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Why are all the House of Cards journalists so bad at journalism?

Zoe and the gang can't report, lack ethics and have the common sense of a hacker's guinea pig. Somebody should fire them

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Janine and Zoe, in 'happier' times. Photograph: Melinda Sue Gordon/AP

(Warning: this piece contains multiple spoilers for [House of Cards season two](#). If you haven't seen episode five yet, you should probably come back later.)

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Journalists have a guilty pleasure. In fact, we have several. But the relevant one for now is that we enjoy seeing ourselves portrayed in TV and films far more than we should.

Reporters are a gift to a writer in a hurry: they have a ready excuse to stick their nose into whatever's going on, to upset or threaten protagonists, or to dig up some old secret from the past. So it's no surprise we pop up everywhere from the Bourne series to soap operas to House of Cards.

House of Cards has no fewer than four journalists as fairly major characters. The problem is, likeable as some of them may be, they're all awful at their jobs. Seriously, they suck. Here's the charge sheet against the House of Cards reporting series in turn.

We do this so that they might improve, should they decide to stop being fictional. Hey, we've all had a story land on the rails from time to time. It needn't be the end of the world.

Lucas Goodwin

Oh Lucas. You did so well at actually seeming like a pretty decent deputy editor, in that unlike Tom Hammerschmidt (we'll come to him later) you didn't decry blogs every five minutes, or call your star staff terrible things.



Lucas Goodwin. Photograph: Nathaniel E Bell/Netflix

You've even, as you tell us once every five minutes, done some Serious Reporting on corruption in the DC police force. By the end of season one, you were looking pretty good.

But oh man, it has gone downhill. We all understand you're having a tough time of it lately, but you do appear to have entirely taken your leave of all sanity.

If you're trying to get hold of your dead girlfriend's

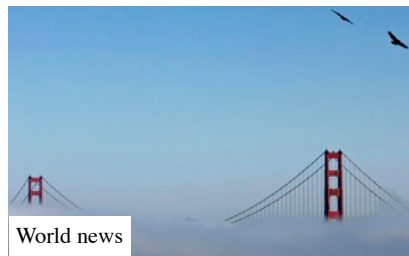
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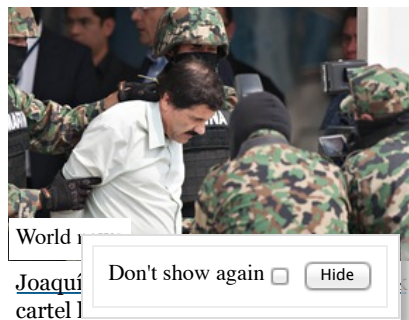
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phone records – yep, that last bit was kinda spoilery – there are easier ways than hacking the entire master server of her phone company. Like, much easier.

Did you think to perhaps look at her phone bills? Or, given she had an iPhone, just retrieve the backup from her laptop, which she wasn't carrying when she died? Or call the phone company (or get her parents to) and just ask for her logs?

No, no, you ruled out these things and decided to go onto the "deep web" and ask an anonymous chat forum for help. And instead of doing it quietly, you told them you thought the vice-president of the United States was a murderer. That's not the world's most subtle way of doing this. A final tip: there's not much point using state-of-the-art anonymisation technology if five minutes later you're going to record yourself on camera vowing to break the law.

Prognosis: Lucas, you've got a few years to work things out. I suggest some good media law training and a computer textbook or two. Good luck. You've got potential.

Janine Skorsky

Janine's had a pretty damn good career. As chief White House correspondent for the Washington Herald, she might've been a bit bitchy about defending her turf, and slow to respond to a challenger, but otherwise things seemed pretty OK. And given that her editor was a moron, fair play to her for switching to Politico-Buzzfeed-Slugline. Gutsy move.

Unfortunately, it seemed to be accompanied by some terrible off-camera accident which entirely removed her ability to sense a story. By the end of season one Janine, Zoe and Lucas had got some pretty damn good leads on what was going on with Underwood and Russo. They might not have nailed the entire plot, but Watergate – a trivial story by comparison – was told piece by piece in two years.

Janine, you seem to have forgot you have credibility as a reporter. People might believe your off-record sources. And you work for a site which we're told on at least four occasions gives you the ability to publish what you want, when you want.

So why not report Russo was dead in the passenger seat? Why not report that Frank Underwood's chief of staff drove off with a prostitute connected to Russo?

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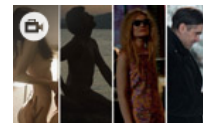


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And, getting to the nub of the issue, why not report that you were anonymously sent explicit pictures of Zoe Barnes about 10 minutes after she “accidentally” died? That might just have got even House of Cards terminally incurious police interested.

Prognosis: Good luck in Ithaca, Janine. Still not sure why you decided you were safe there, given you knew very nearly as much as Zoe did, but your mom’s house seems nice, I guess.

