

An analysis of the audio-visual style used in the portrayal of journalism: being and ought to be in *The Wire* and *The Newsroom*

Análisis del estilo audiovisual en la representación del periodismo: el ser y el deber ser en *The Wire* (*Bajo escucha*) y *The Newsroom*



Miguel Ángel Huerta Floriano. Bachelor's Degree in Law, a B.A. in Journalism, and a PhD in Communication, he serves as a professor of Audio-visual Management and Production at the *Universidad Pontificia de Salamanca*, where he has held the positions of Vice-Rector of Strategic Coordination and Quality, as well as General Secretary. He is the author of several articles in scientific journals, in addition to various books, including the following: *Celuloide en Llamas. El cine estadounidense tras el 11-S* [Celluloid in flames, the US film industry after the 9/11 attacks] (Notorious, 2006); *Paul Schrader* (Akal, 2008); and *Los géneros cinematográficos. Una introducción* [Film genres, an introduction] (Tirant Humanidades, 2019). Professor Huerta Floriano was also a co-editor of the book entitled *El 'cine de barrio' tardofranquista. Reflejo de una sociedad* [late-Francoist 'neighbourhood cinema', the reflection of a society] (Biblioteca Nueva, 2012), and he has led and participated in several research projects on audio-visual fiction as well. Pontifical University of Salamanca, Spain
mahuertaf@upsa.es
ORCID: 0000-0002-4292-7168



Ernesto Pérez Morán. Bachelor's Degree in Audio-visual Communication, and holds the post of assistant professor on the Faculty of Art History at *Universidad Complutense de Madrid*. He co-edited the book entitled, *El 'cine de barrio' tardofranquista. Reflejo de una sociedad* [late-Francoist 'neighbourhood cinema', the reflection of a society] (2012), and has written a dozen articles in indexed journalism, in addition to having participated in several research projects. Professor Pérez Morán has also served as a lead researcher on two other projects funded by the *Universidad de Medellín* (Colombia), an institution with which he was affiliated as a professor and coordinator of the PhD programme in Communication for six years (2013-2018). University Complutense of Madrid, Spain
ernesper@ucm.es
ORCID: 0000-0001-9942-4417

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Abstract:

The portrayal of journalism in fictional series of the 21st century cannot be fully understood without considering two productions, which are *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008) and *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012-

Resumen:

La representación del periodismo en la ficción seriada del siglo XXI no puede entenderse sin dos obras como The Wire (Bajo escucha) (The Wire, HBO, 2002-2008) y The Newsroom (HBO, 2012-2014). Sin em-

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2014). However, academic approaches to the two series have focused on aspects related to theme, narrative, and reception, which generally receive more attention in the field of television studies than other equally relevant viewpoints. This paper aims to fill the existing gap with regard to formal approaches by proposing a textual and comparative analysis of the stylistic keys of both series in their approach to journalistic activity. One of the main findings is that although both series are very realistic, *The Wire* focusses on a formal system built upon the strategies of staging, planning, editing and sound space, with a tendency to descriptively display the facts, while *The Newsroom* uses an expressiveness that idealises the way the profession is carried out with a sentimental emphasis.

Keywords:

Journalistic representation; television style; textual analysis; *The Wire*; *The Newsroom*.

*bargo, las aproximaciones académicas a las dos producciones han puesto el foco en aspectos temáticos, narrativos y de recepción, generalmente privilegiados en el campo de los estudios televisivos frente a otras perspectivas igualmente relevantes. El presente trabajo pretende colmar la laguna existente respecto a los enfoques formales y propone un análisis textual y comparado de las claves estilísticas de ambas series en su tratamiento de la actividad periodística. Como principal resultado, se concluye que, aunque las dos mantienen una conexión importante con la realidad, *The Wire* (Bajo escucha) apuesta por un sistema formal –articulado por las estrategias de puesta en escena, planificación, montaje y espacio sonoro– más proclive a la exposición descriptiva de los hechos, mientras que *The Newsroom* se decanta por una expresividad que idealiza el ejercicio de la profesión mediante el énfasis sentimental.*

Palabras clave:

*Representación periodística; estilo televisivo; análisis textual; *The Wire*; *The Newsroom*.*

1. Introduction

The portrayal of journalists in fictional productions has an impact on how they are perceived in real life (Ehrlich, 1997). In fact, popular culture influences the audience's perception of the efficiency of the media (Saltzman, 2005: 2). As a result, there has been a proliferation of studies on how the film industry, which is a mass medium with a strong cultural standing, has interpreted both news professionals (McNair: 2010) and the journalistic profession itself (Ehrlich: 2004).

Although the early 21st century witnessed a preference for focusing on films in research regarding the portrayal of journalism (Saltzman, 2005), the increasing prestige of television series has helped to broaden the landscape. Undoubtedly, the development of more elaborate and complex serial narratives (Mittell, 2015) have fuelled academic interest in productions such as *The Wire*¹ and *The Newsroom*, which have attracted the attention of film critics, received major awards, and generated a great deal of controversy.

While in the former, journalism was the main topic of the last season², in the latter, journalistic practices were the main reason for its existence. As these were two major commitments by Home Box Office (HBO), the channel that built its brand image on quality (Cascajosa, 2011), the approach to such a transcendental issue regarding the inner workings of democratic societies resulted in every imaginable repercussion except indifference.

1 Numerous publications, such as the compilation edited by *Errata Naturae* (2010), and that of Álvarez and Simon (2013), just to mention a few, have been published as a result of interest in the series.

2 *The Wire* offers a panoramic view of the City of Baltimore in which each of the five seasons focuses on one essential aspect of life in the city, all of which are interrelated: drug trafficking, the smuggling of goods and people in the port, the struggle for political power, the structural problems of the education system, and the way in which the press operates.

