Truth in Fiction:  
The Consequences of Fictional Framing for Political Opinions

Ken Mulligan\textsuperscript{1}  
Assistant Professor  
kmulliga@siu.edu

Department of Political Science  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
Mailcode 4501  
Carbondale, IL 62901-4501

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Introduction

On a typical evening at the end of July, 2009, about 20 million Americans watched the nightly news broadcasts on ABC, CBS, and NBC. That same week, according to the Neilsen ratings, more than twice that number—about 45 million—watched crime dramas on CBS alone. The preference for entertainment over news among average Americans comes as no surprise to anyone with even a passing awareness of the public’s use of its free time. And yet, despite the fact that most people spend much more time watching entertainment media than news, almost all of what we know about the effects of mass media on political attitudes and behavior comes from theories and research that are focused on, and largely limited to, news media. Although some recent work has dealt with the consequences of late night political comedy, talk shows, and news packaged as entertainment, even this “soft” news carries the patina of factuality, however light and sensationalized. Media researchers in general, and political scientists in particular, have largely ignored explicitly fictional entertainment media—movies, sitcoms, and the like—assuming it has few, if any, real world implications. In this study, I take the opposite view. I posit that fictional entertainment media contain many politically-relevant themes, messages, plots, subplots, stereotypes, characters, and portrayals, all of which may influence viewers in any number of ways.

In the next section, I sketch the outlines of a theory of fictional media influence. While fiction is fabricated and most people can fairly easily discern fiction from nonfiction, I posit that they nonetheless use fiction, selectively, to inform their beliefs, opinions, and behavior. In this study I focus on one potential type of fictional influence. In the section that follows, I argue that fictional media, like news media, frame political issues in certain ways, and the way that they frame an issue affects how viewers perceive it, their beliefs about it, and, ultimately, their attitudes toward it. I discuss how this likely occurs and the ways it might affect viewers. Following this, I present my first cut at the results of an experiment designed to test the effects of fictional framing on beliefs and attitudes. Participants were assigned at random to watch one of two movies that played widely at the box office, were well received, won
awards, and framed the issue of unplanned pregnancy in different ways. About half watched *Cider House Rules*, which framed the issue in terms of the problems that would arise when abortion is illegal. The other half watched the movie *Bella*, which framed the issue in terms of the choice of adoption. I chose the issue of unplanned pregnancy because it is one that is familiar to most people and opinions about the related subject of abortion tend to be entrenched. The results show that these different fictional frames of unplanned pregnancy influenced participants’ beliefs and opinions about legalized abortion in ways consistent with the movies’ framing of the issue. As a result of watching the movies, those who watched *Cider House Rules* were more favorable toward legalized abortion and those who watched *Bella* were less so.

I then consider the process by which fictional media influence attitudes and the factors that may increase or decrease the effects of fictional framing. Although this analysis is preliminary, the results are nonetheless consistent with a simple persuasion model of influence. I show that watching the movies changed beliefs about abortion which, in turn, changed opinions. Finally, I test two potential moderators of fictional framing. First, the extent to which participants were mentally absorbed into the movie and, second, how realistic they perceived the movie to be. The results suggest that people who were absorbed into the story and who saw it as the kind of thing that could happen in real life were more influenced than those who were less absorbed and perceived it as less realistic. I conclude by discussing the results in light of our understanding of mass media influence on public opinion.

1 A Theory of Truth in Fiction

After nearly a century of empirical scholarship, researchers of political communication today have a pretty good sense of the news media and its consequences for public opinion. We are familiar with journalism and how people tend to perceive the news. We know that news media engage in agenda setting, priming and framing, and that these effects, while not insubstantial, are a far cry from the magic bullets, hypodermic needles, and related middle-20th-century metaphors thought to capture
the stipulated massive influence the news media on readers and viewers. We have since come to understand that media influence is more subdued, subtle, and, given the objectivity that attends most news reporting, unlikely to sway many people one way or another in any systematic way. Even in this new media age of the internet, satellite TV, and mobile gadgets of various kinds, the media, to paraphrase Cohen (1963), are much better at telling us what to think about than what to think.

The emergence of soft news, both as a medium and a topic of study, has provided a new twist on this now-familiar storyline of mass media influence. Soft news is entertainment with a talk-show format and a focus on topics that are real, useful, and easily understood. It provides viewers with information in a way that is more entertaining than hard news and without the focus on public affairs. Compared to hard news, soft news is more likely to deal with human interest stories than abstract social issues, and to do it in dramatic and sensationalized ways (Baum 2002, Baum 2004b). Soft news is lighter and less substantial than hard news, but may be beneficial to the extent that it brings public affairs to people who would not otherwise be exposed to it (Baum 2002) and helps them to make informed decisions about politics (Baum & Jamison 2006).

