Abortion Representations in Television and Film

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What influences people’s views on abortion?

- Personal experiences
- Family & friends
- Religious community
- Media
- Education
- Policies & resources
- Other
What do people say influences their views on abortion?

- Personal experiences: 14%
- Religious community: 32%
- Family & friends: 6%
- Education: 21%
- Policies & resources: 21%
- Media (TV and Film Representations): 5%
- Other: 21%

Pew Center, 2009 Annual Religion and Public Life Survey
Depictions in TV, film, internet, news, music, books, magazines...

• ... influence and reinforce beliefs

"Although a single exposure to a particular message isn't likely to change someone's opinion on any particular topic, continued exposure to media messages will help shape points of view over time."

• Average American watches:
  – 5 hours/day of TV
  – Children: 1200 hours/year of TV
  – 30 movies/year

1. www.understandmedia.com
2. BLS American Time Use Survey 2013
Many films and TV shows address abortion
TV and Film can Influence Abortion Beliefs

• Fictional representations can impact real-life attitudes
• Subjects (n=194) who watched a favorable abortion film were more likely to support legal abortion scenarios than those who watched unrelated film

Mulligan & Habel 2009 Soc Sci Q
How often and how is abortion mentioned in TV and film?

- Since 1916, 310 abortion plotlines

Pregnancy outcomes by decade (n=302)

65% resolved with abortion  
55% resolved with abortion  

9% adoption (vs. 1% reality)

Sisson and Kimport 2014 *Contraception*
Portrayal of Abortion as “Dangerous”

- 9% risk of death from abortion vs. <0.0006% reality

Sisson and Kimport 2014 Contraception
Stigma, Silence and Secrecy
Social Support around Decision
Social Support around Decision
Interactions with the Health Care System
Interactions with the Health Care System

• Positive experiences
  – Friday Night Lights
  – Parenthood
Common themes

• Fictional media representations of abortion tap into issues of stigma
  – Reinforce stigma with shame/secrecy
  – Debunk stigma with humor
• Positive and negative feelings about abortion can be traced to experiences surrounding the abortion (i.e. stigma, social support) as they can in real life
• Minimal attention to logistical barriers of abortion
• Decision making is often about career goals
  – Not reflective of broad range of women’s experiences
Abortion in TV and Film

• Fictional representations can both reflect reality and perpetuate myths.
• Entertainment media has potential to help destigmatize and normalize abortion experiences.