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## 18 Do American television stories influence Dutch people's opinions about society?

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In their seminal study on *Dallas*, Liebes and Katz studied how various ethnic groups in Israel interpret an episode of the famous television series. Their results convincingly show how people construct their interpretation of the same media content based on their personal history. In that sense their study documents the activity of television viewers. Their focus-group study was carried out against the backdrop of the alleged 'cultural imperialism' of US-based television. In our study we approach this issue from a different perspective, namely that of narrative persuasion, and by means of a different method, namely an experiment. Research shows that print stories and television stories can affect viewers' opinions (Green & Brock, 2000). These studies have attracted attention from researchers who are interested in persuasion. The question in this chapter is whether stories have less impact when they are situated in a foreign country. This question is interesting to countries that broadcast productions from other countries. On the one hand it seems likely that viewers regard events in foreign productions as less relevant to their own life. On the other hand viewers may have become used to watching US series to an extent that they do not consider the origin of the production any more. In order to answer our question, we replicated a US experiment with Dutch students. All participants watched an episode of *Law & Order*. In the first experimental condition, participants were questioned about the US penal system, whereas the questions in the second experimental condition concerned the Dutch penal system. In the two corresponding control groups, the questions were asked before instead of after watching the episode. The main conclusion is that Dutch students, in contrast to US students, do not use the episode in order to construct their opinions on either the Dutch or the US penal system.

### 18.1 Introduction

Narratives are believed to be able to change people's opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. When asked, most readers can recollect a story that influenced their opinions about some aspects of the world. Nowadays, people often recollect films instead of books. One famous example is the film *Philadelphia* in which Tom Hanks plays a lawyer who is fired because he has AIDS. It is claimed that a movie such as *Philadelphia* has

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achieved more for the acceptance of AIDS victims than any public campaign (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Another example is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that Strange (2002) refers to as having played an important role in galvanising public opinion against slavery. The idea that stories can persuade has been picked up in persuasive communication (Slater, 2002a). Stories have been employed in entertainment-education in which Latin American and South African *telenovelas* were designed to affect, for instance, family-planning and enrolment in adult literacy programmes (Singhal & Rogers, 2002). In addition, stories are seen as vehicles for persuasion as part of commercial strategies such as product or brand placement, in which products or brands have a more or less important role in story lines within television programmes, movies, or games (Van Reijmersdal, Neijens & Smit, 2005).

Although the belief in the persuasive power of narratives is widespread, little is known about how this effect is achieved. Singhal and Rogers (2002) urge scholars to conduct research on why and how narratives can have persuasive effects. Insight into the process of narrative persuasion may be relevant to designers of campaigns that intentionally make use of narratives, and to those who are interested in the unintentional effects of narratives on people's attitudes, for instance the impact of media content on people's values.

For the past two decades, research on persuasive effects has been dominated by the so-called dual-process models of persuasion, especially by the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). This model has been developed to explain how people accept or reject message claims. The decision on the claim's acceptability can be either the result of a careful evaluation of the arguments presented in the message, or of giving in to more superficial cues of the message such as the presence of an expert. Whether recipients will scrutinize the message depends on the extent to which they are motivated and able to process the message systematically.

Several authors (Green & Brock, 2002; Slater, 2002b) have noted that the Elaboration Likelihood Model may constitute a valid description of rhetorical persuasion, but certainly not of narrative persuasion. Rhetorical persuasion refers to the acceptance of attitudes and beliefs as a result of processing messages that are overtly persuasive, examples being advertisements, health campaigns, and political speeches. Narrative persuasion, on the other hand, refers to the acceptance of attitudes and beliefs as a result of processing stories that are not overtly persuasive, such as novels, movies, and soap operas. According to the authors mentioned above, the processes that are responsible for the persuasive effects of narratives are markedly different from the processing pattern as described in the Elaboration Likelihood Model.

An important distinction between rhetorical and narrative persuasion is the differential role played by involvement. In rhetorical persuasion, involvement is the result of the extent to which the message has personally relevant consequences concerning the recipients' time, money or other resources. If these consequences are sufficiently severe, recipients are inclined to evaluate the arguments carefully and are more likely to generate counter arguments. Slater (2002a, p. 117) notes that although involvement in entertainment narratives should be relatively low, "viewers or readers of an entertainment narrative typically appear to be far more engrossed in the message than are readers or viewers of news stories, speeches, ads, or social science book chapters."

