BRIDGE ENTERTAINMENT LABS

Can Popular Entertainment Save America?

WHITE PAPER

Executive Summary

Bridge Entertainment Labs is dedicated to harnessing the power of storytelling and entertainment to bridge America's partisan divides. We explore the impact of entertainment media on polarization and societal cohesion, and promote the creation of content that fosters civic health and democratic norms.

America is trapped in a damaging cycle of toxic political polarization and negative partisanship, leading us inexorably toward widening cultural rifts, government dysfunction, and even sectarian violence. We believe the entertainment industry has an important role to play in interrupting this cycle and reversing the trend towards deepening division.

The grassroots movement around depolarization has exploded in recent years, but even the most effective bridging initiatives face two central challenges. First, most Americans who sign up for these interventions are those already predisposed to want to bridge divides – they've chosen to take the critical first step on a depolarization journey. But they are not necessarily the bridging-resistant people we most urgently need to reach. Second, many of these interventions are difficult to scale due to logistical and cost barriers. Popular entertainment represents an untapped opportunity to address both these opt-in and scale challenges.

The power of entertainment media to shape societal norms and behaviors is vast and we believe partisan tribalism can be reduced at scale – and new norms established – through narrative strategies embedded within TV, film, and internet videos. Social science offers proven methods for reducing intergroup hostility and promoting prosocial behaviors. What the entertainment industry requires in order to exploit these insights is a bridge that connects entertainment content creators to academic and practitioner experts with key insights about how to reduce toxic polarization.

Bridge Entertainment Labs *is* this bridge. The following goals drive our work:

Elevate polarization and civic health as mainstay topics for the entertainment industry;

Equip entertainment stakeholders with knowledge, data, and resources to inform the creation of depolarizing content;

Enlist a coalition committed to fostering civic cohesion and democratic norms through entertainment.

Will the entertainment industry take up the challenge to depolarize? We believe it must, and that doing so will ultimately require not only a bridge to the realms of bridge-building research and practice, but the bridging of divides within the entertainment industry itself. In the end it is not only American society that stands to benefit, it is in Hollywood's own self interest to tackle the problem of polarization.

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What Is Affective Polarization?

Partisan polarization represents a growing threat in the United States. It's hard to be living in America at this moment without feeling this polarization at a visceral level.

Partisan animosity – referred to as "affective polarization" – has effects beyond fracturing families and poisoning friendships. As partisan enmity increases, our elected leaders become less willing to work together and compromise, impeding progress on a host of critically important issues. Political violence, rates of which are rapidly increasing in the U.S., is an inevitable consequence of unmitigated "us versus them" tribalism. Polarization has become a profit-driven industry based on the monetization of outrage in which the greatest losers are the American people and our democracy. There is an urgent need to address this escalating problem quickly.

Of course, Americans have always had ideological differences over policy issues, with our two main political parties aligning with and advocating for distinct sets of ideological convictions. This kind of ideological, issue-based polarization can actually be healthy for democracy.

What is different now? The partisan warfare we're experiencing marks a departure from the polarization over issues that has always existed in America. We no longer just disagree with those outside our own political in-group, we feel intense disdain and distrust towards them. We've retreated into our partisan camps, with each side convinced that they are "in the right" and fearful of the opposing camp.

How did we get here? What is it about this moment that has produced this phenomenon?

Americans are fed a diet of polarization on a daily basis – by our politicians, social media feeds, and partisan news outlets. Daily news stories seize on our divisions. Outrage sells, and we're continuously led to feel outraged and suspicious of the "other side" and reassured of the righteousness of "our side." We've begun to internalize this narrative of polarization, creating a vicious cycle.

Social media algorithms reinforce our divisions, driving us deeper into partisan echo chambers that vilify the other side and convince us that the other side holds us in contempt. We encounter stereotypes of our partisan others more often than we encounter living, breathing examples of them, and we begin to accept these stereotypes as reality. We have geographically segregated ourselves, with red pockets of the country becoming redder and blue becoming bluer, resulting in

"A 59 percent majority of Americans believe that creating more TV, movies and music that help people understand those who have different values and views would be effective at reducing divisiveness or destructive disagreements."

Public Agenda, 2021

far fewer opportunities to regularly interact with those outside our partisan bubbles.

With the loudest voices amplified – even those representing a minority view – other voices are drowned out. We mistake the loudest voices for majority opinion. It's no wonder we feel distrustful and angry towards the other side, and that Americans "incorrectly believe that members of the other party dehumanize, dislike, and disagree with them about twice as much as they actually do." [1] The present moment almost seems engineered to exploit our tribal instincts.

