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## **The Impact of Fictional Characters on Political Beliefs: A Reception Analysis of Arrow S5E13**

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The Impact of Fictional Characters on Political Beliefs:

A Reception Analysis of Arrow S5E13

An Honors College Project Thesis

Presented to

The Department of Communication and Sociology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for

Honors Scholar

By

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This Project Thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been  
accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the distinction

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## **Abstract**

Story has a strong power to influence, and in America's current polarized climate, it is important to understand how it can influence politics. In *Arrow* S5E13, there are characters representing every side of the gun control debate in the wake of a mass shooting at city hall. This study uses interpretive communities theory to analyze two focus groups' responses to this episode. The focus groups were composed solely of nine college students, six female and three male in total. The results determine that (1) political moderates appreciate the fair fictional representation of multiple political perspectives in fiction, (2) members of this interpretive community use humor to lessen tension and make points succinctly, (3) the feminist members of this interpretive community want a diversity of female perspectives in fiction, (4) this community pays close attention to the political arguments that narratives make, and (5) this generation has been desensitized to violence.

Story has a strong power to influence, so when a story starts to discuss contemporary political issues, especially in America's current polarized political climate, it is important to understand how the portrayal of these political issues influences audience interpretation. For example, the show *Arrow* is about a man named Oliver Queen who went missing for five years and returned with a passion for saving his city as a vigilante and an extraordinary skillset of fighting and archery. By season 5, he had become mayor of the city and in episode 13, he is faced with a mass shooting taking place in City Hall. In this episode, there are characters representing every side of the gun control debate. Some characters demonstrated strong feelings towards increasing gun control legislation, citing statistics that show why the current gun control policies are not enough. Other characters demonstrated strong feelings against increasing gun control legislation, believing in the right for Americans to own guns without government interference. Some characters want to avoid the topic altogether. A show advocating for a better understanding of both sides of an issue seemed to me to be a rare but welcome occurrence. The reception of this episode, however, was mixed. Reviews called the episode hypocritical (Saenz, 2017) and a provocative title claimed "Arrow Shows How NOT to Tackle Gun Control" (Dyce, 2017). Prevalent Reddit threads called the episode insulting, laughable ([blackmarketing], n.d.), and the worst episode of Arrow ever ([deleted], n.d.). I conducted further research which demonstrated that the terms used in the search engine affected whether most of the articles reflect a positive opinion or a negative opinion of the episode. For instance, simply using the term "Arrow Season 5 Episode 13" leads to more positive or neutral reviews about the episode, whereas using

the term “Arrow Gun Control” leads to more negative or neutral reviews about the episode.

The mixed response to this episode demonstrates that not all audiences appreciate the portrayal of multiple political views in their entertainment. In order to understand this phenomenon, this study uses interpretive communities theory to explore how characters’ political beliefs in a fictional television show affects how the audience receives and interprets the episode.

### **Literature Review**

Distinct media communities are widespread and prevalent in today’s culture. The latest generation of media consumers created fandoms that illuminate the degree to which audiences respond to fictional media in passionate and meaningful ways. Fandoms are large groups of people who find commonality in responding to a favorite television show or cinematic universe and sharing their thoughts with one another, acting as a key part of their individual identities (Lacalle & Simelio, 2017). Jenkins (2018) defines fandoms as “participatory cultures” (p. 23). Over the past couple decades, the emergence of social media caused fan-fiction, fan-art, and various other ways of responding to fictional media to grow exponentially. In particular, the popularity of television shows and its connection with the internet has increased fans’ attachment to their favorite shows (Lacalle & Simelio, 2017). Visual media thus holds a great influence on this generation of consumers. However, fandoms also hold a great influence on media creation. Through social media and other similar forums, the creatives behind films and shows hear the opinions of the general public, which can ultimately change the narrative direction that a series might take (Jenkins, 2018; Lacalle & Simelio, 2017). This creates a cycle of

behavioral affirmation based on the fandom's passion for the media and the creatives' needs to maintain their popular stance within the fandom community to garner better ratings and more revenue. Ultimately, although companies may legally own and control a certain form of media, the fans of the media feel as if they are the true owners as their passion and input creates the media (Hills & Garde-Hansen, 2017).

The existence of fandoms underscores how human beings have always had a need for communities, to feel that they are a part of something. This is seen throughout history as humans form "imagined communities" around different ideas or structures, such as a religion or a country (Anderson, 1983). Anderson (1983) discusses the intrinsic need within each individual to derive meaning about the purpose of a groups' collective action. For example, pilgrimages are one example in which people find familiarity and meaning from knowing that the strangers walking alongside them in the journey are of the same beliefs as them (Anderson, 1983). This need for community led humans to establish familiarities based on demographics, such as gender, age, or race (Anderson, 1983). As modern culture tries to eliminate sexism, ageism, and racism, these affiliations are felt more often than spoken out loud. In other words, while people do not typically say that they spend time mostly with those in their demographic group, they often feel the necessity or desire to affiliate themselves mostly with people from their demographic group. Females tend to spend time with females and males with males. It is often thought odd for a young person to spend much time with someone much older than them. In school cafeterias, one can often see the division of races and ethnicities by who is sitting at what table. However, some organized activities continue to divide groups by



demographics, such as bachelor/bachelorette parties and, in some churches, age-divided Sunday school classes.