This experience of becoming engrossed in a story is often referred to as *transportation*. Gerrig (1993) used the term *transportation* to describe the feeling of entering the

world evoked by the narrative. Transported viewers or readers are no longer aware of what is going on in their physical surroundings and are emotionally affected by the events depicted in the narrative. Being transported is similar to the experience of *presence*, “a psychological state in which virtual objects are experienced as actual objects in either sensory or nonsensory ways” (Lee, 2004, p. 37). In narrative persuasion, the virtual objects are the events and characters in the story. The level of presence refers to the degree to which audience members experience the events and characters in the story as actual, or present without mediation.

Being transported into the world of the narrative is hypothesized to have two consequences that may facilitate persuasion. First, the recipient is likely to feel sympathy for the protagonists. In the words of Green and Brock (2002, p. 326) “the reader may ‘become’ the story characters, or feel as if she is experiencing narrative events.” This response may lead to “at least temporary acceptance of values and beliefs that are implied by the narrative events that represent a shift from the individual's existing beliefs” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 177). A second hypothesized consequence of transportation is that it inhibits the generation of counter arguments. Transported individuals would not be inclined to generate counter arguments “even if the persuasive subtext is inconsistent with prior attitudes, beliefs, or values” (Slater & Rouner, 2002, p. 180). Green and Brock (2000, p. 702) ascribe a similar role to transportation as they note that transportation “may reduce negative cognitive responding.”

Empirical research on the mechanisms underlying narrative persuasion is ambiguous. Most research established whether or not narratives have persuasive effects (see for a review, Slater, 2002a) but did not address the question how these effects are obtained. One exception is a series of experiments by Green and Brock (2000) in which they had participants read a printed story under different conditions. They measured the extent to which participants were transported into the story as well as the extent to which participants agreed with story-consistent beliefs. In the first three experiments, a median split was used to distinguish between high and low transportation into the story. Subsequently, this factor was entered into the analysis as a dichotomous variable to assess its effect on story-consistent beliefs. The effects of transportation on these beliefs were all in the predicted direction but many of them did not reach conventional levels of significance. Furthermore, given that the difference in transportation was observed rather than manipulated, the data were not decisive with respect to the predicted causal relation between transportation and story-consistent belief change.

In the last of their four experiments, however, Green and Brock succeeded in manipulating the level of transportation. Participants who were instructed to check whether the story contained words and sentences that might prove to be too difficult for fourth-grade level readers felt less transported into the story compared to those who were told simply to read the story attentively. Those participants who read the story attentively proved to agree more with story-consistent beliefs than those who had to check the complexity of the words and sentences. A mediation analysis showed that when the level of self-reported transportation was entered into the equation as a covariate, the instruction effect became non-significant, which provided a strong indication that transportation was the factor explaining the persuasive effects of the narrative. Green and Brock also reported significantly positive correlations between the level of transportation and the liking of the main story characters thereby lending support to the claim that transportation and sympathy for the character were related.

Green and Brock (2000) did not assess whether being transported into the narrative world inhibited the generation of counter arguments. Two unpublished studies by Slater and Rouner (as discussed in Slater & Rouner, 2002) lend support to the claim about the inhibition of counter arguing. They had participants read short story excerpts on the negative effects of alcohol on the outcome of a blind date and on a boating trip. Participants generated virtually no counter arguments on the portrayed negative outcomes of alcohol use whereas this particular age group (undergraduates) has been shown to do so when confronted with a persuasive message on this issue in a rhetorical format (Slater & Rouner, 1996). However, in the two unpublished studies Slater and Rouner did not observe or manipulate transportation into the narrative world.

The explanation of narrative persuasion in terms of transportation implicitly assumes that the formation or reinforcement of specific beliefs corresponds to the content of the story. However, communication science has taught us that content effects depend on the interpretation of content and that interpretation may differ among audience members. This insight is illustrated in a seminal book on cross-cultural readings of the television series *Dallas* (Liebes & Katz, 1993). The theme of their study may be summarized in the question on the back cover of the book: "It may be true that the whole world watches *Dallas*, but is everyone seeing the same story?"

Liebes and Katz showed how interpretations of the same story line may differ depending on viewers' background. They analyzed focus group discussions among families or friends from various cultural groups living in Israel, namely Israeli Arabs, Moroccan Jews, new immigrants from Russia, and veteran Kibbutz members of Western origin. Their analysis of the protocols distinguished between two types of assertions: referential and critical. The critical assertions pertained to story characteristics, for instance the observation that episodes usually end with a cliff hanger to attract an audience for the following episode. In the referential assertions, respondents did not address the story as such but they made a connection between the story and one's own life. For instance, a female respondent used the alcohol consumption of a story character to comment on the drinking behaviour of her husband. Or a young marriage in the story was included in a reflection on the stages in one's own older marriage.

