

Université de Montréal

Political opinions: negotiating between reality and fiction. The case of political series

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Thèse présentée à la Faculté des études supérieures en vue de l'obtention du grade de

Philosophiae Doctor (Ph.D) en science politique

17 Octobre 2018

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Université de Montréal
Faculté des études supérieures

Cette thèse intitulée

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RÉSUMÉ

Le but de cette thèse est d'explorer et de comprendre l'influence des séries politiques comme produits médiatiques souvent ignorés par des chercheurs. Nous examinons le sujet à travers trois articles, analysant des données recueillies d'une expérience et d'une enquête en ligne.

Le premier article examine la relation causale entre l'exposition aux séries politiques et le cynisme politique. Nous constatons qu'après une courte exposition (juste un épisode) au contenu fictif négatif les gens sont devenus plus cyniques. Cependant, les personnes qui ont regardé un scénario politique positif n'ont pas augmenté leur confiance dans les politiciens. Par conséquent, l'expérience indique l'existence d'effets asymétriques, dûs au contenu différent des séries, comme pas toutes les séries politiques influencent de la même manière.

Le deuxième article explore le degré de réalisme perçu comme mécanisme capable d'expliquer l'influence de la politique fictive. Les participants à l'expérience ont trouvé les personnages et les événements dans une série (la négative) plus réalistes que l'autre (la série positive). Les résultats prouvent que des changements sur le degré de cynisme politique sont conditionnels à ce que les personnes croient que les événements et les caractères fictifs de la série sont réalistes.

Le troisième article utilise des réponses à une enquête en ligne pour aborder la question de la façon dont les gens perçoivent l'influence que le visionnement d'une série politique a eue sur eux. Nous faisons appel à deux mécanismes psychologiques: la transportation dans un monde fictif et l'identification avec les personnages fictifs pour expliquer l'influence des séries

sur les impressions des fans. Les fans (automatiquement qualifiés d' "heavy watchers") qui ont été transportés dans le monde de la politique fictive ont eu l'impression qu'ils comprennent la politique mieux et que leur intérêt pour la politique s'est développé conséquemment au visionnement de cette série particulière. Ils se sont également identifiés avec le personnage principal, un politicien égoïste et stratégique, mais ceci n'a pas affecté leurs impressions sur les « bénéfices » de regarder la série.

Mots clés: effets des médias, séries politiques, fiction, cynisme, réalisme, théorie de la transportation, théorie de l'identification, fans, *House of Cards*, *The West Wing*

SUMMARY

The purpose of this doctoral dissertation is to explore and understand the influence of political series as media products often ignored by scholars. We do so through three articles, that analyze data gathered from an experiment and an online survey.

The first article examines the causal relation between exposure to political series and political cynicism. We find that after a short exposure (just one episode) people who watched a negative fictional content became significantly more cynical. However, people who watched a positive political scenario did not increase their trust in politicians. Therefore, the experiment reveals asymmetric effects, due to series' different content; not all political series are influencing viewers the same way.

The second article explores perceived realism as mechanism able to explain the influence of fictional politics. Participants in the experiment found the characters and events in one series (the negative one) more realistic than the other (the positive series). Results show that changes in the degree of political cynicism are moderated by how realistic people believe the fictional events and characters in the series are.

The third article uses answers to an online survey to address the question of how people perceive the influence of watching political series on them. We do so by appealing to two psychological mechanisms: transportation into a fictional world and identification with fictional characters. Fans (automatically heavy watchers) who were transported into the world of fictional politics believed that they understand politics better and that their interest in politics grew because of watching that particular series. They also identified themselves with the main

character, a villain politician, but this did not affect their impressions about the “benefits” of watching.

Key words: media effects, political series, fiction, cynicism, perceived realism, transportation theory, identification theory, fans, *House of Cards*, *The West Wing*

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For my mom, the person who never allowed me to forget who I am

Datorită ție nu am pierdut trenul

Remerciements

In 2013 I took a big step into the unknown, starting my long PhD journey. The first few weeks were marked by enthusiasm, novelty and curiosity. Soon (as I later found out is normal), doubts, fear and questions made their way into the process. I realize now that this 5-year journey was no “bed of roses”; coming from a completely different educational system, with rusty French, were no easy challenges. You’ve never experienced frustration until you know the answer to the teacher’s question in class, but you have no time to answer, because by the time you figure out how to say it in French he’s moved on to the next question.

In the end it was all worth it, as the past 5 years not only shaped my professional path, but my personality too. I discovered and put together pieces of a puzzle I would not have completed any other way.

What can I say about André Blais? I never told him, but he was the reason I decided to come to the University of Montreal. I confess to having doubts back then (only when my application was accepted did I fully realize I had to move to another continent, only about 5,000 miles away from everything that was familiar). The Skype conversations I had with André, his calm tone and assurances fully convinced me. Thank you for hearing me in my happiest and most desperate moments. I know that the subject of my dissertation was not one of the topics which André’s students usually “attack”. Political TV series are far from elections, strategic voting or electoral systems. Yet he always heard my ideas with an open mind, even when he was not fully convinced. Sometimes I managed to convince him, and in most cases, he convinced me to drop

paragraphs or change the perspective. Thank you, André, for the vote of confidence. I hope that the past 5 years convinced you to someday watch *House of Cards*.

C'est en 2013 lors d'une rencontre entre les étudiants et professeurs qu'André m'a introduit à Frédérick, en me le suggérant comme co-directeur de recherche. Il a eu une excellente idée. J'ai énormément appris de Frédérick. C'est la personne la plus organisée et méticuleuse que j'ai rencontrée (j'espère avoir intégré ces qualités dans mon éthique de travail). Il a toujours été de bon conseil, il est un véritable expert dans son domaine, et j'ai une absolue confiance en lui. À plusieurs occasions, Frédérick m'a écrit des lettres de recommandation si positives que je lui dois les stages ou les projets ou j'étais acceptée. J'écris ce paragraphe en français, parce que Frederick était un facteur important dans mon "parcours francophone". Je me souviens encore de notre première réunion ou je lui parlais en anglais et il me répondait en français. C'était mon ambition de réussir à avoir des conversations cohérentes avec lui uniquement en français- et j'espère que j'ai réussi.

I owe a lot to the Research Chair in Electoral Studies, to its old and new members. I realize I am the last standing bastion of the old gang. Thank you, Jean-Michel, Alexandre and Simon, for hearing my methodological issues even after the ending of your programs. I hope our lunches will continue when I am no longer at the University.

A special thank you to Damien Bol, my very first "office roommate", as I used to call him. Not only was he my Stata expert, and articles' submission counselor, but he became my European friend, who best understood the transition process and the hidden traps of the PhD. Years after he left the Chair, I knew I could still count on him for any question I might have, or for a little encouragement (much needed at times). Thank you for all, guru!

Finally, I owe more than just simple thanks to my family. My grandfather, the most patient person in the world, lost his patience in the last year of my PhD, asking me weekly “Is it over yet?”. If I can consider myself lucky, it is only because of my parents. Mom, Dad, I am proud to be your daughter. My parents have such different parenting styles and support systems. My dad, with his engineering logic, always had arguments for any of my problems and kept me anchored to reality. I have no words to describe my mom’s contribution for the past 5 years. She was always my rock, my stability. Always there to offer solutions, encourage me, but most of all to hear me. She even started to watch *House of Cards* because of me, and her comments were very helpful, as I saw the reactions of a viewer who judged politicians very critically according to what was happening on screen. I have to say though, she started to like Frank Underwood a bit too much. I also discovered that cynicism may be genetically transmitted.

Alex, you were there for me in my final months of the PhD and witnessed the last struggles and nervous breakdowns. Thank you for your calmness, patience and love and for binge-watching with me the final season of *House of Cards*.

For the past 5 years I have been among those who are deeply transported into the fictional world, and who identify with fictional characters. At some stages I got so involved with my subject that I lost contact with reality (thankfully, my two supervisors were there to moderate my enthusiasm and remind me to stay grounded). It will be very hard to get back to reality and having to control my cynicism, which has only increased with every episode of *House of Cards*, with every word I have written for the dissertation, and with every little significance star that appeared in the regressions.

Thank you, Frank Underwood, for all the lessons!

Chapter 1:

Political series that matter

The introduction is divided into four sections. First, after an attempt to define this type of series, we will present the major reasons why we should pay attention to the effects of political series. Their popularity, the high number of people watching them, the reactions they generate online, as well as the blurred line between fiction and reality are just a few of the reasons why researchers should start adding political series on their list of preoccupations. Additionally, the fact they can be considered as culturally shareable products (due to globalization and glocalization) means they have a potential to influence their audiences on a large scale, not just within the borders of the country of production. The second section of this chapter, devoted to the theoretical framework, presents the effects of news media and infotainment and the effects of fictional media products. The methodology section will present the two research methods used to explore the effects of political series, describing the pros and cons associated with each of them. Finally, a short description of each of the three articles will offer a preview of the following chapters.

1. The state of the question

1.1. Defining political series

The focus of this dissertation are political series, and the way they are “travelling” from the screen to our minds, potentially affecting our attitudes and perceptions. We will address aspects like political cynicism, the degree of realism of political series, as well as people’s perceptions of their influence.

We first need to understand what political series are. We are aware of their existence, we enjoy watching them, but they are still a “slippery” concept.

The Library of Congress catalog, in the “Moving Image Genre list”, under the genre terms, classifies the political dimension as “fictional work centering on the political milieu, often of candidates, elections, and elective or appointive office. Some of the protagonists may be corrupt or dictatorial”.

“The television genre book” (Creeber 2015) provides an extensive list of genres (and subtypes): dramas (crime series, action series, hospital drama, science-fiction, among others), soap-operas, comedy, children’s television, news, documentary, reality TV, animation and popular entertainment (quiz show, the celebrity and confessional talk-show, etc.). Nevertheless, political series are nowhere to be found in this list and it is intriguing why a book about TV genres does not acknowledge the existence of a political dimension. Apparently, there are no “pure” genres in television programmes (Turner 2015, p. 9) as nowadays genres are extremely hybridised, and “research on the representation of politics in fiction has not yet identified general structures, patterns, and routines of the field” (Eilders and Nitsch, 2015, p. 1564). Bednarek (2010, p. 9) distinguishes between sitcoms, action series, police series, science fiction series, detective series, fantasy series, prison series, mystery drama, soap drama. It is intriguing how classifications of television genres acknowledge the existence of specific series, according to their “domain”, like detective, medical dramas, prison series, police series, but the political area is left out.

The short list below (including examples from Internet Movie Database [IMDb]) shows the way in which series focusing on a political subject are classified; mainly appearing as drama, but there are also comedies, thrillers (or a mix of them), without the political label, which would add clarity and distinction to this genre (e.g. political drama instead of simply drama).

Table 1.1. List of political series

SERIES' NAME	COUNTRY	DURATION	GENRE
House of Cards	UK	1990	Drama
House of Cards	U.S	2013-2018	Drama
The West Wing	U.S	1999-2006	Drama
Madam Secretary	U.S	2014-	Drama
VEEP	U.S	2012-	Comedy
Designated Survivor	U.S	2016-2018	Action, drama, mystery
Scandal	U.S	2012-2018	Drama, thriller
The Good Wife	U.S	2009-2016	Crime, drama, mystery
The Politician's Husband	U.K	2013- 2016	Drama
Alpha House	U.S	2013-	Comedy, drama
Political Animals	U.S	2012-	Drama
Brain Dead	U.S	2016	Comedy, drama, horror
Borgen	Denmark	2010-2013	Drama
Baron Noir	France	2016-	Drama, thriller
Marseille	France	2016-	Drama

Sources: IMDb (2015, updated 2018), Netflix (2018)

There is no agreement with this classification. For example, while *House of Cards* appears as drama on the IMDb's list, others consider it a crime drama (Schubert 2018, p. 163). It is true that the series contains crime scenes, but this element is secondary to the political one,

which is obvious in every episode. So how can we explain that *House of Cards* is seen more as a “crime drama” than a “political drama”?

There have been attempts to acknowledge the existence of series which are a mix between politics and entertainment. Holbert et al (2005, p. 445) proposed a classification based on political content as primary or secondary and explicit-implicit political messages. In their typology a particular type of television is the “fictional political drama”, which has a high political content and intense political messages.

Another typology is proposed by Kleinen-von Konigslow (2013) who looks at two axes. The first axis is the orientation of the programme: entertainment versus information. The second axis is high versus low political intensity. In her schema, which takes into consideration a large variety of political content (fictional or not), a particular genre is “fictional political production”, which has a high political intensity and is entertainment oriented (at the extreme opposite of information orientation). Entertainment is surely one main feature, and we can consider these series a politicotainment product, which “denotes the ways in which politics and political life are interpreted, negotiated and represented by the entertainment industry, in particular by drama series and reality-based television programming. (Riegert 2007, p. 1).

Kleinen-von Konigslow’s classification seems to be more general, as she is referring to productions and not “political dramas” as Holbert et al (2005). This might go beyond drama, and include other categories like comedies, crime, thriller (or their mixture, as we have seen on the IMDb list).

One of the most complex and enlightening studies is Eilders and Nitsch’s who proposed a classification of fictional programs based on two elements: degree of political intensity and

degree of realism wanted (2015, p. 1568). They coded political intensity according to four variables (political issues, sociopolitical issues, political characters and state officials) doing the same for realism (of events, characters, time and places). Their sample (after analysis on IMDb) consisted of 114 political movies and 98 political TV series (both movies and series released after 1990). By looking at the series' sample, they could establish a typology of four clusters: non-political series, thriller, fantasy and political fiction. The TV series in the political fiction cluster are addressing sociopolitical issues, with a high attention to political institutions, policies and characters (even though fictional). The second particularity of this cluster is the high degree of realism. Eilders and Nitsch (2015, p. 1571) use the example of *The West Wing* as belonging to the category of political fiction because it explains the "inner life in the White House", addresses political issues and "contains realistic references".

Another important element when trying to establish the features of this category of series (besides political content, political intensity, degree of realism and entertainment) is the similarity with the content of soap-operas. As such, Van Zoonen (2005) talks about the connections between politics and soap-opera genre. Not only politics has penetrated the television programmes and genres (becoming a source of inspiration), but also the fictional genres have affected the way we think of politics: "(...) is the ubiquitous presence of the soap-opera as a frame of reference both for presenting and understanding politics" (Van Zoonen 2005, p. 20).

Since there is no clear definition of political series, after exposing the three models (Holbert et al. 2005; Kleinen von Konigslow 2013; Eilders and Nitsch 2015) and looking at other factors (like the soap- opera content, the tricky classification attempted by movie

websites), we can propose one, to clarify the concept we have in mind when we refer to political series in this dissertation. Fictional political series are a politicotainment product, with variations in political content and intensity of the message, in which the main characters are politicians, containing a certain degree of realism and similarities with the political world.

1.2. Popularity

The popularity of political series is intriguing in a world where people feel more and more disconnected with politics, characterized by “an overwhelming sense of cynicism in the system” (Van de Velde 2014). With every new generation, cynicism spreads more among Americans (Pompper, 2003, p. 17). The 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer (an online survey of 28 markets, with more than 33,000 respondents) talks about a world of distrust, as 20 out of 28 markets are classified as “distrusters”. The situation in the U.S is concerning, as the “trust decline is the steepest ever measured”, as the country felled down from the 52- position occupied in 2017 in the trust index to the 42 in 2018 (Edelman Trust Barometer 2018, p. 6). A Pew Research Center Poll (2018) reveals that only 3% of respondents trust the elected officials to “act in the best interest of people”, while 52% do not trust them “too much”. All this combined with people’s low interest in politics (a Pew Research Center report from 2015 shows that especially young generations are not placing politics and government on their list of top interests) shows that people are not very fond of politics in real life (no matter their reasons). So why do they choose to expose themselves to politics on screen and why do they like to observe “fake” politicians? It almost seems like many citizens are disconnecting with real politics but connecting with its fictional counterpart.

Political series are not new on screen. In the U.S. in the 60s, 70s and 80s politics was a subject of inspiration for series like *Mr. Smith goes to Washington* (1962-1963), *The Senator* (1970-1971), *Grandpa goes to Washington* (1978-1979), *Hail to the Chief* (1985), *Mr. President* (1987-1988). The U.S. was not the only country producing and airing political series. UK's political series were quite popular in the '80s when series like *Yes Minister* (1980-1984), *Yes, Prime-Minister* (1986-1987) or *House of Cards* (1990) were airing. But they have never reached the notoriety nor gained the attention of recent political series. In the last decade the list of political series grew constantly, indicating that "the appetite for backstage political intrigues seems to have sharpened" (Sorlin, 2016, p. 4). Many viewers cannot get enough of fictional politics and politicians!

A difference between the old generation of political series and the current one is the duration, with the former usually lasting a year or two, and the latter spreading on four, five years or even more. If anything, older series have regained attention now, with bloggers and journalists encouraging "political junkies" to watch them, adding them to the list of other series they like (Verlaque 2018; McAlpine 2013). For example, the original, British version of *House of Cards* (1990) is now available on Netflix, after fans of the American version found out about it.

Political series are now more popular than ever. A Reuters poll (2015) revealed that people are fonder and approve more of fictional presidents than the real ones. In 2015 president Obama's approval rate was 46%, while Josiah Bartlet's (the president in *The West Wing*) was 82%. But the most perturbing fact, Obama's score was lower than the one of Frank Underwood (57%), the criminal president of *House of Cards*.

The popularity of a television format is reflected in the number of people watching (and liking) it, engaging in conversations across platforms, becoming fans, but also in the attention the media pays to it. For example, “*House of Cards* was the first Netflix original show to win cultural cachet and be credited as an engine of subscriber growth. It will continue to win media attention thanks to its ability to riff off real-life political drama” (Slattery 2017). But being a Netflix product makes it harder to have exact numbers and demographics of the viewers, as the company keeps this type of information for itself. There have been attempts by survey companies to find out the exact number of viewers of *House of Cards*, but Netflix never confirmed the information. For example, when it first aired in 2013, Nielsen revealed that the series “had about 4.6 million viewers for their season premiere” (Molla 2017). Another survey (with 2,500 Netflix subscribers) led by Luth Research informs that “(...) the program has been the most popular series on all of Netflix in March (6.4%). Its third season was also binge-viewed more than any of the other aforementioned originals, with nearly half of subs having watched at least three episodes in a single day in the first 30 days after release” (Wallenstein 2015).

Fortunately, the mystery of viewership applies only to the Netflix series. We can get a better idea of the popularity of other political series. *Scandal*, for example, has been a huge success for ABC, the network that diffuses it. A few years ago, it was reported that “the show had 3.52 million viewers aged 18 to 49, and 8.4 million total viewers. Among the group aged 18 to 34 it typically ranks first in its 10 p.m. Thursday time slot” (Vega 2013). Analysis performed on the tweets of fans and anti-fans (for the premiere of season 3 of *Scandal*), revealed that the series was extremely popular among Black Americans (Chatman 2017).

Going back more than 12 years ago, *The West Wing* was extremely popular, also breaking audience's records, and we can get an idea by looking at the numbers for one particular episode, "Isaac & Ishmael", which was aired after the September 11 tragic event: "The NBC drama averaged 25.2 million viewers Wednesday, the show's largest audience ever" (Armstrong 2001). At the time *The West Wing* was airing, NBC was proud to say that the series "had the most upscale viewers of any show on network television, and those statistics have held for each season. In 2000, more adults aged eighteen to forty-nine who earned over \$ 100,000 a year watched this show than they did any other regular series on television" (Richardson Hayton 2003, p. 77). It might stand true also for the current political series, what makes a difference between their audience and the audience of other genres (comedies, soap-opera, etc) is the degree of education and income. Especially in terms of education, political series might prove a challenge for those not knowing anything about the political system, parties, elections, since they are abundant in specific political elements (you do not need specific knowledge to watch sitcoms like *The Big Bang Theory*, or *Friends*).

In the case of *Scandal*, a great part of the audience is the African-American community, who is drawn by the character, Olivia Pope (one of the few African American main characters in a series), and who are transforming themselves very fast from viewers to fans, engaging online with other fans, live-tweeting (Chatman 2017).

The popularity of political series can also be "measured" in the amount of online reactions. Social media increased the visibility of these series, allowing people to react and engage on social platforms and forums. The majority of these political series have their own Facebook and Twitter accounts, where they have millions of people following their posts (e.g.

House of Cards Twitter account has more than 2 million followers). In just a few weeks, the *House of Cards* trailer for season 1 was “the most viewed of all the videos in Netflix’s YouTube Channel with more than 1.2 million views” (Edelsburg 2013). In the case of *Scandal*, the finale of the first season in 2012 “generated 2,838 tweets per minute and a total of 157,601 tweets” (Vega 2013).

The online platform Reddit has subreddits (forums created by communities, where the members interact) for these political series, with hundreds of messages, posts, questions, discussions over episodes and characters.

1.3. Fact and fiction in political series

Political series may have caught people’s eyes due to coincidence with real events or persons, making people more curious to watch, allowing them to draw parallels between fiction and reality. From the beginning these political series (some more than others) have raised questions about their degree of similarity with reality (Keeble 2016).

In the case of *Scandal*, Judy Smith’s name was attached to the series and the media drew a lot of attention on this matter, since she acted as advisor for the series. Judy Smith runs a crisis management company, with tight ties to Washington politics, since she once worked as Assistant U.S. Attorney and Deputy Press Secretary in the White House of President George H.W. Bush. As the writer of the series admitted that the main character, Olivia Pope, was inspired by Judy Smith (both having the same mission and skills in crisis management), people questioned how many of the plots in the series are based on Smith’s experience (Elber 2018).

A great deal of debate was created around the similarities between the fictional couple Frank and Claire Underwood (from *House of Cards*) and the real couple Bill and Hillary Clinton. People have observed the things the two power couples have in common immediately, as proven by the conversations started on forums like Quora (“Are the Clintons a real-life version of the Underwoods?”¹) or Reddit (“Are the Clintons the real life Underwoods?”², “More evidence the Underwoods are based off of the Clintons”³). The fact that media devoted a lot of attention to the subject increased people’s doubts and curiosity (CNBC 2016). Michael Dobbs (the creator of the original *House of Cards* series, the U.K version) stated in an interview that “Hillary Clinton is the real Claire Underwood” (Waterson and Lynzy 2015). Another coincidence is the fact that season 4 of *House of Cards* (released in March 2016) focused on Frank’s presidential campaign for re-election. The season aired in the middle of a tumultuous year, just months before real elections happening in U.S. Season 5 (aired in May 2017, after the election of Trump) depicted the last part of the fictional presidential campaign which ends with the installment (although not through election) of a female president, Claire Underwood. Again, people followed closely the similarities between the two campaigns and some of them even stated that, in this case, the reality beat fiction. Even Robin Wright (the actress playing Claire) admitted that “Trump has stolen all of our ideas for Season 6” (Desta 2017). *Scandal* is another series where the dream of having a woman as president is made possible through the character of

¹<https://www.quora.com/Are-the-Clintons-a-real-life-version-of-the-Underwoods>

²https://www.reddit.com/r/HouseOfCards/comments/4c0ed4/are_the_clintons_the_real_life_underwoods/

³https://www.reddit.com/r/HouseOfCards/comments/3tyexj/more_evidence_the_underwoods_are_based_off_of_the/

Mellie Grant (just to keep the coincidences rolling both Claire Underwood and Mellie Grant are wives of former presidents).

Finally, political series may “owe” some degree of their popularity to the support they receive from “celebrity fans”. Perhaps one of the reasons why people are avid viewers of political series is the fact that real politicians have declared themselves fans and compared what happens on the screen with their real jobs. The tweet of Barack Obama expressing his excitement for the second season of *House of Cards* (Barack Obama’s Twitter account) gained public attention. In fact, former president Obama admitted several times that he is a fan of *House of Cards*, and that his wife enjoys *Scandal*. While joking in Ellen DeGeneres talk-show that “life in the White House is much more boring than in *House of Cards*” (The Ellen Show 2014), he also admits that he admires Underwood’s efficiency (McDevitt 2013).

Obama is not the only politician who likes *House of Cards*. Bill and Hillary Clinton have admitted being fans also. During *The Ellen DeGeneres* show in January 2016, Hillary Clinton was invited to play a game with her fictional Presidential opponent, Fitzgerald Grant from the series *Scandal*. To quote the host of the show “Who better to play with than the person whose job you are applying for? Please welcome the President of the United States, Fitzgerald Grant” (The Ellen Show 2016). Kevin Spacey, the actor playing Frank Underwood, revealed in an interview that Bill Clinton had said that “Kevin, 99 percent of what you do on that show is real. The 1 percent you get wrong is you could never get an education bill passed that fast” (Rothman 2015).

1.4. Promotors of globalization and glocalization

It is one thing to understand the fascination of Americans with series about their own politics, inspired by their political system, making references to their parties. It can be easy for them to compare fictional characters with real politicians. But how can we explain the popularity of series about American politics outside of the country's borders? In Europe, *House of Cards* ranks number one in 20 out of 44 markets (Hegedus 2016).

Apparently, we can consider political series “a culturally shareable product” (Singhal & Rogers, 1999, p. 39), which manages to surpass national borders. Why should a series about American politics (the system, the actors) interest someone in France or Romania, countries which are not even sharing the same political system? Looking at the case of *The West Wing*, Wodak believes “it is quite remarkable that this popular American drama series is quoted so frequently in the European media” (2010, p. 56). Focusing on one particular episode, “Isaac and Ishmael” (released immediately after 9/11), her explanation is that *The West Wing* is a clear example of glocalization, as the American liberal values and fictional types of politicians are “transferred to other national contexts”. Wodak recognizes that the facility of this transfer is explained by people's desire to see good, charismatic politicians (2010, p. 57). If *The West Wing* served in spreading the political values and the American myth back in the day, what are the current political series spreading around the world? What story does *House of Cards* or *Scandal* tell about American politics? If values and attitudes are transferable, are cynicism, disengagement and negativity towards politics transferable on a large scale?

Not only are American series exported to other countries, but the trend of political series has touched Europe, which started producing their own series like *Borgen* in Denmark, *Marseille* and *Baron Noir* in France (to name the most popular).

1.5. Audiences of political series

Probably one of the biggest advantages a series has upon a movie is time, time to develop the plot, add details, make the relations between characters more complex, keep the suspense from one season to another, giving time to viewers to get attached, to bond with the fictional characters, even form obsessions. A movie is limited by time, a series has more liberties, making its audience more powerful. Producers have the time to observe what viewers like and do not like, which characters they prefer and which they do not. According to audiences' reactions they can change the original script to please them (Garcia Martinez & Gonzales, 2016, p 23). In this sense, we can say that sometimes audiences of a series get what they want. This makes the audience of a series very different than the one of a movie, not only by giving them more power, but also offering them the opportunity to engage more and get more influenced by what they see.

Scandal is an example of this practice. Fans had constantly the chance to get in touch with their favorite characters, who were live tweeting. Actually, the media consider *Scandal* “the show built by Twitter” (Arit 2013) due to its practice of #ScandalThursday, which meant that fans were live tweeting, while viewing the show. The fans (gathered around the hashtag #Gladiators or #Scandal Heads) were constantly communicating with the actors on Twitter #AskScandal, where their questions were answered. ABC admitted that social media were used

as a strategy by the series, and the live-tweeting during the broadcast of an episode helped creating a community of fans communicating in “real time” among them and with their favorite characters. The success of this practice is easily measured in numbers, as the last episode of the first season reached 2, 838 tweets per minute (Arit 2013).

Another example of the influence of audiences is Doug Stamper (a character from *House of Cards*), Underwood’s Chief of Staff, who handled all his dirty work. His role and importance in the series increased with every season (without an initial plan) because viewers liked him and wanted more of him (Acuna 2015).

Not all viewers remain passive viewers, some of them move to the next level, where after the show ends they reflect upon characters, they imagine different scenarios, they relate their experience to the fictional ones. A fan is “somebody who is obsessed with a particular star, celebrity, film, TV programme, band; somebody who can produce reams of information on the object of their fandom, can quote their favored lines or lyrics, chapter and verse” (Hills, 2002, p. IX). As Hills mentions, some fans are very articulate, which makes them more aware and more critical of the series than regular viewers, who do not reach the same levels of attachment towards what they see or the characters. Fans of political series may be more easily transported into the fictional world they know well (they had several seasons to get familiar with the environment) and identify with characters (which they had the time to get to know and get attached to).

Political series remain first and foremost an entertainment product, which people discover (and they may get addicted to it later) because they are looking for entertainment. Although getting information about a topic (in this case politics) might not be viewers’ first

wish, even unconsciously they may perceive a benefit in watching something more than entertainment.

Rubin and Perse (1987) have studied the activity and the involvement people have with soap-operas. According to them people watch soap-operas for five main reasons: they want to be entertained, to fill in their time, because they are voyeurs or because they want to relax. But they watch this genre also for information and for social utility. Lee and Lee (1995) identified as main reasons for why people watch TV a commitment to viewing, mood improvement but also an informational benefit and social learning. All in all, besides mere entertainment, audiences of political series may watch them also because they perceive a gain in terms of political information. And the more people watch these series “the more they develop values, attitudes beliefs and perceptions that are consistent with the world as it is portrayed on television. The internalization of the television message may result in the learning of television “facts”” (Shrum and Lee 2012, p. 148). Therefore, we consider important to look at what type of message political series are promoting, so we can be aware of what viewers internalize, reflect on, and finally have the feeling they “learn” about politics.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Media effects: from news media to infotainment

In 1938, when Orson Wells staged the “War of Worlds” prank, playing it on the radio (fictional story of an alien attack), a great number of listeners fell into the trap and believed, without questioning, the messages they heard. This may be one of the best examples of the power of media and the way they affect people. This prank was considered by many the proof that “seeing (or hearing, mostly, at that time) was believing” (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2007, p.17) and this back-upped the hypodermic effects model of media influence. This model argued that the effects media can have on their audiences are powerful, but also direct and immediate. Its caveat was not taking into consideration the particularities of audiences, the fact that not all individuals are affected equally (the same way and with the same intensity).

