

How Television Dramas Raise Citizens' Civic IQ

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Learning theories suggest that prime time television dramas constitute an ideal learning environment (Shrum 2004; Green et al. 2004). But do they really, and does learning encompass politically-relevant information contained in the story? This paper explores the circumstances under which prime time television dramas are a source for learning of politically relevant information, the nature of learning and the extent of learning. Data collection involved diverse research approaches that were designed primarily to establish when, where, and how learning occurs or fails to occur in natural settings.

The Data Base

We started the project by scrutinizing nine prime time television dramas for political content currently relevant for average Americans. We included the *West Wing* and *24* for their overtly political content about national and international politics and the long-lived *Simpsons* cartoon show for local politics stories. *E.R.* and *Grey's Anatomy* were chosen for their focus on the perennially vital issue of health policy. *CSI* and the *Sopranos* represent the ever-popular crime show genre while *Lost* presents a mixture of issues ranging from science to cultural diversity to problems of an anarchic society. *Family Guy* was chosen as a cartoon shows that satirize real-life situations and

occasionally relies on political content for its comedy. It turned out to be least germane to our study.

To study learning from these shows, we have completed 65 interviews with more to come. We also scrutinized up to six Message Boards for each of these shows where viewers post their reactions and solicit responses from fellow watchers. To discover how much the stories presented in prime time dramas penetrates our political culture, we also undertook a Lexis/Nexis search for news stories outside the papers' entertainment section. We searched for stories that mentioned a show's name and commented on its political aspects or linked it to real world events.

Steps in the Research Process

We began our research with traditional experiments using students at a large Midwestern urban university. We pre-tested their level of political sophistication and then exposed them to clips from the *Sopranos* that contained unfamiliar political information. One week later, we tested the accuracy of their recall of this information. Most participants had learned new political information from the shows, rather than other sources, judged by the fact that they worded their responses using phrases and descriptions that closely resembled the language in the clips. Focus groups conducted in the second week confirmed that the subjects had learned from the clips, rather than other sources.

Following these traditional experiments, we tested learning in more natural field settings. To avoid potentially sensitizing pre-tests that might alter respondents' normal television watching behaviors, we used a cold-calling approach, soliciting immediate interviews from people who had been identified by third parties as regular watchers of the television dramas in our data base. Most interviews were completed as planned, but some did require scheduling at a later time to honor the respondent's preferences. Telephone interviews averaged 20 minutes in length and were recorded.

The initial phases of the interview were open-ended allowing participants to identify the areas of knowledge that they linked to the show. Our rationale was that interviewer-chosen questions would fail to capture much of what respondents had actually learned while wasting questions on non-existent memories. We realize, off course, that the subjects' choices from their stored memories do not represent a full accounting. Therefore, we followed up with more targeted questions about specific politically-relevant incidents that the respondent had not mentioned previously. We also tested whether respondents could apply the information to a hypothetical situation that we posed on the assumption that ability to use information connotes understanding beyond memorization.

During data analysis, we rediscovered that simple answers to deceptively simple questions tend to be volatile. They change when questions

are worded differently or asked in a different context. That is why we used multiple primes to tap into diverse niches of memory. We also rediscovered that the interaction between television shows and viewers is akin to a conversation in which the ideas from the show and the ideas the viewer brings to the show become thoroughly intermingled (Delli Carpini & Williams 2001). It is impossible to unscramble the components that have gone into the respondent's answers. When people are knowledgeable about matters discussed in the show, neither they nor we can tell with precision what aspects of their knowledge were acquired before, after, or during the show.

We used standard content analysis methods for scrutinizing the message boards and newspapers, employing computer search functions wherever available. Unfortunately, many of the message boards have no regular search capabilities, requiring reading of thousands of entries in search of the target information.

Vital Assumptions: Memorization versus Understanding

Your child has just returned from her last semester in college. You ask her what she has learned. Oh, she says, we discussed a lot of current problems like dealing with uninsured patients in hospitals, the wisdom of returning children to parents who are recovering alcoholics, and the problems presidents face when they are at loggerheads with Congress. How would you react? Shocked that this did not sound like 'regular course' material or

delighted that she had pondered vexing public issues, albeit in somewhat cursory and disorganized fashion? How do you and should you define 'real learning?'