The root of a community ultimately comes from the “common meanings” the members of a community share (Lindlof, 1988, p. 90). Lindlof (2012) defines a community as a group of people with “a shared consciousness of core beliefs, ideals, or identity” (p. 555). This shared consciousness shapes the way that the members of a community understand and interpret the world around them. There are various different communities with widely different beliefs from one another. These differences in core values in turn cause differences in the way different communities interpret what they see or hear. That is why a single media text, such as a television show or a book, can produce different meanings for different people (Carragee, 1990). In the earlier example, when I first watched *Arrow* S5E13, the meaning I derived from the episode was the importance of being willing to discuss and explore multiple views of controversial political topics. However, other viewers thought the meaning of the episode was simply for the show to “score points for seeming ‘relevant’ or ‘socially conscious’” with “nothing to actually say” (Dyce, 2017, para. 2-3). Dyce and I are likely from two very different interpretive communities, one which values media that makes a specific and clear argument for one side or the other and one which values media that demonstrates the advantages and disadvantages of each political perspective in a debate.

Media may influence viewers, but the communities the viewers come from may also influence how they interpret media. Researchers have demonstrated the powerful influence that stories can have on human beings, especially when it comes to affecting ethical behavior or attitudes (John, 2018; Morris, et. al., 2019; Ranjit, et. al., 2015;

Robinson & Knobloch-Westerwick, 2017; Sandvik, 2019; Swanson, 2016). However, these researchers also recognize the importance of the audience member's identity and values when using stories as a way to inspire ethical change (John, 2018; Morris, et. al., 2019; Ranjit, et. al., 2015). John (2018) states in her research that "there is no ethical blank slate available . . . we must somehow work with the ethical influences that have formed us" (p. 643).

Fish's theory of interpretive communities explores how communities affect the meaning that a single person derives from a media text as they judge it according to the community's values and understanding (Lindlof, 1988; Lindlof, 2012). This theory uses the constructed meaning approach, in which the meaning in a text only exists as a result of a person extrapolating it, as opposed to the presented meaning approach, where the meaning of a text is universal (Lindlof, 1988). The meanings that audiences derive from a media text may not be what the creator of the text initially intended, yet audiences extract their own meaning and apply it to their own understanding of life (Jensen, 1991). Meaning therefore becomes "a product of the interaction between media texts and the . . . interpretive strategies used by audience members" (Carragee, 1990, p. 81). This dynamic is important to recognize because meaning can change a person's attitudes in ways that may be reflected in their thoughts, behaviors, and actions (Jensen, 1991). Furthermore, fandoms often create interpretive communities by finding a group of people who all relate to a media text in a similar way (Jenkins, 2018). Their mutual interpretation of a media text solidifies the individual's theories and opinions as facts in the community's core beliefs, particularly in online forums (Buozi, 2021). Additionally, in contemporary times, media markets constantly inundate audiences with stories that are made with the

intention of shaping their audience's beliefs (John, 2018). Thus, understanding how communities create meaning from stories is essential to understanding the motivations of human beings in general.

One important element to consider when studying interpretive communities theory is the genre of the media text in question. The genre of the media affects the interpretation of the media (Jensen, 1987). For instance, seeing violence on a news broadcast can create vastly different interpretations than seeing violence in a show about superheroes (Jensen, 1987). Genres ultimately can create and maintain interpretive communities themselves as they are developed for specific expected audiences and followings (Jensen, 1991; Lindlof, 1988, 2012). For instance, when making their movies, Marvel Studios uses certain storytelling devices from the comics to appeal specifically to the community of hardcore comic book fans as opposed to the generic movie-goer (Beatty, 2016). Interpretive communities therefore shape the media text even as the media text shapes the community.

Interpretive communities theory also addresses the portrayal of political issues in fictional media. First, works of fiction which present political arguments often use emotion, particularly fear, to induce self-reflection within the audience (Cozen, 2017). Specifically, showing the realities of people's experiences to support an argument can be very persuasive when making a political argument (Cozen, 2017). However, social judgment theory argues that persuasion works best if the argument proposed lies at the edge of the listener's latitude of acceptance as it would pull the listener closer to the opinion the persuader would like them to have (Gass & Seiter, 2018). Arguments that land in the listener's latitude of rejection may have the opposite effect, strengthening the

listener's rejection to the idea (Gass & Seiter, 2018). When it comes to interpretive communities theory, different interpretive communities will have different latitudes of acceptance and rejection. Thus, proposing a political point of view in a work of fiction inevitably leads to the rejection of the work by one or more interpretive communities, depending on their respective beliefs. For example, a fictional work denouncing abortion would not be received well by those from a pro-choice interpretive community, while a fictional work supporting women's freedom of choice would not be received well by a pro-life interpretive community.

Overall, shared interpretive communities are a part of everyday life and culture, particularly in modern times through the development of fandoms. These communities impact how a single person may interpret a work of fiction, particularly when political arguments are made, because of the community's underlying values. This is particularly important to note as fictional media can shape audiences and the audiences can shape fictional media in return.

RQ: How do fictional characters' political beliefs affect the audience's interpretation of a fictional work?

### **Methods**

Researchers using interpretive communities theory rely upon qualitative methods to investigate the lifeworlds of the communities that constitute the interpretive communities in question. As opposed to quantitative studies, qualitative studies allow the research to explore how the audience creates and articulates new understandings from their own experiences (Lindlof, 2012). These results are often something that neither the

audience nor the researcher could have predicted in a quantitative study, which ultimately enriches media reception research (Jensen, 1987).

