Playing the House of Cards game: How political TV series increase cynicism

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Abstract

In this article I propose a potential explanation for why political TV series (non-news media) may have an impact on people's opinions, especially on political cynicism. People may watch political series for entertainment, but unconsciously they make comparisons to real life events and individuals, which will affect their beliefs. Based on data gathered from an experiment including two of the most popular series of this kind, results seem to show asymmetric effects: people perceive this genre depending on their content. They attach a much higher degree of realism to characters and events portrayed in a negative series (House of Cards) than to those portrayed in a more positive way (The West Wing). Results also indicate that people are more influenced in their cynical opinions by the negative events than the negative characters.

1.1. Political cynicism

"Researchers concur that Americans grow more cynical with every new generation" (Pompper 2003: 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 & Lau 1990), to failed expectations citizens experience with politics (Miller 1974) or even a general feeling of mistrust towards politics which tends to "corrupt" the people who participate at it (Cappella & Jamieson 1997). The media is considered to be a factor in analyzing political cynicism, although it falls in the middle of a debate about its role and impact. On one side there are scholars warning about the existence of a "spiral of cynicism" (Cappella & Jamieson 1997), and the language the media adopts to talk about politics and politicians which uses strategic frames and emphasizes a negative tone, with war and sport metaphores (Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1995) has a negative impact on people's perceptions about politics. On the other side, there are those praising the benefits of all the media choices, which may lead to better understanding of politics, as the political information is made easier and more comprehensible (Norris 2000).

1.2. Political TV series in the spiral of cynicism

Could political TV series have a role in the relationship between people and politics and more importantly could they act as a mediator for cynicism? Now, probably more than ever people feel disconnected and disengaged with politics, and the variety of media offers them the choice to avoid any political information and politicians have disappointed them so many times that the level of trust in the government is very low. People may watch political TV series for various reasons: from satisfying their need of entertainment to gaining some political information: "to supplement inconclusive political news accounts, audiences may attend to popular culture texts like NBC's The West Wing to fill in information gaps" (Pompper, 2003: 17).

There is no consensus on the definition this type of series, usually being categorized under the "drama" genre (IMDb), though one of the best terms to describe them might be "polidrama" (Berger 2000). According to their content and their approach on the subject and emphasis on certain aspects in the characters they are a mix of drama, docudramas, soap-opera, and their fictional aspect is using all these elements to create the plot.

Political TV series are a bizarre mix of fiction and realism, 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 (White House), a real country (U.S), with a real democratic system where the parties are struggling for power (Democrats and Republicans), real titles and institutions (Vice-president, congressmen, ambassadors..). The similarity to reality, the degree of realism people attach to these political TV series, may be the psychological mechanism through which they are affecting people's cynicism.

In the next section I will briefly introduce the general concept of realism and observe how it may apply to the case of political TV series. The literature review contains a section dedicated to studies of documentaries versus fictional movies and it will end with studies on fictional politics (series and movies) and the effects on their audiences.

1.3. Is there any realism in fiction?

Busselle and Bilandzic (2008) describe the concept of perceived realism 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 plot could be easily found in real life. Narrative realism on the other hand involves the internal coherence of the fiction: are the characters, their actions, the story and the events coherent and complementary. Both dimensions can apply to political TV series, because the viewer may judge their external realism (are the fictional politicians resembling the real ones, are the events likely to happened in reality) as well as their narrative realism (are the fictional politicians reacting as they should given the political events and experiences they encounter). "It is generally assumed that respondents report high realism when they observe similarity between the fictional and the real worlds" (Busselle&Bilandzic 2008: 268).

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: "Its dimensions included plausibility, typicality, factuality, narrative consistency and perceptual quality" (Cho, Shen & Wilson, 2012: 828).

There are mixed findings regarding the influence of realism and fiction. Some say people are not strongly influenced by fiction. Atkin's (1983) study on the effects of televised violence exposure showed a difference between those exposed to violence in realistic news and those exposed to fictional violence condition. Violence in what appears to be real news had a greater impact on participants in the agressivity treatment and also stimulated their attention twice as much as for those exposed to fictional violence (but still, the fictional violence has a significant impact on the aggressivity of participants, when compared to the control group).

Others sustain that on the contrary, effects are similar, or even stronger for fiction: "It is remarkable that the power of narrative is not diminished by readers' or viewers' knowledge that the story is invented. On the contrary, successful stories-those that engage us most- often are both fictional and unrealistic" (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008: 256).

