An Experimental Test of the Effects of Fictional Framing on Attitudes*

Kenneth Mulligan, Southern Illinois University Carbondale
Philip Habel, Southern Illinois University Carbondale

Objectives. Most studies of media effects in political communication focus on news media. A smaller body of work extends theories of news media effects to fictional entertainment media. Just as news media engage in priming and agenda setting, these studies suggest that fictional media do as well. In this study, we deal with fictional media’s framing of issues. No research has sought to test the effects of framing in explicitly fictional media on political opinions. We develop the outlines of a theory we call “fictional framing” and test it in an experiment. Methods. Participants in our treatment group watched the film Cider House Rules. The movie frames the issue of abortion in the case of incest in a pro-choice way, and frames morality in terms of following one’s own conscience. Results. The film influenced opinions in ways consistent with the framing of these issues. Conclusions. Since abortion opinions and moral values tend to be entrenched, we consider this a strong first test of the effects of fictional framing.

Almost all research on the effects of mass media on public opinion focuses on the influence of news media or political campaigns. Although some recent work has begun to demonstrate the influence of “infotainment,” a form of “soft” news that entertains while it enlightens (Baum, 2002, 2003), relatively few studies of political communication have investigated the effects of explicitly fictional entertainment media on political attitudes and values.1 This is unfortunate for at least two reasons. For one, fictional media in particular can contain socially and politically relevant topics and themes that are woven into the media’s plots, subplots, dialogue, and imagery. These themes could affect how consumers of fictional entertainment media think.

*Direct correspondence to Kenneth Mulligan, Department of Political Science, Southern Illinois University, Mailcode 4501, Carbondale, IL 62901 (kmulliga@siu.edu). The authors will provide data for replication, in compliance with the guidelines of the Human Subjects Committee at SIUC. A previous version of this article was prepared for the 2009 Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association in New Orleans, LA. The authors thank Tobin Grant, Scott McClurg, Robert Goidel, and participants in the Works in Progress Seminar at SIUC for helpful comments. They thank Drew Seib, Josh Mitchell, and Brendan Toner for research assistance.

1Soft news includes television programs that are based on reality but whose primary purpose is to entertain rather than inform, such as late-night comedy shows and Oprah. Some recent studies of the consequences of soft news include Baum (2003), Hollander (2005), Niven, Lichter, and Amundson (2003), and Young (2004).

SOCIAL SCIENCE QUARTERLY, Volume 92, Number 1, March 2011
© 2011 by the Southwestern Social Science Association
about politics. Also, as citizens today are increasingly afforded choice in their means of media consumption—including television, films, Internet, video games, Blackberries, iPods, and other technologies—an examination of the consequences of entertainment media for political attitudes is especially warranted.

Today, entertainment media are ubiquitous. Unlike an earlier generation that had few options other than watching the news if the television was turned on during certain hours of the day, 21st-century Americans can decide among dozens of television channels and other forms of entertainment media. This increase in media choice has not been without consequence. Mindich (2005) and Wattenberg (2008) show that the audience for news is declining, particularly among the young. Prior (2005, 2007) demonstrates that the wider array of media available has benefited the small percentage of the public that has an active interest in the news—given that they can now readily access information—but for the majority of citizens who have little interest in news, choice has had negative repercussions. As the public turns away from news to entertainment, Prior’s work shows that levels of political knowledge and turnout decline, raising serious concerns for democratic theorists. Yet there are likely additional consequences of the choice to watch entertainment, namely, that consumers of such media could be affected by what they see and hear. Choosing entertainment media may have consequences for citizens’ attitudes about government and politics.

One way that entertainment media could influence opinions is through framing of issues. Framing is “the process by which a source . . . defines the essential problem underlying a particular social or political issue, and outlines a set of considerations purportedly relevant to that issue” (Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson, 1997). Much research has shown that news framing has consequences for how people think about the world (Chong and Druckman, 2007; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Weaver, 2007). At least one study suggests that fictional entertainment media also frame issues, defining relevant considerations for viewers (Holbert et al., 2005). However, no research to date has tested the effects of entertainment media framing on opinions. In this study we develop a theory of the effects of entertainment media on attitudes that we call fictional framing and test it in a laboratory experiment.

