AMERICAN REALITIES ON PUBLIC TELEVISION:

ANALYSIS OF INDEPENDENT TELEVISION SERVICE'S INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARIES, 2007–2016

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary • 3
About the Project • 5
Introduction • 6
Methodology • 10
Findings • 15
Discussion & Conclusion • 23
References • 26
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What are the kinds of filmmakers, places, people, and topics addressed in the documentaries produced by public media’s major documentary production wing, Independent Television Service (ITVS)? This study maps this landscape, to better understand how public media functions in a time when viewers are besieged by unreliable news and at a moment when public broadcasting’s federal funding is under debate.

Founded in 1988 to coproduce independent, innovative documentary storytelling – particularly about underrepresented concerns and for underserved audiences – ITVS has grown into an anchor organization for public broadcasting documentary programming and public knowledge ecology. It has funded 1,400 films, many of which have garnered premier journalism and artistic awards. ITVS-funded films often spur community-focused engagement with the public around issues of shared concern. Independent, publicly-funded TV programming that reflects both rural and urban American communities faces a threat of elimination through the congressional budgetary process.

This study uses quantitative content analysis and analysis of self-reported ITVS data to examine the filmmakers, characters, social issues, and regional story settings reflected in the complete list of 342 U.S.-focused films funded by ITVS over a decade (2007-2016). We compare this information to two other sets of data: The U.S. Gallup “Most Important Problem” poll, which articulates the top social issues Americans care about (Gallup, 2017; Aisch & Parlapiano, 2017), and U.S. Census designations of demographics of the population, including geographic location in rural and urban communities (United States, 2016).

Major findings include:

Publicly-funded independent documentary films cover social issues and concerns that are most important to the American people.

ITVS-funded films focus on social issues and concerns that match the long-running Gallup “Most Important Problem” survey of Americans. The top social issues included in ITVS-funded films correspond with the top social concerns indicated by the American people in the May 2017 Gallup data, including: race relations/racism, economy, government, health care, immigration, and national security/war.

Publicly-funded independent documentary films reflect the geographic diversity of America.

ITVS filmmakers come from 33 states and the District of Columbia, an area that in total represents 84% of the U.S. population, according to 2016 U.S. Census data. The stories they tell focus on life in all four major regions of the United States, including the West (27%), South (19%), Northeast (18%), and Midwest (12%), with an emphasis on rural America.

Publicly-funded independent documentary makers reflect the gender and racial diversity of the United States.

Filmmakers (directors and producers) of documentaries coproduced by ITVS reflect the organization’s commitment to diversity as a reflection of the country, and are more likely to be diverse than the general population. Forty-eight percent were women and 38% were men (13% declined to identify themselves). Racially, 41% self-identified as white, far under white representation in the general population.

Characters on publicly-funded independent documentaries reflect the United States.

In ten years of ITVS-funded, U.S.-focused films, top on-screen characters include: community-serving professionals (military service members, religious/faith leaders, medical personnel, law enforcement professionals, and educators), parents, artists, civically engaged individuals (community activists), community leaders and elected officials, and immigrants.
"OVER THE PAST 50 YEARS, since the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967, PUBLIC MEDIA HAVE PROVIDED THE AMERICAN PEOPLE with public affairs news programming, journalism and independent documentary storytelling."
ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Center for Media & Social Impact

The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) at American University’s School of Communication, based in Washington, D.C., is an innovation incubator and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for social impact. Focusing on independent, documentary, entertainment and, public media, CMSI bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners who work across media production, media impact, public policy, and audience engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and research; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter. www.cmsimpact.org
INTRODUCTION
Over the past 50 years, since the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967, public media have provided the American people with public affairs news programming, journalism, and independent documentary storytelling (Aufderheide & Clark, 2008; Day, 1995; Engelman, 1996). This function has become increasingly important with the corporate consolidation of American news and entertainment media, the digital disruption that challenges once-bedrock journalistic institutions, and the emergence of more unreliable and untrustworthy information in circulation (Baker, 2007; Knight, 2009; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Waldman & United States Federal Communications Commission, 2011; Lewis, 2014). Meanwhile, national surveys consistently register public trust in public media; a 2015 national survey showed that “PBS and its member stations are rated number-one in trust among nationally known institutions, and are called an ‘excellent’ use of tax dollars by the American public for the 12th year in a row” (PBS, 2015). Public media’s provision of trusted, reliable public affairs, journalism, and independent documentary storytelling thus increasingly serves a critical function in a democracy.

