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Fictional Politics on TV: Comparing the Representations of Political Reality in the U.S. Series *The West Wing* and the German Series *Kanzleramt*

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Abstract: It is generally agreed upon that fictional stories can serve as sources for the audience's perceptions of reality. This also includes the political realm. Our paper examines the fictional representation of politics in the U.S. series *The West Wing* and its German adaption, *Kanzleramt*. The comparative content analysis concentrates on political actors and political themes as key parameters of fictional politics. It investigates whether the national political context is reflected in the political dramas. Results show a rather small impact of national contexts. This indicates that the logic of fictionalization levels out national differences in shaping fictional politics.

Keywords: fictionalization of politics, TV-series, The West Wing, Kanzleramt, content analysis, international comparison, fictional entertainment

Blurring the lines between politics and entertainment has been closely observed and critically discussed by numerous scholars from both political science and media and communication studies (e.g., Dörner, 2001; Dörner & Vogt, 2012; Holbert, 2005; Street, 1997; van Zoonen, 2005). The large body of work on the interface of politics and entertainment typically deals with entertaining features in news and public affairs programs (e.g., Reinemann et al., 2012) or with the depiction of politics in non-fictional entertainment such as late-night comedy (e.g., Niven et al., 2003). The growing attention on politics and entertainment also reflects that large shares of the audience are turning away from traditional political information. They are hardly reached by news but rather watch entertainment formats (Pew Research Center, 2012; Krüger, 2013). While there is a rich research tradition dealing with the hybridization of entertainment and political information, there is still a blind spot regarding the *fictional* representation of politics. That we are still lacking knowledge about the typical way politics is addressed in fictional entertainment is even more surprising, as fiction not only

represents a large share of media content, but also as there is sound empirical evidence in media psychology and cultivation theory that fictional content is particularly powerful in shaping the audience's beliefs and attitudes (e.g., Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerrig & Prentice, 1991). Studies on political effects of fictional media content are still rare, but nevertheless indicate an impact of fiction on political perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intents. This applies to TV content in general (e.g., Gerbner et al., 1982, 1984; Morgan, 1986), as well as to genres (e.g., Holbrook & Hill, 2005; Pfau et al., 2001) and single TV series (e.g., Holbert et al., 2003; Mutz & Nir, 2010).

The obvious lack of research on fictional politics by political communication scholars can be attributed to the fact that fictional entertainment and politics have long been conceived as two mutually exclusive concepts. Concentrating on the news media's performance in information dissemination, scholars have left the analysis of politics in fiction to film studies and popular culture analysts. This means disregarding a significant source of political information. This paper argues that we need to advance our knowledge about the representation of politics in fictional TV entertainment. Due to their foci on politics and the realistic appearance of the settings, this especially applies to popular political dramas such as *The West Wing*, *Kanzleramt*, *House of Cards*, and *Borgen*. The paper asks how the political realm is presented in the fictional plots of political dramas. It further investigates whether these plots reflect the factual norms, structures, practices, and the political culture in a given country. The relevance of this question relates to the changes in media use: If political dramas serve as a source of political information, we need to know whether the political realm which serves either as context in which a plot develops or is in the center of the fictional story itself is represented faithfully. We tackle the research questions by analyzing two prominent examples, the U.S. series *The West Wing* and its German adaption *Kanzleramt*.

Politics in fictional entertainment

According to a typology by Holbert (2005) fictional politics can be found in three types of fictional TV-content: 1) "Fictional political dramas" such as *The West Wing* which are considered to be the most explicitly political, 2) "satirical situation comedies" (e.g., *The Simpsons*) and 3) "programs with life world content" which include either sociopolitical messages or "brief snippets of political satire" (Holbert, 2005, p. 444; see also Kleinen-von Königslöw 2013, pp. 42-43). A typology originating from the film studies introduces the differentiation between four types of films according to their political content and political intent (Christensen & Haas, 2005). Even though the typologies rest on slightly different dimensions, Christensen and Haas also identify fictional films with genuinely political plots. In their typology, these films are classified as films with "high political content". The typologies contribute to organizing the extensive and

heterogeneous field of fictional politics according to different degrees of political intensity which already advances the hitherto unstructured field. However, they do not provide information on the content dimension of the representation of politics: What kind of political references are built into the plots, and which of the three dimensions of politics do they relate to? Do they regard policies (particular political issues), politics (competition and power relations) or polity issues (institutional and normative infrastructure), and which overall picture of politics and political actors “doing politics” is constructed in the fictional stories?

