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# TV genres' moral value: The moral reflection of segmented TV audiences<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims for a deeper understanding of the TV audience's exposure to TV's moral content and the reception of this content through an innovative methodological design. We combine content analysis data on the moral contents of TV genres and survey data on the moral reflection on moral elements offered by these genres among a representative sample of the Dutch TV audience. TV audiences are segmented via latent class analysis into three clusters: information seekers, fiction and entertainment viewers and paucivores. Results show that distinct audience groups differ significantly in moral exposure and moral reflection. The way audiences reflection on moral issues, forms of moral reasoning and insight in human character – is explained through different mechanisms. Particularly the differences between information seekers and fiction and entertainment readers add to our understanding of moral decision-making processes in relation to TV watching.

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## 1. Introduction

The conception of television as a contributor to moral values in society is widely acknowledged. Various academic fields have articulated similar perspectives over the past few years and produce more and more studies showing TV's moral value to society.

On the one hand, academics such as Silverstone (2007), Boltanski (1999), Tester (2001) and Chouliaraki (2013) focus on the political dimension of morality and how TV genres such as news and current affairs do or do not contribute to a moral stance on human suffering. On the other

hand, scholars from two specific academic fields, *cultural studies* and *media psychology*, contribute to understanding the relationship between popular TV and morality. Authors in *cultural studies*, like Hill (2007) and Slade (2002), show that TV can be read as offering various ethical lessons to the viewer. Likewise, media psychologists like Raney (2011), Oliver (2008), and Bilandzic (2011) show with experimental designs various mechanisms at work when audiences consume entertainment products.

Together these studies provide us with convincing insights into the relationship between TV and moral reflection. Yet, all these studies concentrate on *how* television relates to moral reflection and give us little insight into *what* moral insights offered by TV programs are reflected upon by *what* audience. Additionally, most, if not all, of these studies focus on a particular genre or program and therefore cannot be generalized to other genres and programs, hindering a more holistic view of the media. This holistic view is necessary, since the content of TV is interpreted within the whole of what audiences view (Signorielli, 2009).

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To achieve a more holistic understanding of how TV contributes to moral understanding, in this article a comparative perspective on exposure and reflection on moral TV content is presented. The aim of this study then, is to explore the full range of TV genres and the extent to which their moral content is reflected upon by a representative sample of TV audiences. Grounded in previous work on moral content of TV, we will show how TV genres can be defined by distinct characteristics in terms of moral content. The premise is that different types of genres, for example news versus soap opera, differ in moral content in terms of topic, argumentation and people involved. Next, genres' moral characteristics are contrasted with audiences' genre preferences and their moral reflections. Hence, not only do we compare how the moral content of distinct genre categories is received (which moral topics are reflected upon and which are left aside), we also attend to differences among TV audiences. Whilst most audiences watch a large variety of TV genres, genre preferences do structure television viewing habits and media orientations (Signorielli, 2009; Van Eijk & Van Rees, 2000). Therefore, we expect that a different viewing pattern causes reflection on different moral content. Assuming that moral reflections are appropriated into one's stock of moral knowledge, necessary to make moral judgments, it is of vital importance to study what moral characteristics are reflected upon. Please note that we do not set out to make judgments of what is (morally) good or bad TV, but we focus on the content of the audiences' moral reflection on TV. Neither do we attempt to match specific moral messages (such as moral statements of characters in a drama serial like *CSI*) with the content of the audiences' moral reflection. Rather, general moral characteristics of genres, which will be explained in a later section, are contrasted with the audiences' moral reflection.

The research questions are inspired by theoretical viewpoints on literary narratives as this enables a comparison across genres. Philosophers such as Nussbaum (2001) and Rorty (1989) focus on the *what* as well as on the *how* of narratives' capacity to evoke moral reflection. The genre of the narrative is not necessarily of relevance, as it is the narrative character that is of importance. Though the area of inquiry is literary stories, TV can be viewed as a narrative medium and hence an important source evoking moral reflection. The questions that guide our study then are twofold:

- 1: Do various types of television audiences differ in their (a) exposure to moral content and (b) moral reflection, and, if so, how can these differences be characterized?
- 2: To what extent is exposure to moral content related to moral reflection?

To answer these questions, we analyze survey data of a representative sample of the Dutch population, and supplement this with content analysis data on the television genres that these respondents watched. These content analysis data concern an originally qualitative data collection in which for over 160 hrs. of television content was inductively coded for moral characteristics. TV broadcasting in the Netherlands is marked by its international

character. About 30% of the dataset consisted out of programs of international origin (U.S., Canada, U.K., Germany, Belgium, Denmark and Australia). Results are therefore also valid on a global level. The codes acquired in this analysis were subsequently quantified. In the survey, Dutch television viewers were asked about the programs they watch, as well as the moral reflections they engage in when watching. We add the morality scores from the content analysis to the choices of the viewers. While we cannot, and do not claim to, examine how one particular form of moral insight TV presents is actually applied to generate moral reflection, which is done much better using experiments or interviews, this design does allow us to extend the scope of what moral reflection comprises and which audience are engaged in reflection. We believe this study thus contributes to previous work on morality and media by (a) moving beyond specific instances of morality, (b) disentangling moral reflection amongst various audience segments, and (c) providing estimates of how moral TV content relates to such reflection which are generalizable to a national population of television viewers.

## 2. Morality defined

Research into TV and what kind of stories it offers its viewers was kick-started with George Gerbner's (1969, 1998) articulation of TV as one of the most important story-tellers in contemporary society. Though Gerbner formulated his theories decades ago, the idea that TV provides us with valuable lessons on the cultural norms and values, and hence contributes significantly to our enculturation, is still widely acknowledged. Many scholars have devoted their time studying what norms and values TV actually contains. This study also concerns itself with the moral content in TV programs and how audiences receive this content, which makes it necessary to define morality itself. In order to distinguish moral TV content from other material and to compare widely diverging genres such as news and soap opera, we turn to authors who discuss the content literary narratives.

Philosophers such as Rorty (1989) and Nussbaum (2001) have emphasized how literary narratives can bridge the moral gap between the self and others by teaching us empathy and compassion. The literary narrative is thought to enrich the empathic capacities, usually called the compassionate or emphatic imagination. From this perspective, literary narratives have the capacity to shake us up, to evoke a profound emotional experience which generates new insights about others and ourselves. These insights make us understand our own and other individual's feelings, motivations and desires and are viewed as quintessential to moral decision making. Johnson (1993) takes this idea one step further and speaks of moral imagination, which can be defined as: "the ability to imaginatively discern various possibilities for acting within a given situation and to envision the potential help and harm that are likely to result from a given action." (p. 202). Narratives are presented as a laboratory, in which readers can exercise their moral skills (Mar & Oatley, 2008). In this laboratory, readers can practice with moral decisions and

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