For these reasons, it is not possible to understand the television portrayal of journalism in the current century without examining two specific works which, given the fact that they were aired during approximately the same years and through the same broadcaster, enable a comparative analysis to be added to the list of studies that have addressed both of them.

Moreover, these series have generally focused on ideological, narrative and ethical themes. Therefore, theoretically it would be novel to add a stylistic perspective that would enhance the understanding of the specific audio-visual format in which the journalistic profession appears on the screen.

1.1. *The Wire and The Newsroom: two approaches to the practice of journalism*

The newspaper called *The Baltimore Sun* is at the heart of the last season of *The Wire*, and the cable news network *Atlantis Cable Network* (ACN) is the setting for first season of *The Newsroom*. The names chosen by David Chase and Aaron Sorkin, who are the creators of both series, are highly significant: while one is a fictional version of the well-known *Baltimore Sun* newspaper, the other is an imaginary company whose name refers to the famous mythological City of Atlantis. Consequently, the names indicate both the realistic and epic aspirations of both productions.

To begin with, it bears mentioning the different personalities of the key figures of the series, Simon and Sorkin, even though they both fit the profile of temperamental and problematic showrunners who played a leading role in the Third Golden Age of American television (Martin, 2014)³.

With regard to Simon, he became interested in the profession because his father was a journalist, and he began writing for student newspapers at high school, and later at the University of Maryland, before working as a reporter for twelve years at *The Baltimore Sun* (Sabin, 2011: 140). Influenced by the New Journalism with a left-wing liberal outlook, Simon cultivated a style of reportage that sometimes took on a serial format, focusing on drug trafficking in the city. During the 1990s, he refined a style that would come to fruition with two books: *Homicide* (1991), and *The Corner* (1997). In between these two works, he wrote and produced *Homicide: Life on the Street* (NBC, 1993-1999), which is a series based on his literary work. The move to HBO with *The Corner* (2000) culminated his journey from the written press to the audio-visual medium, which allowed him to explore the same themes in a narrative way with considerable freedom as an author (Jensen, 2017). The last season of *The Wire* can only be understood from the perspective of a screenwriter who was disappointed with the trends in journalism.

Regarding Sorkin, his interest in journalism came from outside. Although he is from a family of lawyers, his taste for drama led him to obtain a Bachelor's Degree in Musical Theatre from Syracuse University in 1983. He made his Hollywood screenwriting debut with *A Few Good Men* (Rob Reiner, 1992), which was an adaptation of his own play. The success of *Malice* (Harold Becker, 1993), and *The American President* (Rob Reiner, 1995), opened doors for him in the television industry, for which he produced and wrote *Sports Night* (ABC, 1998-2000), which revolved around the sports newsroom of a cable network, although it focused more on personal rather than professional aspects (Ferrucci and Painter, 2012). His consolidation as a series creator came with *The West Wing*, NBC, 1999-2006, which won awards and critical acclaim during the four seasons he was on the series. At

³ Simon plays a major role in Martin's controversial book dedicated to both of these complex men, yet strangely enough, Sorkin is noticeably absent from the work.

that stage of his career, Sorkin's writing style was fairly well defined, to the extent that he himself admitted to possessing an "idealistic and romantic style" (Fahy, 2005: 14).

HBO premiered *The Newsroom* in November of 2014, after a shaky period that included *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip* (NBC, 2006-2007), whose theme was the late night world, but it was cancelled after the first season. Clearly, Sorkin was fascinated by the inner workings of the media, so he spent more than a year in various television newsrooms to recreate the ins and outs of the cable news industry (Huver, 2011).

With this type of background, some details that epitomise the mood of *The Wire* and *The Newsroom* are not surprising. For example, in one episode from the first season of Simon's series, *The Wire* 1.06, Detective Lester Freamon (Clarke Peters) utters the phrase, "all the pieces matter", which became an iconic expression reflected in the merchandising of products, as well as a monograph that addressed the series (Abrams, 2018). Meanwhile, promotional material for *The Newsroom* presented the series as a behind-the-scenes look at those who fulfil the "quixotic mission" of achieving good news by overcoming commercial and corporate obstacles (Peters, 2015: 608).

Freamon's utterance summed up the factual vision and descriptive style that Simon tried to imbue in the stories that unfold on several interrelated fronts. Moreover, Sorkin's quixotic assumption was a declaration of principles about the idealism of the series. These were two distinct approaches to the journalistic profession, which could be summed up as what is versus what ought to be.

1.2. *The interest of the stylistic perspective in television studies: objectives and hypotheses*

The approaches taken by Simon and Sorkin toward the portrayal of journalism were different, yet the two series had one thing in common: they both suffered a hostile response from the US media.

After the enthusiasm generated by the previous seasons, the fifth season appeared to result in the media taking revenge on Simon, who was accused of twisting and manipulating his personal experience to settle unresolved issues. Thus, firms belonging to the Tribune Media Company, which is the owner of *The Baltimore Sun*, targeted the journalistic profession in order to defend their own credibility, which had been called into question (Steiner et al., 2012). Although there were exceptions, the author's rancour was the victim of considerable criticism (Zurawik, 2007; Vozzella, 2008; Ryan, 2008), along with lampooned portrayals of some of the main characters, especially those who were executives (Caramanica, 2008).

In turn, much of the criticism of *The Newsroom* revolved around its defence of institutional ideals that were perceived as unrealistic and impractical (Koliska and Eckert, 2015: 751). The breach between what many journalists saw as the reality of the profession and the on-screen depictions fuelled harsh criticism in the mainstream media (Stern, 2012; Nussbaum 2012; Hale, 2012; Marash, 2012).

