When is Fiction as Good as Fact? Comparing the Influence of Documentary and Historical Reenactment Films on Engagement, Affect, Issue Interest, and Learning

Heather L. LaMarre
School of Journalism and Mass Communication
University of Minnesota

Kristen D. Landreville
School of Communication
The Ohio State University

This study advances documentary film effects research by comparing the influence of a political documentary with a historical reenactment film on narrative engagement, affect, learning, and interest. Using the Rwandan genocide as a context of study, a documentary film, *The Triumph of Evil*, and the historical reenactment fictional film, *Hotel Rwanda*, were examined. Results revealed significant differences between documentary and historical reenactment film exposure for affective responses and issue knowledge gain. However, increased issue interest and narrative engagement were not significantly

Heather L. LaMarre (Ph.D., The Ohio State University, 2009) is an assistant professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Minnesota. Her research examines the social-psychological processes and effects of strategic communications and campaigns in news and entertainment media.

Kristen D. Landreville (M.A., University of Florida, 2006) is a doctoral candidate in the School of Communication at The Ohio State University. Her research interests include the processes and effects of political entertainment use with a focus on emotion and discussion.

Correspondence should be addressed to Heather L. LaMarre, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Minnesota, 111 Murphy Hall, 206 Church Street SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455. E-mail: hlamarre@umn.edu
different for the two stimulus groups, suggesting that dramatic fictional reenactments of socio-political events lead to increased issue interest as much or more than the live footage and factual account of events offered in a documentary. The results of this study are discussed in terms of their importance for key democratic outcome variables (e.g., knowledge and participation), along with suggestions for future documentary film research.

Communication scholars have long shown an interest in how entertainment media influences emotional arousal, learning, and engagement (e.g., Raney, 2004; Shapiro & Chock, 2003; Zillmann, 2006). Often this line of research concerns itself with the motivations and gratifications of watching fictional entertainment media (e.g., Nabi, Stitt, Halford, & Finnerty, 2006). However, recent work by Pouliot and Cowen (2007) has begun to explore these relationships in documentary film, finding significant differences between fictional and factual narratives in terms of perceived realism, enjoyment, and engagement. Although Pouliot and Cowen offered an interesting analysis of such differences, the theoretical focus of this work remains limited to traditional entertainment media theory (e.g., enjoyment, uses and gratifications). Because many documentaries cover key public policy and socio-political issues (e.g., foreign issues, climate change, social movements), reexamining the influence of documentary and historical reenactment film from a socio-political lens provides a new understanding of the role documentaries play as an alternative outlet for political information.

As such, this study combines key entertainment theory with political communication theory to extend what researchers know about documentary and reenactment film effects from a political entertainment viewpoint. By comparing the influence of these two film formats on key democratic outcomes, we provide a better understanding of the role that documentary and historical reenactment films play in educating and engaging the electorate. Specifically, this study examines the differences between the historical reenactment fictional film Hotel Rwanda and the PBS Frontline documentary The Triumph of Evil. This work is moving beyond extant literature and bridging gaps between entertainment and political communication theory by examining several underlying communicative processes and their influence on political knowledge and issue interest.

What follows is a review of current research regarding known differences between documentary and historical reenactment films. This summary is followed by the results of an experiment designed to test the hypotheses offered herein, a discussion of the results in terms of political documentaries’ role in educating and engaging the electorate, and suggestions for future documentary effects research.
Before examining the differential effects between documentary and dramatic fictional reenactment film, it is necessary to review existing literature regarding known differences between these two media messages. Within the documentary and fictional film literature, there are established differences of visual and auditory features (Eitzen, 1995; Huston & Wright, 1983; Wright & Huston, 1983). For example, common features of film include close shots, rapid pace of editing, a frequent moving camera, studio-created sounds, and dramatic music, whereas common features of documentaries are the opposite—long shots, slow pace of editing, immobile or seldom traveling cameras, location sounds, and background noises (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007). To date, much of the research regarding such differences relies heavily on the premise that documentaries and fictional dramatic films adhere to these format differences, and pay little attention to the growing hybrids between documentaries and dramatic films (e.g., Sicko, March of the Penguins, and Super Size Me).