Americans' increasing hostility towards one another based on partisan affiliation is one of the most corrosive forces in American life today. This more emotional form of polarization grinds our problem-solving gears to a halt. If we regard our perceived political adversaries as enemies, rather than as good-faith opponents, we lack the foundational trust needed to solve problems together. Democracy is predicated on the idea that non-like-minded citizens listen to competing perspectives and find ways to work together, persuade, and compromise. When voters and politicians are caught in the grip of affective polarization – when we eye each other with fear, suspicion, and loathing from across the political aisle – the collaborative problem-solving required by democracy becomes impossible.

The good news? We're not helpless against the forces of polarization. While we may be prewired for partisanship, we're not hardwired. And the forces in 21st century American life that are exploiting our tribal tendencies? We created them, and we can change them. Identifying those societal levers capable of overcoming the forces of division is the urgent work of our day. Bridge Entertainment Labs believes popular entertainment is one of these levers.

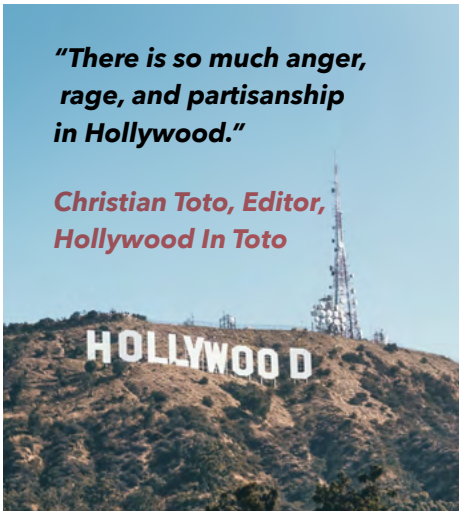
Hollywood And Polarization

Virtually every corner of American life has been impacted in some way by polarization, including popular entertainment. But how, exactly, are the dynamics of division playing out in the world of entertainment? Is the entertainment industry a driver of – or a victim of – our crisis of division? We contend it is both.

Toxic partisanship is palpable within the entertainment industry, resulting in fractured relationships, aborted deals, and – increasingly – siloed entertainment ecosystems. When *Mandalorian* star Gina Carano was fired by Disney in early 2021 over a series of social media posts, we saw Hollywood's liberal and conservative camps immediately line up in predictable order. Those on the right decried excessive political correctness and defended Carano as the victim of a dangerous "cancel culture" that serves to silence conservative voices. Those on the left applauded Carano's firing, claiming her comments had been unacceptably offensive and that Disney had an obligation to draw a line regarding socially intolerable statements. It was an all too familiar sequence of events, and a microcosm of the dynamics playing out in sectors across the country.

Not only did this incident expose deep divides within the entertainment industry, it prompted a development likely to exacerbate the problem. In response to Carano's firing, Ben Shapiro and his media company, The Daily Wire, announced the launch of their own Texas-based film studio Bonfire Legend. Conservatives who lament being "cancelled" by major Hollywood studios are deciding to jump ship entirely and form their own studios, offering a home to actors, content creators, and executives exiled by the left. Antonio Sabato Jr.'s Conflix Studios is another example of this trend, offering "casting, filming and distribution outside of the restraints of Hollywood" for conservatives in the industry. Conservatives are renouncing Hollywood altogether, building out an alternative, soup-to-nuts entertainment universe for right-leaning America.

We've seen this phenomenon before in the worlds of social and news media – partisan tribes deciding they can't coexist on the same platforms, and creating parallel universes (like Parler and Breitbart) for their own tribe. Popular entertainment is producing yet another category of self-contained echo chambers in which like-minded partisans are exposed to only the content and views deemed acceptable to their group. What will it mean when there are red and blue news, social media, *and* entertainment ecosystems?



"If Hollywood is going to make an ideological business decision to not produce content that the majority of America wants to see, I don't have any problem with that . . . Because they're leaving a giant pile of money on the table, and my company has no problem taking that."

Amanda Millius, co-founder of the conservative Washington-based production company, 1AMDC

What's happening to the world of entertainment is clearly a symptom of societal polarization, but is entertainment also a cause of our division?

We know that what we watch shapes our perceptions of other people and establishes societal norms and behaviors. How is the entertainment content being watched by millions of Americans right now influencing the way liberals perceive conservatives and vice versa? How does this content inform the way we're engaging with each other across these lines of difference? There is a need to investigate this, in part because that research could empower the entertainment industry to combat the forces of polarization.

One thing is clear: the partisan divide is reflected in what Americans are watching. With few exceptions, liberal and conservative America prefer very different entertainment content. Conservatives opt for "programs that are family-friendly, funny, plot-driven or have storylines that involve 'good versus evil.'" Liberals on the other hand prefer programs that are "sexy, edgy, emotionally involving, ethnically diverse or have strong characters."[2] It's the increasingly rare show nowadays that commands a broad crossover audience and appeals equally to red and blue America.

