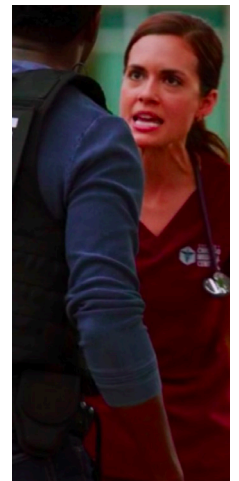USC
Annenberg
Norman Lear Center
Media Impact Project

STORIES MATTER

How new entertainment narratives about health can influence mindsets and policy

Research Highlights

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Introduction

In a world of information overload, stories have the power to grab our attention. They evoke emotions, relate to our experiences, transport us and make meaning by connecting seemingly random dots. Our minds aggregate those stories—from entertainment, art, traditions, our surroundings, policies and other experiences—into narratives that help us interpret the world and how it works. Narratives, in turn, shape public opinion—and so public policy as well—about urgent concerns like systemic inequities in health. In short, **narrative change can drive policy change.**

To inform the growing field of narrative for social change, the Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism is exploring how media and entertainment narratives impact audiences' understanding of health and well-being, disparities and solutions; and how entertainment might play a key role in shifting mindsets toward equity, justice and systemic change. **Ultimately, this work aims to increase public support for more equitable policies, programs and practices.**

Project Overview

In tandem with other research investments, this project seeks to expand the evidence base for the field of narrative and culture change and to use this evidence to shape stories that can reach millions of viewers. **The overarching goals of this project are:**

- Validating the effectiveness of using popular culture as a vehicle to communicate about social determinants of health (physical, social and economic conditions that affect health and quality of life) with the public;
- Inspiring the creative community to develop storylines about what needs to change and how change happens at a systemic, rather than individual, level (we call these "Culture of Health" storylines);
- Understanding how entertainment narratives influence audiences' understanding of health and well-being, health disparities and remedies for those inequities; and
- Ultimately, helping to shift mindsets and increase public support for more equitable policies.

To assess current and potential Culture of Health media narratives, and to understand which audiences respond most strongly to—and even take action based on—those narratives, the Lear Center conducted a mixed-methods analysis that we call a "cultural audit."[1]

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> **We found that the right mix of social conditions and personal stories create narratives that can build support for equity-based policies.**

1. We conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of narratives related to social determinants of health in scripted TV and film from 2015-2020, finding **four existing narratives** in entertainment with varying emphasis on individual versus systemic causes of and solutions to health problems.

2. To understand the connection between people's mindsets about a Culture of Health and their tastes in entertainment, we conducted a nationally-representative survey, identifying **three mindsets** that shape people's receptivity to these narratives.

3. Finally, we performed an online experiment to test the effectiveness of different COVID-19 stories, based on the existing narratives in entertainment. We found that the **right mix of social conditions and personal stories** create narratives that can build support for equity-based policies.

In the final phase of this project, in progress now, we are conducting outreach to the entertainment industry to inform health storylines, and we will then evaluate the impact of one or more of these storylines. This report focuses on the research phase; we hope to report on the outreach later in 2021.

Existing Narratives About Health in Entertainment Media

To understand existing entertainment narratives that directly or indirectly address the factors that influence health, we conducted a qualitative analysis of American scripted films and TV shows from 2015-2020. Through this research, we identified four key narrative types:

(1) Personal Responsibility Narratives
The first type, which we call "personal responsibility" narratives, focus on individual choices and responsibility for health outcomes. These often include an emphasis on willpower or lifestyle choices and largely exclude discussion of external factors beyond individual control, or social determinants of health.

(2) Hybrid Narratives
A second type of narrative combines personal responsibility with external factors, situating individual stories within a larger structural context. We call these "hybrid" narratives. Research has shown that audiences experience greater empathy in

Still from an episode of *Black-ish* (ABC) illustrating geographic disparities in access to healthy food.

response to this type of narrative; they are more open to the idea that society is partly responsible for health outcomes; and they are more supportive of equity-based policies, relative to messages about external factors alone.[2]

The hybrid narrative is exemplified by a *Black-ish* episode in which Dre, the main character, discusses the factors that place Black communities at higher risk of diseases like diabetes, while still acknowledging the role of personal choices. In an animated vignette, he notes that obesity, poor diet, and inactivity are risk factors for developing diabetes, but also says "it's not all our fault," noting that some geographic areas lack access to affordable healthy foods.

Many hybrid narratives end without proposing a solution to address the identified inequity. However, research indicates that messages that both identify problems and provide solutions promote audience engagement and self-efficacy—confidence in their ability to make a difference.[3] We identified two additional types of narratives that build upon hybrid narratives by proposing or modeling a solution.

