

**LIGHTS**

**CAMERA**

**IMPACT**

**20 Years of Research on the  
Power of Entertainment to Support  
Narrative Change**

**May 2023**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## BACKGROUND

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in the world of philanthropy about what has come to be known as *narrative change*. Narrative change encompasses strategies harnessing the power of narratives — in entertainment, in news, in movement spaces, and in the broader culture — to shift public mindsets and generate culture change toward equity and justice. At the USC Norman Lear Center, we have spent more than two decades studying and leveraging narratives to address a variety of health and public interest topics, particularly in the context of scripted TV and film.

1. The long time horizon of culture change is emphasized by multiple sources in the field, including Choi & Phelan (2022); ORS Impact (2021), Potts, Lowell, & Manne (2022); The Opportunity Agenda (2021), [and our own recent interviews with funders, thought leaders, and practitioners in the narrative change field.](#)

Funders interested in narrative change frequently approach us with some variation of the same question: **How do we really know these strategies are working?** Or, put differently, if culture change strategies can take between five and twenty years to show large scale effects,<sup>1</sup> what kinds of impact are realistic to expect and how do we know it is working? Are there key factors that can be culled from existing evidence to shed light on the conditions under which narrative change strategies are most impactful?

This report is a first attempt to answer these ‘million-dollar questions.’ With this aim in mind, we synthesize twenty years of research on the social impact of entertainment media — with a focus on scripted television and film — in order to distill ‘best practices’ for those harnessing narrative for social change.

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

The growing **narrative change field** — which brings together artists and other creatives, nonprofit organizations, philanthropies, movement builders, and researchers — aligns on the idea that to promote equity, we need to tap into **narratives**, or commonly held ideas and collections of stories about how the world works (Soriano et al., 2019). Narratives rooted in public consciousness inform shared ideas about identity, equity, policy, and justice.

2. See Navarro & Silver (2022); Moore & Sen (2022); The Opportunity Agenda (2021).

The narrative change field has spent much time working to align around theories and methodologies that can inform and sustain this work.<sup>2</sup> However, recent writings in the field have called for less focus on theory, and more practical research that gets at the “how” of narrative change work (e.g., Moore & Sen, 2022; Potts et al., 2022). This includes ways in which field members can generate more impact, know that their efforts are working, and share learnings with each other.

**In this report, we respond to this call by mining and synthesizing available evidence for the audience impact of entertainment media, and distilling factors associated with the success of entertainment-driven social change efforts.**

Certainly, entertainment-driven efforts do not represent the entirety of narrative change strategies. Still, the audience impact of entertainment narratives has been extensively and rigorously studied. Indeed, a recent report indicates that generating culture change through Hollywood is the most well known engagement framework for philanthropy (Moore & Sen, 2022). However, many of the factors that contribute to the power of entertainment narratives are also relevant to other narrative contexts. By drawing upon this vast evidence-base, our hope is that the learnings presented here can inform the development, funding, strategy, implementation, and measurement of narrative change efforts in the entertainment context and beyond.

3. The project is supported by the California Healthcare Foundation (CHCF).

4. Note that this review is not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, it's an introduction and overview of research on the impact of entertainment media, with an eye toward identifying factors associated with greater impact. There are many other types of impact that are studied in relation to media, but the focus of this report is the *audience impact* of entertainment addressing health and social issues.

This report is part of a larger mixed-methods research project<sup>3</sup> which aims to generate a strategic framework for decision-making around entertainment-driven efforts. The frameworks and takeaways in this report draw on recent reports, white papers, and convenings in the diverse and growing narrative change field. We review contemporary research on the audience impact of entertainment media, focusing on popular media in the U.S. and Canada from 2000 to 2020, while placing this work in a broader context.<sup>4</sup>

## **KEY FINDINGS: TOPIC CLUSTERS**

There is extensive evidence that popular media has a significant impact on audiences' knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, policy support, and behavior. While these shifts alone may not suffice as evidence of narrative change at the scale of culture, they can be viewed as indicators of progress toward culture change goals. In this body of research, four topic clusters emerged as particularly prominent:

### **1. Stereotypes and belonging**

Popular media affects our understanding of who we are and sways our views of other social groups. "Meeting" characters unlike us on the screen can lead to real-life changes in these circumstances. Analyzed case studies include *Will & Grace*, *Superstore*, *The Fosters*, and *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, spotlighting ways in which these shows were associated with lowering viewers' prejudice towards marginalized groups.

## 2. Public and reproductive health

A significant amount of research demonstrates that TV shows and movies affect how we view and act on health issues. We review the ways in which TV shows like *Grey's Anatomy* and *Numb3rs* can encourage viewers to change behavior, like signing up to be organ donors, through immersive storytelling and role modeling.

## 3. Social policy

Through deep engagement in popular shows like *Homeland*, *Quantico*, *Law & Order: SVU*, and *24*, viewers learned and shifted their support for or against various public policies and social norms — from torture in counterterrorism to sexual assault intervention.

## 4. Nature, climate, and science-related issues

There are fewer examples of research on popular scripted entertainment in relation to the environment and climate change. The existing evidence shows that apocalyptic movies like *The Day After Tomorrow* and science fiction like *Interstellar* are associated with viewer inspiration to consider and care for the environment.

# KEY FINDINGS: FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH IMPACT

Across topics, we identified several common attributes, features, and strategies that appear to be associated with greater audience impact. These factors can be categorized at three levels: the **media project** level, the **audience** level, and the **infrastructure** level.

➡ **At the level of the media project** — the content, story, and production — research spotlighted the power of entertainment to change hearts and minds. Some media level factors include:

- Strategies connected to **immersing viewers** into the storyline and helping them **feel kinship with characters**, such as **prioritizing story consistency and coherence**, **crafting funny and intelligent characters**, and **incorporating vivid imagery**;
- Viewers engaging with **multiple episodes** or **storylines**, as opposed to a single episode or storyline; and
- Incorporating **resources** such as **epilogues**, **public service announcements (PSAs)**, and **storytelling that feels accurate, relevant, and inclusive**.

➡ **At the audience level**, impact factors were related to acknowledging the diversity of viewers and their perceptions of the relevance of storylines. They include:

- Understanding that **different audiences engage with** and **interpret media** in **distinct ways**;
- Exploring the impact on **groups across the ideological spectrum**, understanding the role of marginalized identities, and **considering potential troubling effects** on vulnerable audiences; and
- **Identifying subsets of target audiences, testing messages to see how they land, and thinking about how and when these audiences will engage with the media** are strategies proposed to boost impact.

|||➔ **At the infrastructure level**, factors surrounding the media project and its creators make a difference. These factors include:

- **Diversified representation** and **decision-making** behind the scenes;
- **Partnering** with subject matter **experts** and relevant **community, advocacy, and nonprofit organizations**; and
- Careful **consideration of the larger sociopolitical context**.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, evidence consistently points to the power of thoughtful storytelling that feels relevant to and immerses audiences. Our analysis suggests several implications and recommendations for funders, practitioners, and other stakeholders to maximize the power of narrative change. These include:

|||➔ **Key recommendations for narrative change practitioners:**

- Prioritize the **entertainment value of projects** by centering emotion, character development, production, and coherence to create immersive and compelling stories.
- Provide audiences with **resources to learn more about a topic or seek support**, such as public service announcements (PSAs), websites, hotlines, and transmedia elements.
- **Beat the drum of your project's target narratives** across multiple stories and channels.
- Connect your media project to **broader social movements and cultural conversations**.
- Bring in **experts** and **people with relevant lived experience** to ensure that **stories are accurate**, responsible, and **authentic** to the communities being

depicted.

- Pay attention to framing, by **showing societal problems from both individual and structural perspectives**, which can help build support for systemic solutions.

### III → **Key recommendations for funders of narrative change and others in the field:**

- **Bolster collaborations** among diverse media creators, community-based organizations, and researchers and experts invested in working with key issues and audiences.
- Prioritize **diversity, representation and power-building**, both on-screen and off-screen, to redistribute decision-making and storytelling power to marginalized communities.
- Create **flexible evaluation frameworks identifying best practices** and criteria for capturing diffuse media impacts, while also allowing space for the creative process to unfold.
- **Strategize a distribution plan** to ensure that projects have the necessary tools for spreading target narratives across storylines, channels, mediums and fields.
- **Pay attention to the sociopolitical context** to align entertainment narratives with relevant work in social movements and mass media.
- **Identify and understand audiences sectors and test stories and core messages** to see how they are likely to land.
- Fund **infrastructure development in the narrative change field** to boost capacity-building, learning, measurement, and evaluation.
- **Evaluate long-term narrative change efforts holistically** by looking at progress from multiple angles and finding ways to measure impact incrementally.



CHAPTER 1:

# THE ROADMAP FOR THIS WORK



This chapter introduces the project, situates the report in a context of the narrative change field, and provides a roadmap for this research report. Key takeaways include:

- **Narratives** are deep collections of stories that mold and reflect our perception of reality and possible futures.
- Recognizing the power of narrative, a **field** of narrative change practitioners, funders, experts, and researchers emerged. The field aims to shift narratives that inform cultural attitudes and behaviors toward various prosocial and equity-oriented goals.
- This analysis explores research on the link between entertainment media and social impact, with a focus on scripted TV and film in the U.S. and Canada from 2000-2020.
- The goal is to distill factors that are associated with greater impact, and to apply these learnings and applications to the broader narrative change field.

5. The term “narrative” has multiple uses and definitions across many literatures and fields (FrameWorks, 2021). Across the ecosystem we are describing, ‘narrative’ is used interchangeably with story, a collection of stories, a cultural framework and orientation, a set of mindsets and mental models. Sometimes the distinction between narrative and “deep narrative” or “meta-narrative” is highlighted: the common American narrative of welfare, for example, is tied to metanarratives of scarcity and individualism. [See this reference](#) for a list of terms and definitions often used in the narrative change field. In this report, we use narrative to mean a collection of stories, as this definition is applicable to a majority of the efforts, reports, and research papers covered in this work.

6. Throughout this report, we use definitions of terms aligned with reports and white papers in the narrative change field, along with inclusive language guidelines proposed by the American Psychological Association [APA] (2021). See the sidebar on page 20 for definitions used in this report.

## INTRODUCTION

Stories are powerful. They act like glue, unifying an individual’s identity and binding human societies. Narratives are deep collections of stories that reflect and shape our sense of the current and possible reality.<sup>5</sup> The narratives of our culture, or the stories we tell ourselves, define what is and what can be. It makes sense that efforts to change minds and move the needle toward equity and other social good goals center the role of **narrative**.

Since the early 2010s, a distributed ecosystem of practitioners, funders, and researchers focused on narrative has consolidated into a nascent **field of narrative change**.

**The narrative change field leverages narrative to achieve social good and social justice objectives**<sup>6</sup> (Kalra et al., 2021; Lynn & Kathlene, 2020; Moore & Sen, 2022; Potts et al., 2022).

In the last ten years, this community has grown significantly, drawing in people from various sectors, including but not limited to, non-profit organizations, philanthropy, the entertainment industry, communications, artists, researchers and evaluators, movement-builders and community organizers. Although many different definitions are used, the field is organized around narrative, since “[t]he aspiration of narrative change efforts is to **shift the underlying pattern of meaning** around an issue” (Green & de Vries, 2021, p. 3). **As a social change strategy, narrative change holds promise because it goes beyond the surface. Once we reframe issues, we change how we talk, vote, and consume in relation to those issues, and, ultimately, we can see shifts in relevant policies, norms, and rules.**

7. See *Sidebar: Key Readings in the Narrative Change Field* following Chapter 2 for a list of some of the most frequently cited reports and resources.

Narrative change is a systems-focused approach, since changing narrative in society means shaping “public discourse, debate, and imagery” (Sen & Moore, 2022). The approach has been applied across time, settings, domains, issues, and political stances. However, the narrative change field, which has accelerated in growth recently, focuses on using the approach in service of social equity and the social good. In this growing field, important work is being done on narratives related to race, gender, caregiving, immigration, poverty, policing, guns, health equity, reproductive rights, and more.<sup>7</sup> Organizations in the field work with multiple tactics, audiences, and kinds of narratives. Narrative change efforts run the gamut from correcting health-related misinformation to rethinking stories often told about historically-excluded social groups to shifting large scale understandings of justice and equity.

The stories told through entertainment media, including the movies and TV shows we consume, are inextricably tied to narratives, as media both reflects and cultivates specific understandings of the world (Gerbner, 1998; Morgan et al., 2016). Because popular entertainment media can reach massive audiences, narrative change efforts often look to entertainment media as potential vehicles for accelerating social change.

In a time when democracies are faltering, public spaces are dwindling, news and information feeds seem polarizing and fragmented (Chitra & Musco, 2020; Pariser, 2011; Pateman, 2012), entertainment media remain potential anchors that can unite large segments of audiences. Currently, the U.S. and Canada present high-choice, highly curated media ecologies, so reaching multiple populations at scale is harder than before (Davidson, n.d.; Prior, 2014). However, reaching large segments of audiences via popular entertainment media remains a clear possibility, especially in comparison to news and information communications. To offer audience members another view of reality — a new **narrative** — movies and TV shows need to be

reachable and impactful, now more than ever. The urgency of this cultural moment is marked by growing inequality, large-scale disinformation campaigns, and a rise in derisive narratives.

## PROJECT RATIONALE

The Norman Lear Center is a research center based at the University of Southern California that has studied and shaped the impact of media and entertainment on society since 2000. The Center's Hollywood, Health & Society (HH&S) program provides accurate information and expertise to content creators developing storylines on health, safety, and security. Our team at the Center's Media Impact Project (MIP) conducts research on the content, audiences, and impact of media narratives on a wide range of health and social issues. In recent years, we have also undertaken a number of projects with the goal of leveraging data and insights to inform grantmaking and shared learning tools in the narrative change space. In this capacity, we have been fielding many questions about considering, creating, and measuring conditions for social impact in regards to entertainment-driven narrative change efforts. As attention to and prominence of narrative change initiatives grew, there has been a corresponding increase in demand for understanding if narrative-oriented projects are on the path to making large scale cultural shifts.

In addition, recent landscaping efforts in the narrative change field have highlighted the need for less theory and greater attention to the "how" of narrative work (Potts et al., 2022). In a world of limited resources, this question represents a need among practitioners and funders of narrative change for actionable insights about what is already known, in order to effectively strategize and plan narrative change projects. Another recent report in the field, *Funding Narrative Change*, shows that there is a lack of alignment around 'best practices' to advance change in the field (Moore & Sen, 2022). What counts as a 'best practice' will depend on the context, but digging into available research can help

## PROJECT OVERVIEW

8. See our slide deck [Narrative Change and Impact: Analysis of In-Depth Interviews with Experts, Practitioners, and Funders in the Narrative Change Field](#).

Inspired by these calls for best practices, at MIP we are engaged in a mixed-methods learning project to better understand **what it takes to generate social impact through entertainment-driven narrative change approaches**. Funded by the California Health Care Foundation, the learning project includes interviews conducted with leaders in the narrative change field,<sup>8</sup> along with an in-depth case study of investments in HH&S over a period of ten years. The ultimate aim of this project is to create an **evidence-based framework of best practices** or 'what works' to maximize the impact of narrative change projects.

As part of the larger learning project, we have conducted a review and synthesis of existing research on the audience impact of prosocial entertainment. Our goal is to distill factors, features, and processes associated with greater impact from the evidence base and to translate these insights into narrative change efforts, through entertainment and beyond. Given the contemporary limited attention economy and competitive philanthropic funding, identifying factors associated with success of narrative change projects is especially important in order to set up socially meaningful projects for success.

9. Social media serves as another significant source of entertainment for audiences. While studies explicitly focused on social media are beyond the scope for this report, future analyses can focus on the interplay between TV/film and social media.