Tom Hammerschmidt

In season one, Tom Hammerschmidt is fired as the editor of the Washington Herald. This is the single best decision anyone makes in the entire run of House of Cards: Tom is a decent contender for the worst journalist ever.



Like many retired journalists, Tom is writing a book carrying a bag of beer. Photograph: Nathaniel E Bell

Let’s start with his firing. Having been ordered by his proprietor to do anything to retain the paper’s hot young talent Zoe Barnes, he has a contemptuous meeting with her, and calls her a cunt.

Yes, a reporter so nakedly ambitious and attention-seeking that she practically has “I WILL TWEET EVERYTHING YOU SAY” illuminated in neon over her head is called the unspeakable curse by her executive editor. You might guess what she does next.

Shortly afterwards, at the culmination of a tirade about journalistic ethics, which mostly seems to involve curing “blogs” (go take that debate to 2004, which is the last time anyone cared), he’s fired.

This doesn’t stop his journalism getting even worse. Shortly after his former deputy Lucas is arrested in an

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FBI sting, Tom agrees to do a profile. His vaunted journalistic ethics mean he won't just let Lucas write the whole thing from his own perspective, but he is more than happy to blindly turn over approval to his friend: if Lucas doesn't like the story, he'll spike it.

That's a pretty major ethical lapse in itself, Tom. What gives?

Luckily, Lucas kills the story, despite it being his last hope of getting the truth about Underwood out. I like to think it's because the story is terribly written. If you pause episode five at the point where Tom holds his copy up to the glass (yes, I really did this), you can read his article. It begins:

A deputy editor for the Washington Herald awaits trial for allegedly breaking into AT&T servers stored in a data center outside Washington DC.

Really, Tom? Really? That might be OK agency copy for an arraignment hearing, but you've left something out. Like that the reason he did it is because he suspects the *vice-president killed his girlfriend*. I think that might be worth putting in the lede, don't you? It's reportable as his motivation. Even you should know that.

Prognosis: Tom, I think I hate you. Your novel's going to be terrible.

Zoe Barnes

We have to take as a given that Zoe initially had basically no scruples whatsoever, and apparently no idea what she wants. She says she wants to cover politics, but turns down the White House beat. She says she wants to break news, but offers a source a deal in which she says she'll print anything he wants. For the record, this is not a deal serious journalists offer.



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Zoe: a journalistic contradiction. Photograph: Nathaniel E Bell/Netflix

To be fair to Zoe, she is given terrible advice. Janine, who prior to this point had seemed a good reporter, reassures Zoe in season one that “everybody” sleeps around to get stories (er, nope ... it’s purely recreational), and she shouldn’t “screw her way to the middle”.

Zoe really starts to pick up professionally towards the end of the season. She’s decided to do some actual reporting, find sources and ask hard questions. She’s even warned by Lucas and Janine that they’ve done scary stories, received death threats and should take precautions.

Zoe, deleting every record of your contacts with a source you’ve already conceded “crushes people” is probably not a good precaution. It’s a little bit like in a murder mystery when someone says “I know who the killer is! I’ll tell you after I visit the cellar alone for no reason.”

Still, I’m sure you’ve got plenty of time to work it out.

Prognosis: Also, Zoe – actually, I’m going to have to leave this here. A confidential source of mine’s just texted.

He wants to meet down on the DC metro for some reason, despite it having more CCTV cameras than any other place in America. Don’t want to keep him waiting, as he’s been pretty pissed off with me lately. BRB!

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Vincent Lima

10

22 February 2014 5:08am

You forgot to take on Ayla Sayyad -- the journalist who broke the story that led to the resignation of the president. Was she a great journalist because she uncovered and exposed the money laundering, influence peddling scandal, or was she terrible because she got manipulated?



JamesRBall Vincent Lima

7

22 February 2014 7:06am

She seems a good journalist, but she isn't a character who's realised in plot terms: she's just a vehicle for the story around which the second half of the season revolves. It's a shame, given they'd spent so much plot time fleshing out four journalist characters, that they didn't use one of those to deliver the device. But still...



Mukkinese

3

22 February 2014 8:55am

Perhaps if papers like the Guardian had features on poverty caused by benefits cuts, or the deaths of the disabled caused by ATOS, or the arbitrary overuse of sanctions against the unemployed, we might have more patience for this lightweight criticising of "fictional journalism".

As it is this comes across as a group of "journalists" who want to talk about anything, but the really difficult stuff...



JamesRBall Mukkinese

7

23 February 2014 2:34am

Happily, you can read extensive reporting on all the issues you've mentioned in the Guardian, which actually broke several of the revelations on these.

For benefits cuts, sanctions or ATOS assessments do take a look at work by Amelia Gentleman, Patrick Butler or Randeep Ramesh.

On sanctions and "workfare", Shiv Malik's taken the lead, though I've also chipped in a bit of stuff.

We've also spent a large chunk of the year doing major national security revelations based on the Snowden docs. It is nice, though, now and then, to do something a bit lighter – like a bit of TV reviewing...

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16 Feb 2014
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