



Charitable Giving

in the media

Research Highlights

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■ INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the percentage of Americans who donated to charity was at an all-time low.¹ Although there has been a surge in both individual and corporate giving in the context of COVID-19, it remains to be seen whether these trends continue.² To understand why charitable giving has been on the decline, it is essential to first ascertain the dominant cultural norms and narratives around charitable giving in the United States. Mass media play a powerful role in shaping our social norms, attitudes, and behavior on a wide variety of issues,³ and could be a highly effective medium for promoting charitable giving. However, there is little research on how giving is represented in mass media,⁴ and what little research exists is focused primarily on news and social media.⁵ With this in mind, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation commissioned the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center’s Media Impact Project (MIP) to analyze what narratives about giving are conveyed through mass media news and entertainment, as well as what types of media content are consumed by potential donor audiences.

The Norman Lear Center has conducted 20 years of research on the power of media and entertainment to shape our perceptions of the world. Entertainment narratives have a tremendous ability to raise awareness about different causes and motivate people to action. Our audience research indicates that 59% of Americans have taken one or more civic actions based on entertainment programming, including joining a volunteer group (4%) and making a donation to a charity (7%).⁶ One notable study — on which the Lear Center collaborated — studied the impact of an organ donation storyline on the primetime TV series *Numb3rs*. In the episode, a beloved character models the process of registering to become an organ donor. The study found the storyline motivated 10% of audience members who were not already registered as organ donors to say they would become one.⁷

1. Haynes, E., & Theis, M. (2019, June 18). Gifts to charity dropped 1.7 percent last year, says ‘Giving USA.’ *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. <https://www.philanthropy.com/article/Gifts-to-Charity-Dropped-17/246511>; Jones, J. M. (2020, May 14). Percentage of Americans donating to charity at new low. Gallup. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/310880/percentage-americans-donating-charity-new-low.aspx>
2. Nowski, T., O’Flanagan, M., & Taliento, L. (2020, May 21). *A transformative moment for philanthropy*. McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/a-transformative-moment-for-philanthropy>
3. Gillig, TK., Rosenthal, E.L., Murphy, S.T., & Folb, K. L. (2018). More than a media moment: The influence of televised storylines on viewers’ attitudes toward transgender people and policies. *Sex Roles*, 78, 515–527. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0816-1>; Rosenthal, E.L., Rogers, A. A., Peterson, E., Watson-Currie, E., & Shin, H. (2020). *Change the narrative, change the world: How immigrant representation on television moves audiences to action*. USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center and Define American. <https://download.defineamerican.com/2020/09/Change-the-Narrative-Change-the-World.pdf>
4. Rosenthal, E. L., & Saucier, C. J. (2019). *Charitable giving in mass media: Analysis of research landscape*. USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center. https://www.mediaimpactproject.org/uploads/5/1/2/7/5127770/charitablegiving_landscapeanalysis.pdf
5. Ndulue, E. B. (2018, April 22). *Giving and philanthropy in the US: Analysis of discourse in news and social media*. Media Cloud. <https://mediacloud.org/news/2019/4/22/giving-and-philanthropy-in-the-us-analysis-of-discourse-in-news-and-social-media>
6. Blakley, J., Watson-Currie, E., Shin, H., Valenti, L.T., Saucier, C., & Boisvert, H. (2019). *Are you what you watch? Tracking the political divide through TV preferences*. USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center. https://learcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/are_you_what_you_watch.pdf
7. Morgan, S., Movius, L., & Cody, M. J. (2009). The power of narratives: The effect of entertainment television organ donation storylines on the attitudes, knowledge and behaviors of donors and nondonors. *Journal of Communication*, 59(1),135-151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01408.x>

8. These data are intended to establish a baseline — in terms of media depictions and audience — against which campaigns related to giving can be measured.