While we focus on evidence in the context of entertainment media — specifically TV and film — the applicability of these findings is wider.<sup>9</sup> Research connecting visual media and culture is as old as the screen itself, and spans multiple disciplines, theories, and approaches. Although we draw from this wider body of research, we focus on studies measuring the audience impact of primarily scripted movies and TV shows that were popular in the U.S. and Canada in the time period from 2000 to 2020. We know that leveraging entertainment is a well-known narrative change engagement strategy (Moore & Sen, 2022). And, because this strategy has received extensive public and scholarly attention, it serves as a tool for fieldwide learning. We also recognize that supporting the work of mass movements and mass media, including journalism, in addition to entertainment, is needed for transformational changes in dominant narratives related to race, health, and equity (Moore & Sen, 2022; Davidson, 2022). Features and practices that are associated with impact in the context of entertainment media can be applied to other kinds of projects that involve narrative. In an explainer focusing on what media creators can learn from the research on how stories and media affect audiences, Caty Borum notes:

**“[M]any organizations and media companies don’t know this kind of research exists — and more importantly, how it can be leveraged to further develop the idea of entertainment storytelling and social good.”**

(Borum, n.d., para 3)

After all, impactful storytelling across fields and disciplines relies upon strategic, targeted communication and its distribution.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS & METHODS

The work was guided by three research questions:

- 1. What does research show about the audience impact of entertainment media?**

2. **What structural, narrative, and production factors are associated with greater or lesser impact?**
3. **How can this research inform the work of the practitioners, supporters, and funders of narrative change efforts?**

We use several streams and types of data to cover research on the audience impact of entertainment media along with work pertaining to narrative change strategies.

**Our sources included:** academic research studies, scoping reviews, and meta-analyses;<sup>10</sup> reports, briefs, white papers in the narrative change field and in the media impact field; bibliographies of key articles; suggested sources from experts and practitioners; conversations with field experts and researchers. The report went through several rounds of feedback provision and revision with thought leaders in the narrative change field.<sup>11</sup>

10. A meta-analysis is a statistical analysis of a large collection of analysis results from individual studies for the purpose of integrating the findings (Glass, 1976).

11. See Acknowledgements.

### **Framework**

For the framework and discussion sections, recent white papers and reports focusing on narrative change and media impact were prioritized to sharpen the lens of this analysis.

### **Analysis of existing research**

For the research analysis sections, published empirical studies and meta-analyses were foregrounded to gather robust available evidence that links entertainment media and social impact. Our criteria for inclusion of research articles in the research analysis were:

12. Empirical studies are based on observation, investigation, or experiment rather than on abstract reasoning, theoretical analysis, or speculation.

- Studies that used and specified empirical research methods<sup>12</sup>
- Studies in the U.S. and Canada
- Published in the time period from 2000 to 2020
- Published in English

### **Databases**

We searched multiple databases for the main analysis. We mostly used Google Scholar, with supporting searches in PubMed, Wiley Online, Taylor and Francis Online, and ProQuest. We also performed searches on specific media projects and attendant research, using the same academic databases, and mined the references of relevant articles.

## Search terms

We used a combination of the following search terms in the databases for the main research analysis, along with supporting searches on specific issues (e.g., marriage equality) and specific media (e.g., *Will & Grace*):

- narrative change AND entertainment AND television AND impact(s)
- mass media AND social change
- entertainment-education
- mass media AND social impact
- education-entertainment
- social impact television
- edutainment
- media AND narrative change
- social impact entertainment
- media AND culture change

## Data

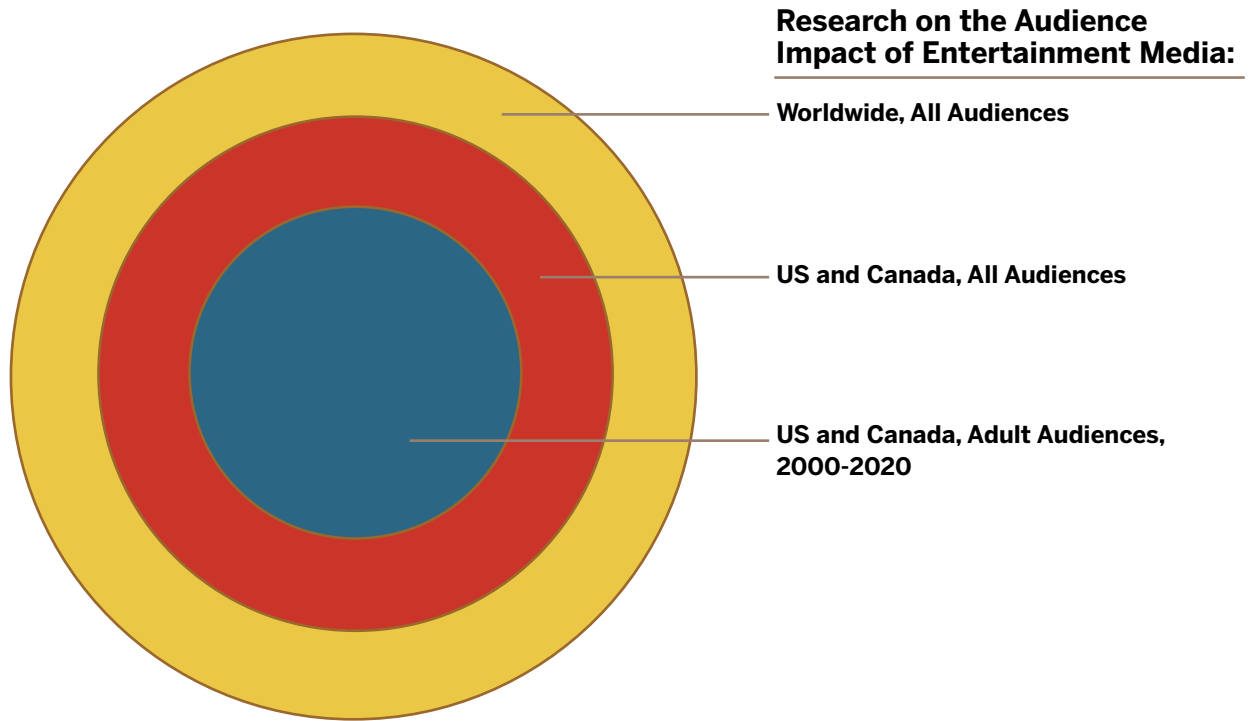
This framework casts a wide net for capturing different methods, approaches, and sampling techniques. In the main research analysis, the bulk of the data came from quantitative studies of audiences and meta-analyses. Meta-analyses and audience studies were a priority since they aggregate and show evidence of overall effects and changes connected to media projects. Also included were relevant content analyses that included audience-based research. Audience research methodologies included surveys, experiments, observational studies, and combinations of these.

## Scope

Members of the narrative change field often define their work in reference to systemic shifts toward specific social goals and domains: from rethinking public health equity and practice to honing senses of justice and belonging. To build an expansive repository for the empirical evidence base in this analysis, we included many kinds of objectives, topics, studies, and approaches that could be relevant to the field. For the review of historical and current work on entertainment media and social impact, we started with a broader lens that included work for all kinds of audiences and media-based projects across time (Chapter 3) and then zoomed in to more recent research on mostly scripted media intended for adults, produced in the U.S. and Canada (Chapters 4 and 5).

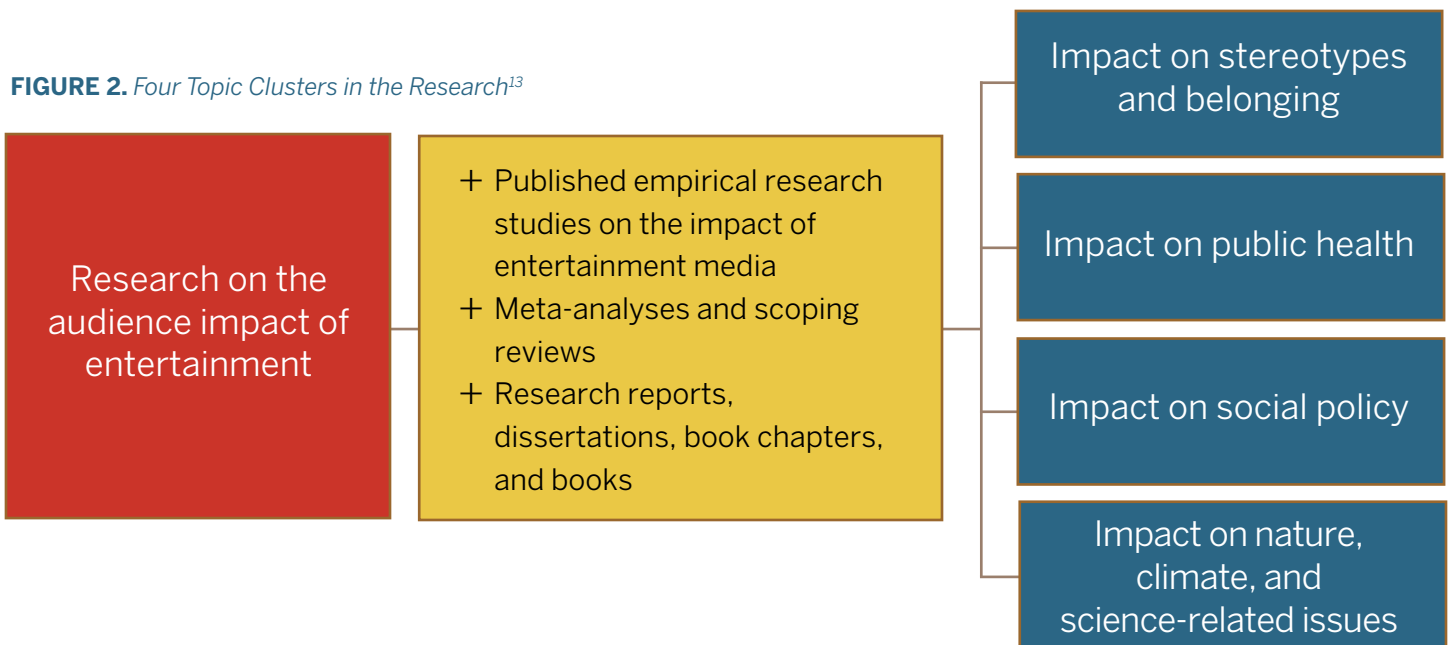
**FIGURE 1.** *Narrowing Our Focus to Center Contemporary Research on the Impact of Entertainment Media on Adult Audiences in the U.S. and Canada*

13. The majority of studies reviewed in each topic cluster examine impact on audience perceptions of each social issue, rather than direct impacts on outcomes related to the topic. Topics in these clusters are intimately interconnected. In this report, the topics were analytically separated by the ways the studies addressed and articulated the key constructs in order to organize the data.



We organized key findings by topic cluster, concentrating on what the research has to say about factors that facilitate or impede impact.

**FIGURE 2.** *Four Topic Clusters in the Research*<sup>13</sup>



## LIMITATIONS

This review is not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, it's an introduction and an overview of trends in the research and theory connecting entertainment media and social change. We focus primarily on peer-reviewed work (academic journals and edited volumes) that document effects of media. The peer-reviewed publication system is inherently biased in that mostly those studies that show statistically significant impacts are published; if no differences are reported, the study is unlikely to be accepted for publication (Rosenthal, 1979).

In addition, reviews of research on media and cultural shifts have documented shortcomings in this body of research. These include relatively small changes in attitudes or behavior as a result of media exposure, lack of control groups (we don't always have a way to compare viewers to nonviewers), unnatural conditions in lab-based studies, and little follow-up with study participants, so we rarely know what happens after the study and if the effects persist (Borum & Das, 2014; Godsil et al., 2016; Green, 2021). Finally, changes in human behavior are notoriously hard to observe and measure, so many studies rely on proxy measures of behavior, such as surveying participants about their intention to behave in a particular way (Heino et al., 2021).

Given these limitations, we used a diverse pool of data sources, incorporated studies with a variety of research methodologies, and prioritized meta-analyses and empirical studies of audiences. While the measured shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and behavior tend to be relatively small, they translate to massive change at scale because popular entertainment storylines reach millions of viewers. Entertainment media can depict, normalize, and help facilitate cultural sea changes, thus providing fertile ground for narrative change research.

## AUDIENCES

The primary audiences for this report are funders, supporters, researchers, and practitioners interested in narrative change work. In *Spotlight on Impact Storytelling*, Erin Potts, Dom Lowell, and Liz Manne (2022) parse the members of the narrative change field into three functional groups:

- 1. Those on stage — the impact storytellers;**
- 2. Those backstage — the support crew;**
- 3. The backers — the funders.**

Playing various roles in the field, the work connects those who create and spread stories that shift narratives (on stage “practitioners”), those who build knowledge, connection, and capacity for this work (backstage “supporters”), and those who provide resources (backers



14. Narrative change practitioners are often nonprofit organizations, advocates, artists, creatives, impact storytellers, cultural or narrative strategists.






Supporters include researchers, evaluators, trainers, coaches, consultants, and conveners.

Funders include “backing” donors, foundations, and collaborative funds (Potts et al., 2022).

or “funders”).<sup>14</sup> The authors go on to recommend more coordination, production, and distribution of impact storytelling across these roles, including leveraging media and entertainment industries for changing narratives at scale (Potts et al., 2022).

This report aims to support those in philanthropy and media, working to strategize, align expectations, and advocate for the value and promise of narrative-based initiatives. Of course, media creation is an art, not a science. But, research can inform this art in order to reach social and organizational impact goals. Ultimately, storytellers know which stories they want to bring to life. The work presented here aims to give storytellers and their supporters more impact-oriented tools for their toolbox.

## REPORT OVERVIEW

- 
**Chapter 2: Setting the Field** defines key terms, theories, and concepts within the narrative change field, and introduces entertainment-driven narrative change.
- 
**Chapter 3: Background Research** describes bodies of literature that are influential and important to contextualize entertainment-driven narrative change work, but are not directly within the scope of this report due to time period, geography, and intended audience. This includes historical research on largely negative media effects, the impact of children’s media, international entertainment education (EE) work, and earlier examples of public health campaigns utilizing entertainment. This section presents theories and cases that inspire public understandings of the power of narrative.
- 
**Chapter 4: Social Impact of Entertainment Media** maps trends and key findings in the research literature (2000-2020) on the impact of entertainment on adult individuals, audiences, and culture. The research articles and highlighted case studies are presented in four topic areas: stereotypes and belonging, public health, social policy issues, and nature, climate, and science-related issues.
- 
**Chapter 5: Factors Associated with Impact** draws upon the research to distill factors in entertainment media across all topic areas that are associated with social impact, and categorizes them at three levels of media project, audiences, and infrastructures.
- 
**Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations** reviews overall takeaways and translates research findings into emerging recommendations for both funders and practitioners in the narrative change field.

## CHAPTER 2:

# MAPPING THE DEVELOPING NARRATIVE CHANGE FIELD

This chapter defines key terms, theories, and concepts within the narrative change field, and introduces entertainment-driven narrative change.

Takeaways include:

- Stories are powerful because they are enticing, memorable, and can overcome psychological resistance.
- Narratives, or patterns of stories, manifest at personal, cultural, and structural levels.
- Narrative change is defined here as the effort to shift narratives toward social good and social equity.
- A key component of many narrative change efforts is building the infrastructure to redistribute storytelling and decision-making power in society.
- Entertainment-driven narrative change specifically uses mass media storytelling, typically in television and film, to shift cultural narratives around various social issues.

## KEY THEORIES & DEFINITIONS

### Narrative and Culture are Related

At their core, narrative change efforts rely on the understanding that narratives shape our realities, influencing the way we think, feel, believe, act, and relate to each other and to the world (Kalra et al., 2021; Davidson, 2022; Narrative Initiative, 2019; Winskell & Enger, 2014). Narratives manifest at different levels (Manne et al., 2022):

- 1. The personal level — informing individual beliefs and behaviors,**
- 2. The cultural level — shaping norms and conversations,**
- 3. The structural level — seeding policies and institutions.**

Narrative change efforts draw on and appear in multiple fields, including strategic communications, education, political organizing, legal and public policy advocacy, community organizing, arts and cultural production, and other domains (Kalra et al., 2021; Manne et al., 2022; Narrative Initiative, 2019).

15. See more variety in definitions in the narrative change field [here](#).

There are a number of different terms and theories that are often used in this field, which we have attempted to outline in the sidebar. However, many of these definitions are contested, and that overall alignment or consensus on terminology does not exist in the narrative change field.<sup>15</sup> The terms represent a starting point for conceptualizing the analysis in this report.

## NARRATIVE CHANGE AS A BURGEONING FIELD

As both an *emergent field* and an application of the *narrative change strategy*, a number of nonprofit and advocacy organizations have adopted narrative change tactics as a means to advance social good and social justice goals, from supporting racial equity to combating misinformation.

