

**CHARLES UNIVERSITY**  
**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
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Department of North American Studies

**Master's Thesis**

**2020**

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**FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
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**Portrayal of Journalists in Netflix' Series "House  
of Cards"**

Master's Thesis

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Study programme: International Area Studies

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Year of the defence: 2020

## **Declaration**

1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
2. I hereby declare that my thesis has not been used to gain any other academic title.
3. I fully agree to my work being used for study and scientific purposes.

In Prague on May 21, 2020

Tomáš Linhart

## References

LINHART, Tomáš. *Portrayal of Journalists in Netflix' Series "House of Cards."* Praha, 2020. 125 pages. Master's thesis (Mgr.). Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of International Studies. Department of North American Studies. Supervisor Mgr. Jana Sehnálková, Ph.D.

**Length of the thesis:** 264 572 characters.

## **Abstract**

This thesis examined the contemporary U.S. popular culture, specifically the Netflix series *House of Cards*, and the analysis was focused on the representation of the media reality portrayed in the first two seasons of the series. The credibility of given model situations or their exaggeration is examined based on thirteen research interviews with Czech and American journalists in March, April, and May 2020. The public trust in media, the influence of popular culture on mass society, specifics and ethics of investigative journalism, and broadly the representation of media in cinematography were presented in the first part. The analysis of the portrayal of journalists and media in the series and research interviews with experts followed. The main objective of this research was to evaluate the credibility of the portrayal of journalists. The secondary research question was focused on the public trust in media and the potential harm that the depiction in culture might cause. The views of Czech and American journalists on the portrayal of media in popular culture and the discussion about their diverse opinions are the primary asset of this thesis. The results prove that the perception of ethics and journalistic behaviour in given specific situations differ individually. Therefore, aspects such as nationality, gender, experience, or the field of specialisation cannot be fully applied in this research to explain the findings. However, the research questions can be answered relatively decisively. Based on the interviews with 13 Czech and American experts, it seems that the portrayal of journalists in *House of Cards* is exaggerated and distorts reality. Also, such a depiction could, according to the research results, to a certain extent, impact the public perception of journalists. The majority of respondents are convinced that the depiction of media in popular culture could influence the public trust in media. Half of the interviewees believed that specifically the series *House of Cards* could cause harm to real journalists by its depiction of the profession. Only a minority did not ascribe any effect to the portrayal.

## **Abstrakt**

Tato diplomová práce se věnuje současné americké popkultuře, konkrétně seriálu *House of Cards*. Analytická část práce je zaměřena na reprezentaci mediální reality v prvních dvou řadách seriálu. Zkoumá věrohodnost či zkreslení vybraných postav a modelových situací na základě třinácti výzkumných rozhovorů s českými i americkými novináři, které byly provedeny v průběhu března, dubna a května 2020. V první části práce je rozebrána důvěra

veřejnosti v média, vliv popkultury na masovou společnost, specifika a etika investigativní žurnalistiky a obecně zobrazení médií v kinematografii. Ve druhé části následuje samotná analýza provedených výzkumných rozhovorů. Hlavním cílem výzkumu bylo zhodnotit věrohodnost zobrazení novinářů v seriálu, vedlejší výzkumná otázka mířila na to, jakým způsobem může jisté zobrazení novinářů v popkultuře teoreticky ublížit reálným novinářům. Nejdůležitějším přínosem této práce jsou originální a mnohdy nesouhlasné názory českých a amerických novinářů na seriál jako takový a na zobrazení novinářů. Výsledky výzkumu prokazují, že vnímání etického novinářského chování je výlučně individuální záležitostí, v níž se ukazuje, že aspekty jako národnost, pohlaví, zkušenosti či zaměření nehrají příliš důležitou roli. Výzkumné otázky však i přesto mohou být relativně jednoznačně zodpovězeny. Na základě analýzy rozhovorů se třinácti vybranými odborníky se zdá, že obraz novinářů v seriálu *House of Cards* je přehnaný a převrací realitu. Navíc takovéto zobrazení může dle získaných poznatků do jisté míry ovlivnit náhled veřejnosti na novináře. Většina respondentů je přesvědčena, že vyobrazení médií v popkultuře může hrát roli v tom, jak veřejnost tuto profesi vnímá, a přesně polovina expertů se domnívá, že konkrétní vliv může mít přímo tento daný seriál.

## **Keywords**

Journalists, House of Cards, popular culture, portrayal, credibility, distortion, media, public trust

## **Klíčová slova**

Novinář, House of Cards, populární kultura, obraz, věrohodnost, zkreslení, média, důvěra veřejnosti

## **Title**

Portrayal of Journalists in Netflix' Series "House of Cards"

## **Název práce**

Obraz novinářů v americkém seriálu House of Cards

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to express my gratitude, especially to the dearest Mgr. Jana Sehnálková, Ph.D., for all her priceless advice, numerous consultations, assistance, flexibility, and infinite tolerance. Furthermore, I am grateful to my beloved family for the immense support during the uneasy quarantine writing months; to Lucie Kýrová, M.A., Ph.D., for permitting me to terminate my studies and for her valued expertise; to doc. Mgr. Jakub Macek, Ph.D., for a brief, yet fruitful consultation; to Mgr. Tereza Vicková, for the streaming facilitation and supportive feedback; to all the 13 respondents who reserved their time to provide a unique insight into the perception of the portrayal of journalists; and finally, as this study is analysing popular culture at the Department of North American Studies, to the California band *Hollywood Undead*, whose music accelerated my concentration incessantly throughout spring 2020. I would also like to thank the whole Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, for providing me all the invaluable knowledge in both fields of study to make this thesis possible.

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## 1. Introduction

“You must keep up the attack on the media. You’ve got to keep destroying their credibility. There’s not a good one on the whole goddamn three networks, not one.” These words could easily be attributed to Kevin Spacey in the role of Francis Underwood, an ambitious politician who eventually becomes the most powerful person in the world, the President of the United States. However, the fictional President Underwood from the renowned Netflix series *House of Cards* never said the aforementioned words. More or less surprisingly, the author of the quotation was real U.S. President, as demonstrated in a recent<sup>1</sup> HBO film *Nixon by Nixon: In His Own Words*, which is based on secret recordings from the White House during the administration of Richard M. Nixon between 1971 and 1973. As the quotation was accurate, one could simply argue that there is not always a fine line between reality and fiction.

The relationship between media and politics is a long- and well-known evergreen cliché. One cannot really exist without the other, but both must maintain an exact distance from each other. The mutual influence has also been reflected in culture, namely in films such as *All President’s Men*, *Wag the Dog*, more recently *The Post*, *Mark Felt: The Man Who Brought Down the White House* or the American series about a presidential administration from the turn of the century called *The West Wing*. And many more. Political movies and TV series have been largely popular for decades, ever since the British series *Yes, Minister* came into being more than 40 years ago in February 1980. The extensive, 6-seasons long series *House of Cards* could be viewed as the recent hit or trending front-runner. Three years before Donald Trump was elected President of the United States, the first season about an ambitious, cold-blooded Democratic Congressman Frank Underwood gained immense worldwide popularity. It happened despite his rather demeaning character, which is for many currently personified by the real incumbent President.

According to several public opinion surveys, the public trust in media is steadily and gradually decreasing, which is also discussed in the following chapters. It is impossible to prove any verifiable causality of the impact of TV series on the public trust in media. Still, the depiction of journalists raises a question whether *House of Cards* and similar series could (even unintentionally) somehow contribute to the presently observed erosion

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<sup>1</sup> 2014. More details available at: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3889036/>.

of public trust in media. Decreasing public trust concerns not only media – it affects politics and other public institutions equally, although not to such a great extent.

*House of Cards* has gained relatively a high popularity worldwide, and the Czech TV broadcasted its first five seasons between the years 2016-2018. Its popularity in the last couple of years denotes more broadly the public demand for this particular type of production, which reflects the actual issues in politics and society. Although the portrayal of journalists in such series and movies is undoubtedly compressed and hyperbolic, and they are presented in an archetypal nutshell, it always provides some indication. Based on those compressions, the audience either stabilizes or inverts its impression on a given topic. Even a condensed portrayal could then potentially have an enormous impact on society, which is the reason why analysing the popular Netflix series is an important research topic for an academic dissertation.

In broader terms, this topic is a specific application of the cultivation theory elaborated by George Gerbner and the theory of the representation of reality. Other theorists such as Umberto Eco, Hannah Arendt, or the Frankfurt school are included, and their research contributions to the influence of popular culture on mass society are discussed. The agenda-setting theory, presented in the 1970s by Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs, explained what impact media could have on public opinion. Although the theory is not recent, Netflix, as a currently trending medium, must also be taken into account. Furthermore, the media researchers from the Czech universities Jan Halada, Jan Jiráček, Barbara Köpplová, Jakub Macek, Barbora Osvaldová, Tomáš Trampota, Martina Vojtěchovská, or Marína Urbániková provided the necessary local context related to the global influence of media on society or to the public trust in media.

This thesis is analysing the contemporary production of U.S. popular culture, specifically the Netflix series *House of Cards*. The analysis is focused on the representation of the media reality portrayed in the first two seasons of the series, and the credibility of given characters or their dubiousness (distortion of reality) is examined. That is also the essential research question of the thesis: “How are journalists in *House of Cards* portrayed? Is their image credible, or exaggerated? Does the series distort reality?” The answer is provided based on the analysis of the series as well as on multiple interviews with relevant experts (Czech and American media professionals) conducted throughout spring 2020. The public trust in media, the influence of popular culture on mass society, specifics and ethics of investigative journalism, and broadly the portrayal of

media in cinematography are presented in the first part. The analysis of the representation of journalists and media in the series and research interviews with field experts follows.

The main objective of this research is to evaluate whether the *House of Cards* series portrays the journalistic reality credibly, or whether it is fiction instead. Moreover, the secondary research question was focused on the public trust in media, and the respondents were asked: “Could series such as *House of Cards* (or others where journalists are presented as tools for political objectives) have any impact on public trust in media? Could series such as *House of Cards* cause any harm to real journalists and media by their portrayal?” Therefore, this thesis’ valuable asset is a unique reflection of the Czech journalists’ perception of the series. No similar research has ever been conducted in the Czech context before; thus, the thesis brings brand new data in a broad consideration of the impact of popular culture on society.

Another outcome might potentially be a non-representative comparison of the reactions by Czech and American journalists and their comments on the series. For the purposes of the thesis, qualitative research was conducted in a fairly extensive range – 10 Czech and 3 American journalists were interviewed. The survey included journalists who know the profession well and therefore have a relevant opinion on the reflection of their work in popular culture. However, it is by no means a sample large and representative enough to permit drawing universally valid conclusions. It rather demonstrates what the views of journalists on their own portrayal are and whether the opinions of experts differ in perception of the series.

*House of Cards* provides a particular depiction of the profession, and the main research questions are how reality is represented and what the influence on viewers might be, according to journalists. Their agreements and disagreements are analysed in a broader context due to their nationality, gender, experience, or field of specialization. The analysis might not be professional, but the main asset of this unique research is the set of a brand new data that has never been studied here before. Although a more in-depth evaluation might have resulted in a more grounded and detailed analysis, the author attempted to avoid his personal opinions and rather presented the contextualized views of the experts.

Currently, there is insufficient empirical evidence to demonstrate the correlation between public trust in media and the image of journalists in popular culture. Research on public trust in media generally does not even include the potential impact of popular culture as a factor. However, the influence has not so far been disproved and remains unknown,

which opens up space for studying it. Most of the respondents to the survey agreed that, to a certain extent, *House of Cards* distorts reality, but on the other hand that it perfectly demonstrates the interconnectedness of media and politics. The question stands then whether it may also, in some way, influence the perception of U.S. politics, society, and media in general. About half of the interviewees believe that the series itself might have an impact on the public trust in media. Furthermore, the majority are convinced that if not this specific series, then broadly popular culture and its depiction of journalists play a role in the public perception of the profession. Thus, this thesis is a small contribution to the topic, and (ambitiously viewed) a potential foundation or inspiration for a more abundant future study.

Warning: Spoiler alert. The following chapters work in detail with the plot of the series.

## 2. Methodology

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a variety of worldwide researchers examined the influence of press, television, or media in general on society. The present era of a gradually decreasing public trust in media demands more inquiries into the causes of the decline. Surprisingly, popular culture might be one of them. As explained above in the introduction, currently, there is no sufficient evidence to demonstrate the correlation between the public trust in media and the portrayal of journalists in popular culture. Therefore, based on one specific series, where journalists play a significant role, this qualitative research aims to provide at least a partial explanation by analysing views of several Czech and American media professionals.

According to Jan Hendl, the research approach could be qualified as a deductive analysis. The analysis divides the aggregate, the series, into individual components, the model situations, and studies their mutual relations. Moreover, deductive methods proceed from general premises towards claims subsequently compared with the data obtained from research interviews (Hendl, 2016, 32-33). Based on the selected methods, Hendl could also characterize this research as a phenomenological case study. John Creswell defined qualitative research as follows: “Researcher creates a holistic, complex image. Various types of texts are analysed, and opinions of research participants are presented. The research is conducted in natural conditions” (Creswell, 1998, 12, in Hendl, 2016, 46). The assets of qualitative data, as defined by Hendl, are natural layout, daily-life description, local grounding within a specific context, and detailed description (Hendl, 2016, 165). However, he also outlines the limits of the qualitative nature of research: “The researcher can never capture the actual experience, which is later only replicated in a text. The validity of qualitative research is usually high, unlike its reliability – repetition could seldom lead to similar results. It is hardly replicable as only a certain number of specific respondents is included. Also, the generalization of results is limited (Hendl, 2016, 63).

The essential research material for this thesis is the Netflix series *House of Cards* (2013-2018). The analysis focused on seasons 1 and 2 (released in 2013 and 2014, respectively), where journalists appear as main characters. The full two seasons, each 13-episodes long, consist of approximately 26 hours of running time, and they were rewatched during spring 2020 while taking detailed notes. Subsequently, the ten model situations were identified, as

explained in detail below in the research chapter. The model situations are listed in successive order according to the plot of the series. The principles stated by Norman Denzin proved helpful in prioritizing the analysis of the research: “Audiovisual data are a particular depiction of reality that can be examined critically. The four principles to follow in a critical analysis of an audiovisual material are:

1. Watch and perceive, take notes, and write down all related questions.
2. Create a research question, identify key scenes. How are specific values presented?
3. Structured microanalysis: detailed analysis of individual scenes, transcription, and quotations; ask how the reality is portrayed?
4. Look for patterns in a holistic perception, how is the film related to the research? Formulate the interpretation” (Denzin, 2003 in Hendl, 2016, 137-138).

The potential respondents were selected according to their specialization, for example, the Czech investigative journalists, and due to their knowledge of the American context, for example, the (former) correspondents or foreign news reporters focusing on the United States. Three American journalists, who, contrarily, have a detailed knowledge of the Czech reality, were included as reference points allowing a small, unrepresentative comparison. The detailed explanation of the selection follows below in chapter 5.1.

The potential interviewees were approached first by email and later, in some cases, also by phone, to arrange the timing of an interview. Given the pandemic circumstances, the majority of the interviews were conducted remotely, either over the phone, FaceTime, Skype, WhatsApp, or one in a written form. A few were held as personal meetings. All selected respondents were first asked whether they were willing to undertake such a research interview. If approved, they were sent beforehand the informed consent form, which is attached in the List of Appendices. Therefore, the ethics of the research, as defined by Hendl (2016, 157), is guaranteed by this informed consent form.

All interviews followed a unified structure. Hendl remarks: “Data is obtained in a standardized form and the conclusion is not known beforehand. Instead, the final image is constructed during the analysis, and the overall context plays an integral role in comparison of the individual cases” (Hendl, 2016, 49). The recording device usage was approved by all respondents at the beginning of the interview, as well as all of them agreed that their name might be published. Some of them requested the authorisation before the submission. The interview was not rehearsed beforehand by the author.

At the beginning of the interview, respondents were asked to provide their general comments, should they have any. Subsequently, ten model situations with related questions followed. Although structured, the research interview was flexible, adaptable to time availability, and permitted loose narration; therefore, it could also be classified as semi-structured. Hendl adds: “Qualitative nature of the research allows flexible modification of research questions throughout the research. The researcher looks for any relevant information supporting the research questions” (Hendl, 2016, 46). The flexibility of the structure was capitalized in a few cases of insufficient time; then, some model situations were omitted. The interview was concluded by two summarising questions. The structure of the interview is also attached in the List of Appendices.

All interviews were transcribed afterwards, and those ones conducted in Czech also translated into English. All obtained information was stored privately without any external access. Due to the limited time for the analysis and also because of the large portion of gathered data, the complete sample for the qualitative research was closed by the end of April 2020. Ten Czech and three American journalists were as agreed as a final number with the thesis supervisor. The sample is, by no means, representative, and does not permit any universal generalization; it is rather an insight of Czech professionals supplemented by the American perspective. The research is based on Czech journalists and their perception of the series in the Czech context; the views of their American colleagues could only serve as reference points.

Apart from the primary sources, the *House of Cards* series and the 13 interviews with experts, various other sources helped to analyse all concerned phenomena. Among the most significant ones, Jan Hendl’s *Kvalitativní výzkum: základní teorie, metody a aplikace* from 2016 takes the leading position due to the helpful advice outlining the correct way to conduct interviews. The theoretical foundations allowing the study were laid mainly by George Gerbner in his 1980s study *The “meanstreaming” of America*, and also by Umberto Eco, whose book *Skeptikové a těšitelé* summarizes his thoughts related to popular culture. Various media theories and approaches were grounded and reassured by three Czech essential publications: *Média a společnost* by Jan Jirák and Barbara Köpplová, *Metody výzkumu médií* by Tomáš Trampota and Martina Vojtěchovská, and *Praktická encyklopedie žurnalistiky a marketingové komunikace* by Barbora Osvaldová and Jan Halada eds. Last but not least, Marína Urbániková, with her colleagues, must not be left out of this review thanks to her elaborated research focusing on the public trust in media.

Several theses recently published in the Czech academia were also focused either specifically on *House of Cards*, or on the role of a journalist. The most recent one, *Character of a Journalist in the Danish series Borgen* by Klára Křištofiková from Charles University, was successfully defended in 2019 and analysed the role and development of the characters by creating a typology of situations. The study reflected stereotypes related to reporters in the audiovisual pieces. It partly inspired this thesis due to the similar focus, except for the selected series. However, Křištofiková chose a different approach – the narrative analysis based on Marie-Laure Ryan’s theory. Therefore her conclusions were not applied any further, as this thesis’ primary method and asset were the multiple interviews with media professionals. Moreover, David Hecht compared the representation of journalists in the TV series *The Wire*, *The Newsroom* and *House of Cards* in his undergraduate thesis *The Image of the Journalist in Contemporary „Quality TV”* at Charles University in 2019. In 2018, Martina Jergová from Masaryk University compared all three versions of *House of Cards* with each other and subsequently studied them through a Machiavellian lens in her thesis *House of Cards Comparative Analysis: Machiavellian Leader*. Her work was used in the following Synopsis chapter. Also in 2018, Vojtěch Nitra from Charles University examined the portrayal of media in political fiction. However, he focused specifically on the British context in his thesis *Image of media in British television political fiction*, where he analysed the original *House of Cards* or *Yes, Prime Minister*, among others. Furthermore, Zuzana Schwagerová from Palacký University, Olomouc, examined both the English and American TV series in her 2017 undergraduate thesis *House of Cards: example of complex narration*. In 2015, Šárka Ludvíková defended her thesis *Perception of the so-called American culture values by the Czech audience in the U.S. TV series* at Charles University. And finally, Štěpán Kopřiva in his 2014 thesis *Media representation of spin doctoring in audiovisual narrative context of last fifteen years* analysed the impact of media reflection and spin doctoring presented in the audiovisual pieces *Wag the Dog*, *Thank you for Smoking* and the American *House of Cards*.

All of the above-stated theses have aspects in common with this research. However, the thesis presented below brings a brand new perspective of the media representation in popular culture. Its different approach reveals the research fields, which, to the present point, have not been fully explained. It also demonstrated the perception of Czech and American journalists and their views on the portrayal of media in *House of Cards* in unique qualitative research that has not been applied in the Czech context before.

### **3. Theoretical Foundations to Study *House of Cards*, the Portrayal of Journalists and Its Potential Impact**

#### **3.1 Public Trust in Media**

Decreasing public trust in media in recent years can be observed both in the United States and the Czech Republic alike. The situation is caused not only by growing public discontent with the system and political pressure on media but also by the inability of media to convince the people to be standing at their side as the democracy watchdog against the powerful ones. Other reasons to be counted in are for example fragmentation of the media scene linked with the creation of media bubbles, the gradual dissolution of the journalistic profession (as the public sometimes perceives, almost anyone in the digital age can be a journalist, which goes along with the eternal debate about requisites of the journalistic profession), or merely the fact that people do not understand the media. People do not know much about the journalistic ethics or the system how media function, which the respondents also discussed.

One of these aspects was even confirmed by one of the respondents during the research when Veronika Bednářová stated that the technologies are not always helping the profession: “It is not always the fault of the human factor. Even the journalists, who, based on their personal preferences, would be willing to work diligently, rarely have the chance, being under a performance and rapidity pressure. (...) And due to social media, currently, everyone can take a picture or write a short story. It is way more difficult to verify its validity, and a general social media user does not always think critically about sources. But it is simply not true that everyone can be a journalist even at this time. (...) The profession is crucial for society, for the nation, and therefore it is even more essential that it is being conducted by people without ethical flaws” (Bednářová, 2020).

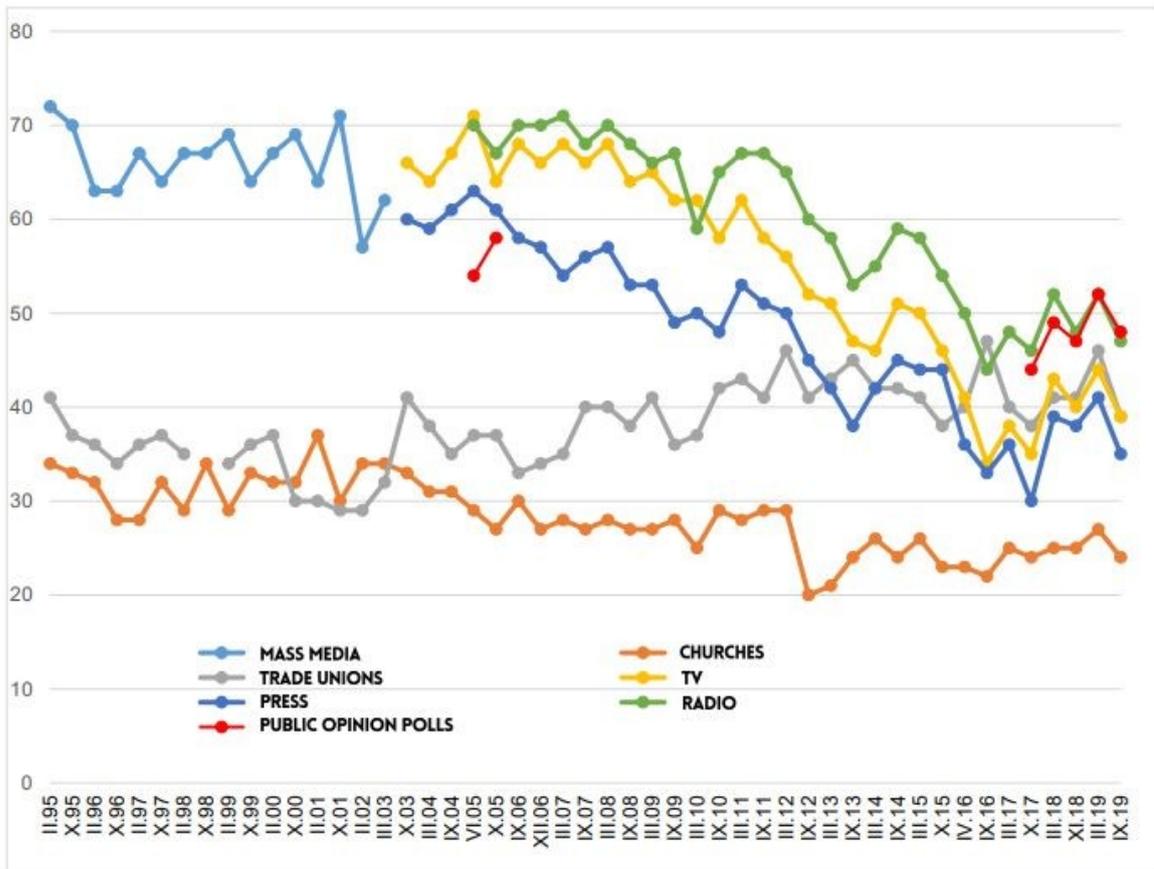
Marína Urbániková, media researcher and assistant professor at the Department of Media Studies and Journalism at Masaryk University in Brno, claims that there is hardly any other profession under such a concentrated and focused attack from the political elites than journalism. She also added that the public perceives journalists to be members of the ruling clique, blamed for current problems of societies (Urbániková, 2020). The embedded distrust in institutions (including media) is well demonstrated by an old Czech proverb “he lies as if he is printing” (literally translated); the closest English idiomatic expression is probably “to lie through teeth.” During the era of Communism,

the old popular proverb was updated and related to specific media: “The *Czechoslovak TV* lies just like the *Rudé Právo* (one out of few papers approved by the ruling party – note by the author) prints.”

A decrease in trust might also be caused by the perception of journalists, who are often believed to be promoters or advocates of the current system, which certain groups of society consider inequitable. That perception might be linked to the historical notion of journalists as constructors of the regime. Such perception is also supported by the analysis of media ownership – in the Czech Republic as well as in the USA, almost all of the influential and biggest media are owned by political and economic elites. Growing disrespect for experts, increasing inequality gap, and growing societal polarization also play a role. In such an atmosphere, a journalist aiming to be objective, and therefore not favouring anyone, not even the hurt section of society, is sometimes interpreted as a betrayal by that part of society (Ibid). Once the dissatisfied ones perceive journalists as members of the elite, media are subsequently seen as traitors of the society. The elite is generally not trusted by the broad public. Therefore, even the purest journalistic attempt to be objective and impartial might not be accepted.

Urbániková pointed out to the 2019 regular opinion poll conducted by the Czech CVVM (Centre for Public Opinion Research) asking about public trust in selected institutions. While trust in general media was hitting over 70% in the mid-1990s and again in 2001 (after 9/11), the semi-annual survey shows a gradual decrease. In 2019, average trust in radio, TV, and press only reached 40% in the Czech Republic. The research centre states: “According to the developments in the last three years, it is possible to judge that the trust in media is heavily influenced by current affairs within the society, which is a reason for recent short-term fluctuations” (CVVM, 2019, 4). In the graph below, the media, in general, are indicated by light blue in the first decade. Following the research modification, then the dark blue curve stands for press, the yellow one for television channels, and the green one for radio stations. As one can observe, politics, media, and other institutions are interconnected, to a certain extent, due to the public trust in them. The interconnectedness is reflected by various political, economic, or societal repercussions (namely, for example, 9/11, Czech admission to the EU in 2004, the 2008 financial crisis or the European immigration crisis starting from 2015 on).

**DEVELOPMENT OF TRUST IN MEDIA, TRADE UNIONS, CHURCHES (IN %) IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC**



Graph no. 1: Development of trust in media, trade unions, churches (in %) in the Czech Republic. Source: CVVM, 2019, 4. Translated by the author.

However, the public trust in media did not drop everywhere – for example, Germany and Austria currently experience a higher level of trust in media than 15 years ago, and Urbániková suggests that every country is specific. Also, lower numbers are achieved if respondents are explicitly asked about the general trust in the news (Urbániková, 2020). According to the Digital News Report research conducted by Reuters Institute in 2019, the Czech Republic and the United States are lined up comparably in the lowest quarter of the graph no. 2, with Czechia scoring 33% and the USA 32%, respectively.

PROPORTION THAT TRUST MOST NEWS MOST OF THE TIME – ALL MARKETS



Q6\_2016\_1. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements: I think you can trust most news most of the time. Base: Total sample in each market = 2000, Taiwan = 1005.

