EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research examines the representation and dominant storylines associated with immigration, immigrants, and immigrant and border communities within popular television programs during the April 2014 to June 2016 television seasons.

This report is intended to offer advocates, activists, entertainment executives and creatives, media commentators, and media literacy promoters a more holistic understanding of the popular media narratives currently influencing public attitudes and behaviors toward immigrants. This report also offers guidance and tips for improving the portrayal of immigrants in popular entertainment and best practices for using popular culture to advance a social justice cause and engage new audiences.

THE FOLLOWING KEY FINDINGS EMERGED FROM OUR ANALYSIS:

IMMIGRANT CHARACTER REPRESENTATION

Identifiable immigrant characters are underrepresented in popular television shows:

Our analysis of 40 randomly sampled shows reveals that immigrants are significantly underrepresented in popular broadcast, cable, and streaming television shows. Foreign-born nationals currently comprise roughly 13.5 percent of the U.S. population, a figure that increases to 16.9 percent when factoring in the estimated 11.1 million undocumented immigrants. Yet between fall 2014 and spring 2016, identifiable immigrant characters comprised just 6 percent of leading and minor character roles. Specifically, of the 1,164 leading and minor characters present in the 40 television episode we examined, only 70 characters were identifiable as immigrants.

Immigrants are significantly more likely to be depicted in historical dramas and science fiction/fantasy shows:

Historical dramas had the highest rate of immigration representation, with 16 percent of characters in the historical dramas representing immigrant characters. In other words, of the 164 leading and minor characters featured in the historical dramas in our sample, 26 were identifiable immigrant characters. Sci-fi and fantasy follow with the second highest rate of immigrant representation, with 9 percent of characters identifiable as immigrants. Frequency of representation is significantly lower within the comedies and dramas. Immigrants accounted for just 4 percent of leading and minor character representation in popular dramas included in our sample, 3 percent for comedies, and just 2 percent for horror.

Immigrants of color are less likely than white immigrants to be cast in recurring4 roles:

White immigrants from Europe are significantly more likely than immigrants of color to not only be represented, but also depicted in leading roles. Sixty-seven percent of white, non-Hispanic immigrant characters were represented in leading regular and recurring roles, compared to 50 percent of Asian immigrant characters, 20 percent of Black immigrant characters, and 12.5 percent of Latino immigrant characters. Latino immigrants are significantly more likely than other demographics to be represented in minor, non-recurring roles. Nearly 90 percent of Latino immigrant characters occupied minor non-recurring roles, compared to just 6 percent of white immigrants, 25 percent of Asian immigrants, and 40 percent of Black immigrant characters.

White, European immigrants are overrepresented in television programming:

In the 2014–2016 television seasons, white, non-Hispanic immigrants were significantly overrepresented in the popular television shows. Specifically, of the 70 leading and minor characters identifiable as immigrants, 46 characters (66 percent) represented white immigrants from various regions. The nationalities of white immigrant characters skewed heavily European, with roughly 48 percent of white characters originating from Western and Eastern European countries, despite European immigrants (of all races) comprising only 11.3 percent of the foreign-born population in the United States as of 2014.

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4 Characters appearing in a series periodically or repeatedly.
Immigrant characters are more likely to be male than female:
Male immigrant characters comprised 73 percent of immigrant character representation, compared to 27 percent for female characters—a distribution that is in stark contrast to the foreign-born gender distribution in the United States. As of 2013, women represent roughly 51 percent of the foreign-born population\(^5\) and roughly 46 percent of undocumented immigrants, according to data from the Migration Policy Institute.\(^6\)

The occupation and socioeconomic status of immigrant characters vary significantly among racial/ethnic groups:
White immigrants are more likely than immigrants of color to represent working in discernible occupations, but they also are depicted in high-ranking positions or highly skilled professions. Thirty-nine percent of white immigrant characters were represented in discernible, traditional occupations, with the vast majority (83 percent) cast in senior roles in the military, and another 11 percent appearing as doctors or scientists. At the same time, Latino immigrants tended to be represented in lower-skilled professions or as unemployed due to involvement in unlawful activity. For instance, only 25 percent of Latino immigrant characters were depicted in any discernible occupation.

Bilingualism and subtitles play an important role in immigrant representation:
In-depth analysis of trends in character representation revealed a strong correlation between immigrant character representation and bilingual or multilingualism. In the episodes in our sample, code switching—that is, the practice of alternating between two or a variety of languages or dialects in conversations—was a prominent tool used by show creators to signify immigrants. For instance, of the 16 episodes in our sample that featured an immigrant character, 50 percent (eight out of 16) included a character speaking English alongside another language.

LGBTQ immigrants are largely absent in television content:
Our sample included no representation of trans or non-conforming immigrants, and only one immigrant character openly identified as gay.

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DOMINANT STORYLINES AND THEMES ASSOCIATED WITH IMMIGRATION

Storylines focused on historic immigration and European colonialism—dominant immigrant character representation:
More than one-third of episodes featuring identifiable immigrant characters included an overarching storyline centered on historical immigration, generally within the context of colonialism and imperialism. Historical dramas accounted for the majority of this category of storytelling. Storylines centered on historical immigration were almost exclusively tied to European nations' ethnic groups’ exploration and colonization of territories around the globe, with several based loosely on real historical events.

14% of immigrant characters were directly tied to some form of unlawful activity including murder, human trafficking, and drug dealing.

A significant portion of storylines tied to immigration or immigrants centered on unlawful activities:
Storylines about unlawful activities accounted for 25 percent of storylines involving immigrant characters. These storylines depicted immigrant characters directly participating in unlawful activities or being questioned by police, often as a direct result of their status as an immigrant. Overall, 14 percent (10 of 70) of immigrant characters were directly tied to some form of unlawful activity including murder, human trafficking, and drug dealing.

