COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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The concept of power and its representation in television seriality. The case of *House of Cards*

Abstract

To study how power is configured, this article analyzes the first and second seasons of the TV Series *House of Cards*. The behavior patterns of the main character, Frank Underwood, were tracked to analyze his foundations, the means used, the scope and the type of power he wields. The theoretical approaches of Dahl (1957) and French and Bertram (1959) were used for constructing a group of categories that served as a guide in the search for index units. Therefore, the methodology is based on units (Barthes, 1970) identified within the dialogues, the iconic composition, and the actions of the character. The results obtained reveal that in the first season argumentation as a means to exercise power predominates, and manipulation predominates in the second season. Also, the media repertoire is much broader in the first season when the main character builds the scenarios to achieve his goals. These findings contribute to the construction of a broader understanding of power and its exercise.

Keywords
***House of Cards*, the concept of power, units, character analysis, the exercise of power.**

1. Introduction

House of Cards (2013-2018) was the first Netflix production made based on the analysis of massive data generated by the platform's users. The big data gathered from the digital footprint of television fiction viewers produced precise figures on audience preferences, which predicted the show's success without resorting to other studies, such as audience measurement, niche studies, or focus groups (Carrillo Bernal, 2019). The formula pointed to the following elements: a character with distinct antihero qualities, a type of character created during the productions of the Third Golden Age of television seriality notable for being audacious, clever, and irreverent, represented by an actor, Kevin Spacey, who possessed the necessary attributes to cultivate a fandom phenomenon among audiences.

Another element is the partiality among spectators for the version of the same show produced by the BBC: a political drama focused on the highest levels of government and, finally, an audience willing to subscribe to a long-term reading pact, which favors the screening of a TV series in a binge, or marathon viewing, a phenomenon typical of the new audiovisual consumption fueled by viewership voracity (García Catalán *et al.*, 2019). This explains why Netflix released the first season, which consists of 13 chapters, in a single installment (Murolo & Aon, 2018; Carrillo Bernal, 2019; Pilipets & Winter, 2017). The story of

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House of Cards is based on the novel of the same name written in 1989 by Michael Dobbs and produced as a miniseries by the BBC in 1990. The Netflix version is about Democratic congressman Frank Underwood, whose hunger for power drives all his actions as he occupies increasingly more influential positions in the political sphere, beyond even the presidency of the United States.

The strings pulled by Underwood range from manipulating the press to openly threatening his opponents. He teams up with his wife Claire, who shares his thirst for power and willingness to use any means to achieve it (Donstrup, 2018; Martínez Lucena, 2015). Like many TV series about political fiction, there is an exploitation of the viewer's engagement with the character: "Frank Underwood is the antihero who is essentially an extreme antihero, one of those that make one feel empathy or sympathy for them and wonder what the hidden mechanisms are that make this possible" (Martínez & Cigüela, 2015, p. 18).

Beyond the popularity attained among audiences, made evident by the series six seasons, *House of Cards* marks a milestone among the TV series that address the issue of political power through the strength of its main character. The series was created under the Machiavellian premise of "the end justifies the means" and that advances, therefore, a plot arc in which the character is consistent in his relentless desire to gain power through the achievements, agreements, and tactics derived from unethical and obscure, but highly persuasive, moves: "Francis Underwood has managed to construct a certain identity that, for some, is the precise image of a good politician because he gets things done, and for others is the image of a ruthless human being" (Valdivieso, 2018).

The character's trajectory seeds the path that leads him to power with landmines: "Politics are a continuous quest for power and just as he managed to gain all that power someone else with the same abilities could make him fall" (Valdivieso, 2018). This constitutes one of the most definite success factors of the plot, strongly invigorated by the audacity of a character who, by way of breaking the fourth wall, among other narrative ploys, involves the viewer in the diegetic universe that allows the weaving of his actions, morally flimsy but very profitable in the creation of a process of fascination experienced by the viewer.

These elements make power the central theme of the series, in other words, not political management but the exercise of powers itself: over adversaries, co–religionists, women, and anyone else who aspires to reach an increasingly critical position in the U.S. governmental structure. This TV series has been analyzed in a significant number of scholarly articles (Donstrup, 2017, 2019; Klarer, 2014; Sorlin, 2016; Hackett, 2015a; Hackett, 2015b). There are works whose approach to emerging concepts has brought new insights to the discussion on TV shows and politics, such as that of Corner and Richardson, (2008), who classify the term "political culture" as a vehicle of meaning to understand the development of political structures and how political processes occur. However, the examination of the category of power in the show has been less scrutinized.