Doubting the fact that media can affect (in a powerful way) its audience, a second model of media influence was proposed. The minimal effects model downplayed the power of the media. In *The people’s choice: how the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign*, Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944) expose the “two-step flow” theory, where the media does not play an important role on people’s behavior. Taking as example the 1940 election, it appeared that social factors (family and friends) were the most influential. Media messages are first reaching opinion leaders who, after processing and interpreting it, are passing it on to their social circle. On the other hand, in *The American Voter*, Campbell et al (1960) argue for the importance of factors like religion, education and income on political attitudes, which are relatively stable. Again, the role of media is minimized, since it cannot change already

established attitudes. The attention goes to long lasting factors like partisanship, while other factors (media falling into this category) account only for short-term fluctuations (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 65). Media effects are limited by selective perception (people are focusing their attention on news or stories which they select according to their already existing values, opinions and predispositions). Therefore, due to this process of selection, some say the media can only reinforce opinions and attitudes and not create or change existing ones (Gans 2003, p. 71).

The “more-than-minimal-effect” theory arose as a compromise between the first two (extreme) models. According to this theory, “(...) the media’s most powerful influence on American society relates to agenda-setting not telling us what to think so much as telling us what to think about” (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2007, p. 19). The media have an indirect effect, by indicating people what are the most important topics and news, which they should pay attention to (McCombs and Shaw 1972, Iyengar, Peters and Kinder 1982, Iyengar and Simon 1993).

Media have been indicated as one of the determinants of people’s political behavior (after all media in all its formats is our main source of information), because the way media present reality (e.g. strategic frames, personalization, negative tone, tabloidization, transition to soft news) will influence the way people perceive politics and the image they have of politicians. Their influence did not pass unnoticed by politicians, who often accuse them of spreading false rumors and even creating “fake news”. We might be witnessing today an attempt of the American president Donald Trump to regain control over the frames, by by-passing the media with his Twitter account (Chaitin 2018; Sable 2017)? He proudly declares that he is the author of the posted messages, although analyses of his tweets seem to indicate that his staff are posting

on his behalf, imitating his style (Linkey 2018). Reading one of its latest tweets it almost seems that the message is a tabloid headline: “For people in Nevada viciously robbed and killed by an illegal immigrant who should not have been in our country. 26 people killed on the Border in a drug and gang related fight. Two large caravans from Honduras broke into Mexico and are headed our way. We need a powerful Wall!” (Twitter, @realDonaldTrump, posted January 21st, 2019, 15:37).

Framing is the process by which “all political players define and give meaning to issues” (Callaghan & Schnell 2001, p. 185). A certain issue could be looked at from multiple perspectives that way affecting the attitudes and behaviors of their audiences (Chong and Druckman 2007). There is a great amount of studies, showing the existence of frames, explaining how frames are created, etc. Of great interest for researchers has been the study of strategic framing, mainly because it was assumed that consuming news framed in a strategical way has negative consequences on people’s beliefs and attitudes, increasing cynicism and political distrust, inviting to lower interest and participation (Capella and Jamieson 1997; De Vreese 2004; Rhee 1997; Valentino et al 2001). At the same time, studies offer mixed evidence about strategic framing, as some talk about the existence of positive effects, like an increased interest in politics (Iyengar et al 2004) or that it does not lower political participation (de Vreese and Semetko 2002).

There are numerous studies about the influence media (print, broadcast, new media) have on people, but research has focused mainly on news (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Elenbaas and de Vreese 2008; Pinkleton and Austin 2001; de Vreese and Semetko 2002; Patterson 1993).

One of the most hypothesized consequences of media was the creation or spreading of cynicism.

Political cynicism has long received the attention of scholars (Agger et al 1961; Miller 1974; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Norris 2000; Chaloupka 1999). News media are often seen as a factor in the development of political cynicism (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995, Cappella and Jamieson 1997), although opinions are divided, as some authors argue about the benefits of the media as a "virtuous circle" (Norris 2000; Prior 2007).

Based on national survey data, Kanter and Mirvis found that 43% of the Americans "fit the profile of the cynic" (1989, p. 1). Cappella (2002, p. 231) defines the cynic as someone who "fundamentally believes that political leaders and the groups they represent cannot be trusted". The discussion about media influence has divided scholars among those who warn about the negative effects (cynicism being one of them) and those who are more optimistic and praise the variety of sources from which people can "extract" their information.

One of the most influential works in the field is *Spiral of cynicism: the press and the public good* (1997) written by Cappella and Jamieson. The authors focus on the way the media frame the news which reach the public, the frames being constructed around key elements as strategy and conflict (1997, p. 31). Analyzing the way media has reported on two major U.S political events (health care reform debate and the mayoral race for Philadelphia) they were able to emphasize the distinction between strategic versus issue frames. Their multiple experiments are rigorously constructed. They offer many different tests (including print and broadcast media and a combination of the two) of their argument, thus strengthening the validity of their findings: people exposed to strategic frames in the media (negative content) are more cynical than those

who are exposed to issue frames. Even if Cappella and Jamieson base their argument on the fact that strategic stories produce a more cynical reaction than the issue ones, they do not dismiss the possibility that the un-sophisticated category of audience might not be able to make the distinction between strategy and issue frames and their cynicism comes from the fact they find it difficult to understand the story.

The fact that the news media landscape has changed in the last decades is confirmed by Patterson (1993), whose content analysis over a period of 30 years (1960s-1990s) shows that when covering campaigns, the mainstream media have moved from issue to strategic framing. Jamieson (1996) also found that the strategy/ horse race frame has been the dominant one used by the print and broadcast media (1960-1992), while Farnsworth and Lichter (2007) found the same thing by examining elections between 1988-2008 depicted in the U.S television.

The other side of the debate highlights the positive effects of the media. Norris (2000) considers that media malaise and its symptoms are exaggerated and argues about a "virtuous circle" whereby usage of news media increases political trust and knowledge, leading to mobilization. Thinking that "negative news produces a cynical public is too simplistic" (Norris 2000, p. 251). Her findings are based on a combination of content analyses (newspapers and television in 15 states of the EU) and surveys (NES (1948-1998) and Eurobarometer (1970-1999)). Nevertheless, the direction of causality is not very clear: does trust lead to exposure to the media, or does media exposure generate trust? Although Norris is an advocate for the virtuous circle, parts of her analysis seem to be more arguments for the spiral of cynicism, confirming the existence of strategic frames and negativity: "the attentive public reading about Europe in the newspapers or watching TV news received a steady diet of bad news" (Norris

2000, p. 206). As it is the case in the U.S., European audiences have also gotten the taste for entertainment. In 15 OECD countries (between 1971 and 1996), the numbers of hours on entertainment quadrupled in the last 25 years, television is offering more and more entertainment. Austin and Pinkleton (1999) also found that those who are active media users are not automatically transformed into cynics.

Recently, scholars have acknowledged the presence of “infotainment media” (Baum 2006, Riegert 2007) and how politicians “adapted” their strategies to appear in talk-shows where they can subtly present their agenda while talking about their private lives. Entertainment shows allow them to reach the less informed, through their presence in talk-shows for example. Researchers managed to show the importance of non-traditional, political media, like soft news. Baum (2005) looks at how the fact that presidential candidates make appearances in popular entertainment programs (almost like “hitting the talk-show circuit”) offers a chance to get informed even to those voters who do not possess much information. Of course, the level of information contained in talk-shows is lower than those of news or debates, and the focus is more on the private lives and personalities of the politicians, but “soft news is better than no news”. The same is evidenced by Baum and Jamieson (2006) when they talk about the “Oprah effect”, as those who are heavy watchers of daily talk-shows (like the *Oprah Winfrey show*) are in fact able to vote more consistently (according to their preferences). The influences of infotainment media usually pass unnoticed by its public because it manages to neutralize “the “politics” filter and reached citizens not normally interested in public affairs” (Bastien 2018, p. 113). The same might stand true for political series.

With the attention directed to different talk-shows, scholars have ignored the existence of another media product which may have similar effects on people. Are political series entering the category infotainment? They provide entertainment (for sure), but do they provide information (even in its softest version)? We believe so, because information is not only a reference to a real event or a real politician (although sometimes we encounter those in fictional series) but also information is everything related to processes and events (elections, passing a bill, the impeachment procedure, preparations for debates, different positions and role in the White House, international relations). Nitsch and Eilders (2015) do not exclude the possibility that political dramas could be an important source of information, in which case we should investigate the accuracy of the fictional story (“represented faithfully”). They perform a content analysis of *The West Wing* and *Kanzleramt* (German series) and they discover that politics does play a significant center-stage role in fictional series (e.g. 80% of the scenes analysed for *The West Wing* ranked high on the political dimension). Policy, polity are omnipresent, with elections and foreign relations receiving particular attention. The authors conclude that political series could in fact prove valuable as a source of information, as they “provide insights into a political sphere largely unknown to the audience. *The West Wing* and *Kanzleramt* hence pick up where journalism stops” (2015: 13). They do however find differences in the way politics is portrayed in the two series, therefore it is important to note that the amount of political information may differ, according to the content of each series.

Stockwell (2004, p. 8) defines infotainment as the space between traditional news and entertainment products (movies, series, soap-operas, talk-shows). But political series are also a clear example of “politainment”, which is “the presentation of politics through the mass-mediated lenses of entertainment and popular culture” (Sampert and Trimble 2010, p. 18). In

political series, as well as movies, “messages are wrapped within the framework of entertainment” (Genovese 2014, p. 45).

It seems that political series are the new “talk-shows”, initially ignored, but they started to gain more and more the attention of researchers. Bastien (2018, p. 11) doubts that viewers of infotainment are always capable of differentiating between “seriousness and humor” (“in an ideal world perhaps, in reality probably not”). Extending this line of thought to political series, it might be true that these viewers are not able to make the difference between fiction and reality (and thus getting their opinions and attitudes affected by what they see on screen).

2.2. Fictional media effects

It is high time to extend the study of media effects outside news and non- news media (non-fictional). As previously mentioned, research on the relation between media and politics has focused intensely on news and thus “purely dramatic fictional television has been largely ignored by scholars interested in the political impact of mass media” (Mutz and Nir, 2010, p. 197).

When it comes to the literature about fictional politics, there has always been a certain interest in the relationship between Hollywood and Washington. Most studies though, focus on how political figures and cases are exploited by producers to create box office subjects (Coyne 2008; Scott 2011). Scholars have also been interested in the comparison between fictional politics (as depicted in series like *The West Wing*) and real politics (Challen, 2001, Nitsch and Eilders 2015) or on how the image of the President is portrayed in a positive, optimistic way (Podhoretz, 2003).

Fiction is not at all plain and uniform. Besides the fictional movies and series, one interesting category seems to be “news fiction”, which covers or gets inspired by real topics or cases appearing in the news, and as it seems political series can be categorized as such (Gans 2003 gives as example *The West Wing*). The series classified as “news fiction” have a positive impact as it encourages a part of their audiences to reach out for more information, while sometimes providing them with details they do not find in the media (Gans 2003, p. 107).

Although fictional series may just seem “a relief from the rigors of the day, a diversion (...) in reality, all that “entertainment” and advertising is saturated with political meaning” (Palentz and Entman 1981, p. 169), which in the end affects (unconsciously) people watching them. Previous studies have indicated that fiction can influence people's perceptions on health and social issues. For example, a fictional series (*Lie to me*) about nonverbal communication and body language influences the way people perceive social interactions and their peers (Levine et al 2010). Even some of the most innocent forms of fiction, like romance novels, have an impact on people’s behavior (as shown by Diekmann et al 2011). Murphy et al (2011) revealed that stories in the series (soap-opera *Desperate Housewives*) about cancer had an impact on viewers’ knowledge about the disease and raised awareness about its risks. The subject of violence was also studied in the context of fictional effects. Gerbner and Gross’s (1976) study on media proved that violent content can lead viewers to perceive life as dangerous and fearful. Following the same line, Atkin’s (1983) experimental study shows that fictional violence has an impact on adolescents who watch (especially when the format of the program seems to be highly realistic). Crime dramas have the potential to affect people’s attitudes towards U.S. criminal justice system (attitudes towards death penalty, sentences), as shown by Mutz and Nir (2010) in their experiment.

Looking at political subjects, fiction is capable of making people believe in conspiracies, increase/decrease their trust in government, change their political intentions, affect their opinions on specific policies. Even more important, positive depictions of fictional characters (*The West Wing*) improve the image of real presidents (Holbert et al, 2003).

Fictional political movies and docudramas have attracted the interest of researchers. Sigelman and Sigelman (1974) have shown that political movies (in their case *The Candidate*) can affect the way people think of campaigns and a candidate's image. With the help of a panel survey, Feldman and Sigelman (1985) showed that movies with a political/national security topic (*The Day After*) shape people's political attitudes. Butler et al (1995) explored the psychological impact of the docudrama *JFK*, as viewers declared a lower intention to vote, to make political contributions and to volunteer, immediately after watching it. Similarly, an experiment designed by Mulligan and Habel (2013) shows the influence of political movies on people's opinions, as those watching the film *Wag the Dog* have begun to consider the U.S. government as being capable of creating a fake war and hide information from its citizens (the fictional scenario of the movie).

Political series have also reached the interest of scholars, as there are significant differences between political movies and series. As in the case of their shorter counterparts, the movies, fictional series devoted to a political subject have also a special relation with viewers, affecting parts of their behavior and opinions. Already in 1989, Lenart and McGraw raised awareness about the effects of series on audiences. The mini-series *Amerika* made those who perceived it as realistic much more aware and concerned about communism and the Cold War (influencing their attitudes towards U.S. military defense). Fictional series have certain effects

on people's perceptions about the federal government (Pfau et al 2001), depending on their genre (law enforcement versus science fiction). As shown by Holbert et al (2003), political series (*The West Wing*) affect viewers' images of real presidents (in this case in a positive way).

Williams (2011), examined the identity of the fans of *The West Wing*, revealing that they connected with the fictional characters and linked their own experiences to the ones in the series. Some of them even believed that *The West Wing* convinced them to become more interested in politics.

Political series may affect their viewers differently than other series. Liesbet van Zoonen (2007) identified four ways in which fictional politics makes people think about politics (examining the comments left by viewers on IMDb): descriptive, reflective, judgmental and fantasy. Due to watching movies and series people reflect about the challenges politicians face, they criticize politicians (especially for their morals) or start fantasizing about politics, raising their hopes. The descriptive comments are probably the most important, not only because people refer to the realism behind fictional politics but because "(...) some stories give their viewers the feeling that they have acquired new knowledge about specific elements of politics" (Van Zoonen, 2007, p. 544).

At this stage, it seems clear that fictional politics does not pass unnoticed by those watching it, and that it has the potential to make people reflect on what they see.

In the study of the effects of fictional politics, realism is an important factor, considered by a number of researchers, together with other fictional moderators like familiarity with the environment and empathy with characters. The degree of perceived realism seems to make the difference among viewers, splitting them into those believe that the series they watch are a

faithful representation of reality and those who sees them as mere fiction. Mulligan and Habel (2013) find that among those who have watched the movie *Wag the Dog* only participants who believed the movie was highly realistic were more likely to believe in a conspiracy theory like the one on screen. Lenart and McGraw (1989) investigated the effects of the mini-series *Amerika* with the help of a panel study (before and after viewing). The aforementioned series depicting a world where the Soviet Union had won the Cold War influenced the opinions of those perceiving it as very realistic, who became more supportive toward U.S having a strong military position and less trusting of communists.

Research on fiction is often based on transportation and identification theories. The literature examining narrative persuasion usually looks at transportation and identification as moderators of media influence (Sestir and Green 2010, p. 272). A study by Tal-Or and Cohen (2010) shows that transportation predicts enjoyment of movies, while viewers are more likely to identify more with positive characters. Green and Brock (2000) reveal that a fictional story can transport people as much as one presented as real news, and that the beliefs of those highly transported became consistent with the story they read. The same was revealed by Appel and Richter (2010), as those transported in a story change their beliefs according to that story (in their case beliefs about restrictions on the freedom of psychiatric patients). As for political series, examining the comments of fans of *The West Wing*, Williams (2011) found that viewers are connecting with the fictional characters and compared their life experiences with the ones in the series. Therefore, if political series affect their audiences' beliefs and attitudes, the effects could be (at least partially) explained by transportation and identification theories. We have already established the "entertainment character" of political series, and as some authors believe in entertainment's capacity to make people engage in such a way that they leave their surroundings

(Gripsrud 2002, p. 276), as they are carried away (Costera Meijer 2005, p. 34) into a fictional politics. As it seems that entertainment facilitates transportation, political series should be an interesting case to observe.

2.3. Mediatization

The concept of mediatization of politics (Strömbäck 2008, Strömbäck and Esser 2014, Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999) might also be considered when examining the effects of political series.

Mediatization refers to “a long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions, organizations and actors has increased” (Strömbäck and Esser 2014 p. 244). In other words, mediatization refers to the interaction between media and politics. For Schulz (2004, p. 88) mediatization “relates to changes associated with communication media and their development”. These authors of mediatization of politics focus on news media. According to Strömbäck and Esser (2014, p. 245) “the media that matter most are news media conceived of as socio-technological organizations and institutions. In essence this means organized journalism at newspapers, radio, television and news magazines in either their traditional or digital formats.” However, it can also be applied to the study of a broader range of media products and their effects, like social media, television talk-shows and political series.

The mediatization of politics occurs in several “phases” (Strömbäck 2008) or dimensions; two of them being relevant to our study. The first one is known as mediation, where media become people’s most important source of information. Since it is the main interface

which connects citizens with politics, the media would have the potential to impact opinions and behaviors, especially whether they are perceived as credible. For instance, Druckman (2001) has shown that framing effects are moderated by the credibility people perceive in the source of information. He argues that “perceived source of credibility is prerequisite for successful framing in terms of both overall opinion and belief importance” (2001, p. 1059). The content of the news is commonly perceived as credible since it comes from official, trustworthy sources. In the case of political series, viewers are arguably aware of the fact that they are fiction. To find out what is happening today in the American politics, they are tuning in to the news and not to an episode of *House of Cards*. But the moment they start perceiving fictional political series as realistic, something changes. Despite their invented reality, these series become somehow credible.

The lines between fiction and reality could get blurred, as the plot and characters of political series seem to reflect more and more the news shown on TV. Especially in the last years, political series have obliged the political world to acknowledge their existence and influence (VH1 2016, Desta 2017, Poniewozik 2017), while their content is carefully scrutinized and compared to the reality. Taieb (2018, pp.12-13) reminds us that political series want to give the viewer the impression of familiarity and realism. For example, the character of the Latino democrat Matt Santos in *The West Wing* series was inspired by the young senator at the time, Barack Obama. In the case of *House of Cards*, Frank Underwood comes from a small town, like former presidents Harry Truman or Bill Clinton, the Russian president Petrov is a replica of Vladimir Putin and many journalistic and talk-show hosts appear playing themselves. There were times when the events in the series coincided with the real ones, like presidential elections-

making people question once again the mutual influences between real and fictional politics (Desta 2017, Atkinson 2017).

Another relevant dimension of the mediatization of politics- the third one in Strömbäck (2008) is the role of a “media logic” (in contrast with a political logic) in media content. According to that literature, the strategic frame favoured by the news media fits with the media logic as it allows to build a dramatic narrative. When focusing on a metaphorical, “winners and losers” language, when insisting on polls’ results, journalists create a narrative to attract audiences. Political series share this narrative potential. For instance, the plot of House of Cards is designed around the race and strategies between political actors. As the strategic frame has an impact on citizens’ cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson 1997), we may hypothesize that some political series cause the same effect. The concept of mediatization creates a bridge between the two formats of media (news and fictional series).

Strömbäck (2008, p. 233) acknowledges that media needs to use different storytelling techniques because they are on “an ongoing struggle to capture people’s attention”. Among these storytelling techniques that are applied to traditional media, there can be found: the simplification, intensification, visualisation, stereotypization, framing of politics as strategic game, and also personalization. The same techniques used by traditional media can be observed in the case of political series, “the new generation of political TV series have also become storytellers” (Manoliu 2018b, p. 140). In fact, the function of storytelling is a key factor in understanding the implications of cultivation theory.

McGregor, Lawrence and Cardona (2017) present personalization as a trend in political strategies, used differently by female and male candidates. It is not just the voters who

personalize the politicians, but politicians themselves perform a self-personalization. McGregor (2017) uses an online experiment, which demonstrates that personalization affected the way people make their voting decision, as they rely more and more on the personal characteristics of politicians. The personalization of politics may have an influence on citizens watching series like *House of Cards* or *Scandal*, where they can see the private lives and thoughts of politicians. Graber (2001, p. 6) argues that the academic critics accuse television of “personalizing the news excessively and of overemphasizing its dramatic aspects”. The tendency to use and even abuse personalization in the news may have created a taste for enjoying series like these because it “(...) has cultivated a bad reputation in politics” (Meeks 2016). However, various frames may have diverse impacts on different people. Jebril, Alback and de Vreese (2013) look at the effects of privatization and personalization in the news on cynicism. By personalization the authors refer to a focus on the traits of politicians, their experiences and emotions, while privatization is a focus on politicians’ private lives and scandals, being more “linked to strategic game coverage” (Jebril et al 2013, p. 107). Their cross-national study including three countries (Denmark, Britain, Spain) reveal that exposure to privatization content had a positive impact on cynicism, while exposure to a personalization content leads to increased cynicism for the less interested in politics but decreases cynicism for the less interested in politics.

3. Methodology

3.1. The series: *House of Cards* versus *The West Wing*

This dissertation is centered around two well-known political series, one which stopped airing in 2006 and a recent one which will air its 6th (and final season) in fall 2018. The series

were not randomly chosen. Besides their popularity, they are depicting politics and people involved in it in opposite ways. Fictional content has the potential to create “inaccurate beliefs” and “skewed perceptions of the real world” (Mutz and Nir 2010). *The West Wing* was considered by many “television’s positive (and often realistic) portrayal of the American presidency” (Sachleben and Yenerall 2012, p. 116) or “the peak of presidential fiction” (Courmont and Benezet 2007, p. 82), thus creating high expectations for real politicians (and comparing with reality will lead to disappointment). *House of Cards* on the other hand, is considered as exaggerating cynical and negative aspects, potentially creating a distorted reality for viewers, where they perceive real politics as much more dirty, unfair and selfish than it actually is (Murphy 2013). At the same time the series is recognized for its cynicism, as Taieb (2018, p. 48) states: “Malgré son cynisme, la série décrit bien plusieurs formes de l’activité politique (discussions sur les textes législatifs, réunions et réunions, prises de décision, arbitrages, lancements de projets créateurs d’emploi, rédaction de mémos, discussions juridiques)”.

House of Cards is a Netflix political series, “qui met en scène un monde politique plausible et familier” (Taieb 2018, p. 9) focused on the life and ascension to power of Frank Underwood. Underwood's ascension from Congress to the Presidency is a perfect occasion for viewers to assist at what is happening back-stage in American politics. The series makes it very clear that the road to success in politics is paved with cheating, manipulations, lies, enemies and that politicians are capable of everything (even murder) in order to fulfil their ambitions. The prototype of politician is embodied by Frank Underwood, compared by many with Machiavelli’s prince, who builds himself an “unscrupulous career” (Schubert 2018, p. 165). Underwood explains his strategies and intentions directly to the viewers, his monologues being negatives and cynical.

On the other hand, *The West Wing* was seen by many as an ideal depiction of American politics, the kind of politics and politicians that people wish to have. The series was well received by the public, for whom it has quickly become a standard for the way politicians should do their job. In numerous occasions viewers have expressed their desire for having Josiah Bartlet as president (Van Zoonen 2005, p. 33). As opposed to *House of Cards*, *The West Wing* seems a political utopia, where moral principles and democratic values guide politicians. Researchers have noticed that currently we are exposed to extreme negative and cynical political series and across this tendency to portray politics, *The West Wing* “(...) stands as a grand exception to the seemingly seismic shift toward a more cynical and negative depiction of the presidency” (Sachleben and Yenerally 2012, pp. 95-96).

The two series are opposite in terms of the tone they use to present the fictional political world. The difference in tonality can be observed in the way characters are constructed in the two series. While in *House of Cards* the villain is winning, the good guys have the final word in *The West Wing*. Both series focus on politicians, the difference being that politicians in *House of Cards* are very efficient in defending their own interests whereas in *The West Wing* they perform in a more honest and efficient manner.

There are different methods to test the effects that political series may have on their viewers. “Lorsque l’approche expérimentale est employée, la validité externe des résultats est remise en cause. Lorsque des données d’enquête sont privilégiées, le sens de la relation entre les variables ne peut être dégagé” (Bastien 2007, p. 300). We tried to answer this methodological dilemma by using both approaches. First, we designed an experiment which allows us to draw a direct link between exposure to political series and cynicism (first article) and which also

explains it through perceived realism (second article). Second, the online survey explores the perceptions fans have on the political benefits of watching such series (third article).

3.2. The experiment

Studies devoted to media effects have employed experiments, as researchers believe they make it possible to evaluate the impact of variables and establish strong causal relations (Mutz & Reeves 2005). “The most definitive findings about news media effects have come from laboratory research” (Gans 2003, p.71). To determine how news affect people’s attitudes, experiments are usually considered the best approach, as it can “convincingly establish” (Prior 2008, p. 893) the link between exposure to media and change in attitudes, opinions and behaviors.

Cappella and Jamieson (1997) designed experiments where they manipulated stories (about a mayoral race and a health care reform) and subjects were exposed to either a strategically framed news or an issue framed one. The reactions were compared to a control group, as results show that people recall and interpret information according the frame they received (making those exposed to the strategic frame condition more cynical than others). Similar to Cappella and Jamieson’s experiment, Valetino et al (2001) studied the existence of a spiral of cynicism for some, designing a pre-post-test experiment, where participants had to read a set of three articles (two non-political and one manipulated story about a political campaign). Others designed experiments, where the treatment was a visual stimulus instead of written ones. Mutz and Reeves (2005) exposed subjects to different versions of a fake political talk-show, where two actors playing the roles of two congressional candidates were having a debate

(manipulated as civil and uncivil). To study the effects of frames on people's opinions, de Vreese (2004) designed an experiment where he created a version of the evening news program, containing a story about the enlargement of the European Union (story manipulated as a conflict or economic consequences frames).

Experiments are also popular in the research of fictional effects. Experimental designs usually test for changes in beliefs and attitudes of participants, after being exposed to an episode of a series (Holbert et al 2003, Levine et al 2010) or to an entire movie (Mulligan and Habel 2013, Sigelman and Sigelman 1974). Some even designed a pre-post test in a cinema, to recreate the "natural conditions" under which people usually watch a movie (Butler et al 1995), so they could capture the effects it has on viewers' beliefs.

The great advantage of an experiment is that allows to clearly establish the cause and effect. Randomly assigning participants to the groups (treatment and control) makes the results much more reliable, increasing the internal validity of the findings. An experiment with a pre-post design allows to compare the changes in the treatments versus control groups. Another strength of experiments is the flexibility in determining the target, in our case the liberty to determine the eligibility criteria (people who never saw the series involved). Although some question student samples usually used in experiments, researchers believe they are reliable (Trussler and Soroka 2014, Hanson et al 2010, Mutz and Reeves 2005).

Considering these reasons, we have designed an experiment which took place at the University of Montreal in the spring of 2016 (March 18 - April 8). The main goal was to observe the change in the levels of political cynicism before and after exposure to political series.

We have selected two political series and a sitcom (non-political) to assign participants randomly to one of three groups: the first group watched a negative political series, *House of Cards* (N=61); the second group had a positive treatment, watching *The West Wing* (N=58); participants in the third group saw a comedy series, *The Big Bang Theory*, as control (N=61). They only watched the first episode of the assigned series (with differences in the length of the episodes). They watched the episodes in small groups, in a projection room, which re-enacted a cinema theater (creating the feeling of watching under “normal” conditions). Since most of the participants’ first language was French, the episodes were screened in English (original version), and French subtitles were added. We preferred to use the original English version (and not the one dubbed in French) to not lose the accuracy and the specificity of the series, like the voice of the characters, their tone, the original language full of metaphors. Participants were handed a set of two questionnaires, the first before and the second after watching the episode they were assigned to.

Participants were mostly university students; sixty percent were women and forty percent were men. The majority of them were Quebeckers; the nationality of the sample should not pose a problem, since we have already established that political series are a culturally sharable product, which transcends the border of their country. Even in Quebec the influence of the American neighbour is felt not only in television/ cinema but in media also, as many American shows and movies are diffused by Canadian and Quebec TV networks (Théorêt et al 2009, pp. 1-2).

Participants were recruited mostly via university student associations, departments, and social networking sites. The selection criterion was to not have already seen any of the three

series and those meeting the criterion were then randomly assigned to one of the three groups. This eligibility condition was necessary, because we did not want that participants' cynicism to have been previously affected by the selected series, so the moment we observe a change between the pre- post to be sure it is because of the series, to capture their reaction to the first exposure.

Experimental designs have their flaws. The internal validity is sometimes questionable, due to the short treatment participants are subject to. In our case there is no guarantee that one short treatment (one episode) can have a stable effect. It would be desirable to compare our results with the ones provided by longer exposure, as de Vreese (2004) did, by using a two-wave experimental design to test for the longevity of the effects of strategic news on political cynicism. We leave this for future research. In terms of external validity, again there is no certainty that the effects can be generalized beyond the experiment and they could be replicated in a real-life situation.

3.3. The online survey

Surveys have also been a popular method in studies about media effects. Some have used mixed methods, like Robinson (1976) who tested for “the growth of political malaise”, by combining a lab experiment using a CBS documentary (“The selling of the Pentagon”) with survey data, which confirmed that television news lead to political cynicism and distrust.

Trussler and Soroka (2014) have also backed-up their experiment (participants were offered the option to choose what kind of news to read- strategic or policy) with survey data (respondents' preferences for news content). Their results revealed there is a gap between what people declare

(wanting less negative news) and their actual preferences and behavior (given the choice they will prefer strategic stories).

Wanting more reliability for our findings, we have changed the method for the third article, from an experiment to an online survey. Online surveys have their advantages, offering respondents convenience (they chose when and for how long to answer), providing anonymity, and allowing to escape social desirability. Online surveys provide accessibility in reaching specific segments and give “access to unique populations” (Wright 2005).

Current problems associated with online surveys are related to self-selection bias, as on the Internet some people are more likely than others to participate. These sampling issues inhibit researchers' ability to make some generalizations about study findings.

De Vreese and Semetko (2002) and de Vreese (2005) used panel surveys (in an European context) with repeated measures for political cynicism, which revealed that individuals exposed the most to strategic news are most cynical. Pinkleton and Austin (2001) chose to use a cross-sectional survey for their study, with results revealing that cynicism depends on the source of information and that those who use newspapers as main source of information are less cynical than those for whom television news are primary.

Hanson et al (2010) also appeal to a survey (student respondents) to document political cynicism in social networks during the 2008 presidential campaign. According to the survey, users of social networks are less cynical. Other researchers chose surveys as method for their studies, to find out if cynicism in the media leads to cynicism (Moy and Pfau 2000; Elenbaas and de Vreese 2008).

