



The Wire and repair of the journalistic paradigm

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Abstract

The last season of *The Wire* drew particular attention from journalists given its setting at a fictional version of the *Baltimore Sun*, where show creator David Simon once worked. The concept of paradigm repair was used here to explain journalists' responses to *The Wire*. Our qualitative analysis of articles from 44 newspapers, as well as radio transcripts, dealing with the 2008 season shows that a fictional challenge can precipitate vigorous efforts by journalists to restore their reputation after what they regard as an attack on their professional identity and credibility. The [real] *Baltimore Sun* and other papers where Simon's journalistic nemeses worked were the most likely to call Simon vindictive and obsessed and to use this to marginalize his stinging critique of corporatized newsrooms.

Keywords

David Simon, journalism criticism, paradigm repair, professionalism, *The Wire*

The Wire, an HBO series set in Baltimore, attracted enormous attention among journalists, especially for its fifth season, in 2008, which focused on journalism. *The Wire* was

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conceived, co-written, and co-produced by David Simon, who covered crime for the *Baltimore Sun* from 1982 to 1995. Each 'Wire' season had a specific theme, including a police department war against drug rings, the decline of the local ports, local and state politics, and public education. The final season featured a fictional *Baltimore Sun* (henceforth, unless quoting, 'the paper') that invoked major controversies at the real *Baltimore Sun* (henceforth, the *Sun*), most of them dating back to Simon's years there. Journalists' ongoing fascination with themselves and Simon's famously pointed criticisms of newspapers made it unsurprising that both entertainment critics and staff writers at more than 130 media outlets previewed, reviewed, or followed Season 5 (McCabe, 2008). Among others, the *Atlantic*, the *New Yorker*, and *Columbia Journalism Review* ran long profiles. Magazines and daily papers maintained weekly discussions online. Bloggers scrutinized nearly every aspect of the newsroom storyline, ad infinitum. 'Not all of this attention has been positive – or even levelheaded', arts editor Bret McCabe said correctly.

As both appreciative and (especially) unsympathetic journalists noted, *The Wire* was snubbed by the Emmys. But they nearly all admired the series for its invocation of Greek tragedy, except that modern institutions, not meddling gods, ruined people's lives; and for its compelling dramatization of urban problems.¹ Given its dark tone, dense structure, and moral ambiguity, media critics said Simon did for Baltimore what Balzac did with Paris, and Dickens with London.² It was 'complex, authentic, and credible' (Kelly, 2009). *The Wire* was incorporated into university curricula for film, social and cultural studies, sociology, and law (Fairbanks, 2010). A University of Michigan student called *The Wire* the 'most valuable course I've ever taken' (Passman, 2008). For Sabin, *The Wire*, with its manipulation of the 'rhetoric of the real', presented a reformist and nostalgic critique informed by Marxist theories 'increasingly fashionable' in Media Studies and liberal circles (2011: 142). During that season, Simon spoke at several universities, although not his own alma mater, where he wrote for the campus paper.

Journalists' critiques of the newsroom season regularly incorporated what they knew about Simon, and what Simon had said and was saying about newspapers and journalists. In speeches, interviews, and lectures, Simon provided Season 5's back story, developed the argument, and vigorously rebutted journalists' criticisms. *The Wire*, he said, accurately described a crisis resulting from out-of-town chain ownership, wholesale cutbacks in staff positions, a narrowed scope of coverage, mismanagement by corporate and/or non-local owners, closing of bureaus, timidity, failure to confront problems, pandering to management and/or readers, and the exaggerated influence of prizes, which tempt unethical practitioners to hype or fabricate news. As he suggested, these problems and the general problem of doing more with less are well known, having been reported by academics and, more importantly, by journalists. But *The Wire* literally dramatized this.

Commentators rarely ignored that the season's primary arch-villains were proxies for Simon's former nemeses at the *Sun*, executive editor John Carroll and managing editor William Marimow.¹ Simon so regularly denounced them in speeches and interviews that the *Sun* (Zurawik, 2008) accused Simon of 'character assassination' and of sacrificing a landmark art work 'on the altar of getting even with former bosses'. For example, Simon said (2006):

Under the *Sun's* previous regime, a reporter repeatedly caught fabricating the very premise of news stories was defended . . . And the editors overseeing such moved on to helm the *Los Angeles Times* and NPR, proving that in journalism as elsewhere, careers are about hiding the dirt.

Stories about *The Wire* likewise named and quoted Carroll and Marimow, who insisted that they were motivated by public service, not prizes. Indeed, this mutual snarling itself became a theme.²

The model for the fictional reporter who flagrantly fabricated sources, quotes, and stories, with the encouragement of top editors, was former *Sun* investigative reporter Jim Haner; like Marimow and Carroll, he came to the *Sun* from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Already in 2000, Simon (Pogrebin, 2000) alleged that Haner embellished quotes, fabricated events, and exaggerated his clout. These accusations received considerable attention, especially from Baltimore's alternative paper, which independently reported that Haner 'makes shit up' (Chalkley, 2000). At the time, *Sun* editors tried to discredit Simon and the *Brill's Content* piece. Haner's mistakes were minor, they said; his detractors were motivated by rivalries, petty squabbles, and jealousy. During interviews around Season 5, Simon never named Haner. Likewise, although some journalists knew the back story (Montgomery, 2008), the only mainstream journalist to identify Haner was the *New York Observer's* Tom Scocca (2008), a former *Baltimore City Paper* media columnist. Bloggers also named Haner, who now free-lances.