In order to reconstruct the general fictional representation of politics, we have to turn to scattered studies from different academic backgrounds. A number of mostly qualitative analyses elaborate on how U.S. films reflect the change of political regimes and paradigms over time and shed light on the main political topics (Christensen & Haas, 2005; Gianos, 1998; Giglio, 2005; Lesske, 2012). In contrast to those comprehensive analyses of U.S. films, another strand of qualitative research focuses on rather specific aspects of fictional politics and examines individual programs or genres only. The subjects include the agricultural reform in Brazil (Hamburger, 2000, on the telenovela *The Cattle King*), gender, race, dialogue, and discourse in *The West Wing* (Rollins & O'Connor, 2003), uncertainty and tensions in politics (Corner & Richardson, 2007, on *The Amazing Mrs. Pritchard*), and the life world of *The Simpsons* (Cantor, 1999). Each of these studies contributes to our understanding of the range of fictional politics, but due to their specific foci, the findings do not allow us to extract a generic picture of politics.

Some predominantly quantitative studies focus on political themes and actors in fictional entertainment. These indicators might be rather crude, but provide an account of these two fundamental aspects of political representation. A comprehensive content analysis by Lichter and colleagues (2000) focuses on prime-time shows in the U.S. between 1955 and 1998. The large share of civil servants and public officials presented in the programs underlines that the political realm finds considerable attention. The programs draw a rather negative picture of politics by characterizing politicians as corrupt and taking a critical perspective on the political system in general. The depictions even worsen in the time period under study with “a sharp increase (...) in portrayals of systematic corruption” (Lichter et al., 2000, p. 102). Van Zoonen and Wring (2012) support these findings for British political TV fiction between 1965 and 2009. They conclude that fictional politics is a men’s business with corruption as a constant companion: “With some exceptions, mostly found in recent drama, the characters and stories in UK political fiction present a rather gloomy understanding of how politics works and what individuals can achieve” (Van Zoonen & Wring, 2012, p. 275).

Quantitative content analyses of politics have also been conducted for single TV series. A study on the TV series *Lindenstraße* concentrates on the episodes during the German national election campaigns between 1987 and 2005 (Eilders &

Nitsch, 2010). This series includes references to the election campaign in the last weeks before the election. Not surprisingly, findings show that the episodes highlight political competition and power relations rather than particular policy decisions or normative aspects. Since not only professional politicians, but also citizens, were shown to be involved in political action, the series is assumed to mobilize participation rather than political cynicism. *The West Wing* has also attracted scholarly attention in quantitative research. Holbert et al., (2005) analyzed the framing of the fictional president Jed Bartlet. Their results indicate a very positive depiction of the fictional politician. Mostly presented in his role as chief executive, Bartlet is portrayed as honest, trustworthy, hardworking, and determined. When presented in his role as a private citizen, he is shown as loving, warm, humorous, and compassionate.

The scattered studies on the fictional representation of politics do not have completely different foci but are based on different designs and samples and concentrate on fictional material of no more than one country at a time. Hence, the studies certainly do not add up to a sound empirical basis from which a consistent picture of the presentation of politics in TV fiction can be drawn. Yet, some insights on the basic features of fictional politics can nevertheless be extracted. The occurrence and particular depiction of political actors has received the most attention. Political themes ranked second. Actors and themes can be considered the two key variables in the analysis of fictional representations of politics. The question of whether or not political reality is reflected in the fictional material is implicitly inherent to most of the studies, but only rarely made explicit. Some scholars refer to real-life events which are reflected in the fictional narratives, but a systematic analysis of the connections between real-world politics and fictional politics is still lacking. It remains unclear whether or not national contexts impact the fictional representations of politics.

Fiction as reflection of political reality?

Since research on political communication has not dealt with the relationship between factual political norms, structures, practices, and political culture on the one side and political fiction on the other side, we need to turn to other research disciplines in order to deepen our understanding of fictional representations of social phenomena.

Fundamental reflections on fiction can be found in literature studies. In the 1930s, Inglis suggested to distinguish between two perspectives in the relationship between literature and reality: “the reflection theory holds that literature reflects society; the control theory, that it shapes society” (Inglis, 1938, p. 526). Although this approach was originally meant to explain printed fiction, it may also be applied to fictional TV content. Generally speaking, all fictional media content can be seen as a source of clues to the society it generates them from. Literature sociology and cultural studies, for instance, claim that fictional narratives are

always construed against the background of the real world and reflect the respective values, customs, and beliefs of a time and nation (Löwenthal, 1961; Williams, 1977): “Fiction is not a substitute for systematically accumulated, certified knowledge. But it provides the social scientist with a wealth of sociologically relevant material, with manifold clues and points of departure for sociologically relevant material” (Coser, 1963, p. 3). Fictional texts are therefore considered to be socially determined cultural products.