Created in 1988 and funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting as a commitment to incubate and showcase independently-produced documentary storytelling reflective of the American people (Aufderheide, 1999), the Independent Television Service (ITVS) coproduces content with independent filmmakers programs that, according to its mission statement, “enrich the cultural landscape with the voices and visions of underrepresented communities, and reflect the interests and concerns of a diverse society.” The documentaries created by ITVS each year form an important part of the body of independent character-driven and social-issue documentary work created in the U.S. In 2017, ITVS was awarded the Peabody Institutional Award, one of the highest honors in American journalism. Each year, the documentaries ITVS coproduces also win major journalism and film accolades such as Oscar nominations, and Emmy and Peabody awards. They form the backbone of the two major U.S. public television series for documentaries, POV and Independent Lens, as well as contributing to other PBS series such as FRONTLINE, American Experience, American Masters, and others.

Taken as a whole, the documentaries ITVS coproduces form a portrait of American reality, social issues, concerns, stories, and values. This study examines the demographics of that portrait.

Framework of Debate

The cultural landscape portrayed by programming funded primarily by taxpayer dollars is of particular interest now for two reasons. First, public funding for culture and arts is in question under President Donald Trump’s administration (Deb, 2017). Second, the quality of media behavior is under intense scrutiny with claims and counter-claims of fake news and media bias; some of these claims are political partisan accusations, but some examples of proven fake news may well be products of espionage and sabotage (Chen, 2015; Marwick & Lewis, 2017; Perez & Prokupecz, 2017; Savage, 2017).

The question also is relevant because the current debate occurs within a historical context in which some political actors on the right portray public broadcasting programming as partisan, for their own strategic purposes. Such politicization has also been seen in education, humanities, arts, and science funding. The charges of politicization in public broadcasting have been made from its origins in 1967, because of the way its federal funding is structured. Public broadcasting is subject to perennial
appropriation debates, and the three-year appropriation process involves, potentially, political debate over content in every year (Aufderheide & Clark, 2008). Debate over the representation of American issues and values in public television has historically focused on public affairs, often specifically on documentaries. Some Republican critics have, in service of an argument for defunding, have argued that documentaries leaned “left.” This claim has been made from the earliest days, when public broadcasting funding was nearly eliminated because of the redlining documentary Banks and the Poor, which targeted the bank of a Nixon campaign funder. It continues in the present, with a congressional representative recently denouncing three films he had not seen, but which included female characters of color (Aufderheide, 1994; Blumler, 1992; Bullert, 1997; Engelman, 1996; Sefton, 2017; Zimmermann, 1982).

This attribution of partisan bias was one element in a larger conservative movement to demonize social inquiry generally under the rubric of partisan “political correctness.” For instance, the National Association of Scholars, supported over decades with funding from openly far-right conservative foundations, succeeded in eliminating civil rights readings in curricula and diversity as an accreditation standard, and has called for political “balance” in professorial hires (Cohen, 2008; People for the American Way, 1996). These arguments depend on a purely political polarization, which fails to reflect the complexity of knowledge-building in research, teaching, and the public knowledge-sharing that is journalism. As scholar Norman Fairclough has noted, “‘Political correctness’ and being ‘politically correct’ are, in the main, identifications imposed upon people by their political opponents. But this in itself is also a form of cultural intervention to change representations, values, and identities as a way of achieving social change” (Fairclough, 2003, p. 21).

With news of potential defunding of public broadcasting in 2017, a New York Times article addressed the traditional Republican framing of the debate, with interviews from filmmakers demonstrating both diversity of subjects and richly experiential storytelling (Anderson, 2017). This reporting, however, remained at the anecdotal level. More importantly, it did not challenge the partisan claim that documentaries can be usefully categorized along “left” or “right” lines. As scholars have repeatedly demonstrated (and as some sources argued in the article), journalism generally develops narratives that may cause discomfort and awareness without being partisan (Scheufele, 1999; Schudson, 2008, 2012).

Beyond Partisan Framing: Theoretical Approaches

More helpful than the rigid description of media along partisan lines in any analysis of media narratives is a social constructionist approach, in which narratives are seen as rich social constructions, participating in a reflexive, constantly active process of creating meaning, developing culture, and asserting agency (Carey, 1989; Dewey, 1927; Hall, 1980). This approach permits analysis that can transcend partisan rhetoric.

What is not in question is whether media representation affects individual understanding of the self and the world, and whether such understandings have social ramifications. A long history of social science research shows the power of representation on social attitudes (Berry, 2007). Bandura and others using social-cognitive theory showed that television viewers and especially children...
may use media representations to form expectations or schema about categories of people, including themselves (Bandura, 2002). Scholars employing the methods of cultivation theory – matching patterns of representation with patterns of belief among low, medium, and high television watchers – have shown that the flow of television carries overarching messages and themes that affect belief (Morgan, Shanahan & Signorielli 2009; Potter, 2014). For instance, alarmist messages of fear and danger on television are associated with heavy television viewers being unusually fearful and risk-averse.

