Political fact or political fiction? The agenda-setting impact of the political fiction series Borgen on the public and news media

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Abstract: Politicotainment and democratainment are concepts used to identify the relevance of popular culture for citizenship. Among the most prominent examples of these concepts are political fiction series. Merging political facts with fictional narratives, such series provide a unique opportunity to engage the audience with political matters in an entertaining way. But can these series also affect the agenda of the public and the news media? Based on aggregate-level data of Google search queries and news-media content, the current study examines the agenda-setting effects of the political fiction series *Borgen*. Time-series analyses show that only a few *Borgen* episodes affected the public agenda and even fewer the news media agenda. Evidence is also found for negative patterns. Thus, we should be careful not to overestimate the impact of political fiction in terms of agenda-setting effects: It occasionally has agenda-setting effects but more often not.

Keywords: agenda-setting, intermedia agenda-setting, political fiction, public agenda, media agenda, time-series analysis, politicotainment, democratainment

1 Introduction

Media consumption is increasingly driven by citizens' inherent content preferences (Prior, 2007), which eventually has caused a growing number of news-disconnected citizens (Blekesaune, Elvestad, and Aalberg, 2012). A range of polit-

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ical entertainment genres have stepped in, though, and may reconnect the unengaged audience with the public sphere that they would otherwise drop out from (Riegert, 2007). These developments have been captured in concepts, such as "democratainment" (Hartley, 2004) or "politicotainment"; the latter being defined as "the ways in which politics and political life are interpreted, negotiated and represented by the entertainment industry" (Riegert, 2007, p. 1).

The current study is rooted within the line of literature that claims popular culture has a strong political relevance. This research has demonstrated that political citizenship is also sparked by entertaining media formats (Nærland, 2019; Van Zoonen, 2005). This may, for example, happen through the active interpretation of content and subsequent identity formation (Hermes, 2005) by learning the basic practices of citizenship through entertainment shows (Hartley, 2004), or through the affective processes that are employed by entertainment media (Van Zoonen, 2005). Altogether, popular culture and entertainment encourage an emotional dimension of citizenship that may involve people in politics in a playful manner. This role of infotainment, however, is too often neglected.

Dramatized fiction is a prominent form of political entertainment that may encourage such involvement. It allows audiences to reflect and fantasize about political processes and topics in a pleasurable way (Riegert, 2007; Van Zoonen, 2005). The current study systematically analyzes the content and agenda-setting effects of one of the most prominent political fiction series of the past decades: *Borgen*.

Borgen is a textbook example of politicotainment because it exemplifies "that political information and entertainment are not mutually exclusive" (Nitsch, Jandura, and Bienhaus, 2019, p. 18); rather the opposite is true, because *Borgen* has been found to be of the same democratic quality as traditional TV news (Nitsch et al., 2019). *Borgen* was inspired by real political events and had the ambition to adequately reflect the political process (see Baym, 2017). This makes it, potentially, a powerful platform for informing and involving its audience with political matters; indeed, people may perceive it as 'real'.

Making politics salient, interesting, and understandable—due to its compelling narratives—political fiction potentially motivates citizens to become engaged with "real-life" politics (Hoewe and Sherrill, 2019; Van Zoonen, 2007). However, political fiction often presents a non-substantive view of politics by focusing solely on strategy and conflict rather than on policy (Nitsch et al., 2019), which could turn citizens off politics (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). To assess the real-world impact that the series may have had, we analyze one potential outcome: the agenda-setting effects of its specific episodes on the public agenda and news media agenda. Did the public and the news media pay more attention to a specific topic when this topic was covered in *Borgen*? Of course, agenda-setting is only

one of the many consequences that political entertainment may have. Therefore, we hope that this study will be a stepping-stone for future research to address the impact that fiction—or politicotainment more specifically—may have for democratic citizenship (see, e. g., Doona, 2016; Hermes, 2005; Van Zoonen, 2005).

2 Theory

The genre of political fiction

Political fiction is characterized by a high degree of political intensity (i. e., featuring political issues and political characters) and a high degree of realism in the portrayal of politics (i. e., taking place in the 'real' Parliament and the current time) (Eilders and Nitsch, 2015). This exactly characterizes *Borgen*, making it a textbook example of the political fiction genre. Birgitte Nyborg is the central character of the series and in that role became the first female Prime Minister in the history of Denmark. Thereby, she is a rare character within the political fiction genre (see, e. g., Holbert et al., 2005; Phalen, Kim, and Osellame, 2012), as the main political figures are "mostly plain men of uncertain age – around 40 or over" (Van Zoonen and Wring, 2012, p. 274).

Simply due to its format, the "fictionalization of politics" requires a presentation that is more manageable and less chaotic than the real world of politicians (Wodak, 2010). In British political fiction, it emerged that the dominant theme is often the working of the political machinery (Van Zoonen and Wring, 2012). So, the stories are usually more framed from a political strategic than from a political substantive perspective. Such non-substantive but strategic views of politics may eventually turn citizens off from politics because this type of framing makes them cynical according to research on regular forms of political communication (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997). A clear example would be the American version of *House of Cards* (Delledonne, 2018).

Borgen, instead, provides a more substantive example of political fiction (Nitsch et al., 2019). The reason is that *Borgen* was produced as part of a public broadcasting duty and, therefore, had to "simultaneously entertain and educate, not just in overall concept, but in each episode. For *Borgen* specifically, the goal was to 'explore how power is exercised in Denmark, and translate the knowledge into dramatic form' (Hammerich, 2015, p. 22)" (in Baym, 2017, p. 18). As such, a full-time researcher participated in the writing team to provide factually correct information about actual political processes to the storylines. Given this focus on actual politics, rather than only on the strategy and horse-race that are involved (Nitsch et al., 2019), *Borgen* arguably could have a substantial societal impact.