This suspicion resulted in an interest that moved very quickly to the academic world. In the case of *The Wire*, the features that stand out are the dramatic techniques used to design a reformist and nostalgic critique (Sabin, 2011), the attempt to repair journalistic paradigms (Steiner et al., 2012), and the role of pseudo-events in the newsgathering process (Ferrucci and Painter, 2013). In the case of *The Newsroom*, proposals focused on the heroic portrayal of journalists (McNair, 2014), popular reflections on the state of journalism as a reaction to the series (Peters, 2015), and the media's response to the way the profession is

portrayed (Koliska and Eckert, 2015). Such research focuses on ideological, narrative and receptive aspects, which is no surprise, due to the fact that of all the possible approaches taken toward the television industry, those related to style have been among the least addressed (Butler, 2010). The history of television studies can be described as a slow progression of aesthetic and formal approaches by those who were laying the theoretical foundations of this type of research (Newcomb, 1974; Ellis, 1982; Thorburn, 1987; Caldwell, 1995; Metallinos, 1996), and by theorists who applied them to case studies of influential authors and works after a few years (Vidal, 2018; Huerta and Pérez, 2019).

For these reasons, the main objective of this paper is to complement existing research on the portrayal of journalism in *The Wire* and *The Newsroom* with a study that takes a fresh approach by focusing on the stylistic features of the series. To this end, our starting point is the hypothesis that the audio-visual style of both series is consistent with their realistic and idealistic approaches, respectively.

2. Methodology

To examine the stylistic qualities of the series, a text analysis was carried out regarding the ten episodes of the fifth season of *The Wire*, as well as the ten episodes that comprise the first season of *The Newsroom*. Specifically, the analysis focuses on the features that Bordwell and Thompson describe as the “cinematographic style” (2001: 155-350).

Text analysis makes it possible to identify the possible meanings that are inherent to a text, which is useful for the researcher who is concerned with fictional media content (Larsen, 1991). Indeed, text analysis helps to circumvent the limitations of quantitative methodologies and opens up a range of options for identifying implicit patterns present in the object of study (Furshich, 2009: 41).

However, as this field of study is vast, we have focused specifically on analysing portrayals that emphasise formal aspects of a stylistic nature. Many of the visual and sound features that comprise fictional audio-visual texts are explained by Bordwell and Thompson using the concept of “cinematographic style” (2001: 155), as mentioned above. In the opinion of these authors, style is a formal system resulting from a certain type of staging, planning strategies, a combination of shots in the editing, and a specific sound design.

Starting from these blocks, the analysis of the twenty or so episodes focuses on the following: sets and scenery, costumes and make-up, lighting, and the expression and movement of the figures; the composition of the frames, planning in terms of scale, angulation and movement; the graphic and rhythmic relationships between shots; and the sound qualities (noises, music, and the like).

The results obtained can be potentially compared to each other in order to discern, in a way that is comprehensive and panoramic, the way in which they deal with the same subject: the work of journalists. For the sake of comparison, the sample consists of one season for each series, and an equal number of episodes for each season. However, in the case of *The Wire*, the fifth and final season was chosen, and in the case of *The Newsroom*, the first season was selected. It bears mentioning that in David Simon’s crime drama, only one of the plots focuses on the press, which occurs in the fifth season, whereas Aaron Sorkin’s series revolves around a TV news network in the two seasons that aired.

Finally, the texts are also comparable with a regard to production. The two series were produced by HBO and were originally broadcast in the same way (weekly for HBO subscribers), with a time span that ran from 9 March 2008 (the farewell date of *The Wire*) to 10 November 2014, the premiere of *The Newsroom*.

3. Results

3.1. Stylistic qualities in depicting journalism: the fifth season of *The Wire*

The last release of *The Wire* extends several plot lines of the story about a police unit that pursues drug traffickers using eavesdropping and video surveillance techniques. However, the series gives a panoramic view of Baltimore, the most populous city in the state of Maryland, and one of the most violent in the world.

In season five, the police squad is disbanded due to city council cost-cutting. Detective Jimmy McNulty (Dominic West), fed up with the situation, uses the deaths of several homeless people to make it look like they have been murdered. When Mayor Thomas Carcetti (Aidan Gillen) realises that he can make electoral gains in his aspiration to become governor, he allocates the resources necessary to solve the crime, although McNulty diverts the funds to the case of Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector), one of the drug lords who has been under surveillance for months. Veteran Lester Freamon leads an undercover operation that culminates in the downfall of Marlo's gang. Finally, when everything is revealed, the political machinery is activated to ensure that no information gets out, even if it means the demotion of several policemen and the release of the drug lord.

The involvement of *The Baltimore Sun* is decisive in the sequence of events as well. The newspaper is in financial trouble and its employees are working in precarious conditions.

Executive editor James Whiting (Sam Freed) encourages the editors to push the “Dickensian side” of the news so they can compete for a Pulitzer Prize. Ambitious M. Scott Templeton (Thomas McCarthy) takes advantage of the situation and ends up publishing a series of stories full of falsehoods about the homeless murders. Veteran local section editor Gus Haynes (Clark Johnson) tries to stop Templeton, who is supported by Whiting and editor-in-chief Klebanow (David Costabile). In the end, despite the fact that both Gus and McNulty are aware of the lies in the heart of the articles, the executives and the journalist of *The Baltimore Sun* get their long-awaited Pulitzer Prize.

The relationship between the newspaper and the city is evident in the season's headline. The sequence is made up of short images, the second of which corresponds to the copies running on a press belt, just after the close-up of a screen with sound waves, yet before a long-shot shot of Baltimore City Hall. To the sound of “*Way Down in the Hole*”, performed by Steve Earle⁴, there are other shots that relate to the world of crime: taking drugs, suspects being booked, police cars with sirens blaring, and so on. In short, we view a scene of politics and marginality. In between the shots, the headlines of various news stories are added to those of the print press to announce the role of newspaper articles in the rhythm of the city.

