

widely televised case of Casey Anthony unfolds through daily airings that echo the media narrative of O. J. Simpson's court trial after his ex-wife Nicole Brown and her friend Ronald Goldman were found dead on June 12, 1994. Film scholar Linda Williams used O. J. Simpson's televised case to argue that daily airings aimed to extend the drama as every new piece of information introduced a twist in the story, holding the viewers' attention for days on end. It filled screen time and focused attention away from important political issues:

Like those daytime melodramas, it was a multiple 'family saga' with villains and victims, [a] glacial pace, meandering twists of plot, pregnant pauses, paucity of action, and abundance of talk, and with cuts to commercials during recess or after dramatic pieces of testimony.⁸

Don deconstructs this type of reporting, which is presented as anathema to *New Nights* practices, thereby enhancing the heroic behavior of journalists who would rather face the dangers of revolution in Egypt to collect valuable news than entertain the audience through melodrama.

The private and the public

The Newsroom blends the personal and the political to produce an entertaining fiction drama series that points to the generic hybrid of information and entertainment in news programming. Media scholar Angela Smith notes that the increasing commercial pressure, both in the form of competition from cable and satellite outlets and in a slackening of government and state regulations, have undermined the quality of the public service media, resulting in "a blurring of the boundaries between public and private, information and entertainment."⁹ She observes that tabloid television has reverberated across the news broadcast, producing an emphasis on the personal that is believed to engage audiences with politics:

News merged with and became dependent upon entertainment. Increasingly, it is the norm for "serious" broadcast news reporting to include stories about the personal lives of celebrities among the top stories, and for politicians to readily appear on such

talk shows as Oprah Winfrey. This increased focus on personalities, one component of tabloidization, has increasingly become a feature of news and current affairs programming as broadcasters seek new audiences. [...] Thus, while the topics covered in tabloid television can be seen as entertainment-focused, tabloidization also indicates a series of journalistic practices. Part of this process is related to language, where there is a tendency towards more informality, characterized by the use of humor and colloquial speech. There has been an increase in the use of conversational styles in the media since the late 1970s, which has had the positive effect of allowing more people to better understand the complex social and political issues covered by the media.¹⁰

Although the team of *The Newsroom* aim to avoid the trappings of tabloid television, including its focus on sensationalism and the trivial, concerns with audience rates compel them to find a balance between informing and entertaining. Significantly, Will McAvoy's dual professional career allows him to navigate between the two: Charlie Skinner refers to his previous experience as a Brooklyn District Attorney who obtained a 94% conviction rate, which gives him the credentials to pose as the American citizen's lawyer standing up against the lies delivered on television by the Tea Party members. In his "mission to civilize," he opposes gossip columnist Nina Howard, who is his counterpart in tabloid prints, writing what she dubs "tear down pieces" whose success is measured by the extent of the scandal they incite (S01E04).

Quite ironically, the series itself draws entertainment from the narrative practices it denounces. The focus on Will McAvoy enhances his role as the lead anchor of *News Night*, overshadowing the collective work behind his image. The series also delves into his private life through the depiction of regular sessions with his analyst, progressively constructing a past that suggests the character's life in the limelight is a means to overcome traumatic memories. Depicted as an egotistical man whose self-esteem is bolstered by ratings, Will McAvoy's perspective often is the viewpoint from which many events are related. Several flashbacks are embedded in the narrative of his therapy sessions, revealing the relation between his professional quest for success and his intimate fear of abandonment. The tabloid dimension of his life as a celebrity contaminates the series, constructing a continuous narrative line shaped in part by the focus on his misadventures as related in the tabloids. His

therapist pinpoints the influence of his public life on his personal life (including the fit of insomnia triggered by recurrent death threats), representing two narrative strands that are interconnected through the character of Mackenzie McHale—the executive producer who he was about to marry before she cheated on him.