Vindicated by Political Science, the concept emerges as a valid way of approaching the phenomenon, which allows the inference of the links between the political sphere and popular culture. In this context, the role of television has been vital as a mediator in shaping the perception of concepts by citizens and their relationship with power structures. Another example is the case of *Borgen* (2010), analyzed by Padilla Castillo and Sosa Sánchez (2018). The series breaks the female stereotype by having a character the Danish prime minister and depicting how she wields power in an environment traditionally controlled by men. It is worth highlighting the television series whose leading characters are professional women, doctors, lawyers, journalists, and now, politicians. Claire Underwood is one of them.

The discursive elements of *House of Cards* point in their totality to the representation of power in various forms: from the imposing shots of buildings and monuments typical of Washington DC's visual identity and the sturdy musical cadence that complements them, to the network of relationships between the characters in which there is no variation in the

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subject, Frank, and in the object, power. The study of this character constitutes an excellent approximation to the analysis of power employed by individuals: furthermore, the construction of this character allows us to examine the role played by an authority in collaboration with it, as well as the range of methods to exercise it. For this reason, some claim that this show is not about politics, but about power "with a capital P" (Curtis, 2015). In this TV series, the political context in which the plot unfolds is a subset of the broader theme, which is power.

2. The character's strength

Frank Underwood, as a fictional character, is a construct that works within the limits of the text and acquires value and significance from the organizing principles of the story itself: "identifiable fictional beings, with an inner life, who exist as artifacts constructed for communicative purposes" (Mittel, 2015, p. 118). Such is the strength of the character, that according to Rampton (2015), Americans prefer as president the manipulative Underwood rather than Obama himself, in whose administration *House of Cards* premiered. His antihero attributes (Mittel, 2015), which the long interaction between character–viewer ends up vindicating, as well as his Machiavellian profile, bring him closer to the concept of sociopathic character, whose presence in fiction has been profitable: "...it could be argued that most cultures have idolized those ruthless individuals who live by their own rules" (Kotsko, 2016, p. 9).

In the case of a highly complex television serial, as has already been explained in numerous works on the actuality of the TV shows, we encounter narratives that require a long-range engagement from the viewer, which forces the creation of characters that resist the wear and tear of the passage of the seasons without losing their solidity and verisimilitude: "[...] the gestures performed by the actors are a dimension as or more serial than the plot, and not only because the acting palette modulates from one episode to another, but also because the links between the character and the viewer create a specifically serial structure of cyclical affections" (Garin, 2017, p. 27).

However, it is the consistency of the character that helps the audience establish a parasocial relationship[1]. The viewer imagines, discusses, intuits, or foresees what the character will do in the future or what he has done in the past, that is, the viewer's reading goes beyond the present of the story; he or she experiences the emotional states of the character and takes a stance against his actions (Mittel, 2015). In this sense, we are talking about projective empathy: "Normally, attractive characters, with prestige, leading a rewarding and successful life, are evaluated favorably. There is a positive relationship between the desire to be like the characters and the identification with them that occurs while watching entertainment series or movies" (Igartua & Muñiz, 2008, p. 34). In this process, mirror neurons, discovered in 1996 by neurosciences (Olson, 2008), allow the viewer to experience sensations and emotions triggered by the actions of others. This explains the breadth of fiction in terms of generating empathy with the characters.

Not all viewers, however, imagine that they are the character, especially if the said character does not match the spectators' gender, age, or condition, but what they can do is align their expectations to what they anticipate will happen to the character. This occurs within the limits of the narrative frame in the parallel universe created in every fictional story and understood as diegesis[2]. In it, the norms of a relationship that are established by the story

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[1]A parasocial relationship is understood as one which the viewer feels he has with a television character. The phenomenon has been studied by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl since the 1950s. Their studies are cited in: Miguel de Moragas Spa (2011). *Interpretar la comunicación. Estudios sobre medios en América y Europa.* Barcelona: Gedisa.

[2] Diegesis: a concept with Aristotelian roots that has been adopted by narrative and screenwriting fiction to define the internal, parallel universe in which stories are developed. Cited in David Bordwell (1985). *La narración en el cine de ficción.* Barcelona: Paidós.

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and the way the plot is articulated, are constrained, taking into account the narrative genre, the modes of narration, and the medium for which it is narrated.