Of the available qualitative methods, focus group interviews are a common way for researchers to study interpretive communities theory in practice (Lindlof, 2012). Focus group interviews are conducted in a group of three or more people using “discussion, question and answer, [and] interactive dialogue” (Tracy, 2019, p. 190). Focus groups allow researchers using interpretive communities theory to analyze the formulation of group interpretations and where different interpretive communities may exist within the focus group.

The interpretive communities of college students were the main focus of interest for this project. The recruitment used a convenience sample of potential participants that the researcher knows or could access through the faculty director’s courses. Nearly one hundred college students received an email from the researcher of this study inviting them to participate. The recruited college students were informed of the purpose of the study before participating. The faculty advisor offered extra credit to students in two of her classes for participating. The students chosen were those who expressed interest in the study and were able to participate at the scheduled times. This recruitment process resulted in a total of nine participants in two focus group sessions. All procedures of participant recruitment, data collection, data storage, and data analysis were approved by the university IRB Board.

There were two focus group sessions held in March of 2022. The students completed the written consent process before attending and consent was verbally reviewed as they arrived. Five students attended the first study and four students attended

the second study. The first study consisted of an entirely female group. The second study consisted of three male participants and one female participant. As the students arrived, they chose from several different pre-selected pseudonyms which they were to be referred to by for the rest of the study. The focus group started with the participants getting pizza and soda. Each participant was given a paper with four open-ended questions for them to answer in writing. These questions were:

1. How would you characterize your political beliefs?
2. How familiar are you with the show *Arrow*?
3. What is your opinion about the show?
4. How would you characterize your view on gun control?

Once everyone had completed the written survey, the participants were given a brief introduction to *Arrow*. The participants viewed the entire episode of *Arrow* S5E13 on a projector screen in the room.

After the episode, the participants responded to a series of open-ended questions designed to prompt interaction and discussion about the show, the characters, and gun control (Tracy, 2019). Both focus group sessions were audio-recorded. At the beginning of the audio recording, each participant was first asked to say their pseudonym to help with distinguishing vocal patterns during analysis, then asked what they thought of the show. The guiding questions for the focus group session were as follows and follow up questions were asked to probe for more details and exploring ideas that participants brought to the discussion (such as school shootings):

1. What specific parts of the episode stood out to you?
2. What did you think about the characters?

3. Which character did you identify with the most and why?
4. Do you feel your views were represented in the episode?
5. Were there any views that you would have liked to have seen in the episode?
6. How do you think different political parties would react to this show?
7. How do you think gender impacts people's views on gun control?
8. What is the relationship between gender and beliefs on gun control or why is there no relationship?
9. Does watching this show make you recall any personal experiences you have with firearms of any kind for any reason?
10. What is your reaction to the stories shared in this group?

Data analysis followed a process for thematic analysis (Tracy, 2021). The audio recordings and written responses were analyzed with the support of the qualitative analysis software program Atlas.ti. This software allows for open-coding which resulted in 151 initial codes. In this study, every participant's turn of speech was held together as a unit of analysis. For each unit of analysis, topics were labeled as they occurred, including references to the episode and its characters, political expression, personal experiences with firearms, and interaction behaviors, such as using humor, interrupting, or agreeing with others. The software also facilitates the axial coding process where connections among initial codes are documented. The multiple coding within a unit of analysis allowed the researcher to note connections between different codes and which codes occurred most often, which are used to explain the following results.

## **Results**

The coded focus group discussions and written survey answers reveal six categories of results that appeared most frequently or had the most emphasis in the participants' discussions. Their conversations and thoughts reveal the values and understandings of their interpretive community. . First, each focus group member identified themselves with the same specific characters. Second, the multiple political perspectives in the show were discussed often in both focus groups with generally positive interpretations. Third, both groups often used humor in the discussions to lessen tension or make a point succinctly. Fourth, both groups mentioned gender frequently and made strong observations about how gender is associated with gun control. Fifth, focus group members connected strongly with a character's backstory despite forgetting his name. Lastly, both groups had strong feelings about the prevalence of teenage shooters, with the first group focusing on school shootings.

### **Result 1: Character identification**

Each member of each focus group was asked about the characters from the episode with which they primarily identified. Two participants responded to the question from the first group and all four participants responded in the second group. The two who responded in the first group identified themselves as loosely Republican or conservative in the written survey, one specifically specifying they do not typically label themselves as one side or the other. One said:

I think I kind of more, more identify with Oliver because, like, he's not particularly on one side . . . I don't know. I think I'm more in that area, and I just want to come up with a solution that best fits all.



The other participant agreed, saying:

I feel like a lot of people think that you either have to be completely for gun control or completely against it, and, yeah, like he was kind of in the middle . . .

So yeah, I say I relate to him the most.

Thus, both of these participants identified with the main character Oliver Queen because he was not on either side, representing the middle perspective, and because he wanted a solution that benefited both sides.

In the second group, two participants identified themselves as true moderates, one identified themselves as a centrist-leaning conservative, and one identified themselves as a moderate, leaning left. The one who was moderate leaning left said:

I, for sure, identified with Felicity just because I am very non-confrontational and I don't want to get involved in those kind of con-I mean, not conversations because I'm fine having conversations about it, but when it turns into, you know, heated arguments, I'm like 'we're not gonna talk about this,' and, so, I did find myself siding with her the most.

One of the moderate participants said:

I would have to agree and say Felicity is kind of the person that I, as a person, kind of would have been in that situation. . . . I really appreciated the way that [Oliver] handled the situation for the most part.