We may not yet know whether what we watch fuels polarization, but *how* we watch is definitely a culprit. The streaming revolution of the past decade has steadily eroded the "communal" nature of entertainment consumption. Once upon a time, Americans chose from the same limited menu of content delivered via the same channels at the same times. As limiting as that was, it provided abundant opportunities for "water cooler moments" and created common cultural references shared by liberals and conservatives alike. Americans of different backgrounds watched the same programming at night and could converse about it together the next day. We've gained flexibility and options through recent changes in content delivery, but sacrificed some of "the communal nature of television watching." [3]

The shift to streaming has also changed incentives for the entertainment industry in consequential ways. The explosion of options available to audiences through streaming means networks no longer follow a "four-quadrant strategy" designed to create content capable of appealing to all four demographics: female, male, over 25, under 25. Instead, networks now aim "to hit one audience with a given show, and to hit it really well."[4] On one hand, this means underrepresented groups that previously might not have seen themselves and their experiences reflected in the programs they watched are offered tailored content that resonates more deeply and authentically. Unfortunately, it also means a splintering of our entertainment culture, a steep decline in shared viewing experiences, and fewer business

Late night tv is both a reflection and driver of polarization. Tune in after 11pm for a taste of the combustible mix of Hollywood and partisanship. Many Americans, particularly those on the left, delight in late night hosts' commentaries on our current partisan divide, but do these shows amount to pouring gasoline on the flames of our national crisis of division? Throwing red meat to a partisan base may satisfy viewers and boost ratings, but at what cost? The same could be said of what many regard as the right wing analogue to late night TV: conservative talk radio. Investigating the impact of this content on audiences' levels of affective polarization is an area ripe for research.

"Five shows have equal appeal for all ideological groups: America's Funniest Home Videos, Bones, Criminal Minds and MythBusters are enjoyed by all three groups. Pawn Stars has the distinction of being watched, but hated by all groups."

Johanna Blakley,
"Are You What You Watch?"

incentives to create content that Americans of diverse backgrounds can enjoy together.

More research regarding the impact of entertainment media on America's partisan divides is needed. While we're only beginning to understand ways in which the entertainment industry is both a victim and driver of polarization, however, one thing is certain: it can be part of the solution.

Embracing Polarization As An Urgent Impact Issue

Hollywood has wielded the unique power of storytelling since its earliest days, but the last two decades have seen the industry fully embrace "social impact entertainment." The notion that content can both entertain and drive social change has gained traction throughout the industry at breathtaking speed.

Examples of entertainment being leveraged to address issues ranging from racial injustice to gender inequality abound. Whether through documentaries, scripted narratives in TV and film, or short form videos, entertainment's ability to effect change in society is now taken as a given. The show *Will and Grace* had a profound impact on Americans' attitudes towards gay people, just as films like *The Day After Tomorrow* and *An Inconvenient Truth* marked a turning point in national discussions around climate change.

The time has come for Hollywood to regard toxic polarization as an urgent social impact issue of its own. The same energy and talent that have been brought to bear on other critical issues in our society can be applied to our crisis of division and declining civic cohesion. We've seen the role entertainment can play in advocating for increased voter participation and other forms of civic engagement; now is the moment for the industry to explore the power of storytelling and entertainment to mitigate polarization and bridge deepening divides within our country.

Elevating toxic polarization as a distinct impact issue represents a unique challenge for Hollywood. While issues like climate change and racial justice neatly align with the priorities of an industry known for its more left-leaning predilections, polarization is different. Embracing the cause of depolarization and partisan bridge-building requires a different mindset and calls on stakeholders to think about their partisan "others" in ways that may feel unfamiliar. Individuals and institutions must be willing to commit to the goal of humanizing one tribe to the other.

> *"Story has the ability to build bridges of understanding, tolerance, empathy and respect, helping us to make sense of our lives and the world around us. The time has come to use the infinite power of story, as expressed through entertainment and performing arts, to inspire social impact. "*
>
> *Teri Schwartz, Dean UCLA School of Theater, Film, and Television*

The goal of this humanization is not to convince one side or the other to abandon its moral convictions or embrace an opposing ideology. Nor is it an effort to push Americans into the "middle" and away from bold positions on social issues. Rather, the goal is to create the necessary preconditions for rational debate and collaborative problem-solving. No one need leave their convictions at the door. If entertainment succeeds in this endeavor, the good news is that research shows there is more common ground to be plowed than either side recognizes now.

Many would argue that Hollywood executives care first and foremost about box office results and streaming subscribers. If the social imperative of depolarization does not inspire action – despite the obvious urgency of the problem – there are market-based, commercial incentives that can. The prospect of content that has broad crossover appeal and attracts both liberal and conservative audiences may be what moves studios and creatives to engage. How have shows like *NCIS*, *Young Sheldon*, and *Big Bang Theory* been consistent ratings hits on network television? By targeting a shared cultural space and appealing to both red and blue America. A hit show like ABC's *The Conners* is a case study in how scripted narratives that intentionally humanize characters on the left and right can also be a recipe for ratings (and revenue) success.