16. See Appendix 2 in the [Spotlight on Impact Storytelling](#) (2022) report for more examples of organizations involved in the narrative change field, including the “backstage” groups not listed here, such as researchers, evaluators, trainers, and conveners.

Leading practitioners of narrative change include: the Center for Cultural Power, Color of Change, Define American, Harness, IllumiNative, Narrative Initiative, the Norman Lear Center’s Hollywood Health, and Society, The Opportunity Agenda, Reframe, Caring Across Generations and the National Domestic Workers Alliance, and Story Strategy Group.<sup>16</sup> Prominent funders and philanthropic consortia investing in the field include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The California Endowment, Convergence Partnership, Compton Foundation, Cummings Foundation, Open Society Foundations, Pop Culture Collaborative, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and Unbound Philanthropy.

In addition to the term “narrative change,” related efforts are sometimes referred to as “social impact storytelling,” “culture change,” or “cultural strategy” but the fundamental aim is largely the same — to shift underlying narratives that inform cultural attitudes and behaviors.

Similarly, writings in this field rely on different frameworks — for instance, different visions of how culture and narrative are related to each other. In some organizations’ views, narrative is a subset of culture and in others, culture is embedded in narrative. For example, one framework considers narratives to be constellations of stories within the galaxy of culture (Chang et al., 2018; Sen, n.d.). Another framework rests on the idea of “narrative oceans” as ecosystems of narratives, ideas, and cultural norms (Pop Culture Collaborative, 2022). In both framings, culture and narrative are intricately connected. Convergence lies in the use of stories to drive changes in people that lead to broader, systemic changes in institutions and societies.

## SIDEBAR: KEY TERMS & THEORIES

### In the Narrative Change Field

17. Stories are often infused with messages — key takeaways and organizing ideas for the audience.

<b>Stories</b>	Tales about particular events and people that give rise to and draw from narratives. <sup>17</sup>
<b>Narratives</b>	Collections of stories that shape and reflect our sense of the current and possible reality.
<b>Narrative change</b>	The effort to challenge, modify, and/or replace existing narratives toward the social good and social equity.
<b>Narrative power</b>	The ability of narrative to change the norms and rules of society (Robinson, 2018).
<b>Narrative infrastructure</b>	The set of systems to gain narrative power (Robinson, 2018), including organizational restructuring, leadership development, coalition building, and engaging artists and communities to create and disseminate new narratives (Kalra et al., 2021).
<b>Culture</b>	1) the overarching beliefs, values, and customs of a particular group; or 2) a set of activities and practices that hold, convey, or express concepts, values, and behaviors among individuals and groups (The Culture Group, 2014; Manne et al., 2022).
<b>Cultural narratives</b>	Patterns of stories that are prominent and wide-reaching in media and entertainment, which inform cultural norms and conversations (Manne et al., 2022).
<b>Entertainment narratives</b>	Patterns of stories that specifically manifest in entertainment content, including television, film, music, art, books, video games, social media, etc. In this report, we focus on entertainment narratives that are located in scripted TV and film.

## In Media Impact Research

<b>Parasocial interaction</b>	Encounters through media where viewers experience “face-to-face” contact with media figures, akin to direct experience (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Schiappa et al., 2005).
<b>Intergroup contact theory</b>	The theory that intergroup contact between diverse groups of people — specifically dominant and marginalized groups — is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice (Allport, 1954; Schiappa et al., 2005).
<b>Parasocial contact hypothesis</b>	The idea that viewers can form parasocial relationships — or feelings of friendship — with media figures and fictional characters to reduce prejudice, particularly for people who may have limited intergroup contact in real life (Schiappa et al., 2005).
<b>Identification</b>	A process by which viewers come to see themselves reflected in a character (Giles, 2002).
<b>Narrative transportation</b>	A phenomenon where viewers feel immersed in a storyworld (Green, 2021).
<b>Boomerang effect</b>	The backfiring of media projects producing undesired effects such as backlash (Byrne & Hart, 2009).
<b>Meta-analysis</b>	A statistical analysis of a large collection of independent study results that reveals, overall, the strongest and weakest findings (Glass, 1976).
<b>Transmedia</b>	Refers to stories being told across multiple media platforms, with each addition making a unique contribution to the whole (Jenkins, 2003).
<b>Reactance</b>	A sense of anger and counterarguing when experiencing a threat to one’s freedom or, in media studies, encountering overly persuasive messages.

## Inclusive Language Guidelines in Social Science

<b>Marginalization</b>	Relegation to or placement in an unimportant or a less powerful position in society (APA, 2021).
<b>Social justice</b>	Commitment to creating fairness and equity in resources, rights, and treatment of marginalized individuals and groups of people who do not share equal power in society (APA, 2021).
<b>Prosocial behavior</b>	Behaviors that are meant to protect or increase the welfare of others (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1990).

## Situating the Narrative Change Strategy and the Narrative Change Field

Citing the Narrative Initiative (Kim et al., 2017), ORS Impact, a consultancy focused on social impact and social change, explains that the *narrative change strategy* is geared toward shifting the underlying values and beliefs that get activated around a certain issue (Kalra et al., 2021). As a powerful approach to changing mindsets and under many names, it's been practiced for centuries, using communications tools and technologies available.

In the last 10 years, more and more advocacy groups, researchers, consultancies, philanthropies, policy and media companies name and deploy the narrative change strategies as a means to advance social goals in domains like public health, policy, and public discourse. This growing ecosystem of organizations, energized by exploring the link between the systems we've built and the collections of stories we use to understand the world (Davidson, 2022) refers to the growing *narrative change field*. In practice, such work can be difficult, protracted, and collaborative, requiring complex coordination of multiple organizations and social sectors and rethinking norms in philanthropy, research, and advocacy.

## THE ROLE OF INFRASTRUCTURE IN NARRATIVE CHANGE

Narrative change strategy requires **infrastructure** to make narrative shifts powerful (Kalra et al., 2021). The president of a civil rights advocacy group Color of Change, Rashad Robinson, connects narrative power and narrative infrastructure:

**“Narrative power is the ability to change the norms and rules our society lives by; narrative infrastructure is the set of systems we maintain in order to do that reliably over time.”**

(Robinson, 2018, p. 4)

**Infrastructure is important, because it's connected to narrative power.** Organizational infrastructure is connected to what's going on in the industry and in society. For example, a media team can have great talent, ideas, and capacity to design powerful content but the content might not reach, immerse, and influence audiences. So, narrative infrastructure means capacity for storytelling that *matters*.

Developing narrative infrastructure may include activities ranging from organizational restructuring, leadership development, building coalitions, networks, and pipelines, and engaging artists and communities to create and disseminate new narratives (Kalra et al., 2021).

Narrative change can operate through multiple pathways, including leveraging or expanding existing narratives, countering harmful ones, influencing or seeding new narratives, or defending positive narratives, all in the effort to achieve desired transformation (Potts et al., 2022). This process can take many forms, including storytelling via music (Guerra et al., 2020), theater (Boal, 1979), visual arts (Singhal & Devi, 2003), social media, news and journalism, social movement building (Storer & Rodriguez, 2020), television and film (Wang et al., 2019).

### Case in Point: The Meritocracy Narrative

One illustrative example is the American meritocracy narrative which posits that if you work hard, you can succeed; and its corollary: if you don't succeed, you must not have worked hard. Similarly, the bootstraps narrative asserts that struggling individuals need to dig in and overcome all of their challenges. These narratives are ubiquitous in many American popular media forms, from political speeches to underdog movies to discourses in sports and branding — think Nike's *Just Do It*.™

Analysis from FrameWorks Institute highlights popular media examples of the two intertwined narratives (Miller & Volmert, 2021). The **meritocracy** narrative is exemplified in rapper Cardi B extolling the value of “hustle.” The related **bootstraps** narrative exemplified in the movie *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006).

Once a narrative is deeply embedded, it informs individual and collective choices and policies.

For example, the American meritocracy narrative diminishes the role of structural barriers and intersectional oppressive systems in the pursuit of success. If someone has failed to succeed, the narrative implies, then they must not have worked hard enough. Some argue that this narrative is entrenched because it works to uphold existing power dynamics (Dommu, 2020).

With time and synergistic work across public outreach, legal action, economic, political, and media fields, underlying narratives — and the attitudes and behaviors they inform — can shift. For example, in philanthropy, funders interviewed by Moore and Sen (2022) spoke about shifting narratives around health and homelessness. They saw a trend among public policy decision makers to reframe health problems such as being unhoused from being *individual* failures to *systemic ones*.<sup>18</sup> This trend may also be reflected in shifts in understanding among the general public — FrameWorks Institute's Culture Change Project (2022) recently found that although *individualism* (narratives that place blame on the individual, like meritocracy and bootstraps) still characterizes the dominant American mindset, *systemic thinking* (narratives focusing on structures and systems) is gaining prominence as a way for

18. See case studies in Opportunity Agenda's (2021) [report](#) for how tipping points activating multiple social spheres led to narrative change. For more on the American meritocracy narrative and efforts to shift this narrative, see the [US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty](#). NLC's research on entertainment [narratives of poverty](#), and Harmony Labs' [Narrative Observatory](#) for poverty and economic mobility narratives and audiences.

the public to explain and understand societal issues.

Often, narrative change efforts involve shaping not only the stories being told, but also influencing who is telling those stories.

### **Diversifying authorship means developing infrastructure for more inclusive and authentic storytelling.**

This is why many narrative change organizations prioritize stories from marginalized groups. To support infrastructure, organizations invest in diverse artists to create content directly and work to get underrepresented creators into writers' rooms via pipeline programs. These organizations also work toward the inclusion of historically excluded voices in decision-making processes of the entertainment industry (Pop Culture Collaborative, 2022; National Domestic Workers Alliance [NDWA] & TCC Group, 2022).

Several creators and celebrity power brokers, such as Oprah Winfrey and Ava DuVernay, leveraged their own success to strategically create spaces within the entertainment industry for people from marginalized backgrounds. A number of large corporate media also invest in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, to include more members of underrepresented groups on the screen, behind the scenes, and, occasionally, in the boardroom. These efforts reflect a growing recognition that the representation of diverse groups on screen is not an end goal for entertainment-driven narrative change efforts. Rather, having marginalized communities represented at the storytelling, decision-making and ownership levels of the industry represents a fundamental shift in diversifying the power and profit structures in entertainment.

## **ENTERTAINMENT-DRIVEN NARRATIVE CHANGE**

Entertainment media informs how viewers see the world and absorb dominant social norms and beliefs (Gray, 2008; Morley, 1992; Van Zoonen, 2005). Entertainment-driven narrative change uses popular media, such as television and film, to shift cultural narratives around health and social issues. A wide body of research suggests that narrative change efforts that include entertainment can work (Godsil et al., 2016; Shen & Han, 2014; Shen et al., 2015; Orozco-Olvera et al., 2019; Diddi et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2021).

### **Entertainment media influence audiences, even those regarded as hard to reach due to structural or ideological barriers, because stories can be powerful.**



## **Why are stories so powerful?**

- First, stories are enticing. Audiences tend to seek out and engage with entertaining stories on their own (FrameWorks Institute, 2021). Humans tend to enjoy a good story.
- Second, stories are “sticky” or memorable. Compared to purely informational messages, stories are more persuasive (Oschatz & Marker, 2020; Barton et al., 2020), better at overcoming psychological resistance, or reactance (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) and are easier to understand and remember (FrameWorks Institute, 2021; Graesser et al., 1980).
- Third, neuroscience suggests that stories have powerful effects on the brain (Barton et al., 2020). Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans reveal that listening to stories activates multiple neural pathways, and can even lead to the mirroring of brain waves between the storyteller and story receiver (Renken, 2020). Other physiological responses to entertainment include increased sweating, heart pounding, blinking, and facial movements, which suggest heightened engagement with a story.
- Fourth, entertainment storytelling has the potential to reach across ideological divides, by exposing mass audiences to social issues and commentary that they may not otherwise seek out (Blakley et al., 2019; Gillig et al., 2018).
- Additionally, when entertainment stories attract large audiences, they tend to be more cost-effective than health behavior change interventions that implement interpersonal communication strategies (Jah et al., 2018; Banerjee et al., 2021; Chandrashekar et al., 2019; Avenir Health, 2021).

When social justice organizations harness the power of entertainment media to pursue narrative change, they tend to inform diverse, inclusive, and nuanced portrayals of disempowered communities and social issues, while critiquing negative and stereotypic portrayals of marginalized communities (Borum, 2021).

Many entertainment-focused advocacy organizations incorporate multiple objectives and activities (Borum, 2021), including:

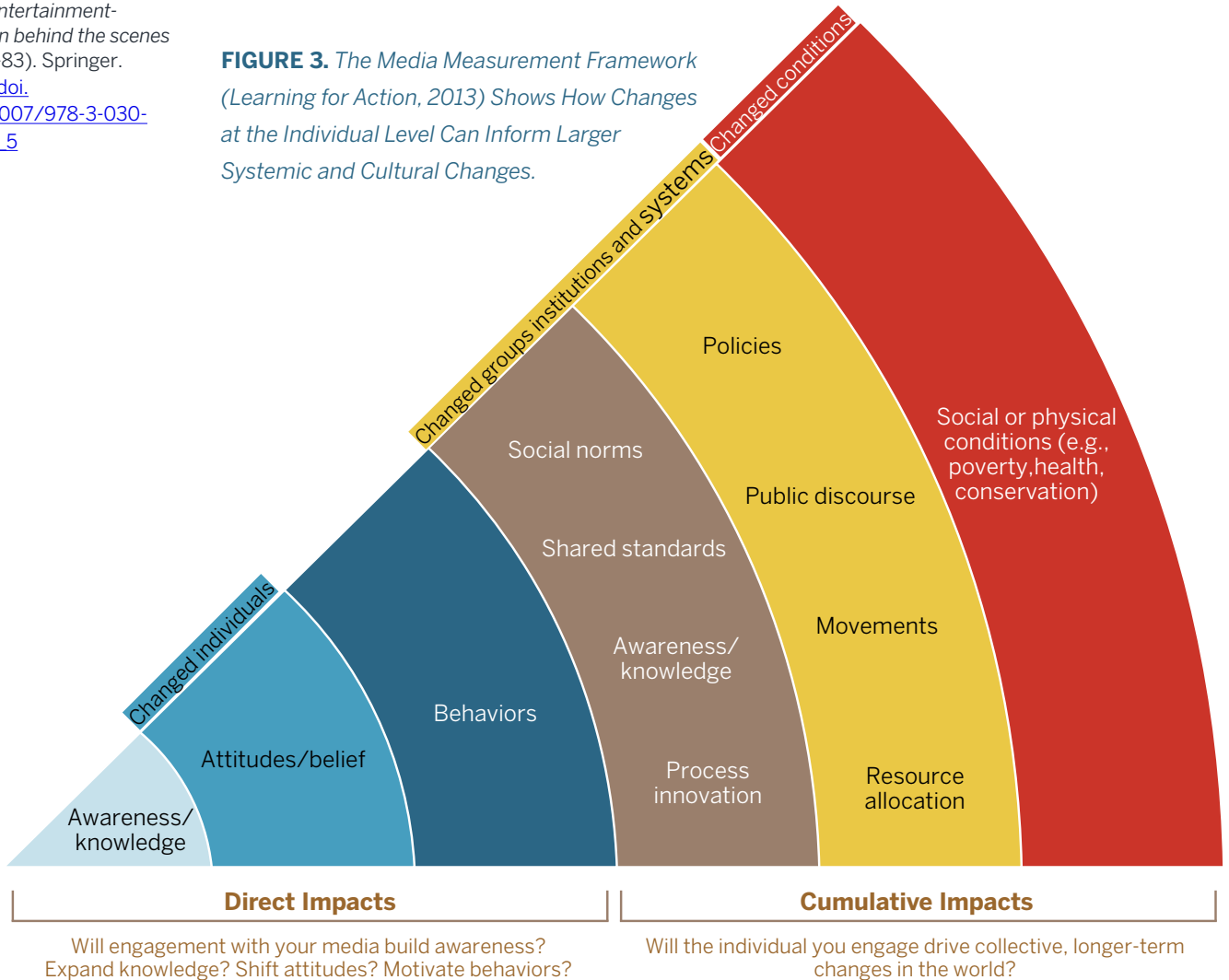
- Diversifying the entertainment industry;
- Collaborating with Hollywood writers and producers to tell equity-oriented stories in ongoing storylines;
- Illuminating damaging portrayals and storylines circulating in popular media;
- Developing new storylines and other content, including social media projects.