The participant who was centrist leaning conservative said:

I think, from an overall standpoint, [I identify with] Felicity because I tend to steer away from any political arguments just because I know that I will get heated

about certain things, and like, that's not who I am. That's not who I identify as.

That's just what I think, and so I do try to steer away from those conversations.

The second of the moderate participants, similar to the first, said:

I feel like for me, I'm a mixture between Oliver and Felicity . . . Sometimes, I just want to avoid the conversation altogether cause that's easy. It's the easiest way-easiest thing to do. . . . But then also I resonate with Oliver because I want to do something about it. . . . I'm like I want to listen to everybody and I want to make everyone happy, but I don't know how.

Thus, every participant in the second group identified with Felicity because they would react similarly to her when faced with a debate about a political conflict as she sought to avoid heated political arguments. It is interesting to note, however, that those who identified themselves as true moderates in this group also brought up that they either appreciated or also identified with Oliver because of the way he handled the situation.

Their responses demonstrate that moderates, particularly in this interpretive community, desire a solution that benefits both sides or seek to avoid political debate when possible. Thus, the participants, particularly the self-identified moderates, find it meaningful and significant when a narrative portrays seeing the benefits of multiple views or avoidance as legitimate responses to political expression, particularly because, as discussed in the next section, they feel they see these responses rarely in the media.

## **Result 2: Response to multiple perspectives**

Out of the nine students who attended the two focus groups, seven identified themselves on the written surveys as moderate or only weakly associated with a political perspective while the other two identified themselves as liberal. That being said, there

seemed to be a great appreciation in both groups for the amount of perspectives presented in the episode. The members of the focus group referred to the show's multiple perspectives at least fifteen times across both focus groups, each group member discussing this topic at least once. One even said:

Typically shows or, like, movies in Hollywood just go with one side, and so, I liked that they gave both sides, and were very, uh, aware of how it could affect people. I don't know. I just think that they did a really good job representing every side.

She added that she "thought they really touched that well without, like, being too, like, without having some kind of political agenda."

Furthermore, in both focus groups, members talked about the multiple perspectives within the show at the beginning of the discussion in response to the researcher asking what they thought about the episode. In the first group, the first response to this question was "I thought [the episode] did a good job of, like, talking about this really, uh, sensitive topic, but in a way that demonstrated both sides, [and that] there's a reason behind what they believe and it's valid." In the second group, the second person to respond to this question said he "thinks the episode did a good job of touching on a lot of different aspects of the issue." This was before the researcher asked what they thought about the inclusion of multiple perspectives in the episode. This supports the idea that the focus group appreciates multiple perspectives being presented in fictional work.

Since the majority of participants self-identified as politically moderate, this indicates that the presentation of multiple perspectives is important to the moderate interpretive community. Previous studies suggest that moderates appreciate and promote

political compromise, whereas even those who slightly identify with a party are most often frustrated with political compromise (Toll, 2006). This seems to hold true within this interpretive community. As a whole, the focus groups seemed to agree that the inclusion of multiple perspectives in the episode made them rate the episode as good.

Notably, the two participants who identified themselves as liberal refrained from expressing a positive opinion about the multiple perspectives portrayed in the episode. One participant mentioned that she “felt like [the episode] didn’t really try to pick sides. They put in just as much effort for both sides of the argument.” She refrained from classifying this as good or bad. The second said that the episode did a good job of addressing the nuances of both sides, interestingly enough giving an example of the side she identified herself as opposed to on the written survey and failing to give an example for her own side. This demonstrates that these two participants did not find the multiple perspectives presented in the episode as meaningful as the other focus group participants, but they were unwilling to directly state their disagreement. Instead, the two participants seemed to give statements that appeared to agree on a surface level with the interpretive community’s assumption but did not directly state their agreement. Their silence regarding the differences between their potential interpretive community and the community of the group is an example of the effects of group conformity (Gass & Seiter, 2019). These two participants were unwilling to verbally state their disagreement because they felt the contradiction between their beliefs and the beliefs of the interpretive community presented in the focus group. This demonstrates the existence of interpretive communities as one shared community was clearly dominant within the study, creating a need for those from other interpretive communities to conform or stay silent.

### **Result 3: The use of humor**

Both focus groups used humor for two reasons. First, the focus group members would often use humor to reduce the tension or seriousness related to a topic, striving to make others or themselves feel more comfortable. The first group used humor in their discussions about the school lockdown drills they had experienced in middle school and high school, reducing the natural tension and seriousness that comes from discussing the potential of a school shooting. One participant explained that lockdown drills are scary, “especially when they don’t tell you that it’s just a drill, and you’re like, well, are we going to die?” Another participant shared: “we’d like hide in the corner and go around [to] turn off all the lights, like if they don’t think we’re in here, they won’t come in here.”

In the second group, the group members often made humorous interjections to lighten the mood after more serious discussions and points were made. There are several examples of this in the discussion. First, after one member brought up the consequences of mental health evaluations, one member interjected, “what if we go back to swords?” Second, after one member discussed how government registries could be accessed or hacked, another member interjected: “I don’t know. I think that if they had the ACU two-step authentication, they would never get into it.” Third, after one member talked about the misrepresentation of female gun owners in the media, one member quipped, “this is depressing.” Finally, after a discussion of some gun owners not using guns responsibly, one member quoted an old Disney Channel show *Hannah Montana* saying, “a famous philosopher once said ‘Nobody’s perfect. I gotta work it.’”