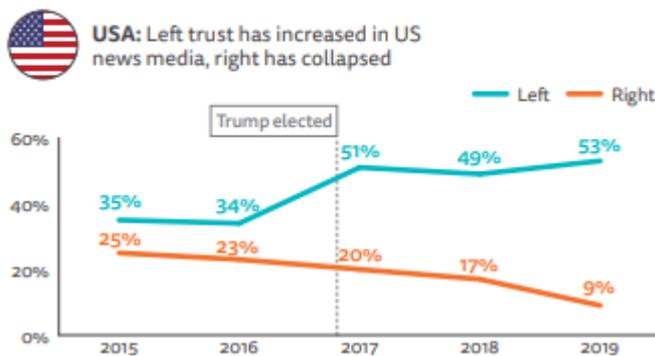
Graph no. 2: Proportion that trust most news most of the time – all markets. Source: Reuters Institute, 2019, 20.

Researcher Urbániková adds: “Steady political attacks on media also undermine the public trust. A model known from Hungary, Poland, Slovakia but also from the USA, where politicians meticulously attempt to delegitimize media aiming to serve as democracy watchdogs, is being applied in the Czech Republic as well in a longer-term. Such attacks often originate from the highest political offices, such as the presidential and the Prime Minister’s one” (Urbániková, 2020). Unfortunately, almost all Czechs remember what President Miloš Zeman mentioned (allegedly as a joke) to his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin: “There are too many journalists, they should be eliminated.”<sup>2</sup> Both incumbent and previous Czech presidents had similar relations towards media and journalists, just like the (former, in some cases) leaders of the aforementioned countries – Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico, Hungarian PM Viktor Orbán or the American President Donald Trump. Trump’s victory in 2016 also affected the level of trust in news and revealed a sharp polarization, not only in politics but also in media trust.

Reuters Institute research in 2019 describes the trust in media in the United States as follows: “Trust levels in the United States (32%) have remained flat overall, but this hides a much richer and more dramatic story. Digging into the detail, we find an increase in trust (+18pp) amongst those who self-identify on the left of the political spectrum as they lent their support to liberal media outlets in the wake of Donald Trump’s victory. Over the same period, we have seen the almost total collapse of trust on the right to just 9%” (Reuters Institute, 2019, 21).

<sup>2</sup> Also Putin’s response to this remark was noteworthy: „They should not be eliminated, but just reduced“. Record available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wggOPb3Ehn8>.

**PROPORTION THAT TRUST MOST NEWS MOST OF THE TIME  
- USA AND UK**



Graph no. 3: Proportion that trust most news most of the time – USA and UK (omitted).  
Source: Reuters Institute, 2019, 21.

Masaryk University researcher Urbániková also admits that there exists a crisis in public media trust, but not towards all of them: “Usual public opinion polls ask about media in general or specific media types – press, radio, TV, internet. That is certainly valid. However, zooming in on individual stations, channels, or magazines, people tend to follow the rules of critical thinking and distinguish well between the trust in different individual media outlets” (Urbániková, 2020). Public service media generally scored higher, whereas biased media or tabloids position at the bottom. She also adds: “The results suggest that the public expects independence, impartiality, and reliability from the media particularly. On the other hand, sensationalism or political biases could cause an immediate drop in trust” (Ibid).

One could assume that there is not a direct link between portrayals of journalists in culture (specifically in TV series) and the public trust in media. In reality, multiple factors affect the public trust in media. It is more likely that there are other causes than the influence of popular culture, which have a more significant impact on the decreasing public trust in media. Popular culture usually reflects motions and moods in society; it could reinforce or refute the trends, yet it is hardly a decisive aspect between the numerous causes of the media-trust drop. Czech and international researches alike do not suggest that the influence of culture might play any significant role in decreasing public trust in media. Therefore, not listing cultural significance as a factor does not, on the one hand, confirm any correlation, however, on the other hand, it does not disprove the fact that it might be one of the multiple causes.

A research conducted by Marína Urbániková in cooperation with Czech media lecturer and anchor Václav Moravec and media sociologist Jaromír Volek, carried out in 2016, aimed to describe some of the predictors of increasing trustworthiness of the Czech journalists among Czech population and at the same time looked for an explanation of the collapsing trust. Is journalism endangered? Not all impacts of decreasing trust are apparent, but three types of aspects were described.

Those are, firstly, long-term asymmetric values of the audience's political views and journalists' political views. The audience generally tends to lean left, while journalists tend to lean right and liberal (there is a different perception in the Czech Republic; in the U.S. terms, liberal often means left-leaning – note by the author). When the audience feels that the author of a text they are reading is having a different political opinion (which the medium was unable to hide), they tend to trust both the reporter and the medium less.

Secondly, it is the perception of journalists in mainstream media as a power tool misrepresenting the interests of the broad public. This aspect is similar to what Urbániková described: while some parts of society feel dissatisfied with the political-economic standings, journalists, who are usually better situated, are not viewed as impartial providers of information. They are the ones who help the elite to maintain the status quo. In the eyes of some, journalists might be perceived as traitors of the society who only support the mighty, wealthy, and powerful ones. And as long as the public feels endangered and misrepresented in media, its trust in it will remain low.

And the third factor is the lack of accountability for presumed social issues connected with the transformational process after the 1989 Velvet Revolution. Certain groups of the Czech society often blame journalists for the legitimization of the process, which was perceived as harmful by some. It is hardly doubtful that during the transformation period in the 1990s, not everyone strictly followed the rules. And while some opportunists were not truly abiding the law, other people felt more harm caused by the economic processes. Journalists who were active in that period are often until nowadays blamed for not referring to all the perceived wrongdoing (Moravec, Urbániková, Volek, 2016, 82-122).

Another researcher from Masaryk University, Jakub Macek, the Head of the Department of Media Studies and Journalism, suggests that research in media trust needs to be more specific because questions about trust in TV, internet, radio, or print are no longer valid. Macek claims: “The question is too broad, there must necessarily follow another question asking which specific TV channels or dailies are examined. Fragmentation

of the media spectre went so far that it is not possible to answer the broad question anymore. (...) People tend to trust some media more and others less based on numerous other criteria than just the liberal concept of the media role (Macek in Magazín M, 2018). Macek also mentions polarization as the main factor of decreasing public trust in media in the western countries, where defenders of traditional values clash with progressivists (Ibid). Mediaguru comments on Macek's research that trust and mistrust in media correlate with what people believe in. About 70% of Czechs tend to believe the media they consider essential for themselves and vice-versa; a similar percentage of people do not trust the media they avoid. The less confidence people have in media, the less confidence they put in journalists (Mediaguru, 2020).

A thesis successfully defended at Charles University in 2011, explicitly exploring media and trust, listed several possible causes of the decrease of the public trust in media. The reasons are deregulation, individualist culture, or independent information, different from the mainstream media. Those have helped to reveal the mistakes from the transformation era related to corruption, PR strategies, misinformation, or conflicting interests. Additionally, the author provided several further analysed factors. He added the medialization of the public sphere, the economic sphere and marketing, the political and war propaganda, the infotainment and media management, the creation of emergency impression, and the "microdynamics of trust" (Mičánek, 2011, 57-64). The potential influence of popular culture was not enlisted in the research.

In 2018, Medium.com published results from a new Knight-Gallup survey, showing that Americans believe that the media have an essential role to play in a democracy. However, the respondents do not see that role being fulfilled (Medium.com, 2018). The server also lists ten possible reasons to understand why the public trust in media dropped to the all-time low. Not even here, the influence of popular culture has been proved so far to have any impact on public trust in media. There is currently little empirical evidence whether there is some correlation between the portrayals of media in popular culture and the public trust in media. Research usually does not even include the popular culture influence as a factor. Instead, the Knight-Gallup survey offers the following ten reasons for the decrease of the public trust in media in the United States:

1. 84% of Americans think the media is key to democracy – but only 44% can name an objective news source.

2. Perceptions of the media vary depending on political affiliation (confirming the Graph no. 3 showing the polarization in the United States by the Reuters Institute).
3. More sources make it harder than ever to be well informed.
4. Concern over “fake news” is high (73% of Americans find inaccurate info on the internet a significant problem).
5. Perceptions of what constitutes “fake news” vary.
6. The public is divided on who should be responsible for informing citizens, whether individuals or the media.
7. Many Americans get their news from social media, but most do not view it positively. Also, 53% of Americans believe that political leaders using social media to communicate with the public directly has been more negative than positive.
8. Americans share news mostly with people they know they agree with them.
9. The public is divided on whether platforms should be regulated (in other words, the methods used how the news is selected and displayed in the digital feed).
10. Peoples’ trust in the media is highly influenced by partisanship (Ibid).

Also, the Aspen institute leaves the influence of culture out in its 2019 report conducted in cooperation with the Knight Commission on trust, media, and democracy: “When institutions perform poorly, people lose trust in them. Reasons for the decline of the public trust in the media include the proliferation of news sources, media disintermediation, confusion between news and opinion, the spread of misinformation and disinformation, the decline of local news, and the politicized criticism of the media” (The Aspen Institute, 2019, 53-69).

### **3.2 Influence of Popular Culture on Mass Society**

In the relation between media (which also broadcasts popular culture) and the audience (part of the mass society), media is always believed to be the stronger partner (Jirák, Köpplová, 2003, 102). Studying the audience in the past century resulted in distinguishing between the active and passive audience. The passive one is only receiving transmitted

information, while the active one expects the public to be an active contributor or even the creator of the content.

Therefore, four phases of development were presented when speaking about the influence of media in general on its audience. The first is the theory of almighty media related to the media at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, there was a widely recognized notion that the press could “inject” any intended message into its audience. The development of mass penny press worldwide, as well as propaganda during both wars, played a role, and the audience was viewed as a very passive one.

Later, a theory challenging the almighty media followed; between the 1930s and the 1960s, it was discovered that media have a significantly smaller influence than ascribed before as there are many more substantial aspects influencing people such as family, education, surroundings, authorities, etc. The image of the audience transformed into more active perception.

Subsequently, the almighty media were rediscovered in the 1960s-1980s, when the long-term effects of media consumption were examined (related to agenda setting, more discussed below). The media research focused on content processing before the delivery to the audience – also, the influence of media content on a change of behaviour was examined. Concerning the public opinion polls, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s spiral of silence was identified as an essential theory that explains how perceived public opinion impacts individual behaviour. Also, in this period, the cultivation theory developed by George Gerbner became known (presented below).

The last phase was identified as the theory of arbitrarily agreed and accepted media influence (since the 1970s) and it significantly more takes into account how the audience approaches the content and how it is perceived; therefore the audience is an active entity again – in a constructivist view (Ibid, 161-168). Nowadays, it mainly plays a role in examining the impact of social media on societal behaviour.

Considering Netflix both as a product of popular culture and a specific form of a medium is practical in understanding the function of media, its roles, and contribution to society. Jiráková and Köppllová identified five socially-integrating roles of media, which at least in part, explain what the relation between media and broader societal processes is.

1. Media brings new information to people, educates them, and provides them with what is expected to be true. Such information may lead to decision-making (in the election process).

2. Media may influence public perception and preferences because the media provide an interpretation of events and information by choosing a narrative and emphasis. Therefore it is essential not only what appears in media but also in which way it is presented. The agenda-setting theory (analysed below) explains this phenomenon further.
3. Another interpretation views media as serving the role of the social reproduction of power relations. In such a view, media are the tools of hegemony, and they do not serve the society as a whole but prefer the dominant groups or classes, which people tend to criticize as Urbániková pointed out above.
4. The media may also function as a keeper or maintainer of the status quo, following upon the hegemonic reproduction role. Jirák and Köpplová add: “Media present the current conditions as natural and therefore reinforce such view in the audience to take it for fixed” (Jirák, Köpplová, 2003, 59).
5. The social construction of reality (also analysed below) goes the furthest by claiming that media present the socially accepted structure of the world. Therefore, the media construct the world by showing what is real, normal, or acceptable. Moreover, the media also highlight the opposite - what is not acceptable anymore or what is perceived even extreme. According to media theorist Stuart Hall, media do not only speak about events, but they actively construct the atmosphere instead (Ibid, 58-59).

The real influence of media on society has long been debated and disputed, and there is no explicit agreement on how that would be achieved. The impact of popular culture (via media) is likewise a similar case of communicating vessels. So far, it has been neither proved nor even thoroughly researched in the Czech context. However, the influence of media cannot be separated from the rest of the social setting as it always functions within a specific social framework. “Speaking about the power of media is pointless without mentioning the power of culture at the same time” (Roach, 1993, 12 in Jirák and Köpplová, 2003, 152).

### 3.2.1 Development of Theory on Linkages Between Media and Popular Culture

Early theorists to examine popular culture came from the so-called Frankfurt School, a school of critical philosophy which was based on the Marxist and neo-Marxist theory, during the inter-war period. The founders of the school, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, were both affiliated to the Institute for Social Research at Goethe University in Frankfurt. They have revised the Marxist theory and stated that culture determines the conditions of society's economic operations. They were also the first to coin the term "Culture Industry" for mass culture, a concept where culture is modified and commercialized, where art becomes a commodity, which they had criticized. Other notable thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School are, for example, Max Weber, Hannah Arendt, Erich Fromm, or later Elisabeth Nöelle-Neumann and Jürgen Habermas. The Frankfurt School of thought could be considered a typical "alternative paradigm" institution, which is dealing with theories critical to the mainstream establishment. The Frankfurt School theorists claim that mass media and popular culture are tools used and exploited by the privileged ones, and therefore that the elite controls and manipulates the masses. They also condemned that the Culture Industry no longer enables culture to criticize the status quo system. Instead, it legitimizes and consolidates it by typical features: uniformity and serial production. Back at that time, cinema and jazz music were considered characteristic forms of the Culture Industry (Jirák, Köpplová, 2003, 57).

The German-born Jewish American political theorist Hannah Arendt followed up later on this school of thought. In her renowned book *Between Past and Future*, she contemplates in one of her essays about a crisis in culture and its influence. She enlists style or taste, an essential cultural activity, as a human political ability: "We all know well how quickly people get to know one another and how clearly they might feel the sense of belonging together if similarities in preferences are reached. Based on this broad experience, it might seem that taste is decisive not only in the way the world looks like but also in terms of who belongs together" (Arendt, 1994, 45). All in all, Arendt ascribes culture (and the taste and cultural preferences) the power of influencing the shape of the world and human behaviour. Despite being published first in the early 1960s, her theory would nowadays probably also encompass Netflix, its series, and its consumers (the audience).

Another theorist studying popular culture was Umberto Eco. The Italian philosopher and writer was one of the thinkers who examined popular culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – long

before the era of Netflix. Still, some of the thoughts remain valid even in the following millennium. In his famous 1964 book *Apocalittici e integrati* (partly translated to English as *Apocalypse Postponed, Skeptikové a těšitelé* in Czech), he views culture from an elitist point of view (for which he has also received criticism). He distinguishes between high and low culture and argues against the latter one. Low culture is, in his theory, symbolized by the concept of “Culture Industry.” According to Eco, the culture industry began by Gutenberg and the discovery of the press, which has caused the transformation of fragile, spiritual culture into industrial production of goods (Eco, 2007, 10-11). No doubt that Netflix would probably fit into the low culture category by Eco, but on the other hand, he recognizes its role in the “alphabetization of folk social classes” (Ibid, 13).

However, Eco also claims that creators of culture exploit the mass society to maximize their profits instead of educating them (Ibid, 18). The phenomenon he called “Mass Culture” would undoubtedly include Netflix too, as it is nowadays a way of amusement for masses, even though they have not created it. In such a black and white perception, one could observe a classic clash between the bourgeois class creating entertainment for the proletariat. Eco admits that mass media and mass communication permitted wider society to participate in public affairs, and the concept of the public was also widened. However, he also criticizes that as each member of the community became a consumer of serially manufactured commercialized products (according to the economic rules of offer and demand), the model of “Mass Human” is imposed on the society. Therefore, popular (or mass, as used by Eco) culture might have a unionizing effect on society according to him (Ibid, 26-27). The “homogenized taste would lead to a reduction of class differences, the unification of the national sensibility and tempering the anti-colonial sentiments in many parts of the world” (Ibid, 41).

In many of his essays, Eco deals with the main heroic characters of novels, cartoons, series, or movies. When analysing myths, Superman serves as a guinea pig for Eco who examines types and archetypes of characters, plots, and myths in mass culture. Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Perry Mason, but also the Three Musketeers, Siegfried, or Hercules are mentioned as archetypal characters searched for by the audience identifying with them. A curious fact of no relevance to this research that Eco also comments upon is that Superman was actually a journalist in his civic life – at times when he was not saving the world, Clark Kent was a shy boy in a newsroom. However, such a portrayal of double identity gives any reader or viewer also the internal secret notion that

even an undervalued underdog could turn into Superman one day and fulfil his dreams (Ibid, 218-219).

However, Eco also analyses the reception of popular culture by the audience and, regardless of whether it is an audio impulse, image, text, or audiovisual transmission, he argues that the audience might easily be influenced and adapt its behaviour accordingly. As an example, Eco offers a CBS radio transmission in the United States from 1938. The radio broadcasted the play *War of the Worlds* by Orson Welles about a Martian invasion to Earth. During the era of international tension, there were allegedly some listeners who ignored the introduction of the play and took the information as a tragic forewarning – New York City witnessed a herd scare for several hours when crowds were abandoning the city in panic (Ibid, 320-321). Jiráková and Köpplová added that “Director Welles (later the author of a famous film *Citizen Kane*) approached the radio drama innovatively as live coverage of a current Martian attack on the United States and other countries. The drama started by interrupting the regular broadcast by an excited warning that millions of people are dying. Despite the warning, a million out of an estimated 6 million listeners started panicking. The chaos supposedly resulted in traffic jams, damages on properties, and injuries” (Jiráková, Köpplová, 2003, 159).

Eco also claims that television, nowadays easily interchanged for online screening or Netflix, is an easy tool for false suggestions stimulating false participation, false immediateness, and false drama. In totalitarian regimes, persuasive tools serve directly for propaganda purposes. In democratic societies, hidden “opinion directing” sometimes happens due to market mechanisms and economic pressures, where the “Culture Industry” adopts the persuasive and manipulative marketing practices, and implies what the audience should think about (Eco, 2007, 321-324). It cannot be interpreted in a way that nowadays, Netflix is manipulating its audience by its series. Still, in accord with Eco’s belief, likely, the content that the audience receives (in any form of popular culture) might have an impact on social behaviour.

Eco also adds that “Visual information (...) reduces the viewer’s vigilance, forces him to participate and inducts intuitive understanding, resulting in a psychological transformation of mass users caused by visual communication. The relation between people and the world, their fellowmen and the space of culture is therefore modified” (Ibid, 331). However, Eco, even if it might seem like that, does not condemn the communication tools, which at the time were new to him, judging it would only lead to societal

polarization. He also mentioned that television effectively played a significant role in the public refusal of Sen. McCarthy's accusations during the era of McCarthyism. More related work in this field is discussed below in the theory of George Gerbner.

### **3.2.2 Cultivation Theory**

Despite being 40 years outdated and considering the audience only as a passive receiver, therefore dismissing any of its individual preferences, the theory of George Gerbner from the University of Pennsylvania might provide at least a partial explanation of the presupposed influence of popular culture and media. It also demonstrated well the power of television. Gerbner focused his research on violence in televised contents and on how it impacts real life. For 20 years, he has been studying the prime time of prominent American TV stations and defined a "violence index" – violent scenes per hour.

Later, based on watching the media content, he discovered that there are groups of viewers who perceive any real-life danger more sensitively than others. Strong viewers, those who watch television often, were brought together with the mainstream. When the content is in accord with one's own beliefs, it constructs, reinforces, and ultimately in the long-term, it cultivates the views. According to Gerbner, it is happening because television confirms worries and prejudices of how people perceive the real world. Time is an essential factor in the theory – the more time people (binge)watch TV (or series in our case), the more likely they are to think that the real world is similar to what they have watched.

Gerbner claims: "Especially strong watching of television might lead to the cultivation of views from dissimilar and remote groups towards a compact, mainstream view" (Gerbner, 1980, 55). Not everyone is nowadays merely a passive consumer of the content without any thorough consideration, but at least a proportion of Netflix viewers certainly falls into this category. Therefore any depiction might still influence real-life perceptions. Jiráček and Köpplová explain that, according to Gerbner's theory, the impact of television could lead even up to the extension of societal norms in terms of ethics and behaviour (Jiráček, Köpplová, 2003, 165). The theory of cultivation explains the influence of media content on the gradual public acceptance of what is portrayed as mainstream. If applied in the purest form, its effects would correspond with the Thomas theorem, which, in short, says that if some situation is defined as real, then it truly is real in its

consequences (Ibid). Most known examples include runs on banks or petrol stations when shortages of money or gas are expected. In early spring 2020, the world was not very far from runs on supermarkets for groceries, disinfection, and toilet paper. The theorem explains that perception of a fact or event and its interpretation and understanding is more important than its objective nature. The resulting behaviour might not necessarily be rational (Ibid).

### **3.2.3 Representation of Reality**

Media representation is a process of giving a specific shape to abstract ideas. It is created by a discourse that defines reality and ascribes meaning to the surrounding world. According to Jirák and Köpplová, “representation of social reality in media communication means displaying general views and opinions in the form of tangible scenes or facts” (Jirák, Köpplová, 2003, 141). Media could either confirm or disprove such views, and therefore any media content is burdened by ideology (Ibid, 138). Representation of reality is based on the mediation of real-life actualities or stories because it presents something (a piece of information, news, or a story) which is not tangible itself to the audience. On the one hand, there is a media reality, and on the other, there is a social reality. Both these realities are being incessantly constructed, approved, and disproved while often competing, influencing, overlapping or shading into each other (in formats like docureals – note by the author), and are based on culture and history, which form the values of individuals (Ibid, 140).

Jirák and Köpplová present the sociologists Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, who coined the term “social construction of reality” in their renowned book of the same name. According to them, the reality is created socially through “significant others” who are related to a cultural and social setting (parents, partners, friends, teachers, etc.) and heavily influence one’s perception of reality. They state that people tend to confirm or disprove their perception of reality at all times in communication processes. Still, they always take the perception as real (Berger, Luckmann, 1999 in Jirák, Köpplová, 2003, 165). Should that be valid for any communication activity, media then play a significant role in the construction of social reality, and they can influence the audience by defining the meanings which are widely accepted by society, either via agenda-setting or by cultivation (Jirák, Köpplová, 2003, 165).

The importance of the media reality is relatively high, as Jiráček and Köpplová argue: “Supposedly, media provide a growing portion of reality which is located beyond one’s personal experience. (...) Representation of reality always happens when the media content is in line with current societal myths and ideologies” (Jiráček, Köpplová, 2003, 140). The credibility of the content or the realistic portrayal is always questioned by the audience. It also presupposes that the content is related to the real world – not only in case of news or documents but also in terms of fictional popular culture such as series or films (Ibid, 141). Thus, explicitly interpreted for this research, the less people know about journalists and their working methods, the more are they likely to believe how they are portrayed, especially in a critical atmosphere where leading politicians are hostile towards journalists. The role, attitudes, or ethics of journalists, as presented by Netflix, might, therefore, be perceived real by the audience. Several interviewees confirmed this interpretation during the research. Jiráček and Köpplová added: “Especially in cases when the audience lacks personal experience with a certain group, it is likely to find believable the media portrayal of such a group. As a result of the media amplification, stereotypes are created for various groups” (Ibid, 144). During the research interview analysed below, Lukáš Valášek, one of the respondents, approved the significant role of stereotypes in the portrayal of journalists in popular culture.

Four factors must be taken into account when discussing fictional content and its level of realistic portrayal and credibility, as identified by Jiráček and Köpplová (2003, 142). Firstly, it is the “outer realness” – details in the content and their similarity with the real world (costumes, surroundings, etc.). *House of Cards* well fulfils this category. Secondly, it is the inner or emotional realness of characters, their motives, and behaviour with which the audience may identify. Concerning *House of Cards*, this factor is questionable in certain specific situations, some of which were identified by the author as model situations from the series for the research interviews. Thirdly, it is the logic and probability of the plot – in some cases, the audience might perceive situations as unreal or illogical when too exaggerated. As for *House of Cards*, respondents disputed this factor in case of the death of Zoe Barnes almost unanimously. And lastly, the fourth factor of realness is the usage of vehicles of expression, which the audience is used to (filming style, effects, music, etc.). This category did not seem problematic in *House of Cards*.

### 3.2.4 Agenda Setting

Setting the public agenda is one of the effects of media, besides convincing, formulation of public opinion, impact on public image, the effect on behaviour, forming of public interpretation, or simply informing the society. By the end of the 1960s, the renowned *Chapel Hill Study* conducted in North Carolina laid the foundations for the agenda-setting theory. It was focused on the presidential campaign in 1968 by comparing the media content with voters' expectations, and at first, agenda-setting was not even a primary concern of the study. In 1972, the study was published in *Public Opinion Quarterly* by authors Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs (Trampota, Vojtěchovská, 2010, 100-102). At that time, it confirmed the widely accepted general conviction of enormous media power. However, as proved later, the real power of media is smaller, but the agenda-setting is still viewed as one of the most important ways how media might influence society. The authors later refined their methodology and repeated the study in 1972 during the presidential clash between Richard Nixon and George McGovern to define the media construction of reality. It disproved the universal role of media but confirmed that impacts differ group by group, and also that the effect of individual media varies. Uncertainty and ignorance related to concerned topics tend to make the audience more likely to accept the agenda (Ibid).

Agenda setting is a way how media inform about stories or events and how it impacts what people think and discuss. The primary outcome of the theory is that media are not here to tell people what to think, to inject them, but they may suggest a topic to consider. Selection of problems, recurrence, framing, and emphasis are essential for the future public debate – but they might not necessarily be intentional. There is no evidence of a direct effect on the whole society, but certain groups are more prone to be persuaded than others. The impact of agenda-setting becomes evident when a person hears about something which he later discusses elsewhere (Jiráček, Köpplová, 2003, 181).

There are two types of agenda-setting effects – short-term and long-term. The latter one is more effective due to recurrence and frequency that are proving to be more important than the content of the information. Form dominating the content is in line with the cultivation theory or the Thomas theorem. Moreover, Trampota and Vojtěchovská add: “Research on long-term effects is problematic because usually other non-media influence cannot be ruled out. It is an aggregate of various impulses in a longer-term, and agenda

setting is the only proven theory of the long-term effect” (Trampota, Vojtěchovská, 2010, 239).

It is also necessary to distinguish between the public agenda, meaning what is being discussed in public, the media agenda, accordingly what is published and provided by media, and the political agenda, meaning what is being declared by the politicians. The political agenda usually aspires to become the media agenda and, eventually, the public agenda. However, the real-life indicators such as truth, realness, facts, objectivity, or scientific research were proved irrelevant in agenda-setting. Ideas are communicated, socially constructed, interpreted, and then evolve independently.

### **3.3 Investigative Journalism and Ethics**

#### **3.3.1 Specifics of Investigative Journalism**

Investigative journalism has a specific role in the media field. Investigative journalists are most often the feared ones by those in power, and, unfortunately, also the most vulnerable ones who agree that, to a certain extent, fear is a necessary part of their profession. Czech media theorists Barbora Osvaldová and Jan Halada describe in their essential journalistic publication *Practical encyclopaedia of journalism and marketing communication* what investigative journalism is. “A type of journalism which is inquiring, searching for and ultimately revealing concealed information which is vital for the public interest” (Osvaldová, Halada, 2007, 245).

*Investigative Journalism Manual* defines it as a form of journalism in which reporters go in-depth to investigate a single story. That may uncover business or political corruption, review government policies or of corporate houses, or draw attention to unknown aspects of social, economic, political, or cultural trends. The Manual adds, “unlike conventional reporting, where reporters rely on materials supplied by the government, NGOs and other agencies, investigative reporting depends on material gathered through the reporter’s own initiative” (Investigative Journalism Manual, 2020).

According to *UNESCO*, the watchdog role of media is indispensable for democracy as it contributes to freedom of expression and media development. “Investigative journalism means the unveiling of matters that are concealed either deliberately by someone in a position of power, or accidentally, behind a chaotic mass of facts and

circumstances - and the analysis and exposure of all relevant facts to the public” (UNESCO, 2019).

Investigative journalists are expected to gather facts thoroughly, research dutifully, and provide flawless evidence verified by at least two mutually independent sources. Osvaldová and Halada alert that sometimes the aim to uncover criminal activities may lead up to reduced space for the accused side when proclaimed impartiality is replaced by subjective features (Osvaldová, Halada, 2007, 245). Credibility is the aspect also highlighted by *UNESCO*: “At a time of a widening communications ecosystem, journalism today needs to show its key value-add to the public interest clearly. In this light, credible investigative stories are increasingly pivotal to public confirmation of the continuing importance of professional journalistic work in the coming years” (UNESCO, 2019). *Investigative Journalism Manual* also recognizes the importance of teams and points out the problem of financial stability. “Investigative reporting calls for greater resources, team work, and more time than a routine news report. (...) But this poses problems for small, local, and community publications with limited time, money, staff, or specialised skills” (Investigative Journalism Manual, 2020).