By the time of Season 5, none of these 'principals' remained at the *Sun*. Carroll became editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, which had purchased the *Sun*. The *Sun* fired Marimow in 2004. The two-time Pulitzer Prize winner spent two years at NPR, returned to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, already facing the same declines in advertising and circulation, and resulting layoffs, as the *Sun*; was fired in 2010; taught journalism at Arizona State University; and returned as the *Inquirer's* editor in 2012.

Audience size dwindled from 4 million for season one, to 700,000 by the end. Discussing *Sun* staffers' unhappiness at Simon's attack, *Variety* (Lowry, 2008) noted that far fewer people watched the season opener than *The Simpsons*. Nonetheless, the show achieved further distribution abroad, especially in Europe and Asia; it is available on Netflix and remains a bestseller on Amazon. It was most unpopular with Baltimoreans, who regarded the whole show as overly negative. In 2008, on her way to Season 5's premiere, Sheila Dixon, then Mayor of Baltimore, emphatically denied that *The Wire* accurately portrayed Baltimore; nonetheless, she said, she looked forward to Simon's attention to journalism. Journalists – who are professionally committed to exposing problems, including (or perhaps especially) in their home towns – previously admired *The Wire* for its gritty portrayal of urban institutions. The *Sun* (Zurawik, 2007) said, 'Steeped in a dense and seething urban sociology, the Baltimore-based series is still one of the most daring dramas in the history of the medium.' Many Baltimoreans said they could not bear to watch a show they were convinced reinforced a skewed and pejorative image of their city.

Theoretical context

The question here is whether paradigm repair – the notion that when journalists perceive an event or situation as undermining journalists' or news organizations' credibility and

authority they will go to great efforts to restore their own image and reputation – explains journalists' response to *The Wire* newsroom. Thomas Kuhn's (1970[1962]) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* spurred enormous interest in paradigms. Only journalism scholars, however, seem interested in interrogating paradigm repair, although instead of using the definition of paradigm that Kuhn's second edition explicitly highlighted, as exemplars of puzzle-solving, they prefer the definition as the constellation of commitments to shared beliefs and values required for 'normal' science. To remain in good standing, Zelizer (2004) shows, journalists must work according to paradigmatic standards; they must not only respect their community's norms and practices, but reinforce and police them. Breaches threaten the shared sense of a credible, valued work ethic and undermine solidarity.

As Kuhn underscored, paradigm revolution is frighteningly difficult. If possible, journalists may try to ignore the problem, like scientists, ignoring the anomalous evidence. Eventually, given the resulting stress, they try to alter or repair and restore the paradigm (Hindman, 2005; Reese, 1990). They can try to justify actions or methods undertaken by an accused person or organization; contextualize the problem, emphasizing their good intentions; deny that the breach ever occurred, given their professional work routines; or claim a case is 'old' or outdated and already corrected. If 'renegades' can be identified, journalists can blame the greed, stupidity, laziness, or pathology of individual reporters, editors, publishers or entire organizations – that is, as not merely deviant but 'exceptional'. Often a specific platform or genre is blamed. After Princess Diana's death, 'serious' journalists ritually separated themselves from tabloid journalists, whom they said constituted a different (unethical) phenomena altogether (Berkowitz, 2000). Meanwhile, the tabloids blamed sensationalism-hungry audiences and aberrant paparazzi.

Scapegoating is common. The canonical cases show journalists avoiding responsibility for transgressions by focusing attention on, and even excessively blaming, those who violate accepted ethical standards. The notion of paradigm explains why journalists worry about the impact of 'bad apples'. Cecil (2002: 46) quotes a reporter agonizing: 'We're all vulnerable to a bad reporter essentially conning, swindling the organization he or she works for ... It is terrifically scary.' Repair work, however, involves a more pronounced kind of boundary-drawing. Journalists may purge or 'excommunicate' deviants in order to redeem the larger institution (Steiner, 2009). The professional community discursively tries to repair the damage by collectively closing ranks against perceived or real threats and clearly drawing boundaries between who can be a part of the interpretive community and who cannot, between what is and what is not acceptable practice. This contains the damage and (re)binds the community (Wall and Bicket, 2008; Zelizer, 2004) and enables the professional community to operate as before (Hindman, 2005: 227). Sometimes journalists and news organizations accept responsibility, at least partly, for breaches of journalistic standards. Regarding the Jayson Blair scandal, the *New York Times* accepted responsibility for violating ethical standards and for the organizational failure of its editing processes (Hindman, 2005). More often, however, those undertaking repair work fail to acknowledge their own responsibility. They short-circuit deeper analyses without altering or even questioning their assumptions.

