



Study: TV shows exaggerate the number of undocumented immigrants, but nuanced portrayals can educate

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Scripted TV shows can encourage viewers to support immigration rights, but need to more accurately represent immigrants and the issues they face.

Those are the key findings of a new study, "Change the Narrative, Change the World," released Wednesday by Define American and USC's Norman Lear Center. It finds that undocumented immigrants are portrayed on TV more often than their true numbers suggest, and that the connection between immigrants and crime is overstated.

But the report goes beyond onscreen measurement: The survey concludes that the more exposure viewers had to immigration-related stories and characters on TV, the more inclusive their attitudes became and the more likely they were to take supportive action.

"The report shows just how much more can be done" in creating an accurate and nuanced look at immigration, says Jose Antonio Vargas, founder of Define American, an advocacy organization that encourages media to humanize conversations about immigrants.

But the study also shows how representation on NBC's 'Superstore' or former CBS drama 'Madam Secretary' – two of three shows that received special focus due to their immigration storylines – "actually fosters more inclusive attitudes and beliefs and drives people to create and inspire change wherever they are," he says.

In the Season 4 finale of "Superstore," which aired in May 2019, Mateo (Nico Santos), a store employee and undocumented immigrant, was detained, while "Secretary," which ended its six-season run in December, featured a two-part episode about a mother being separated from her young son after crossing the border to seek asylum. A third show highlighted in the study, Netflix's "Orange Is the New Black," focused much of its final season on an immigration detention center.

The study, which followed up a 2018 report and looked at depictions of 129 immigrant characters in 59 shows between August 2018 and July 2019, found that 63% of the characters with a known immigration status were undocumented. That figure is substantially higher than the 41% found on TV in the earlier study and more than double the percentage of unauthorized people (24%) among all U.S. immigrants.

Immigrants were associated with committing, witnessing or being a victim of a crime in 22% of depictions, a substantial drop from the 2018 study. However, that was still above the level of real-world incidents: They commit less crime in general than native-born Americans, the report says, citing research by the Cato Institute and The Marshall Project.

Getting the facts right and portraying immigrants accurately is especially important "in the most anti-immigrant era in modern American history," says Vargas, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who revealed his own undocumented status in a 2011 New York Times Magazine essay. "In the Trump administration, there is no separation between legal and illegal immigration. Like they just basically said, 'Nope, we don't want any more immigrants.'"

Scripted TV shows, in contrast, offer "a really powerful way to reach people and make them understand that this is not only a political, partisan piñata, but a human issue," he says.

When immigrant characters and storylines are presented with nuance and empathy, Vargas says they become more potent and "can actually shift attitudes and inspire people to (significant) real-life action," such as talking to friends about the topic, posting on social media or making a donation to a charity.

Although "fear-based narratives" can lead some viewers to more inclusive attitudes, they can also backfire, particularly among conservative or religious viewers who may feel pressured or manipulated, the study found. For that reason, it advises against heavy-handed plots.

Some troubling trends continued in the new report, including an overrepresentation of Middle Eastern immigrants, often in extremist storylines, and an undercount of Asian/Pacific Islanders compared to their actual numbers. About half of immigrant characters were Latino, roughly equivalent to real-world percentages. Transgender immigrants, those with disabilities and undocumented Black immigrants were all but invisible on TV.

The 97 episodes analyzed in the study reflected the focus of recent news coverage, as the immigration issues most commonly featured in storylines were about deportation (29% of episodes) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE (25%).

Although TV is making strides to portray immigrants more accurately, "the study shows there's absolutely a lot of room to grow," Vargas says. "But when you do it the right way, there's real potential for change."