While soft news differs from hard news in many ways, the two share at least one thing in common. They both deal with real-life issues, places, people, and events. When dealing with politically-relevant topics, soft news, however sensationalized and dramatic, is still news. Entertainment Tonight might have a different take than CNN on President Obama’s appointment of Sonia Sotomayor to be the next Supreme Court justice, for example, but viewers can feel safe in assuming that Judge Sotomayor is a real person and whatever tidbits of information they might learn about her from either source are likely to be at least nominally true.

Fictional entertainment media share many of the same characteristics as soft news. Sitcoms, movies, and the like also emphasize human interest stories, are not generally focused on public affairs, are dramatic, and sensational. But fictional media differ from both hard and soft news in at least one key respect. News, hard or soft, cannot make up people, places, events, dialogue, or anything else—at least not without controversy—while fictional media can, and do so, regularly. In contrast to
both hard news and soft news, creators of fictional entertainment media are free to invent whatever or whomever they wish so long as it suits their story, which itself is likely a figment of someone’s imagination. There is one key difference between fictional media and other types of media, and it is that fiction, by definition, is fake.

Presumably viewers are aware of this difference and can, for the most part, distinguish news from fictional entertainment. In a 1999 episode of the popular drama *The West Wing*, President Josiah Bartlet (played by Martin Sheen) appointed Judge Roberto Mendoza (Edward James Olmos) to be the first Hispanic justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. We can assume, I suggest reliably, that viewers knew that Sheen’s character was not really the president and that Olmos would not himself assume a position on the Court. Watching *The West Wing*, viewers were aware that it was fiction. I begin with the premise that people who avail themselves of fiction are, by and large, aware that it is not some kind of particularly dramatic news program, documentary, or reality show. Fiction is indeed fake, and viewers know it.

This much seems understood. Perhaps for this reason, communication scholars have largely ignored the potential implications of fictional entertainment media for political attitudes and behavior. On its face, this would seem to be for good reason. Even where fictional media deal with politically relevant topics and issues, the fact that they are fiction would seem likely to neutralize any potential for influence.

Even so, let me suggest that average people do not simply reject everything they see and hear in fiction, nor should they, because not everything in fiction is false. In their classic study of “The Representation of Fictional Information,” Gerrig and Prentice (1991) distinguish between two types of information in fiction. First, there is information that is relevant only to the story at hand. Mr. Bartlet’s presidency and Mr. Mendoza’s appointment to the high court are fictional “facts” specific to the *The West Wing*. Watching the program, there is no real world utility per se in “knowing” that Bartlet is president or that Mendoza has been appointed to the Supreme Court. Of themselves, these pieces of story specific information are relevant only to the story at hand.

The second type of information in fiction is that which has potential real world utility. For the most part, fictional characters, plot, and events, people may rea-
sonably disregard as story specific. But other information in fiction—say, President Bartlet’s reasons for nominating Mendoza, the politics of the appointment, the reactions of Congress, and public reaction to the nomination—people may reasonably assume that these and other contextual cues reflect, to a some degree, reality. It is no secret that producers of fiction often seek to make their works as realistic as possible, nor that people frequently watch or read fiction to gain access vicariously to places, times, events, and types of people that have basis in history or otherwise of the real world. People avail themselves of fiction in part because fiction can offer a window on some corner, aspect, or dimension of the actual world. This second type of information in fiction has relevance not just to the story at hand but also to the life and times of real live human beings and the communities in which they live.

If Gerrig and Prentice are correct—if some aspects of fiction have potential real world utility—then it seems reasonable to suggest that viewers or readers would use this information to inform their perceptions, beliefs, judgements, and opinions, not merely of the fictional world, but of their world. Viewers or readers might take fiction at face value, rejecting what appears fanciful and accepting what rings true. They might reasonably adopt those perspectives or insights that seem useful or valid for their lives, community, or society. I posit that viewers watch fiction to be entertained, but do so with an eye toward learning about the real world, where “learning” is to be construed broadly, referring to factual information, but also insights into the human condition, lessons for daily life, and opinions about politics and other things. In short, people perceive truth in fiction, and use it to learn, form perceptions and opinions, and guide their behavior.

1.1 Fictional Framing and Political Opinions

If this theory is true—if people sometimes perceive truth in fiction—then the ways that fictional media deal with politically-relevant issues should influence real world beliefs and opinions. One way that fictional media might take up political issues is through framing. Framing is a broad concept that extends across several fields of study and literatures (see Bolson 2009 and Chong and Druckman 2007 for recent
reviews). In the context of mass media, the idea of framing posits that when dealing with a political or social issue, the media must find a way to condense it to its essential elements, so that it can be presented concisely and viewers will understand it. In doing this, the media look for simple “metaphors, catchphrases, visual images, moral appeals, and other symbolic devices” that capture what the issue is really about. We encounter issue frames, according to Gamson and Modigliani (1989, 2-3 emphases in original), “not as individual items but as interpretive packages.” These issue packages have, “at [their] core[,] a central organizing idea, or frame, for making sense of relevant events.” “In this approach,” remark Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley (1997, 568), ”frames act like plots or story lines, lending coherence to otherwise discrete pieces of information.” Framing helps people to understand an issue by helping them to grasp the most relevant aspects or dimensions of it.