③ Hybrid Narratives with Individual Solutions

The *Black-ish* episode goes on to model a solution to Dre's medical problem: He makes lifestyle changes to improve his health. This is what we call a "hybrid narrative with an individual-level solution." These are very common in entertainment, especially medical shows.

2. Carger & Westen, 2010; Gollust & Cappella, 2014; Niederdeppe et al., 2015.

3. Curry, 2014; Lundell et al., 2013; Niederdeppe et al., 2008.

A frequent version is the "hero doctor" narrative, in which a healthcare professional goes above and beyond, often coming up with a creative workaround. Often, these individual solutions violate ethical, legal or bureaucratic rules. For example, in an episode of *New Amsterdam*, a woman deliberately crashes a van full of her friends in order to gain them access to health care for chronic illnesses.

These narratives often point out the flaws in the healthcare system, but by placing responsibility for solving these problems on individuals, they do little to address underlying structural problems. In an episode of the *Black-ish* spinoff *Mixed-ish*, a Black mother talks about introducing her children to police officers to reduce the likelihood of their injury at the hands of law enforcement. While the clip focuses on an individual-level solution—introducing Black children to cops—it draws attention to the limitations of this approach, such as when the mother says, "I'm trying to be realistic here."

4 **Hybrid Narratives with Systemic Solutions**

Finally, we identified a rarer variant of hybrid narratives—those that propose or model systemic solutions. These have characters who, rather than breaking the rules, work to change them, often through collective action. In an episode of the comedy *Superstore*, for example, a manager uses faux disciplinary action as a creative way of giving an employee paid maternity leave. At first this appears to be a classic individual-level solution, but when the manager is fired, the other employees stage a walkout. In this sense, the episode models a systemic solution. While they are not successful in securing paid maternity leave, they do end up winning a partial victory—saving the manager's job.

Still from *Superstore* (NBC) showing the employees staging a walkout—a systemic solution.

Mindsets About Health

To inform narrative change strategies, it is important to identify target audiences; analyze how they interpret information and make decisions; and understand how to reach them most effectively. We conducted a nationally-representative survey of 2,600 people living in the U.S.[4] to identify audiences based on their mindsets about health, and to understand what types of media each audience consumes.

We defined mindsets based on three sets of beliefs:
- How serious are structural factors that contribute to health disparities?
- What is the role of the government in addressing these inequities and helping everyone achieve the American Dream?
- How fair is the world? Do people generally earn the rewards and punishments they get?

Based on these beliefs, we clustered survey participants into three audience segments, representing different mindsets about who deserves good health. We call these segments Rugged Individualists, Optimistic Moderates, and Witnesses to Injustice. Their mindsets, as well as media patterns that suggest where they can be reached, are detailed below. (Note that there are a handful of shows that substantial portions of all three segments report watching, including *Ozark*, *The Walking Dead*, and the quintessential 2020 series, *Tiger King*.)

26.9%
rugged individualists

witnesses to injustice

36.9%

36.2%

optimistic moderates
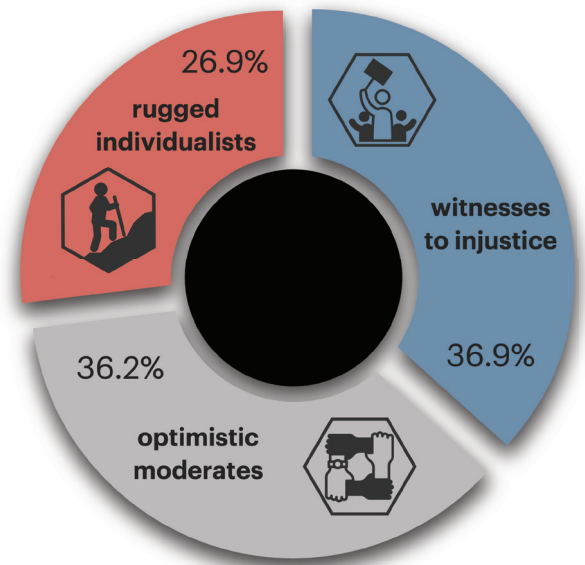
AUDIENCE MINDSET SEGMENTS

Rugged Individualists

This mindset could be summed up as: **"You get what you deserve. But not everyone pulls their weight. Take responsibility!"** Rugged Individualists don't consider structural barriers to be very important. Instead, they believe people themselves are largely responsible for their own health outcomes. They don't think the government should help people, and they believe the world is generally fair. They get their news from Fox News, and they tend to watch less TV than the other groups, aside from a handful of niche cable shows like *Live PD*, *Gold Rush* and *The Curse of Oak Island*.
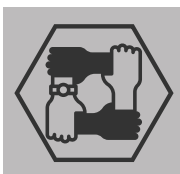
Optimistic Moderates

This mindset is: **"Sometimes people get left behind. But we can fix that. Progress is possible!"** Optimistic Moderates believe that structural barriers are substantial, and that government should be responsible for helping people to some extent. Like Rugged Individualists, they generally believe the world is fair. They're defined by their optimism that things will work out in the end. They watch a variety of TV and especially like reality TV and musical competition shows like *American Idol*, *The Masked Singer* and *The Voice*.