The answer gets us into hotly-disputed intellectual territory. But it is essential to understanding my claim that watching prime-time television dramas on American television does enhance citizens' civic IQ. According to *Webster's Dictionary*, learning involves gaining new knowledge or understanding or skills. It includes the ability to modify existing knowledge and use it appropriately, wisely or not. Learning results from study, instruction, or experience. It may require conscious effort, or it may occur effortlessly without the learner's intention or even awareness of learning. It may involve learning something totally unknown before, or it may involve learning more about something previously known.

The primary goal of learning may be understanding or memorization. Understanding involves the ability to grasp the meaning of information and integrate it into the learner's fund of existing knowledge. It entails the ability to project consequences by inferring general concepts from particular situations. For example, many of the happenings in entertainment shows are not actually presented on screen; they are merely initiated or suggested implicitly or explicitly (Franklin 2006). Viewers who understand the situation can fill in the blanks. Precisely how they do this and how well depends on

their particular fund of stored memories and on their learning styles. The end results and consequences of understanding are rarely uniform.

The objective of memorization is different. It entails committing information to memory so that it can be reproduced or recalled as precisely as possible. Memorization neither requires nor precludes understanding the meaning of what one is recalling or integrating it into one's existing fund of knowledge. People can and often do memorize difficult concepts and articulate them accurately without understanding them at all. Most tests calling for the recall of detailed factual information invoke the powers of memorization. They fail to test understanding.

The distinctions between learning as understanding and learning as memorization are crucial because our research focuses on understanding which is a sorely neglected aspect of citizens' knowledge acquisition. Political scientists usually measure citizens' powers of memorization, neglecting their far more important powers of truly understanding their political world. Our work, instead, is designed to discover how much new understanding about public policies and the political environment people gain from watching various prime time television dramas.

Seven Learning Scenarios

From our interviews, we distilled seven different learning scenarios. We debated whether priming should be considered as learning since *West Wing*

studies indicate that the show primes viewers' thinking about real presidents (Holbert et al. 2003; Gans-Boriskin & Tisinger 2005). Ultimately, we decided against including priming as a learning form absent further evidence that the recalled episodes led to further learning.

Table 1 indicates the criteria by which we judged respondents' learning along with measures of the relative frequency of the type of learning.

Learning was rated as 'often' if it appeared in 50 percent or more of the interviews. 'Some' covers the spread of 11-49 percent of the interviews and 'rarely' means 10 percent or fewer. In the learning categories, adding major facts means learning something totally new; minor facts means fleshing out existing knowledge. The 'new slants' categories mean viewing facts or relationships from previously ignored perspectives. As viewers put it, "I never thought about it in that way." Or it may be a deepening of existing knowledge, as happened to one viewer who noted: "I knew pollution was bad, but *not that bad!*" Experiential insights are recorded when respondents report actually observing relationships in action rather than merely hearing about them. We recorded expressions of newly-formed opinions about previously known situations as signs of learning, along with statements that the show had refreshed the respondent's memories about forgotten situations. For example, many *Lost* viewers commented that setting up a new government on a

deserted island reminded them of similar situations in William Golding's famous novel Lord of the Flies.

Table 1 Usage of Learning Categories

Learning categories	Often 50%+	Some 11-49%	Rarely 0-10%
Add major facts			x
Add minor facts	x		
New slants on facts		x	
New slants on relationships	x		
Add experiential insights	x		
Add evaluations		x	
Refresh fading memories			x

Table 1 clearly shows that enrichment of existing information was far more common than accumulating of completely new important facts. Table 1 also shows that experiencing politics vicariously is prized, especially when it demonstrates how people interact in complex situations. New perspectives and evaluations are less common. Learning major new facts is rare which accords with the common finding that most of the learning from these shows is unintentional (Baum 2005). In fact, interviewees as well as posters to message boards repeatedly expressed their resentment about being taught about political events in their drama shows. Here's a typical post, selected from literally hundred of similar ones: "I am sick of that Africa thing. If I wanted to watch Darfur, I'll turn in to CNN of the evening news. . . The show's name is ER, not 'Adventures in Africa.'"

The design of our research forecloses gauging the amount of our interviewees' or web posters' learning because we have no means to assess their prior knowledge. Nor did we test completely everything that they had learned – we merely sampled it. We therefore do not know which types of recorded situations are never or rarely remembered or how many different types of frames were in individual viewers' repertoires. However, our demographic data show that it is as true in learning from dramas as it is in learning from regular news that people who already know more learn more. The reason is that they can call on related schemas in their memory store. We also know that the shows which are richest in political information tend to draw the most educated and media-savvy audiences (Fitzgerald 2005).