The alignment of the spectator, which will lead to the development of loyalty towards the character, is generated from the identification of external marks: actions, dialogues, and representation of emotions through gestures, gazes, or movement. Given the impossibility of accessing the character's thoughts, those marks that accumulate throughout the narrative discourse and that constitute the signs of the character's composition and trajectory must be identified in the representation.

3. The concept of power

Power as a concept has been the subject of multiple theoretical discussions in disciplines such as political science, sociology, and social psychology. There is some consensus that power resides in the ability of individuals or social groups to *get things done*, especially when there is some kind of resistance. In social science and politics, power is the ability of an individual to influence the actions, beliefs, or conduct (behavior) of others. In sociology, this concept has its origins in the capacity to achieve ends or goals within the context of social relations (Parsons, 1963). This vision makes it possible to situate power as a specific mechanism that works to produce changes in the actions of an individual or collective unit in processes of social interactions. Therefore, from this perspective, social relations are fundamental for power to operate. Parsons (1963) illustrates this mechanism with the commitments and obligations that exist in societies; in other words, social contracts of various kinds where people respond to power.

Power has a coercive and consensual nature that does not function as a separate entity and is essential in politics. In the political arena, a plurality of factors that shape power converge, which is why different ways of exercising it can be found. In this sense, consent and coercion are fundamental in the study of power in politics. The article "The Concept of Power" by Dahl (1957) was the first contribution to the study of power in this field. This idea of power indicates that "A has power to the extent that he can make B do something that he would not otherwise do" (Dahl, 1957, p. 203). In this regard, power is a relationship between diverse actors: individuals, groups, offices, governments, or states, among others. According to the author, power can be exemplified by the relationship between a president and congress: both have their identifiable characteristics, interests, and values. Politics is, then, the field in which these elements interact to achieve a concrete result.

For this paper, the conceptualization developed by Robert Dahl (1957) will be used to understand how individuals exercise power in the political domain[3]. This conceptualization uses the following categories to study the power exerted by a specific actor: a) the source, domain, and base of power; b) the means and instruments used; c) the amount or extent of power; and d) the range or scope of power. The source or basis of an actor's power consists of all the resources, opportunities, acts, and objects that an individual can use to affect the behavior of another. In this sense, the bases of power are sustained in figures such as the constitutional veto, in the influence over the electorate, and in personal characteristics such as charisma, charm, and the capacity to please others[4].

Alternatively, the means or instruments may include threats or promises. For example, the promise of patronage, the threat of veto, the threat of appeal to the electorate, and the

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[3] The formal definition of power present in Robert Dahl's work has been described as incomplete by some authors (Lukes, 1974; 2015) who argue that it leaves aside the analysis of an actor's capacities to shape collectively held norms and values. However, in this study, the interest is in the identification of analytical categories that allow us to analyze the exercise of power by an individual actor. In this sense, the discussion centered on the collective is not the focus of this article.

[4] According to Dahl (1957), the basis of power is passive, that is, it is a matter of characteristics that are given and that require certain means or instruments to be exercised.

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exercise of personal charisma, among others. Therefore, the means or instruments constitute a mediating activity between the base of A and the response of B. For Dahl (1957), the base and the means are intimately related. In the case of a president, the office itself grants certain powers (the power base) that can be used to affect the behavior of others if accompanied by some other instrument, such as threat, promise, or the use of charisma. This is what is implied by the actual use of the bases of power.

The amount of power can be represented in terms of the probability that an actor, who uses certain means to enhance his power base, will not be inhibited by other actors (Dahl, 1957)[5]. Consequently, this category is directly related to the means used and the reach of power. It could be said that the amount of power a president has over the Senate is the probability that, for example, the Senate will not override his veto if the president promises a judgeship to a key group of senators. Finally, the scope or reach of power consists of the responses articulated by B. Thus, the scope of the president's power could include all those actions exhibited by an actor such as Congress, in passing or superseding a bill, not overriding a veto, holding hearings, among others.

In the meticulous study of the power exercised by a specific character, elements are required to illustrate the spectrum of power in distinct terms. In this sense, we consider it pertinent to use French and Bertram's (1959) theory of individual power, which takes as its starting point the effects of power on B as a psychological outcome. In this way, five different bases of power are identified: (a) reward power (A's ability to offer a reward to B); (b) coercive power (the exercise of power based on threats of coercion); (c) legitimate power (the exercise of power based on compatibility of shared values that cause B to perceive A as a legitimate subject to exercise power); (d) power of reference (which is based on B's identification with A); and, finally, (e) expertise-based power (which is based on B's perceived authority of A).