Agenda-setting effects of political fiction on the public

Previous research found that fictional programs influence political attitudes. They do so by weakening the relationship between one's initial political positioning (i. e., ideology) and subsequent policy opinions (Igartua and Barrios, 2012; Slater, Rouner, and Long, 2006), eventually aligning these with the fictional narrative. This has even been demonstrated concerning deep-seated issues such as abortion (Mulligan and Habel, 2011), the death penalty (Mutz and Nir, 2010; Slater et al., 2006), and gender norms (Swigger, 2017). The question remains whether other effects known from political communication research also apply to content consisting of *explicitly* fictional narratives. We investigate this potential regarding agenda-setting theory. Almost cliché, research has shown that

> *The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about* (Cohen, 1963, p. 13)

Following (first-level) agenda-setting theory, people take increasing amounts of media attention as a cue for which topics are pressing at the moment (McCombs, 2005). But does this also apply to the saliency of topics in explicitly fictional television programming?

Agenda-setting theory, traditionally, assumes that public opinion regarding which issues are societally relevant is partly determined by how prominent topics are on a consonant media agenda (McCombs and Shaw, 1972): When topics are salient within a wide range of news media, this is likely to reach a large share of the population and may thus have an aggregate-level effect on the public agenda. One may question whether one fiction series (or individual episodes of it) is able to exercise an agenda-setting effect similar to a consonant media agenda. Research has shown that the film *The Day After*, by itself, increased public salience of nuclear war after its broadcast (Feldman and Sigelman, 1985). Similarly, two satire episodes determined the public agenda of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) in the Dutch context (Boukes, 2019). These examples have in common that they had a large audience share and, thus, could also reach a large share of the national population. Within the Danish context, *Borgen* was also very popular and attracted about 1.5 million viewers to every episode according to TNS Gallup TV-meter statistics: This is equal to 27 % of the Danish population (total 5.6 million at that time). With such a large audience base, the show could in theory have a substantial agenda-setting impact.

The persuasive influence of fictional narratives has theoretically been explained using three processes, which are important to mention when trying to analyze its effect—but are beyond the scope of this manuscript's empirical endeavor. First,

fiction's tendency to cause *identification* with the characters would increase the likelihood that viewers adjust their opinions to align with the narrative's message (Igartua and Barrios, 2012; Mutz and Nir, 2010). Second, fictional programming absorbs its viewers into the content through *transportation* (Hoewe and Sherrill, 2019; Slater and Rouner, 2002), which causes viewers to produce less resistance and more acceptance of what they see (Green and Brock, 2000; Moyer-Gusé, 2008). Third, the audience of fiction programs tends *to believe* that what they see is to a certain degree an accurate reflection of reality (Liebes and Katz, 1986). These shows, accordingly, inspire thoughts and conversations about real-world politics (Peters, 2015; Van Zoonen, 2007) and help to make sense of political processes (Van Zoonen, 2005). Consequently, fictional narratives are integrated into real-world knowledge and may have long-term persuasive effects (Appel and Richter, 2007).

Lacking a clear boundary (in content *and* in people's minds) between fiction and reality, it seems likely that these processes may evoke agenda-setting processes. By portraying political issues in a dramatic manner, citizens may be guided to believe that the topics depicted in fictional shows should be topics of major public importance and, therefore, belong at the top of the agenda. The claim has often been made that *Borgen* would open the door for the first 'real' female PM of the country (Baym, 2017): Only one year after its first season, Helle Thorning-Schmidt was elected as the 26th Prime Minister of Denmark. The current study examines whether the specific topics raised in *Borgen* episodes indeed determined which issues Danish people considered to be of increasing public importance.

Besides anecdotal evidence, there is a theoretical reason to expect that the public agenda would be influenced by *Borgen*. The series committed itself to a realistic portrayal of the political process (Baym, 2017)—and people were aware of this—which makes it unlikely that audiences drew a firm line between the program's content and their perceptions of reality. Due to this perceived realism of a fictional series (Holbert et al., 2003; Mulligan and Habel, 2013), viewers may incorporate what they learn from the series into their ideas of public importance. Moreover and because of its realistic portrayal, the series has the potential to provide the audience with provocative information that could shift their attention towards an issue (Feldman and Sigelman, 1985; Holbrook and Hill, 2005). This information will mostly be wrapped in a dramatic package, which potentially evokes concern and worry about the fictionalized real-world topics (Feldman and Sigelman, 1985; Holbrook and Hill, 2005). Accordingly, we expect:

H_1: *Borgen* episodes focusing on a specific political topic cause higher public salience of that topic.

Intermedia agenda-setting effects of political fiction on the news media

Not only may *Borgen* influence the *public*'s perception of which topics are important; arguably, intermedia agenda-setting processes could also affect the agenda of regular news media. Intermedia agenda-setting was originally conceptualized as the transfer of issue-salience across journalistic media (McCombs, 2004). In particular, high-profile or elite newspapers have been found to guide the topic selection of other news media (Reese and Danielian, 1989; Vliegenthart and Walgrave, 2008). The reason for journalists to follow the agenda of other news media is both economic (i.e., less costly to produce follow-up stories than to discover new stories) as well as socio-psychological (Harder, Sevenans, and Van Aelst, 2017) because journalists look at their peers when making the rather arbitrary decision about which stories are newsworthy and which are not.

