

FORTUNE

raceAhead: I Want My Immigrant TV

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I grew up in a pretty diverse part of New York City, filled with immigrants from a host of nations. It never occurred to me until later in life that nothing in my copious television viewing as a young person resembled in any way the experiences of the many people I knew and went to school with.

Could it really be that the most memorable immigrant character I grew up with was *Kung Fu*'s utterly non-Chinese David Carradine?

For all the improvements since the olden days—*Fresh Off the Boat*, *Jane the Virgin*, *Master of None* as recent examples—we still have a long way to go.

A new study from Define American, the media organization founded by Pulitzer-winning journalist Jose Antonio Vargas, USC Annenberg's Norman Lear Center and *The Hollywood Reporter* charted the depiction of immigrants on scripted television and compared it with data about their real life behavior.

Immigration Nation: Exploring Immigrant Portrayals on Television analyzed 143 sample episodes from 47 series airing in 2017 and 2018, and found that immigrant characters are portrayed as less educated and more prone to criminality than is actually true. Blame it in part on the never-ending search for a news peg, but these depictions matter.

“Historically, the way that media has portrayed marginalized communities has had a direct impact on how those communities were treated in wider society, from voting rights to criminalization of their mere presence in spaces,” Noelle S. Lindsay Stewart, entertainment media manager for Define American tells *The Hollywood Reporter*.

Here's just one example. In the analysis, more than 34% of immigrant characters on TV are associated with crime, and 11% are depicted as formerly, currently or about to be incarcerated. Yet, according to studies by the Cato Institute and others, real-life immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-born citizens. If you exclude the now-murky world of immigration-related detention, only about 1% of immigrants are incarcerated at the state or federal level.

These impressions shape the thinking of all sorts of viewers for whom television is the primary way they get to know people different from themselves.

A 2011 study conducted by The Opportunity Agenda, a social justice media organization, found black males are similarly depicted negatively in the media. (If, of course, they're given a chance to speak at all.) These negative portrayals—as criminals, bullies, fools, or simply “underprivileged”—lead to real-world consequences. According to the authors of the study, there

is a connection between these inaccurate media portrayals and “less attention from doctors to harsher sentencing by judges, lower likelihood of being hired for a job or admitted to school, lower odds of getting loans, and a higher likelihood of being shot by police.”

Not to mention the creation of an ill-informed electorate unprepared to understand the outcomes of their policy ideas.

But a commitment to more nuanced story-telling—showing immigrants and people of color as fully realized human beings living in a complex world, can help.

It’s about proximity and understanding. “Our research experience also suggests that hopeful stories and novel ideas can go a long way towards engaging new audiences and new support,” the authors of the report say. Think of it as entertainment as bias-mitigation training.

“The idea of a color-blind society is appealing to many Americans for a variety of emotional and ethical reasons,” they say. “However, those who advocate for a color-blind society are often responsible for suppressing discussions of race that are ultimately essential for addressing disparate obstacles.”