While increasingly rare, additional shows have managed to reach this elusive goal of the broad crossover audience. Research is beginning to uncover the "secret sauce" that enables these scripted shows to overcome partisan segmentation.[5] Identifying the specific features that these shows have in common provides not only a roadmap for how to create more shared cultural spaces for red and blue America, it's a potential recipe for greater viewership and market share.

It's worth noting that the second-highest grossing film franchise of all time is one squarely focused on humanization of enemies. While depicting a universe starkly divided between the forces of good and evil, "*Star Wars* teaches us the importance of empathy and humanizing our opponents, especially when it is hardest to do so."[6] For studios, networks, and content creators seeking connections between humanizing storytelling and commercial payoff, there may be no better example than this epic tale of intergalactic tribalism.

"The difference between 'the middle' and 'common ground' is the difference between a superficial process that papers over problems, and a patient process of healing, reconciliation, and trust-building that allows us to move forward together, with our differences intact and our dignity affirmed."

Shamil Idriss,
CEO, Search for Common Ground [16]

Can Entertainment Help Depolarize?
Equipping the industry with tools and optimism.

Getting the entertainment industry to recognize the urgency of addressing polarization and its corrosive impact on civic health is the first step. Then the question becomes: what would it look like for entertainment to address the problem? How do we begin to understand the role that entertainment media can play in ameliorating toxic partisanship, bridging divides, and promoting civic cohesion in America?

Social science – particularly in the fields of Media Psychology, Mass Media & Communications Studies, and Social Psychology – offers valuable insights about how to reduce intergroup hostility and promote prosocial norms and behaviors through popular entertainment. We believe greater collaboration between social scientists, bridge-building practitioners, and Hollywood's content creators offers enormous potential for scalable impact on the problem of polarization.

Recent examples of entertainment successfully reducing intergroup prejudice and hostility provide a promising roadmap for how to "depolarize" through storytelling. In the realm of scripted content, a vast body of research offers a starting point. Over the past decade, researchers have begun to investigate the specific elements of fictional narratives that are most effective at reducing polarization between groups defined by race, religion, sexual orientation, and other dimensions. Work on reducing differences defined by ideology or partisan affiliation has been less prevalent but should – we believe – be accelerated, given the growing urgency of addressing affective partisan polarization.

Four promising theories for depolarization through entertainment media are outlined below:

"More importantly, empathy lends to humanizing our opponents and resisting the gravitational pull of tribal politics, which demands that we reduce political opposites to something other than complex individuals….Whether it's encounters with alien species or confronting villains shielded by menacing masks, the journey of any hero in the Star Wars universe tends to involve a personal quest for empathy."

Stephen Kent, 2021[17]

Theory #1: The Contact Hypothesis

In the 1950s, Gordon Allport famously theorized that sustained interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice between majority and minority groups. Allport's "intergroup contact theory" has been applied to prejudice reduction in a broad range of contexts and since expanded into theories of "parasocial contact" and "vicarious contact." "Parasocial contact" involves audience members observing outgroups they may not be exposed to in their real lives. This sustained exposure to an outgroup – even when mediated through television or film – has been proven to reduce prejudice.

Similarly, "vicarious contact" – ingroup audience members observing fellow ingroup members interacting with outgroups – has been shown to have persistent positive effects on inter-tribe perceptions. A great example of vicarious contact can be found in *Will and Grace*, a sitcom focused on the friendship between Will, a gay lawyer, and Grace, a straight interior designer, featuring a number of LGBTQ+ characters.

With an audience of close to 20 million viewers each week, *Will and Grace* demonstrably reduced anti-gay bias and shifted our national consciousness in profound ways. Straight viewers lacking (or believing they lacked) direct contact with gay people in their real lives got to see fellow straight characters interact in positive ways with gay characters. The results of this vicarious contact were profound: 60% of viewers reported that "watching the show led to positive perceptions of gay people," and 71% of viewers rejected the statement that "heterosexual relationships are the only 'normal' relationships compared with 45% of non-viewers.

Equally impactful was the fact that viewers were presented with different versions of outgroup members. Monolithic perceptions of "the gay community" were shattered by creating in Jack and Will two characters representing very different types of gay people. Could similar effects be achieved with regard to partisan polarization? Just as not all gay people are the same, not all conservatives or liberals are the same. Can we challenge viewers' stereotypes about their partisan others by intentionally highlighting the diversity that exists within partisan groups? For Americans lacking direct interpersonal contact with their partisan others, TV and film might help penetrate social bubbles via parasocial and vicarious contact.

