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# Pseudo Newsgathering: Analyzing Journalists' Use of Pseudo-events on 'The Wire'

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**Abstract**
This textual analysis examines the role of pseudo-events in the newsgathering process depicted on season five of *The Wire*. The researchers found that the press and sources construct "reality"; sources present "masks" to conceal "reality"' and journalists acknowledge the absurdity of pseudo-events but cover staged events as genuine news. The overriding conclusion is that journalists fail citizens by constructing a false reality through a negotiation with powerful sources who are media- savvy enough to control depictions. These findings are then interpreted through the lens of cultivation theory.

**Disciplines**
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# Pseudo Newsgathering: Analyzing Journalists' Use of Pseudo-events on *The Wire*

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## Introduction

The relationship between the press and its sources are an important consideration in how the press covers news. McCombs and Shaw suggested that the media play a vital role in regards to what issues are deemed important in a political campaign.[1] Their work in agenda setting found that the media do not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about. By deciding what to cover as news, the media also often help determine what news is important on a day-to-day basis. News, however, is a construction of reality, and journalists do not construct that "reality" alone.[2] Instead, news is an often ongoing negotiation between media (reporters, editors, and publishers) and politicians, campaign managers, campaign volunteers, and voters.[3] Shoemaker and Reese identified five levels of influence on news production.[4] While it may, on the surface, seem like a journalist uncovers and then disseminates news, the process is far more complicated with numerous

other institutions impacting what eventually becomes news.

While journalists engage in this ongoing negotiation with sources, with all trying to influence the content of news, other institutions also indirectly—or in some cases, directly—impact news. Since the commercialization of the press, news is also a selected commodity chosen for its ability to please both advertisers and readers.[5] Consequently, the constructed reality of the news is the result of a negotiation between journalists and other institutions, including sources, advertisers, political parties, government agencies, public relations firm, and readers.[6] News choices also are influenced by the size and scale of a newspaper, costs, and competition.[7]

Boorstin introduced the concept of a pseudo-event in 1961. His main argument concerned how journalists were no longer simply gathering and disseminating news, but were spending numerous resources working with non-journalists to create news.[8] He observed that journalists were reporting about events held simply to garner journalists' attention. Boorstin called these events "pseudo-events," and defined them as planned occurrences such as press conferences and events developed for the primary purpose of generating news coverage.[9]

The purpose of this textual analysis is to examine how reality is constructed through the use of pseudo-events on the fictional television show *The Wire*. Textual analysis allows researchers to examine more than the manifest content of *The Wire*; it allows for a deep examination of both implicit and explicit meanings.[10] The study is important because, as posited by Gerbner's cultivation theory, portrayals on television influence how viewers see the real world.[11]

Ehrlich argued that depictions of journalists in film and television influence

audience perceptions in the real world, and if they see journalists primarily gathering news through constructed events, this could result in negative and possibly incorrect perceptions of the journalistic industry.[12] If the depictions of journalists on *The Wire* influence how viewers perceive the news industry, and if, as agenda-setting argues, the media, including television shows, can impact what people think about, then these depictions could certainly impact the public's trust of journalism. This could have serious, negative consequences if the journalists on *The Wire*, a program deemed realistic by television critics, construct reality through planned occurrences, which Boorstin called "pseudo-events" meant to influence the news. And, in general, the depictions of *The Baltimore Sun* reporters and editors in *The Wire* could influence how the show's audience thinks and feels about their real-life counterparts, both in Baltimore and in the greater journalistic field.

## Literature Review

### *Journalism in Popular Culture*

Journalism has played a large role on screen since the beginning of the film industry.[13] The 1931 comedy *The Front Page*, based on the 1928 play of the same name by former Chicago reporters Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur, tells the tale of a journalist who would do just about anything for a big scoop, including hiding an accused and escaped murderer in a desk so he can pen an exclusive for his editor. The comedy has been remade several times, including the 1940 film *His Girl Friday* with Rosalind Russell as the reporter and Cary Grant as her editor, a Jack Lemmon-Walter Matthau reporter-editor version in 1974, and a 1988 adaptation titled *Switching Channels* starring Kathleen Turner as a cable TV news anchor and Burt Reynolds as her producer.

Arguably the most iconic film representation of journalism comes from the 1976 Academy Award-winning *All The President's Men*, which is based on the book by *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.[14] The movie centers on Woodward and Bernstein's coverage of Watergate. According to Schudson, the film upholds the ideals upon which American journalism was founded and "offers journalism a charter, an inspiration, a reason for being large enough to justify the constitutional protections that journalism enjoys."[15] More recently, *Shattered Glass* (2003) tells the story of Stephen Glass, a real-life magazine journalist who fabricated stories for *The New Republic* and other magazines. The movie has been compared to *All The President's Men* because it "performed much the same role that the Woodward and Bernstein story and other journalism movies had done: It underscored the press's centrality in American life, in particular the notion that self-regulation of the press works."[16]

