

# Journalism, gender, and television: the image of women journalists in US series (1988-2022)

## *Periodismo, género y televisión: la imagen de las mujeres periodistas en las series estadounidenses (1988-2022)*



**Carlota Coronado Ruiz.** In addition to her role as professor at Complutense University of Madrid, her main lines of research focus on the study of social portrayals related to gender, identity, history, and historical memory from an interdisciplinary point of view, mainly directed at the audio-visual media of film and television. As a result of her research, a number of articles have been published in scientific journals of international prestige.

Complutense University of Madrid, Spain

carlotac@ucm.es

ORCID: 0000-0001-6997-0206

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### Abstract:

Over the decades, the film industry has perpetuated certain narrative paradigms and stereotypes about female journalists. Some of these have been transferred to television fiction, where such portrayals have been updated with new archetypes. The aim of this research is to determine the way female journalists are portrayed in US fictional series. To this end, an analysis has been carried out regarding eight series broadcast between 1988 and 2022, which focus on journalism, featuring women as the protagonists who work in the profession. A diachronic perspective has been taken, which allows us to see the evolution of these stereotypes over more than three decades. In this way, it is possible to observe changes in archetypes as well those that persist, and to show evidence of social progress related to the diverse portrayals of women journalists.

### Keywords:

Female journalist; television; United States; television fiction; journalism.

### Resumen:

*El cine ha perpetuado a lo largo de décadas unos paradigmas narrativos y estereotipos sobre las mujeres periodistas. Algunos de ellos se han trasladado a la ficción televisiva, pero ésta ha actualizado estas representaciones con nuevos modelos. La presente investigación trata de determinar cuál es la imagen que las series de ficción estadounidenses han proyectado sobre las profesionales del periodismo, a través del análisis de ocho series emitidas entre 1988 y 2022, tanto centradas en el periodismo como con protagonistas femeninas que ejercen esta profesión. Se aplica una perspectiva diacrónica que permite ver la evolución de estos estereotipos a lo largo de más de tres décadas. De esta manera, se pueden observar los cambios en los modelos, así como las continuidades, y hacer evidente el progreso social y las diferentes representaciones de las mujeres periodistas.*

### Palabras clave:

*Mujeres periodistas; televisión; Estados Unidos; ficción televisiva; periodismo.*

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## 1. Introduction

Journalism has been the subject of numerous films since the early days of cinema. In these audio-visual stories set in press newsrooms, or in radio or television studios, portrayals of journalists have alternated between the image of a hero in search of the truth, while at the service of democracy, and the antithesis of the unscrupulous and unethical villain who is greedy for power and capable of lying, bribing or distorting reality to achieve their own ends (Ehrlich, 2004; Ehrlich and Saltzman, 2015).

It is rare to find a film title in which journalism is approached in a way that is balanced and neutral (González, 2003: 77). From the drunken, foul-mouthed journalist who twists the truth to create a scandal, a shift has occurred toward the myth of the self-made journalist who fights for justice. Moreover, as pointed out by Mera (2008: 519), “What is portrayed are aspects that are uncommon in the profession, because features are exaggerated and nuances are reduced”.

Authors such as Laviana (1996), Langman (1998), Ghiglione and Saltzman (2005), and McNair (2010) have reflected on these stereotypical visions of journalists offered by fiction and have proposed the most recurring typologies: the reporter as a bloodhound on the hunt for news (Langman, 1998: 2); the human journalist with emotions and internal conflicts; the anonymous reporter, always in the midst of a mass of microphones and cameras; the scandalmonger, or gossip columnist; the grumpy editor who chain-smokes, but has a nose for a good story; and the media owner, who is always looking out for their own self-interest (Ghiglione and Saltzman, 2005: 14-21). McNair (2010) adds other categories: the journalist as a watchdog of political power; the writer or artist as part of the mythology of journalism; the first-hand witness to events; and the villains of the profession.

Of all these journalistic categories, only one refers to women: the so-called *sob sisters*. This derogatory term refers to “female news reporters who appeal to readers’ sympathy with their accounts of heart-wrenching events” (Saltzman, 2003: 2). According to journalist Ishbel Ross, it was first used in 1907. However, the term did not become popular until it started to appear in films. Related to this stereotype of the “sentimental news” journalist was the so-called *news hen*, who had to face a hostile and uncooperative work environment, which sometimes led to her feeling forced to leave to devote herself to the family (Langman, 1998: 3).

This stereotype had already been present in *A Female Reporter* (1909), which was the first short film produced in Hollywood starring a female journalist. Reflecting reality, these films showed the tearful, human, and social issues in which women were involved.

In order to prove their worth, many had to become “one of the boys” (Saltzman, 2003: 3), which gave rise to a process of masculinisation that the big screen highlighted in the 1930s and 40s with characters such as Hildy JoYson in *New Moon* (Howard Hawks, 1940), who was an intelligent and ambitious journalist, capable of speaking on equal terms with her male colleagues, and characterised by her masculine dress and strong personality.