Therefore, several organizations integrate the worldwide investigative institutions to allow smoother communication and exchange of information, knowledge, and skills; one of them is, for example, the *Global Investigative Journalism Network*. It justifies its existence by the need for a sophisticated, multinational integrated body of investigative reporters. “We live in a globalized era in which our commerce—and our crimes—are multinational. (...) They (investigative journalists – note by the author) have become, in effect, the “special forces” of global journalism” (Global Investigative Journalism Network, 2020).

Another global organization, the *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, boasts “issues that didn’t stop at national frontiers, including cross-border crime, corruption and holding the powerful to account” (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 2020). One of the members of the organization is also the *Czech Centre for Investigative Journalism*, which is also partnering with the *Global Investigative Journalism Network*, and its founder and director, Pavla Holcová, also contributed to the research below. The Centre brings original investigative cases about multinational organized crime and its impacts on the Czech Republic. It aims to uncover financial criminality and organized crime related to the Czech Republic to allow society responsible

decision-making. The Czech Centre is built on the following principles: freedom and independence, accountability, integrity and fairness, transparency, the courage to take a different approach, willingness to take risks, sharing, cooperation, global interconnection, primary sources, verification, and balance. It also aims to maintain and increase the public trust in the quality and balanced news media (Czech Centre for Investigative Journalism, 2020).

*The Bureau of Investigative Journalism* adds: “Robust journalism is a crucial part of any democracy. Our aim is to inform the public about the realities of power in today's world. We are particularly concerned with the undermining of democratic processes and failures to accord with fair, legal, and transparent practices. We inform the public through in-depth investigative journalism, with no corporate or political agenda. Through fact-based, unbiased reporting, we expose systemic wrongs, counter misinformation, and spark change” (The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2020). Another example of a successful investigative organization is *ProPublica* – the “journalism that holds power to account,” as sounds its motto. Its mission claims that the organization aims to “expose abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust by government, business, and other institutions, using the moral force of investigative journalism to spur reform through the sustained spotlighting of wrongdoing” (ProPublica, 2020). In 2010, the organization became the first online independent newsroom to win the Pulitzer Prize, and their piece was later published also by the *New York Times*.

Since the 1960s and 1970s, investigative reporting meant developing sufficient sources and documents over a long period to offer the public a reliable interpretation of an event. By the end of the 1950s, the famous case by Ralph Nader against unsafe automobile production gained nationwide attention. But the term *investigative* became extremely popular after Seymour Hersh uncovered the story of the My Lai massacre in Vietnam and joined the *New York Times* staff in time to look into the CIA (Emery, 2000, 421-422). The term “investigative journalism” has been used since the 1960s, especially after the Watergate scandal. However, its roots are to be traced back to the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, the group of “Muckrakers” existed in the United States, tackling corruption, governmental lack of skills, human rights violations, or the rule of law contravention in newspapers, magazines, and books. Eyewitnesses, insider observation, and thorough evidence became vital for their work. Thanks to the expansion of television, investigative journalism received a new visual dimension. However, biased tendencies and

selected technical features also pose a threat in the televised content (Osvaldová, Halada, 2007, 245). Several views of respondents were in line with Osvaldová and Halada during the research below, pointing out to problematic aspects of recent investigative cases. Emery agrees that investigative journalism did not begin with the 1960s and states it was a continuation of the muckraking tradition instead (Emery, 2000, 422).

### **3.3.2 Journalistic Ethics**

Ethics in journalism is an uneasy phenomenon as Frank Kuznik, one of the below-interviewed American journalists could tell: “I was teaching this class last semester on Ethics in journalism. Later I told it to a Czech friend, and he started laughing and said: ‘What ethics?’ Well, that’s why I need to teach this class because that’s what everybody thinks now!” (Kuznik, 2020).

Osvaldová and Halada identify ethics as a set of morality and virtuousness; in journalism, it is an aggregate of both written and unwritten norms that a journalist should follow. The rules are usually explicitly stated in ethical codes issues by each organization. In the Czech Republic, the Committee for Ethics of the Syndicate of the Czech Journalists oversees the compliance with ethics (Osvaldová, Halada, 2007, 66).

Anna Remišová defined the basic ethical norms in journalism as: “reporting true information; honesty; respect to the freedom of expression; respect to the human dignity; accountability for individual actions and their consequences; and serving the public interest” (Remišová, 2020, 87-88). Speaking about ethics in the interview, one of the respondents, Josef Klíma, summarised that a journalist should never: “endanger anyone innocent, such as witnesses of a crime, by a report; support by the in/activity anything illegal or unethical, except for secretly recorded provocation which might serve as evidence once published; disclose the source of information unless previously warned or agreed upon with the source; record audio and video covertly if possible otherwise; and publish, or conceal publishing anything which could result in his personal profit” (Klíma, 2020). Another respondent, Lukáš Valášek, added: “One mustn’t lie, bargain with sources, support one group or another, or be a tool of anyone. A journalist must inform truthfully. Those are the ethical borders that need to be respected” (Valášek, 2020).

Two levels of ethics exist in journalism, institutional, and individual. Ethical codes outline the institutional level of syndicates, newsrooms, and platforms. Although the codes should be binding for each journalist, its compliance is not, except for the most severe cases, legally enforceable. Media, therefore, request the reporters to comply with ethical standards, because each failure sheds a negative light on journalism as a whole. Excessive long-term immoral behaviour could, in the most extreme case, result not only in the total loss of the public credibility but also in the regulatory measures. Such an ultimate step would mean the end of the freedom of expression. However, the perception of ethics differs individually, and Zoe Barnes in *House of Cards* is its prime example.

While analysing ethics, Josef Klíma also mentioned during the research that a strong ambition of a journalist could sometimes lead to crossing the ethical borders, and Lukáš Valášek agreed. “Being friendly with the wealthy and influential ones is an ill-driven motivation; such a journalist could rather harm the society instead of helping it” (Valášek, 2020). Josef Klíma also pointed out to several problematic aspects of the ethics: “Imagine that a journalist writing about crime and corruption establishes ties with the police and also with criminals. Is this a breach of ethics? Otherwise, he would get nothing. But what shall a journalist do after discovering crime? He should definitely report it, but would a paragraph about source protection be enough not to reveal, and therefore, threaten his source? And while doing so, should he also inform his source? In this matter, there are more questions than answers, and it differs case by case” (Klíma, 2020).

Lukáš Valášek also noted that ethics is essential in decision-making processes. “Sometimes the decision is difficult when you know you obtained an important piece of information that you believe to be true, but at the same time your source could benefit from publishing it, and someone else would be harmed. Your source may be replacing the one, or there might be other unforeseen consequences. In that case, a journalist serves as a tool. Then it is necessary to balance the importance of that message and necessity of publishing it, the public interest, versus someone else’s benefit” (Valášek, 2020). Both Klíma and Valášek agreed that ethics is not always black and white and that many aspects of its different interpretations may lead to highly controversial consequences.

### 3.4 Media in Cinematography

Matthew C. Ehrlich and Brian McNair both wrote essential publications focused on journalists in movies, and they need to be mentioned. However, their work is not analysed in great detail as this thesis, first, does not operate with films but series instead, and, second, it rather examines the portrayal of journalists and its perceptions and potential impact. Still, their assets cannot be omitted.

In 2004, Ehrlich published a book of how movies depicted American journalism from the start of the sound era. He particularly stressed the role of myths, which are being applied in journalistic films. His book, *Journalism in the Movies*, examined similar films as McNair later. Of several, which were mentioned in this thesis, *The Front Page*, *Citizen Kane*, and *All the President's Men* were included. Ehrlich claimed that films provide a useful reflection upon the profession, but also warned that Hollywood has reproduced overstated myths related to journalism. In his view, movies such as *All the President's Men* glorify journalism's self-serving claims to be able to discover objective truth and its position as an institution dedicated to surveillance (Ehrlich, 2003, 3-4).

Jindřich Šídlo, one of the respondents during the subsequent research, added in accord with Ehrlich that the portrayal of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward is exciting, but, in general, it is exaggerated and unrealistic because fiction requires heroes. “*All the President's Men*, despite being 45 years old, is interesting because it is based on what the then-boys had written themselves. They wrote it in a manner they wanted to highlight. And the whole Watergate scandal is fascinating. If we knew from the beginning that the Deep Throat source was FBI Associate Director, we all would logically be looking at the story and its journalistic heroes in a different light” (Šídlo, 2020). Contrary to *All the President's Men*, the Watergate affair is depicted in an opposite perspective from Mark Felt's view in the 2017 Netflix film *Mark Felt: The Man Who Brought Down the White House*.

McNair's book *Journalists in Film: Heroes and Villains* demonstrated how journalists are represented in cinematography since the 1930s and explicitly focused on the period 1997-2008. He also provided a separate analysis of female journalists, foreign correspondents, or investigative reporters. His study does not include any TV series, but analyses some of the movies which were also mentioned in this thesis, such as *Citizen Kane* or *All the President's Men*. McNair claimed that journalism is one of the key social and cultural institutions. Therefore, it is useful to study its depiction in cultural forms, namely the film, which is “highly relevant to the analysis and understanding of contemporary debates

around news and other forms of journalism” (McNair, 2010, 3). He also stated that there have always been debates about journalistic ethics or political bias. Thus, this research exploring the portrayal of journalists in specific situations in *House of Cards* is yet another contribution to the list of views on a complex issue which the popular culture enables to grasp easier. Furthermore, McNair admitted that the film, and generally all popular culture, may have a significant impact on the public agenda related to media. “The film-maker is licensed to dramatise the images of journalists, and thus to furnish the material for public debate around the performance of the journalists” (Ibid, 15).

McNair also mentioned that films do not reflect society without distortion or error, but they are certainly a prism, through which we analyse the conception of society. “Movies have a reach and a resonance which make it reasonable to consider them a particularly fertile source of how a society perceives and relates to the phenomena which they address” (McNair, 2010, 14). If the same logic is applied to TV series, *House of Cards* could also provide a forceful testimony of society. However, Ehrlich observed a certain level of exaggeration to be wary about: “Films dramatize journalistic failings while drawing lessons from them in a way that typically maintains the status quo and journalism’s place in it” (Ehrlich, 2004, 9). Jindřich Šídlo agreed and noted that if reality were the same as the portrayed one, series such as *House of Cards* would not be needed: “In general, the majority of portrayals of media and journalists in cinema and literature are quite incredible. Reality is often different” (Šídlo, 2020).

However, not every journalist would share his view, which emblematically introduces the research, which is about to follow subsequently. One of the respondents, Martin Řezníček, former *Czech TV* U.S. correspondent, claimed that many other products of the American popular culture have an extraordinarily high level of relation between reality and its depiction: “The way how America is portrayed in Hollywood blockbusters, books and series is eventually closer to the reality than we imagine, we tend not to believe it, but in the end, the United States, in general, is depicted in the popular culture quite realistically” (Řezníček, 2020). McNair added that films inevitably and not always intentionally capture something of the prevailing cultural *zeitgeist*<sup>3</sup> in relation to journalism. “Film-makers, like the rest of us, live in society. They absorb its changing moods and anxieties and reflect them to their audiences. Contemporary concerns inevitably inflect their work” (McNair, 2010, 3-4).

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<sup>3</sup> A concept from the German philosophy meaning the “spirit of the age.”

McNair also confirmed the claim from the very beginning of this thesis related to the current popularity of TV series similar to *House of Cards*: “The cinema produced by a given society at a given time is one source of data on how that society views itself. Its journalists, and also the public who consume journalism, in so far as the tastes and demands of audiences determine to some extent which films are made” (McNair, 2010, 15). However, he also emphasised that film is primarily a commercial commodity whose main objective is to succeed economically.

Ehrlich also noted that journalistic films usually feature four elements: a reporter character, story, editor, and love interest (Ehrlich, 2004, 10). *House of Cards* includes all of them. He also pointed out a common journalistic myth in movies. “By presenting morality tales in which wayward reporters are duly punished for their sins, the films also highlight rules of proper professional and personal conduct; a common function of a myth is to use a deviant or scapegoat figure to reassert and enforce social norms” (Ibid, 9). Such an approach was more than adequately demonstrated by Zoe Barnes and other journalistic characters (described below) in *House of Cards*.

Nevertheless, a film cannot provide an entirely real depiction of reality, and therefore is never real or genuine in any simple sense, as McNair noted and unintentionally linked films to the representation of reality theory. “Like journalism itself, but to a greater extent, it is an account of the real. No matter how true are the events on which it is based, nor how realistically it is directed, can be entirely factually accurate. (...) This is, and always has been, in the nature of art” (McNair, 2010, 15). Therefore, the research in this thesis was not aimed to judge whether the portrayal of journalists in *House of Cards* is accurate or real. Instead, the credibility or exaggeration perceived by journalists were examined.

## 4. Journalists in *House of Cards* and the Analysis of Their Portrayal

### 4.1 *House of Cards* Overview, Synopsis, and Acclaim

*House of Cards* is an American series created by Netflix and introduced in February 2013. It is one of the most popular TV series ever created, based on audience rating. According to Rotten Tomatoes, American web aggregator of movie reviews, where the series scores 76 % of audience reviews, *House of Cards* is a “drama about a ruthless congressman and his equally ambitious wife who navigate the corridors of power in Washington, D.C.” (Rotten Tomatoes, 2020).

IMDb or the Internet Movie Database, where the 73-episodes long series obtained 8.8/10 rating, describes it simply as: “A Congressman works with his equally conniving wife to exact revenge on the people who betrayed him” (IMDb, 2020). On the same website, keywords characterising the series are, for example, political corruption, government corruption, husband-wife relationship, or media manipulation (Ibid). Therefore even the most basic description via key words suggests that the portrayal of journalists in *House of Cards*, the 5<sup>th</sup> most popular series on IMDb, might be rather negative.

*House of Cards* is the winner of two Golden Globes, both for the Best Performance by an Actress/Actor, respectively, in a Television Series – Drama. Robin Wright alias Claire Underwood won in 2014 and Kevin Spacey, aka Frank Underwood, a year later. The series is, without any doubt, likewise popular in the Czech Republic. Even though the first two seasons in Czech were broadcasted on Czech TV as late as in 2016, it still scores 91 % on ČSFD (Czech version of IMDb, the Czechoslovak Film Database), where it is also listed as the 28<sup>th</sup> best series (ČSFD, 2020).

So what is, in fact, the plot of the series? Jacob Oberfrank, an IMDb reviewer, describes it as an Americanized recreation of the BBC series of the same name, where “Majority House Whip Francis Underwood takes you on a long journey as he exacts his vengeance on those he feels wronged him - that is, his own cabinet members including the President of the United States himself. Dashing, cunning, methodical, and vicious, Frank Underwood, along with his equally manipulative yet ambiguous wife, Claire, take Washington by storm through climbing the hierarchical ladder to power” (Oberfrank, 2020).

As suggested above, the *House of Cards* is an American political thriller/drama adapted as a television series for Netflix by Beau Willimon. It originates from the 1990 BBC miniseries of the same name and also of 1989 *House of Cards* British novel written by Michael Dobbs. The first season containing 13 approximately 50-minutes long episodes was introduced by the streaming server Netflix on February 1, 2013. Five more seasons were released annually year by year until 2018, each of 13 episodes except for the final one, which composed of 8 episodes only. Thus, as already mentioned above, in total, there are 73 episodes of *House of Cards* (ČSFD, 2020).

The story is taking place in the capital of the United States, Washington D.C., where Congressman Francis Underwood (Frank) first appears as South Carolina Democrat and House Majority Whip. His ambitious wife Claire is leading a non-profit organization, "Clean Water Initiative," and craves for power just like her husband. "(The) character may be fictional, but his philosophy isn't" (Graves, 2014) – Mr. and Ms. Underwood's approach to the world and politics could be identified as ruthless pragmatism.

The Machiavellian perspective of Frank Underwood was already analysed in the Czech context in a 2018 dissertation defended successfully at Masaryk University, Brno, by Martina Jergová. She compared all three main characters from all three versions of *House of Cards* (Dobbs' novel, British series, and American series). "The work shows that although the novel, the British miniseries, and the American series are different in many aspects, they are surprisingly similar when viewed through a Machiavellian lens" (Jergová, 2018, 93). As both TV series were based on the very same novel, I do not find the discovery of being similar by the Machiavellian perspective too ground-breaking. Yet still, the incontestable point of the Machiavellian character was made precisely and suited Frank Underwood well.

However, rather than Machiavellian, the term "ruthless pragmatist" fits Underwood more appropriately. "The greatest compliment Frank Underwood bestows upon anyone in season two of *House of Cards* is when he calls his political protégé, Rep. Jacqueline Sharp, a "ruthless pragmatist." He tried hard to deserve the title himself (Graves, 2014).

Right from the beginning, in the first episode of season 1, new president-elect Gareth Walker reneges on his pledge to nominate senior House Congressman Underwood for Secretary of State. And that is a powerful set-off for Frank's plot of revenge as he develops a patient, diligent, step-by-step plan to gradually gain more and more power, with his wife Claire as an essential accomplice.

From sleeping with a young and over-ambitious journalist Zoe Barnes (despite being married) when the relationship is mutually beneficial and getting rid of her when the tie becomes dangerous, to abusing the loyalty of junior Congressman Peter Russo when it is in Frank's interest, Underwood is not shy of using any means from the list of pragmatic solutions. "Even his marriage to his wife, Claire Underwood, is probably calculated: She came from a wealthy family, he was just gearing up for his first congressional campaign, and he needed the money" (Graves, 2014). On this topic, Daniel Anýž, one of the respondents in the research, added: "The whole series is a hyperbole. The way American President acts with his wife is very close to a cynical perception of politics" (Anýž, 2020).

*House of Cards* is, however, not only about one ruthless, pragmatic politician but more broadly about power, manipulation, and betrayal. IndieWire is not far from the truth when claiming that the story of greed, corruption, and disloyalty was the milestone when "Netflix changed the television industry." Remarkably, the series' season 1 was the first one ever to leave behind the weekly broadcast scheduling and was made available all at once instantly to meet the growing public demand to consume the shows at the audience's own pace (Cronk, 2013).

More or less curiously, the series is not based purely on Dobbs' novel adapted to the U.S. political landscape. Still, according to the chief co-creator and writer Beau Willimon, the main characters were inspired by the masters of political gamesmanship: "Lyndon Johnson, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln, people who were "willing to break the rules in order to lead properly" (Graves, 2014). And the roots may go back even further as Kevin Spacey stated that he was inspired by a character of Richard III, a part he had played on stage the prior year. Cronk comments that: "Character equally as ruthless as Congressman Francis Underwood was offered an analogy for the show's pointed indictment of corruption and innate human selfishness. Not only were Richard III's ideals a point of reference, but the functionality of his stage performance and, in particular, the theatre's narrative technique of directly addressing the audience informed Spacey's portrayal of a politician who'll stop at nothing to satisfy both his personal and professional urges" (Cronk, 2013). Based on his theatre experience, Spacey also found the glee of involving the viewer, who becomes a co-conspirator in crucial decision-making moments.

The inspirational leaders of American history are certainly reflected in the character of Frank Underwood, and the origin traces back to America's founding: "George Washington's family coat of arms bears the Latin motto *exitus acta probat* ("the ends justify the means"). LBJ was famous for his brokering and cajoling. And Abraham Lincoln, as we were recently reminded by Hollywood's Steven Spielberg, made all kinds of corrupt bargains to ensure the passage of the 13th Amendment. The "ruthless pragmatist" title has also frequently been applied to President Obama" (Graves, 2014).

However, especially under a congressional gridlock, the pragmatic approach of a U.S. President need not necessarily be a wrong thing – Machiavelli's spirit is still alive. The right question instead stands whether the ends really justify the means. Creator of *House of Cards* Willimon brings up a poignant consideration: "It's a paradox that the people who are making the rules sometimes have to break them in order to move us forward. And, you know, we want our politicians to be perfect people, and yet at the same time we want them to lead our country, and that means sometimes playing outside the box" (Ibid).

A major twist in the series cast happened in 2017. After several allegations of sexual misconduct, Netflix took an extremely wary precautionary measure and removed Kevin Spacey from the final season. Regardless of all ongoing cases and lawsuits against him being closed, dismissed, or dropped by summer 2019 as the actor pleaded not guilty, the final season had been shot and released in 2018 without his involvement. Comprising of eight episodes instead of the usual thirteen, the writers had to deal with Spacey's absence to create a different path forward without him (Adalian, 2017). At the beginning of the final season, it was indicated that Frank Underwood passed away between the two seasons.

#### **4.1.1 *House of Cards* Leading Characters**

Throughout the whole series, only two characters are starring in all six seasons. Those are Claire Underwood portrayed by Robin Wright, and Douglas Stamper, Frank's loyal aide and chief of staff played by Michael Kelly. As explained above, Kevin Spacey as Frank Underwood only appears in seasons 1-5. Below follows a list of the selected *House*

of *Cards* key characters described according to the *House of Cards* Wiki at Fandom.com website (House of Cards Wiki, 2020); the full cast overview is to be found on Wikipedia.<sup>4</sup>

- Francis Joseph “Frank” Underwood (Kevin Spacey): Democratic Party politician who first appears on the scene as the Majority Whip for the United States House of Representatives; later becomes 49<sup>th</sup> Vice President of the United States; after the resignation of Garrett Walker, he assumes the office as the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States. He later resigns himself and dies subsequently (in between season 5 and season 6). He is married to Claire Underwood.
- Claire (Hale) Underwood (Robin Wright): Frank’s wife and Chief Executive Officer of Clean Water Initiative NGO; later a running-mate in 2016 elections; subsequently, the 46<sup>th</sup> First Lady of the United States and the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations. She has also served as the 51<sup>st</sup> Vice President, and after the resignation of her husband, she became the 47<sup>th</sup> President, the first woman ever to assume the office. In the final season, she returns to her maiden surname, “Hale.”
- Douglas “Doug” Stamper (Michael Kelly): A right-hand man of Frank Underwood who would undertake any risk to protect him; former Director of Strategy and later a White House Chief of Staff is Frank’s most loyal aide.
- Peter Russo (Corey Stoll): Member of the House of Representatives and candidate for Governor of Pennsylvania. At the beginning of Season 1, he gets arrested for driving under the influence (DUI) and soliciting a prostitute (Rachel Posner). When Frank needs someone 100% loyal, a police officer is bribed, and the case is covered up out of fear that his lewd behaviour would be made public. Frank then uses Russo as a tool for his own goals, and Peter obeys all directions. He is later left to suffocate by Frank; his death becomes a subject of an investigation by Zoe Barnes, Lucas Goodwin, Janine Skorsky, or Tom Hammerschmidt.
- Rachel Posner (Rachel Brosnahan): A prostitute hired by Congressman Russo is approached by Doug Stamper and offered thousands in cash for her silence. She is a part of the plot against Russo later and, therefore, a burdensome witness that Doug gets to love. Despite the attraction, he killed her in season 3.

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<sup>4</sup> *List of House of Cards Characters*. Wikipedia [online]. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_House\\_of\\_Cards\\_characters](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_House_of_Cards_characters).

- Tom Yates (Paul Sparks): Writer hired by Frank to write a book about him and his political program “America Works,” also serves in the White House as a speechwriter. He later becomes an occasional lover of Claire Underwood.
- Margaret Tilden (Kathleen Chalfant): Owner of the *Washington Herald*, a leading newspaper in the series. A strong supporter of Zoe Barnes on her rise later takes action and decides to modify the newsroom staff by forcing the editor-in-chief Tom Hammerschmidt to resign.

#### 4.1.2 Key Journalistic Characters

The leading journalistic characters, which are essential for understanding the plot and also mentioned in the research model situations, are listed below, as described at Fandom.com (House of Cards Wiki, 2020).

- Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara): One of the main characters of the whole series is a young, attractive, and ambitious journalist from *Washington Herald* who is struggling in the newsroom to gain more attention and more important tasks. She later becomes a mouth-piece for Underwood, who leaks classified information and hints as he needs. The symbiotic relationship between a politician and a journalist turns into an extra-marital affair. At the same time, Zoe alienates her co-workers and leaves the Herald due to her mildly arrogant attitude and conflicts with the team. She later teams up with Janine Skorsky, a former rival, and more senior White House Correspondent, in a different newsroom (*Slugline*). Despite the competition, they begin to respect each other’s work ethics and together work to unearth hidden details regarding Congressman Russo’s DUI cover-up and his death. As the investigation goes deeper and becomes more dangerous for Frank, he carries out her murder in cold blood by pushing her under an arriving train.
- Janine Skorsky (Constance Zimmer): former abrasive White House Correspondent for the *Washington Herald*, battling hard with a fresh competitor personified by Zoe Barnes. They later start investigating affairs around Underwood together and assemble a compelling amount of data. However, after Zoe’s murder, Janine pulls back from journalism. She left Washington D.C. and returned to her home state to care for her elderly mother and teach at college, being afraid of Underwood’s growing power and concerned that he was able to get away with

all criminal activities. Multiple times later, she is approached either by Lucas or Tom with a request to help to investigate the political atrocities. Still, she remains mainly reluctant to get involved back again.

- Lucas Goodwin (Sebastian Arcelus): national politics reporter and editor at *Washington Herald*; one of the main characters up to season 4. After Zoe's depart to Slugline, her former boss Lucas becomes romantically involved with her and discovers dangerous details of her relationship with Frank. Later a deputy editor at the Herald, he continues where Zoe left off after her murder to expose Underwood's crimes. He uses dark web and hacktivists to obtain Zoe's phone records to prove the intimacy of the relation. However, Doug, via FBI, is aware of his attempts, and Goodwin ends up being sentenced to prison for cyber-terrorism. He tries to convince Janine and Tom to continue in his investigation, but without evidence provided by Rachel Posner, the story would only be dismissed as a conspiracy. Janine is also testifying against Lucas' credibility. After two years, he is released with a new identity and still pursues his goal to expose Underwood's wrongdoing and avenge Zoe. Desperate Lucas seeks the help of Heather Dunbar, Frank's adversary in Democratic Primaries, but she refuses to get involved. Later, as a last act of defiance, Lucas uses the campaign rally crowd to get closer to Frank and shoots him to the liver. In a chaotic situation, he is taken down by the Secret Service. He fatally shoots Frank's loyal driver and bodyguard, Edward Meechum, who himself manages to kill Lucas before his death. Frank falls unconscious, but he survives the assassination attempt.
- Tom Hammerschmidt (Boris McGiver): tough and dedicated editor-in-chief of *Washington Herald*, showing high respect for thorough investigation work and ethical standards. He is the manager of the team, including Zoe, Janine, and Lucas. After an argument with upstart Zoe, who disobeyed his order, he ends up firing her, which eventually leads up to being forced to resign by Ms. Tilden, the owner. At first, Tom doesn't believe what Lucas suggests about Underwood being involved in criminal activities. After the imprisonment of Lucas, he tries his best to help him with a credible article, but all Lucas' claims are based on no evidence. When Lucas is killed after the assassination attempt, Tom continues in the investigation of shady deaths of Barnes and Russo. He is able to pile up a credible amount of evidence and testimonies even from high-profile witnesses

(including former President Garrett Walker), but in the final season, he gets shot at President Claire Hale Underwood's command.

Other journalists appearing in the series, for example, Ayla Sayyad, Kate Baldwin, or Sean Jeffries, were not included as they played little or no role in seasons 1 and 2. Their characters are, therefore, irrelevant to this research.

## **4.2 The Portrayal of Journalists and Media in *House of Cards***

Ten model situations were identified based on re-watching seasons 1 and 2 for further analysis. During re-watching and note-taking, situations that seemed unethical, controversial, or otherwise problematic to the author were marked and subsequently transcribed into the model situations. Also, some cases where the portrayal seemed precise and credible were selected to either confirm or disprove that view by professionals. The selection was made by the author and therefore is individual and subjective; the following analysis aspires by no means to be exhaustive or generalising, nor does it state that there are no more problematic aspects from the journalistic point of view in the series. In the following chapter, the selection of each model situation is analysed and explained and subsequently commented by the journalists. To reduce the complexity of the already extensive research, the ten following model situations were identified in *House of Cards* seasons 1 and 2, where journalists play almost a leading role. The respondents were first asked several questions related to the model situations:

- To what extent are the portrayals presented below exaggerated?
- Is such crossing of ethical borders as presented in *House of Cards* a pure fiction, or does it really similarly happen in reality?
- Under which circumstances could similar situations actually happen?
- Is anything of that sort usual in Czech journalism?
- Could such a portrayal do any harm to journalism in general?

