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Not Necessarily the News: Does Fictional Television Influence Real-World Policy Preferences?

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In 1992, when vice president of the United States Dan Quayle lashed out against fictional television personality Murphy Brown for glamorizing single motherhood and mocking the importance of fathers, many observers found the public dialogue surrounding this incident absurd. After all, Quayle was criticizing the actions of a *fictional* character in a weekly sitcom, not a real person (see, e.g., “Dan Quayle,” 1992). Likewise, in 2005 when a vice president of the National District Attorneys Association railed against the drama *In Justice* on the editorial pages of the *New York Times*, he was complaining about a *fictional* television drama, not about events that had actually happened (Marquis, 2006). Political leaders and the general public often express concerns about the influence of fictional programming on

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public attitudes toward real-world political issues (Montgomery, 1990). Nonetheless, purely dramatic fictional television has been largely ignored by scholars interested in the political impact of mass media; studies of media and politics focus almost exclusively on news and public affairs programming.

There is a variety of explanations for what might be considered an oversight, but foremost among them is an assumption that fiction is processed differently from nonfictional content. In other words, people store information about the world that is implied by fictional programming in a way that compartmentalizes it from information about the world that comes from nonfiction sources (see a critical discussion of explanations that suggest a “toggle” between fiction and nonfiction, in Gerrig, 1993, pp. 201–207). When forming political attitudes, viewers presumably discount what is known to be dramatic fiction and rely strictly on information about the real world, using only the latter in forming perceptions and policy preferences.

Although this assumption seems plausible at one level, scholars also pointed out a contrary expectation. People “often search for the real-world point” of works of fiction (Gerrig, 1993, p. 201), and spontaneously draw on television imagery and fictional television characters in conversations about current events (Delli Carpini & Williams, 1994, 1996). There are other theoretical arguments predicting that fictional television content should have as much, if not more, influence on the formation of political preferences as nonfiction television. The sheer amount of fictional content viewers consume makes it a likely source of information that affects political and social views. Americans spend more than one third of their free time each week watching television—much more than they spend socializing, reading, or participating in religious activities (Robinson & Godbey, 1999, chap. 9). What is less often noted is that the time is overwhelmingly spent watching entertainment programming: sitcoms, game shows, reality shows, and dramas, but *not* the evening news, political talk shows, or public affairs programming (Nielsen Media Research, 2008). Although we do not address the *relative* amounts of influence from these kinds of content in this study, we ask whether fictional content can have consequences for politically relevant attitudes and beliefs. Does it matter what kinds of fictional content Americans watch regularly on television? Or does such content function purely as a diversionary enjoyment, without any consequences?

POLITICAL INFLUENCE FROM TELEVISION NARRATIVES

To date, there is scant empirical evidence on which to base predictions about the influence of *fictional* television content on *politically* relevant attitudes. Numerous studies have offered interpretive readings or analyzed the content

of fictional television for its portrayals of minorities and women (e.g., Dines & Humez, 2002; Holtzman, 2000), but little is known about the potential effects of portrayals of these fictional characters on attitudes toward related public policies. Studies adhering to media effects traditions, such as cultivation, tested primarily either the influence of viewing fiction on outcomes other than policy attitudes, or the effects of *nonfiction* genres, such as late-night talk shows, mock news, and documentaries on political attitudes.

A large body of research on “cultivation effects” argues that when prime-time television is viewed daily over time for decades, it cultivates symbolic representations of power that promote deference to police authority—and by extension, to state authority in general (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). “Television reality” suggests a mean and scary world from which citizens need protection; viewers are thus encouraged to sacrifice personal liberty for individual safety. Cultivation theory was the first research agenda to focus explicitly on political effects from fictional television content, yet these early observational studies proved less than robust when examined as multivariate causal relationships (e.g., Doob & MacDonald, 1979; Hirsch, 1980).

Recent advances in cultivation theory provide a more general explanation of how fictional content may cultivate inaccurate beliefs about the state of the world: exemplar accessibility (see Brosius, 2003; Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Gibson & Zillmann, 1994). For heavy viewers, reality as portrayed on television is more accessible than reality in the world around them. Examples of both characters and behaviors drawn from televised content are thus more vivid and salient than real-world examples (Busselle, 2001; Busselle & Shrum, 2003; Shrum, 2002). Unfortunately, however, most studies of cultivation bear only indirectly on political attitudes. Although television can cultivate skewed perceptions of the real world, it is not clear when or how those perceptions translate to political attitudes.