19. For in-depth profiles of some of these organizations, see: Borum, C. (2021). Entertainment-education as social justice activism in the United States: Narrative strategy in the participatory media era. In L. B. Frank & P. Falzone (Eds.), *Entertainment-education behind the scenes* (pp. 61–83). Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-63614-2\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-63614-2_5)

This work acknowledges that popular media makers are also culture creators and changemakers.<sup>19</sup>

The Media Measurement Framework created by Learning for Action (2013) considers both direct impacts and cumulative impacts that entertainment media can have.

**FIGURE 3.** *The Media Measurement Framework (Learning for Action, 2013) Shows How Changes at the Individual Level Can Inform Larger Systemic and Cultural Changes.*



(Bisanz, n.d.)

20. This model captures ways in which stories, narratives, and meta-narratives interact and connect smaller individual effects to larger, cultural, and systemic ones.

The logic remains that entertainment media stories, alongside other strategies, can help shift attitudes and behaviors, inform public opinion, foster conversation and deliberation, and ultimately contribute to cultural, political and policy changes. Hence, research on individual changes — impact on audience members' awareness, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors — can serve as a conduit to understand research on larger narrative shifts — norms, standards, discourses, movements, and policies.<sup>20</sup>

## ENTERTAINMENT EDUCATION TRADITION SHOWS DIRECT IMPACT OF MEDIA

Some fields have directly focused on entertainment-driven social impact. For example, entertainment education (EE) is a field concerned with leveraging entertainment media to *entertain* and *educate* audience members (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). As a strategy, EE informs, engages, and motivates audiences by creating media storylines. In practice, EE is usually mobilized to address public health issues and has traditionally been applied in the Global South. In the U.S. and Canada, EE is less often practiced, in part due to the strategy's reliance on a more top-down approach, with media projects being organized by governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

In contrast, entertainment-related work in the narrative change field often uses grassroots and bottom-up approaches, working directly with media creatives and community members. Still, research in connection to the strategy of EE has valuable evidence for the many ways and mechanisms by which entertainment media affects attitudes, knowledge, and behavior in the short term and culture in the long term. Thus, we focus on EE less as a strategy but as a rich data source for learning about how entertainment media connects to minds and hearts.

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## CHAPTER 3:

# BACKGROUND RESEARCH

This chapter describes bodies of literature that are influential and important to contextualize entertainment-driven narrative change work but are not directly within the scope of this report due to time period, geography, and intended audience.

- Contemporary work on entertainment media and impact is informed by important research across time and discipline:
  - Media effects research viewed audience members as passive media consumers and focused on negative outcomes of media use.
  - Studies of children’s media have found both helpful and harmful effects of entertainment on kids.
  - Entertainment education (EE) is a proven, cost-effective way to reach large audiences, most often used in the Global South to promote public health-based attitudes and behaviors.
- Entertainment has been leveraged by a number of historical public health campaigns in the U.S., like the Designated Driver (DD) campaign, which conducted outreach to Hollywood and brought national attention to the risks of drunk driving.
- Seeing entertainment as one vehicle for sparking public discussion and attitude change has a long history. Popular shows in the 1970s, such as *All in the Family* and *The Jeffersons*, are early TV examples that depicted societal issues, such as racism, classism, & sexism.

The link between media and culture has been researched for more than a hundred years. We know that cultural narratives are transmitted and transformed through media, in addition to other sources. Since the 1930s, popular media have functioned as important agents of socialization and are given their due as researchers study mass media for mass effects across disciplines. In this section, we provide history, theory, and international examples that inform this report but fall outside of our main research focus — entertainment media for adult audiences in the U.S. and Canada from 2000 to 2020. Historical and international media research and practice inform the ways we understand the power of media to inspire change at the individual level — attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge — and the systemic level — public narratives, policies, and cultures. Here we include background research threads and historical examples to contextualize the current body of work in media impact research:

1. **Historical media effects research**
2. **Studies of children’s media**
3. **International examples**
4. **Historical examples in public health**
5. **Historical examples in American media**

## HISTORICAL MEDIA EFFECTS RESEARCH

21. Early media effects theories were developed in the 1920s and 1930s after researchers observed the effect of government propaganda during World War I and media events like Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds* broadcast.

Early research<sup>21</sup> concluded that mass media have a direct impact on audiences, one that is especially pronounced with vulnerable young audiences. This perspective has been dubbed the “hypodermic needle theory” because it imagines media messages as a powerful substance that can be injected into the public consciousness.

**Current approaches to media studies emphasize how audiences interpret, interact with, and utilize media, with the understanding that effects are not uniform and vary across groups.**

Within the media effects literature, researchers have paid particular attention to how entertainment media exposure leads to or *cultivates* negative outcomes, including unhealthy, antisocial, and aggressive behavior. They contended that the more viewers engage with depictions of violent behavior modeled on the screen, the more likely they are to engage in violence off the screen (Berkowitz & Powers, 1979; Fickers et al., 2013). And, the more time viewers spend ‘living’ in a violent world on the screen, the more likely they are to believe that the world is inherently violent (Gerbner et al., 1980). These perspectives are supported by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2009), which posits that viewers adopt behaviors they observe, especially if such behaviors are rewarded, portrayed as correct (Berkowitz & Powers, 1979), or aligned with viewers’ lived experience (Schultz et al., 2001). Initial waves of media research came with cautionary tales of how TV, movies, and advertising can negatively affect viewers.

In time, most media scholars shifted to a more nuanced understanding of audiences, acknowledging audience agency in addition to vulnerability. We now know that audience members use media for different purposes and approach media in different ways. And, the intention audience members bring to media experiences affects their engagement with it. Many film viewers simply want to have fun; some



prefer a thought provoking experience while others are looking for *both* (Oliver & Bartsch, 2010). One current approach called *critical audience research* emphasizes the variety of interpretations that audience members bring to media content. Countering the hypodermic needle theory that considers audiences as passive recipients of messages, critical audience researchers focus on audience agency. These scholars analyze viewers' uses, transactions, and interactions with media beyond simple "effects" (Hall, 1980; Valkenburg et al., 2016).

## STUDIES OF CHILDREN'S MEDIA

Educational outcomes from media play a central role in studies of children and young people. Children's media diets produce important effects and uses, both beneficial and harmful. In fact, a meta-analysis of research on the effects of television programming on children found that television was equally likely to have prosocial and antisocial outcomes (Mares & Woodard, 2007).

Studied harmful effects of media on kids	Studied helpful effects of media on kids
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A possible propensity to violence (Christakis &amp; Zimmerman, 2007; Anderson &amp; Dill, 2000)</li> <li>● Problems with attention (Swing et al., 2010)</li> <li>● Materialistic worldviews (Vandana &amp; Lenka, 2014).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Promoting altruistic habits (Mares &amp; Woodard, 2007)</li> <li>● Increasing academic knowledge (Fisch, 2004; Mares &amp; Pan, 2013, Linebarger et al., 2004)</li> <li>● Eating vegetables (Winskell &amp; Enger, 2014)</li> </ul>



Almost one hundred years ago, a major goal of the cartoon production Popeye was to promote healthy eating, especially spinach consumption, in young viewers (Winskell & Enger, 2014). This cartoon, with its vegetable-focused messaging, is sometimes cited as the first concerted mass media effort to effect cultural change — potentially, one of the first modern examples of entertainment-driven narrative change. More recently, young viewers of educational children's programming, such as *Sesame Street* and *Blue's Clues*, demonstrated pronounced increases in school readiness skills (Hurwitz, 2019). Popular media programs are commonly used as tools to help children learn academic and social rules and norms.



## INTERNATIONAL ENTERTAINMENT EDUCATION WORK

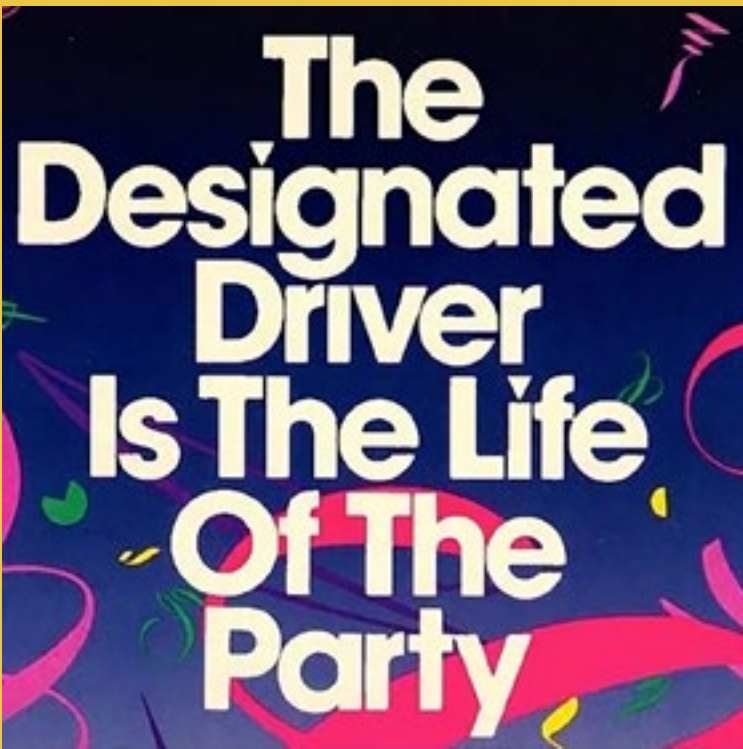
**Media-infused strategies to change hearts and minds have proven to be effective, especially in public health campaigns in the Global South, including in India, Mexico, and sub-Saharan Africa.**

International Entertainment Education strategies find their roots in the work of Miguel Sabido in the 1970s. His Peruvian telenovela *Simplemente Maria* depicted the protagonist Maria enrolling in adult literacy classes and finding career success with her Singer sewing machine. The popular telenovela was linked to increases in enrollment in adult literacy classes and purchases of Singer sewing machines (Singhal et al., 1994; Singhal et al., 2003). With this success in hand, Sabido went on to develop more telenovelas devised to captivate viewers and increased their personal and social well-being. Others experimented with this approach around the world, promoting a wide variety of prosocial causes, with an emphasis on public health. Entertainment education has been implemented globally to influence attitudes on a number of social issues, including women's rights, domestic violence, and economic empowerment (Godsil et al., 2016).

In part because entertainment media can attract large audiences, especially in less media saturated markets, the EE strategy presents an affordable way to change health-related behaviors at scale. A number of international studies demonstrate the power of entertainment media to change knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of audience members (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). For example, one of the most well-researched EE programs, *Twende na Wakati*, a radio soap opera airing in Tanzania in the 1990s, was proven to increase the adoption of family planning methods and HIV prevention strategies by listeners (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Another successful EE program, the South African TV series *Soul City IV*, contributed to shifts in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to domestic violence and inspired grassroots social mobilization around the issue (Usdin et al., 2003).

## HISTORICAL PUBLIC HEALTH CAMPAIGNS

EE has been applied in the U.S. to boost public health. The U.S. Designated Driver Campaign represents a successful case study of leveraging entertainment to promote a specific behavior, relying on designated drivers to avoid drunk driving. The campaign rose to prominence in the late 1980s with the help of EE (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). Inspired by the grassroots efforts of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), the Harvard School of Public Health worked with Hollywood executives, producers, and writers to integrate anti-drunk driving messages into primetime TV and films.



With the support of Hollywood studios and the main television networks at the time, writers collaborated with experts to incorporate drunk driving prevention messages. This was often accompanied by the airing of public service announcements (PSAs) reinforcing the message of designating a fellow partygoer to remain sober so they could safely drive everyone home. ABC, CBS, and NBC donated \$100 million worth of TV airtime to the campaign. Finally, at least 77 primetime shows, including hits like *Cheers*, *Dallas*, and *L.A. Law*, integrated dialogue that encouraged the use of designated drivers (DDs) (Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, n.d.).

The Designated Driver Campaign has been credited with a number of social, behavioral, and cultural shifts: bringing national attention to the risks of drunk driving, creating widespread cultural recognition of the concept of designated drivers, increasing uptake of DDs among Americans, and reducing traffic fatalities in the 1990s (Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, n.d.).

From this campaign, stakeholders learned what works, including strategies, such as:

- Deploying focused messages that **target specific behaviors** among audience members (e.g., encouraging designated driving versus tackling alcohol abuse on the whole);
- Using **positively framed messages** — “the designated driver is the life of the party;”
- **Strategically timing the campaign** to leverage the success of MADD;
- **Obtaining buy-in** from Hollywood’s creatives and leadership.

Moreover, important lessons can be drawn from the DD campaign’s strategic alignment. DeJong & Wallack (1992) argue that the widespread acceptance of the concept of designated drivers is due in part to its resonance with the core American values of altruism and fairness:

**“The designated driver strategy also has strong appeal because it resonates with how Americans think of themselves. First, as altruistic: Designated drivers are positioned as good friends who take care of**

**others by creating an opportunity for them to have a carefree good time. [...] Second, as fair: Ideally, friends would take turns in the designated driver role. That way, the ‘penalty’ of having to abstain is equally shared. In the bargain, every member of the group is rewarded by being able to drink ‘safely’ on most occasions.”**

(DeJong & Wallack, 1992, p. 432)

At the same time, this alignment may also serve to reinforce the dominant ethos of American individualism and self-determination, whereby *individual* choices (such as designating a DD) are presented as the solution for systemic problems (i.e., alcohol abuse) (DeJong & Wallack, 1992).

## **HISTORICAL EXAMPLES IN AMERICAN MEDIA**

Popular media has a long history of changing hearts, minds, and practices around social and public health issues (Kline, 2003; Singhal et al., 2003). 1970’s-era TV shows *All in the Family* and *The Jeffersons* serve as cases in point. Unlike escapist sitcoms of the day (e.g., *Gilligan’s Island*, *Green Acres*), these Norman Lear productions portrayed the real struggles of ‘regular’ people, including people of color. *The Jeffersons* featured the first interracial couple on television (Sewell, 2013). *All in the Family* is credited with playing an active role in the acceleration of culture change, particularly with respect to women’s social roles (von Hodenberg, 2021). Collectively, these shows “redefined” American culture, inspired groundbreaking public and private conversations (Newton, 2017, para. 1), and engaged a record-breaking 50 million American viewers for an average episode (Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974).

However, the impacts of these shows were not always regarded as prosocial. *All in the Family* is well known for its *boomerang effect*, or the backfiring of media projects by having undesired effects (Byrne & Hart, 2008). The bluster of Archie Bunker, the “lovable bigot” (Kaufman, 1971) at the show’s center, was intended to illuminate how prejudice is both irrational and fear-based. Norman Lear specified then:

**“Archie is a fool. Every week he is a fool. The world is changing so fast around him, attitudes on everything are changing, that’s why he is lashing out at everything.”**

(Kaufman, 1971, para. 6)

Yet, many viewers interpreted the character differently, hailing Archie and his bigoted views as heroic. Surlin and Bowden (1976) found that among viewers that saw themselves as



All in the Family and The Jeffersons

similar to Archie, watching the show increased a sense of agreement with Archie. This effect was reinforced the more they watched the show. This observed *backfire*, in which audience members identify with negative media role models, has come to be known as “the Archie Bunker effect” (Singhal & Rogers, 1999). This effect has informed entertainment-driven narrative change efforts, as campaigns aim to avoid potential boomerang effects through thoughtful character development (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).

Since the 1970s, entertainment media have become more established as a vehicle for attitude and public opinion shifts. Many shows and movies have become associated with specific cultural shifts. For instance, in the context of the fight for marriage equality, then-Vice President Joe Biden opined on *Meet the Press* in 2012 that TV show *Will & Grace* did more to “educate the American public than anything else done thus far” in terms of fostering acceptance of the LGBTQ community (Berman, 2012, para. 3). Through the years, we’ve learned much more about the relationship between entertainment media and societal norms and behaviors. Waves of more granular research show us *how* entertainment media can change hearts and minds and *how* to avoid unintended consequences, like the Archie Bunker effect.