To date, almost all research on media framing has dealt with news media. But as Gamson (1992, 24) notes, the framing that characterizes public discourse “is carried on in many forums—conferences, speeches, hearings, books, magazines, television, movies, and newspapers. It does not confine itself neatly to entities labeled ’news and public affairs,’ but rudely enters advertising and entertainment as well.” Fictional entertainment media also frame issues. Unlike hard news, which package information through reporting on newsworthy events, or soft news, whose interpretive packages tend to focus on episodic human interest stories, fictional entertainment media convey politically or socially relevant messages through character development, dialogue, and imagery. Issues are raised, sometimes subtly, other times overtly, in the context of an ongoing story. As with news framing, the valence, tone, and messages associated with the issue help viewers or readers to understand what the issue is about. Fictional framing provides clues that, in practice, help viewers to understand what considerations are most relevant to the issue. News framing does this as well, but the difference is that in fictional framing, frames don’t just “act like plots or story lines,” they are plots or story lines. Story lines with a message—here, a politically-relevant message.

If, as I theorize, people perceive truth in fiction, then the way that fictional media frame an issue should influence beliefs and opinions about the issue. If a fictional TV
program, movie, or book frames an issue in a particular way, highlighting in some way considerations that promote a particular perspective, and lend themselves to adopting a particular attitude toward the issue, and the story rings true, so to speak, for viewers or readers, then this framing of the issue should influence beliefs and opinions about the issue. In this research report, I sought to test this hypothesis—that fictional framing influences beliefs and opinions.

1.1.1 The Process of Fictional Framing Influence

Assuming for the moment that this hypothesis is true—that fictional media frame issues and, in consequence, influence opinion—the question arises: How, in the sense of by what process, does fictional framing affect attitudes? Perhaps the most straightforward process is persuasion by way of belief change. If the effects of fictional framing occur through persuasion, then we would expect that the fictional frames would influence beliefs which, in turn, change opinions. I test for this simple mechanism of persuasion through belief change: Fictional frames change beliefs, which change opinions.

1.1.2 Potential Moderators of Fictional Framing

The effects of fictional framing on opinions may be greater in some circumstances than others. I test for two potential moderators of the effects of fictional framing. One is the extent to which viewers are absorbed by a story. A few studies have suggested that fictional media might influence real world perceptions, beliefs and opinions because people become absorbed in the story (Gerrig 1993, Green & Brock 2000, Green, Strange & Brock 2002, Slater 1997). If this is true, then people who are highly absorbed by the story should be more influenced by fictional framing than those who are less absorbed. I test whether absorption into the story moderates the effects of fictional framing on opinions.

A second potential moderator is the extent to which people perceive the story to be realistic. Some stories are so far fetched that they would seem to beg credulity. Others hit home, so to speak, and, for some appear more lifelike and otherwise
realistic. A handful of studies have suggested that people tend to perceive fictional stories as resembling reality, especially when they can relate to them on a personal level (Busselle & Bilandzic 2008, Green 2004, Oatley 1999, Slater, Rouner & Long 2006). Where people view the story as realistic, that it could happen in real life, they may be more influenced by fictional framing than those who see it as unrealistic and not like reality. I also test whether perceived realism moderates the influence of fictional framing on attitudes.

2 The Experiment

I conducted the study in the political psychology lab of the political science department at a large state university. The sample included 147 undergraduates who participated in exchange for course credit. They were randomly assigned to watch either *Cider House Rules* or *Bella*. Both *Cider House Rules* and *Bella* are dramatic human interest stories. Table 1 summarizes the gist of both films, showing the different ways that they framed the issue of unplanned pregnancy. Here I review briefly the two movies.

[Table 1 About Here.]

2.1 Fictional Framing in *Cider House Rules*

*Cider House Rules* is a coming of age story about an adolescent named Homer Wells (played by Tobey McGuire) who grows up in an orphanage in rural New England around the middle of the twentieth century. The movie played widely in the U.S. and won two Academy Awards. The focus of the film is on Homer’s life and that of his mentor, Dr. Wilbur Larch (Michael Caine), the director of the orphanage, who is a father figure to Homer. Homer assists Dr. Larch with his medical practice. Dr. Larch hopes that one day Homer will take over the practice and the care of the

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1^They participated under the ruse that “the purpose of this research is ... to explore perceptions of a story when watching it on film versus reading it in a book,” where they had been assigned to watch the film version of the story, rather than read the book version.
orphanage. At this time and place, both in reality and in the movie, abortion was illegal. However, Dr. Larch performs abortions on women in need. Homer opposes abortion and does not assist Dr. Larch in the procedure, although he has been trained to do so. The issue of unplanned pregnancy comes up early in the movie when a twelve year old girl, the victim of a botched abortion, comes stumbling to the orphanage, bleeding. Dr. Larch tries to save the girl but she dies. Homer and Dr. Larch debate the issue.

