

**“His Women Problem”:  
An Analysis of Gender on *The Newsroom***

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**Introduction**

Aaron Sorkin’s *The Newsroom* has received mixed reviews since its June 24, 2012, premiere, with many critics writing that the show was preachy and unrealistic. Another common cry was that the female journalists on the show were ditzy, subservient, and shallow. Critics contended that MacKenzie “Mac” McHale (Emily Mortimer) was as intelligent as the leading men, and that Leona Lansing (Jane Fonda) was tough, although they weren’t portrayed that way. Following the start of *The Newsroom*’s second season, there appeared to be improvement, although one critic observed that the changes were “as obvious and shallow as Sorkin’s stale, tone-deaf stereotyping.”<sup>1</sup> While MacKenzie McHale is at times seen as heroic, the other female characters are marginalized and function as “supporting players to their more successful male counterparts.”<sup>2</sup> This marginalization led

Ellen Killoran to ask whether, with *The Newsroom*, Sorkin solved “his women problem” that also surfaced in his earlier *Sports Night* series.<sup>3</sup>

Sorkin, speaking to the Television Critics Association, disagreed with the criticism that his female characters were portrayed as inferior and incompetent:

I completely respect that opinion, but I 100 percent disagree with it. [The characters are] shown being good at their jobs. Caring about something other than yourself or reaching higher or being curious, plainly smart, and great team players, those qualities to me are what define these characters. And once you nail that down, you can have them slip on as many banana peels as you want. That’s just comedy.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this study is to investigate how fictional female journalists were portrayed on *The Newsroom*. The show featured powerful women, including the show-within-the-show’s executive producer and the owner of the network’s parent company, as well as reporters and on-air personalities. The researchers focus their analysis on several key themes developed in the literature. After the analysis, the authors discuss the ethical implications of these characters and portrayals, especially as they relate to socialization and cultural conditioning of future journalists.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Portrayal of Female Journalists in Popular Culture***

Feminism is defined in its simplest form as the creation of a society where women are provided the same opportunities as men.<sup>5</sup> The depictions of feminism on television are understood not as a matter of politics but as a matter of identity and lifestyle.<sup>6</sup> Such depictions fall into postfeminism, or third-wave feminism, which combines feminist ideas with postmodern concepts of society’s instability.<sup>7</sup>

This feminist identity is expressed most readily on television programs such as *The*

*Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Murphy Brown*, *Sex and the City*, *Sports Night*, and *The Newsroom* through white, straight, single, professional women working in a man’s world.<sup>8</sup>

Researchers argue that fictional portrayals of people have a powerful impact on how we perceive those types of people in real life.<sup>9</sup> Humans do not look at the world around them neutrally but rather as a part of “an active construction that incorporates our past memories and expectations as well as the current context.”<sup>10</sup>

Feminist theorists argue that cultural conditioning and learning experience affect a woman’s career decisions.<sup>11</sup> Socialization is the “process leading individuals to accept institutionalized realities as their own perceptions of what is real.”<sup>12</sup> Television and other sources constantly inundate young girls with ideas about cultural norms, and this media-rich environment reinforces cultural norms of femininity. Socialization of a particular nature, whatever the source, ultimately will become a part of an individual’s conception of his or her abilities. The media can and do socialize young women about gender identity and intellectual ability, and media portrayals provide socializing messages about women in a certain profession, such as journalism, or women in general.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, stereotypes of passive, overemotional, and dependent women<sup>14</sup> in fictional portrayals have a powerful impact on real women.

### ***Portrayal of Female Journalists on Television***

The sight of a female reporter on a television screen is nothing new. However, television shows portraying female reporters are not simply about journalism. Instead, journalism is used as a way to explore certain gender-based conflicts: career versus marriage, workplace versus home, co-workers versus family, freedom of the night versus middle-class domesticity, the individual versus the collective, feminism versus femininity,

and agency versus victimization.<sup>15</sup> Further, the focus is on women’s relationships with men, a focus that undermines the importance of the female community by assuming that male relationships ultimately have the most importance in women’s lives.<sup>16</sup>

Women on television systematically are underrepresented, usually reduced to traditionally feminine roles, and appear traditionally feminine.<sup>17</sup> Women portrayed as journalists or other professionals are an attempt to break this traditional mold. The appeal to genre type is related to its capacity for change: “Its flexibility allows the foregrounding of different combinations of traits as the type is re-interpreted by different stars, in different genres and different eras.”<sup>18</sup> However, television shows that attempt to break the stereotypical genre mold still tend to situate female characters within overarching patriarchal schemes.<sup>19</sup>