9. Rosenthal, E. L., & Saucier, C. J. (2019). *Charitable giving in mass media: Analysis of research landscape*. USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center. https://www.mediaimpactproject.org/uploads/5/1/2/7/5127770/charitablegiving_landscapeanalysis.pdf

10. Jauriqui, V. (2019). *Charitable giving in mass media: Interviews with key stakeholders*. USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center. https://www.mediaimpactproject.org/uploads/5/1/2/7/5127770/charitablegiving_stakeholderinterviews.pdf

11. Rosenthal, E.L., Rogers, A.A, & Peterson, E.B. (2020) *Charitable Giving in the Media: Detailed Findings*. USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center. https://www.mediaimpactproject.org/uploads/5/1/2/7/5127770/charitablegiving_detailedfindings.pdf

12. Rosenthal, E.L., Rogers, A.A, & Peterson, E.B. (2020) *Charitable Giving in the Media: Detailed Methodology*. USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center. https://www.mediaimpactproject.org/uploads/5/1/2/7/5127770/charitablegiving_detailedmethodology.pdf

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

To better understand priority audiences for charitable giving and the media narratives they consume, we conducted a mixed-methods study called a cultural audit. Our research addressed the following questions:

1. What types of news and entertainment are consumed by priority giving audiences, and what are their attitudes toward giving and how do they give?
2. What charitable causes and topics are most mentioned and most viewed on TV, including news, scripted and unscripted TV, commercials, and sports? How, if at all, do these representations shift throughout the year or in response to current events?⁸
3. How is charitable giving depicted in scripted television and film, including the charitable causes, characteristics of donors and beneficiaries, motivations for giving, and other contextual factors?

To answer these questions, we first conducted formative research. This began with landscape analysis of the existing literature on media representations of charitable giving, framing of related issues like poverty, and the factors that make charitable appeals most effective.⁹ We also interviewed 13 experts and key leaders in charitable giving or developing narratives for prosocial impact.¹⁰

Informed by this formative research, we conducted a **national audience survey** in two waves, analyzed **2.6 million hours of television**, and did a **deep-dive into scripted content** to better understand the narratives about giving that dominate the media landscape. These research activities are the primary focus of this report. Detailed findings and a detailed methodology can be found in separate reports.^{11 12}

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59% of Americans have taken one or more civic actions based on entertainment programming, including joining a volunteer group (4%) and making a donation to a charity (7%).



Sheldon Cooper calls church members for donations on *Young Sheldon*.

FORMATIVE RESEARCH: KEY FINDINGS

Our landscape analysis found **media coverage of charitable giving exists predominantly in news media, and tends to favor large organizations.** While there is little research on media framing of charitable giving specifically, there is a considerable literature on framing of poverty. TV news, and particularly conservative news outlets, are more likely than print news to use episodic frames that treat poverty as an individual failure. This type of framing tends to increase stigma and reduce willingness to help. Perceptions of responsibility for poverty may influence beliefs about effective solutions, such as individual giving.

From the expert interviews, **a clear consensus emerged that U.S. television and film do not adequately depict philanthropy, acts of charity and generosity, and other related subject matter.**

Interviewees further suggested that mass media contribute to misconceptions about the philanthropic community, affecting public understanding of both the organizations that work to fund important causes and the recipients of those charities. Overall, interviewees believed media could reframe stories about charitable giving and expand their coverage.

The landscape analysis further revealed several strategies for developing effective charitable appeals in media and beyond, including emphasizing similarities between beneficiaries and potential donors, focusing on local impact, and using images.

CHARITABLE GIVING SURVEY

To understand Americans' charitable giving attitudes and behavior, we conducted a national audience survey of over 2,500 people at each of two time points: April and July 2020 (5,089 total). We then divided participants into three audience segments based on their 2019 giving to examine the relationship between individuals' charitable giving behavior and their media and entertainment consumption:

1. **Responsive Givers (38.1%):** Those who primarily gave in response to current events or when asked by friends or family.
2. **Planned Givers (35.1%):** Those who primarily planned their giving ahead of time.
3. **Non-Givers (22.3%):** Those who did not donate any money to a charitable organization in 2019.



