TOPIC SPECIFIC ENTERTAINMENT-DRIVEN NARRATIVE CHANGE


Research Highlights
July 2023

USC Norman Lear Center
Media Impact Project

This deck is based on research funded by the California Health Care Foundation (CHCF). The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of CHCF.
Interest in narrative change approaches* has been increasing over the last several years in advocacy and philanthropic spaces.

With support from the California Health Care Foundation, the USC Norman Lear Center’s Media Impact Project embarked on a learning project to:

- Explore what is needed to generate impact through entertainment-driven** narrative change
- Align impact expectations among key stakeholders
- Understand factors associated with successful narrative change investments

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*Narrative change refers to efforts to challenge, modify, and/or replace existing narratives with new ones focused on social good and equity.
**Within the scope of this project, entertainment media refers to screen-based mass media such as TV and film.
The project includes several tasks, completed in Phase 1 research:

- **Interviews** with stakeholders in the narrative change field
- **Research review** on the audience impact of entertainment media in the U.S. and Canada
- **Analysis of factors** associated with narrative change impact through a case study of 10 years of *Hollywood, Health & Society* (HH&S)* projects and investments

*Hollywood, Health & Society* (HH&S) is the outreach arm of the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, which provides the entertainment industry with accurate and up-to-date information for storylines on health, safety and security; *Media Impact Project* (MIP) is the Norman Lear Center’s research and evaluation arm, which studies how entertainment and news influence our thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge and actions.
Phase 2 of the project is ongoing and includes:

- Deep-dive case studies of HH&S’ work on two topics:
  - Maternal Health (*present analysis*)
  - Nuclear Threats

- An evidence-based framework of best practices (*in development*), distilling key factors that help maximize the impact of narrative change
HH&S provides the entertainment industry with accurate and up-to-date information for storylines on a range of health, safety and security topics, with services including:

- Briefings and consultations between content creators and subject-matter experts
- Events and panel discussions
- Newsletters and social media campaigns
- Public service announcements (PSAs)
- Topic-specific provision of information and resources
Study Context:

Case Study

Aims

We conducted case studies of HH&S work on two specific topics in order to:

- Explore factors that may facilitate or hinder entertainment-driven narrative change efforts on given topics
- Consider the conditions under which narrative change efforts on certain topics may be most successful
- Provide more evidence and resources to support funder decision making in the narrative change space
This case study focuses on HH&S outreach work on the topic of maternal health.

- This work was supported by three investments from the California Health Care Foundation between 2017 and 2022.
- To capture trends and patterns in the media landscape before, during, and after these investments, our case study time frame spans 2016-2023.
CHCF’s investments supported HH&S' outreach to entertainment industry content creators on maternal health issues.

The goals of outreach were to generate aired storylines and contribute to public awareness of issues related to maternal health, specifically:

- Maternity care through non-medical interventions (e.g., the use of midwives, doulas)
- The importance of maternal mental health
- Racial disparities in maternal health outcomes in the U.S. (the focus of the most recent investment from 2020-2022)
The organizing research questions for this case study were:

1. What was the media coverage of relevant topics and narratives like before, during, and after the investments from CHCF, across various streams of media?