*The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977) was “informed by and commented on the changing role of women in American society.”<sup>20</sup> Mary Richards (Moore), an associate producer and later producer for the Minneapolis television station WJM-TV, was “bright, attractive, well liked, ha[d] a good job that she perform[ed] well, and [was] generally happy.”<sup>21</sup> She was seen throughout the show’s run as a positive character, one who redefined understandings of personal relationships.<sup>22</sup>

The title character in *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998) can be seen as a more advanced version of Richards. Unlike Moore’s Mary, Murphy (Candice Bergen) has made it: She is the award-winning network co-anchor of a primetime news magazine.<sup>23</sup> *Murphy Brown* is considered to be influenced by or representative of feminism because it is a sitcom based on a single, working woman.<sup>24</sup>

*Sex and the City* (1998-2004) starred Sarah Jessica Parker as Carrie Bradshaw, a sex

and relationships columnist for a New York publication. Carrie and her friends are the embodiment of a more progressive version of Helen Gurley Brown’s “single girl,” although they are older and more successful in their chosen careers.<sup>25</sup> As successful professionals, they embrace “the intellectual and sexual freedom, and independence that their success has given them.”<sup>26</sup> Carrie’s sex life, the fodder for her columns, can be seen “as a product of a longer representational history of women, feminist or not, who sought sexual freedom or freer expression of female sexuality.”<sup>27</sup> Seen in this postfeminist light, the show can be situated between the feminist struggles of the individual versus the collective, feminism versus femininity, and agency versus victimization.<sup>28</sup>

*Sports Night* (1998-2000), which was created by Aaron Sorkin, centered on the titular show, a *Sportscenter*-like sports news program. In the show, “sports becomes a metaphor for human accomplishment, drive, pain, loss, and disappointment.”<sup>29</sup> Much of that accomplishment, drive, pain, loss, and disappointment is driven by the two female leads, Dana Whitaker (Felicity Huffman) and Natalie Hurley (Sabrina Lloyd). The women ostensibly are in charge of *Sports Night*. Dana and Natalie run the show-within-the-show, and Sally Sasser (Brenda Strong) produces the sister-show *West Coast Update*. However, Dana is not shown respect by her colleagues. She is not in charge, “and this is made clear throughout the arc of the entire show, despite her obvious intelligence and capability.”<sup>30</sup> Further, Dana and Sally are shown in constant competition, both for power and for the affections of lead anchor Casey McCall. This competition is shown as the equivalent of a “sophisticated cat fight.”<sup>31</sup> The five female journalists on *Sports Night* were depicted as acting unprofessionally, displaying motherly qualities, choosing their personal lives over work, being deferential to men for ethical decisions, and showing a lack of sports

knowledge compared to the male characters.<sup>32</sup>

*Murphy Brown*, with its intelligent feminist perspective, went off the air the same year that *Sex and the City* and *Sports Night* premiered. While Carrie and her cohort extended feminism on television, at least in part, the female characters on Sorkin’s *Sports Night* did not.

### ***Aaron Sorkin’s Portrayal of Female Journalists***

Aaron Sorkin’s *The Newsroom* premiered on HBO on June 24, 2012. Sorkin has long had a fascination with journalism, creating the critically acclaimed *Sports Night* and often depicting journalists at work in *The West Wing*. Sorkin also presented a media organization in his short-lived series *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*. In *The Newsroom*, Sorkin depicts an entire news organization, from the executives in charge of the conglomeration that owns Atlantis Cable News (ACN), to the journalists in the newsroom.<sup>33</sup> Sorkin wanted *The Newsroom* to be a show based around journalists and news executives “who are very good at their jobs and less good at everything else.”<sup>34</sup>

*The Newsroom* features several powerful women. MacKenzie “Mac” McHale (Emily Mortimer) is the executive producer of the show-within-the-show *News Night*, Leona Lansing (Jane Fonda) is the CEO of ACN’s parent company, and several women are shown as anchors, producers, and reporters. Previous researchers have argued that Sorkin uses women in positions of power to throw viewers off the scent of sexism and that Sorkin’s female characters are “incapable of existing without the protection, adoration, and support of the men.”<sup>35</sup> Sorkin’s female characters are smart and capable, and they often guide their male counterparts through difficult experiences. However, the primary character is inevitably a male, and the plots generally center on the male leads.<sup>36</sup>

The focus on the male characters to the detriment of the female characters should come as no surprise because “Sorkin is a man, and he thus logically places the final decisions, power, and value in his male characters.”<sup>37</sup> However, Sorkin’s writing underscored a sexist attitude in *Sports Night* that ran counter to the feminist and postfeminist portrayals of female journalists in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Murphy Brown*, and *Sex and the City*.