This paper focuses on the study of a character who is located in a specific political context and fulfills a political function that allows him to access resources used to influence the behavior of others. To the extent that the main interest lies in the power exercised by a specific actor and not in the social construction of power, the categories of source and means are the most useful for this analysis. Therefore, we will focus on the operationalization of the source of power and the means and instruments used. These two categories of analysis obtained from Dahl's (1957) conceptualization allow us to analyze the character, as a political actor with a certain base, who uses various tools to exert the power that his position affords him.

The category of quantity and rank of power will not be studied based on the character's personality. However, an approximation will be constructed from the actions of the subjects over whom power is being exerted, for example, a goal reached by using certain instruments and, thus, succeeding in making a subject act in a specific way. Likewise, while in Dahl's conceptualization (1957) the basis of power consists of all those characteristics that stem from the individual and the position he occupies, which allow him to wield power using certain means, French and Bertram (1959) unite bases and means in a single category that aims to differentiate the type of power that is exercised. Moreover, in that same power relationship that is formed when A has influence over B, subject B is considered as part of this relationship to the extent that he/she can perceive A as an expert and can identify or confer authority in different ways. In this sense, both views complement each other.

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[5] In Dahl's (1957) text, it is exemplified as follows: "there is a high probability that if the president promises a judgeship to five key senators, the senate will not override his veto."

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Table 1. The power of Robert Dahl (1957) and French and Bertram (1959).

Robert Dahl (1957)	French y Bertram (1959)
Bases of power - The actor's personal resources - The actor's contextual characteristics - Political role of the actor	**Power typology** Power of reward Coercive power Legitimate power Power of reference Power based on expertise
Means of exercising power -Threats -Promises -Use of personal characteristics	

Source: Own elaboration.

4. Signifying units

Fiction opens the door to a world of possibilities, not certainties. This world is governed by the principle of verisimilitude that grants causal validity to events. In the development of a fictional narrative, events are joined together in a cause–effect relationship that produces in the spectator the impression of a feasible chain of events (Matamoro, 2009; Spang, 1984; Genette, 1979; Metz, 1964; Todorov, 1972). Its study, therefore, facilitates the focus of cultural practices because they are filtered from a complex reality into a universe whose limits are more clearly defined.

Following the behavioral patterns of a character is an achievable task since the character has been fashioned by centering on his personality traits and his performative possibility. In this regard, a character is clearer than a person, because he responds to a certain degree of stereotyping, or to archetypical qualities granted by his social role, which stem from a selective activity of the marks that will determine his personality and behavior. The information that the viewer receives through these marks represents clear significant units that shed light on the way a character thinks. These units are called indices and describe the symbolic universe of the story. To approach the concept of power developed in the show and represented mainly through the character of Frank Underwood, we identify the indexical cues in the actions and dialogues of the character, as well as the cues of the power relationships he has with other characters through the visual composition.

In the *Structural Analysis of Narratives*, Roland Barthes (1972) establishes the existence of signifying units called catalytic functions, which are the indices that provide information about the character's thought processes, temperament, and intentions. By dividing the story, we obtain segments of the narrative discourse. In this universe, we discriminate as "functions" those units that correlate with the action[6]. For Propp (1971), the functions define the actions of the characters concerning the development of the plot, as catalysts, they have a chronological function (García Landa, 1998).

The second class of units of an integrating nature is the index units, which are not themselves an act that complements another but is instead personality cues about the characters, their identity, atmospheres, etc. These cues are semantic units since they refer to meaning, not to an operation determined by the antecedent-consequent relation. "Indices encompass another classical distinction: functions imply metonymic narratives. The Indices, the metaphorical narratives; the first corresponds to the functionality of doing and the second to the functionality of being" (Barthes, 1972, p. 19).

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[6] The clear example that Barthes offers us is the purchase of a pistol by a character that has a correlate in its subsequent use, which allows for the development of the plot.

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Indices require "deciphering" on the part of the viewer or reader, who has to resort to his or her cultural references to construct the meaning of the index and thus understand the character's traits or the atmosphere in which he or she is acting. Identifying the indices in a complex and polyphonic story like the audiovisual one implies their prior classification and the determination of what type of indices to look for (Lizarazo, 2005). Thus, in this paper, we will differentiate the linguistic indices, present in the character's dialogues, and the behavioral ones, derived from his attitudes and actions concerning the categories of power that were obtained for this study.