Paradoxically, *The Newsroom* replicates the very system its characters condemn as dumbing down factors in the world of journalism, drawing entertainment from the tabloid stories that appeal to the voyeuristic instinct of television viewers. McAvoy stands out as the focal point of the series, enhancing the fact that his celebrity makes him vulnerable to gossip columns. Exposing his private life to the public not only entices diegetic voyeuristic tabloid readers, but it also ironically attracts viewers to watch *The Newsroom*. The anchor's personal drug use and affairs with different women contribute much of the entertainment in *The Newsroom*. Secondary characters' stories develop into subplots that add a soap opera dimension to the whole series, hinting at repressed feelings that complicate the narrative. Love stories engage the viewers, as these intimate relationships bond the characters to each other on both personal and professional levels. *The Newsroom* develops two interwoven narratives: the characters' private concerns interfere with their everyday work activities whereas the news programmes mix the private and the public through infotainment. The type of framing used to create the sense of proximity in the soap also prevails in filmed interviews, thus further blurring the lines between private and public, entertainment and information.

Media scholar Doris A. Graber observes that the reporter's camera allows journalists to bridge the distance their interviewees' unfamiliar faces may inspire: "When close-ups depict people outside the closest family circles, they convey a sense of intimacy with strangers that is lacking in real life."¹¹ Soap operas are also characterized by an abundance of close-ups, which according to Christine Geraghty, "work to make every gesture and action seem highly coded and significant, making out emotional relationships and enabling the audience to understand the significance of every action."¹² These close-ups become less conspicuous as the series unfolds and characterization develops outside the newsroom, allowing the viewers to catch a glimpse of the characters' everyday life. However, they create reflexive distance as regards the reality the series claims to represent. The private and the public merge in

the newsroom, where colleagues behave as friends and lovers, bringing down invisible gender barriers at the workplace. Intimate relationships develop along the lines of work in the newsroom: Jim and Maggie repress the romantic feelings they have for one another, reflecting the subdued sentiments McAvoy and McHale entertain. The first episodes are rather awkward, expressing a difficult balance between the serial and the series, echoing the blurring of boundaries between entertainment and information. The conspicuous camera comes close to the characters' faces, intruding on intimate personal matters that may sound out of place when addressed in the work place.¹³ While the first season focuses on the process of news making, the second lays emphasis on the characters' individual development, spotlighting interpersonal relationships through the dynamics of teamwork. When the series broaches the arrest of Osama Bin Laden, the journalists become the bearers of tidings of international significance, a news item that also touches an emotional chord. The people in the newsroom often live through the events they report by proxy: when they learn about the shooting of Democrat Congresswoman Gabrielle Gifford, the whole team of *The Newsroom* look deeply affected (S01E07). A gloomy silence reigns over the newsroom, as the images of the shooting go viral on the computer screens.

Media truths and lies

The Newsroom reflexively broaches the work of the news media, highlighting that the journalists' mission to inform is based on an investigation into the facts that they then expose to the viewers in order to allow them to become informed citizens. This is in keeping with philosophers John Dewey and Walter Lippman, who argued in the 1920s that journalism had a vital role to play in a democracy through fuelling political debate and engagement.¹⁴ The *News Night* team repeatedly advocate this idealistic stance, striving to expose the invisible and the unsaid, something they demonstrate from the onset of the first season when publicly accusing Halliburton of using improper materials for deep-water drilling. Will McAvoy daringly exposes the Koch Brothers' secret financial commitments to the Tea Party, thus debunking the myth of a party which is led by and responding to the call of the common man, as its spokespersons claim (S01E03). Also representative of the journalists' civic

commitment is the anchor's insistence that Internet posts should be authored by real names instead of pseudonyms, thus inviting the viewers to express their comments as citizens in the open (S01E06). Don's ethics change over the course of the series, as he relinquishes easy tabloid infotainment money to make quality prevail when collaborating with McHale. This is particularly obvious in his reactions to the story of Troy Davis, who he is convinced will be executed on false grounds. Unable to use his position in the media to question the race issue because he cannot have access to the details of the prosecution, the journalist unwillingly finds himself compelled to silence (S02E02).