On the other hand, a growing body of research has evidenced the politically relevant effects of *nonfiction* genres other than hard news: documentaries, soft news, late-night talk shows, and mock news as Jon Stewart’s *The Daily Show*. Viewing Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* documentary film, for example, precipitated greater ambivalence toward George W. Bush among Republicans (Holbert & Hansen, 2006) and was associated with greater negativity toward Bush, even after selective exposure was taken into account (Stroud, 2007). TV talk shows, such as *Oprah*, *The Tonight Show*, or *Late Night*, in which politicians appear on occasion, increase salience of campaign issues and consistency between self-described preferences and vote choice, among less-informed (Baum & Jamison, 2006; Moy, Xenos, & Hess, 2005, 2006). Viewers of *The Daily Show*, a distinct audience (Young & Tisinger, 2006), were more likely to rate negatively the leading candidates

in the 2004 presidential race, and expressed less faith in the electoral system and news media, compared to an experimental group who viewed *CBS Evening News* (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Trait-ratings of the 2000 presidential contenders, such as Bush's intelligence and Gore's charisma, were not directly associated with *Daily Show* viewing, but Young (2004, 2006) found heavy exposure increased the probability of mentioning Bush's "lack of intelligence" among the least informed viewers.

A number of studies have directly examined the political impact of fictional television specials or movies, with mixed results. For example, Sigelman and Sigelman (1974) found that the movie *The Candidate* failed to produce the anticipated increases in political cynicism. On the other hand, *The Day After* was found to influence attitudes toward nuclear war, at least according to one study (French & van Hoorn, 1986). A more methodologically rigorous study showed effects strictly on levels of *information* about nuclear war—but not on political attitudes (Feldman & Sigelman, 1985). The mini-series *Amerika* (which purported to show what life would be like 10 years after a Soviet takeover of the United States) produced more negative attitudes toward the Soviet Union and greater support for "Cold War" values among its viewers (Lenart & McGraw, 1989).

Still other studies have shown no evidence of direct attitudinal effects in the case of viewing *The West Wing*, though investigators found that viewers were more likely to base their judgments of politicians on the specific issues primed by serial drama and entertainment programs (see, e.g., Holbert, Pillion, et al., 2003; Holbert, Shah, & Kwak, 2003, 2004; Holbrook & Hill, 2005). In a notable exception, Slater, Rouner, and Long (2006) found that individuals who watched a crime drama reported more support for the death penalty than those who did not. Unfortunately, comparing those primed by the program to think about vicious crimes to those who were not makes it difficult to know whether it is the implication of the fictional storyline that is important or simply the priming of thoughts about brutal crime. With few exceptions, therefore, the kinds of television programs that have been studied as potential sources of political effects are variations on news: talk shows, mock news, and docudramas—programs that make certain claims as to the political relevance of the situations they portray. There has been little systematic study of influence from bona fide fictional programs, that is, programs that make no claims to realism, documentary value, or historical accuracy.

WHY FICTIONAL NARRATIVES MAY MATTER

Despite social scientists' general neglect of fictional narratives as sources of policy-relevant information, the idea that fiction may have consequences for

political views has been around for a very long time. One need only think of fictional novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which is widely credited with crystallizing sentiments leading to the American Civil War¹ (Green & Brock, 2005, p. 117; Kaufman, 2006, pp. 18–19). Of course, it may or may not have actually played a role in producing this outcome. Nonetheless, if fictional narratives on the printed page are assumed to have potential political influence, why not televised fictional narratives?

For a variety of reasons, we suggest that fictional programs can and probably do exert political influence that goes beyond simply reflecting the already-dominant cultural and political attitudes. One reason to expect such an impact has to do with the amount and nature of nonfiction *content* that is consumed by Americans. A second category of considerations relate to the kind of *people* who view fictional (as opposed to nonfictional) television content. A third reason to expect impact involves expectations about how people *process* dramatic fictional content, and this becomes the focus of our empirical investigation.

Television Content

In addition to its popularity, fictional programming—precisely because it is fiction—is not obliged to cover the range and diversity of political positions on issues, as do most (though not all) nonfiction news programs. As Brock, Strange, and Green (2002) pointed out, the producers of fictional content are typically absolved of responsibility for any potential impact their content may have, because they do not claim to provide realistic depictions of the world. In most contexts involving controversy, there are sources supplying information favorable to each of the two or more sides in a debate. Within fictional narratives, however, it is more likely that coverage of any given controversy may not be balanced by other voices.

Recent trends in the content of fictional programming also make it increasingly worthy of research attention. Television observers have been experiencing an increased blurring of boundaries between fiction and non-fiction programming. Such programs have increasingly flagged their plots

¹*Encyclopedia Britannica*, for example, lists Stowe as “the author of the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which contributed so much to popular feeling against slavery that it is cited among the causes of the American Civil War. . . . With sales of 300,000 in the first year, the book exerted an influence equaled by few other novels in history, helping to solidify both pro- and antislavery sentiment.” In addition, according to Stowe's biographers, Abraham Lincoln himself said upon introduction, “Why, Mrs. Stowe. . . . So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!” (Stowe & Stowe, 1911/2005, p. 203).

as “ripped from the headlines” and thus have drawn selectively from ongoing news stories for inspiration for their fictionalized plots. In addition, ostensibly nonfiction programs have increasingly utilized fictionalized recreations of actual events in telling their stories to the public.²

Television Viewers

In addition to the amount and nature of fictional content, its lack of compunction to present a balanced story, and its tendency to mimic recent real-world events, it is also worth considering how television viewers are likely to approach fictional content differently from news content. Heavy viewers of news and public affairs programs tend not to be the same people as those viewing large quantities of fiction (Prior, 2005). The former viewers tend to be heavily partisan, well informed, and politically involved, all traits that make them less easily influenced by most media messages. Heavy fiction viewers, on the other hand, do not share these same characteristics.