We begin by defining fictional media and fictional framing, reviewing some related research, and discussing our theory of how fictional framing could be expected to influence attitudes. Then we discuss our experiment, in which participants in the treatment group watched the acclaimed drama, *Cider House Rules*, which frames two issues explicitly: the choice of abortion when it results from incest, and the morality of following one’s own conscience as opposed to a set code of conduct. Our results show that fictional framing influenced opinions on these two issues. Participants in the treatment group were more favorable toward legal abortion in this traumatic situation and more likely to agree that it is important to follow one’s own
moral pathway. We also test the influence of the film on attitudes toward abortion and morality more generally. Here, we find the movie did not affect these general abortion and morality opinions. We also consider the process by which fictional framing affects attitudes, exploring the implications of dual-mode theory for our theory. We conclude by discussing the implications of our results for our understanding of the effects of entertainment media in the study of political communication.

The Relevance of Fictional Media for Public Opinion

To understand how fiction might affect real attitudes, it might be helpful to distinguish fiction from nonfiction. Nonfiction is about actual people who have lived, places that exist, or events that have occurred. It does not include large amounts of creative license. Most documentaries, biographies, and news are examples. Fictional media are counterfactual works of imagination, usually involving characters who interact with each other in a suspenseful, comedic, or otherwise entertaining plot. The simplest distinction would be to say that nonfiction is real while fiction is not. Of course, in practice most people will recognize that this distinction is often blurred. Even explicit nonfiction may include fictional “literary devices,” such as that in Edmund Morris’s (1999) famously controversial biography of Ronald Reagan. Even soft news programs typically deal with real people and real events, rather than actors who are role playing in events wholly concocted. Such programs, including late-night comedy and the *Daily Show*, blend fact with fiction, with the fiction typically taking the form of humor and satire. Other works blend nonfiction with fiction, as in Oliver Stone’s conspiratorial movie *JFK*. The distinction between fiction and nonfiction is more of a continuum than categorical. This study focuses on the influence of fabricated works of imagination, created to entertain the audience rather than to inform them.

Because it is not based in reality, the idea that fictional media might influence real-world beliefs goes against conventional wisdom. Some suggest that fiction cannot be appreciated, let alone influential, without what the poet Coleridge called “a willing suspension of disbelief.” Theorists have presumed that even to enjoy fiction viewers must find a way to buy into it by actively suppressing disbelief (Gerrig, 1993). For these reasons, fiction has generally not been considered important enough to be taken seriously by political communication scholars. Researchers have mostly ignored fiction because it is neither serious nor considered relevant for politics (Delli-Carpini and Williams, 1994a). For one, fictional media are usually designed to entertain rather than inform. The audience for these media recognizes the

---

2There has been interest in the effect of entertainment news media, programs such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*, as well as late-night talk shows. These programs blend fact with fiction. We are interested in entertainment media that are explicitly fictional.
entertainment value of fiction, whereas the audience for news expects the content to inform it about public affairs. Viewers of entertainment recognize that fiction presents a pseudo-reality, while the news describes and explains the real world. Social scientists who study media effects focus on news rather than fiction because the news depicts reality and has been shown to be consequential for public opinion.

Conventional wisdom notwithstanding, at least four areas of research point to the potential influence of fictional content on real-world beliefs and attitudes. First, some of the earliest research on media effects dealt with entertainment, and this work suggested entertainment can have strong effects. Cantril et al.’s (1940) study of the 1938 radio broadcast of “War of the Worlds” estimated that about 1 million of the 6 million listeners thought that New Jersey really had been invaded by Martians. Also, the Payne Fund studies of the late 1920s and early 1930s included many experiments, content analyses, and observational studies of the effects of the then-new and wildly popular motion picture industry on young people (Jowett, Jarvie, and Fuller, 1996).

A second area of research has focused on the influence of entertainment media on children and adolescents. The bulk of this work has dealt with the potentially negative influence of violent media on young people (for reviews, see Huesmann and Taylor, 2006; Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley, 2007) and the effects of popular media on their sexual attitudes (Eyal et al., 2007; Zhang, Miller, and Harrison, 2008) and behavior (Brown et al., 2006; Chandra et al., 2008; Collins et al., 2004). A third body of research has established links between fictional content and the views of adults. This work shows that information obtained in fictional narratives is often incorporated into real-world beliefs (Gerring and Prentice, 1991; Marsh, Meade, and Riediger, 2003) and this effect may actually increase over time (Appel and Richter, 2007). More specifically, fictional portrayals on TV and in film have been shown to influence real-world perceptions of doctors (Chory-Assad and Tamborini, 2003; Pfau, Mullen, and Garrow, 1995; Quick, 2009), lawyers (Pfau et al., 1995), racial minorities (Davis and Davenport, 1997; Mastro and Greenberg, 2000; Vidmar and Rokeach, 1974), women (Holbert, Shah, and Kwak, 2003), the president (Holbert et al., 2005), presidential candidates (Adams et al., 1985), national security (Feldman and Sigelman, 1985; Lenart and McGraw, 1989), and government (Pfau, Moy, and Szabo, 2001). Studies show that factual and hypothetical scenarios are processed in overlapping, though distinct, regions of the brain (Abraham, von Cramon, and Schubotz, 2008), that messages identified as factual are no more persuasive than those labeled as fiction (Green et al., 2006), and that when arguing a point, people are just as likely to cite fictional sources as factual ones as evidence (Delli-Carpini and Williams, 1994b).