Newer evidence suggests that these formal features are only tendencies and are not hard and fast distinctions. Renov (1993a) argues that documentaries can contain fictive elements such as musical accompaniment, narration, close shots, telephoto or wide-angle lenses that distort space, or high or low camera angles. In fact, Renov (1993a, p. 3) suggested that the two domains “inhabit” one another and that narrative is the fundamental condition that binds the two film types. Simply put, storytelling is the essential element of both genres. Nevertheless, documentaries are based in nonfiction and films are based in fiction, and the fundamental tendencies of documentaries (i.e., to record, reveal, or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyze; to express) are not as present or dominant in fictional films (Renov, 1993b). It would be hard to argue that the main focus of a fictional film is “pleasurable learning,” as is the case with many documentaries (Renov, 1993b, p. 35).

Perceived Realism of Documentaries and Fictional Films

Beyond structural differences, research has found that documentaries and fictional films activate different expectations and are not processed in the same way (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007). Pouliot and Cowen had participants view one of six 2-minute stimuli: a fictional film or documentary about (a) AIDS, (b) Gandhi, or (c) a wedding. In terms of perceived external realism (i.e., degree of similarity between the message and reality), all of the documentaries were interpreted as more factually realistic than fictional films about the same content (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007), reaffirming the idea...
that documentaries have a tendency to record, reveal, or preserve. Shapiro and Chock (2003) suggested that documentaries are perceived as more factual than reenactments (even when covering the same content) because fictional films include more unusual and dramatic scenes, which are perceived as less real. This would suggest that documentaries hold more credibility with audiences, although this hypothesis has not been tested empirically.

**Interest and perceived reality.** On a similar note, interest for a documentary seems to depend on a high degree of external reality, but for a fictional film seems to depend on the lack of similarity to reality (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007). This distinction might be attributed to one’s pre-exposure expectations, which would explain theoretically why the perceived factual narrative (i.e., documentary) would require a higher degree of external realism than the fictional version. Simply put, if audiences expect a documentary to include a factual account of events, low external realism would violate their expectation and call the film’s validity into question. On the other hand, a film that is only based on a true story would not be held to the same standard with audiences expecting a certain level of drama and a somewhat unrealistic interpretation of events.

**Influences of Affect on Issue Interest and Learning**

This study focuses on negative affect due to its ability to increase attention, interest, and learning. Research in both emotion psychology (e.g., Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989) and political science (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000) has shown that negative affect leads to stronger behavioral and action tendencies (e.g., learning about issues) than positive affect. As such, we chose to focus on how guilt and disgust influence interest, learning, and engagement. These two emotions are especially relevant to the study because of the nature of the stimuli—a documentary and historical reenactment film about the international humanitarian failure to stop the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Guilt is an expected negative emotion for the audience to experience for several conceptual reasons. For one, guilt is a form of sadness because the person feels irrevocable loss and helplessness and that person internalizes the accountability of the loss (Lazarus, 1991). Guilt is ultimately different than sadness because sadness does not have a referent for blame, whereas the self is a referent for blame in feeling guilt (Lazarus, 1991). In the case of the Rwandan genocide, guilt should play a role in how the audience reacts to the stimuli; that is, people will feel guilty that they and their government did not do more to stop the genocide.
The second emotion that is likely to play a role in interest is disgust. Disgust is a kind of aversion that has been conceptualized as possessing similar high-energy levels and functions as enthusiasm (Marcus et al., 2000). Both disgust and enthusiasm incite the desire to do something; in particular, for disgust, we want to take action to deflect, undermine, or destroy the aversive target (Marcus et al., 2000). Marcus et al. described feelings of disgust as a type of stable disapproval in addition to a type of negative emotion. In the case of the film stimuli, disgust is likely to be evoked because of the normative, and nearly universal, disapproval of failing to stop genocide. Also, the graphic visual images in the films (e.g., slain dead bodies, burned churches, bloody machetes) may contribute to feelings of disgust.

Moreover, a perceived negative event is considered threatening and unique, thus inciting interest and attention to the event (Marcus et al., 2000). Therefore, more interest and learning should result from a narrative that arouses higher levels of negative emotions because more attention is paid to the event. Because literature shows higher levels of perceived realism and fact-based storytelling are associated with documentaries (e.g., Poulilou & Cowen, 2007), it makes sense to expect the documentary audience to have stronger emotional reactions to the narrative. Thus, we hypothesize that the documentary group will report significantly higher levels of negative affective arousal and that negative affect will be a positive predictor of issue interest and knowledge. Stated more formally,

H1: The documentary group will report significantly higher levels of negative emotional arousal (i.e., guilt and disgust) than the historical reenactment group.