Dramatized fictional portrayals of social controversies have the potential to induce otherwise politically inattentive citizens to consider public policy issues and to form or change attitudes toward them (Baum, 2002). Programs may prove politically potent because viewers watching fictional television are not doing so for purposes of information so much as for enjoyment. As a result, they may be less likely to resist potential political messages in the way they might if viewing a news program or documentary. But it remains to be seen whether fictional television matters for mass opinion, especially for political issues that are guided by long-term partisan loyalties.

Processing of Fictional Television

In addition to characteristics of its content, and of its viewers, we suspect that the *process* by which fictional programs influence political views also may be different. Unlike most news content, fictional drama has the potential to produce tremendous emotional and empathic reactions as a result of high levels of involvement in the storyline. Although news programs—particularly the magazine variety—may attempt to create empathy and emotional involvement in the lives of their real world “characters,” few news programs have sufficient air time to do so. Dramatic elements such as

²For example, on the fifth-anniversary commemoration of the 9/11 attacks, ABC aired in prime time the miniseries *The Path to 9/11*, a dramatized account of events, loosely based on the 9/11 Commission Report, performed by professional actors. In this environment, 21st-century television viewers could easily be mixing up what is supposedly real and what is fiction (Delli Carpini, 2006).

narrative progression and character development serve to involve the viewer in ways that reporting conventions often cannot. Serial programs, in particular, create viewer involvement with recurring characters' fictional lives (Zillmann & Bryant, 2002). Moreover, the plotlines in fictional narratives may be sufficiently long and complex that viewers are essentially "transported" into the story, thus temporarily losing sight of the fictional nature of the narrative. "Transportation" has been shown to facilitate persuasion in studies of print narratives, mainly because transportation stimulates feelings of empathy for characters in the story (Green & Brock, 2002).

Viewing the mediated misfortunes of others has been shown to induce empathic reactions on the part of the audience (Batson et al., 1997; Davis, Hull, Young, & Warren, 1987; Zillmann, 1991, 2006). Thus empathy toward a fictional character may facilitate persuasion toward the political lessons of the storyline, whatever that message may be. High levels of cognitive involvement may produce skepticism about the realism of any given program, or scrutiny of the believability of the plot. Conversely, emotional involvement may facilitate the process of influence from fictional television (Slater et al., 2006).

In summary, fictional narratives on television hold the potential for persuasive influence on real-world political views for a host of reasons involving their content and their viewers. Fiction is obviously more prevalent, and may be politically potent because it is less balanced in presentation of various sides of a controversy. In addition, viewers of fictional television are more likely to be politically uninformed and open to persuasion. Audiences of fictional television more likely include those with weakly held political views, whereas viewers of nonfictional content are more likely to have high levels of political knowledge and thus stronger opinions. Furthermore, fictional programs may influence viewers through a different process than nonfiction programs. Because viewers are watching as a source of relaxation and entertainment, they may be less resistant to this subtle form of persuasive influence relative to overtly political nonfiction television content. Dramas have greater potential to involve viewers emotionally in an ongoing storyline, and thus to encourage them to empathize with sympathetic characters who are wronged in various ways.

Hypotheses

We focus specifically on television programs that are known to be fictional in order to test the hypothesis that narratives suggesting a favorable depiction of some target will influence political attitudes in a positive direction relative to unfavorable depictions of the same target. Using an experimental design, we contrast positive and negative fictional portrayals of the criminal justice system in order to better understand the implications of fictional

plots for political opinions. In order to better understand the potential process of influence, we examine the hypothesis that it is emotional involvement in a fictional narrative that facilitates its influence. Thus, we also attempt to manipulate and measure the levels of empathy viewers feel for the protagonist in each plot. We test the following:

- H1: Television viewers who watch a positive fictionalized portrayal of the criminal justice system will be more positive about the system relative to those viewing a relatively negative portrayal.
- H2: High levels of empathy with the most sympathetic central character in the story will facilitate stronger effects on political attitudes in the respective direction suggested by the plots.