Through this methodology, it is also possible to identify the indices that the composition of the image allows us to visualize; for example, certain power relations that are understood when reviewing elements such as the shot, the angulation, and the disposition of the characters within the frame. According to the constructivist psychology of perception, "...seeing is not a passive absorption of stimuli. It is a constructive activity involving very rapid calculations, stored concepts, and various purposes, expectations, and hypotheses." (Bordwell, 1985, p. 32).

5. Methodology

Twenty-six episodes of the series *House of Cards* were analyzed, corresponding to the first two seasons. The average length of each episode is 54 minutes. These two seasons were chosen because they set the tone for the subsequent development of the plot. In other words, they comprise the narrative corpus in which the character deploys his performative resources to achieve power. In season 1, Frank Underwood establishes the necessary ties in Congress and the White House to gain access to the Vice Presidency. In season 2, he manages to weaken President Garret Walker until he has no option but to resign, allowing Underwood to access the presidency, the highest position available in the political terrain. The categories and indicators used to evaluate how the power exercised by the character under analysis is configured are presented in the following table (Table 2).

Table 2. Analysis categories.

Category	Indicators
Bases of power	-Personal resources of the character: elements of the construction of the character's temperament and personality. -Contextual characteristics: elements that facilitate the power relationship and that go beyond the character and his position. -Political function of the actor: everything that facilitates the character's exercise of power and that depends on his political position.
Means	-Threats -Argumentation -Proximity -Agreeableness -Promises -Manipulation -Comprehension -Provocation -Intimidation -Assessment

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Type of power	-Reward power: What does A offer to exercise power over B? -Coercive power: What coercive resources does A use to exercise power over B? -Legitimate power: What values do A and B share so that B perceives the power exercised by A as legitimate? -Referent power: How does B identify with A? Expertise-based power: How does B perceive A's authority?
Scope and quantity	The specific action that B performed due to A's influence is recorded.

Source: Own elaboration.

These categories made it possible to locate the framework in which the action of power takes place. For the first category, a scene in which all the indices that showed the character employing his resources to exploit his position as a source of power was chosen. The indices are fundamentally linguistic (dialogues) and behavioral (actions), although on occasions it was possible to gather some visual indices in terms of the composition of the frame. The second, on the other hand, captures the broad spectrum of resources used by the character to exert power. Moreover, the third category depicts the configuration of the power relationship. Finally, the fourth category seeks to capture the concrete outcome that is derived as a result of the exercise of power. All of the categories were recorded in a codebook in which each indexical unit was captured.

6. Results

Twenty-nine and twenty-two indices were identified in the first and second seasons, respectively. In their most general configuration, these indices share some similar characteristics, which are described below. The linguistic indices in the marks of the concept of power in Frank Underwood's character constitute the most important source of information for determining the means he uses to wield power. They are usually expressed directly to the camera, breaking the limits of diegesis. These types of actions subtract transparency from the enunciation (Lizarazo, 2005) by integrating the viewer into the character's world and generating certain complicity and empathy with him.

The development of the plot is strongly supported by the dialogues. We hardly see the characters in places other than the offices where they discuss and decide their actions. The saturation of dialogue leaves an imprint of verisimilitude on the discussions that take place in the circles close to the presidency, which provide glimpses of the global context and the complicated relations of the United States with other countries, such as China, or with certain social sectors, such as the unions. This is why the linguistic indices in the show are the common thread that joins the rest of the signifying units. Some examples are presented below:

T1.E1. "*We're in the same boat now, Zoe. Be careful not to capsize it. I can only save one of us."
A dialogue* developed with Zoe, the journalist who pursues an alliance with him, both in front of a painting in a gallery, and two strangers who coincide in a public space (visual index). The action is framed by the act of handing Zoe the Education Bill prepared by his rival, Blythe, to pave the way for the imposition of his proposal.

T1E2. "*Cathy, if you don't like the way the table is set, turn it over."* Dialogue with Secretary of State Catherine Durand. Both are seated facing each other in the office room, with no hierarchy of who occupies the desk (visual index). The dialogue triggers Catherine Durand to confront the Chinese government despite the president's refusal.