However, there is no theoretical reason to exclude the possibility that journalists would only look at *journalistic* productions when deciding what to report. Previous research, for example, also revealed that journalists are susceptible to cover issues that were salient in political blogs (Meraz, 2011), political advertising (Boyle, 2001; Roberts and McCombs, 1994), and politicians' social media posts (Conway, Kenski, and Wang, 2015). These political forms of expression, nevertheless, are still reflections of actual political processes. As such, topic attention from these non-journalistic sources may function as *trigger events* leading to more news coverage of the specific topic due to changing journalistic selection criteria, meaning that more attention is given to the topic that was "triggered" (Kepplinger and Habermeier, 1995). The question remains whether television shows that are explicitly fictional also have such an intermedia agenda-setting effect.

Journalists may experience discomfort when the serious is intertwined with entertainment (Carlson and Peifer, 2013); after all, they see it as their job to separate fact and fiction. Nevertheless, previous research has demonstrated that fiction may still function as trigger events and inspire news media to cover certain issues: A convincing example is the movie *Schindler's List* that increased the amount of news coverage on Holocaust-related topics (Soroka, 2000). Similarly, journalists have been shown to explicitly use and take up fictional actors or topics in their reporting of non-fictional issues (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2009). The agenda-setting influence of *Borgen,* in particular*,* may be more likely than in other fiction shows because of the serious effort that is invested in creating accurate reflections of Danish politics (Baym, 2017)—journalists may take this into account and feel less of the discomfort they normally experience when dealing with politicotainment (Carlson and Peifer, 2013). We therefore expect that *Borgen*

may have encouraged the news media to cover specific topics that were the main topics in its episodes:

H[2]: *Borgen* episodes focusing on a specific political topic cause a higher news media salience of that topic.

Agenda-setting with fiction: Topic conditionality

Agenda-setting effects by entertainment, plausibly, are more the exception than the rule: Previous studies, rightfully, show the *potential* of infotainment to determine the agenda (Boukes, 2019; Soroka, 2000), but cannot test whether such effects occur more generally and in all instances. A general influence, however, seems unlikely because agenda-setting effects are conditional on one important factor: unobtrusiveness. Agenda-setting is most likely to occur for topics that are not yet well-known (Maurer and Holbach, 2016; Watt, Mazza, and Snyder, 1993). This squares well with findings that the effects of fiction would be strongest among citizens who are least knowledgeable about a topic (Cao, 2015; Feldman and Sigelman, 1985)—for them it is more unobtrusive. To gain more insight into the characteristics of issues that determine whether political fiction can have agenda-setting effects, we analyze the full range of *Borgen* episodes to examine how frequently and for which specific topics agenda-setting occurred:

RQ[1]: Which political topics in *Borgen* episodes have caused (a) greater public salience and (b) greater news media salience of that topic?

3 Method

To analyze the agenda-setting impact of *Borgen*, three types of data were collected. First, the main topics in *Borgen* episodes were detected and, subsequently, the prominence of these topics was measured on the public and media agenda, respectively. Both agendas were constructed using weekly data from a period of six months before the individual episode and six months after its screening—thus, a total of 52 weeks (i. e., observations) per episode/topic combination were analyzed.

Main topics in Borgen episodes

All 30 episodes broadcast between 2010 and 2013 (i.e., three seasons of 10 episodes each) were analyzed individually to determine their main political topic. Rather than using a pre-determined list of topics, an open-ended question was used to describe the main topic with keywords that people would most likely use when trying to find more information about this topic online. The eventual list of topics was verified by a native speaker who was familiar with the television

Table 1: Main political topic and accompanying search term per *Borgen* episode.

	Season 1	Season 2	Season 3
Episode	**Main topic**	**Main topic**	**Main topic**
1	Government fraud (*Regeringssvindel*)	Danish soldiers in Afghanistan (*Danske soldater i Afghanistan*)	Leadership election (*Formandsvalg*)
2	Immigration (*Invandring*)	European Commission (*Europa-Kommissionen*)	New party (*Nyt parti*)
3	Budget bill (*Finanslov*)	Early retirement (*Førtidspension*)	Integration (*Integration*)
4	Greenland (*Grønland*)	Somalia piracy (*Somaliske pirater*)	Animal welfare (*Dyrevelfærd*)
5	Gender equality (*Ligestilling mellem kønnene*)	Green growth (*Grøn vækst*)	Prostitution (*Prostitution*)
6	Extradition (*Udlevering*)	Age of criminal responsibility (*Den kriminelle lavalder*)	Espionage (*Spionage*)
7	Security and Intelligence Service (*Politiets Efterretningstjeneste*)	Peace negotiations (*Fredsforhandlinger*)	General election (*Folketingsvalg*)
8	Scandals Danish government (*Skandale i den danske regering*)	Peace negotiations (*Fredsforhandlinger*)	Education reform (*Uddannelsesreform*)
9	Corruption (*Korruption*)	Health-care reform (*Sundhedsreform*)	Economic policy (*Økonomisk politik*)
10	Ministerial reshuffle (*Ministerrokade*)	Female PM (*Kvindelig statsminister*)	Coalition government (*Koalitionsregering*)

Note. Grey shaded boxes represent politically substantive main topics. Exact search terms (in Danish) are presented in parentheses.

series and with the Danish political context. Table 1 gives an overview of the main political topics that were covered in the *Borgen* episodes. Notably, more than half (67 %, shaded in grey in Table 1) of the episodes focused on a topic that can be characterized as politically substantive, which corresponds to the conclusion of Nitsch et al. (2019) regarding the democratic quality of *Borgen*.