METHOD

To examine the potential impact of fictional television viewing on viewers' political attitudes, we designed a simple experimental study in which participants were exposed to a typical crime drama, one of the most popular of entertainment genres on fictional television. We chose this particular topic because of its prevalence on prime-time television and because of its potential relevance to political attitudes. Although criminals, police, detectives, lawyers and judges are frequent fodder for fictional programming, many issues involving the criminal justice system are also part of contemporary political debate. In addition, this topic should provide a relatively conservative test of whether fictional programming can influence political attitudes. Influencing attitudes about a relatively novel public policy issue should be relatively easy to accomplish given people's lack of strong pre-existing attitudes. But citizens are likely to have opinions about how much leniency our criminal justice system should be granting to suspects in order to ensure that innocent people are not wrongly convicted, or whether guilty suspects too often get off on technicalities.³

Research Design

The experimental design included four conditions in a 2×2 factorial design. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental conditions. The

³Impressions of the criminal justice system as either too harsh or too lenient can play into many policy-related attitudes. Should funds be used to build more prisons and incarcerate more people for longer periods? Should the death penalty be allowed? Are poor suspects put at a disadvantage because the lawyers appointed to defend those who cannot afford their own lawyers are less competent? All of these views are potentially influenced by fictional programming and are relevant to contemporary political attitudes.

central manipulation involved the portrayal of the criminal justice system implied by the storyline in the particular crime drama. We contrast episodes of the popular and long-running crime series *Law & Order*, one that *negatively* portrays the criminal justice system as failing citizens, and another that offers a more *positive* portrayal of the criminal justice system. In the positive storyline condition, participants viewed an episode of *Law & Order* in which the detectives worked long and hard and with great personal anguish to hold and charge a suspected child molester whom they strongly assumed was guilty. The drama revolves around the limited amount of time they may hold and interrogate this suspected molester, for whom they have insufficient evidence thus far. The dramatic tension comes from the detectives' race against time to gather evidence to charge the molester and the anguish of the detectives as they piece together their case while facing the prospect of putting him out on the street to strike again. The episode, titled "Rage" (Butters, Fazekas, & Campanella, 2005), continues to air regularly as a rerun.

Those assigned to the negative storyline condition viewed a different episode of the same program, in this case a storyline that highlighted the potential for error in the criminal justice system. This episode, titled "The Myth of Fingerprints" (Zelman, Kopp, & Platt, 2001), also continues to air in reruns. In this episode, a convicted murderer who already has served more than 10 years in prison turns out to be innocent. The justice system is depicted as ineffective because of a fingerprint expert who is all too eager to help police nab their current suspect despite a lack of solid evidence and because of the pressures on law enforcement officials to produce suspects quickly as a means of promoting their own careers. Although the innocent man is ultimately released, he has lost much of his life as a result of his long incarceration.

A second experimental manipulation probed the potential *process* of influence by which fictional programming may exercise its influence. Using a standard induction from psychological studies of empathy (e.g., Batson et al., 1997, p. 108), participants randomly assigned to the high empathy condition were instructed as follows: "You are about to watch an episode of the program *Law & Order*. One of the characters in the story is [Detective Elliott Stabler/Bobby Campbell] [See picture]. While you watch the program, imagine how [Detective Stabler/Bobby Campbell] feels about what has happened and how it has affected his life. Try to feel the full impact of what he has been through and how he feels as a result." In the low empathy condition, subjects were instead simply told, "You are about to watch an episode of the program *Law & Order*." If one of the reasons television programs with no basis in real events can influence political attitudes is because viewers are drawn into the story narrative by empathizing with sympathetic characters, then the effect of the positive and negative storylines

should be most pronounced in the high empathy conditions. Thus evidence in support of H2 would consist of a significant interaction between our storyline manipulation (positive vs. negative) and levels of empathy for the main character.

Participants

Adult participants (not students) were recruited through a temporary employment agency and through various civic organizations in Philadelphia, PA. All participants were paid for their participation in the experiment, and each filled out a pre-viewing background questionnaire, viewed television for 40 minutes, and then answered the posttest questionnaire. Data collection began on July 12, 2005, and ended on January 11, 2006. A total of 86 participants watched one of the programs, one person at a time.

Dependent Measures

The posttest-only design included several measures tapping attitudes and policy positions on criminal justice-related issues. These included perceptions of the fairness and effectiveness of the system; feelings toward police officers and trial lawyers; confidence in police, judges, the court system, and the criminal justice system more generally; support for policies intended to reduce crime; the death penalty; and leniency in prison sentences. The exact wording of these items is described in the appendix.