4 The song, composed by Tom Waits, has different performers and versions in each season: The Blind Boys of Alabama, Waits himself, The Neville Brothers and DoMaJe in the first four seasons.

3.1.1. Staging Strategies

The Baltimore newspaper plays an important role in the events of the season. To emphasise the realistic tone, as David Simon had covered the world of crime from 1982 to 1995, he kept the name and made sure that the staging features resembled as closely as possible the premises of *The Baltimore Sun*. Thus, the arrangement of the newsroom, the colour of the walls, and even the way in which the professionals rolled up their shirt sleeves were duplicated in detail (Steiner et al., 2012: 708).

Access to that world occurs near the end of the episode *More with Less* (1.01), a title that refers to the financial cutbacks of the police and journalists. During the scene, Gus is with other colleagues at the back of the building. An electric fence with a sign saying *Keep Out* stands between the group and the camera lens which, aesthetic differences aside, is reminiscent of the beginning of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). Here, too, the obstacle is overcome to see and hear how, amidst rusty machines parked in disarray, the men discuss the rumours of layoffs circulating in the company.

After finishing a cigarette, Gus goes up the stairs leading to the newsroom, which is undoubtedly the great scenographic reference of the journalistic plot. The space is large, crowded with people and objects: editors are huddled together at small tables with their computers, books, file cabinets, scattered papers, posters on the walls, and more. The set reflects the cramped and untidy working spaces, emphasised by a low ceiling full of fluorescent lights that seem to oppress the characters at the top of the frame. There is also an overemphasis of cold, neutral tones, with a predominance of grey and white, complemented by the pastel green of some of the columns and offset with small patches of red and yellow. It is, in short, an artificial and somewhat chaotic environment as a result of everyday demands.

Most of the journalistic scenes take place in the newsroom, which points to a certain loss of street reporting. The frequency with which editors attend press conferences and other events organised by politicians and the police, which appear in *Transitions* (5.04)⁵, *The Dickensian Aspect* (5.06), *Late Editions* (5.09), and *30* (5.10), reinforces this view. Moreover, the close relationship between journalism and power is evident in bars and cafés, places where professionals and their sources find a confidential atmosphere for exchanging information. Especially eloquent is the scene in *Not for Attribution* (5.03), during which Gus shares a few drinks with Norman Wilson (Reg. E. Cathey), a retired journalist and current advisor to the mayor, who leaks news of the change in the post of police superintendent. The game is so obvious that Gus claims to talk to his interlocutor “from whore to whore”⁶.

On the other hand, journalists rarely appear in their homes. When they do, the situation is similar to that of police officers, who also find it very difficult to take their minds off work. In the early episodes, the series uses the home to characterise some of the journalists, for example, when Gus is unable to sleep and wakes his wife in *Unconfirmed Reports* (5.02), because he doubts the

5 The idea of press conferences as an instrument of public relations through euphemisms becomes a reality when Gus interprets what the mayor says during an appearance broadcast on television, which the journalists follow from the newsroom.

6 The character's fondness for public places as locations of encounter with his sources is confirmed in *Last Editions*, when Gus has lunch with Nerese Campbell (Marlyne Barrett), who is preparing her candidacy for the mayor's office. Jimmy McNulty also meets on more than one occasion with Alma and Templeton in cafés and bars to use the press for his Machiavellian crusade.

accuracy of a piece of information that is about to be published. In Not for Attribution, Alma also gets up in the early morning hours and goes out to find a copy of *The Sun*, just to find the page on which one of her pieces is published.

Therefore, the prevalence of interior settings in the journalistic plot is quite evident. Nevertheless, as the case of the fake homeless murderer unfolds, the exteriors become more prominent. On more than one occasion, however, Templeton's discomfort when working outdoors is noted, both in his search for testimonials for a story on the local baseball team, and when he is immersed in his series of reports on the homeless. This negative view of the profession is offset by Mike Fletcher (Brandon Young), the young black editor who, late in the season, is authorised by Gus to live with Bubbles (Andre Royo) to prepare a feature story that offers an authentic view of life on the streets.

The scenography is generally used to create a realistic atmosphere. Furthermore, Bordwell and Thompson use the term *attrezzo* to describe those objects in the set that actively operate within the action and can become a reason for the narrative (2001: 160-161). Along these lines, the printed copies of the newspaper that are used by many characters at key moments, such as police officers, politicians, drug dealers, and the editors themselves, highlights the importance of the press in the different plots and its influence on the life of the city. This importance is mitigated, however, by the number of occasions on which the newspapers are thrown into a waste bin, especially when police officers are angry about what has been published.

Costumes and make-up are also realistic. Generally, the professionals wear shirts with rolled-up sleeves, along with jackets and ties, when in the newsroom. However, when they work outside the newsroom or attend official events, they generally respect the rules of formality by dressing with modesty and avoiding luxury. The seniority of the newspaper's supporting cast, who seem to be the last of a dying breed, is striking. As Sabin points out, more than a dozen of David Simon's former colleagues at *The Sun*, including his wife Laura Lippman, appear throughout the series (2010: 147). What's more, Simon himself take a seat at the editor's desk during the last episode, with a pen in his mouth, as he writes with full concentration. Directly in front of him is a sign with a vindictive message that reads, "Save *The Sun*"⁷.

The lighting varies according to the type of setting in which the action takes place. As previously mentioned, the low ceilings of the newsroom are full of fluorescent lights that flood the room with a soft, overhead illumination, creating a uniform and neutral atmosphere consistent with a space designed for group work.

However, when the journalists leave the newsroom, the lighting in other places is more stylish. Thus, there is a proliferation of shadows and warm tones in places where the journalists meet, such as a bar in the first episode, which reinforces the camaraderie among colleagues, and during the successive meetings with sources. In these scenes, the lighting helps to create an atmosphere of confidentiality that is essential for the series' portrayal of reporting.