Although researchers agree that “survey research is necessary to understand media effects” (Prior 2008, p.893), there are problems associated with its use, mainly consisting of the fact that people overestimate their exposure to news.

To see how fans of political series perceive the “benefits” of watching them, we have designed an online survey (36 questions in total), covering basic demographics, measures for transportation (7 items), identification (6 items), and a particular dimension of realism (perceived plausibility- 7 items).

The survey was posted on Reddit, an online platform, mostly known for its “forum” feature. The category of heavy viewers/ fans (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998) is very active on Reddit. According to their interests, registered members can post information and ask questions on “subreddits” dedicated to specific subjects (music, films, TV series, comic books, politics etc.). In the last years, several academic studies started using the platform to recruit participants in different studies (Sample Size is a subreddit created for research purposes). Additionally, there were already subreddits, or channels dedicated to various political series. The *House of Cards* subreddit was one of the most active, with members posting questions every day and engaging in different conversations about the characters and the plot.

We received 86 responses to the survey, on a voluntary basis. Despite its non-probabilistic nature, this type of sampling is usually used when working with “hard-to-reach” populations. The eligibility condition was for them to be regular viewers of *House of Cards* (having seen at least 2 seasons), so they were familiar with the plot, the events and the characters.

4. The articles

To explore the subject of political series and some of their potential implications on people watching them, we have divided the dissertation into 3 separate studies.

4.1. ARTICLE 1: Does my favorite political TV series make me cynical?

The first question we were interested in was to see if there is a relationship between watching political series and political cynicism. Palentz and Entman warned that “Media content is crucial: different content, different effects on power” (1981, p. 9) and there are differences in the way series portray the fictional political world. Politicians are presented in different lights, some are very efficient in defending their own interests (Frank Underwood in *House of Cards*), some are efficient in the way they represent the well-being of the population (Josiah Bartlet in *The West Wing*). Therefore, we expect the effect on viewers' cynicism to be different depending on the series' tone.

With the help of the experiment mentioned previously we wanted to test the following hypotheses:

H1: People exposed to the negative tone of a political TV series (House of Cards) will become more cynical.

H2: People exposed to the positive tone of a political TV series (The West Wing) will become less cynical.

The level of sophistication should moderate the effects of media exposure (studies show that the victims of agenda-setting, priming and framing are those with lower levels of political

sophistication: Iyengar 1991; Iyengar and Kinder 2010), that is, the least sophisticated should be more likely to be impacted by the tone of the series (either negative or positive). There is a distinction (Mutz and Nir 2010) between viewers of fictional content (non-partisans, with low levels of involvement and information) and viewers of news content (partisans, well-informed, engaged in politics). Viewers of fictional content should be less resistant to the messages they receive from their political series (Zaller 1992). Valentino et al (2001) argue for the existence of a spiral of cynicism for some, the less sophisticated people being more vulnerable to strategic frames.

We expected that political sophistication should moderate the effects of political series as well:

H3: The impact of political TV series is stronger among the least sophisticated.

Results reveal that the contrasting tonalities of the series lead to asymmetric effects. The negative series influences people's cynicism, and the positive series has no effect. The hypothesis stating that political sophistication should act as a moderating variable was not confirmed, as we found no significant difference between the least and the most sophisticated in their response to treatments. While the number of participants in each treatment group may be somewhat modest to detect asymmetric effects, we nevertheless test this hypothesis. The size of the sample made it a conservative test and a type II error appears more likely

The results show how the different tones of these series lead to different results, but most importantly they show the existence of a correlation between the negative series and political cynicism. While the number of participants in each group may be somewhat modest to detect asymmetric effects, we nevertheless test this hypothesis. The size of the sample made it a conservative test and a type II error appears more likely.

4.2. ARTICLE 2: Watching House of Cards: Connecting perceived realism and cynicism

After discovering that only one type of political series (the negative one) had an impact on participants' political cynicism, the second article tries to explain these asymmetric effects with the help of perceived realism. The basic argument is that perceived realism is a necessary condition for a series to change the political attitudes of those watching it.

Therefore, our main expectation was that the effect of political series depends on how realistic viewers consider them.

Studies have already shown the importance of perceived realism as a moderator of viewers' different beliefs and attitudes (Mulligan and Habel 2013, Feldman and Sigelman 1985, Lenart and McGraw 1989). Data coming from the same experiment as in Article 1 include a measure for realism on two dimensions: events and characters.

This allowed us to test two separate hypotheses for each of the realism' dimension:

H1: Participants in the House of Cards (negative series) treatment group will become more cynical only if they perceive the fictional events and characters as very realistic.

H2: Participants in The West Wing (positive series) treatment group will become less cynical only if they perceive the fictional events and characters as very realistic.

Results revealed differences in the way people perceive the two political series involved in the experiment. The fictional characters in the negative series (*House of Cards*) were perceived as realistic by 82% of the participants in the negative treatment group, while only 43% of those watching *The West Wing* (the positive series) believed the characters were realistic. The same stands true for the realism of the series' fictional events: considered by 80% as realistic

for *House of Cards*, and by 48% of the subjects in *The West Wing*. Results reveal that in the case of *House of Cards* those believing the episode was realistic (in terms of events and characters) become more cynical than those who do not. For *The West Wing* group, there is no significant interaction effect between watching the episode and perceptions of realism.

4.3. ARTICLE 3: Psychological reactions to House of Cards. The role of transportation and identification

Lastly, we wanted to explore the perceived benefits people believe the series had on them. A fictional narrative can persuade its viewers/readers through two mechanisms: transportation and identification. Transportation is a cognitive and emotional process in which the person is drawn in and engages in the story (Green and Sestir 2017), while identification allows her to “become one with the character” (Oatley 2002, p. 61) and understand the events through the eyes of the fictional character. Transportation and identification theories become relevant when searching for potential mechanisms which could explain the impressions people have of political series.

“Do people who watch infotainment programs learn something from them? Given that these programs actually convey information, we can intuitively deduce that they must have a positive impact on citizens’ political proficiency” (Bastien 2018, p. 115). We believed the same line of thought could apply to political series, although we were not interested in seeing exactly what people learned from these series, but if they have the impression they did learn something. The method used (online survey) is not measuring a shift in a particular attitude, but rather people’s perceptions of what they learned.

The regular audiences of political series are exposed to their content over a long period of time (seasons spread sometimes over the course of years). As fans, they are more critical “continuously evaluate the quality of the acting” (Baym 2000, p. 98) and are the first to notice « realism ruptures » (Baym 2000, p. 99). They are not just a « passive audience » (Chafee and Kaniham 1997, p. 425) and they have the time to create relationships with the characters, to get familiar with the setting and the events of the series (thus are more prone to be transported and identify with the fictional characters).

Our main interest is to discover if these audiences are under the impression that watching the series has a positive influence on them, by making them more capable of understanding politics, by offering them more political information, or even by increasing their political interest.

More precisely, we are interested in answering three specific research questions:

- Are people watching *House of Cards* transported into the story?
- Are people watching *House of Cards* identifying with the main character, Frank Underwood?
- Do transported viewers and those identifying with the characters have the impression the series had a positive influence on them? After watching *House of Cards* do people believe the series made them understand politics better, increased their interest in politics and offered them real political information?

The results of the online survey reveal that *House of Cards* can transport its viewers into the fictional political realm. Our analysis revealed that transportation can be divided into two sub-scales, mental/emotional and cognitive. Both sub-scales proved to be significant for the

political interest dependent variable, but only those transported on a cognitive dimension believed that they understand politics better after watching the series, while those who attached a high degree of realism to the series were under the impression they understand politics better after watching the series. Another interesting fact revealed by the study was that people connected and had the tendency to identify with the main fictional character of the series, Frank Underwood. People usually identify more easily with positive, moral characters (Tal-Or & Cohen 2010, Sestir and Green 2010), therefore it is interesting that they have identified with a negative character in *House of Cards*.

The mix of methods used in the three articles allows us to study the influence of political series on attitudes, but also on perceptions. At the same time, we are able to analyse two types of participants: the “first-timers” (for the experiment) and the fans/heavy watchers (for the online survey) and have a glimpse of what are the consequences of watching political series for these two (very) different categories. This provides an interesting value of the results, as we test the impact of the first episode (short-term effects) on political cynicism, and the impact of the series as a whole (multiple seasons meaning long-term effects) on perceptions.

Chapter 2

Does my favorite political television series make me cynical?

Article published in Canadian Journal of Communication 2018, vol.43, no. 4, pp. 547-566

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Abstract

Background: In recent decades, scholars have become increasingly concerned about rising political cynicism. This study tests whether people exposed to political television series become more cynical.

Analysis: Three groups of participants are exposed to the first episode of two political series (*House of Cards* and *The West Wing*) and one non-political series (*The Big Bang Theory*). Their level of political cynicism is measured before and after exposure to the episode.

Conclusions & Implications: Results indicate that not all political television series have the same impact on their audiences: series recognized for their intense negativity increase people's level of cynicism, while those portraying politics in a positive way do not have any impact. More sophisticated participants did not seem to react differently, as political knowledge does not moderate the impact upon cynicism.

Résumé

Contexte : Depuis quelques décennies, les chercheurs se préoccupent de l'augmentation du cynisme politique. Dans cette étude, nous testons si les gens exposés aux séries politiques télévisées deviennent plus cyniques.

Analyse : Nous avons conçu une expérience au cours de laquelle trois groupes de participants ont été exposés au premier épisode de deux séries politiques (*House of Cards* et *The West Wing*) et d'une série apolitique (*The Big Bang Theory*). Leur niveau de cynisme politique a été mesuré avant et après l'exposition à l'épisode.

Conclusions et Implications : Les résultats indiquent que toutes les séries politiques télévisées n'ont pas le même impact sur leurs publics: les séries reconnues pour leur négativité intense augmentent le niveau de cynisme des gens, tandis que celles décrivant la politique d'une façon positive n'ont pas d'impact. Le niveau de connaissance politique n'a pas modéré l'impact des séries sur le cynisme.

Keywords: Media/mass media effects; Political cynicism; Audience reception; Political television series; Experiment

Mots Clés: effets des médias/médias de masse; cynisme politique; réception par l'auditoire; séries politiques télévisées; expérience

1. Introduction

Cynicism, and political cynicism in particular, has long received the attention of scholars (Agger, Goldstein & Pearl, 1961; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Miller, 1974; Norris, 2000). News media are often seen as a powerful factor in the development of political cynicism (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1995; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), although opinions are divided, as some authors argue about the benefits of the media as a “virtuous circle” (Norris, 2000; Prior, 2007).

Political television series have large audiences and receive a lot of attention, not only from their viewers but also from politicians; President Obama declared himself a fan of *House of Cards* and even tweeted about it (Lombardi, 2014). But political series are raising a number of

discussions about their content and their potential effects (Maloney, 2016; Melber, 2013; Murphy, 2013). How is the positive or negative fictional portrait of politicians and politics affecting people's attitudes and opinions?

Numerous studies have been dedicated to the effects of news (television and print) as well as entertainment media (especially talk shows). Academically speaking, it is high time to extend the study of media effects outside news and nonfictional media. "Purely dramatic fictional television has been largely ignored by scholars interested in the political impact of mass media; studies of media and politics focus almost exclusively on news and public affairs programming" (Mutz & Nir, 2010, p. 197).

Research on political television series may shed light on new social and cultural practices and help us better understand whether, how, and why they affect people's attitudes about politics. This study addresses one crucial question: do political television series make people more (or less) cynical toward politics? This question is examined through an experiment involving two of the most popular political series: *House of Cards* and *The West Wing*.

House of Cards is a Netflix political series, focused on the life and ascension to power of Frank Underwood. American politics is depicted in various instances, along with Underwood's advancement from Congress to the presidency. Viewers quickly learn that, in order to succeed in politics, one needs to cheat, manipulate, lie, crush their enemies, and even commit murder. A unique feature of the series is the way Frank Underwood communicates directly with audience members, looking straight at the camera, addressing them directly, explaining his next move, and letting them be a part of his plans and conscience. Negativity and cynicism are omnipresent, and many of Underwood's statements are evidence of that: "Politics

is no longer theater, it's show business. So let's put on the best show in town." (Season 1, episode 1) "The road to power is paved with hypocrisy, and casualties." (Season 2, episode 9) "Democracy is so overrated." (Season 2, episode 2). The White House is the world of "dirty politics," political actors are self-centred characters, voters are manipulated, while viewers are given the impression of having a glimpse of behind the scenes.

On the other hand, *The West Wing* can be characterized as "political romance," (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2006, p. 21) due to the high level of positivity, the depiction of White House staff as highly competent, and especially because of the main character, the fictional president of the United States, Josiah (Jed) Bartlet, who manages to somehow save the day in each episode. *The West Wing* was seen by many as an ideal depiction of American politics, the kind of politics and politicians that people wish to have: "Jed Bartlet and his acolytes were always more progressive, more intelligent and much fairer than what Democrats at the time were experiencing in real life" (Moylan, 2016). As opposed to *House of Cards*, *The West Wing* seems a political utopia, where moral principles and democratic values guide politicians.

Political television series can be considered "politicotainment" programs, a genre that "denotes the ways in which politics and political life are interpreted, negotiated and represented by the entertainment industry" (Riegert, 2007, p. 1). The background of the plot and the evolution of the characters offer a reinterpreted, fictional depiction of politics. Diana Mutz and Lilach Nir (2010) refer to "fictional television drama" that does not pretend to closely reflect reality and "has the potential to produce tremendous emotional and empathic reactions as a result of high levels of involvement in the storyline" (p. 201). Political television series share

some of the characteristics of docudramas (e.g., *The Kennedys*) without the political documentary aspect, as they do not portray real events or political characters.

This article begins with a brief review of the pertinent literature, which leads to a discussion about the psychological mechanism through which political television series may have an impact on people's cynicism and why there might be asymmetric effects. The next section presents the experiment and the results. It concludes with a discussion of some implications of the findings and the limitations of the experiment, as well as new research directions it opens.

2. Political cynicism, the media malaise, and political TV series

Political cynicism can be defined as “a mistrust generalized from particular leaders or political groups to the political process as a whole - a process perceived to corrupt the persons who participate in it and that draws corrupt persons as participants” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997, p. 166). It “refers to the degree of negative affect toward the government and is a statement of the belief that the government is not functioning and producing outputs in accord with individual expectations” (Miller, 1974, p. 952). Other definitions include references to lack of confidence, negativism, and the disapproval of politicians as individuals, political parties, or politics in general (Erber & Lau, 1990). One of the most “extreme” definitions comes from Peggy Schyns, Margreet Nuus, and Hank Dekker (2004), who consider cynicism as “an individual's attitude, consisting of a deep-rooted conviction of the inherent evilness of politicians, political institutions, and/or the political system as a whole” (p. 3). This last definition of cynicism may

be the one best fitting the case of some political television series that, through their dramatic and strategically framed content, emphasize this dimension of “evilness” that Schyns et al. (2004) refer to.

The news media has been pointed to as one of the most important determinants of cynicism. Some scholars suggest that the way the media present politicians, their actions, and campaigns through an emphasis on strategic frames and negative tone, has a negative impact on the perceptions people have of politics. In *A Spiral of Cynicism*, Joseph Cappella and Kathleen Jamieson (1997) focus on the way the media frame the news that reaches the public: “both the contemporary journalistic culture and a focus on strategy, conflict and motives invite cynicism” (p. 31). They highlight the distinction between strategic frames versus issue frames, as employed by the print and broadcast media in two major political events (the healthcare reform debate and the mayoral race for Philadelphia). Their multiple experiments are rigorously constructed. They offer many different tests (including print and broadcast media and a combination of the two) of their argument, thus strengthening the validity of their findings: people exposed to strategic frames in the media (negative content) are more cynical than those who are exposed to issue frames.

The other side of the debate highlights the positive effects of the media. Pippa Norris (2000) argues about a “virtuous circle” whereby the usage of news media increases political trust and knowledge, leading to mobilization. Her findings are based on a combination of content analyses (looking at newspapers and television in 15 states of the European Union) and surveys (National Election Studies and Eurobarometer surveys). The main problem that Norris (2000)

could not solve is the direction of causality: does trust lead to exposure to the media, or does media exposure generate trust?

Beyond the news media, scholars have more recently acknowledged the role of infotainment programs. They often focus on television talk shows and how politicians work to build a “human” image and advocate for their campaign in easy, simple language, allowing them to reach the less informed (Baum, 2006). When it comes to the literature about fictional politics, there have been a number of studies interested in the relationship between Hollywood and Washington, but most of them examine how cinema uses political figures as box office subjects (Coyne, 2008; Morgan, 2011; Scott, 2011). There have also been studies on one of the most popular political television series, *The West Wing*, but they are content analyses ascertaining the veracity of the fake White House (Challen, 2001): how the image of the president is portrayed in a positive, optimistic way (Podhoretz, 2003), how actors playing politicians may have a word to say in politics as activists (Collins, 2007).

Some authors have gone further by discussing how a series such as *The West Wing* has the potential to improve the image of the president in the eyes of the population: “It is significant that Sorkin debuted *The West Wing* during the ‘moral disappointment’ of the Clinton presidency,” providing the “perfect antidote for a nation weary of human frailty in its ultimate leader” (Ezell, 2003, p. 160).

But current political television series are much more cynical. They range from comedy (*VEEP*) to soap opera (*Scandal*) to a drama of extremely dirty politics (*House of Cards*). The fictional genre is diversified, and studies have already been exploring the potential effects of “non-news media.”

Michael Pfau, Patricia Moy, and Erin Alison Szabo (2001) use two different fictional series to observe the effects of television on people's perceptions about the federal government, according to genre. The results show that science fiction series had a negative effect on people, making them lose confidence in federal institutions, while crime dramas series put federal institutions in a positive light, since the characters solve the cases and rehabilitate the good name of the people and institutions involved. Similarly, Kenneth Mulligan and Phillip Habel (2013) demonstrate how after watching the movie *Wag The Dog* participants in their experimental treatment were influenced by what they saw and began to consider the U.S. government as being capable of creating a fake war and hiding information from its citizens.

Liesbet van Zoonen (2007) examines how political movies and television series trigger different comments from audiences, through a content analysis of comments people posted on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Her results show that fictional politics enable people to think about politics in four different ways: descriptive (talking about the content of the movie and sometimes comparing it to reality), reflective (people raise questions about political issues), judgmental (judgments upon politicians and events), and fantasy (people dream about ideal politics and politicians).

2.1. Why and how fictional politics may affect cynicism

This study explores two factors that are expected to produce differential effects on cynicism: the contrasting tone of the series and the level of political sophistication of the viewers. These factors could be explained by two plausible psychological mechanisms behind the effects of political television series: transportation and identification. The effect of a political

television series on people's cynicism depends on the tone it "uses" to portray political events and the type of politicians it promotes as its characters. This study reconsiders political television series (the plot, the dialogues that include political references, the political speeches of the characters, scenes depicting elections, negotiations in state affairs, even the characters themselves) according to their tone regarding politics.

Traditionally, the association between media and cynicism leads directly to blaming the use of strategic framing. Cappella and Jamieson (1997) define strategic news frames as those that "draw the audience's attention to the motivations of the people depicted. In doing so, personal traits are automatically activated. With the focus on winning and losing and the self-interest implied by this orientation, the traits activated are likely to be negative ones indicative of artifice, pandering, deceit, staging and positioning for advantage - in general, mistrustfulness" (pp. 84–85). Toril Aalberg, Jesper Stromback and Claes H. de Vreese et al (2011) specify that "framing politics as a strategic game reflects journalism's enduring focus on drama, conflict and negativity" (p. 164). Strategic framing is almost automatically associated with the use of a negative tone. The negative tonality is obvious for *House of Cards*, which emphasizes the evil nature of politicians and closely follows the career and ascension to power of Frank Underwood, a scheming, selfish character who would do anything for power. The scenes draw more attention to the character, activating negative personal traits, focusing on the winning-losing dimension, using war metaphors, and thus having the potential to create cynicism. Values and moral principles are mentioned solely to be mocked and are presented as weaknesses that make people vulnerable.

On the other hand, other political television series (less numerous) are promoting fictional political characters as the “good fellows.” No matter how many challenges they face, politicians struggle to maintain their honesty, make no evil compromises, and think and act in the interest of those who elected them. This appears to be the case for *The West Wing*, in which the main character, the president of the United States, seems to always consider the collective well-being of the people and is fond of his staff, which he respects and works with as a team and not individually for selfish interests. The characters are depicted in a more human light, and problems are usually solved in an honest way, for the benefit of all. As opposed to *House of Cards*, *The West Wing* uses a positive tone to present its fictional political world. While in *House of Cards* the villain is winning, the good guys have the final word in *The West Wing*. Both series focus on politicians, the difference being that the politicians in *House of Cards* are very efficient in defending their own interests (e.g., Frank releases secret information to the press; the president breaks a promise regarding a nomination to the position of secretary of state), whereas in *The West Wing* the politicians perform in a more honest manner (e.g., the president gives an idealistic speech about Cuban immigrants, saying they will find freedom in the U.S.; in the last scene, the president says “vacation is over,” and sends everyone to work).

The effect of a television series on the cynicism of its viewers will be different depending on the type of tone. The main hypotheses are:

H1: People exposed to the negative tone of a political television series (*House of Cards*) will become more cynical.

H2: People exposed to the positive tone of a political television series (*The West Wing*) will become less cynical.

Stronger effects among some types of viewers are also expected. Studies on agenda setting, priming, and framing have shown that the “victims” of these effects have lower levels of political sophistication (Iyengar, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 2010). The same pattern will likely apply to political television series: less sophisticated citizens should be more vulnerable, as they are less well-equipped to make the distinction between reality and fiction and will therefore be easier to “trick” into connecting fictional situations to real-life ones. Mutz and Nir (2010) make a clear distinction between viewers of news content (partisans, well-informed, and very engaged in politics) and viewers of fictional content (non-partisans, with low involvement and information). The former should be more resistant than the latter to the messages they receive (Zaller, 1992). In their study on the impact of strategic campaign coverage on turnout and confidence in government, Nicholas Valentino, Matthew Beckmann, and Thomas Buhr (2001) adopt an idea similar to Cappella and Jamieson’s (1997), arguing that some people experience a spiral of cynicism, with less sophisticated people being more vulnerable. The results show that less sophisticated (less educated) people are more negatively affected by the metaphorical war language of the strategic frames. In terms of fictional content, Baum (2002) observed how politically inattentive citizens are easily fooled by social controversies presented in a dramatic way.

The level of sophistication should thus moderate the effects of media exposure, that is, the least sophisticated should more easily accept the tone of the series (either negative or positive). Therefore:

H3: The impact of political television series is stronger among the least sophisticated.

Fictional content has the potential to create “inaccurate beliefs” and “skewed perceptions of the real world” (Mutz & Nir, 2010). Political television series may have such effects and their twisted scenarios can alter the viewer’s perception of reality. *The West Wing*, with its high level of optimism and focus on the good human nature of the characters is a “too good to be true” story (McLean, 2001). *House of Cards* on the other hand, is considered as exaggerating cynical and negative aspects, potentially creating a distorted reality for viewers, where they perceive real politics as much more dirty, unfair, and selfish than it actually is (Murphy, 2013). Being transported in the action and identifying with the characters of these series may make it more difficult for the audience to distinguish how real the events presented on the screen are, enabling the potential effects of fictional politics on their attitudes and opinions.

The theory of transportation into a narrative world explains how easily people reading a book or watching a movie get immersed into the story and connect it to their own experiences. Political television series can “transport” people into a parallel political reality, making them more vulnerable to believing that the plot and the characters are “realistic.” Identification theory could also explain how people are affected by these series, “to identify with a character means seeing the character’s perspective as one’s own, to share his or her existence” (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004, p. 319). Some studies have found signs of transportation and identification in the case of *The West Wing*, whereby fans “linked the show to their self-narratives and often interpreted and understood the show and its characters through their own real-life experiences” (Williams, 2011, p. 266). Rebecca Williams has also found that the priming and framing used in the series affect individual-level perceptions of the U.S. presidency. Mario Klarer (2014) writes about novel narration and the important role of storytelling in *House of Cards*, which could facilitate the transportation of the viewer into a fictional political world. Therefore,

transportation and identification theories complement each other when it comes to potential mechanisms that could explain the effects of a political television series.

3. Methodology

This study relies on an experiment to examine the potential effects of a political television series on the audience's level of cynicism: some participants were exposed to one of the two most well-known series of this genre: *House of Cards* or *The West Wing*. These programs have all the characteristics mentioned above: fictional content, strong fictional characters, action revolving around controversial political subjects, large numbers of viewers, as well as the presence of negative or positive tonality. In the post-viewing survey, one of the questions asked participants about the overall image the series they watched gave of politics on a 5-point scale ranging from "very negative" to "very positive." The group watching *The West Wing* believed the series offers a positive image of politics (58%) and the one watching *House of Cards* thought the series offers a negative one (88%), confirming that participants perceived the two political series as intended by the researchers.

3.1. Experimental design

The experiment took place at the Université de Montréal between March 18 and April 8, 2016. Participants were mostly university students, representing a wide variety of departments, the large majority being enrolled in an undergraduate program. Sixty percent were women and forty percent were men. They were recruited via university student associations,

departments, and social networking sites. Posters and flyers were spread all around the campus. Participants were asked to be part of an innovative political science experiment involving popular television series (without giving the names of the series) for which they would receive a financial reward. They were asked to contact the researcher via email. Once they sent an email expressing their interest in participating, they were asked if they had already seen the three series (only those meeting the eligibility condition of not seeing any of the three series were retained). They were then offered details about the timetable of the experiment and were randomly assigned to one of the three groups. One important aspect is that they are Francophone students, their first language being French. Despite their nationality, showing participants series about American politics should not pose a problem for the design of the experiment, since this type of series is viewed worldwide. For example, *House of Cards* ranks number one among the political television series viewed in Europe in 20 out of 44 markets (Hegedus, 2016).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the three groups: the first group watched the political series *House of Cards* as the negative tone treatment ($N = 61$); the second group watched *The West Wing* as the positive tone treatment ($N = 58$); the third group watched the comedy series *The Big Bang* as the control ($N = 61$).

For each series the debut episode was chosen, which is typically more suitable for people who (like the participants in the experiment) have never seen any of these programs and are not familiar with the characters. The episodes were all in English but had French subtitles, so all the participants were able to fully understand them.

Participants in the first treatment group watched the inaugural episode of *House of Cards* (53 minutes) in which the viewers meet Frank Underwood, a Democratic congressman who

proudly prepares for his nomination as secretary of state. Facing the camera and speaking directly to the viewers, Underwood explains that he was the brains behind the election of the new president, who promised him the position of secretary of state in return. He soon discovers that the president is not keeping his part of the deal. Underwood devises a vindictive plan toward him and swears to never again be taken for a fool. His wife, Claire, accompanies him in his devious plans. The viewer also meets Zoe Barnes, a reporter who quickly becomes Underwood's secret weapon and to whom he discloses secret information about a story that will destroy his opponents. The negative tone is present in various sequences: the conversation between Underwood and his wife in which they make plans for revenge and reveal their cold-hearted temperament, scenes where he explains directly to the audience how he is going to use people in his selfish plans, and other segments in which he uses the young journalist and she becomes a pawn in his game.

The second treatment consisted of the first episode of *The West Wing* (42 minutes), in which the viewer encounters the busy, fast-paced, and unexpected schedule of the staff at the White House. The main issue of the day is the scandal caused by the chief of staff, Josh Lyman, who got into a heated dispute on television with the head of a religious group, which may lead to his resignation. Although everyone keeps mentioning the name of the president, he appears only in the final minutes of the episode to put an end to the problem. Very calm and confident, President Josiah Bartlet's first words are (metaphorically very symbolic): "I am the Lord, your God, you shall worship no other God before me." He puts an end to the conflict in a competent manner, and makes the religious representatives go away, even if it is in his interest to have them by his side in the elections. The strategic frame often presents politicians in a positive light: the president does not fire his chief of staff because he cares about him and gives him a

second chance, he resists the claims of the religious group even if he would gain considerably from their support. The staff at the White House work as a true, functional team.

The control group watched the first episode of *The Big Bang Theory* (23 minutes), a popular television series that has nothing to do with politics and does not contain any references of a political nature (at least in this episode). The comedy series focuses on the life of two physicists, with outstanding knowledge of their field, but no social skills. The appearance of their cute, but not very bright, neighbor creates many hilarious situations.

All participants had to fill in questionnaires before and after viewing the programs. The participants responded to a survey before the experiment that included questions about their media exposure and preferred television genres, political cynicism, and a battery of questions on political knowledge and political interest. Participants watched the episode they were assigned to in a projection room at the university that resembled a movie theatre. After the show, they responded to another survey that included the same items on cynicism, as well as questions about the program they watched.

3.2. Variables

Political cynicism is the dependent variable of this study. It was captured both in the pre- and the post-experimental questionnaires in order to measure changes in the participants' level of cynicism after viewing the programs.