Controls

In addition to providing a variety of background and demographic characteristics of the participants, in the pretest we also measured empathy as a personality trait using Davis's (1980) Interpersonal Reactivity Index.⁴ Participants were presented with 14 statements and asked to indicate how well each statement described them. Seven of the statements form a subscale reflecting perspective-taking ability, the tendency to cognitively appreciate someone else's perspective (e.g., "I try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective" or "I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision"). Seven additional statements reflected empathic concern, that is, the tendency to

⁴The Interpersonal Reactivity Index is a validated measure of empathy in adults (e.g., Davis, 1980, 1987; Davis et al., 2004). It assesses individual differences in distinct dimensions of empathy, including empathic concern and perspective-taking ability. Its measurement properties include high internal consistency (α coefficients .70 to .78); high test-retest reliability (.61-.81 over a 2-month period; .50 to .62 over a 2-year period).

share emotionally others' feelings (e.g., "I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me" or "I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person"). Factor analyses of the items, using varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization, confirmed each scale was unidimensional and internally consistent. One factor explained 47% of the variance in the perspective-taking items (eigenvalue = 2.35, factor loadings above .60 and none below .40; Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$). Similarly, a single factor explained 39% of the variance in the empathic concern items (eigenvalue = 2.73; Cronbach's $\alpha = .74$).

Manipulation Checks

Given that our experimental stimuli were taken directly from actual television programs, and were not explicitly designed to portray the criminal

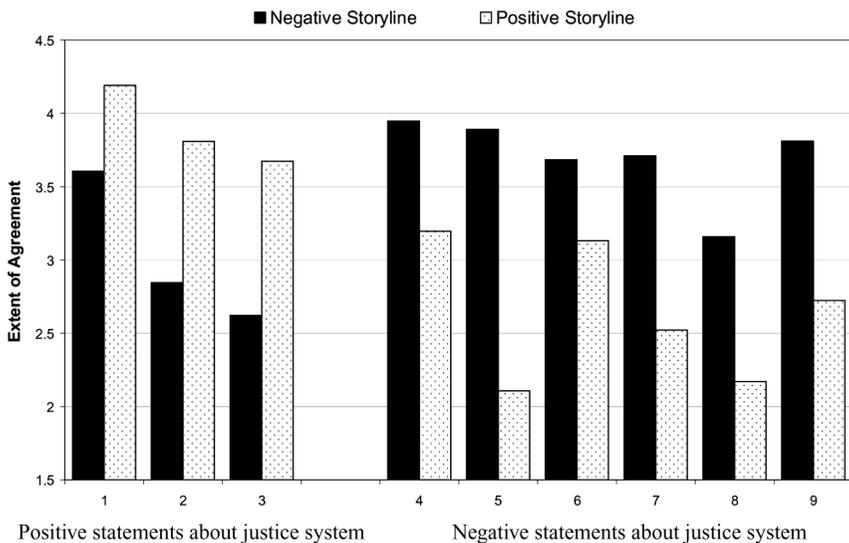


FIGURE 1 Storyline manipulation checks. According to the story in this TV program... *Positive statements*: 1. People working in the legal system were shown as hard-working and reliable; 2. Law enforcement officials can rely on their co-workers' judgment calls; 3. Most suspects are in all likelihood guilty. *Negative statements*: 4. The legal system was portrayed as likely to make mistakes; 5. The story made it seem as if some law enforcement officials are not honest; 6. The criminal justice system has many flaws; 7. Law enforcement officials are too quick to conclude a person is guilty of a crime; 8. Police officers are too eager to convict a person, rightly or wrongly, because it helps their professional career; 9. There is no guarantee that a person convicted of a crime actually did it.

justice system in a uniformly positive or negative manner, it was important to ensure that these manipulations were, in fact, viewed as intended. Toward that end, 10 statements in the posttest served as a manipulation check. We specifically asked respondents how the program they watched had portrayed the legal system, law enforcement officials, and so forth. Each of the statements assessing program content began with, "According to the TV program . . .," and these items were asked *after* the dependent variables of theoretical interest were assessed in order to avoid artificially calling attention to the message in the plot.

As shown in the left panel of Figure 1, positive statements about how the justice system was characterized in the program were significantly more likely to elicit agreement if participants viewed the positive storyline. Conversely, all six negative statements about the criminal justice system produced significantly more agreement among those viewing the negative storyline. Mean differences were consistently in the expected direction and were statistically significant as well. For example, people in the negative condition were significantly more likely to agree with the statement "There is no guarantee that a person convicted of a crime actually did it" than did people in the positive condition.

RESULTS

We have established thus far that our experimental participants did, indeed, view the fictional content of the two crime programs as providing different portrayals of the criminal justice system based on the manipulation checks. But then again, they also knew that the programs were entirely fictional dramas. To what extent are such programs nonetheless capable of altering viewers' perceptions of the real world of criminal justice? To examine this question we compared means by experimental condition, using an analysis of variance including the main effects of storyline, empathy with characters, and the interaction between the two. The experimentally induced empathy was not detectable, and instead we used items that tapped the amount of empathy participants experienced for the lead characters to create an index, split this scale at the median, and used these as indicators of high and low empathy in further analyses. Our measures of empathy are thus observational indicators (though *not* predispositions), rather than experimentally manipulated ones. Given that we are interested strictly in empathy's effects in interaction with positive versus negative storylines, this does not pose major problems to a causal interpretation of our findings. Effects of empathy were only of theoretical interest to us when examined in interaction with the randomly assigned main effect of storyline. To control for the effects of

long-term predispositions toward these issues, we included as covariates measures of partisanship and the extent of empathy as a personality trait (see the Appendix).