Finally, certain features are also reiterated in the expression and movements of the characters. The dynamic depiction of the activity in the editorial office enhances the fast-paced internal rhythm of many of the scenes that take place there. Most of the frames include movements of people that create a clamorous and chaotic atmosphere. As if that were not enough, Gus's proactive and non-conformist nature is evident in his continuous trips between tables. In fact, there are many scenes that

7 This is not the only detail in the scene: the editing sequence that ends the season features another sign on Gus' desk that reads, "Support our staff".

begin with him entering the set energetically, which emphasises the personality of a man who sees his profession as a constant search for the truth.

3.1.2. *Planning strategies*

As a general rule, the fifth season of *The Wire* tends toward descriptive planning, with an emphasis on a variety of medium scales (American shot, medium shot, and medium- long shot), which balances the prominence of the characters and the context. To a lesser extent, long shots are also used to focus on the location of the action, along with close-ups to assist in reading details such as the headline of a news story. In the same way, standard camera and slightly oblique angles take precedence over other more forced or expressive camera positions, which are nearly non-existent. Camera movements also need to be added to the equation, especially for travelling and panoramic scenes for multiple intentionality, as often the same movement serves to accompany a character, describe the setting, and make connections between elements found at the beginning and end of a take.

Newsroom scenes tend to repeat planning patterns. On numerous occasions, Gus's point of view takes precedence in the plot, as he enters the place with a determined pace while the camera records his itinerary using either long-shots or American shots, with considerable depth thanks to short focal lenses, as well as slightly tilted shots that emphasise the low height of the ceiling, and an accompanying travelling shot that increases agility. Moreover, the movement of the camera is often intended to be descriptive of the space and relational as well, as it establishes a meaningful link between elements or characters arranged on the set. From that moment on, during the dialogues between the journalists, the scales are reduced to medium shots, generally static or with slight travelling movements. Only occasionally does the planning become more expressive by combining close-ups with the use of a shoulder-mounted camera, which adds tension to the filmmaking. The use of this technique is evident in Took (5.07), especially when Gus turns to the journalists and announces that they will have more resources to follow up on the case of the alleged psychopath. At the same time, there is a meeting in which Cedric Daniels (Lance Reddick) speaks to other officials to organise a search for the killer, as the mayor has also committed resources to the case. The similarity between journalistic and police fiction that runs throughout the season is reinforced by another circumstantial use of the shoulder camera. This occurs in 30, when Templeton lies to McNulty by saying that he saw the suspect fleeing in a van.

On the other hand, medium shots are usually filmed with longer focal length lenses that avoid depth and generate the perception of being far away. This strategy includes another compositional feature that appears frequently with a strong effect: the characters usually have objects in front of them that take away a certain amount of space, make the area more closed, and give both the camera lens and the spectator the role of being a witness to the events.

The sequence in which Gus enters the newsroom for the first time is a fairly typical example of this technique. The camera awaits the journalist in a central area and when he enters, a slight panoramic view is combined with an accompanying horizontal travelling shot which, at the same time, shows a big room full of work stations. The American shot cuts to a medium long shot when he stops to talk to an editor. After a brief ellipsis, he does the same with another, at which point three out-of-focus computer monitors are placed in the forefront, occupying a large part of the frame. The appearance of a stolen shot, as

if the camera lens is the eyes of an anonymous editor observing the activity, gives the spectator the role of participating in the scene as a witness to the events.

3.1.3. Editing strategies

The Wire uses an invisible style characteristic of classical language, with a tendency toward continuity between images and gradual changes of shots and cuts, which is nearly the only assemblage technique that promote transparency. Furthermore, in terms of the rhythm generated by the editing, synthesis predominates, with an abundance of long takes and shorter fragments when there are dialogues with brief statements.

Continuity and transparency in the editing help to display the events portrayed as interrelated parts of a larger whole. Consequently, there are scenes that set up a situation that is suddenly interrupted in order to pave the way for another scene with a different plot or plots, before recovering the development and resolution of the first one. In this sense, staging is a basic tool that embodies the axiom, “all the pieces matter”, which drives the production, although only exceptionally are actions that happen simultaneously on different stages presented in parallel.

On the other hand, a linear and fluid flow of events in which there are no flashbacks is common. However, the expository style is broken in the final sequence of the last episode.

One of the most distinctive formal features of *The Wire* is how all the seasons close with a montage sequence as exceptional as the slow motion of some of its shots, which provides a brief resolution of each plot through short fragments. As they follow one after another, there is an effect of creating meaning through combination, establishing a valuable nexus between the various parts of the large-scale altarpiece, which is the City of Baltimore in its entirety.

The evaluative intention becomes more evident as the sequence is preceded by McNulty’s gaze toward the city, in a gesture similar to that of a longshoreman contemplating the port in the episode Port in a Storm (2.12). Instead of the counter-plane corresponding to their point of view, the spectator sees diverse situations that belong to the world of the police, the street, the judicial domain, prisons and, of course, the media, in a proposal that clarifies the causes and effects of what is happening in the city.

Specifically, the plot at *The Sun* culminates in two very brief excerpts that sum up the love/hate relationship that the drama seems to have with the world of journalism: while Templeton accepts his Pulitzer Prize and shares it with Whiting and Klebanow, the strict Fletcher seems to have been promoted, as he gives directions to a veteran editor.

When the sequence ends, the story returns to McNulty. After saying, “let’s go home”, to the homeless man he has taken out of the shelter, he starts the car and leaves the scene, with the last image of the series being a long shot of the skyscrapers of Baltimore in the background, and a motorway criss-crossed by cars in the foreground. The shot remains on screen for a considerable amount of time as a conclusion: nothing has changed, everything remains the same.