Public agenda

Google search query data were used as a measurement of the *public agenda*. Whereas public agenda-setting has previously been investigated using survey research, recent investigations have shown that *Google* search query data is a more flexible, efficient, and less costly alternative (Scharkow and Vogelgesang, 2011; Whyte, 2016). How often the public searches for a particular topic in online search engines strongly correlates with regular survey measurements of the public agenda (Scharkow and Vogelgesang, 2011). Searching for a topic requires a citizen to, at least, invest some of its scarce time and energy in the topic (Ripberger, 2011): He or she, thus, must care about it. One major advantage of search data is that they are unobtrusively observable and continuous (Maurer and Holbach, 2016; Whyte, 2016). Hence, it possible to compare how much people care about an issue before and after a specific event (Boukes, 2019), for instance, the broadcast of a fictional episode about a particular political issue. Like any measurement, this method has limitations, too, which are elaborated on in the Discussion section.

For each episode's main topic, weekly data were collected concerning the relative number of *Google* users located in Denmark that searched for the topic of that episode (in Danish). *Google* provides a normalized frequency with a baseline score of 100 in the week that most people searched for the topic under consideration, and relative scores for all other weeks in comparison to this baseline score.

Two topics (i. e. "government fraud" and "scandals Danish government") did not yield any data because too few people searched for these topics in the given time period. Different wording was tried for these topics, but this did not result in useable data either. Hence, analyses could not be conducted for Episodes 1 and 8 of *Borgen*'s first season. For the other political topics that did not yield any data (i. e., "anti-immigration", "replacing Danish minister", "European Commissioners", "Danish peacekeeping", "forming a political party", and "Russian espionage"), different wording resulted in available data (i. e., "immigration", "ministerial reshuffle", "European Commission", "peace negotiations", "new party", and "espionage"). Again, this alternative wording was generated in cooperation with, and verified by, a Danish native speaker to guarantee the face validity of

search terms. Table 1 gives the exact wording of used search terms (in parentheses).

News media agenda

The *news media agenda* was operationalized as the weekly number of published news items about the main political topic. This number was determined using the database *Infomedia*, which has news items stored from a wide variety of Danish news outlets. The data collection covered five of the most-read national Danish newspapers: the three quality broadsheet newspapers *Berlingske*, *Jyllands-Posten*, and *Politiken,* and the two tabloids *Ekstra Bladet* and *B.T.* In this database, news items were searched for using the same specific keywords as for the operationalization of the public agenda using an asterisk where relevant to capture variations of the keywords. In cases with several keywords for one episode, all keywords had to be present.

Data analysis

Dealing with longitudinal data, we use time-series analyses. This kind of analysis requires variables to be stationary (mean, variance, and autocorrelation structure do not change over time). Dickey-Fuller tests showed that the null-hypothesis of non-stationarity could be rejected in most instances. For all time-series, the lagged dependent variable models showed that the unstandardized coefficient of the lagged dependent variable was significantly weaker than one; thus, all series were stationary and did not need to be differenced.

Other requirements for valid time-series models are white noise in the residuals and the absence of autoregressive conditional heteroscedasticity. Ljung-Box Q-tests and Engle-Granger tests were conducted to determine which models were required to achieve this. For most series, including one autoregressive lag-dependent variable (AR[1]-term) was sufficient. Yet, some time-series required two autoregressive lag-dependent variables or one or two lagged moving average terms to achieve white noise or avoid heteroscedasticity.[1] Only after white noise was achieved, were the independent variables added to the models.

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[1] For the public agenda Season 3, Episode 1: AR(1) MA(1) was used. For the media agenda Season 1, Episode 4: AR(1,2) MA(1,2). For the media agenda Season 2, Episode 6: AR(1) MA(1,2). For the media agenda Season 3, Episode 5: MA(1). For the media agenda Season 3, Episode 10: MA(1,2).

For all episodes, two operationalizations of the central independent variable (the event of broadcasting a *Borgen* episode on a specific topic) were tested separately: a decaying effect (where the effect of a *Borgen* episode is divided by three every week after its screening, see Boukes, 2019) and a permanent effect (where the effect remains stable after the screening of the episode). This allows two patterns to be examined: (1) a short-lived media effect of which the influence quickly disappears (Boukes, 2019; Watt et al., 1993), and (2) a media effect that places an issue permanently on a higher position compared to the period before the episode had aired. For the analyses on the media agenda, the lagged independent variable was included because episodes were aired on Sunday evening; so, the media effect could only become visible in the week after.

Control variables

For the analysis of the public agenda, we additionally controlled for the decaying media agenda effect of regular news coverage (i.e., classic agenda-setting effect). After all, the public could also be influenced by the saliency of topics in the regular media. Including this control variable also decreases the likelihood that an unobserved third variable simultaneously affects the public agenda and *Borgen*'s content, because it is improbable that this would not feature prominently in the news media. For the analysis of the media agenda, we did the same, but controlled for the lagged public agenda (i.e., journalists might respond to audience demand).

