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Transgender TV characters have the power to shape audience attitudes, USC Annenberg research shows

News coverage, even when pervasive, does not have the same effect

LOS ANGELES _ Aug. 10, 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](#). Just published in the peer-reviewed journal *Sex Roles*, the research 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.

The research was published online in *Sex Roles* and is available at <http://rdcu.be/uG2T>.

About Sex Roles

[Sex Roles](#) is the most-cited journal in Women’s Studies and the 11th most-cited in Social Psychology (Springer Publishing, 2017). *Sex Roles* has published seminal studies on attitudes toward transgender people (and LGBTQ people more broadly), including the first national study on attitudes toward transgender people in the U.S. (Norton & Herek, 2013) and the most-used scale measuring transphobia and genderism (Hill & Willoughby, 2005).

About Hollywood, Health & Society

[Hollywood, Health & Society](#) (HH&S) is a program of the [Norman Lear Center](#) at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. HH&S provides entertainment industry professionals with accurate and timely information for storylines on health, safety and national security issues. With funders that include the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the N Square Collaborative and others, HH&S recognizes the profound impact that entertainment media have on individual knowledge and behavior. We offer several resources, including briefings and consultations with experts, case examples, panel discussions, a quarterly newsletter, and an expanding list of tip sheets written specifically for writers and producers. HH&S also conducts research to understand how entertainment storylines shape the knowledge, attitudes and behavior of individuals and the larger public.

About the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism

Located in Los Angeles at the [University of Southern California](#), the [Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism](#) is a national leader in education and scholarship in the fields of communication, journalism, public diplomacy and public relations. With an enrollment of more than 2,200 students, USC Annenberg offers doctoral, master's and bachelor's degree programs, as well as continuing development programs for working professionals across a broad scope of academic inquiry. The school's comprehensive curriculum emphasizes the core skills of leadership, innovation, service and entrepreneurship and draws upon the resources of a networked university located in the media capital of the world.

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