Dr. Larch (Michael Caine, to Homer): If she’d come to you four months ago and asked you for a simple D and C, what would you have decided to do? Nothing? This is what doing nothing gets you, Homer. It means that someone else is going to do the job–some moron who doesn’t know how!

Later, as Homer and a fellow Orphan Buster (Kyrian Kalkin) bury the girl at the cemetery, they continue the conversation.

Buster (Kalkin): What’d she die of?

Larch (Caine): She died of *secrecy*, she died of ignorance! ... (To Homer) If you expect people to be responsible for their children, you have to give them the right to decide whether or not to *have* children. Wouldn’t you agree?

Homer (McGuire): How about expecting people to be responsible enough to control themselves to begin with?

Larch: How about this child? You expect her to be responsible?

They leave the issue unresolved. Later in the movie, however, after Homer has moved away and taken a job picking applies with a family of itinerate workers, one of the workers, a young woman, becomes impregnated by her father. Seeing her pain, and worried about what she might do to herself, Homer sees the need for abortion in this circumstance, has a change of heart, and performs the abortion. These poignant scenes near the end of the movie provide the setup for the conclusion, which
deals with the rules on the wall of the cider house. None of the family members can read, so they ask Homer to read the cider house rules.

Homer: One. Please don’t smoke in bed. ... Two. Please don’t go up to the roof to eat your lunch...Three. Please—even if you are very hot—do not go up to the roof to sleep.

First worker, Hero (Lonnie Farmer, indignantly): What do they think? They must think we’re crazy!

Second worker, Muddy (K. Todd Freeman): They think we’re dumb [African Americans] so we need dumb rules. That’s what they think.

Homer: Four. There should be no going up on the roof at night.

Third worker, Peaches (Heavy D): Why don’t they just say, “Stay off the roof!”?

Rose Rose (The incest victim): That’s it? It means nothin’ at all! And all this time I been wonderin’ about it.

Peaches: They’re outrageous, them rules!

Mr. Rose (Her father, sternly, breaking into the conversation): Who lives here in this cider house? ... Who grinds them apples, who presses that cider, who cleans up the mess, and who just plain lives here ... just breathin’ in the vinegar? [He pauses] Somebody who don’t live here made them rules. Them rules ain’t for us. We the ones who make up them rules. We makin’ our own rules, every day. Ain’t that right, Homer?

Homer (stone-faced): Right.

The theme of Cider House Rules is that we as individuals should follow our own lights rather than an imposed set of rules. Between the botched back-alley abortion, the incest, and similar messages in the movie, Cider House Rules clearly frames the issue of unplanned pregnancy in a pro-choice way. To the extent that fictional framing influences opinions and beliefs, one would expect that viewers of this movie would adopt beliefs and opinions that are relatively pro-choice.
2.2 Fictional Framing in *Bella*

*Bella* is a dramatic story about two protagonists, Nina (Tammy Blanchard), a young waitress at a Mexican restaurant, and Jose (Eduardo Verstegui), a former soccer star who is a cook at the restaurant. The two come together in the midst of difficulty. *Bella* also played widely in the U.S., and won the People’s Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival (the second-most prestigious festival after Cannes). For Nina, the problem is that she is unexpectedly pregnant, unmarried, and fired for showing up late, which was the result of a pregnancy test and morning sickness. For Jose, he is recovering from the haunting events of a tragedy a few years earlier. On his way to signing a new pro soccer contract that would make him rich, joking with his manager, he took his eyes off the road, and struck and killed a little girl. On this day with Nina, he leaves the restaurant with her and spends the day with her as she struggles with her pregnancy. They stop for lunch and discuss the issue.

Jose (Eduardo Verstegui): Let’s talk about the things you need for a child.

Nina (Tammy Blanchard): who said I was having a child?

Jose: (Mystified) You did.

Nina: (Shaking her head) No, I said I was pregnant. I’m not ready to have a kid. You have a kid your freedom’s gone.

Jose: (Looking concerned) Things change.

Nina: Having a kid isn’t just a change. ... I just can’t do it. I’m broke. And alone.

Jose: Alone?

Nina: (After a long awkward stare at Jose, annoyed) I made my decision, okay?

Jose: What does the father think?

Nina: (Sarcastically) ... He’s all for “getting it taken care of.” Those were the words he used. As if it were a wisdom tooth to be pulled out. I wonder why kids are always the problem of the mother. Guys aren’t
inconvenienced by them. It doesn’t ruin their freedom. And yet they have all this advice. (Heavy sarcasm) “What’s best for me.” (Emotional pause) Getting it taken care of is what’s best for me.

Later, Jose asks her, almost nonchalantly, whether Nina had considered adoption. She says she would not want a stranger to raise her child. Jose suggests that it would not have to be a stranger. She visits Jose’s family, is invited for dinner and, given her own difficult upbringing, is struck by what she describes as the “joy” that seems to come so easily there. After dinner, they talk on the beach and head for home. As they part, she simply says “I’ll call you.”