Television writers also have used journalism as a backdrop to tell various tales and, in turn, give viewers something on which to base their notions of the field.[17] *Lou Grant* (1977-1982), a spin-off of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970-1977), won numerous Emmy Awards while letting viewers behind the scenes at the fictional *Los Angeles Tribune*, which the late journalist Tom Brazaitis once called possibly the best newspaper in America.[18]

Of course, for every positive portrayal of journalists, there are many negative ones. One such example is Aaron Sorkin's critically lauded *Sports Night* (1998-2000). In the comedy, women hold many of the top positions in a sports newsroom but are portrayed as mediocre-to-bad journalists who are "incapable of existing without the protection, adoration, and support of the men."[19] In a study of how female journalists are

depicted on *Sports Night*, Painter and Ferrucci found that although the women served in supervisory roles in a male-dominated newsroom, they were often portrayed as weak, unprofessional and not qualified for their positions.[20]

In a content analysis exploring how journalists were depicted on primetime television in general in 1987, Stone and Lee found that while journalists were portrayed often, it was usually on a crime show to facilitate the narrative and to act like a Greek chorus.[21] However, the authors discovered that television journalists were often both men and women and depicted favorably, but newspaper journalists were predominantly white men depicted negatively. They theorized that these types of depictions could cause the public to trust the media less.

***The Wire***

On June 2, 2002, HBO aired the premiere episode of *The Wire*, a sprawling and complex television drama that lasted for five seasons and 60 episodes. Set in and around the streets of Baltimore, Maryland, the show has been heralded by critics as unlike any other scripted series ever aired on television.[22] Creator and main writer David Simon pitched *The Wire* as a twist on the police procedural. However, while the first season did focus extensively on the drug trade and the police's response, subsequent episodes and seasons revealed that Simon's true intent was building a city.[23] The majority of the critics who praised the show compared it not to other television programs, but rather to classic literature, especially Greek tragedies.[24] Simon has said while Greek tragedies focus on the gods, *The Wire* is about how people give god-like reverence to institutions such as the city newspaper.[25]

*The Wire* details the story of a fictional version of Baltimore, from the inside out.

According to Schaub, "*The Wire*, seen in its entirety, can be read as a study in the vulnerabilities of surveillance to the seductions of spectacle. Each season highlights individuals in a particular civic institution who are unequal to the problem they are charged with monitoring."[26] During the first four seasons, the institutions Simon highlights are the police force, the drug trade, the schools, the unionized docks, and City Hall.

For the fifth season, Simon and his team of writers focused on the media as an institution. They created a newsroom that would intimately face many of the challenges described and studied by numerous scholars.[27] These media scholars posit that corporate media's drive for more profits has resulted in cost cutting, less quality reporting, and a drastic and negative shift in newsroom culture. With fewer reporters, newspapers cannot always be an accurate mirror of the communities they cover, thus there is a diminishing of the public sphere and journalism's role in a democracy.[28] For Simon, the fifth and final season was "about the people who are supposed to be monitoring all (the corruption) and sounding the alarm—the journalists."[29]

In a study of *The Wire's* fifth season, Ferrucci and Painter analyzed the portrayal of *The Baltimore Sun* and argued that the show depicts journalism as a powerful institution that serves as a watchdog on city institutions, yet it also is a morally decaying occupation because journalists had to do more with less, which resulted in newsroom tensions, pressures and ethical lapses.[30] Steiner, McCaffrey, Guo, and Hills also examined the fifth season, focusing on how the media covered *The Wire* during that season.[31] They found that while the season received overwhelming lauds from the majority of sources, some media outlets, especially the real-life *Baltimore Sun*, took

umbrage at the negative depictions of journalists and criticized David Simon and show thoroughly. For example, the real-life *Sun,* while it lavishly praised earlier seasons of the show that mixed fiction and real-life issues, said the fifth season "blurred fact and fiction, and simplistically linked demonized newsroom characters to real-life journalists."[32] The Steiner et al. study concluded that the fifth season of *The Wire* had a significant impact on journalists at the establishments that Simon and his writers directly criticized on the show. This impact resulted in journalists at those establishments attempting to repair the reputation of journalists and journalism through their coverage.

The fictional *Sun*'s newsroom is comprised of a group of longtime editors and reporters such as Gus Haynes, "a city editor who tries to hold the line against dwindling coverage, buyouts, and pseudo-news," and a new batch of reporters and head editors more focused on winning awards regardless of ethics.[33] Besides Gus Haynes, the season focuses on executive editor James C. Whiting, managing editor Thomas Klebanow, young and talented reporter Alma Gutierrez, ethically challenged reporter Scott Templeton, court reporter Bill Zorzi, City Hall reporter Jeff Price, young, savvy and hardworking reporter Mike Fletcher, and solid veteran reporter Roger Twigg, who accepts a buyout near the end of the season.

***Pseudo-events***

In his seminal book, Daniel J. Boorstin wrote that journalists devoted time and resources to covering what he deemed "pseudo-events" or "realities," such as press conferences, that are planned occurrences created for the primary purpose of generating news coverage.[34] He blamed journalists for playing a part in the reshaping of reality for the general public and said these pseudo-events have an uncertain relationship to the

reality of the topic and are aimed to be self-fulfilling prophecies.[35] A pseudo-event is an uncertain truth that may replace the spontaneous happenings—a car accident or a crime—that journalists craft into stories and that people consume as news.