Political Information in Television Dramas

Television dramas offer their information packaged in four overlapping categories: *Process Information*, which is generally easiest to internalize, *Factual Information*, which presents the greatest learning problems, *Context Information* which is usually internalized subconsciously, and *Insights*, which people tend to absorb only if they can fantasize about immediate usefulness of the information (Graber 2006).

Viewers receive *Process Information* when drama episodes stage specific events realistically on screen. The episodes don't merely describe happenings leaving it for viewers to imagine the actual details. Rather, they show how the

game of politics and other human interaction games are actually played. Being an eye witness to what is happening, when it is designed for easy understanding, normally is the simplest way to comprehend complex situations.

Television dramas also contain *Factual Information*, like proper names, dates, rules, statements about policy positions and the like. That type of information is usually difficult to recall because most people engage in on-line information processing when confronted with new information. That means that they draw meanings from information that has aroused their attention and store these personal meanings, rather than the data details that produced them (Graber 2001). The fact that they are nonetheless able to apply the information in subsequent judgments indicates that they have internalized the substance of the message even when the details are forgotten. However, their scores on recall of specific factual details are apt to be poor so that they risk being labeled as poorly informed (delli Carpini & Keeter 1996; Kuklinski et al. 2000).

***Context Information* refers to descriptions of the social and political climate which is the setting for each drama's episodes, rather than its explicit focus. Viewers often ignore that type of unobtrusive information. Nonetheless, repeated exposure makes it likely that at least some of that information will be**

absorbed, even though it rises to consciousness only when specific questions are asked.

Finally, *Insights* refers to nuggets of knowledge that tip citizens off to behaviors that may be useful in future life situations. Insights are very memorable but only for the limited number of viewers who can tie them to some present or future need in their lives. To avoid information overloads, most people tend to limit information storage largely to information bits that fit into existing memories or seem otherwise useful. Selective storing of information is therefore commonplace (Graber 2001).

Below is an example of the four types of information drawn from content analysis of *The Sopranos*. We use that example to illustrate that even shows that seem remote from the political realm, like the Mafia world depicted in *The Sopranos* or the situations satirized in *The Simpsons* cartoon show can be rich in politically relevant information.

Table 2 – Samples of Information Categories in *The Sopranos*

Process Information	How people hide money overseas to shield it from taxation; how people buy real estate through shell companies to defraud HUD; creating trusts for children; how poor people get free legal services
Factual Information	History of right to vote in U.S. ; history of slavery in U.S.; history of Christopher Columbus and Columbus Day; laws about drug possession and use; First Amendment rights of American citizens.
Context Information	Prevalence of various forms of gambling in recreational facilities; rules of conduct within the mob hierarchy and enforcement principles; constant police and FBI surveillance of mob activities; discrimination against immigrants.
Insights	Crooked police cooperate with mobsters to protect gambling; mobsters use prison phones to conduct business; communities have suicide prevention hotlines; abortion can lead to permanent infertility.

The Substance of Learning.

That television dramas have an impact on viewers' opinions and actions has been amply documented. The *CSI* effect is a prominent example. Jurors who watch crime shows now hold real-crime fighting officials to the same standards as those depicted in the show. If officials have fallen short, juries have failed to convict even in cases where the evidence was strong by pre-*CSI* standards. Unfortunately, the crime shows often mislead jury judgments by raising unrealistically high expectations with their display of highly sophisticated crime-fighting methods and the illusion that these methods yield almost instantaneous results (Willing 2004; Nir & Mutz 2005).

Strong behavioral effects have also been observed in shows dealing with medical issues and other areas of daily life. For example, when the Center for Disease Control (CDC) worked with the producers of the popular daytime soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful* to produce a subplot about HIV that included the CDC's AIDS hotline toll-free phone number, the hotline was overwhelmed with calls from viewers. They wanted information on protection and testing, in line with the recommendations that were made by the show's protagonists. Studies of advertising messages embedded in entertainment shows also demonstrate learning (Bhatnagar et al. 2004; Green et al. 2004).

So what kind of learning did our respondents glean from shows that they had watched? In Table 3, we have grouped the information, under the 4 category headings used earlier.