Paradigm assaults from outside journalism, including in fiction, and by journalists themselves can provoke crisis. The continued blurring of information and entertainment

forms, and the increased authority of ‘fake news’ shows such as *The Colbert Report*, requires increased boundary-drawing (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009). Ehrlich (2005, 2006) argues that films that seem to depict bad journalism consistently fail to challenge journalism’s status quo; by endorsing journalists’ myths, popular culture also performs paradigm repair. Basing his argument on plots, he finds that instead of encouraging public skepticism of journalism, such films prove that self-regulation works. It cannot be assumed that Simon’s dramatic *cri de coeur* – whose newspaper hero ends up defeated – endorsed journalists’ assertion that all is well. Nonetheless, Ehrlich’s point that journalists worry groundlessly about films’ negative impact on audiences may apply to *The Wire*. Either because they overestimate the audience’s commitment to critique or they underestimate how criticism can be inverted for a positive message, some *Sun* reporters worried that, at a crisis point for journalists both generally and in Baltimore, Season 5 reinforced only the most negative aspects of their profession.³

Ehrlich, however, makes claims about journalists’ fears and audience impact by analyzing the films themselves. Journalists praised Evelyn Waugh’s *Scoop*, despite the novel’s negative depiction of journalists (Salwen, 2001), but, otherwise, journalists’ responses have not been examined. We ask whether a fictional depiction could produce the kind of status anxiety that would provoke boundary maintenance and repair work. We do not assume that *The Wire* damaged journalism’s reputation in the eyes of its audiences or that *The Wire* correctly represented news media’s ‘real’ problems, notwithstanding its popularity among fans and claims to realism. Indeed, as we will show, those who adopted the defensive posture were not necessarily responding to evidence either that ‘actual’ ethical violations had caused ‘real’ damage or that *The Wire* had undermined journalists’ reputations. Rather, the question was whether journalists perceived *The Wire* as undermining or attempting to undermine journalism’s status, and, if so, how (and which) journalists responded to the *perceived* challenge. To analyze how journalists characterized Season 5 and then responded to their own characterization, we examined journalists’ published accounts.

The question is who feels threatened. Although paradigm literature does not explicitly address this, we expected that the journalists who felt most directly attacked would feel most compelled to repair what they took to be a damaged paradigm. Comparing responses to the re-publication of cartoons satirizing the prophet Mohammed, Berkowitz and Eko (2007) attributed the much milder response of the *New York Times* when compared with *Le Monde*’s more heated ideological boundaries between European and Arabo-Islamic free speech or press principles, to differences in national culture. But geographical and cultural proximity are also important, as is sheer institutional interest. That is, we expected the *Baltimore Sun* to particularly condemn the season or even retroactively vilify the entire show. It might launch a counter-attack against Simon, perhaps claiming that Simon was motivated by revenge or personal animus and/or that his *Sun* experiences were too long ago to be relevant. In some sense, the *Sun* anticipated this hypothesis. Its TV critic (Zurawik, 2007) introduced his condemnation of Season 5 by noting that ‘the fact that I work for the *Sun* means I am likely to be mistrusted, if not damned. So be it – I am not the first journalist to write about matters involving his or her own paper.’

Therefore, we compared how Simon and his work were treated by the media outlets that were more and less invested in the conflict, based on whether they were directly

challenged or were merely ‘associated’ by virtue of professional identity. To see how the alleged ‘villains’ reacted to a show set in their workplace, we first looked at the responses in the *Baltimore Sun* and other papers connected with Simon’s nemeses, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*. (The Chicago Tribune Co. bought the Times Mirror Co. in 2000.) We expected that the four papers’ rivals might even engage in *schadenfreude*, while journalists less invested in the feud would be more even-handed and would construe Simon’s attack as aimed at the *Sun*.

Again, *The Wire* was part of a larger discourse. Entertainment companies have been said to want films that critique media, both to exploit and dissipate audience’s interest in media criticism; films such as *Truman* ultimately affirm media power (Bishop, 2000). But Simon’s repeated accusations illustrated that he desired wholesale paradigm overhaul. On the DVD commentary track for Season 5, Joe Chappelle, episode one’s director, acknowledged the portrayal ‘was very controversial within the journalistic community’. He added that journalists who had previously praised the show reacted differently when it showcased their profession: ‘When it was kind of directed at their world they were, like, “that’s not the way it works”.’

Casting The Wire

Simon’s team carefully replicated the look of the *Baltimore Sun*, from the color of the office walls to the way people rolled up their sleeves. *The Wires*’ casting likewise aimed at authenticity. Simon said, ‘it leavens the project to have local faces, accents and credibility’, although he also blamed the fact that audience size dwindled on the casting, around 65 percent black (Kelly, 2009).⁶ Over the years, a rich insider discourse was produced by cameo appearances by real-life politicians and locals, including a former police chief (and convicted felon) radio personality and a former mayor. Jay Landsman, a real police officer, for example, played a lieutenant and inspired another character with that name. *Sun* management had prohibited any then-current staffers from appearing in Season 5, but visibly winced at the participation of former *Sun* veterans, such as political journalist William F. Zorzi, who essentially played himself, and Scott Shane, now with the *New York Times*. Popular discourse about *The Wire* often highlighted the presence of journalists (i.e. in addition to novelists) on its writing team. For example, the late David Mills worked on several major newspapers before writing for television, including for all three of Simon’s previous series set in Baltimore. The *Sun*’s David Zurawik (2007) criticized Simon for ‘casting on the friends-and-family plan’. Zurawik specifically disparaged cameos by Simon’s wife, former *Sun* reporter Laura Lippman, and by Michael Olesker, a *Sun* columnist for 27 years who resigned after being accused in the *Baltimore City Paper* of inventing quotes and recycling work (Dechter, 2006). The daughter of a well-known *Sun* writer, Lippman has written novels featuring a Baltimore reporter turned private investigator.⁷ Ironically, Simon (2006) defended Olesker, saying, if he had plagiarized, then most reporters and columnists plagiarize, including Simon himself. His much vaunted reputation as a purist notwithstanding, Simon here argued, ‘we’re pretending to purity we never possessed’.