3.1.4. Sound strategies

Sound helps to configure a formal system with expository intentionality. The descriptive purpose is evident in the use of the soundtrack, which is very present in the scenes set in the newsroom of *The Sun*. The soundscape tends to be dense, with telephone rings, computer keystrokes, and conversations in the background. Just as the staging revealed a tendency toward accumulation and disorder in the visual aspects, the sound environment during these types of sequences is in line with the same idea.

In any case, here too the aim is realism, which makes the spectator a type of eyewitness.

There is creative forethought in one of the most unique formal features of the series: almost all the sounds are diegetic; consequently, they are present in the action. This is overwhelmingly true of the music, as *The Wire* lacks a non-diegetic soundtrack that might convey emotion or be used for other expressive purposes. The only musical compositions played are part of the diegesis. Moreover, they are not introduced through post-production techniques. As such, popular and energetic genres such as blues, jazz and rock supplement the credibility of the meetings in bars, such as that of Gus and the veteran Twigg (Bruce Kirkpatrick) in Not for Attribution. Consequently, the exuberance of a jazz trumpet serves as a counterpoint to the lamentation of Twigg, who is about to be fired: “In ten years, there will be nothing left to call a newspaper”.

As illustrated in the montage, the elaborate sequence that serves as a closure is truly exceptional. The series of short scenes is complemented by an extradiegetic theme song that plays from beginning to end. This is the only one in the entire season and something that happens in previous seasons as well. This added expressive feature also has a self-referencing nuance, as the song is a version of *Way Down in the Hole*, performed by The Blind Boys of Alabama, which was also played in the header of the first season.

3.2. Stylistic qualities in the depiction of journalism: The first season of *The Newsroom*

The flashpoint of *The Newsroom* comes when Charlie Skinner (Sam Waterston), president of the news division of the Atlantis Cable Network (ACN), hires MacKenzie McHale (Emily Mortimer) as executive producer of *News Night*, the network’s prime time show. Its host and editor, Will McAvoy (Jeff Daniels), is uneasy about the decision for two reasons: they had a relationship that ended because of her infidelity, and he doesn’t think she’s the right person to get big ratings.

MacKenzie’s idealism, which is illustrated by her comment, “It’s Don Quixote’s moment”, in We Just Decided To (1.01.), which is clearly evident when her first task upon arrival is to cover the explosion of a BP oil platform, which is followed by a five-million barrel oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

The story’s timeline is firmly set from 20 April 2010 (the day on which the accident occurred) to 8 August 2011, the date when The Greater Fool (1.10) narrates how Will dismantles the false republicanism of the Tea Party, the ultra-conservative branch that controls another party of which he is a recognised member. In between, the members of the newsroom try their best to produce an ethically impeccable news programme, an objective that is put to the test when covering events such as the attack on Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in I’ll Try to Fix You, (1.04), the rebellion against Egyptian President Mubarak in Amen, (1.05), or the assassination of terrorist leader Osama Bin Laden in 5/1, (1.07), among other real-life events. This concept of

journalism as the cornerstone of a healthy democracy sometimes clashes with the economic and political interests of the Atlantis Media Group, the business conglomerate to which ACN belongs, which is owned by Leona Lansing (Jane Fonda).

The show's opening is a statement of the series' intention. Its first section is highlighted by real black-and-white images of old newsreels that follow one after another, a CBS set broadcasting election day, a make-up room, a production control room, and the faces of Edward R. Murrow and Walter Cronkite (two legendary figures in television journalism) who fill the screen as they present their programmes. Thomas Newman's soundtrack reinforces the nostalgic tone of a performance which, in its second half, offers a colour replica of the invented ACN full of short shots and chained fades. The dialogue between a fictional present and a historic past that serves as a benchmark is embedded in the opening piece of each episode.

3.2.1. Staging Strategies

The newsroom of the programme called *News Night*, which is artificial and indoors, is the main setting of the story. The room is quite large, with a notable separation between work stations, and a ceiling of considerable height. A blue colour abounds, which is consistent with the channel's corporate image, combined with grey tones of file cabinets, glass dividers, etc., with some wood panels in brown for contrast, and green columns.

The style is repeated in other professional settings in nearby rooms, such as the boardroom where topics to be covered in the news bulletin are discussed. In these cases, large glass windows are more prominent, in Will's office as well (adjacent to the newsroom), although with a peculiar aspect: they are tinted for a certain amount of privacy, which illustrates his character as a person who tries to protect himself.

The set and the programme's production control area are equally remarkable. The many technological resources required for broadcasting dominate the setting. In this sense, television monitors play a highly active role in the narrative, thereby embodying what Bordwell and Thompson call a fundamental tool, or *attrezzo*.

The omnipresence of the screens makes them another character in an attempt to demonstrate their power of influence, which is a determining factor in the professional commitment of those who inhabit the series. However, the expressive polyvalence of the scenarios is striking, as the spaces in question are not only home to professional activity, but they often host events of a personal nature as well. On several occasions, the partners of some of the characters are quietly sitting in the newsroom, even during hectic moments like the time just prior to the announcement of Bin Laden's death in the episode 5/1.

In this regard, the sets are places where the professional and the emotional are constantly intermingled. Sorkin combines the two dimensions, so that even in the apartments, such as Will's luxurious home or in the more modest version belonging to Maggie (Alison Pill) and Lisa (Kelen Coleman), or in the bar near the station known as Hang's Chew karaoke bar, the journalistic plots can move forward. In fact, profession and emotion go hand in hand at all times.

The characters tend to wear comfortable clothes with toned-down colours when working behind the scenes, with the exception of Skinner, who clearly belongs to the old school with his inseparable bow tie and classic jacket, yet they dress much more elegantly when they appear in front of the camera. In the first episode, MacKenzie asks who is in charge of Will's wardrobe. When she is told that no one is, she instructs them to order suits in "ash grey, navy blue and black from Zegna, Armani and

Hugo Boss”. When they question her decision by asking, “Isn’t he going to look like an elitist prick?” she replies, “That’s what he is! Let him at least go back to being sexy”.