Research on the relationship of media and democracy demonstrates the vital link between a rich information environment and democratic participation (Baker, 2007; Barber, 1984; Keane, 1991). This relationship is not merely about an informed citizenry, but about a media ecology routinely nourished by informed civil discourse on a variety of topics; indeed, a narrow focus on political information and a highly motivated citizenry can function to exclude voices (Schudson, 1998). Thus, representation and participation matter to democratic publics, whose agency – capacity to act in the world – is affected by it. This indeed has been a time-honored argument for the existence of public media, which can offer reliable programming beyond the typical commercial constraints in the service of public knowledge and benefit, particularly in a hectic, increasingly decentralized and often unreliable media environment (Blumler, 1992; Debrett, 2010; Raboy, 1995).

Partisan attacks on media representation as either liberal or conservative belie the complexity of routine media decision-making, shaped around institutional mandates, cultural expectations, and resource realities. The well-developed field of media sociology (Waisbord, 2014; Waisbord, 2012) demonstrates the importance of looking closely at institutional practices, the content of media products, and the media ecology.

This study contributes to doing just that.

# A Decade of Publicly-Funded Independent Documentaries: Role of this Study

To date, there is no systematic analysis of publicly-funded independent documentary storytelling in the United States that provides a comprehensive portrait of the filmmakers, places, people, and social issues portrayed as a reflection of American concerns and communities. Such an analysis can provide first-level data to address the question of priorities and values in such work. To address this gap, this study provides a topography of the filmmakers, places, people, and social issues represented by documentaries coproduced by the Independent Television Service. It does so to map patterns over a period of time – not by any one documentary, but by the selection as a whole. Such mapping is a precondition for any kind of discourse analysis (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012), which could analyze not only what is addressed but how it is addressed.

This study anchors its analysis in characteristics of the filmmakers, places, people, and subjects in ITVS-coproduced documentaries over the past decade (2007-2016), across two White House administrations, both Republican (George W. Bush) and Democrat (Barack Obama). We then compare this information with two sources of publicly available information: The Gallup Poll’s 2017 “Most Important Problem Facing the Country Today,” which provides a nationally representative portrait of social concerns perceived by Americans as most important (Gallup, 2017); and U.S. Census designations, including rural and urban data (“Urban and Rural,” 2016).

This study addresses the following questions:

**Filmmakers:** Who are the storytellers (directors, producers) represented in ITVS-funded documentaries, in terms of race, gender, and age groups, and how do they compare with the general American population? In what states do the filmmakers reside?

**Places:** What kinds of American communities are represented in ITVS-funded documentary stories, in terms of regions, and rural or urban designations?

**People (Lead Characters):** Who are the primary on-screen characters in these stories, and how do they compare with the general American population?

**Social Issues:** What are these films about, and how do they reflect the concerns Americans have identified as top issues, according to Gallup public opinion data?
Overview & Data

In order to address our questions about the nature of the population of filmmakers and the characters and the places portrayed by independent documentaries on publicly funded U.S. television, we were granted permission by ITVS to examine its archived data. ITVS is meaningful in this pursuit, as it is the largest single funder/co-producer of independent documentaries on U.S. public TV and, due to its mandate, it already maintains, over time, extensive demographic and summary records about its funded films and filmmakers. ITVS provided limited access to its in-house data about each film in the following areas: (1) filmmaker information (filmmakers’ self-reported race, gender, age groupings), (2) story setting (country region, rural vs. urban designation, according to U.S. Census definitions), (3) film synopses, which contain detailed information about the on-screen story, social issues, and major characters. The copies we made of this information were kept on password-protected computers and deleted from our records upon completion of the study (analysis and writing), after sharing our data analysis with ITVS.

We used quantitative content analysis to examine the complete list (synopses, filmmaker information, story settings, and filmmaker states of residence) of 342 U.S.-focused films coproduced by ITVS over a ten-year period, from the 2007 season to the 2016 season, and also calculated totals based on self-reported information (filmmakers’ demographic details, story settings). During this decade (2007-2016), ITVS coproduced 430 films in total, but 88 of these were stories focused on international topics, and thus, not included in this analysis. We examined the U.S. stories and the filmmakers who produced them. On average, about 34 films were coproduced by ITVS during each year. Each film and filmmaker was coded according to key content information about each film (and film team) available in ITVS’ internal databases for ten years (2007-2016). As part of ITVS’ internal record-keeping protocol, each film and film team that received ITVS funding was required to record a range of information.

Upon our request, ITVS provided limited access to its in-house data about each film in the following areas: (1) filmmaker information (race, gender, age groupings), (2) story setting, (3) film synopses, which contain detailed information about the on-screen story, social issues, and major characters.