4 Results

As Table 2 shows, there is no generalizable evidence for H_1 and H_2, which therefore have to be rejected: Agenda-setting effects on the public agenda as well as on the news media agenda were more frequently insignificant than significant. Moreover, some of the significant effects were even negative instead of positive. Only a few main topics in *Borgen* episodes caused a higher public saliency or a higher news media saliency of that topic in the weeks following its screening. Because negative effects have been yielded too, caution should be taken when drawing conclusions about the agenda-setting potential of fiction series (see Discussion section).

Table 2: ARIMA models predicting the saliency of the main topics per episode on the public and news media agenda.

Episode	Topic	Public agenda (decaying effect)			Public agenda (permanent effect)			News media agenda (decaying effect)			News media agenda (permanent effect)		
		b	(SE)	p	b	(SE)	p	b	(SE)	p	b	(SE)	p
		-	(-)	-	-	(-)	-	-	(-)	-	-	(-)	-
101	Government fraud	-	(-)	-	-	(-)	-	-	(-)	-	-	(-)	-
102	Immigration	2.61	(75.75)	.972	9.69	(4.43)	.029*	-1.05	(49.03)	.983	2.71	(9.45)	.774
103	Budget bill	-8.66	(392.86)	.982	3.97	(4.62)	.391	-32.07	(110.26)	.771	-4.64	(19.57)	.813
104	Greenland	-22.50	(193.74)	.908	11.74	(4.96)	.018*	14.05	(13.50)	.298	1.22	(2.12)	.565
105	Gender equality	77.80	(11.46)	.000***	4.11	(33.35)	.902	-3.31	(622.28)	.996	2.54	(3.44)	.459
106	Extradition	15.55	(179.44)	.931	-27.04	(5.92)	.000***	2.13	(45.80)	.963	-1.02	(3.45)	.768
107	Security and Intelligence Service	21.55	(89.92)	.811	-3.59	(11.03)	.745	6.66	(62.83)	.916	-0.21	(3.39)	.539
108	Scandals Danish gov.	-	(-)	-	-	(-)	-	-0.58	(84.17)	.995	-0.16	(1.44)	.909
109	Corruption	-12.30	(32.09)	.702	-5.95	(7.20)	.409	10.40	(126.97)	.935	10.98	(5.01)	.028*
110	Ministerial reshuffle	3.22	(49.28)	.948	0.33	(3.45)	.925	-1.22	(235.53)	.996	1.33	(3.89)	.733
201	Danish soldiers in Afghanistan	-3.00	(131.44)	.982	12.26	(8.67)	.158	15.35	(45.11)	.734	4.94	(3.83)	.198
202	European Commission	31.39	(78.81)	.690	-1.60	(6.34)	.801	3.59	(1.15)	.002**	0.52	(0.45)	.246
203	Early retirement	1.75	(126.44)	.989	8.31	(5.17)	.108	-10.79	(71.90)	.881	7.58	(12.87)	.556
204	Somalia piracy	-24.77	(25.55)	.332	-11.25	(5.11)	.028*	31.52	(34.90)	.366	-0.32	(3.17)	.919
205	Green growth	-14.38	(194.74)	.941	-10.91	(9.12)	.231	-2.32	(44.99)	.959	0.85	(1.68)	.614

Episode	Topic	Public agenda (decaying effect)			Public agenda (permanent effect)			News media agenda (decaying effect)			News media agenda (permanent effect)		
		b	(SE)	p	b	(SE)	p	b	(SE)	p	b	(SE)	p
206	Age of criminal responsibility	-6.97	(153.79)	.964	10.66	(7.32)	.145	3.85	(2.73)	.158	-0.72	(1.31)	.586
207	Peace negotiations	-11.96	(90.19)	.894	-2.34	(11.14)	.833	2.23	(22.34)	.921	-3.61	(2.44)	.138
208	Peace negotiations	69.84	(83.26)	.402	12.39	(21.71)	.568	-1.85	(37.40)	.961	-3.34	(2.45)	.172
209	Health-care reform	-26.91	(160.01)	.866	**24.16**	**(9.24)**	**.009****	0.07	(327.33)	.999	0.22	(1.57)	.887
210	Female PM	-11.46	(159.29)	.943	3.21	(11.17)	.774	-5.31	(111.67)	.962	-5.10	(10.90)	.640
301	Leadership election	10.79	(12.66)	.394	0.03	(8.95)	.997	-9.35	(24.20)	.699	-8.41	(10.23)	.411
302	New party	9.10	(115.44)	.937	6.90	(10.14)	.496	2.13	(24.27)	.930	1.15	(1.30)	.376
303	Integration	14.53	(241.41)	.952	-0.80	(8.84)	.928	-7.42	(31.32)	.813	-1.17	(7.35)	.873
304	Animal welfare	52.62	(27.40)	.055†	-8.56	(6.88)	.213	-4.64	(28.97)	.873	0.61	(1.70)	.721
305	Prostitution	7.24	(95.71)	.940	-3.05	(4.76)	.522	-5.25	(25.94)	.840	-5.44	(4.77)	.254
306	Espionage	-9.92	(115.35)	.931	7.88	(11.67)	.499	0.31	(53.41)	.995	4.37	(5.52)	.428
307	General election	1.65	(60.43)	.978	-7.25	(6.10)	.235	6.62	(189.79)	.972	0.79	(2.21)	.719
308	Education reform	-10.04	(112.40)	.929	-6.68	(7.72)	.387	-0.34	(1.73)	.843	-0.04	(0.20)	.859
309	Economic policy	-9.52	(94.30)	.920	-15.46	(8.29)	.062†	6.21	(41.25)	.880	**-7.87**	**(2.30)**	**.001*****
310	Coalition gov.	-18.15	(113.00)	.872	**-20.27**	**(7.62)**	**.008****	1.45	(11.33)	.898	0.98	(0.87)	.261

Note. Cells contain unstandardized (*b*) coefficients with standard errors (S.E.), and probabilities (*p*; two-tailed): † *p* < .100* *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01, *** *p* < .001. Episodes with a significant agenda-setting effect are printed in **bold**. Cells that are shaded grey find a significant effect of the control variable (i.e., news media agenda on public agenda, or public agenda on news media agenda).