NON-GIVERS

Did not give to any charitable organization



PLANNED GIVERS

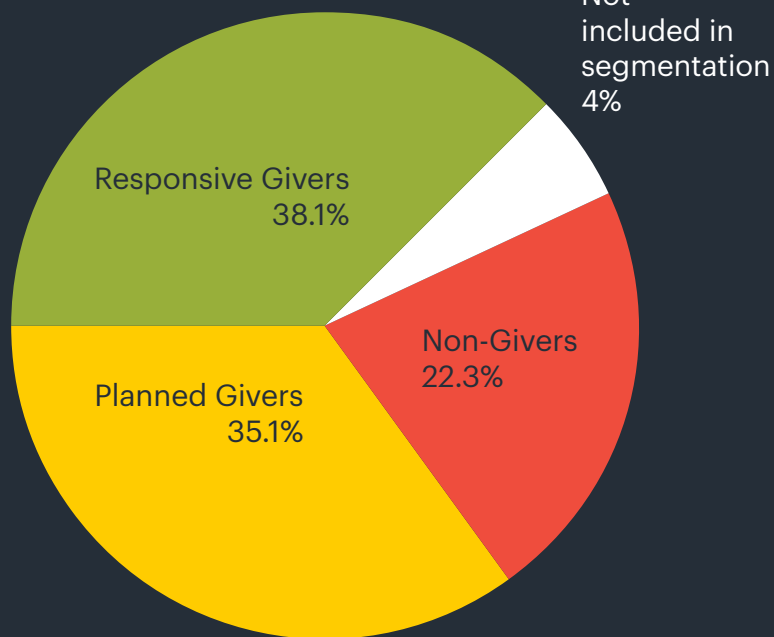
Made donations ahead of time



RESPONSIVE GIVERS

Made donations in response to a sudden need

GIVING GROUPS



An additional 227 respondents (4%) could not be classified into segments, but were included in some analyses that did not include audience segmentation.

CHARITABLE GIVING ON TV

To establish a baseline for how often charitable giving is depicted in U.S. news and entertainment programming, we conducted a rigorous analysis of TV coverage of charitable giving, including news, scripted TV, unscripted TV, advertising, and sports. We captured every mention of 12 charitable giving keywords during three separate 40-day periods:

1. **Giving Season period**
(Thanksgiving 2019 – New Years 2020)
2. **Normative period**
(February – early March 2020)
3. **COVID-19 period**
(Late April – early June 2020)

13. Impressions refer to the number of views each charitable giving mention received, based on viewership data from TVEyeS, a global TV search engine that monitors TV stations in all U.S. media markets.

14. A TVEyeS search of “football” over the month of October 2020 provided an average of 20,749 mentions per day, which would scale to 2,489,880 over a 120 day period.

In total, we examined almost 300,000 unique charitable giving mentions. For each mention, we analyzed the topic, genre, and number of impressions.¹³ References to charitable giving on U.S. television had over 15 billion impressions across 120 days. To provide some perspective, these 12 keywords combined appeared about half as many times as the word “football” alone would appear on television over 120 days.¹⁴

CHARITABLE GIVING IN SCRIPTED ENTERTAINMENT

Because scripted narratives are especially powerful, we sought to better understand the nature and context of depictions of charitable giving in scripted TV and film. First, we searched a database of over 87,000 scripted TV episodes and films from 2008-2019 for 12 charitable giving keywords, identifying more than 25,000 separate keyword mentions. Next, we conducted an in-depth content analysis of 170 giving storylines that included multiple references to charitable giving keywords, examining things like the motivation for giving and the characteristics of both donors and beneficiaries.

■ KEY FINDINGS

PRIORITY GIVING AUDIENCES

RESPONSIVE GIVERS



The largest of the three audience segments, Responsive Givers were racially diverse, and more likely to be female. They also tended to be younger, have moderate incomes, and lean a bit more progressive. They were more likely than others to give money directly to a specific person in need, and to feel committed to causes related to vulnerable populations, such as animal care, human services, and disaster relief.

Responsive Givers enjoyed all types of popular TV including scripted, reality, and talk shows. Some of their favorite shows from 2019 included *Game of Thrones*, *The Tonight Show* and *The Voice*. When they were not watching entertainment TV, Responsive Givers enjoyed listening to pop and hip-hop music, and checking their Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok social media accounts. They were more likely to say they get their news from social media.

Of the three groups, Responsive Givers were the most likely to be motivated to take civic action based on news or entertainment. Consistent with their responsive nature, they were also more likely to be inspired by celebrities to donate to charitable causes.

PLANNED GIVERS



Planned Givers were more likely to be male, and about three-quarters identified as white. They tended to be older and wealthier than members of the other segments, and leaned slightly conservative. Members of this group typically had a vision ahead of time of where they wanted their charitable dollars to go. They had a lot of confidence that their donations would make a difference, especially in their local communities, and they also had the greatest satisfaction with their giving experiences. They were the most religious of the three groups and cited church-related giving as a top charitable cause, with a substantial portion of their giving through recurring donations to a church or religious organization. Among those who were parents, Planned Givers expressed the most confidence in talking with their kids about giving, and felt they had the resources and tools to talk about giving as a family.