Finally, recent work has applied theories of media effects typically associated with news to entertainment. An experiment by Holbert et al. (2003) showed evidence of fictional priming, as subjects’ perceptions of the ficti-
tious President Bartlet in *The West Wing* influenced real-world views of Presidents Clinton and Bush. In a demonstration of fictional agenda setting, Strange and Leung (1999) conducted an experiment where participants read a story identified as either factual news or fiction, and they found that the story labeled as fiction influenced perceived causes, consequences, and best solutions to a social problem. Dealing with both agenda setting and priming, Hollbrook and Hill’s (2004, 2005) experiments, which exposed participants to crime dramas such as *Without a Trace* and the doctor drama *ER*, increased perceptions that crime and healthcare are important issues and influenced perceptions of Presidents Clinton and Bush. Similarly, Slater, Rouner, and Long (2006) showed that participants who watched an episode of the crime drama *Law and Order* featuring a conclusion implicitly advocating the death penalty for the perpetrator of a brutal murder were more likely to approve of capital punishment.\(^3\)

**A Theory of Fictional Framing and its Consequences**

If agenda setting and priming apply to fictional media, then, presumably, fictional media engage in framing that could matter as well. Framing research posits that when dealing with social or political problems and controversies, the news media must find a way to organize and present complex issues for viewers efficiently and concisely. Time and viewer attention are both limited, so news media present issues as discrete “interpretive packages” (Gamson and Modigliani, 1989) that help viewers understand what is the essence of an issue. These issue packages have, “at [their] core[,] a central organizing idea, or frame, for making sense of relevant events” (1989:3). In packaging an issue for public consumption, news media present some dimensions of an issue, or some relevant considerations, but not others (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Kellstedt, 2003).

The effects of news media framing on opinions have been demonstrated over and over in studies involving a variety of news frames and political issues (for reviews, see Chong and Druckman, 2007; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Unlike news media, which package information through their reporting on events, fictional entertainment media can convey socially and politically relevant messages through character development, dialogue, and plot. Fictional media, like news media, may present topics as “issue packages” that, in varying degrees, subtle or overt, give meaning to contestable political issues. The context in which the issues are raised, and the valence, tone, and implications of characters’ reactions to the issues, highlight some facets of the issues, or offer a certain perspective on the issues. Like the news,

\(^3\)However, another experiment in the same study found that participants who watched the pro-gay-rights HBO drama *If These Walls Could Talk II* were not significantly more favorable to gay rights.
entertainment media use framing to help people conceptualize complicated topics by providing clues about what are the most relevant considerations. News media are constrained to be balanced in their framing of contestable political topics; fictional framing need not be impartial. Creators of fictional media can craft a context where a certain way of perceiving an issue dominates at the expense of others without concerns about an ethic of objectivity.

To the extent entertainment media frame issues, we suggest that these fictional frames would be likely to influence opinions in ways similar to that of news media framing. Just as news frames influence attitudes, so should fictional frames. By setting the context in which people think about an issue, fictional frames could affect how people perceive the issue and, ultimately, their opinions toward it. One study suggests that this is the case. Holbert et al. (2005) show that the television program The West Wing framed the role of the president as chief executive, political candidate, and private citizen. Whereas Holbert and his colleagues show that fictional media do in fact frame issues, our theory of fiction framing takes this demonstration of framing in fiction one step further by hypothesizing that fictional frames influence attitudes in ways consistent with the implications of the frames. The primary goal of this study is to test the theory that where fictional media frame issues, opinions on the issues are moved in ways consistent with the framing.