To test our first hypothesis, we compare mean levels of fairness attributed to the criminal justice system by experimental conditions, and by low and high levels of empathy for the characters in the fictional plots. Our results show a significant main effect of positive versus negative portrayals of a fictional criminal justice system: The positive storyline made people more positive about the criminal justice system, whereas the negative storyline corresponded with lower levels of perceived fairness; the more negative portrayal of the system made viewers less likely to perceive the system as working fairly ($F=10.47$, $p<.001$). Whether the three items comprising this index were analyzed separately or as an index, the main effects were consistently significant and in the predicted direction. For example, participants who viewed the episode about a wrongfully imprisoned person were more likely to disagree with the statement that “criminals get off on technicalities.” Similarly, those who viewed the episode involving the interrogation of a rapist who almost gets away were more likely to agree with the statement suggesting that “our legal system protects criminals too much at the expense of crime victims and their families.” The proposed interaction between storyline and empathy for characters also approached statistical significance ($F=2.57$, $p<.06$). Consistent with H2, the effects of storyline were most evident among those with high levels of empathy for the target character.

Our second test of the two hypotheses utilized a three-item index of attitudes toward the death penalty. American citizens are noteworthy for their unusually high levels of support for the death penalty relative to other Western democracies. Capital punishment is a highly controversial topic, and one assumed to elicit strong feelings from many citizens. For this reason alone, it seemed somewhat *unlikely* that viewing a single fictional program might affect attitudes on this well-known and longstanding issue. Further, neither of the fictional plots involved death penalty cases, thus it was not brought up at any point in either story, though the general fallibility of the criminal justice system has obvious implications for this policy.

As shown in Figure 2, mean comparisons revealed a main effect of storyline on support for the death penalty ($F=3.49$, $p<.06$). Those who saw the negative storyline suggesting that the criminal justice system is fallible and does not always get the right bad guy were less supportive of the death penalty. By showing that the criminal justice system is more or less prone to error, these episodes correlated with postviewing attitudes on the death penalty.

In addition, as illustrated in Figure 2, we also found the hypothesized interaction between empathy for characters and storyline ($F=3.77$,

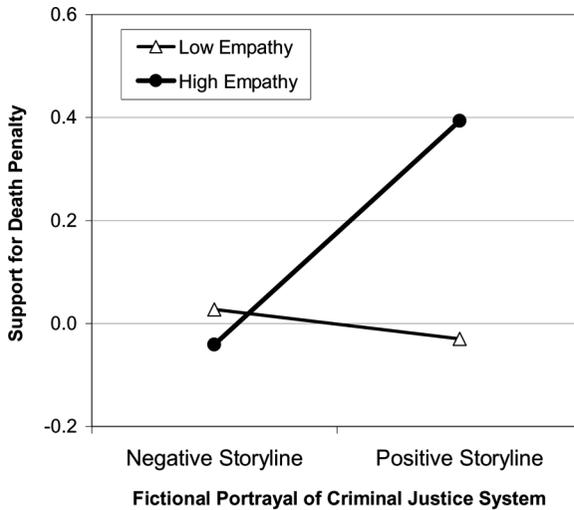


FIGURE 2 Effects of fictional programs on support for death penalty, by levels of empathy. Note. The main effect of storyline bordered significance ($F = 3.49, p < .06$), and the interaction of storyline and empathy was significant ($F = 3.77, p < .05$).

$p < .05$). The effects of viewing a positive versus negative storyline were moderated by the level of empathy for the target character. In other words, the main effect of the storyline was evident only among those with high levels of empathy; viewers who empathized with the law enforcement character expressed more punitive attitudes postviewing, compared to those who did not empathize. Once again, the impact of fiction depends heavily on viewer empathy for its powers of persuasive influence.

As a third test of the hypotheses, we examined four different questions tapping attitudes toward *specific* policies involving the criminal justice system, such as whether respondents would support more funding for public defense lawyers, higher taxes for rehabilitation and education in prison, or better medical care and more humane treatment of prisoners. Three of the four analyses show significant main effects of the storyline in the anticipated direction (consistent with H1). For example, those who watched a story about a wrongfully imprisoned fictional man were significantly more likely to express support for more funding for public defense lawyers relative to participants who watched a story about a man who had, until recently nabbed, gotten away with a crime ($F = 5.16, p < .05$). Likewise, those who viewed the episode highlighting a mistake by the criminal justice system also were more likely to support paying higher taxes to fund more humane treatment of prisoners ($F = 4.39, p < .05$).