Alongside these two stereotypes, in late 20th century American cinema, other categories of women journalists can be observed: the ambitious, cold, and implacable woman who moves in a male environment and whose professional practices are unorthodox; the frivolous and seductive journalist, superficial and fame-hungry, with no scruples whatsoever; the updated *sob sister* who feels like an outsider in a man’s world to which she has to adapt; the housewife journalist whose main

motivation is not work, but love; the action film heroine, incorporated into the male professional world for the development of the romantic plot (Osorio, 2009); the clumsy young woman with few journalistic skills; the female editor-in-chief who keeps the inexperienced women reporters at bay and is portrayed as embittered and tyrannical; and finally, the myth of the columnist with an unrealistic lifestyle, writing one piece a month with hundreds of fans.

Television fiction from the late 20th to the first part of the 21st century has not abandoned these portrayals: although more than half of the students in journalism schools are female, and the majority of the people working in the profession are women, female journalists in fiction continue to navigate through a man's world trying not to be seen as sex objects, nor use their femininity to achieve success. Television has perpetuated clichés about women journalists for decades, but some positive images have been offered as well. In fact, as pointed out by Saltzman (2003), the two most positive references to journalists in popular culture are women: Mary Richards (Mary Tyler Moore) in *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977), and Murphy Brown (Candice Bergen) in *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998).

Television series have become one of the most popular cultural phenomena of the 21st century. From the 1990s to the present day, there has been a greater presence of women in television fiction, not only quantitatively, but qualitatively as well. The hegemonic androcentrism of Hollywood has given way to new narratives in which female characters have more influence, or in which the problems experienced by women are highlighted. Social changes and the so-called Fourth Wave of feminism have permeated television narratives.

The evolution in the portrayal of women in US television series is closely linked to series about professionals (Marek, 1997) and, in particular, about journalists. The evolution of the female journalist in American series from the 1980s until well into the 2000s is quintessential. Some of the key series that have led to changes in the female archetypes have focused on women journalists (Press, 2018). From *Murphy Brown* in the 1980s, to *Sex and the City* in the 1990s, and *Good Girls Revolt* in the new millennium.

The aim of the present study is to determine whether stereotypes present in film depictions of women journalists have been perpetuated in American television series over the last three decades. Are there new narrative paradigms in the portrayal of these characters, and has there been an evolution in the different archetypes of women journalists over the last thirty years? To answer these questions, and in order to give as complete a picture as possible of how US television fiction has portrayed women journalists, an analysis was carried out of eight American series broadcast between 1988 and 2022, all of which focus on journalism with female journalists as the main characters in the profession.

The study is limited to the USA for several reasons. The first has to do with a methodological issue with regard to quantitatively defining the corpus under analysis, as the object of study is not only limited in time (1988-2022), but also geographically. Naturally, there are television productions from other countries that focus on journalism within this time frame as well, such as the Spanish series *Periodistas* (Telecinco, 1998-2002); the British series *The Hour* (BBC, 2011) *Press* (BBC, 2018); the Danish series *Borgen* (DR and Netflix, 2010-2022); Sweden's *Blinded* (Misofilm, 2019); and South Korea's *Argon* (TVN, 2017), among others. However, the decision was made to focus the research on the US television industry because if other countries had been included, the research would have been unmanageable. The second reason for delimiting the study was to see the evolution of

female characters over several decades, rather than conducting a comparative study with other countries. Moreover, the focus was placed on the United States due to its status as the benchmark of international television.

The film portrayal of journalism has been the subject of numerous research articles and books from the 1970s to the present day, including those of the following authors: Barris (1976); Good (1985 and 1998), Ehrlich (2006); Laviana (1996); Ness (1997); Bezunartea et al. (2007); Requeijo (2013); and Bunyol, (2017). Nevertheless, neither television fiction nor the portrayal of women journalists have been recurring themes in these studies. In the Anglo-Saxon world, among the first works on journalism and television, the book by Douglass K. Daniel (1996) stands out, which focuses on the series *Lou Grant*. The author also devotes a chapter to journalistic drama as a genre of television, in which he makes a historical review of series produced between 1947 and 1977.

In the decades that followed, there was an increase in the number of series that focused on the work environment of journalism, yet this interest by television networks, and later by platforms, has not generated much academic interest. Over the last decade, however, which coincides with the Third Golden Age of American television fiction (Cascajosa Virino, 2009: 12-13; Wayne, 2016: 41), research on series has multiplied, yet there are still few studies that analyse the image depicted of this profession, especially in Spain. Most of them focus on case studies, such as the work by Gómez Morales (2014), who examines the portrayal of journalists in prime time animated comedy series, or Novoa Jaso (2017), who tries to identify the stereotypes of journalists in current television fiction by analysing the series known as *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012) and *Argon* (TVN, 2017). In the Anglo-Saxon world, the comparative work by McNair (2014) on the transfer of old stereotypes of the journalist from film to television stands out.

Research on the image of female journalists in series is also scarce. Saltzman (2003) was one of the first authors to address this issue, pointing out the constant repetition of the archetype that popular culture has conveyed of female journalists. Other studies have examined series about journalism with female protagonists, including the following: *Good Girls Revolt* (Painter and Ferrucci, 2019); characters who work in journalism in series such as *How I Met Your Mother* (Rizwan, 2013); and case studies to identify the portrayal that a given series offers of female journalists (Painter and Ferrucci, 2012 and 2015; De Wulf Helskens et al, 2023). One of the most deeply explored series is *House of Cards* (Cvetkovic and Oostman, 2018; Painter and Ferrucci, 2017), especially regarding the sexualisation and lack of professionalism of women journalists portrayed in the series.