The programme hints at the secrecy and the lack of transparency that create hurdles for journalists in search of truth. These informational gaps build suspense in the narrative, heightening the difficulties encountered by journalists who wish to spotlight the truth. The language barrier, which Sloan Sabbith easily overcomes because she speaks fluent Japanese, aptly expresses the confusion that followed the 2011 Fukushima nuclear power plant explosion. While she is able to obtain concise details from TEPCO spokesman Daisuke Tanaka in a private conversation, she cannot make him repeat the information during the filmed interview. When Sloan unexpectedly switches to Japanese in an attempt to straighten the record, she cannot make herself understood by the American audience, thus admitting her frustration at the missing pieces of evidence (S01E06). The series delves into the shady world of politics as Charlie receives an anonymous phone call informing him that the White House press secretary is about to send him an email (S01E07). The tip comes from an NSA employee who wishes to establish his trustworthiness before leaking secret information - including a case of internal wire tapping at Atlantic Cable News, which echoes the scandal of phone tapping that implicated media mogul Rupert Murdoch (S01E08). The interview of General Stomtonovitch, whose face remains in the shadows while the camera rolls, illustrates the barriers to be overcome in a society where the truth remains out of the limelight—especially when military matters are involved (S02E07).

Operation Genoa epitomizes the narrative strategy used to rejuvenate the series' second season: much attention is given to the public drama which ACN journalists created around Operation Genoa, wrongly blaming the American military

for allegedly committing war crimes during a rescue operation led in Afghanistan.¹⁵ Genoa refers to a secret military operation conducted in Afghanistan by the American military, during which the ACN news team is convinced sarin gas was used on civilians in a rescue mission. The second season depicts the cross-examination to which every collaborator on the programme of *News Night* is submitted, using flashbacks to illustrate their personal memories of the past fourteen months. The series therefore runs from one timeline to the other, opposing the events of the past with those unfolding in the present. The time gap gives rise to questions that heighten suspense, for it enhances the changes that have affected the characters' attitudes and physical appearance. Maggie's short dyed hair hardens her features, signifying the trauma of her experience in Uganda where she went on a reporting mission that unexpectedly went wrong. The embedded flashbacks progressively fill in the blanks of the narrative, retracing the events that construct a background to the characters' evolution. Genoa turns into a word with multiple associations as the series unfolds, connoting all the unpredictable mistakes presented by lawyer Rebecca Halliday as the consequences of an "if situation." McAvoy and McHale both complete the "if..." sentence when interrogated, thereby anticipating the following episodes: "If Jim Harper hadn't gone to New Hampshire, if Dantana hadn't come to cover for him, if West hadn't been on the drone panel, if seventeen different things hadn't conspired in just the right order, we wouldn't be sitting here." (S02E01) The anchor opens the first episode with this statement and *News Night's* executive producer repeats the almost same words before the closing credits, suggesting that the narrative of Genoa trapped the whole the team into believing the evidence brought in by Jerry Dantana. Rebecca Halliday and her three associates grill one team member after the other, leaving no question unasked in order to determine whether an institutional failure permitted Operation Genoa to be distorted into false news. *The Newsroom's* second season relies on the serial structure that permeates the investigation launched after that media fiasco, which threatens to annihilate the basic narrative principles of the series. McHale, McAvoy and Skinner have handed in their resignation and are expecting Reese to make a decision about the future of *News Night*.

The flashbacks retrace the debates that took place among the journalists to determine whether their framing of Operation Genoa into a newsflash was consistent with the facts they had uncovered. The mention of Genoa dramatizes the second season, creating a mystery that can only be solved through analysing the subjective process of news making. The same story is told from differing viewpoints, highlighting the journalists' individual relationship to the events they relate. Jerry Dantana forges evidences in order to produce the truth he believes cannot be revealed otherwise: the senior producer tampered with the footage of the interview he conducted with retired General Stomtonovitch, changing his hypothesis ("If we used sarin gas, here is how we used sarin") into an assertion through editing ("We used sarin gas"). The whole sequence is embedded in McHale's testimony, as she was able to prove that Dantana willfully cut the original footage to make his interviewed witness say what he wished to hear. The cuts become flagrant when one carefully watches the clock of the basketball game filmed on the television screen inserted behind the interviewed character (S02E07).