### **4.2.1 Model Situations**

#### **1. The Proactive Approach and Exclusive Cooperation Offer:**

Young and ambitious reporter Zoe Barnes benefits from her physical attractiveness and by herself initiates a late-evening meeting with a politician. Without

prior notice, she shows up at the door of the Congressman Frank Underwood, who invites her in for a drink and she accepts. Neither is she writing an article about him nor asking for an interview – she just offers a secret, mutually beneficial, and exclusive cooperation.

**2. The Romantic Affair and Trade-off Model:**

Initial purely professional cooperation turns into a personal matter, and a romantic extra-marital affair emerges between a reporter and a politician, based on which an information trade-off goes on.

**3. The Awareness of the Ethical Breach and Commissioned Articles:**

The reporter to the politician: “We are currently in a very grey area, legally and ethically, which I’m okay with.” In fact, she writes tailor-made articles ordered by him (via text messages or direct calls). When the politician is not satisfied, and the reporter does not cooperate as desired, the politician is not reluctant to threaten her.

**4. The Role of the Supervisors and Newsroom Publication Standards:**

Both the Editor-in-Chief and the owner of the paper want to know Zoe’s source of information, but she does not reveal it. Is her attitude ethical? Is it realistic that a newspaper would publish a story based on one secret source only, whose identity is only known by the author of an article and not by any superiors?

**5. The Regularity of Sexual Practices by Journalists:**

Zoe with her colleague Janine speak outright about their working methods (including the seduction of high ranking politicians). “Who is the mysterious buddy, who do you get all stories from? I’m just teasing you, not that I would judge, we’ve all done it just to get a story, including with a Congressman.” When Zoe denies, Janine continues: “I don’t do it anymore, once a word got out, nobody took me seriously.”

**6. The Role of Zoe’s Colleague and Later Partner:**

An ongoing investigation against Underwood (Zoe’s source of information), she initially attempts to protect him; until she finds out that he was really probably exploiting her. Her later partner (and former colleague) Lucas mentions: “Underwood has been using you, don’t you want to know why? Is it all about covering yourself? You don’t want anybody to know you were sleeping with him. Not exactly objective reporting, is it?”

### **7. The Portrayal of Fear in Investigative Journalism:**

Janine to Zoe: “If you weren’t afraid, you wouldn’t be doing your job. I investigated police cover-ups before, I got death threats for a year!” Is fear (about oneself, about life, about work, about family, etc.) a necessary part of the profession?

### **8. Manipulative Practices in Journalism:**

Zoe has learned one thing well from Frank – using a manipulative pressure to obtain a contact or a respondent, deliberate lies and made-up stories such as: “She is my friend, she’s got a mental illness and just texted me she wanted to hurt herself, that is why I need her address.”

### **9. Politicians Labelling Journalists:**

Doug Stamper (Underwood’s aide) about critical newspapers attempting to investigate potential criminal activities with Frank’s involvement: “They are trying to smear Frank, it is a coordinated campaign!”

### **10. Zoe’s Catharsis:**

Too late awakening and catharsis by Zoe: “I took a chance, showed up at your house, and placed myself at your feet. Crossed ethical lines, professionally, physically, and I hold myself accountable for that. Those were my choices, and I can live with them. I’d like to move forward, but I need to know exactly what I was a part of; that I wasn’t part of someone’s murder.” (One of her last sentences before being murdered and thrown under a train by Frank in a subway).

Moreover, respondents were asked the two additional questions, as listed below.

- How are journalists in *House of Cards* portrayed? Is their image credible, or exaggerated? Does the series distort reality?
- In recent years (or decades) the public trust in media has gradually decreased. Could series such as *House of Cards* (or others where journalists are presented as tools for political objectives) have any impact on public trust in media? Could series such as *House of Cards* cause any harm to real journalists and media by their portrayal?

## 5. The Perception of Czech and American Professionals of the Portrayal of Journalists in *House of Cards*

### 5.1 Selection of Interviewees

Ten Czech and three American journalists were interviewed for this research. The Czech ones were selected based on either their professional orientation (political reporting, investigative journalism) or based on their experience with the American reality (e.g., former or current correspondents or journalists who have lived or focused on the United States), as the American politics and journalism play a significant role in the series. Also, the emphasis was laid on the newsrooms the journalists represent to provide variety as wide as possible. The majority of them were selected by the author.

The selection of the American participants was limited by their availability. All of them were recommended to the author by the thesis supervisor, or by another research participant. All three of them either lived or have lived in the Czech Republic so that they understand the local political and journalistic context and dynamics, which allows them to offer a comparison. To a certain extent, both in cases of the Czech and American journalists, the snowball sampling method was partially applied on a small scale. According to Hendl, this sampling method would be called “combined” (Hendl, 2016, 154). Although the previous knowledge of the series was not a necessary prerequisite as the research was based on model situations, all of the respondents knew the series. They had previously watched at least several episodes or seasons of it.

The interviewed Czech journalists (arranged by the date of the interview) were the following ten:

- Veronika Bednářová, interviewed on March 27, 2020, via telephone call; foreign and culture reporter for *Reflex* magazine; studied in Prague and New York; recommended by the thesis supervisor.
- Pavla Holcová, interviewed on March 30, 2020, via telephone call; founder and director of the *Czech Centre for Investigative Journalism*; selected by the author.
- Josef Klíma, interviewed on April 8, 2020, in a written form; senior investigative reporter and writer currently for *Seznam TV*; selected by the author.
- Lukáš Valášek, interviewed on April 9, 2020, during a personal meeting; chief investigative reporter for *Aktuálně.cz*; selected by the author.

- Jana Ciglerová, interviewed on April 16, 2020, via Skype call; former foreign correspondent from the United States for *MF Dnes* daily and currently for *Deník N* daily; recommended by the thesis supervisor.
- Martin Řezníček, interviewed on April 16, 2020, via FaceTime call; former foreign correspondent from the United States for the *Czech TV*; current news anchor; selected by the author.
- Daniel Anýž, interviewed on April 22, 2020, via telephone call; foreign reporter focusing on the United States for *Aktuálně.cz*; recommended by the thesis supervisor.
- David Miřejovský, interviewed on April 22, 2020, via Skype call; current foreign correspondent from the United States for the *Czech TV*; selected by the author.
- Jindřich Šídlo, interviewed on April 27, 2020, via telephone call; former political reporter in multiple Czech newsrooms, currently at *Seznam TV*; selected by the author.
- Jaroslav Kmenta, interviewed on May 6, 2020, during a personal meeting; leading investigative reporter and writer for *Reportér* magazine; recommended by Josef Klíma.

Several more Czech journalists were asked to participate in the research: Robert Břešťan, Robert Čásenský, Nora Fridrichová, Lenka Kabrhelová, David Klimeš, Michal Kubal, Ondřej Kundra, Václav Moravec, Vít Pohanka, Sabina Slonková, and Martin Veselovský. They were either unavailable or unreachable. Moreover, several more were selected, but eventually not reached out to as the sample got sufficiently large. Those were: Václav Dolejší, Daniela Drtinová, Tomáš Etzler, Jiří Kubík, Jiří Majstr, Teodor Marjanovič, Jan Lopatka, Jiří Sobota, and Julie Urbišová.

The interviewed three Americans (also arranged by the date of the interview) were these:

- Drew Hinshaw, interviewed on April 21, 2020, via WhatsApp call; Senior Reporter, Central and Eastern Europe correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*; previously based in Prague; recommended by the thesis supervisor and facilitated by his former colleague and author's classmate.
- Frank Kuznik, interviewed on April 24, 2020, during a personal meeting; American journalist based in Prague, culture reporter for *Hospodářské noviny* daily and *Aktuálně.cz*; recommended by the thesis supervisor.

- Peter Green, interviewed on May 7, 2020, via WhatsApp call; former Central and Eastern Europe correspondent for *International Herald Tribune* and the *New York Times*; previously based in Prague; recommended by David Miřejovský.

## **5.2 Perception of the Portrayed Journalists in *House of Cards* – General Comments**

Based on the author's previous journalistic experience and simultaneous study of journalism, the statements of all respondents were given sufficient space, which some may perceive as excessive use of quotations. The author aimed to present the views of interviewees objectively without any bias or judgement. Although a more in-depth evaluation might have resulted in a more grounded and detailed analysis, the author attempted to avoid his personal opinions. Therefore, at the beginning of each sub-chapter, a description of each model situation is provided, along with a brief analysis of the obtained data, how the respondents perceive the portrayed issues. The nationality and gender of the interviewees were taken into account in analysing their views on the perceived credibility or exaggeration of the model situations.

The respondents could have started the interview by providing their general comments on the series and the portrayal of journalists, should they have any. This brief chapter gives a general overview of comments from nine respondents. Both female respondents providing this comment agreed that the series dramatically exaggerates reality, and the opinions of their male colleagues were not much different. Characteristics such as dramatization, exaggeration, artistic concession, truthful portrayal, or authenticity were discussed.

Veronika Bednářová stressed the main female character, Zoe Barnes, and presented levels: "She is a very important depiction of a journalist in a popular-culture discourse. (...) What is also interesting about the series is that it is the top worldwide level of everything: journalism, politics, ambitions, etc. Therefore it suggests how hard it might be to rise elsewhere than to the White House reporting and how difficult it might be to turn the chances down" (Bednářová, 2020). She also added that the critical issue related to the series is that the leading character, the politician Frank Underwood, is portrayed there as the only one who is intriguing and that the others simply follow and do not observe the greater context of his actions. Veronika Bednářová admitted that there is an element of truth that media usually tend to take hold of what is the most visible

or controversial as it is more attractive for the audience. (Which effectively sells the newspaper; the commercial aspect was also discussed by Martin Řezníček later in the fourth model situation focused on the role of supervisors in the newsroom – note by the author). However, the journalists, according to Veronika Bednářová, used to be very reflective about their work earlier in reality, which is what she had missed in the series: “Therefore, the series deteriorates the reality a bit in favour of the audience’s interest” (Ibid). Jana Ciglerová agreed that a story shortcut was applied: “Journalists are portrayed as the ones who simply write a piece, dramatically press “enter,” and the story is published – that is entirely out of reality” (Ciglerová, 2020).

Daniel Anýž declared that the whole series is a hyperbole: “It crosses the border where I refuse to believe it might happen (both in cases of politicians and journalists – note by the author). There is a certain degree of hyperbole and a literary concession which goes beyond the real world of media and politics” (Anýž, 2020). David Miřejovský recalled an interview with Kevin Spacey, who said that the creators tried to think of an exciting and dramatic plot in the series to make it always authentic for a viewer. Miřejovský then drew a parallel to the current American politics: “The reality of the upcoming years in American politics and journalism, in general, went even further than what they were able to create in the script. Recent years have shifted far beyond what we had been capable of imagining” (Miřejovský, 2020).

Jindřich Šídlo pointed back to the original version of the British *House of Cards* and noticed the differences in the usage of technologies: “It was written by Michael Dobbs in the UK in the 1980s (...). And while reading the book, one sees the old school, which is also interesting regarding the development of media. Before, there were secret paper notes below the door instead of electronic channels” (Šídlo, 2020). Moreover, right at the beginning, he clarified that the exaggeration of *House of Cards* is evident at least from the moment when a Congressman throws a reporter under a train: “If that was a reality, no dramatic portrayal would be needed” (Ibid). Martin Řezníček stated that the depiction of politics is very credible in *House of Cards*. Still, he was not sure about the role of the reporter: “The portrayal of journalists might be slightly exaggerated, it is no representative example, but in any way, we cannot rule out that similar situations depicted in the series might be happening in reality” (Řezníček, 2020).

The American point of view on the level of exaggeration is not much different, and Drew Hinshaw indefinitely distanced himself from the exaggerated portrayal of ethics, standards,

and methods that he would not be capable of: “Never ever in my entire career” (Hinshaw, 2020). Frank Kuznik added that *House of Cards* is a great series that deserves its popularity. Just like Martin Řezníček, he praised the depiction of politics but objected to the portrayal of media: “A lot of the political stuff is really dead-on, it is very good and very well observed. The media stuff is shakier, but they use it very effectively from a dramatic standpoint. If you’re doing something about power and politics in Washington, the media has to be part of it. It is not very accurate but dramatic. However, the political part is outstanding; it’s really good” (Kuznik, 2020). Peter Green concurred with these views, saying that the portrayal is exaggerated and dramatised for television. “In many ways, it is a great portrayal, but for example, the thing about people having affairs with their sources is not all that common, although it happens. And I don’t think it does a lot of harm because it’s fiction, it’s dramatised. Does the portrayal of a vicious Congressman do any harm to Mitch McConnell<sup>5</sup>? Probably not, I think that everybody knows this is TV” (Green, 2020).

The perception of a potential harm to real journalists was a point where opinions of the interviewed professionals differed. More specific cases and the comments of journalists on the portrayal presented by *House of Cards* unravel in the following chapter.

### **5.3 Perception of Portrayed Journalists in *House of Cards* – Model Situations**

#### **5.3.1 Proactive Approach and Exclusive Cooperation Offer**

Young reporter Zoe Barnes took advantage of her physical attractiveness and proactively initiated a late-evening meeting with Frank Underwood, an influential politician. Without prior notice, she showed up at his house with no intentions to write a story or conduct an interview with him. She just offered him a secret, mutually beneficial, and exclusive cooperation. The first model situation right from the beginning of the series was a striking establishment of ties between Zoe Barnes and Frank Underwood. Out of the total 13 interviewees, eight of them were rather in favour of the credible portrayal, while five leaned to a dramatised exaggeration.

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<sup>5</sup> U.S. Senate Majority Leader in 2020; Republican Party Senator from Kentucky.

This sub-chapter argues that the nationality context and experience play a role in the perception of ethics, in terms of close ties between a reporter and a politician established at the home of one of them. While the journalists condemned such unethical behaviour, they admitted that in some cases, it still might be likely to happen. Majority of the Czechs had no illusions about such an approach, and agreed that this situation was portrayed to a certain extent credibly, with one view admitting potential credibility, should it have happened decades ago. Only one of the Czech professionals fully shared the opinion of all three Americans that the depicted situation was unlikely to happen and that the portrayal is unrealistic, far-fetched, and exaggerated. However, this situation was the first and the only one where nationality seemed to have influenced the answers, likely because of the perception of privacy by Czechs and Americans. The gender of the respondents appeared to have played no role in their understanding of this specific model situation.

Jaroslav Kmenta and Lukáš Valášek shared a similar opinion: “Well this certainly could happen, there even might be a real context, but another thing is whether this is right or wrong” (Kmenta, 2020). Valášek believes that this should not be happening: “There are many things wrong in this situation. It is hard to judge whether it is possible or not. Probably it is, I have never been directly confronted, but one hears things about certain colleagues. Journalism is a profession just like any other; there are excellent people, average people, and under-average people. Moreover, some people tend to behave ethically at any time, and some people do not care about ethics and follow their own benefits purely. But I still believe that a majority of people in this field aim to work ethically” (Valášek, 2020).

He also pointed to the issue of gender: “Some of my female colleagues could say more how to deal with it, whether being attractive is an advantage or not in communication with politicians or lobbyists. More often, they rather tend to complain about being taken purely as a sexual object, whom the politicians think they can make the offer of a trade-off” (Ibid). Jana Ciglerová confirmed his view: “It was troubling to me that politicians perceived me as a woman. I did not want to be taken as a woman; I wanted to be taken just like a journalist. I did not want them to react on my physical appearance, and once, I was even quite seriously harassed by a politician” (Ciglerová, 2020).

Moreover, Valášek claimed that going up to a politician’s house is not a great way to maintain distance, but going for a drink as for networking is another thing to him. However, he admits the management of sources is difficult: “An informal meeting with

a politician is a thing that one does, it is a common part of the journalistic profession because sometimes meetings are held off-record. Establishing a relation and communication is usual and logical; journalists should not only meet their sources on the occasion of an interview. It leads to a situation when a politician feels he is under fire all the time to be scandalised, which is not ideal” (Valášek, 2020). Josef Klíma confirmed that maintaining ties with politicians is a ubiquitous part of the journalistic profession, especially for political commentators – except for sexual methods: “They have their favourite politicians who bring them backstage information. In return, politicians ask them time to time to publish something in favour of their party” (Klíma, 2020). However, this might also be perceived as a trade-off, even without any attraction or affairs, and an ethically-based journalist should always try to maintain the right balance as there is a very fine line between practical, informal networking meetings, and bargaining.

However, Klíma also raised important ethical questions that journalists must face – would a journalist have to publish something, which is against their personal view or could do some unjust harm to someone else? Or should they refuse and not publish information of public interest, related, for example, to corruption, for the sake of solidarity with the source? And how shall a journalist react after finding out something negative about the source? Keep silent, or publish it? Or forward it to another journalist while reporting conflict of interest? (Ibid) The comments of Klíma and Valášek suggest how tricky maintaining close cooperation with politicians is and that the character of Zoe Barnes had to face a serious ethical dilemma.

Lukáš Valášek also highlighted that such relationships should never be taken as a trade-off: “I cannot rule out that some Czech journalists behave like that, but I simply think that under no circumstances it is acceptable to do something in exchange for information. When a source is in such a position, it is the journalist’s failure that he is not defending democracy but doing business, e.g. to become famous instead of publishing important information of public interest. I would say that in this series, this girl is something like a caricature of what a good journalist should not do. She crosses borders, which a good journalist should not cross” (Ibid). On the contrary, Pavla Holcová did not see such depiction as a caricature: “I don’t think it distorts reality. There are, of course, some aspects of the relationship highlighted, usually it is more complicated, but it happens. It is definitely not far from reality. A relationship between a reporter and a politician using her as a tool is very frequent” (Holcová, 2020). Veronika Bednářová added that there

is nothing wrong about being young and ambitious: “No journalist desires to stay where he was at the age of 18, writing sports for some local daily. Everyone has professional visions to fulfil. But one must set a clear line demarking what I’m willing to sacrifice for the career. It is tempting to cross it, which Zoe Barnes did, but eventually, it costs her life” (Bednářová, 2020).

Jana Ciglerová also pointed out a different aspect of the cultural context and the perception of home, claiming that this would never happen in the Czech Republic. However, her understanding of Americans and their homes was not supported by any of the interviewed American journalists, so either it might have only been her impression from Florida, where she had lived, or merely a subjective perception. She claimed: “As I lived in the United States, I know that they perceive home slightly differently than we do. They move and migrate more often, which means that they are not so strongly or intimately attached to the house – therefore, such visits are relatively common in the USA, that someone shows up at the door and rings the bell. Such portrayal is likely in line with the American reality; they do visits in a different way than we do” (Ciglerová, 2020). Jana Ciglerová also admitted that without any doubt, there are journalists who would use their appearance of gender to obtain information or a position and also implied a possible cause: “We all are just human. I think this really could happen in reality, too; she was definitely not the first female journalist to sleep with her source. But sometimes it is not entirely voluntary, and the female journalists are hard to be blamed for that. It mainly happens because there are mostly men in the leadership of newsrooms. Politicians are primarily men. So it is just one of their tools” (Ibid). Josef Klíma agreed: “Naturally there are more young female journalists than males using eroticism as an information-obtaining tool. It happens simply because there are more men in the leading roles” (Klíma, 2020). From the gender point of view, an analytical approach could be applied here to discuss the hierarchies of power that several of the respondents pointed out; that would, however, require a more profound study explicitly focused on the gendered view in TV series.

Martin Řezníček stated that he has never encountered such a situation and does not even know anyone who would similarly break the rules to obtain information (however, the question also stands whether he would even be told by any of his colleagues – note by the author). Based on his personal experience from the United States, he claimed: “Which doesn’t mean it does not happen. Time to time, it is quite likely that it might turn into something more serious. It is also quite likely that some American journalists go over

dead bodies. Zoe's portrayal isn't exaggerated, because I believe that especially some young journalists can break the rules to gain more attention or credit and to build their career and convince their supervisors they can obtain information. Senior renowned journalists would have no reason doing it" (Řezníček, 2020). Řezníček's colleague and successor in the role of the Czech TV American correspondent, David Miřejovský, holds a slightly different view. He said that a reporter from a quality newsroom would not do this nowadays: "I have a sense that this might be a modest dramatization of what could have potentially happened in the 20th century, but not today anymore. I think that it is a great series, but even back in 2013, the creators were 50 years old. Today I feel that politicians are way more cautious in terms of who do they meet with or who can they be spotted with" (Miřejovský, 2020).

Although Daniel Anýž accepts a degree of artistic dramatization, he affirmed that the series is getting quite close to reality and decisively stated: "The fact that female reporters might benefit, and they do, from being in close contact with politicians is a common thing" (Anýž, 2020). For Jindřich Šídlo, on the contrary, such a personal visit seemed exaggerated to him: "I cannot imagine who and how would do this, who would dare it. Maybe it works like that, and my imagination is limited, I do not know what all my colleagues do, but it seems to me too far, especially in the United States, as far as I know the American media" (Šídlo, 2020).

The American views did not differ overly from Šídlo. Drew Hinshaw could not imagine that happening and doubted Zoe Barnes' reason for going to Underwood's house: "That late at night, assume a person could be annoyed by you. It would have to be really important, just something like extraordinary circumstances – talking about a global news story. I just couldn't find it very credible at all" (Hinshaw, 2020). Frank Kuznik recognized the ambition, but added that it is 95% fictional: "Certainly there were people who were that ambitious, it's not uncommon at all. I've certainly seen ambition like that, but basically, this woman offers herself. Anything you want to see in print, just give it to me, and I'll get it there. There is no discussion about whether the information is true. Her only goal is to get ahead. I will not tell that it has never happened, but it would be very uncommon because it is such a serious ethical breach. Something like that would eventually come out" (Kuznik, 2020). Peter Green judged it unrealistic: "It is ridiculous and far-fetched. Far more often, it is the source that makes the offer to a journalist" (Green, 2020).

### 5.3.2 Romantic Affair and Trade-off Model

The exclusive cooperation initiated by Zoe Barnes, at the beginning purely work-related, although not entirely ethical, quickly escalated into a romantic affair. Based on the transactional manner of the relationship, the information trade-off between a reporter and a politician started. This sub-chapter is a continuation of the previous model situation, although currently, the aspect of the physical relationship and sexual affair is included. This section examined the views on sexual relations between journalists and their sources of information and reflected the ethics of source management. Despite the unethical character of this model situation, the vast majority of interviewed journalists, regardless of their nationality or gender, are confident that affairs between reporters and politicians do happen, although not regularly, that those are rather exceptional individual cases, which exist yet. Twelve professionals approved or tended to approve the credibility of the portrayed situation. Even the only strong dissenting opinion admitted that affairs do happen but objected to the likelihood of the portrayed transactional sexual relation as depicted in the series. All respondents agreed that such behaviour is immensely incorrect. Still, it might exist in reality, and therefore *House of Cards*, by this specific depiction, does not exaggerate.

Lukáš Valášek doubted that such behaviour would be standard and mentioned that for a young female journalist, a similar situation might be a lot harder than for him given the pressure they face: “Some of them could benefit from it to gain some information; I cannot rule that out. I do not know all the people in Czech journalism, and I do not know how they do their job. But the people I know really take good care of ethical behaviour” (Valášek, 2020). He also added a normative remark that people could get closer, but also that is why a journalist must be extremely cautious about any form of familiarization: “There is no universal rule saying what is acceptable, it is individual. But those people are not friends; they are sources with whom journalists have a professional relationship, and it is necessary to think it over twice whether it is not going too far” (Ibid).

Josef Klíma holds a similar view that, in some cases, the judging is complicated. When Zoe uses her charm to obtain information, the question is how far she is willing to go: “Either she just implies and teases, flirts or goes into bed with someone – then it becomes prostitution where information has its price. If she finds out about a serious subversive or criminal act and contributes to the ‘common good’ by revealing it, therefore, a question is raised what is good and evil” (Klíma, 2020). He also added that while colleagues usually

condemn these relations, the one concerned oftentimes does not feel guilty: “If a relationship with a source lasts longer, usually the initial purpose is blurred and is transformed into some emotional feeling. It also works as an alibi” (Ibid).

Jaroslav Kmenta hinted that this was the point when Zoe’s ethical behaviour got incorrect: “A romantic affair is a line that shall not be crossed. In such a case, all ethical norms of journalistic independence are breached. Correctly, if Zoe wanted to continue at work after having fallen in love with a politician, she would have to report to her supervisors in the newsroom that she is unable to do anything related to that person due to conflicting interests. Otherwise, it is a road to hell for any journalist because binding oneself to a service might limit one’s independence” (Kmenta, 2020).

Veronika Bednářová pointed to a gender aspect and stated that even if it is possible, it contradicts any basic journalistic ethics: “From an ethical point of view, that is absolutely inadmissible and that should never happen. The utilization of gender, intrigues, or love affairs to benefit from at work is tricky, which was demonstrated by the Harvey Weinstein case. Ironically, *House of Cards* was created even before the Weinstein affair came out. We know from history that such things were happening, not only in journalism but in the film industry in general, too. It is necessary to establish boundaries. It never works, and eventually, it did not work well for her, too. It only works usually in the short term, but then a fatal downfall comes, which is what I like about the series” (Bednářová, 2020). Pavla Holcová added that the ideal world would look completely different, and while this happens, no journalist would ever admit sleeping with a politician: “You never hear it from a journalist; they could only say it comes from a very good source that they can’t tell” (Holcová, 2020). Jana Ciglerová fully accepted the credibility of this model situation: “It is entirely real” (Ciglerová, 2020).

Although Martin Řezníček could not provide a detailed comment on this as he did not know any similar case, he linked the situation to a recent affair from real American politics. It involved David Petraeus, former U.S. Army General and CIA director, and Paula Broadwell, journalist and writer of his biography, who engaged in a romantic relationship. “This is a known affair, possibly illustrating a similar model situation. It is one out of some female journalists having an intimate relationship with the source they were cooperating with” (Řezníček, 2020). Petraeus had to step down in 2012. He resigned, citing an extramarital affair, which was eventually confirmed to be with Broadwell. She was working on his biography and was a credentialed journalist with

the Department of Defense. An investigation into the affair revealed Petraeus shared sensitive information with her. As part of a plea deal, he received two years probation (Watkins, 2017). Paula Broadwell might have served as a loose inspiration for the character of Tom Yates, who was initially hired by Frank Underwood in the series to write a book about him and his political program. He also worked as a speechwriter in the White House and later became an occasional lover of the President's wife, Claire Underwood.

Daniel Anýž believes this scenario is not exaggerated: "It is something that should not but could happen. Yes, she crosses the ethical norm, but it is a different situation from the first point where she offers herself proactively for a trade-off. When there is a romantic affair, I see it as a credible portrayal" (Anýž, 2020). David Miřejovský also highlighted it goes beyond ethical norms, and that it should not be happening and does not often happen in the high-profile American media. Still, he could not rule it out: "If I look around in the Czech media in the past ten years, similar things have happened. One of the last cases of a famous reporter is Ms. Alex Mynářová<sup>6</sup>, so it happens" (Miřejovský, 2020). Jindřich Šídlo holds a similar view and added that such cases harm journalism: "Well, this might be real. Apart from many rumours, I don't know a specific case, but it is likely. And it is a huge conflict of interest, which is absolutely unethical. But on the other hand, in which sense is this more problematic than male journalists hanging out for a beer with politicians and getting familiar with them?" (Šídlo, 2020).

The second model situation brought contradiction also between the American journalists. While Drew Hinshaw could not imagine a similar affair, Frank Kuznik and Peter Green confirmed a certain extent of credibility. Although Hinshaw suggested that incidents do happen, he objected to such a transactional manner: "I'm not saying it could never happen, but I've never heard of anything like that happening, it is not plausible to me. Because it will come out sooner or later that there was an affair. Everything that was said by that reporter will no longer be credible. For a reporter, it's a career-killing thing to do" (Hinshaw, 2020). Frank Kuznik claimed it is possible in reality: "Trading sex for information, absolutely. Would it happen exactly like it's portrayed? Probably not, extremely powerful people are under intense scrutiny, so it's unlikely it would play out that way, but it happens all the time (Kuznik, 2020). Peter Green also cautiously approved the credibility, but also added that it should not be perceived as regular:

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<sup>6</sup> Former *Czech TV* and *Czech Radio* reporter, currently wife of the Czech President's Chancellor Vratislav Mynář.