Whereas Responsive Givers watched a variety of popular TV, Planned Givers turned primarily to scripted entertainment and got their news from traditional

PERCENT WHO SELECTED EACH CAUSE AMONG 3 MOST IMPORTANT



sources like print newspapers and local TV news. They especially enjoyed watching working-class comedies like *Last Man Standing* and *The Goldbergs*. Planned Givers were also more likely to consume sports-related entertainment and podcasts.

NON-GIVERS



Non-Givers were the smallest of the three groups. They were more likely to be female and politically independent. Like Responsive Givers, they were a racially diverse group, with about one-in-five identifying as Hispanic. However, they were characterized by a low income relative to the other segments. More than half of this group reported a household income of less than \$35,000 a year. By definition, this group did not donate any money in 2019, though they did occasionally engage in other charitable actions, such as volunteering or making non-monetary donations. The causes most important to Non-Givers include civil rights, education, and animal care.

Of the three groups, Non-Givers consumed the least news, sports, social media, and entertainment television, and were least motivated by television to take civic action. When they did watch entertainment TV, they were most likely to enjoy popular shows like *The Big Bang Theory* and *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. They were less likely than other groups to tune in to popular music genres like pop and hip-hop, but they did enjoy heavy metal and rock music more than other groups.

MEDIA GENRES

TELEVISION NEWS

Charitable giving showed up in news programming more than anywhere else on TV, with eight out of 10 charitable giving mentions appearing in this context. When charitable giving stories appeared in national news — including network morning shows like *Good Morning America* and *The Today Show* — they reached millions of viewers. However, the vast majority of impressions came from local news programming. This is important because local TV news was the most commonly cited news source across all giving audiences.

Our research further suggests that stories about local giving — individuals in their communities — are likely to be more powerful than depictions or mentions of celebrity giving, at least in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Across all giving audiences, those who remembered seeing donation stories about individuals in their community donating to COVID relief were more likely to donate themselves. This was true even when controlling for how serious they thought the pandemic was and how closely they followed COVID news.

UNSCRIPTED TELEVISION

Giving stories in unscripted programming — including talk shows, game shows, and reality shows — can have a major impact. During Giving Season, each mention in unscripted TV received on average three times as many impressions (148,505) as each news mention (42,000). There is anecdotal evidence, at least, that incorporating giving stories in unscripted programming can have an impact on donations. Between the 1980s to the early 2000s, many charitable organizations were beneficiaries of “The Oprah Effect,” in which an organization was overwhelmed with donations after being mentioned on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.¹⁵

15. O’Conner, C. (2012, September 17). The Oprah Effect, charity edition. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/clareoconnor/2012/09/17/the-oprah-effect-charity-edition/#6699756f3ea2>



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Across all giving audiences, those who remembered seeing donation stories about individuals in their community donating to COVID relief were more likely to donate themselves.”

Kelly Clarkson and the cast of *Sesame Street* encourage viewers to give back to their local community for GivingTuesday.

Three quarters of all episodes depicted donors. While fundraisers and charity galas are sometimes considered playgrounds for the rich, our analysis identified just as many informal fundraising events as formal ones. **Among episodes that depicted an act of giving, almost half featured non-rich donors. Forty percent of episodes with fundraising events featured a racially diverse group of attendees, and 4% had predominantly Black attendees.** Whereas donors were ubiquitous in charitable giving episodes, beneficiaries only appeared in about one-third of episodes.

Sixty-nine percent of episodes with an act of giving represented at least one white donor. Black donors were depicted in 17% of episodes with a giving act. Only 8% of giving episodes portrayed a Latinx donor and 6% featured an Asian/Pacific Islander donor. Most donors of color appeared in shows with predominantly non-white casts like *Kim's Convenience*, *Lopez, Insecure*, *Black-ish*, *Grown-ish*, and the film *Dear White People*.