## OUR RESEARCH FOCUS

Informed by these histories and theories, the remainder of this report reviews the documented power of popular media to shift audiences’ knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and social, political, and cultural outcomes. Centering empirical studies of popular TV shows and movies premiering in the U.S. and Canada between 2000 and 2020, we detail the research findings and pinpoint factors that are associated with social impact in order to make evidence-based recommendations about potential ways to contribute to the impact of narrative change efforts.

CHAPTER 4:

# ■ SOCIAL IMPACT OF ENTERTAINMENT MEDIA

This chapter maps trends and key findings in the research literature on the impact of entertainment on individuals, audiences, and culture.

Highlights:

- Entertainment media can counter stereotypes and facilitate a sense of belonging for members of marginalized groups (ex: Will & Grace).
- Repeated or *cumulative* exposure to positive portrayals of marginalized groups fosters acceptance. Feelings of friendship with characters can lead to impact.
- Effects of entertainment are rarely uniform. Some groups may respond positively to certain content, while the same content can backfire or have unintended consequences for other groups.
- The impacts of TV and film on public health-related knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and policies are well documented.
- Through *framing*, TV and film can shape views and proposed solutions on other social issues, such as welfare, the death penalty, torture, police misconduct, and sexual violence.

Research on the social impact of entertainment media traverses many formats, films, genres, and topics and uses varied research approaches. What counts as social impact can be challenging to pin down. Entertainment media projects — movies and TV shows — rarely express social impact goals and focus on entertainment value, relatability, quality, and accuracy of the work, along with commercial success.

A small proportion of creators do make their impact goals known. Well-documented evidence of impact often comes from media productions designed with impact in mind.<sup>22</sup> Projects like EE programs and advocacy-oriented documentaries articulate social impact goals at their outset. These kinds of media projects can bring together industry leaders, diverse creative teams, researchers, and nonprofit or philanthropic organizations. Because these projects specify their aims, it's easier to define and measure their social impact. Additionally, the

22. Media creators might not have articulated social goals in mind for their project, but the media we consume necessarily affects us, in intended and unintended ways.

collaborative nature of social impact productions means they are more likely to have a budget for research and evaluation, allowing for the study and publication of their impact research.

## **MEDIA CONCEPTION AFFECTS HOW IMPACT IS SEEN AND STUDIED**

Collaborative entertainment media projects with social impact evidence come in many forms. Some media creators conceive and carry out projects with the goal of encouraging certain cultural outcomes. For example, the Canadian sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* set out to challenge dehumanizing stereotypes about Muslims (Khan & Eid, 2011).

In other cases, experts and relevant organizations consult on a particular storyline or episode to promote accurate and nuanced portrayals of a certain issue or cultural group. For example, writers on the medical drama *ER* worked with subject matter experts to inform a storyline illustrating the risks of binge drinking, and researchers studied the attitudes and intended behaviors of viewers after the episode aired (Kim et al., 2014).

The way that media is conceived and distributed can affect how its social impact is studied. Although increasingly rare, examples of EE programs carried out in North America, like the TV show *East Los High*, come with ample data on process, reception, and impact.

### **Case Study: East Los High**

*East Los High* is a TV series focused on accurate and authentic portrayals of Latino/a youth in the Los Angeles area and the social and public health issues they often face. The show started as a collaboration between Wise Entertainment — a Hollywood-based production company, Population Media Center — an EE organization that works primarily in the Global South, and various NGOs working on reproductive health and justice (Wang & Singhal, 2016).

Researchers gathered lots of data on the show's impact, in part due to well-articulated intentions of the media creators and the associated transmedia information campaign (Wang et al., 2019). The show rolled out story-related elements and informational sources across multiple media platforms to engage and inform audiences.

Researchers pinpoint the use of transmedia as important to promoting viewers' understanding of family planning methods and healthy relationships (Wang et al., 2019). In concert with other media research, we see that the transmedia storytelling strategy can be used to reach fragmented audiences by spreading entry points across the platforms and avenues that are popular among target audiences (Lutkenhaus et al.,



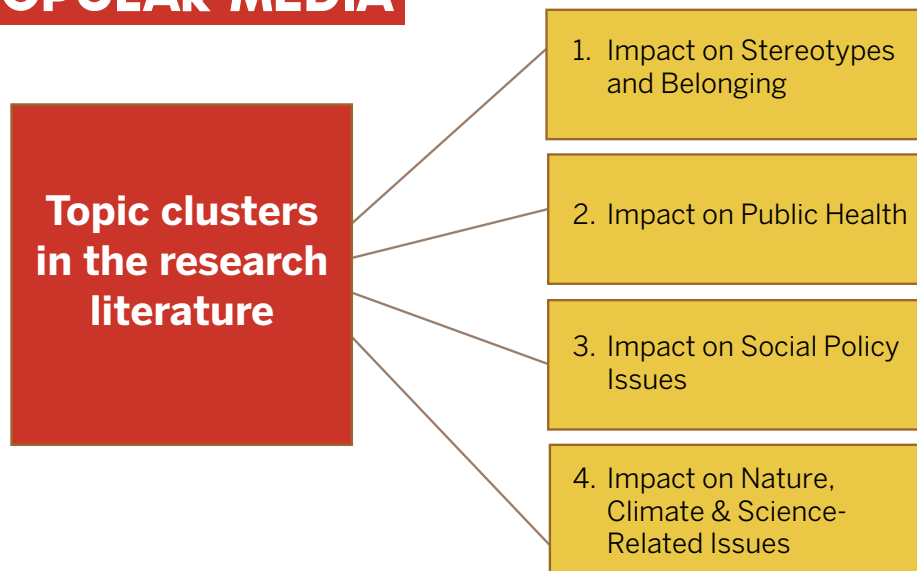
2020). Viewers can enter the storyworld via television, social media, websites, searches, and other channels.



Transmedia elements of East Los High.

**The choice of entry points in transmedia facilitates greater audience exposure in our media saturated yet fragmented ecology.**

## TOPIC CLUSTERS: SOCIAL IMPACT OF POPULAR MEDIA



Scanning published studies and meta-analyses focusing on the social impact of popular media in the last 20 years, four topical clusters emerge.

## **Stereotypes and Belonging**

Media affects how we view various groups of people. Research documents the power of entertainment media to introduce people to characters from groups that are unlike them and to showcase characters that serve both as positive role models and as sources of resilience for members of marginalized groups (Bond, 2021; Bonds-Raacke et al., 2007; Gillig et al., 2018; Gillig & Murphy, 2016; Massey et al., 2021; Shade et al., 2015; Tian & Yoo, 2018). For some people, popular media narratives may be their only source of information about communities with whom they have little to no contact in real life. In fact, TV and film inform cultural understandings of who belongs in “ingroups” — often culturally dominant communities — and “outgroups” — often marginalized communities (Godsil et al., 2016; Hinds et al., 2005).

### **Popular Media Can Counter Stereotypes and Reduce Prejudice**

Although popular media often reinforce harmful stereotypes (Appel & Weber, 2021; Lee et al., 2009; Reny & Manzano, 2016), they also have the potential to counteract such stereotypes.

### **Complex and humanizing portrayals of members of stereotyped groups can help reduce stigma towards those groups.**

(Murrar & Brauer, 2018; Schiappa et al., 2006; Wang & Singhal, 2016)

Media portrayals change hearts and minds through various mechanisms, including parasocial interaction, or feelings of friendship with fictional characters. In meeting people on screen and experiencing parasocial interaction, viewers of *The Fosters*, *Will & Grace*, *Six Feet Under*, *Queer as Folk*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and *Transparent* learned about LGBTQ+ people and developed more positive attitudes towards this cultural group (Bond, 2021; Gillig & Murphy, 2016; Massey et al., 2021; Schiappa et al., 2005; Schiappa et al., 2006).

Vicarious contact — the observation of ingroup members successfully interacting with outgroup members — is another mechanism through which entertainment media can bring about prosocial impacts (Li, 2019; Murrar & Brauer, 2018). One experimental study using clips from the ABC reality TV series, *Becoming Us*, found that showing positive interactions between a cisgender and transgender cast member on screen led viewers to have more positive attitudes towards the trans individual (Li, 2019). More significantly, when the story was narrated from the perspective of the transgender cast member (versus narrated by the cisgender cast member), viewers were more likely to feel absorbed in the story, experience heightened emotions, and exhibit less prejudice towards not only the trans cast member, but towards transgender people as a group. Contrary to the conventional assumption that stories told by messengers from dominant social groups are more effective at fostering intergroup understanding among mass audiences, the author finds that narration by outgroup members may be more impactful:



**“These findings demonstrate the importance of having the minority outgroup members tell their own stories [...] When it comes to shifting people’s attitudes toward a social group as a whole, the strategy needs to focus on letting the outgroup members tell their stories from their perspectives, regardless of whether their stories are positive or negative.”**

(Li, 2019, p. 161)

### **Case Study: *Will & Grace***



*Will & Grace* (NBC)

Dubbed the “Will & Grace effect,” research links the show with a shift in American stories about queer relationships (Schiappa, n.d.). The show is seen as a “tipping point,” that added to ongoing social and political movements (Schiappa, n.d.), which culminated in the U.S. Supreme Court’s passage of the marriage equality act in 2015 (Human Rights Campaign, 2017; Kane, 2012).

Research verifies the power of *Will & Grace* in bringing about more supportive attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals (Bonds-Raacke et al., 2007; Schiappa et al., 2006). For instance, Schiappa et al. (2006) found that the more viewers watched *Will & Grace* and formed parasocial bonds with the gay characters on the show, the greater their reduction in prejudice towards gay people. This effect was particularly pronounced when viewers reported little to no “real life” contact with anyone who identifies as LGBTQ+ (Schiappa et al., 2006). Parasocial relationships with television characters have the potential to reduce prejudice in a similar way to meeting diverse groups of people in real life.<sup>23</sup>

23. See Allport’s (1954) contact hypothesis, which proposes that intergroup contact between diverse groups of people — specifically dominant and marginalized groups — is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice.

Another study asked college students to remember any gay character in the media (Bonds-Raacke et al., 2007). Results showed that those who recalled the gay protagonist from *Will & Grace*, Will, had more positive attitudes toward gay men and women than non-viewers or than viewers who didn't remember him (Bonds-Raacke et al., 2007). This study included an experiment that concluded that simply remembering a positive media example of a stigmatized social group can affect social attitudes. Study authors explain:

**“[T]hese results suggest the potentially enormous influence of a few positive role model media characters on attitudes toward that social group. It may be that the show *Will & Grace*, with its huge audiences, is doing more to improve attitudes toward gay men than any amount of explicit social teaching in schools, families, churches, and elsewhere.”**

(Bonds-Raacke et al., 2007, p. 29)

We see similar effects with recurring immigrant and Muslim characters in popular shows. Viewers of the TV show *Superstore* who experienced feelings of friendship with the recurring undocumented character Mateo — particularly those who had little or no “real life” contact with immigrants — were more likely to support increased immigration to the U.S. (Rosenthal et al., 2020). Similarly, a study of humorous portrayals of Arabs and Muslims on *Little Mosque on the Prairie* found that the longer viewers watched the show, and the more relatable and likable they found the main Arab characters, the more the show reduced prejudice toward this group (Murrar & Brauer, 2018).

### **Different Represented Groups, Different Audiences, Different Effects**

Studies repeatedly show that humanizing media portrayals are often associated with increased tolerance toward members of marginalized groups. But, these effects aren't uniform. For instance, Gillig and Murphy (2016) found a *boomerang effect* for young heterosexual viewers of a gay romance storyline on a TV show called *The Fosters*. Heterosexual viewers were more likely to feel disgust while watching *The Fosters* storyline, which was associated with more negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people. For an audience of LGBTQ+ youth, however, viewing *The Fosters* was linked to a greater sense of hope and pride (Gillig & Murphy, 2016).

A related study on a storyline in the TV show *Royal Pains* depicting a minor transgender character, found evidence of another boomerang effect. Conservative viewers were more likely to feel disgust when introduced to the trans character, which negatively impacted their attitudes towards transgender people and policies (Gillig et al., 2018). However, the more

viewers saw shows featuring transgender characters, the more positive their attitudes towards transgender people and related policies became, causing the boomerang effect to all but disappear. This effect of *cumulative exposure* was particularly pronounced among conservative viewers. The authors highlighted this finding, noting that the cumulative effect of viewing multiple transgender entertainment narratives may have the potential to breakthrough political and ideological divides:

**“Given that political conservatism has been shown to be associated with more negative attitudes toward transgender people, these results indicate that smaller storylines featuring transgender characters in mainstream programming have the potential to improve the attitudes of more conservative viewers who may not seek out transgender depictions.”**

(Gillig et al., 2018, p. 524)

In the context of storylines about immigrants, conservative and religious viewers of *Madam Secretary*, *Orange is the New Black*, and *Superstore*, were more likely to experience reactance — psychological defensiveness — and to feel manipulated by the storylines. Reactance was associated with less inclusive attitudes and behaviors related to immigration (Rosenthal et al., 2020).

Despite possible boomerang effects and backlash potential, the idea of ‘different audiences, different effects’ has an upside.

**Entertainment media can act as a powerful source of identity formation and empowerment for members of marginalized groups when they see themselves depicted positively on screen.**

(Dogan et al., 2021; Stubbins, 2016)

For instance, one study found that Black viewers of the superhero movie *Black Panther* expressed pride, empowerment, and connection to their racial identity after watching the movie (Dogan et al., 2021). Another study found that after watching a Black history documentary, Black male youth exhibited improved self-esteem, sense of racial identity, and self-efficacy (Stubbins, 2016).

Varied audience reactions to TV shows highlight the complexity of developing media for prosocial purposes and studying media impact. Because audiences bring their unique experiences, perspectives, and interpretations to a media project, the effects of entertainment are rarely consistent across groups. It’s thus important to pay attention to how audience segments differ from one another and watch for unintended effects, while recognizing that

there's no "one-size-fits all" approach to audiences engaging with media.

## Public Health

Decades of research show that entertainment can shape audiences' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to a wide range of health topics (Shen & Han, 2014).

### A Sample of Health Topics Studied In Media Impact Research

- Organ and bone marrow donation (Lapsansky et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2009)
- Cancers and preventative practices (Hether et al., 2008; Kennedy et al., 2011; Li et al., 2019; Marcus et al., 2010; Murphy et al., 2011)
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as HIV/AIDs (Kennedy et al., 2004; Moyer-Gusé, Chung, et al., 2011; Whittier et al. 2005)
- Birth control methods, such condom & other contraceptive use (Wang et al., 2019; Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010)
- Abortion and reproductive decision-making (Chandra et al., 2008; Sisson et al., 2021)
- Infectious diseases and pandemics (Blakley & Shin, 2016)

Captured effects in this research aren't huge, but notable. One meta-analysis found that entertainment stories were linked to some gains in health-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors of audience members (Shen & Han, 2014), with the greatest impact on knowledge and awareness. Another meta-analysis surfaced similar results: entertainment seeking to educate young adults about STIs led to small increases in young viewers' safe sex practices, along with increases in knowledge of STIs and contraception methods (Orozco-Olvera et al., 2019). The majority of studies, such as those reviewed by Hoffman and colleagues (2017), reported either positive (32%) or mixed health effects (58%) of viewing fictional medical dramas. Only 11% of the studies reported a negative impact on viewers' health-related knowledge, perceptions, or behavior.

## More Episodes → More Impact

The "dosage" of viewing — that is, how much of a TV show or film viewers consume and how often they watch it — plays an important role in facilitating impact on audiences. Shen and Han's meta-analysis (2014) found that *exposure time* drove impact: studies in which participants viewed several TV episodes produced more impact than studies in which participants viewed a single episode. Other studies confirm that *cumulative exposure* to multiple breast cancer episodes and storylines is associated with stronger effects on TV viewers' cancer-related knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors (Hether et al., 2008; Rosenthal et al., 2018). Watching multiple episodes can help viewers dive into the story, which can in turn enhance impact.

## **Prevention and Detection Stories Had More Impact**

Research suggests that depicting certain types of health behaviors may be more effective than others. One meta-analysis found that stories promoting prevention and detection activities (e.g., exercising, attending health screenings) led to significant effects, while stories advocating for cessation (e.g., quitting smoking) did not (Shen et al., 2015).