A popular Muslim-Canadian sitcom, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, offers an equally compelling case-study in the power of parasocial contact to reduce intergroup prejudice. First aired in 2007, the story features Muslim characters navigating daily life in North America, presenting the audience with positive portrayals of Muslims and Christians interacting in a fictional small town setting. Research confirms that the

CBS filmed Ways and Means, a new political drama pilot starring Patrick Dempsey, in 2021. The show portrays a "powerful Congressional leader who has lost faith in politics [and] finds himself working secretly with an idealistic young Congresswoman from the opposing party to subvert the hopelessly gridlocked system he helped create; together, they'll attempt to save American politics … if they don't get caught."

show significantly reduced anti-Muslim bias among viewers, and that these effects were persistent over time.

Theory #2: Perceptions and Metaperceptions

As red and blue America drift further and further apart, parasocial and vicarious contact offer strategies for overcoming the distancing and self-segregation among partisans that is accelerating polarization. But we know that another key driver of polarization has to do with the perceptions America's political tribes have about each other. The animosity felt towards "the other side" is often based on misperceptions and mischaracterizations of our partisan opponents that are manufactured and reinforced by partisan news outlets, social media, and politicians. In fact, many researchers argue that despite *feeling* hyper-polarized, Americans agree on more than they realize and are not nearly as polarized as they're being told they are.[7]

Social scientists refer to a phenomenon involving "meta-perceptions," in which behavior towards a competing outgroup is motivated not only by one's own perceptions of the outgroup, but also by how one believes they are perceived by the outgroup. Whereas straightforward polarization can be summed up as, "I dislike you because of your specific actions and beliefs," polarization stemming from meta-perceptions means "I dislike you because I'm convinced you dislike me." When it comes to America's current political moment, the gap between perception and reality is vast. Studies reveal that "Democrats and Republicans equally dislike and dehumanize each other but think that the levels of prejudice and dehumanization held by the outgroup party are approximately twice as strong as actually reported by a representative sample of Democrats and Republicans." [8]

How might entertainment help address this? Writers can reveal and correct misperceptions of partisan outgroups by creating complex, non-stereotypical depictions of "conservatives" and "liberals." We also need content that dramatizes the causes and consequences of partisan metaperceptions. Content creators might focus on exposing liberals' and conservatives' equally skewed notions of what the "other side" thinks of them, thereby helping bring metaperceptions back in line with reality.

In a 2020 episode of the hit show *The Conners*, show writers intentionally embedded a nuanced storyline about mask-wearing and showed characters working through different opinions about it. An analysis of that one episode's impact by a research team at Northwestern revealed measurable decreases in levels of affective polarization among viewers.

Theory #3: Positive Deviance

"Positive deviance" is another social science concept worth exploring. The positive deviance approach argues that every community has individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers even though everyone has access to the same resources and challenges.[9] If popular entertainment can identify and showcase examples of positive deviance related to polarization and bridge-building, it may be possible to scale these uncommon behaviors and establish new norms.

A concrete example of positive deviance that is begging for a TV or film treatment: Little Rock police officer Tommy Norman. "Officer Norman" became a local hero due to his unique approach to community policing. Norman, a white officer who patrols predominantly black neighborhoods, is known for incessant acts of kindness and care towards the people on his beat, particularly youth. Kids in the neighborhood genuinely love Officer Norman. The positive relationships he's developed with them is the result of years of joining in on pickup basketball games and impromptu dance routines, posting selfies with neighborhood kids, and personally investing in the welfare of community members. A neighborhood bridge-builder, Officer Norman's social media postings capture his joyous interactions with Little Rock's youth, earning him praise from the likes of rapper Killer Mike and hip hop star The Game.[10]

Officer Norman epitomizes the kind of police - community relationship we want. Entertainment can help scale this norm by spotlighting examples of positive deviance like Tommy Norman and illustrating that solutions to divisive issues — like white law enforcement's attitudes towards and engagement with communities of color — are already present in our midst. Symmetry and nuance are critical, here, and it's important that portrayals not unintentionally reinforce oversimplified, monolithic conceptions of the positive deviant's tribe or alienate in-group members who might not exhibit these "uncommon characteristics."

Theory #4: Conflict Transformation

As creatives explore these various paths for bridging divides and scaling new norms through entertainment, it's important to emphasize one point: while compelling drama always revolves around some form of conflict, scripting depolarizing narratives does not necessarily require *partisan conflict* to be the animating focus of a story. If partisan animosity *is* the beating heart of the storyline, seize the opportunity to model conflict transformation tactics known to be

effective, such as relationship-building dialogue and perspective taking. Tensions between partisans should be portrayed realistically, but those tensions need not drive the storyline in order for the narrative to have a depolarizing effect.