A positive significant effect on the public agenda was found for gender equality (episode 105, b = 77.80, p < .001). This agenda-setting effect was decaying, which means that gender equality gained more public saliency after the episode had aired but that the effect also weakened rapidly. As Figure 1 shows, a strong increase of search behavior on gender equality occurred with the broadcast of the *Borgen* episode about this topic. However, this peak in attention also quickly went down in the weeks afterwards. Similar, but only marginally significant, is the decaying agenda-setting effect of the episode on animal welfare (episode 304, b = 52.62, p = .055).
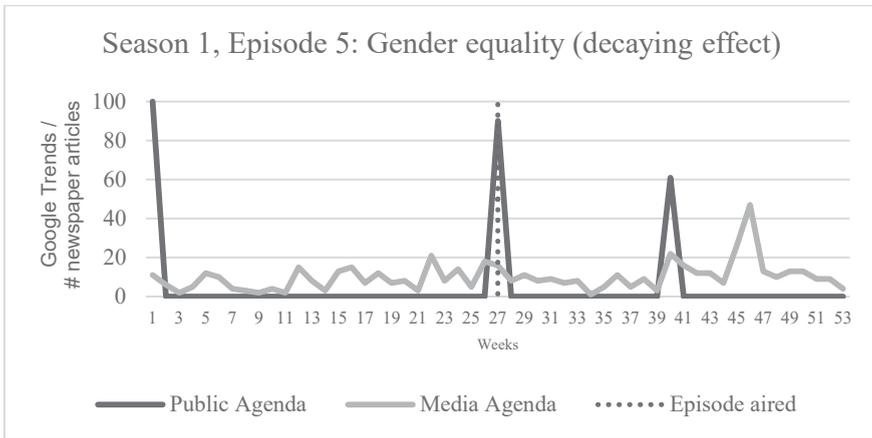

Figure 1: Saliency of gender equality on the public and media agenda before and after the *Borgen* episodes about this topic.

The significant agenda-setting effects of other topics were permanent rather than decaying: The episodes about immigration (episode 102, b = 9.69, p = .029), Greenland (episode 104, b = 11.74, p = .018), and health care reform (episode 209, b = 24.16, p = .009) caused a significantly higher level of permanent public saliency of these topics after the episode about these topics aired. Although permanent effects are less obvious in data visualizations, Figure 2 shows that more searches were generally made on "immigration" in the period after the *Borgen* episode about this topic compared to the period before the episode was broadcast (on the 0-to-100 scale; 9 points). However, this increase only becomes visible about four weeks after the episode on this topic and co-occurs with a spur in media attention for immigration. So, one may question whether the effect was really caused by *Borgen* or by this third variable (media agenda).
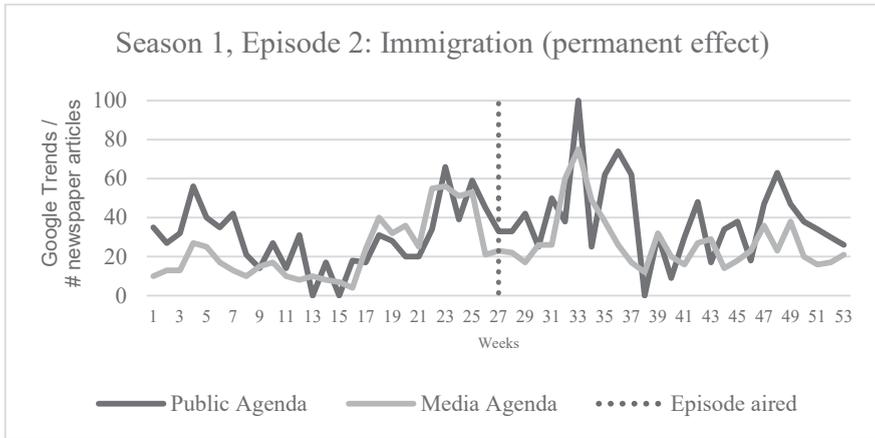
Figure 2: Saliency of immigration on the public and media agenda before and after the *Borgen* episode about this topic.

Answering RQ_{1a}, we have identified four topics (plus one marginally significant) where *Borgen* positively influenced the saliency of topics on the public agenda: gender equality (decaying), immigration, Greenland, and healthcare reform (permanent). These were all rather specific and politically substantive (i. e., not strategic) topics in Denmark during the investigated period. Four episodes (out of thirty in total) that yield such a positive effect equals only 14 % of all analyzed cases. Moreover, the *negative* permanent effects found for the topics of extradition (episode 106, b = -27.04, p < .001), Somalia piracy (episode 204, b = -11.25, p = .028), and coalition government (episode 310, b = -20.27, p = .008) were more surprising. The public saliency of these issues significantly and permanently decreased after the episode was aired. Having an equal number (three) of positive and negative permanent effects, one could question the agenda-setting power of *Borgen* in the long term (see Discussion section).

