TOPIC SPECIFIC ENTERTAINMENT-DRIVEN NARRATIVE CHANGE


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USC Norman Lear Center
Media Impact Project

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS
Project Overview: The Learning Project

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. For more information about media impact research and entertainment-driven narrative change, see our research review on the impact of entertainment media in the U.S. and Canada from 2000 to 2020.
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
**Study Context:** Hollywood, Health & Society (HH&S)

**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 topic-related factors that may facilitate or hinder entertainment-driven narrative change efforts
- 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
From 2016 to 2021, 3 organizations co-funded HH&S to conduct outreach on nuclear threats to facilitate aired storylines which, in turn, could potentially increase public awareness:

- **Nuclear Threat Initiative** (NTI)
- **N Square**
- **Ploughshares Fund**

According to one member of the funding team, the reason entertainment was chosen as the platform for this investment was because TV and movies have the potential to affect “what people believe” and “what is possible.” These ideas are supported by extensive research showing that media impacts knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.*

The case study period spans from one year before the investment to one year after (2015 to 2022).
The objectives of these investments included:

- Sharing resources and information with the entertainment industry that could lead to aired storylines about nuclear issues

- Raising general public awareness of nuclear threats with emphasis on:
  - Representing nuclear threats as a current issue, rather than a historical one
  - Showing that nuclear weapons create risk, rather than reduce it
  - Demonstrating that nuclear threats are a human-made problem that can have a collective human solution
The organizing research questions were:

- How did media coverage of topics and narratives around *nuclear threats* shift before, during, and after the project, across various streams of media?
- What factors were associated with the success of these investments in maternal health topics?
To study… | We performed… | Using…
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Task 1. HH&S outcomes, successes, and challenges in work on nuclear threats | Document review and interviews with two HH&S staff members | 13 grant reports, 1 impact study

Task 2. Trends in the media landscape:
- General news trends relevant to nuclear threats | Searches of relevant and co-occurring keywords in a news database, mapped by year | Scan of 15,000 U.S. news outlets indexed by LexisNexis
- Cable news trends relevant to nuclear threats | Searches of relevant and co-occurring keywords in a cable news database, by month | Search of 300,000+ cable news recordings in Stanford Cable TV News Analyzer
- Online search interest in nuclear subjects | Searches of Google Trends queries and topics in an online search database, by month | Large sample of real search requests made to Google via Google Trends

Task 3. Trends in scripted TV shows and movies related to nuclear threats | Keyword searches in a database containing TV show and film scripts, along with a dialogue analysis of 2 episodes | The Norman Lear Center script database containing 130,000+ TV episodes and 30,000+ films

Task 4. Factors that facilitated or interfered with airings of relevant storylines and viewership | Interviews with four key informants representing various fields and vantage points | Two members of the HH&S team, a member of one of the funding organizations, and a TV writer
Case Study

Task 1:
Key Learnings from HH&S

Outcome Analysis

With the investment, HH&S was able to reach members of the entertainment industry and, in turn, public audiences with information and target narratives related to nuclear threats.

Consultations
40 consultations between experts and writers on nuclear topics

Aired Episodes
19 episodes aired, with a direct link to consultations

Viewers Reached
Up to 132 million people* watched 19 TV episodes featuring nuclear-related content and storylines

To bolster storytelling around nuclear threats, HH&S:
- Held 17 events, featuring prominent experts, politicians, actors, and TV writers, related to nuclear threat education and storytelling
- Facilitated the airing of storylines on Madam Secretary and Bull, which amplified target narratives of nuclear risks and solutions
- Conducted an impact study of Madam Secretary that showed watching the storyline was associated with increased knowledge of nuclear threats

* 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, online search, TV & film databases) together shows fluctuations in the amount of nuclear talk, alongside HH&S consulting work, popular show airings, and coverage of relevant sociopolitical events.

Patterns of keywords across media streams indicate that there was more talk about nuclear threats in 2015-17 and 2021-22, with spikes around coverage of the Iran Deal, nuclear rhetoric in North Korea, and the invasion of Ukraine, and took a backseat during the pandemic in 2020-21.

- News items containing the keywords “nuclear” and “threat” peaked in 2017, at the height of nuclear threat discourse about North Korea.
According to interviews, framing nuclear threats as a current issue helped the topic gain ground in U.S. public consciousness, with likely connections to increased relevant coverage in mass media and entertainment.*

* We used a combination of nuclear- and threat-related keywords to assess for target narratives across multiple media streams, including news, online searches, and scripted TV & film. The presence of these co-occurring keywords suggests that target narratives are in place. However, keyword combinations are are ultimately proxies for narrative presence/absence, rather than narratives in and of themselves.
During the case study period, the presence of nuclear narratives in the media landscape was influenced by several key sociopolitical events:

- **Iran Deal** – According to interviewees, the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal set the stage for growing awareness and nuclear discussions at the beginning of the case study time period.

  - Google searches for related keywords also spiked in April 2017, when North Korea conducted missile tests.

News items about the U.S. containing the keywords “nuclear” and “threat” from 10/15/15-12/31/22

U.S. Google Searches for “nuclear threats,” “nuclear weapon,” “atomic weapon,” “nuclear age” (scored 1-100) from 10/15/15-12/31/22
Case Study

Task 2:

Key Learnings from Media Landscape Analysis

- Russia-Ukraine War – The Russian invasion of Ukraine, starting in February 2022, brought renewed attention to the threat of nuclear war, as well as the dangers of nuclear accidents in a conflict zone.
  - News coverage of nuclear threats began to increase, following the dip likely associated with coverage of COVID-19.
  - Online search interest spiked again in March 2022 after the outbreak of war in Europe and highly publicized comments about nuclear threats by world leaders.