Then, unexpectedly, the movie flashes forward about five or six years, as Jose plays on the beach with a little girl. It becomes evident that they are there to meet the girl’s Mommy. Nina pulls up in a cab and meets her daughter, Bella, for the first time. She cries tears of joy and mouths “thank you” to Jose. For him, by adopting Bella, he has atoned for his accident that killed a little girl about the same age. It is a happy ending. Although the framing in Bella is not anti-abortion, it is clearly pro-choice-of-adoption. Bella presents adoption as realistic, viable, good alternative to abortion, and it does it in the context of a film that is uplifting. For participants who watched this movie, one might expect them to adopt beliefs and opinions that are more anti-abortion or pro-life relative to those who watched Cider House Rules.

2.3 Measures

After watching the movie, participants answered a series of questions that tap their opinions and beliefs about abortion.

2.3.1 Abortion Opinions

The seven abortion opinion items were presented in random order and worded as follows. Also, I created a scale of abortion opinions by averaging together the seven items.
How much you would favor or oppose having abortion be legal in each of the following situations. (ref. NORC; PSRA/Newsweek 2005) Would you favor or oppose legal abortion when ...

- a pregnancy results from incest?
  1. Oppose Very Strongly
  2. Oppose Strongly
  3. Oppose Somewhat
  4. Neither Favor Nor Oppose
  5. Favor Somewhat
  6. Favor Strongly
  7. Favor Very Strongly

- ... a pregnancy results from rape?
- ... a pregnancy puts the woman’s health at risk?
- ... the woman is not married and does not want to marry the man?
- ... the child would be born with mental or physical disabilities?
- ... the woman cannot afford a child?
- ... the woman is under 18 years of age?

2.3.2 Abortion Beliefs

The five “beliefs about abortion” items were randomized and worded as follows. I created a scale of abortion beliefs by averaging together the five items.

- Women who face a crisis pregnancy often have no alternative other than abortion.
1. Disagree Very Strongly
2. Disagree Strongly
3. Disagree Somewhat
4. Neither Agree Nor Disagree
5. Agree Somewhat
6. Agree Strongly
7. Agree Very Strongly

• If abortion were illegal, women would seek abortions anyway.

• If abortion were illegal, compassionate doctors would still perform abortions.

• Overall, legalized abortion is compassionate.

• When a woman faces a crisis pregnancy it is often best for her to "get it taken care of" by having an abortion.

2.3.3 Absorption Into the Movie

I created the absorption scale base on these 11 items, presented in random order. These were Likert (agree—disagree) items. Response options were the same as those of the beliefs scale above.

Items 1, 2, 5, 6, and 7 were adapted from or inspired by Green and Brock’s (2000) measurement of transportation into a narrative story.[2] Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements. While I was watching the film ...

• I was mentally involved in watching it.

• I wanted to learn how the film would end.

[2] Using their “transportation” scale in this study was not possible because several of the items are specific to narrative readings rather than motion pictures.
• Time seemed to fly by.

• I WAS VERY FOCUSED ON the plot (the storyline or sequence of events) of the film.

• I was very focused on the conversations among the characters in the film.

• My eyes were “glued to the screen.”

• I felt my mind wandering. (reverse coded)

• Activity going on in the room around me was on my mind. (reverse coded)

• I could not wait for the film to be over. (reverse coded)

• I was bored. (reverse coded)

• I LOST TRACK OF the plot (the storyline or sequence of events) of the film. (reverse coded)

2.3.4 Perceived Realism

The perceived realism scale was based on these eight items, which were randomized. Most of them were adapted from or inspired by Elliott et al. (1983) or Green (2004). These were also Likert items, based on the same 7-pt. scale.

• Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

• The dialogue in the film is realistic and believable.

• The setting for the film does NOT seem real. (reverse coded)

• The people in this film are like people you or I might actually know. (reverse coded)

• This film does NOT portray accurately the way real people live their everyday lives. (reverse coded)
This film deals with events that actually have happened or could happen.

This film is very realistic.

I have a hard time believing the people in this film are real because the basic situation is so farfetched. (reverse coded)

This film deals with the kind of difficult choices that people have to make in real life.