Previous research on humor supports the idea that humor creates a positive environment, particularly by regulating emotions and reframing a situation more

positively (Nir & Halperin, 2019). Overall, the purpose of using humor seems to be to keep the conversation light-hearted and comfortable for everyone despite the seriousness of discussing potential political disagreements about a controversial issue and the risks of school shootings.

Second, focus group members often used humor to illustrate their reasoning about their beliefs in a simpler way. For instance, one of the group members used humor and the table in front of him to explain how anything can be a weapon: “anything can be a weapon. This table could be a weapon. I mean, I’m not that strong but . . .” Later, he also illustrated the importance of gun owners’ responsibility by saying “I think a sensible gun owner’s not just gonna be like, you know, back off!” and miming the rapid brandishing of a gun. In this way, this group member made logical points humorously in order to make their point more succinct and clear.

It is also important to note that humor was used in the second group 150% more often than the first group. There are a couple different reasons this could be. First, all of the group members in the second group were close friends, whereas some of the group members in the first group knew each other and others did not. The second group’s familiarity with one another may have sparked more moments of humor. Second, the first group consisted of all females whereas the second group consisted of mostly males. It is possible that men may feel more comfortable using humor either in general or as it pertains to this topic. There is not enough data from this study to make a definite conclusion about why this statistical difference occurred, but it is important to note that both groups used humor to alleviate tension and express arguments.

#### **Result 4: Gender and gun control**

Both focus groups engaged in a lot of discussion about how gender factors into gun control and gun ownership. The prompt about gender, elicited more than thirty responses across both groups. Participants tend to perceive that men own guns more often and women own guns less often. Both focus groups seemed to agree that cultural gender norms contributed to this assumption. One member in the first group observed:

Even in societal roles like job-wise, most of the jobs that have to do with guns, like hunting or, um, being security guards and stuff, most of those jobs are dominated by men. So it's just more common even in, like, the workforce for men to be gun handlers.

A member of the second group observed:

I personally think it has to do with just, like, historical stereotypes within our civilization and just what we are socialized into thinking regarding gender. I think we have so many images, um, in old movies, old, even, like, our wars in history have always been fought by men in the past, and so we have all this imagery of men with guns, um, you know, historical heroes in history have been men with guns. I think it's been socialized into us to see men as, you know, men are the ones who hold guns. In our history and everything, that's what we've grown up to see.

The second group brought up the point that, in the media, females are not given guns very often. One participant claimed that, in the media, "it's never just a woman who owns a gun." One of the members in the first group brought up the point that "guns are more likely to be marketed towards men," which was then discussed by the whole group for an

additional four minutes. The groups believed that these three components reinforce the assumption that guns are mainly owned and used by men, not women.

A participant in the first group, which was composed entirely of women, expressed a belief about natural gender roles, saying that women tend to be more nurturing and thus they do not own guns as often. She said:

From a Christian perspective, I'd say we're kind of, I think we're made differently . . . I think women were made to be a little more nurturing and most women are. Some women are not that way. But, um, made to be more nurturing and loving towards people, and so I feel like guns are not typically nurturing or loving, um, so, that could-that could play a major role, and, um, and I, yeah. So I think that women are just, like, more, yeah. I guess that's all I got to say.

This participant's statements included many qualifiers, indicating uncertainty in how the group would receive her opinion. Towards the end of her statement, the speaker stammered to a halting conclusion. The next person to speak then changed to discussing how society affects gender differences in gun ownership. The idea of natural gender differences was not brought up again even though no other participants overtly disagreed with her. It appears that this belief about natural gender roles is not meaningful to the dominant interpretive community. However, it may be part of other interpretive communities to which this participant belongs.

In the second focus group session when the researcher asked about the relation between gender and gun control, the only woman in the group said "I felt like I had to say something because I'm the only woman sitting in this room." Being the only woman in the group seemed to give her cause to express her strong convictions on the topic. She



had written a paper about women and gun ownership and was already deeply familiar with and invested in the topic before coming to the session. She said:

I liked that they made the [pro-gun council member] a woman. I think it was very important for them to do that versus having some male that could, like, just, like, just another politician, you know? No, this is like a woman who is very pro-gun, which is, I personally think, very under-represented.

However, she still argued that “the women’s view is not very diversified [in the episode], and I was glad they added a little, but I feel like it could have been more.” She also claims that “in the media, usually when women have guns, it’s either over-romanticized or some type of sexualized something or other. It’s never like them protecting themselves. It’s always some type of fantasy whatever.” Both her passion about and knowledge of the topic influenced the interpretive community into themselves being more passionate about the topic as demonstrated by the energy and speed of conversation notably picking up after her strong positive reactions when others contributed to or agreed with her points.

### **Result 5: Rene and his backstory**

One of the most commonly discussed characters in the episode was Rene. Rene is a new member of Team Arrow, the superhero team of vigilantes featured in the television show. His backstory is explored in flashbacks interspersed throughout the episode. He presents himself as firmly against the idea of too much gun control policy on behalf of the government because, as the audience discovers, his wife was killed ultimately because he was unable to access the gun in his safe in time. Both focus group sessions discussed his story a lot; however, participants often forgot his name. One participant in the first group said:

What was his name? Rene? Whenever the show just like kept showing him as like he was for guns, blah, blah, blah, but, like, we didn't know, like, the reason behind it? And then when they actually showed why he's so for guns, like, that was, like, a big, like, moment, I feel like.