Because covering pseudo-events is cheaper and less time-consuming than gathering and finding news, the majority of news is now what government officials or other elites think about an issue[36]; to hear from ordinary people in stories from the mainstream press is a rarity.[37] Berner argued that journalists are no longer the objective truth-seekers and fact-finders that the profession promotes.[38] Scherer, Arnold, and Schlütz agreed with this assessment and wrote that journalists are, for the most part, autonomous creators of reality.[39] Shoemaker and Reese argued that "mass media content is a socially created product, not a reflection of an objective reality."[40] The scholars provided different levels of influence on content: individual, media routines, organizational, ideology, and extra-media.[41]

Boorstin identified three different data-gathering methods associated with pseudo-events: the interview, the press conference, and the press release.[42] For example, Boorstin wrote that during an interview, a journalist "incites a public figure to make statements which will sound like news."[43] Other scholars described a similar concept of "routine events."[44] They outlined routine events as purposeful endeavors in which "the people who undertake the happening are identical with those who promote them into events."[45] Scholars also established three different types of routine events: "those where event promoters have habitual access to news assemblers; those where the event-promoters are seeking to disrupt the routine access of others to assemblers in order to make events of their own; and those where the access is afforded by the fact that the promoters and news

assemblers are identical."[46]

Molotch and Lester, like Boorstin, distinguished between these socially constructed events and spontaneous ones. Kepplinger and Habermeier also made a distinction between what they called "staged events" and "genuine events."[47] The duo noted the existence of what they call "key events," stating that these are events created for the sole purpose of fulfilling the news media's needs for a product. When conceptualizing the term pseudo-event, Cassady argued that they "are commonly staged by public relations people attempting to draw news media coverage of activities that otherwise would go unnoticed."[48] He used events such as ribbon-cuttings, grand openings, and groundbreakings as examples. Cassady identified pseudo-events as "events created by people seeking media attention and news coverage and the dramatization of news events by the media, primarily television, for visual impact."[49] Basically, an example of the first category would be a politician announcing a run for office by setting up a press conference to inform the media. The second category would include a ribbon cutting at a new store, which is an event created for a photo opportunity. In a study that examined how journalists covered the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, Clarke defined a pseudo-event as a version of reality set up by organizers with the hope that journalists convey that version of reality.[50]

Bennett examined pseudo-events in the context of President George W. Bush's declaration about the end of the war in Iraq in 2003.[51] Bush staged a press conference on an aircraft carrier while wearing a flight suit. Bennett wrote that "like many Hollywood productions, the landing required considerable reality-bending staging."[52] Harpine used the concept of a pseudo-event to examine President William McKinley's "front porch

campaign" in the late 19th century.[53] During the campaign, McKinley's main strategy was to hold events at his home, delivering speeches from his front porch. Harpine concluded that these events fit Boorstin's definition of a pseudo-event. If comparing the campaign to Cassady's definition, the front porch speeches fit into the first category because someone seeking media attention created each event.[54]

Clarke, when looking at the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops, argued that the withdrawal itself was a pseudo-event.[55] She writes that journalists should have had access to information that would have shown the actual withdrawal was a construction of reality different from actual reality. Journalists "generally judged the withdrawal to be real on the basis of their knowledge of the international situation and the evidence of their own eyes," even if this evidence was staged for their consumption.[56]

Beasley examined how first lady Eleanor Roosevelt employed pseudo-events during her time in the White House.[57] Roosevelt held press conferences for female reporters only as a way to strengthen the influence of women. Beasley argued that Roosevelt influenced the news-making process by holding these press conferences. The first lady created news by giving female journalists stories without even requiring questions. Roosevelt knew that whatever she spoke about during these press conferences would become news.

Schulz studied media coverage of the 1990 German election and found a direct correlation between how officials packaged their schedules and what became news.[58] Tandoc and Skoric examined the presence of stories about pseudo-events in the Philippine press through a content analysis, doing a contrasted week sample of all 2006 stories that appeared in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer.* The authors found that the

newspaper gathered news at pseudo-events often.[59]

While the vast majority of research concerning pseudo-events examines Boorstin's original idea of staged occurrences meant to garner a certain type of coverage, an event that shifts more of the power from the press to its sources, MacCannell, using Goffman, incorporated the idea of staged authenticity.[60] MacCannell specifically discussed the tourist settings in the context of a pseudo place, a destination where people come together to deliver tourists an authentic feeling experience even if it is the antithesis of authentic. In his study, MacCannell described people acting a certain way to get a very specific feeling or experience across. This can also occur when journalists cover pseudo-events. Not only is an event planned and implemented with the purpose of generating a specific type of coverage, sources at that event, as Boorstin noted, project a specific image and disseminate specific information that the press then covers as truth, even when they know it may be false.[61]