“This has happened, there are some pretty famous cases, but it doesn’t happen that often, it is not regular” (Green, 2020).

### **5.3.3 Awareness of the Ethical Breach and Tailor-made Articles**

During one of their continued meetings, Zoe Barnes noted to Frank Underwood that she operates in a grey area. She knew well what she was doing when she offered exclusive cooperation to him, and he made great use of it. The information he was leaking her served him well. Zoe was receiving hints via text messages, and Frank expected her total compliance to publish what he needed. This model situation aimed to find out the perception of ethics on the commissioned writing and tailor-made articles wrote in full compliance with the politician. Surprisingly, even though the behaviour is far from an ethical one, the answers provided an unequivocal result. Interestingly, the answers split almost equally. This time, twelve responses were recorded, out of which five approved the credibility, while seven respondents denied it. Nearly half of respondents tended to believe that in some cases, this might have happened. The other half tended to rule it out as exaggerated. They stressed the essential control role of the editorial board in a newsroom that the series seems to have underrated in their opinion.

At first sight, it seems apparent that neither nationality nor gender had any impact, instead of the lived experience in the United States. However, this argument has only limited validity. The majority of views advocating the exaggerated portrayal have, at least for a while, lived in the United States (all three Americans, Martin Řezníček and Jana Ciglerová). However, exceptions were noted, too, as Jindřich Šídlo and Jaroslav Kmenta also opposed the credibility. In a more in-depth evaluation of this argument, its limits must be cleared, as two out of five respondents tending to approve the credibility have also lived in the United States for a while (Veronika Bednářová and David Měrejovský). Therefore, the conclusion is indecisive, based on the presented factors and the ambiguous perception only confirmed the notion that each journalist perceives the ethics of the profession individually.

Some of the respondents agreed that a proper journalist would not tolerate this behaviour. Some claimed that either in the past or in the case of some individuals, it might be happening. They admitted such wrongdoing might be credible in the case of a bad

journalist. Also, direct threats from a politician did not seem very plausible to the interviewees.

Lukáš Valášek does not believe that any politician would take the risk to threaten personally: “It poses a too big risk. However, the closer the source gets to a journalist, the bigger leverage he has then. That’s why it is necessary to think twice over every step made towards a source, despite looking beneficial at first” (Valášek, 2020). He further argues that what Zoe was doing is that she had exchanged exclusive information for being a tool of a particular group. And that each group or source has own interpretation of a situation that suits them: “I feel that she is a prototype of a bad journalist. One could meet many vicious people, but getting information from them is not unethical. However, one-way communication and amplification of views need to be avoided. Receiving a text from a lobbyist does not qualify for an article automatically; it is just a piece of a bigger context” (Ibid). He also suggested that experience proves that even accurate information does not always guarantee a real context of a situation. That is why politicians or lobbyists often seek young and inexperienced journalists who are easily manipulated and not aware of it. Zoe was portrayed as an ideal prototype: “When someone important and influential comes up, you should not only be interested in truth but also the context of the message, what is the source’s motivation of telling you” (Ibid).

Veronika Bednářová agreed that a good journalist knowing the borders would not consent to this: “If I am a professional, information is what I want from you. If you are a professional and want to provide it to me is a sense of true journalistic work, then yes, it is alright. But if not, then I will not be doing this” (Bednářová, 2020). Without further specification, Pavla Holcová also mentioned borders that even an ambitious journalist should never cross and that distinguishing between types of journalism is necessary, but confirmed that tailor-made articles exist. “There are many politicians who have available journalists in this way, whom they leak information. In the Czech Republic, the journalistic community is smaller, so there are not so many cases as in the United States, but it happens, and it is quite common. Still, not all journalists react immediately” (Holcová, 2020). Upon this point, Valášek offered a potential explanation: “The journalistic field is very small here and the risk of exposure too huge” (Valášek, 2020).

While Jana Ciglerová argued it could happen, she also suggested that such a portrayal overrates the power of a reporter and underrates the editorial team’s role and the editorial control. “Not always could a reporter guarantee that an article would be published

in the form it was written. An editor, a chief of a department, and an editor-in-chief are all above a journalist. These three layers work with an article and its tone. Sooner or later, it gets exposed when someone has exclusive information from a certain source too often. And newspapers don't want it. Everybody wants good information but not at any price. Once a journalist is proved untrustworthy by inclining too much to one source and therefore preferring a positive point of view upon it, it is not tolerated for too long" (Ciglerová, 2020). Also, Martin Řezníček admitted that potential excesses might happen, but otherwise, it is an attempt of a dramatic portrayal: "The real power of such a young journalist is a hyperbole" (Řezníček, 2020).

Jaroslav Kmenta, too, granted that a high-ranking politician would possibly be a source to leak some essential information, but also pointed out to the newsroom's role: "It is quite usual worldwide. But there must be a correct control of the relationship and of the potential usage of such information in the newsroom" (Kmenta, 2020). Just like Ciglerová, he also doubted the power of the journalist. "A reporter does not decide what and in which way is published. He comes up with interesting ideas, but the final product must go through a newsroom process which is decisive for quality, objective and independent reports and news" (Ibid).

For Daniel Anýž it is a logical outcome of the romantic affair, both ethically and legally: "This is really on edge, but it still seems to me that it might work similarly in media" (Anýž, 2020). Jindřich Šídlo denied any extortion and added this tricky situation reveals the risk of conflicting interests. "Regardless of gender, once a politician gets used to this, it is a great risk because the politicians tend to take it personally and do not understand what keeping distance means. Later the politician cries out that you wrote negatively what he didn't deserve" (Šídlo, 2020).

David Miřejovský claimed that ethically it is beyond any norms of journalism: "That is no more journalism. That is commissioned writing. And it is a dramatization. Similar situations were very likely happening in the past, no doubts about that (Miřejovský, 2020). He also shared a story from Slovakia, where he used to be based as a correspondent earlier. During the SMER administration, the previous Minister of the Interior was caught texting and dictating what to write to a reporter. She was explaining to him what was published and why. There might not have been any romantic affair, which is eventually irrelevant: "The reporter is discredited forever" (Ibid). Reportedly, then-Minister Robert Kaliňák texted to the reporter Vanda Vavrová from *Pravda* daily (ironically enough, *pravda* means

truth in Czech and Slovak – note by the author): “I’d like to see four headlines, baby. Vanda, as we had agreed, you will be my communication device”. However, the newsroom stood by its reporter. Vavrová had been a close friend to Kaliňák, but she remained in the paper after the editor-in-chief stood up for her (Glovičko, 2011).

The Americans Drew Hinshaw and Peter Green almost unilaterally declared the situation exaggerated, claiming that the editor would not publish tailor-made articles. “It’s not like you can promise your source to get a story in the newspaper. The editor might tell you that he does not agree with this, or another reporter might bring something that contradicts with your saying. It isn’t believable; the reporter’s power seems exaggerated. The whole series makes a too big deal of her access, and I don’t see it plausible (Hinshaw, 2020). Green added that even though the portrayal was exaggerated, it identified a key issue in the journalistic profession: “There are plenty of reporters who sell out and who think it will help them just to communicate what the one side says without any context. You get a lot of journalists who will print what politicians tell them. Still, a good editor would have smelled these tailor-made articles immediately, particularly coming from a young novice reporter in Washington” (Green, 2020). Frank Kuznik doubted the whole model situation as Zoe must have known she was entering ethically and legally a grey area earlier. “The minute she walked up the steps and ended in the Congressman’s house, she was in an ethically and legally grey area. She crossed that line a long time ago” (Kuznik, 2020).

#### **5.3.4 Role of the Supervisors and Newsroom Publication Standards**

Zoe Barnes receives exclusive material from Frank Underwood. It is a draft of a new education bill containing some controversial suggestions. Frank needs to have it published as soon as possible, and Zoe delivers. She pushes it through the newsroom smoothly, and the article, based on one unnamed source from whom the materials were received and whose identity is known to Zoe only, is published. Both the editor-in-chief, Tom Hammerschmidt, and the owner of the paper, Margaret Tilden, want Zoe to reveal her source, but she denied. This particular model situation was selected purely because of its entirely unrealistic manner, which seemed dubious even to the author, a student of journalism. Both ethics and newsroom standards are discussed in this sub-chapter, which provided a unique result – none of the respondents approved the credibility of the

portrayal. This was also the only model situation where all journalists reached an agreement, as well as the only one without a single view in favour of credibility.

Remarkably, all the eleven interviewees, who were asked this specific question, held the same view and agreed that such depiction is exaggerated and distorts reality. Several supported their claims by references to real affairs or cases supporting their opinions. One of them, the American Frank Kuznik, analysed specifically the particular situation from the series and recognized the impulses leading Tom Hammerschmidt to publish it in that specific case. However, in general, all respondents unanimously ruled out publishing stories based on one unnamed source, known to the author only.

Pavla Holcová claimed that this situation was not depicted credibly and that such an article should not be published without an editor knowing the source. “In large newsrooms, which are not owned by the source, the editor would not allow publishing an article based on one unnamed source only. The information would have to be verified in another, more elaborate way, and with additional context. Also, owners are curious. It happens frequently, and it is up to the journalists to refuse it. However, we have a rule that at least one editor must know the source” (Holcová, 2020). Lukáš Valášek concurred that when a supervisor wants to know the source, he has the right to demand it, and exposed the legal aspect of such practice: “The publisher, the newsroom and the author are legally responsible for what they publish. You can write a text based on unnamed sources, but once being sued, you might be asked in front of a court to reveal the source to confirm it. Otherwise, you lose the trial because of the inability to justify the claims. Losing such a trial could have fatal consequences for the newsroom and result in a lack of credibility” (Valášek, 2020). He added that the usage of unnamed sources should be minimal, as it is always very little credible for a reader. “It is possible to publish it in some cases, but it must be the last resort, an infrequent option. However, no text can be built purely on one source, no matter how credible it might be” (Ibid).

Jaroslav Kmenta also thought this could not have happened in the real world. He added that if the creators had some advisors from media, those must have turned a blind eye upon several occasions because otherwise, they would have to explain what is and is not possible. “In a serious newsroom, there would be a discussion. That it is essential because unless we know the source, we cannot publish. In cases related to sensitive political things vital for state operations, the editor-in-chief is entitled to know all necessary information as he is the one putting himself at risk” (Kmenta, 2020). He argued that the editor-in-chief

must judge whether the newsroom is exploited for specific purposes just in exchange for a good piece of information. Concerning Zoe, he claimed that fame is not everything in journalism. “It is not important to come up with news first, but rather being first with quality news where you can be sure about verification of truth and about the context in which the information has been provided, what purposes it might serve. Once there might be legal consequences, and a whole newsroom gets sued, not just the individual, so the image is at stake. The journalist just personifies the newsroom: Kmenta wrote something<sup>7</sup>, Zoe wrote something” (Ibid). All in all, Kmenta believes that in this case, the series distorts reality as they published the article, which he considered unreal, and Zoe’s power to push it through was overrated.

Martin Řezníček did not see such portrayal likely either. He observed potential economic impacts: “The younger a journalist is, the more is he/she pressed to reveal the source to the editor, especially when it is the only source. The commercial effect would measure all. Would one great piece of news for one day be worth it, even if it was true? Would they be able to make enough money to compensate for potential failures? That’s the consideration. I would say that they would think twice because the editor-in-chief is accountable to the owner. Image of an independent editor-in-chief in American media, who is free of the owner’s views, is naïve” (Řezníček, 2020). He also added that brand new information that no one ever heard of brought by an inexperienced junior reporter would not be enough to take that risk, because the decrease of the company’s shares would potentially be too high and too risky. Martin Řezníček concluded that such a portrayal is not a very representative look into American journalism – despite financial pressures, the big newsrooms try to maintain the procedures and methods respected for decades (Ibid).

Also, this situation seemed dubious to Jindřich Šídlo, who referred to the famous Watergate affair. Additionally, he claimed that if an article based on one source only known to the author is published, it is just wrong and against all the norms in all newsrooms: “I don’t think this is possible at all. In most of the newsrooms, there is a set

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<sup>7</sup> Just like in the United States everything is Barack Obama’s fault currently, in the Czech Republic it is usually the prominent opposition politician Miroslav Kalousek and more than a decade ago it was the investigative journalist Jaroslav Kmenta who was blamed universally. Kmenta knows well what it feels like sparking a controversy after several of his investigative books became bestsellers. His name even got its way to the Czech popular culture, specifically music. In a 2007 protest-song against then-PM Jiří Paroubek, *Slovní pyrotechnika*, the Czech band *Chinaski* sings a line saying: “...jsem za dementa, za všechno může Kmenta” (translated into English as: ...I look like a moron, it’s all Kmenta’s fault). More details (in Czech) at: [https://www.idnes.cz/kultura/hudba/pisen-chinaski-karikuje-paroubka.A070824\\_213517\\_hudba\\_mia](https://www.idnes.cz/kultura/hudba/pisen-chinaski-karikuje-paroubka.A070824_213517_hudba_mia).

of rules, sometimes written, defining who must know the source. During the Watergate affair, as portrayed in the *All President's Men* movie, the source, Mark Felt, was known to the two reporters, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. Then Ben Bradlee knew as editor-in-chief. And once the boss, the publisher, Ms. Graham, got involved and asked, they hesitated. In the end, she refused to know which was a fascinating moment in the history of world journalism. Therefore, I think that publishing a story based on one source known to the author only is, in fact, ruled out" (Šídlo, 2020).

Jana Ciglerová stated that such a portrayal in the series is a distortion: "This would not be imaginable. The source is, at all times, known at least to one extra person. It is impossible to publish an article based on one source, which is known to nobody but the author" (Ciglerová, 2020). Pavla Holcová remarked that it does not necessarily need to be an editor-in-chief or the owner: "It is up to the superior direct editor whether to deal with it further if the source is somehow controversial. Sources may come from organized crime, so it is always good to know potential risks" (Holcová, 2020). Moreover, Jana Ciglerová pointed out to a recent case of the unnamed source usage by *New York Times*<sup>8</sup>: "An article to remember is the 2018 editorial. They had a source from the White House, and of course, the editor-in-chief must have known it. It was never revealed later, and the paper was blamed for publishing it, but they did because they had known who was telling it to them" (Ciglerová, 2020).

The fourth model situation was the point when Daniel Anýž started doubting. "Here I think it is no more real, the fact that no one else apart from a reporter would know the source. I can imagine an individual failure, but the general failure of a newsroom does not seem credible to me anymore. Newsroom control should compensate for such failure. I think it still works like there is always someone else to know the source" (Anýž, 2020). The view of David Miřejovský was in an almost absolute accord as he disqualified it as unreal: "Apparently, failures do happen in media worldwide – recently it was *Der Spiegel*<sup>9</sup> in Germany whose young talented journalist was making stories up. But publishing something based on one protected source only without any other confirmation

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<sup>8</sup> „*I Am Part of the Resistance Inside the Trump Administration*“ op-ed sparked numerous controversies in September 2018. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/05/opinion/trump-white-house-anonymous-resistance.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Claas Relotius had to return four press awards after it was found that he had fabricated facts in a number of articles. He was fired shortly after in December 2018. More details available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-spiegel/spiegel-journalist-who-made-up-facts-loses-awards-from-reporter-forum-cnn-idUSKCN1OJ1ZY>.

seems impossible to me in a newsroom such as *Czech TV* and so-called traditional media. Some media would do it easily, but it is impossible in what we call today the traditional or mainstream media. Or it should not be possible” (Miřejovský, 2020).

Pavla Holcová also added that the character of Zoe’s boss, Tom Hammerschmidt, is vital in the series: “He tries to address this wrongdoing, but Zoe has her own goals and objectives, so she doesn’t care about his recommendations” (Holcová, 2020). Hammerschmidt’s character was appreciated by Jaroslav Kmenta as well: “I liked the thoroughness of Zoe’s boss, who continued with the investigation even later. Due to the mistrust in the obtained information, he was even the most credibly portrayed character from all journalists who have appeared in *House of Cards* for me. In my view, that is how a journalist should behave. He was bearing huge accountability, found the strength to return to the case and investigate it over again and trace it back years later after his two colleagues died. That was a true portrayal of investigative journalism” (Kmenta, 2020).

Veronika Bednářová commented on the potential generational clash and also emphasized Hammerschmidt’s character while also raising the flaws he had after having banned Zoe from public appearances in season 1. “Any boss in any job has no right to ban you from TV appearance. On the other hand, every employee entering a professional contract is bound by it, and there are usually non-disclosure clauses related to private information. There certainly exists a generational clash in real journalism, and social media enhanced it. It’s not the typical generation clash when youngsters think that older ones are exhausted and impractical. Instead, the investigative reporter in the 1960s had a different set of skills than the current one” (Bednářová, 2020). She also referred Seymour Hersh, the senior prominent American journalist who first exposed the Vietnam War My Lai massacre at the end of the 1960s, and connected him with Zoe. “His work is an exquisite example of a brilliant piece of journalism, and this old-school journalist never needed any popularity or exposure. But if I’m not mistaken, he was fired twice from a respected paper. Of course, a manager needs a functioning business regardless of profession, and it is easier for him to have a person who follows the rules and orders. Which Zoe did not” (Ibid).

Although Frank Kuznik recognized the temptation to publish such a unique material in this individual case, all the Americans share the opinion that a similar portrayal is unrealistic. Drew Hinshaw also mentioned Seymour Hersh in comparison to a real-world example but claimed that the article would raise red flags in the newsroom and that other

reporters would ask, too. “A paper would not possibly publish a story based on one source only that the reporter refuses to reveal. A good example is Seymour Hersh’s story about the killing of Bin Laden<sup>10</sup>, which was based on two sources, both unnamed. And we are speaking about Seymour Hersh, the greatest living journalist who won two Pulitzer prizes, not a young, ambitious starter. And the New Yorker Magazine refused to publish it because of the unnamed sources. That proves one cannot just get a story published based on one unnamed source, that’s preposterous to me” (Hinshaw, 2020). Peter Green also claimed it could not happen: “Almost never, it would have to be verifiable in some way because nobody wants to print unverifiable information. I’ve never been allowed to write an article sourced with anonymous sources that even my editor doesn’t know. That is a necessary condition, at least in the places where I’ve worked. Using anonymous sources is perilous if you cannot confirm 100% sure what they are saying” (Green, 2020). Frank Kuznik provided a more extended reflection upon this topic, beginning by saying that the general answer is no. “If it’s a very sensitive story that could have a big impact, you would never go with a single source and particularly if you’re a kid. If you were an editor, you would say: I might get sued for something like this, so where did this come from, how did you get it? So the short answer is no” (Kuznik, 2020). However, Kuznik was thinking specifically about the situation from the *House of Cards* season 1 when Zoe brought a copy of a proposed bill directly from Frank Underwood, which was a strong persuasive argument for Kuznik. “If I were the editor, I might be thinking to make an exception for that particular story because she had the documents. She had the complete draft, and it was pretty clear. So when you have a great story like that, and it’s apparent that you’re dealing with authentic documents, I would be tempted to go with that. Having the documents in hand, that would be a reason enough” (Ibid). Naturally, he reminded that verification would still be needed and that it could not get in print the other day because the lawyers would need a day or two more to review it – but he recognized the dramatic effect. “Anytime you’re in a position like that, there are two conflicting impulses that you have. If you’re a reputable newspaper, you can’t afford to do something like that. But you want to get the story out there before everyone else, so you’re always torn, it’s a judgement call. So I understand the impulse, and in this particular case with this bill, I think I would have done what he did, that turned out to be the right call. But generally? No, you have to be extremely careful about that” (Ibid).

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<sup>10</sup> More details available at: <https://www.vox.com/2015/5/11/8584473/seymour-hersh-osama-bin-laden>.

### 5.3.5 The Regularity of Sexual Practices by Journalists

Later in season one, Zoe's senior colleague Janine realised that Zoe's source is too good to believe in coincidence. Janine hinted that she had suspected Zoe, but reassured her that it meant no judgement, by claiming that "we've all done it to get a story" including with politicians. The older reporter also noted that once revealed, her reputation was damaged. This sub-chapter is focused on the portrayal of female journalists regularly obtaining information or access by sexual or seductive practices. The model situation formed a vast majority of respondents cautiously tending to believe that similar things might be credible. Surprisingly, the gender aspect played little role in this sub-chapter, as none of the three female respondents denied the portrayal as exaggerated. Their views were in line with the majority of males, and most of the interviewees opposed the regularity, which was expressed by Janine Skorsky in the series. Out of twelve collected answers, ten slightly tended to approve the credibility of sexual methods in exceptional cases, but denied the regularity at the same time. Even the sharpest opposing views denying such depiction as exaggerated would believe that something similar might have happened, although they both claim it was rather rare and accidental and that the image provided by *House of Cards* is distorting the reality. However, these voices only formed a minority among the respondents. Nationality, again, played no role in the perception of this specific model situation – while Drew Hinshaw joined Jaroslav Kmenta in dissent, both Frank Kuznik and Robert Green aligned with the majority of Czech journalists.

Jana Ciglerová did not evaluate whether such a portrayal might be real or exaggerated and commented on the outcome of the damaged reputation instead. "If it is known that a journalist sleeps with a politician, that is wrong, and the journalist loses credit. Women are different, and I can't judge anyone, but definitely, it does not help the prestige. It is terribly short-term, and it doesn't last long" (Ciglerová, 2020). She also highlighted that although a reporter might once or twice get exclusive information, later, they are still obliged to use the same source. Therefore the reporter gets engaged and loses the sense of objectivity – and the surroundings always discover soon. "One loses the needed distance, and the editor finds out, he sees the biased point of view, he sees the overly positive phrases, and that is never correct" (Ibid).

Josef Klíma hinted what a reporter should do in a similar uneasy situation: “He or she should tell it to the supervisor and ask for advice in further steps, how to avoid complications” (Klíma, 2020). David Miřejovský brought up the rule existing in the *Czech TV*: “Such relationships should be reported to supervisors, and the journalist is then delegated to do some other tasks. He cannot be a political reporter anymore, and the supervisors should be informed” (Miřejovský, 2020). Moreover, he added that journalists must think thoroughly about the profession as a whole: “It is simply not fair to all the colleagues, who are subsequently categorized into the same sort by the public. Because once you are close to someone you are writing about, you cannot be objective. You cannot even claim that. There will never be the objectivity you could justify” (Ibid). Miřejovský also agreed that the reporter is subsequently discredited once the affair comes out and admitted that such portrayal has a valid real basis: “We know that relations between politicians and reporters have existed. It used to be real, apparently, and we know cases that have happened similarly. It may still be going on, but it is definitely beyond the boundary. It seems dramatized to me for the series, maybe it still exists, but I do not know anyone from my colleagues operating similarly” (Ibid). On the contrary, Pavla Holcová objected to the claim that everybody has done it just to get a story but added: “Not everybody does it for sure, even though I know some Czech female journalists who operate in this way” (Holcová, 2020). Daniel Anýž shared her view but denied the proclaimed regularity: “I would consider it real that the colleague had done it and that the person loses credit once revealed. I think it is very credible, but we are still talking about exceptional cases, I don’t want to sound like everyone does it although exceptions cannot be ruled out” (Anýž, 2020).

Lukáš Valášek could not judge the credibility of the selected situation either. Instead, he returned to the opposite issue: “I think they have rather an opposite problem facing sexual harassment or implications because the politicians tend to think they might benefit from it. Also, it is a form of tactics to intimidate a journalist” (Valášek, 2020). He also argued that sexual practices might be possible, although he had never witnessed it. According to him, it is a very short-sighted method: “The journalist is not taken seriously, and their credibility is lost. It is better to build your image on being adamant than on being willing to do a trade-off. What may seem advantageous shifts into a limiting, disadvantageous position sooner or later” (Ibid). Martin Řezníček could not decisively tell either and did not want to speculate about rumours he had heard. However, he added that the portrayal of reality

is not always as exaggerated as it might seem at first sight, based on his subjective observation: “I could agree with many things in the series. At first sight, there are many things unrealistic. At second sight, they seem more realistic than it looks like, but from all that is portrayed, I would not rule out anything. However, I am not implying that every other female journalist would try to obtain information by seduction” (Řezníček, 2020).

The portrayed regular seductive methods applied by journalists to maintain closer relations with their sources took Jaroslav Kmenta by surprise, and he was not able to imagine that. “Such perception of journalistic work is exaggerated to me, and in my view, this is an artistic concession, this is far beyond the edge. A serious newsroom would not allow having such a burden to tolerate the sexual practices of employees with their sources. Even in the Czech context, this has been said about a range of female colleagues, but I think that if it ever happened, it might have rather been an accidental affair” (Kmenta, 2020).

Jindřich Šídlo suggested a theoretical precondition for similar relations. “I don’t know this, but if you look at the proportion of men and women in the Czech Chamber of Deputies and the Press Pool, it is clear that men of some age are all excited from young parliament correspondents. I am not implying any further condition of a special relationship, but the men simply feel good. However, a great deal of risk and ethical problems are included” (Šídlo, 2020). Veronika Bednářová pointed to the perceived tension and rivalry at the workplace as the older and more experienced colleague, Janine Skorsky, was initially jealous of Zoe’s sudden rise: “The series makes a nice point in this. The job is very competitive, there are not many people doing it on such a high level, and they must be wary of keeping up the investigation quality” (Bednářová, 2020). That might have been another explanation for Zoe breaching the ethical norms, and her older colleague later implied that such behaviour was typical for female journalists. However, not every respondent was able to identify with such a portrayal.

Peter Green admitted that there are people who do that, but very few and that it is not very common: “It certainly happens, but is it a regular occurrence? Is it deliberate and that widespread? No. You certainly would not have an editor saying we all slept with Congressmen and asking who was yours. Certainly, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, you would be fired for that. It is very exaggerated” (Green, 2020). He would not say that no reporters are using their attractiveness as a subject to get information. Instead, he was convinced that there are, but he objected to the regularity: “People are people, but affairs with that high-ranking

politician do not happen all that often. I don't think there is a lot of hanky panky sex between young reporters and old, washed-up Congressmen, who wish they were movie stars" (Ibid). Frank Kuznik agreed that the part about losing credibility was right: "That does not seem unrealistic or exaggerated to me, in a sense that as a reporter, you develop a reputation. If that gets around, nobody will trust you, and nobody will give you anything because you're not reliable, trustworthy. If you choose to go that route, it will catch up with you" (Kuznik, 2020). At last, Drew Hinshaw refused the portrayal of female journalists and the regularity of sexual practices. "The whole thing is preposterous. That is certainly not true that everybody's done it. It's exaggerated to the point when it's just completely false. If one person has done it, and she says we've all done it, even that is an exaggeration, but I'm not even aware of it happening once" (Hinshaw, 2020).

### **5.3.6 Role of Zoe's Colleague and Later Partner**

In the finale of season 1, investigative journalists work on revealing details related to criminal activities with the potential involvement of Frank Underwood. As he has been Zoe's essential source of information, she initially tried to protect him from the investigation conducted by her colleagues and hindered the investigation. Later, she was warned by her future partner and former colleague, Lucas, that Underwood had been exploiting her and that she became his puppet, impeding the objective journalism. That motivated her to continue in the investigation process.

This sub-chapter was selected to include also the character of Lucas Goodwin, Zoe's supervisor, an older colleague, and eventually a partner who fell in love with her long before she started an affair with Congressman Underwood. The situation is fascinating from multiple points of view. Firstly, Lucas and his opinions might be blurred and blinded by jealousy and love due to his feelings to Zoe. Secondly, he truly represents the diligent investigative work. Thirdly, Zoe was initially not aware that Underwood might have been exploiting her. She trusted him as a source blindly and hindered the investigation at the beginning.

This model situation was commented upon by only a limited number of respondents. Due to the restricted time in interviews, this question was the one that was the easiest to be left out. Therefore, only seven respondents provided their answers. Remarkably, almost every respondent took a different approach to this case, so it is virtually impossible to draw any

valid conclusion. The gender aspect was not substantial in this sub-chapter and, likely, nor nationality. The majority of interviewees provided their comments without explicitly denying anything similar might happen, and three of them confirmed probable credibility. All of them were Czech. Although the only one voice claiming that the situation was unrealistic was American, it is impossible to estimate the influence of nationality as the two other American journalists, Frank Kuznik and Peter Green, did not answer this question. Moreover, Drew Hinshaw provided negative answers contesting the credibility of the portrayal in the vast majority of model situations (except for one), so this trend should also be taken into account in consideration of possible causes leading to the results presented below.