Data about filmmakers (race, gender, age groupings, state of residence) is self-reported data by the filmmakers, and thus, reflected here in terms of categorization; no additional independent coding was required. Data about story settings (country region) was reported and recorded by ITVS staff as part of its comprehensive internal record-keeping, and thus, also not subject to independent coding by this research team; this research team completed all total calculations, however. From film synopses – that is, 500-word narrative summaries and descriptions of the film’s story, social issues, and primary characters – the team independently coded based on particular variables of interest, described below. Since we used existing records created in the process of production of documentaries, and did not analyze the text of the documentaries themselves, we do not draw conclusions about the narrative structure.

Community Setting: Based on self-reported and archived ITVS information about the city/town in which the story takes place, each film story was cross-referenced with its setting identification with U.S. Census Bureau designations that determine rural and urban communities. The U.S. Census Bureau identifies urban and rural counties across the country based on population density. Based on this classification, urban regions are classified either as “Urban Areas” (50,000 or more people) or “Urban Clusters” (at least 2,500 but less than 50,000 people), and “Rural” encompasses all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area.” Each county in the country is classified according to this designation, available most recently in the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau County Classification Table. Counties with less than 50% of the population living in rural areas are classified as mostly urban; 50 to 99.9 percent are classified as mostly rural; 100% rural are classified as completely rural. To categorize each U.S.-focused film’s community setting as either “rural” or “urban” (or both), each county associated with each film story was then matched with this official U.S. Census designation (“Urban and Rural,” 2016). ITVS delivered this data.

Self-Reported Information & Analysis

Filmmakers: ITVS-funded filmmakers were asked to self-identify themselves in three demographic ways: race, gender, and age group. This data is reflected in the final totals and analysis. Not all filmmakers chose to reveal this information, which accounts for the “decline to state” category in these areas.
Regional Setting: Based on self-reported information identifying the location of each film’s story, we calculated totals based on the U.S. Census-designated regions of the United States: Midwest, West, South, Northeast.

Film Synopses Coding Scheme: People & Social Issues

Each film’s synopsis information was analyzed and coded by two trained graduate students, and checked by the study’s lead authors. Both coders were briefed and trained with the full codebook and discussion of the coding rules, and any questions were resolved in subsequent discussions with the study’s lead authors. The presence of each variable was noted with “1,” and the absence of each variable was coded with “0.” Before coding the full sample of films and filmmakers, both coders independently analyzed a subset of the full sample to assess and verify intercoder reliability (Krippendorff, 2004a). Two waves of reliability samples included 68 randomly-selected films in each wave of sampling, 20% of the population (342 films) in each intercoder reliability sample. To ensure intercoder reliability, Krippendorff (2004a) has recommended a range of acceptability from $\alpha \geq .800$ to $\alpha \geq .667$ (p. 241). He also acknowledges challenges in particular coding scenarios such as the one we present here, in which many variables present as zeroes (Krippendorff, 2004b, p. 425). In this case, the wide variety of potential categories means that many films do not include the presence of any of the available variables, thus increasing the scenario in which some variables included many “0” codes for their lack of presence, relative to “1” codes to indicate the existence of the variables across multiple films. For this reason, for each variable, we report intercoder reliability results with percent agreement between the coders, as well as Krippendorff’s alpha.

For 37 out of 41 total variables we coded (in terms of “story themes/social concerns” and “on-screen characters”), percent agreement was at least 88% and Krippendorff’s alpha ($\alpha$) was at least .66. Of the total variables we coded, three fell below Krippendorff’s .66 threshold for intercoder reliability (Krippendorff, 2004a, p. 241), but only minimally; thus, we have reported them here. In the “story themes” category, this includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT) themes (96% agreement, $\alpha = .65$) and mental health themes (96% agreement, $\alpha = .65$). In the “on-screen characters” category, this includes: Native American (96% agreement, $\alpha = .65$) and child/teen (91% agreement, $\alpha = .62$).

People (Lead Characters): Each documentary story is told through the portrayal and reflection of people who drive the main narrative, typically referred to in documentary filmmaking as “lead characters.” These lead characters were coded based on two levels: (1) any evident occupation referenced in the film synopsis, and (2) any evident demographic characteristics referenced in the film synopsis. Only an overt, explicit reference in the film’s synopsis triggered the coding. Thus, the results reflect not the total demographic or occupational reality, but categories significant for the role the person played in the narrative. Categories for on-screen characters are:

- Education professional (K-12 and college/university) (100% agreement, $\alpha = 1.0$)
- Parent/s (94% agreement, $\alpha = .85$)
- Immigrant/refugee (93% agreement, $\alpha = .70$)
- Military servicemember (97% agreement, $\alpha = .74$)
- Religious/faith leader or member (99% agreement, $\alpha = .85$)
- Artist (including writers, playwrights, painters, and filmmakers) (96% agreement, $\alpha = .84$)
- Community activist (100% agreement, $\alpha = 1.0$)
- Medical personnel (includes EMTs, emergency responders, and firefighters) (100% agreement, $\alpha = 1.0$)
- Community leader/elected official (93% agreement, $\alpha = .70$)
- Law enforcement (including attorneys, judges, police, and prison officials) (97% agreement, $\alpha = .88$)
- Celebrity/notable public figure (not including elected officials) (99% agreement, $\alpha = .90$)
- Farmer/rancher (100% agreement, $\alpha = 1.0$)