**Fictional Frames Likely to Matter Most**

Because fiction is centered on entertainment while news focuses on providing information, politically and socially relevant frames in fictional media are likely to be more subtle than news frames, and their effects on attitudes limited to central frames. The relatively few studies of the effects of fictional media on political views conducted to date have tended to confirm that influence of fictional media is limited to the “dominant message” (Lenart and McGraw, 1989:710), or “central theme, narrowly conceived” (Feldman and Sigelman, 1985:559), and is “highly specific to themes depicted in [a] movie [that do not] carry over to general political views” (Butler, Koopman, and Zimbardo, 1995:250). Thus we should expect central frames to affect opinions that are directly related to the message but not opinions that are tangential, extrapolations, generalized, or otherwise not directly related. In the next section, we discuss two central themes of the fictional drama Cider House Rules and test the effects of those two dominant frames on related opinions.

**Cider House Rules and Fictional Framing**

*Cider House Rules* (*CHR*) is the story of Homer Wells (played by Tobey Maguire) as he grows up at the St. Cloud’s Orphanage in rural New England. The movie is based on the novel of the same name by author John
Irving. Since he was a young child, Homer has worked under the tutelage of Dr. Wilbur Larch (Michael Caine), the head of St. Cloud’s, who hopes Homer will one day replace him. But Larch has a medical practice, and Homer resists the idea of taking over Larch’s practice because he has not gone to high school, let alone medical school, and is not qualified. The story follows Homer as he moves away to take a job at a cidery, finds romance, moral conflict, and maturity. We identify and test two instances of framing in *CHR*—an abortion frame and a morality frame.

**Abortion Frame**

Abortion emerges as a subplot to the main story. Set in Maine during World War II, at that time the state had one of the most restrictive abortion laws in the country. In the movie, abortion is illegal, yet Dr. Larch, who is portrayed as caring and compassionate, performs abortions for desperate young women who come to St. Cloud’s looking for help. Homer, in contrast to his mentor, views abortion as a matter of personal responsibility and sees it as wrong. They occasionally debate the issue as they go about their business at the orphanage.

Midway through the movie, a young couple, Candy (Charlize Theron) and her boyfriend Wally (Paul Rudd), come to the orphanage so that Candy can have an abortion. Afterward, as Candy and Wally are preparing to leave, Wally offers Homer a job picking apples at his family’s orchard. Acting on impulse, Homer accepts. At the farm, he falls in with an extended family of migrant apple-pickers named the Roses. Late in the movie, Homer and Candy learn that Rose Rose (a young woman played by Erykah Badu) is pregnant by her father, Edward Rose (Delroy Lindo), the family patriarch. Ms. Rose says she is not able to raise a child, and will not go to St. Cloud’s to have an abortion. It becomes clear that she may do something drastic, and Candy and Homer worry about her well-being. Subtly, over several scenes, Homer recognizes her need and has a change of heart on abortion—at least in the circumstance. As she is a victim of incest, here his previous objections about personal responsibility do not apply. Although anti-abortion, Homer has been trained by Larch to perform the procedure, and he aids Ms. Rose by performing the abortion at the cider house. In this traumatic case of abortion for reasons of pregnancy by incest, *CHR* frames the issue clearly in a pro-choice direction. For this reason, to the extent that the movie influences abortion opinions, we expect that participants who watched *CHR* will be more favorable toward legal abortion when the pregnancy results from incest.

Exploring the effects of fictional framing in this context is a particularly strong test. Although some people are ambivalent about legalized abortion (Alvarez and Brehm, 1995), many others are firm in their opinions (Luker, 1984:Ch. 7). Moreover, in this particular context—pregnancy resulting
from incest—opinion polls show that an overwhelming majority of Americans favor having abortion remain legal in this situation (Bowman, Foster, and Samadi, 2006; Ladd and Bowman, 1999). Even if fictional framing affects opinions, there would seem to be little room for opinions to become more favorable toward this already popular view. Equally important, opinions on abortion are deeply rooted in beliefs about personal autonomy and religious values, and for this reason are inherently resistant to change (Luker, 1984; Zaller, 1992). The one-sidedness of opinions on this particular issue, and the entrenched nature of abortion opinions generally, work against our finding a significant effect of fictional framing from watching *Cider House Rules*.

**Morality Frame**

Homer’s change of heart on traumatic abortions late in the movie was part of a broader dominant frame that is reflected in the title—*The Cider House Rules*. This frame is woven throughout, but becomes particularly salient toward the end, after Rose Rose’s abortion. The cidery owners had posted a list of rules on the wall of the cider house where Homer lives with the Rose family. None of the Roses can read. Earlier in the film one of them asked Homer to read the rules posted on the cider house wall. “One. Please don’t smoke in bed,” he begins. At this, three of them cough and laugh, smoking in their beds. “It’s too late for that one!” Rose Rose exclaims. Then Mr. Rose breaks in, in a tone uncharacteristically stern and direct. “Stop it, Homer. They aren’t our rules. We didn’t write them. I don’t see no reason to read them.” Later, toward the end of the film, after Ms. Rose’s abortion, the family and Homer are gathered in the cider house. The following powerful scene transpires when Ms. Rose asks Homer to finish reading the rules.