Headline example from *New York Times* about the discourse around nuclear threats in March 2022

A Kremlin spokesman says Russia could use nuclear weapons if there is ‘an existential threat for our country.’

News items about the U.S. containing the keywords “nuclear” and “threat” from 10/15/15-12/31/22

U.S. Google Searches for “nuclear threats,” “nuclear weapon,” “atomic weapon,” “nuclear age” (scored 1-100) from 10/15/15-12/31/22
Analysis of nuclear keywords* in scripted entertainment – popular TV shows and films – in the time period 2016-2022 showed that keywords related to nuclear issues are relatively frequent, appearing in 4,892 scripts (7.8% of all analyzed scripts).

* The 10 nuclear-related keywords we search for were nuclear, nukes(s), atomic, bioterrorism, biological weapons, chemical weapons, Chernobyl, Hiroshima, Plutonium, and “dirty bomb.”
Of the nine impact factors found in this analysis, seven aligned with factors identified in previous research tasks:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact Factors Identified from Previous Research Emerging in Present Analysis</th>
<th>Novel Impact Factors &amp; Nuances Emerging from Present Analysis</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Writers’ interests</td>
<td>● Writers’ views of the dramatic potential and relevance of a topic to their show/film</td>
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<tr>
<td>● Favorability of sociopolitical context</td>
<td>● Stakeholders’ values and priorities</td>
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<td>● Media saturation</td>
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<td>● Grant flexibility and trust</td>
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<td>● Relationships with the media industry</td>
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<td>● Incorporation of multimedia campaigns</td>
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<td>● Partnerships with subject matter experts</td>
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Several factors identified in Phase 1 research re-emerged in this deep dive:

- **Writers’ interests**
  Writers’ interest in the topic – writers perceived nuclear threat issues as both interesting and personally meaningful or relevant.

- **Grant flexibility**
  Trust-based, flexible investments were key to leveraging organizational expertise, experiences, and connections.

- **Relationships in the media industry**
  HH&S leveraged existing relationships and fostered new connections in the industry.

- **Favorability of the sociopolitical context**
  Public attention increased alongside coverage of relevant events in world politics.

- **Media saturation**
  News coverage of the pandemic as a global threat eclipsed nuclear threat coverage in 2020-21, demonstrating the importance of competing narratives.

- **Multimedia campaigns**
  Live Tweeting, Reddit AMAs, and original videos captured the attention of new audiences with content focused on nuclear threats.
According to interviews across fields, organizational practices of HH&S – especially relationship maintenance, trust-building, and access to prominent subject-matter experts – were key ingredients in reaching and informing content creators, with multiple topic-relevant storylines eventually reaching millions of viewers.

Conducting impact research was a fruitful way to capture audience uptake of one episode’s representation of nuclear issues, showing a direct increase in viewers’ knowledge of nuclear issues after watching a relevant episode.
We also saw novel factors and additions to factors we identified in Phase 1 of the research.

**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*.

**Stakeholders’ values and priorities**

Value alignment of industry decision makers, creatives and philanthropists on nuclear nonproliferation helped the process of getting relevant storylines on the air.
The context of global political events played a role not only in media coverage and public interest, but also in writers’ interests in nuclear topics.

- The *sociopolitical context* (salient world events) and related *saturation of the media landscape* (how much coverage events got) affected overall public discourse.
  - We saw a rise in nuclear threats narratives around North Korean and Iranian leaders using nuclear rhetoric, and a downward swing as news media increasingly centered on the pandemic in 2020.

- Several interviewees grew up in the *context* of the 1970s and 80s, when public consciousness focused on nuclear risks, and therefore had knowledge and interest in the topic.

- Existing *interests*, along with finding the *dramatic* throughline to the show’s or film’s storyworld, led to impact. For example, a writer learned about nuclear hair-triggers* from an expert and visualized a compelling story arc for his protagonist, which led to the story airing and reaching millions of viewers.

*Hair-trigger alert refers to a US military *policy* that allows for the rapid deployment of nuclear weapons in as fast as 10-minutes.*
Organizational capacities and HH&S’ relationships, along with agency granted by the funder, contributed nuclear storylines getting on the air.

- Because the investments included *flexibility* and *room for the grantee to exercise agency*, HH&S was able to put creatives in conversation with prominent nuclear scholars, which inspired and provided up-to-date information to the creatives.

- Grant *flexibility* allowed HH&S to build and leverage *relationships* with entertainment professionals, nuclear nonproliferation experts, and others working in this space.

- Similarly, *social media campaigns*, involving live Tweeting about relevant episodes and facilitating Q&A sessions with experts on Reddit (“Ask Me Anything” or AMAs) engaged new audiences and potentially helped nuclear topics find more traction.
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
Use synergy between media streams to introduce and reinforce target narratives, possibly supporting practitioners working in different sectors: news, social media, and entertainment media.

Build in trust and flexibility in narrative change grants so that practitioners can exercise agency and use knowledge of their industry (e.g., communicating with entertainment insiders). For example, with grant flexibility and existing connections, HH&S brought in prominent experts that informed relevant storylines that reached tens of millions.

Emphasize opportunities to document and learn from the project, using research studies and analytics from multimodal campaigns, such as live Tweeting with a campaign-specific hashtag.

Consider value alignment when building grantee teams – our interviewees saw their success linked to effective collaboration, learning mindsets, and a sense of the gravity connected to nuclear weapons.

Leverage timing and cultural conversations to boost the target narratives for more saturation. Build organizational reaction capacity so that practitioners can nimbly adapt and respond to relevant events and public awareness shifts.