Political series could 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 talks about how easy it is for people reading a book or watching a movie to enter the story and connect it to their own experiences. "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: 701). Political TV series can "transport" people into a parallel political reality, making them more vulnerable to believe that the plot and the characters are 'realistic'. Identification with a fictional character facilitates transportation theory, "to identify with a character means seeing the character's perspective as one's own, to share his or her existence" (Green & al, 2004: 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: 266). Williams
also found that the way the series primed and framed aspects of the American politics affected the individual-level of perceptions of the US presidency. Klarer (2014) talks 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. The fact that these series are organized into episodic actions and events, all connected to the main story or main character increase the chances of viewers being drawn into the world of fictional politics.

Although my objective is not to measure or prove the existence of transportation and identification theory in these mentioned series, the literature on these two concepts is worthy of being mentioned. The perceived degree of realism plays an important role for transportation and identification theories, enabling and facilitating their effects. Realism attached to them is just one of the first steps, the viewer will be more engaged and transported in the action and more willing to identify with the characters if he believes them to be realistic.

Hall (2006) analyses people's perceptions about reality programs through focus groups, in order to determine what are the elements people are looking for in this kind of programs and what they judge as realistic, as "the status of these programs in terms of realism is particularly ambiguous" (Hall 2006: 193). The main feature of reality programs is that they show real people (using their real identity), but there are also artificial elements: they know they are filmed as well as the unrealistic settings (e.g. Survivor- isolated islands, The Race around the world- countries and places most people have never been to). The case of political TV series is similar to reality programs, but in a reverse order: the people portrayed are not real persons (actors with fictional identities) but a lot of the events are inspired by the political reality (parties in power, the hierarchy and titles in the parties, elections, speeches, international conflicts, protocols, institutions) and the most realistic is the setting: Washington and the actual White House.

Another thing reality programs and political TV series have in common is the emphasis on negativity, by "pointing out people's problems" and "highlighting like the worst in people" (Hall, 2006: 198). The majority of the popular political TV series are respecting this condition (e.g. *House of Cards, Scandal, Madam Secretary, VEEP, Homeland*).

In the same manner, to test if fiction has lesser effects on people's opinions and attitudes LaMarre and Landreville (2009) compare the reactions of people exposed to a documentary film with those watching a fictional film (historical reenactment), both on the same subject- the Rwandan genocide. Their results indicate substantial differences between the two groups in terms of affective responses and issues knowledge (the documentary was stronger in raising these reactions), but no significant differences for issue interest and narrative engagement, "suggesting that dramatic fictional reenactments 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 & Laudreville, 2009: 538). The distinction between documentaries and fictional movies (or fact versus fiction) was also studied by Pouliot and Cowen (2007). In an experimental design the two researchers exposed a total of 230 participants to different treatment conditions including short videos on the same subject (from one of the three topics: wedding, AIDS, Ghandi) extracted from both documentaries and fictional movies.. Their results show that "documentary stimuli were perceived as more factual than their fiction counterparts. However, contrary to expectations, memory for visual and verbal information and the intensity of emotional reactions were greater overall for fiction films" (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007: 241). This is not surprising, taking into account the fact that fiction has the tendency to emphasize on drama, exaggerates, uses more of the negative elements in the world, arousing and playing more with the emotions of their audiences.

Fiction does have its part of reality. In their study about the duration of the effects of fictional narratives, Appel and Richter (2007) reach the conclusion that "Fact-related information contained in fictional narratives may induce substantial changes in readers' real-world beliefs" (Appel & Richter, 2007: 113). They have designed an experimental study, where 81 participants read either a fictional story (true and false information) or a control story. The results show that the
false information had strong short-term effects, but more importantly a group that was monitored after 2 weeks (assessment delay) presented even stronger results.

There has always been a fascination of writers and film scenarist for the political world, but lately Washington has been their source of inspiration more than ever, with at least "8 big-budget shows set in the nation's capital" (Frank 2013). Since 2013 new series have been added to the list, with Madam Secretary airing in 2014 and Designated Survivor in 2017. "At the beginning of the twenty-first century, 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 2016:4).