### **Case Study: Organ Donation Storylines**



*Numb3rs* (CBS)

Research on organ donation storylines offers insights on the delicate balance between the entertainment value and the accuracy of TV portrayals. As predicted by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2009), characters' role modeling of desired behaviors is an important factor that drives prosocial outcomes. For instance, Morgan et al. (2009) found that viewers of

organ donation storylines on *CSI: NY*, *Numb3rs*, *House*, and *Grey's Anatomy*, were more likely to choose to become donors if the storyline favorably portrayed organ donation by showing characters making their decision to donate, mulling over donation merits, and signing up. Transportation into the storyworld was also associated with viewers' increased likelihood of becoming an organ donor.

However, the episode of *Numb3rs* studied — the only episode in the sample to depict the organ donation sign-up process — included myths about the existence of a black market for organs in the U.S. (Morgan et al., 2009). As such, viewers who were transported into the *Numb3rs* storyline were more likely to take away inaccurate information. In this way, audiences' knowledge gains and behavior changes were connected to complex, intertwining mechanisms. On the one hand, TV dramatization likely led to increased emotional involvement with the storyline, which facilitated viewers' intentions to donate.

But, the drama came at the expense of accuracy. Viewers who felt really involved in the narrative — they were transported — were more likely to take away inaccurate information. These unintended takeaways show that non-factual organ donation storylines produced more inaccurate knowledge, negative attitudes, and less support for organ donation among TV viewers (Morgan et al., 2010).

## **Impact on Public Health Policy**

### **Entertainment media can shape audiences' perceptions of public health policies.**

One study found that watching episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* stimulated critical thinking about healthcare policies and the perceived shortcomings of a privatized healthcare system (Jubas et al., 2017). Focus group participants watched *Grey's Anatomy* clips about characters who could not afford necessary treatment due to lack of health insurance. In the ensuing discussions, participants expressed their preference for a policy framework that ensured universal access to health care.

Narrative approaches are also used by advocates who seek to influence public health policy (Davidson, 2022). One meta-analysis of narrative research (Fadlallah et al., 2019) found that health-based storytelling can raise awareness, encourage policy inquiries, and inspire audiences to initiate discussions about public policies. Broader, thematic narratives that included personal stories about groups of people and systems, rather than *episodic* frames of a single event or individual, were more common at affecting policy outcomes. One *ER* episode depicting was shown at a Congressional Committee meeting to highlight patient navigators (Marcus et al., 2010). The showing was credited with getting Congress to understand the role of patient navigators, and ultimately helped pass the Patient Navigator Act in 2005. As such, entertainment narratives can be a tool for shifting individual-level knowledge and behaviors, as well as informing structural-level policy changes.

### **Health-Based Storytelling: Balancing Individual and Systemic Narratives**

Stories in popular media about health often emphasize individual narratives linked to health, as opposed to systemic narratives. These framings have consequences.

The majority of Americans think of health as a matter of personal responsibility — where individual choices, like exercising and eating healthy, matter more than systemic or environmental factors, such as access to recreational spaces, grocery stores, or even policies guaranteeing a living wage. But research consistently shows that these social and environmental factors are highly consequential — and widely underestimated — in determining health outcomes. Notably, FrameWorks' (2022) culture change research found that, despite *systems thinking* being on the rise for making sense of important social issues (such as racism, poverty, and aging), Americans currently don't extend this logic to health. Instead, health is thought of as a *product* of individual choices and decision-making, rather than a *byproduct* of the systems and environments in which we are embedded. Popular and entertainment media play a role here by perpetuating individualistic narratives that continue to frame health as a matter of personal responsibility (Knibbe et al., 2017; Weinstein et al., 2020).



## **Sexual and Reproductive Health**

Entertainment media depicting sexual and reproductive health represent another robust area of media impact research on public health. Entertainment stories are shown to raise awareness of family planning methods (Collins et al., 2003; Kearney & Levine, 2015; Wang et al., 2019), promote information-seeking and screening behaviors related to STIs (Kennedy et al., 2004; Whittier et al., 2005), encourage open sexual communication (Moyer-Gusé, Chung, et al., 2011), and even shift views on abortion (Mulligan & Habel, 2011; Sisson et al., 2021; Sisson & Kimport, 2016).

24. See ANSIRH's [Abortion Onscreen Database](#), which tracks all abortion-related TV and film content.

Depictions of on-screen abortions are one area of academic focus exploring the link between media depictions and reproductive health.<sup>24</sup> Researched TV shows and films, including *Grey's Anatomy*, *Cider House Rules*, and *After Tiller* have been credited with raising awareness of medication abortion (Sisson et al., 2021) and boosting personal and political support for the procedure (Mulligan & Habel, 2011; Sisson & Kimport, 2016). Watching the abortion storyline on Season 4 of *East Los High* was associated with more positive attitudes towards abortion, with *identification* emerging as a predictor of attitude shifts (Walter et al., 2018).

In terms of sexual communication, one experimental study found that study participants who watched a *Sex and the City* episode that modeled sexual health conversations were more likely to engage in future sexual health discussions, when compared to viewers in the control groups (Moyer-Gusé, Chung, et al., 2011). Another study showed that female viewers of an unplanned pregnancy storyline on *The O.C.* reported greater intentions to use birth control than prior to watching the episode (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2010).

## **Tone and Humor Play a Role in Audience Reception**

Research suggests that tone and humor matter. One experimental study found that viewing a humor-filled *Scrubs* storyline about an unintended pregnancy led viewers to report greater intentions of engaging in unprotected sex (Moyer-Gusé, Mahood et al., 2011). However, when pregnancy-related jokes were removed from the episode, this boomerang effect was not found. Infusion of humor has the potential to trivialize important issues (Hoffner & Cohen, 2018; Moyer-Gusé, Mahood et al., 2011). At the same time, other studies suggest that humor in entertainment media — particularly in the political satire news format — can be an effective tool for promoting political participation and civic engagement (Baumgartner & Lockerbie, 2018; Bode & Becker, 2018; Jones, 2005). As one extensive review of the role of comedy in social change notes, there is not yet enough impact evidence to understand the ways in which entertainment-based humor shapes audiences' perceptions of social issues (Borum, 2019). Nonetheless, the author cautions:

**“leveraging comedy [...] to communicate about social issues, without trivializing the seriousness of a social issue, is a difficult balance [to strike]”**

(Borum, 2019, p. 509)

### **Case Study: *16 and Pregnant***

Audience responses to the reality TV program *16 and Pregnant* show that *identification* can sometimes backfire. Despite the show’s educational objective to discourage teen pregnancy (Dinh, 2010, as cited in Aubrey et al., 2014), viewers who felt a sense of friendship with the featured teenagers — or *parasocial interaction* — had unintended takeaways (Aubrey et al., 2014). While some research suggests that the show led to a reduction in the U.S. teen birth rate (Kearney & Levine, 2015), other studies indicate that viewers were significantly more likely to endorse myths about teen pregnancy, when compared to non-viewers (Aubrey et al., 2014; Martins & Jensen, 2014; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019).

In particular, viewers who identified and experienced parasocial interaction with the featured teenage moms were more likely to eschew the risks and consequences of teen pregnancy (Aubrey et al., 2014; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2019). One article suggests that the unscripted TV format of *16 and Pregnant* may have done a disservice to the pregnancy prevention goals of the show, because the writers and producers had less control of the storyline and the messages conveyed (Aubrey et al., 2014). Researchers assert that the messages in the show were often contradictory and not aligned with the intended health goals of the program (Aubrey et al., 2014).



*Monk* (USA)

### **Depictions of Mental Health and Disability**

Research on other health topics, like mental health and disability, sheds light on audiences’ varied perceptions and reactions to TV storylines. Multiple studies have investigated representations of characters with disabilities or who are experiencing serious mental illness. Analyzing the main character in *Monk*, who has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), one study reported that after viewing the show and feeling a connection with the character, audience members held reduced negative stereotypes of mental illness (Hoffner & Cohen, 2015). A related study found that audience members had mixed



feelings about the use of humor to depict the disorder — using Adrian Monk’s OCD as a funny plot device — especially if the viewers themselves had a disability (Hoffner & Cohen, 2018).

**Such research underscores the importance of engaging with the affected community in order to produce more accurate and inclusive stories about that community.**

### **Case Study: *13 Reasons Why***

The young adult TV drama *13 Reasons Why* (*13RW*) has been extensively studied for its depiction of suicide in Season 1 and its impact on viewers, both positive and negative (Arendt et al., 2019; Ayers et al., 2017; Hong et al., 2019; Nesi et al., 2020; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2019; Plager et al., 2019; Uhls et al., 2021). Reported negative effects of the show included a spike in online searches for suicide, a number of attempted suicides following the show’s release (Ayers et al., 2017; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2019), and heightened depressive symptoms among at-risk viewers (Arendt et al., 2019; Hong et al., 2019; Nesi et al., 2020; Plager et al., 2019). Reported positive outcomes of the show included promoting discussion and information-seeking behavior related to the mental health topics depicted on the show (Uhls et al., 2021), lowered suicide risk, and increased intentions to help a suicidal friend (Arendt et al., 2019).

There were varied results for different groups of viewers (Arendt et al., 2019). Vulnerable viewers<sup>25</sup> who stopped watching *13RW* likely due to distress, showed greater suicide risk and reported lower levels of optimism for the future. However, vulnerable viewers who continued to watch the full season had more positive outcomes, such as lowered suicidality and more interest in helping a suicidal friend.

Watching the whole season as opposed to one episode mattered (Arendt et al., 2019). Viewers learned to empathize with characters and take away prosocial messages if they watched an entire season. Other studies also point to the role of audiences’ media choices — opting in or out of certain content — in reducing the negative effects of *13RW*’s suicide depiction on at-risk youth populations (Evans et al., 2021).

Ultimately, due to the backlash, Netflix removed the suicide scene from *13RW* (AFSP, 2019), and the impact of eliminating the scene on audiences has yet to be studied. After consulting with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) for its second season, the show intentionally incorporated storylines of

25. Vulnerable viewers included adolescents that experienced prior suicidal ideation (Arendt et al., 2019)



13 Reasons Why character in a therapy session (Netflix)

hope and healing, where characters modeled seeking out support from peers, parents, and mental health professionals (AFSP, 2019). As such, the arc of *13RW* speaks to the ability of a show to learn from irresponsible portrayals and to recognize the value of bringing in experts who can advise on sensitive storylines.

The reception of *13RW* also presents a look into different impacts on audience groups. The work shows the importance of audience research and providing resources (e.g., trigger warnings, suicide hotline numbers, websites, and toolkits) to those who may be negatively impacted by a storyline (AFSP, 2019).

## **Social Policy Issues**

Researchers have also explored the relationship between popular media and audiences' opinions on social policy issues, such as nuclear threats (Kim, 2020), the death penalty (Slater et al., 2006), and U.S. policies on torture (Kearns & Young, 2018). Although we normally associate entertainment media with fun and escapism, research reveals that audiences are driven by multiple motives. A large proportion of viewers seek out media that is simultaneously fun and thought provoking (Hoewe & Sherrill, 2019).

## **Politics depicted on the screen affect politics in real life.**

For example, one study found that viewing popular political TV dramas with lead female characters was associated with increased political interest and self-efficacy in women viewers (Hoewe & Sherrill, 2019).

## **Framing Social Issues in Entertainment**

*Framing* — the choices around how content is presented — affects how audience members view and understand core issues represented on the screen. Framing is explored across genres, especially in news media and health communication, but has been largely

understudied in the context of entertainment (Brusse et al., 2017; Iyengar, 1987). However, entertainment media is an important source of frames that people use to make sense of social issues (Sotirovic, 2000).

**The framing of social issues can be powerful, even for viewers who hold strong opposing views on the subject.**



Law & Order: SVU scene from an episode focusing on the death penalty (2002) (NBC).

For instance, Slater and colleagues (2006) found that liberal viewers predisposed against the death penalty became more supportive of this policy when *Law & Order: SVU* reframed the issue: the show’s depiction of the death penalty went from being perceived as a cruel and unusual practice to a mechanism for protecting women from brutal crimes.

Viewers’ entertainment watching patterns inform their use of different frames to discuss social issues, such as welfare reform (Sotirovic, 2000). Viewers of crime and adventure programs

were more likely to endorse frames related to the consequences of reducing welfare and its impact on those experiencing poverty, whereas sitcom viewers were less likely to use those frames. The study suggests that heavy sitcom viewership may inadvertently reduce support for welfare, as viewers come to believe in these shows’ “undifferentiated picture of reality” (Sotirovic, 2000, p. 288), in which college-educated, underemployed characters can easily afford costly apartments (think *Friends*). Crime and adventure shows, on the other hand, can deal with moral, legal, and political issues with broader applications, which may help audiences think about the systems involved in public issues like welfare (Sotirovic, 2000).

**Social Policy Issues in Crime Dramas**

In part because many people rarely interface with police, dramatic depictions of law enforcement inform public understandings and attitudes toward this often controversial occupational group (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Donahue & Miller, 2006; Donovan & Klahm, 2015; Eschholz et al., 2002). One study found that viewers of crime dramas were more likely than nonviewers to believe that police are effective at reducing crime, only use necessary levels of force, and that police misconduct does not usually produce false confessions (Donovan & Klahm, 2015). Comparing these to real-life statistics about the police, Donovan & Klahm (2015) conclude that “when it comes to the efficacy and accuracy of the policy, viewers are overly optimistic about police practices and results” (p. 1276). They suggest that crime TV

dramas are partially responsible for the high regard of many Americans toward police officers.

A similar phenomenon occurs with depictions of counterterrorism forces. Movies and TV thoroughly shape our understanding of counterterrorism practices. For example, although empirical research shows that torture is rarely effective, public opinion tends to endorse this practice, in part because torture scenes are commonplace in post-9/11 popular media portrayals of counterterrorism — in shows like *24*, *Homeland*, and *Quantico* (Kearns & Young, 2018). Viewers' support of torture as a counterterrorism practice increased after exposure to scenes including torture, regardless of whether the protagonist obtained useful information from the tortured subject. To explain public support of the practice, despite research studies showing that it doesn't work, study authors (Kearns & Young, 2018) remind us that:

**Most people do not have access to academic articles behind paywalls — but they do have access to entertainment media.**

Just as crime dramas affect audiences' knowledge and attitudes towards social issues, studies demonstrate effects on behavioral intentions. One study showed that the more viewers watched crime dramas (*Law & Order*, *CSI*) that depicted trauma experienced by sexual assault survivors, the more likely they were to report intentions to intervene in sexual assault situations in real life (Hust et al., 2013). Other work indicates that viewers of sexual violence scenes on crime dramas like *Law & Order: SVU* report lower likelihood of believing rape myths, such as the idea that sexual assault occurs due to the conduct of the victim (Lee, Hust, et al., 2010). Researchers contend that it's difficult to extrapolate these findings to "real life" settings or to learn know whether watchers will actually intervene in sexual assault situations. Still, the study results suggest that popular media can affect prosocial values and inspiration to act.

### **Nature, Climate, and Science-Related Issues**

Documentaries focusing on climate, nature, and animal issues have real-world effects as they activate audiences (Acımaz Özden & Özden, 2021; Beattie et al., 2011; Duhon et al., 2016; McCormack et al., 2021; Nolan, 2010). Impact studies of documentaries such as *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Blackfish* show changes in viewers' attitudes, intended behaviors, and real-world consequences. In what has been called "the Blackfish effect" after the movie, documentaries may lead to significant changes. In response to the CNN documentary about killer whales in captivity, viewers were inspired to collaborate with animal rights advocates, news reporters, and government regulators. This multi-pronged effort culminated in company policy changes as SeaWorld and other animal-based theme parks stopped the breeding of killer whales (Boissat et al., 2021).