Witnesses to Injustice

This mindset might be described as: **"Everyone deserves justice. But the system is broken. Demand change!"** Witnesses to Injustice believe that major structural barriers exist, and that government should help people achieve the American Dream. But unlike the Optimistic Moderates, they believe the world is not always fair. They get news from local or national TV (CNN and MSNBC), as well as newspapers and social media, and they prefer scripted TV shows like *American Horror Story*, *Grey's Anatomy* and *This is Us*, as well as *Saturday Night Live*.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Because we are especially interested in whether the stories people watch have an impact on what they do, we asked them if they have ever taken action based on something they learned from a fictional movie or TV show. Across all of the segments, 77% reported taking at least one action. Fictional stories are more than entertaining; they move people to take a variety of low- and high-effort actions.

PERCENT OF EACH GROUP WHO TOOK ACTIONS AS A RESULT OF A FICTIONAL MOVIE OR TV SHOW
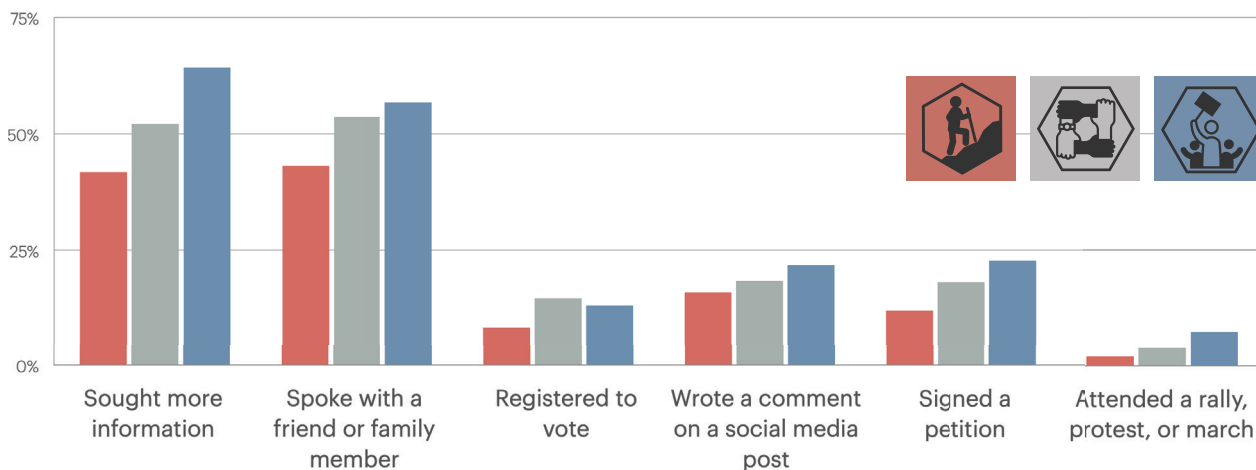
COVID-19 AND RACIAL INJUSTICE

We conducted our survey in July and August 2020, just a few months into the pandemic. We wanted to see how these three mindsets would play out in this context. All three segments agreed that COVID-19 represents a major threat to the U.S. economy. But beyond that, they did not agree on much.

Witnesses to Injustice were more likely to say the government's top priority should be stopping the virus's spread, even if the economy gets worse. Rugged Individualists said the opposite—that the economy takes priority over health. They did not believe COVID-19 represented much of a threat to their personal health or to the country, and they were more likely to say it threatened their freedom. And they were far less supportive of policy solutions to address the economic impact of COVID-19 for individuals, such as guaranteed income support.

Considering the greater rates of COVID-19 infection and hospitalization among Black Americans, Witnesses to Injustice were the only group to attribute this to "factors outside their control" more than "lifestyle choices"; the other two groups pointed to lifestyle alone.

Can Narratives Shift Mindsets?

