

Watching a lot of TV increases susceptibility to everyday myths

August 23 2016, by Johannes Angerer

People who watch a lot of television are more likely to be susceptible to everyday myths – irrespective of their age, education or gender. This is the basic finding of a media study conducted at MedUni Vienna's Center for Public Health and led by Benedikt Till and Thomas Niederkrotenthaler. In the recent study, 322 people were asked about their television viewing habits and also whether they believed that the death penalty still applies in Austria and how many people are on death row. 11.6 percent of those questioned erroneously believed that the death penalty still exists – the more TV they watched, the higher the probability that they believed this.

In fact: the death penalty was completely abolished in Austria on 7 February 1968, therefore around 50 years ago, following a unanimous decision by the Austrian National Council. The last actual execution in Austria took place on 24 March 1950.

American TV series influence perceptions

The fact that more than one in 10 people think that Austria still has the death penalty is presumably due to the high proportion of American films and TV series on Austrian television," says Benedikt Till.

"Detective dramas, in particular, continually portray the American justice system, where the death penalty plays a central role."

From so-called cultivation research, which looks at the extent to which

television shapes viewers' perceptions of reality and attitudes, we know that a distorted portrayal of the world on TV can also result in a distorted view of the world on the part of viewers. Till: "For example, people who watch a lot of television often overestimate the number of people in those professions that are frequently portrayed on television, such as doctors, lawyers or policemen, for example. They also overestimate the probability of being the victim of crime."

However, what has emerged from a new study published in the journal *Death Studies* is that [television](#) viewing not only changes attitudes and values but also has a fundamental negative influence upon knowledge about fundamental societal principles, such as the [death penalty](#), for example, the MedUni Vienna researchers explain. Based on this study, it would also be reasonable to conclude that other prejudices, myths and misinformation about health-related topics – for example about suicide, a key subject for the two social medicine experts from MedUni Vienna's Center for Public Health – could be linked with higher levels of exposure to media. MedUni Vienna is currently conducting a study into this aspect.

More information: Benedikt Till et al. Blurred world view: A study on the relationship between television viewing and the perception of the justice system, *Death Studies* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/07481187.2016.1186761](#)

Provided by Medical University of Vienna

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