H2: Negative emotional arousal (i.e., guilt and disgust) will positively predict issue interest and learning.

Engagement, Issue Interest, and Learning

When people are relatively uncritical and engaged with a text, they may be transported into a narrative world (Green & Brock, 2000). Engagement theories posit that narratives, whether fictional or factual, can transport people into the story and lead to higher levels of issue interest and learning (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004; Wirth, 2006). In relation to perceived reality, narrative engagement has been shown to be positively correlated with perceived reality (Green, 2004; Wilson & Busselle, 2004; Zhang, Hmielowski, & Busselle, 2007). Specifically, the more real a narrative is perceived, the more absorbed and engaged the audience becomes. Therefore, when comparing a fictional film to a documentary, the documentary should encourage more narrative engagement because documentaries are typically perceived
as more real (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007). This would also suggest that documentary exposure, by way of higher engagement, results in more issue interest and knowledge gain than the viewing of a fictional reenactment film on the same topic.

However, there is an argument in the opposite direction as well. That is, when people perceive a narrative to be fictional, then this encourages less critical evaluation and more narrative engagement (Green et al., 2004). For example, transported people typically have more story-consistent beliefs, more positive impressions of the protagonists, and find fewer errors in the narrative than people who were less transported (Green & Brock, 2000, 2002). This is because critical evaluation leads to disengagement from the narrative and less narrative engagement (Green et al., 2004). Following this line of thinking, fictional films should encourage more narrative engagement than documentaries because fictional narratives encourage less critical evaluation and more engagement with the narrative. With these opposing arguments and contradictory findings, we pose competing hypotheses about the effect of condition on narrative engagement. Therefore, the following competing hypotheses are offered:

H3a: The documentary will influence higher levels of narrative engagement.  
H3b: The historical reenactment film will influence higher levels of narrative engagement.

METHOD

Participants

Ninety-nine participants were recruited from three communication courses and one political science course at a large Midwestern university. Participants were given extra credit in their courses for participation. There were 50 participants in the fictional film condition and 49 participants in the documentary condition. Female participants comprised 46% ($n = 45$) and male participants comprised 54% ($n = 52$) of the total sample. The majority of participants were White ($n = 75, 77\%$), 15 participants (15\%) were minorities, and 9 participants either did not give their race or chose “prefer not to answer.” The average age of the participants was 21.38 ($SD = 2.88$). The mean family income was between the $50,000–$75,000 and $75,000–$100,000 income range. Democrats comprised 38\% ($n = 37$) of the participants; Republicans 34\% ($n = 33$); and Independents, participants with no party affiliation, and others 28\% ($n = 27$). Political ideology was measured as an interval variable, with 1 being very liberal and 7 being very
conservative. The average political ideology score was slightly oriented toward being liberal (\(M = 3.78, SD = 1.58\)).

To ensure random assignment, a comparison of the documentary and reenactment fictional film groups revealed no significant differences between the groups on gender, \(\chi^2(1, N = 97) = .853, p = .36\); race, \(\chi^2(5, N = 97) = 7.565, p = .18\); age, \(t(95) = .470, p = .64\); family income, \(\chi^2(5, N = 97) = 10.650, p = .06\); political party identification, \(\chi^2(2, N = 97) = 1.622, p = .44\); and social ideology, \(t(95) = .859, p = .86\). Last, there were no differences between the groups in terms of pretest knowledge about the Rwandan genocide, \(t(96) = -.405, p = .69\).

Because of the use of a blockbuster film that was nominated for several awards, all participants were asked in the posttest if they had previously seen the film Hotel Rwanda. Twenty-three percent had seen the film before, and they were marginally different on several demographic variables than participants who had not seen previously seen the film. Participants who had seen the film before were somewhat younger (\(M = 20.41, SD = 1.05\)) than those who had not seen the film (\(M = 21.67, SD = 3.17\)), \(t(95) = -1.824, p = .071\); somewhat higher on family income (\(M = 4.86, SD = .94\)) than those who had not seen the film (\(M = 4.33, SD = 1.47\)), \(t(95) = 1.592, p = .115\); and somewhat more conservative (\(M = 4.27, SD = 1.55\)) than those who had not seen the film (\(M = 3.64, SD = 1.57\)), \(t(95) = 1.664, p = .10\). Participants who had seen the film were not significantly different than participants who had not seen the film in regard to gender, race, and political party identification. However, participants who had seen the film possessed somewhat more pretest knowledge about the Rwandan genocide (\(M = .10, SD = .17\)) than participants who had not seen the film yet (\(M = .04, SD = .11\)). Because Levene’s test for equality of variances was significant (\(F = 13.726, p < .001\)), equal variances were not assumed, yet the difference between groups in terms of prior knowledge was not significant, \(t(26.09) = 1.762, p = .09\).