According to Daniel Anýž, the character of Lucas telling Zoe off was easily imaginable (Anýž, 2020). Jindřich Šídlo pointed to the perceived jealousy and the more comfortable situation that politicians are in: “In the story, this might be an expression of jealousy of Lucas. It is just another example of the great risk of conflicting interests from the reporter. Politicians are slightly safer. They can do whatever they want; it only might be a huge problem or sudden end if leaked. But they are playing in a different field than journalists” (Šídlo, 2020). Veronika Bednářová provided a comment from a different point of view about relationships between colleagues: “There is an old Czech proverb ‘co je v domě, není pro mě’ (the possible equivalent of the English saying ‘don’t dip your pen in the company ink’). Full stop, and that’s it. It is a holy truth. It can never end up well” (Bednářová, 2020). It was surely a screenwriting intention, but eventually, in the series, it was the blind love to the murdered colleague that led Lucas to commit an assassination attempt against President Underwood.

The situation seemed credible to David Miřejovský, who raised the question of various interpretations of ethics: “This might be real, there are probably crazier things in personal relations. This character, if I remember correctly, gets quite mad later after Zoe’s death and aims to get Underwood. Later he makes an assassination attempt on him, and that’s an enormous dramatization. Speaking about ethical norms, every single journalist has a slightly different view. Ethics and abiding both written and unwritten rules in journalism is a big topic, there are extreme questions without clear answers, or everyone has his own clear answer instead” (Miřejovský, 2020). That was also evident in Zoe’s case. The approach that seemed not objective to Lucas, Zoe perceived differently at first, and it took her a while to understand she had been exploited and that she partly unintentionally

played Underwood's game that she initialized. So, in the beginning, her different perception of ethics led to the later contradiction.

Lukáš Valášek provided a similar normative comment related to Zoe's behaviour: "One day, you might find that your source is doing something worth writing about, something wrong, problematic. Any relation should not be an obstacle to it, which is important to be taken into account. The relation between a journalist and a source should never go beyond the point of having issues writing about that person's wrongdoing" (Valášek, 2020).

Furthermore, Jaroslav Kmenta appreciated the thoroughness of Lucas Goodwin: "He was purely a journalist, not doing this investigation for any political purposes. Despite his affection for Zoe, the warning was quite a common thing, and there was no conflict. He was rather her normative reflection for what she had done wrong. He had no moral failure until that point, and he was quite credibly portrayed as a devoted professional who simply fell in love and wanted to help her and bring her back in line, keeping her distance from sources" (Kmenta). However, Drew Hinshaw, the only American journalist answering this model situation, opposed Kmenta's view: "I find him implausible too because of the romantic affair they had. His role is not particularly plausible either" (Hinshaw, 2020). Nevertheless, Drew Hinshaw did not provide a detailed explanation of why he perceived that portrayal implausible.

### **5.3.7 The Portrayal of Fear in Journalism**

During the investigation of Underwood's potential involvement in criminal activities, Janine and Zoe were talking about fear and threats. Janine mentioned to Zoe that fear is a common part of the job and that she used to receive death threats for a long time. Therefore, this sub-chapter is focused on the portrayal of fear, whether *House of Cards* depicts credibly what real journalists have to face. Threats were appearing relatively commonly in the series, which was the reason for including this model situation.

Each journalist in the world has a different personal experience, which varies field by field. Unsurprisingly, for example, sports journalists get extorted less often than investigative journalists unless they write something controversial about, for example, the management and financial background of a club. This research features no sports journalists, but political reporters, foreign correspondents, and investigative journalists, who are probably the most prone to some kind of extortion.

Eight journalists provided their comments upon this topic, and, regardless of nationality, the majority of the interviewed experts tended to feel the depiction of fear credible. Six of them leaned towards the notion that fear was portrayed very credibly in the series, while two opposed the portrayal as overly dramatized. Those were Drew Hinshaw, who, again, viewed the depiction of fear exaggerated, and Lukáš Valášek, who lacked any similar personal experience. However, in this case, none of them opposed the portrayal too strongly. Nevertheless, both admitted that there might have been extreme cases when fear was justified. The nationality aspect cannot be applied here as answers by Frank Kuznik and Drew Hinshaw differed; Peter Green did not answer this model situation. Likewise, the gender aspect is hardly justifiable. Although Jana Ciglerová admitted that fear was portrayed credibly and sometimes is a limiting burden in the journalistic profession, the other two female journalists did not participate in this model situation. Instead, it seems that personal experience played a more significant role in this perception. Still, the respondents stressed that the impact of fear differs field by field, and for example, the foreign correspondent does not observe fear as commonly as the investigative reporter.

Daniel Anýž remarked that threats or extortion were not his case, as he is rather a political commentator of news than an investigative reporter. Still, he admitted it might be possible in various forms. “Journalists being afraid for their life is quite a credible portrayal. We had some assassination attempts here, and the journalists are aware that it can never be ruled out. In my case, abusive emails are just unpleasant. At the time of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, I was receiving five or six emails per day, accusing me of being a CIA mercenary. One stops reading it later. Regarding my investigative colleagues, not that they would be afraid, but they change their manners as a consequence of vigilance, such as usage of encrypted communication” (Anýž, 2020). Lukáš Valášek implied that the portrayal might be slightly exaggerated as he lacks similar personal experience: “People know the limits here, and the Czech field is relatively cultivated, although Slovaks might have felt the same until recently<sup>11</sup>. Menacing by legal actions is quite a routine but beyond that? I have never experienced threats, and there are not many colleagues who did. Admittedly there were cases like that, especially when you uncover political relations with the mafia. One must simply stay strong, but sometimes it leaves

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<sup>11</sup> In 2018, Slovak investigative reporter Ján Kuciak and his fiancée were shot dead in their house. More details available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder\\_of\\_J%C3%A1n\\_Kuciak](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_J%C3%A1n_Kuciak).

an impact. Subconsciously you might slow down because of potential denunciations leading to unintentional self-censorship” (Valášek, 2020).

Furthermore, Daniel Anýž brought up his story about legal threats: “Legal actions are a different category; I’ve experienced this when the newsroom sued on my behalf, and it was quite a clear case of corruption attempt. I was offered a bribe, then we published it, and they went on to the court, but eventually dropped it. It is problematic just because you have to deal with it, and it is on your mind. That was probably the least comfortable situation that I had to face when legal actions threatened my newsroom. One is always unsure whether he might have done anything wrong to commit any procedural error, which could be faulty. The image of the newsroom is then at stake” (Anýž, 2020). Lukáš Valášek, who comes by coincidence from the same newsroom, shares his perspective on potential damage to the newsroom by personal mistakes: “Sometimes you fear whether it is true and indisputable what you write. You worry about the image and credibility of the newsroom you represent. You are the flagship of the newsroom, and you stand against extremely powerful people with extreme influence. The key actors could make use of any mistake to make the newsroom untrustworthy. But fear for life, family? Fortunately not, and I hope it is not even going to happen, that the society will be functioning here” (Valášek, 2020).

David Miřejovský accepts fear as a part of his profession: “It is not so difficult for me, I have been abroad for the last ten years. I’m unknown in the United States. In Russia, it was specific before; one needed to be cautious just because of being a journalist. But you cannot take it too seriously when someone writes you that you’re an idiot, that you should die and your children should die. Should I be afraid after receiving each similar email? Since then, I’ve blocked so many addresses that nowadays almost nobody writes again. Some of my colleagues cooperate with the legal department of the *Czech TV*. Sometimes even police are involved in threatening or stalking cases” (Miřejovský, 2020). He believes that such a portrayal is again a dramatization. “But on the other hand, a journalist is visible, known, and sometimes it results in these negative reactions. Either you have to have the nerve for that, or you have to face it differently, including the legal department or security services” (Ibid).

Jindřich Šídlo concurred that his job has not been hazardous lately but admitted that it might happen: “I wrote about the Russian mafia in the 1990s, and I was very young at that time, so I didn’t really think about anything. I’ve experienced a few situations

involving the people around me; I remember well the case of Sabina Slonková<sup>12</sup> since she was my close colleague at the time when she was supposed to be assassinated. But for myself, I've never had some huge fear. Receiving insulting messages that someone will beat me up outside because of my satirical show does not bother me. Sometimes you get to think that you have a small child, but no" (Šídlo, 2020).

Jaroslav Kmenta stated that the best approach for him is finding the right balance. He believes that such a portrayal is credible unless writing about culture or sport without digging deep into background issues: "You don't put yourself in much risk that way, but once you dig deeper, people get angry, which might trigger some response. Sooner or later, you feel the fear, and you must be ready for some reactions. Neither can I surrender to it, nor completely disregard it. Both are extreme, and you get dangerous for yourself as you cannot distinguish the risks. The ethics is different in the organized crime business; the price of life is just about money. So the fear was portrayed very well. I could relate to that and reflect how well some situations were described, for example, the fear or extortion" (Kmenta, 2020).

Also, Jana Ciglerová is sure that fear is a part of the journalistic profession: "It is real, and I had feared. I have never done any great investigation just because I was terrified, the fear was paralysing me, and I am not as brave as other female journalists. I often get under attack just for comments where I highlight the equal approach to men and women. Then I receive threats, sexual violence, of course, included. And I do no investigation" (Ciglerová, 2020).

Both American journalists who got to answer this model situation agreed that to a certain extent and in certain kinds of journalism, fear is a relevant factor. For Frank Kuznik, fear is the most extreme example of threats but credibly portrayed in *House of Cards*; for Drew Hinshaw, it is imaginable in war journalism or while uncovering sensitive stories but exaggerated in the series. Kuznik believes that if a journalist is not disturbing someone, he might probably not be doing his proper investigative job. "It's not an absolute requirement of good journalism, but if you're doing serious journalistic work and you're breaking stories, somebody is always going to be unhappy with you. It might not be anything more than threats mentioning ties with your boss, complaints, or firing. It's not that often that it escalates to the level of personal violence. But what if you're writing

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<sup>12</sup> More details to the murder plot available at: <https://www.radio.cz/en/section/curaffrs/former-top-official-accused-of-plotting-to-kill-journalist>.

about organized crime? Can those make you disappear overnight? Yes, they absolutely can” (Kuznik, 2020). He further believes that a professional journalist gets used to fear after a while because it is a part of the profession. “The portrayal of fear is credible. Fear is the most extreme example. But you would get threats; unhappy people would react in negative ways” (Ibid). Compared to the series, Drew Hinshaw does not believe that journalists get murdered in the United States: “I just had to say that one is exaggerated. I think it depends on what kind of journalism, if you’re doing war journalism, definitely. If you do some very sensitive stories, yes, I think you can at least get the apprehension of fear for the reputation of the newsroom” (Hinshaw, 2020). Nevertheless, he agreed that journalists do get sued; they do receive letters; they get harassed on Twitter (Ibid).

### **5.3.8 Manipulative Practices in Journalism**

By the end of season 1, the viewer could have observed a slight transformation of Zoe’s working methods. Possibly she might have learned from Frank how to use manipulative pressure to obtain what needed – a contact, a respondent, or an address – even by using deliberate lies or made-up stories, which she applied during the investigation against Underwood to obtain information or discover a potential witness. This sub-chapter deals with manipulative or deceptive methods and their ethical usage.

Nine respondents gave their comments, and again, the majority of interviewees, regardless of nationality, reached an agreement and approved that these practices were portrayed credibly. Seven of journalists were in favour of the credibility, although the methods applied by Zoe were not entirely ethical. Most of them stated that similar techniques should be rare; only Jaroslav Kmenta would not prohibit them and claimed that their limited usage would be acceptable. Drew Hinshaw, as in most cases, confirmed that the methods are not ethically acceptable and that it does not work like that in reality. However, he might have found the answers of his colleagues surprising. The only other disapproving voice apart from Hinshaw was Jindřich Šídlo, who pointed out to the complete improbability and exaggeration of the whole series. Therefore, according to him, the model situations should be approached under a similar prism, this one related to manipulative methods alike.

Josef Klíma admitted the deceptive practices are common and went even further to point out to journalistic extortion: “There are certain journalists who use extortion commonly –

tabloids. They dig something out of the private life of a certain celebrity but do not publish it straight away. They first ‘blackmail’ the celebrity to ‘redeem’ by providing information from the private life of other celebrities. Or there is private information about someone wealthy. The extortion is then used to obtain sponsorship or advertisement in that medium, whose journalists are blackmailing the wealthy one” (Klíma, 2020).

Investigation sometimes demands exceptional methods, confirms Jaroslav Kmenta, who also said that there is a fine line in this field. However, he would not prohibit these methods completely: “You often find an obstacle which is sometimes better to slip under if impossible to jump over it. Although you cannot do anything seriously wrong, you cannot start affairs or use threats. But if I make up some small story which is fictional in part, but I obtain the key information thanks to that, I might use it. But never to craft my report based on that. If you need an address, it is just one small step in the investigation, so for this little thing, turning a blind eye is possible unless it is somewhat essential. In one case, we had a recording, but we never used it. We only had it as a cover for potential legal consequences if evidence was needed” (Kmenta, 2020).

Jana Ciglerová validated Kmenta’s claims that sometimes there is no other solution than this last resort. She admitted it is possible, although not genuinely ethical and in line with journalistic norms: “I have done it myself on several occasions. What is most common is not revealing being a journalist to obtain information. Especially in Czechia, once you say that you’re a journalist, people almost run away. Sometimes I simply need an impression of a situation. I often act as an ordinary interested person. It is not ethical, it should not be done, but it sometimes happens” (Ciglerová, 2020).

Lukáš Valášek elaborated on the usage of hidden identity and hidden recording devices and admitted that it might happen exceptionally, although it shouldn’t: “In general I think it is rare. Lying always boomerangs, and what’s more, it is fundamentally unethical. Journalists should always tell the truth. The ethical frame of circumstances when a journalist could hide his identity is related. In numerous ethical codes of various newsrooms, you can find a precise definition clarifying when is it possible to use these methods, and it is rigorous” (Valášek, 2020).

He also pointed out two recent controversial cases in Czech journalism. Firstly, the close ties and 2017 secret recordings<sup>13</sup> from the meetings between the current Czech PM Andrej

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<sup>13</sup> More details available in Czech at: <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/na-internetu-se-objevila-nova-nahravka-andreje-babise-s-novinarem-mf-dnes-31082>.

Babiš (back then Treasury Minister) and Marek Příbil, journalist from *Mladá Fronta DNES*, a daily which is owned by Babiš's corporate Agrofert. Valášek, who had been Příbil's colleague in the daily for several years, claims that there were some cases when Příbil wasn't honest: "He is the black sheep of Czech journalism. He aimed to fawn over Babiš for his benefit just like Zoe Barnes; I can see the parallel. However, the things he was promising were difficult to deliver, and he acted like an influential person within the newsroom who he wasn't. I perceive this affair as proof of how deep a journalist could descend. I don't think that the whole newsroom was being manipulated" (Valášek, 2020). The current editor-in-chief of the *Týden* weekly, where Příbil used to work previously, Daniel Köppl, confirmed Valášek's view: "Marek authored tailor-made texts. He adopted calculated information and was unable to distinguish them" (Köppl in Slunečko, 2017).

Secondly and similarly to Kmenta to demonstrate how tricky the usage of manipulative and deceptive practices might be, Valášek also spoke about the usage of hidden recording devices and pointed out to the 2018 report<sup>14</sup> produced by Seznam Zprávy newsroom about the son of the current PM Babiš, who has lived in Switzerland. Valášek stated: "The report about PM's son seemed very problematic to me. Ethically, some things should not have happened. It just illustrates how journalists should spare this method; lying for a greater good is absolutely off-limits. The concerned person will defend and will question your credibility by claiming that he was deceived" (Ibid).

Furthermore, Daniel Anýž admitted exceptional usage of similar methods. He noted that specifically, this portrayal could shed a negative light on journalists because it fits well with the narrative of engaged journalists. He also suggested that even the journalists might sometimes be prejudiced: "Journalists do this exceptionally, I can imagine it. In each profession, there is a certain proportion of people who do not follow the norms of politeness or ethics. Plus the way how journalists see politicians, that most of them are corrupted in some way, which is very unhappy in my opinion, is returned by the politicians. Subsequently, a purpose is being looked for after almost every sentence" (Anýž, 2020). He also described that many people truly believe that journalists do not simply make mistakes, but they do things on purpose: "Very often, in 90% of cases, when there is a news article containing a mistake, it is a matter of negligence or rapidity. But

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<sup>14</sup> The full report (in Czech) available at: <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/prulomove-svedectvi-v-kauze-capi-hnizdo-slonkova-a-kubik-vypatrali-zmizeleho-babisova-syna-60198>.

once you speak to the concerned politician later, I am always surprised that they remember the intent in it. I keep on telling that we all make mistakes, that our newsroom control is imperfect, that we don't know the Czech language properly, that it simply happens" (Ibid).

David Miřejovský also approved it might be real but emphasised differences in the types of media: "Unfortunately this is real but depending on the type of media. For the *Czech TV*, it is unacceptable; it is beyond the border. If revealed, I think that such a journalist should quit, in such a position you cannot afford it" (Miřejovský, 2020)

However, Jindřich Šídlo opposed that these methods could be regular and real. He pointed to the statement 'Democracy is overrated' from *House of Cards*, which characterizes the level of exaggeration to him: "The whole series is all based on extreme situations; the whole plot is improbable. The Chief Whip becomes a Vice-President and later a President only by plots and murders without being elected. That probably cannot happen even in the United States. All other exaggerated situations must be judged in this light" (Šídlo, 2020).

Frank Kuznik admitted these practices are real, but one must be sure to justify them if asked by supervisors. "Sure, it's real. This one was not terribly serious, she made up a small lie, and I think a lot of us do that constantly. I don't think I've ever flat out lied to people, but there were many points when I was working on stories when I just felt like I'll do anything to get this information. And that is why there are so many layers of editors. When you hand in a story, they should look at it and ask how you got this" (Kuznik, 2020). He also recognized the situation of journalists in the Czech Republic related to the low public trust in media: "I know it's hard in this country for journalists, harder than almost anywhere else. But if you're a journalist, you cannot misrepresent yourself, that's just a baseline. Not mentioning being a journalist gets us back to the grey area. Yes, you can, but it's not ethical" (Ibid). Eventually, he also pointed out to the current U.S. President, arguing what impact his conduct could have: "It is so dangerous what Trump is doing. Every time he goes to a podium and says all that 'fake news,' 'liars,' there is a lot of people who tend to believe it, so he is shutting down the information flow in society" (Ibid).

As in most cases, Drew Hinshaw opposed the portrayal, but some other answers above might take him by surprise: "I don't think that anyone who acts in this way would be a journalist for too long. Stories about them would circulate, I can't imagine it. It can cause

harm. You cannot lie in a process like that, that's beyond what's ethically allowed. It doesn't work like that in reality. When you want a contact, you generally say that you're a journalist. I would never get a contact by a lie" (Hinshaw, 2020).

### **5.3.9 Political Labelling of Journalists**

This sub-chapter is related to the perceived denunciations of journalists from politicians. In *House of Cards*, Doug Stamper, Frank Underwood's loyal aide, denounced journalists by the end of season 1 when they began investigating criminal activities with Frank's potential involvement. Doug claimed that journalists are only trying to smear Frank and that it is a coordinated campaign. These words sounded largely familiar to all the respondents. Remarkably, all of those who answered this question concurred that this depiction is, to a certain extent, very credible. Eight journalists in total provided their comments upon this specific portrayal, and all of them found this model situation credible. It was the only case of the research when all experts agreed in unison. Some pointed out remarkable examples from the past; others made references to politicians or their aides. Moreover, the impact of political attacks on public trust in media, the perceived journalistic biases, social media, and the presumed purposeful manipulation were discussed.

The link between politicians labelling journalists in the series and in reality did not seem exaggerated at all to Jaroslav Kmenta, who claimed it happens often, because it is a means of defence for politicians: "The portrayal is surely credible. And I don't think it just came up with Babiš, Zeman or Trump, it has always been here but in a slightly different intensity – if now we're number 10 at scale 1-10, a few years ago it used to be 5 or 7 and never went further. Investigative journalists reveal wrongdoing when a politician gets to some absurd, illegal, or unethical situation. It is a public shame for the politician but not caused by journalists who only do their job of controlling them" (Kmenta, 2020). He also noted that politicians commonly cry out loud that journalists caused this and that, that it is a campaign, that journalists are connected to lobbyists: "Labelling journalists as corrupted, incompetent campaigners is persistent and very credibly portrayed in the series. If we look back to the series, we might find it very familiar now after what we've got to since 2013" (Ibid).

Jindřich Šídlo added that he has known similar labels very well for over 20 years and he agreed with Kmenta that the word ‘campaign’ was not invented by Andrej Babiš in the Czech context: “It’s been here since the 1990s. Sometimes it might look like a campaign because media tend to elaborate on affairs competing with one another. That could look like a campaign, but it emerges from a completely different standpoint than some headquartered, commissioned coordination. So this claim could have easily been heard in Washington in 2013, too” (Šídlo, 2020). He declared that from his own experience, politicians tend to think that. “Especially in Czechia, the problem is that only a few politicians understand media, but it is not as easy as it seems. They act as they understand perfectly how the media function, but it is quite a tricky process. However, this is a nice depiction of political convictions and biases against journalists despite the scandals and problems they are aware of” (Ibid). Lukáš Valášek agreed that many politicians tend to do it in the Czech Republic: “It is almost fascinating that some of the politicians believe it. They are not thinking about what could have been done better; they are only concerned about who made the order instead. For me, that is a terrifying proof of the toxicity of the political field” (Valášek, 2020).

Šídlo also linked Doug Stamper to several real Czech political aides: “Stamper’s character, although very exaggerated, is kind of nice, because it shows that each high-level politician needs such a dirty-job operative who deals with everything. The majority of politicians do have this person. It is sort of Šlouf, Nejedlý, Dalík, or Janoušek<sup>15</sup>” (Ibid).

David Miřejovský confirmed Šídlo’s claims that people around a politician consider everything as a campaign and also pointed to the typical ‘whataboutism’: “Journalists control and watch the elected politicians. They care and check whether they abide by the law, which is the core of this series, of all Frank Underwood’s behaviour. Politicians and their surroundings always feel that someone is fighting them, that there is a plot against them. It is an easy strategy. The typical easy defence mechanism stands: why do you care about me, why don’t you care about someone else? You’re being paid by someone” (Miřejovský, 2020). He explained that this control is caused by the public interest in elected officials, not by a deliberate intent: “There might be a conflict of interest, there might be something shady in the background and journalists as democracy

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<sup>15</sup> Miroslav Šlouf used to be close aide to then-PM Miloš Zeman, who is currently the Czech President in 2020 and his contemporary aide became Martin Nejedlý. Marek Dalík used to be the secretary of the former Czech PM Mirek Topolánek. Roman Janoušek is a Czech businessman and lobbyist with close ties to the former Mayor of Prague, Pavel Bém.

watchdogs should be interested. I don't think that any newsroom would deliberately go against a certain politician to destroy him. However, discrediting journalists is the easiest way to avoid accountability, and it happens very often" (Ibid).

Valášek also noted that thinking is not focused on the true or false manner anymore. It shrank to considerations about who is behind and manipulates people instead: "Politicians learned to use it, Babiš is a prime example of it. Often, people are not even willing to consider it, so it is sometimes more convenient to think in whose interest a journalist wrote this article, whether it was Soros or Bakala" (Valášek, 2020). He admitted a certain impact of technologies and social media: "It is related to the over-consumption of information; there is an abundance of opposing information and disinformation. People often cannot recognize what is true and false" (Ibid).

Labelling was no surprise or exaggeration for Daniel Anýž either, who commented on the collapse of the public trust in media in the United States: "Yes, unfortunately, this reflects reality. The word campaign is very popular by the Czech Prime Minister, which is no accident. And in the United States, the public trust in media, which was never too high since the 1970s, currently collapsed totally. There are two fundamentally different perceptions of the journalistic profession. Trump's voters have no trust at all in mainstream media. Unfortunately, they are partly right because the mindset is simply anti-Trump" (Anýž, 2020). Moreover, he noted we are witnessing a complete breakup of the public trust in media, thus confirming Urbániková's research conclusions from the first chapter. "*Washington Post* or *New York Times* journalists are doing a great job despite their mindset, but they cannot convince a single Trump voter by what they're doing. These people only see the default intent to smear the politician. And claims about a coordinated campaign fit appropriately into the thinking of a large part of society" (Ibid). Valášek concurred that such an approach has been applied by politicians regularly: "Sure, this is a thing that has spread a lot recently. Many politicians understood these tactics. When you have a certain target group of voters, this could work well with them" (Valášek, 2020).

Jana Ciglerová did not oppose the view that the portrayal is real and agreed with Kmenta and Šídlo that the hostility existed long before the presidents Miloš Zeman or Donald Trump assumed their offices. "This portrayal is very credible and close to reality; it is an attempt to discredit the source of information. Once you cannot believe the source, then you cannot believe the information, which is what a politician needs.

The more the information is true and hurting to a politician, the more likely it is that he will aim to discredit you” (Ciglerová, 2020). She added that she has not experienced any campaign against a politician but admitted that some media do not abide by journalistic standards. “However, when I hear ‘a campaign,’ I always smile. Although Trump in charge in the United States and Babiš here did not commence all this. The first who started being hostile to journalists and damaged their reputation on purpose here was Miloš Zeman in the 1990s when he spoke about journalists as hyenas and muck etc. Since then, he has been destroying the credit of journalism systematically” (Ibid).

Ciglerová also explained that due to harsh competition, coordinated media campaigns are merely impossible, and brought up the only exception from her career. “Once you work for a newsroom, you are almost supposed to dislike the others. Generally, journalists are great rivals. The idea of calling one another to coordinate is naïve. Editors in chief would have to make such calls because only they can guarantee what is published in a way they say” (Ibid). She also reconfirmed her view on the fourth model situation related to the portrayed power of a reporter and the editorial control. “If I promise to write an article that will be published in a way that I write it, then it is not true, I have no guarantee. The only ones entitled to do so are editors in chief, but they are often at odds. The more one paper is being sold, the less another one is being sold, so they have no interest in joint actions” (Ibid).

The only successful joint media campaign that Ciglerová mentioned was the so-called ‘Náhubkový zákon’ which was a 2009 bill limiting journalists’ work. “At that time, it was a transparent moment when media joined together. It was a campaign when journalists coordinated and organized themselves against the bill. But it is extremely exceptional. Otherwise, there is nothing such as a campaign; it would be a journalistic misdemeanour. Any politically biased campaign means colouring reality into a colour you need, which is a wrongdoing. You might be angry with a politician, but the fact that I’m angry does not mean that my editor feels the same, nor the editor-in-chief” (Ibid).

Furthermore, Valášek added that the political attacks are related to the public trust in media and that facts do not play a role for a large part of the society anymore. “There is no question about true and false; it is about whether something looks like a campaign or not. There are still readers who are interested in facts, but the journalistic profession became more difficult. The number of personal attacks increased. Before, it was enough to make the newsroom untrustworthy by its owner, for example, Babiš, Bakala, Křetínský,

previously the German owners. People would say that you wrote in favour of German interests. Currently, there are more personal attacks on individual journalists who are allegedly either paid by or sleep with someone” (Valášek, 2020).

He also provided a very complex comment related to several aspects: ethical behaviour of journalists, the usage of hidden devices, labels, and attacks used by politicians and manipulation. “There are transcendental debates with politicians convicted from lying, who say that it is their opinion. But the lie is no opinion; a lie will always be a lie. Low media and information literacy in Czechia is also not very helpful, because such manipulations are easier. When a politician claims it is a campaign, many people simply accept that journalists found something else on that poor guy again” (Valášek, 2020). He added that a similar approach helped Babiš enormously in case of a report about his son in Switzerland. His son has been mentally ill, which was not explicitly stated in the story to deliver a stronger message. “Babiš was very skilful in spinning it that his son was ill and journalists were hunting him. He claimed it was a campaign and brought the public attention to how far journalists can go. He played a victim, which is one of his two positions: a strong leader and a victim. He can switch them appropriately, and his voters follow it. I don’t think that a journalist would be misled, but it just requires quality work and writing the truth” (Ibid).

The American perception did not differ at all from their Czech colleagues. In this case, Drew Hinshaw, too, admitted it might be happening. Although he perceived the portrayal slightly exaggerated, he stated: “It’s not so common, but if you dig deep into something, you can get harassed like that” (Hinshaw, 2020). Frank Kuznik matched all the aforementioned views and said that Stamper’s job is to protect the politician and make him look good, whether it is true or not. “They all say that. They all cry complaints. This portrayal is real. As soon as politicians are criticized, they blame the media and say that they’re running out a smear campaign. Trump says this all the time: they’re against me, fake news, a witch hunt. It’s rarely true; the press does not arbitrarily gang up on people. If they’re coming after someone, there’s a reason. If the reason is wrong, the politician calls a press conference and explains it” (Kuznik, 2020).