### ***Social Responsibility Theory***

In its facilitative role, the media seek to promote dialogue between constituent groups in a society.<sup>38</sup> The media serve as a community-building forum, encouraging dialogue in neighborhoods, churches, and other institutions divorced from state and market forces.<sup>39</sup> The goal of the facilitative role is to promote pluralism, which is a fundamental need and ideal for a functioning democracy; this role is not directed toward uniform public opinion but toward a multicultural mosaic.<sup>40</sup> The facilitative role is related to social responsibility theory, which is based on a communitarian model that seeks justice, covenant, and empowerment.<sup>41</sup> The ultimate goal of the press is social transformation.<sup>42</sup> Proponents of a socially responsible press argue that the press only makes sense in terms of public and public life.<sup>43</sup> If the press is failing its normative role to be socially responsible in terms of justice, covenant, and empowerment, then the society in which it operates most likely also will be failing. Similarly, if the social, political, and economic systems are failing, then the press will not be able (or as able) to fulfill its role in society.

Social responsibility theory can be traced back to the 1947 Hutchins Commission Report. The Hutchins Commission stated that the press has five missions: to provide a complete, intelligent, and comprehensive report on the day’s events in a context that give

them meaning; to provide a forum for comment and criticism; to provide a representative sample of the various constituent groups in a society; to report a society’s goals, values, and ideals; and to provide a full account of the day’s intelligence.<sup>44</sup> Taken together, these five missions should promote dialogue and pluralism while simultaneously compelling the press to seek justice, covenant, and empowerment for constituent groups in a society. A media that is based on social responsibility is premised on the idea that freedom of expression is a positive freedom.<sup>45</sup> Expression is not an inalienable right, but a right granted to do moral good.<sup>46</sup> That moral good is serving the public.<sup>47</sup>

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1:** How are female journalists depicted on the television show *The Newsroom*?

**RQ2:** What are the ethical implications of presenting these characters and portrayals as role models?

### **Methodology**

To probe the question of how female journalists were portrayed on the television show *The Newsroom*, researchers conducted a textual analysis of the first season of the program. Season 1 included 10 episodes aired between June 24 and August 26, 2012. (Season 2, which aired between July 14 and Sept. 15, 2013, was released on DVD after this study was completed.) The unit of analysis was spoken and written text, as well as visual features such as type of shot, content, sequencing, and graphics<sup>48</sup> from the 10 episodes.

Textual analysis allows researchers to understand what people produce on television.<sup>49</sup> Scholars utilize textual analysis when examining television programming

because it helps “unearth the meaning of individual programs and links them to broader social formations and problems”<sup>50</sup> and “identify the ideological tenor of the content.”<sup>51</sup> In a textual analysis, researchers not only examine the surface content of a program, but also aim to unearth all possible meanings.<sup>52</sup>

Textual analysis “proceeds from a long soak in the material to an extremely close reading of a specific text as defined by the researcher.”<sup>53</sup> Thick description is used to determine what those structures of meaning are and to digest their meaning.<sup>54</sup> Textual analysis goes beyond the manifest content of messages, allowing researchers to discern “implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text.”<sup>55</sup> Text should be thought of as “an indeterminate field of meaning in which intentions and possible effects intersect. The task of the analysis is to bring out the whole range of possible meanings.”<sup>56</sup> Readings have preferred narratives and subjects.<sup>57</sup> Researchers agree that multiple readings are possible, and that the author of a text might not have intended what the researcher found in his or her reading of the text.<sup>58</sup>

A researcher should begin with a long soak in the material, followed by a close reading of specific texts chosen because they possibly could answer the research question in the best way possible.<sup>59</sup> Texts were examined several times: Themes emerged during initial viewings, and more viewings were done to explore those themes.<sup>60</sup> While coding themes and patterns, the researchers isolated something “(a) that happen[ed] a number of times and (b) that consistently happen[ed] in a specific way.”<sup>61</sup> The researchers discussed reoccurring themes together in the context of the literature, and returned to the texts in order to glean thick description.<sup>62</sup> For increased validity, the researchers compared notes and discussed themes after analyzing 1%, 10%, 25%, and 50% of the sample.