Demographic:
- African American (90% agreement, $\alpha = .75$)
- Native American (96% agreement, $\alpha = .65$)
- Asian American or Asian (96% agreement, $\alpha = .75$)
- Muslim (100% agreement, $\alpha = 1.0$)
- Hispanic/Latino American or Hispanic (99% agreement, $\alpha = .93$)
- Women (91% agreement, $\alpha = .78$)
- Transgender/GLBT (99% agreement, $\alpha = .93$)
- Child/teen (91% agreement, $\alpha = .62$)
- Elderly (100% agreement, $\alpha = 1.0$)

Social Issues: A narrative story synopsis for each film includes the summary of the film, its characters, and the major story themes. To identify a comprehensive list of Americans’ most important social challenges, we used the social-issue categories provided by Gallup’s long-running “Most Important Problem” survey, which has asked a random sample of the general U.S. population “What is the most important...
problem facing the country today?” since 1935 (Aisch & Parlapiano, 2017; Gallup, 2017). We coded the presence of all social issues included in the films’ written synopses. The list of social issues includes:

- Health and healthcare (99% agreement, α = .90)
- Civic participation & engagement (91% agreement, α = .82)
- Criminal justice (including crime) (96% agreement, α = .86)
- Economy and working (including jobs, finding jobs, job flight, wages, and taxes) (91% agreement, α = .68)
- Poverty (including hunger, homelessness, and joblessness) (97% agreement, α = .82)
- Government/leadership (including government corruption, quality of governmental leadership, and gridlock) (99% agreement, α = .97)
- Corporate corruption (100% agreement, α = 1.0)
- National security & war (including terrorism, ISIS, and wars) (96% agreement, α = .80)
- Education (both K-12 and higher education) (96% agreement, α = .78)
- Immigration (97% agreement, α = .90)
- Religion/faith (99% agreement, α = .92)
- Drugs (including drug addiction, the war on drugs, drug policy, and drug-related deaths) (100% agreement, α = 1.0)
- Race relations and racism (99% agreement, α = .97)
- Environment (including climate change) (99% agreement, α = .85)
- GLBT (96% agreement, α = .65)

External to the Gallup “Most Important Problem” poll, we also coded for themes that emerged in the film synopses; these include:

- Food and agriculture (100% agreement, α = 1.0)
- Family life (88% agreement, α = .66)
- Mental health (96% agreement, α = .65)
- Disability (97% agreement, α = 74)
- Reproductive health (100% agreement, α = 1.0)

The Homestretch, directed by Anne de Mare and Kirsten Kelly, won a 2015 News and Documentary Emmy Award. To shed light on the hardships facing 1.6 million homeless young people in America, the film follows the lives of several homeless Chicago teens on a difficult but triumphant journey to finish high school. www.homestretchdoc.com

PHOTO CREDIT: Kartemquin Films
"EACH DOCUMENTARY STORY IS TOLD THROUGH THE PORTRAYAL AND REFLECTION OF PEOPLE as lead "characters" known in documentary storytelling as those individual people who drive the main narrative. Characters are real people, given THE FOCUS OF NONFICTION STORYTELLING."
FINDINGS
Filmmakers

Gender:

Of 553 credited filmmakers, 38% identified themselves as male, and 48% identified themselves as female. (Approximately 13% declined to identify themselves in the gender category.)

By comparison, the most recent 2016 U.S. Census data showed the U.S. is 49% male and 51% female (“QuickFacts,” 2016).

Race:

Of the list of 553 credited filmmakers: 41% self-identified as white, 11% identified as African American, 11% identified as Asian American or Asian, 9% identified as Hispanic or Latino, 3% identified as Native American or Alaska Native, 2% identified as Pacific Islander, and 1% identified as Middle Eastern. Of the remainder, about 15 percent declined to state racial identification, and 6 percent indicated “Other.”

For comparison, the most recent 2016 U.S. Census data showed the U.S. identifies as 61% white (listed as “white alone, not Hispanic or Latino”), 13% African American, 6% Asian American, 18% Hispanic, and 1% Native American or Alaska Native (“QuickFacts,” 2016).
Age Group:

Out of the list of 553 credited filmmakers, in order: 26% were between the ages of 40 and 49; 25% were 30-39; 13% were 50-59; 7% were 60-69; 5% were 18-29; and 2% were 70 years of age or older. Approximately 22% declined to provide their age group.

