

NEURONARRATIVE

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How a Dose of Drama Can Make a Donor Out of You



A new [study](#) suggests that emotional involvement with our favorite television shows might be worth a kidney or two. Organ donation, when depicted favorably in popular television dramas, gets a boost in the public sphere. This might be good or bad, depending on how you look at it.

First, a bit about the study. For some time now research has been showing that television is a potent way to facilitate social learning, which is the tendency of people to model attitudes and behaviors of others under particular conditions. Two conditions are requisite: attention and memory. Engaging television dramas that draw the viewer into their narratives meet both conditions — they absorb attention and catalyze memory formation. When a viewer strongly identifies with a particular character in the drama, the effect is even more potent. (I recently discussed this narrative effect here regarding [smoking](#), and a previous post looked at the [emotional boost](#) TV shows can provide.)

In this case, the research team led by [Susan Morgan](#), associate professor at Purdue University, wanted to know if depictions of organ donation in TV dramas like *CSI*, *Numbers*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *House* would influence learning about organ donation and increase motivation to become a donor. They also wanted to know how, or if, accuracy of the information influences learning and motivation.

Participants were asked to watch a selection of episodes from popular TV dramas with storylines that included both positive and negative depictions of organ donation, and then complete surveys that assessed a range of factors related to how strongly the viewer had been influenced by the storylines (and no small potatoes here; more than 5000 people completed the *House* survey).

The results: viewers who were not organ donors before watching the dramas were more likely to decide to become one if organ donation was portrayed positively and if characters in the show explicitly encouraged it. Viewers who reported emotional involvement with the narrative were significantly more likely to become organ donors. And, finally, viewers

clearly acquired knowledge from the content of each drama – whether it was accurate or not.

And that’s the “depending on how you look at it” part of this. The study is really telling us a couple of different things: emotional involvement with narrative affects the way people think, and supplies knowledge that may very well not be true. Most people would probably agree that organ donation is a social good, and if TV dramas encourage it then all the better – but, the troubling part is that the same dynamic driving the good can also serve up the bad with equal effectiveness. Pseudoscience, vaccine alarmism, and quackery of every flavor proliferates just this way.

Though not a narrative drama per se, here’s a recent *Newsweek* [cover story](#) about the Oprah show that touches on this dynamic operating on a massive scale.



Morgan, S., Movius, L., & Cody, M. (2009). The Power of Narratives: The Effect of Entertainment Television Organ Donation Storylines on the Attitudes, Knowledge, and Behaviors of Donors and Nondonors *Journal of Communication*, 59 (1), 135-151 DOI: [10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01408.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01408.x)

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