The cynicism battery included eight questions, most of which were drawn from the American National Election Study and the Canadian Election Study (see Appendix A). The

questions asked the participants to what extent they agree or disagree with statements regarding whether politicians are people who only think about their own interest or whether they care about ordinary people, their trust in government, their trust in politicians, promises kept by candidates in the elections, and corruption. Respondents were asked to express their opinion on three- or four-point scales, which were recoded from 0 to 1, with missing values (participants choosing the “I don’t know” option) coded in the middle of the range (0.5). A cynicism scale was created, which is the sum of seven of the eight items measured before and after, both ranging from 0 to 7. The internal consistency of the cynicism scale (before) is satisfactory, the Cronbach’s alpha is 0.68, after dropping one item that did not scale with the other questions.²

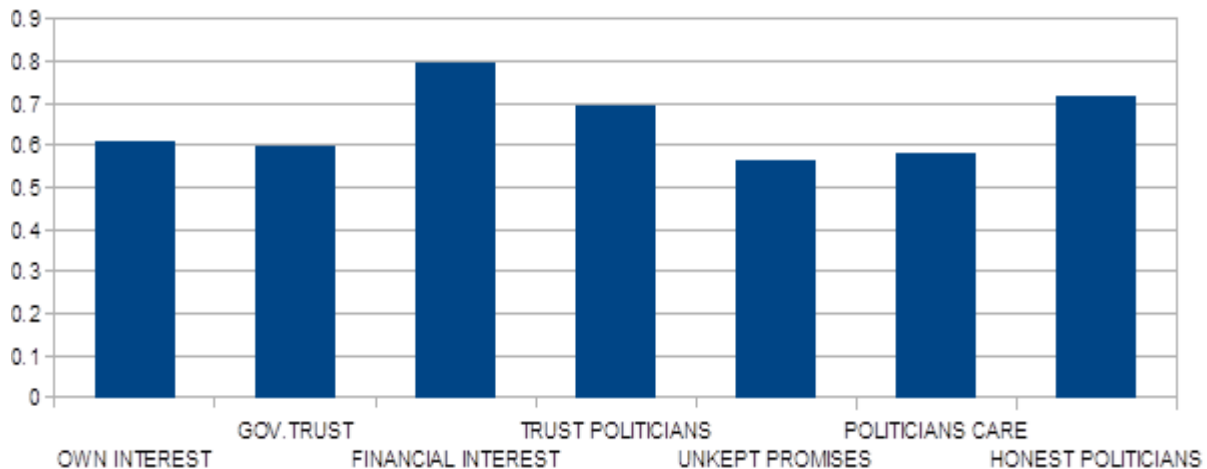
Political knowledge is hypothesized as being a mediating variable. Knowledge of Canadian politics was measured before the participants watched the program. There were questions about the party that came in second place at the last federal election held in 2015 and five items asking participants to match party leaders with their party name (see the wording of questions in Appendix B). Therefore, Canadian political knowledge is a sum of six indicators, which were then dichotomized into two categories of low and high political knowledge. The Cronbach’s alpha for the political knowledge scale indicates a score of .81.³

4. Results

Figure 1 shows the initial levels of cynicism on the seven items, before the participants received the treatments. Participants reacted particularly cynically when asked if a few big financial interests run the government and if politicians are trustworthy and honest. They

appeared slightly less cynical when asked if politicians keep their promises or care about the opinions of ordinary citizens.

Graph 2.1- Indicators of cynicism: Mean levels before exposure



Hypotheses 1 and 2 are tested in two ways to ensure the robustness of the results: first, by performing *T*-tests that indicate whether pre- and post-test measures of cynicism are significantly different; and second, through regression analyses. Both approaches give similar results. *T*-tests were performed initially with each of the seven individual indicators to assess the change in cynicism after being exposed to the experiment.⁴

Similar *T*-tests were performed with the 7-item scale of cynicism obtained before and after the experiment. The initial level of cynicism among participants was high: 4.6 points, on average, on a scale from 0 to 7. The means are similar across the three groups: control (4.5), *House of Cards* (4.5), and *The West Wing* (4.7).

In Table 2.1, Part A indicates there was no significant change in the level of cynicism in the control group, but there was a significant change among participants in the *House of Cards* group, which moved from a mean of 4.50 to 5.01 points. The 0.51-point difference is a statistically significant one. There is a slight decrease of cynicism among *The West Wing* viewers, from 4.69 to 4.45 points, a significant negative 0.24-point difference. Part B of Table 1 shows the change in the treatment groups when compared to the control group. In contrast with *The Big Bang Theory* group of viewers (control), the *House of Cards* group shows a substantial increase in cynicism (0.64 point, $p < 0.01$), while the (small) change in *The West Wing* group is similar to that observed in the control group.

Table 2.1. Comparing cynicism before and after exposure

PART A			
Group	Mean Cynicism Before	Mean Cynicism After	Change (After-Before)
The Big Bang Theory	4.50	4.37	-.13
House of Cards	4.50	5.01	.51**
The West Wing	4.69	4.45	-.24*
PART B			
Groups	Difference in change (mean)		
House of Cards/ The Big Bang Theory	.64**		
The West Wing/ The Big Bang Theory	-.11		

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

The results of Table 2.1 are confirmed by those in Table 2.2, which are based on an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression where the dependent variable is the difference in cynicism before and after the treatment. The independent variables are the two treatments as well as a control for the initial level of cynicism. It is clear that participants in the *House of Cards* group became, on average, more cynical than those who watched *The Big Bang Theory*. Everything else being equal, the level of cynicism in the *House of Cards* group is 0.64 points higher than in the control group, which corresponds to an increase of almost 14 percent compared to the initial level. In contrast, watching *The West Wing* had no significant impact.

Table 2.2. The impact of the treatments on cynicism: OLS Regression

	Political cynicism (change After-Before)
Political cynicism (Before)	-0.12 (0.05)*
House of Cards group	0.64 (0.13)***
The West Wing group	-0.09 (0.13)
_cons	0.43 (0.25) ⁺
N	180
R ²	0.194

Standard errors in parentheses

⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Hypothesis 1 is confirmed. In other words, the episode of *House of Cards* had the expected effect and it significantly increased people's cynicism. But Hypothesis 2 is not

confirmed: participants in *The West Wing* treatment group did not become less cynical when compared to those in the control group. Although there is a small decrease in cynicism for *The West Wing* group, the change does not differ from that observed in the control group. Therefore, it must be concluded that watching *The West Wing* does not contribute to lowering an individual's level of cynicism.

Hypothesis 3 predicts that change of cynicism will become more important among the least knowledgeable, both among those who watched *House of Cards* (an increase of cynicism) or *The West Wing* (a decrease). In order to test this hypothesis, participants' level of political knowledge is taken into consideration.

The political knowledge variable is a mean of six dichotomous indicators testing respondents' knowledge of the last Canadian federal election as well as of political parties and their leaders. Each respondent's knowledge score corresponds to the proportion of correct answers (from 0 to 1) (mean = 0.46, std.dev = .32, min = 0, max = 1). That score was subsequently dichotomized in order to have low and high categories of participants in each group. Knowledge was split into low and high categories at the 0.5 point, for an even distribution: low (49%), high (51%).

Table 2.3 shows the differences in change between the control group and each of the treatment groups, among the least and most politically knowledgeable. The results point out that, for the *House of Cards* group, there are similar effects among the two groups: both the least and the most knowledgeable respondents are significantly affected by the treatment. More specifically, the level of cynicism increases significantly more in the *House of Cards* group than in *The Big Bang Theory* group, among both the least and the most informed participants. In the

case of *The West Wing* there is no effect in either group: neither the least nor the most sophisticated became significantly less cynical after seeing the episode. Both categories of *House of Cards* participants were affected, while neither group of *The West Wing* participants was. To take the analysis even further, a test was also conducted to explore whether an interest in politics determines how strongly participants were influenced by the treatments. As in the case of political knowledge, interest does not moderate the impact of the episodes.

Table 2.3: Cynicism and political knowledge

Political Cynicism (difference in After-Before change)		
Groups	Political Knowledge	
	LOW	HIGH
House of Cards/ The Big Bang Theory	.54**	.72**
The West Wing/The Big Bang Theory	-.33	-.08

Standard errors in parentheses

+ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

These results are also confirmed in Table 2.4, which presents an OLS regression analysis where the dependent variable is the change in cynicism after the experiment. The main independent variables are interactions between political knowledge and each treatment. This model controls for the initial level of cynicism, as well as the main effects of the treatments and political knowledge. As Table 2.4 shows, there is no significant interaction effect. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 is not confirmed: political knowledge does not moderate the impact of the program on cynicism.⁵

Table 2.4. Cynicism and political knowledge (interaction effects)

	Political cynicism (change After-Before)
Political cynicism (Before)	-0.15 (0.05)**
House of Cards	0.54 (0.23)*
The West Wing	-0.37 (0.24)
Political knowledge	-0.49 (0.30)
Political knowledge*House of Cards	0.23 (0.41)
Political knowledge*The West Wing	0.63 (0.43)
Constant	0.76 (0.31)*
Observations	180
R^2	0.210

Standard errors in parentheses

* $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

5. Discussion and conclusion

Do fictional political television series influence people's levels of cynicism? Results indicate that they do, or at least some of them. The findings of this experiment suggest asymmetric effects, depending on the program's content. The first hypothesis was empirically confirmed: participants exposed to the inaugural episode of *House of Cards* raised their level of

cynicism after seeing Frank Underwood and the plots he created. The negative tone that characterizes the series had the expected outcome.

The second hypothesis stated that exposure to *The West Wing* should decrease cynicism, as the positive tone of the series should have the opposite effect than the negative series. This hypothesis is not confirmed, as no effect on cynicism was found in the treatment group exposed to *The West Wing*. A potential explanation is that people pay more attention to negative than to positive information. Positive information is easier to disregard, to take for granted. As Stuart Soroka (2014) argues, people have the tendency to focus more on the negative than the positive: they punish politicians for bad outcomes, but they do not reward them as much for positive results. This might stand true for the content of political series—the negative tone attracts more attention and responses, while the positive tone does not raise the same interest. The post-survey included two open-ended questions asking participants to write down the scene they liked the most and the least. For *House of Cards*, what attracted the most attention was a scene in a museum where Underwood and reporter Zoe Barnes make an agreement to help each other in their mischievous plans. The reporter becomes an instrument of Underwood's, and he leaks stories about his enemies to her. The other scene that was among the viewers' favorites is the final one, where Frank has his revenge (with the publication of an article that destroys the image of his adversary in the secretary of state position) and he celebrates his victory by eating ribs and declaring himself, "hungry as a wolf." What did participants dislike? The ways in which the politician interacts with the opportunistic journalist, because it "contributes to showing a corrupt image of the medias," and "disturbs the independence and neutrality principles" of the media. As for *The West Wing*, people liked the final scene, when the president made his first appearance, "it was a nice figure of authority, that we do not see frequently in our politicians,

nowadays,” solving the conflict between the White House’s staff and a religious group. Some participants disliked that same scene, as some say that the arrival and the speech of the president are “very cliché,” with his speech about Cuban immigrants and the American dream (Manoliu 2017).

The third hypothesis was that political sophistication should act as a moderating variable. The expectation was that the least sophisticated (with a low level of political knowledge) are significantly more affected than those with higher levels of political knowledge. This hypothesis was not confirmed. There is no significant difference between those two categories in their response to the treatments: they are either both affected (as in the case of *House of Cards*) or both not affected (as for those watching *The West Wing*).

Some might not agree with exposing Francophone Canadians to a series about American politics. But as previously stated, this does not pose a problem for the experiment. The audience of political television series is not exclusively American, and *House of Cards* is the number one series viewed in 20 European countries (Hegedus, 2016). The effects of a political series are not restricted to their country of origin, since they are products designed for international consumption, and their viewers are spread worldwide. Not only are the American series penetrating other markets, but the reverse is also true. A clear example is the political Danish series *Borgen*, which gained an international success and has even been named “a cult in Canada” (Kirby, 2012).

Participants were asked if the characters and events they watched in the program were more reflective of an American reality, a Canadian reality, both, or neither. Unsurprisingly, a great majority believed both series are a portrait of the American reality (62% for *House of*

Cards and 63% for *The West Wing*), but a smaller segment believed that the events/characters are appropriate for both Canadian and American reality (24% for *House of Cards* and 15% for *The West Wing*). This is a sign that the Canadian sample reflected on the ways American politics applies to their national reality. The fact that significant results were discovered with this experiment indicates its strength and validity (the nationality of the sample should have normally been a problem, lowering the chances of discovering an impact).

It is possible that the results would be different with an American sample. Some studies show that the effects of fiction are stronger when the context is not familiar, because familiarity leads to more information (Prentice, Gerrig, & Bailis, 1997), while others suggest that fiction is influential no matter whether people know the context very well or not (Wheeler, Green, & Brock, 1999). In the experiment, the Canadian sample was exposed to American politics, with which they are probably not quite as familiar. An American sample could be either more influenced because the plot of the series may appear more plausible or realistic, or less influenced since they may be more capable of differentiating facts from fiction. More research is needed to determine which is the case (or if the overall impact is the same).

The experiment has its limitations. One might be the sophistication measure used. Political knowledge was captured with six items tapping two dimensions of Canadian politics, either the results of the previous election or the party leaders. These items fall in the “knowing the players” category (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996, p. 73), which focuses on political figures or parties. Political knowledge can also be measured with items about the “rules of the game” (knowledge of institutions and processes), the “substance” (domestic and foreign issues), but also “relevant knowledge” (geography and history of the country). It is possible that a measure

combining more dimensions and dealing with American politics, would have produced different results.

Another limitation is the time elapsed between the airing of *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*. The choice of the two series for the positive versus negative content raises questions about the time lag between them. There is a 14-year difference between the airing of the first episode of *The West Wing* in 1999 and the release of *House of Cards* in 2013. The two series talk about two very different political contexts, with different types of politicians and different challenges. The fact that participants live in the age of Obama and Trump might influence their perceptions of *The West Wing*. But the fact that their overall cynicism decreased (though it did not reach statistical significance) shows that despite the time lag, the series managed to have some influence on people's perceptions of politicians.

The strength of this study lies in the confirmation of the first hypothesis, proving that a negative political series influences people's cynicism. Also important is the magnitude of the effect: even if the participants were already cynical before viewing the first episode of *House of Cards*, the overall level of cynicism increased by 14 percent after watching just the first episode. This suggests that the impact on those who watch the whole series may be very substantial.

The asymmetric effect should encourage further analyses, beyond the two political television series used for this experiment, in order to assess people's perception of other series and their effects on citizens' attitudes about politics.

This study observes the effects of two series with contrasting tonalities (negative versus positive). Research may also expand to other genres of television programs. Are people less affected by a political comedy (*VEEP*) or a dramatic soap opera (*Scandal*)? Or are they impacted

only by the more realistic series such as those used in the experiment (*House of Cards*, *The West Wing*)?

The results of the study should encourage new lines of research in the field of “non-news” content. The findings suggest that types of programs other than the news are worthy of attention. The fact that fictional politics have the potential to impact citizens’ attitudes should not go unnoticed. This type of series may have a wide range of effects for its viewers, both negative and positive. Political television series directly and indirectly provide viewers with all kinds of information about how politics works, and that information may unconsciously help the entertainment-seeking viewers to better understand the politicians’ world, in the same way that “soft news” programs make viewers at least slightly better informed about politics (Baum & Jamieson, 2006).

It is important to understand the psychological mechanism by which political television series exert their influence on their audiences, and exploring this path might lead to new information and discoveries in the area of transportation and identification theories. The fact that it was possible to detect an effect on people’s cynicism after viewing these series is only the first step. It remains to be determined if these effects can be explained by audiences being transported to a fictional world and by identifying with the characters. There are studies showing that people usually identify with the positive characters (Sestir & Green, 2010; Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010) in a narrative, which makes the study of an opposite political television series (with a positive versus a negative tone) even more interesting for future research. Are people more impacted in their political attitudes after identifying with a positive or a negative fictional character?

Notes

1. All these examples/scenes are featured in the debut episodes of *House of Cards* and *The West Wing*. They were presented to treatment groups in the experiment, which is described in the following section.
2. Of the eight initial items used to measure political cynicism, the question asking about the degree of corruption of the government scaled the least with the other seven. This might be understandable since the question asked participants to compare the government with private companies. By not taking into account the corruption item, the consistency score passed from 0.63 to 0.68, which is the reason for its exclusion.
3. Respondents' level of political knowledge was measured through a series of questions about Canadian politics. In the post-questionnaire there were also two questions tapping participants' knowledge of American politics. The first one asked who was the president of U.S at the time, and the second one asked the names of the two candidates for the democratic presidential primaries of 2016. The first question was dropped because of the lack of variance. In the second question, 70 percent of respondents identified correctly the names of the two politicians, while 21 percent made an error, and 8 percent did not know or refused to answer. Regressions were performed with the American knowledge variable, and the results indicated that there was no effect. The Canadian measure is more appropriate. It can generally be assumed that someone who has a good level of knowledge about Canadian politics is also likely to be knowledgeable about American politics. Results provided by another variable, political interest, were pointing in this direction. There were two separate questions in the survey about participants'

interest in American and Canadian politics. Results show that the two types of interest are correlated ($r = 0.57$), with people declaring they are even (slightly) more interested in American than in Canadian politics.

4. Results in Appendix C.
5. The same stands true for political interest.

Television series

Borgen

House of Cards

The Big Bang Theory

The Kennedys

The West Wing

Appendix A: Political cynicism measurements

*Political cynicism measure in the pre and post questionnaire (the first 6 questions measured on a 4-point scale from strongly disagree to totally agree and the last two questions measured on a 3-point scale)

1. Politicians only think of their own interest.
2. We can trust the government to do what is right.

3. The government is run by a few big financial interests.
4. The majority of politicians are trustworthy.
5. Candidates in the elections make promises they do not intend to keep.
6. The majority of politicians care about the problems of ordinary people.
7. Do you think that in general politicians are more honest, less honest, or neither less nor more honest than the ordinary citizen?
8. Do you think there is more, less, or neither more nor less corruption in the government than in the private enterprise?

Appendix B: Measure for political knowledge

1. Which party came in second in the election on 19 October, 2015?

Bloc Québécois

Nouveau Parti démocratique du Canada

Parti Conservateur du Canada

Parti Libéral du Canada

Parti Vert du Canada

I do not know

2. Write on the line next to each name of the leader the name of the party associated with him

Thomas Mulcair.....

Rona Ambrose.....

Justin Trudeau.....

Rhéal Fortin.....

Elizabeth May.....

Appendix C: Results of *T*-tests performed individually on each of the eight questions measuring political cynicism

Variable	Before After	<i>The Big Bang Theory</i> group	<i>House of Cards</i> group	<i>The West Wing</i> group
Own interest	Before	0.61	0.59	0.61
	After	0.59	0.74 ***	0.61
Trust in government	Before	0.56	0.59	0.64
	After	0.59	0.63	0.57 *
Financial interest	Before	0.78	0.77	0.82
	After	0.76	0.79	0.73 ***
Politicians trustworthy	Before	0.71	0.66	0.71
	After	0.63 ***	0.65	0.66 *
Unkept promises	Before	0.53	0.55	0.61
	After	0.54	0.68 ***	0.58
Politicians care	Before	0.57	0.58	0.58
	After	0.54	0.66 **	0.57
Politicians are honest	Before	0.70	0.73	0.70
	After	0.68	0.82 **	0.70

⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Chapter 3

Watching House of Cards: Connecting perceived realism and cynicism

Accepted for publication in The Atlantic Journal of Communication, scheduled for publication in November 2019 issue, vol.27, no.5

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1. Introduction

Can fictional politics affect their audiences' levels of political cynicism? And if yes: how and why? We propose to look at the degree of realism people perceive in this type of series as a crucial condition to explain the series' impact (or lack of it) on their cynicism.

"Researchers concur that Americans grow more cynical with every new generation" (Pompper 2003, p. 17) and this cynicism, also known as "political malaise", is frequently associated with the media. Political cynicism refers to a lack of confidence, disapproval of politicians and politics (Erber and Lau 1990), citizens' failed expectations (Miller 1974) or a general feeling of mistrust towards politics which tends to "corrupt" the people who participate in it (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). The media are considered to be an important cause of political cynicism, although there is a debate about its role and impact.

On one side, some scholars warn about the existence of a "spiral of cynicism" (Cappella and Jamieson 1997), arguing that the language the media adopts to talk about politics and politicians, using strategic frames and a negative tone (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995), has a negative impact on people's perceptions. On the other side, there are those praising the virtues of the media, which may lead to better understanding of politics, as political information is made more accessible and comprehensible (Norris 2000). Media effects have received much consideration, but research is usually focused on the "traditional" media products, like written press, news or entertainment shows. These studies have ignored, however, the role of political TV series, which have become extremely popular (Sorlin 2016, Molla 2017). The goal of the present research is to fill that gap.

Writers and film scenarists have always been fascinated with the political world, but

lately Washington has been a privileged source of inspiration, with at least "8 big-budget shows set in the nation's capital" (Frank 2013). Since 2013 new series have been constantly added to the list, with *Madam Secretary* airing in 2014 and *Designated Survivor* in 2017, indicating that "the appetite for backstage political intrigues seems to have sharpened as many telefilms and TV series across countries have made politics their central plot" (Sorlin 2016, p. 4).

Growing cynicism and growing interest for political TV series suggest that there may be a link between these two trends. The research question is: why and how are political TV series affecting their viewers' cynicism? If these series influence political cynicism, does this impact hinge on their perceived realism?

2. Is there realism in fiction?

The following section reviews studies about the general effects of fiction and the mechanisms through which these effects take place. We then introduce some factors which moderate the impact of fictional contents and we discuss the concept of perceived realism and present empirical studies where realism acts as a specific moderator of fictional effects.

2.1. General effects of fiction

Political series can create cynicism through a complex psychological mechanism involving the way their audiences watch and perceive the series. The theory known as transportation into a narrative world describes how easy it is for people reading a book or watching a movie to be absorbed in the story. "Transportation into a narrative world has been conceptualized as a distinct mental process, an integrative melding of attention, imagery and feelings" (Green and Brock 2000, p. 701). Political TV series could "transport" people into a

parallel political reality, making them more susceptible to believe that the plot and the characters are 'realistic'. Identification with a fictional character facilitates transportation theory (Green et al. 2004, p. 319), enabling the whole transportation experience.

Some studies have found signs of identification and transportation in the case of *The West Wing*, as fans "linked the show to their self-narratives and often interpreted and understood the show and its characters through their own real-life experiences" (Williams 2011, p. 266). Klarer (2014) talks about novel narration and the important role of storytelling (episodic, engaging plot) in *House of Cards*, which could facilitate the transportation of the viewer into a fictional political world.

The perceived degree of realism, which is discussed more thoroughly in section 3.2.3, plays an important role for transportation and identification theories, facilitating their effects. Perceived reality was found to be positively correlated with narrative engagement (Green 2004). In the case of political TV series, if the viewer thinks the fictional events and characters are realistic, he/she is more likely to be transported into the fictional world of politics, where his/her attitudes (cynicism) and opinions stand a greater chance of being influenced.

Levine et al (2010) have studied the case of a series called *Lie to Me*, depicting how the main character solves crime cases due to his ability to interpret nonverbal communication. After watching the first episode of the series, participants in their experiment had to judge a series of interviews (containing true and false information). Unlike the participants who watched another series (crime drama *Numbers*) and those in the control group (no drama), those watching *Lie to me*, become more suspicious of people and the information they had to judge and were more likely to qualify the true interviews as lies.

Pfau et al. (2001) designed a study to test the effects of "non news media" on trust in

government, based on data from a telephone survey. They expected that watching law enforcement and legal dramas would make people more trusting of the government, but the results did not support their hypothesis. Their results proved however, that science fiction series (such as *X-Files*) did significantly decrease trust in government.

Butler et al (1995) explored the psychological impact of the docudrama *JFK*, a genre combining fact and fiction in presenting the story of a real political character. Although not a lab experiment (the film was seen "under natural conditions", at the cinema), the study tapped the opinions of 53 subjects as they entered the theater to watch the movie, and the same questions were again asked to other 54 people, after the movie ended (pre-view and post-view). After watching the movie, the viewers declared a lower intention to vote, to make political contributions and to volunteer.

Atkin's (1983) study on the effects of televised violence exposure showed a difference between those exposed to violence in what was presented as actual ("realistic") news and those exposed to fictional violence, presented to them as a movie promotion (experiment upon 98 adolescents). A questionnaire measuring their reactions to the program and their aggressiveness showed that violence in what appears to be real news had a greater impact on participants and also stimulated their attention twice as much as for those exposed to fictional violence (but the fictional violence has a significant impact, when compared to the control group). Atkins' experiment indicates that perceiving (in his case due to framing of the fictional story as real news) fiction as reality increases the potential effects of it.

Sigelman and Sigelman (1974) believed that the movie "The Candidate" may have an impact on people's attitudes about political campaigns. They measured viewers' (pre and post-movie design) cynicism before and after watching the movie and found that those who watched

the movie were more cynical than those who did not (but the difference was not statistically significant). The movie changed people's opinions, making them more likely to think that the image of a candidate and how it is manipulated are the most important factors for electoral success (more important than the candidate's position on specific issues, his qualifications or his virtues). Although it is a study connecting a movie (fictional politics) and cynicism, the authors were interested in a specific type of cynicism, the one towards political campaigns/candidates.

2.2. Fictional moderators

There are some studies on the effects of fiction investigating how people are affected differently according to particular factors (familiarity with the context or empathy towards the characters). Prentice, Gerrig and Bailis (1997) present evidence that when people are exposed to fictional information about a context they know well, they will not be very influenced by it. Their two experiments where students were exposed to two versions of a short story about real world (the kidnap of a professor and students) showed that familiarity with the context (story being set at their own university or another) conditioned the impact the stories had on them. Their study is not about comparing the effects of a fictional story versus a real story, but about how a fictional text is processed, depending on the reader's familiarity with the setting.

Wheeler, Green and Brock (1999) use the same experimental design as Prentice et al. (1997) but find different results. Familiarity with the environment does not affect the influence of the treatment on participants. Regardless of their familiarity with the environment presented in the story, participants were equally influenced by fiction, which provides strong evidence for the persuasiveness of a fictional narrative.

Mutz and Nir (2010) designed an experiment using two different episodes of the crime

drama *Law and Order*, a series about the U.S criminal justice system. Subjects were randomly assigned to either a positive or negative episode, containing a different depiction of the criminal judicial system. Participants' perceptions of the justice system were affected (regarding fairness of the system, punitive sentences), especially their views about the death penalty. Empathy acted as a moderator of the effects of fiction, as those more affected were the ones who felt empathy towards the fictional characters.

2.3 Perceived realism as moderator of fiction

"Generally, perceived realism is the audience's judgment of the degree to which the narrative world is reflective of the real world " (Cho et al. 2014, p. 830). Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) propose a theoretical framework about how people understand and get influenced by narratives, by looking at fictionality and perceived realism. The concept of perceived realism is described as the situation where fictional reality is more accessible to the viewer than the real world. Perceived realism has two dimensions: external and narrative. External realism appears when the viewer is convinced that the fictional characters and the plot could be easily found in real life. Narrative realism involves the internal coherence of the fiction: the characters, their actions, the story and the events must be coherent and complementary. Both dimensions of realism (narrative and external) are important to understand how people are processing a narrative (written or visual): if they sense a violation in the realism of the story, they will be less likely to be persuaded by the narrative.

Cho et al. sustain that the concept of perceived realism is recognized by communication scholars, but still lacks a consensual definition and measurement due to its multidimensionality which includes: "plausibility, typicality, factuality, narrative consistency and perceptual quality"

(Cho, Shen and Wilson 2014, p. 828).

Mulligan and Habel talk about the necessity to explore also the effects of fictional media, and not to focus all the academic research on news media, soft news, talk-shows: "little attention has been paid to the potential consequences of media that are fictional" (2013, p. 122). They used an experiment to account for the effects of a fictional movie, *Wag the Dog*, on people's political beliefs. Results show that people who were in the treatment group were more likely to believe in a conspiracy theory (believed that the U.S. Government could create and take advantage of a fake war if it would be convenient). Their explanation for the effect was the perceived degree of realism and results prove that the participants who believed the movie was highly realistic were more likely to believe that a future or former president of the U.S could or already had staged a fake war.

Other studies show that fictional movies or series have changed people's opinions on specific topics and perceived realism seems to play an important role in the process. Feldman and Sigelman (1985) studied the effects of the movie *The Day After*, where the plot involved a soviet nuclear attack, believing that there are two main conditions which could shape the effects of the fictional movie: perceived realism and knowledge. They used a panel survey, with two waves (1 week before and 1 week after the movie was aired). Realism seems to play a modest role on viewers' political attitudes, which were not highly affected (those believing the movie was very realistic significantly changed their opinions only on the issue of defense spending).

Lenart and McGraw (1989) chose to study (based on a panel study: before and after viewing) the effects of the mini-series *Amerika*, a fictional world depicting life in the US if the Soviet Union had won the Cold War. The series' degree of realism was measured, with 34% of the viewers finding it "somewhat" or "very realistic" and 48% "not at all" realistic. The fictional

series influenced the opinions of those perceiving it as very realistic (these subjects became more supportive toward U.S having a strong military position and less trusting of communists).

Slater et al (2006) designed an experiment to test the effects of televised dramas upon specific public policies (same sex marriage and death penalty). 178 students were randomly assigned to either watch a short version of a movie, *Walls* (the tragic story of a female gay couple) or an episode of *Law and Order* (about the murder of a woman). Participants were first questioned about their political ideology and demographics (pre), watched their assigned treatment and then answered a second questionnaire (post). Identification, empathy and realism were also measured, as the authors believed these could partially mediate "the effects of degree of liberalism/ conservatism on policy support". Results show different effects: the level of support for the death penalty increased for those watching *Law and Order*, while those watching *Walls* did not increase their support for same sex marriage and legal rights (but results fail to show that realism matters).

Holbert et al (2003) designed an experiment using one episode of *The West Wing* (pre-test and post-test design) to show that the series had a positive impact for presidents Bush and Clinton. They asked participants to rate the two real presidents (Bush and Clinton) and also the fictional one (Josiah Bartlet) on 21 character traits, as an attempt to see if the fictional political drama can affect individual-level perceptions. The results are interesting, and on some traits the fictional president scored better than the actual ones (Bartlet was found more principled and engaging than Bush and Clinton). More important, viewing *The West Wing* affected perceptions of real presidents in a positive way: Bush was viewed more principled and common and Clinton more principled and engaging, than they were perceived before the experiment/watching the episode.

Williams (2011), in her study examining the identity of the fans of *The West Wing* (content analysis of comments from forums dedicated to the series), found that they connected with the fictional characters (potential sign of identification) and linked their own experiences to the ones in the series. Some of them even reported in their comments that *The West Wing* determined them to become more interested in politics.

Fiction is capable of making people believe in conspiracies, increase/decrease their trust in government, change their political intentions, affect their opinions on specific policies (like death penalty or same sex marriage). Even more important, positive depictions of fictional characters (*The West Wing*) improve the image of real presidents (Holbert et al. 2003).

Therefore, it is important to explore and analyse different fictional genres, and especially political TV series. Our study proposes to test for the effects of fictional political TV series, by using an experimental design involving two contrasting series (positive versus negative) and their impact on political cynicism. We expect to observe different patterns for the two series: a negative one for *House of Cards* (increased cynicism) and a positive pattern for *The West Wing* (decreased cynicism).

Whereas in previous studies realism was measured at a general level, we use a measure for realism which distinguishes two components: realism of events and realism of characters.

3. Choice of political TV series

There is no consensus on the definition of this type of series, usually being categorized under the "drama" genre (IMDb- Internet Movie Database). According to their content and approach they are a mix of drama, docudramas, soap-opera, and their fictional aspect is using all these elements to create the main plot.