Homer: 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: 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 (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.

In this the climactic moment of the dramatic and emotional scenes surrounding Rose Rose’s pregnancy and abortion, *CHR* frames the cider house rules as both arbitrary and unnecessary. Here and throughout, the film frames morality as a matter of following one’s own conscience rather than adhering to an externally defined and imposed moral code.

Because this is the dominant frame of the movie, we expect that participants who watch *CHR* will be more favorable toward this worldview—that people should always follow their own conscience rather than an imposed set of rules. Although broader in scope, we also test whether watching the movie influences viewers’ opinions about moral absolutism versus moral relativism more generally. Consistent with the idea that people should follow their own conscience, the idea here is that watching the movie could make viewers more likely to eschew an absolute code of moral conduct in favor of a more relative, contextual morality. Since prior research shows that only opinions directly related to central themes of fictional media tend to be influenced by the media, here we do not necessarily expect that watching *CHR* will affect attitudes toward this somewhat broader perspective on morality.

**The Experiment**

We recruited 194 participants from an introductory course in U.S. politics in exchange for course credit at a large midwestern university. Participants were randomly assigned to a treatment group (*N* = 99): those who watched *CHR* and then completed a questionnaire; or to a control group (*N* = 95): those who completed the same questionnaire immediately upon entering the laboratory—they did not watch the movie.4

4Participants were told that the experiment was being conducted by “researchers in the departments of Cinema/Photography and English” who “want to look at how people think about a story when they read it in a book versus watching it on film. Participants at [participants’ university] are watching the film version of the story. Participants at another university are reading the book version.” Subjects in the treatment group watched the movie on individual computer screens with personal headphones and completed the questionnaire on their monitors. While participants in the control group did not watch a movie prior to answering the questions, this is potentially consequential for the internal validity of the study only to the extent that watching any movie tends to influence abortion attitudes—a proposition we find extremely implausible.
Elaboration Manipulation

In addition to watching the film, the experiment included a second manipulation designed to test the mechanism by which fictional framing influences people. Numerous persuasion experiments have shown that the effects of media are often moderated by critical thinking or elaboration on the content of the message. These dual-mode theories posit that persuasion occurs generally in one of two ways—either through high-effort processes, where the individual elaborates on the content of the message and is persuaded (or not) by the cogency and quality of the argument, or low-effort processes, where the individual does not carefully consider the message but instead relies on peripheral cues or heuristics that drive persuasive effects (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986; Chaiken, 1980; for a review, see Chaiken and Trope, 1999). Most theories of persuasion have been shown to fall under the dual-mode rubric.

Researchers who study the influence of fiction have generally assumed that people are not motivated to elaborate on messages or themes in fictional media, and thus, to the extent fiction is influential, it is likely to occur through low-effort processes (Prentice and Gerrig, 1999). Although media psychologists theorize that framing is a qualitatively different process of influence than persuasion per se (Nelson, Oxley, and Clawson, 1997), elaboration of the arguments in fiction would seem likely to moderate the influence of fictional frames. People who are motivated to scrutinize a piece of fictional media would be likely to recognize that, as fiction, any messages received are not necessarily reliable, and thus discount them. But those who watch as they would normally might not discount politically relevant messages or cues. Therefore, we hypothesize that participants motivated to process the content of the film systematically should be more likely to discern fact from fiction, and thus less likely to be influenced by fictional framing than participants who watch the film normally.

In dual-mode studies, a standard method of motivating systematic processing is to tell respondents at the outset of the study that they will be asked to complete a quiz that tests their recall of information in the stimulus at the conclusion of the study. We engaged systematic processing using this method. Participants who watched CHR were randomly assigned to one of two conditions, either to watch the film as they would normally, or to watch it knowing that they would be quizzed at the end on what they remembered about it. Overall, then, there were effectively three experimental groups in the study: (1) those who watched CHR normally/low elaboration ($N = 53$); (2) those who watched CHR and were told of the quiz/high elaboration ($N = 46$); and (3) those who did not watch the movie ($N = 95$). Among participants who watched CHR, we anticipate that those in the careful attention (high elaboration) condition will be less influenced by fictional framing than those in the watch normally (low elaboration) condition, given that attentive viewers should be more likely to recognize the film’s frames as derived from fiction.
Results

We begin by discussing the effects of the abortion framing on attitudes toward this topic in the case of incest, followed by its effects on abortion attitudes more generally. Then we discuss the effects of the morality framing on moral values.