## Climate Change Depictions Affect Information Seeking and Sharing

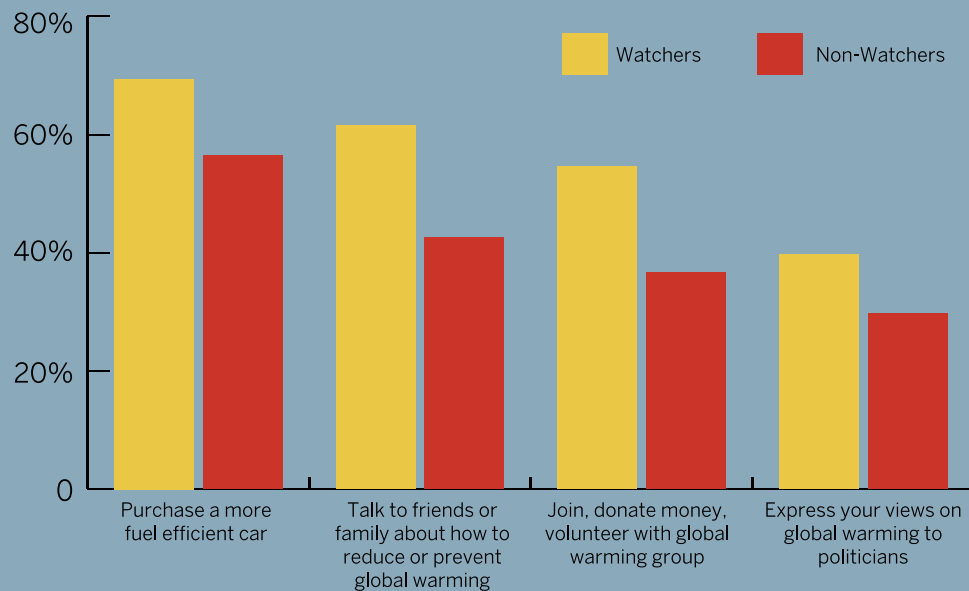
Fictional entertainment spotlighting environmental issues has produced similar effects. Research examining the impact of environment-related media on behavior shows that viewers seek and share information about the topic after engaging with the media.



### Case Study: *The Day After Tomorrow*

Research shows that the 2004 disaster movie *The Day After Tomorrow*, portraying catastrophic climate events that usher in a new ice age, was associated with heightened information-seeking activity on websites about global warming (Leiserowitz, 2004; Hart & Leiserowitz, 2009). Watchers of the movie also reported more intentions to act in more sustainable ways, in comparison to non-watchers.

**FIGURE 3.** Changes at the Individual Level Can Inform Larger, Systemic, and Cultural Changes



(Leiserowitz, 2004)

The film generated mixed responses from the science community due to its dramatic forecasts and exaggerated versions of scientific concepts (Sakellari, 2015). Nonetheless, the film did increase viewers’ awareness and concern about the potential effects of climate change. It also had positive, although short-lived, effects on viewers’ willingness to take action in the face of climate change (Sakellari, 2015).

Finally, the film was associated with increased news media coverage of climate issues. It notably generated ten times the amount of news coverage as a relevant informational report (Hart & Leiserowitz, 2009; Leiserowitz, 2004). The author of the study reflects on the film's reception:

**“[N]ot only can narrative film have social impact, it can have social impact at scale.”**

(Leiserowitz, n.d., “The results”)

### **From Science Fiction to Climate Fiction: Even Allegory Can Aid Awareness**

To date, few popular fiction films and TV shows delve into specific climate change and environmental issues (Roth, 2022). Casting a wider net, research shows that science fiction, including allegorical and dystopian films about science and climate issues, can inform audiences and raise awareness (Acmaç Özden & Özden, 2021; Luong et al., 2020; McCormack et al., 2021). For example, one study comparing a group of students who watched the film *Interstellar* to those who did not found that watching the movie was associated with knowledge acquisition, interest in science, and intentions to seek relevant information (Luong et al., 2020). Researchers point to the potency of environment and climate-related entertainment to overcome resistance and promote care for the environment (McCormack et al., 2021).

### **Apocalyptic Environment Portrayals Entertain More Than They Inform**

Apocalyptic entertainment media present visions of the future that can affirm viewers' worldviews (Schneider-Mayerson, 2013). In a study of survivalists and “peak oil” theorists, Schneider-Mayerson shows that this subset of viewers sought out disaster-based apocalyptic films and books, such as *2012*, *Children of Men*, *Cloverfield*, that validated their peak oil fatalistic beliefs and sometimes used survivalist protagonists as role models for their thinking and behavior (2013). These types of fictional entertainment can provide templates for audiences to understand environmental change. Similarly, because many Hollywood portrayals of climate futures deal with dramatic sudden catastrophes, rather than slow building crises, mass audiences are less equipped to grapple with contemporary environmental issues (Buell, 2004; Dudo et al., 2017; Schneider-Mayerson, 2018).

Research has found that if a story is not relatable, people may feel disconnected from what they view, may not see their actions as having a direct or immediate impact, and, as a result, may feel less of a responsibility to take action (Arlt et al., 2011; Lester & Cottle, 2009; Manzo, 2010; O'Neill et al., 2013; O'Neill & Nicholson-Cole, 2009). Media that links to audience members' lived experiences is associated with greater audience impact.”

CHAPTER 5:

# FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH IMPACT

This chapter draws upon the research to distill factors in entertainment media that are associated with social impact and translates research findings into recommendations for the narrative change field.

Factors linked to impact include:

- The media content's potential for transportation and character identification, entertainment value, accuracy and authenticity, exposure and message saturation, potential for discussion, and the inclusion of PSAs, epilogues and resources.
- Attending to individual, group, subgroup, and audience differences and capitalizing on perceived relevance.
- In addition to representations on screen, paying attention to representation behind the scenes and building in ways to connect with experts, relevant organizations, and the larger sociopolitical context.

## FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND NARRATIVE IMPACT

This review of the research literature, along with recent reports on narrative and cultural change, revealed a number of themes and recommendations, organized into three categories of factors associated with greater social impact. Each of these categories informs practices and considerations that can be leveraged through entertainment media.

1

### POWERFUL MEDIA

Designing and producing media with the potential to engage, transport, and reach target audiences

2

### EMPOWERED AUDIENCES

Knowing, engaging, and empowering audiences

3

### THE POWER OF INFRASTRUCTURE

Building infrastructures surrounding the media content that can facilitate impact



## Powerful Media

To render media more powerful and likely to make an impact, studies point to the key psychological processes involved in media reception. Story and production design facilitate audience immersion and attention. The packaging of the project — how it is broadcast, inclusion of transmedia elements, and provided resources — affect audience engagement and message saturation.

Key Psychological Mechanisms Related to Impact	
Mechanisms that facilitate intended impact	Mechanisms that reduce the chances of the intended end goals
<b>Transportation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Feeling immersed in a storyworld</li> </ul>	<b>Reactance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A sense of anger and counterarguing, especially in reaction to media consumption</li> </ul>
<b>Identification</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Seeing oneself in a character</li> </ul>	<b>Boomerang Effect</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Media having the opposite of intended consequences, sometimes due to audience backlash</li> </ul>
<b>Relevance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A sense that a story reflects one's lived experience</li> </ul>	<b>Backlash</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Negative viewer reactions and actions to media content</li> </ul>

## Transportative Potential Links to Impact

Stories are particularly powerful when we can immerse ourselves into the storyworld. Anchored in Green and Brock's (2000) research on *transportation*, studies demonstrate that films and shows have powerful effects because viewers become emotionally involved and momentarily live in the storyworld built by media creators.

Viewers were more influenced by content that was highly transporting (Morgan et al., 2009). Although some people seem to be more transportable than others (Dal Cin et al., 2004), media can be designed to have more transportative potential. To capitalize on this potential, research points to maximizing storyline appeal, production quality, and unobtrusiveness of messages (Slater et al., 2006).

## Story design is key. As audience members dive into the story, it becomes a source of persuasion and information.

Media consistently inform our knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to health, environment, policy and social issues (Murphy et al., 2012; Slater et al., 2006). Fiction stories



can be especially compelling if they have richly developed storyworlds. Research shows that people process fiction stories differently from factual texts and can be more moved by them, especially if they are transported into the fictional world (van Laer et al., 2014). Scripted media with a compelling and consistent storyworld is thus more likely to affect viewers’ hearts and minds.

In terms of story structure, coherent storylines had higher transportation potential — viewers engage more with a consistent story (Cho et al., 2011). In addition to coherence, studies associate clear narrative structure, immersive visuals, and evoking emotion with more engagement and transportation in the audience (McCormack et al., 2021; Morris et al., 2019; Ratcliff & Sun, 2020).

Factors Associated With Audience Transportation into a Narrative	
Story design factors:	Production factors:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Story appeal</li> <li>● Fiction elements</li> <li>● Clear structure</li> <li>● Coherent narrative</li> <li>● Consistent storyworld</li> <li>● Evocation of emotion</li> <li>● Unobtrusive messages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Overall production quality</li> <li>● Immersive visuals</li> <li>● Vivid imagery</li> <li>● Cohesion between storyline and visuals</li> </ul>

### **Entertainment Value Comes First for the Content to Land**

One common finding is that **entertainment value** is an important precondition for audiences to engage with and learn from media. Across disciplines, audience types, and media formats, viewers engage more deeply in media they find compelling, interesting, and relevant to themselves.

### **Media that feels too preachy can lead viewers to tune out or reject messages.**

Less entertaining productions can lead to lesser impact. For instance, educational shows, explicitly designed to influence viewers’ knowledge and practices, often backfire. Learning scientists warn of the “chocolate-covered broccoli” effect, in which engaging with the media content no longer feels like a pleasurable treat, but more like a chore (Bruckman, 1999). Didactic content can become “broccoli.” In research on young people learning about sex and relationships from popular media, Buckingham and Bragg (2004) found that viewers rejected messages from programs that they saw as preaching to them or lecturing at them. In impactful media productions, entertainment value is essential.

## Identification Potential is Powerful

### Characters play important roles in impactful stories — literally and figuratively.

As audience members relate to characters, form bonds with characters, or see themselves in the characters, the story gains power. In the process of *identification*, a viewer vicariously experiences the thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and consequences experienced by that character (Cohen, 2001) and through *parasocial interaction*, a viewer can form a bond with a character.

## Character Quality & Character Attributes Facilitate Identification

As viewers identify with well-developed characters, they apply the storylines to their own lives. Identification with characters that viewers find relatable and likable links to changes in attitudes and behaviors (Liebers & Schramm, 2019; Moyer-Gusé et al., 2011; Murrar & Brauer, 2018; Wang & Singhal, 2016). In multiple studies, identification was greater if the character was perceived as funny (Kronewald, 2008, as cited in Liebers & Schramm, 2019) or intelligent (Hoffner, 1996). These effects are more pronounced in fictional media — it's easier to get immersed in fictional worlds (Hu, 2016; Liebers & Schramm, 2019).

## Identification ↔ Transportation

*Identification* and transportation reinforce one another.<sup>26</sup> For example, Murphy et al. (2011) found that simultaneous transportation — involvement with narratives — and identification — involvement with characters — were associated with increased knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to lymphoma among women who watched *Desperate Housewives*.

### Being strongly transported into a storyline and strongly identifying with a character are associated with real-world effects. The mechanisms reinforce each other.

High involvement in the storyworld is related to identification with particular characters. If a viewer feels affinity to a character, it's easier to dive into the story. Strong identification with a character is associated with a higher likelihood that a viewer will trust the messages in the media source and apply those messages to their life, as we saw with research on prejudice reduction (Hoffner & Cohen, 2015) and willingness to donate organs (Lee, Park, et al., 2010).

26. The extended-elaboration likelihood model (E-ELM) suggests narrative influence occurs both through identification with key characters as well as transportation into the narrative, which heightens the persuasive effects of a story and reduces the audience's urge to question or argue with a depiction (Gillig et al., 2018; Slater & Rouner, 2002; Wilkin et al., 2007).

## **Inclusive & Accurate Stories Engage Audiences**

Scholars and activists alike point to the importance of telling inclusive stories and engaging affected audiences in the storytelling process. One study of health content in popular media showed that a parameter of success was inclusion of accurate health information in ways that complement the story by increasing its authenticity (Hursting & Comello, 2021). There is consumer demand for diverse content, which builds the commercial case for creating such content and potentiates greater reach. Over half of viewers surveyed by Nielsen (2023) said they were more likely to watch inclusive content. Content representing more than one racial/ethnic group was also found to be more engaging to viewers (Nielsen, 2023).

As we saw in the work on stigmatized groups, LGBTQ+ viewers of *The Fosters* felt their voices elevated and represented by the show's portrayal of this community (Gillig et al., 2018; Gillig & Murphy, 2016), while viewers with disabilities watching *Monk* felt caricatured by this portrayal of someone with OCD (Hoffner & Cohen, 2012, 2015).

Moreover, viewers who saw *Becoming Us* as narrated by the trans cast member exhibited greater acceptance of transgender people, as compared to when the show was told from the perspective of the cisgender character (Li, 2019). These reactions showcase the need to ensure that more members of marginalized groups are included in the storytelling process, particularly with respect to *having the power to tell their own stories* — a key theme in the efforts of research advocacy and consultancy organizations in the narrative change field, like Define American and Black Storytellers Alliance.

## **Stories Fusing the Personal & the Systemic Clarify Social Understandings**

A common thread in studies of media impact is that personal narratives make for compelling storytelling. First-person narratives with strong protagonists dealing with adversity lead to emotional engagement for many viewers (de Graaf et al., 2012; Lipsey et al., 2020; Singhal & Rogers, 2003). The personal narrative approach is centerstage in the work on health-centered media, as studies repeatedly show that viewers can learn from characters modeling healthy behaviors, such as getting screened for cancer (Hether et al., 2008; Li et al., 2019). An important critique of this approach points out that person-centered stories in media covering social problems can be compelling but often miss the structural and contextual dynamics of the issues (Ramasubramanian & Banjo, 2020; Walton-Wetzel, 2018).

## **Focusing too much on personal stories may lead audiences to blame individuals rather than unjust systems and institutions for social issues.**

(Iyengar, 1987; Applebaum, 2001)

Emerging research suggests that “hybrid frames” — stories that situate individual choices within their larger structural context — can foster empathy (Niederdeppe et al., 2015; Weinstein et al., 2020), shift attitudes about who is responsible for solving societal problems, and build policy support (Rosenthal, 2021). As such, narrative change practitioners may need to exercise caution when creating or interpreting stories and studies that prioritize individual behavior shifts over systemic change. Presenting balanced stories that fuse the *individual* with the *systemic* may be a viable pathway for challenging dominant narratives of individualism and personal responsibility.

In a review of intersectional stories that use intersectionality as a prism for illuminating how racism, sexism, and classism (and other “isms”) shape life experiences, Neimand et al. (2021) explain:

**“By telling whole stories with care that include systems and history, and that center the voices of marginalized communities, we can help people understand systemic issues and inspire them to act.”**

### **Cumulative Exposure Within and Across Stories Helps Learning**

In addition to the content of the story itself, delivery factors are important.

### **How much and how often a viewer encounters a topic affects how this topic lands.**

One meta-analysis found that *exposure time* was associated with greater impact on health-related outcomes, with the viewing of multiple episodes having much more impact than the viewing of a single episode (Shen & Han, 2014). The study suggests that exposure to repeated health messages on TV correlates with larger impact on viewers’ attitudes and behaviors. Similarly, the influence of health storylines on television can grow with repeated or *cumulative exposure* (Hoffman et al., 2017).

For example, research suggests that the large number of drunk driving storylines across 160 television programs helped “designated drivers” become a widely-understood concept, and contributed to increased uptake of the practice (DeJong & Winsten, 1990; The Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004).

### **“Beating the drum” of core messages across multiple episodes, storylines, and platforms leads to greater impact.**

Research suggests that *message saturation* — seeing similar messages across multiple viewings, episodes, storylines, and platforms — is also associated with greater impact. Hether

et al. (2008) examined how multiple exposures to a health message can be effective in a media-saturated society. They found that combined exposure to two dramas on the BRCA, the breast cancer gene, compared to exposure to one drama was more effective in changing how much viewers knew about breast cancer and their intention to get screened for it.

### **How Audiences Engage with the Media Affects Takeaways in Complex Ways**

Studies indicate that *how* audiences view media relates to their engagement with the media (Billard, 2019; Walter et al., 2018). Quickly consuming multiple episodes at one time or “binge watching” may result in more cursory engagement with the storylines.