The present research agrees with the idea that the image of female journalists offered by 21st century series are still simplistic and stereotypical: from the “dumb blonde” to the “bitter boss,” and to the masculine female journalist who is successful but has sacrificed her personal life for professional success. These ideas come from various case studies that allow us to make a specific in-depth analysis of a series produced at a given moment. However, it is useful to take a diachronic perspective, which enables the evolution of these stereotypes to be observed by associating the image offered by each series to the production context. In this regard, the present study tries to cover a broad timeframe (1988-2022) in order to identify changes in archetypes, as well as the continuing stereotypes, and to reveal not only social progress, but the different portrayals of women journalists as well.

## 2. Methodology

The first methodological issue was to establish a chronological framework, which was crucial for the design and size of the sample. The aim of providing a broad overview of the image of women journalists in US television series required the selection of a broad time period. Firstly, the idea of focusing on the Third Golden Age of Television, which would have covered fiction produced from the late 1990s to the present day was considered. This chronological framework left out the pioneer of journalistic series and a benchmark in the portrayal of women journalists, *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998), which is why the time period was extended to the last 34 years (1988-2022).

Such a broad period of analysis meant working with an excessively large corpus of documents, so the sample was further delimited by taking different issues into account. Firstly, the authors defined the type of series that would comprise part of the study. The rise of the so-called *workplace TV series*, or professional series, whose main feature is “an approach to reality both in the issues and in the characters’ construction” (Galán, 2007: 41), led to the inclusion of professional series focused on journalism as part of the sample, which reflects the work dynamics of a newsroom, as well as the processes of coverage, creation and news dissemination. However, not all of them were of interest due to the under-representation of women or the limited narrative weight of the women journalists<sup>1</sup>. Therefore, it was reduced to professional series with female protagonists. The selection of a specific genre, such as professional series about journalism, left out other categories such as sitcoms, as well as comedy or drama series with a female journalist as the main character. Therefore, the criterion of narrative weight within the story that was used to select the sample was the following: series with female protagonists<sup>2</sup> in the journalistic profession.

In order to define a sample of analysis with the maximum possible representation, the channels or platforms on which the selected series were broadcast were taken into account. During this period, cable television developed greatly in the United States, which led to a proliferation of channels and television offerings. Although this variety has been addressed in the sample, as the number of series had to be limited, the decision was made to use the following sources: two major networks (CBS and NBC); the platforms with the largest number of subscribers (Netflix and Amazon); and the cable television channel that had changed the US television scene (HBO), which became “the standard-bearer of quality television” (Cascajosa, 2006: 25).

Another important consideration when compiling the sample was authorship. As pointed out by Saltzman (2003: 4), male scriptwriters have safeguarded a patriarchal paradigm in their portrayal of the *sob sisters* by avoiding their depiction as overly independent and feisty, and ensuring that these women ultimately gave in to love. In the Third Golden Age, American television has maintained a cultural, androcentric attitude that is hegemonic; as highlighted by Press (2018: 98), this type of series had always been led by men.

1 Series focused on the professional field of journalism with an under-representation of women have been excluded from the corpus of analysis, but this low narrative weight in itself becomes a way of representing women journalists.

2 In order to determine the degree of prominence of a character and to include the series in the sample, two issues were taken into account: firstly, a quantitative factor was considered, or in other words, the character had to be present in more than one season and a qualitative one, that the character had the functions of the main roles, that is, that it guided the narrative, focused the action, and had individual objectives.

Women were secondary figures in these male psychodramas, and female directors wishing to create less sexist dramas were faced with nearly impossible obstacles. Almost by definition, 'serious' television offered few opportunities for women both in front of and behind the camera (Press, 2018: 98).

However, the rise of women showrunners in American series since 2000, such as Amy Sherman-Palladino, Shonda Rhimes, and Jenji Kohan has meant the introduction of new topics and a greater role for women.

In this regard, the inclusion of series created by women has been taken into account when drawing up the analysis sample, which has allowed a comparison between the male gaze of some series and the more feminist perspective found especially in series written and directed by women. Thus, the final documentary corpus consists of the following series: *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998), *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004), *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006); *How I Met Your Mother* (CBS, 2005-2013), *The Newsroom* (HBO, 2012-2014), *Good Girls Revolt* (Amazon, 2016); *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018) and *Inventing Anna* (Netflix, 2022). Overall, these eight series cover the time period analysed, three of which have a female showrunner, and all with at least one female protagonist who is involved in journalism. Yet they also offer a diversity of characters, different types of journalism (television, political, quality magazines, etc.) and in different periods (from the 1970s to the present day).

Although the sample was narrowed down so that it was not too large, the documentary corpus is broad, so the methodology applied to work with the television fiction was qualitative analysis focused on the female characters and the issues dealt with in each series. By viewing all the seasons, it was possible to see the evolution and narrative trajectory of the female characters over the life of each series and to establish the plots to which they were related. However, an in-depth content and character analysis of each episode was unfeasible given the number of hours that would have been necessary.