Social science and field evidence suggest that storylines that do not explicitly thematize polarization can have a highly depolarizing impact on viewers. Conflict resolution strategies employed in regions riven by seemingly intractable divisions offer valuable insights here. Studies of international conflict zones show that the most effective way to reduce intergroup hostility is often not by exclusively addressing conflicts head-on, but rather by "circumventing the conflict" and providing opportunities for collaboration on tangible projects that are of mutual interest to both parties.[11] Creating "situations where the attention is focused on an external common interest, one that requires interacting cooperatively and without mutual antagonism, in time renders the conflict less relevant."[12] Put another way, trust between opposing groups must be built around "something else" – some superordinate goal or identity – other than the conflict.

Unscripted entertainment content – such as reality shows – offers exciting opportunities to apply this particular research insight. Seeing Americans collaborate across lines of difference to pursue a common goal could have powerful vicarious effects.

The theories above are in no way an exhaustive list; social science is a veritable goldmine of strategies for reducing intergroup hostility and bias. Exploiting these and other research findings through entertainment offers a promising and under-explored path for impact.

Beyond Theories: Scripting Narratives of the Nation

One final driver of polarization that offers fertile ground for experimentation: a lack of shared national narratives. Liberals and conservatives believe and communicate very different accounts of our country right now. Americans are offered a false choice, asked to choose between a "founding fathers and pilgrims" narrative or the 1619 Project. But we need unifying stories about America that create a new version of "us" and expose viewers to cross-cutting identities that transcend the partisan warfare of the moment. Entertainment can help stitch together our frayed social fabric by offering our cohesion-starved populace national narratives to which our diverse citizenry can relate regardless of partisan leanings.

A study of the Netflix reboot of *Queer Eye* might shed light on the question of whether reality TV can help bridge societal divides. A team of gay men ventures into red America to give straight men "makeovers," and audiences witness their mutual discovery of empathy and humanity along the way. Did the show reduce levels of partisan animosity among viewers?

In a New York Times op-ed entitled "Who Are We?" conservative commentator Ross Douthat provocatively posed what should be embraced by Hollywood's best and brightest as the ultimate dare: "Maybe no unifying story is really possible. Maybe the gap between a heroic founders-and-settlers narrative and the truth about what befell blacks and Indians and others cannot be adequately bridged."[13] Douthat's statement is less a cynical surrender than an implicit challenge. Whoever writes this story might not just win an Oscar, they may well save our country.

Entertainment Education: Impact On Steroids

A writer can take any compelling story and subtly integrate the aforementioned research-informed strategies and techniques into A, B, or C plotlines, thereby achieving a potentially depolarizing impact on viewers. Entertainment Education (sometimes referred to as "Edutainment") represents a different, more aggressive avenue for addressing polarization through storytelling.

There's an old adage that great entertainment starts with a good story. Entertainment Education (EE) challenges that notion and flips the creative process. Instead of the story coming first, with a social change agenda woven in after the fact, in EE the impact issue usually comes first and the entertainment is built around it. Characters and storylines are specifically crafted to support the impact agenda, with the desired behavioral outcomes driving narrative and story elements.

By intentionally weaving educational messages into popular entertainment content – ranging from sitcoms to soap operas to reality shows – EE programs raise public awareness, increase knowledge, shift public opinion, and encourage specific behaviors. EE has been successfully employed for social change, literacy, and public health campaigns globally for years. Can it prove equally successful in promoting America's *civic health*? What would an EE approach to depolarization look like?

The Designated Driver Campaign illustrates the power of entertainment education in America. Developed by Harvard School of Public Health's Center for Health Communication, the campaign enlisted every major Hollywood studio and network in an effort to promote public health messages about the dangers of driving after drinking. Primetime programs like *The Cosby Show, Cheers,* and *L.A. Law* embedded the concept of the designated driver in plotlines, scenes, and dialogue – even devoting entire episodes to the campaign theme. The goal was to catalyze a broad shift in social norms and to

mainstream the concept of the "designated driver." It worked. Within two years, 89% of adults and virtually all young adults were familiar with the designated driver concept. Within six years, alcohol-related traffic fatalities had decreased by 30 percent. "Designated Driver" is now a household term.

What would it look like if Hollywood rallied around a civic health campaign to reduce toxic partisan polarization with the same concerted energy and focus? What might a "designated driver" concept for polarization look like?

EE has already proven successful in anti-prejudice and conflict reduction campaigns elsewhere in the world. Take Rwanda, where there was an urgent need for scalable interventions aimed at reconciliation in the aftermath of that country's genocidal war. Recognizing that scripted radio content had been intentionally used to stoke the violence and division that led to the genocide, a team of international experts and Rwandan scriptwriters decided to deploy that same medium to achieve the opposite goal of intergroup reconciliation and prejudice reduction.

