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GWU's Dr. Casey Delehanty Co-authors Study on Prevalence of Torture in U.S. Movies

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Political Science Researchers Analyze 200 Top-Grossing Films



BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—Since America was attacked by terrorists on 9/11, the use of torture for counterterrorism tactics has become a highly-debated issue. Approximately half of adults in the United States believe torture is effective in stopping a terrorist threat, said Dr. Casey Delehanty, assistant professor of political science at Gardner-Webb University. However, many interrogation professionals disagree and maintain that torture is often counterproductive.

Delehanty wanted to find out the reason for the disconnect and suspected it was because of media influence, specifically torture depicted in film. He asked fellow researcher, Dr. Erin M. Kearns from the University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa), to help him study the prevalence of torture in popular movies. Kearns, an assistant professor in the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, is an expert in understanding the relationship among the public, law enforcement and terrorist organizations.

“We watched and coded every instance of torture in 200 movies,” Delehanty informed. “I did not appreciate how prevalent torture was actually going to be. The thing that shook me and what led to the title of our research—“Wait, There’s Torture in Zootopia?: Examining the Prevalence of Torture in Popular Movies”—was how many kids movies have torture

scenes in them.”

They chose to watch the 20 top-grossing films—in terms of North American box office receipts—each year over a 10-year period from 2008 to 2017. Among the seven G-rated movies included, Delehanty and Kearns found nine torture scenes. “They were lighter torture scenes,” Delehanty described, “like hanging people off of things or dropping them from big heights like in ‘Rio.’”

Additionally, they viewed 108 PG-13, 58 PG and 27 R rated movies and coded 275 torture scenes. “Sixty percent of the movies in our sample had at least one torture scene,” Delehanty related. “Of the four movies with the most torture scenes, three are R rated.”

Delehanty and Kearns discovered that movies generally show torture to be effective. They also found that torture was more acceptable and necessary when perpetrated by the protagonist and more harsh and unjustified when conducted by the antagonist. Their findings suggest other areas where research is needed, such as examining torture across other forms of media, including television shows and films popular in other countries. While their research determines the prevalence of torture in American films, the findings can’t say what influence torture scenes have on public perceptions. To identify the impact media depictions of torture have on the public additional studies would be necessary.

“As citizens of a democracy, our suggestion here is certainly not to constrain how media depict interrogations and torture,” Delehanty observes. “Rather, our aim is to draw attention to the prevalence of this trope and hope that screenwriters will exercise more caution in using torture as a plot device.”

[Hear more about Delehanty’s research in this interview for WGWG.](#)

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