Three factors can negatively impact the credibility of qualitative research. These factors include the completeness of the data, reactivity, and selective perception.<sup>63</sup> Researchers improved this study’s credibility by using low-inference descriptors, investigator triangulation, and reflexivity. Low-inference descriptors are the use of descriptions that are meticulously phrased to researchers’ notes; investigator triangulation is the use of multiple researchers when collecting and analyzing material; and reflexivity is the researchers’ use of self-awareness, self-reflection, and understanding of potential biases when analyzing data.<sup>64</sup>

## **Findings**

During the course of its first season, *The Newsroom* continuously depicts its female characters in a decidedly less positive manner than their male counterparts. The women of *The Newsroom* consistently behave unprofessionally in the workplace, stereotypically act motherly and put their emotions on display, and, when actually doing their jobs, succeed less than their male counterparts. While these female journalists have impeccable credentials, stellar resumes, and a genuine interest in disseminating the best possible news, Sorkin and his fellow writers consistently depict these powerful women as inferior to the male characters. In this current study, researchers found that Sorkin portrayed female journalists on *The Newsroom* in a very similar manner to the ones he portrayed on *Sports Night*. The four main female journalists on *The Newsroom*—Executive Producer MacKenzie “Mac” McHale (Emily Mortimer), Associate Producer Margaret “Maggie” Jordan (Allison Pill), economist and host/contributer Sloan Sabbith (Olivia Munn), and ACN owner Leona Lansing (Jane Fonda)—were depicted as lacking in professionalism, not

as good as their male counterparts at their jobs, and as motherly and weak.

### ***Unprofessional in the Workplace***

None of the characters, both male and female, depicted on *The Newsroom* should be considered exemplars of professionalism. All of the characters, at various times, engage in what charitably could be considered unprofessional behavior in the workplace. With that said, none of the male characters display unprofessionalism on nearly the same level as the female characters.

This lack of professionalism begins early. The first time we meet Maggie, in Episode 1 “We Just Decided To,” she engages her boyfriend, Executive Producer Don Keefer (Thomas Sadoski), in an argument concerning meeting her parents for dinner. This dispute occurs in the middle of the newsroom. Maggie even attempts to force co-workers to join in the heated discussion. Don tells Maggie multiple times that he would like to get back to work and continue the discussion at a more appropriate time. Each time he says this, Maggie ignores him and continues arguing in the middle of the newsroom, where all co-workers nearby can hear. Sorkin introduces the character of Maggie to the audience as someone unprofessional enough not only to engage in a personal argument in the middle of workplace, but also as someone who will try to make co-workers partake. Not too long after, in the second scene featuring Maggie, she takes a personal phone call from her father and proceeds to cry in front of her new boss, Mac. Her crying is audible and obvious enough that Mac feels the need to cheer her up.

It is in this episode that we also meet Mac, and her first work-related scene occurs in the office of anchor and Managing Editor Will McAvoy (Jeff Daniels). These two characters previously dated, so they have a personal history in addition to their professional

relationship. This conversation revolves around the role of journalism, specifically the future of the show. Will and Mac do not agree about certain facets. While Will gets agitated, he stays professional. Mac, however, begins pacing around his office and screaming loudly enough for employees in the newsroom to hear.

Sorkin introduces the character Sloan in Episode 2 “News Night 2.0.” Similar to Mac and Maggie, Sloan’s first scene provides the audience with a first impression steeped in unprofessionalism. A conversation between Mac and Sloan concerning Sloan joining *News Night* revolves around how Sloan may be very intelligent, but she’s not the most qualified person for the position. Both characters agree that Sloan only gets the job because of her looks. The way the camera lingers on Sloan’s face and breasts makes it clear that the audience is supposed to think of Sloan as a beauty first and as a journalist and economist second. The message is that Sloan is a person not above using her looks to get ahead professionally.

Even the most powerful woman on the show, ACN owner Leona Lansing, brings her personal life into the office. In Episode 3 “The 112th Congress,” Leona exerts her authority over Charlie Skinner (Sam Waterston), the president of the news division:

**Leona** (*putting up hand to silence Charlie*): Let’s start over, and, this time, disabuse yourself of the idea that this is a conversation between equals where I make an argument, you make a counter-argument, and we agree to disagree. Our cable news division accounts for less than 3 percent of [Atlantis Cable News’ parent company Atlantis World Media’s] annual revenue. (*Pointing finger at Charlie*): You don’t make money for stockholders, which I have a fiduciary responsibility to do. Well, last night, the voters ousted 21 percent of Congress, including seven members of the House Subcommittee on Communications and Technology. Three of those seven are AWM’s most reliable friends on the Hill. Now, the Congressmen that will be replacing them are the same people that Will has been making look like fucking morons for the last six months.