Mulligan and Habel talk about the necessity to also explore the effects of fictional media, and not focus all the academic research to news media, soft news, talk-shows: "little attention has been paid to the potential consequences of media that are fictional" (2013: 122). After an experiment involving a political movie, Wag the Dog, they conclude that people who were in the treatment group were more likely to believe in a conspiracy theory (the U.S. Government can create a fake war it it would be convenient for them).

Pfau et al (2001) discover almost the same thing, fiction does have the potential to change people's opinions. Their study found that crime dramas (like NYPD Blue) make people more trustworthy towards the federal government (due to the efficiency of the characters who were always solving the cases), while SF series (X-Files) have the reverse effect because even with all the exaggeration of the facts people begin to think in a conspiracy, something the government is keeping from them.

Viewers seem to be vulnerable in front of theories of political conspiracies, as it seems to be the case of another movie with political references, JFK. Butler et al (1995) explore the psychological impact of this movie which combines fact and fiction in presenting the story of a real political character and real events. In cases like that people should be affected because it is easy to confuse facts, especially when they have little political information.

Other studies also show that movies or series talking about political issues have changed people's opinions. Lenart and McGraw (1989) chose to study the effects of the mini-series Amerika, a fictional world depicting life in the US if the Soviet Union would have won the Cold War. People watching the series became more aware and concerned of the Soviet danger. Although Feldman and Sigelman (1985) do not find changes in the viewer's political attitudes, watching the movie The day after (about consequences of a nuclear war) affected their levels of political knowledge.

Sometimes the distinction between fact and fiction will become blurry and lab experiments (Levine et al 2010) show how after being exposed to fiction, viewers begun to confuse reality with fiction. Moreover there are occasions where people use the information they receive from fiction to draw conclusions about real facts: “Readers rely on fiction as a source of information, even when fiction contradicts relatively well known facts about the world” (Marsh & Fazio 2006: 1140).

The importance of the perceived degree of realism of political TV series comes from its potential role as a mediating variable for cynicism. People will judge "the degree of similarity between mediated characters and situations and real-life characters and situations" (Shapiro & Chock, 2003: 170) and "respondents report high realism when they observe similarity between the fictional and the real worlds" (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008: 268).

1.4. Choice of political TV series

For the present analysis I have chosen two of the most well known series of their kind: The West Wing and House of Cards. They may be seen as two very different political TV series, even opposite. Even though the background of the two series is the same, the political life, a glimpse of behind the scenes in Washington, presenting details of the American presidency, the way the characters are constructed and their way of dealing with political challenges is very different. House of Cards was described as "a darkly soapy 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 in a "dirty politics" world. The plot of the whole series starts when Underwood, a Democrat Congressman, was promised the role of Secretary of State by the newly President, whom Underwood helped win the election. When he realizes he was deceived and not getting 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 all that means 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, as a source of information.

Meanwhile The West Wing is seen as "an exemplar of characters performing so-called "walk and talks", (...) which chronicles the administration of president Josiah Bartlet and the staff around him. The series often draws on real-world issues, from nuclear proliferation to oil prices" (Davis, 2016). The action of the series follows the Democrat president Josiah Bartlet and his team in their attempt solve political dilemmas in a honest way. The president and his entourage seem to be utopic representations of Washington. One of the things depicted along the series is the special relation between the President and his staff, LeoMcGarry (Chief of Staff), Josh Lyman (Deputy Chief of Staff), Toby Zieglar (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.

Why focus on these two series in particular?

First, both 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 on second (in a top 10), as well as two of the shows a "political junkie" can not miss (Davis 2016).

Secondly, House of Cards and The West Wing correspond to both features of realism described by Hall (2006): typicality and factuality. In terms of typicality, these series are created around characters and events representative of a particular population (the political elite in Washington) and in terms of factuality the series do give the impression of accurately portraying events and characters which could easily be found in reality.

On the Internet, opinions are divided. Some think the series are unrealistic. Masket (2014) says that 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." (Masket 2014). At the same time "the deeply cynical House of Cards may be a useful antidote to thesweetly optimistic West Wing" (Masket 2014). 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, which normaly are not that quick to solve.

One of the best insights on the issue of realism in House of Cards, is an article published by politico.com (McDevitt, 2013), immediately after the release of the first season of the series. Several people involved in American politics ("lawmakers in Washington") gave their opinion on the similarities between the fictional series and the political reality in Washington. The opinions varied from "it's highly entertaining fiction, but not very realistic." to "I think in a way that's an accurate portrayal" of politicians.