In addition, those who viewed a story about a flawed criminal justice system were more likely to agree that prison sentences were too harsh relative to those who watched a story in which the right bad guy was caught and presumably punished ($F = 6.79, p < .01$). In other words, when one believes justice is truly being done by the criminal justice system, then the severity of current prison sentences is just fine or could be even stiffer in its penalties; if people believe the system is making mistakes, on the other hand, then they are less likely to support harsher, more punitive sentences.

The interaction between empathy and storyline (H2), however, was supported in only one case. Viewers' perceptions of whether prison sentences are generally too lenient, too harsh, or about right, varied both by the main effect of storyline ($F = 7.18, p < .01$) and the empathic reaction to the predicament of characters ($F = 3.70, p < .05$). Those high in empathy exhibited very different attitudes toward sentencing depending upon whether they viewed the positive or negative storyline. In contrast, there was no pattern of predicted effects for those low in empathy for the fictional characters.

Finally, it is also worth mentioning a few of our analyses that were highly instructive because of their *lack* of significant effects. A few items included in our posttest tapped perceptions people might have if they literally viewed the specific events in the programs as likely to occur in the real world. If one thought wrongful convictions based on fingerprints were likely to happen in reality, then one should be more likely to support a policy mandating that crime scene samples be sent to multiple laboratories. Of interest, however, attitudes toward forensic experts and the perceived need for more thorough testing of crime samples were identical across conditions. This pattern suggests that the impact of fictional narratives occurs not so much from seeing them as sources of real-world information but rather from the more generalized lessons they impart. The take-home point from the negative episode we used in our study appears to have been not that fingerprint experts can get things wrong, so much as that the criminal justice system more generally is fallible.

DISCUSSION

Does it matter what kind of fictional television citizens watch? Our preliminary results suggest that fictional content can affect respondents' political attitudes and policy positions. Viewers, who watched a program emphasizing flaws in the justice system, demonstrated attitudes that were significantly more pro-defendant/anti-criminal justice system than those who viewed the more positive storyline. It was particularly surprising that attitudes toward the death penalty, which are often seen as deep-seated and immutable,

varied by these episodes (Bobo & Johnson, 2004). In addition, in many—though not all—cases, we found that influence depended upon viewers' levels of empathy for the main character in the drama. Overall, our findings suggest that fictional dramas do, indeed, have implications for Americans' political views and policy opinions, and at least part of the explanation for these effects has to do with the emotional involvement that viewers experience when watching television drama.

Nevertheless, our study is not without its limitations in supporting that conclusion. Most obviously, it explores only one political topic—attitudes toward the criminal justice system—and it does so using only two episodes from hundreds of such programs that appear on television. The influence we have observed may be due to characteristics of these particular episodes or their storylines. Another limitation was failure of the empathy instructions to induce empathy, and our reliance on alternative observational indicators (though not dispositions) of the construct. Previous research successfully employed these instructions (e.g., Batson et al., 1997; Davis et al., 2004). We suspect the differences might have to do with the fact that former studies employed student samples; the empathy instructions were perhaps more effective with college students. Only repeated studies of other programs, other episodes, and other kinds of political opinions will enable us to support a more general conclusion and build a more general theoretical framework for understanding the political effects of fictional television.

The strength of the experimental design was in its capacity to allow us to disentangle the many other influences on citizens' attitudes; its major weakness in examining this hypothesis was the time frame and extent of viewing involved. During the course of the experiment, participants were exposed to only one fictional program, whereas most Americans are exposed to many more such programs on an ongoing basis. In addition, our dependent measures are limited to tapping short-term effects. These may be assumed to be stronger than long-term effects, though the reverse has also been documented. If viewers soon forget the source of their information on a policy-related issue, but remember the implications of the fictional storyline, its impact could increase (Appel & Richter, 2007; Kumkale & Albarracín, 2004; Pratkanis, Greenwald, Leippe, & Baumgardner, 1988).

We can provide no evidence as to the longevity of the effects that we have observed. We suspect, however, that the net impact of such programs on policy attitudes has a great deal to do with the direction of the preponderance of messages in fictional television. Without a control condition in our study, we can only speculate, but we assume it is typically a highly positive message and not one that emphasizes flaws in the system. We seriously doubt that this pro-status quo message reflects a purposeful effort on the part of television writers to influence political views. Instead, happy endings

and justice for all are in abundance in the fictional television world because they coincide with what viewers enjoy watching. Relatively few stories are likely to convey the message that the justice system makes some mistakes that are *never* corrected. Even the wrongly convicted man, who served many years in prison due to an overzealous forensic specialist, was ultimately set free through the hard work of lawyers, police, and judges. A more thorough and comprehensive content analysis of many different crime programs would be necessary to verify this assumption, but we anticipate that television is market driven, and thus tends to avoid the kind of dark content that people find difficult to watch.