The construction of the image responds to the principles of an audiovisual language that we could call canonical: the steady camera, the shots outlined according to the action, generally without angulation (the combination of the general shot as an establishing shot, the common use of over shoulder and field against field in fixed camera). Likewise, the color

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palette is sober and balanced, opting for neutral tones. The arrangement of the characters concerning the frame is the clearest index of their power relations: Frank and Walker are usually seated or standing facing each other without any layout that suggests the authority of one over the other.

Dialogues, action, and image are consistent throughout the two analyzed seasons. Table 3 describes the frequency of the indices in the first category of analysis (the bases of power). As shown, Frank Underwood's power base is strongly founded on his resources, fundamentally on his ability to convince, his charms, his manipulative abilities, and on his talent to induce trust. This corresponds to 82.8 percent of the indices in the first season and 45.5 percent in the second. It is pertinent to highlight that the gathering of privileged information and the audacity to carry out high-risk actions are also important elements: "He possesses supreme astuteness in the political arena, which allows him to move quickly from congressman to president of the United States. His success and ability to come out on top of all disputes in the Senate, Congress, and the White House are more than evident episode after episode" (Martínez Lucena, 2015, p. 29).

Although the actor's attributes are his main source of power, the power exerted by the main character does not occur in a vacuum. In addition to the typical characteristics of the political environment in which the actions take place and the power base granted by the authority of his office, there are also contextual elements determined by the individual motivations and interests of other characters that are exploited by Underwood to set the stage for the achievement of his goals. For example, the desire of the Republicans to win the amendment of the Retirement Act or the need of Jaqueline Sharp to establish herself in a preponderant place by accepting to replace Underwood in the leadership of the chambers (see Table 3).

Table 3. Bases of power.

Bases of power	First season		Second season	
Personal resources	24	82.8 %	10	45.5 %
Contextual characteristics	5	17.2	8	36.4
Political function	-	-	4	18.1
Total number of indices	29	100	22	100

Source: Own elaboration.

The analysis makes it possible to account for a diversity of means for exerting power. Table 4 shows the results of this category of analysis. Although there is an overuse of traditional means such as threats, promises, and manipulation, the capitalization of other means such as argumentation, understanding, flattery, and provocation can also be observed. In the first season, the use of argumentation as a way of exercising power predominates (8 of the 20 indices), followed by manipulation (6 indices), threats (5 indices) promises (4 indices), appraisal (2 indices), and with one index, closeness, understanding, and intimidation. On the other hand, in the second season, the use of manipulation predominates (in 13 of the 22 indices), followed by argumentation (5 indices), threat (3 indices), and promise (1 index).

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Table 4. Means.

Means	First season		Second season	
Threat	5	17.2%	3	13.6%
Argumentation	8	27.6	5	22.7
Proximity	1	3.45	-	-
Agreeableness	1	3.45	-	-
Intimidation	1	3.45	-	-
Manipulation	6	20.7	13	59.1
Promise	4	13.8	1	4.6
Provocation	1	3.45	-	-
Assessment	2	6.9	-	-
Total indices	29	100	22	100

Source: Own elaboration.

The repertoire of means utilized is much broader in the first season when the character creates various scenarios to achieve his objectives. This repertoire of resources allows him to configure a range of power situations that transcend coercive influence. While in the first season nine different means were found, in the second season only four were located. In both seasons, the use of argumentation predominates over all other means of exercising power.

Table 5 shows the results of the third category of analysis (type of power). These types of power are more diversified in the first season than in the second. In a variety of indices, a formation of legitimate power that is based on the presence of shared values is observed. The character often uses the idea of the good of the Nation with the president to get him to make certain decisions that are favorable to him. The manifestation of legitimate power is more evident in the first season (in 37.9% of the indices), while in the second it is practically absent. It is relevant to point out that power is built by long-lasting relationships that have shared values at their core since this allows the actor to "prepare the ground" for the future. Such is the case, for example, of the alliance created with Catherine Durand as Secretary of State. In the second season, on the other hand, the use of coercive and rewarding power predominates, since the main character already occupies a critical position in the White House.

Table 5. Type of power.

Type of power	First season		Second season	
Legitimate power	11	37.9%	1	4.5%
Coercive power	10	34.5	9	40.9
Power of reward	4	13.8	9	40.9
Power based on expertise	3	10.3	-	-
Power of reference	1	3.5	3	13.7
Total	29	100	22	100

Source: Own elaboration.