States of Residence:


Community Setting:

According to U.S. Census definitions of “rural” and “urban” communities (“Urban and Rural,” 2016), ITVS-funded U.S.-based independent films focused on a mix of urban and rural locations. Across ten years, of the U.S.-focused films that identified particular cities and towns as settings (318 films), 72% of the stories focused on primarily urban settings, and 28% were a mix of rural and urban (21%), or only rural (7%).

According to the most recent statement by the U.S. Census Bureau, rural areas in the United States contain about 19% of the U.S. population, compared to the remaining 81% of U.S. residents who reside in urban centers (United States, 2016).

Regional Setting:

In ITVS U.S.-based films, all four major regions of the United States are represented within stories: Midwest, West, South, Northeast.

According to the U.S. Census report, 2016 Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for the United States, Regions, States, and Puerto Rico, the U.S. population is distributed in the four regions as follows: 38% in the South, 24% in the West, 21% in the Midwest, and 17% in the Northeast (United States, 2016).
People (Lead Characters)

Occupation/Status:

Across 342 films, 492 characters were identified and categorized based on their role-based descriptions in story synopses. In ten years of ITVS-funded U.S.-focused films, top depicted characters fall into several major categories, including:

- **Professionals Serving the Community (20%)**: This grouping includes military service members, religious/faith leaders, medical personnel, law enforcement personnel, and educators.
  - Military service members: 6%
  - Religious/faith leaders: 3%
  - Medical personnel: 3%
  - Law enforcement personnel: 4%
  - Educators: 4%
- **Parents (14%)**: This category labels parents as the main description of the primary on-screen characters.
- **Artists (14%)**: This category includes authors, playwrights, painters, poets, and filmmakers.
- **Community Activists (14%)**: This category includes civically engaged community members advocating for improvement or change.
- **Community Leaders & Elected Officials (9%)**: This category includes community leaders, including U.S. elected officials.
- **Immigrants & Refugees (9%)**: This category includes on-screen characters identified primarily as immigrants or refugees.

Other on-screen characters coded here include: Notable public figures/celebrities (7%), farmers and ranchers (3%), mental health sufferers (3%), corporate leaders (1%), and substance abuse addicts (1%).
Demographic Descriptors

Across 342 films, 387 on-screen characters were identified and categorized based on their overt, explicit demographic descriptions in story synopses. ITVS films identified and portrayed women, African Americans, children and teens, Hispanics, and Native Americans the most.

Other on-screen characters identified demographically include: GLBT (6%), elderly (4%), Asian-American or Asian (3%) and Muslim (3%).

Social Issues

*What Americans Care About: “Most Important Problem” Themes:* 

Based on a broad listing of social issues included in Gallup’s long-running U.S.-based “Most Important Problem” survey (Gallup, 2017), the 342 independent ITVS U.S.-focused films focused on a wide cross-section of Americans’ concerns, from race relations and education to health and healthcare. We identified 1,056 story themes for categorization across 342 films. The top ten issues and concerns portrayed in the past decade of ITVS films were:

1. Race relations & racism (14%)
2. Civic participation (9%)
3. Government (including poor leadership) (9%)
4. Family life (8%)
5. Criminal justice & crime (7%)
6. Immigration (7%)
7. Economy/working (6%)
8. Education (5%)
9. Health & healthcare (5%)
10. National security & war (including terrorism) (4%)
Other story themes and social issues exist in the examined ITVS films, but minimally, including: Poverty (3%), religion/faith (3%), GLBT themes (3%), environment (2%), mental health (2%), food and agriculture (2%), drugs (1%), science/technology (1%), reproductive health (1%), and disability (1%).

The top ten social-issue story themes found in the ITVS films reflect most of the top ten social concerns articulated by Americans in the most recent (May 2017) Gallup “Most Important Problem” findings (Gallup, 2017); totals below indicate the percentage of the American population that lists each issue as “the most important problem facing the country today,” in order:

1) Economy (21%)
2) Dissatisfaction with government/poor leadership (18%)
3) Healthcare (18%)
4) Immigration (7%)
5) Race relations & racism (6%)
6) National security (5%)
7) International issues, problems unifying the country (4%)
8) Ethics/moral/religious/family decline (4%)
9) Poverty/Hunger/Homelessness (3%)
10) Wars/War (3%)

The immediate next priority items on the Gallup list include: Education (2%), terrorism (2%), crime/violence (2%), the judicial system (2%), and environment/pollution (2%).