Viewers later learn that the potential for lost revenue is not the only aspect of the coverage frustrating Leona. She also is miffed that she was not invited to a weekend retreat hosted by the Koch Brothers because of *News Night*'s unfavorable coverage of Koch-backed candidates. Here, Leona is letting her personal life, her desire to be included with movers and shakers, interfere with her professional life.

Throughout the season, there are numerous examples of unprofessionalism among the female characters. In multiple episodes, Mac becomes concerned with Maggie's burgeoning relationship with Senior Producer Jim Harper (John Gallagher Jr.), even though Maggie is already dating Don. In Episode 5 “Amen,” Mac will not let Jim go back to work until he answers several personal questions. Mac, a supposed world-class journalist, also causes scenes in the workplace on a handful of occasions. She screams at her boss, Will, in front of others; she brings her boyfriend to work on occasion; and she frequently forces Will to talk about their prior relationship, one that ended years ago and that Will clearly does not want to discuss.

### ***Unethical Lapses on the Job***

While all four of the main female characters receive unprofessional depictions concerning their behavior in the newsroom, some have unethical lapses that affect their jobs. Mac allows her boyfriend to be a source on *News Night* numerous times. When Charlie Skinner learns that Mac's boyfriend will run for Congress, he tells Will that other media may soon publish information concerning Mac unethically attempting to help her boyfriend get elected. Will says he knew the boyfriend was planning to run for office, but when he confronts Mac about it, she had no idea that this was a conflict of interest. Implicitly, this scene shows that Mac's unprofessionalism could produce ethical lapses. If

others knew her boyfriend would run but Mac did not, how can the audience consider her a world-class journalist?

When Maggie is given an assignment to pre-interview the press aide for Arizona Governor Jan Brewer, she does not tell her direct boss, Jim, that she once dated the aide. After the interview, Brewer cancels an appearance on *News Night*. It directly leads to this exchange:

**Maggie:** Things happen, Jim, OK, that are beyond your super-newsman powers of understanding.

**Jim:** I wish that you had told me that you dated Glen Fischer [*the aide*] in college.

**Maggie** (*flustered, stands up*): How could you possibly know that?

**Jim** (*standing too*): He told me, which is what you should have done.

**Maggie:** I know, but I thought you would take it away from me.

**Jim:** I would have.

**Maggie:** And that’s why I didn’t tell you.

This conversation clearly shows that Maggie’s unprofessionalism causes her to be less productive than others and also is catalyst for poor ethical decision-making. Maggie acknowledges that she should have admitted this prior relationship, but she did not and thus negatively affected the show to further her own agenda.

Later in the season, in Episode 6 “Bullies,” Sloan also lets her unprofessionalism affect her ethics. When Sloan finds out a major piece of information, off the record, about a potential disaster in Japan, she uses the information on the air to interrogate a source. This ethical lapse forces the entire news department to deal with negative fallout from her decision.

Each of the four main female journalists in *The Newsroom* not only acts

unprofessionally in terms of bringing their personal life to the office with them, but they all allow events and people in their personal lives to affect their ethical decisions. While the male characters sometimes engage in conversation not suitable for the office, these conversations never affect their abilities to effectively and ethically do their jobs.

***Inadequate at Their Jobs***

While Will, Jim, Charlie, Don, and journalist Neal Sampat (Dev Patel) consistently do their jobs well and are rarely, if ever, shown to make a mistake, the women of *The Newsroom* are at the center of all the journalistic flubs during Season 1. For each and every mistake shown throughout the season, a female character either caused the mistake or exacerbated or furthered it. Each of four female leads displayed inadequacy at points during the 10 episodes.

Leona makes the biggest mistake of all: She trusts her son, Reese, to run the company’s tabloid, *TMI*. At a boardroom meeting with Leona and Will, Charlie reveals that Reese Lansing hacked Mac’s phone, which allowed *TMI* to get damaging information about Will. Reese admits to the hacking, much like the real-life *News of the World* scandal, and Leona concedes that she was oblivious that such acts were happening in her newsrooms.