Results of Abortion Framing

Despite the fact that abortion attitudes are deeply entrenched, we anticipate that the framing of CHR in the case of abortion by incest will matter for viewers’ opinions on this issue. To test this, we used a dependent variable that asked participants whether abortion should be “legal or not legal when a pregnancy results from incest.” We expect that the mean response for this question will differ significantly by whether participants were in the treatment or control group, which we label Watched CHR or Did Not Watch CHR, respectively.5 We conducted t tests, and we present the findings visually using a set of bar charts.

As is evidenced in the first two columns presented in Figure 1, participants who were randomly assigned to watch CHR were more favorable toward legalized abortion in the case of incest than those in the control group. Watching CHR shifted opinions from the value of 0.76—where 1 is legal and 0 is illegal—to 0.93. The difference in means is statistically significant at the 0.001 level.6 The results are notable for two reasons. One, the movie had a significant effect despite the fact that opinions on abortion tend to be deeply entrenched; and, two, support for abortion choice in this particularly traumatic circumstance is characteristically strong even in the control group.

The second set of columns presented in Figure 1 compares the means of the general abortion attitudes index for those who watched CHR and the control group. Because the movie framed abortion in the case of incest in a pro-choice way but—in the poignant scenes involving the victim of a botched abortion—presented both sides of the debate over abortion generally, here we do not anticipate a significant effect of the film on general abortion opinions. Our dependent variable is an index of 12 items that tap support for legal abortion across a range of circumstances.7 As one can see from the figure, the difference in means across control and treatment con-

---

5 Eighteen of the 194 subjects had seen the film previously, 11 of whom were in the treatment group and seven in the control group. We estimated additional logit models controlling for whether viewers had seen the film. This variable was not significant and did not change our substantive findings.

6 We conducted two-sample t tests with equal variances. The standard deviation for the control group was 0.43, and for the treatment group, 0.26. The results are robust if one does not assume equal variances.

7 The 12 items in the abortion opinion index are listed in the Appendix.
ditions, 0.51 and 0.54, respectively, is relatively small in magnitude and not statistically significant.\(^8\)

We now turn to the effect of the elaboration, where those in the high elaboration condition were told that they would be tested on what they recalled about the film, while those in the low elaboration group were instructed to watch the film as they would normally. We expect to find that participants in the high elaboration/careful attention condition received the information in the film with a more critical eye and, as a result, will be less influenced by fictional framing than those who watched normally. For the abortion-incest question, the mean for those in the high elaboration group should be lower and perhaps not statistically significant compared with those in the low elaboration condition. The findings, however, are not consistent with this hypothesis. Instead, both those in the high and low elaboration conditions were influenced by watching the film, and by similar degrees. The mean for the high elaboration condition was 0.93, and for the low elaboration, 0.92, compared to the mean for those who did not watch \textit{CHR} of 0.76.\(^9\) Regardless of whether participants had been instructed to pay careful attention while watching, subjects in both elaboration conditions

\(^8\)We conducted two-sample \(t\) tests with equal variances. The standard deviation for the control group was 0.25, and for the treatment group, 0.23. The \(p\) value was 0.37. The results are robust if one does not assume equal variances.

\(^9\)A two-way ANOVA reveals that the \(F\) statistic for those in the high elaboration condition was 7.74, statistically significant at the 0.01 level, and for the low elaboration condition, 7.54, again significant at the 0.01 level. The standard deviation for the high elaboration group was 0.25, and for the low elaboration group, 0.27.
tended to be more pro-choice regarding pregnancy by incest than those in the control group.

Turning to the effect of the elaboration on general abortion attitudes, here again we do not find evidence of a statistically significant difference between those in the high and low conditions. The mean for those participants in the high elaboration and low elaboration groups were 0.56 and 0.53, respectively, compared with a mean of 0.51 for those in the control.10

### Results of Morality Framing

A second dominant frame in *Cider House Rules* involved morality. The movie framed morality as a matter of following one’s own conscience. We expect to find an effect of fictional framing on participants’ attitudes toward this perspective. We measured attitudes using a seven-point Likert scale (from disagree very strongly to agree very strongly) question that asked subjects to respond to the statement: “People should always follow their own conscience, even if it results in doing something illegal.” The questionnaire included five other morality items that were more abstract and less connected to framing of the film (e.g., “There are objective moral truths that are valid in all times and circumstances”) that, along with the “own conscience” question, we used to create a “moral absolutism versus relativism” scale.11 We consider the effects of the morality framing and the elaboration manipulation. We first discuss attitudes toward the own conscience item and then follow with the general moral absolutism index. The means are presented in Figure 2.