Among others, the analysis showed differences in perceived realism of the story. Although all participants in the focus groups realized that the story was fictional commercial entertainment (a critical assertion), they pointed at realistic elements as well when making referential statements about the episode they watched. Interestingly, some groups, particularly the Russians and the Moroccans, said that the story events were probably realistic for the USA. They used the story to explain what they did not like about the USA lifestyle. This finding was one reason why the authors criticized the fear that stories from the USA would be vehicles of a so-called cultural imperialism, a much debated issue in the seventies and eighties. On the contrary, they argued that stories from another culture could strengthen the values of the receiving culture because they accentuated the difference between the culture in which the story was produced and the culture in which the story was received and interpreted.

The *Dallas* study clearly shows how people may use a story to sharpen their own views on themselves and others. It may be seen as an illustration of how an engaging story with dubious values may enhance one's own values and moral reasoning that are different from or even in contrast with the values expressed in the story. Therefore, we propose two general inferences from the study. The first inference warns against the

seemingly logical assumption that the potential impact of a story corresponds with its content. In other words, if the story shows legitimate violence, viewers will be more in favour of violence. Or if a story paints an attractive picture of promiscuous sexual behaviour, viewers will be more inclined to engage in casual sex themselves. These assumptions may be too simple because they do not address the question how the stories are interpreted. The second inference is that research should consider the possibility that the interpretation and potential effects of media content may vary by cultural background.

Our study is in line with both inferences (of course we take full responsibility for erroneous inference) although our study differs substantially from the *Dallas* study. The most notable difference is the methodology. Liebes and Katz relied on focus group discussions whereas we employed an experimental design. Liebes and Katz were interested in people's verbal reactions to the story whereas we have tried to investigate changes in attitude that may not be easily verbalised. Therefore, our study may be seen as complementary to the focus group analysis. Our approach is risky and perhaps even foolish because we try to find effects of a one-time exposure. If we would not find any effects, one could always argue that one-time exposure is simply not enough. In other words, null results do not prove that there are no effects. Although we acknowledge the risk of our enterprise we have decided to pursue for one good reason, and that is that we are trying to replicate another study that, perhaps surprisingly, did report effects of a one-time exposure to a particular story, namely the well-designed study by Slater, Rouner and Long (2006).

The question we address in this chapter is whether story effects on viewer's opinions about society are reduced when the story is situated in a different country. The question is particularly interesting because many countries broadcast stories from the USA. On the one hand it seems likely that events in television programs that are situated in the USA are seen as less relevant to the situation of viewers outside the USA. On the other hand it is possible that viewers have grown accustomed to American series to the extent that they do not consider the origin of a television programme.

In order to answer our research question, we carried out an extended replication of the study by Slater et al. (2006), in which an episode from an American television series was presented to American students. The students were questioned about societal issues that came up in the story. In our study, we asked a comparable sample of Dutch students the same type of questions about the same episode. Because the story played in the USA, it is possible that it affects opinions about the state of affairs in the USA but not in The Netherlands. Therefore, we extended our study by distinguishing between opinions about issues in the USA and opinions about the same issues in The Netherlands.

The literature on narrative persuasion as discussed above suggests that three concepts seem important to the question whether stories from the USA can affect the opinions of viewers from other countries: transportation or the extent to which a viewer feels engaged with the story (Green & Brock, 2000); perceived realism or the extent to which an American story is seen as depicting reality (Green, 2004); and identification with the story characters (Slater & Rouner, 2002). Therefore these concepts were included in the study design.

## 18.2 Method

The experiment was designed to investigate whether opinions about criminal punishment are influenced by an American television story on the issue. For this purpose we formed two experimental groups. Participants in both groups watched the same episode but answered different questions afterwards. In the first experimental group, participants were questioned on their opinions about the American penal system, whereas participants in the second experimental group answered questions about the Dutch penal system. Beside the two experimental groups, we formed two corresponding control groups in which the same questions were answered before watching the episode instead of afterwards. The answers of the experimental and control groups were analysed by means of a GLM analysis of variance.

### 18.2.1 The story

Because story effects may depend on a specific story, we used the same episode as did Slater et al. (2006). It was an episode from the NBC series *Law and Order* about a horrible kidnap and murder of a woman, the investigation of the murder, and trial of the murderer. The male suspect was apprehended in New York where the murder took place, but could be extradited to another state where the victim had been kidnapped. Conviction in this particular state would probably result in the death penalty, but the prosecution decides to keep the case in New York. An important story line revolves around the victim's mother, Mrs. Bream, who makes perfectly clear that in her view the murderer should suffer the severest punishment, namely the death penalty in the other state.