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<tr>
<th>ITVS Film Content</th>
<th>Gallup &quot;Most Important Problem&quot; Poll (May 2017)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race relations &amp; racism</td>
<td>Economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic participation</td>
<td>Dissatisfaction with gov't</td>
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<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family life</td>
<td>Immigration</td>
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<td>Criminal justice &amp; crime</td>
<td>Race relations &amp; racism</td>
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<td>Immigration</td>
<td>National security</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economy/working</td>
<td>International issues</td>
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<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Ethics/moral/religious/family decline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; healthcare</td>
<td>Poverty/Hunger/Homelessness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National security &amp; war</td>
<td>Wars/War</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Gallup's May 2017 "Most Important Problem" findings can be found here: http://www.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx. Gallup presents a composite of all “economic concerns” at the top, and then primary social issues and concerns (non-economic) are presented from highest to lowest in terms of public concerns.
"HOW DO INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARIES funded and produced by ITVS REFLECT THE CONCerns Americans have identified AS TOP ISSUES FOR for them over the past decade?"
DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Filmmakers

Who told these stories? They were more likely to be female (55%) than male, among those who reported, which is 87% of the total. If all who declined to report were male, the female population would still be relatively high (48%), particularly compared with typical female media makers, who are markedly underrepresented, both in news/public affairs and in entertainment media (ASNE, 2015; Hunt, Ramon, & Price, 2014; Papper, 2015).

The storytellers were more likely to be people of color than the general population is. This conforms to the mandate of ITVS to make diversity a top priority in telling innovative stories to underrepresented audiences. Some 41% identified as white, compared with the U.S. Census proportion of 61%. If all who declined to state (15%) were white, the total would still substantially underrepresent the proportion in the U.S. population. Among federally-recognized minorities, ITVS filmmakers underrepresented African Americans (11% vs. Census population of 13%) and Hispanics (9% vs. 18%), and overrepresented Asian Americans (11% vs. 6%) and Native Americans (3% vs. 1%). ITVS’ categories were more elaborated than that of the Census, which may affect comparisons.

Overall, the independent filmmakers who told these stories were much more likely to be female and people of color than in commercial mainstream media, and they also came from all over the country. They represented 33 states, plus Washington, D.C., and came from states that represent more than 84% of the population. They were well-positioned to tell stories that are less likely to be told in mainstream media, because of their combination of demographic characteristics and the fact that they were independent producers.

Places

The stories they told also reflected American diversity. Geographically, we found that the story settings well represent rural areas of the country. Some 28% of the ITVS-funded films are set either in rural areas or in a mix of rural and urban areas. By U.S. Census designation, rural areas make up 19% of the nation. Thus, the experiences of people living in the heartland areas outside mainstream media centers are getting a close-up focus in the mix of ITVS-produced stories. The rural settings are not a backdrop, furthermore, but the homes and communities of the people whose stories are told.

Regionally, ITVS-produced stories also take viewers far beyond the bicoastal urban mainstream media centers. While about a quarter of the story settings are either located in multiple U.S. regions and places – including international – of the story settings that are located in one identified place, we see substantial diversity.
More than 40% of the story settings that occur in an identified place occur in the South or the Midwest, which holds 55% of the U.S. population. Stories are twice as likely to be in set in the South (25%) than in the Midwest (12%). Stories set in the West (35% of identified story regions) over-represent the population of the area, which the U.S. Census records as 24%. Since ITVS-produced stories over-represent rural areas, and the West includes both densely populated and very lightly populated regions, this overrepresentation correlates appropriately. Overrepresentation of the Northeast is considerably less. Some 24% of identified story regions are in the Northeast, which U.S. Census records show with 17% of the population.

Overall, we see that ITVS programs are routinely set in all regions of the country, especially in the small or mid-range towns that rarely make news.

People (Lead Characters)

Who are the people whose stories are being told in these places? Few of the characters are known names. Rather they are working people involved with their communities. They are important in the stories told in these documentaries because of the roles they play there: as teachers, members of and veterans of the armed services, police, religious leaders, community activists, artists, and farmers and ranchers. They are more likely to be in the prime of their working years (more than ¾ of them) than either a youth or an elder. They are family people; 14% of the lead characters are primarily identified within the story narrative as parents, in fact. They are creative; some 14% are artists of some kind, including writers and filmmakers. They are people who care about and work for their communities. Local leaders, elected officials, civic activists, and professionals working in and for the community account for 43% of identified occupations or statuses in film descriptions.

In the area of gender, lead characters are more likely to be male than female; only 22% of lead characters were identified in story narratives as women. This does not mean, of course, that only 22% were women, but rather that their gender was significant in the story narrative. They are overwhelmingly cisgender; only 6% of lead characters are identified as GLBT. How this compares with the U.S. population involves some estimating. It is challenging to assess the proportion of GLBT people in the U.S. population, due to criminalization of the status and stigma in earlier eras, as results of a recent Gallup poll discussion. While overall more than 4% of the total U.S. population self-report such status, more than 7% of millennials – whose life experience involves less stigma for the categories – do so. As well, direct assessment studies often discover a larger proportion of the population than self-reports (Gates, 2017). The proportion of GLBT lead characters in ITVS-produced work appears to be well within the range of self-reported demographics for millennials and direct assessment, but over the figure that includes self-reports from older generations.