One study found that binge watching *East Los High* lessened the effects of identification with characters in relation to viewers adopting story-consistent attitudes (Walter et al., 2018). Other studies show that binge watching does not affect narrative engagement (Ferchaud et al., 2022), especially since there are different kinds of binge watching practices, some of which might facilitate the sense of getting into the story (Merikivi et al., 2020).

In contrast, episodic broadcasting — where audience members watch one episode at a time — can lead to “watercooler moments,” where viewers digest and then discuss issues highlighted by a show (Kite, n.d.). One study found that viewers who watched *Transparent* episodes on a weekly basis showed lowered levels of prejudice towards transgender people, compared to those who binge-watched the series (Billard, 2019). Moreover, those who viewed the program episodically were more likely to maintain these attitude changes three weeks later.

Another important factor in understanding *how* audiences engage with entertainment media is second screening or the use of smartphones, tablets, or laptops while watching television. Using a second device while watching television is increasingly common among TV viewers (Nielsen, 2018), but its effects aren’t well-understood (Raney & Ji, 2017; Yang & Atkin, 2022).

Some research links second screening to distracted viewing, which can lead to less knowledge recall and comprehension (Van Cauwenberge et al., 2014), lowered transportation into the storyworld, and decreased enjoyment (Park et al., 2019; Yang & Atkin, 2022). Other research suggests second-screening can enhance engagement: one study links second screens to identification (Walter et al., 2018) and another to a sense of community around the program (Nee & Barker, 2020).

In general, a show’s ability to create opportunities for communal discussion after viewing is associated with greater impact (Singhal & Rogers, 1999).

## **The Ending Matters: PSAs, Epilogues, and Resource Provision**

27. An epilogue is a scene that takes place after the climax of a story. It serves as a conclusion to the story's events, giving clarity to the narrative (Heckman, 2022).

In addition to the media narrative, additional elements can add to its potential impact. Inclusion of public service announcements (PSAs) and epilogues<sup>27</sup> and sharing relevant information through social media channels can amplify the impact of media projects. These elements have been shown to promote information-seeking among audiences (Kennedy et al., 2004; Wilkin et al., 2007), reinforce takeaways (Singhal & Rogers, 1999), and clarify ambiguities in the story (AFSP, 2019; Cohen et al., 2018).

An experimental study found that the use of an educational PSA following an EE storyline about drunk driving reinforced the preventive message and produced less favorable attitudes towards intoxicated driving (Moyer-Gusé et al., 2012). Other research shows that health-based TV storylines that included resources, such as support phone hotlines, contributed to significant hotline call upticks, indicating that storylines and PSAs can increase demand for related health information (Kennedy et al., 2004; Wilkin et al., 2007). PSAs using celebrities or television characters seem to be more effective than PSAs that do not include those elements (Keys et al., 2009; Wilkin et al., 2007).

### **Empowered Audiences**

Leading research frameworks have shifted from considering media as something that's injected into an audience to acknowledging plural audiences that actively engage with media.

### **Individual, Group, and Audience-Level Differences**

Research highlights that different people and groups of people interpret and engage with the same media in different ways. Certain audience groups are more persuadable. For example, audience members identifying as more liberal were more likely to take up the intended prosocial messages from shows like *The Fosters*, *Royal Pains*, and *Superstore* (Gillig et al., 2018; Rosenthal et al., 2020). Similarly, certain audience subgroups were more likely to embrace unintended messages from media narratives, as we saw with heteronormative audiences of *The Fosters* (Gillig & Murphy, 2016) and vulnerable populations engaging with *13 Reasons Why* (Arendt et al., 2019).

### **Audience Subgroups Engage with Messages Differently**

Similarly, well-intended projects can have unintended outcomes without careful attention paid to genre and audience, such as the case of the reality TV show *16 &*

*Pregnant* (Aubrey et al., 2014). Research demonstrated that although *scripted* entertainment television shows can be effective in teaching audiences about sex, health, and family planning (e.g., Brodie et al., 2001; Collins et al., 2003), the content and *unscripted* genre of the reality TV show *16 and Pregnant* might have worked against its intended purpose of preventing teen pregnancy. As the subgroup of adolescent viewers formed parasocial bonds with the TV celebrity teen moms, they became more likely to miss the pregnancy prevention messages of the show (Aubrey et al., 2014). Media creators who hope to produce social impact with their work need to consider the affordances of the genre they choose and consider the different types of audience subgroups, especially young or vulnerable ones, that may be attracted to their stories.

### **Perceived Relevance**

Every viewer brings different experiences to media. Studies show that audiences typically seek out media that is relevant to their lived experience, while some audiences are particularly attracted to programming that reflects lives and even values very different from their own (Baker & Blakley, 2008). Either way, audiences cannot avoid using their lived experience as an interpretive lens to understand what appears on the screen (Moyer-Gusé, 2008). In a research study on viewing media focused on social issues such as crime, immigration, and disability, teachers and students understood stories and themes differently, using their own social role as an interpretive anchor (Klein, 2013).

### **Audience reception is necessarily contextual and connected to what's going on in the world.**

For instance, a study of black viewers' engagement with stereotypical portrayals of African Americans in mainstream media showed that viewers who were thinking about the effects of these portrayals on the culturally dominant group — white Americans and their already-held negative stereotypes — found the portrayals concerning (Banjo, 2013). The study relied on an experiment of ethnically mixed audiences watching Tyler Perry's *Diary of a Mad Black Woman*, a comedy, and Chris Robinson's *ATL*, a drama. Viewers not considering the effects on dominant culture found the portrayals more entertaining (Banjo, 2013). Not only *perceived reach* but *perceived relevance* of the project also matters. Another study on the use of a film to educate women about HPV found that the more relevant viewers perceived the film to be to their own lives, the more likely they were able to take away accurate perceptions of the virus' severity and the efficacy of HPV vaccines (Frank et al., 2015). *Perceived relevance*, as a construct, is related to both *narrative transportation* (Quintero Johnson & Sangalang, 2017) and a sense of *story authenticity* (Petraglia, 2009).

Audiences not only consider the storyline in relation to their own lives, but also in relation to other social groups and the larger sociopolitical context. In the design of entertainment



media, producers can anticipate the differential appetites and impacts of the project, based on likely viewers' identities, interests, and perceived relevance of the story. As such, it's critical to identify target audience(s) and plan accordingly for distribution, so that media content is likely to reach those intended groups. Moreover, strategically timing the release of content to build upon cultural conversations and sociopolitical events may enhance audience reach and reception.

## **The Power of Infrastructure**

### **What's going on behind the scenes can inform the project's impact.**

In studies of representation of marginalized communities and work on vulnerable audiences, we saw that well-intentioned productions can lead to harmful effects. One way to mitigate such effects is to center voices and stories of affected communities. In contrast, we saw that strategic collaborations and projects that allied with relevant social movements, cultural conversations, and communities found more *message saturation* and *spread*.

## **Representation Behind the Scenes**

Narrative change practitioners, media researchers, and communications scholars contend that paying attention to the representation behind the scenes is as important as the representation on screen (Amaya, 2010; Pop Culture Collaborative, 2022; Smith et al., 2020). The call for diversification is supported by research showing that the inclusion of community members in the development and production of TV content geared towards that specific group leads to more humanizing inclusive storytelling and audience engagement (Piñon & Rojas, 2011; Riley & Chattoo, 2019). Yet, representation behind the scenes still lags in TV and film industries (Smith et al., 2020).

## **Engaging Experts and Relevant Organizations Aids Accuracy and Reach**

Many media projects oriented toward social impact require engagement and collaboration with stakeholders at multiple levels (Active Voice Lab, n.d.; Sood et al., 2017), including subject matter experts, program evaluators, content creators, communications staff, funders, and impacted communities (Riley & Chattoo, 2019). The commercial success of many profiled films and TV shows, sometimes directly related to the potential of impact at scale, rests on productive collaborations between community members, advocacy groups, storytellers, and production companies. For example, securing buy-in from Hollywood was crucial to the success of the Designated Driver campaign (Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, n.d). Similarly, various studies and reports emphasize the importance of engaging with experts, advocacy organizations, and representatives with lived experiences from impacted communities (NDWA & TCC Group, 2022; Rosenthal & Folb, 2021).

28. These organizations included Wise Entertainment, Population Media Center, Planned Parenthood, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, Advocates for Youth, the National Latina Initiative, the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health, California Latinas for Reproductive Justice, and Legacy LA.

As we saw, *East Los High* represented a unique collaborative effort between a Hollywood production company, a nonprofit with expertise in entertainment education, and multiple national and local NGOs focused on reproductive rights<sup>28</sup> (Wang & Singhal, 2016). NGO partners facilitated focus groups with Latino teenagers, the target audience for the show and intervention, which helped lend authenticity to the characters and dialogue. Expert and organizational engagement can also provide a pathway for ensuring that the voices of community members are heard throughout the project development process. Strategic collaborations aid in the reach of stories and the saturation of messages across stories, platforms, and social spheres.

### **Research tells us that one story or show can't change social norms or behavior on its own.**

For example, in relation to challenging stereotypes, research shows that culture change requires exposure to multilayered and positive portrayals of marginalized groups — repeatedly, consistently, and over time.

### **A multifaceted approach that pairs media content with transmedia elements, community organizing, public engagement, and policy work is more likely to succeed than any one strategy.**

(Conway, 2014; Sobel, 2015; Moore & Sen, 2022)

## **Building on the External Context**

Collaborations across organizations and social spheres are linked to narrative change success in part because these collaborations can better incorporate and respond to the larger sociopolitical context.

Scholars and practitioners agree that to study and to effect narrative change, the cultural and political context of media products must be considered. In studying and working with minority groups, it's important to study representations of marginalized groups such as immigrants (Mastro, 2019) or Muslims (Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019) within the broader context of discriminatory public policies against these groups. Similarly, if media affects the public's view of access to abortion care, the public sentiment change would be meaningless without equitable access to those services. This is why paying attention to power dynamics of narratives (Robinson, 2018) is essential for practitioners, backers, and supporters.

## CHAPTER 6:

# CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

The goal of this report was to review existing research on the impact of entertainment-driven narrative change work and identify features, considerations, and practices that are associated with cultural and narrative impact.

Research on entertainment media for social change clustered around four topics, including stereotypes and belonging, public and reproductive health, social policy, and issues related to nature, climate and science.

Across disciplines, research documents multiple psychological mechanisms that link entertainment media to the possibility of culture and narrative change. Evidence-based psychological mechanisms that help facilitate impact can be leveraged by media designers.

Overall, we found that the effects of entertainment differ between subgroups of audiences. Perceived relevance of media leads audience members not only to seek out certain types of content, but also to feel more kinship to the characters and more immersion in the story. The consistent finding of diverse effects among different audiences suggests that media supporters need to continually consider audience targeting, message testing, and engaging with depicted communities to ensure that their efforts are accurate, authentic, and optimized to achieve the intended impact.

Entertainment media plays a significant role in shaping our knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. These, in turn, mediate our policies, norms, and conditions. The legitimacy of entertainment-driven narrative change efforts is strengthened by numerous studies demonstrating that popular media contributes to measurable, important changes in people's lives. Notable examples include TV shows and films that reduced prejudice towards marginalized groups of people and inspired intentions to act in pro-environmental ways.

Several factors emerged as mechanisms that may maximize the social impact of entertainment media. Some of these factors are relevant to media content and others are more contextual, pertaining to audiences, the entertainment media industry's larger infrastructure, the smaller infrastructures of storytelling, production, and entertainment teams, and the larger sociopolitical context.

Mechanisms Linked to the Social Impact Potential of Entertainment Media	
At the level of media content:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Maximizing the potential to foster transportation, relatability, and identification in response to created media</li> <li>● Facilitating repeated and cumulative exposure</li> <li>● Prioritizing episodic broadcasting</li> <li>● Including epilogues, PSAs, web and transmedia resources</li> <li>● Centering inclusive storytelling</li> </ul>
At the audience level:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Acknowledging that audiences are not homogeneous and attending to how segments of audiences are likely to engage with the content</li> <li>● Heightening relevance of the story to target audience members' lived experiences</li> </ul>
At the infra-structure level:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Working on representation behind the scenes</li> <li>● Engagement with subject matter experts and relevant cultural, community, and advocacy organizations</li> <li>● Consideration of the larger sociopolitical context</li> </ul>

In the work of organizations explicitly focused on narrative change, there is a key theme supported by scholarship in the social movements field:

**Messaging works best when multiple fields are activated.**

For example, the TV show *Will & Grace* served as one contributing factor to legal and public engagement work that paved the path toward marriage equality (Davidson, 2022; Sobel, 2015). There are important takeaways from the literature on entertainment media for social change that can inform other communication efforts, such as political and community organizing, journalism, and advocacy.

**EMERGING RECOMMENDATIONS**

Our recommendations for practitioners focus primarily on those working to leverage entertainment or other media narratives. However, the majority of our recommendations for funders and other stakeholders are applicable to narrative change strategies beyond the specific entertainment context. Here, we split our recommendations into four categories according to the audience (practitioner vs. funder) and focus (entertainment-based strategies vs. broader narrative change):

- **Practitioners focused on entertainment-based narrative change**
- **Practitioners working on broader narrative change efforts**
- **Funders and others in the field interested in entertainment-based narrative change**

- Funders and others in the field interested in broader narrative change efforts

## FOR PRACTITIONERS



### Projects with an entertainment focus:

1. **Prioritize the entertainment value** of the media project through centering emotion, character development, production, coherence, and immersiveness, in order to deliver a compelling and moving story.
2. **Provide additional resources** that supplement the media project content, such as transmedia elements, PSAs, websites, hotlines, and contact information for support organizations. These multiply entry points into the story and deepen engagement opportunities for audiences.
3. **Spread the core messages in the project**, across storylines, and — if the project allows — among partner projects, channels, mediums, and fields. As we saw, message repetition, cumulative exposure, and saturation all contribute to impact.
4. **Leverage the timing and strategic release** of the media project, connecting it to broader social movements and cultural conversations.



### Projects broadly focused on narrative change:

5. **Consult with subject matter experts, members of marginalized groups, and people with applicable lived experience** to design accurate, inclusive, and relevant stories. Such stories have demonstrated consumer demand and are associated with important shifts in public perceptions.
6. **Consider framing.** Powerful stories about societal problems present how issues manifest both at the individual level and at the structural level. This type of framing can build support for systemic solutions.



## FOR FUNDERS AND OTHERS IN THE FIELD



### Entertainment focus:

7. **Support strategic collaborations** among diverse media creators, community-based organizations, teams focused on the issue(s) at the heart of the project, researchers and experts invested in working with key audiences.

- 8. Foreground diversity and representation of members of marginalized groups,** both on-screen and behind the scenes, in order to redistribute decision-making and narrative power to affected communities.
- 9. Provide flexible frameworks** specifying identified best practices and some criteria for the evaluation of media projects. Frameworks can build in space for creator agency, responsive timelines, and the creative process.
- 10. Facilitate message saturation and repetition** by planning for pathways in which messages central to the project and the target narrative can spread across storylines, channels, mediums, and fields.
- 11. Analyze the sociopolitical context.** If certain messages in media projects align with relevant work in growing social movements and mass media, there is greater potential for narrative impact.



**Broadly focused on narrative change:**

- 12. Gather reactions, opinions, and viewpoints** from multiple audience sectors and test ideas and messages to see how they land, among target audience sectors and others. Analysis of audience reception can facilitate social impact and reduce the chances of unintended consequences.
- 13. Plan for strategic distribution** by equipping the project with the needed support, technology, and methodology to reach target audiences. Even if the organization has capacity to create powerful media, its impact is not likely to have reach, unless strategic collaborations, industry buy-in, and the social context aid that reach.
- 14. Fund organizational infrastructure** development in narrative change organizations and other partner teams to help the involved practitioners with growth in narrative capacity-building, learning, measurement, and evaluation.
- 15. Support research** that incorporates audience impact studies, segmentation research, and mixed-methods work that prioritizes voices from communities that have relevant lived experiences to the target narratives at hand.
- 16. Consider impact holistically:** impactful narrative change efforts involve long time horizons, coordination among multiple organizations, and opportune cultural moments. Thus, analyzing incremental impact indicators and looking at progress from multiple perspectives become key to understand if efforts are on the right track. Narrative change is a long game and we need all players on board.

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