Contributing to the impeccable appearance that is the aim of the production company is the intense, vivid, and uniform lighting that floods the set. The lights in front of the anchor-man are often made visible in the diegesis in order to create symbolic value. For example, the programme that Will devotes to the contradictions of the Tea Party in the episode “The Greater Fool” concludes with travelling backward from the host’s back, which gives the huge light sources prominence in the frame, clearly suggesting that the aim of shedding light on reality has been successfully accomplished⁸.

Finally, the movement and expression of the characters gives a sense of hyperactivity in many parts of the episodes, especially during the lead-up to the broadcasts, and when unforeseen events occur. As such, the staging shows frenetic activity in order to find dynamic solutions. This unrestrained internal rhythm is compensated by the thoughtful calm of the preparatory meetings, the broadcasting of the programmes, and recurring situations that depends on other resources such as planning and editing to achieve formal dynamism.

3.2.2. *Planning strategies*

The planning is remarkable for its expressiveness. Although both directors employ a wide range of scales, they give special emphasis both to the more open and the more closed with two objectives: on the one hand, the long shots, especially of the professionals working in the newsroom, try to convey a collective protagonism, so that those who make *News Night* look somewhat like members of a family⁹.

On the other hand, the most relevant scenes in terms of dramatic structure are often concluded with emotional endings full of facial close-ups.

Most of the camera positions are at eye level with the characters, although there are some high-angle shots of the newsroom for the purpose of enhancing the group view of those who work there. There are occasional low-angle shots, especially of Will, Mackenzie, and Skinner, which reinforce their status as moral leaders in the shared adventure of newsreel journalists.

Moreover, the camera movements serve the same purpose: the main characters are often accompanied by travellings, especially when they walk through the bustling corridors of the station, which adds vitality to the filmmaking. Rarely does the camera remain static, while there is a plethora of panoramic shots that shift the attention from one character to another in the same shot, which is a clear alternative to editing cuts, thereby reinforcing the connection between the characters and their belonging to a team. The result is a style with a clearly realistic touch, topped off with a zoom in, which is a common resource in emotionally extreme situations.

8 By contrast, the sets on the 44th floor of the channel’s office building, which is occupied by owner Leona and her son Reese (Chris Messina), contain shadows that are associated with shady corporate interests, as seen in the meeting of The 112th Congress (1.03).

9 The plot is characterised by a strong endogamy, so that the emotional and professional dimensions of the characters constantly overlap.

3.2.3. *Editing strategies*

All the strategies described above have a clearly formal meaning in the editing. As a general premise, *The Newsroom* dramatises journalistic activity with a strong rhetorical component. As a stylistic pattern, during the *News Night* broadcasts, production resources such as cranes, teleprompters, mixing desks, etc., are evident, and the discourse is fragmented by means of brief shots with a lot of movement, whether they are travellings, zooms, panoramas, or shoulder-mounted shots. In the same way, the programme is nearly always edited in close collaboration with the production control department from where the programme is managed, as well as from the newsroom where the professionals closely follow the broadcast, thereby emphasising the notion of team work.

The fragmented discourse, which also occurs in stressful situations in other settings, is mitigated in the multiple scenes that culminate in emotionally intense and ideologically persuasive speeches by some of the characters. To underpin the vehement tone to which the closed scales and musical soundtrack are added, the editing becomes more concise, so that the audience can be compelled to listen to MacKenzie telling Will in *News Night 2.0* (1.02), “be the leader; give us the morale that the programme should have; be the integrity”; just to highlight one example.

The production of meaning through editing is also manifested in episodes that breach linearity. There are non-linear structures through the use of flashbacks in *The 112th Congress, I’ll Try to Fix You, Bullies* (1.06), and *The Greater Fool*, with the season’s farewell episode being the most notorious example of a time disruption that explains the causes of an event (an example of which is converting a report about an elderly black woman not being allowed to vote for a Republican legislative initiative into an opening news story), in addition to describing its consequences with strong emotion.

Moreover, in these and other episodes, the time markers of the story are displayed through labels that specify the day, month, and year of the events in question. This visual information also emphasises that the events with which the fictional journalists are working are based on real situations.

Time disruptions and shifting rhythms guide the viewer to make a very specific interpretation of the events, which undergo emotional enhancement through editing. The aim is clear during the montage sequences that summarise moral principles, which use an array of tools to take advantage of the emotional power of audio-visual depiction. For this purpose, sound strategies are of paramount importance.

3.2.4. *Sound strategies*

Music plays a major role in the stylistic personality of *The Newsroom*. First and foremost, what stands out is the soundtrack by Thomas Newman, an experienced Hollywood composer. His creations emerge in scenes that have the greatest dramatic force, and are generally used to underscore the intriguing, frenetic and, above all, emotional and epic tone of the events. For the most part, emotion is combined with slower, more closely planned productions, in a strategy of remarkable expressiveness that is achieved through the fusion of image and sound.

The prominence of the sound space becomes more relevant in the sequences that use songs by well-known artists, which contribute to the exaltation of concepts and ideas. For example, at the end of *Night News 2.0*, Radiohead’s *High and Dry* is

played from beginning to end, and the climax with electric guitars coincides with Will's gaze at the Statue of Liberty, in a subjective shot accentuated by a zoom-in of considerable duration from the balcony of his flat. The anchorman, who has just told MacKenzie that she can count on him for an ethically reworked version of the programme, is seen in a long shot with the city in the background, which makes him appear as a type of solitary guardian of democratic freedom, a conclusion that is enhanced by the melody.