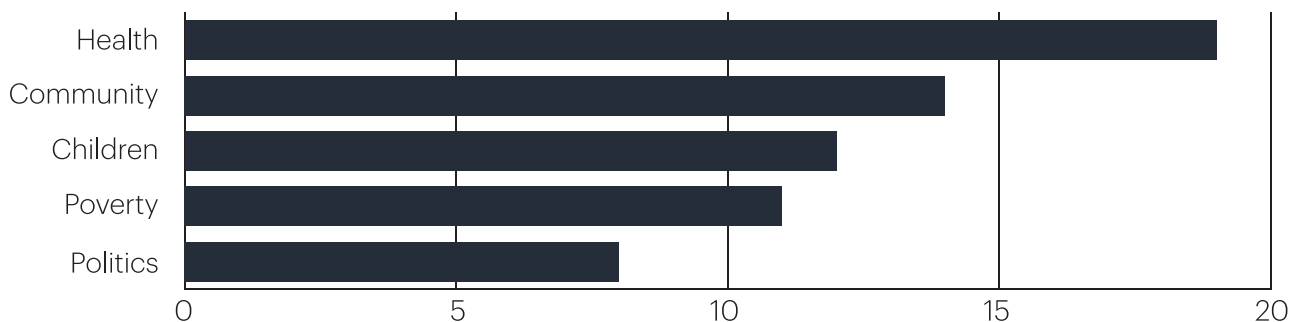
The depicted motivations for charitable giving were complex. Nearly half of episodes portrayed selfless motivations for giving, including giving out of generosity, compassion, or a desire to be helpful. Four in ten episodes depicted self-interested motivations, such as donating due to social pressure, personal benefit, duress, or other insincere motives. Over a quarter of all charitable giving episodes involved an association with corruption, impropriety, quid pro quo, fraud, or some kind of illegal activity.

CHARITABLE CAUSES

MOST COMMON TOPICS

The topics associated with the most impressions across all TV genres were health, community (e.g. local charities), children, and poverty. The same set of topics were also the most frequently mentioned in our analysis of scripted entertainment. These topics were somewhat at odds, however, with the charitable causes audiences listed as most important. Across all giving groups, animal care and human services were among the most important causes, while arts and culture were of lower importance.

PERCENT OF IMPRESSIONS ASSOCIATED WITH TOP 5 CHARITABLE GIVING TOPICS





Tina Fey reacts to the fundraising total for the *Rise Up New York* coronavirus relief event.

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Even Non-Givers, who by definition did not donate money in 2019, were moved to action in 2020. Over 15% of them donated to COVID relief, while about 5% gave to causes related to racial injustice.

COVID-19 AND RACIAL INJUSTICE

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with an uptick in charitable giving mentions on TV. During the COVID period from late April to early June, references to charitable giving garnered 6 billion views, compared with 5 billion during Giving Season, and about 4 billion during the normative period in February and March. Of all charitable giving impressions during the COVID period, 15% directly mentioned COVID. In addition, charitable giving mentions relating to health, poverty, children, and education all increased in frequency during the COVID period. Although racial injustice and the Black Lives Matter movement garnered significant TV news coverage during the COVID period, this coverage largely did not translate to charitable giving or donation language.

The events of 2020 had a particularly profound impact on Responsive Givers. They were more likely than the other groups to donate to either COVID relief or organizations fighting racial injustice, most commonly through smaller donations. Even Non-Givers, who by definition did not donate money in 2019, were moved to action in 2020. Over 15% of them donated to COVID relief, while about 5% gave to causes related to racial injustice.

Relative to Responsive Givers, Planned Givers were less likely to give to either COVID relief or racial injustice. When they did give, however, they tended to do so in higher amounts. Further, empathy seems to play a role in Planned Givers' behavior. Planned Givers with high levels of empathy gave more to COVID relief than those who were less empathetic.

■ CONCLUSION

Through this research, we sought to understand what narratives about giving are consumed by priority audiences, with the ultimate goal of providing charitable organizations and advocates with actionable insights about identifying target audiences, developing messages that resonate, and leveraging or shifting existing media narratives about giving.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PHILANTHROPY AND ADVOCATES

- 1 Target Responsive Givers through calls-to-action in unscripted TV.**

Responsive Givers enjoy many different types of television, and are most likely to be influenced by television to take civic action, making them an ideal group for television-based outreach. Reality TV and talk shows are popular with this group, and calls-to-action can be more easily incorporated into unscripted programming.
- 2 Reach Planned Givers through scripted storylines.**