**Stimuli**

The major purpose of this study was to differentiate between a documentary and historical reenactment fictional film and determine how these two media formats differentially affect several outcomes: emotional arousal, interest, learning, and narrative engagement. The 1994 Rwandan genocide as a stimuli issue was an advantage because of the expected lack of knowledge and familiarity about the issue, and the themes and scripts associated with international humanitarian aid were likely somewhat unfamiliar to the participants. The Rwandan genocide is an appropriate issue because it occurred in 1994, when most of the participants in this study were children.
The 1½-hour documentary, *The Triumph of Evil*, and the 2-hour historical reenactment film, *Hotel Rwanda*, were chosen as stimuli. Both focus on the 1994 Rwandan genocide but emphasize different aspects of the genocide. *The Triumph of Evil* is a Frontline documentary that originally aired on PBS in 1998. The documentary is primarily about how the United Nations, United States, and the West responded to the genocide. The visual and audio features of the documentary are consistent with those common features of documentaries as outlined by Pouliot and Cowen (2007). *Hotel Rwanda*, released in 2004 and rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America, has explicit discussion of the Rwandan government, United Nations, and the West. The film is primarily about one man’s personal story of how he pleaded for international aid, survived the genocide, and managed to save about 2,000 fellow Rwandans. The film is based on a true story, but the film does not give any indication the story was based in reality. These particular stimuli were chosen because of the typical features found in their respective film formats. That is, *The Triumph of Evil* is a nonfictional presentation of information, unscripted, uses real people and recorded live footage, and is about 90 minutes. The historical reenactment film *Hotel Rwanda* is a fictional presentation of information, scripted, uses actors and constructed scenes, and is about 120 minutes.

In terms of internal validity, there is the potential that the time difference between the two conditions will influence the dependent variables. It is possible, for instance, that those individuals in the 90-minute documentary group will have less time to learn than those in the fictional film group who will be viewing the film for almost 2 hours. It is possible that responses will be affected by the temporal element. However, this study chose to maximize external validity: Documentaries are typically 60 to 90 minutes in length and fictional films are often 90 to 150 minutes. Therefore, although there is a temporal difference, this reflects the true nature of the documentary and fictional film, which increases external validity. Another threat to internal validity is the content differences. That is, the focus of the documentary and fictional film is not exactly alike. The findings of this article could be attributed to this difference. However, all of the answers to the knowledge questions could be found in both stimuli.

**Procedures**

The hypotheses were tested using a between-subjects quasi-experimental design with random assignment. Participants were randomly assigned to the documentary or fictional film conditions by flipping a coin. When participants arrived to the experiment location, they were given a pretest that asked them about their media use, attention to international affairs,
political efficacy, and demographics. Also on the pretest were foreign policy opinion questions and knowledge questions about several international issues: the Iraq war, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, the Rwandan genocide, and the Sudan conflict. The purpose of these questions was to gauge knowledge about the Rwandan genocide. Distracter issues were used to mitigate pretest sensitization to the Rwandan genocide. After all of the participants completed the pretest, the respective films were shown in their entirety. Because of some graphic content (violence, dead and decomposing bodies), the participants were told there was graphic content in the film and they could close their eyes, turn their heads, or leave the experiment at any time. No participants chose to leave the experiment. Once the film concluded, the participants were asked to complete a posttest that included emotional arousal, interest in the stimuli, knowledge questions, and narrative engagement questions. Finally, the participants were thanked for their time.