Simon played with names, too. Although he denied the connection (Zurawik, 2006), Simon had in earlier seasons bestowed the name Marimow on a cruel and hated police

lieutenant. The executive editor is James Whiting, perhaps referring to the newsroom's disproportionately white 'cast'. The fictional managing editor is Thomas Klebanow, presumably referring to reporter Hank Klibanow, who co-authored a Pulitzer Prize winning history of news coverage of the civil rights struggle with Gene Roberts – a former *Philadelphia Inquirer* executive editor and supporter of Marimow, and later a professor at the University of Maryland.⁸

Method

To determine whether proximity or distance in newspaper terms was related to acceptance or rejection of Simon's message, we qualitatively analyzed US newspaper articles and radio transcripts that offered analysis or critique of *The Wire*'s fifth season. We analyzed all minimally relevant articles at least three paragraphs long, published or aired between 1 December 2007 (a month before the first episode was aired) and 30 April 2008 (two months after it ended). Searches using various combinations of relevant key words were conducted for all newspapers listed in LexisNexis and Factiva. We located additional newspaper articles not archived by LexisNexis or Factiva. Eventually the search yielded 76 articles from 44 newspapers and transcripts of 10 radio newscasts. Originally we wanted to check whether television broadcasters, seeing the season as specifically attacking print, were especially appreciative. But references in Vanderbilt's Television News Archive turned up nothing substantive.

After training sessions on the coding sheet, four coders examined all articles and transcripts. For example, coders evaluated the extent to which the articles said or implied that the season was realistic or that the series accurately described journalism. A few questions on the initial coding sheet were dropped or merged as a result of discussions. After completing the final coding, the group discussed the findings and identified common themes or anomalies to explore. For purposes of context and background, we read relevant international coverage, trade journals, blogs and web postings, and other writing by Simon.

Also for background, to get informal responses to our draft, and insider gossip about the *Sun*'s response to *The Wire*, we talked, on condition of confidentiality, to four current or former staffers for the *Sun*. The goal was not to analyze staffers' accounts, especially since they (and others) refused to go 'on the record'. Nor was their reluctance surprising. The media attention unnerved *Sun* reporters: 'One *Sun* reporter I know begged off being quoted by me for this story out of fear of even appearing in the same Google result as Simon' (Barnhart, 2008). Sabin (2011) connects the *Sun*'s ferocious backlash to its having championed *The Wire* and having invited Simon 'into the house' – only to find him slashing the furniture. Our sense is that the *Sun* hadn't invited Simon in. Rather, it opened the door to someone who otherwise would use a battering ram to bash it down.

One highly placed *Sun* person read multiple versions of the manuscript to check that we had captured the *Sun*'s position correctly. Two staffers we talked to had intentionally missed Season 5 because it would be 'too painful' or 'offensive'. Told that our aim was to analyze journalists' responses, one journalist who watched all five seasons asserted that journalists' 'true' responses would only turn up in online blogs, never in published articles. This reporter also dismissed the final season as merely sanitized entertainment.

'Real newsrooms', this interviewee said, are rougher and cruder than the fictional *Sun*, with 'a lot more arguments, and fighting, and smoking, and cussing'. Openly aghast that colleagues had watched the entire series, one current *Sun* staffer who refused to watch was convinced the series had been inaccurate, insisting: 'Simon was talking about how things were at the time *he* was there, all those people have left. Now we face different problems – we fight the cancer, it's a matter of survival.' Ironically, in emphasizing the industry-wide financial crisis, the staffer literally echoed a line from Season 5: 'We have to do more with less.'

Responses from the alleged villains and direct competitors

The *Sun*'s TV critic, whose reviews were syndicated nationally for *McClatchy-Tribune*, had celebrated *The Wire*'s past seasons. He hated Season 5. Among other reasons, Zurawik (2007) said the episodes he previewed said almost nothing about newspapers' biggest story: 'the vast technological change sweeping through media today'. Zurawik's (2008) review of the finale repeated each of his initial criticisms, including the 'unconvincing, one-dimensional characters' that populated the 'improbable' and 'deeply flawed' newsroom narrative. He expanded his initial derision of the newsroom scenes as the season's 'Achilles heel':

Worse, they became a cancer that grew deeper and deeper into other parts of the drama as the season wore on. The problems began with the depiction of a newsroom that lacked any sense of the urgent new-media priorities in the real ones today. Worse, from an entertainment standpoint, it was filled with stick figures and former journalists who couldn't act a lick.

He admired the 'heightened sense of anger and righteous moral outrage', but now, he said, anger seemed to control Simon. 'Simon is offering a highly personalized, vendetta-driven mythology of an era that never was at the *Sun*.' Offering 1999 poll data that ranked the *Sun* as the tenth best paper in the USA, Laura Vozzella (2008), then a *Sun* political columnist, asserted that Season 5 was 'all about revenge'.