Charlie reminds Leona that she is a journalist:

**Charlie:** Leona, you’re one of us. You know you are. Stand for something. These guys do. They were willing to lose their jobs. This guy does. He jumped off a bridge. They’re lying, Leona. They’re just lying. A bunch of fatuous, mean-spirited bigots screaming platitudes about what America stands for. Let’s show them what we won’t stand for. Let’s do the news. You and me.

The implication is that Leona is inadequate at her job. She needs Charlie to remind her why she does the news and what a newscast should do. She also needs Charlie to tell her to stop publishing the tabloid. Leona is the boss, she owns the company, but she needs a male

subordinate to lead her.

As the youngest and least experienced of the four women, Maggie receives the least favorable depiction. While she has more journalistic experience than certain male characters, such as Neal, Sorkin and the writers clearly and obviously depict Maggie as someone not cut out for her job. In fact, in Episode 1 “We Just Decided To,” she receives her job as the result of a simple misunderstanding by Will, and it becomes clear that Maggie does not deserve it. During a discussion in Episode 6 “Bullies,” Maggie admits to Jim that she made a crucial mistake during a recent newscast.

**Maggie:** I mixed up Georgia the state with ...

**Jim:** No.

**Maggie:** Yes. Georgia the country.

**Jim:** And this was during the invasion.

**Maggie:** This isn’t about me.

**Jim:** You thought the Russians invaded Atlanta.

This exchange is a clear message by producers that, at best, Maggie is occasionally dimwitted and, at worst, far too ignorant to work as a journalist on one of the highest-rated and most-respected news shows in the country. Mistaking the state of Georgia for the nation of Georgia is an error not even made by a beginner journalist, as noted in the disgusted face Jim makes while hearing the story.

During Episode 7 “5/1,” the journalists of *News Night* attempt to uncover a big story, the death of Osama bin Laden. In a staff meeting after hearing that the president will conduct a press conference that evening, Mac asks everyone to brainstorm ideas for what the news could become. Everybody contributes normally until Maggie speaks. Mac

dismisses her suggestion out of hand as less likely “than ET returning to Earth.” This incident, once again, shows Maggie’s lack of news knowledge and her inadequacy.

Finally, during Episode 8 “The Blackout Part 1,” Mac and others ask Maggie to get her roommate to appear as a source on the show. Will tells her to do her job. This scolding implies that getting a source is her job. Maggie whines, saying she can’t do it, and, in the end, Jim is enlisted to accomplish the task along with Maggie. The roommate does appear, but it is mostly because of Jim, not Maggie.

A smart and world-class journalist in her early 40s, in the 2010s, would presumably understand basic technology. Yet Mac consistently is shown as someone who cannot master it. Her lack of skills affects how well she does her job numerous times. It also negatively affects her reputation as a journalist when she sends an email only meant for Will to everyone in the company, because she does not understand how to use her phone properly. Throughout the season, she also runs into problems using computers. Again, basic technology is not something a journalist on a national stage should have problems understanding.

During Episode 8 “The Blackout Part 1,” Will and Mac have a confrontation about what to put on the show. At the end, Will becomes so frustrated he tells Mac to “get it the fuck together.” The way the scene is shot clearly shows the audience that Will is right and Mac is wrong. Don even tells Mac during the scene that Will is right. Throughout the season, Don is one of the two characters—the other is Jim—depicted as the most knowledgeable about journalism.

Finally, before Sloan commits an ethical and unprofessional sin by using off-the-record material on the air during Episode 6 “Bullies,” she goes to Will for advice on how to interview people. As a professional journalist and someone working on a major network’s

flagship show, one would assume Sloan understands how to interview people. No male character is ever shown soliciting advice on how to do his job, but Sloan needs assistance with a basic journalistic tool. The conversation that follows shows that Sloan is actually quite poor at her job. She asks Will how to elicit good responses from sources during on-camera interviews.

**Will:** There is no trick. You just don't stop until he tells the truth.

**Sloan:** What do you mean you don't stop?

**Will:** I mean you don't stop. Sloan, I watch your show at 4, and you're brilliant, but you let guests say things that I know you know aren't true, and then you just move on. Ask the damn follow-up, and then demonstrate with facts how the guest is lying. You can't just sit there and be a facilitator for whatever bullshit the guest wants to feed your viewers. They're not coming on to plug a movie. It's not Jimmy Kimmel. You knowingly, passively allow someone to lie on your air, and maybe you're not a drug dealer, but you're sure as hell the guy who drives the dealer around in your car. So maybe you'll get it, maybe you won't. Show me something.