For an in-depth analysis of the main characters, a selection of seasons was made, including the first season in all cases, which is the key to presenting characters, plots and environments. In this regard, the first and last seasons of some of the longest-running series with the largest number of episodes (*Murphy Brown*, *Sex and the City*, *The West Wing*, and *How I Met Our Mother*) have been selected for analysis. In the case of *House of Cards*, the analysis focused on the first two seasons, where journalism is given more weight in the plot. *The Newsroom*, *Good Girls Revolt* and *Inventing Anna* have been analysed completely, as they have fewer episodes.

Special attention has been paid to the analysis of the main characters, taking into account the following different points of view: narrative, roles played, relationships with other characters, physical and psychological characteristics, and behaviour. The categories established in previous studies (Galán, 2006) have also been taken into account, based on the theoretical foundations of audio-visual narratives, analysing the female characters from a three-dimensional perspective, including narrative, psychological, and relational. The portrayal of female characters has also been addressed from the viewpoint of gender studies, as well as criticism and theory of feminist films. In this way, variables have been applied that connect the theories of narratology with those of gender, relating aspects such as the situation and position of women compared to that of men, the roles of the characters in terms of the domestic/public dichotomy, the presence or absence of "normative femininity", relations of rivalry or friendships between women, and others (Menéndez and Zurián, 2014: 65). The bibliography on these series has also been used to complete the analysis. In this way, it has been possible to determine the female archetypes that

are most often portrayed, in which contexts they tend to appear, and their narrative weight in each of the series throughout the various decades.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Series that led the way: from *Murphy Brown* to *The West Wing*

The chronological journey through the selected series, which allows us to see the evolution of the stereotypes associated with women journalists in US television fiction in recent decades, begins with a pioneering series that was a benchmark for later television portrayals of journalism. The series referred to is *Murphy Brown* (CBS, 1988-1998), a sitcom created by Diane English. The series focuses on the life of a successful journalist who is a news magazine anchorwoman, and the strategies she uses to prove herself and her journalistic skills on a daily basis. As previously mentioned, according to Joe Saltzman (2003), the character of *Murphy Brown* is one of the two most positive images of journalism in popular culture, and the other is the character of Mary Richards on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (CBS, 1970-1977).

As the direct and up-to-date heir to the *Mary Tyler Moore* show, *Murphy Brown* represents a woman of the late twentieth century. She is a serious, strong, and independent journalist; far from the stereotype of a sob sister, and closer to that of the journalist who drinks a lot and always has a cigarette in his mouth. One of the most striking aspects of the protagonist of the series created by Diane English is her age. As opposed to the demand for youth and attractiveness, which is characteristic of US television anchors, *Murphy Brown* reflects the seriousness and professionalism of a journalist in her forties. As pointed out by Fung (1988), by the 1980s it was already obvious that TV broadcasting positions were going to young women and experienced men. This trend has become widespread in most countries, and continues to this day<sup>3</sup>. In the United States, the traditional pair of an older anchorman and younger female journalist has traditionally been maintained. He represents seniority, seriousness, professionalism, and credibility, while she reflects beauty, attractiveness, and a lack of experience.

However, the character of *Murphy Brown* is no longer the young and attractive “TV girl”, but instead is a TV woman. A woman who no longer asks permission, but gives permission. She is “an adult woman, a recognised professional, brilliant, and admired; but also a polydrug addict, irascible, and single” (Güimil, 2017). She is a character with many shades of meaning who grows throughout the various seasons, both personally and professionally, addressing current social and political issues, as well as questions that entered the national debate when the character became a single mother. *Brown* became the first female journalist in US fiction who was able to balance career and family without having to sacrifice either.

*Murphy Brown* entered the living rooms of American homes on a weekly basis, as if she were a real journalist, conducting interviews with actual public figures such as politicians, and even journalistic luminaries Walter Cronkite and Katie Couric, and many others.

<sup>3</sup> In Spain, for example, in 2023 there were four generalist television news anchors over the age of 60, and no female anchors. The average age of female news anchors in Spain is 41, while the average age of male news anchors is 54 (Vázquez-Miraz, 2019).

This parade of media professionals, whom Murphy greeted as her peers, blurred the line between fact and fiction. The character of *Murphy Brown* took on a life of her own as a successful and professional journalist who became a role model for the following generations. The character created by Diane English paved the way for the great female characters who filled the television screen in later years.

The next series to break the mould in terms of the depiction of female roles was *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004). However, it was more disruptive in terms of taboos surrounding female sexuality than for the stereotypes of the female journalist. The main character is Carrie Bradshaw, who is the alter ego of Candance BusŶell. The latter is the author of the book by the same name that inspired the series created by Darren Star. Bradshaw works as a freelance columnist for the fictional newspaper, *The New York Star*. The character, played by Sarah Jessica Parker, is both the narrator and central figure in the series. Each episode revolves around the articles in Carrie's column regarding her experiences, hobbies, and sex life. Through this narrative, the series makes significant commentaries on the moralistic discourse of female sexuality and lifestyle choices (McHugh, 2001: 195-196).