This theoretical assumption is based on considerations about both authors and recipients of fictional media content. The authors are part of the society they live in and subject to the impact of societal structures. This necessarily leads to reflections of social reality in literary and other fictional works (e.g., Bensman & Gerver, 1982). Recipients of fictional media content furthermore “reconstrue the world of a fiction (...) as being the closest possible to the reality [they] know” (Ryan, 1980, p. 406). In order to understand the story and immerse into the fictional plot, the fictional world needs to contain recognizable aspects of reality (Luhmann, 2000). This means that the plots must take place in a fictional setting that resembles familiar structures of the real world. Fictional worlds are thus always construed and reconstrued against the background of the real world. For the genre of soap operas, Ang (1991) points out the importance of the familiar domestic setting and the emotional realism of soap operas which facilitates identification with the fictional characters (also see Klaus, 1998). The popularity of soap operas can be explained by a considerable degree of realism which generates the audiences’ enjoyment of recognition (O’Connor & Klaus, 2000). This can be applied to any sort of fictional media content showing not only fantasy components, but also realism components.

However, content analyses of fictional material on certain characteristics of social reality (e.g., violence, gender distribution) regularly highlight discrepancies between fictional representations and factual characteristics. Certainly, evidence for both reflection and distortion can be found—even in a single fictional work—and it needs to be examined which aspects of social reality are reflected and which are disregarded or distorted. For the fictional depiction of journalism in novels from the U.S. and Germany, Nitsch (2011) showed that the structural conditions of journalism (e.g., economic conditions and organizational structures) were largely reflected, whereas the daily routines of the fictional journalists showed a highly distorted image in favor of an exciting plot. It can be assumed that this is also true for politics: The fictional plot is embedded in the political system the respective national audience is familiar with and thus reflects specific national characteristics.

The review of the state of the art on politics in fiction shows that there is no discernable line of research devoted to identifying the basic features of the representation of politics in fiction. Neither the theoretical approaches in literature sociology and cultural studies nor the empirical results in the scattered studies on

political references in fiction suffice as a basis from which to develop assumptions or even directional hypotheses for an empirical study in this field. Since we cannot draw from existing research on the relation of political fact and fiction, we start out with a rather general research question aiming at the reconstruction of the fictional representation of politics: *Which basic dimensions of the political realm are addressed and which particular characteristics of a nation's political norms, structures, practices and political culture are reflected in the fictional plot and in the setting?*

The first part of the question aims at identifying political actors and political themes which have been addressed as key dimensions of political representations in previous research. We ask which institutions and individuals are shown to pursue policies, to take part in the political power struggle related to the concept of politics, and to refer to the normative infrastructure associated with the polity concept. We further ask which sorts of themes are addressed in the plot and how they relate to politics, polity and policies as the three dimensions of the political realm. We do not expect that fictional themes or types of actors directly correspond to factual events and actors, because fictional plots follow a particular logic that does not adhere to real world events.

The second part of the research question regards the link between fact and fiction. Since political fiction does not usually intend to stage historical reality in terms of retelling the life of real political actors and political events (see films like *All the Presidents' Men* and *JFK*), but rather constructs imaginary plots to take place in a realistic setting, it is only partially expedient to compare factual politics and fiction. Fictional entertainment cannot be expected to reflect the factual mechanism of the power struggle, because the objectives of entertainment do not encompass explanation. However, it may hint at them (Dörner, 2006). The political norms, structures, practices and political culture in Germany or the U.S. may serve as background against which the fictional plot develops. So, if anything may be expected to be reflected in fiction, it is the conditions under which political action takes place. This includes norms, structures, practices, and political culture. In line with research on representations of social reality, we use "political reality" as an umbrella term to include these aspects, even though this terminological decision might be mistaken to indicate a naïve approach in an epistemological sense.

A promising way of assessing the reflection of political reality in fiction is to compare the fictional representations of structural conditions between two different political systems. If the features of the political system shape fictional stories, the fictional representations of politics in different countries are likely to differ. In this study we compare fictional representations of politics between Germany and the U.S. These two countries were chosen because they differ sufficiently, which facilitates examining the impact of the structural conditions. The fictional representations should reflect these differences if political reality

affects the fictional stories.

In light of the maturing comparative research tradition (Gurevitch & Blumler, 2004) with ever-increasing numbers of cases and sophisticated most-different or most-similar designs, the comparative design in this study is rather simple. Its intention is to identify the effects of national context conditions on the fictional representations of politics in political dramas. In the typology of cross-national research by Kohn (1989) this study would qualify as a 'nation as context' study. Kohn distinguishes four types of studies according to the purpose of the comparison. The 'nation as context' studies intend to test whether the findings can be generalized¹ (also see Esser, 2013). This also implies that they investigate how structural conditions affect certain social or political phenomena. The studies are set out to "ascertain whether similar or dissimilar processes occur in diverse nations" (Kohn, 1989, p. 24). Applied to the comparison of fictional politics in different nations, this strategy enables us to assess how national specifics affect the fictional representations of political systems in political dramas: What are the differences in the depiction of political actors, their work routines and their reactions to special challenges as presented in German vs. U.S. political fiction?