The *Los Angeles Times* was equally damning. Entertainment critic Jon Caramanica (2008) conceded that *The Wire* had been nuanced, sensitive, and educational as well as a salve 'for those inside who felt they never had a voice'. Nonetheless, without mentioning that his boss was the model, he dismissed the fictional executive editor as a one-note character, 'more a caricature of corporate mismanagement than a commentary on journalistic practices'. After Jayson Blair, he insisted, editors never treated allegations of fabrication lightly. Lamenting the fate of the daily newspaper feels 'decidedly fogeyish and smells like a vendetta ... The result is farce – not Shakespeare, but Keystone Kops', and a 'stand-in for Simon's own futilities'. Meanwhile, Chris Barton, who regularly blogged about *The Wire*, pointedly linked a description of the fictional managing editor – weak and ineffectual even when he called himself 'sick' over having to cut jobs – to a real story about the 2008 departure of a *Los Angeles Times* editor, apparently the fourth senior executive in three years to quit over budget reductions. To Barton this was necessary and even heroic.

Like the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune* ran several articles about *The Wire*, including some that focused on the portrayal of crime, and the Emmys snub. The entertainment critic for the *Tribune*'s free daily, *RedEye*, hated *The Wire*, calling it cynical, preachy, and 'overly pessimistic' and mocking how its 'heaviest bile' came in an anti-media 'crusade' (Wagner, 2008). The *Tribune*'s regular TV critic avoided the newsroom theme. Maureen Ryan's (2008a) long profile of Simon quoted his criticism of out-of-town ownership but also quoted Carroll and Marimow: 'To hold a grudge that long poisons the grudge-holder.' Agreeing, for once, with Simon about non-local ownership, Carroll noted that he and Marimow had lost their jobs in disputes with corporate owners. Ryan's Season 5 review (2008b) mentioned the newsroom narrative very late, and merely to complain that it lacked the series' 'typical subtlety and understated realism'; moreover, fabrications did not cause journalism's crisis. Like Zurawik (2007), who mocked Simon's city editor as 'a repository of all things good' while the villainous editors 'are pure duplicity and evil', Ryan (2008b) singled out the newsroom figures as exceptionally one-dimensional – either pompous or noble.⁹

The *Philadelphia Inquirer*'s preview of Season 5 was appreciative. Its movie critic promised to watch: 'Even if it hurts.' But the newsroom theme emerged only briefly – in the last paragraph, which also quoted Simon acknowledging that he held grudges 'long and nastily' (Rea, 2008). At the season's end, multiple stories in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* barely mentioned the newsroom. Summarizing the show as 'a sprawling, confounding and grim urban portrait, shot through with cynicism and gallows humor', a staff writer (Hiltbrand, 2008) merely said Simon reserved his 'most bilious outcome' for journalism.

One media columnist (Scocca, 2008) described the *Sun* as a colonial holding of the *Los Angeles Times*, as a result of which it was not dedicated to covering Baltimore. Taking a very different position from its rival but without mentioning Carroll or the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Los Angeles Daily News* (Kronke, 2008) took seriously *The Wire*'s 'urgent and important' warning that the system is irrevocably broken. The message 'bristles with both passion and a gallows humor that's equal part gallows and humor'. The *Chicago Sun-Times* (Elfman, 2008) similarly praised the season as flawlessly cast, better paced, more concise, and less confusing than previous seasons. He mentioned the *Tribune*'s ownership, but without bashing the *Tribune*. This was far milder than the *schadenfreude* of the *Baltimore City Paper*, which described the *Sun*'s 'constantly smoldering ire' over Simon. McCabe (2008) said: 'The tenor of these pieces runs from evenhanded to reactionary, but by and large *journalists* haven't cared for the journalism thread one bit, and blame Simon's own personal feelings.'

The rest of the journalists

A good place to begin looking at the presumably less-invested accounts is the *Washington Post*, since the opportunistic Templeton character regarded the *Sun* merely as a stepping stone to the *Post*. Calling the season 'a gruelingly edgy combination of complexity and clarity', TV critic Tom Shales (2008) said it proved 'with lacerating brilliance that blurring the line between fact and fiction can be a very good thing'. What was 'passionately good' included the journalism narrative: 'Talk of "buyouts"

and “layoffs” and anal-retentive corporate owners lusting for a healthy bottom line helps keep “The Wire’s” portrayal of an endangered press timely and troubling.’ Another *Post* writer (Wiltz, 2008) called it:

... the rare show worth grieving for. It served up reality writ large, reality in the form of a five-season visual novel ... marinated in Old Bay seasoning and a hefty dose of skepticism and rage against the systems that fail us. Its air of authenticity was greatly aided by the real-life characters sprinkled in with the fictional ones.

Several journalists at other papers referenced their own careers to buttress the claim that *The Wire* depicted US journalism accurately, was ‘grittily realistic’, ‘dead-on’, or had ‘a firm footing’. Reporters for the *New York Post* (Buckman, 2008) and the *Arkansas Democrat* (Martin, 2008), for example, said their own experience suggested that *The Wire* newsroom had ‘the ring of truth’. NPR’s David Folkenflik (2007), who mentioned having worked at the *Sun*, was one of many to compare the fictional and real *Sun*: ‘On the show, as in real life, the paper’s corporate owners in Chicago are slashing costs.’ The *Sacramento Bee* said: “‘The Wire’s’ *Sun*, like many real papers, has been hurt by cuts and by a growing unwillingness to take on larger issues because of the costs’ (Kushman, 2008). Once Simon confirmed that he randomly choose the *Kansas City Star* as Templeton’s former paper, the *Star*’s critic (Barnhart, 2008) could call *The Wire* ‘the greatest TV series to grow on American soil’.