Mindsets can predict how people will process stories, but can stories actually shift mindsets? Can they increase support for equity-based policies? If so, what types of stories are most influential? To explore these questions, we conducted a message-testing experiment.[5] We recruited thousands of people from each of the three mindset segments, who were then randomly assigned to read one of four different fictional stories that we developed about COVID-19, based on the four existing narratives in entertainment described above.

This experiment validated that hybrid stories, and especially those with systemic solutions, are most effective at shifting mindsets about the factors that shape health outcomes, as well as about who should be responsible for addressing these factors. Key findings include:

- Those who read any of the hybrid stories—which addressed social determinants of health—were slightly less likely to blame the protagonist for his health outcomes, and more likely to place responsibility on the government for protecting people.
- People who read the hybrid stories were more likely to agree that "It is our duty to help the less fortunate," but those who read the version with an individual solution were slightly less likely to agree.

- For Witnesses to Injustice and Optimistic Moderates, the hybrid stories led to greater support for paid sick leave, a policy solution offered in the story.
- Among Rugged Individualists, those who read the hybrid narrative with a systemic solution were more likely to support policies that were not even mentioned in the story, like suspending rent payments and guaranteed unemployment during the pandemic.
- Regardless of what story they read, most people said they would allocate a hypothetical medication to someone who is "high risk," but they differed in how they defined risk. Those who read any of the hybrid stories were more likely to say that "not having insurance," which was directly mentioned in the stories, makes someone high risk, and that they should be among the first to receive the medication.

Conclusions

Driven by the pandemic, stories about physical, social and economic conditions that influence health have been having a cultural moment. But the applicability of this research extends far beyond COVID-19. Moving ahead, storytellers have the power to create new narratives that prioritize pluralism, justice, and abundance over scarcity thinking, which can transform the way Americans think about health and influence policy. Further application, exploration and funding of this narrative change strategy hold great potential for the social justice movement.

IMPLICATIONS FOR STORYTELLERS

These findings provide further evidence of the power of scripted narrative entertainment to change hearts and minds and to spark action. Here are a few considerations for how entertainment content creators can apply these findings:

- Scripted entertainment is especially appealing to Witnesses to Injustice and Optimistic Moderates, who represent 70% of the public.
- These groups are highly responsive to socially relevant content. They are likely to take action based on something they learned from entertainment, ranging from seeking information or talking to a friend or family member, to attending a rally or registering to vote.
- Stories that combine individual choices and broader social context can shift attitudes about who is responsible for solving societal problems and even build policy support.
- Stories that illustrate systems change solutions are more powerful mindset shifters than "hero doctor" narratives or others that model individual-level solutions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR NARRATIVE CHANGE RESEARCHERS AND FUNDERS

Beyond entertainment, findings from this research can be applied broadly by the narrative and culture change field—those researching narrative change, using it as a social justice strategy, and funding further exploration. These findings:

- Contribute to the evidence-base for narratives—particularly narrative change in entertainment media—as a viable culture change strategy worthy of future exploration, application and investment.
- Advance the field's understanding of how narratives relate to mindsets.
- Provide insights on key audience segments and what narratives are most effective at reaching and inspiring action among those segments.
- Recommend messaging strategies to elicit system-level solutions.
- Sharpen questions for ongoing research, testing and documentation.

NEXT STEPS

The goals of this project include both investigating existing narratives and mindsets, and using these learnings to shape new stories. Drawing on insights from this research, the Lear Center's Hollywood, Health & Society (HH&S) program has been working with writers to inform and potentially inspire storylines about conditions that influence health. When a suitable storyline arises, we will study its impact on viewers' attitudes, mindsets and support for relevant policies.

THE NORMAN LEAR CENTER

The Norman Lear Center is a nonprofit, nonpartisan center of research and innovation based at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Our work is propelled by the idea that stories matter. Our practice couples research on story impact with outreach to storytellers. We study narratives, and we aim to *shape* their impact on audience mindsets, public policy and social action. Because of their emotional power and massive reach, stories told by popular entertainment particularly interest us; because we are located in the heart of the entertainment industry, we have enjoyed a unique opportunity to bridge academia and Hollywood. The Lear Center's Media Impact Project (MIP)[6] conducts rigorous mixed-methods research on the content, audiences and effects of media, while the Center's Hollywood, Health & Society (HH&S)[7] program has for over 20 years been a trusted source of accurate information for showrunners, writers and producers of health storylines. Our understanding of the science of media impact enables us to measure the influence of media narratives and the factors that enhance it—findings that HH&S translates back to the creative community.

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6. https://www.mediaimpactproject.org/
7. https://hollywoodhealthandsociety.org/
8. https://www.rwjf.org/en/how-we-work/building-a-culture-of-health.html

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