Germany and the U.S. have frequently been subjects of comparisons. They both are modern Western democracies, yet the U.S. media system is classified as a liberal model, whereas Germany is considered to represent a democratic-corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Regarding the possible reflections of the political system in the fictional representations of politics, they show a number of distinct features. We focus on the few features that refer to context characteristics and can be considered to become visible in a fictional story. Since the U.S. is a presidential system and Germany is a representative system, we expect a more prominent role of the president in political dramas of the U.S. than of Germany (H1). The emphasis on the president in the U.S. is reinforced by the commercialized media system which not only relies on personalization but also directs a great deal of attention to the private life of politicians. Therefore, we secondly expect an emphasis on private aspects in political dramas of the U.S. (H2). Further structural differences between Germany and the U.S. regard the number of relevant political parties. While there is a multi-party system in Germany, the U.S. is a two-party system. This is expected to result in a relevance assignment to more political parties in the political process in German fiction (H3). Finally, there are differences regarding the significance of political public relations. In Germany, where the government mainly needs the support of the political parties, political PR is not very prominent in government communications compared to presidential systems. In contrast, U.S. politics heavily relies on public support and much more effort goes into political public relation practices of the government

¹ In contrast to this objective, 'nation as objects' studies emphasize learning about a particular country, 'nation as unit of analysis' studies see individual nations as cases of a larger entity sharing a particular feature, and 'transnational research' studies see nations as components of larger international systems.

(Pfetsch, 2001). Due to this difference, we expect higher degrees of attention to political public relations in U.S. fiction (H4).

Method

Sample material

In order to reconstruct the fictional representations of politics and to detect reflections of the national political systems, we analyzed the series *The West Wing* as an U.S. political drama and *Kanzleramt* as its German counterpart. Both series explicitly address politics. They show the fictional inner life in the respective government headquarters of the U.S. and Germany. The series focus on the backstage of politics, which is not usually visible in news formats (Pompper, 2003). Created by Aaron Sorkin and aired on NBC from 1999 to 2006, *The West Wing* features fictional Democratic president Jed Bartlet and his administration. *The West Wing*'s popularity is documented by excellent ratings, numerous awards, newspaper articles, and scholarly publications (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2006; Rollins & Connor, 2003; Williams, 2011). Political experts were consulted while developing the series in order to draw a realistic picture of the White House (Pompper, 2003). *The West Wing*'s realism is indicated through its use for civic education purposes (Beavers, 2003; Moulton, 2003) and serious discussions of the plot among political scientists (Riegert, 2007; Skewes, 2009).

The West Wing served as prototype for the German *Kanzleramt*. Created by Hans-Christoph Blumenberg and Martin E. Süßkind, *Kanzleramt* was aired on the public service channel ZDF in 2005. The series stands out because it avoids the most typical subjects in German political fiction: the "Third Reich" and local political affairs (Dörner, 2006). The plot follows fictional chancellor Andreas Weyer and his staff through various political and private experiences. Even though similarities with former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder from the Social Democratic party have been highlighted (Dörner, 2006; Kinkel, 2005), the strictly neutral policy of public service television in Germany does not allow for a clear identification of the party in office (Kaiser, 2004).

Since *The West Wing* served as a template for *Kanzleramt*, equivalence of the two series, which is required in comparative research is not in question—particularly since we concentrated on manifest content and did not assess the reception of the series which may be different in different cultures. The equivalence of the two political dramas is further ensured through the analyzed seasons. Both seasons under study were aired in 2004/2005 which ensures a rather similar background of world politics. The analysis includes the sixth season of *The West Wing* (22 episodes) and the first season of *Kanzleramt* (12 episodes).

Measures

The comparative design is based on a quantitative content analysis. It is designed to assess the relative presence of national features representing the political systems of Germany and the U.S. which serve as settings for the series. The standardization of the coding process ensures reliability, traceability, and repeatability. By opting for a quantitative analysis, we tacitly accepted that the architecture of the story and the underlying message of the narrative are disregarded. The trade-off is reasonable because we still lack thorough knowledge of how politics is conveyed via fiction. To first conceive the rough structure of the fictional representation of politics on a larger scale is mandatory before one can move on to more sophisticated analyses of the picture of politics drawn in fiction.

The coding unit was an individual scene, which was defined as a semantic unit ending with a change of actors. The analyzed episodes comprise a total of 2068 scenes, allowing for a comprehensive and detailed analysis of the representation of politics in the two political dramas. The detailed coding of the material on the basis of individual scenes offers the benefit that even minor aspects in the representation of politics are considered. Thus, all political references which might shape the audience's beliefs about politics are captured.