Measurement

In the posttest, negative affect and interest were measured by asking respondents to rate strength of emotion on a 5-point scale ranging from none of this feeling to a great deal of this feeling. The two negative emotions assessed and their reliabilities were guilt (guilt, regret, ashamed; \( \alpha = .85 \)) and disgust (disgust, revolted, repulsed; \( \alpha = .77 \)). Prior research has also found these scales valid and reliable (see Dillard & Peck, 2000, 2001). Interest was measured using the same 5-point scale with the words interest, captivated, and intrigued (\( \alpha = .70 \)).

Pretest knowledge was measured with four fill-in-the-blank questions about the Rwandan genocide. These items were basic questions about how many people were killed in the genocide, how long the genocide lasted, which ethnic group perpetrated the genocide, and which ethnic group was the majority ethnic group in Rwanda. The proportion of correct answers out of the four questions was computed for each participant, which was their pretest knowledge score. Posttest knowledge questions consisted of five fill-in-the-blank questions (the same four pretest questions plus a question about the type of media used to promote the genocide—radio) and five multiple-choice questions (see the appendix for exact questions). The proportion of correct answers out of the 10 questions was computed for each participant, which was their posttest knowledge score. For the analyses, the difference between their posttest knowledge score and their pretest knowledge score was used. This difference was their knowledge change score. The questions varied in difficulty, but all of the question topics were discussed in both stimuli for similar amounts of time. Theoretically, a
person could answer all of the questions correctly, no matter if he or she saw the documentary or fictional film.

Narrative engagement was measured using the original 11-item narrative engagement scale by Green and Brock (2000). This scale has been shown to be valid and reliable by multiple studies (Green, 2004; Green & Brock, 2000, 2002). This study also produced a reliable scale ($\alpha = .73$).

Analyses

Ordinary least squares regression was used to test the stated hypotheses. Prior viewing of the documentary and prior viewing of the fictional film were controlled in each regression, along with demographics and political interest.1

RESULTS

The first hypothesis predicted stronger levels of negative affect for the documentary group than the fictional film group. The first two regressions revealed that there was a significant difference of guilt between conditions, and no significant difference of disgust between conditions. As expected, both negative emotions, guilt (Documentary, $M = 2.94$, $SD = .84$; Reenactment, $M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.05$) and disgust (Documentary, $M = 3.52$, $SD = .47$; Reenactment, $M = 2.28$, $SD = .80$), were higher in the documentary group. Thus, H1 was partially supported, given the nonsignificant $p$ value for disgust ($p < .10$). This suggests that the factual account elicited stronger

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1Although prior viewing was controlled in each regression, we wanted to ensure that prior viewing was not a moderator of any of the relationships between condition and the dependent variables. We conducted Fisher’s $z$ transformations to more formally test for this possibility. This test involves finding the difference between the two groups’ unstandardized beta coefficients on the key variable of interest and then dividing by the square root of the total squared standard errors (Cohen & Cohen, 1983). The test provides a $z$ score for which significance can then be assessed. Values of 1.96 or greater are determined to be significantly different at the $p < .05$ level, indicating a significant difference between groups (i.e., moderation). We included condition as the sole independent variable to predict the various dependent variables we assessed. Then, we selected cases so that only previous viewers of Hotel Rwanda were in the initial set of regression equations, and we then ran the same models (i.e., condition predicting the dependent variable) for those who had not seen the film in the past. We recorded the unstandardized beta coefficients and respective standard errors for each regression equation. Next, we computed the Fisher $z$ transformation score to assess significant differences. Results revealed there were no significant differences between the two groups for any of the five dependent variables (guilt, disgust, interest, knowledge change, narrative engagement), thus prior viewing of Hotel Rwanda was not a significant moderator at the $p < .05$ level.
emotion than the dramatic interpretation. Table 1 and Table 2 show the regression results for guilt and disgust, respectively.

The second hypothesis predicted that negative affect would lead to higher levels of issue interest and knowledge. As reported in Table 3, the negative emotions of guilt and disgust were significant positive predictors of issue interest (Guilt, $B = .355$, $SE = .070$, $p < .001$; Disgust, $B = .281$, $SE = .102$, $p < .01$). In addition, disgust was a significant positive predictor of knowledge gain ($B = .087$, $SE = .030$, $p < .01$), whereas guilt was a significant negative predictor of knowledge gain ($B = -.040$, $SE = .020$, $p < .05$).