Thirdly, this two specific series were chose because of 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 offered up honorable public servants with oddly uniform patter trying to steer the nation to a better place. It 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 portays 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 other that sometimes *House of Cards* is considered to be "*The West Wing's* evil twin-meanner, edgier and cynical" (Mandel 2015)

**Hypotheses**

**H1:** People thinking characters and events in *House of Cards* are very realistic become more cynical than those who perceive them as less realistic.

**H2:** People thinking characters and events in *The West Wing* are very realistic become less cynical than those who perceive them as less realistic.

### 2. METHODOLOGY

#### 2.1. Research Design

I 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 the three groups: the first group watched a negative political series, *House of Cards*, as treatment (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* -23 minutes, *The West Wing* - 42 minutes, *House of Cards* - 53 minutes. The episodes were screened in English (original version), and French subtitles were added. Participants received two sets of questionnaires- one which had to be filled in before and the other one- after watching the episode they were assigned to (measuring their media exposure, personal and political cynicism, asking them how much they enjoyed the episode, how much realism they attribute to the characters and events). Participants watched the episodes in small groups, in a projection room, which reenacted a cinema room.

The first treatment group was assigned to watch the inaugural episode of *House of Cards*. In this particular episode, the viewer gets acquainted to 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 against all those who have mislead 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 also meets 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*, in which is exposed 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 in 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 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 work as a functional team,
the President has a very 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 feminine neighbor forces them to step out of their comfort zone and deal with real-life situations, which will cause many humorous moments.

2.2. Participants

Participants were mostly university students, representing 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. Subjects were promised a financial compensation in change of their participation. Participants contacted 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.

2.3 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 after re-coded from 0 to 1. The items questioned them among others about important topics like politicians’ self-interest and financial interest, their honesty and care about the problems of ordinary people, as well as if candidates in the elections are making promises they do not keep afterwards1. 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.

In order to measure how much realism people attach to the series I rely on two variables from the post-questionnaire. Participants were asked to rate on a scale from 0-10 how realistic they perceived the characters of the series and how realistic they perceived the events portrayed in the episode.

3. Results

The initial level of cynicism among participants is high, 4.56 points on a scale from 0 to 7 (the three groups had similar means- control- 4.50, House of Cards- 4.50, The West Wing- 4.69).

There was no significant change in levels of cynicism in the control group (moving from 4.50 to 4.37), but there was a significant change for the House of Cards group, which moved from a mean of 4.50 (pre) to 5.01 (post), and the .51 difference is a statistically significant one. There is a slight change in cynicism for The West Wing group, a decrease from 4.69 to 4.45, and the negative -.24 points difference is (just barely) significant. When comparing the treatment groups to the control one, the House of Cards group shows a significant increase in cynicism (.64, p<0.01), while The West Wing group is not very different from the control (-.11, not significant).

Looking at the realism variables there is a clear difference between the three groups in terms of distribution of the perception of the degree of reality they associate with fictional characters and events. The two variables were dichotomised to create two categories: those believing that the

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1 Exact wording of the items can be found in the Appendix
characters and events are not realistic (0-7) and those who believe the characters and events in the series are very realistic (8-10).

Graph 1 shows that the control group is very balanced, almost half of the participants did not find the characters very realistic, while the other half found them highly realistic. It is interesting how for the *House of Cards* group the vast majority think (82%) that Frank Underwood and the rest of the characters are very realistic. The situation is different for the second treatment group, as among those exposed to *The West Wing*, 57% think the characters are not realistic and only 43% believe they are.

**Graph 1**

![Perceived reality of the characters](image)

Concerning the perceived reality of the events presented in the episode, Graph 2 shows again how the three groups manifested different patterns. The control group is not as balanced as for the perception on characters, and 67.21% 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 (80.33%) than those in the control group and in *The West Wing* group, which is the most balanced (48.28%).

**Graph 2**
Table 1 displays the differences between the two categories (those not perceiving the characters and events very realistic and those who do) and which category was more affected by cynicism. There is a great difference for the *House of Cards* group: those perceiving the characters and the events as very realistic are in fact, those who became more cynical. Even for *The West Wing* group, those perceiving the fictional characters and the events as very realistic have also lowered their cynicism significantly and those who did not see them as realistic were not as affected.