3 Results

3.1 Effects of the Movies on Abortion Opinions

I begin by discussing the main effect of the treatment—the movies—on attitudes toward legalized abortion. If the framing of this issue in the two movies influenced opinions, then we would expect that when asked to give their attitudes toward legalized abortion, participants who watched *Cider House Rules* would tend to adopt more pro-choice positions on abortion than subjects who watched *Bella*. I tested this expectation by conducting a difference of means test between the two experimental conditions on each of the seven abortion circumstances and the index that represents participants’ general opinion on legalized abortion. The results of this analysis are in Table 2. Column 1 presents the mean opinion on abortion in each circumstance and the index, on 1-7 scale, for participants who watched *Cider House Rules*. Column 2 is the mean opinion on the abortion items for those who watched *Bella*. The third column is the p-values for the difference of means tests. For each item and the scale, it is the probability that the difference in mean opinion between the two conditions resulted from chance. The circumstances are listed in the order of highest support for legalized abortion in each circumstance, with those receiving higher support at the top and those with less support at the bottom. Consider the first question, whether or not abortion should be legal when the pregnancy results from rape. Here there is strong support in both conditions, but greater support among those who
watched *Cider House Rules* than those who watched *Bella*. The difference between the two conditions is statistically significant at $p = .03$. Because participants were assigned to watch either Cider or Bella at random, and the only difference between participants in the two conditions was that some watched *Cider House Rules* while others watched *Bella*, we can infer that the framing of unplanned pregnancy in the two movies caused this difference. The second issue in Table 2 is when the pregnancy results from incest. This was a poignant theme in *Cider House Rules*, and here again we see a statistically significant difference in support for legalized abortion in this circumstance between the two groups. Participants who watched *Cider House Rules* were again more pro-choice in this circumstance than those who watched *Bella*, and the difference is significant at $p = .01$.

Looking at the other five abortion circumstances in Table 2, we see a similar pattern. In each case—where the health of the mother is at risk, the mother is underage, the child would have disabilities, or the mother is poor or unmarried—participants who watched *Cider House Rules* expressed, on average, a more pro-choice attitude, while those who watched *Bella* adopted positions that were relatively less pro-choice and more pro-life. The last line in Table 2 is an index of all 7 items, averaged together. It reflects participants’ general opinion on legalized abortion. For this index, as expected, the results show that participants who watched *Cider House Rules* were more pro-choice as a result of watching the movie, while those who watched *Bella* gave more pro-life opinions, statistically significant at $p = .00$.

Considering the results overall, the differences between the two conditions are statistically significant in all seven circumstances. The logic of the research design—random assignment to the two conditions—means that we can attribute causality to the movies. We can infer that the framing of unplanned pregnancy in the films influenced participants’ opinions about abortion. The pro-choice framing in *Cider House Rules* caused participants who watched it to be somewhat more pro-choice, while the underlying pro-life (or at least pro-choice-of-adoption) message in *Bella* caused those who watched it to be relatively more pro-life. On this issue, with respect
to these movies, we can say that the viewers perceived truth in fiction because the film’s framing of unplanned pregnancy influenced their opinions about abortion.

3.2 Effects of the Movies on Abortion Beliefs

Thus far I have looked at opinions about abortion—how much participants favor or oppose legalized abortion in various circumstances. Next I take up the effects of the framing of unplanned pregnancy in the two movies on beliefs about abortion. If the movies influenced beliefs, it would be interesting in its own right, and it would also suggest that the effects of fictional framing on attitudes might occur through persuasion—the movies change beliefs which, in turn, change opinions.

[Table 3 about here.]

The results of this analysis are presented in Table 3. Participants were asked to say how much they agree or disagree with five proposed statements of fact about abortion. The first one states that “If abortion were illegal, women would seek abortions anyway.” In Cider House Rules it is illegal, and young women in very traumatic circumstances seek abortions anyway. In Bella, however, adoption is presented as a viable alternative. Did the different frames of the two movies influence beliefs on this question? The first line of Table 2 addresses this. It shows that participants who watched Cider House Rules were significantly more likely to agree with this statement than those who watched Bella. The second line of Table 3 is based on how much participants agree with the statement, “If abortion were illegal, compassionate doctors would still perform abortions.” Here, participants who watched Cider House Rules were more likely to agree with this pro-choice belief than those who watched Bella, and the difference is significant at p = .01. In fact, looking at the other three beliefs, we can see that the two movies significantly influenced not just the first two but all five, and in every case the difference is significant at p ≤ .01, except the first, which is significant at p = .02. The last line in the table is the scale of all five items. It is an index of abortion-related beliefs. Here, the results show that the two movies influenced beliefs about abortion generally, and the difference is highly significant.
Again the results suggest that viewers saw truth in these fictional movies, so much so that it changed their beliefs about this issue.

### 3.3 Process of Fictional Framing Influence

Having demonstrated that fictional framing in the two movies influenced opinions and beliefs about abortion, I now look at the process by which they influenced abortion opinions. I test whether fictional framing affects opinions through the traditional mechanism of persuasion—the movies influence beliefs which, in turn, influence opinions. In other words, I test whether the effects of the films on abortion opinions are mediated by beliefs about abortion. To do this, I use Baron and Kenny’s (1986) four step procedure for establishing mediation. This is perhaps the most common method of testing for mediation in social psychology. I explain the procedure as I discuss the results, which are presented in Table 4.

[Table 4 about here.]