For the purpose of this paper politics is defined as aggregate of institution-based processes generating collectively binding decisions. Every scene that showed a political actor (either as presented or as referred to) was considered for the analysis. Political actors were defined as holders of political office or any other actors who performed political actions in the broadest sense—such as discussing political issues or candidates. We distinguished between four types of political actors: genuine political actors (e.g., the President, the Chancellor and members of the government), journalists, ordinary citizens, and other actors. Set in the heart of the political system, it is not surprising that the two series encompass a total of 2027 scenes (98%) complying with the political actor criterion. Due to the different number of episodes of the two series the 2027 political scenes divide into 1308 for *The West Wing* and 719 for *Kanzleramt*.

For each political scene, we coded the centrality of politics (three values: high, medium, low) and four thematic dimensions: polity for the institutional and normative infrastructure, policy for particular political issues, and politics for competition and power relations, plus a dimension that refers to the private life-roles of actors. Since the fictional representation of politics heavily relies on the depiction of political actors, we coded a maximum of five political actors per scene. We further coded the political actions executed by these actors. We distinguished between seven different political actions, including for example “discussing political strategies,” “mediating political messages” and “political media use”. This allows for analyzing whether politics is predominantly shown as a decision and negotiation process or as symbolic actions. We also coded whether the political actors were portrayed in backstage situations (e.g., working in their offices, negotiating in meetings not open to the public) or in front-stage situations typical

for news programming (e.g., talking at press conferences, visiting other countries). The five coders were randomly assigned to six or seven episodes of the two series. Intercoder-reliability (according to Holsti) across all variables was at .83²; intercoder-reliability for unitizing the episodes into relevant scenes was at .90.

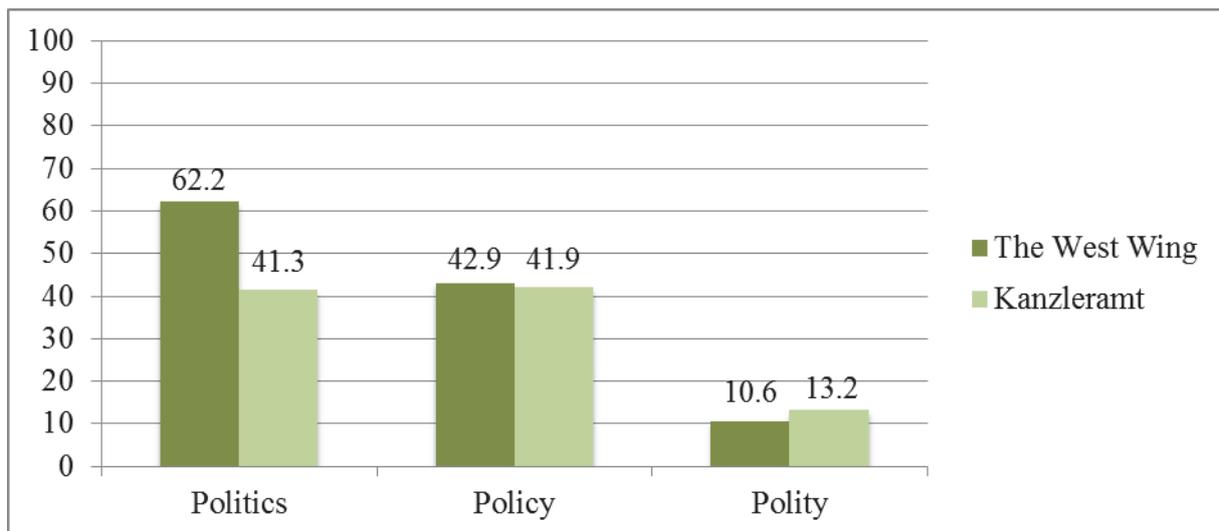
Results

Results from the content analysis of the 2027 scenes confirm our assertion that politics play a crucial role in both *The West Wing (TWW)* and *Kanzleramt (KA)*. However, politics are even more dominant in *TWW*, with 80% of the scenes scoring high on the centrality of politics. These scenes are usually set in the institutional workplaces and deal with the political day-by-day life of the fictional characters. In *KA*, comparable scenes only account for 63%. Scenes with a moderate degree of centrality, featuring both political and non-political topics, account for 14% in the German series and 8% in the U.S. series; a low degree of political centrality, which means a predominance of non-political aspects, is also more common in *KA* (23.3%) than in *TWW* (12.4%), ($\chi^2(2) = 66.11$; $p \leq .001$; Cramer's $V = .18$). This finding indicates that compared to their U.S. counterpart, fictional politicians in the German series are more frequently involved in non-political action (see also H2).