Political TV series are an unusual blend of fiction and realism, as there are a number of ambiguous elements of reality inserted in the story. Even though the characters and events are not real, they are inspired by reality: the plot is placed in a real, well-known context (for example, the White House), a real country (e.g. U.S), with a real democratic system where the parties are struggling for power (e.g. Democrats and Republicans), real titles and institutions (Vice-president, Secretary of State, Congressmen). The degree of realism people attach to these political TV series may be the psychological mechanism through which their cynicism is affected.

For the present analysis two of the most well-known series of their kind were chosen: *The West Wing* and *House of Cards*. These are two very different political TV series, even opposite. The background of the two series is the same: a depiction of the political life, a glimpse of behind the scenes in Washington, focusing on details of the American presidency. But the way the characters are constructed and their way of dealing with political challenges are very different. *House of Cards* was described as very dark soap-opera looking "at the lives of the most powerful people in the nation and the lengths to which they'll go in order to ascend the political ladder" (Davis 2016), focusing on the figure of Francis Underwood and his battle for power. The plot of the whole series starts when Underwood, a Democrat Congressman, was promised the role of Secretary of State by the newly elected President, whom Underwood helped win the election. When he realizes he had been deceived and would not get what he was promised, Underwood starts an intricate plan of revenge. Following the stages of his plan (culminating with him becoming the President of the U.S.A), the viewer is witness to almost every aspect of the American politics: coalitions, negotiations for power, unkept promises, voters played only as pawns while politicians fight for their own interest. The series also reveals

the connections between politics and the media world, the journalists' fight for stories and their complicated relations with politicians.

Meanwhile, *The West Wing* depicts the honest administration of Josiah Bartlet and the special relation he has with his staff members, while the events "often draw on real-world issues" (Davis 2016). The action of the series follows the Democrat president Josiah Bartlet and his team in their attempt to solve the political dilemmas they encounter along the way. The president and his entourage seem to be utopian representations of Washington politics. One of the things depicted along the series is the special relation between the President and his closest staff people: Leo McGarry (Chief of Staff), Josh Lyman (Deputy Chief of Staff), Toby Ziegler (Communications Director), Sam Seaborn (Deputy Communications Director), C.J. Cregg (Press Secretary). The staff of the White House cares for their President and they work together, collaborating and caring for each other.

Both series are listed as two of the most realistic political TV series so far (Bowen 2016), with *The West Wing* on third place and *House of Cards* second (on a top 10 list), as well as two of the shows a "political junkie" cannot miss (Davis 2016). The question of how realistic political TV series are has been the object of a large debate in the online sphere.

Masket (2014) says that "the deeply cynical" *House of Cards* is "not remotely" realistic even if "the show is roughly based on Washington, D.C., politics, and that the writers have some familiarity with the basic features of the Constitution". Rosenberg (2012) argues that *The West Wing* is a "terrible guide to American Democracy" because it gives a false image of the efficiency of the staff and the rapidity of procedures.

One of the best insights about the issue of realism in *House of Cards*, is an article published on Politico (McDevitt 2013), immediately after the release of the first season of the

series. Several people involved in American politics ("lawmakers in Washington") gave their opinions about the similarities and differences between the fictional series and the political reality in Washington. The opinions varied, some considering it just "entertaining fiction", while others were impressed by the "accurate portrayal" of politicians.

One of the main reasons for the choice of these two particular series was their contrasting content and way of presenting political life and its actors. There is a shift in the way Washington was depicted in the past and how it is portrayed now. There has been a time when "*The West Wing* (...) made public policy fashionable, and it didn't hate Washington" (Frank 2013). Things have changed and today Washington "lies to us, takes our money, monitors our contacts, hands out presents, puts us in debts" (Frank 2013). Hollywood takes advantage of that shift and changed the way it portrays political subjects in movies and series. *House of Cards* "helps affirm America's cynical attitude toward both government and politicians. (...) Thus, *House of Cards* speaks to the culture, history and psychology of American politics" (Haltiwanger 2015). They are so similar in certain aspects, but so different in others that sometimes *House of Cards* is considered to be "*The West Wings*' evil twin-meaner, edgier and cynical" (Mandel 2015).

The West Wing was used as a study case to show that the characters are "virtuous, likeable", promoting a good image of fictional politics (Richardson 2006). Holbert et al. (2005) looked at how *The West Wing* framed the image of the president of the U.S. They used a quantitative content analysis of the second season of the series (aired between 2001-2002) to identify the presence of 3 main roles: chief executive, political candidate and private citizen. Each of these roles was associated with different character traits (chief executive presented as principled and private citizen as engaging). Although not a study about the effects of the series on people's opinions, this fictional depiction may ultimately influence their viewers into

perceiving the fictional president in certain ways.

Considering all these differences and similarities between the two series, our main expectation is that political TV series' effects on cynicism depends on how realistic viewers consider them.

H1: Participants in the House of Cards (negative series) treatment group will become more cynical only if they perceive the fictional events and characters as very realistic.

H2: Participants in The West Wing (positive series) treatment group will become less cynical only if they perceive the fictional events and characters as very realistic.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The analyses rely on data gathered from an experiment which took place at the University of Montreal in the spring of 2016 (March 18 - April 8). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups: the first group watched a negative political series, *House of Cards* (N=61); the second group had a positive treatment, watching *The West Wing* (N=58); participants in the third group saw a comedy series, *The Big Bang Theory*, as control (N=61). They only watched the first episode of the assigned series. The length of the episodes was different: *The Big Bang Theory* lasted for 23 minutes, *The West Wing* was a 42 minute episode and *House of Cards* was the longest treatment - 53 minutes. The episodes were screened in English (original version), and French subtitles were added. Participants responded to two questionnaires, the first before and the second after watching the episode they were assigned to. They watched the episodes in small groups, in a projection room, which re-enacted a cinema

theater.

The first treatment group was assigned to watch the inaugural episode of *House of Cards*. In this episode, the viewer gets acquainted with the main character, Frank Underwood, a Democratic Congressman who was promised the position of Secretary of State, after assiduously working for the President's campaign. Underwood discovers that the president is not keeping his promise and gives the position to someone else. He starts planning a detailed vengeance plan against all those who have misled him and took him for a fool. In his devious plans he is accompanied by his wife, Claire, the perfect feminine match for Frank. In this episode the viewer is introduced to another key character, Zoe Barnes, a reporter who becomes Underwood's ally and receives secret information for a story that will destroy his opponents. The episode contains quite a few examples of negative scenes: the conversation between Underwood and his wife in which they make plans for revenge, scenes where he explains directly to the audience how he is going to use people in his selfish plans, segments where he instructs the reporter to follow his plans.

The second group watched the first episode of *The West Wing*, which exposes the fast-paced and unexpected schedule of the staff at the White House. The viewer falls in the middle of a scandal caused by the chief of staff, Josh Lyman, who got into a heated dispute on TV with the head of a religious group, and now he is in danger of being fired (as the President cannot afford to have someone messing with his image in his staff entourage). Even if everyone talks about him, the President appears only at the end of the episode to put an end to the dispute (which gives him a strong scene entrance). President Josiah Bartlet's first words in the series are rich in metaphorical meaning: "I am the Lord, your God, you shall worship no other God before me". He ends the conflict in a quick and efficient manner, sending away the religious

representatives despite the fact that he loses their support. The episode contains frequent positive scenes: the President does not fire his chief of staff because he cares about him, he resists the claims of the religious group even if he would gain considerably from their support, the staff at the White House works as a functional team, the President gives an idealistic speech on honesty and liberty.

The control group watched the first episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, a popular TV sitcom, not at all related with politics. The comedy series focuses on the life of two young physicists, with outstanding knowledge of their field, but no social skills. The appearance of their cute, but not very bright female neighbor forces them to step out of their comfort zone and deal with real-life situations, which will cause many humorous moments.

4.2. Participants

Participants were mostly university students, registered in a wide variety of departments. Sixty percent were women and forty percent were men, and they were all francophone students (French as main language). They were recruited mostly via university student associations, departments, and social networking sites. The recruitment message referred to an innovative political science experiment involving popular TV series. The subjects were offered a financial compensation for their participation. They had to contact the researcher via e-mail and they were asked about their previous exposure and knowledge of the series. The selection criterion was to not have already seen the three series. Those meeting the criterion were then randomly assigned to one of the three groups.

4.3. Variables

Political cynicism was captured both in the pre- and the post-experimental questionnaires.

The battery included seven questions, most of them drawn from the American National Election Study and the Canadian Election Study. Respondents were asked to express their opinion on three- point or four-point scales, which were recoded from 0 to 1. The items questioned them about topics like politicians' self-interest and financial interest, their honesty and whether they care about the problems of ordinary people, as well as whether candidates are making promises they do not keep afterwards.⁴ A scale of cynicism was created, representing the sum of the seven items measured before and after, both ranging from 0 to 7 (as each individual variable was coded on a scale from 0 to 1). The internal consistency of the cynicism scale is satisfactory, with a Cronbach's alpha of .68.

The degree of realism people perceive in the series was measured with two questions in the post-survey (after exposure to the episodes). Participants were asked to rate separately on a scale from 0-10 how realistic they perceived the characters and how realistic they perceived the events portrayed in the episode. This measure comes close to the concept of external realism (Busselle and Bilandzic 2008), where the viewer thinks the plot and fictional characters can be easily found in real life.

5. Results

Table 3.1 shows that the initial level of cynicism among participants is high, an average of 4.56 on a scale from 0 to 7 points. The three groups had similar means, all starting with a

⁴ Exact wordings can be found in the Appendix.

high level of cynicism before the experiment: 4.50 in the control and *House of Cards* group and 4.69 in *The West Wing* group.

Following the treatment, as expected, there is no significant change in levels of cynicism in the control group, but there was a significant change (reaching statistical significance) for the *House of Cards* group, which moved from a mean of 4.50 (pre) to 5.01 (post). *The West Wing* group also followed the expected pattern, and there is a decrease in the participants' levels of cynicism, although the negative (-.24 points) difference is weaker.

Table 3.1: Changes in means of cynicism (Before and After)

Group	Level of cynicism Before	Level of cynicism After	Pr T > t
The Big Bang Theory	4.50	4.37	0.11
House of Cards	4.50	5.01	0.00
The West Wing	4.69	4.45	0.02

When comparing the treatment groups to the control, a simple regression (where the independent variable is the difference in cynicism (After-Before) and controlling for the initial cynicism of participants (before)⁵ indicates that the *House of Cards* group had a significant increase in cynicism (.64, $p < 0.00$), while *The West Wing* group is not different from the control (a small decrease of -.11, but not significant, $p = 0.50$).

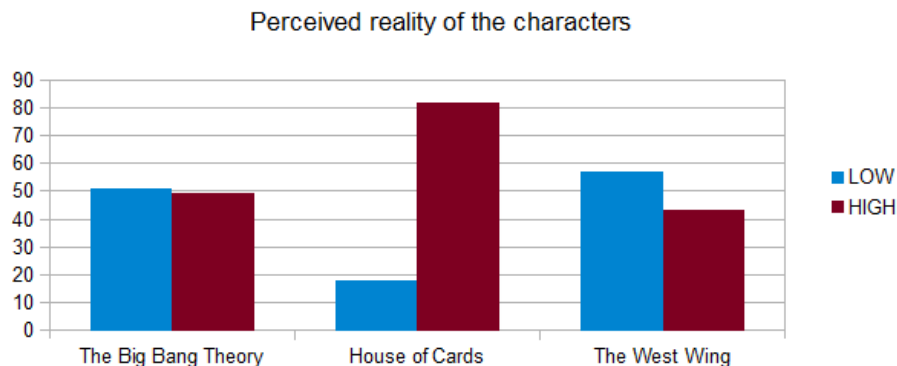
Realism was measured separately for characters and events, both on a scale from 0 to 10, with a mean of 6.63 and a standard deviation of 2.04 for realism of characters and a mean

⁵The reason for this choice is to control for potential ceiling effects.

of 6.35 and 2.22 standard deviation for realism of events. We consider those who give a score of 7 or higher to perceive the characters and events as very realistic and those who give a score of 6 or lower to perceive them as not very realistic.

Graph 3.1 shows that the control group is very balanced, almost half of the participants did not think the characters were very realistic, while the other half found them very realistic. In the *House of Cards* group the vast majority thinks (82%) that Frank Underwood and the rest of the characters are realistic. The situation is different in the second treatment group: among those exposed to *The West Wing*, 57% do not think the characters are very realistic and only 43% believe they are.

Graph 3.1: Perceived realism (characters)



Concerning the perceived realism of the events presented in the episode, Graph 3.2 shows again how the three groups manifested different patterns. In the control group 67% of the participants reported the events in *The Big Bang Theory* as not very realistic. Participants in the *House of Cards* group perceive the events much more realistic (80%) than those in the control group and in *The West Wing* group, which is the most balanced (48%).

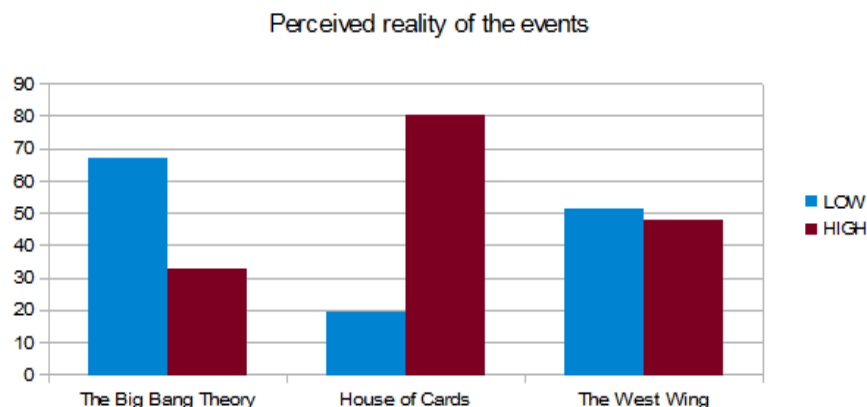
Graph 3.2: Perceived realism (events)

Table 3.2 displays the mean change in cynicism (before/after the experiment) in the two categories (those not perceiving the characters and events realistic and those who do). There is no significant change in the control group. There are two main expectations regarding the treatment groups, depending on the degree of perceived realism. First, for the *House of Cards* group, the participants scoring high on realism should be experiencing increases in their cynicism, while those scoring low on this scale should not. Table 3.2 confirms this expectation: the level of cynicism of participants who thought that characters and events were very realistic increased by .61 and .58 on the -7 to +7 scale (statistical significance $p < 0.001$). This is a relatively large effect given that the variable has a standard deviation of .80. By contrast, the level of cynicism of participants who thought the characters and events were not realistic barely change after the experiment. For *The West Wing* group, we expect a decrease in cynicism among those who perceive the characters and events very realistic and no change in the "low realism" group. Table 3.2 also confirms, at least partially, this expectation: the level of cynicism of participants who perceived that the characters and events were very realistic decreased respectively by .32 and .36 points. The effects are thus much smaller than in the case of *The*

House of Cards group.

Table 3.2: Mean change in cynicism by TV program and perception of realism

Group		Characters	Events
The Big Bang Theory	Low realism	-0.06	-0.14 ⁺
	High realism	-0.20	-0.08
House of Cards	Low realism	0.02	0.23
	High realism	0.61***	0.58***
The West Wing	Low realism	-0.19	-0.12
	High realism	-0.32 ⁺	-0.36*

• values coming from T-tests between the difference of means

⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

These analyses are complemented with regressions for more robust findings. Table 3.3 shows the results of an OLS regression where the dependent variable is the change in cynicism before and after the experiment and the independent variables are the perceived degree of realism of characters (Model 1) or events (Model 2), the randomized treatment, and an interaction between the two. Model 3 includes a combined realism scale, which is the sum of the two realism items (characters+events/2). As a control, we also include the level of cynicism before the experiment to account for ceiling effects. In these three models we expect a positive interaction between the realism variables and the treatment *House of Cards* and a negative interaction between the realism variables and the treatment *The West Wing*, since the increased cynicism produced by *House of Cards* and the decreased cynicism produced by *The West Wing* should be conditional on finding the episode realistic. Results in Model 1 and Model 2 mostly

confirm the above prediction with respect to *House of Cards*. The interaction between realism and *House of Cards* is, as expected, positive, and is statistically significant in two of the three models. The results are more ambiguous with respect to *The West Wing*. The interaction between *The West Wing* and realism has the expected negative sign in all three models, but the variable never reaches statistical significance. We thus find strong evidence for H1 and only mild evidence for H2.

Table 3.3: Realism and political cynicism

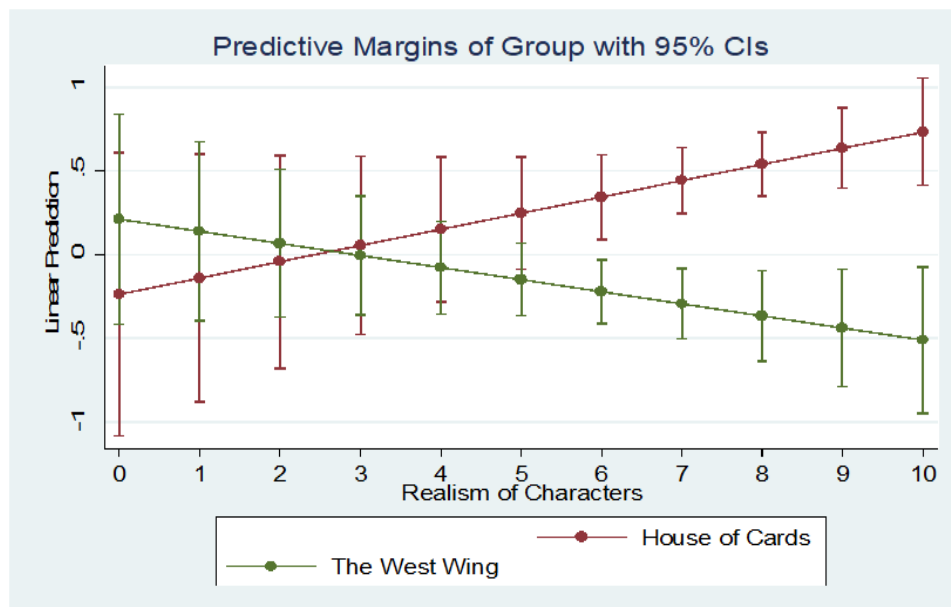
	Political cynicism AFTER-BEFORE		
	Model 1 (realism of characters)	Model 2 (realism of events)	Model 3 (realism of characters+ events)
Political Cynicism BEFORE	-0.13 ** (0.05)	-0.14 ** (0.05)	-0.14 (0.05)**
House of Cards group	-0.13 (0.51)	-0.59 (0.53)	-0.50 (0.55)
The West Wing group	0.31 (0.43)	0.37 (0.37)	0.46 (0.43)
Realism of characters	-0.05 (0.04)		
Realism of characters*House of Cards	0.10 (0.07)		
Realism of characters* The West Wing	-0.06 (0.06)		
Realism of events		-0.006 (0.039)	
Realism of events*House of Cards		0.16 * (0.07)	
Realism of events* The West Wing		-0.07 (0.05)	
Realism			-0.007 (0.04)
Realism*House Of Cards			0.15 (0.07)*
Realism*The West Wing			-0.09 (0.07)
Constant	0.53 (0.35)	0.54 (0.31) ⁺	0.55 (0.34)
Observations	180	180	180

Standard errors in parentheses

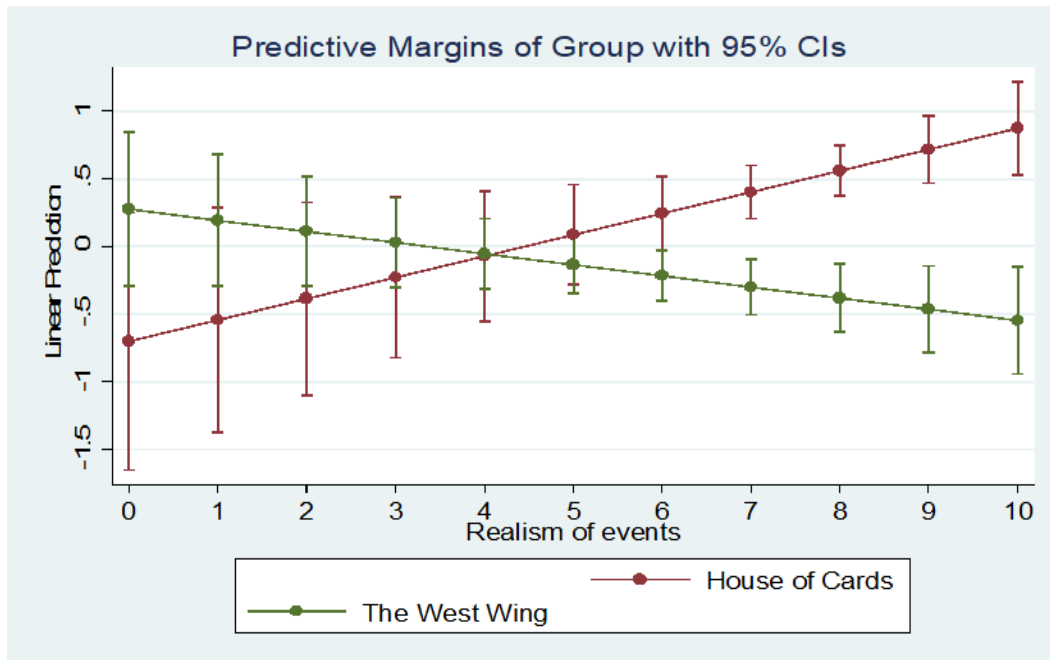
⁺
 $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

To better illustrate the effects of perceived realism on cynicism, we introduce graphs in which we plot the predicted change in cynicism (with a 95% confidence interval) for participants in the *House of Cards* and *The West Wing* groups, based on Model 1 (Graph 3.3) and Model 2 (Graph 3.4), as the realism variable varies. Both groups behave as expected: increased cynicism for those perceiving *House of Cards* as realistic, decreased cynicism for those perceiving *The West Wing* as realistic. We see that the two series did make a difference for participants who perceived that the events were realistic. For both dimensions of perceived realism (characters and events) there is no effect on those scoring low on the realism scale (0-5), but there is an effect for those in the high category (when the realism variable is 6 or more, the predicted value of change in cynicism is statistically different from 0).

Graph 3.3: Realism of characters



Graph 3. 4: Realism of events



6. Discussion

This article proposes an analysis of the degree of realism people perceive in political TV series. We wanted to test whether being exposed to a TV series has an effect that is conditional on the perceived realism of the program.

The first hypothesis stated that people who watched the first episode of *House of Cards* will become more cynical only if they perceive the fictional events and characters as very realistic. This hypothesis is confirmed. Those who thought the episode was very realistic became more cynical, but not those who did not find the events or the characters to be very realistic.

The second hypothesis was that people will become less cynical only if they perceive characters and events in *The West Wing* to be realistic. The patterns observed provide some

support for the hypothesis. There is no significant interaction effect between watching the episode and perceptions of realism (Table 3.3).

One of the main contributions of this article is to pay attention to what people find realistic in terms of political fiction. Given two political TV series opposite in content, the participants in the experiment perceive a much higher degree of realism in a negative portrayal of politics than in the positive episode. The measure we used for realism revealed interesting results also, people in the *House of Cards* group being more influenced by the events than the fictional characters. Participants in the experiment were asked to rate separately the realism of the events and of the characters, which enabled a more detailed analysis of the way realism affects cynicism. The distinction between events and characters may be an interesting point for future research instead of asking people if they find a fictional story realistic overall, it might be useful to ask them to rate certain elements separately (plot, the characters, their actions).

It should be mentioned that the perceived realism of the two series was measured after a very short exposure, only the first episode (42 minutes for *The West Wing* and 53 minutes for *House of Cards*). In real life it takes more time for viewers to get familiar with the characters in a series, to understand the action and filter the events, before judging how real are they and maybe connect them with their experiences. The important thing is that we were able to find significant changes after participants only watched one episode. The present study did not test for the longevity or the strength of the effects in time, but this might be a future piece of research.

The present study has its limitations. An important aspect that may affect people's perception of the realism of the series is the fact that the sample is composed of Canadian participants who were showed fictional stories about American politics. Participants were asked in the post-survey about whether the characters and events they have seen reflect more the

American reality, the Canadian reality, both or none. Both treatment groups reported that the two political series are describing the American reality more than the Canadian one (62% for *House of Cards* and 64% for *The West Wing*), with a slightly higher percentage of people thinking that *House of Cards*' events and characters could apply to both realities (25%) than *The West Wing* (15%).⁶ The fact they think both series reflect more the American reality might influence the participants into associating them less with their own political experience (Canadian) and ultimately may have a lesser impact on their cynicism.

All in all, our study shows that political TV series can shape citizens' degree of cynicism, but that their effect critically depends on whether the characters and the events of the fictional story are perceived to be realistic.

APPENDIX

Political cynicism measures

* Political cynicism measures in the pre and post questionnaire (the first 6 questions measured on a 4 point scale from strongly disagree to totally agree and the last one was measured on a 3 point scale).

1. Politicians only think of their own interest
2. We can trust the government to do what it is right
3. The government is ran by a few big financial interests
4. The majority of politicians are trust-worthy

⁶ Detailed results in Appendix.

5. Candidates in the elections make promises they do not intend to keep
6. The majority of politicians care about the problems of ordinary people
7. Do you think that in general politicians are more honest, less honest or neither less nor more honest than the ordinary citizen?

*Additional measures of realism:

1. Do you think the characters and events of the episode you have seen reflect more the American reality, the Canadian reality, none of the two or both realities?

Group	None of the realities	Both realities	More the Canadian Reality	More the American Reality
The Big Bang Theory	24,59%	24,59%	1,64%	44,26%
House of Cards	4,92%	24,59%	0,00%	62,30%
The West Wing	18,97%	15,52%	0,00%	63,79%

2. How many Canadian politicians resemble Frank Underwood/ Josiah Bartlet?

Group	None	Few	Some	Many	Do not know
House of Cards	4,92%	4,92%	34,43%	22,95%	32,79%
The West Wing	1,72%	25,86%	29,31%	15,52%	27,58%

Participants seem to think that "some" of the Canadian politicians (34%) and "many" of them (22%) are like Frank Underwood. Compared to that Josiah Bartlet's figure seems to match 29% of "some" Canadian politicians, while 15% of the participants think that "many" national politicians are like this positive figure. It should be noted the high rates of "do not know" answers (33% for *House of Cards* and 28% for *The West Wing*), which might mean that it was difficult for the respondents to associate real Canadian politicians with the fictional American ones. The present results show that it may be difficult for the participants in the experiment to make connections between an American fictional politics and a Canadian political reality, since they were asked to undergo a more difficult and intense mental process.

Chapter 4

Psychological reactions to House of Cards: the role of transportation and identification

*Under review as chapter for “The Psychology of Political Behavior in a Time of Change”,
Springer’s series on “Identity in a Changing World”*

Editors: Jan D. Sinnott and Joan S. Rabin

Abstract

With the growing popularity of political TV series, we examine fans' impressions about the benefits they derive from watching the series. More precisely are people under the impression that watching a fictional series increases their level of political information and interest and enables them to better understand the real political world? Transportation into a narrative world and identification with fictitious characters are psychological mechanisms which have the potential to affect people's opinions and attitudes in real life. An online survey measured the level of transportation into the fictional political world and identification with the main character among fans of a popular political TV series, *House of Cards*. The results indicate that those who were cognitively transported perceived the series as having a positive impact on their level of political interest and understanding of politics, even though the series did not give them the impression they gained real political information. Although we find signs of identification with the main character of the series, this did not affect people's impressions about the benefits of watching the series.

1. Introduction

The question of the influence of fictional stories has preoccupied researchers, interested in how stories about fictional characters and events could influence people's judgments and behaviors (Sestir and Green 2010, Strange 2002). Previous studies have indicated that fiction can influence people's perceptions in areas like health, social and political issues. Diekman, McDonald and Gardner examine how romance novels, an "ostensibly harmless form of media" (2000, p. 179) may influence their readers' sexual health behavior. Murphy et al (2011) test the

effects of a popular soap-opera on viewers' attitudes, behavior and knowledge, which are influenced by identification with a fictional character suffering from cancer. After exposure to a fictional scenario (in which an expert in body language solves different cases by reading people's expressions), participants in an experiment become more suspicious of people around them and the information they receive (Levine et al, 2010). Other people start believing in government conspiracies (Mulligan and Habel, 2011), increase or decrease their trust in government, change their political intentions in terms of vote, political contributions and volunteering (Butler, 1995), or had their opinions affected on specific policies like death penalty or same-sex marriage (Slater et al, 2006). An interesting study by Holbert et al (2003) shows that after watching the TV series *The West Wing*, people had a more positive image about real presidents (Bush and Clinton), after forming a good impression of the fictional president Josiah Bartlet.

To better understand the effects of fiction, we need to look at the psychological process of narrative persuasion. The persuasive effects may occur when receivers “engage” with the narrative through two main mechanisms: transportation and identification. Transportation into a narrative world is a complex psychological act, “an integrative melding of cognitive, emotional and imagery engagement in a story” (Green and Sestir, 2017, p.1). Transportation is usually linked to identification, which can be described as the state where “a reader or audience member becomes one with the character in a story or a play” (Oatley, 2002, p. 61).

The goal of this study is two-fold. First, we want to see if political TV series transport their audience into a fictional world and make them identify with its characters. Does *House of Cards* create the experience of transportation and identification among its viewers? Secondly,

what are the effects of transportation and identification upon people's impressions of political TV series? We wish to determine whether, after watching *House of Cards*, people have the impression it impacted them in a positive way, making them more knowledgeable and capable of understanding politics, or increasing their interest in politics. In this case, transportation and identification double their psychological significance by linking fictional representations with changes in people's real beliefs and perceptions. Political fiction may affect the political reality and the way those who are exposed to it chose to interact with it. In the *International Encyclopedia of Media effects* transportation theory (Green and Sestir 2017) appears in the section devoted to "Psychological Approaches to Media Effects" but if other theories (e.g. affective disposition theory, social comparison theory, presence theory) have received greater attention, the implications of transportation in the political field remained mostly unexplored.

2. Engaging with a story

The persuasion of a narrative (story) is mainly achieved through two psychological mechanisms: transportation and identification. This section reviews the various definitions that have been proposed for the two concepts and discusses the difficulties created by the fluidity of the definitions and multiple measurements. Secondly, it presents some of the studies that have examined the effects of transportation and identification on people's beliefs and attitudes.