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The series allows us to discuss and analyze in depth what the foundations of legitimate power are. This goes beyond the final result and the motivations of those who wield power. Regardless of the resources used to exert it, the legitimacy of power is based on the real or imaginary perception of a set of shared values. Interestingly, despite the manipulation employed by the character, the actions of others are generally not triggered by coercion.

An image that shows a powerful politician making a deal from a privileged position with a young up-and-coming journalist to obtain favorable media coverage, might suggest that the power exercised in this situation is not legitimate. However, the fundamental element that shapes this relationship is not coercion, nor the renunciation of cherished personal values (such as journalistic ethics), but a value that both hold very dearly: ambition. Frank and Zoe's relationship, which begins in the first chapter, is a clear example of this.

Throughout the first season, power manifests itself in situations that provide an apparent sense of balance in which all parties involved win. Examples of this are the relationship with journalists Zoe, Peter Russo, and with Donald Blythe. These three elements are what shape the foundations of his true power base and provide significance to his main goal in the first season: to reach the vice presidency of the United States. As the first season progresses this element is simplified, for example, when the character builds a relationship with Linda based on the apparent benefit that the association would bring to both. However, Linda's gain is not configured on the same ground and transcends rather to the personal realm.

There are other ways in which Frank legitimizes his power. The shared value scenario is created by himself most of the time through the overexploitation of his skills. This does not make the powerless legitimate; on the contrary, it allows him to achieve more. For example, the ability to make a veteran politician feel unfit for office and renounce his political ideals is an example of this situation (T1C2). When Donald willingly gives up his lifelong dream of offering a different perspective in the creation of an educational policy for the country, one also observes an exercise of power that is not bidirectional. The most important element of this scene is that, in return, Frank gives him the necessary validation which reinforces the power relationship: he expresses that he will accept to be in charge only if he can come to him for advice.

Furthermore, there are elements of the context that also facilitate the power relations observed. The interlocutor takes on special relevance in this regard, since there is an appeal to the deep desires for power, fears, vision of the world, and to the most fundamental values of the other. Thus, a power relationship that seems to be unidirectional and that ends with the action of the other, acquires many nuances. Consequently, we are before Frank Underwood's clearest manipulation of power: exploiting the desire of the other to convey his interests, using resources such as alluding to his intelligence or audacity, and moving the mechanisms of his pride that trigger the action. Such is the case of Cathy Durand confronting the Chinese government despite her knowledge that economic relations with that country were extremely strained.

Among the means used for wielding power, manipulation stands out, which consists of eliminating the argumentative resources of others and imposing a position as the most viable one. It is recurrent in the two seasons analyzed that Frank extracts a decision out of someone and then uses this decision to attack. This provokes a confrontation of power between the other characters, which in the long run weakens them and contributes to Underwood's strength.[7] The extent of the activation of Frank Underwood's resources and means of power triggers a series of elements that configure throughout the plot the ideal scenario for him to

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[7] The series constructs a rather porous presidential authority, represented by the dubious Garren Walker, always involved in Underwood's Machiavellian networks, so the clearest scope of the latter's exercise of power will consist of delegitimizing the president's image by paving the way to achieve the presidency without a single vote in his favor (Curtis, 2015).

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reach the highest position in the White House and become, as declared on several occasions in the show, the "most powerful man in the free world."

The extent of his resources comprises the promotion of key figures in the cabinet and Congress who will become his political capital in subsequent seasons, as well as the decisions taken by Congress in terms of amendments approval, such as the Education Law or the Retirement Law, promoted by Underwood through the resources and which help him to activate loyalties in certain sectors of the population. Another clear galvanization of resources is the use of the press. In this regard, the series portrays a plausible relationship between journalism and political power. In the context presented in the series, the annihilation of journalists who have been identified as threats, like Zoe Barnes and Lucas Goodwin, is a resource that borders on obviousness but works within the internal logic of the story. In the second season, this relationship becomes subtler as it consists of the leakage of information so that a shrewd journalist can detect the perverse relationships between big capital, embodied in the character of Raymond Tusk, and political parties, which is a potent input to generate scandal and weaken power structures.

7. Conclusions

The *House of Cards* TV series is an emblematic case study for analyzing how power is configured and wielded within a political context. This case study allowed us to integrate the theoretical approaches of political science (Dahl, 1957) and applied social psychology (French & Bertram, 1959). As they are complementary, these two theoretical positions work adequately to analyze power in an individual context. It is important to note that for Dahl (1957) the basis of power and how it is exercised are intimately related. This is illustrated by the powers granted by political offices.