The lead characters are more likely than the general population to be people of color or a recognized minority. Some 46% of lead characters are identified in film descriptions associated with some minority status, most often African American (21%), Hispanic (11%), or Native American (8%). This proportion is double the proportion of people of color in the U.S., which the Census reports at 23%. It also reflects the ITVS explicit mandate for diversity, to address the chronic (and continuing) underrepresentation of minorities and people of color in mainstream media. Aligned with the occupational/community role played, we saw that people of color are often portrayed as active, contributing members to their communities.

Overall, the characters whose stories drive the narratives of these documentaries are working people active in their communities, more likely than the general population to be in a federally-recognized minority.

Social Issues

Finally, we asked: How do independent documentaries funded and produced by ITVS reflect the concerns Americans have identified as top issues for them over the past decade? Here we discovered that the primary concerns or issues of ITVS documentaries, as expressed in summaries, overlap substantially with concerns Americans express in the annual Gallup poll. All of the top ten categories that coders devised to categorize ITVS-produced films are found with similar terminology in the top 14 categories used in the Gallup poll. Differences in categorization and the sample used account for the need to consider 14 categories in Gallup and 10 in ITVS. Two of the top-ten Gallup categories, “Wars/war” and “National security” are grouped together in ITVS categories. Two Gallup categories, “crime/violence” and “judicial system” were included in the ITVS category “criminal justice and crime.” As well, one Gallup top-ten category, “International issues,” was not considered here as we excluded films dealing with international issues.

The lead categories in the two lists show different emphases, but otherwise there is often congruence between the two lists. ITVS’ top category, “race and racism,” appropriately aligns with its diversity mandate; it also reflects the fifth concern in the Gallup poll. The top Gallup concern, “economy,” is the seventh most referenced subject for ITVS films.

The level of concern sometimes aligns well between the two data sets. For instance, immigration concern is at 7% for both sets. Some 5% of Gallup respondents identified national security as their top concern, and 4% of ITVS films addressed that, although this ITVS
category also contains terrorism/war, which is a separate concern (at 3%) for Gallup respondents. Four percent of Gallup respondents registered crime/violence and the judicial system as their top concern, and 7% of ITVS programs dealt with criminal justice and crime.

In some cases, ITVS emphasis was greater or lesser. Only 2% of Gallup respondents made education their top issue, but 5% of ITVS programs dealt with education. This may also align with the emphasis on community and locality in ITVS documentaries. The proportion of respondents to the Gallup poll invested in healthcare issues is higher, at 18%, than the 5% of ITVS films dealing with health and healthcare. This is probably not surprising given that healthcare was a top legislative and electoral headline at the time of the Gallup poll, and documentaries are made on a longer timeline.

In two areas, the levels of concern are similar, but the valence is different. Gallup respondents tended to respond with dissatisfaction or concern with decline, while ITVS films tended to focus on civic engagement about the same issue. The second two categories of ITVS films, “civic participation” and “government (including poor leadership)” align with the second Gallup concern, “dissatisfaction with government/poor leadership.” But ITVS films tend to be more positive than the negative nature of the concern in Gallup. The ITVS’ focus on community, engagement, and agency is reflected in the category of “civic participation.” Some 4% of Gallup respondents registered “ethics/moral/religious/family decline” as a concern. Meanwhile, 8% of ITVS films are specifically about family life. These difference in categories suggest that ITVS films may be looking at how people actively address dissatisfaction with civic action. This hypothesis could be explored in further studies that look at the films themselves, rather than their production information.

Overall, the issues dealt with in ITVS documentaries aligned with the top concerns of Americans responding to the Gallup poll.

Conclusion

We found that ITVS documentaries over a ten-year period represented, both in their makers and their subjects, a broad range of American demographics and geography. They showed working Americans addressing concerns in their community with active strategies for improvement. They represented the top concerns of American people as reflected in an annual Gallup poll. They had a strong focus on community and civic engagement. This pattern of representation makes a distinctive contribution to the media environment, by providing insights into aspects of America that typically are under-represented in mainstream media, but shape American civic and cultural realities.

"We found that ITVS DOCUMENTARIES OVER A TEN-YEAR PERIOD REPRESENTED, both in their makers and their subjects, A BROAD RANGE OF AMERICAN DEMOGRAPHICS AND GEOGRAPHY."


AMERICAN REALITIES ON PUBLIC TELEVISION:

ANALYSIS OF INDEPENDENT TELEVISION SERVICE’S INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARIES, 2007-2016

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