

The Portrayal of Journalists in K-dramas Leaves an Impression on Viewers

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Abstract : As the popularity of K-drama viewership increases, the depiction of journalists' news gathering and distribution behavior in these series can have an impact on viewers' perceptions of journalism practices in Korea. Studies have shown that viewers are impacted both by their impressions of actual journalists delivering news, as well as by fictional portrayals of journalists they have seen. As mistrust in the media grows internationally, it is important to understand how journalists are viewed. K-dramas are an increasingly popular export and consumed across the globe. In 2021 Netflix had 74 million subscribers in the US/Canadian market, about 36% of its overall subscriber base, with an increase of about 16 million new subscribers during the pandemic. A Statista November 2023 survey found that K-dramas are moderately (27%) or very popular (41%). While Hallyu has grown increasingly in the past decade, between 2019 and 2021, viewership numbers for TV series produced in South Korea went up a staggering 200% in the U.S. Additionally, a 2023 KOCCA report about K-drama viewership in the U.S. found that, within the past year, male viewership became nearly equal to female viewership. This study evaluated how viewers perceive journalists and journalistic practices in South Korea as portrayed in eight K-drama series. Six in-depth interviews and two focus groups were conducted to evaluate viewer perceptions of journalism practices as portrayed in K-dramas. This study builds upon two previous research projects: a content analysis of the same eight K-dramas featuring journalists in a primary role and whose journalistic work is pivotal to the plot, followed by subsequent in-depth interviews with South Korean journalists. The K-dramas in the sample featured both print and broadcast journalists. Using clips from these K-drama series that featured journalistic practices, as well as pressure faced by journalists, participants were asked a series of questions about their impressions of journalists and journalism in South Korea and how realistic they perceived these portrayals to be. The participants were comprised of viewers who frequently watched K-dramas and occasionally/seldom watched K-dramas. The initial findings show that regardless of how frequently the participants watched K-dramas, they indicated that the presentation of the journalists seemed pretty realistic, and that the journalists behaved ethically. Participants felt their portrayal was relatable to their impression of how journalists behaved in the United States. This was also true in terms of the internal pressure shown in the clips toward journalists that featured behavior by the journalists' supervisors focused on supporting the media company's political and business positions. The amount of negative feedback toward the journalists from the general public, as shown in the clips, seemed less realistic to the participants. The idea of 'fake news' as a function of the news consumer's own personal beliefs, versus actual misinformation, resonated with the participants. Additional research is being conducted. Because Korea is an important source of news and information in East Asia, it is important to understand the potential perceptions of consumers and how they view journalistic practices in Korea.

Keywords : ethical journalism, K-drama, Korean journalists, viewer perceptions

Conference Title : ICMCMC 2025 : International Conference on Media and Mass Communication

Conference Location : Seoul, Korea, South

Conference Dates : April 17-18, 2025