Charitable giving advocates can use scripted TV to raise awareness and encourage recurring donations among those who plan their giving in advance. This strategy may be particularly effective when it depicts causes important to this group, like animals or human services. As a bonus, scripted TV also reaches Responsive Givers in high numbers.
- 3 Target Non-Givers through causes they care about and building their giving confidence.**

While Non-Givers are more difficult to reach through popular television content, they may be reached through other avenues, such as the music they enjoy. They gave less in 2020 compared to the other groups, but a number of 2019 Non-Givers were motivated to give to COVID relief and organizations addressing racial injustice. In the future, they could be motivated to give to causes they care most about, including civil rights, education, and animal care. Because this group tends to be lower-income, advocates might build confidence among Non-Givers by encouraging or modeling other ways to give back, such as soliciting donations from others or volunteering.
- 4 Focus on local giving.**

Stories about local giving, including members in the community donating or engaging in charitable acts, may be more likely to motivate viewers to give back themselves than high-profile stories about celebrities or philanthropists.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STORYTELLERS

- 1 Put beneficiaries at the center of stories.**
Focus more attention on the beneficiaries of charitable giving, and let them speak for themselves.
- 2 Showcase the impact of giving.**
Let audiences see the positive effects that charitable giving can have on beneficiaries.
- 3 Model more inclusive donors.**
Showcase more giving storylines involving young donors and donors of color.
- 4 Make giving accessible.**
Emphasize that anyone can be a philanthropist by depicting characters who are not rich engaging in charitable giving.
- 5 Include modern giving platforms.**
Integrate crowdfunding and online donations into charitable giving storylines, making them more relevant to younger audiences.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This research project establishes a needed baseline of existing media narratives for future research on U.S. giving. It also provides valuable insights for foundations and charitable organizations as they seek to understand the culture of giving in the U.S. and the role that media plays in establishing social norms. We recommend the following future research activities:

- 1 Measure the effectiveness of charitable giving campaigns.**
The effectiveness of new and ongoing campaigns can be assessed by monitoring shifts in content from the baseline established in this research. Conducting longitudinal content analysis of TV programming and scripted entertainment both television programming and scripted entertainment content would enable year-over-year comparisons in the content of charitable giving narratives.



Integrating charitable giving messages and stories into entertainment could be a highly effective strategy for promoting donations, particularly for Responsive Givers.



NCIS features a fundraiser for an accessible playground.

2

Track shifts in audience attitudes and norms.

The effects of campaigns can be further measured through longitudinal surveys assessing shifts in giving attitudes and behavior over time. Such research could produce actionable insights that enable advocates to adjust their strategies in response to changes in social norms around giving.

3

Measure the impact of charitable giving stories on different audiences.

Impact research on substantial charitable giving storylines in scripted or unscripted TV would enable advocates to understand the effects of such stories on the knowledge, attitudes, and giving behavior of different audience segments. This could include experimental research in which a narrative storyline is compared with a traditional charitable appeal. Insights on how audiences are influenced by different types of charitable giving narratives can be used to inform strategic outreach to the entertainment industry, as well as communication strategies more generally.

4

Engage in targeted outreach to entertainment content creators.

It is essential to have a rigorous evidence base to inform research and advocacy work. Armed with data on depictions of giving in different media genres and audiences, outreach efforts can be more effectively targeted to different types of content. For 20 years, the Lear Center's Hollywood, Health & Society program has served as a free resource to the entertainment industry, connecting content creators with subject matter experts on a variety of health and public interest issues.

Media, and particularly scripted entertainment, have an unparalleled reach and power to raise awareness about specific topics and move audiences to action. Audiences for a wide variety of scripted and unscripted entertainment are motivated to give money, moved to action by stories, and just waiting to be told where to aim their dollars. This research suggests integrating charitable giving messages and stories into entertainment could be a highly effective strategy for promoting donations, particularly for Responsive Givers.

This research is informative to the philanthropy field, and more generally, those who seek to harness the power of media and entertainment to reach audiences on policy relevant issues. Charitability and generosity play a fundamental role in any media effort that promotes volunteering or donations of any kind, whether the topic is climate change, immigration or racism. Deepening our understanding of the powerful cultural narratives that inform this nation's giving behavior, and ultimately its social conscience, will hasten the already quickening pace of progressive social change.

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