Table 1

| Group              | Perception on Reality of characters | Mean After-Before cynicism | Pr \(|T|>|t|\) | Perception on Reality of events | Mean After-Before cynicism | Pr \(|T|>|t|\) |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------|---------------------------------|---------------------------|---------|
| **The Big Bang Theory** | Low                               | -0.06                      | 0.56    | Low                             | -0.14                     | 0.09    |
|                    | High                              | -0.2                       | 0.12    | High                            | -0.08                     | 0.60    |
| **House of Cards**  | Low                               | 0.02                       | 0.93    | Low                             | 0.23                      | 0.35    |
|                    | High                              | 0.61                       | 0.00    | High                            | 0.58                      | 0.00    |
| **The West Wing**   | Low                               | -0.19                      | 0.13    | Low                             | -0.12                     | 0.33    |
|                    | High                              | -0.32                      | 0.09    | High                            | -0.36                     | 0.03    |

After analyzing the two variables (characters and events) separately I have created another variable, which is the sum of these two (characters+events/2). Table 2 contains the results of a regression including interaction variables between the degree of perceived realism and the treatment groups. As we can see below the variable “Realism” does not seem to have a direct effect upon people's degree of cynicism. Results indicate how only for the group exposed to *House of Cards* there is a slight effect (p<0.10) and those attributing more realism in general (both characters and events combined) to the first episode are more cynical. There is no effect for *The West Wing* group, as those thinking the characters and events in the first episode were more realistic did not become automatically less cynical.

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Table 3 shows the results of a regression where Model 1 includes the interactions between the perceived degree of realism of characters and each of the two treatment groups, and Model 2 includes the interactions between the perceived realism of events and the two treatment groups. Simply looking at the variables Realism of the characters and Realism of the events indicate there is no effect on the participants' cynicism (cynicism as the difference between after-before exposure to treatment).

The interaction variable of the realism of characters and the two groups does not seem to interfere and have any sort of effect on cynicism. But the interaction variable between the perceived degree of realism of the events and the *House of Cards* group shows there is an influence on their degree of cynicism (*p*<0.05). It does not stand true for *The West Wing* group which is not affected by the realism of the events.

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Standard errors in parentheses

+p < 0.10,  *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001
## 4. DISCUSSION

This article proposes an analysis of the perceived degree of the realism people attach to political TV series. What was put to a test was a conditional effect, looking at the perceived degree of realism that people attach to the characters and events as a mediating variable for political cynicism.

The first hypothesis stated that people who perceive the characters and events in *House of Cards* as very realistic will be more cynical than those considering them less realistic. This hypothesis is partly confirmed. Those thinking the events are very realistic became more cynical than those who do not think the fictional events could be easily found in reality. But the perception on the reality of the characters in the episode does not have the same effect. Taken all together the variable “Reality” (characters and events) does affect the cynicism of people in this group (p<0.10), although its statistical significance is not very high. Looking at the interaction variables with the *House of Cards* group only the events interaction variable has an effect on people's cynicism (p<0.01) and not the characters interaction.

For *The West Wing* group, the expectation was that those perceiving characters and events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The West Wing group</th>
<th>Realism of characters</th>
<th>Realism of characters* House of Cards</th>
<th>Realism of characters* The West Wing</th>
<th>Realism of events</th>
<th>Realism of events* House of Cards</th>
<th>Realism of events* The West Wing</th>
<th>Constant</th>
<th>Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.44)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.07)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.07)*</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.35)</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard errors in parentheses

+p < 0.10, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001
more realistic would become less cynical than those who consider them less likely to happen in real life. Results indicate that neither the perceived realism of the characters nor the events had enough impact on participants, to make them significantly less cynical.

Although the results may not seem to confirm the initial hypotheses, one of the main contributions of this article is revealing what people find more realistic in terms of political fiction. Given two political TV series opposite in content, participants in the experiment seem to attach a much higher degree of realism to a negative portrayal of the political scene and doubt the positive one. The most important thing to consider is 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 acquainted 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.

Why these asymmetric effects for the two series in terms of perceived realism? Why the characters and events in the House of Cards episode were considered more realistic than those in The West Wing and why only people's perception upon the reality of events in the first series has a certain impact on their cynicism?

