

How television influences careers paths

April 28 2016, by Roya Rafei



Julianna Margulies plays Alicia Florrick on the legal drama, *The Good Wife*.
Credit: CBS/*The Good Wife*

If you think there are too many cop or doctor shows on TV, you're not wrong.

A team of Rutgers students, who collectively watched about 200 episodes of television programming recently for a research project, found the characters on top-rated scripted shows tend to be in one of three professions: law, medicine or the police force.

The students – two undergraduates and a graduate student from the School of Communication and Information and four students from School of Arts and Sciences – spent nearly a year exploring television's impact on teens and young adults as they consider a career path.

"These days if you talk to a teenager or even a college student, many will tell you they got interested in a career from a TV show they watched," said Bernadette Gailliard, an assistant professor of communication at the School of Communication and Information, who led the study. "I wanted to see how television influences the ways youth are socialized into potential careers."

Youth of all ages continue to watch lots of television even as their use of other media grows. Children 12 to 17 watch about 20 hours of traditional television per week while 18- to 24-year-olds watched more than 17.5 hours, according to an annual report by Nielsen, which tracks Americans' media consumption and habits.

Gailliard said the Rutgers team analyzed 27 scripted and 29 [reality shows](#) from the 2012-2014 seasons. They picked the top-rated shows from those two seasons, but excluded competition shows such as Project Runway or Survivor, in which cast members are eliminated weekly. They dissected every scene's dialogue for references to the character's job. The group, which will present its findings at the [Aresty Undergraduate Research Symposium](#) April 29, also noted race, gender, size and any references to sexuality.

Here are some of their findings:

- The characters on scripted shows are more diverse and they tend to be more career-orientated than on reality TV. "In scripted shows, there is an effort at diversity," Gailliard said. "Even if there was a token character, it was there." Her team, she added,

couldn't even figure out the jobs some reality TV stars held. And the cast of a reality show tends to be from the same income bracket and race.

- Scripted shows do well in depicting the day-to-day responsibilities of characters with jobs, but there is not much information on the character's career history. "The career trajectory is missing on scripted TV," Gailliard said. "If you're interested in this career at 15 or 18, what does it take to get there? How much training do you need? How many years of school do you need? You won't find out from TV."
- Though scripted shows have a diverse cast, there are few women portrayed in high-ranking jobs and gay characters are usually white.
- There may be more representation of careers on scripted television but the characters on the shows Gailliard's team observed were predominately in law enforcement, followed by law and medicine. "I think they are more represented because they are careers that are highly valued in American society and, in many ways, are particularly central to various parts of American life," Gailliard observed.

Toni Moletteri, a communication major and one of the Aresty students on Gailliard's research team, spent much of her winter break in front of the television. She logged at least 60 hours of program viewing – from NCIS and Grey's Anatomy to reality TV like the Long Island Medium and The Real Housewives of Atlanta.

Moletteri had expected reality shows, by definition, to be closer to real life, portraying a wide range of people.

"TV is not a great source of information to learn about careers," she said. "It's unrealistic. It doesn't show all the hard work that they have to do, especially doctors. You're in school for 12 years. They hardly talk

about that on TV shows."

Gailliard said the study provides additional information on the impact of television on our lives. "It allows us to be more critical of [television](#) and it helps parents to talk to their kids about these shows' influence on their career choices," she said.

Provided by Rutgers University

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