Bradshaw is an independent and financially stable woman with career aspirations, who does not allow her life to be influenced by the desires or needs of men. Unlike other female characters who portrayed the stereotypical sob sisters, and who ultimately chose love over career, for Carrie and her friends, marriage and motherhood are not the goal of every woman, nor are they the epitome of happiness. In fact, the series presents work as a source of personal fulfilment and not as a place of conflict.

Despite the fact that the series breaches social gender roles, the image of these young, white, attractive, and professionally successful women is unrealistic. As pointed out by journalist Simon Paget (2013), in a blog post entitled "Carrie Bradshaw vs. Reality", a freelance journalist needs to write various articles every week in order to pay the bills.

The exact opposite of light journalism is the political communication professional portrayed in *The West Wing* (NBC, 1999-2006). After depicting the work of sports journalists in *Sport Night* (1998-2000), the creator of *The West Wing*, Aaron Sorkin, displays his interest in journalism through the character of C.J. Cregg, who is the fictional reflection of Dee Myers, the first woman to hold the position of Press Secretary for the US government. Having the advice of the person who held this position for the final two years of the Clinton administration surely gave the character more realism, as well as depth. Although an impeccable professional, highly valued by the president and her colleagues, she has to confront sexism in numerous situations. In expressing his admiration for C.J., fictional US President Bartlet refers to her as "a 1950s movie star, capable, loving, and energetic" (Sorkin, 1999) which, as pointed out by Garret (2005: 87), makes her seem more like a "cuddly pet" rather than a political journalist.

This female character, who rises to positions of power, first as press secretary and later as chief of staff, not only faces the difficulties of her job and position, but other issues related to her gender as well, such as doubts regarding her capabilities and decision-making competence. At times, it is clear that she suffers unfair treatment, such as when her opinion is not given much consideration. Nevertheless, Sorkin's depiction of the character conveys an image of seriousness and professionalism. C.J. Cregg's sexuality is not explored, not even in the way she dresses, which is austere, yet not masculine. She is a woman who has come to power and lives in an environment where she is sometimes made to feel like a fish out of water, yet she clearly shows that a woman does not have to act like a man to reach a position of power, but that it is necessary to prove one's worth and let



one's work speak for itself. This multifaceted character contrasts with others employed by Sorkin to generate sexual tension, which limits their depth. As pointed out by Garrett (2005: 189-190), women in the series such as C.J. Cregg, or first lady Abbey Bartlet, are strong and capable, while others come across as "neurotic or naive". Even so, Dee Myers' impact on the series is evident, as her advice for the scripts highlights the sexism faced by women who work in the White House.

### 3.2. *Journalists of the new century: from How I Met Your Mother to Inventing Anna*

At the beginning of the 21st century, US television fiction reached a high level of quality. The thematic diversity, the originality, and the technical quality of premium pay channels such as HBO, Showtime, and later Netflix launched the phenomenon of television series at the international level, and consolidated what has subsequently been called the Third Golden Age of American television. During this period of thematic and formal renewal, the sitcom *How I Met Your Mother* appeared (CBS, 2005-2014). Created by Carter Bays and Craig Thomas, the series features Robin Scherbatsky as a reporter for *Metro News 1*, who is tired of being labelled as a young, attractive journalist only dedicated to trivial and cheesy stories. She is ambitious and wants to be taken seriously as a professional, so she must continually prove her skills. Even so, Robin does not portray a stereotypical sob sister, because she struggles to avoid being labelled a "naive journalist", and she hates the kind of news she covers. However, her desire to succeed does not make her an avid reporter who steals stories or sabotages the careers of her colleagues. She is energetic, but not opportunistic or aggressive, so she is far from the stereotype of the masculinised female journalist who pursues success by being aggressive, self-reliant, and arrogant. As noted by Rizwan (2013: 16), Robin has the ability to balance the qualities traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity, making her a unique character within the portrayal of female journalists in popular culture.

Robin's character also does not use her sexuality or physical appearance to advance her career. She aspires to become the new Katie Couric or Barbara Walters, yet the tyranny of beauty weighs upon her, as it does on most female news anchors. According to Chambers et al. (2004), the physical appearance of female hosts continues to be the target of audience comments. Robin Scherbatski experiences this reality, as well as other difficulties faced by US television reporters today, creating a realistic picture of the modern journalist who is both strong and vulnerable at the same time. It breaches the traditional image of the ruthless anchorwoman or journalist who has achieved fame, but feels the bitterness of having no romantic life, as Robin does not sacrifice personal relationships or professional ethics to achieve success.

In 2012, screenwriter Aaron Sorkin returned to journalistic television fiction with *The Newsroom* (HBO), with plots located in the frenetic newsroom of a breaking news programme that explores issues of the profession such as superficiality in news coverage, the battle for audience share, journalistic ethics, and the importance of verifying sources.

When the series premiered, television critic Alberto Rey (2012) wrote the following:

What offense have women committed against Mr. Aaron to deserve having all the female characters of *The Newsroom* portrayed as basically hysterical, incompetent girls? And yet, without them, there would be nothing, because their cognitive and sentimental inoperativeness hides a genius that in fact doesn't make much sense. Isn't that the ultimate male chauvinism, to say that "the one in charge at home is my wife, who on the other hand is an idiot"? Isn't it the degrading epithet, and the most extreme ridicule? Why are Mackenzie McHale, Maggie Jordan and Sloan Sabbith so unhinged? Is it necessary? Does it provide any insight?