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Upon entry $B$ ($SE$)</th>
<th>Final $B$ ($SE$)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Block 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.667 (.114)</td>
<td>2.903 (.148)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior viewing of documentary</td>
<td>-.530 (.576)</td>
<td>-.620 (.562)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prior viewing of film</td>
<td>.254 (.234)</td>
<td>.290 (.229)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$R^2 = .020$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Block 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Condition (film coded high)</td>
<td>-.473 (.194)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2 = .058^*$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total $R^2 = .078$</td>
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*Note. $N = 97$. Unstandardized ordinary least squares regression $B$s are reported (standard errors in parentheses).

*$p < .05$.

### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Upon entry $B$ ($SE$)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Block 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>3.352 (.077)</td>
<td>3.466 (.101)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prior viewing of documentary</td>
<td>.126 (.388)</td>
<td>.084 (.385)</td>
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<td>Prior viewing of film</td>
<td>.233 (.161)</td>
<td>.246 (.159)</td>
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<td>$R^2 = .023$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Block 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Condition (film coded high)</td>
<td>-.229 (.133)$^\dagger$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2 = .030$</td>
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<td>Total $R^2 = .053$</td>
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</table>

*Note. $N = 97$. Unstandardized ordinary least squares regression $B$s are reported (standard errors in parentheses).

$^\dagger p < .10$. 

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Thus, it appears that negative affect led to stronger interest in genocide. Interestingly, disgust increased learning and guilt decreased learning (see Table 4).

### TABLE 3
Model Predicting Interest

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Upon entry B (SE)</th>
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<td>Block 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.940 (.087)***</td>
<td>1.047 (.340)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior viewing of documentary</td>
<td>-.108 (.434)</td>
<td>.043 (.348)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prior viewing of film</td>
<td>-.162 (.180)</td>
<td>-.304 (.144)*</td>
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<td>$R^2 = .010$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Block 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Condition (film coded high)</td>
<td>-.238 (.150)</td>
<td>.006 (.124)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2 = .036$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Block 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guilt</td>
<td>.355 (.070)***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disgust</td>
<td>.281 (.102)**</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2 = .363$***</td>
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<td>Total $R^2 = .398$</td>
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*Note. N = 95. Unstandardized ordinary least squares regression Bs are reported (standard errors in parentheses).  
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. 

### TABLE 4
Model Predicting Knowledge Change Score

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Upon entry B (SE)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.586 (.022)***</td>
<td>.474 (.099)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior viewing of documentary</td>
<td>.081 (.122)</td>
<td>.023 (.101)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior viewing of film</td>
<td>-.002 (.047)</td>
<td>-.010 (.042)</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2 = .006$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Block 2</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition (film coded high)</td>
<td>-.146 (.036)**</td>
<td>-.146 (.036)***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2 = .151$***</td>
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<tr>
<td>Block 3</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt</td>
<td>-.040 (.020)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disgust</td>
<td>.087 (.030)**</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2 = .081$**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total $R^2 = .237$</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 94. Unstandardized ordinary least squares regression Bs are reported (standard errors in parentheses).  
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. 


For the final hypotheses (H3a/H3b), competing explanations for the relationship between condition and engagement were offered. That is, perceived reality and narrative engagement are positively correlated (Wilson & Busselle, 2004; Zhang et al., 2007), and documentaries are typically perceived as more real than fictional films (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007), which reflected H3a. Yet a fictional film may encourage diversion and entertainment orientation, which may result in higher narrative engagement for the fictional film, and reflected H3b. Results show that condition was not a significant predictor of narrative engagement. Although, the narrative engagement mean for the documentary ($M = 4.02, SD = .81$) was slightly higher, though not significantly, than the fictional film ($M = 3.78, SD = .75$). Thus, neither H3a nor H3b was supported. Even though condition did not predict narrative engagement, there were three positive significant predictors of narrative engagement—guilt, disgust, and interest. This indicates that the increased narrative engagement was related to affect and interest, regardless of format.

**DISCUSSION**

The goal of this study was to bridge gaps in the entertainment and political communication literatures with regard to the role of documentaries. As such, we forwarded several hypotheses that blend key entertainment media concepts (i.e., perceived realism, engagement, and affect) with important democratic outcome variables (i.e., issue interest and learning). This was a formative study, designed as a first step in understanding the differential effects between factual accounts offered in documentaries and dramatic interpretations of the same event offered in historical reenactment films. Although this study opens the door to empirical research comparing political film effects in a general fashion, and specifically offers insight into the role of documentaries as a political information outlet, the results should be interpreted with caution. The use of full feature length stimuli increased external validity, yet compromised our ability to isolate all relevant variables in the study. In addition, the relationships between engagement and affect are still tentative, at best. Future research should examine engagement as a potential moderator of affect, as well as a mediator between one’s exposure and their resulting interest and learning. Essentially, there is still much to investigate regarding the role engagement plays in documentary film effects. Although this study was a first step, it provides many insights that merit discussion.