In the second group, one participant said:

The character that stood out the most was . . . I totally forgot what his name was, but like, how he'd experience-like how his experience was so crazy and violent, and how, like, he did have a gun to protect himself, but, like, he was so discouraged from having it that, like, all the circumstances ended up, like, with his wife dead and his daughter being taken away and how crazy that was, so I felt like it was a focal point, for sure.

These comments demonstrate that the participants resonated with the story and its application to lived experience more than its importance to the development of the character. In the first example, the focus group member particularly resonated with learning and understanding why Rene believed what he believed about guns, which corresponds with this group's appreciation for multiple perspectives being demonstrated. In the second example, the focus group member saw his backstory as illustrating the difficulties associated with gun control and how it gets in the way of self-protection.

These groups' discussions of Renee's backstory reveal two components of the dominant interpretive community: (1) the interpretive community sought to find the argument behind the focus on Rene's backstory and (2) the community resonated with the self-protection argument presented by his story. The first point demonstrates that the interpretive community paid closer attention to the political views presented in the show

than the entertainment value of the show. The focus group members evaluated the show for its arguments sixteen times across both groups. In particular, they evaluated the show's use of politics, talked about the overall message it was trying to convey, and discussed what points they would have liked the episode to have included in their argument and what limitations may have prevented the episode from including these points. For example, one participant said:

I wish that-I mean, I-I understand that a TV show the episodes have to be a certain length and there's a lot goes into this topic. I do wish they had shown a little bit more self-reflection on the part of the main character, um, as far as this issue is concerned . . . He uses a lot of violence in his methods as a vigilante, um, and he doesn't necessarily use guns, but that doesn't mean that the negatives and the responsibilities and the consequences of using a weapon of violence, like, that still applies, and so I do wish they had spent some time in the episode, um, with him reflecting on what his opinions are regarding his own personal use.

The focus group seemed invested in understanding and evaluating the arguments the episode presented which may be a component of the dominant interpretive community.

The second conclusion demonstrates the interpretive community's agreement with the argument that guns are an effective tool for self-protection. One member specifically said:

Whenever I, like, think about, like, the gun issue, I think about my sister who's a single mom, and when she's home by herself, and if, like, a man was going to come in and try to hurt her and my niece, I would want her to have that equalizer.

Self-protection is thus an important value to this community, and they see the responsible use of guns as an effective way to achieve that value.

### **Result 6: Teenage shooters and school shootings**

School shootings were thoroughly discussed in the first focus group session. When asked if they had any personal experiences with firearms, one of the group members responded that “an experience that I know all of us have that isn’t specifically, like, we haven’t had this experience with an actual gun, but it is, like, gun-adjacent would be when we were in K-12 having to do lockdown exercises. Everyone has to do lockdown exercises now.” Another focus group member added that “all of us were younger whenever, like, the big, like, when Sandy Hook happened, and, like, then all the ones after that obviously, and I think that affects everyone’s views on gun control.” The researcher, noting the group response to the mention of Sandy Hook, asked what they remembered about the Sandy Hook shooting and how they reacted to it. Sandy Hook occurred while these participants were in middle school. Most members of the group described how Sandy Hook was discussed for months afterward at their respective schools and how they themselves lived in a state of fear while attending school for a long time afterwards.

They also noted that this initial fear stagnated over time and news of school shootings seemed insignificant anymore. One said:

[Sandy Hook was] all anyone would talk about in school, for, yeah, like, at least a month. And then, another school shooting would happen, and we would talk about it. And then another one. And just, we got kind of desensitized, and, like, it got to the point in high school where it would be turning on Twitter and you’d just

be like another school shooting happened. How sad. But nobody would be as affected by it as it was when it was Sandy Hook, because that was the first big deal.

This was a shared background for four of the five participants in the first study, but one of the participants was an international student. She said that “as someone who is not from the U.S., it’s shocking to me how many school shootings the U.S. has. . . . I didn’t have that experience, like, at all when I was in [my country].” Although she seemed to be an outsider to this dimension of this particular interpretive community, the other group members’ vocal inflections became more excited as they described their experiences with school lockdown drills to her, assimilating her into this interpretive community.

Furthermore, although the international student may not have had the same experiences in her home country, she shared the interpretation of the group that it is awful that kids must live with the experiences of school shootings and school lockdown drills. This demonstrates that similar backgrounds do not have to be the key determining factor in the creation of interpretive communities.

In this group, there was a negative evaluation about the amount of access teenage shooters have to weapons. For them, this belief about access was the most concerning issue when it comes to school shootings. The international student also brought up that for her “one of the first few questions whenever an event like that happens if it’s like a kid, I’m like, ‘how, how did they get possession of a gun?’” Even though most of the members acknowledged that they are desensitized to news of school shootings, they still seemed bothered by the idea of teenagers gaining access to guns. One of them even specifically referenced this in their opinions about gun control on the written survey: “I

think that guns are too accessible to the public, many teenagers have had easy access to them and hurt many people. I would want us to reduce the occurrence [*sic*] of school shootings.”

This concern about youth access to weapons is a similarity that developed between the both focus groups. Both groups share the same story of a November 2021 school shooting at Oxford High School in Michigan. A member of the first group recounted this story:

There was a situation, I don't, it was a few months ago. I don't remember where it was, but the...it was a student. He shot up the school, and they, like, the teachers had expressed, I think that day to his parents that they worried about him doing exactly that, and they didn't send him home. They let him stay in school that day. His parents had given him, like, a gun for his birthday, but he wasn't really supposed to have it until he was eighteen, and so they kind of locked it away, but he got it anyways.