***Cultivation Theory***

Cultivation theory, originally introduced by George Gerbner, argues that people are affected by what they see on television.[62] Gerbner argued that most of what people know, or at least think they know, they have never seen or experienced and, therefore, have formed those thoughts through what they see in the world around them, primarily on television.[63] Cultivation posits that the more people immerse themselves in the world of television, the more they start to consider the depictions viewed as realistic approximations of the real world. Through a series of content analyses, Gerbner and colleagues identified behaviors depicted on television and then surveyed viewers about these depictions. The research found that people who often saw televised depictions of a

certain behavior, believed that behavior was more prevalent in the real world than the actual evidence suggested.[64] For example, Gerbner found that television depicts violence far more often than it happens in reality and heavy viewers of television believed the world to be more violent. Gerbner and his colleagues do not argue that television viewing has direct effects on the audience, but rather the experience of watching "cultivates" an experience and, over time, viewers interpret the depictions as consistent with everyday reality.

For example, Romer, Jamieson, and Aday examined whether heavy viewers of the evening news believed the world to be more violent than it actually is; the researchers found that viewing of the sometimes violent stories depicted in broadcast news did in fact influence a viewer's perception of violence in the world.[65] A recent study found that heavy watchers of television saw many depictions of young adults using controlled substances. Surveys showed that these viewers believed young adults abused drugs in real life far more often than they did.[66] Researchers also examined, through the lens of cultivation theory, how depiction of marriage on television affects viewers' ideas of marriage.[67] Their study found that there was, indeed, an effect. Viewers who watched more television did have more ambivalence concerning marriage and family, which is similar to what was depicted on television.

For this study, the manner in which journalists on *The Wire* produce news could have an effect on how viewers think about journalists. If these fictional journalists gather most of their news by attending staged occurrences or pseudo-events, viewers could be more likely to believe that journalists do not actually uncover stories, but rather work hand-in-hand with the people they are supposed to cover to affect the construction of

reality that is news.

Television critics often call *The Wire* the most realistic depiction of journalism in television history. Laura Miller of *Salon* noted that the show depicts characters who are sometimes subject to forces outside of their control, something that is rarely shown on television.[68] Christopher Hanson argued that the show's depiction of a newsroom losing touch with the city it covers and going through massive financial turmoil mirrors the fate of numerous current news organizations.[69] And Brian Lowry, the main television critic at industry magazine *Variety* noted that journalists "can finally point to by far the most accurate presentation of their craft ever: the final season of HBO's dense urban drama *The Wire*."[70]

With these plaudits in mind, it stands to reason that viewers of *The Wire* believe that the journalists who are depicted act in a similar manner to their real-life counterparts. While scholars have focused considerable energies studying pseudo-events, the general public likely understands little concerning their role in how journalists gather information.

## Research Questions

**RQ1:** How were pseudo-events depicted in season five of the television series *The Wire*?

**RQ2:** How did these depictions help construct the "reality" of the fictionalized Baltimore in *The Baltimore Sun*?

## Method

To examine how pseudo-events were portrayed on *The Wire*, a textual analysis of the fifth season was conducted. The researchers examined the entire season, episodes one through 10. The unit of analysis was text and video of the 10 episodes that originally

aired between January 6, 2008 and March 9, 2008. Each of the episodes was closely observed for dialogue, facial expressions, camera framing, lighting, and body language.

Textual analysis is "a means of trying to learn something about people by examining what they … produce on television."[71] The value of employing textual analysis is that researchers can identify all possible meanings inherent in a text.[72] Meanings from manifest content are socially constructed. Thus, textual analysis was developed as an alternative to the quantitative content analysis commonly used in analyzing media messages.[73] Textual analysis goes beyond the manifest content of messages, allowing researchers to discern "implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text."[74]

In addition to spoken text, visual features such as type of shot, content, sequencing, and graphics also were analyzed.[75] While coding themes and patterns, the researchers isolated something "(a) that happens a number of times and (b) that consistently happens in a specific way."[76]

Three factors can detract from the credibility of qualitative research: completeness of the data, selective perception, and reactivity.[77] This study's credibility and validity were improved through the use of low-inference descriptors, reflexivity, and researcher triangulation. Low-inference descriptors are the use of descriptions closely phrased to the participants' accounts and researchers' notes.[78] Reflexivity is the researchers' use of self-awareness and critical self-reflection on potential biases and predispositions that may affect the research process and conclusions.[79] Researcher triangulation in qualitative research, as described by Johnson, is the use of multiple coders to analyze the text.[80]

For this study, two researchers individually examined each episode of season five

three times. The study followed the three-step procedure outlined by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw concerning qualitative analyses.[81] During the first viewing, each researcher took general notes about how the show portrayed journalists. Each researcher focused extensively on journalists' actions and how newsworkers gathered, reported, and edited news. The second viewing incorporated a more stringent and focused viewing. Each researcher watched and rewatched each scene containing journalists and transcribed dialogue along with general comments about presentation. Finally, a third viewing allowed both researchers to watch while rechecking our notes and ensuring quality and completeness of data. Finally, researchers convened, read over each other's notes and discussed data. Researchers then put the data together and read through it separately, looking for themes and patterns to emerge.

