

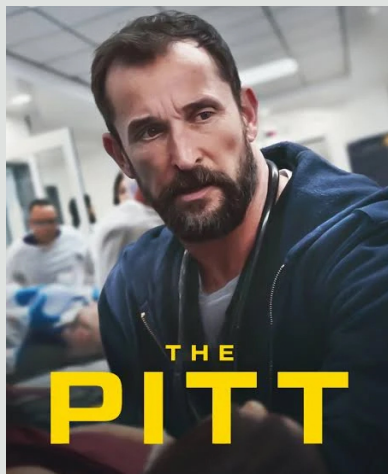


RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

LIFE AND DEATH IN *THE PITT*

How Accurate, Authentic Stories Move Audiences to Action

Entertainment has a profound impact on audiences' knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. For 25 years, the University of Southern California's **Norman Lear Center** has both studied the impact and helped to shape it through the Center's Hollywood, Health & Society (HH&S) program. In late 2023, HH&S began consulting with a new medical series—***The Pitt***—which would go on to consistently draw audiences of over 10 million US viewers and win three 2025 Primetime Emmy awards.



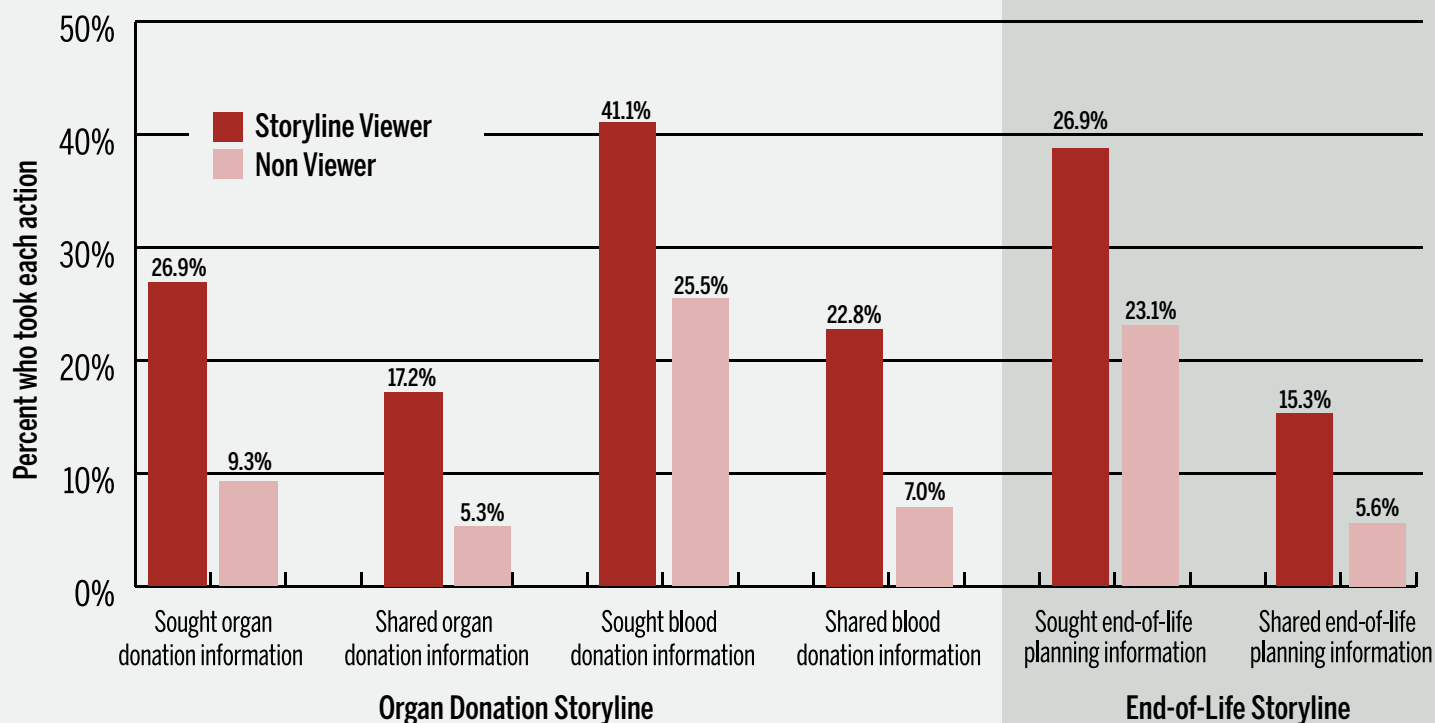
The Pitt is set in a Pittsburgh emergency room and stars Noah Wyle (ER) as senior attending physician Dr. Michael Rabinovitch (“Dr. Robby”), who struggles with trauma and burnout. He leads a team of residents, nurses, and medical students in balancing empathy with the structural pressures of the emergency context. HH&S provided expert consultation on all fifteen episodes of the first season, on topics such as racial disparities, caregiver stress, mental health, organ donation, and end-of-life decisions.

To study the audience impact of *The Pitt*, the Lear Center's research team interviewed **25 medical professionals** and surveyed **1409 HBO Max viewers**, of whom **709 saw at least three episodes**. We measured the impact of two specific multi-episode story arcs addressing organ donation (OD) and end-of-life decisions (EOL).

Our findings show that accurate, expert-informed health stories built around authentic characters not only validate the lived experiences of medical providers but also have the power to shift attitudes and move audiences to action.

- **Medical professionals felt “seen”** and found *The Pitt*'s characters and storylines authentic, particularly its ongoing portrayal of systemic healthcare challenges like overcrowding and underfunding, and the “hidden toll” on providers.
- Nearly **90% of viewers agreed that the show educates people while entertaining them**, makes provider stress relatable, and shows how understaffing affects patient outcomes.
- Compared to non-viewers, those who saw either storyline had **more positive attitudes, greater intentions** to make plans or discuss preferences with loved ones. These impacts were strongest among **POC—and especially Black—audiences**.
- Viewers of each storyline were two to three times more likely to have **sought or shared relevant information** about the topic than non-viewers. **One in four** (26.9%) OD storyline viewers and **over a third** (38.8%) of EOL storyline viewers **sought more information** about organ donation and end-of-life planning, respectively.
- Emotional responses to the storylines, particularly **empathy, sadness, and hope**, played a key role in driving outcomes.

Action-Taking by Storyline Exposure



RECOMMENDATIONS

For Storytellers & Decision Makers

- **Prioritize** accuracy by engaging expert consultants in the process of developing health stories, in traditional entertainment and beyond.
- **Embrace** authenticity and infuse broken systems into character-driven stories. At the same time, emphasize hope and opportunities for audiences to take action.
- **Attract** and engage audiences by supporting and greenlighting content that addresses systemic challenges.

For Health Providers & Communicators

- **Share** your clinical expertise and lived experience with storytellers to promote more accurate, authentic, and impactful stories.
- **Use** *The Pitt* as an accessible entrypoint for discussions of serious topics with patients, family members, students, and the public.

For Advocates & Funders

- **Highlight** *The Pitt* as a case study illustrating a successful approach to entertainment-based narrative change.
- **Support** efforts to promote accuracy in entertainment. A modest investment can infuse dozens of storylines—each reaching millions of viewers—with expert insights.
- **Fund** research to gain a deeper understanding of how audiences engage with media narratives.

Learn More:

Hollywood, Health & Society
(Norman Lear Center Outreach)

hhs@usc.edu
hollywoodhealthandsociety.org

The Media Impact Project
(Norman Lear Center Research)

media.impact@usc.edu
mediaimpactproject.org

The full report can be found at:
lear.center/the pitt



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