### 18.2.2 Participants and procedure

Like our comparison study (Slater et al., 2006), we selected first-year students from a communication bachelor at Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen. The sample ( $N = 118$ ) was comparable to the sample in the American study with respect to faculty of origin (Humanities), average age, and gender. The participants were randomly assigned to one of both experimental or corresponding control groups. Participants in the experimental groups first answered questions about their personal characteristics and political orientation. Subsequently, they watched the *Law and Order* episode in small groups. They were instructed to watch as they would do on a quiet evening at home. Afterwards they answered questions regarding their opinions about the American or Dutch penal system. All questions were taken from the comparison study (Slater et al., 2006) and translated into Dutch.

### 18.2.3 Dependent variables

#### 18.2.3.1 Opinions about the penal system.

The respondent indicated on 9-point scales to which extent he / she agreed with four statements about the legal rights of the victim versus those of the perpetrator. We formulated two versions of these statements, one version about the Dutch legal system and an-

other about the American system. The statements were: 'The American / Dutch legal system favours the accused'; 'The American / Dutch legal system goes too far in protecting the rights of criminals at the expense of victims'; 'In the American / Dutch legal system, the rights of the victim should be more important than the rights of the accused'; and 'I would sign a petition in favour of imposing longer sentences for violent criminals' [1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree]. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .74 and .80 for the statements about the American and the Dutch penal system respectively.

## 18.2.4 Covariates

### 18.2.4.1 Political orientation and stance in social issues

Two separate questions asked the respondents about their political orientation and their stance in social issues: 'In terms of my political orientation, I consider myself ... [1 = liberal, 9 = conservative]'; and 'In terms of my stance on social issues, I consider myself ... [1 = progressive, 9 = conservative]'.

### 18.2.4.2 Identification

Identification with the victim's mother, Mrs. Bream, was assessed with five questions, for instance 'How much did you feel for Mrs. Bream? [1 = not at all, 9 = very much]' (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .92$ ).

### 18.2.4.3 Perceived realism

Respondents indicated on three items how realistic they perceived the story to be, for instance 'The events in the story are realistic [1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree]' (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ).

### 18.2.4.4 Engagement with the story (transportation)

Six items addressed the engagement with the story that respondents felt during watching, for instance: 'While watching, I was completely taken by the story' and 'While watching, I tried to imagine how the story would continue' [1 = strongly disagree, 9 = strongly agree]. Factor analysis on the six items showed a solution with a strong first factor (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ).

## 18.3 Results

Table 18.1 shows the outcomes of the GLM analyses for the items about the American and the Dutch penal system. In both analyses we found no significant difference between conditions ( $F < 1$ ). The opinions about both legal systems were, in other words, not influenced by watching the television story. This finding contradicts the results of our comparison study showing that similar opinions of American students were influenced by the same story.

The opinions about the American and Dutch penal systems are predicted by overlapping but different sets of covariates. In both analyses, the respondent's political orientation is the strongest predictor. The more conservative respondents judge themselves to be, the stronger they believe that the rights of the accused should be subordinate to those of the victims. In the American comparison study, the control group showed a similar relation between conservatism and opinions but this relation was absent in the



Table 18.1 Outcomes of GLM analyses of models that predict opinions about the American and Dutch penal system

| Source                    | American penal system |      |                  | Dutch penal system |      |                  |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|------|------------------|--------------------|------|------------------|
|                           | $F_{1,108}$           | $p$  | Partial $\eta^2$ | $F_{1,108}$        | $p$  | Partial $\eta^2$ |
| Corrected model           | 4.573                 | .000 | .253             | 3.149              | .003 | .189             |
| Condition                 | .755                  | .387 | .007             | 1.569              | .213 | .014             |
| Gender                    | 2.741                 | .101 | .025             | .135               | .715 | .001             |
| Condition $\times$ gender | 3.083                 | .082 | .028             | .967               | .328 | .009             |
| Political orientation     | 14.245                | .000 | .117             | 9.431              | .003 | .080             |
| Stance on social issues   | 1.613                 | .207 | .015             | .021               | .885 | .000             |
| Engagement                | .215                  | .644 | .002             | .047               | .829 | .000             |
| Perceived realism         | 4.756                 | .031 | .042             | 2.242              | .137 | .020             |
| Identification Mrs. Bream | 2.981                 | .087 | .027             | 7.481              | .007 | .065             |

experimental group, most likely as a consequence of watching the television story (Slater et al., 2006). Apparently, the episode of *Law and Order* persuaded American students to an extent that the relation between political orientation and opinions disappeared whereas the episode failed to have a similar effect on Dutch students.