## Findings

Four major themes emerged during the course of the 10 episodes: the press and its sources negotiated to construct "reality"; sources would present "masks" to conceal "reality"; members of the press would acknowledge the absurdity of a pseudo-event; and journalists would cover staged pseudo-events as genuine news.

### *Events Negotiated Between Media and Sources*

Previous scholars have argued that news is an ongoing negotiation between reporters and their sources.[82] This negotiation between journalists and sources, advertisers, political parties, government agencies, and readers leads to a constructed reality of the news.[83] The journalists depicted in *The Wire* often were shown negotiating with their sources, and such negotiations inevitably would lead to a socially constructed product instead of a genuine reflection of an objective reality.

In Episode 4 "Reflections," *Sun* editors watched television coverage of State Senator Clay Davis leaving the city courthouse, where he had testified to a grand jury in a corruption case. *The Sun*, however, was not there because court reporter Bill Zorzi had not been notified. City editor Gus Haynes sums up the paper's feelings when he says, "You remember the good old days when nobody in their right mind would stage a perp walk without calling the daily newspaper. Nowadays all they care about is a goddamn video."

Zorzi confronts Ronnie Perlman, the assistant city prosecutor, during her boss' press conference in Episode 5 "React Quotes."

> **Zorzi**: Ronnie Perlman? I'm Bill Zorzi *(extends hand),* covering federal court for *The Sun*.
>
> **Perlman**: Right, how do you do? *(Shakes hand.)*
>
> **Zorzi**: Not to be all petulant on your special day here, but since when does the prosecutor in this town stage a perp walk and not call the daily newspaper?
>
> **Perlman**: We called Gail Gibson. Left a message on her voicemail.
>
> **Zorzi**: Gail left for a freelance gig four months ago.
>
> **Perlman**: Well, her voicemail still works. Who's replacing her on city courts?
>
> **Zorzi**: *(Handing Perlman a business card.)* From now on … just don't jam me up like that again.

The negotiation, here, is that the daily paper wants to be notified whenever there is a pseudo-event being held in the city. Zorzi is not necessarily asking for real news, just to be included when there is staged news to cover.

In Episode 8 "Clarifications," Mayor Thomas Carcetti holds a press conference to

address police efforts to stop a string of homeless murders. While he views the press conference as important, he sees that this news will overshadow the good news he wanted the press to cover from another press conference he held earlier in the day.

> **Carcetti** *(aside to assistant before entering the press conference)*: Did we have to schedule this the same day as New Westport? My good news isn't even going to make the front of the local section. *(Enters press conference.)* First of all, I'm surprised to see so much media here. A press event held earlier today to announce the revitalization of yet another part of our city was not so well attended. It would appear that media attention is always focusing on the negative when it comes to Baltimore, but you guys aren't around when we're making real progress.

The media, however, are less focused on the mayor's wishes for good press and more focused on getting a story about the homeless murders.

> **First unnamed reporter:** Is there any connection between these murders and those in the vacant homes last year?
>
> **Second unnamed reporter**: Are you asking the FBI to join in the investigation?
>
> **Alma Guiterrez**: Deputy, even with all the resources at your disposal, isn't it extremely difficult to catch a serial killer?
>
> **Bill Zorzi**: Has a note been found at any of the scenes?

This suggests that the negotiation between the press and its sources is an ongoing struggle. Carcetti wants the press to focus on the good news of the New Westport development announcement, but the members of the media want to focus on the bad news of the homeless killings. Both scenes, however, were staged events created by Carcetti to fulfill the media's needs for a product.

Sometimes, a potential source does not want to talk to reporters. Such a refusal also is part of the ongoing negotiation to construct "reality." In Episode 9 "Late Editions,"

*Sun* reporter Alma Guiterrez wants a quote from Deputy of Operations Cedric Daniels about a major drug bust.

> **Guiterrez**: Deputy, Alma Guiterrez, *The Sun* papers. Care to comment?
>
> **Daniels**: It's a good day for the good guys.
>
> **Guiterrez**: Can you be a bit more substantive?
>
> **Daniels**: *(Sighs.)* The last time *The Sun* had me in its pages, you had me doing things I didn't do.
>
> **Guiterrez**: Regarding?
>
> **Daniels**: Something about me stabbing someone in the back. Look it up.

Guiterrez wanted a quick yet substantive quote but only received a cliché from a source who previously had been burned by *The Sun*. Even during a pseudo-event such as a press conference, sources negotiate with reporters to construct a nonobjective reality.

***Masking Reality***

One storyline that permeated the season was the grand jury investigation of Clay Davis, a corrupt state senator who was accepting bribes and kickbacks, while also embezzling campaign funds. In Episode 4 "Transitions," reporters confront a visibly shaken Davis as he is leaving the city courthouse. Davis puts on a fake smile and acts like a confident politician—offering a public mask rather than private reality—before answering questions.

> **Unnamed reporter**: Is it true that you appeared before the grand jury?
>
> **Davis**: Jane, I insisted that I be called.
>
> **Reporter**: Senator, it's our understanding that you're the target of an investigation into theft and fraud.