Table 3 – Samples of Learning Reported in Interviews

Process Information	How President and Congress work together; how the different branches of government interact; how people are picked for government jobs; how politics really works; how acts of individuals can cause international incidents; how school voucher system works; how FBI and counter-terrorism units interact; relations between top and bottom-level officials; the problems of women government employees in male-dominated agencies; provision of health care for indigents; honor codes and killings in Middle Eastern societies; problems posed by lack of regulation of Internet content; government agencies' response in aviation and railroad crashes; living conditions in African refugee camps.
Factual Information	Tools and techniques used in crime detection; U.S. policy on negotiating with terrorists; prerequisites for impeaching a president; sick leave rights of employed parents; legal limits on physicians' shifts in hospitals; inheritance rights when deceased leave no wills; patients' medical privacy rights; carnivals' liability for unsafe rides
Context Information	Prevalence of subtle racism; the second-class status of AIDS victims; problems of privacy invasion; the power of judges over citizens' personal lives; the amorality of foreign policy decisions; informal discussions about space exploration; environmental pollution issues; faith versus science discussions
Insights	How to survive a bomb explosion; how to create government in a wilderness setting; use of CPR and other emergency rescue procedures; how to deal with stressed out co-workers; how to secure a government loan for college.

To counteract the impression that the sample information sketched out in Table 3 indicates that the scope of learning is quite narrow, Table 4 presents the array of subjects covered by television dramas under topical headings. To avoid overloading the table with information drawn from the *West Wing's* overtly political content, data from that show have been excluded.

Table 4 : A List of Political Information Topics

TOPIC AREA	EXAMPLES
Public Policies	Oil wells in Alaska; referenda on school policies; universal health

	insurance; immigration control; welfare issues; tax fairness
Citizens' Rights	Mandatory disclosures about contracts; right to be informed about medical procedures; right to custody of biological children
Public Opinions	Acceleration of anti-war feelings; pressures to support government policies as patriotism; anti-Arab sentiments;
Public Officials	Complexity of jobs; stupidity in decisions; evidence of corruption and favoritism; red tape; agency jurisdiction limits
Life Style Issues	Gender roles; protecting children in their homes; adoption by stereotyped groups like gays & lesbians; privileges of the rich
Health Care Issues	Safety of surgeries and drugs; hospital overcrowding; treatment of drug addicts; patient privacy; bad doctors
History Topics	Nixon's ouster; Clinton impeachment scenarios; Vietnam War; 1930's Depression; birth of Communist China; Cold War
Family Law Issues	Pre-marital arrangements; wills & child custody plans; divorce issues; teen-age pregnancy termination; rental deposits
Constitutional Provisions	Essential provisions of 1 st , 4 th , 14 th & 25 th amendment; reasons for constitutional protections; primacy of constitution.
Role of Various Public Agencies	Food and Drug Administration, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Coast Guard, Federal Emergency Management Agency
Criminal Justice Issues	Activities of prosecutors; lawyers' strategies; public defenders' roles; witnesses' obligations; defendants' strategies; prisons
Group Interaction Difficulties	Need for laws to regulate human interactions; pervasiveness of power struggles; import of interpersonal relations in politics

To quote from our earlier work: "It seems fair to argue that citizens who concern themselves with situations that are encompassed by the topics . . . deserve to be called 'politically engaged.' They may not be able to spout numbers about how many of their fellow citizens lack health insurance or recite the names of agencies who deal with terrorist sleeper cells, but they have a real sense about the serious consequences involved in these situations and the difficulties their government faces in dealing with them. That type of knowledge, it seems to us, is valuable for the civic health of the nation and cause for some degree of optimism about the civic IQ of average citizens. . . . our interviews and message board evidence thus clearly demonstrates that the

television dramas and comedies we examined are sources for gaining important knowledge about politics" (Graber & Navratil 2006).

Some learning does not fit neatly into the Process-Factual-Context-Insights categorizations depicted in Table 3. Attitudinal or behavioral changes that make the respondent more receptive to learning are examples. One viewer, for instance, told us: "I have learned compassion from *ER*. They show you really well how people feel so that you can empathize." Another claimed that *Lost* had made her "more aware of things, more observant." Several respondents told us that their shows had raised their interest in politics and increased their consumption of regular political news (Kull et al 2003).