**Sloan:** Got it.

**Will:** Do you?

The clear takeaway from *The Newsroom's* depiction of journalists doing their jobs is that males always know what to do, accomplish it, and move on. Females sometimes do their jobs correctly, yet are just as likely to become the catalyst for large problems that could have been avoided by a competent, professional journalist. These mistakes, however, are made by female journalists in positions of power at one of the largest and most influential newsrooms in the country.

### ***Motherly and Weak***

Leona is the only actual mother on the show, but she is depicted as the least motherly. At various times during the season, the other three female journalists display

clear motherly sides. The male characters receive depictions that focus consistently on their ability to perform admirably at their jobs while trying to avoid all the personal life issues the women bring to the workplace. Sorkin and his writers clearly depict female journalists who not only must do their job, but also must act as office mothers. This depiction starts almost immediately.

When Mac first appears on the show, she acts very motherly toward both Jim and Maggie. First, Maggie gets off the phone with her father during Episode 1 “We Just Decided To,” and immediately begins crying. Mac walks over to her with a box of tissues and wipes her eyes. She immediately, even though she does not know Maggie at all, delivers motherly advice concerning Maggie’s relationship with Don. This conversation, though, starts with Mac telling Maggie to “turn and face me,” so that Mac could wipe the tears. This very shot of Maggie turning and Mac smiling presents a clear motherly depiction to the audience. About five minutes later, Jim approaches Mac to tell her that he has a tip on a story that will become the British Petroleum oil spill, but all Mac can talk about is how Jim should date Maggie. She is very motherly toward Jim, telling him that he needs to think about his personal life, not just his professional life.

Later in the season, during Episode 10 “The Greater Fool,” Sloan can tell that Don does not like himself very much, that he may be a little depressed and feeling guilty for dating Maggie. She then gives Don a very motherly pep talk, telling him,

**Sloan:** I don’t know who told you you’re a bad guy, but somebody did. Somebody along the way. Somebody or something convinced you of it because you think you’re a bad guy, and you’re just not. I’m socially inept, but even I know that. So, because you’re a bad guy, you try to do things you think a good guy would do, like committing to someone you like but maybe don’t love. Sweet, smart, wholesome Midwestern girl. I could be wrong. I almost always am.

Maggie is not depicted as motherly, but she frequently is shown as being weak. Maggie cries often throughout the course of the season. She also is shown as someone who is too weak for success. When she succeeds at securing a source during Episode 1 “We Just Decided To,” she acts so surprised that she cannot tell Jim that she did it. She simply hyperventilates and gasps. In Episode 3 “The 112th Congress,” Maggie has a panic attack during a staff meeting to discuss coverage of the Koch Brothers and has to leave the meeting, only to be rescued by Jim. Whenever Maggie encounters any problems, she inevitably finds a male co-worker and asks for his advice. Maggie seems to search for a father figure throughout the season. Even her relationship with Don seems fatherly despite the fact that he is only a few years older.

Mac shows her weakness in other ways. Despite accomplishing quite a bit in her career, she clearly lacks self-esteem and confidence. In a scene during Episode 1 “We Just Decided To,” Will is about to go on the air when Mac sabotages his teleprompter simply to prove her power over him. In fact, he is her boss, but during the show, she controls things and wants him to understand this dynamic. She lacks the confidence and self-esteem to perform her job without resorting to childish games to show dominance.

This depiction of Mac is similar to the one writers provide Sloan. Sloan often gets emotional, but not as emotional as Maggie. Instead, Sloan tries to prove her worth through compliments. She often tries to garner positive comments from her male co-workers. In one scene, Neal pitches her a potential story, and Sloan will not let him continue until she coerces him into complimenting her ability. This coercion happens subtly, yet frequently, throughout the season.

The women journalists of *The Newsroom* do not receive the same type of depiction

as the male journalists. Sorkin and his writers portray female journalists as unprofessional in the workplace; lacking the same abilities as men; and as mothers and weaklings first, journalists second.