In a similar vein, montage sequences are also used at the end of I'll Try to Fix You, during which Coldplay's *Fix You* can be heard, and in The Blackout (Part 2): Mock Debate, during which Amy Winehouse's *Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?* is heard as well. The two episodes end with similar actions of both a professional and personal nature, which are loaded with emotional energy.

By comparison, as the diegetic music is reduced almost exclusively to the moments that take place in Hang's Chew, it has less impact on the stylistic configuration of the series. The background songs played during these scenes contribute to the realism of the situation, similar to the scores played during the broadcast of the programme and the noises in the newsroom such as telephone rings, computer keystrokes, and so on, which help to create the atmosphere of agitation and urgency in which the professionals work.

In fact, these journalists display a striking quality, which is the wit they use to express themselves through words. In terms of sound, *The Newsroom* also stands out for the fast pace of its dialogue, which is full of irony and double meanings. The discussions that take place provide a frenetic rhythm of expression that moves seamlessly between the professional and personal realms, as they do at other formal levels as well.

4. Discussion and conclusions

I'll Try to Fix You, which is the fourth episode of the first season of *The Newsroom*, concludes with a long sequence that sums up the stylistic approach of the series in relation to journalistic practices: Just when Maggie discovers that a shooting has taken place in the City of Tucson, and that the date of 8 January 2011 is overprinted on the screen, the chords of *Fix You*, which is one of Coldplay's best-known hits, begins to play.

From beginning to end, the song sounds like an emotional¹⁰ piece that drives News Night's coverage of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords' situation. The series uses a style similar to that of a video clip in order to compress time and abandon the realistic depiction of details such as the cancellation of the newsroom noise band, so as not to lose an ounce of musical emotion. The slow cameras, the ceaseless movement, and the close-ups combine with aesthetics that convey an unmistakable message: contrary to what happens in reality, media outlets such as Fox News, CNN and MSNBC News prematurely announce

10 As we have seen, this is not the only stylistic feature that helps to create rhetoric with strong emotional depth in the construction of the text. The work presents such a strong personality at the level of emotion that it would allow for a complementary analysis focusing on the semiotic dimension of passion (Greimas and Fontanille, 1994).

Giffords' death, while ACN complies with the imperative to offer responsible information, resists the pressure, and proves that the Congresswoman has survived the attack.

The emotional lyrics speak of an attempt at healing while the chorus wails, "I'll try to heal you," along with the crescendo of electric guitars, which are joined with images to create a composition that can only be viewed as a utopian alternative to the journalistic praxis that took place that day. In both form and substance, the text is organised in the way that the information should have been handled. Furthermore, an attitude of idealistic amendment runs throughout the series, as the characters strive to engage in alternative coverage of high-profile events that take place between 20 April 2010 and 8 August 2011.

In short, *The Newsroom* takes the media and political reality as points of reference in order to improve them through a fictionalised and idealised alternative¹¹. The strategies of staging and planning are decisive in this endeavour, because in many of the scenes they dramatise the journalistic profession as a collective mission charged with the responsibility of preserving democratic values. Above all, however, editing and sound are the most crucial features in structuring a formal system that tries to achieve persuasive objectives through resources based on emotional manipulation, in the neutral sense of the term, of the spectator.

If *The Newsroom* takes a poignant editorial approach, *The Wire* uses a chronicle-style method. Simon concurs with Sorkin in maintaining a close connection to reality, yet their approaches are different: as opposed to the fictitious newsroom of a television channel whose mythological name deals with authentic events, in this case it is based on a quasi-real newspaper, a carefully recreated version of *The Baltimore Sun*, which covers invented information.

The production style is a seemingly neutral description of events, thanks to staging and planning that is fairly restrained. The expository nature of the work is most evident in the area of sound, which is based on a radical approach: the exclusive use of sounds present in the action and the omission of extra-diegetic music. It is evident that this formal technique avoids any sign of emotion outside the events being narrated, so the presentation is somehow grimmer.

However, at the end of each season, the series plays a trick on the viewer by using a montage sequence with a song that is not part of the diegesis, which is a rhetorical exception. The driving force of the phrase, "all the pieces matter", comes to life in the final minutes, which serve as an explicit interpretation that journalism is part of a political and social structure with little possibility of change, as well as an expressive interpretation of the plots narrated. Up to that point, however, the viewer makes a stronger connection with a naturalistic aesthetic that discards emotional emphasis.

In summary, it can be concluded that text analysis based on stylistic criteria is useful for understanding these series. Thus, the present study shows that the style used by *The Wire* and *The Newsroom* is consistent with the way of interpreting the journalistic profession that has been fairly well addressed by previous research, which has focussed on contextual, narrative, and receptive aspects.

11 Placement of the series in the realm of idealisation, which is apparent in its stylistic qualities, is also evident in the structural components of the story and in the management of the point of view. In fact, the first scene depicts McAvoy's supposed hallucination during a lecture, suggesting a contrast between the real and the ideal that is recurrent throughout the narrative.

Until now, however, the task of examining the specific visual and sound design of two television series considered outstanding in their portrayal of journalism had not yet been accomplished. From the viewpoint of aesthetics, the portrayals in question stand out for their descriptive and idealistic postulates that enhance the vision of what the journalistic profession is, and what it should be, in the first part of the 21st century.

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6. Specific contributions of each author

	Name and surname
Conception and design of the work	Miguel Ángel Huerta Floriano
Methodology	Miguel Ángel Huerta Floriano and Ernesto Pérez Morán
Data collection and analysis	Miguel Ángel Huerta Floriano
Discussion and conclusions	Miguel Ángel Huerta Floriano and Ernesto Pérez Morán
Drafting, formatting, version review and approval	Miguel Ángel Huerta Floriano and Ernesto Pérez Morán

7. Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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