It is interesting that many viewers initially claim that they learn nothing from the shows, yet, in the course of the interview their responses indicate that they did indeed learn from the show. Sometimes they explicitly acknowledge that their initial assessment was wrong or they claim that they had construed 'learning about politics' as memorization of assorted facts. Not all learning is genuinely productive. Respondents regularly mangle important facts. For example, some viewers of 24 totally misperceived the FBI's role in fighting terrorism, they did not know the meaning and implications of a 'coup d'etat' or the pre-conditions for impeaching a president. Of course, misperceptions are also common when people learn from regular political news.

When it comes to a major learning step -- changing opinions based on situations presented in the dramas -- most respondents profess to stick to their own views. They also express pleasure when their views are backed by actors in the show. A *West Wing* viewer commented "I don't think that it has changed my mind on an issue, but I will use it to support how I already feel." A *Simpsons* viewer was slightly more open to change: "I bring my experiences to the show and use the information from the show to broaden my perspective and I try to change my views a little based on how they portray an issue."

Ascertaining the Sources of Learned Information

How do we know that people learned the information reported during our interviews from the shows rather than from other sources? There are a number of indicators that support that learning does, indeed, spring from the shows though none of them provide absolute proof. We already mentioned that participants in the initial experiments had adopted the language used in the show and had confirmed in focus groups that specific knowledge had originated with the show. In addition, many interviewees reported discussing the show while it was broadcast and afterwards with friends, family and co-workers. Such discussions rehearse the scenes that have been viewed and embed them more deeply in memory.

Another sign that information reported in interviews came from the shows is the fact that all viewers could report the general thrust of episodes

that they had recently watched and many related a broad array of details that could only come from the shows. That this information had been processed and internalized was evident from the fact that many viewers reported experiencing situations similar to those in the show and expressed opinions, judgments, and evaluations. One *ER* viewer, for instance, noted "You can compare someone's story to your own life" and then proceeded to link events in the show to her own anti-war activities and volunteering health services to the poor. Viewers also draw parallels between characters and situations in the shows and real-life people and events. For instance, viewers told us that Mayor Quimby in *The Simpsons* seemed patterned after Senator Kennedy and they likened calls for impeaching the president in *24* to impeachment calls in the Nixon and Clinton administrations. They also commented on the shows' political perspectives – its idealistic portrayal of the West Wing president and far more sinister characterization of the *24* presidential incumbent. Real-life situations then became the foil for comparing and judging the fictional situation.

Viewer involvement with the show was clear from the many reports about emotional reactions. Phrases like "It really bothers me" "I am upset" "I cried when that happened" "It gave me nightmares" are sprinkled throughout the interviews. Some viewers even reported screaming at their television set when bad things were happening to their favorite characters.

Many viewers reported checking drama data against real-world data to confirm or refute the accuracy of information. For example, they checked on the accuracy of reports about torturing prisoners or conditions in refugee camps, or denial of medical services to the indigent. A few viewers speculated about hidden meanings and hidden purposes that producers of the show might have, such as advocating specific environmental policies or laws to safeguard the civil rights of gay people. Some thought that shows might be a trial balloon for testing the public's reaction to prospective governmental actions. When viewers suspected ulterior motives for the shows' plots, they watched episodes closely for possible cues. They often complained about feeling manipulated.

Finally, some viewers told us that episodes served them as behavior models. For example, viewers of *Lost* mentioned learning survival skills following a plane crash. Drama episodes showed them strategies for getting their children into first-rate colleges, planning for child care if both parents died, or asking life-saving questions in a medical setting. Many claimed to gain important insights into human interactions in various life situations. Said one *Grey's Anatomy* watcher: "You get things out of watching how others interact and respond to things" followed by a report about how he used that information. Viewers even compared actual public policies to the policies

reflected in specific episodes, suggesting that the episodes had better solutions or proposing alternative solutions to improve performance.

When shows depict situations that most people have not experienced in real life – such as being stranded on a deserted island after an airplane crash or a previously anonymous sperm donor meeting his offspring unexpectedly -- viewers draw on related bodies of knowledge to speculate to what degree the depiction in the television drama is true to life. Generally, they lean toward accepting the dramatic presentation as fairly realistic (Delli Carpini & Williams 2001; Baum 2005).

The User-Friendliness Factor

Our claim that political content in television dramas enhances citizens' civic IQ is buttressed by learning theories that outline the conditions that ease information acquisition. We briefly outline the seven major factors that make such dramas ideal teaching tools.