These issues highlight the controversy regarding female characters of the renowned US screenwriter, who has been accused of having problems in designing female characters who “are not all from the same mould of the misfit, primordial, and mad woman” (Rey, 2012). In *The Newsroom*, only Sloan Sabbith’s character is portrayed as a woman who is professional and educated, yet with poor social skills. On the contrary, Mackenzie McHale, producer of *News Night* in the series, and Margaret Jordan, associate producer, are portrayed as compulsively melodramatic, and who focus strongly on personal issues. Although McHale is a determined, experienced and professional woman who was in the Afghanistan and Iraq wars covering the news, she suffers from repeated panic attacks, and her character is permanently intertwined with the protagonist, who is the news anchor and her ex-boyfriend as well. Margaret Jordan is a mix between the stereotype of a rookie journalist and a sob sister: her continual clumsiness leads her to make mistakes, which sometimes allows her to obtain an exclusive merely by chance. Throughout the series she gains experience and confidence as a journalist, yet her character has more narrative impact in the sentimental plots than on the professional ones.

Despite the stereotypical female portrayal in both cases, it is worth noting that Mackenzie McHale’s character depicts the pursuit of truth by promoting rigorous journalism. She makes this clear in the first episode of the series when she declares her goals as the new executive producer of *News Night*:

Defend the fourth estate. Reclaim journalism as an honourable profession. A nightly news programme that delivers a debate worthy of a great nation. Civic-mindedness, respect, and a return to what is important. The death of vulgarity, gossip, and voyeurism. Tell the truth, even to the fools (Sorkin, 2012).

The opposite of these values associated with journalism can be found in the series *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-2018), through the character of the ambitious Zoe Barnes. She portrays a professional who is without ethics, easily manipulated, self-centred, and eager to climb the career ladder using any weapon at her disposal, including sex. As opposed to political journalism based on documentation, cross-checking of sources, and contextualisation of data, the journalism that Zoe Barnes epitomises has no ethical guidelines (Painter and Ferrucci, 2017). Moreover, she uses flirtation and sexual advances to obtain information. This only serves to consolidate a negative stereotype of the female journalist as someone without professional merit whose success depends on who she sleeps with.

As pointed out by Cvetkovic and Oostman (2018), women’s sexuality as part of the journalistic routine in the series is quietly accepted in the profession. This is specifically stated by the character of Janine Skorsky, the White House correspondent for the fictional newspaper, *The Washington Herald*, when she confesses that she, like other journalists, “sucked, wanked, and fucked for a good story” (Cleveland and Willimon, 2013). Both Skorsky and the rest of the editorial staff assume that the important information obtained by Zoe Barnes is not the result of an exhaustive and substantiated investigation, but rather due to an information leak obtained through the use of her body. The consequence is a lack of professional consideration for women journalists. Because once the word got out, Skorsky explains in a dialogue, “It was like I hit a wall, and no one took me seriously” (Cleveland and Willimon, 2013).

Nevertheless, Zoe Barnes represents not only the journalist who takes the easy way out, but also the ambitious young woman who breaks the rules and routines of a newsroom in order to achieve fame. She defies the conventional model of journalism by representing the millennial journalist who places more emphasis on the impact of the rumour than on the veracity of the

information. The contrast can be seen between the values of the veteran editor of *The Washington Herald*, who is a bastion of rigorous, quality journalism, and those of Barnes who, along with Carly, her young editor-in-chief at the new online media outlet *Slugline*, are more interested in the audience and viralising the news than in accuracy.

This difference highlights the seriousness and quality of the information of the former, and the superficiality and lack of social responsibility of the latter. Barnes, moreover, represents a model of journalism closely linked to the generation of social networks, where impact and followers are sought, regardless of the quality and rigour of the information.

The difficulties encountered by women journalists and the lack of consideration for their work is a common feature in most of the series analysed. In the case of *Good Girls Revolt* (2016), created by Dana Calvo for Amazon and inspired by real events, the show recreates the struggle carried out in 1969 by the so-called researchers (fact-checkers) at *Newsweek* magazine which, in the series, is known as *News of the Week*. On the editorial staff of *Newsweek*, women were not allowed to write stories. They could only be secretaries, assistants, or research clerks, but they could not sign their names to articles. “We were told very explicitly, ‘If you want to write, go somewhere else.’ Women don’t write for *Newsweek*,” recalled Povich, author of the book on which the series is based, and one of the women who sued the magazine in the 1970s (Sottile, 2016).

The three main characters of the series rebel against the magazine’s mandate, which prevented women from moving up the career ladder. Led by an activist and lawyer of the *American Civil Liberties Union* (ACLU), Eleanor Holmes Norton, a real-life figure, they mobilised the women workers to take joint action against the magazine for discrimination in the workplace<sup>4</sup>. The series reflects these women’s awareness of the daily discrimination that takes place at the magazine, as well as the sexual and sexist harassment they experienced in the office.