If empathy is a necessary condition for television narratives to influence viewers, then television fiction may have a unique advantage over news in persuasive influence of this kind. The uses of emotional, empathy-producing prototypes of people in actual news stories (i.e., episodic frames that focus on an individual victim or protagonist) have failed to find changes in politically relevant beliefs to the same extent that unemotional, base-rate information influences policies (see Iyengar, 1991, but also Strange & Leung, 1999). Because narrative transportation in television, more than any other communication medium, simulates the appearance, the sound, and the similitude of physical closeness of other human beings (Reeves & Nass, 1996), it may have a distinct advantage in creating the kind of emotional involvement that facilitates persuasive effects on political attitudes (see also Mutz & Reeves, 2005).

More broadly, the results of this study urge scholars interested in the effects of media on public opinion to pursue additional research on the impact of fictional narratives and their consequences for political attitudes. Long-term exposure to such programs, as cultivation researchers maintain, should result in profound long-term political effects among viewers. For the variety of reasons that we have outlined, as well as our modest experimental evidence, there is reason to believe that fictional narratives play an important role in shaping citizens' political views, perhaps even one as important as the extensively studied content of political news.

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APPENDIX: QUESTION WORDING

Perceived Fairness of the Criminal Justice System

On 4-point agree–disagree scales, with high scores indicating greater perceived fairness: (1) “People in the US do not believe the criminal justice system is working properly or fairly,” (2) “Too many criminals get off on technicalities when everyone knows they are guilty,” (3) “Our legal system protects criminals too much at the expense of crime victims and their families.” Answers were combined by taking the mean of the three items.

Death Penalty Opinions

Assessed using three items scored such that high scores indicate greater support for the death penalty. (1) “I support the use of the death penalty in our justice system.” (2) “Based on what you have read or heard, do you think the criminal justice system in death penalty cases is generally fair or generally unfair?” (3) “Which comes closer to your view? The U.S. should stop using the death penalty until we can be sure it is being administered accurately and fairly in this country. The U.S. should not stop using the death penalty because there are already sufficient safeguards in the current justice system to prevent the execution of innocent people.”

Crime-Relevant Policy Opinions

“Next is a list of things that people can do to reduce crime. For each, please tell me how likely you would be to personally engage in that activity, if asked.” Response options ranged from “Definitely do it, Probably do it, Probably not do it, Definitely not do it,” with items scored so that high scores indicate support for the proposal. (1) “Would you contribute money to a fund that goes toward paying more experienced lawyers to represent those who cannot pay for their own lawyer?” (2) “Would you pay higher taxes in order to insure better medical care and more humane treatment of prisoners?” (3) “Would you pay higher taxes to put more rehabilitation and education programs into prisons?” (4) Respondents were also asked, “Do you think most prison sentences these days tend to be too harsh, about right, or too lenient?” High scores indicate that respondents perceive sentences as too lenient.

Empathy for Characters in Plot

All four items coded on 5-point agree–disagree scale with high = greater empathy. Episode with Positive Portrayal of Criminal Justice System: “I found it difficult to see things from Detective Stabler’s point of view.”

“I could feel Detective Stabler’s frustration over not having stopped this criminal the last time he raped and murdered a young girl.” “I did not feel sorry for Detective Stabler.” “I felt Detective Stabler treated Gordon Rickett too harshly during questioning.” Episode with Negative Portrayal of Criminal Justice System: “I felt sympathy for Bobby Campbell, the man who served time for a crime he did not commit.” “I could sense the frustration Bobby Campbell felt when he was in prison and no one believed that he was innocent.” “I did not feel pity for Bobby Campbell.” “I could understand why Bobby Campbell’s brother, Luke, took matters into his own hands.”

Empathy as Trait [Interpersonal Reactivity Index]

Fourteen items, each answered on 4-point scale (*Does not describe me at all, Describes me only a little bit, Describes me somewhat well, Describes me very well*) in which high = greater trait empathy. Items combined into an additive index for the seven items that tap perspective-taking ability and for empathic concern, as well as for the combined Trait Empathy index. *Empathic Concern subscale items*: (1) “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.” (2) “Sometimes I don’t feel very sorry for other people when they are having problems.” (3) “When I see someone being taken advantage of, I feel kind of protective towards them.” (4) “Other people’s misfortunes do not usually disturb me a great deal.” (5) “When I see someone being treated unfairly, I sometimes don’t feel very much pity for him or her.” (6) “I am often quite touched by things that I see happen.” (7) “I would describe myself as a pretty soft-hearted person.”

Perspective-taking subscale items: (1) “If I’m sure I’m right about something, I don’t waste much time listening to other people’s arguments.” (2) “I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the “other person’s” point of view.” (3) “I try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision.” (4) “I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.” (5) “When I’m upset at someone, I usually try to “put myself in his shoes” for a while.” (6) “I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.” (7) “I try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective”

Partisanship

Seven-point scale ranging from *strong Democrat* to *strong Republican*.