Together they created *Musekeweya*, a sweeping *Romeo and Juliet* narrative involving fictional lovers from rival ethnic groups whose union represents the possibility of overcoming deep tribal divisions. Educational messages designed to influence listeners' beliefs about prejudice, violence, and possibilities for reconciliation were woven into the show's storyline. These messages teach "that the roots of prejudice and violence are located in the frustration of basic psychological needs (e.g., for security, a positive identity, and belongingness) and that violence is the accumulation of a number of factors, including a lack of critical thinking, of open dissent, of active bystanders, and of meaningful intergroup connections."[14]

As audiences across Rwanda tuned in every week (radio is that country's most important form of mass media), something remarkable happened. After just one year, listeners' perceptions of social norms changed dramatically, resulting in greater acceptance of intermarriage and open political dissent, as well as higher levels of empathy and trust towards members of ethnic and religious outgroups. Research on the show's impact provides "some of the first clear evidence of the media's impact on intergroup prejudice and conflict in the world."[15]

As Americans we're not accustomed to thinking of our own country as a "conflict zone" in need of peacebuilding interventions. Yet recent events have illustrated that we are not immune from the kind of domestic intergroup violence with which other regions in the world have long struggled. Markers of intergroup hostility we've seen in places like Rwanda are increasingly evident here at home: close to

half of Democrats and Republicans now say they would be "upset" or "very upset" if their child married someone from the opposite political party (up from 5% in 1960). We have an opportunity to interrupt the cycle of escalating partisan hostility before further damage to our social fabric and institutions is wrought, and we would do well to examine examples of entertainment media being employed to reduce intergroup bias and hostility in conflict zones abroad.

One EE strategy – transmedia – may hold particular promise. Transmedia represents a storytelling technique designed to engage, educate and empower audiences in ways traditional entertainment is not equipped to do. In the simplest sense, transmedia involves telling stories across multiple media platforms. Audiences enter the fictional world through various access points, with the main show representing but one piece of a large interconnected web of experiences aimed at educating viewers and inspiring them to take action. It offers a vast interactive storyworld in which viewers are not just passive consumers of content, but active participants. Transmedia entertainment campaigns further maximize their impact by frequently coordinating their messages and calls to action with NGOs and other partners.

Transmedia storytelling turbocharges social impact campaigns. Viewers become invested in the story and its educational message on a whole different level. Transmedia has been proven to be highly effective in public health campaigns. Can it be equally effective in promoting *civic health?*

East Los High offers a great example of transmedia storytelling for social impact. A top-rated, Emmy-nominated drama series on Hulu, the show was designed as a reproductive health intervention for Latina/o youth. Audiences are invited to engage with – and help craft – the story in multiple ways beyond just streaming episodes. At the end of each episode, viewers are steered to the *East Los High* website, replete with a resources page with widgets to find local health clinics, links for additional information, and opportunities for real-time interaction between fans and characters.

East Los High seeks to leverage the unique power of entertainment media to influence norms and behaviors at scale. The show was the product of a rare teaming up of social scientists and Hollywood types, and early studies of its impact on the target audience – Latina/o youth – reveal promising results.

In order for EE – or any entertainment – to be successful at this, creatives first need to define the particular norms and behaviors they're looking to promote. In the case of *East Los High*, the desired behaviors were related to sexual and reproductive health. In our case, those

behaviors might be related to increased perspective-taking with outgroup members, willingness to stand up to members of one's own ingroup, breaking out of media echo chambers, or being able to alter a position and accept a compelling argument made by an outgroup member.

Whether transmedia campaigns might be effective in reducing polarization is unknown for a simple reason: it hasn't been tried yet. Could a strategy like this be too heavy-handed, posing the risk of what social scientists refer to as "reactance," or resistance to perceived efforts at manipulation? Without research and experimentation, we'll never know.

Who's Telling the Story? Breaking Silos and Building Bridges

Zeroing in on the kinds of content that can help stitch together our frayed social fabric is critical, but that's just part of the solution. In addition to focusing on the *what* (what kind of entertainment is being created) we need to examine the *how* and the *who*. How is content being created, and who's telling the stories that end up on our screens?

Entertainment can help Americans reimagine the meaning of "national unity" and popularize new social norms around how we navigate conflict and engage with each other across lines of difference. The silos that liberal and conservative creatives increasingly inhabit are an impediment to this happening at a scale necessary for systemic impact. Entertainment silos mean content is seldom the product of cross-partisan collaboration or informed by deep, firsthand understanding of "the other side." We therefore need more than a bridge between social science and content creation, we need bridges between content creators themselves.