Another participant added on, saying that “the parents were also facing repercussions because of it, because they, in a way . . . enabled him to have, to be able to get access to this gun, which led to a shooting.” Referring to the same story, a member of the second focus group recounted the event this way: “the recent shooting in a school in Michigan . . . this most recent one. That one, the parents were negligent. They weren't keeping an eye on their child. The unfortunate circumstance happened that that child shot up that, uh, school.” Thus, the story was not only notorious among this community but was impactful enough that members in both groups recollected the story and used it to make a point

about teenage shooters getting access to weapons at too early an age, indicating the interpretive community's strong negative evaluation of young people having weapons.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study offer several conclusions regarding the question of how fictional characters' political beliefs in a television show affects audience member interpretations of the show based on the interpretive community characteristics discovered in the study. The characteristics of the dominant interpretive community in these focus groups are as follows: (a) appreciation of multiple views, (b) use of humor, (c) attributions about gender, (d) understanding arguments in narrative form, and (e) influence of youth. These characteristics work together within an interpretive community to influence how they derive meaning about political portrayals in a fictional work. These meanings influence how people participate in political discourse.

#### **Moderates' Appreciation of Multiple Views**

Most of the participants in this study self-identified as having moderate political beliefs, which relates to their interpretive community appreciating a fictional work's portrayal of multiple perspectives of a political issue. In other words, viewers with moderate political beliefs and viewers who do not identify strongly with a political party seem to appreciate that a television show displays multiple sides of a political argument. They expect polarization in the media and are pleasantly surprised when both sides are represented fairly and equally. They identify with characters and storylines that portray two sides of a divisive issue and/or identify with characters who seek to avoid conflict and the topic altogether. In the United States, noting this viewpoint is particularly important because political moderates are believed to make up the majority of people in

the United States (Ansolabehere, et. al., 2006; Toll, 2019). It is important to note that although appealing to moderates may be appealing to the majority, those who clearly favor one side of the argument will likely be more vocal in their negative feelings (Barcelo, 2017). Thus, while a moderate viewer may hold a positive interpretation of a work with a balanced treatment of political viewpoints, a polarized viewer's interpretation may be heard more often. Media creators should consider this when making choices of how to present political arguments in their work. Furthermore, consumers of fan community discussions should also be aware of this and react accordingly when they see strong criticism of a fictional work with political implications.

Two of the focus group participants are outliers to this interpretive community, as they specifically identify themselves as liberal and give non-committal responses regarding the multiple perspectives presented in this episode. Furthermore, there are no participants in this study that identified themselves as strongly conservative. The lack of strong conservative and liberal voices could indicate that potential participants with these political convictions self-selected out of the study because they did not want to be presented with multiple political perspectives or because they did not want to risk being in discussion with members from a different interpretive community.

### **Use of Humor**

As demonstrated in the focus group sessions, humor can relieve tension, create a comfortable atmosphere, and make points clearer and more succinct. Media creators working with potentially controversial political topics can adopt the use of humor. In order to help connect with audience interpretations of fictional shows, episodes dealing with political topics should consider including moments of humor to relieve tension,



create a comfortable atmosphere, or, perhaps most importantly, make points clearer and more succinct. Shows already use humor often to relieve tension and create a comfortable atmosphere (Zillman, 2000), but rarely to make an argument. Comic strips in newspapers demonstrate that humor delivers an argument in a short amount of time (Khasandi-Telewa, 2014). This strategy also applies to television shows and as seen in comedies that imitate the art style of comic strips, like *Family Guy* and *The Simpsons*. While the point can also be made in dramas without the use of humor, constraints around episode length limit time available for making narrative arguments. The occasional use of humor to illustrate points succinctly, while not sacrificing clarity, may also help dramatic shows present political views in a way that appeals to political moderates.

### **Attributions about Gender**

A characteristic of this interpretive community relates to attributions of gender: they positively evaluate a diversity of female perspectives in a work of fiction. For instance, the choice to cast the pro-gun council member as a woman appealed to some members of this interpretive community. Because of this casting choice, the more feminist members of this interpretive community appreciated the show better as a whole. However, they still claimed that there was a lack of female perspectives in the episode, mainly because they felt there was not enough diversity in the perspectives presented by females. Thus, the political beliefs presented by the female characters affected this interpretive community's reception of the episode. In order to better reach this audience when discussing political topics, fictional works should include not only a number of female characters' opinions, but the opinions must also be diverse and somewhat unique from one another and societal expectations.

## **Understanding Arguments Through Narrative**

Rene's backstory particularly stood out to the focus groups, not because the story developed Rene as a character, but because the story seemed pivotal to understanding the core message behind the episode. Ultimately, this interpretive community seems to value analyzing and understanding arguments especially as presented in a narrative form. This being the case, a media text presenting why a person believes what they believe is important for this interpretive community as this helps them better understand the motivation behind the character's arguments and thus the show's overall argument. For the members of this interpretive community, the show's overall argument does not necessarily have to choose a side on a political controversy. For instance, the main argument that this community derived from this episode is that people should be more willing to discuss political issues with one another without developing negative feelings when their views disagree.

The participants of this study watched the show with an analytical mindset rather than a casual mindset for consuming entertainment that they more typically have while watching television. They may have had this mindset because they were aware that they were participating in a research study and the research primed them to pay attention to how the issue of gun control was portrayed in the episode through the different characters. Thus, the participants may have paid more attention to what the characters believed and whether it represented their own beliefs while they were watching the show.