The first hypothesis tested found that the documentary film elicited stronger guilt and somewhat stronger disgust from the audience than did
the reenactment film. This finding suggests that documentaries have the power to evoke just as much, and sometimes more, emotion than a fictional portrayal of an event. The fact that real footage, real people, and no scripts are used for the presentation of historical material may contribute to the increase in negative affect for the audience. This reflects Pouliot and Cowen’s (2007) findings about the historical reenactment theme documentary evoking more emotion than the fictional film. In addition, the discrete emotions that were aroused demonstrate that a documentary is certainly capable of eliciting strong, gut-wrenching emotions in the audience, thereby increasing interest and knowledge about important issues. Future studies should expand these hypotheses to examine whether these strong emotions also influence individual attitudes and public opinion regarding the issue. Equally as important is investigating if individual-level emotional arousal can encourage more awareness, discussion, and subsequent activism on topics that public affairs documentaries address (e.g., Holbert & Hansen, 2008).

Because the documentary group reported higher levels of affect, as well as increased issue concern and learning, it appears that socio-political documentaries can play a vital role in both informing and engaging the electorate. Such evidence also suggests that documentaries, as a form of political information, have the potential to strongly influence public opinion. Future research should examine how documentary can be brought to mass publics (e.g., feature length films, television specials), in an effort to understand how mass consumption of this form of political communication impacts the public sphere. For example, Nisbet (2007) suggested that selectivity bias can, in part, be overcome by forum public screenings of documentaries, where audience members engage in a facilitated dialogue about the issue at hand (e.g., Rojas et al., 2005). Moreover, viewers who engage in diverse citizen dialogue after viewing a documentary may be more likely to further discuss and participate on an issue (Rojas et al., 2005). In fact, alternative interpretations of a social issue may even evolve from these types of post-exposure discussions (Whiteman, 2004). Thus, it is clear that future research needs to address the process of how mass-mediated social messages in documentaries can influence both individual-level discussion and subsequent social organization and action on those issues.

Likewise, because documentaries are created in a way to record, persuade, analyze, and express (i.e., more educational and informational message focus than fictional film), it makes sense that significantly more learning was found in the documentary group. Here it is important to consider the expectations of the audience. Specifically, documentaries are commonly shown in college classrooms (our sample is college students) and the expectation of education and learning may be present when a documentary is viewed as opposed to a fictional film. Researchers should
examine the audience expectations before automatically assuming that
television events or feature-length documentaries shown in theaters would
have the same influence. It might be the case that audience expectations
change when the context or environment changes. Thus, there is much to
consider in terms of environmental factors and audience demand
characteristics.

Nevertheless, these results do show promise for the influential role of
documentaries in raising issue awareness, garnering interest, and educating
the public. Indeed, several nonprofit organizations, including the ACLU
and Sierra Club, have already taken advantage of the documentary format.
By featuring people in the documentaries who would not ordinarily be
labeled as “activists” or traditional supporters, the narratives attempt to
attract new members and mobilize current members to action (see Hirsch,
2007, for details on case studies). The continuing rise in popularity of
documentaries as a “pleasurable learning” tool to attract new audiences
and members provides more reason to study the individual-level and
sociological-level effects of these mass-mediated messages.

Again, it is worth emphasizing the likely role that narrative quality has on
engagement and perceived realism with the film. Narrative quality can refer
to the internal consistency of the storyline as well as professionalism, edit-
ing, and formatting qualities of the film itself (see Busselle & Bilandzic,
2008, for a review). In fact, poor narrative quality may even disrupt engage-
ment and lessen a narrative’s persuasive power (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008).
Perhaps an example of this concern with narrative quality is reflected in the
efforts to promote greater realism in fictional portrayals of science topics.
The National Academy of Sciences pairs scientists with Hollywood screen-
writers to achieve greater scientific realism in their films, which would
ideally materialize into greater audience interest and informal learning
(The Science and Entertainment Exchange, 2009). Surely, historical and
socio-political documentaries and films benefit from hiring academics and
experts just as well.