USA Today (Bianco, 2008) subtitled its story of how Simon addressed Baltimore’s problems ‘Grounded in genius’. Perhaps speaking for many journalists irritated by Simon’s smugness and insistent abrasiveness, Tim Goodman (2008b), the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s TV critic, complained about Simon’s *Huffington Post* column, which called all journalists ‘oblivious to the big-ass elephant in our mythical newsroom’. Goodman disagreed: everyone understood the problem of greedy, non-local newspaper owners. But few critics mentioned the point picked up by the *St. Petersburg Times* TV critic (Deggans, 2008): In chasing potential Pulitzer prizes, the fictional newspaper missed nearly every major news story. Arguably a couple of writers were wholly off the mark. The *Wall Street Journal* (Finnerty, 2008) regarded the executive editor as overbearing but shrewd, with sound instincts and a clear vision for improving Templeton’s stories: ‘don’t unfurl a sweeping condemnation of society’s ills’.

Print and broadcast reporters generally agreed that journalism’s problems went far beyond prizes and had to do with resources. A couple also highlighted how money caused all the problems addressed in Season 5, not only for journalism, but also for the police and schools. Discussing the *Chicago Tribune* take-over, NPR critic David Bianculli told Terry Gross (2008) that everything ‘from corporate interference and dwindling resources to staff buyouts and editorial mismanagement, is as true now as it ever was’. The greatest consensus was that the city editor Gus Haynes was a noble, dedicated hero. The *San Diego Union-Tribune* description of the ‘heroic old-school newspaper man’ is highly representative (Peterson, 2008). Haynes made mistakes (i.e. he was imperfect). Nonetheless, a few agreed with the *Sun* and *Tribune* that he was flat and one-dimensional. Only the *Boston Globe* (Gilbert, 2008) suggested that, because it focused on sociological

portrayals of systems rather than offering psychological portrayals of individuals, the season had no ‘obvious heroes’.

Within a single paper, of course, journalists were not of a single mind. A *San Francisco Chronicle* op-ed (Kilduff, 2008) deemed the newspaper narrative as the least convincing of the themes. Much of the venom directed at the paper, he said, ‘sounds like score-settling by Simon, who once worked there and departed unhappily ... Sorry, the media has plenty of problems but faked quotes and cooked-up stories aren’t on the top 10 list.’ But the *Chronicle’s* critic (Goodman, 2008a) said the fictional paper ‘mirrors the decline of the American newspaper business. Every paper ... can see its issues reflected at *The Sun*: declining ad revenue, cutbacks and buyouts, ethical lapses, worries about relevance, etc.’

Simon was always a central ‘character’ in these accounts, one who was consistently described as forceful, quick-witted, pugnacious. One widely shared criticism was that Simon, a self-described ‘wood-pulp Luddite’ (2008), ignored technological change and reporters’ online duties. NPR’s TV critic David Bianculli (Gross, 2008) said: ‘What’s not accounted for here, but is the hot button issue and Achilles heel of just every newsroom in America right now, is what to do with and on the internet ... But he got everything else just right.’ More to the point, journalists explicitly connected the negative depiction to his *Sun* experiences:

Simon left the paper some 12 years ago, disheartened by the downsizing of the newsroom and what he saw as *The Sun’s* mismanagement by two prize-chasing editors who backed a reporter who fabricated details to forward his career. Both editors and reporter are long gone, but Simon has not forgotten them. (Gilbert, 2008)

Simon himself often boasted that he had devised the season as ‘payback’ against his old bosses (e.g. Folkenflik, 2007). But Baltimore reporters were not alone in complaining how Simon was settling old scores. Pointing to bits of dialogue gone wrong, a Wisconsin reporter asserted that the ‘vindictive streak hurts the show’s verisimilitude’ (Thomas, 2008). Outside the *Sun* and its former editors, NPR issued the most direct criticisms. Folkenflik (2008) attributed the ‘cartoonish’ nature of some of Simon’s newsroom figures to personal animus. Again, journalists regularly quoted or interviewed other former *Sun* reporters, most often Carroll and Marimow, who disparaged Simon as ‘obsessed’.

Discussion and conclusion

Season 5 drew more ‘hotly debated printed ink and internet bloviating’ than any other *Wire* season (McCabe, 2008). This comment, while true, obscures important patterns in the responses, which ranged from condemnation to hearty agreement. Notably, according to one online rating system, the average score of 24 reviews of *The Wire’s* final season was 89 (the overall score for Season 4, in contrast, was 98); but six television critics awarded it a perfect 100.⁴ The fact that the *Sun’s* score was the lowest, at 70 and that the other relatively hostile responses to that season came from newspapers whose owners or management had been attacked by Simon may indicate the aggressive defensiveness of journalists who felt particularly under attack. This seemed to matter far more than whether the writer was a TV critic or reporter.

Again, the *Sun* admired previous seasons. It appreciated the \$90.5 million that Simon spent in Maryland to produce a series that ‘thoroughly and intelligently dramatized’ urban problems (To the Point, 2008). But Zurawik’s preview and review of the final season (2007, 2008) accused Simon’s ‘docudrama’ of a host of sins: the ‘morality play’ blurred fact and fiction, and simplistically linked demonized newsroom characters to real-life journalists. Arguably ignoring how he had previously not objected to plots that mixed actual events and fact with fiction, Zurawik complained that Simon also blurred time: ‘the people on whom he bases his villains are long gone, yet he presents events set in the newsroom as if they are taking place at the *Sun* today’. Ironically, Zurawik argued both that the series falsely gave viewers the sense that they were watching reality; and that its points were true, but well known: ‘To say that even the most respected newspapers sometimes have ethical lapses will hardly be news to any HBO viewers who have ever heard of Jayson Blair and *The New York Times*.’

