

‘House of Cards’ journalists portrayed as odd but at least they’re not sociopaths



by [Roy Peter Clark](#) **Published** Feb. 24, 2014 4:08 pm **Updated** Feb. 24, 2014 5:03 pm

Anyone who is up-to-date on the Netflix TV drama “House of Cards” knows that journalists play a significant role. I have something to say about that with the goal of viewing this portrayal within a historical context of fictional representations of reporters and editors. (If you have not yet binge-watched the 26 episodes, not to worry. There are no spoilers in this essay.)

Based on a trilogy of novels by former conservative British politician Michael Dobbs and a BBC miniseries, “House of Cards” shows American politics at its worst. Congressman Francis Underwood (played by Kevin Spacey) and his wife Claire (played by Robin Wright) have been aptly compared to Lord and Lady Macbeth. Nothing can quench their appetite for power. No one can stand in their way.

Like other contemporary dramas such as “The Sopranos” and “Dexter,” the anti-heroes in “House of Cards” are sociopaths, almost daring the audience to find someone to root for. To borrow a phrase from Flannery O’Connor, “a good man – or woman – is hard to find.”

We live in an era, of course, when almost all great American institutions are in decline and disrepute. The one exception may be the military – if you are willing to discount the sexual predation of women, a subplot in “House of Cards.” All boats sink on a low tide, and the tides in this drama almost run the Ship of State aground.

Perhaps because the shallow water is so polluted, journalists in “House of Cards” don’t look so bad. Individually, each is a mess. Zoe Barnes (played by Kate Mara) looks like a teenager, but is pathologically ambitious, willing to exchange sexual favors for information with a much older Frank Underwood. Her ruthless scoops let her climb the ladder of news celebrity, placing her at odds with the old school editor of the Washington Herald, Tom Hammerschmidt (played by Boris McGiver). He wants to put Zoe in her place and looks like he may even have some ethics, until he drops the c-word on her in an encounter that costs him his job.

Over two seasons we meet some other journalists as well, including reporters and editors who face violence, imprisonment, and intimidation as they inch closer to unthinkable truths about how things work in Washington.

This may not sound very encouraging, but the collective press corps manages to establish itself in “House of Cards” as the lesser of evils. When you get past their idiosyncrasies, jealousies, and

careerism, they do seem to be following a compass. They have a collective sense of mission and purpose, which is to keep watch over a corrupt government, to pierce the veil of secrecy and to reveal horrible truths in the public interest.

If this seems like faint praise, consider the history of such portrayals of journalists over the last century. We started out pretty well in motion pictures with actors like Clark Gable in such films as “It Happened One Night,” playing the hard-drinking, hard-driving news hound as a representative of the common man, a champion of the little guy.

That portrayal began to change in the 1970s, especially after Watergate. TV’s Lou Grant was the exception to an endless stream of journalists portrayed as vultures, preying upon the weak and vulnerable, shouting over each other in predatory packs. It was a time when the tabloid press was depicted as the norm.

We were once the good guys. Then we became the bad guys. Now, at least in “House of Cards,” we are – what can I say? — morally complex. Maybe that’s the best we can hope for: to serve as the tiniest pinpoint of light in one of the darkest depictions of America you will ever see. Just don’t sleep with a source.