The investigation of Operation Genoa reinforces the serial dimension of *The Newsroom*, which downplays the broken narrative of the series that focuses on actual events. The 2012 election campaign provides another narrative strand that links the episodes, leading to the ballots whose results provide the climax of the last two episodes. The focus on Jim Harper's provocative questions as he joins the embedded journalists on Republican candidate Mitt Romney's press bus shed light on his character as an agitator rather than on the political issues the candidate consistently eschews (S02E01, E02, E03). His meeting with Hallie adds another romantic touch to the series, once again diverting attention away from the political debates. The series delves into the intimacy of the characters through the flashback structure, which evokes the haunting power of traumatic memories insofar as they are retrospectively commented upon by the characters who relate them. When Maggie speaks of her mission in Africa, the film interweaves the present and the past into two narrative lines that complement and compete each other, highlighting both the distance and the proximity of her memories. A band of robbers attacked the orphanage where she and her colleague Gary were staying, demanding that they give them their camera – something the language barrier did not allow them to comprehend at the time

(S02E04). Maggie feels that she bears responsibility for the murder of a child she had befriended, as his body stopped a bullet that could have killed her. Maggie's African memories are interspersed with the news storylines, which helps contain the emotional power of the embedded story.

The Newsroom therefore appears to be constrained by the episodic nature of factual events, which the process of news making does not turn into a global narrative. The events depicted are disconnected from each other, thus limiting the historical narrative shaped by the series to infotainment.

Conclusion

The Newsroom hybridizes the serial and the series formats by combining the chronology of news stories with the characters' personal life narrative. The intertwining narrative strands point to the influence of journalists over the process of making the news, while underlining the impact of world events on them as individuals. The second season downplays the political critiques posited in the first season, highlighting that the news making process is based on the personal frame of understanding the world. The serial narrative provides the framework of the second season, which focuses on the characters' relation to the world around them and how it affects them as individuals. The episodes that retrace Operation Genoa and Mitt Romney's political campaign suggest the limits of the journalists' mission by confronting the news team with the military's Omerta code and the presidential campaign's politics. Operation Genoa symbolizes the lack of transparency in military and political matters, creating enigmas in the narrative of everyday life, which *News Night* journalists endeavour to resolve. The series therefore draws entertainment from the situation it denounces, turning the journalist figure into a hero of civic life.

Michael Hammond argues "the series/serial [...] presents us with a need for paying attention to the text in a more focused form, if only to gain a better understanding of how this form works and then subsequently what may be the constituents of its appeal."¹⁶ *The Newsroom* is characterized by the hybridity between the serial and the series, which is related to the process of news making in which the characters are engaged. While such events as the Dominique Strauss-Kahn rape scandal may have provided infotainment when related for the first time, the

reference to the case in the newsroom promotes a reflexive glance at the framing of a newsflash storyline whose well known outcome undermines the dramatic appeal (S02E01). *The Newsroom* draws entertainment from its fictional components rather than from the factual narrative it exploits. The characters' intimate stories create "the desire to find what happens next,"¹⁷ making serial dynamics prevail in *The Newsroom*.

Notes

¹ "American quality television programmes tend to exhibit high production values, naturalistic performance styles, recognised and esteemed actors, a sense of visual style created through careful, even innovative, camerawork and editing, and a sense of aural style created through the judicious use of appropriate, even original music. This moves beyond a 'glossiness' of style. Generally, there is a sense of stylistic integrity, in which themes and style are intertwined in an expressive and impressive way. Further, the programmes are likely to explore 'serious' themes, rather than representing the superficial events of life; they are likely to suggest that the viewer will be rewarded for seeking out greater symbolic or emotional resonance within the details of the programme." Sarah Cardwell, "Is Quality Television Any Good? Generic Distinctions, Evaluations and the Troubling Matter of Critical Judgement" in Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (eds.), *Quality TV, Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 26.

² Media scholars Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson contend that Fox News and MSNBC viewers behave as partisans who select their programmes according to their political beliefs: "Fox News and MSNBC talk show viewers see more political bias in news media reports than do network news viewers. They also extend their trust to news media outlets more narrowly than do network news viewers and the inattentive. Fox and MSNBC viewers are also more likely to indicate a preference for news programming that shares their political point of view. The implication of this audience comparison is that news consumers are *selective* in choosing source of information [...]" Kevin Arceneaux and Martin Johnson, *Changing Minds of Changing Channels: Partisan News in an Age of Choice* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 49-50.

³ Doris A. Graber, *Processing Politics from Television in the Internet Age* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 87.

⁴ Daya Kishan Thussu, *News as Entertainment, The Rise of Global Infotainment* (London: Sage Publication, 2007), 8.

⁵ Brian A. Monahan, *The Shock of the News, Media Coverage and the Making of 9/11* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2010), xii-xiii.