However, in the series, we observe that Underwood's power rarely rests solely on his position. The use of his attributes predominates, and his political position ends up being a circumstantial characteristic. In this way, French and Bertram's (1959) theoretical approach complements the spectrum by allowing us to add elements that are useful for analyzing interactions between characters, resources, values, and identification. Likewise, this approach makes it possible to better outline the use of personal characteristics to generate effects on the subjects over whom power is exercised.

Analyzing the concept of power in television fiction makes it possible to contribute to its understanding because it highlights the exercise of power by a given character. The format helps to delve into the contextual elements, such as the scene, the motivations of the actors involved in the relationship, and the results and scope of their actions. The study of power is usually simplified in a relationship between A and B, where the latter does something he or she would not have done without this input. This starting point enabled us to identify a situation in which power is exercised. However, it was also important to analyze B's motivations, values, and expectations, as well as the situational framework of the action. In this way, the integration of two theoretical visions used as platforms to study the power scenes added greater complexity to the analysis.

This augmentation of complexity in the analysis allowed us to account for the nature of power in the TV series. Power has a coercive and consensual nature. These two characteristics complement each other. What does it mean to study consent in a power relationship? Undoubtedly, it is essential to know the situation, the context, and the actors involved. Frank Underwood's exercise of power is sufficiently nuanced to affirm that it is not a power that can be reduced to coercion. This makes the source of power granted by the benefits of his political position secondary and blurry while bringing the substantial source of power that is sustained and nourished by the strategic use of his characteristics to the forefront.

In the series, Frank stars in many scenes in which he has the opportunity to wield power. However, not all the achieved results have the same impact in the short, medium, and long

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term. Knowing the outcome of the power situation and the scope of the concrete action that is accomplished in political terms, allows us to advance in the composition of an understanding of power that is much broader than the usual knowledge: An influence B. Therein lies the main contribution of this article.

The development of the narrative of *House of Cards* follows a linear dramatic structure, in which the discursive resources are articulated classically. The image is built from an iconicity that always refers to the relationships between the characters and their environment: the large government buildings are exploited with open shots when an ideologically marked context of power is required, but in general, the camera is set according to the scene and the hierarchy of the characters. There is no audacity in the language, but plenty of eloquence, which undoubtedly represents an important attraction for a large audience. The audience encounters an accessible narrative within an attractive story.

Frank Underwood's character, although very appealing in his linguistic richness and audacity, is quite linear. This should not be understood in a critical sense, but from the clarity of his motivations: he does not surprise, he does not doubt, and he does not change his scale of values. Equally, the plot twists modify the lines of action of the characters around him, but not his own. The context in which he exercises power can be considered complex, especially due to the overexploitation of dialogues with a strong semantic load that refer to the political, diplomatic, social, or economic problems faced by the White House. Frank Underwood's use of power becomes more evident and even predictable once the mechanisms underlying his actions have been discovered.

The TV series represented a risky bet for Netflix since they produced the entire season and uploaded it in a single installment to the streaming platform. Although the predictive model derived from the analysis of the users' data offered a slight assurance that it could meet the public's expectations regarding a show of this nature, not making a pilot know the audience's response is a decision that breaks the production paradigms of any audiovisual company. Undoubtedly, its success transcended the barrier of mere entertainment to become, according to the Reuters survey, a reference to U.S. politics and the way the president conducts himself. The fact that Obama declared himself an admirer of the series, according to what was published by the newspaper *El País* in 2014, is a symptom of the reach of *House of Cards* in the creation of a generalized concept of power in a context in which the United States is, without a doubt, the emblem of what we can consider an empire by today's standards.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the series ended unexpectedly, as a result of several sexual harassment scandals surrounding Kevin Spacey, which forced the screenwriters to kill the character and favor the rise of Claire Underwood as the new protagonist who embodies a sort of Lady Macbeth (Asli Tunc, 2020) by exploiting interpersonal relationships to fuel her ambition. Claire recaptures fundamental traits of Francis' character, such as speaking to the camera directly to assert her convictions about pain, revealing the signs of the coldness with which she views life. Claire's plot arc in the series transitions from a woman running a charitable foundation in the shadow of her husband to seeking, with similar and some renewed methods, the path to the White House. In this sense, the underlying concept of power is the same as in the first seasons, flavored with the narrative resources typically attributed to a female character.

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