## **Influence of Youth**

All of the participants in this study were young college students and had similar experiences regarding the resurgence in school shootings in the last decade. In the 1990s,

mass school shootings, defined as school shootings that result in four or more injuries or deaths, occurred thirteen times, but this was before the participants in this study had attended school. In the 2000s, when the focus group participants likely started to attend school, mass school shootings only occurred five times, a significant decrease from the 1990s. However, in the 2010s when the focus group participants were in middle school or high school, eight mass school shootings occurred in the United States, resulting in 42% more deaths than occurred in the 1990s, when school shootings were at their highest in the United States (Katsiyannis, et. al., 2018). In many ways, this interpretive community has become desensitized to the threats and occurrences of mass shootings. The emotional impact this interpretive community experiences concerning mass shootings portrayed in fictional media is construed with different emotional impact than viewers from other generations may feel. In fact, the scene of the mass shooting depicted in the episode was never referenced in the focus group discussions.

Violent depictions, therefore, do not seem to have as much of an emotional impact on this interpretive community as opposed to interpretive communities with different age generations. However, the amount of discussion in the focus groups dedicated to the topic of shootings suggests that the topic is still meaningful to this interpretive community. The way this community interprets shootings indicates the difference in emotional impact. This community regards gun violence as a fact of life, not an unusual, tragic occurrence, because this community has lived through an increase in American gun violence and experienced some of its consequences firsthand through school lockdown drills. This interpretive community feels that there is nothing they can do to stop gun violence themselves, further evidenced by their appreciation of the argument that guns can be a

form of self-protection. Thus, using violent depictions as a way to evoke emotional response towards a political argument may not be the best method with this community. They have become emotionally desensitized to gun violence. However, presenting a means to respond to gun violence may be particularly impactful for this community. According to Witte's extended parallel processing model, it is best when using fear appeals to give specific, effective steps and present how one has the self-efficacy to take these steps (Gass & Seiter, 2018). As of right now, this interpretive community has more practice with fear control, where they regulate the fear of the problem, rather than danger control, where they take specific steps to address the problem (Gass & Seiter, 2018). This is why the community has become desensitized to the issue. Thus, the best way to make a political argument regarding violence to this interpretive community would not be to depict the realities of violence, but to depict the steps they can take to prevent violence.

### **Conclusion**

The main question of this study was whether the political opinions of fictional characters impacted the audience's interpretation of the fictional work. The researcher showed nine college students, divided into two groups, an episode of the TV show *Arrow* which discussed gun control policy and displayed a wide variety of opinions on the topic. The focus group discussions illustrated five characteristics of an interpretive community that may affect an audience member's interpretation of a fictional work. First, as political moderates, this interpretive community appreciates fiction that represents all sides of a political issue fairly and equally. Secondly, this interpretive community uses humor to reduce tension and clarify their arguments regarding political topics. Third, feminist members in this interpretive community appreciate when works of fiction present a

variety of political views from female characters. Fourth, this interpretive community seems to derive political meaning from arguments presented in narrative form that allow them to understand the motivation behind fictional characters' beliefs. Finally, the public gun violence that this generation has experienced has desensitized them to public acts of violence and created a need for violent depictions in fictional media to include concrete steps to address violence in their lived experiences.

The findings of this research could particularly benefit creators who seek to address political issues in their work. Appealing to every interpretive community is impossible. Therefore, it is important for the creator to know the interpretive community of their audience or the audience they are trying to reach in order to fictionalize the political issue in a way that appeals to them. The characteristics of the moderate interpretive community listed above are a starting point.

This research also explains the wide variety of opinions and reactions to political issues being represented in fictional works. Fandoms are an interpretive community based on a mutual love of a fictional work, but divisions can arise within these fandoms when political issues are presented in their favored fiction, as seen with the online response to this episode of *Arrow*. This research demonstrates the different ways different interpretive communities respond to political issues in media, which may override the wider fandom interpretive community.

Several changes or additions to this study could benefit further research into this topic. First, widening the demographic range of this study could yield interesting results. Specifically, by screening potential focus group members before the session about their political beliefs, future research may learn how interpretive communities with different

political orientations would respond to the political beliefs showcased within a work of fiction. Extending the study to older participants may also yield different responses for analysis.

Second, different works of fiction could be presented to analyze whether the work makes a difference in the interpretations of the focus group members. This could include television show episodes which choose to take a particular stance on a political issue or shows that come from a different genre of television. Future researchers could also use books or other forms of fictional works to study rather than television shows.

Finally, future researchers may wish to not let participants know the true meaning of the study ahead of the focus group discussion. Participants in this study may have viewed the episode differently than they typically would because they knew the purpose of the study was about the political beliefs presented in the episode. Different results may surface if the focus group participants are unaware of this purpose before viewing the episode.

It is important that members of society are aware of the existence of different interpretive communities, particularly when political issues are presented in fiction. Fiction can be a foundation for discussion about political issues and has been many times in the past. As demonstrated by the current U.S. political climate, discussion about political issues can become very divisive. However, the presence of fiction and politics are prominent in everyday life and will thus inevitably cross over with one another. When this happens, an awareness of different interpretive communities could help society understand why disagreements occur in interpretation and reception of these fictional works, allowing for more civil discourse and perhaps even grace in disagreement.



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