First of all, the drama format makes these shows attractive to millions (Thelen 1996, Lembo 2000, Delli Carpini & Williams 2001, Jones 2005, Franklin 2006). For example, the 2006 season finale of *CSI* attracted 25.4 million U.S. viewers; *Grey's Anatomy* garnered 19.9 million viewers for its finale while *Lost* captured 17.6 million. These figures omit the world-wide audience which exceeds U.S. numbers. In the *American Idol* contest, 63.4 million viewers voted in the election that determined the winner. That

compares to 62 million who voted for President Bush in the 2006 presidential election (Evidence . . . 2006; FootnoteTV 2006). Furthermore, when we asked our interviewees why they watched their shows, nearly all mentioned dramatic elements.

The exposure to the episodes is lengthy because the shows are broadcast weekly in one-hour time slots. There is much repetition of themes within shows, between shows and through re-runs. In fact, records for *The Sopranos* show that many viewers see each show at least twice because it is packed with so much information. Unlike newscasts, episodes tend to dwell on a limited number of major themes which are linked through the involvement of the same familiar characters. The audience is exposed to this continuing story for multiple years in a row, eighteen in case of *The Simpsons*. Repeated presentations of the same story facilitate forming deeper memory tracks.

The stories reported in popular television dramas are likely to be remembered because they often become topics for interpersonal conversations and because episodes and characters are periodically mentioned in news stories and editorials. Lexis/Nexis searches for 2005 and 2006 found many examples. For instance, the *Chicago Tribune* used an editorial to celebrate that their favorite won in the *West Wing* presidential election (*Chicago Tribune* 2006). In an article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (11-9-05), titled "Fictional debate easily trumps the real thing", reporter Sally Kalson, praised the *West*

Wing candidates for coming "across as utterly genuine. By contrast, too many real politicians seem to have been hollowed out and stuffed with straw polls by party taxidermists, the better to mouth platitudes devoid of meaning or passion." She concluded that "a glimpse of what a genuine exchange could look like makes what passes for presidential debates in this country even more pale and pathetic by comparison." Zogby International and MSNBC did an actual snap poll immediately following the fictional show. Even encyclopedias get into the act: *Wikipedia* has an entry describing the CTU (Counter Terrorism Unit), a fictional counter-espionage unit featured in the *West Wing*, *24*, and other shows. Press mentions of shows as reference points suggest that reporters are convinced that ordinary news consumers will be familiar with the characters.

Contrary to political fare in regular news media, which emphasizes facts, figures and names, the political dialog in television dramas is "refreshingly honest, impassioned, diverse, stimulating, witty, and smartly commonsensical " (Jones 2005, p. ix). The shows feature recognizable personalities in scenarios carefully constructed to attract attention. They abound in attention-arousing norm violations, like physical violence, racism, sexism and homophobia which are known to rivet viewer attention and enhance memory (Graber 2007b). Episodes are told in ordinary language and stress the human complexities that are inevitable when flesh-and-blood people

are involved. The casts of characters who are directly involved in the happenings are familiar to most of the audience because they take part in multiple episodes. They find themselves enmeshed in situations mirroring current hot button issues in American society (Sachleben & Yenerall 2004). Compared to press reports, drama episodes have the added benefit of commonly presenting clear causal chains so that villains and heroes are readily identifiable.

The shows are varied enough, and rich enough in content, to capture the interests of diverse audiences. Viewers are receptive to the content in particular dramas because audiences self-select themselves to watch information realms that interest them. Our interviews clearly show that the varied individual backgrounds and experiences that people bring to the story are key factors in determining how they target their attention and how they use the information. For instance, two nurses watched E.R. because of their interest in the medical field but largely ignored details about administrative problems in U.S. public hospitals because they found that information familiar and therefore uninteresting. By contrast, people outside the health professions took note of problems that arise when hospital service is impaired by bed-shortages, operating-room shortages and blood shortages or when patients lack insurance. Overall, most shows are pitched to cater to the

interests of young Americans because they are the most attractive targets for advertisers (Christensen & Haas 2005).

The Fiction Factor

To what extent is learning hampered by knowledge that prime time television dramas are fiction? The answer seems to be that most people consider the lines between fiction and reality as quite porous. They believe that fiction mimics reality and what is reported as reality often turns out to be partially or wholly fiction (Tokosumi 1999; Green et al. 2002, 2004; Gendler & Kovakovich 2005). Scholars agree: "the traditional distinctions between news and entertainment content are no longer very helpful" (Mutz 2001, p.231). Many young Americans are skeptical about traditional news program, considering satirical or fictional news as closer to the truth (Graber 2007a).