A contemporary setting is perhaps predictable for a contemporary drama. One might wonder, however, why the *Sun* so persistently complained about the vendetta against people ‘long gone’. According to someone at the *Sun* we talked to, Simon offered the *Sun*’s editors a choice. If allowed to call the fictional paper ‘The Baltimore Sun’, he would emphasize in all interviews that the villains were ‘long gone’. If not allowed that name, he would omit such clarification, thus implying the *Sun* continued to be a bad place harboring unethical journalists. ‘The *Sun* was screwed either way’, our informant said; after all, Simon was going to set Season 5 in a Baltimore newsroom and associate the *Sun* with bad journalism. Even his avowed goodwill to current staffers and repeated ‘grand promise’ could not and would not ameliorate the [real] journalists’ concerns. Ultimately the publisher decided to allow use of the name. From *Sun* editors’ point of view, there was no *quid pro quo*. Ironically, Simon’s vow recuperated a classic technique of paradigm repair: isolate a couple of renegades and show that they are long gone. Simon’s not naming them would have implied, just as the *Sun* worried, that *current Sun* editors encourage and tolerate flagrant violations of journalism ethics. But the fact that Simon arguably accommodated paradigm repair did not prevent the *Sun* from feeling attacked and thus pushed to defensive repair.

As expected, the *Sun* was toughest on Simon, and the three related newspapers were next in line. The intra-city competition, however, did not play out neatly as we expected, perhaps because the relations were not structurally analogous. The *Baltimore City Paper* took real glee in applauding Simon and in reporting the *Sun*’s discomfort. But that ‘alternative’ paper had *always* reported on its rival’s foibles. In contrast, the *Philadelphia Daily News* – which, notably, shares ownership with the *Inquirer* – rather mildly rebuked the season as unsubtle. The *News*’s TV critic (Gray, 2008) described herself as ‘not stupid enough to believe [the fabulists have] all been caught’. In any case, ‘If his vision of newspapers’ downsized mission has a flaw, it’s probably not that [Simon] went too far, but that he left the business too early to see what happened next.’

Nor were Simon’s nemeses alone in taking offense. Asserting that deceptive reporters are ‘mercifully rare’, one public editor (Tuck, 2008) complained that *The Wire* highlighted ‘the extreme and egregious behavior of a few bad apples’. Meanwhile, apparently unaware that this might seem contradictory, she asserted, ‘There are too many checks and balances for this to happen in most newsrooms.’ Moreover, ‘Journalists don’t need

to make up stories – truth is often stranger than fiction.’ The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Rotstein, 2008) was almost fatalistic about the increasing number of respected columnists who fabricate and plagiarize. He added: ‘Our broadcast comrades are no nobler.’

Demonstrating that popular culture provokes repair work by both evoking and challenging noble visions of journalism, *The Wire* attempted to recall and shore up journalism’s grand narrative about journalists heroically protecting the public’s interests. Nobility was precisely the point of Simon’s essays and speeches, which exploited the acute attention paid to *The Wire* to glorify the ambitions of ‘high end’ journalism and which, with *The Wire*, work intertextually on behalf of multi-layered paradigm overhaul. Sometimes Simon was optimistic. At a 2009 Senate hearing on the future of newspapers, he testified that only professional reporters (i.e. not amateur bloggers or citizen journalists) can compel officials to care about people. A month later at the National Press Club his pessimistic side re-emerged in a speech mocking journalism’s false martyrdom:

We were heroic in our pursuit of our jobs, ... we were out here clearing the path for democracy, and then technology shifted and the paradigm changed and now we’re stuck, and it’s not through any fault of our own that we’ve been caught behind the internet.

Simon accused journalists of already abdicating their responsibilities by 1995, when he took his buy-out and well before the internet’s emergence.

This case shows how vulnerable a challenge is when its content and maker are imperfect, as they inevitably are, and especially when the maker is emotionally and personally ‘close’. Simon’s failure to show a digitized newsroom would seem to be a nitpick. His demonstrable reputation as an angry, obsessive, bitter person, however, came perilously close to provoking (or at least enabling) journalists to deny wholesale all problems in the process of mounting their defensive counter-attack. Perhaps only Simon – who said when journalists are criticized, ‘they start screaming like cats in an alley’ (Barnhart, 2008) – could see his broadsides as inviting useful discussion. Moreover, journalists opposing Simon were not necessarily insincere: just as journalists feared that *Shattered Glass* would encourage public skepticism, so journalists worried that *The Wire* would undermine journalists’ credibility. Ultimately, Simon’s critique probably ‘stuck’. Beyond treating journalists as an audience, we did not study whether Baltimore or non-Baltimore audiences saw *The Wire* as attacking the *Sun* or whether they regarded the negative and contradictory reviews (if they noticed this at all) as knee jerk defensiveness. In any case, the highly complex series was nothing if not polysemic. There was some basis for optimism: at least one reading of the season finale is that while the city editor is demoted, he isn’t fired. More importantly, his noble vision survives through his successor; and other ‘good’ journalists continue to do their work. As the *Post* (Montgomery, 2008) noted, several of the paper’s staff were ‘animated by the same almost impossibly idealistic passion to expose and reform that drew Simon and so many others to the craft’.