To answer RQ_{1b}, a positive and significant decaying effect was found for the episode on the European Commission (episode 202, b = 3.59, p = .002). This episode had a positive effect on the news media agenda but the effect decayed over time. The episode on the topic of corruption (episode 109, b = 10.98, p = .028) caused a significant and permanent increase of media saliency of this topic after the episode aired. Figure 3 shows that more news coverage on corruption was published in the weeks after the *Borgen* episode on this topic (on average 11 extra articles per week). Lastly, the broadcast on economic policy (episode 309, b = 7.87, p = .001) had a significantly negative permanent effect on the media agenda, which means that the news media wrote significantly less

about economic policy after this episode had aired. So, again, we revealed one positive decaying effect, and an equal number of positive and negative permanent effects (both one).
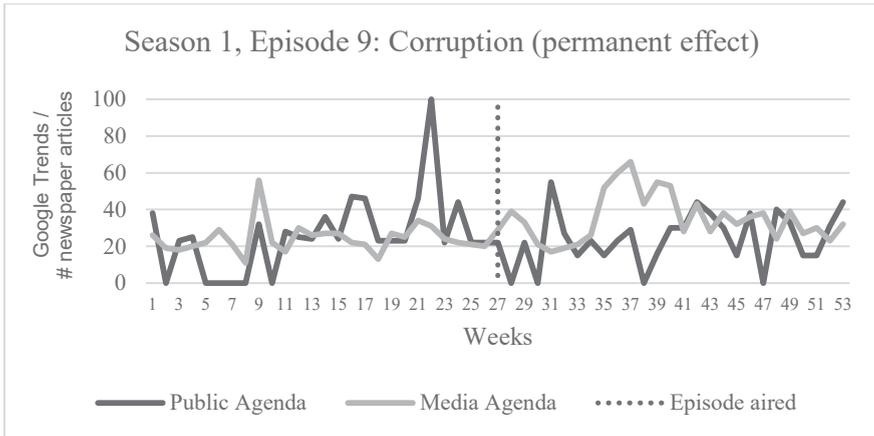

Figure 3: Saliency of corruption on the public and media agenda before and after the *Borgen* episode about this topic.

Regarding the control variables (i. e., news media agenda predicting public agenda, and vice versa), we find repeated evidence in line with the basic agenda-setting theory. The cells in Table 2 have been shaded grey when the effect of the control variable was found to be significant ($p < .050$). In twelve of the thirty cases the control variable measuring the news media agenda predicted the public agenda (either permanently or decaying): all in a *positive* direction. This occurred for the following topics: immigration, budget bill, ministerial reshuffle, early retirement, Somalia piracy, female PM, leadership election, new party, animal welfare, prostitution, espionage, and coalition government. Only in one case, was the news media agenda *affected by* the public agenda; this happened for the topic of leadership election. So, we find limited evidence of reversed agenda-setting (McCombs, 2004) and mainly confirm the traditional agenda-setting hypothesis.

5 Discussion

In this study, we investigated the agenda-setting impact of one of the most prominent political fiction series, *Borgen*. Many claims have been expressed about this show—even by politicians—for example, that it would have serious consequences for the real world of politics. The reason, arguably, would be that the show provides a relatively substantive view of political issues and processes in the Danish context. Additionally, *Borgen* has intentionally been produced to accurately portray real-world political processes (Baym, 2017), which may result in audiences and journalists being open to letting it influence their agenda.

However, our longitudinal analysis only found very limited evidence of public and news media agenda-setting by the *Borgen* episodes. A positive effect on the news media agenda was only observed twice, regarding the topics of corruption and the selection of an EU commissioner. Both are clearly strategic issues that are not very salient on the Danish media agenda of that time. The episodes could have served as a trigger event or wake-up call for journalists to fulfill their traditional role of a "watchdog" that reveals corruption and nepotism.

Significant increases of *public* saliency have been observed in four of the thirty cases (and one marginally significant case). It is difficult to pinpoint why it happened for the topics of immigration, Greenland, gender equality, healthcare reforms, and animal welfare. Clearly, these are substantive rather than strategic political issues: some of them unobtrusive, and others are evidently obtrusive issues. Moreover, other unobtrusive policy issues (e. g., Somalian piracy or espionage) were not influenced—so, this topic dimension does not seem to be a decisive factor. One pattern, nevertheless, seems to be that public agenda-setting was more likely regarding (substantive) topics that are already important and frequently raised in the Danish public debate. In addition, the topics that yielded an agenda-setting effect have in common that they are rather specific issues, which makes it easier for the audience to search for them on *Google* compared to general issues. It is remarkable that most of the agenda-setting effects occurred within the first season of *Borgen*; arguably, the audience may have perceived the series as more 'real' at the beginning.

Although the number of agenda-setting effects was modest, this is in line with the idea that such effects are conditional upon a number of factors (McCombs and Shaw, 1993): It would have been more remarkable if *Borgen* had had an effect in all instances. Moreover, the null effects and mixed results are very relevant on their own, too. They help to debunk the commonly accepted idea that *Borgen*, or other fictional shows, have a major agenda-setting impact. This is especially evident in relation to the episode about prostitution. A real-world politician from the *Conservative Party*, Mai Henriksen, suggested prostitution should be legal-

ized, and prostitutes should be entitled to unemployment allowance. Afterwards, the politician explained that she thought "it was smart to use *Borgen* as a lever to get a debate started" (Klarskov, 2013). So, while this episode is believed to have been particularly influential, our data showed no evidence for an agenda-setting effect of *Borgen* on either the public or the news media agenda concerning prostitution. One reason why the hypotheses about *Borgen*'s agenda-setting impact are not supported could be that the main topic shifts with almost every new episode. Lacking a clear focus on a specific issue—in contrast to, for example, *Schindler's List* (i.e., the Holocaust) or *24* (i.e., terrorism)—might instill less motivation for citizens to learn more about a topic and makes it difficult for journalists to convince their editors that they should investigate a topic more closely.