One potential explanation might be the “generational” gap between the two. Busselle and Bilandzic talk about the story world model which implies “place, time period, and general contemporary state of affairs” (2008: 259). This model follows the "story world logic", which indicates to a person whether the fictional aspects they are exposed to (narratives, visual..) could actually apply to reality. This may explain why the two series are perceived differently in terms of realism. The age and period they live in of the participants makes The West Wing more unrealistic as a time period (they are unfamiliar with beginning of the 2000s) and how politics looked liked at that time.

Another aspect that may affect people's perception of the realism of the series, is the fact that the sample is a Canadian one which was showed fictional stories about American politics. Results of two other items related to the realism of the series seem to support this guess. 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%).

The other question asked them how many of the Canadian politicians resemble the main character in the series they had been watching (Frank Underwood or Josiah Bartlet). Of course the task is a difficult one, since the comparison required a double level of reflection: not only to associate a fiction with reality, but also to pass from an American fiction (unknown, unfamiliar) to a Canadian reality (the familiar context). Participants seem to think that some of the Canadian politicians (34.43%) and many of them (22.95%) are like Frank Underwood. Compared to that Josiah Bartlet's figure seems to match 29.31% of the real Canadian politicians, while 15.52% of the participants think that many national politicians are like this positive figure. It should not pass unnoticed 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 we are asking them to undergo a more difficult and intense mental process: it is easy to make associations between new things and old things that you are familiar with. Because they were aware of "how easily American movies and television programs cross cultural and linguistic frontiers", Katz and Liebes (1990: 46) studied how people perceived and decoded the soap-opera

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2 Detailed results in Appendix
3 Detailed results in Appendix
Dallas, with the help of focus-groups of different nationalities (American and Israeli). Even if there are some differences in the decodings of the two samples (due mainly to the cultural and identity differences), the thing both have on common is the fact that they seem to get involved, to make judgments about characters, to relate with the events in the series.

Research about the effects of fiction offers mixed perspectives. There are studies (Prentice, Gerrig & Bailis 1997) presenting evidence that when people are exposed to fictional information about a context they know well, they will not be very influenced about it (they have the necessary details to judge it and reject it for not being realistic). On the other hand, there are studies (Wheeler, Green & Brock 1999) proving that people are influenced by fictional information no matter their familiarity with the context (fiction affects those knowing as well those not knowing the situation/environment).

This is just the first step in establishing potential explanations for why there are asymmetric effects on people's cynicism, created by these series' content (negative and positive) and how it is perceived in terms of realism.

Further research in the area of realism, transportation, identification with the characters and the situations presented in these series should improve our knowledge about why political fiction in these TV series can alter people's attitudes in some cases but not in others, depending on their content. Also, matching the items asked in the questionnaires with people's knowledge of the context and political environment would be an improvement. Probably asking Americans about the degree of realism they perceive in an American series, connect fictional politicians with national, real ones would shed new light on this topic.

The present study did not tested for the longevity of the effects, but this might be a future point of research. Political TV series present a great opportunity to study if the effects on cynicism and perceptions upon realism of the characters and the plot change over time. On one side there are people who have admitted to binge-watch, watching multiple episodes/seasons all at once so the effects may be strong on the short-term, as they suffer from the "Neflix effect" (McDonald & Smith-Rowsey 2016). On the other side, there are still people who follow the series as they are aired on television (except for House of Cards the other series follow the traditional model of one episode/week, with 2-3 months of pause between seasons), meaning they are exposed to aproximately one hour of political fiction every week (a constant reminder for cynicism and realism). As it was the case for those watching *The West Wing* back in the day: "Many plotlines of *The West Wing* continue into future episodes and are reintroduced periodically, offering viewers sustained, extensive perspectives on complex, unfolding issues" (Pompper 2003: 22)

All in all, political TV series seem to have the potential of creating a new framework of analysis upon the effects of fictional narratives.
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APPENDIX

Political cynicism measurements
* 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 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 it is right
3. The government is ran by a few big financial interests
4. The majority of politicians are trust-worthy
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 nor less nor more honest than the ordinary citizen?
8. Do you think there is more, less or nor more nor less corruption in the government than in the private enterprise?

*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?

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>None</th>
<th>Few</th>
<th>Some</th>
<th>Many</th>
<th>Do not know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>House of Cards</td>
<td>4,92%</td>
<td>4,92%</td>
<td>34,43%</td>
<td>22,95%</td>
<td>32,79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The West Wing</td>
<td>1,72%</td>
<td>25,86%</td>
<td>29,31%</td>
<td>15,52%</td>
<td>27,58%</td>
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