Notwithstanding the key role of politics in both series, politics are rarely shown to take place in public. While news coverage tends to show political actors speaking in public or giving interviews, only 10% of the scenes in *TWW* and 16% of the scenes in *KA* are set in places accessible to the public ($\chi^2(1) = 14.45$; $p \leq .001$; Cramer's $V = .08$). *TWW* and *KA* alike thus offer a backstage view of politics (see also Pompper, 2003). In this perspective, politics is presented as a hardly accessible sphere that excludes ordinary citizens.

This result fits in with the strong presence of the politics dimension (see Figure 1; see Table A1 (appendix) for an overview of the subthemes of politics, policy, and polity). The negotiation processes between the parties and the power struggle between political camps within a party do not usually take place in public. Regarding the differences between the series, *TWW* shows a considerably larger share of politics than *KA* (62.2% vs. 41.3%) with elections receiving particular attention: They account for 45% of the politics domain (*KA*: 7.7%). This can be explained by the specifics of the plot in the sixth season where the Bartlet administration comes to an end and the election campaign moves into focus. Other recurring politics' subthemes regard public relations (19.2% in *TWW*, 30.3% in *KA*) and human resources development (10.1% in *TWW*, 26.3% in *KA*).

² Centrality of politics of scenes .82; political dimensions: polity .70, policy .96, politics .84; private issues .88; accessibility of the political world .92; political actors .81, political actions .67.

Figure 1: Political themes in *The West Wing* and *Kanzleramt* (in %)

The West Wing: $n = 1308$ scenes; *Kanzleramt*: $n = 719$ scenes

Politics: $\chi^2(1) = 81.41$; $p \leq .001$; Cramer's $V = .20$; Policy: $\chi^2(1) = 0.20$; $p = ns$; Cramer's $V = .01$;

Polity: $\chi^2(1) = 3.23$; $p = ns$; Cramer's $V = .04$

Regarding the relative attention to individual policies, foreign relations rank first in both series. They account for 48% of the policy issues in *TWW* and 28% in *KA*. The strong focus on foreign policies which is especially prominent in the U.S. series, emphasizes the international scope which implies a great deal of discussions and negotiations with other countries. The other policy areas vary according to the plots of the episodes and hardly show any similarities between the two series (see appendix, Table A1). However, domestic policies which account for most of the parliamentary debates in real-life politics are assigned a comparably small role.

In both *TWW* and *KA*, polity themes are addressed in roughly 10% of the scenes. It is interesting to note that even though polity refers to the institutional infrastructure on the basis of which political practice is exercised, polity questions play a rather insignificant role in the fictional political life. Actors are shown to be parts of the institutions of a country and they underlie the respective norms and values, but these structural conditions are rarely explicitly contested or supported in the plot. In the few cases in which polity issues are addressed, we found international differences: Polity in *TWW* mainly regards laws and legal norms (33.3%), whereas in *KA* it primarily regards political parties and parliamentary groups (41.1%) (see also H3).

A total of 6310 political actors were coded: 4172 in *TWW* (average of 3.2 actors per scene), 2138 in *KA* (average of 3.0 actors per scene). Genuine political actors (politicians and their entourage) clearly dominate all other types of political actors in both series (see Table 1). Despite of our broad definition of political actors, citizens, journalists and other political actors are only rarely shown to take part in politics. This is partly due to the plot's confinement to the inner circle of politics, but should not rule out any visibility. This critical view is supported by Moulton

(2003) who examined students' reactions to *TWW*. The students disliked the lack of attention to citizens' participation and complained about the disregard of demonstrations, voting and politically active and interested young people in the series.

Table 1: Political actors (in %)

	<i>The West Wing</i> n = 4172	<i>Kanzleramt</i> n = 2138
Genuine political actors	88.9	82.4
President/Chancellor	15.7	30.0
Government/Members of Government	5.3	5.3
Chief of Staff	10.9	14.2
Office staff	41.9	34.6
Other actors	26.3	16.0
Media/Journalists	4.7	6.6
Citizens	3.8	7.8
Other political actors	2.6	3.0

Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

$\chi^2(3) = 62.27; p \leq .001; \text{Cramer's } V = .10$

The genuine political actors deserve special consideration, because they are in the center of attention ($n = 3709$ for *TWW*; $n = 1764$ for *KA*). Office staff accounts for the largest share (41.9% resp. 34.6%) which points to the significance of the day-to-day political business. This includes people conducting research on political topics or talking to oppositional party members, as well as members of interest groups. Together with the chief of staff, they account for roughly half of the genuine political actors in both the U.S. and the German TV series.