When further scrutinizing the agenda-setting power of *Borgen*, a number of negative agenda-setting effects were also detected. These are unexpected and difficult to theoretically explain. Statistically, however, with 120 different statistical models (Table 2) it could also be the outcome of chance. If that is the case, it might also be that some of the positive effects were significant by chance. Zooming in on the results, we found three positive and three negative *permanent* effects on the public agenda—and one positive and one negative *permanent* agenda-setting effect on the news media agenda. The decaying positive agenda-setting effects, however, were all in a positive direction. Based on the visualizations of the data trends, it is obvious that the figures of immigration (Figure 2) and corruption (Figure 3) contained a lot of white noise—effects may thus be yielded by coincidence. In particular, the permanent effect on the public agenda of the episode about immigration (Figure 2) seems to be rather the result of a third variable, namely the saliency on the media agenda. The positive but rapidly decaying effect on the public agenda concerning gender equality (Figure 1), nevertheless, seems undeniable. Altogether, this shows that a qualitative interpretation of visualized data is needed to verify the (significant) results of statistical analyses: We can only fully trust the decaying effects yielded in the short-term—regarding permanent effects, an equal number of positive and negative effects were found, and visualized trends did not provide unequivocal evidence for agenda-setting effects either. So, we conclude that agenda-setting effects were very scarce and if they occurred, this happened in decaying trends; evidence for permanent effects was simply too weak to be convincing.

Whereas the operationalization of the news media agenda followed the conventional approach in agenda-setting research, an innovative method was used to measure the salience of issues on the public agenda: the relative number of *Google* search queries. Although measuring issue salience has always been "a persistent problem of agenda-setting research" (Scharkow and Vogelgesang, 2011, p. 105) and search query data have obvious advantages over traditional

survey methods (i. e., no interviewer bias nor social desirability, low cost, and reflecting real-time dynamic trends), it is not without limitations. One may question, for example, the demographic generalizability of *Google* users; however, Denmark has always been among the countries with the highest internet penetration, already being over 90 % in 2012 (Eurostat, 2012); so, this concern does not seem warranted.

Yet, this aggregate level measurement does not allow disentangling the search behavior of *Borgen* viewers from those who do not watch the series; still, the non-viewers may coincidentally search for the same topics. This arguably results in more noisy data and, therefore, conservative effect estimates. Relatedly, our dependent variable of the public agenda only includes the relative number of *Google* searches on one specific search term identified in the content analysis; however, people might also have searched for other related terms consisting of alternative words. If this were the case, the result would likewise lead to conservative effect estimates because we are not able to pick up increases in searches on related words. Together, these limitations therefore might result in us underestimating the impact of *Borgen*. In addition, a serious downside of search query data is the reliance on the black box of *Google* to provide reliable statistics. First, only normalized data are available (scale 0-to-100), which makes it impossible to generate exact point estimates and complicates knowing how many people actually searched on a topic (Scharkow and Vogelgesang, 2011). Second, public agenda trends are not available for certain topics because "very few people" would have searched on a topic (Google Trends, 2019); however, *Google* is not open about what their cut-off point for a sufficient number of searches would be (Ripberger, 2011).

Most fundamentally, *Google* search queries measure a *behavioral consequence* of the agenda-setting process. Whereas agenda-setting in theory is a cognitive process (McCombs, 2005; Pavitt, 2010), we thus rely on a behavioral proxy of it (Scharkow and Vogelgesang, 2011). Because some topics may require further information seeking more than others, the measurement validity may be conditional upon the topic. Notwithstanding the limitations of this method, we are still convinced by the arguments that search query data provide a suitable estimate of the public agenda (Ripberger, 2011; Scharkow and Vogelgesang, 2011) when survey data are not available. We are encouraged to believe that our measurement provides a valid indicator of the public agenda because traditional agenda-setting effects of the control variables were statistically confirmed in almost half of the cases (Table 2, grey shaded). This indicates that our data were repeatedly able to detect regular agenda-setting effects of the media on the public.

In sum, our study reflects that media effects are often minimal (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008; Klapper, 1960). Although previous studies found agenda-setting effects of political entertainment (Boukes, 2019; Soroka, 2000), this by no means

proves that this is a generalizable phenomenon—those studies, arguably, focused on 'most-likely cases'. The current study shows that agenda-setting effects of political fiction are probably more the exception than the rule. Thus, we should be careful about overestimating the agenda-setting impact of political fiction. Future research is needed to explore the influence *Borgen* and similar shows may have on other dimensions of citizenship (see, e. g., Doona, 2016; Hermes, 2005; Nærland, 2019). Forms of popular culture like this may, for example, playfully create a sense of community, teach democratic principles, or stimulate political thought (Hartley, 2004; Riegert, 2007; Van Zoonen, 2005). More research is needed to conclude how *Borgen* and other types of politicotainment live up to these promises. Concerning agenda-setting, however, the *Borgen* series only rarely turned political fiction into political fact.

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