⁶ "I was an accomplice to a slow and repeated and unacknowledged and unamended train wreck of failures that have brought us to now. I'm a leader in an industry that miscalled election results, hyped up terror scares, ginned up controversy, and failed to report on tectonic shifts in our country. From the collapse of the financial system to the truths about how strong we are to the dangers we actually face. I'm a leader in an industry that misdirected your attention with the dexterity of Harry Houdini, while sending hundreds of thousands of our bravest young men and women off to war with due diligence. The reason

we failed isn't a mystery. We took a dive for the ratings. In the infancy of mass communication, the Columbus and Magellan of broadcast journalism, William Paley and David Sarnoff, went down to Washington to cut a deal with Congress. Congress would allow the fledgling networks free use of taxpayer-owned airwaves in exchange for one public service. That public service would be one hour of airtime set aside every night for informational broadcasting, or what we now call the evening news. Congress, unable to anticipate the enormous capacity television would have to deliver consumers to advertisers, failed to include in this deal the one requirement that would have changed our national discourse immeasurably for the better. Congress forgot to add that under no circumstances could there be paid advertising during informational broadcasting. They forgot to say that taxpayers will give you the airwaves for free, and for 23 hours a day you should make a profit, but for one hour a night, you work for us. And now those network newscasts, anchored through history by honest-to-God newsmen with names like Murrow and Reasoner and Huntley and Brinkley and Buckley and Cronkite and Rather and Russert, now they have to compete with the likes of me, a cable anchor who's in the exact same business as the producers of *Jersey Shore*. And that business was good to us, but *New Night* is quitting that business right now. It might come as a surprise to you that some of history's greatest American journalists are working right now, exceptional minds with years of experience and an unshakeable devotion to reporting news. But these voices are a small minority now and they don't stand a chance against the circus, when the circus comes to town. They're overmatched. I'm quitting the circus, switching teams. I'm going with the guys who are getting creamed. I'm moved they still think they can win, and I hope they can teach me a thing or two. From this moment on, we'll be deciding what goes on our air and how it's presented to you based on the simple truth that nothing is more important to a democracy than a well-informed electorate. We'll endeavour to put information in a broader context because we know that very little news is born at the moment it comes across our wire. We'll be the champion of facts and the mortal enemy of innuendo, speculation, hyperbole, and nonsense. We're not waiters in a restaurant serving you the stories you asked for, just the way you like them prepared. Nor are we computers dispensing only the facts because news is only useful in the context of humanity. I'll make no effort to subdue my personal opinions. I will make every effort to expose you to informed opinions that are different from my own. You may ask, 'Who are we to make these decisions?' We are Mackenzie McHale and myself. Ms. McHale is our executive producer. She marshals the resources of over 100 reporters, producers, analysts, and technicians, and her credentials are readily available. I'm *New Night's* managing editor, and make the final decision on everything seen and heard on this program. Who are we to make these decisions? We're the media elite." (S01E03)

⁷ Richard Davis and Diana Owen, *Media and American Politics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 193.

⁸ Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card, Melodramas of Black and White From Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 263.

⁹ Angela Smith, "Tabloid television" in Sterling, C.H. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of journalism: 4 : Q-Z*, London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2009, 1365.

¹⁰ Smith, 1366.

¹¹ Doris A. Graber, *Processing Politics from Television in the Internet Age* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 87.

¹² Christine Geraghty, *Women and Soap Opera, A Study of Prime Time Soaps* (Cambridge, Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), p. 30

¹³ McHale broaches the subject of Maggie's relationship with Don when she first meets her in episode 1, thus providing an insight the viewer is not yet familiar with. (S01E01)

¹⁴ Max McCombs, Lance Holbert, Spiro Kiousis, Wayne Wanta, *The News and Public Opinion: Media Effect on Civic Life* (Cambridge, UK and Malden, US: Polity Press, 2011), 175.

¹⁵ The story is based on the accusations that CNN falsely reported that a war crime had been committed in Vietnam during Operation Tailwind in 1998. The internal investigation conducted by the Pentagon proved the reporters wrong.

¹⁶ Michael Hammond, "Introduction: The Series/Serial Forms" in Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon (eds.), *The Contemporary Television Series* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 78-79.

¹⁷ Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 3.

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