

## **Changing Channels: Entertainment Television, Civic Attitudes and Actions**

### *Fact Sheet*

Flash back nearly 30 years ago: Millions of American children gather in front of the television on Saturday morning for their weekly dose of pop culture civics education. They learn how a bill becomes a law and the difference between the three branches of government by viewing a snappy musical cartoon called “School House Rock.”

Fast forward to today: In a national internet campaign designed to recruit new (read “younger”) employees to the Central Intelligence Agency, Jennifer Garner encourages viewers to check out the CIA’s website to find out more about job possibilities. Although Garner is not actually a CIA agent, she has become an effective spokesperson for the agency. She plays one on ABC’s *Alias*, a drama which ranks among the top broadcast TV shows.

More and more people are learning important civic lessons from television, through creative, sophisticated and high quality portrayals of government on shows like *Alias*, as well as *The West Wing*, *Judging Amy*, *Law & Order* and *24*. Nestled among prime time reality shows, situation comedies and news magazines are acclaimed dramas with serious government themes. And those who regularly watch these types of shows are learning about government and politics, and they are inspired by what they see.

That’s according to *Changing Channels: Entertainment Television, Civic Attitudes and Action*, a national survey of 1,000 people across the country, sponsored by the Media, Citizens & Democracy Project – a joint effort of the USC Annenberg School’s Norman Lear Center and the Council for Excellence in Government. The project, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, examined the impact of television shows on public perceptions of civic engagement and public service. Since July 2002, the joint project has marshaled the entertainment, advertising and public policy communities to explore ways to use entertainment television to engage citizens – particularly youth – in government and the practice of democracy.

Among the report’s major findings:

- Young people aged 18-24, seem to be particularly influenced by government and civic engagement content they see on TV. They are more likely than older adults to say watching an entertainment TV show encouraged them to find out more about a political or social issue (40% vs. 28% aged 25-49) and to register to vote or take voting more seriously (24% vs. 15%).
- More than half (55%) of 18-24 year old respondents learn “a lot” or “some” about government and politics from viewing government-themed shows (compared to 29% who learned “a lot/some” from late night talk shows), dispelling the myth that a majority of young people get their information from late night television.
- Forty three percent of government-themed show viewers have found out more about a particular political or social issue as a result of watching.
- Forty one percent of those surveyed say they learn “a lot” or “some” about government and politics from selected TV shows (half as many as those who learn “a lot/some” from the evening news, and more than twice as many as those who learn “a lot/some” from late night talk shows). More than half (52%) of regular viewers of government-themed shows (those who watch at least three out of every four new episodes of a show) say they learn “a lot or some” from watching these types of shows.”
- About one-third (31%) of government-themed show viewers say that a show changed their way of thinking about an issue. Twenty nine percent say that it changed their views of government and its workers.
- Forty five percent of those aged 18-49 say personal experience is the biggest influence on their views of the federal government, but just as many (44%) say what they have seen on television is the more important factor.

The survey was designed to study the relationship between attitudes toward government and government employees and viewership of network TV programs that focus on civic engagement and government themes, or actual civic behaviors. Eleven specific “target shows” were selected from the prime time offerings available in fall 2002 on the four major broadcast networks as presenting complex, sophisticated portrayals of government employees and civic engagement storylines. The shows included *The District JAG*, *Judging Amy* and *The Agency* on CBS; *Law & Order*, *Mr. Sterling*, *The West Wing* and *Third Watch* on NBC; *Boston Public* and *24* on FOX, and *Alias* on ABC.

*Changing Channels: Entertainment Television, Civic Attitudes, and Actions* was conducted by Princeton Data Source, LLC, and included telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,000 people ages 18-49. The margin of sampling error is +/-3.6%.