### 5.3.10 Zoe's Catharsis

The last model situation is related to the catharsis that Zoe attempted to undergo and to the way she was murdered. By the beginning of season 2, Zoe came to an awakening point, although too late. She covertly met Frank in a subway station where she wanted to return their professional relation to the previous condition. Zoe was aware of what she had committed and that she had crossed all ethical borders, but still aimed to move forward. She promised Frank that nobody else knew about the relationship (which was not true) and got rid of all potential evidence – deleted the contact information and all related messages from Frank. Eventually, she wanted to know what she had been a part of, and she was purely curious. However, it seemed like he had already made his mind sooner so that Zoe is cold-bloodedly murdered and thrown under a train by Frank, who disappeared in the arising chaos. It is hardly imaginable that a high-ranking politician would personally assassinate a journalist as Frank Underwood did – none of the respondents doubted about that. Not every interviewee was asked this last question due to the limited time, but those who answered provided diverse comments. Five answers were collected, and while two journalists admitted some credibility, the other three tended to consider the portrayal exaggerated. Opinions differed regardless of nationality and gender, whether the portrayed (attempted) catharsis and transformation might even be possible.

Josef Klíma commented upon how far a reporter would go, also pointing to the wrongdoing committed by Lucas Goodwin in the following seasons. He also offered his view of whether a journalist can transform over time, claiming that such catharsis, should it have happened in the series, might have been credible. “Some of them would do anything, including crime: hacking, stealing documents, etc. It also depends on which stage of their career they are. Beginners like Zoe might want to break through at any price; others have no reason to prove their qualities. So they can transform over time – in a good way or vice versa” (Klíma, 2020).

Another approving opinion came from Daniel Anýž, who could imagine such situation of a career restart in an honest way, even though he also criticised Zoe's unethical behaviour: “Even if she hadn't gone to any school of journalism, that's simply given that reporter cannot be friendly with sources. She knew well from the beginning what she crossed. People make mistakes, even intentionally, and I can imagine that one day, they attempt to start differently. The question, however, stands: she failed fatally once, could she avoid it the second time? Such catharsis seems quite real to me” (Anýž, 2020). He also

praised the screenwriting decision on how to deal with Zoe: “This was a smart solution to avoid the creation of a reformed hero by the makers” (Ibid).

While Veronika Bednářová briefly commented on the ultimate penalty, Pavla Holcová doubted the credibility of the portrayed assassination. “The punishment for her disobedience is immediate and enormous” (Bednářová, 2020). Despite her catharsis, awakening, and willingness to cooperate further, Frank ruthlessly killed Zoe himself, which seemed dubious to the founder of the Czech Centre for Investigative Journalism: “I do not know any politician who would murder a journalist on his own” (Holcová, 2020).

Not only the final execution, but contrary to Daniel Anýž, also the catharsis was contested by Jaroslav Kmenta. He eventually pointed to real-life cases where similar transformation seemed problematic: “The end when Zoe is thrown under a train is completely exaggerated just because no politician would do that himself. Politicians would always have some people to do it for them” (Kmenta, 2020). Should the assassination have been conducted by Doug, Frank’s aide, the portrayal would likely be less doubtful. Moreover, Kmenta also questioned Zoe’s correction chances: “Her behaviour even before the catharsis was simply unreal and beyond any line, it was too exaggerated and such catharsis does not seem very trustworthy. She would not be trusted by her colleagues, and she would have been compromised. I’m not saying that continuation as a journalist is impossible, but the investigation is no more feasible due to such discredit” (Ibid).

He also shared stories from his own experience: “In a loose association, my former colleague Sabina Slonková went through a similar transformation before and after 2013 due to her relationship with Andrej Babiš. She worked as an editor-in-chief in the daily he has owned, and she was unable to handle it. She also got to the point of catharsis, just like Zoe, when she realised she had made a mistake. It is a borderline case, your credibility is at stake, and colleagues tend to perceive the trustworthiness. I also made a similar mistake when I had worked in a tabloid for a year” (Ibid). He also noted that accepting former political speakers back to newsrooms seemed weird to him: “Once embezzled, returning to journalism is problematic to me, and I find it difficult to trust them after they had deliberately worked for politicians” (Ibid).

Frank Kuznik almost wholeheartedly agreed with Kmenta that Zoe could never take back what she has already done and provided a thoughtful insight into the character of Frank Underwood: “It’s too late to restart the relationship. Dramatically it works very well in the series, but in reality? No, she’s already done that. The Kevin Spacey character, he

is a complete user, he exploits everybody. One of the things that struck me is the marriage that Frank and his wife have. It's an open marriage where both are free to sleep with other people. However, there seems to be an unspoken agreement that they only sleep with people they can use to somehow further their careers. Is Zoe naïve? Yes, but if you spend 5 minutes with this guy, you can see his whole life is about using people" (Kuznik, 2020). He admitted that Zoe might have been young and naïve to think that Frank was using everybody except for her. "But the minute she walked in that house in the first episode and said 'use me' was naïve. Then she was equally naïve to think later, 'can we reset the whole thing?' No, you cannot. And even if he had agreed to go back to square zero, it would have been different. He will just use her again. It is ridiculous, dramatically, I understand it but in terms of reality – impossible (Ibid).

## **5.4 Perception of Portrayed Journalists in *House of Cards* – Additional Questions**

Following up on the model situations, the respondents were asked two additional questions related to the objective of the research at the end of the interview. The overall portrayal of journalists, mainly whether it is rather credible or exaggerated, and the potential impact of the series on the public trust in media – whether the depiction might somehow harm the real journalists – were examined.

### **5.4.1 Credibility, or distortion?**

The first additional question was related to the overall perception of the portrayal of journalists in *House of Cards*. All 13 respondents provided their comments. Only three were fully approving the credibility of the depiction, whereas nine were in favour of exaggeration and dramatization, and one comment was ambiguous. Neither gender nor nationality seemed to have had any impact. Instead, the specific field of the profession might have affected the perception of those who approved the credibility. Remarkably, for the first time since the first model situation, all American journalists reached an agreement and contested the overall credibility of the portrayed journalists in unison. Also, the majority of Czech journalists agreed that the series is exaggerated, but many admitted rare real foundations for such portrayal. Only a minority of Czechs believed that

the depiction of journalists in the *House of Cards* is credible. For the record, all three of them are experienced investigative reporters (Pavla Holcová, Josef Klíma, and Jaroslav Kmenta), which probably caused the higher level of imagination that they shared regarding the credible portrayal of journalists.

Veronika Bednářová admitted that creators were in part right to portray journalists in the selected way but stressed the gender aspect of the depiction: “Every work of art operates with certain impressions of reality that are in some creative way implemented into the fiction. The impression of the creators about media seems to be that the media do not play the watchdog role, as they should. And that is true in reality because the quality of journalism has changed in the last 10 or 20 years” (Bednářová, 2020). She also pointed out to the stereotypical black and white gender issue applied in the series: “What troubles me is the portrayal of a woman who either stays at home supported by someone, or she is over-ambitious. Not many women who are ambitious just to a fine extent appear in the series. It lacks women who only want to work just like men do, who are successful in their jobs and who are willing to sacrifice time, personal life, etc., but at the same time does not necessarily cross borders. Zoe goes over dead bodies” (Ibid). Furthermore, Bednářová added that according to her certain aspects were portrayed perfectly, for example, that Zoe was kind of naïve, unknowing what was happening. She was quite young, at the beginning of her career, and it looked like she could not fully grasp the ramifications of her steps. It credibly seemed like she followed her adrenalin and that she was dragged by circumstances (Ibid).

Practices and methods of journalists portrayed in *House of Cards* are not typical for American journalists only and not exaggerated according to Pavla Holcová: “Unfortunately it is credible. I think this works in Czechia as well. I believe there were a bit extreme cases, admitted, but I would say that these journalists definitely exist, and this type of journalists might end up with a very similar fate in reality – with an exception that the murder would not be conducted by a politician. Murders of journalists happen differently; usually, there is someone hired to cover the traces” (Holcová, 2020).

Also, Josef Klíma approved the credibility: “To me, this was no exaggeration, the portrayed journalists were credible. The journalistic field is very diverse – by human nature, by character or by quality, the range is wide in all countries; besides sometimes anxious morality watchdogs, there are numerous completely unscrupulous, cynical, over-ambitious journalists, especially in the tabloid media. Those are only driven

by success and have no troubles harming or even destroying someone by dispassionately using half-truth or flat-out lies. Therefore, the character of Zoe could easily be real” (Klíma, 2020).

Lukáš Valášek is confident that journalists like Zoe form only a small minority: “There is a stereotype of a corrupt young journalist who prefers her career to the public interest. I believe that the vast majority of my colleagues do not work like this, that they do their job because they care about society. People who see some deeper sense in this work are attracted by it, not just by fame, publicity, or wealth. I rather think it is a stereotype, which makes sense, on the other hand, from a screenwriter’s point of view. But the reality is perhaps somewhere else” (Valášek, 2020). Valášek’s view was fully supported by Jana Ciglerová: “It is slightly exaggerated, of course, to make it more dramatic. The series is more dramatic than reality” (Ciglerová, 2020).

Martin Řezníček claimed that the series is more exaggerated than what reality is like, too. “At some points, I had a feeling that some parts were given a more integral role in the system than they have, that the fine line between a journalist and a politician was not always portrayed so clearly. Journalists are sometimes depicted only as tools playing their political part, which I do not believe. Yes, indeed, journalists are all part of a bigger political-journalistic establishment, but I do not think that the relationship is this close. Yes, the relation is close, but not as much as depicted” (Řezníček, 2020).

Even though Daniel Anýž “scored” the highest number of affirmative answers regarding the credibility of the portrayal, he overall noted that the series overstates the reality. “Imagine an iceberg, the tip, the noticeable 10% above the sea level is added extra, but of course the series is based on knowledge of political and journalistic world where the interaction is present, it’s a double-sided coin. The main value for a journalist is information. And indeed, journalists go to the very edge of the contact with politicians. Gender plays no role here; it could be a beer in a pub. It is one of the most difficult journalistic skills to be able not to cross the border. The creators had a clear knowledge of the environment, which is, however, deduced into a model which is no more real, e.g., pushing a reporter below a train” (Anýž, 2020).

Also, David Miřejovský agreed with the exaggeration and dramatization due to the length of an episode. Still, he admitted a real basis for the portrayal: “It is exaggerated and dramatized for the 50 minutes of action. It is compressed; what you generally experience in two months must fit into 50 minutes. Some situations were turned absurd to make them

more interesting and attractive for the audience. The standards of American media or the fact-checking are somewhere else than how it was portrayed in the series. The other thing is that, of course, it is based on some real rare stories that we all know” (Miřejovský, 2020).

For Jindřich Šídlo, who also referred to another recent political Netflix series, the distortion of reality was not that great, although the portrayal seemed exaggerated to him. Similarly to Miřejovský, he also hinted at the real foundations: “It doesn’t distort the reality that much, there are various other ways of portrayals in stories and films. I just finished re-watching the *Designated Survivor*, which is quite similar, and the characters are deliberately depicted in the most absurd situations. However, you can often imagine their foundations. But otherwise, it is completely exaggerated” (Šídlo, 2020).

Jaroslav Kmenta overall believed that the majority of the portrayed situations are real and praised the work of the advisory team. However, he admitted a certain level of dramatization: “I think that 70% is rather a reality; the portrayal of the atmosphere and journalistic work is quite credible. Although in specific situations, just like sleeping with a politician and not reporting it, there are essential issues that cannot be happening in reality. That is an artistic concession to me. But altogether, it was depicted and created at a very high level. I often found myself thinking that the media advisory team had to have a profound experience when writing the script. They must have advised how to approach certain situations despite the dramatization. Until the artistic concession, it was a true portrayal of reality” (Kmenta, 2020).

However, Drew Hinshaw disagreed with Kmenta regarding the advisory team: “The image of journalists in *House of Cards* is completely not credible, I don’t think that makers of that show spoke to a single journalist, it rather looks like a weird imagination of journalism. It could harm media” (Hinshaw, 2020). He also, similarly to Veronika Bednářová, highlighted the gender issue: “The creators made female journalists particularly all sleeping with their sources. Those are terrible things implied to all the female journalists. It will probably give some people the wrong idea of how they can treat female journalists. It gives a bad reputation of being an underhanded profession where people get news unethically” (Ibid).

For Frank Kuznik, the show was cynical and not fully representative for media: “I would put that in the context of everything – politics look bad there, media looks bad. You understand the people; you can see their motivations, the lust for power, the ambition. I

think most of the reporters are honest and hardworking people trying to get stories right. They understand that politicians are always trying to use them in some way. I don't think the series is accurate in that sense" (Kuznik, 2020). Peter Green concurred to almost all proclaimed opinions and pointed out to hundreds of Zoe's colleagues in Washington, D.C.: "It distorts reality and exaggerates it for TV. There is also the press corps, hundreds of people who all read what she writes. They would all want to know how she got that. It is not such a big city, and someone would find out sooner or later" (Green, 2020).

#### **5.4.2 Impact on the Public Trust in Media and Image of Journalists**

The other additional question was related to the secondary research question of this thesis. The interviewees were asked whether they think that the portrayal of journalists in *House of Cards* and similar series could somehow affect the public perception of journalists and media in general, and eventually whether it could have any impact on the public trust in media. The last question of the research provided diverse views and comments.

The media researcher Marína Urbániková noted, in line with Jaroslav Kmenta below, that journalists themselves have a significant influence on the public trust in media logically. "Journalists and media are, of course, not only powerless puppets commanded by societal processes – they have a significant influence on their own perceived public trust" (Urbániková, 2020). However, the interviewed reporters perceived the overall impact of the portrayal of journalists in popular culture, specifically in *House of Cards*, on the public trust in media ambiguously, irrespective of gender or nationality.

Similarly to their agreement above upon the generally credible portrayal of journalists in the series, the three Czech investigatives Pavla Holcová, Josef Klíma, and Jaroslav Kmenta came to the same conclusion that the impact of the series is limited. However, Jindřich Šídlo and Pavla Holcová both admitted that popular culture and other depictions of journalists could play a more significant role than this specific series. Frank Kuznik and Peter Green proved again that nationality played no role in their perception and agreed with Holcová and Šídlo. They also attributed to popular culture a certain impact on the public trust in media, but rather not in the case of *House of Cards*. On the contrary, the other five Czech journalists plus Drew Hinshaw believe that the depiction of reporters might cause harm to the public perception in reality. Overall, out of twelve collected answers, six fully supported the potential impact of the series on the public trust in media.

Two respondents entirely refused any effect, and four disapproved the impact of *House of Cards*, but admitted a certain influence of popular culture in general.

Pavla Holcová believes that the image of a reporter like Zoe could damage the investigative journalism as a whole: “The journalistic ethics is rigorous. Sometimes it is easier to bypass the ethics and justify it. Once the norms loosen, just like in her case, it could undermine the public trust in journalists and the public trust that a journalist defends a public interest, not a private one. Loosening norms could inspire others, if one could get away, why not me” (Holcová, 2020). However, she did not think that such a portrayal could play an essential role in the public perception of journalists. She suggested a different representation instead: “I do not think it is the most important. This particular series rather portrayed some mental process of a journalist, the decision-making, or reasons. But there are plenty of other series which damage journalists and their work more than *House of Cards*. For example, in the first season of *Narcos*, an evening news anchor has an affair with Pablo Escobar and, at the same time, shoots exalting reports about him. Even though it is a bit misrepresented in the series and those things were happening fifty years ago, it could undermine the trust in journalists more. Many people could then think: Alright, that’s how it works when one could buy journalists and reports they make” (Ibid). She concluded that all the pieces where a journalist is portrayed as an enemy who does not let a politician work hard and aims to destroy him instead could damage journalists more.

The gender aspect was, besides other things, mentioned by Veronika Bednářová, who perceives that the series might shed a negative light on the current form of media: “Of course this portrayal is not helping. And it’s not helping either to the picture of a working woman in the current world. Her depiction is a certain screenwriting cliché because her fate is no script surprise, it is an evergreen story of a girl who follows her ambitions on her way towards fortune, but then it backfires, we’ve seen this thousand times. (...) I feel the series shows the negative image of politics. And journalism is, in fact, on its tail, trying to catch up toothlessly. I blame the series for the depiction of the journalistic characters as toothless and powerless” (Bednářová, 2020). She also indicated the infamous cases of journalists being threatened and physically endangered:

one that happened two years ago in Slovakia<sup>16</sup> and the other about eighteen years ago involving Sabina Slonková (as discussed above – note by the author) was no different. “The real cases show us that once an ethically-minded person aims to find out something sensitive, the risk is enormous. By this, I wanted to say that I’m not sure whether it sheds so negative light on journalism itself but rather on its current condition” (Ibid).

Josef Klíma did not agree with them as he claimed that the field is very diverse, and he believes that this particular series would not have any considerable influence on public trust in media: “I don’t think so. Journalists are, by characters, as various as doctors, judges, police officers or politicians. Some of them are honest, some of them are not. I don’t think it might be harmful. Firstly, the general public has no illusions about journalism, especially tabloid journalists, and secondly, as I mentioned, there are also bad police officers, judges, doctors, or teachers” (Klíma, 2020).

According to Lukáš Valášek, who confirmed the conclusions presented in the chapter related to the public trust in media, it is a more complex phenomenon as researches often vary and the way that questions are asked matter. “It is interesting to look at the numbers of audience, which media they take the news from and which they consider credible. There you can see that the situation is better than according to the credibility of professions where journalists are often at the bottom” (Valášek, 2020). Furthermore, he remarked similarly to what Jindřich Šídlo mentioned above in the ninth model situation analysis, that very few people understand how the media function. “The stereotypical portrayal of journalists could cause harm, importantly in Czechia with low media literacy. People usually have no clue how journalists work. How do they obtain information, how they handle it, what are their ethical borders, what is the difference between a serious medium, tabloid or misinformation medium – that’s a Dutch village for the people. I can imagine that with this vacuum being filled by the series, where journalists are portrayed stereotypically, then it could harm journalism as a whole” (Ibid).

Valášek also observed, based on public discussions, that people judge journalists based on the tabloid *Blesk* journalists or *Nova* and *Prima TV* as those are the media they follow. Then they ascribe it to the whole journalistic field, although it is usually just a sector. “So, of course, such a portrayal could play a role. That is why my colleagues and I are increasingly getting the notion that our work should not only consist of writing an article

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<sup>16</sup> As Lukáš Valášek noted above, in 2018, Slovak investigative reporter Ján Kuciak and his fiancée were shot dead in their house. More details available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder\\_of\\_J%C3%A1n\\_Kuciak](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder_of_J%C3%A1n_Kuciak).

or shooting a report. Additionally, we should also explain the circumstances – how the journalist created this product, how the information is being handled, how it was obtained, what ethical principles we all follow. And therefore, people could believe it more than some status on social media” (Ibid).

Valášek elaborated on the social media topic and emphasized there must be a clear difference. “There was a belief related to the Arab Spring when people started to think of how mighty social media are, that we don’t need traditional media anymore and that social media will save everything. Now it turns out how toxic social media could be. Traditional media must be different and show the difference by working with verified information put into context to convince people to believe it by facts. We must think about how we can explain our work. We can never explain it to the whole population, but we should always dedicate our work to it” (Ibid). He once again mentioned the report by *Seznam Zprávy* about the son of the Czech PM Babiš from 2018 that he perceived problematic. “Instead of an investigative report it was shot like a docu-drama, circumstances were not explained very well, and the form took over the content. A section of society that has no idea about serious investigative journalism could think that this is the way. And that also harms” (Ibid).

The variety of the field outlined by Josef Klíma was also supported by Jana Ciglerová. She, on the contrary, believes that such portrayal might shape the public opinion on journalism – and not always in a positive way. “Journalism is a profession just like any other. There are great people, bad people, strong ones, and weak ones, honest and dishonest ones. However, the more popular some series is the bigger impact to shape the public opinion it holds. It could shape the perception by the portrayal. I believe we are no such detectives as presented in *House of Cards*, and we are not so cynical. Maybe someone could cynically abuse physical appearance, but more frequently, a bit of true love plays a role, that the two simply fall in love. Quite often, there exists an attraction when the two meet regularly at work. And as journalists naturally ask politicians questions, people enjoy being asked, it makes them more special. Such dynamics is helpful to create an affair” (Ciglerová, 2020).

Daniel Anýž also has no doubt it could discredit the image of journalism as there are, according to him, many people happy to believe that journalism works just like the series shows it. Many people do not see the hyperbole: “It fits suitably to the prejudiced image of corrupted journalists who would do dirty tricks like politicians for their fame and front

page. However, it is hard to fight back, and the series reinforces such a narrative. *House of Cards* only is a fiction, dramatic series, but it might further damage the profession, and it does. Many people believe it is not hyperbolic so that it could influence the public trust in media in general” (Anýž, 2020).

The portrayal of journalists creates a general image of a reporter, which is not exactly flattering, according to David Miřejovský, who also pointed to the societal polarization in the United States and compared the situation with Czechia. “In very general terms, it could cause harm just because it is the 189<sup>th</sup> series depicting journalists as hyenas with no ethical norms where everything is allowed. However, I feel that the society in the United States is very polarized currently in two sections. Both have the media they love and hate, and the character of a journalist disappears. It is just a yes/no question. The newsroom to which individual journalists belong to is usually enough reason for judgement. It is either Democratic or Republican and nothing between plus some obscure websites. In Czechia, there is not as great polarization as the ownership of media changes continuously. We’ll see how it will be profiled in the following years, but the situation is far different, given the two-party system” (Miřejovský, 2020).

Jindřich Šídlo, to a certain extent, shared the view of Pavla Holcová. He confirmed that the impact of the portrayal of journalists might be one of many factors forming the public opinion on media, which further stresses the need to include the potential impact of popular culture into future researches on public trust in media. “I don’t think it might cause great harm. It might be only one of the multiple factors, but I believe there are different reasons which are more serious, having a greater impact. But the artistic concession of such portrayal only plays a small role in all that” (Šídlo, 2020).

Jaroslav Kmenta was either not convinced that the portrayal in the series could be harmful. According to him, the real cases hurt the profession significantly more: “I don’t think so. Trust in politics might rather be harmed because of such a raw depiction of reality. That might have been shocking for some. If you realise what the series was about and how Underwood behaved, I appreciated in hindsight how true the depiction of politics was when seeing Trump. Commissioned writing by a reporter for a politician could erode the image of journalists. However, many people later realise that a journalist is the last resort who can save the situation. That is no artistic concession, that is the reality even for many whistleblowers who want to help but cannot do anything else than reach out to journalists” (Kmenta, 2020).

Drew Hinshaw noted that all series where they treat journalists similarly do have a negative influence on the public perception: “It gives an idea that a journalist is not to be trusted, that he is unfair, underhanded. It implies the way you get information from journalists is unethical. Therefore, if you read a newspaper, you should be doubtful of it, mistrust it. Because showing that a reporter slept with that source to get it is a terrible thing to say (Hinshaw, 2020).

Frank Kuznik admitted that the influence is limited given the range of Netflix but accepted that there might be some impact, although entirely unknown yet. “I think it does harm media in the same way that Trump is calling everything fake news, and it creates an impression in people’s minds. It reinforces this idea that they are liars, they’re all double dealers. And in general, it reinforces the negative perception of the media. Now, *House of Cards* is an adult series on one of the premium platforms, so there is only a certain audience to watch it. So this particular series is not going to have a hugely detrimental effect” (Kuznik, 2020). However, he added that other depictions do harm and that there is a need to find out the real impact of popular culture: “The negative portrayals of media feed this frenzy that you cannot trust the media. You can’t trust anything 100%, but when people stop trusting the media, that’s when the society starts to fall apart. I think that the popular culture might have some impact on the public trust in media, I can’t quantify that, I don’t have the studies, but I think so, that is my impression. It is so hard to measure it, but I think that clearly, it is a growing factor. At some point, somebody will have to look at this and serve the quantitative fashion and say what’s happening. It’s one of the hot button issues going on around the world” (Ibid).

To a certain extent, Peter Green shared Kuznik’s views on the limited influence of the series and other factors. “I don’t think that people would take it too seriously and that the series does anything particularly, the spy movies where the spies masquerade as journalists are a bigger problem; that has a slightly bigger impact. But none of it matters today because Donald Trump has already made everything he can to reduce the objectivity of journalists and the status of journalists. He decreased the understanding of the role the journalists play in a democracy, and that is far more dangerous than what the series would do. On top of that, the media is in terrible financial shape for multiple reasons. That’s not helpful either, and people then wonder why something was not in the paper – because of the lack of subscribers, so we could not afford to hire a reporter, and therefore

we could not cover events as we don't have enough reporters. That does more damage to journalism than *House of Cards*" (Green, 2020).

He also brought up one specific feature from the series, which he felt harmful: "The part that is damaging is the whole thing where he feeds her as an uncritical source. Smart people would see that in the news they read every day because that does not make any sense why the reporter wrote it and skipped the entire necessary context" (Ibid). Furthermore, to conclude optimistically, Green also mentioned that even a positive depiction of journalists exists and named several pieces of cinematography: "*All the President's Men* provides a positive depiction rather. *Spotlight* also must have had a positive and accurate impression on the perception of journalists; that was very emblematic of how journalism really works" (Ibid).

## Conclusion

Carl Bernstein, the legendary American journalist, who, along with Bob Woodward, brought the story of the Watergate affair, which consequently led to the resignation of the U.S. President Richard Nixon, once claimed about journalism, that it is the best obtainable version of the truth. He is, in fact, right, as people often have nothing better to rely upon than what the journalists produce and publish. It is, therefore, a job requiring a high level of dutifulness, accountability, and ethical behaviour. Many of the reporters in the research above agreed and added several normative remarks. To note, Jana Ciglerová said: "A journalist's objective is to describe things as close to reality as possible, that's the most you can do. No agenda, no activism, no claims what should be done" (Ciglerová, 2020). By unintentionally rephrasing Bernstein's claim, Ciglerová captured what seemed wrong with the ethics of Zoe Barnes in *House of Cards*.

This thesis analysed the contemporary U.S. popular culture, specifically the Netflix series *House of Cards*, and the analysis was focused on the representation of the media reality portrayed in the first two seasons of the series. The credibility of given model situations or their exaggeration is examined based on thirteen research interviews with Czech and American journalists in March, April, and May 2020. The public trust in media, the influence of popular culture on mass society, specifics and ethics of investigative journalism, and broadly the representation of media in cinematography were presented

in the first part. The analysis of the portrayal of journalists and media in the series and research interviews with experts followed.

The main objective of this research was to evaluate the credibility of the portrayal of journalists in *House of Cards*. The secondary research question was focused on the public trust in media and the potential harm that the depiction in popular culture might cause. The views of Czech and American journalists on the portrayal of media in popular culture and the discussion about their diverse opinions are the primary asset of this thesis. Being a journalist nowadays is a very specific role. As this thesis proved, the TV shows like *House of Cards* and others can portray journalists in a very biased way that can be catchy for the viewer but does not represent the actual reality. The thirteen journalists that the author decided to interview are the primary sources that may determine and evaluate to what extent does the popular culture portrait of their profession match with reality. Thus, the principal analysis of this thesis to answer the question of credibility of the portrayal was the interpretation of extensive interviews the author conducted.

No similar research has ever been conducted in the Czech context before, and the thesis brought brand new contextualized data in a broad consideration of the impact of popular culture on society.

However, the sample of this study was not large and representative enough to permit drawing universally valid conclusions. Still, the current empirical evidence to explain the correlation between the public trust in media and the image of journalists in popular culture is not sufficient. Research does not focus on the cultural aspects and their potential impact. Nevertheless, the author was able to observe and analyse significant patterns between the public trust in media and the image of journalists in popular culture, based on the interviews with the Czech and American professionals. The influence has not been disproved yet, which opens up space for a potentially more extensive study that could work with better and greater resources.

This concluding chapter aims to bring a summarising report of results obtained in the research. Ten model situations allowed the interviewees to comment on various aspects of the portrayal of journalists in *House of Cards*, and therefore their quoted statements were given sufficient space. Their views were aimed to be presented objectively without any bias or judgement as the author attempted to avoid his personal opinions. The collected comments were analysed in each specific sub-chapter, and various aspects of the respondents' backgrounds were taken into account, such as nationality, experience, gender,

or the field of specialization in examining their views on the perceived credibility or exaggeration of the model situations.