Our supposition is that watching *CHR* will make participants more responsive to what we suggest was a central message of the movie, following their own conscience. The evidence from the first two columns in Figure 2 supports this. Subjects who watched the film were more likely to agree that one should follow one’s own conscience, even if it results in doing something illegal. This is reflected in a mean value of 0.58 for those in the treatment group compared to 0.47 for those in the control—a movement of 0.11 on the 0–1 Likert scale. Substantively, viewers shifted from disagreeing somewhat to agreeing somewhat on this item. A *t* test reveals that this difference is statistically significant, with a *p* value of 0.002.12 This suggests that the moral message of the film was not lost on viewers—watching *CHR*

---

10 A two-way ANOVA shows that the *F* statistic for those in the high elaboration condition was 1.25, and for the low elaboration condition, 0.16. Neither value is statistically significant. The standard deviations for both the high and low elaboration groups were 0.23.

11 Participants responded to each of these items using a seven-point agree-disagree Likert scale. Three of the six items were worded so that a positive response indicated moral relativism and three were worded in the opposite direction. The six items were presented in random order. The items are fairly well correlated, and the absolutism scale has adequate reliability. The wording of these questions is in the Appendix.

12 We conducted two-sample *t* tests with equal variances. The standard deviation for the control group was 0.23, and for the treatment group, 0.27. The results are robust if one does not assume equal variances.
influenced attitudes about whether people should take their own moral path rather than be guided by an externally imposed set of rules.

We also discuss the effect of the movie on the moral absolutism index. Although the theme of the movie was that people should forge their own moral pathway, one might suppose that this message could cause participants to reject an absolutist moral authority in favor of one that is more fluid and relative. The results do not support this conclusion. While the mean for those in the treatment condition was slightly higher at 0.57 compared to 0.54 for those in the control, this difference was not statistically significant.13 Consistent with prior research, which suggests that primary themes in fictional media tend to be most influential, the results show that watching the film influenced attitudes consistent with the primary message but not a broader extrapolation from this message.

We also consider the effect of the elaboration manipulation on both the “follow one’s conscience” question and the moral absolutism index. For the follow one’s conscience question the effect of fictional framing is statistically significant in both the high and low elaboration groups, as was the case for abortion-incest opinions. The mean for the high elaboration condition was 0.57, and for the low elaboration, 0.59, compared to the mean for those who did not watch CHR of 0.47.14 For the moral absolutism index, we

13We conducted two-sample t tests with equal variances. The p value was 0.11. The standard deviation for both those in the control and treatment groups was 0.13. The results are robust if one does not assume equal variances.

14A two-way ANOVA reveals that the F statistic for those in the high elaboration condition was 5.18, statistically significant at the 0.05 level, and for the low elaboration co-
again find similar effects for those in the high and low elaboration groups. The mean for the high elaboration condition was 0.57, and for the low elaboration, 0.56, compared with a mean of 0.54 for those in the control group.

Taken together, contrary to our expectations, yet substantively interesting, we find that those motivated to process the information systematically were no less influenced by fictional framing than those who were instructed to watch as they would normally.

Discussion

Our study offers new insight into the influence of entertainment media on political attitudes. A burgeoning literature in political communication has documented the effect of news media framing on opinions. In this study, we introduced a theory of fictional framing in which fictional entertainment media, like news media, frame issues, with effects similar to those of news framing. We presented the results of an experiment in which participants in the treatment group watched the popular film *Cider House Rules*, which explicitly frames abortion in the case of incest as justified and frames morality in terms of following one’s own conscience. We found that participants who watched *CHR* were more pro-choice on abortion in this specific context and more likely to agree with this moral message of the film than those in the control group. Because opinions on abortion and moral values are fairly well crystallized and resistant to change, we suggest that this is a strong first test supporting fictional framing. Moreover, our work implies that there may be unexplored consequences for the choice of watching fictional entertainment rather than news: fictional media can affect viewers’ political attitudes.

Our results suggest that when fictional media frame an issue, the framing appears to influence opinions directly related to the issue. Whereas we found significant effects in the confines of abortion in the case of incest and following one’s conscience, viewing *CHR* did not influence opinions on related, but not directly related, issues. Although it would be misleading to draw theoretically meaningful inferences from null results, we speculate that fictional media influence attitudes related to major topics or themes of the media but not those that are inferential, which is consistent with previous work.