In addition to political orientation, a second predictor of the opinions about the American penal system was the perceived realism of the story. In contrast, the opinions about the Dutch penal system were secondly predicted by identification with Mrs. Bream, the mother of the victim. In other words, being in favour of a tougher approach of criminals in the USA was associated with more perceived realism of the story, whereas the opinion that the Dutch penal system should be harder on criminals corresponded to identification with the victim's mother.

Although covariate findings do not allow causal conclusions, this finding suggests that the extent to which one regards a story to be realistic influences the opinions about the legal system in the country that is presented in the story (here, the USA), whereas the extent to which one identifies with one of the victims influences the opinions about the legal system in the viewer's own country (here, The Netherlands).

## 18.4 Discussion

The most important conclusion of this comparison between American and Dutch respondents is that a US-made story playing against the backdrop of the American penal system proves capable of influencing American students' opinions but does not have a similar effect on Dutch students' opinions. This conclusion applies not only to opinions about the Dutch penal system that was not presented in the story but also to opinions about the American penal system that was presented in the story.

An explanation for the finding that Dutch students do not have their opinions about the Dutch legal system influenced is that the story addresses only the American penal system. Therefore, the story may in the viewers' eyes not be relevant to the Dutch situ-

ation. The lack of relevance could explain why Dutch students are not influenced by the American story.

The lack-of-relevance explanation falls short, however, for the finding that the story does not influence the Dutch sample's opinions about the American penal system either, because, if anything, the story addresses the American penal system. Moreover, the same story did affect similar opinions among American students. A possible explanation for the contrasting findings among American versus Dutch students is that the Dutch students are not sure whether the story provides a reliable depiction of the American penal system and consequently do not rely on the story to form their opinions about the system. In support of this explanation is the finding that opinions about the American penal system were predicted by the perceived realism of the story.

Our findings are relevant to theoretical ideas about the importance of the concept *distance to a story* in cultivation processes as proposed by Bilandzic (2006). According to Bilandzic, individuals who experience a story as something that does not concern them will process the story information relatively fast and effortless. Consequently, they will forget the information source more rapidly than the information itself, possibly resulting in what she calls 'moderately strong' cultivation effects. Both perceived reliability and perceived relevance seem to be indicators of what Bilandzic means by *distance to a story*. Our study suggests that perceived distance is likely to influence not only the memory of the information source but also the processing of the information itself while watching. More specifically, if viewers are insecure about the reliability of the information in the story, or if viewers regard the information as irrelevant to their own situation, they will not use the information to construct their opinions. If true, cultivation effects would not be moderately strong, as predicted by Bilandzic, but nonexistent.

Our study points at the importance of replication studies with American stories outside the USA, even if these stories are well-known and popular, an insight that was well-illustrated in the study by Liebes and Katz (1993) some fifteen years ago. In an era of globalisation, communication scientists may assume too easily that effects found in the USA apply to other countries as well. Our study suggests that experiments or surveys that address the effects of stories on viewers' opinions should include measures for perceived relevance and perceived reliability. Or alternatively, we may follow Liebes and Katz's example to organise focus group discussions and analyse the types of referential statements in various samples. Based on the experiment in the USA by Slater and colleagues and our experiment in The Netherlands, we expect that in contrast to their American peers, Dutch students will not volunteer referential statements on the penal systems in any country.

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## 18.5 Epilogue by Hans Beentjes

When I first heard about the active recipient I was confused because I could not imagine a passive recipient. Later I learned to my surprise that some theorists on media effects had more imagination than I had, and that in communication science a passive recipient was not bizarre at all. Therefore it was understandable and even necessary that the concept of an active recipient was spelled out in the context of media effects. My appreciation for the active-recipient concept got a boost when I more fully understood that often though not always (!) the recipient's interpretation of media content is a prerequisite for understanding the impact of media on behaviour, attitude, or knowledge. Better still,

I found the study of interpretation more interesting than the study of effects. However, as implied by the exclamation mark above, I have never been completely comfortable with the rhetoric around the active recipient, because *active* is often used in the sense of *conscious*. The image of man as a conscious creature does not, in my view, explain the many instances of unconscious perception, judgement, and effects. So I guess that viewers, readers, gamers and web-surfers are always active but not always conscious receivers. In the above chapter, for instance, the 'relevance' and 'reliability' of a story may be unconsciously evaluated. The act of evaluation is certainly active but not necessarily conscious. Nevertheless, as popular discourse on media effects still tends to mask the active role of viewers, the concept of the active recipient is still relevant.