2. What factors were associated with the success of these investments in maternal health topics?
# Research Methods: Tasks, Methods, and Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
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<td><strong>To study…</strong></td>
<td><strong>We performed…</strong></td>
<td><strong>Using…</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Task 1. HH&amp;S outcomes, successes, and challenges in work on maternal health</td>
<td>Document review and interviews with two HH&amp;S staff members</td>
<td>14 grant reports, post-event survey data</td>
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<td>Task 2. Trends in the media landscape:</td>
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<td>● General news trends relevant to maternal health and equity</td>
<td>Searches of relevant and co-occurring keywords in a news database, mapped by year</td>
<td>Scan of 15,000 U.S. news outlets indexed by <a href="https://www.lexisnexis.com">LexisNexis</a></td>
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<td>● Cable news trends relevant to maternal health and equity</td>
<td>Searches of relevant and co-occurring keywords in a cable news database, by month</td>
<td>Search of 300,000+ cable news recordings in <a href="http://cabletvnewsanalyzer.stanford.edu">Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer</a></td>
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<td>● Online search interest in maternal health and equity</td>
<td>Searches of Google Trends queries and topics in an online search database, by month</td>
<td>Large sample of real search requests made to Google via <a href="https://trends.google.com">Google Trends</a></td>
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<td>Task 3. Trends in scripted TV shows and movies related to maternal health and equity</td>
<td>Keyword searches in a database containing TV show and film scripts, along with a dialogue analysis of 2 episodes</td>
<td>The <a href="https://normlearcenter.org">Norman Lear Center</a> script database containing 130,000+ TV episodes and 30,000+ films</td>
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<td>Task 4. Factors that facilitated or interfered with airings of relevant storylines and viewership</td>
<td>Interviews with four key informants representing various fields and vantage points</td>
<td>Two members of the HH&amp;S team, a member of the funding organization, and a TV writer</td>
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With the investment, HH&S was able to reach members of the entertainment industry and, in turn, public audiences with information and target narratives about maternal health and equity.

To bolster storytelling around maternal health and race, HH&S:

- Held 6 events, featuring prominent experts, TV writers, and people with lived experience in support of maternal health equity
- Facilitated the airing of storylines on *The Resident* and *New Amsterdam*, which amplified target narratives of race & maternal health
- Consulted on a public service announcement (PSA) for *The Good Doctor* that provided critical pregnancy loss resources to audiences

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<tr>
<th>Consultations</th>
<th>Aired Episodes</th>
<th>Viewers Reached</th>
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<tr>
<td>61 consultations between experts &amp; writers on maternal health topics</td>
<td>31 episodes aired, with a direct link to consultations</td>
<td>Up to 160 million people* watched 31 TV episodes featuring maternal health-related content &amp; storylines</td>
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*Viewership is based on the numbers provided in HH&S grant reports, plus supplementary ratings data from Wikipedia episode lists, when available. Note that there may be repeats due to overlapping viewers of different shows.*
Analyzing multiple media streams (news, search platforms, TV & film databases) together reveals narrative-related trends alongside:

- HH&S consulting work,
- Aired TV episodes addressing the topic, and
- Mass media coverage of key sociopolitical events.

Upticks in relevant keywords, occurring together, across media streams, indicate that narratives around maternal health, equity, and racial justice became more present over the time period studied.

- These narratives had documented spikes after the coverage of the George Floyd murder and the overturn of Roe v. Wade.

- News items containing the keywords “maternal,” “health” and “race” grew nearly 5x between 2016-2022.
Case Study
Task 2: Key Learnings from Media Landscape Analysis

Summary Timeline of Key Events

- **2017**: HH&S receives funding from CHCF for maternal health
- **2019**: HH&S hosts “Black Mothers Matter” panel for entertainment insiders
- **2020**: COVID and Black Lives Matter animate discussions of health, race & equity
- **2021**: High of 7 scripted TV storylines on maternal health & race intersections
- **2022**: Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade, igniting conversations about maternal mortality & race
- **2023**:
During the case study period, the presence of maternal health narratives in the news and online media landscape was shaped by several key sociopolitical events:

- **COVID pandemic & Black Lives Matter (BLM)** - In June 2020, growing attention to the BLM movement promotes awareness of racial injustices, including poor Black maternal health outcomes. The “twin pandemics” of racism and COVID-19 are discussed in tandem.

- **Supreme Court overturn of Roe v. Wade** - In spring of 2022, the impending overturn of *Roe v. Wade* aligned with conversations about reproductive rights, race, and maternal health, in TV news and online.

### U.S. cable news coverage featuring keywords “maternal,” “health,” and “race”; 3/1/16-4/30/23

### U.S. Google search interest for “maternal health equity,” “birth equity” and “birth racism” (scored 1-100); 3/1/16-4/30/23
Case Study
Task 3: Key Learnings from Scripted Entertainment Analysis

- Maternal health keywords appeared frequently in scripted entertainment content. Keywords appeared in 17% of analyzed scripts during the case study time period.

