“Watch & Learn”

Representation of Illegal Behavior and Obedience to Legal Norms Through the Eyes of Popular Culture, the Case of TV Shows Broadcasted in Israel

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ABSTRACT

Mass media is perhaps the most pervasive influence upon contemporary society. The literature in the field suggests that mass media has two main roles: first, shaping ideas and perceptions, especially concerning issues we lack sufficient knowledge, such as the law; second, reflecting social values, ethics and conceptions. The strong connection between the legal sphere and daily cultural life has given the media an important role in the legal context.

With this theoretical framework in mind, the current research is aimed at illuminating the leading narratives in popular TV shows in Israel regarding law enforcement, obedience to legal norms and their role in governing civil society. By adopting a dual empirical research strategy - analyzing both the messages conveyed in popular culture and the way they are perceived by the viewers - the research addresses the gap in existing research on law and popular culture. This was conducted through content analysis of four of the most popular TV shows in Israel in 2011-2012. The content analysis was complemented by an Internet survey among 500 Israeli respondents, aimed at understanding how viewers perceived the messages conveyed in those shows.

The content analysis pointed at a depiction of an unstable legal world with vague boundaries, controlled by four leading themes present in both American and Israeli shows: (a) illegal acts not resulting in severe punishment, and sometimes even rewarded; (b) a recurrent battle between law and other competing interests, with the latter often trumping the law; (c) unflattering depictions of the police and their competence; and (d) law as an obstacle to problem-solving. Furthermore, three main differences were identified between Israeli and American shows: (a) a weaker emphasis on explaining the illegal acts in Israeli shows; (b) a more radical portrayal of police incompetence in Israeli shows; and (c) a more extreme criticism towards society and its institutions in Israeli shows. This portrayal of the legal world was supported by the survey results: the vast majority of viewers perceived a leading narrative of illegality among the TV characters. Moreover, the findings suggested a correlation between viewing habits and the acceptance of the illegality portrayal, providing more support for the evolving literature on the cultivation effects of mass media.

Interestingly, the leading narratives identified in the research resonated with past sociological studies conducted in Israel concerning public distrust in the police and legal disobedience. By pointing at these connections, the research gives preliminary empirical support for the role of popular media in society, and opens up the gate for future study regarding the actual influences of popular culture on the society in which it functions.