2.1. Defining transportation and identification

Gerrig (1993) was among the first to draw the attention to the idea of transportation, an experience which use "as means of travel novels, anecdotes, movies" (1993, p. 12) and impose a certain distance from reality. The person transported returned "somewhat changed by the

journey” (1993, p. 11), after “experiencing” another world. Following Gerrig's steps, Green and Brock (2000, p. 701) define transportation as “a convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative”. Attention, imagery and feelings are dimensions involved in the process of transportation. For Busselle and Bilandzic (2008, p. 262), transportation is a type of shift, carrying away “viewers and readers from their current location into the narrative, so they can understand what the statements of the characters mean and to which person or location they refer”. Green and Brock (2002, p. 324) also look at transportation as a mental process “which may mediate the impact of narratives on beliefs (...). Individuals are swept away by a story, and thus come to believe in ideas suggested by the narrative”.

Identification is the “ease with which one can experience the tale through the eyes and ears of the key characters” (Slater 2002, p. 172). This is in line with de Graaf et al.’s definition, who believe that identification occurs when “readers adopt the perspective of a character and see the narrative events through the character's eyes” (2012, p. 804). This is the definition which we find most clear and that we adopt for our study.

For Sestir and Green (2010, p. 274), identification is a “slippery term” because “while it is self-evident that identification involves a perceived connection between viewer and character, the actual definition of the term varies across researchers”. Various definitions refer to the level of (perceived) similarity between an audience member and the fictional character, to liking the character, as well as to emotional and cognitive dimensions through which one adopts the perspective of the character (Murphy et al. 2011, p. 409). Due to the multitude of elements associated with identification (which creates a problem in defining the concept), some researchers (Moyer-Gusé 2008; Murphy et al. 2011) prefer the term involvement with the

character instead of identification. Cohen (2001) specifies that identification with a character involves four dimensions: empathic (shared feelings with the character), cognitive (sharing the character's perspective), motivational (internalizing the character's goals) and absorption (the loss of self-awareness during exposure). The two concepts are closely related because transportation can lead to identification (Green and Sestir 2017), although it is unclear if in order to be transported one needs first to identify with the character (de Graaf et al 2009, p. 38). Sestir and Green raise the same question: “Theoretically, transportation can occur without identification, and identification can occur in the absence of transportation, although the latter is less likely” (2010, p. 276).

The two concepts are therefore very similar in some respects, making it hard to clearly distinguish them (de Graaf et al 2012, Moyer-Gusé 2008). This conceptual confusion creates empirical problems, as different scales are used in different studies. It is still possible to distinguish them, however, since “while identification describes a relationship with a specific character, transportation is a more general experience created by the narrative as a whole” (Tal-Or and Cohen 2010, p. 404).

2.2. Effects of transportation and identification

Several studies have examined the effects of transportation and identification. We review them briefly here, paying particular attention to the nature of the stories whose effects are being studied and the participants involved in the research. Most of these studies use narratives (written or visual) that facilitate people’s emotional reactions, and that emphasize a common fictional world, close to everyday reality. The fictional characters are also regular people, with

typical jobs, lives and problems, making identification easier for those exposed to the story. People participating in these studies are exposed to a short narrative for the first time. With these two features in mind, we propose to introduce political TV series as a case study for transportation and identification theories. This entails a different type of narrative, as well as a special kind of character with whom audiences are exposed over a long period of time.

In the field of transportation studies, Green and Brock's (2000) experiments became very popular and their 15-question transportation scale – covering the dimensions of cognition, emotion, and imagery – was replicated in its exact form or adapted by other researchers interested in the same subject. “Murder at the Mall” – a story about a little girl who, during a visit to the mall with her big sister, was murdered by a psychiatric patient who had escaped from his institution – became the story that many other researchers “borrowed” for their studies. In one of their experiments, the story was manipulated as a fiction (extract from a literary magazine) or non-fiction (resembling a real article in a newspaper). Results reveal that participants were equally transported in the fictional and non-fictional stories and that highly transported participants’ beliefs became consistent with the story (they agreed with restrictions on the freedom of psychiatric patients and believed that attacks in public places like the mall were very frequent).

Appel et al (2015) tried to improve the transportation scale constructed by Green and Brock (2000). They used an online study (N=179) in which participants were randomly assigned to read one of two stories: "Murder at the Mall" or "Christmas Carol" – the story of a man with cancer, spending his last Christmas with his family. Transportation was measured using the exact 15 items from Green and Brock's scale. Results show that only 20% of the variation was due to

the 3 factors proposed by Green and Brock (cognition, emotion, imagination). Therefore, they designed a second study (using stories about organ donation and fables) and tested for a shorter form of transportation scale (only 6 items), which proved reliable and similar to the original one.

Tal-Or and Cohen (2010) designed an experiment manipulating a story (15 minutes video from the movie “The Brothers McMullen”) about the dilemma faced by a married man attracted to a friend of his wife. Their analyses show that transportation and identification are two distinct concepts; a factor analysis enabling them to use two different scales for transportation (experience and attention subdimension scales). The study shows that participants identified more with the positive character than with the negative one and that transportation (but not identification) was a significant predictor of enjoyment.

Other researchers using the « traditional » narrative (Murder at the Mall) are Appel and Richter (2007), who propose a mediated moderation model. They find that people's need for affect determines the intensity of the degree of transportation in a narrative experiment. Those reading "Murder at the Mall" scored higher in believing that psychiatric patients are dangerous, transportation having a positive effect on beliefs about the danger, while those scoring lower on transportation did not change their beliefs.

Basil (1996) used a survey to test if identification mediates message effects of a true story about a celebrity who contracted HIV. Identifying with the celebrity "mediated people's perception of their own risk and behavioral intentions", making them more aware of the risks involved and of the consequences for their own health. De Graaf et al (2012) looked at how identification can act as a mechanism of narrative persuasion. They designed two experiments using two different stories: a job interview for a man in a wheelchair and a story about two sisters with opposite views about euthanizing their mother who is in a coma. Participants read

the story from the perspective of one character. The results indicate that identifying with a character made participants also identify with her position (e.g. those reading the story where the character was in favor of euthanasia, were also more in favor) and changed their beliefs/attitudes according to the story. Therefore, identification works as a mediating mechanism of narrative persuasion.

Murphy et al (2011) designed a pre-test/post-test survey using a story about how cancer affected one of the main characters in a popular soap-opera, *Desperate Housewives*. Their results show that those highly transported into the story became more willing to know more about cancer and changed their attitudes, by becoming more aware of the risks. Identification with the main character, suffering from cancer, did not have a direct impact on the attitudes, but it did mediate transportation.

de Graaf et al (2009) designed an experiment using multiple stories about asylum seekers in the Netherlands. The results indicate that people can feel empathy for a fictional character, but not identify with her, especially when that character is very different from them (people felt sorry for the Turkish woman living an injustice, but that did not lead to identification, as they were not familiar with the situation of an asylum seeker).

This short review of prior research allows us to draw the following conclusions. Most studies use stories that are based on everyday experiences, which people have either lived themselves or heard about around them. The fictional character (to whom people connect to) is usually a common man/woman, with an ordinary life and profession. These narratives emphasize the emotional aspect and researchers test for changes in beliefs and attitudes in areas related to social or health issues. To our knowledge, there is no test trying to link transportation

and identification to political perceptions.

Therefore, the present study proposes a test of transportation and identification “beyond the mall,” that is, leaving aside the emotional and common nature of the narratives used until now. We propose to examine the case of political TV series (one in particular: *House of Cards*), where the story and the characters are extraordinary in many respects. People need to be transported in a political world, which is relatively unknown. Identification needs to be made with a character representing a political figure (and not even an ordinary politician, but the President of U.S.A.). Identification should be harder in this case for two reasons. First, there are studies showing that people usually identify with the positive characters (Tal-Or and Cohen 2010, Sestir and Green 2010), and the main character of the present study, Frank Underwood, is without any doubt a villain. The second reason is his position: how can viewers identify with a president whose job is clearly most exceptional? Therefore, political series would be a harder test for the two psychological mechanisms of transportation and identification.

Why *House of Cards*? Besides its popularity and world-wide recognition, the series portrays politics in a negative way, displaying a world where politicians’ self-interests prevail and the fight for power corrupts easily and wins over moral values. Therefore, if people who watch it get transported into this world and identify with its negative characters, the results on their beliefs should worry us. Previous studies (Manoliu and Bastien 2018) found the harming potential of *House of Cards* on people’s cynicism. The series confirms the existence of the negativity bias, where people liked what they saw, retained more information and details about the events and characters (compared to a positive series like *The West Wing*) and even reflected upon the realism behind it (Manoliu 2017).

Almost all the studies that are reviewed above are experiments, where different beliefs

and opinions are measured before and after first-time exposure to a fictional narrative. This design is certainly valuable, but it raises questions about what happens when people view a fictional content over a long period, as is the case for the series that we are interested in. Our research is a departure from previous studies as it surveys viewers who have watched a program over a long time. They have had the time to internalize, think of the events, at how they could have turned out differently, they have had time to establish a relationship with the characters, get to know them well, and thus are more prone to be transported and identify with the fictional characters. This category of viewers is different than unregular ones, or those who watched just a few episodes, because they are more capable of judging the quality of the series. As regular viewers, fans are more critical when evaluating the series and they are the first to notice «realism ruptures » (Baym 2000, p. 99). What is particular in the case of fans is that “the individual changes how they see their identity” and goes through a process of “affective change” (Duffet 2013, p. 155). People start to report themselves to the fictional characters, wanting to be more like them, adopting their way of talking or the way they look (Russell, Norman and Heckler, 2004, p. 276). Fans are experiencing a psychological transformation, sometimes resulting in a change in their own way of living or a shift in their personality, transformation explained mostly by the “affective relations” (Bury 2017, p.88) they create with fictional characters.

The primary goal of this study is to examine how transportation and identification work in the case of political TV series, represented by *House of Cards*. The method employed will not be an experiment measuring a shift on a particular attitude, but an online survey capturing some consequences (through transportation and identification) of watching the series on people's attitudes. Are these audiences under the impression that watching the series has a

positive influence on them, by making them more capable of understanding politics, providing useful political information, even increasing their political interest?

An important aspect of the study is the sample employed, consisting of fans of *House of Cards*, who have seen at least half of the seasons, who therefore are likely to live a true experience of transportation. At the same time, the character and the situation are highly unusual, which complicates the process of transportation and identification.

Our three main research questions are therefore:

Q1. Are *House of Cards* fans transported into the story?

Q2. Do *House of Cards* fans identify with the main character, the ‘bad’ Frank Underwood?

Q3. Do transportation and identification foster the belief that the series made them (a) better understand politics, (b) provided them with useful political information and (c) increased their interest in politics?

To get informed about a political matter (and in general also) people usually appeal to reliable sources, such as news (in its traditional and new media formats), opinion leaders, family and friends. Therefore, identifying a potential link between political series and the benefits people associate with their viewing will cast light to the value of these series, which unintentionally may have become a source of political information for a part of the population.

3. Methodology

The data were gathered through an online survey advertised on Reddit, an online platform mostly known for its “forum” feature. Registered members can post information and questions in a variety of “subreddits”, covering a wide range of subjects, from popular news to

music, films, and politics. These posts are voted by other members, increasing their visibility in order to remain on the first page of the subreddit. Reddit was chosen because it provided many advantages. First, Reddit has gained the attention of researchers (Haralabopoulos et al 2015), who analysed the advantages and limits of participants recruitment on the platform (Shatz 2016), and there are already studies with data gathered on Reddit (Wang et al 2015). Second, Reddit already featured subreddits, or channels, dedicated to the series. The *House of Cards* subreddit was one of the most active, posting different questions everyday and engaging in different conversations and reflections on the topics and characters of the series. The link to an online survey was posted in different subreddits (HouseofCards, SampleSize, NetflixBestOf, Netflix, Television). The online survey was posted on June 6th, 2017 and most of the respondents filled it in the same day or the next one, but we received questionnaires until June 14th.

The official release date of season 5 of *House of Cards* was May 30, 2017. The survey was posted one week later, to allow people time to at least start watching the new season (if not binge-watch it). The release was expected with great excitement by the fans. On the series official subreddit, there were already many posts about the upcoming season, predictions about what would happen, people making plans of binge-watch the entire season in one week, asking for no spoilers.

We received 86 responses to the survey, on a volunteer basis. The mean age was 27 years, 35% were female and 48% were American. Even if it is non-probabilistic, this type of sampling is often used when working with “hard-to-reach” populations. The eligibility condition was for them to be regular viewers of *House of Cards* (having seen at least two seasons), so they were familiar with the plot, the events and the characters. Asked how many seasons they had watched so far, 71% of the participants reported watching all five seasons, while 21% watched four of

the previous seasons. We were particularly interested in this community, which we can classify as fans, because “nowadays the emotional relationship between the spectator and a TV series can extend itself through emotional communities which are created around blogs, wikis and other cross-media extensions by the community of fans” (Garcia 2016b, p. 6).

The online survey consisted of 34 questions in total, covering basic demographics, measures for transportation (7 items), identification (6 items), and a particular dimension of realism – perceived plausibility (7 items). Other questions, used as dependent variables, were asking them if they have a better understanding of politics, if they have gained political information and if their political interest has grown because of the series (see Appendix).

To measure transportation, we adapted seven items from the original scale of Green and Brock (2000), with two questions about the cognitive dimension, two about the emotional one, two from the unaccounted category and an additional question asking respondents if they felt part of the action.

For identification, the task was harder. Measurement of identification varies from one study to another: Slater et al (2006) asked directly how much the respondents identify with the respective characters; de Graaf et al (2012) asked if people empathised with the characters in the story and if they imagined they were in their position; Basil (1996) measured identification by asking if the respondents saw the characters in the story as friends, if they had feelings for them, if they could work with them, or if they saw them as a role model. We believe some of these measures do not capture identification as such (e.g. Basil 1996), therefore we have adapted Cohen (2010) and Tal-Or and Cohen (2010) scales, which ask about the respondent’s ability to connect with and understand the events through the character’s perspective.

We have also included a measure of the degree of realism people perceive in the series,

as it was previously shown that realism facilitates the narrative experience and predicts transportation (Busselle and Bilandzic 2011, Van Laer et al. 2013). Realism was measured with a set of seven questions, replicated from Green (2004), which adapted them from the scale used by Elliot et al (1983). Questions asked respondents (among others) if the dialogue in the narrative was realistic and believable or if people in the narrative are like people they might actually know.

4. Results

As a first step we examined the reliability of the scales we employed, which allows us to test the distinction between transportation and identification. Therefore, we conducted a factor analysis on all the items measuring transportation, identification and realism. This analysis revealed four main factors: two for transportation, one for identification, and one for realism (Table 4.1).

One transportation factor refers to a mental/emotional sub-dimension, consisting of 3 items (t2, 3, 4) asking the viewer if she was mentally involved in the show, if it was hard for her to put the series out of her mind and if she was affected emotionally. The second subdimension is a cognitive factor, consisting of 4 items (t1, 5, 6, 7) related to a “physical” experience : it asks the viewer whether she could picture herself in the scenes and events, if she thought of ways in which the episode/season could have turned out differently, if the events are relevant to her everyday life and if she felt part of the action. Basically, two out of the four items demanded her to picture herself directly in the middle of the action. The Cronbach's alpha for the two scales is satisfactory (0.71 and 0.63). We are not the first to divide the transportation scale into two different dimensions. Tal-Or and Cohen (2010) also found two different sub-scales (which they

named the “experience” and “attention” subscales).

Table 4.1: Results of exploratory factor analysis of transportation, identification and realism

Mental Transportation	Alpha= 0.71
T2. How much would you say you were mentally involved in the series while watching it?	0.73
T3. How hard was it for you to put it out of your mind after finishing watching an episode/season?	0.75
T4. How much did House of Cards affect you emotionally?	0.75
Cognitive Transportation	Alpha= 0.63
T1. How much could you picture yourself in the scenes and the events of the series?	0.65
T5. How often did you find yourself thinking of ways an episode/event/season could have turned out differently?	0.70
T6. How much would you say that the events in House of Cards are relevant to your everyday life?	0.58
T7. How much would you say that while viewing House of Cards, you felt as if you were part of the action?	0.51
Identification	Alpha= 0.85
I1. How much were you able to understand the events in House of Cards in a manner similar to that in, which Frank Underwood, understood them?	0.63
I2. How much do you think you have a good understanding of Frank Underwood?	0.80
I3. How much do you think you understand the reasons why Frank Underwood does what he does?	0.78
I4. How much do you think that viewing House of Cards you could feel the emotions Frank Underwood portrayed?	0.61
I5. How much do you think you could really get inside Frank Underwood's head?	0.78
I6. How much would you say that at key moments in the series, you felt you knew exactly what Frank Underwood was going through?	0.82
Realism	Alpha= 0.72
R1. How much do you think that the dialogue in the narrative is realistic and believable?	0.55
R2. How much do you think characters in House of Cards are like people you or I might actually know?	0.44
R3. How much do you think that political events that actually have happened or could happen are discussed in House of Cards?	0.64
R4. How much would you say that House of Cards deals with the kind of very difficult choices people in real life have to make?	0.46

All of the items were measured on a scale from 0 to 7.

Exploratory factor analysis, with principal component factors, rotation: orthogonal varimax (Kaiser off)

On a scale from 0 to 7, the means for mental transportation and identification are the highest (Table 4.2), suggesting that transportation is higher on the mental/emotional dimension than on the cognitive one. Viewers are transported by involving themselves mentally in the series, having a hard time stopping thinking about it. The second dimension of transportation, the cognitive one, is much lower (3.14), with people having a hard time imagining themselves in the middle of the fictional events and considering the events are not very relevant to their everyday lives. Identification was also present (mean of 4.66 on a scale from 0 to 7), suggesting a relatively high connection to the fictional character Frank Underwood, with respondents declaring they have a good understanding of him or that they felt exactly what he was going through.

Table 4.2. Descriptive statistics of independent variables

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Mental Transportation	4.53	1.31
Cognitive Transportation	3.14	1.38
Identification	4.66	1.27
Realism	3.93	1.42

As expected, the two scales of transportation are correlated ($r=.41$). Identification is also slightly related to mental transportation ($r=.32$) and cognitive transportation ($r=.37$). Perceived realism was best related to mental transportation ($r=.45$), but also related to cognitive transportation ($r=.38$) and identification ($r=.37$).

The means for the three dependent variables seem to suggest that those watching the series have the feeling they understand politics better after viewing (3.98 on a scale from 0 to 7), with the other two variables reaching slightly lower values.

Table 4.3. Descriptive statistics of dependent variables

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Understanding politics	3.98	2.03
Gaining political information	3.63	1.96
Political interest	3.75	2.33

*On a scale from 0 to 7

The results of bivariate regressions indicate that that the three dependent variables are correlated with the two subscales of transportation and with perceived realism but not with identification.

Table 4.4: Bivariate analyses

	Understanding Politics		Political Information		Political Interest	
	Coef.	P> t 	Coef.	P> t 	Coef.	P> t
Mental Transportation	.39	0.01**	.40	0.03**	.75	0.00***
Cognitive Transportation	.58	0.00***	.44	0.00***	.76	0.00***
Identification	.26	0.11	.08	0.62	.32	0.10
Realism	.58	0.00***	.41	0.00***	.49	0.00***

*p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Table 4.5 displays the results of a multivariate analysis⁷. We can observe how the two dimensions of transportation affect differently the three dependent variables. Cognitive transportation has a significant impact on two of the dependent variables and slightly influences

⁷ The regression was performed also with control variables: the number of seasons viewed, age, gender and nationality. We present the results of the analysis without controls, as it better illustrates the significance of the relations. The “political information” variable becomes slightly significant for cognitive transportation and realism (compared to the results of the regression with control variables), and the strength of the correlation gets stronger in the case of cognitive transportation, political understanding and political interest (moving from a p<0.05 when control variables were added to a p<0.01 without the controls).

the impression on political information, meaning that those who were transported at the cognitive level believed that watching *House of Cards* helped them understand better the political world and it increased their political interest. The second dimension of transportation, the mental one has a positive effect on the political interest variable. Realism is significant ($p < 0.01$), but only in the case of the “understanding” politics variable. People who identified with the main character of the series are not under the impression they understand politics better or that their connection to Frank Underwood increased their interest in politics or their level of information.

Table 4.5 : Results of multivariate analysis

	Political Understanding	Political Information	Political Interest
Mental Transportation	0.01 (0.18)	0.18 (0.18)	0.48 (0.20)*
Cognitive Transportation	0.44 (0.17)**	0.34 (0.17) ⁺	0.56 (0.19)**
Identification	-0.10 (0.17)	-0.24 (0.18)	-0.11 (0.20)
Realism	0.46 (0.16)**	0.29 (0.17) ⁺	0.12 (0.18)
Constant	1.23 (0.89)	1.70 (0.91) ⁺	-0.14 (1.00)
Observations	86	86	86
R^2	0.242	0.161	0.274

Standard errors in parentheses

⁺ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

5. Conclusion

The main goal of this study was to assess whether people who are fans of political TV series like *House of Cards* perceive some benefits (the series as an influential factor in growing their political interest, their level of understanding politics and as a source of information) due to this exposure and if these impressions could be explained through the processes of transportation and identification.

The results of the online survey reveal that a series like *House of Cards* can transport its viewers into the fictional political realm. The analysis revealed that transportation can be divided into two sub-scales: a mental/emotional and a cognitive one. The cognitive dimension of transportation proved to be more important than the mental one. Those transported on a cognitive dimension believed (in a significant way) that they understand politics better after watching the series and that their political interest grew because of watching it. Those “mentally” transported believed that *House of Cards* managed to increase their level of political interest. Apparently, the series highlightens more the cognitive aspect of transportation than the mental one. Fans are influenced by the physical experience, and the fact they are able to picture themselves in the scenes, feel part of the action and believe that what they see on screen is relevant to their everyday life, makes them believe that *House of Cards* “offers” them a real chance to know more, understand better and raise their interest for politics.

Results also reveal that people do feel connected and tend to identify with the main fictional character of the series, Frank Underwood (the mean for identification was 4.66 on a 0-7 scale). People usually identify with the positive, moral characters (Tal-Or and Cohen 2010, Sestir and Green 2010), therefore it is interesting they identify with the villain in *House of Cards*. Identification here might be explained by the “duration” of the series, which allows viewers to

create a bond with the fictional characters and also “allows us to identify with morally defective characters who – beyond some obvious virtues – commit crimes, abuse and deceive; the type of person that would repel us in real life” (Garcia 2016, pp.52-53). But identification did not affect people’s perceptions. Even though people declared they understand and feel the emotions of the character, identification did not make them believe the series affected them positively (enabling them to understand politics better than before or increasing their level of political interest).

Transportation and identification with a fictional character are powerful psychological mechanisms, which were challenged by the scenario and characters of political series. Fans need to make an extra effort to put themselves into the skin of a politician (without knowing too much about what the position implies) and to get immersed into the world of politics (an unknown universe, where access is restrained). Transportation and identification prove to be even more relevant and valuable in explaining the effects of a special type of narrative, the one proposed by political series.

One of the strong points of this study is the nature of the participants, made of heavy watchers, fans of the series. Garcia signalizes the particularity of the TV series audiences, which in general have much more power, as producers are considering their audience’s opinions and reactions, sometimes adjusting the plot or fate of the characters according to what fans love and hate (2016, p. 23). Fandom communities have their own culture, their own way of expressing themselves, which makes them harder to reach. Recruitment on Reddit proved to be the best option in our case, allowing us to reach people who were already engaged in discussions about *House of Cards*, already expressing and sharing their views online.

Another interesting point of the study is the focus on the impact of a visual narrative, and not a written one. Research in the area of transportation and identification using visual

narratives is not as developed, the majority of the studies rest on written stories. “Whereas the imagery evoked by narratives needs to be generated by readers, narratives on television provide the images ready-made. How these differences between modalities affect the dimensions of narrative engagement is an important question for future research” (de Graaf et al 2009, p. 399). It would be interesting to test if transportation and identification are stronger in the case of visual narratives compared to written ones (*House of Cards* the book released in 1989 and written by Michael Dobbs, compared with *House of Cards* the series). Green et al (2008) tested if the same story (“Harry Potter and the chamber of secrets”) transports people the same way in its print or film version. Interestingly, their results reveal that people with low levels of need for cognition are more easily transported into the movie version, while people with high levels are transported more by the book. The visual narrative is considered “an easier medium”, requiring less mental effort than the written narrative (Green et al 2008, p. 530) which puts the imagination of its readers to a test.

Political TV series represent an interesting study object also because “our engagement with TV characters is slightly different than our engagement with film characters” (Garcia 2016 pp.57-58). This allows viewers to experience another type of transportation and identification (stronger, long lasting connections, developed in time), different from the one created by movies.

We need to also be aware of the risks associated with the fact that people believe that watching fictional series has some benefits for them. They may have the feeling they understand better politics, but they are basing this judgment on fictional information, which might mislead them: “What strategies might we use, to protect ourselves and others from “false” information that might distort our memories, knowledge, and beliefs?” (Johnson 2002, IX). Political TV

series offer them the “fake” sense of gaining some understanding while they are entertained, therefore discouraging them to search for further information. Could series like *House of Cards*, which offers an insight into a fictional political universe, become a potential enemy of news, if people start to consider TV series as sources of information about politics (and prefer it to news media)?

Finally, the results of the present study offer some perspectives in the area of entertainment-education effects. Researchers recognize the educational impact of entertainment on people's beliefs and behaviors (Slater 2002, p. 158). Singhal and Rogers (1999) brought evidence on how a Latin-American telenovela changed people's opinions about class differences, encouraged maids to surpass their condition, increased enrollment in adult education classes, encouraged migration from villages to cities and even increased sales in sewing machines (audiences were so influenced by the fictional characters that they started imitating their actions). Gans (2003, p. 107) believes that movies and other forms of entertainment could trigger a search for information that traditional media are not capable of providing: “For example, television’s *The West Wing* has, for all its faults, acquainted its viewers with White House politics in ways that the news media do not.” Political TV series may facilitate some sort of political education. Through their content and setting, they might offer their audiences some political information, which they (think) can use to judge real issues. After all, regardless their dramatic, soap-opera like content, much of the elements present in the series are depicting real actions: elections, campaigns, debates, and strategy meetings around all these events. Despite a positive short-term effect, the long-term effect might prove to be negative, people could get overconfident about their understanding (and the quality of the information found in political series) and have less incentives to inform themselves from actual, official

sources (e.g. news).

“How might a story about invented characters in imaginary situations influence readers’ judgments about people, problems, and institutions in the everyday world?” (Strange 2002, p. 276). This study offers an answer to the question: the influence of fictional stories is exercised through transportation and identification.

We must be aware that not only politics has changed, the ways many citizens get persuaded have also changed and multiplied. Political series are part of popular culture and in most cases their influence passes unsuspected. Viewers (who with time become fans) do not actively seek for information when choosing, but in most cases what they look for is entertainment. The entertaining experience provided by political series transports the viewer into the fictional world of politics, allowing her to establish a connection with the characters and start seeing things through their eyes. According to this, Green, Garst and Brock suggest that transportation “may aid in suspension of disbelief and reduction of counter-arguing about the issues raised in the story. Another means by which transportation may affect beliefs is by making narrative events seem more like personal experience” (2004, pp. 168-169). The identification process functions in a similar way. When viewers engage with the characters and adopt their perspective they will oppose less resistance to the message of the series.

All in all, under the mask of entertainment, series like *House of Cards* offer an interesting insight into the world of fictional politics and trigger certain psychological processes which affect the impressions of their audiences.

Appendix

TRANSPORTATION

1. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much could you picture yourself in the scenes and the events of the series?
2. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much would you say you were mentally involved in the show while watching it?
3. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very hard” how hard was it for you to put it out of your mind after finishing watching an episode/season?
4. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much did House of Cards affected you emotionally?
5. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how often did you find yourself thinking of ways an episode/event/season could have turned out differently?
6. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much would you say that the events in House of Cards are relevant to your everyday life?
7. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much would you say that while viewing House of Cards, you felt as if you were part of the action?

IDENTIFICATION

1. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much were you able to understand the events in House of Cards in a manner similar to that in, which Frank Underwood, understood them?

2. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much do you think you have a good understanding of Frank Underwood?
3. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much do you think you understand the reasons why Frank Underwood does what he does?
4. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much do you think that viewing House of Cards you could feel the emotions Frank Underwood portrayed?
5. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much do you think you could really get inside Frank Underwood's head?
6. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much would you say that at key moments in the series, you felt you knew exactly what Frank Underwood was going through?

PERCEIVED PLAUSIBILITY

1. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much do you think that the dialogue in the narrative is realistic and believable?
2. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much do you think that the setting for the narrative in House of Cards just doesn't seem real?
3. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much do you think characters in House of Cards are like people you or I might actually know?
4. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much do you think that the way people really live their everyday lives in not portrayed very actually in House of Cards?

5. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much do you think that political events that actually have happened or could happen are discussed in House of Cards?
6. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much would you say you have a hard time believing the people in House of Cards are real because the basic situation is so far-fetched?
7. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much would you say that House of Cards deals with the kind of very difficult choices people in real life have to make?

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

1. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much do you think House of Cards helped you understand more real politics?
2. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much political information do you think you have gained watching House of Cards?
3. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means “Not at all” and 7 means “Very much” how much do you think your political interest has grown because of watching House of Cards?

5. Conclusion

“With all this watching there must be some effect” (McGuire 1986, p. 175)

1. Introduction

The main goal of this dissertation was to address an existing gap in the literature; the effects of fictional political series. As mentioned in the introduction, the literature concentrates around more or less traditional forms of media, from news (print or broadcast), televised debates, talk-shows to social media outlets. If infotainment has managed to attract the attention of researchers, politicotainment is still in its early stages, but we believe the results of this dissertation are convincing enough to indicate that this is an important avenue to explore.

The dissertation sheds light on the influence of political series. The conclusion starts with a short summary of the main findings of the three articles, followed by their implications, and it ends with a reflection on future research.

2. Summary

Some researchers have already pointed out the potential of fiction to impact behaviors, opinions and perceptions (Mutz and Nir 2010, Van Zoonen and Wring 2005). Fictional series and movies have received some attention but apart a few studies, political fiction has been almost entirely ignored.