In both series, politics is clearly a men's business, which confirms previous findings on fictional politicians (e.g., Van Zoonen & Wring, 2012). Female staff members account for roughly one fourth of the characters (24.0% in *TWW*, 22.6% in *KA*) and tend to be confined to undemanding jobs (see also Levin, 2003). This is true especially for *KA*. In *TWW*, C.J. Cregg is the only female person with an influential position. Working as the press secretary, she takes over as chief of staff after Leo McGarry's heart attack.

In two-thirds of the cases, the genuine political actors are portrayed exercising some sort of political action ($n = 2490$ for *TWW*; $n = 1106$ for *KA*)—mostly engaging in discussions on particular political strategies (see Table 2). In *TWW* the discussion of campaign issues ranks second, whereas it is largely disregarded in *KA* (2.0%). This difference can be attributed to the above mentioned election focus in

the sixth season of *TWW*. In total, both series show a dominance of discussions on strategies, campaigns and other political actors that account for more than half of the political actions. This underlines the dominance of politics over both policy and polity addressed above. It also points to the prominent role of conflict and personalization in fiction.

Table 2: Political actions of genuine political actors (in %)

	<i>The West Wing</i> n = 2490	<i>Kanzleramt</i> n = 1106
discussing political strategies	27.5	28.3
discussing campaign issues	21.4	2.0
speaking about political competitors/allies	9.6	23.4
mediating political messages	8.6	10.9
daily routines of political work	9.3	6.3
political media use	4.8	5.2
other political action	18.8	23.9

Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

$\chi^2(6) = 314.62$; $p \leq .001$; Cramer's $V = .30$

With regard to real-life differences in the political systems of the U.S. and Germany, we formulated four hypotheses. The first hypothesis referred to the presidential democracy in the U.S. as opposed to the representative democracy in Germany. We expected that the president is assigned a more prominent role in *TWW* than the chancellor in *KA*. However, President Bartlet accounts for only 15.7% of all genuine political actors in *TWW* (n= 3709) whereas Chancellor Weyer accounts for 30.0% in *KA* (n= 1764), ($\chi^2(1) = 151.06$; $p \leq .001$; Cramer's $V = .17$). Contrary to our assumptions, *KA* puts more emphasis on the single actor in charge of the country than *TWW* and H1 is thus not confirmed.

The powerful position of the president is reinforced by U.S. news coverage practices. Due to the commercialized media system the president was not only expected to attract a greater deal of attention in *TWW* as compared to *KA*. He is also likely to be portrayed with an emphasis on private aspects (H2). Although political aspects, mostly professional work routines, clearly outweigh private aspects in both series, we found slight differences for private topics: In *TWW* private themes are addressed in roughly one third of the scenes (33.0%, n= 1308), in *KA* they account for almost half of the scenes (46.7%, n= 719), ($\chi^2(1) = 37.50$; $p \leq .001$; Cramer's $V = .14$). This finding contradicts the image of German TV to be particularly sober compared to the U.S. entertainment industry. H2 has to be rejected, since private themes are actually more common in the German series. Private themes in both political dramas mainly result from the interaction between

the political leaders and their families. In *KA*, the relationship of the chancellor and single parent Weyer and his 17-year-old daughter is a recurring theme; in *TWW*, it regards Bartlet's wife and three daughters. Health issues are another substantial component of the plots (e.g., Bartlet's multiple sclerosis, Leo McGarry's heart-attack, and Weyer's critical situation due to a virus he caught in Africa).

Our third hypothesis referred to the multi-party system in Germany as opposed to the two-party system in the U.S. We expected this structural difference to result in a relevance assignment to more political parties in the fictional political process in *KA*. The relevance of political parties was firstly coded via the polity issues. In *KA*, 5.4% of the 719 scenes deal with political parties and parliamentary groups, in *TWW* this is true for only 0.8% of the scenes ($n= 1308$). The fact that political parties and parliamentary groups are more frequently addressed in *KA* than in *TWW* ($\chi^2(1) = 42.71$; $p \leq .001$; Cramer's $V = .15$) is in line with our assumption. A second indicator for the relevance of political parties regards the political actions of the fictional political actors. In *KA*, "speaking about political competitors and allies" (23.4%) is ranked second of all political actions ($n= 1106$). It includes talking about other genuine political actors and expressing opinions on individual politicians and political parties. With 9.6%, this form of political action plays a rather low role in *TWW* ($n= 2490$), ($\chi^2(1) = 121.67$; $p \leq .001$; Cramer's $V = .18$). The different emphasis points to differences in the party systems in Germany and the U.S. and might reflect the necessity of coming to terms with more political parties. H3 is confirmed.