Step one involves showing that the main independent variable (Here, the manipulation) is a significant predictor of the dependent variable (the abortion opinion index). To establish this, I regressed the abortion opinion index on an indicator of the manipulation. The results of this OLS model are in the first column of Table 4. Consistent with the results in Table 2, the results show that participants who watched *Cider House Rules* were more pro-choice than those who watched *Bella.*

Step two requires that I show that that the IV (the manipulation) significantly predicts the mediator (the abortion beliefs index). I did this by regressing the abortion beliefs index on the manipulation. Consistent with the results in Table 3, The OLS results in the second column of Table 4 show that the manipulation predicts the index of abortion beliefs. Step three involves showing that the mediator (abortion beliefs index) significantly predicts the DV (abortion opinion). The results in column 4 show that abortion beliefs do predict abortion opinions, and strongly so. In the fourth and final step, to demonstrate that the mediator does in fact mediate the effect of the IV on the DV, I need to show that the effect of the focal predictor (the manipulation) on the DV (abortion opinion) is reduced when the mediator
(abortion beliefs) is introduced into the model at the same time. If the effect of the IV on the DV is completely mediated by the mediator, then the effect of the IV should be indistinguishable from zero, which is to say, become nonsignificant, with the mediator in the model. The results in column 4 of Table 4 present this fourth and final step. They show that the effect of the the manipulation does in fact drop to zero when abortion beliefs are included in the model, which indicates that the effect of the movie on abortion opinion is mediated by beliefs. That is, the results of the mediation analysis overall confirm that the fictional framing in the two movies influenced opinions through persuasion—the movies changed beliefs, which changed opinions.

3.3.1 Moderators of Fictional Framing

In this final analysis, I look at two factors that might increase or decrease the effects of fictional framing on opinions, absorption into the story and perceived realism. Beginning with absorption, if people who are highly absorbed into the film are more influenced by it, then we would expect participants who watched *Cider House Rules* to be more pro-choice than those who watched *Bella*, but only among those high in absorption, not those low in absorption. I tested this expectation by splitting the absorption scale at its median and otherwise conducting the same analysis as in Table 2. The result of this analysis are at the top of Table 5. Among participants low in absorption, on the left side of the table, the difference in abortion attitudes between the two treatment groups is not statistically significant (or, if one were to be charitable, marginally significant, at p = .13). However, among those high in absorption, participants who watched *Cider House Rules* are more pro-choice than those who watched *Bella*, and this difference is significant at p = .01. Based on this analysis, we can say that absorption into the film moderates the effects of fictional framing on opinions. People who are highly engrossed in the story are more influenced by the movie than those who are not.

[Table 5 about here.]
The second potential moderator is perceived realism. If people who perceive the movie as very lifelike are more influenced than those who do not, then we would expect a significant difference between the two treatment groups among those who are higher in perceived realism and not among those who are low in perceived realism. The results of this test are at the bottom of Table 5. The left side of the table shows the results for those who tended to view the movie they watched as less realistic. The results of this analysis show that the difference between the two experimental conditions is not statistically significant, which means they cannot be differentiated from chance. On the right side is the analysis for participants who were high in perceived realism. These results show that among these participants who saw the movie as very lifelike, those who watched *Cider House Rules* were more pro-choice than those who saw *Bella*, and the difference is highly significant at $p = .01$.

Taken together, the results of these two analyses show that absorption into the movie and perceived realism moderate the effects of fictional framing on attitudes. Fictional framing influences opinions, but these results suggest that it is more likely to occur among people who are absorbed into the story or perceive it as realistic.

4 Discussion

Research on the effects of media on political attitudes and beliefs has focused almost exclusively on news media. Although some recent work has explored the implications of soft news and late night comedy shows for political perceptions and opinions, hardly any research has dealt with the potential implications of fictional entertainment media for public opinion. In this study, I sketched the outlines of a theory of fictional media influence which posits that whereas some of the information in fiction is relevant only to the story, other information has potential real world utility. I suggested that for this type of information, people sometimes perceive truth in fiction, and when this occurs, it can affect their beliefs and attitudes. I suggested that fictional media, like news media, sometimes frame issues in politically relevant ways. If people perceive truth in fiction, then, I suggested, the way that an issue is framed by some fictional media could influence the real world opinions and beliefs of
viewers and readers. I tested this supposition in an experiment.

Participants were assigned at random to watch one of two movies that frames the issue of unplanned pregnancy in different ways. *Cider House Rules* frames the issue in terms the problems that would arise if abortion were illegal. The movie *Bella* also deals with abortion, but presents adoption as a viable alternative. If these divergent fictional frames in the two films influence viewers, then we would expect that those assigned to watch *Cider House Rules* would express more more pro-choice beliefs and attitudes, while those assigned to watch *Bella* would offer relatively more anti-abortion viewpoints. Testing this supposition, I found that the fictional framing in the two movies influenced beliefs and opinions as expected. Participants who watched *Cider House Rules* were more pro-choice in both beliefs and opinions than those who saw *Bella*.