> **Davis**: No, partner, no. *(Laughs.)* Some people are confused about some things. That's why I came down here today, to set 'em straight. Happy to do it, too. Happy to avail myself of the opportunity *(fading into background)*.
>
> **Officer Leander Sydnor to Lester Freeman** *(walking out of courthous**e**)*: Grand jury is supposed to be secret. Who called the reporters?
>
> **Freeman**: Mr. Bond, our state's attorney. Laying claim to the senator before anyone else can.
>
> *(Focus back to Davis)* **Davis**: There just seems to be a little bit of a misunderstanding about some of my dealings here in the community.

The Davis story continues to draw huge crowds of media, and he is greeted, a lot less confrontationally, in Episode 7 "Took" while returning to the courthouse.

> **TV reporter**: Senator, there have been rumors of a last-minute plea offer.
>
> **Davis**: How can I plead to what I didn't do? *(Walks toward courthouse steps.)*
>
> ***The Sun*** **court reporter**: What are you reading there, Senator?
>
> **Davis**: *Prometheus Bound*, ancient play, one of the oldest we have. About a simple man who was horrifically punished by the powers that be for the terrible crime of trying to bring light to the common people. In the words of Aeschylus, no good deed goes unpunished. I cannot tell you how much consolation I find in these slim pages. Ladies and gentlemen, I do believe I have my day in court, and I will see you inside.

The public mask, here, put on by Davis alludes that he is like Prometheus; he is a simple man who is being punished by Baltimore powers for trying to help the poor people in his district.

Davis is not the only character to wear a "mask." In Episode 5 "React Quotes," former Baltimore Mayor Royce leads a pep rally for Davis on the courthouse steps.

Royce seems to fully support Davis, until the camera catches an aside, through smiling teeth, between Royce and Davis.

> **Royce**: And they want you to believe that there's only one side to this story, and that their so-called facts cannot be denied. But we have some facts of our own. Don't we?
>
> **Crowd**: Yeah.
>
> **Royce**: We know who our leaders are, and we don't want them picking our leaders for us. Do we?
>
> **Crowd**: No.
>
> **Royce**: And we will not stand idly by as they single out our leaders and selectively prosecute, or should I say persecute, them just because they have the courage and the fortitude to stand up for us. *(Crowd cheers.)* Let them hear you. *(Crowd cheers more loudly.)* Let them here you loud and clear. Clay Davis isn't going anywhere, is he?
>
> **Crowd**: No.
>
> **Royce**: We need him. We're going to keep him, and damn anyone who says otherwise. *(Holds up Clay Davis' arm.)*
>
> **Crowd** *(shouting)*: Clay Davis. Clay Davis.
>
> **Royce (aside to Davis)**: What the fuck is this I hear about you might not stand tall on this?
>
> **Davis (aside to Royce)**: You got that wrong old friend. I'm gonna carry this.
>
> **Royce (aside to Davis)**: You damn sure better because if you don't, you won't be able to squeeze another greenback out of this town for the rest of your natural life.

Each of these examples is a staged pseudo-event. Further, the principle participants know exactly how to perform during these events. Davis is smiling and confident for the television cameras even though he is the subject of a grand jury

investigation. Royce is outwardly supportive of his political ally, but questions Davis' loyalty under his breath.

***Acknowledging Absurdity of Pseudo-events***

Reporters cover pseudo-events as news even though these events are created, at least in part, for the purpose of exploiting the media's needs for a product. Journalists might need pseudo-events and will cover them as objective reality instead of a socially created product; however, the journalists at *The Sun* often were shown mocking the very events that they would then go on to report in their paper.

For example, in Episode 4 "Transitions," Gutierrez is reporting on a press conference where Mayor Carcetti is announcing a new interim police commissioner, Bill Rawls. Meanwhile, editors watching it in *The Sun*'s newsroom are mocking the press conference.

> **Carcetti**: I wanted to say a few words about public service, and about Irvin H. Burrell. During my time on the City Council, Irv was no stranger to me. *(Cuts to* The Sun *newsroom where editors and reporters are watching the news conference.)* I chaired the public safety subcommittee, and I called upon him many times. We worked closely together then, and, when I became mayor, we formed a strong relationship.
>
> **Gus Haynes (to others in newsroom)**: He feared and hated me, and I merely wanted him dead.
>
> **Carcetti (on TV)**: … making Baltimore a safer city.
>
> **Haynes**: Don't stray from Near Harbor.
>
> **Carcetti (on TV)**: … carry on without him. I know that the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council seeks new leadership …
>
> **Haynes**: It took a while, but I finally put his ass out to pasture.
>
> **Carcetti (on TV)**: *(Shakes Burrell's hand and gives him a plaque.)* Thank you.

> **Haynes**: Plaques for hacks … the prerogative of any big-city mayor.
>
> **Thomas Klebanow**: How much of that insight and analysis can we get in tomorrow's story?
>
> **Haynes**: Little to none. *(Turns off TV.)* Twig was the man who could work the department sources, and they're the ones who would shit all over a dog-and-pony show like that.
>
> **Klebanow**: What about Price at the hall?
>
> **Haynes**: Mayor's office? They're the ones who set up the press conference. They're not gonna tell the truth, not even on background. No, a veteran in the cop shop is what gets us over on a story like this, and fuck if we didn't buy ours out.

