

Executive Summary
The Effect of Entertainment Media on Public Willingness to Donate Organs
Susan E. Morgan, Ph.D., Associate Professor
Purdue University, Department of Communication

Organ donation appeared in over 200 episodes of medical dramas, thrilling police shows, and daytime soap operas in the past three years. This is a conservative estimate as research only looked at shows on the major networks: ABC, CBS, FOX, NBC, and the WB (now the CW). Of 200+ portrayals, over 150 were major plotlines. Most importantly, and most disturbingly, none of these appearances presented organ donation in an accurate or positive light.

Myths about organ donation that appear often on entertainment television

The following are common myths, misrepresentations, and misconceptions of organ donation, organ donors, and the organ procurement process:

- People with money can move up on organ transplant lists
- Doctors are able to find people organs
- Organs are stolen from people and sold on the black market
- People waiting for an organ hope that other people die so that they live
- Doctors waiting for an organ transplant hope patients die
- If a person is dying, and someone needs an organ, doctors will not make the effort to save that person's life
- Only good people deserve organ transplants
- Someone is a good person because he/she is an organ donor
- Organ recipients take on the characteristics of their donor (a.k.a. transmutation)
- Belief that other people won't want a person's "damaged" organs

Many people have argued that these negative representations of organ donation are of little consequence because "the public knows the difference between Hollywood and reality." Unfortunately, there is little evidence for this in the area of organ donation. Unlike televised sex and violence, the public does not have information to counter what they have learned about organ donation on television. Asserting the right to "creative license" in developing storylines that exploit myths about donation for entertainment value sidesteps the social responsibility of the media to not exploit a health issue at the expense of the real lives of people on the transplant waiting list. Several media studies (described below) have demonstrated that this presentation of false information about organ donation has not only affected the public's beliefs about organ donation, but that there is a direct link between what is viewed on entertainment television and viewers' willingness to become a potential organ donor.

Why are Hollywood's depictions of organ donation so influential?

Simply put, the power of narrative in the absence of accurate information is powerful. We process all kinds of narratives in a completely different way than we process factual information. Functional magnetic resonance imaging now allows us to watch the brain in action and neuroscientists know that narratives are subjected to dual hemisphere processing. This might explain why people naturally suspend disbelief when they watch stories unfold on television. Additionally, there are a number of studies that show that narrative-based information is subject to the "sleeper effect." That means that our usual cues about credibility ("oh, that was just in a movie") are forgotten over time.

Additionally, medical and legal shows use a lot of jargon, much of which is accurate. Because they portray many other health issues accurately, these shows have more credibility than other types of dramas. It is easy to recognize many of the storylines presented in these entertainment episodes from the

news. Therefore, there is every reason for the public to believe that, at the very least, there is a “kernel of truth” to what they see on television. It makes perfect sense that the public’s fears about organ donation mirror exactly what’s being shown on entertainment television. Unfortunately, the only *real* source of information that the public has is the mass media.

People also have a sense of vicarious experience when they watch an engaging program that depicts organ donation. Essentially, people feel that they have “seen something with their own two eyes.” The more they “get into” the story—what researchers call transportation—the more people will accept the information in the narrative as fact.

Research Studies on the Effect of Media on Donation

- Maloney & Walker (2000, 2002): Australian studiesⁱ
 - Tracked content of the media, then documented the media’s effect on decisions about donation as revealed through interpersonal discussions.
- Morgan, et. al (2005ⁱⁱ; 2007ⁱⁱⁱ): Family discussions about organ donation
 - When people were not in favor of donation, they frequently recited the plots of television shows or movies.
- Morgan, Harrison, Chewing, DiCorcia, & Davis (2007)^{iv}: Depictions of organ donation in entertainment media
 - Documents the overwhelmingly false portrayal of organ donation in entertainment media (ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX) over the course of three years.
- Morgan, Huang, Ganikos, Movius, & Cody (2006)^v: Effects of specific show storylines on viewer attitudes and behaviors
 - Attitudes and behaviors directly reflected the content of the show storyline, even months after viewing.
 - Myths portrayed in an episode were more likely to be believed by viewers than nonviewers. Viewers were less likely to donate or to encourage others to donate than non-viewers.

ⁱ Maloney, G. and Walker, I. (2000). Messiahs, pariahs, and donors: The development of social representations of organ transplants. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 30 (2), 203-227; Maloney, G. & Walker, I. (2002). Talking about transplants: Social representations and the dialectical, dilemmatic nature of organ donation and transplantation. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 41, 299-320.

ⁱⁱ Morgan, S. E., Harrison, T.R., Afifi, W.A., Long, S.D., Stephenson, M.T., Reichert, T. (2005). Family discussions about organ donation: How the media is used to justify opinions and influence others about donation decisions. *Clinical Transplantation*, 19(5) 674-682.

ⁱⁱⁱ Morgan, S.E., Harrison, T.R., Long, S.D., Afifi, W.A., Stephenson, M.T. (In press, 2007). In their own words: A multicultural qualitative study of the reasons why people will (not) donate organs. *Health Communication*.

^{iv} Morgan, S.E., Harrison, T.R., Chewing, L.V., DiCorcia, M., Davis, L. (In press, 2007). Entertainment (mis)education: The framing of organ donation in entertainment television. *Health Communication*, 22.

^v Morgan, S.E., Huang, G., Ganikos, M., Movius, L., Cody, M. (2006). The impact of prime time drama TV and news media stories on public attitudes and behaviors toward organ donation. Presented to the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association, Boston.