Thus, we identify a different kind of paradigm repair enacted by journalists – one precipitated by fiction, albeit one defended extra-televisually as based on real, albeit historical, circumstances. And the effort – more a matter of fear of audience reaction and status anxiety than a response to real loss of credibility – was practiced unevenly across news media. This conclusion is supported by the enormous volume of commentary, and

by the attempts of the *Sun*, *Inquirer*, and *Tribune*-owned papers to delegitimize Simon's argument by dismissing him as angry, obsessed, and vindictive. It's especially evident in the contradictory nature of the repair claims: Season 5 blurs fact and fiction, is too realistic, is merely entertainment. Everyone knows fabulists still infect newsrooms; no editors still protect fabulists; fabricating is unnecessary. There were no bad apples; the bad apples are extreme, isolated cases with little impact; the bad apples have been eliminated.

A remaining question is why the *Baltimore Sun*, and to a lesser extent, the *Inquirer* and *Tribune* were so thin-skinned. After all, many 'non-invested' journalists, while mentioning the Baltimore back story, saw this as about US journalism. *The Wire* took on not merely problems of 'all media, and the growing confusion over how to deliver news, but also the way those changes are buffeting the culture of journalism, the leadership, and the media's ability to have a positive impact on society' (Kushman, 2008). This narrative is now very well known, including outside the profession. So-called 'public editors', required to criticize their own newspapers, painfully recognize that, as one ombudsperson put it, 'Journalists love to probe, and criticize, but are famously thin-skinned themselves' (Moses, 2000). Even the *Washington Post* ombudsperson (Howell, 2008) admitted:

An unpleasant fact about journalists is that we can be way too defensive. We dish it out a lot better than we take it. It's not that we have thin skin; we often act as though we have no skin and bleed at the slightest touch.

Sometimes the subject of repair is not journalism's dominant paradigm but instead the imagined collective subscription to the paradigm by the wider journalistic community (Berger, 2008). Even so, journalists' hostility to Simon's challenge seemed to block or inhibit productive 'status reinforcement' of their paradigm. Journalists were predictably irritated by Simon's extra-textual aggressiveness. They were reacting as much to his speeches and lectures as to *The Wire* itself, often doing so with deep insider knowledge. The *Washington Post* (Montgomery, 2008) dealt at length with an increasingly venomous back-and-forth, involving essays, hyperlinks, and 'commentary on the commentary'. Journalists' blogs and published commentary indicated that many had read the responses and counter-responses.

Journalists are paid to get and tell the story. Missing the story deserves critique. 'Why should cops and lawyers and doctors get all the microscopic attention to their fields and the moralistic soul-searching that comes with it?', the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Goodman, 2008a) asked rhetorically. 'Journalists and journalism are ripe for exploration and vivisection. So, yes, that's good to see – though it's hard to imagine anyone at the actual *Sun* being too pleased with the series.' But journalists often fend off the necessary 'soul-searching'. It would be a shame to short-circuit serious consideration by various publics of the issues *The Wire* put on the table, including the very future of news.

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Notes

1. Prison inmates keenly watched the entire series on DVD, with gang members telling a Columbia University sociologist, 'These people get it' (Gold, 2008: E1). Watching the series may have important functions for gang culture. But police claims (Rashbaum, 2005) that drug rings learned to evade arrest by watching *The Wire* may have been equally hyperbolic. A long-time gang member with multiple drug convictions in prison at the new Jessop (the notorious Jessop mentioned in *The Wire* closed in 2007) contemptuously denied such learning to a coauthor, there for another purpose.
2. This comparison to Dickens was apt but ironic given that the season's newsroom's 'bad guys' were described as highlighting a story's 'Dickensian' aspects to inflate pathos. Meanwhile, Simon said he quit the *Sun* when his editor demanded more 'Dickensian' writing (Pearson, 2009).
3. These speeches had their own compounding effects. A speech on 22 September 2007 apparently significantly fanned the flames of the feud; reports of Simon's speech caused greater animosity. Available at: <http://www.stoopstorytelling.com/shows/19/storytellers/169> (accessed 26 April 2010).
4. Whether because *The Times-Picayune*, in winning the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News, disconfirms Simon's thesis or because Simon wants to avoid offending New Orleans, Simon's next HBO series 'Treme', set in post-Katrina New Orleans, never mentions journalism, except for one *Village Voice* reporter with a tiny role.
5. Confidential personal interview, explained in methods section.
6. Many HBO shows use reality television's visual coding; the blurring of fiction and reality allows actors to play with their persona and reference real events (Kelly, 2009).
7. Simon's father majored in journalism and wrote for magazines and newspapers before going into public relations.
8. The first episode took a few potshots at journalism education, when the paper agreed to sit on a story about racism at Maryland. The managing editor pretends to confuse College of Journalism Dean Gene Robbins with Dean Wormer (from Animal House), and crooner Dean Martin.
9. The *Tribune* website carried an appreciative review of Season 5, a detailed interview with Simon, and an interview with Carroll. Available at: http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment_tv/2008/01/david-simon-tal.html
10. Metacritic converts critics' scores to a 100-point scale; it assigns scores (based on general impressions) for reviewers who do not indicate scores. Available at: <http://www.metacritic.com/tv/shows/wireseason5?q=Wire%20Season%205>

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