Latino immigrants are significantly more likely to be tied to storylines about unlawful activities and depicted participating in unlawful acts:
A troubling 50 percent (four of eight) of Latino immigrant characters were represented committing an unlawful act. Thirty-eight percent (three) were depicted as incarcerated. This compares to a third of black immigrants who were depicted participating in an unlawful act (33 percent), 25 percent of Middle Eastern immigrants, and just 9 percent of white immigrants.

50% of Latino immigrant characters were represented committing an unlawful act.

Comedies are a space where discrimination against immigrants and anxieties related to demographic change are being challenged through humor:
Twenty-two percent of total episodes reviewed included storylines about the everyday life of immigrant characters, often within the genre of comedy. Beyond simply conveying the everyday lives of immigrants in receiving countries, comedic depictions of immigrant characters also emerged as an important space where nuanced stories of the immigrant experiences are being told and where stereotypes and social anxieties related to specific immigrant groups are being creatively challenged through humor. Popular comedies *Parks and Recreation* and *The Big Bang Theory* are illustrative of this point.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Our findings and analysis lead to a series of recommendations for how social justice advocates, media commentators, entertainment executives, and creatives can improve the overall portrayals of immigrants and immigration and also leverage popular entertainment to advance a social justice issue.

STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING THE PORTRAYALS OF IMMIGRANTS AND IMMIGRATION:

**Uplift nuanced portrayals of immigrants in popular entertainment.** From Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang’s original Netflix series, *Master of None*, to Eddie Huang’s comical depiction of the immigrant experience in ABC’s *Fresh Off the Boat*, the spring 2014 to fall 2016 television season gave way to a number of more complete and varying depictions of immigrant communities that we were unable to touch upon in this study. Acknowledging and uplifting helpful and nuanced representations when they exist is essential to improving the overall portrayal of immigrants and immigration in popular entertainment. Advocates should positively reinforce existing character portrayals and storylines that provide a positive example of nuanced and compelling storytelling.

**Challenge and reframe negative portrayals of immigrants in popular entertainment.** Our research unveiled a troubling trend in the representation of immigrant characters, specifically a correlation between immigrant character representation and storylines focused on unlawful activities, particularly in the case of Latino immigrant characterization. In a time when political discourse has become more openly hostile to immigrant communities and people of color, challenging harmful portrayals in popular entertainment is of critical importance. Advocates should actively challenge and reframe negative portrayals of immigrant characters when they occur by not only drawing attention to particularly stereotypical depictions, but also providing audiences with a context for understanding why a particular representation is problematic. As our research notes, prolonged and recurring representations of immigrants typically result in more authentic and positive representation. As such, advocates should also pressure entertainment executives to provide more varied and quality representations of immigrant characters.

**Encourage new storylines that avoid tired and harmful stereotypes and more authentically depict the immigrant experience.** Key to increasing and improving the overall portrayals of immigrants in popular entertainment is developing new storylines and characters. In recent years, as the media landscape has become increasingly interactive and the line between content producer and consumer has blurred, the opportunity for social justice advocates, entertainment executives, and creatives to collaborate has increased. Social justice advocates seeking to more actively engage popular culture should seek to involve entertainers and creatives in the development of new storylines that better reflect the complex immigrant experience.
STRATEGIES FOR USING POPULAR CULTURE TO ADVANCE YOUR CAUSE AND ENGAGE NEW AUDIENCES:

Use storylines and popular characters to frame your issue. For those seeking to leverage popular culture in their own work, making use of popular cultural storylines can help build an emotional understanding and connection to your issue. Research has shown that we develop para-social relationships with characters that we regularly watch on television, identifying them (in our brains) as friends of sorts. So talking to some audiences about the immigration or cultural experiences of Raj from the *Big Bang Theory*, for instance, will help them see those experiences in a new light and likely with more empathy. As with any individual storytelling, however, doing this needs to be balanced with other kinds of stories that broaden the focus so that audiences aren’t just focused on that individual’s plight, strengths, and weaknesses.

Help audiences become educated consumers of entertainment and other media. The importance television preferences play in predicting political decision-making has come to the forefront of media research in recent months and presents an important new avenue for advocates to reach otherwise disengaged audiences. Audiences educated in media literacy are less likely to be susceptible to stereotypical portrayals. Advocates and creatives seeking to minimize the impact of stereotypical media representation need to help young people become educated consumers of entertainment and other media.

Engage progressive fandoms. Our analysis of social media data revealed that audiences are actively engaging in online discussions of popular television shows, a cultural phenomenon that represents an important opportunity for social justice advocates to leverage popular entertainment to tell more accurate and empowering stories about immigrant communities. Fans of shows developed or headed by people of color and children of immigrants in particular are prime for cross-issue engagement concerning immigrants’ rights, women’s rights, and racial justice. These fan bases should be prioritized for outreach and engagement and targeted during show premieres or season finales—periods when they are most active online.

Define immigration in the modern context. In our analysis, historical dramas emerged as an important space where stories of immigration are being told in complex and innovative ways. The representation of immigration within this genre touched on a variety of themes, including the establishment of new identities and homes. These historic representations of immigration, specifically to the United States in shows like *TURN: Washington’s Spies*, may not be viewed by audiences as related in any way to contemporary immigration. It is important for advocates and media commentators to make this connection explicit for audiences. Linking the desire of characters in historical shows to find a new home and begin a new life to current immigrant communities’ desire to do the same may be a strategy for engaging and educating new audiences.

Our analysis consisted of a random sample of 40 shows, with some genres better represented than others. Future research projects should focus on representation with specific genres and also expand the scope of research to include additional mediums.