The series allows for presentism to be interpreted in the story it tells, as the setting is a place where many professionals in the media and the world of entertainment were starting to publicly denounce sexist behaviour, as well as situations of sexual harassment, which later gave rise to the *#MeToo* movement in 2017. Also, the obstacles faced by women journalists in this fictional series, such as the lack of visibility, the wage gap, and restricted access to certain jobs are perceived in the 21st century as problems that still have not been resolved (Robertson et al., 2021).

Therefore, in *Good Girls Revolt*, the feminist perspective is evident in the approach to the workplace and personal situation of the protagonists, as well as in the intention to create female archetypes who achieve empowerment within journalism, as in the case of Nora Ephron (Grace Gummer in the show). In the series, this character becomes the catalyst of the protest after resigning from her job, which resulted from her being prohibited from publishing an article that she had written<sup>5</sup>. The women’s solidarity and the absence of rivalry between them also highlights the feminist perspective from which the series is approached, not to mention the choice of a theme that puts women’s struggle for their labour rights in the spotlight: after the

4 In 1964, the Civil Rights Act was passed, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race or gender.

5 Ephron worked at *Newsweek* in the 1960s, but left to join *The New York Post*. In the series she appears to be the spark that ignites the protest, but in fact, the awareness-raising that led to the mobilisation were the meetings of women workers in which they shared their personal and work-related problems, a strategy that was widely used in the feminist movement of those years.

lawsuit against *Newsweek* in 1970, this was followed by similar lawsuits against employment discrimination at other magazines such as *Life* and *Time*, among others.

Also inspired by real events and characters, *Inventing Anna* (Netflix, 2022) portrays the journalistic work carried out by Jessica Pressler<sup>6</sup> (Vivian Kent in the show) related to the case of Anna Delvey (Anna Sorokin in the series), a young woman who scammed hotels, companies and New York high society by posing as a wealthy German heiress in order to maintain her luxurious lifestyle.

The series' creator, successful showrunner and producer Shonda Rhimes, enlisted Pressler's help in adapting the story, which allowed for a portrayal of the journalist from the point of view of a professional reporter. This brings not only humanity to the character, but reality as well. The hard work of documentation, fact-checking, interviews and, above all, the effort to convince the magazine's editor that the story was worthwhile, is perfectly reflected in the series. Other details drawn from the life of the real journalist include the fact that she was pregnant and gave birth shortly after publishing the story, and the controversy in which she was involved when she wrote a report about a young man who gave false testimony.

The character Vivian Kent is a tireless professional, nearly obsessed with cross-checking data in order to avoid the mistakes of the past that have lowered her credibility and influence inside and outside the newsroom. She carries out meticulous investigative work in order to gain the trust of her editor, and to demonstrate that sound journalism and good stories require data to be studied, along with verification of sources. Compared to other archetypes of fictional journalists, such as some of those mentioned above, Vivian does not break the rules, does not resort to illegal or unethical means to obtain information, respects her sources, and shows that the facts are what count.

#### 4. Discussion

Over the years, films have perpetuated narrative paradigms and stereotypes about women journalists. One of the questions this research has attempted to answer is whether these portrayals of the work of women journalists have changed, and to what extent new archetypes exist. By analysing eight selected television series, an attempt has been made to answer these questions.

Firstly, similar to films, we also find in series the dilemma that women journalists have to face, which is the incorporation of masculine traits into their behaviour as something indispensable for success. To prove their worth, sometimes they have to be arrogant, self-reliant, and aggressive, but without forgetting what society demands of them as women, or in other words, to be caring, compassionate and empathetic (Saltzman, 2003, 1-3).

This dichotomy reflects a reality experienced by women journalists who, as pointed out by Chambers et al. (2004: 104), face a dilemma: If they do not want to be seen as "too soft" or "feminine", they are forced to "beat the boys at their own game" by being more assertive and aggressive, but never overly arrogant nor "excessively masculine".

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6 The article about Anna Sorokin's story entitled "*How Anna Delvey Tricked New York's Party People*", was published in 2018 in *New York Magazine*.

In the case of women journalists, ambition is perceived as something negative, either because it leads them to pursue promotion at any cost, even if it means engaging in unethical behaviour, or because ambition forces them adopt negative stereotypical male traits such as aggressiveness, individualism, and competitiveness (Lacalle and Hidalgo: 2017, 477). According to Osorio (2009), these characters are cold and implacable women who reject conventional female roles.

In general, the professionals portrayed in the series analysed are women who are constantly proving their worth as journalists, and therefore have to fight against the social surroundings, sexist attitudes, and invisible barriers such as gender stereotypes and prejudice. In their day-to-day work, they have to face situations in which their skills or leadership abilities are called into question. In this sense, the portrayal coincides with the difficulties many journalists encounter in the real world.

In contrast to the authenticity of some characters, especially those of series created by female scriptwriters, there are traditional stereotypes that link female journalists to the emotional and personal domains. These women are the ones who struggle between family and work life, and even in some series, their presence is narratively justified in order to generate romantic interest or sexual tension between them and the male protagonists. Many of them, as pointed out by Painter and Ferrucci (2015), are portrayed according to the female stereotype that identifies women with the emotional realm, and sometimes with a lack of professionalism, or inexperienced and clumsy.