We also investigated the process by which fictional framing influences opinions. We theorized that the effects of fictional media are greater when people watch it as they would normally than when they scrutinize carefully the source and its messages. To test this, we used a dual-mode procedure to
motivate participants’ elaboration on the stimulus. Contrary to expectations, we found that subjects in the careful scrutiny condition were no less affected by the fictional frames than those in the watch normally condition. What does this imply for how people process fiction?

We suggested that fiction is influential whether people scrutinize it carefully or watch it in typical “couch potato” mode. This is one possible implication, but it is also possible that the manipulation failed to motivate critical scrutiny. As a follow-up check of the manipulation, we evaluated recall about the movie among participants in both the high and low elaboration groups. If the manipulation motivated scrutiny as intended, causing some participants to pay close attention while others watched in a typical low-effort mode, then presumably subjects in the high elaboration group should remember more facts about characters and events in the film than those in the low elaboration group. After watching the movie, participants in both conditions answered five recall questions. Almost 90 percent of those in the high elaboration condition answered correctly at least four of the five items. This is not surprising, since they had been told that they would be tested on what they remember about the film. However, about the same proportion of participants in the low elaboration condition—nearly 9 of every 10—also answered correctly at least four of the five questions. If recall is a proxy for scrutiny, then it would seem that the manipulation failed to differentiate participants on this dimension.

Clearly, participants in both groups remembered most of what they saw in the movie. But why? The reason for this is not immediately apparent. One possible reason is that watching fiction is not such a mentally lazy activity after all. Although it is often assumed that people “tune out” when watching fiction, prior work shows that people are often mentally and emotionally absorbed by narrative fiction (Gerrig, 1993; Slater, 1997; Green and Brock, 2000). This could explain why the effects of fiction on attitudes do not disappear when viewers are critically engaged. People may naturally pay close attention, making the couch potato metaphor inapt. Future research might explore more systematically how people watch fiction, whether it varies from how they view nonfiction, and with what, if any, consequences.

There are two additional possibilities for why the elaboration manipulation did not work as anticipated. A second possible reason is that scrutiny or elaboration on fiction may depend more on how entertaining the media is than on scrutiny or recall. Our postmanipulation questionnaire included a question that asked: “Overall, how much did you like or dislike the film you just watched?” Large majorities of subjects in both groups liked the movie “somewhat” or “very much.” So many, in fact, that there was not enough variance on the question to control for its unique effects on abortion attitudes. However, we were able to estimate its effects in the morality model, and they were not significant. A third possible reason is that participants in both conditions may have paid particularly close attention because they were watching the movie in our lab for course credit. Future work might also
study the effects of fiction under circumstances that more closely resemble how people watch on their own time. Perhaps under conditions less artificial they would be less attentive, not remember as much about it, and be less affected by it.

As this is among the first studies of fiction and framing, it should not be surprising that it raises a number of questions. In addition to these avenues for future work, researchers might turn their attention to three other issues. First, while we focused on the consequences of critical scrutiny for fictional framing, future work should explore other potential moderators. These might include factors shown to be relevant in other media contexts, such as political discussion, knowledge, ideology, and ambivalence, and also those that are particularly relevant to fiction, such as perceived realism (Busselle and Bilandzic, 2008; Green, 2004) and absorption into the story (Green and Brock, 2000; Slater and Rouner, 2002). This research could develop theory and test hypotheses about how people process entertainment media more generally, as well as whether and how it differs from the way they watch news and other nonfiction programs. Second, while the present study had participants watch a single movie and then measured its effects on attitudes immediately following exposure, future work might also address the persistence of the effects of fictional framing and the cumulative effect of watching several movies or programs. Some recent work suggests that the effects of fictional accounts on opinions are small immediately following exposure to the stimulus, but that these effects could increase over time, especially as viewers forget that the source of their information was fictional (Appel and Richter, 2007; see also the classic work by Peterson and Thurstone, 1933). Other work has shown that framing effects may be moderated by deliberation and counterframing (Druckman and Nelson, 2003; Druckman, 2004). Finally, while we showed the consequences of a particular frame in a single film, future research should investigate the presence (or absence) of fictional framing across a variety of fictional genres or types of media. At present, we know little about what types of media engage in fictional framing, the nature of the frames, the issues typically framed, whether they are one-sided or multidimensional, which frames are most influential, or why. Future studies can systematically explore the nature, prevalence, and consequences of fictional framing for public opinion.

REFERENCES