*The Sun*, of course, is going to cover the press conference in the next day's paper. The paper most likely will run it as a straight news story, even though the city editor, Gus Haynes, knows it is nothing more than "a dog-and-pony show." However, without enough reporters—or enough experienced reporters—to cover City Hall adequately, Haynes has little choice but to run a straight story without real insight.

Similarly, court reporter Bill Zorzi knows that a Carcetti press conference announcing a major drug bust, in Episode 9 "Late Editions," is nothing more than an effort by a failing Baltimore Police Department to show that it is doing something to keep the city safe.

> **Carcetti**: And let me just say to all others responsible for the drug trade's assault on the welfare of this city, a day like this is coming for you.
>
> **Zorzi** *(under his breath)*: Oh, you are so butch.
>
> **Carcetti**: I have seen what drugs have done to Baltimore. Drug dealers do not just destroy individuals, they destroy families …
>
> **Zorzi** *(under his breath)*: Don't forget about the community.

**Carcetti**: They destroy entire communities. *(Gutierrez laughs.)*

While *The Sun* reporters see the press conference as little more than a joke, it is treated as real news elsewhere. The mayor's podium includes six news microphones, and the Baltimore station WYBA-TV broadcasts the press conference live under the tag "$16 Million Drug Bust." While Zorzi and Gutierrez are laughing at the mayor, the straight coverage by other news outlets suggests that *The Sun* also will publish a conventional news story about this staged event.

***Staged Events vs. Genuine Events***

The Baltimore depicted in *The Wire* is a city beset with problems. The schools are failing and broke, the police cannot curb the drug trade and subsequent murders, and there is a potential (although fake) serial killer on the loose. Despite real news, however, news organizations are consistently depicted covering staged pseudo-events.

Journalists are almost always present when Mayor Carcetti does anything mayoral. They seek a few comments as he is leaving a Baltimore City Schools debate tournament in Episode 9 "Late Editions." In Episode 8 "Clarifications," they cover a candlelight vigil he holds for the homeless, with homeless people used as backdrops—or props—on the stage behind the mayor. Finally, Carcetti hosts a ribbon-cutting ceremony on the city docks to announce the groundbreaking of a new, upscale development called New Westport in Episode 6 "The Dickensian Aspect." Newspaper photographers and television cameramen are on the scene to document the event, but pay little attention when out-of-work dockworkers attempt to stage a protest.

The season, and the series, ends with a pseudo-event in Episode 10 "30." *Sun*

reporter Scott Templeton wins the Pulitzer Prize for his (faked) coverage of a (fake) serial killer. He is shown smiling and holding his award, bracketed by a beaming Klebanow and James C. Whiting. The message is clear: Journalists are not rewarded for doing a good job, and journalists love covering pseudo-events—especially pseudo-events about journalists.

**Discussion**

Boorstin introduced the concept of the pseudo-event as a tactic to differentiate what the field of journalism had previosuly considered a newsworthy event from events planned for the primary purpose of generating news coverage.[84] This study found that on *The Wire*, a program lauded for its realistic depiction of journalism and news workers, the pseudo-event is the primary tool for newsgathering. However, although a cursory examination of the fifth season of the program reveals the journalists' dependence on pseudo-events for coverage, a deeper investigation unearths how the pseudo-event shifts power.

We found that in *The Wire*, journalists and sources negotiate to construct reality. When covering a pseudo-event, the initial power in this negotiation lies with the sources. They decide when, where, and how a press conference or other type of pseudo-event will occur. Basically, the source sets all the important rules of the game, and the journalist must then act in this negotiation. Once the rules are set, the power shifts to the journalist, who gets to ask questions and attempt to elicit new information. However, the source can still refuse to answer a particular question or even remove the journalist from the event. Therefore, the sources primarily control this negotiation, and they have a particular ideology they wish to disseminate.

In *The Wire*, viewers see journalists covering pseudo-events and explicitly discussing this lack of power. Bill Zorzi and Alma Gutierrez consistently acknowledge the overtly dishonest, vague, and untrue views presented by city officials at press conferences. However, because they want continued access to these sources in some manner, Zorzi and Gutierrez unfailingly participate in the perpetuation of lackluster stories. They continue to print stories they know to be vague and decidedly pertaining to tertiary issues of importance. In short, they lose the negotiation with sources, with their only power coming in the form of being able to not attend some press conferences, as Mayor Carcetti noted during one aforementioned situation. This gives viewers a look at less powerful journalists knowingly printing less-than-stellar stories.

The second theme unearthed through this examination of pseudo-events on *The Wire* concerns the "masks" worn by sources covered by the fictional journalists at *The Baltimore Sun*. The saga of Clay Davis illustrates this theme. All the journalists covering Davis' trial know he is guilty. Viewers know he is guilty. In private scenes, Davis admits his guilt. Yet whenever the press interviews Davis, he puts on a mask and cautiously and gregariously divulges facts and quotes to journalists. The character crafts his answers in a way to paint himself in an innocent and positive light. Davis knows he is lying. The reporter also knows this, yet coverage of Davis is generally positive.