Our last hypothesis refers to differences in the relevance of political PR. Due to the greater significance of political PR in the U.S., which results from the focus on public support, we expected that higher degrees of attention are given to political PR in the U.S. series (H4). The relevance of political PR was coded via politics issues and the results show hardly any differences between the two political dramas. In 12.5% of all scenes in *KA* ($n= 719$) political PR was addressed; in *TWW* 11.9% of the scenes ($n= 1308$) referred to political PR ($\chi^2(1) = 0.15$; $p > .05$, n.s.; Cramer's $V = .01$). H4 is therefore not confirmed.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper argued that fictional entertainment has to be considered as an additional source of political information for a growing share of the audience. In order to examine how fictional stories communicate politics to the audience, we conducted a content analysis of the U.S. series *The West Wing* and its German counterpart *Kanzleramt*. Being political dramas, both series are set in the heart of the national governments and centered around politics. They focus on the backstage of politics rather than on public appearances and symbolic action which distinguishes them from the way politics is conveyed via news programs. While news tends to concentrate on the "who, what, when and where", but omit the "why

and how” of politics (Pompper, 2003, p. 18), these fictional series provide insights into a political sphere largely unknown to the audience. *The West Wing* and *Kanzleramt* hence pick up where journalism stops.

The content analysis concentrated on actors and themes representing the key parameters of the fictional depiction of politics. In line with the series’ focus on the backstage of politics, political elites and their staff account for the main share of political actors. They are predominantly engaged in discussions about strategies, campaigns, or other political actors. In dominating the political actions, these discussions illustrate the complex and tedious process of reaching consented decisions on candidates or policies. The discussions furthermore document a focus on the politics dimension rather than on aspects regarding policies and polity. In terms of political themes, fictional politics very much resembles a strategic power game taking place in a hermetic sphere without citizens. It is worth noting, however, that unlike other fictional programs (Lichter et al., 2000; van Zoonen & Wring, 2012) the series do not address corruption and poor performance within the political elites. By large, these results are true for both *The West Wing* and *Kanzleramt*.

In order to determine whether the fictional stories reflect the structural conditions of politics as suggested by the reflection thesis (Inglis, 1938), the analysis was set up as a cross-national comparison. The results showed only few differences in line with our assumptions. The multi-party system in Germany was reflected through the particular attention directed to parties and parliamentary groups in *Kanzleramt* as compared to *The West Wing*. Moreover, “speaking about political competitors/allies” was more common in the German series, too. The findings on further differences in the political systems did not support our hypotheses. This sparse evidence for a reflection of nation-specific political structures in the political dramas raises the question of whether the fictionalization of politics follows a particular logic that impedes the reflection of real political conditions. Exploring the rules of these transformation processes would mean a significant advancement in this field of research. This is especially true for political contexts where we assert a significant lack of theoretical approaches on the relation between reality and fiction.

Further desiderata regard the scope of empirical research on fictional representations of politics. *The West Wing* and *Kanzleramt* are only two, and moreover very obvious examples for the fictional depiction of politics. Our analyses may be taken as case studies which highlight typical characteristics, but may not be generalized. This particularly holds true for generalizing the findings for different genres. They strictly relate to political dramas. In order to deepen our understanding of political representations in fictional TV-entertainment in a more general manner, analyses of a broad range of genres are necessary. This especially regards programs with fewer and less obvious political references.

Finally, future studies should go beyond analyzing the key parameters and include the more implicit political messages conveyed in fictional entertainment. More sophisticated measures, suited to be applied to large samples have to be developed to assess these evaluative dimensions of the picture of politics in fiction. The implications of fictional politics for a general support of the political system and for opinion formation on specific policies in the audience can only be identified if political communication research incorporates the representation of politics in fiction into its research agenda.

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Appendix

Table A1: Top five subthemes in *The West Wing* and *Kanzleramt* (in %)

<i>The West Wing</i>	<i>Kanzleramt</i>
Politics	
n = 813	n = 297
elections, campaigns (44.6)	public relations (30.3)
public relations (19.2)	human resources development (26.3)
human resources development (10.1)	mediation of interests (13.5)
coordination, decision (8.2)	compromises, consensus (8.1)
mediation of interests (4.9)	elections, campaigns (7.7)
Policy	
n = 561	n = 301
foreign policy (47.8)	foreign policy (28.2)
health policy (6.8) financial policy (6.8)	financial policy (19.3)
---	economic policy (15.9)
defense policy (6.2)	security policy (11.3)
research and development policy (6.1)	EU-policy (7.6)
Polity	
n = 138	n = 95
laws and legal norms (33.3)	parties, parliamentary groups (41.1)
parliament, congress (18.1)	government (17.9)
international norms and treaties (8.7)	parliament, congress (7.4)
government (8.0)	further political institutions (6.3)
parties, parliamentary groups (7.2)	laws and legal norms (5.3) upper house of parliament, house of representatives (5.3)