There are also negative portrayals that cause the public to associate women journalists with unethical practices such as using sex to get information and advance their careers, or to become famous. These are usually young, ambitious women who break the rules in order to achieve success quickly. In this regard, female ambition has a negative connotation and often leads the character to a traumatic end. The archetype of the ambitious young woman is placed on the screen next to that of the clumsy and inexperienced young female, the latter of whom continuously makes mistakes, yet she is essential from a narrative point of view in order to create romantic plots. Nevertheless, she sometimes overcomes this awkwardness and proves to be a good professional.

The image of women journalists portrayed in series is capable of distorting the reality of this profession and normalising certain unethical behaviour, which could have a negative impact on society's perception of journalism in general, and on female reporters in particular. According to Ehrlich and Saltzman (2015), depictions of journalists in popular culture shape public perceptions of journalism as a profession.

These portrayals of certain groups or professions in television fiction can trigger culturally shared racial and gender stereotypes, which have a negative influence on these groups, as they start to perceive themselves in a way that is influenced by the bias created in the media (Murphy 1998). These cultural restraints affect women's career choices (Hoffner, Levine and Toohey 2008), and may be related to the low number of women in high positions (Painter and Ferrucci, 2016: 11-12).

The way women journalists are portrayed on screen influences society's perception of them. Without first-hand knowledge of media work routines or newsrooms, the audience develops its idea of journalism through what it sees in these types of fictional shows. This can perpetuate stereotypes such as that of the drunken, chain-smoking journalist, or the seductive journalist who will sleep with sources for a good story. It is interesting to note that these gender stereotypes are not interchangeable: it is rare to see a female journalist addicted to alcohol and tobacco, just like seeing a male character use his body to get an exclusive is also anomalous, and it is also nearly non-existent for a man to have to choose between family life and work. The loneliness and

bitterness with which some women are portrayed, especially if they are female executives who have sacrificed their personal lives for the professional realm, is not seen in the same types of characters when they are men.

Despite the variety of female journalistic archetypes in the series analysed, there is one consistent aspect: these professionals are portrayed as white women, mostly young, with standard bodies, and heterosexual. Although some, such as *Murphy Brown*, break the dress codes of female news anchors, most comply with certain standards in terms of beauty, size, age and sexual orientation. Unfortunately, there is a lack of diversity that could allow for the visibility and normalisation of characters from racial minorities, or from other groups such as LGTBQ+, within the journalism profession.

## 5. Conclusions

One of the leading female journalists in television fiction is *Murphy Brown*, a character created by Diane English, the latter of whom was one of the first female showrunners in American television. When English met with CBS executives to present her project, they suggested changes to the script, including having a leading lady who was 30-something rather than a woman in her 40s, and who was attractive, or in other words, “30-ish and hot”. Nevertheless, the showrunner ended up imposing her criteria because she knew that Brown’s character was complex and required an older actress to play her in order to show her experience as a journalist. In the end, the strategy succeeded, but it was due to the creator’s determination to maintain her concept of the character.

In this regard, one of the questions posed by this study is whether there are notable differences in the way female journalists have been portrayed depending on the gender of the scriptwriter. Although the sample is not large enough to draw general conclusions, the three series created by female showrunners present the most positive and empowering archetypes. *Murphy Brown* (Diane English), *Good Girls Revolt* (Dana Calvo), and *Inventing Anna* (Shonda Rhimes), move away from the most common stereotypes about women journalists in the audio-visual sector. There are no clumsy young women nor seductive journalists, but professionals who try to perform quality journalism in a way that is ethical, and who defend their rights. A feminist perspective permeates the scripts and the construction of the characters, especially in the two 21st century series. This contrasts sharply with the images of female journalists designed by creators such as Aaron Sorkin (*The West Wing* and *The Newsroom*) and Beau Willimon (*House of Cards*), as the women are portrayed as hysterical, unprofessional, sexualised, and overly ambitious.

With this situation in mind, a new question must be asked: Are women scriptwriters and female producers of series helping to change gender stereotypes and portrayals? There is no established line of research that combines the study of the television industry with content analysis to determine whether there is a relationship between the gender of scriptwriters and the portrayals of gender in their series. Until now, most research has focused on gender stereotypes in case studies, yet it might be beneficial to carry out comparative analyses between different television series by taking into account these gender variables, as well as other factors related to the social, political, and cultural contexts of the countries where the productions take place.

In this study, although the figures are not overly representative (8 series, of which 5 were created by men, and 3 by women), differences can be seen, as previously pointed out. In addition to a higher degree of sexualisation, series created by male showrunners tend to use more conservative stereotypes and associate women more with emotional aspects. In the case of

female creators, new archetypes can be seen, as well as stronger solidarity among the women characters, and less rivalry between them on romantic issues. Their characters also break down more barriers, and even social taboos: the main character of *Murphy Brown* is a single mother in her 40s; the female reporters of the *Good Girls Revolt* join together to fight for their rights; and Vivian Kent of *Inventing Anna* is shown as a tireless and thorough professional.

As such, it can be concluded that the female creators of the series analysed tend to reduce the androcentric approach with a more respectful and realistic approach to female characters. Therefore, the participation of women in the creation of television series implies the emergence of new trends in audio-visual culture, as they are capable of becoming a driving force for change regarding social portrayals in audio-visual media by giving greater prominence, complexity, and dramatic richness to female characters.

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