We were intrigued by the popularity and the polemic around current political series, so we tested their potential impact. We have discovered interesting results, which we believe should encourage further research and analysis. Political series do have an impact on people's attitudes. Depending on their content (either positive or negative) these series are capable of affecting people's beliefs about real politics and politicians. After watching an episode of a

negative series, people have experienced a significant increase in their level of political cynicism. On the other hand, those who watched an episode of a positive series did not increase their trust in politicians.

These effects are conditioned by an important factor: perceived realism. Only those who consider the fictional events and characters as realistic are affected in their cynical views.

Political series do not have an impact only on attitudes, they also shape feelings people may have due to watching. It seems that people do not look at political series only as mere entertainment. Those who watch them regularly come to believe the series increased their political interest and enhanced their understanding of politics,

2.1. Political series and cynicism

The dissertation started by investigating the role of political series in the spiral of cynicism, with the help of an experiment, where people were exposed to two political series and a non-political one. Participants in the experiment did not start with a clean slate, their level of cynicism was high from the beginning. This means that political series do not transform people into cynical monsters, they just reinforce their previous opinions, offering them a confirmation of their beliefs and predispositions. Slater (2007, Slater et al. 2014) talks about the framework of reinforcing spirals, meaning that first we select a certain type of media to get informed, and then in a second phase we search and consume media with a similar content, to reinforce our beliefs.

The findings demonstrate a significant change in cynicism (pre-post experiment) for the participants in the *House of Cards* group. Compared to the control group, this group experienced a substantial increase in their levels of cynicism. The group exposed to the positive treatment, *The West Wing* episode, showed a slight decrease in cynicism, which proved not to be significant. Furthermore, “sophistication” (political knowledge and interest) did not moderate the impact of the episodes. There is no difference between the least and the most sophisticated participants: they are either both affected (in the case of the negative series, *House of Cards*) or both unaffected (in the case of the positive series, *The West Wing*).

This article confirms that political series sometimes have an impact, but this impact depends on the content of the fictional series.

2.2. Perceived realism explains political cynicism

Chapter 3 (article 2) attempts to explain the effect previously found in chapter 2, by looking at perceived realism. Data coming from the same experiment shows that 82 % of the participants in the negative treatment group believed that the fictional characters in *House of Cards* are very realistic, while only 43% believed this to be the case about the characters in *The West Wing*. The same happens in the case of events. Fictional events in *House of Cards* are thought to be more realistic (80%) than the ones in *The West Wing* (48%). Results show that the level of cynicism increased for those considering the events and the characters in *House of Cards* to be very realistic. The findings support the idea that political series can shape people’s degree of cynicism, but their effect is conditioned by perceived realism. Van Zoonen and Wring believed that “perceived realism is one of the clearly identified mechanisms through which

television effects have been seen to occur” (2012, p. 275). This article shows again that the influence of TV series is not automatic; there is an effect only when people believe that the events and characters have some degree of “realism”.

2.3. Transportation and identification: their impact on fans’ political impressions

Chapter 4 (article 3) takes the dissertation further, through a different perspective and approach. The focus of this article was on the fans of *House of Cards*, their “affective relationship” (Bury 2017: 73) with the fictional events and characters and how this influences the way they perceive the series. Jenkins (1992) states that becoming a fan normally takes place over an extended period of time. We assume that due to their length (seasons running on the course of years), political series should enable the process of transportation and identification.

Using two psychological mechanisms, transportation and identification, we tested fans’ political impressions after watching. We focused our attention on three impressions, all related to some sort of learning process: understanding politics better, gaining information and increased political interest. We considered political series to provide a “harder” test for the two mechanisms due to the positions of the characters (almost all being politicians working in the White House) and the political environment (which is non-familiar to the majority of the viewers). Fans of the series identify with the main character, but their affection for Frank Underwood had no impact on their impressions. Adopting and understanding Frank’s perspective did not make them believe they understood politics better or that they gained political information, nor did they have the feeling it increased their interest in politics. With respect to transportation the cognitive dimension proved to be more powerful than the mental

one. Those who believed they could picture themselves in the scenes, feel part of the action and thought that the events were relevant to their everyday lives were under the impression that the series improved their understanding of politics and increased in their political interest. This study suggests that political series are among the narratives which transport their fans into their fictional universe and this has an impact on feelings or political impressions. When the fictional world is the world of “dirty politics”, inhabited by avid for power politicians, these impressions may be influenced in a negative way.

3. Implications

Our goal was to “extend” the spiral of cynicism, after reading Cappella and Jamieson’s book and open the path to investigate non-news content. We believe we have achieved more than that, showing that not all political series are the same (different contents lead to asymmetric results) and that their effect can be partially explained with the help of perceived realism.

3.1. Political fiction and cynicism

Chapter two “Does my favorite political TV series make me cynical?” was the departure point of the dissertation, as it proposed to find a causal link between political series and cynicism. With recent events (e.g. last presidential elections in the U.S., the fake news phenomenon) cynicism becomes more and more pertinent to talk about. At the same time television’s potential to influence people’s beliefs and attitudes was noticed right from its early stages (Robinson 1976, Gerbner & Gross 1976, Gerbner, Gross & Morgan 1980, 1986). It was not long before researchers proposed the news media as one of the causes of cynicism, blaming

them for transforming their style of reporting news. Cappella and Jamieson (1997), de Vreese (2004), Aalberg et al (2011), all believe that exposure to news that are strategically framed is one important cause of cynicism.

Patterson (1993) observed an increase of strategic frame usage (compared to issue framing), by analysing *The New York Times* publications for 30 years. Farnsworth and Lichter (2011) observed the same pattern for news covering presidential elections between 1988-2008. Altheide (1997) and Soroka (2002) reveal how negative information receives more coverage, while Trussler and Soroka (2014) found a gap between people's declared opinions about media and their preferences (they report not liking negativity in the news and the strategic frame, but when given the opportunity to choose what to read, they opt for the strategic one).

At the same time other researchers believe that citizens have been taught to "believe in formidable media effects" (McGuire 1986, p. 174) but in fact media influence is very limited (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948, McGuire 1983). More than 20 years ago, Bartels stated that the studies attempting to prove the existence of media effects are "one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science" (1993, p. 267).

Our study supports the first perspective: media do have an impact on people's attitudes. Not only do news media have effects on people's cynicism, but non-news formats also. Results show that fiction is one of the factors influencing people's attitudes, more specifically their political cynicism. Our main hypothesis was that the effect of political series on cynicism depends of the tone of the series. This hypothesis was partly confirmed. The negative series (*House of Cards*) had a significant effect on the level of cynicism of participants in our experiment, even after just one episode. We hoped to find a "cure" for cynicism in political

series with a positive content like *The West Wing*: positive portrayals of the White House administration and with an honest and moral president. But the positive series was not able to lower the cynicism of participants. In their study on the importance of pre-treatment effects (based on one lab experiment and one exit poll experiment) Druckman and Chong argue that an experimental stimulus may have no impact for individuals with strong attitudes. The authors state that “In short, those who process information in a way that produces strong attitudes during the pretreatment period may subsequently be immune to the experimental stimulus either because yet another consistent communication has little effect or because they reject a contrary communication” (2012, p. 877). Therefore, based on Druckman and Chong’s (2012) arguments, our theoretical expectations, and our hypothesis concerning the effects of exposure to *House of Cards* should have been different. Since their initial level of cynicism was already high (due to the pretreatment effect, which in this case would have been exposure to strategic frames on political matters) there should have been no increase after watching the episode (ceiling effect).

Druckman and Chong hypotheses are “(...) that pretreatment effects (e.g. leading to no experimental stimulus effect) will be more likely to occur when individuals (a) are exposed and attentive to earlier communications similar to the experimental stimuli and (b) form/update their attitudes in ways that promote strength” (2012, p. 877). Basically, because people are exposed to a cynical frame in their everyday life (which they familiarize themselves with) and they receive a similar frame (as it was the case for the *House of Cards* group)- no effects should have occurred. Our experiment reveals the contrary.

On the other hand, the idea of “pretreatment contamination” might be useful to explain why the subjects in *The West Wing* group were not affected and did not decrease their initial

cynicism. The positive image displayed in the episode contradicted their already strong and cynical opinions, leading them to ignore or reject it as it did not correspond to their negative image of the political world. These participants may fall in the category of the dogmatic people (as opposed to the malleable ones), who are having strong initial opinions that are not affected by any additional information/ treatment.”

Similarly, Entman’s study (2004) also may explain why participants who were exposed to *The West Wing* did not decrease their level of cynicism. Entman examines the case of the U.S. foreign policy agenda and reaches the conclusion that after the Cold War the administration frame was challenged more and more by the counter-frames (offered by other elites and by the media) as the international context had changed. The Cold War fuelled a cultural paradigm which offered strong explanations to multiple international events, but this paradigm collapsed the moment communism disappeared. In the aftermath, Entman argues that political elites and the media have more opportunities to promote counter-frames to the official ones, initiated by the White House (the cascade model). If we consider cynicism as a cultural paradigm of today, it is hard for a counter-frame like the one depicted in *The West Wing*, to impact public opinion. Therefore, the participants in the *House of Cards* group were exposed to a series that convey the paradigm they already knew, while the ones in *The West Wing* condition were exposed to a frame they are normally not used to, contradicting their existing beliefs. This may be the reason why these participants did not lower their cynicism, as they were more resistant to the message of honest politicians. Another hypothesis stated that the level of sophistication of participants will moderate the effects of political series on cynicism. Previous studies have shown that people with a lower level of knowledge or interest are more vulnerable to media messages (Iyengar 1991, Iyengar and Kinder 2010, Valentino et al 2001). Our results do not support such claims.

In the case of our experiment the level of sophistication did not play a moderating role on cynicism, the least and high sophisticated were either equally affected by the negative series, or not affected in the case of the positive series.

Therefore, our initial goal was fulfilled: not only does exposure to strategic news influence people's cynicism, but so do political series with a negative content, entering this way the famous spiral of cynicism.

We should not forget that political series are culturally shareable products, viewed and enjoyed by fans worldwide, which means that the effects transcend borders. As remarked in this study, a series about American politics increased the cynicism of young Canadian francophones (participants in the experiment). This means that the effects of political series on cynicism are not limited to one country or one population, they are general.

3.2. The more realistic the better

Realism has been proposed as a moderating variable for the effects of different fiction formats. Chapter three, "Watching House of Cards: Connecting perceived realism and cynicism" explored a potential mechanism which could explain how political series affect people's cynicism. The degree of perceived realism plays an important role when trying to understand how we are affected by what we read or watch, especially when these narratives are fictional. Green (2006, p. 169) highlights the importance of realism; when a story resembles an event that could actually happen, the impact of the story will be higher. Realism thus facilitates fictional effects (Appel and Richter 2007).

Political series are a particular case to test the moderating effects of realism, since “(...) this kind of TV fiction always raises the question of whether it represents political reality in a realistic way” (van Zoonen and Wring 2012, p. 275). The two authors indicate as reasons why there is a strong connection between reality and fiction in these series: real political figures are either mentioned, either briefly appearing in an episode, stories imply actual political events, some characters are based on real political figures.

For example, in the first episode of *Scandal*, Olivia Pope watches news on TV, when on the screen appears the message “President Grant to host President Sarkozy in State Dinner”- the headline joints a fictional president with a real one. The same thing happened in *The Good Wife*, where one of the characters battled against Hillary Clinton for people’s support in the presidential race. In *House of Cards*, Underwood’s initiative AmWorks was compared to Obamacare, and the fictional Russian president Petrov seemed a copy of Vladimir Putin.

The fact fictional series can influence people’s behaviors is explained by...fictional series. The best example is an episode of *The Good Wife* (season 6, ep.16). where Alicia Florrick’s campaign manager (for State Attorney) has a clever strategy to win votes by contacting Martin Sheen (who played the fictional president in *The West Wing*) to endorse her, by recording a message calling electors to vote. He wants to take advantage of the popularity of the fictional character, as he is very sure that people who watched that series will trust him and follow his advice (a fictional character’s potential to influence people’s opinions and behavior).

Research on fictional movies and series shows that when people believe in the realism of the story they are exposed to, they have higher chances to change their beliefs and attitudes to match the ones in the story. When the fictional scenario of a government conspiracy is

perceived as realistic, people believed that the government could do the same (Mulligan and Habel 2013). People watching a mini-series (Lenart and McGraw 1989) about a fictional scenario where communists have won the Cold War were more in favor of a strong military position and they were less trusting of communists (but only those who believed the series was realistic). Research on the effects of fiction explored the comparison between documentaries and fictional movies. Results show that "(...) dramatic fictional re-enactments of socio-political events lead to increased issue interest as much or more than the live footage and factual account of events offered in a documentary" (LaMarre and Landreville 2009, p. 538). Other studies show that sometimes fiction is more powerful than a real story related in a documentary, with a higher impact on people's retention of information and intensity of emotional reactions (Pouliot and Cowen 2007, p. 241).

The main assumption of our second article was that the degree of perceived realism people attach to fictional on-screen politics acts as a moderating variable. Our results confirm the assumption. Not only did people find that one series was more realistic than the other, but realism moderated the impact on cynicism, only those who found the episode of *House of Cards* realistic were affected, becoming more cynical. It is interesting to see the differences in perceptions of realism of the two series involved in our experiment. 82% of the participants believed that the characters in *House of Cards* were very realistic, while only 43% believed the same thing about the characters in *The West Wing*. In the case of the fictional events the pattern is the same (80% compared to 48%). Furthermore, if we correlate these results with the ones from article three we see how realism is associated with political series. When asked "How much do you think that political events that actually have happened or could happen are

discussed in *House of Cards*”, on a scale from 0 to 7, 24% of the respondents gave a score of 6 and 15% a score of 7.

Realism explains the impact of fictional political series on people’s cynicism (and their attitudes in general), because people do not judge a story (written or visual) according to an accuracy criterion, but to a plausibility one (Green 2006, p. 174). In this case what is important is if fictional characters act, talk and react like real people and if the fictional events are seen as likely to happen in reality. Livingstone and Mele (1997) talk about the “paradox of fiction”, as even if most people are capable to make the distinction between fact and fiction and to not automatically believe that what they read or see is real, still they are influenced by it. Realism facilitates transportation and identification, thus the interest of our final article.

We experience cognitive dissonance when our opinions and behaviors are in contradiction. The dissonance theory refers to the fact that individuals have the tendency to seek consistency among their cognitions and feelings and reduce the discomfort of contradicting beliefs (Festinger 1957; McGregor 2013). In the case of the survey respondents their existing beliefs were not contradicted by the series they have watched for seasons-*House of Cards*. Often exposed to a negative frame, having their cynicism reinforced on a regular basis, the series was not at all contradicting the image they already had about politics. Potential factors affecting the dissonance individuals may experience are the importance of the previous beliefs and the degree of inconsistency between beliefs. The respondents of the survey are not challenged in this aspect: probably their previous opinions are already strong (cynical) and the message of the series does not create an inconsistency between their beliefs. If additional information supports the previous opinions and behaviors, individuals have an incentive to keep on repeating those

behaviors and keeping those opinions. Therefore, the individuals may have chosen to watch the series because it reinforced their previous thoughts and attitudes. From this point of view, the respondent to the survey might just be more influenced from the message of the series, having the impression they have learned more, understand better, increased their interest.

Taking into consideration the cognitive dissonance theory, the participants in the experiment might have experienced either a contradiction or a compatibility between their beliefs and the images they saw on screen. For most participants in the *House of Cards* group- there was a compatibility between their previous (cynical) beliefs and the image of politics depicted in that first episode. The situation was different for *The West Wing* group, where many participants might have experienced a contradiction between the previous beliefs and the positive image they saw on screen. When individuals feel there is an inconsistency between their beliefs, they have to reduce the dissonance. Constantly being exposed to a negative frame of politics in their everyday life, participants in *The West Wing* condition were exposed to something that was contrary to their previous beliefs. This may have triggered their resistance to the positive frame, therefore explaining why they were not influenced by the positive frame and did not reduce their cynicism. Individuals give different importance to different pieces of information, in their case they preferred to rely on their previous (cynical) opinions instead of believing the positive image offered by *The West Wing*. A sign of the discomfort and the resistance they may have felt can be seen in the comments of the participants, who believed it's a cliché, or even that the episode was insulting their intelligence (Manoliu 2017). We can see that also when looking at the percentage of people who think the series was realistic. *The West Wing* was not perceived as very realistic, around 43% believed in the realism of its characters and events, and this might be an effect on the dissonance theory. Maybe they had a tendency to discredit the series, as it

contradicted everything they believe about politicians. Cognitive dissonance might shed light to a new aspect in the case of *House of Cards* group. Matthew Robin (1994, p. 177) shows that “increasing people’s distaste for being immoral can increase the level of immoral activities. This can happen because of the psychological phenomenon of cognitive dissonance: people will feel pressure to convince themselves that immoral activities are in fact moral”. Watching the immoral actions of Frank Underwood might in fact influence people into accepting more easily some behaviors than usually. Some participants in the experiment felt compassion for the immoral villain, finding excuses for his behavior (Manoliu 2017).

3.3. Transportation and identification

For the final stage of our dissertation, in chapter four, “Psychological reactions to House of Cards. The role of transportation and identification” we were interested to see what the impressions of the fans are. As heavy watchers, who tuned in for seasons, they had enough time to internalize and reflect upon the events and create close connections with the characters.

Previous work (especially Green 2004, 2006, Green and Brock 2000, 2002) has established the persuasive effect of fictional stories, explained through two mechanisms: transportation and identification. But the majority of the studies are interested in demonstrating a social influence of fictional narratives. We were interested in testing if people have the impression they “got something” after having watched (almost) all of the seasons of a political series. People transported into a fictional world are less resistant to the message of the story, transportation reducing counterarguing (Green 2004, 2006). Identifying with a character acts

the same way, by adopting her perspective, the reader/viewer is more likely to be influenced by the story, the events experienced by that character (Cohen 2001, 2014).

Transportation theory usually appears in studies related to health and consumption behaviour. Green (2006) states that narratives about cancer could have a positive effect on people's level of knowledge and information about the disease if these narratives manage to transport people (Murphy et al's experiment from 2011 confirms this). Transportation explains the effects of fictional movies where smoking appears, and which affects especially adolescents, increasing the use of tobacco as they feel encouraged to smoke (Green and Clark 2012, Heatherton and Sargent 2009, Morgenstern et al 2011). Transportation theory was applied in studies about another addictive behavior, drinking, where transported adolescents in movies where alcohol was consumed increased their consumption (Dal Cin et al 2009, Sargent et al 2006). Transportation theory was also associated with studies of media effects. For example, research in advertising shows that the effectiveness of ads depends on transportation. For those transported into the narrative (written or visual), if the ad does not interrupt their transportation experience, it will have a positive influence on people's consuming behaviour (Wang and Calder 2006, 2009).

Concerning identification, studies show that people tend to identify not only with fictional characters, but with real persons also, like with singers (Fraser and Brown 2002) or celebrities (Basil 1996). Eyal and Rubin (2003) explain that when identifying with a character we are influenced by our own personality traits, e.g. those who scored high on the aggressiveness scale identified with aggressive characters.

The stories usually employed in studies about transportation and identification refer to familiar places and contexts (a mall, university, a job interview) or characters meant to attract our sympathy and empathy (people affected by cancer, a man in a wheelchair, a man passing through a romantic dilemma). Both events and characters of the stories are highly emotional, enabling transportation and identification. Political series do not offer the same familiarity with the context (the White House), which should not facilitate empathy with the characters (corrupt politicians) therefore they should not alter people's opinions or impressions.

Green and Clark (2012) acknowledge the fact that highly transported individuals will change their attitudes, beliefs and behaviour to match the narrative. But this refers to studies where people read or watch a very short visual narrative. What we proposed was to test a change in perceptions for those who were extremely familiar with the fictional story and its characters: the fans of a political series.

We had three questions we wanted to find an answer to. To the first two, we answered affirmatively: people watching *House of Cards* are transported into the story and they identify with the main character, Frank Underwood. To the third question, what were the effects of transportation and identification on fans' impressions (on three aspects: better understanding of politics, information gain and increase in political interest) the results were more nuanced. Transported people into *House of Cards* perceived the series as having a positive effect on most fronts. The political theme and characters of the narrative convinced them the series served them well: offering them better understanding and increasing their interest in politics. Our results reveal that we could distinct between two types of transportation: mental and cognitive, with different effects on people's perceptions. Those who were mentally transported believed that

their political interest grew because of watching the series, but not their understanding of politics or their level of political information. On the other hand, those who experienced a cognitive transportation believed that *House of Cards* made them understand politics better and increased their interest in politics.

Intriguing is the fact that people do identify with a negative, morally questionable character like Frank Underwood, contrary to previous studies (Tal-Or and Cohen 2010, Sestir and Green 2010) which indicated that we have the tendency to identify with the positive characters. Brown (2015) offered an explanation to the phenomenon, by taking the case of another fictional character, Dr. House, a liar with dark humor, disrespectful to his patients, superficial and superior. Normally people should not feel any attachment to him, no sense of admiration, but identification may occur with his “qualities”: intelligent, prepared, always finding the best cure for his patients. It might be the same with Underwood. People do not identify with his political position, his deceiving acts, manipulations and lies, but with his strategical sense, always prepared to fight. Cohen (2006, p. 185) says that identification is influenced by viewers’ values, interest and experiences. What does identification with such a character say about us?

The fans of the series (respondents to the survey) could have kept a distance from the character and be what Cohen names “detached viewer”, but they did not choose this position.

Our study confirms the impact of fiction, not only to change beliefs and attitudes but also impressions. The impact is explained through transportation into the narrative. But the results provide new insight as we have tested transportation and identification with a different type of narrative, as the content of the story and the nature of the characters are both political. People

watching political series perceive these as helping them to better understand politics and believe they were able to increase their level of interest in politics. But these are only people's impressions. "Where can average citizens turn for political news? How well do their preferred news sources serve their political needs as they see them, and as sophisticated political observers see them?" (Graber 2001, p.1). In the light of our results this question becomes more pertinent than ever. Are people turning to political series for political news? Is the traditional news not serving them well, not responding to their needs, leaving an open path for these series to slowly be considered credible information sources?

What should follow is a study meant to measure fans' levels of political interest and factual knowledge about politics, to be able to determine if there is an actual shift (an increase) in information or interest directly linked to viewing *House of Cards* (or other political series).

4. Future research

The dissertation focuses on how fictional series are presenting the political world to their viewers and the consequences on how they view politics. As any study, ours provides some answers to the questions we have addressed while raising more questions that need to be examined in future research. We wish to highlight the following avenues of research that we believe flow from some of our findings.

4.1. Political series and media cynicism

My study has examined the impact of political series on citizens' attitudes towards politicians. This raises the question whether such series affect people's views about other actors. One obvious possibility is that these series also make people more cynical about the media.

There is plenty of evidence of the public's distrust towards the media (Manoliu 2018a). The 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer revealed a concerning situation, as it seems that media have lost their credibility. Trust in the government and trust in the media were at the same level (43% of the general population and 53% of the informed public). The interesting fact is that there was an increase of 2 points in trust in government compared to 2017, while the percentage remained the same for trust in the media (43% in 2017 and in 2018).

A poll reveals that 77% of those surveyed believe that all major traditional television and newspapers are reporting fake news (Lima 2017). A Gallup poll indicates that only 45% of Americans have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the mass media to report the news "fully, accurately and fairly" (Jones 2018). Although the number may seem low, this is actually a great improvement (only 32% of the Americans trusted their media in 2016). People losing their confidence in the media is not a situation particular to the U.S., the image of media is tarnished everywhere in the world (Edelman Trust Barometer 2018).

As political series portray the media universe, offering an insight on journalists' daily practices, they might affect their image.

The first season of *House of Cards* reveals many parallels between the political and journalistic worlds, as it follows the relation between congressman Frank Underwood and the young reporter Zoe Barnes. The "bad politician" is not the only negative character in the series, the mischievous journalist betraying his ethical standards to get the story is also obvious. The way journalists and their job are presented in *House of Cards* (and other series) cast doubts on the media's watchdog role, the objectivity of journalists and their relation to their (political) sources. Political series might increase cynicism about politicians and government but also

about the media and journalists. A content analysis of the answers of the participants involved in our experiment revealed that this aspect caught their attention (Manoliu 2017). People have conflicting feelings about the way the politician and the journalist interact: “It shows the narrow links between the press and politics, which are not very ethical” (participant’s comment). Some of them do not like the relation between politics and media implied by the series: “This disturbs the independence and neutrality principles of the media and contributes to showing a corrupt image of the media and of the information sent to the public”. People are less willing to accept a negative portrait of a journalist: “The fact that a politician can be corrupted is understandable, but it is less easy to imagine seeing journalists act the same way” (participant’s comment).

4.2. Media enjoyment

Researchers have already directed their attention to the study of media enjoyment, as enjoyment is “(...) likely to be a key variable from an effects perspective. For example, the relationship between enjoyment and consumption may leave viewers susceptible to potentially negative effects (e.g. aggression)” (Nabi and Kremer 2004, p. 288). The concept of media enjoyment is hard to define leading to measuring issues, mostly because it is used interchangeably with other concepts “liking”, “attraction”, “appreciation” or “preference”. Nabi and Kremer (2004, p. 290) define it as a “general positive disposition toward and liking of media content”, reflecting reaction to the message and the media experience. Reinecke, Vorderer and Knop (2014, p. 417) consider that (traditional, but especially new) media enjoyment proves to be a “growing challenge for entertainment research”. The concept helps us understand the results of our studies, since “[e]njoyment is one of the reasons viewers return to watch the next episode of a series, do not tune out of a film before it ends, or- over time- develop content-related

viewing habits and genre preferences” (Bilandzic and Busselle 2011, p. 29). The results of this dissertation are valuable to extend this line of research, exploring how enjoying a fictional series could affect our political behavior. Bilandzic and Busselle (2011) establish that narrative experience (transportation and identification) predict enjoyment. Hall and Bracken (2011) tested for the relations between empathy, transportation, perceived realism and movie enjoyment, and found that transportation is indeed positively correlated with film enjoyment. As the authors put it their results “extend the theories regarding trait empathy and transportation” (2011, p. 97). On the other hand, the results of our online survey, revealed that those highly transported into the fictional world of *House of Cards* started believing they understand politics better or are more interested in politics because of the series. Green, Brock and Kaufman (2004, p. 311) argue that “[t]ransportation theory provides a lens for understanding the concept of media enjoyment”.

The relation between different aspects of the narrative experience (transportation, identification, realism and enjoyment) is something worthy to be explored by future researchers. The results of our online survey revealed the potential of series *like House of Cards* in making their viewers believe they contribute to a better understanding of politics and this opens the path for future research. Among the few studies looking into the matter is the one by Schneider et al (2015) who were interested in seeing how enjoyment is related to objective and subjective knowledge. The difference between the two types of knowledge is that subjective knowledge refers to the feeling of being informed, while the objective type refers to actual information. As the authors explain “To feel knowledgeable does not necessarily imply to know something about a specific issue” (2015, p. 476). Their online survey (on 419 participants) implied watching 1

out of 4 versions of a short clip on natural gas as fuel for cars. The results showed that enjoyment is positively correlated with both objective and subjective knowledge, but only indirectly with behavioral intentions. The question that remains open: why do we enjoy political series and how does this enjoyment affect our behavior? The results of our experiment clearly show that people really enjoy watching some of the political series. 69% of the participants in the *House of Cards* group reported liking very much the episode (a score of 8, 9 and 10 on the 0-10 scale), while only 29% enjoyed *The West Wing* with the same intensity. 78% of those in the control group reported liking very much the episode of *The Big Bang Theory*, which is a funny sitcom.

The things we enjoy may have important consequences on some of our perceptions, beliefs, attitudes and ultimately translate into our behavior. Alice Hall (2007) studied the implications of enjoyment on individuals' expectations of others, by looking at different types of music, movies and television genres. An online survey of 108 respondents questioned their opinions on different music, film and television genres, and revealed differences in perceptions. For example, enjoyment of some genres like jazz music, film and television comedies raised the expectations of the individual, while enjoyment of heavy metal music, anime films and even soap operas lowered such expectations. These results suggest that "being seen to enjoy or engage with particular types of music, film or television programming has the potential to be rewarding to media users because these activities function as a means of expressing or reinforcing aspects of their social identity" (Hall 2007, p. 261). Only future research could reveal how watching political series could shape the social and political identity of their viewers.

4.3. Learning effects

A third direction for future research would be to explore other types of effects, most notably learning effects. The third article of the thesis allowed us to explore people's impressions about the benefits of watching a series like *House of Cards*, which according to them increased their interest in politics and made them understand politics better. But the question that arises from this is: is this really true? Do people actually learn something concrete from political series, do they gain information which may help them in their political decisions? Zukin and Snyder (1984) talked about passive learning as people might retain information without any intention or motivation to do it. Baum and Jamieson (2006) show that soft news which appeared in day time shows had a positive influence upon people who were "politically inattentive", helping them in their voting decisions. Shrum and Lee (2012, p. 148) also believe that "[t]he internalization of the television message may result in the learning of television facts", which increases the more people watch television. Foy (2008) also saw the potential of political fiction to act as a lens through which people could understand politics better. The process of by-product learning is a matter of debate, as other researchers point out that "[t]here is only very limited evidence that viewers actually learn from soft news" (Prior 2003, p. 149). Political series may prove an interesting case for experiments testing levels of political knowledge before and after people watched one (or multiple) series, as researchers (Schudson 1999, Deuze 2008) have talked about the monitorial citizen, who is always scanning different types of media (more interested in surveillance than gathering information).

4.4. Replications

4.4.1. Different genres, different effects?

We were interested in seeing if different types of series have different effects on cynicism. In the introduction, we discussed the difficulty of defining political series and their genres. Some of the current political series are labeled as comedy, drama or thriller, even horror. Some series are constructed to be more “serious” (*House of Cards* versus *VEEP* or *Designated Survivor*) and therefore people might perceive them to be more realistic. Hall (2007) found that different preferences in music film and television genres lead to difference in perceptions in the social identity of individuals. Studies like Hoffman & Young’s (2011) show that not all political entertainment is the same, and different genres (satire, parody, comedy) have different effects on political participation. It might be the case also for political series. An experiment, with the same design as ours (articles 1 and 2), where every group of subjects would be exposed to different genres would prove very useful.

