

# Transgender TV characters have the power to shape audience attitudes

August 11 2017

---

Watching transgender characters on fictional TV shows has the power to influence attitudes toward transgender people and policy issues, according to new research from USC Annenberg. The research was published in the Springer Journal *Sex Roles* and further highlights the ways political ideology shapes viewer responses to transgender depictions in entertainment.

The researchers surveyed 488 regular viewers of the USA Network series *Royal Pains*, of whom 391 saw a June 2015 episode featuring a portrayal of a transgender teen, played by transgender activist Nicole Maines. Those who saw this episode had more positive attitudes toward both [transgender people](#) and related policies, such as students using bathrooms aligned with their gender identity. The fictional *Royal Pains* storyline was more influential than news events; exposure to transgender issues in the news and Caitlyn Jenner's transition (which was unfolding at the time of the research) had no effect on attitudes.

Beyond the impact of the *Royal Pains* episode, the study is the first to demonstrate the effect of cumulative exposure to transgender portrayals, across multiple shows. The more shows featuring transgender characters (such as Amazon's *Transparent* and Netflix's *Orange is the New Black*) that viewers saw, the more transgender-supportive their attitudes. Viewing two or more transgender storylines reduced the association between viewers' political ideology and their attitudes toward transgender people by half.

According to Traci Gillig, a doctoral candidate at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and the lead author on the study, "While media visibility of transgender people reached new levels in recent years, little has been known about the effects of that visibility. Our study shows the power of entertainment narratives to influence viewers' attitudes toward transgender people and policy issues."

The research was conducted in collaboration with Hollywood, Health & Society (HH&S), a program of the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center that serves as a free resource to the entertainment industry on TV storylines addressing health, safety and national security issues. HH&S Director Kate Langrall Folb explains: "We worked closely with the *Royal Pains* writers, connecting them with medical experts and providing information for the storyline."

The results of this research suggest increased visibility of transgender characters in mainstream entertainment can have far-reaching influence on public perceptions of transgender [people](#) and the policies that impact them.

"Watching TV shows with nuanced [transgender](#) characters can break down ideological biases in a way that news stories may not. This is especially true when the stories inspire hope or when viewers can relate to the characters," said HH&S Senior Research Associate Erica Rosenthal.

**More information:** Traci K. Gillig et al, More than a Media Moment: The Influence of Televised Storylines on Viewers' Attitudes toward Transgender People and Policies, *Sex Roles* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s11199-017-0816-1](#)

Provided by Springer

Citation: Transgender TV characters have the power to shape audience attitudes (2017, August 11) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-08-transgender-tv-characters-power-audience.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.