Like every other sector in American society, the entertainment industry must be willing to grapple with toxic polarization in its own ranks, venture beyond partisan echo chambers, and experiment with greater cross-partisan collaboration and co-creation. This is true both within and beyond the rarefied world of Hollywood; we need to empower content creators across the country to partner in the telling of stories that matter to red and blue America alike. One of the most powerful levers in intergroup conflict reduction is bringing people together across lines of difference to collaborate on projects of mutual importance. How can we incentivize cross-partisan collaboration in the telling of America's stories, both within established centers of gravity

EE presents unique opportunities for impact measurement. Placement of "markers" (new words, phrases, or concepts) throughout a narrative helps track uptake among viewers of concepts introduced by the show. Viewers are encouraged to engage with these concepts on social media; by tracking marker-related social media posts, researchers can measure levels of engagement around an intervention. One could imagine a term being coined that's the "Designated Driver" equivalent for bridge-builders and depolarizers - tracking that marker's digital footprint would enable us to see whether audiences are internalizing the concept.

in the entertainment industry like Hollywood, Atlanta, etc., and in lesser known regional centers?

Promising approaches might include fostering content creation hubs that bring ideologically diverse stakeholders together to tell stories that matter to their local communities, ensuring ideological diversity in writers' rooms and mentorship programs, and creating reciprocal opportunities for liberals to embed in and learn from conservative media ecosystems and vice versa.

Storytelling is one of the most unifying human experiences, and this binding commonality presents rich opportunities for bridging divides. We're all hardwired for storytelling, and we share the impulse to craft narratives that help us make sense of our lives and the world around us. Finding ways to leverage the universality of this human impulse is an important piece of the entertainment + civic health puzzle.

The more that content creators – both within Hollywood and in local communities across the country – can break out of their own partisan bubbles, the better equipped they are to translate those experiences into onscreen narratives that expose Americans to new ways of thinking about and engaging with each other.

As some of the most influential agents in our society, storytellers can help us imagine new possibilities for America. The individuals who script the shows, movies, and videos we watch play an outsized role in shaping social perceptions and norms. Influencing these influencers – alerting them to just how much power they hold, empowering them with tools and knowledge, and building bridges between them – is essential if entertainment is to play a positive role in addressing our crisis of division.

"Culture may be the last thing standing in this country that can bridge our divides."

Eric K Ward, Executive Director, Western States Center

Engaging the Entertainment Industry: Our Approach

The economic and cultural forces that sustain and profit from polarization are strong. Are storytelling and entertainment powerful enough to combat those? We believe they are, and we're enlisting stakeholders throughout the entertainment industry to take up the challenge.

Bridge Entertainment Labs is committed to understanding the impact of entertainment media on Americans' partisan divisions and harnessing the power of storytelling to reduce toxic polarization and foster pluralistic norms in America. Our approach focuses on three areas of activity:

Research, Content Creation, and Education.

Research

We support research on the relationship between entertainment and civic cohesion, and translate social science and practitioner insights into actionable strategies for content creators. We also equip the industry with data and measurement tools to understand the impact of content on polarization. In doing so, we serve as a bridge between the worlds of academic research and content creation.

Content Creation

Through the establishment of a mission-aligned network of studios, executives, content creators, and funders, we promote collaboration and accelerate the production of entertainment content that mitigates toxic polarization. Through workshops, webinars, and consultations with academic and practitioner experts, we equip writers and creatives with knowledge and resources that can inform the creation of depolarizing content.

Education

We elevate awareness within the entertainment industry about toxic polarization as an urgent social impact issue. Through podcasts, conferences, events, and summits that bring together stakeholders across the political spectrum, we encourage the industry to wrestle with its role in our crisis of division.

Many questions about the best strategy for depolarizing through entertainment remain. Should Hollywood aim to establish depolarization as a social impact "cause" and invite audience engagement in America's grassroots "bridging" movement? Or is a far more subtle approach that quietly leverages insights from social science and conflict transformation called for? Bridge Entertainment Labs provides a hub for exploration of these and other questions.

Underlying our country's polarization crisis is a deeper epistemological crisis — a divide not just in our values and desires, but in what we think we know, how we claim to know it, and whom we trust to deliver truths about our reality. Increasingly, Americans can't even agree on a shared factual universe. If we don't find ways to reconnect soon on some very basic levels, the epistemic divide will grow wider and we will face an even more daunting scenario. Entertainment might be one of the most impactful and scalable interventions available to bridge our divides and establish a common reality before it's too late.

How you can help!

Whether you're a stakeholder in the entertainment industry or simply a viewer of television and movies, you can be part of the solution.

For entertainment professionals:

- Become a member of the Bridge Entertainment Labs network;
- Participate in Bridge Entertainment Labs sponsored workshops, webinars, and events;
- As studio and network executives, promote content that transcends and transforms America's divides rather than fueling them;
- As creators of entertainment, integrate depolarizing strategies into projects at their inception or into existing shows already on air.

For everyone:

- Subscribe to the Bridge Entertainment Labs newsletter and podcast;
- Participate in Bridge Entertainment Labs sponsored events for the general public;
- As consumers of entertainment, reject content that fuels our crisis of division. Demand content that humanizes Americans to each other across partisan divides.

www.bridgeentertainmentlabs.org

Endnotes

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