4.4.2. Long-term effects

The experiment we have designed for the first part of the dissertation revealed short-term effects of political series on cynicism. We were encouraged to see that after only a short exposure to an episode (less than an hour) people experienced a significant change in cynicism. It would be interesting to replicate the experiment to capture long-term effects. Chong and Druckman (2010) were intrigued by how the effects of a message are influenced in an environment of competing messages, received at different times. One of their experiments used the U.S Patriot Act, a controversial issue to investigate the longevity of the framing effects. Their design included conditions for when participants received no additional frames after the initial exposure (T1)

and when they were exposed to a competing frame (at T2). Participants also received different tasks to manipulate the way of processing the messages: either memory-based or online. As expected, those exposed to a frame in favor of the Patriot Act increased their support for it, while those who received a frame against- declined their support for the Act. What is interesting is that the group exposed to both frames at the same time experienced no significant effect for either of them. The results showed that there is a diminishing effect (almost to the initial level) in the case of those not who were not exposed to any other frames. The only ones for whom the effect was still observable even 10 days after, were the subjects in the “online condition”, since they evaluated the information in a way that increased their chances to form stable preferences.”

What happens with our participants after watching *House of Cards*: would our findings stand true a week after, a month after? It might, depending on the situation. When thinking at the way the effect is altered by time, we should consider not only the disappearance of it, but other type of changes. Since the majority of the news we watch or read nowadays are framed in a cynical way, the fictional frame they have been exposed to in that first episode of *House of Cards* might get reactivated over and over again. At the same time, moving outside of the experiment and into the real world, the stability of the opinions gained after watching the first episode of a series like *House of Cards* might last, as watching episode after episode, season after season will make those effects go a long way (these effects might be of course altered by the time period each individual takes between episodes). A special case is provided by those individuals who binge-watch, who watch the whole season in a day or over the weekend. Will the effect be stronger? Are 13 hours of fictional politics (the typical duration for a season of *House of Cards*) a lot more powerful than 1 hour?

We are aware of the challenge brought by an experiment of that type and magnitude. It would mean gathering a sample of people who have never seen *House of Cards* (or another political series), so that we can measure their political cynicism before the exposure and repeating the survey after each season, to see if the effects on cynicism grow with every season. That way we would be able to see if political series have a durable and cumulative impact. The time frame of an experiment of this sort is the major problem, as a series extended on the course of many seasons would imply that the experiment takes place over a long period of time.

4.4.3. Competing frames

Another piece of future research that interest us is replicating the experiment, this time with four groups, with the same series, but with a critical difference. The first group would watch the first two episodes of *House of Cards*, the second group- the two first episode of *The West Wing* and the control group would be exposed to an episode of each series (and a forth group acting as control).

At the time of our experiment our main interest was to asses the existence of some effects for each of the series. However, it would be more important to observe if in the case of that third group the two series would cancel each other, since we agree that the frames are competing, though we also need to consider the “pretreatment” of the subjects (Chong and Druckman 2012). Given that the effects were significant only for the *House of Cards* group (for our experiment), it might just be that the positive frame provided by *The West Wing* will not have enough power to cancel the negative one, considering also that people are not that often exposed to those positive frames.

4.4.4. Fictional effects versus news media effects.

The experiment at the core of the dissertation was focused on the effects of fictional political series. The main goal was to investigate if they are capable of producing a change in people's cynicism. We constructed our hypotheses and designed the experiment by looking at the large literature on the effects of news media on people's behavior. Cappella and Jamieson's *Spiral of Cynicism* (1997) was a key reference. But after finding that some fictional series have an impact on people's cynicism (the negative *House of Cards*), while other do not affect it (as it was the case for *The West Wing*), we are interested into comparing the effects of fictional politics with those of real news on politics. Which one is stronger and why? Is fictional politics as influent as real news when it comes to affect people's beliefs and behaviors? Green, Brock and Kaufman (2004, p. 321) state that "(...) narratives do not need to be true to affect readers", while Green and Brock (2000) argue that it does not matter if people are exposed to factual or fictional stories, they are equally transported by both types narratives.

4.4.5. The "nationality" factor

The last point of future research derived from our findings is repeating the experiment, this time taking into account the nationality of participants. For the thesis, we have used political series depicting American politics. The fact that we did find an effect on people who are not personally affected by what they see (e.g. young Francophone Canadians participating in the experiment) made us believe in the universality of the power of political fiction. But this may not be the case for French or Danish political series. Although they are known outside their borders, we cannot compare them to the success of American series outside the United States. An experiment where French participants are monitored for the impact of French series (like

Baron Noir or Marseille) or Danish participants for *Borgen*, would help us test for the strength of the national factor. Are citizens more affected by fictional politics when it is a portrait of their own country? Are we more easily transported into the fictional world that takes place in their country?

4.5. Towards cultivation theory and a shifting values system

Finally, we want to underline once more how the effects documented here could be explained with the help of psychological mechanisms and theories, other than the ones we used for this dissertation. One of our future interests is cultivation theory, which focuses on long-term effects that gradually affect the audience, people beginning to believe that the world created by television is an accurate depiction of the real world. How are political series shaping people's beliefs about politics through the story they tell, the cultural model and value system they propose (Manoliu, 2018b)? Political series might be "cultivating" skewed perceptions, one of them being the "Mean World Syndrome" (Gerbner & Gross 1976). Heavy exposure to fictional politics may induce the belief that real politics is far dirtier, and politicians are more corrupt and self-interested, than they actually are. One of the elements of cultivation theory (along with story-telling, the cultural model and indicators, etc) is the cultivation of a value system. Political series are "focused on a political value system which is presented as corrupted, where morals and decency in politics are no longer the norm" (Manoliu 2018b, p, 141), but a value system present in the society nowadays. Citizens' values have changed (one of the consequences of cynicism), therefore the qualities and traits they look for in politicians have also changed. This shift of values is visible in both real and in fictional politics: from Obama to Trump and from

Bartlet to Underwood. Trust, competence and morality were always among the traits people wished for in a leader (Stevens and Karp 2012, Wojciszke and Klusek 1996). The Pew Research Center, relied on data gathered from surveys conducted between 2015-2016 to find out “what voters want in a president today, and how their views have changed” (Fingerhut 2016). Considering a number of presidential traits, results revealed that 74% of respondents did not care if the candidate attended a prestigious university. Some traits, which were traditionally seen as negative were not of much importance to the voters. For 46% of them it would not have mattered if the candidate had a “longtime Washington experience”, for 74% it would not have mattered if the candidate “used marijuana in the past”. 58% gave no importance to the fact that the candidate “had an extramarital affair in the past” (and for the knowers, yes, at the time of the survey the series *Scandal* focused on the affair between the president and his former communication manager, had already been on the screen for 4 years). We judge politicians’ morality, but at the same time we are not so concerned about their Machiavellianism. Examining the perception people hold of political leaders in the Australian context, one of the measures examined by Forgas and Menyhart (1979) was Machiavellianism, which did not alter people’s perception of politicians. This may explain why people like the character of Frank Underwood and his way of dealing with politics.

It may be that political series are just a reflection our new set of values, our new expectations of politicians. Maybe Frank Underwood is the new type of politician we look for: ruthless but efficient. For the White House Correspondents’ dinner in 2013, Spacey played Underwood in a short clip, along staff of the White House. At the end of the video he declares “Washington and Hollywood- some new faces, some old faces, some new faces on old faces (...) It must be so hard to write jokes about a town already is one. (...) I may lie, cheat and intimidate to get what

I want, but at least I get the job done. So I hope some of you were taking notes”. (ABC News 2013). In one of the trailers released to promote the series, Netflix announced: “Frank Underwood- the leader we deserve” (Netflix 2016).

5. House of Cards: The end or the beginning?

When I started my research, there was not much research about political TV series, especially the most recent. Now, while I am writing the conclusion I am glad to observe that researchers have started to devote more attention to political series (Hackett 2015, Sorlin 2016). This year only, at least three books about *House of Cards* have been released (Taieb 2018, Gierzynsky 2018, Solokon and Smith 2018).

While completing my dissertation, the final season of *House of Cards* was already announced for November 2, 2018. In its usual style, Netflix will release all 13 episodes at once. After five years, the story of the villain politician, scheming his way to power will come to an end. Coincidence or not, I started my PhD in 2013, the release year of the series, and it appears that as the adventures of Frank Underwood will reach to an end this year, so will my PhD. While Frank Underwood proved his value in a hostile political climate, reaching his goals one by one on the road to Presidency, my hope is that this dissertation highlights the importance of political series. The goal of my dissertation, and the five years behind it, could be summed up by something I said during one of my conference presentations: “So next time you catch yourself thinking “all politicians are bad, they are all corrupt, my vote does not count”, it might just be because last night you watched an episode or an entire season of *House of Cards* with a bowl of popcorn.”

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APPENDIX A : PRE SURVEY (all three groups)

Veillez répondre aux questions suivantes en encerclant la réponse ou en cochant la case correspondante à votre choix, ou en inscrivant l'information sur la ligne pointillée.

1. Êtes-vous de sexe masculin ou féminin ?

Masculin

Féminin

2. Quel âge avez-vous?

3. Dans quel programme/département êtes-vous inscrit(e) à l'Université de Montréal ?

.....

Je ne suis pas inscrit(e) à l'Université de Montréal

4. Quelle attention accordez-vous aux:

	Aucune	Peu	Assez	Beaucoup	Je ne sais pas
Comédies de situation (ex: Friends, New Girl, Les Beaux malaises, Les Parents)					
Séries de science fiction (ex:The X-Files)					
Talk-shows de divertissement (ex: Oprah, Ellen de Generes Show, Tout le monde en parle, En mode Salvail)					

	Aucune	Peu	Assez	Beaucoup	Je ne sais pas
Séries policières (ex: NYPD Blue, Law& Order, 19-2)					
Séries politiques télévisées (ex: House of Cards, Madam Secretary, VEEP, Bunker le cirque)					
Séries historiques (ex: Reign, War and Peace, Downtown Abbey, Les Belles histoires des pays d'en haut)					

5. En général, combien de jours par semaine faites-vous chacune des actions suivantes?

5a. Regarder les nouvelles à la télévision?

- Un jour
- Deux jours
- Trois jours
- Quatre jours
- Cinq jours
- Six jours
- Sept / tous les jours
- Aucun / jamais
- Je ne sais pas

5b. Lire les nouvelles dans les journaux?

- Un jour
- Deux jours
- Trois jours
- Quatre jours
- Cinq jours
- Six jours
- Sept / tous les jours
- Aucun / jamais
- Je ne sais pas

5c. Écouter les nouvelles à la radio?

- Un jour
- Deux jours
- Trois jours
- Quatre jours
- Cinq jours
- Six jours
- Sept / tous les jours
- Aucun / jamais
- Je ne sais pas

5d. Lire les nouvelles sur l'internet?

- Un jour
- Deux jours
- Trois jours
- Quatre jours
- Cinq jours
- Six jours
- Sept / tous les jours
- Aucun / jamais
- Je ne sais pas

6. Voici quelques énoncés sur ce que vous pouvez ressentir ou ne pas ressentir au sujet des politiciens ou du gouvernement. Veuillez cocher la case de droite qui montre à quel point vous êtes d'accord ou pas d'accord avec ces énoncés.

	Fortement d'accord	D'accord	Pas d'accord	Pas du tout d'accord	Je ne sais pas
1. Les politiciens ne pensent qu'à leur propre intérêt					
2. On peut faire confiance au gouvernement pour faire ce qui est juste					
3. Le gouvernement est dirigé par quelques grands intérêts financiers					
4. La plupart des politiciens sont fiables					
5. Les candidats aux élections font des promesses qu'ils n'ont aucunement l'intention de remplir					
6. La plupart des députés se soucient des problèmes des gens ordinaires					

7. Diriez-vous qu'en général les politiciens sont plus honnêtes, moins honnêtes, ou ni plus ni moins honnêtes que le citoyen moyen?

Plus honnêtes

Moins honnêtes

Ni plus ni moins honnêtes

Je ne sais pas

8. Pensez-vous qu'il y a plus, moins, ou ni plus ni moins de corruption au gouvernement que dans l'entreprise privée?

Il y a plus de corruption

Moins de corruption

Ni plus ni moins de corruption

Je ne sais pas

9. Selon vous l'économie canadienne s'est-elle améliorée, est-elle restée à peu près la même ou s'est-elle détériorée depuis un an?

Améliorée

Restée à peu près la même

Détériorée

Je ne sais pas

10. Selon vous, dans les 12 prochains mois l'économie canadienne va-t-elle s'améliorer, rester à peu près la même ou va-t-elle se détériorer?

S'améliorer

Rester à peu près la même

Se détériorer

Je ne sais pas

11. Votre situation financière s'est-elle améliorée, est-elle restée à peu près la même ou s'est-elle détériorée depuis un an?

- Améliorée
 Restée à peu près la même
 Détériorée
 Je ne sais pas

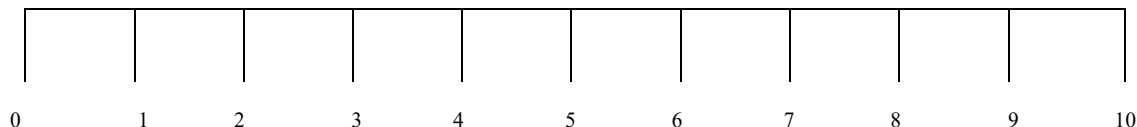
12. Pensez-vous que d'ici un an, votre situation financière va s'améliorer, rester à peu près la même ou va-t-elle se détériorer?

- Améliorée
 Restée à peu près la même
 Détériorée
 Je ne sais pas

13. Sur une échelle de 0 à 10, où placeriez-vous les partis politiques suivants? (Écrivez le numéro de votre choix à côté du nom du chaque parti)

Gauche

Droite



- | | |
|--|---|
| Bloc québécois _____ | Je ne sais pas <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Nouveau Parti démocratique du Canada _____ | Je ne sais pas <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Parti conservateur du Canada _____ | Je ne sais pas <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Parti libéral du Canada _____ | Je ne sais pas <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Parti vert du Canada _____ | Je ne sais pas <input type="checkbox"/> |

14. Quel parti est arrivé en deuxième place aux élections du 19 octobre 2015? (Cochez votre choix)

- Bloc québécois
- Nouveau Parti démocratique du Canada
- Parti conservateur du Canada
- Parti libéral du Canada
- Parti vert du Canada
- Je ne sais pas

15. Pouvez-vous inscrire sur la ligne le nom du parti auquel vous associez chaque chef?

Thomas Mulcair.....Je ne sais pas

Rona Ambrose.....Je ne sais pas

Justin Trudeau.....Je ne sais pas

Rhéal Fortin.....Je ne sais pas

Elizabeth May.....Je ne sais pas

16. Pouvez-vous nommer le président actuel des États-Unis?

.....

Je ne sais pas

17. Qui, parmi les personnes suivantes, sont des candidats à l'investiture du Parti démocrate pour l'élection présidentielle américaine de 2016 ?

- Hillary Clinton et Barack Obama
- Donald Trump et Bernie Sanders
- Bernie Sanders et Hillary Clinton
- Je ne sais pas

18. Quel est votre intérêt pour la politique EN GÉNÉRAL? Utilisez une échelle de 0 à 10, où 0 veut dire aucun intérêt et 10 veut dire beaucoup d'intérêt et encerclez le numéro de votre choix.

Aucun

Beaucoup

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Je ne sais pas

19. Quel est votre intérêt pour la politique canadienne? Utilisez une échelle de 0 à 10, où 0 veut dire aucun intérêt et 10 veut dire beaucoup d'intérêt et encerclez le numéro de votre choix.

Aucun

Beaucoup

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Je ne sais pas

20. Quel est votre intérêt pour la politique américaine? Utilisez une échelle de 0 à 10, où 0 veut dire aucun intérêt et 10 veut dire beaucoup d'intérêt et encerclez le numéro de votre choix.

Aucun

Beaucoup

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Je ne sais pas

APPENDIX B: POST SURVEY (control group- The Big Bang Theory)

Veillez répondre aux questions suivantes en encerclant la réponse ou en cochant la case correspondante à votre choix, ou en inscrivant l'information sur la ligne pointillée.

1. Sur une échelle de 0 à 10, à quel point avez-vous aimé l'épisode que vous avez vu? (Encerclez le numéro de votre choix, où 0 signifie "pas du tout" et 10 signifie "beaucoup".)

Pas du tout

Beaucoup

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

2. Sur une échelle de 0 à 10, où 0 signifie "aucunement réalistes" et 10 signifie "tout à fait réalistes", comment évaluez-vous les personnages dans cet épisode ? (Encerclez le numéro de votre choix.)

Aucunement réalistes

Tout à fait réalistes

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

3. Sur une échelle de 0 à 10, où 0 signifie "aucunement réalistes" et 10 signifie "tout à fait réalistes", comment évaluez-vous les événements dans cet épisode ? (Encerclez le numéro de votre choix.)

Aucunement réalistes

Tout à fait réalistes

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

4. Quelle scène avez-vous aimée le plus? Pourquoi?

5. Quelle scène avez-vous aimée le moins? Pourquoi?

6. Voici quelques énoncés sur ce que vous pouvez ressentir ou ne pas ressentir au sujet d'autres personnes. Veuillez cocher la case qui montre à quel point vous êtes d'accord ou pas d'accord avec ces énoncés.

	Fortement d'accord	D'accord	Pas d'accord	Pas du tout d'accord	Je ne sais pas
La plupart des gens sont prêts à mentir quand cela fait leur affaire.					
La plupart des gens sont fondamentalement honnêtes.					
Malgré tout, la plupart des gens se préoccupent du bien-être des autres.					
La plupart des gens ne pensent pas qu'à leur propre intérêt.					

7. Voici quelques énoncés sur ce que vous pouvez ressentir ou ne pas ressentir au sujet des politiciens ou du gouvernement. Veuillez cocher la case qui montre à quel point vous êtes d'accord ou pas d'accord avec ces énoncés.

	Fortement d'accord	D'accord	Pas d'accord	Pas du tout d'accord	Je ne sais pas
1. Les politiciens ne pensent qu'à leur propre intérêt					
2. On peut faire confiance au gouvernement pour faire ce qui est juste					
3. Le gouvernement est dirigé par quelques grands intérêts financiers					
4. La plupart des politiciens sont fiables					
5. Les candidats aux élections font des promesses qu'ils n'ont aucunement l'intention de remplir					
6. La plupart des députés se soucient des problèmes des gens ordinaires					

8. Diriez-vous qu'en général les politiciens sont plus honnêtes, moins honnêtes, ou ni plus ni moins honnêtes que le citoyen moyen?

Plus honnêtes

Moins honnêtes

Ni plus ni moins honnêtes

Je ne sais pas

9. Pensez-vous qu'il y a plus, moins, ou ni plus ni moins de corruption au gouvernement que dans l'entreprise privée?

Il y a plus de corruption

Moins de corruption

Ni plus ni moins de corruption

Je ne sais pas

10. Est-ce que cet épisode vous a fait penser à un événement qui s'est réellement produit?

Non

Si OUI, lequel

Je ne sais pas

11. Pensez-vous que les personnages et les événements que vous avez vus dans le programme reflètent :

Plus la réalité américaine que la réalité canadienne

Plus la réalité canadienne que la réalité américaine

Autant la réalité américaine que la réalité canadienne

Ni la réalité américaine, ni la réalité canadienne

Je ne sais pas

APPENDIX C : POST SURVEY (House of Cards group)

Veillez répondre aux questions suivantes en encerclant la réponse ou en cochant la case correspondante à votre choix, ou en inscrivant l'information sur la ligne pointillée.

1. Sur une échelle de 0 à 10, à quel point avez-vous aimé l'épisode que vous avez vu? (Encerclez le numéro de votre choix, où 0 signifie "pas du tout" et 10 signifie "beaucoup".)

Pas du tout

Beaucoup

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

2. Sur une échelle de 0 à 10, où 0 signifie "aucunement réalistes" et 10 signifie "tout à fait réalistes", comment évaluez-vous les personnages dans cet épisode ? (Encerclez le numéro de votre choix.)

Aucunement réalistes

Tout à fait réalistes

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

3. Sur une échelle de 0 à 10, où 0 signifie "aucunement réalistes" et 10 signifie "tout à fait réalistes", comment évaluez-vous les événements dans cet épisode ? (Encerclez le numéro de votre choix.)

Aucunement réalistes

Tout à fait réalistes

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

4. Veuillez indiquer, en cochant la case appropriée, à quel point chacun des adjectifs suivants décrit le personnage principal : Frank Underwood.

	Pas bien du tout	Pas très bien	Assez bien	Très bien
Méfiant				
Déterminé				
Hypocrite				
Sympathique				
Traître				
Ambitieux				
Manipulateur				
Honnête				
Égoïste				
Intelligent				

5. Quelle scène avez-vous aimée le plus? Pourquoi?

6. Quelle scène avez-vous aimée le moins? Pourquoi?

7. Voici quelques énoncés sur ce que vous pouvez ressentir ou ne pas ressentir au sujet d'autres personnes. Veuillez cocher la case qui montre à quel point vous êtes d'accord ou pas d'accord avec ces énoncés.

	Fortement d'accord	D'accord	Pas d'accord	Pas du tout d'accord	Je ne sais pas
La plupart des gens sont prêts à mentir quand cela fait leur affaire.					
La plupart des gens sont fondamentalement honnêtes.					
Malgré tout, la plupart des gens se préoccupent du bien-être des autres.					
La plupart des gens ne pensent pas qu'à leur propre intérêt.					

8. Voici quelques énoncés sur ce que vous pouvez ressentir ou ne pas ressentir au sujet des politiciens ou du gouvernement. Veuillez cocher la case qui montre à quel point vous êtes d'accord ou pas d'accord avec ces énoncés.

	Fortement d'accord	D'accord	Pas d'accord	Pas du tout d'accord	Je ne sais pas
1. Les politiciens ne pensent qu'à leur propre intérêt					
2. On peut faire confiance au gouvernement pour faire ce qui est juste					
3. Le gouvernement est dirigé par quelques grands intérêts financiers					
4. La plupart des politiciens sont fiables					
5. Les candidats aux élections font des promesses qu'ils n'ont aucunement l'intention de remplir					
6. La plupart des députés se soucient des problèmes des gens ordinaires					

9. Diriez-vous qu'en général les politiciens sont plus honnêtes, moins honnêtes, ou ni plus ni moins honnêtes que le citoyen moyen?

- Plus honnêtes
- Moins honnêtes
- Ni plus ni moins honnêtes
- Je ne sais pas

10. Pensez-vous qu'il y a plus, moins, ou ni plus ni moins de corruption au gouvernement que dans l'entreprise privée?

- Il y a plus de corruption
- Moins de corruption
- Ni plus ni moins de corruption
- Je ne sais pas

11. Est-ce que cet épisode vous a fait penser à un événement qui s'est réellement produit?

Non

Si OUI, lequel

Je ne sais pas

12. Selon vous, combien de politiciens au Canada ressemblent à Frank Underwood?

- Plusieurs
- Quelques-uns
- Peu
- Aucun
- Je ne sais pas

13. Frank Underwood vous a-t-il fait penser à un politicien canadien en particulier?

Non

Si OUI, lequel

Je ne sais pas

14. Pensez-vous que les personnages et les événements que vous avez vus dans le programme reflètent :

- Plus la réalité américaine que la réalité canadienne
- Plus la réalité canadienne que la réalité américaine
- Autant la réalité américaine que la réalité canadienne
- Ni la réalité américaine, ni la réalité canadienne
- Je ne sais pas

15. Quel image l'émission House of Cards donne-t-elle de la politique?

- Très positive
- Plutôt positive
- Neutre
- Plutôt négative
- Très négative
- Je ne sais pas

APPENDIX D : POST SURVEY (The West Wing group)

Veillez répondre aux questions suivantes en encerclant la réponse ou en cochant la case correspondante à votre choix, ou en inscrivant l'information sur la ligne pointillée.

1. Sur une échelle de 0 à 10, à quel point avez-vous aimé l'épisode que vous avez vu? (Encerclez le numéro de votre choix, où 0 signifie "pas du tout" et 10 signifie "beaucoup".)

Pas du tout

Beaucoup

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

2. Sur une échelle de 0 à 10, où 0 signifie "aucunement réalistes" et 10 signifie "tout à fait réalistes", comment évaluez-vous les personnages dans cet épisode ? (Encerclez le numéro de votre choix.)

Aucunement réalistes

Tout à fait réalistes

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

3. Sur une échelle de 0 à 10, où 0 signifie "aucunement réalistes" et 10 signifie "tout à fait réalistes", comment évaluez-vous les évènements dans cet épisode ? (Encerclez le numéro de votre choix.)

Aucunement réalistes

Tout à fait réalistes

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

4. Veuillez indiquer, en cochant la case appropriée, à quel point chacun des adjectifs suivants décrit le personnage principal : Josiah Bartlet.

	Pas bien du tout	Pas très bien	Assez bien	Très bien
Méfiant				
Déterminé				
Hypocrite				
Sympathique				
Traître				
Ambitieux				
Manipulateur				
Honnête				
Égoïste				
Intelligent				

5. Quelle scène avez-vous aimée le plus? Pourquoi?

6. Quelle scène avez-vous aimée le moins? Pourquoi?

7. Voici quelques énoncés sur ce que vous pouvez ressentir ou ne pas ressentir au sujet d'autres personnes. Veuillez cocher la case qui montre à quel point vous êtes d'accord ou pas d'accord avec ces énoncés.

	Fortement d'accord	D'accord	Pas d'accord	Pas du tout d'accord	Je ne sais pas
La plupart des gens sont prêts à mentir quand cela fait leur affaire.					
La plupart des gens sont fondamentalement honnêtes.					
Malgré tout, la plupart des gens se préoccupent du bien-être des autres.					
La plupart des gens ne pensent pas qu'à leur propre intérêt.					

8. Voici quelques énoncés sur ce que vous pouvez ressentir ou ne pas ressentir au sujet des politiciens ou du gouvernement. Veuillez cocher la case qui montre à quel point vous êtes d'accord ou pas d'accord avec ces énoncés.

	Fortement d'accord	D'accord	Pas d'accord	Pas du tout d'accord	Je ne sais pas
1. Les politiciens ne pensent qu'à leur propre intérêt					
2. On peut faire confiance au gouvernement pour faire ce qui est juste					
3. Le gouvernement est dirigé par quelques grands intérêts financiers					
4. La plupart des politiciens sont fiables					
5. Les candidats aux élections font des promesses qu'ils n'ont aucunement l'intention de remplir					
6. La plupart des députés se soucient des problèmes des gens ordinaires					

9. Diriez-vous qu'en général les politiciens sont plus honnêtes, moins honnêtes, ou ni plus ni moins honnêtes que le citoyen moyen?

Plus honnêtes

Moins honnêtes

Ni plus ni moins honnêtes

Je ne sais pas

10. Pensez-vous qu'il y a plus, moins, ou ni plus ni moins de corruption au gouvernement que dans l'entreprise privée?

Il y a plus de corruption

Moins de corruption

Ni plus ni moins de corruption

Je ne sais pas

11. Est-ce que cet épisode vous a fait penser à un événement qui s'est réellement produit?

Non

Si OUI, lequel

Je ne sais pas

12. Selon vous, combien de politiciens au Canada ressemblent à Josiah Bartlet?

Plusieurs

Quelques-uns

Peu

Aucun

Je ne sais pas

13. Josiah Bartlet vous a-t-il fait penser à un politicien canadien en particulier?

Non

Si OUI, lequel

Je ne sais pas

14. Pensez-vous que les personnages et les évènements que vous avez vus dans le programme reflètent :

Plus la réalité américaine que la réalité canadienne

Plus la réalité canadienne que la réalité américaine

Autant la réalité américaine que la réalité canadienne

Ni la réalité américaine, ni la réalité canadienne

Je ne sais pas

15. Quel image l'émission West Wing donne-t-elle de la politique?

Très positive

Plutôt positive

Neutre

Plutôt négative

Très négative

Je ne sais pas

APPENDIX E : ONLINE SURVEY (House of Cards fans)

1. How many seasons of House of Cards have you watched so far?

1

2

3

4

5

2. What is your gender?

Female

Male

Prefer not to say

3. What is your nationality?

4. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much" how much could you picture yourself in the scenes and the events of the series?

5. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much" how much would you say you were mentally involved in the show while watching it?

6. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very hard" how hard was it for you to put if out of your mind after finishing watching an episode/season?

7. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much" how much did House of Cards affected you emotionally?
8. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much" how often did you find yourself thinking of ways an episode/event/season could have turned out differently?
9. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much" how much would you say that the events in House of Cards are relevant to your everyday life?
10. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much would you say that while viewing House of Cards, you felt as if you were part of the action?
11. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much were you able to understand the events in House of Cards in a manner similar to that in, which Frank Underwood, understood them?
12. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much do you think you have a good understanding of Frank Underwood?
13. On a scale from 0 to 7, where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much do you think you understand the reasons why Frank Underwood does what he does?
14. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much do you think that viewing House of Cards you could feel the emotions Frank Underwood portrayed?
15. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much" how much do you think you could really get inside Frank Underwood's head?

16. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much" how much would you say that at key moments in the series, you felt you knew exactly what Frank Underwood was going through?

17. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much" how much do you think that the dialogue in the narrative is realistic and believable?

18. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Extremely" how much do you think that the setting for the narrative in House of Cards just doesn't seem real?

19. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much do you think characters in House of Cards are like people you or I might actually know?

20. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much" how much do you think that the way people really live their everyday lives is not portrayed very accurately in House of Cards?

21. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much do you think that political events that actually have happened or could happen are discussed in House of Cards?

22. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much would you say you have a hard time believing the people in House of Cards are real because the basic situation is so far-fetched?

23. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much would you say that House of Cards deals with the kind of very difficult choices people in real life have to make?

24. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much do you believe House of Cards doesn't present issues seriously?

25. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much would you say that the feelings portrayed by the actors in the series are too shallow and one-dimensional for the characters to seem real?

26. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much do you believe House of Cards doesn't have any plot or real meaning?

27. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much" how much do you think you use the ideas from House of Cards when you find yourself in similar real-life situations?

28. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much" how much do you think House of Cards helped you to understand more real politics?

29. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much would you say the ideas on House of Cards about how to deal with people are helpful to you when you have to deal with people in your own life?

30. Would you vote for Frank Underwood in a real presidential election?

Yes

No

Maybe

31. Would you like more politicians in real life to be like Frank Underwood?

Yes

No

Maybe

32. How many real politicians do you think are like Frank Underwood?

Many

Some

Few

None

I do not know

33. Do you think you have learned something about real politics from watching House of Cards?

Yes

No

Maybe

34. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much political information do you think you have gained watching House of Cards?

35. On a scale from 0 to 7 where 0 means "Not at all" and 7 means "Very much", how much do you think your political interest has grown because of watching House of Cards?