The lesson imparted to viewers is clear: Journalists print false information rather than utilize resources to dig up a corroboration of the truth. Theodore Glasser argued that "objective reporting is biased against independent thinking; it emasculates the intellect by treating it as a disinterested spectator."[85] Journalists are forced to remain impartial and neutral, which means they should just report the "facts" as they are told instead of

interpreting events through a critical lens. Davis puts on a mask, and that is enough to substantially influence coverage. Once again, this illustrates that on *The Wire*, the journalist does not have much power. The journalist does have some power concerning how the public receives a story, but the source holds the majority of the power concerning what story and how a story reads when it reaches the public.

Finally, the main take-away from *The Wire* is how easily journalists transition from covering genuine events to staged events. There is an effortless transition. While the reporters and editors of *The Baltimore Sun* mock the disingenuous nature of the pseudo-events that they often attend, they cover them in almost the exact same manner as a genuine event. This shows the reader how journalism has become a broken institution that cares less about the truth, and more about awards and filling news pages, regardless of the quality of the content. The pseudo-event is presented as an essential element of the newsgathering process. When a journalist misses the chance to attend one, not only do editors complain to the reporter who missed the event, but also the reporter complains to the person coordinating the event.

This study illustrates that it is no longer necessary to plan a pseudo-event because there are times when public figures can assume the media will approach them. For example, in season five of *The Wire*, Clay Davis on the courthouse steps is one of many illustrations of a non-staged event that might as well be staged. Davis attempts to leave the courthouse without notice from the press. However, this attempt fails and Davis answers questions. This is not an interview Davis intended, but because of the "mask" he is able to put on, the interview becomes similar to a pseudo-event.

Boorstin did not classify all interviews with politicians as pseudo-events; however,

season five of *The Wire* implies that reporters no longer act as traditional watchdogs because of their reliance on traditional pseudo-events. In this particular scene, Davis takes control of his image and only delivers measured information. He is able to do this now because of the lack of resources the press can call on to investigate. The journalists might know he is lying, but they cannot prove it and therefore must print his story in the manner he desires. If, however, a journalist forcefully questioned Davis and scoffed at his clearly false answers, the newspaper could suffer by not receiving information about upcoming press conferences, for example. As depicted earlier in the season, the reporters at the fictional *Baltimore Sun* rely on this information and these press conferences to gather political news.

We can now tentatively ask the question of whether all dealings with public officials are pseudo-events. According to *The Wire*'s creator and longtime journalist David Simon, it looks that way. His show depicts the field of journalism as a powerless and decaying institution forced to knowingly print spurious information because of a lack of resources. Public officials are now so media savvy that even without a planned event, they can control their image and effectively use the media to disseminate an ideologically slanted view.

Cultivation research shows that people draw conclusions about the world around them based on television depictions.[86] And surveys conclude that the public trusts journalists less and less as years pass.[87] The public believes the media do not get their facts right; that is one factor why this level of trust keeps lowering. The findings of this study show that part of the reason for this could lie in how journalists are depicted in popular culture. The journalists on *The Wire* do not do their profession any favors. While

the hardworking professionals at the fictional *Baltimore Sun* may understand they are failing in the mission to inform the citizenry and preserve democracy, that does not make their performance any better. The most salient conclusion one comes to when analyzing the final season of *The Wire* is that the field of journalism is failing, the situation will not get better, and, most specifically germaine to this study, journalists are very rarely investigating actual news.

This study's primary research questions concern how *The Wire* depicts pseudo-events, and how those events help shape a "reality." It is our belief that the overriding message regarding journalism sent to viewers of *The Wire* is that just as politicians, schools, corporations, and other major American institutions are failing citizens, so is journalism. No longer holding the powerful accountable, the press, through the consistent use of pseudo-events, now constructs reality through a negotiation with powerful sources who are media savvy enough to control depictions.

Viewers base many of their assumptions on popular culture depictions. *The Wire* has received numerous lauds for its realistic depiction of journalism. Therefore, the manner in which the fictitious *Baltimore Sun* utilizes pseudo-events could negatively impact the real field of journalism. While *The Wire* concluded its run on HBO in 2008, new viewers consistently discover the program; DVD sales of the series are still very strong.[88] *The Wire* has also contributed to David Simon's reputation as an expert on the media, thus allowing him to further disemminate his ideas on journalism and, more specifically, pseudo-events.[89]

While many viewers of *The Wire* may already hold negative opinions of journalists, a viewing of the series would not change this opinion. Even people with

favorable opinions concerning journalists could view season five and find themselves disillusioned with journalism. This depiction portrays journalists as, in many ways, attendees of press conferences who will fail to ask tough questions and allow public officials to continuously spin the news. Cultivation theory posits that this could very likely negatively impact the public's pereption of journalism. Programs such as *The Wire*, with its depiction of journalists as failing to do their job, must shoulder some of the blame for a public so thoroughly disenchanted by the media.

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