Our respondents reacted to questions about the concerns they might have when information is presented in fictional settings mostly by saying that the fiction aspect did not matter in terms of taking the situations seriously. In fact, many commented that the episodes were very realistic and often more accurate than 'real' news. A few went so far as saying that the information was more persuasive as fiction than as real news because the truth criterion was attenuated. Their fictional friends were more 'real' than the cardboard characters they met in news reports. A few viewers were more skeptical, claiming that nothing was believable in a fictional event, or indicating that

they accepted it as realistic only by checking it against actual events or carefully assessing its plausibility.

The extensive literature on emotional arousal produced by fictional stories weighs in on the side of viewers who say that they have no hesitation to accept and use information from fictional shows. The literature documents that many people are as aroused by fictional stories as they are by stories describing real events. The many emotional arousal reactions that our interviewees reported support these findings. These reactions encompass a broad array of emotions, including love, concern, empathy and hope, as well as fear, disgust, anger and hatred (Tokosumi, 1999; Gendler & Kovakovich, 2005).

The Moral of Our Story

The inescapable conclusion from our multi-faceted research is that prime time television dramas do raise citizens' civic IQ and learning does occur. That judgment is predicated on interpreting 'learning' as broadly as it needs to be to encompass all aspects of citizens' knowledge enhancement. Precisely what is learned – mostly inadvertently and sometimes incorrectly -- depends on the story line of each show with some shows loaded with politically-relevant content and others featuring it only sporadically (Christensen and Haas 2005). The amount and depth of learning vary among individuals and from topic to topic. For instance, *The West Wing* and *24*

present more opportunities for learning about politics than any of the other shows. Just like regular news, most shows slight historical insights and analyses of political institutions and focus instead on current political issues (Sachleben & Yenerall 2004). Learning possibilities are limited accordingly. Viewers use the information mostly to reinforce what they already believed rather than with an open mind, receptive to major changes in their viewpoints. Again, this parallels what generally occurs when people learn from regular news.

We explain in this paper why average Americans are more likely to learn from shows than from news reports. First, although television dramas' primary intent is to entertain, they do feature ample amounts of information about political processes, political facts, political contexts and factoids that we dubbed 'insights'. Secondly and most importantly, dramas are excellent sources for learning about politics because they feature information in appealing, user-friendly formats. To paraphrase James Carville's famous aphorism from the 1992 presidential campaign: "It's the format, stupid!" We contend that the learning-promoting features that are the hallmark of television dramas make them superior teaching tools compared to regular news. This is not surprising because embedding politics in entertainment is a hallowed tactic. It reflects appreciation that many people, especially those with little formal education, learn most effectively from story-telling formats.

The *West Wing* is a prototype of the politics-in-entertainment approach. Its fans call it "a magnificent episodic series that depicts the tension and backroom drama of presidential politics with an unusual mixture of maturity and humanity"(Sachleben & Yeneral 2004, p.114). Critics have attacked its political orientation, but not its format. Its sizeable impact on viewers' perceptions of politics has been detailed in multiple books and articles (Gans-Boriskin and Tisinger 2005; Holbert et al. 2003; Rollins and O'Connor 2003). *The West Wing*, as we have shown, is by no means the only currently popular television drama that contains substantial political content.

In today's world, the importance of citizens' learning from television dramas should not be underestimated. Polling data continue to show that consumption of "regular news" including the nightly news, local television news, radio, and the newspaper, is declining steadily. Nineteen percent of the public consumes no news at all on a regular basis; among people under 30 years of age, that figure has risen to 27 percent (Pew 2006). Collectively, current prime-time television dramas therefore can make major contributions to civic education considering that citizens do learning from watching these dramas, as we have shown.

Some political purists will undoubtedly shudder at the thought of considering fictional dramas as potentially important sources of political information. They fear that citizens' ability to appreciate the gravity of

politics and be truly enlightened will be compromised by using entertainment sources to learn about politics.. Pragmatists most likely will think otherwise and will applaud. In politics, as election campaigners know, one must hunt where the ducks are. Currently, they are congregating in huge numbers in front of their television sets watching prime time dramas. That is where dispensers of important political messages need to go -- following in the footsteps of shrewd practitioners of politics like saxophone player Bill Clinton or Oprah Winfrey guest George Bush.

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