I also tested the process by which fictional framing affects opinions. Consistent with a traditional persuasion model of influence, mediation analysis showed that the movies influenced beliefs about abortion which, in turn, affected opinions. Finally, I also tested two moderators of fictional framing—absorption into the story and perceived realism. Consistent with expectations, I found that people who were highly absorbed by the film they watched were more influenced by fictional framing than those who were not. I also found that people who perceived the movie they watched to be the kind of thing that could happen in real life were more affected than otherwise.

These results have at least two important implications for what we know about media effects and public opinion. First, they support the theory that people draw real world implications from fictional media. They suggest that when accessing fiction people do not, as Coleridge suggested, willingly suspend disbelief. Rather, they suggest that people draw out real world implications from fictional media. Second, insofar as people use much more entertainment media than news, and most media effects research has focused on news, we as researchers may be ignoring a vast array of fictional media effects. The present research report dealt with one experiment and two movies. As limited as they may be in the bigger picture of mass media influence, the results suggest that they may also be the tip of an iceberg of fictional media influence.
References


## 5 Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th><strong>Cider House Rules</strong></th>
<th><strong>Bella</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story</strong></td>
<td>Homer grows up in orphanage, moves away, finds romance, and moral challenges</td>
<td>Unplanned pregnancy, Nina chooses abortion. Jose, a friend and former soccer star, is haunted by accidental killing of little girl in car accident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plot</strong></td>
<td>Abortion is illegal, anti-abortion Homer sees need from botched abortions and incest</td>
<td>Bella changes her mind, Jose adopts baby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dialogue</strong></td>
<td>Homer’s mentor: “If you expect people to be responsible for their children, you have to give them the right to decide whether or not to have children”</td>
<td>Jose: “Have you thought about adoption?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Imagery</strong></td>
<td>Scenes of girl dying from botched illegal abortion and heart-wrenching scenes of incest victim</td>
<td>Flash forward, years later, Nina crying tears of joy when she meets her daughter, and mouths “thank you” to Jose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Message</strong></td>
<td>Morality should be self-directed rather than imposed</td>
<td>Good things can come from difficult circumstances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Framing of Unplanned Pregnancy in *Cider House Rules* and *Bella*
Table 2: Mean Abortion Opinions by Condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Cider House Rules</th>
<th>Bella</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>5.46</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incest</td>
<td>5.42</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disabilities</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmarried</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion Scale</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“How much you would you favor or oppose having abortion be legal in each of the following situations?”
Entries are mean values on 7-pt. Likert scale coded 1-7.
Higher values reflect greater support for legalized abortion in each circumstance.
See text for wording of these 7 items.
Opinion Scale is index of opinions toward the 7 items.
Participants were assigned to watch either Cider House Rules or Bella.
p-value based on two-tailed difference of means test.
Data are from student sample in lab experiment.
Table 3: Mean Abortion Beliefs by Condition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>Cider House Rules</th>
<th>Bella</th>
<th>p-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women Seek Abortions Anyway</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctors Will Still Do Abortions</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion is Compassionate</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get Abortion “Taken Care Of”</td>
<td>3.51</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>No Other Alternative</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs Scale</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.”
Entries are mean values on 7-pt. Likert scale coded 1-7.
See text for wording of these 5 items.
Beliefs Scale is index of these 5 items.
Participants were assigned to watch either *Cider House Rules* or *Bella*.
Higher values reflect pro-legalized abortion beliefs
p-value based on two-tailed difference of means test.
Data are from student sample in lab experiment.
Table 4: Test for Mechanism of Influence on Abortion Opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th>Step 4</th>
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<td>11**</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Abortion Beliefs</td>
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<td>(.03)</td>
<td>(.03)</td>
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<td>Abortion Opinion</td>
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<td>.77**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Abortion Opinion</td>
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<td>(.08)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>.41**</td>
<td>.15**</td>
<td>.15**</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.03)</td>
<td>(.02)</td>
<td>(.04)</td>
<td>(.04)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-sq.</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.41</td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>147</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

OLS Models based on Baron and Kenny’s (1986) 4-step procedure for establishing mediation.

Participants were assigned to watch either *Cider House Rules* or *Bella*. The Movies changed abortion beliefs which, in turn, changed attitudes toward legalized abortion.

** p ≤ .01, * p ≤ .05, two-tailed, standard errors in parentheses.

All variables, including the DV’s, are coded to range from 0 to 1. Higher values of DV’s reflect pro-legalized abortion opinions and beliefs.

Data are from student sample in lab experiment.
Table 5: Effects of Movies on Abortion Opinion by Absorption & Perceived Realism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Absorption</th>
<th></th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>p-value</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>p-value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cider</td>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>Cider</td>
<td>Bella</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abortion Opinion</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Entries are mean values on Abortion Opinion index, scaled 1-7. Higher values reflect pro-legalized abortion beliefs. Participants were assigned to watch either *Cider House Rules* or *Bella*. “Low” is below median, “High” is above median. p-value based on two-tailed difference of means test. Data are from student sample in lab experiment.