## **Discussion**

The first research question focused on the depiction of female journalists in *The Newsroom*. While there were no professional exemplars, either male or female, females were depicted in a less positive manner than their male counterparts throughout Season 1. Researchers who studied Sorkin’s earlier show *Sports Night* argued that the five female journalists on that show were depicted as acting unprofessionally, displaying motherly qualities, choosing their personal lives over work, being deferential to men for ethical decisions, and showing a lack of sports knowledge compared to the male characters.<sup>65</sup> Similar results could be seen in this textual analysis. The four main female journalists in *The Newsroom* were depicted as being unprofessional in the workplace, being inadequate at their jobs, and being motherly and weak. Several unethical lapses were shown as some of the female journalists brought their personal lives into the office and let this affect their professional decisions. The blending of personal and professional was true for each of the female journalists. This blend was consistent with previous researchers who suggested that journalism is used to explore gender-based conflicts.<sup>66</sup>

Female journalists also were shown as being inadequate for their jobs. Each had a job at a major news organization, yet the women were at the center of all journalistic errors; they either directly caused the mistake, or they exacerbated it. Finally, female journalists were shown as motherly and weak. Previous researchers suggest that television shows that

attempt to break the stereotypical genre mold still tend to situate female characters within overarching patriarchal schemes.<sup>67</sup> Sorkin uses women in positions of power to throw viewers off the scent of sexism, and his female characters are “incapable of existing without the protection, adoration, and support of the men.”<sup>68</sup> Such depictions are not benign.

The second research question focused on the ethical implications of these characters and portrayals. These portrayals could have a major socializing effect on women who are contemplating entering the journalism field. Researchers argue that fictional portrayals of people have a powerful impact on how we perceive those types of people in real life.<sup>69</sup> Cultural conditioning and learning experience affect a woman’s career decisions,<sup>70</sup> and stereotypes of passive, overemotional, and dependent women<sup>71</sup> in fictional portrayals have a powerful impact on real women. The media can and do socialize young women about gender identity and intellectual ability, and media portrayals provide socializing messages about women in a certain profession, such as journalism, or women in general.<sup>72</sup> The terms unprofessional, inadequate, motherly, and weak are all negative in a professional context.

There is an ethical difference between news media and entertainment, and ethical standards for entertainment programming are less codified when compared to news media.<sup>73</sup> However, “boundaries between news and entertainment programming are falling fast.... All of the free-marketplace arguments that traditional news has enjoyed must now be applied equally to entertainment programs.”<sup>74</sup> Consequently, media ethicists increasingly are exploring the ethical implications of entertainment and amusement, the dominant role of almost all media content.<sup>75</sup> While there is not a codified standard similar to the Hutchins Commission, ethicists argue that “if portraying participants can result in

foreseeable, substantial negative consequences for them, the portrayal must serve an overriding public interest.”<sup>76</sup>

There are substantial negative consequences for female journalists. First, female journalists have written in the popular press about vitriolic comments focusing on their professionalism and looks, comments that are designed to intimidate and silence journalists writing about controversial topics.<sup>77</sup> Second, such portrayals might have a socializing influence for young women thinking about entering the journalistic field. Females account for 63.5% of all journalism and mass communication graduates.<sup>78</sup> However, a greater percentage of males than females seek reporting jobs at daily, weekly, wire, radio, TV, and cable news organizations.<sup>79</sup> A greater percentage of females seek jobs at public relations agencies and departments, and at advertising agencies and departments.<sup>80</sup> While the researchers are not suggesting there is a direct causal relationship between these tendencies and the portrayal of female journalists on television shows such as *The Newsroom*, there could be a negative socializing effect influencing these decisions.

Sorkin and his creative team should be criticized for their unfavorable portrayal of female journalists because the creators of any television series have an ethical obligation to their audience to be socially responsible. There is an academic tradition of criticizing dramatists for their unfavorable portrayals of groups such as journalists,<sup>81</sup> physicians,<sup>82</sup> and ethnicities<sup>83</sup> because such portrayals might negatively influence viewers’ perceptions of those groups. Entertainment programming also could have an agenda-setting or framing influence on news programming. Such an influence has been shown in relation to conflict diamonds<sup>84</sup> and organ donation.<sup>85</sup> The anti-feminist tone of *The Newsroom* conflicts with the facilitative role of the media. In the facilitative role, media professionals seek to enrich

and improve society’s associations in order to create a multicultural mosaic, not to create a uniform public opinion or insert users into the ruling ideology.<sup>86</sup>

## Conclusion

In social responsibility theory, an organization is obligated to act in a way that benefits society, either directly by advancing social goals or indirectly by avoiding socially harmful acts. Sorkin and his creative team have failed in their ethical obligation to the audience and society. Critics in the popular press argued that the female journalists on *The Newsroom* were ditzy, subservient, shallow, and stereotypical. The current researchers argue that the popular press did not go far enough in their critique. Depicting these female journalists as unprofessional, inadequate, motherly, and weak is socially irresponsible and could impact how real female journalists are perceived.

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