- Similarly, scripts featuring race and equity keywords were commonplace. Race and equity keywords appeared in 18% of analyzed scripts during the case study time period.
Of thousands of scripts that had co-occurring maternal health and race keywords, 13 storylines explicitly focused on the intersections between race and maternal health.

- The number of storylines addressing this intersection peaked in 2021 — potentially in response to #BlackLivesMatter and COVID-19, which brought discussions of race and health equity to the forefront.

- While rare, these core storylines reached millions of viewers through some of TV’s most popular shows, including Grey’s Anatomy, New Amsterdam, and The Resident.
Case Study Task 4: Key Learnings from Analysis of Impact Factors

Several factors associated with impact, identified in Phase 1 research, re-emerged as important in this deep dive:

- **Writers’ interests**
  Interest in race and maternal health, personal experiences with racism, and exposure to the healthcare system facilitated intersecting storylines.

- **Representation of affected communities**
  Centering those with lived experiences related to maternal health and society was seen as moving by creators, facilitating multiple storylines with high viewership.

- **Relationships in the media industry**
  HH&S’ long-standing relationships with medical TV shows helped with networking and resource provision.

- **Favorability of the sociopolitical context**
  The rise of race-related discourse connected with #BlackLivesMatter coincided with more relevant episodes and public interest.

- **Entertainment value**
  Writers emphasized that it’s a balancing act to provide information on important social issues to viewers and prioritize entertainment in their stories.
According to interviews across stakeholder groups (funders, practitioners, and creatives), organizational practices of HH&S – especially relationship maintenance and trust-building – were key ingredients in reaching and informing content creators in Hollywood. These practices helped multiple topic-relevant storylines eventually reach millions of viewers.

Tracking audience responses to PSAs was a useful way to capture audience uptake of the show’s message, along with providing health-related resources to viewers.
Novel factors also emerged as important in this deep dive:

**Writers’ views of the dramatic potential and relevance of the topic**

TV writers’ views of how dramatic a topical story could be and how it would fit into their show’s storyworld mediated their creative decisions. For example, issues of maternal health were seen as a natural fit for medical shows like *Grey’s Anatomy* and *New Amsterdam*.

**Industry decision makers’ values and priorities**

Interviewees underlined the power of industry decision makers in greenlighting shows and setting priorities for networks. These priorities can inform the topics creatives understand as a better fit for the network.
Our research in Phase 1 identified multiple factors associated with impact for entertainment-driven narrative change efforts, organized at 5 levels:

1. Media & Sociopolitical Context
2. Investment Structure
3. Measurement & Learning
4. Organizational Capacity
5. Media Content
**Case Study Research Highlights:**

### Emerging Recommendations for Funders

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<th>Media and Socio-political Context</th>
<th>Leverage <em>timing</em> and <em>cultural conversations</em> to boost the target narratives. Build <em>organizational reaction capacity</em> so that practitioners can quickly respond to relevant events and public awareness shifts.</th>
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<td>Use <em>the synergy between media streams</em> to introduce and reinforce target narratives, possibly supporting practitioners working on news, social media, and entertainment media.</td>
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<td>Address <em>change</em> and <em>power</em> at multiple stakeholder levels. For example, studied storylines resulted from the collaboration and values-alignment of diverse writers, showrunners, and decision makers in the entertainment industry.</td>
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<td>Investment Structure</td>
<td>Build in <em>trust</em> and <em>flexibility</em> in narrative change grants so that practitioners can exercise agency and use knowledge of the industry (e.g., communicating with entertainment insiders).</td>
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<td>Measurement and Learning</td>
<td>Emphasize opportunities to <em>document</em> and <em>learn</em> from the project, using techniques and tools such as measuring website hits from PSAs or conducting narrative analysis in multiple media streams.</td>
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