Turning back to our findings, negative affect predicted learning, but the
two discrete negative emotions we examined influenced learning in quite
different ways. Specifically, guilt was a negative predictor of learning and
disgust was a positive predictor of learning. To understand this result, we
must consider the action tendencies associated with guilt and disgust. Guilt,
as explained earlier, initiates self blame, sadness, and helplessness (Lazarus,
1991). Cognitive abilities, such as learning, may be inhibited by guilt because
a person withdraws and feels debilitated. On the other hand, disgust may
incite cognitive abilities because it may arouse attention and initiate a desire
to create a plan of action to deflect, undermine, or destroy the aversive
target. Thus, stronger feelings of disgust will predict knowledge gain, but
stronger feelings of guilt have a negative impact on knowledge gain. These differences in influence as related to negative affect show the need for scholars to avoid combining discrete negative emotions into one measure when there may be potential differences that relate to action tendencies and behaviors (e.g., learning). In the future, it may be more appropriate to create distinct hypotheses for different discrete emotions.

The results regarding the influence of stimuli condition on narrative engagement were somewhat inconclusive, yet still enlightening. Although condition was not a significant predictor of narrative engagement, the mean for narrative engagement was slightly higher for the documentary group. Three scenarios arise: (a) Documentaries encourage more narrative engagement than historical reenactment fictional films because they are perceived as more real, and/or (b) historical reenactment fictional films encourage less narrative engagement because viewers are critically evaluating the portrayal of the real event, or (c) viewers do not process documentary and historical reenactment film any differently and, in the end, both formats are merely storytelling.

In regard to the second scenario, it is noteworthy to consider that realism to the actual event may have a strong influence on audience learning and engagement. Historical reenactment fictional films may not be processed the same as general fictional films. That is, more critical evaluation and less narrative engagement may consistently result from historical reenactment fictional films. This may explain why film critics and audiences do not respond as well to fictional films based on recent historical events that include true people and stories (e.g., *United 93*), as opposed to a film set in history that fabricates people and stories (e.g., *The Patriot*).

Alternatively, as mentioned previously, there may not be differences among narrative engagement between the two formats because both are essentially storytelling. Viewers may approach all narratives with an initial credulity and truthfulness unless otherwise prompted to question the narrative’s realism (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008; Gerrig & Rapp, 2004; Gilbert, 1991; Gilbert, Krull, & Malone, 1990; Prentice & Gerrig, 1999; Prentice, Gerrig, & Bailis, 1997). This is because it takes more mental effort to critically evaluate and disbelieve information than it does to accept it (Gilbert, 1991; Gilbert et al., 1990). Only when violations of external realism or internal consistency are present does a viewer critically and negatively evaluate a narrative’s realism and subsequent engagement (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008).

Likewise, some fundamental building blocks of storytelling include the plot, characters, and morality, all of which factor into viewers’ narrative engagement. Researchers should consider these elements when examining different film formats. For example, affective disposition theory (Zillmann, 1994; Zillmann & Knobloch, 2001) is a framework in which to study
emotional- and morality-based favorability of media characters, including characters in news stories (e.g., Knobloch-Westenwick & Keplinger, 2007), novels (e.g., Knobloch-Westenwick & Keplinger, 2006), and videos (e.g., Raney & Bryant, 2002). Busselle and Bilandzic’s (2008) mental models approach to narrative processing and engagement would also be a beneficial framework to consider. Future research should test the idea that audience members evaluate the plot and characters in documentary film no differently than historical reenactment and fictional films.

Finally, although it appears that documentaries offer much in terms of public policy issue awareness, education, and interest, it should be noted that both film types engaged the audience. Thus, we cannot simply discount the merits of the dramatic film. Remembering that Gamson and Modigliani (1989) found that public opinion regarding nuclear power plants was significantly influenced by the nuclear power disaster film The China Syndrome, it may well be that the power of drama to engage the audience has important effects that can enhance learning, increase interest, and shape public opinion. Thus, the newly emerging hybrids such as Sicko, March of the Penguins, and Disney’s Earth might offer the best of both worlds (or the worst of each). Perhaps delving into this line of research offers the most potential for political entertainment scholars interested in understanding how film influences the electorate.

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