The opening sub-chapter introduced general comments of the journalists on their perception of the series in general. Characteristics such as dramatization, exaggeration, artistic concession, truthful portrayal, or authenticity were discussed. Subsequently, the first model situation followed, which faced the issue of an ethical approach to sources and the use of physical attractiveness by a young reporter. Out of the total 13 interviewees, eight of them were slightly in favour of the credible portrayal, while five leaned to a dramatised exaggeration. All journalists condemned the unethical behaviour but admitted that in some cases, it still might be likely to happen. This sub-chapter argues that the nationality context and experience played a role in the perception of ethics as the majority of Czech journalists agreed that the situation was portrayed credibly. Only one of the Czech professionals fully shared the opinion of all three Americans that the depicted situation was unrealistic. However, this situation was the first and the only one with any influence of nationality. The gender of the respondents appeared to have played no role in their understanding of this specific model situation.

The second model situation expanded on the first one and included specifically the aspect of affairs between journalists and their sources. Despite the unethical character of this model situation, the vast majority of interviewed journalists, regardless of their nationality or gender, were confident that affairs between reporters and politicians do happen, although not regularly, that those are rather exceptional individual cases, which exist yet. Twelve professionals approved the credibility of the portrayed situation. The only opposing respondent also admitted that affairs do happen but objected to the likelihood of the portrayed transactional sexual relation as depicted in the series. All respondents agreed that such behaviour is immensely incorrect. Still, it might exist in reality, and therefore *House of Cards*, by this specific depiction, does not exaggerate.

The third model situation operated with the awareness of the ethical breach by the reporter, who continued in the unethical conduct anyway. This sub-chapter aimed to find out the perception of ethics on the commissioned writing and tailor-made articles. Surprisingly, even though the behaviour was far from an ethical one, the answers provided an equivocal result. Interestingly, the answers split almost equally. Twelve responses were recorded, out of which five approved the credibility, while seven respondents denied it. The journalists stressed the essential control role of the editorial board in a newsroom that the series

seemed to have underrated. At first sight, it looked apparent that neither nationality nor gender had any impact, instead of the lived experience in the United States. However, the argument's validity was limited. The majority of views advocating the exaggerated portrayal have, at least for a while, lived in the United States. However, exceptions were noted, as two Czechia-based journalists also opposed the credibility. Moreover, two out of five respondents tending to approve the credibility have also lived in the United States for a while, and therefore, the conclusion is indecisive. Based on the presented factors and the ambiguous perception, this sub-chapter confirmed the notion that each journalist perceives the ethics of the profession individually.

The fourth model situation was selected mainly due to its unrealistic manner evident even from watching the series. The sub-chapter analysed the role of a reporter in delivering a tailor-made story through the newsroom and the role of supervisors while discussing the ethics and newsroom standards. Several problematic issues related to the use of unnamed sources were addressed, and the respondents often referred to real controversial stories, such as the Watergate scandal, the Seymour Hersh's story about the killing of Bin Laden, or more recently affairs related to *New York Times* or *Der Spiegel*. Remarkably, the sub-chapter provided a unique result – none of the 11 respondents approved the credibility of the portrayal. It was the only model situation where all journalists reached an agreement, as well as the only one without a single view in favour of credibility. They all agreed that such depiction is exaggerated and distorts reality. Furthermore, all respondents unanimously ruled out publishing stories based on one unnamed source, known to the author only.

The fifth model situation achieved a relatively high level of answers approving the credibility of the portrayal, where two female journalists discussed sexual and seductive practices to obtain information or access. A vast majority of respondents cautiously tended to believe that similar things might be credible. The gender aspect played little role in this sub-chapter, as none of the three female respondents denied the portrayal as exaggerated. Their views were in line with the majority of males, and most of the interviewees opposed the portrayed regularity. Out of twelve collected answers, ten slightly tended to approve the credibility of sexual methods in exceptional cases, but denied the regularity at the same time. Even the opposing views denying such depiction as exaggerated would believe that something similar might have happened, although they both claim it was rather rare and

accidental and that the image provided by *House of Cards* is distorting the reality. Nationality, again, played no role in the perception of this specific model situation.

The sixth sub-chapter focused on the role of a specific character in the story and discussed multiple points of view related to the character, such as relationships at a workplace, diligent investigation, or the sidelining of ethics due to overly close ties to a source. The young female reporter hindered the investigation of her source and was warned by her supervisor, who, at the same time, felt affection to her. This model situation was commented upon by only a limited number of respondents due to the restricted time in interviews. Only seven respondents provided their answers, and almost every respondent took a different approach to this case, so it is virtually impossible to draw any valid conclusion. The gender aspect was not substantial in this sub-chapter and, likely, nor nationality. The majority of interviewees provided their comments without explicitly denying anything similar might happen, and three of them confirmed probable credibility. Although the only opposing voice was American, it is impossible to estimate the influence of nationality as the two other American journalists could not answer this question.

The seventh model situation focused on the portrayal of fear in the series, and the interviewees commented whether it is a common part of the journalistic profession. Threats were appearing relatively commonly in the series, which was the reason for including this model situation. Eight journalists provided their views, and, regardless of nationality, the majority of the interviewed experts tended to feel the depiction of fear credible. Six of them leaned towards the notion that fear was portrayed very credibly in the series, while two opposed the portrayal as overly dramatized. However, none of the two opposed the depiction too strongly. The nationality aspect could not be applied as answers provided the Americans differed. Likewise, the gender aspect is hardly justifiable because only one female journalist answered this model situation. Instead, it seemed that the field of specialization played a more significant role in this perception. The respondents stressed that the impact of fear differs, and for example, the foreign correspondent does not observe fear as commonly as the investigative reporter.

The eighth sub-chapter analysed the usage of manipulative or deceptive methods and the ethics of applying such techniques. Nine respondents gave their comments, and the majority of interviewees, regardless of nationality or gender, reached an agreement and approved that these practices were portrayed credibly. Seven of journalists were in favour of the credibility, although the methods were not entirely ethical. Recent high-profile cases

from the Czech context were introduced as examples related to deceptive techniques usage. Two journalists viewed the situation improbable and exaggerated, and the behaviour unacceptable.

The ninth sub-chapter focused on the portrayal of denunciations of journalists from politicians. Words like ‘coordinated campaign’ sounded largely familiar to all the respondents. Remarkably, all of those who answered this question concurred that this depiction is credible. Eight journalists in total provided their comments, and all of them approved this model situation. It was the only case of the research when all experts agreed in unison. Some pointed out remarkable examples from the past; others made references to politicians or their aides. Moreover, the impact of political attacks on public trust in media, the perceived journalistic biases, social media, and the presumed purposeful manipulation were discussed. Nationality, gender, or experience did not play a role in this perception.

The tenth model situation was related to the possibility of catharsis that the main journalistic character attempted to undergo before being murdered personally by the politician, which itself is hardly imaginable that a high-ranking politician would personally assassinate a journalist. None of the respondents doubted that. Only five respondents were asked this last question due to the limited time, and diverse comments were obtained. Five answers were collected, and while two journalists admitted some credibility, the other three tended to consider the portrayal exaggerated. Based on such a limited sample, it was impossible to evaluate the potential causes or influential aspects of their decision-making.

Moreover, the respondents were asked two additional questions related to the objective of the research at the end of the interview. The overall portrayal of journalists and the potential impact of the series on the public trust in media were examined. All 13 respondents provided their comments upon the credibility or exaggeration of the depiction. Only three were fully approving the credibility, whereas nine were in favour of exaggeration and dramatization; one comment was ambiguous. Neither gender nor nationality seemed to have had any impact. Instead, the specific field of the profession might have affected the perception of those who approved the credibility as all of them were Czech investigative journalists. Remarkably, for the first time since the first model situation, all American journalists reached an agreement. Also, the majority of Czech journalists agreed that the series is exaggerated, but many admitted rare real foundations for such portrayal.

The other additional question was related to the secondary research question of this thesis. The interviewees were asked whether they think that the portrayal of journalists in *House of Cards* and similar series could somehow affect the public perception of journalists and media in general, and eventually whether it could have any impact on the public trust in media. The last question of the research provided diverse views and comments. The reporters perceived the overall effect of the portrayal of journalists in popular culture ambiguously, irrespective of gender or nationality. Overall, out of twelve collected answers, six fully supported the potential impact of the series on the public trust in media. Two respondents, both Czech investigative journalists, entirely refused any effect, and four disapproved the impact of *House of Cards*, but admitted a certain influence of popular culture in general.

Out of the total ten model situations, seven were approved as credible by the majority of respondents, while three seemed exaggerated overall: those were the model situations 3, 4, and 10. Moreover, the fourth model situation related to the role of supervisors and newsroom standards recorded the highest number of disapproving answers (11), and, at the same time, all of the respondents agreed. The total agreement appeared only once again, in the ninth model situation related to political denunciations, when all interviewees (8) approved the credibility of the portrayal. Other decisive results were achieved in situations 2 and 5, both related to the sexual practices of female journalists. A vast majority in both cases (11:2 and 10:2) believed that the depiction was credible.

Daniel Anýž provided the most answers approving the credibility of the portrayal (9/10), while Drew Hinshaw believed the most that the depiction was exaggerated (1/9). Apart from these two and those who answered less than seven questions (Veronika Bednářová, Pavla Holcová, Josef Klíma, Martin Řezníček, and Peter Green), the results of the remaining respondents showed interesting correlations. Lukáš Valášek, Jana Ciglerová, and David Miřejovský shared a relatively high level of the credibility approval rate. Both Miřejovský and Valášek approved 7/9 model situations as rather credible (77%), Ciglerová approved 6/8 (75%). No gender or field of specialisation might be applied as Lukáš Valášek is an investigative reporter, unlike the two foreign correspondents. The nationality aspect might seem more likely, although, on the other hand, the remaining three journalists disprove it. Jindřich Šídlo shared the proportion of approving answers with Frank Kuzník (5/9, therefore 55%), Jaroslav Kmenta approved precisely 5 out of 10 model situations (50%). The results prove that the perception of ethics and journalistic behaviour in given

specific situations differ individually. Therefore, aspects such as nationality, gender, experience, or the field of specialisation cannot be fully applied in this research to explain the findings.

However, the research questions can be answered relatively decisively. Based on the interviews with 13 Czech and American experts, it seems that the portrayal of journalists in *House of Cards* is exaggerated and distorts reality. Also, such a depiction could, according to the research results, to a certain unknown extent, impact the public perception of journalists. The majority of respondents are convinced that the depiction of media in popular culture could influence the public trust in media. Half of the interviewees believed that specifically the series *House of Cards* could cause harm to real journalists by its depiction of the profession. Only a small minority did not ascribe any effect to the portrayal.

The back cover of the McNair's book *Journalists in film* contains quite an appropriate quotation which fits well to sum this thesis up. "We both love and hate our journalists. They are perceived as sexy and glamorous, on the one hand, despicable and sleazy on the other. Opinion polls regularly indicate that we experience a kind of cultural schizophrenia in our relationship to journalists and the news media: sometimes they are viewed as heroes, at other times villains" (McNair, 2010, back cover).

Be nice to our journalists and praise the quality work. Everybody makes mistakes, but a society without free media would cease to be a functioning society.

## Summary

Proslulý americký novinář Carl Bernstein, který s Bobem Woodwardem rozkryl aféru Watergate vedoucí k rezignaci prezidenta Spojených států amerických Richarda Nixona, jednou prohlásil o novinářině, že je to ta nejlepší dosažitelná verze pravdy. A měl vlastně pravdu, jelikož často lidé nemají jinou možnost než se spolehnout na to, co vyprodukuje novinář. Tato profese tedy vyžaduje vysokou spolehlivost, zodpovědnost a především etické chování. Několik respondentů během výzkumných rozhovorů dodalo množství souhlasných připomínek. Například Jana Ciglerová: "Úkolem novináře je objektivně popsat skutečnost tak blízko realitě, jak jen to je možné. Nic víc udělat nemůže a žádné aktivistické činy do novinářiny nepatří" (Ciglerová, 2020). Možná nevědomky

parafrázovala Bernsteina, avšak přesně tím vystihla, co bylo v nepořádku s přístupem Zoe Barnesové v seriálu *House of Cards*.

Tato diplomová práce se věnuje současné americké popkultuře, konkrétně seriálu *House of Cards*. Analytická část práce je zaměřena na reprezentaci mediální reality v prvních dvou řadách seriálu. Zkoumá věrohodnost či zkreslení vybraných postav a modelových situací na základě třinácti výzkumných rozhovorů s českými i americkými novináři, které byly provedeny v průběhu března, dubna a května 2020. V první části práce je rozebrána důvěra veřejnosti v média, vliv popkultury na masovou společnost, specifika a etika investigativní žurnalistiky a obecně zobrazení médií v kinematografii. Ve druhé části následuje samotná analýza provedených výzkumných rozhovorů.

Hlavním cílem výzkumu bylo zhodnotit věrohodnost zobrazení novinářů v seriálu, vedlejší výzkumná otázka poté mířila na důvěru veřejnosti v média a na to, jakým způsobem může jisté zobrazení novinářů v popkultuře teoreticky ublížit reálným novinářům. Nejdůležitějším přínosem této práce jsou originální a mnohdy nesouhlasné názhledy českých a amerických novinářů na seriál jako takový a na zobrazení novinářů. Podobně zaměřený rozsáhlý výzkum dosud nebyl v českém prostředí proveden, tudíž tato diplomová práce přináší nové informace v oblasti vlivu současné populární kultury na společnost. Výzkumný vzorek však nebyl dostatečně široký ani reprezentativní natolik, aby bylo možné vyslovit univerzální závěry. Tato práce proto spíše přináší unikátní vhled do vnímání expertů v dané oblasti. V současné době neexistuje dostatek empirických dat k vysvětlení korelace mezi důvěrou veřejnosti v média a vlivem popkulturních zobrazení novinářů, výzkumy často aspekt kultury ani nezohledňují. Vliv popkultury však dosud nebyl ani vyvrácen, což otevírá prostor budoucím výzkumům.

Toto shrnutí je krátkým přehledem závěrů, k nimž diplomová práce dospěla. Deset modelových situací umožnilo respondentům vyjádřit se obsáhle k rozličným aspektům zobrazení novinářů v seriálu. Získané komentáře byly analyzovány v přehledných podkapitolách, jež braly v potaz specifika konkrétních novinářů jako jejich národnost, pohlaví, zkušenosti či zaměření. Z deseti modelových situací považovala většina expertů sedm za věrohodné ztvárnění reality. Respondenti dále zodpovídali dvě dodatečné otázky. Všech třináct novinářů zhodnotilo věrohodnost zobrazení profese v seriálu a pouze tři z nich plně souhlasili, že obraz je věrohodný. Všichni tři jsou čeští investigativní novináři, tudíž v tomto případě do jisté míry hrála specializace větší roli než národnost či pohlaví. Přestože se většina respondentů shodla, že obraz profese je zkreslený, většina také

přiznala, že takto zkreslené vyobrazení má své reálné základy ve výjimečných případech z historie novinářiny.

Ve druhé dodatečné otázce měli respondenti zhodnotit, jaký vliv může mít obraz novinářů v seriálu *House of Cards* na důvěru veřejnosti v média. Tato otázka zaznamenala množství různorodých odpovědí a nedá se s jistotou stanovit, zda tento konkrétní seriál může důvěru veřejnosti v média narušit. Z dvanácti celkových odpovědí věří v potenciální vliv seriálu *House of Cards* polovina respondentů. Dva čeští investigativci naopak jakýkoliv efekt na společnost odmítají a zbývajících čtyři respondenti připustili jistý vliv zobrazení novinářů v popkultuře obecně či v jiných filmech a seriálech, nikoliv však konkrétně v *House of Cards*.

Výsledky výzkumu prokazují, že vnímání etického novinářského chování je výlučně individuální záležitostí, v níž se ukazuje, že aspekty jako národnost, pohlaví, zkušenosti či zaměření nehrají příliš důležitou roli. Výzkumné otázky však i přesto mohou být relativně jednoznačně zodpovězeny. Na základě analýzy rozhovorů se třinácti vybranými odborníky se zdá, že obraz novinářů v seriálu *House of Cards* je přehnaný a převrací realitu. Navíc takovéto zobrazení může dle získaných poznatků do jisté míry ovlivnit náhled veřejnosti na novináře. Většina respondentů je přesvědčena, že vyobrazení médií v popkultuře může hrát roli v tom, jak veřejnost tuto profesi vnímá, a přesně polovina expertů se domnívá, že konkrétní vliv může mít přímo tento daný seriál.

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## Master's Thesis Summary

<b>ZÁVĚREČNÉ TEZE MAGISTERSKÉ PRÁCE NMTS</b>
Závěrečné teze student odevzdává ke konci Diplomního semináře III jako součást magisterské práce a tyto teze jsou spolu s odevzdáním magisterské práce do SIS předpokladem udělení zápočtu za tento seminář.
<b>Jméno:</b> Tomáš Linhart
<b>E-mail:</b> tom.lin@seznam.cz
<b>Specializace (uved'te zkratkou)*:</b> SAS
<b>Semestr a školní rok zahájení práce:</b> LS/2019
<b>Semestr a školní rok ukončení práce:</b> LS/2020
<b>Vedoucí diplomového semináře:</b> Lucie Kýřová, M.A., Ph.D.
<b>Vedoucí práce:</b> Mgr. Jana Sehnálková, Ph.D.
<b>Název práce:</b> Portrayal of Journalists in Netflix' Series "House of Cards"
<b>Charakteristika tématu práce (max 10 řádek):</b> Tato diplomová práce se věnuje současné americké popkultuře, konkrétně seriálu House of Cards. Analytická část práce je zaměřena na reprezentaci mediální reality v prvních dvou řadách seriálu. Zkoumá věrohodnost či zkresení vybraných postav a modelových situací na základě třinácti výzkumných rozhovorů s českými i americkými novináři, které byly provedeny v průběhu března, dubna a května 2020. V první části práce je rozebrána důvěra veřejnosti v média, vliv popkultury na masovou společnost, specifika a etika investigativní žurnalistiky a obecně zobrazení médií v kinematografii. Ve druhé části následuje samotná analýza provedených výzkumných rozhovorů. Hlavním cílem výzkumu bylo zhodnotit věrohodnost zobrazení novinářů v seriálu, vedlejší výzkumná otázka mířila na to, jakým způsobem může jisté zobrazení novinářů v popkultuře teoreticky ublížit reálným novinářům.
<b>Vývoj tématu od zadání projektu do odevzdání práce (max. 10 řádek):</b> Téma práce se nijak nezměnilo, pouze po dohodě s vedoucí práce bylo upuštěno od komparace s jinými, podobnými seriály. Na základě domluvených výzkumných rozhovorů také byl výzkumný cíl upřesněn a zaměřen spíše na český kontext z důvodu nereprezentativního počtu amerických novinářů.
<b>Struktura práce (hlavní kapitoly obsahu):</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. INTRODUCTION</li> <li>2. METHODOLOGY</li> <li>3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS TO STUDY HOUSE OF CARDS, THE PORTRAYAL OF JOURNALISTS AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Public trust in media</li> <li>3.2 Influence of popular culture on mass society</li> <li>3.3 Investigative journalism and ethics</li> <li>3.4 Media in cinematography</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. JOURNALISTS IN HOUSE OF CARDS AND THE ANALYSIS OF THEIR PORTRAYAL <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4.1 House of Cards overview, synopsis, and acclaim</li> <li>4.2 The portrayal of journalists and media in House of Cards</li> </ol> </li> <li>5. THE PERCEPTION OF CZECH AND AMERICAN PROFESSIONALS OF THE</li> </ol>

<b>PORTRAYAL OF JOURNALISTS IN HOUSE OF CARDS</b>		
5.1 Selection of interviewees		
5.2 Perception of the portrayed journalists in House of Cards – General comments		
5.3 Perception of portrayed journalists in House of Cards – Model situations		
5.4 Perception of portrayed journalists in House of Cards – Additional questions		
<b>CONCLUSION</b>		
Hlavní výsledky práce (max. 10 řádek): Výsledky výzkumu prokazují, že vnímání etického novinářského chování je výlučně individuální záležitostí, v níž se ukazuje, že aspekty jako národnost, pohlaví, zkušenosti či zaměření nehrají příliš důležitou roli. Výzkumné otázky však i přesto mohou být relativně jednoznačně zodpovězeny. Na základě analýzy rozhovorů se třinácti vybranými odborníky se zdá, že obraz novinářů v seriálu House of Cards je přehnaný a převrací realitu. Navíc takovéto zobrazení může dle získaných poznatků do jisté míry ovlivnit náhled veřejnosti na novináře. Většina respondentů je přesvědčena, že vyobrazení médií v popkultuře může hrát roli v tom, jak veřejnost tuto profesi vnímá, a přesně polovina expertů se domnívá, že konkrétní vliv může mít přímo tento daný seriál.		
Prameny a literatura (výběr nejpodstatnějších): Rozhovory se 13 českými a americkými novináři Netflix. House of Cards [TV series], USA, 2013-2018. Eco, Umberto. 2007. Skeptikové a těšitelé. Prague: Argo. Ehrlich, Matthew C. 2004. Journalism in the Movies. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. Hendl, Jan. 2016. Kvalitativní výzkum: základní teorie, metody a aplikace. Prague: Portál. Jirák Jan, Köpplová Barbara. 2003. Média a společnost. Prague: Portál. McNair, Brian. 2010. Journalists in Film: Heroes and Villains. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. Osvaldová Barbora, Halada Jan. 2007. Praktická encyklopedie žurnalistiky a marketingové komunikace. Praha: Libri. Remišová, Anna. 2010. Etika médií. Bratislava: Kalligram. Trampota Tomáš, Vojtěchovská Martina. 2010. Metody výzkumu médií. Prague: Portál.		
Etika výzkumu:**		
Informovaný souhlas s účastí na výzkumu		
Jazyk práce: Angličtina		
Podpis studenta a datum 21. 5. 2020		
<b>Schváleno</b>	<b>Datum</b>	<b>Podpis</b>
Vedoucí práce		
Vedoucí diplomového semináře		
Vedoucí specializace		
Garant programu		

\* BAS – Balkánská a středoevropská studia; ES – Evropská studia; NRS – Německá a rakouská studia; RES – Ruská a eurasijská studia; SAS – Severoamerická studia; ZES – Západoevropská studia.

\*\* Pokud je to relevantní, tj. vyžaduje to charakter výzkumu (nebo jeho zadavatel), data, s nimiž pracujete, nebo osobní bezpečnost vaše či dalších účastníků výzkumu, vysvětlíte, jak zajistíte dodržení, resp. splnění těchto etických aspektů výzkumu: 1) informovaný souhlas s účastí na výzkumu, 2) dobrovolná účast na výzkumu, 3) důvěrnost a anonymita zdrojů, 4) bezpečný výzkum (nikomu nevznikne újma).

## List of Appendices

Appendix no. 1: Informed consent (form)

### Informed Consent Form CHARLES UNIVERSITY, PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC

The general nature of this study *Portrayal of Journalists in Netflix' Series "House of Cards"* conducted by **Tomáš Linhart** has been explained to me. In approximately 30 minutes long interview, I will be asked questions related to the investigation nature of journalism, professional ethics, interconnectedness with politics, and the potential impact of the portrayal on media and society in general.

I understand that this project is a part of dissertation research and may result in a possible publication in the future. I understand that anonymity will be preserved in the results of this study (in other words, my name and identity will not be divulged) unless I give my permission below.

I know that I may refuse to answer any question asked and that I may discontinue participation at any time. I also understand that the student's grade or the successful completion of the dissertation will not be affected by my responses or by my exercising any of my rights. Potential risks resulting from my participation in this project have been described to me.

I am aware that I may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this research to the Research Supervisor (Mgr. Jana Sehnálková, Ph.D., [sehnalkova@fsv.cuni.cz](mailto:sehnalkova@fsv.cuni.cz)) or to the Head of the Department of North American Studies (PhDr. Jan Hornát, Ph.D., [jan.hornat@fsv.cuni.cz](mailto:jan.hornat@fsv.cuni.cz)). I am aware that I must be at least 18 years of age to participate. My signature below signifies my voluntary participation in this project, and that I have received a copy of this consent form.

My name may be used in any paper or published work that results from this interview, including on-line publications.

Yes No

Date

Signature

Print Name

This project was approved by the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University, on June 6, 2019.

## Appendix no. 2: Research Interview Structure (form)

Research for the dissertation: *Portrayal of Journalists in Netflix' Series "House of Cards"*

Tomáš Linhart (Charles University)

### **10 model situations (below) and related questions:**

- To what extent are the portrayals presented below exaggerated?
- Is such crossing of ethical borders as presented in *House of Cards* a pure fiction, or does it really similarly happen in reality?
- Under which circumstances could similar situations actually happen?
- Is anything of that sort usual in Czech journalism?
- Could such a portrayal do any harm to journalism in general?

### **Model situations:**

#### **1. The proactive approach and exclusive cooperation offer:**

Young and ambitious reporter Zoe Barnes benefits from her physical attractiveness and by herself initiates a late-evening meeting with a politician. Without prior notice, she shows up at the door of the Congressman Frank Underwood, who invites her in for a drink and she accepts. Neither is she writing an article about him nor asking for an interview – she just offers a secret, mutually beneficial, and exclusive cooperation.

#### **2. The romantic affair and trade-off:**

Initial purely professional cooperation turns into a personal matter, and a romantic extra-marital affair emerges between a reporter and a politician, based on which an information trade-off goes on.

#### **3. The awareness of the ethical breach and commissioned articles:**

The reporter to the politician: “We are currently in a very grey area, legally and ethically, which I’m okay with.” In fact, she writes tailor-made articles ordered by him (via text messages or direct calls). When the politician is not satisfied, and the reporter does not cooperate as desired, the politician is not reluctant to threaten her.

#### **4. The role of the supervisors and newsroom publication standards:**

Both the Editor-in-Chief and the owner of the paper want to know Zoe’s source of information, but she does not reveal it. Is her attitude ethical? Is it realistic that

a newspaper would publish a story based on one secret source only, whose identity is only known by the author of an article and not by any superiors?

**5. The regularity of sexual practices by journalists:**

Zoe with her colleague Janine speak outright about their working methods (including the seduction of high ranking politicians). “Who is the mysterious buddy, who do you get all stories from? I’m just teasing you, not that I would judge, we’ve all done it just to get a story, including with a Congressman.” When Zoe denies, Janine continues: “I don’t do it anymore, once a word got out, nobody took me seriously.”

**6. The role of Zoe’s colleague and later partner:**

An ongoing investigation against Underwood (Zoe’s source of information), she initially attempts to protect him; until she finds out that he was really probably exploiting her. Her later partner (and former colleague) Lucas mentions: “Underwood has been using you, don’t you want to know why? Is it all about covering yourself? You don’t want anybody to know you were sleeping with him. Not exactly objective reporting, is it?”

**7. The portrayal of fear in investigative journalism:**

Janine to Zoe: “If you weren’t afraid, you wouldn’t be doing your job. I investigated police cover-ups before, I got death threats for a year!” Is fear (about oneself, about life, about work, about family, etc.) a necessary part of the profession?

**8. Manipulative practices in journalism:**

Zoe has learned one thing well from Frank – using a manipulative pressure to obtain a contact or a respondent, deliberate lies and made-up stories such as: “She is my friend, she’s got a mental illness and just texted me she wanted to hurt herself, that is why I need her address.”

**9. Politicians labelling journalists:**

Doug Stamper (Underwood’s aide) about critical newspapers attempting to investigate potential criminal activities with Frank’s involvement: “They are trying to smear Frank, it is a coordinated campaign!”

**10. Zoe’s catharsis:**

Too late awakening and catharsis by Zoe: “I took a chance, showed up at your house, and placed myself at your feet. Crossed ethical lines, professionally,

physically, and I hold myself accountable for that. Those were my choices, and I can live with them. I'd like to move forward, but I need to know exactly what I was a part of; that I wasn't part of someone's murder." (One of her last sentences before being murdered and thrown under a train by Frank in a subway).

**Additional general questions:**

- How are journalists in *House of Cards* portrayed? Is their image credible, or exaggerated? Does the series distort reality?
- In recent years (or decades) the public trust in media has gradually decreased. Could series such as *House of Cards* (or others where journalists are presented as tools for political objectives) have any impact on public trust in media? Could series such as *House of Cards* cause any harm to real journalists and media by their portrayal?