# USC NORMAN LEAR CENTER
# MEDIA IMPACT PROJECT

## Because Stories Matter

### WHO WE ARE

The **NORMAN LEAR CENTER** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan center of research and innovation established in 2000 at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism. Our work is undergirded by the idea that stories matter. Whether in scripted or unscripted TV, documentary or narrative film, journalism, social media, or video games, stories have the power to inspire, to engage, and to move people to action.

The **MEDIA IMPACT PROJECT** is the Lear Center's research and evaluation arm. We study the content of stories disseminated through media and entertainment, the audiences who consume these stories, and their impact on knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Our research addresses a wide range of health and social justice issues and employs a multitude of quantitative and qualitative approaches. We draw upon decades of social science theory, 25 years of partnership with the entertainment industry, and emerging best practice in the growing field of narrative change.

### SOME OF OUR PARTNERS INCLUDE:

- **California Health Care Foundation**
- **Caring Across Generations**
- **DARPA**
- **Define American**
- **EndWell**
- **Everytown for Gun Safety**
- **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**
- **Gold House**
- **Howard Hughes Medical Institute**
- **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**
- **Good Energy**
- **PBS Frontline**
- **SHOWTIME/MTV Entertainment**
- **US Department of State**
- **Walton Family Foundation**

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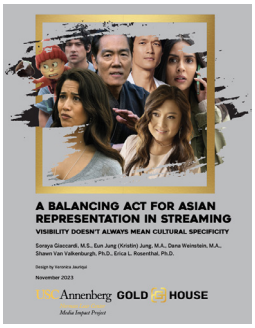
## CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABILITY


Our research with Good Energy found that only 2.8% of TV and film scripts between 2016 and 2020 mentioned climate-related keywords, and fewer than one percent explicitly referenced climate change. Other research has examined climate and sustainability mentions in unscripted TV, portrayals of single-use plastics, and audience responses to narrative and non-narrative content addressing climate change and the energy transition.

## IMMIGRATION

Since 2017, we have partnered with Define American for three rounds of content analysis research on representations of immigrants and immigration and audience impact research. Exposure to nuanced stories about immigrants is associated with a greater likelihood of taking actions in support of immigration. And those who experience parasocial relationships — feelings of friendship — with immigrant characters have more inclusive attitudes.

## REPRESENTATION RESEARCH




At the 2024 Emmys, actor John Leguizamo delivered an impassioned speech calling for "more stories from excluded groups." In recent years, we have expanded our research into on-screen representations of — and stories helmed by — members of historically-marginalized communities, including Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and people of size. We measure not just underrepresentation but also the nuance behind the numbers. *The Hollywood Reporter* called our research in collaboration with Gold House "a lesson in representation 2.0 or even 3.0."

## INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH

Since 2017, we have conducted program evaluation and audience research as part of two U.S. State Department cultural diplomacy programs: American Film Showcase (AFS) and the Middle East Media Initiative (MEMI). We are also supported by a DARPA award to apply entertainment mechanisms to the development of machine learning tools for identifying geopolitical influence campaigns.

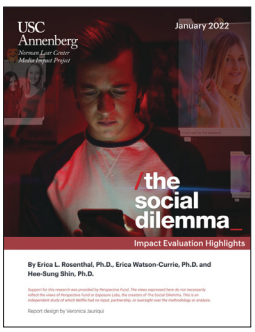
## CULTURAL AUDITS


A cultural audit is a means of understanding audience mindsets by examining the media narratives they consume. We have used this approach to study narratives related to health equity, poverty and wealth, and charitable giving, employing a mixed-methods approach that combines landscape analysis, interviews, quantitative or qualitative content analysis, and audience surveys.

## JOURNALISM IMPACT

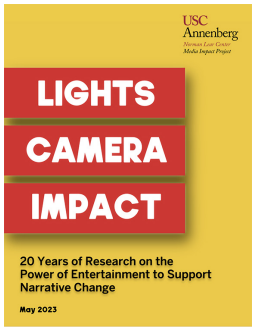
Since our inception, we have measured the impact of journalism. With support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, we identified and studied best practices for impactful science journalism, with the goal of informing future investments. We are also conducting an evaluation of the Walton Family Foundation's environmental communications grantmaking.

## DOCUMENTARY FILM IMPACT




For years, we have studied the audience impact of documentary films, including *Food Inc.*, *Waiting for Superman*, and *The Social Dilemma*. We apply a statistical technique called Propensity Score Matching to adjust for pre-existing differences between viewers and non-viewers of niche content.

## THOUGHT LEADERSHIP




As narrative change approaches gain ground in philanthropy and advocacy circles, many questions remain about the strategy. To address this gap, we have begun developing frameworks to inform measurement and strategic investments in the narrative change space. We reviewed 20 years of research on the audience impact of entertainment — published in our landmark *Lights, Camera, Impact* report — and designed a framework of 25 best practices that make media-based narrative change efforts more likely to be successful.