New study examines how TV portrayals of immigrants affect real-life actions and attitudes

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The nonprofit media advocacy organization **Define American**, in collaboration with the **Norman Lear Center** **Media Impact Project** at USC Annenberg, has released its second-annual report ***Change the Narrative, Change the World: How Immigrant Representation on Television Moves Audiences to Action***, examining the portrayal of immigrant characters and storylines across scripted television, and how they can inspire people to real-life action. This new study explores how these depictions can foster more inclusive attitudes and beliefs and drive viewers to create and inspire change.

The new research analyzed 129 immigrant characters across 97 episodes of 59 scripted, narrative TV shows on broadcast, cable, and streaming platforms, airing between August 2018 and July 2019. It also surveyed viewers of three TV shows that featured prominent immigration storylines in their 2018-2019 seasons — *Madam Secretary* (CBS), *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix), and *Superstore* (NBC) — to measure their impact.

For each of the three shows, viewers who saw the immigration storyline had more inclusive attitudes toward immigrants than those who did not, including greater comfort meeting undocumented people and opposition to criminalizing undocumented immigrants. Those who saw the immigration storylines were also more likely to take certain related actions, such as speaking to a friend about immigration issues or attending an immigration-related community event.

"This new data shows how the power of storytelling can engage audiences, shift mindsets, and move people into action," said Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and Emmy-nominated filmmaker Jose Antonio Vargas, who founded Define American in 2011 to fight injustice and anti-immigrant hate through the power of storytelling. "We're calling on creators in the entertainment industry to continue to better develop authentic immigrant characters and storylines, which not only broaden representation, but empower viewers to take action on immigration-related issues."

The *Change the Narrative, Change the World* research — an expansion of earlier research described in Define American's 2018 report, *Immigration Nation: Exploring Immigrant Portrayals on Television* — suggests there's still significant work needed to achieve more accurate representation across the entertainment industry:

- Immigrants continue to be criminalized, with 22% of all immigrant characters associated with some sort of crime and 10% incarcerated. While this represents a drop from 2018, (in which 34% of immigrant characters were associated with crime), it still reinforces negative stereotypes. In reality, immigrants commit less crime and are less likely to be incarcerated than native-born Americans, according to studies from the CATO Institute and The Marshall Project.

- Undocumented immigrants are heavily overrepresented on TV. Of the characters with an identified immigration status, 63% were undocumented immigrants or asylum seekers. In reality, only 24% of immigrants in the U.S. are unauthorized.

- For the second straight year, specific at-risk immigrant communities were largely invisible, including those with disabilities, transgender immigrants, and undocumented Black immigrants.

- Asian/Pacific Islander (API) representation on TV declined from 2018, from 16% to 12%, when in reality they make up more than a quarter of immigrants in the U.S.

- The most commonly represented immigration issues included deportation (29% of episodes), ICE (25%), and mentions of the terms "illegal" (22%) and "undocumented" (17%).

"Television and movies can expand our minds and expose us to people and experiences we may not have access to in real life," said Erica Rosenthal, Norman Lear Center Director of Research. "This is why it is so important that content creators include diverse and nuanced representations of immigrants, even in content that doesn't directly address immigration. The attachments that audiences form with series regular immigrant characters on TV, like *Superstore*'s Mateo, can actually compensate for the absence of real-life contact with immigrants."

The report also includes specific recommendations for show creators on how to better represent immigrants and integrate immigration-related storylines into their content, including hiring more immigrant show writers, consulting with immigrant communities, and seeking out compelling stories about underrepresented communities such as LGBTQ+ immigrants, older immigrants, immigrants with disabilities, and undocumented Black immigrants.